

MICHAEL GIFFIN

A SENSE OF THE ENDING



MARGARET ATWOOD ISN'T a snob and would no doubt avoid making too fine a distinction between high culture and popular culture. She's particularly careful about admitting to a literary vocation, although her work is immensely literary, as idea and as art. She acknowledges the pitfalls of the romantic image of the artist as inspired and is wary of the "drastic mythologies" of the author as self-dedicated "priestess of the imagination" devoted to creating a "perfect work". But even she admits: "In truth, if you do not acknowledge at least some loyalty to this ideal ... you are unlikely to achieve more than mediocrity, and perhaps a glaring insignificance." So she does believe in a particular genre of story—let's risk sounding snobbish and call it literary fiction—which she writes for an implied reader, an ideal reader, who exists on a continuum somewhere between a real person in her life and the God who commands her to write but refuses her the security of knowing the certainty of the command.

Atwood once agreed with the proposition—put to her by an interviewer—that her fiction is about "the power of language to transform our perception of how the world works". Notice the proposition is made by the interviewer not the author. Notice also the implied contrast between story and life, since story isn't life. Stories can influence life. Some theories of narrative go further and suggest stories cohere with, correspond to, or imitate life. No story is life, though, in spite of claims that life is a story, or a collection of stories. The author who creates her stories isn't God either. She's a sub-creator who finds it difficult ending her stories because: "Life doesn't end. People's lives end. But other lives keep going from that and the dance goes on." For Atwood,

ending a story which hopes to transform our perception is like snipping off a piece of ribbon. It's always a bit arbitrary.

Transformative stories with arbitrary endings are about time. "Time is a fact of life," Atwood admits: "In some ways it is *the* fact of life. It might even be considered the true hidden subject of all novels." In *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), Frank Kermode writes about this

LITERATURE

need of the novelist, or at least certain kinds of novelist, to explore time as a fact of life. In that study he promotes the idea that a story's beginning and ending mirror

a culturally-determined sense of time, whether linear or circular. The gist of his thesis is that a Western story written under the sign of classical metaphysics tends to represent time as linear, and the imagined ending—of the story and of life—is imminent rather than immanent, although immanence is still there in the shadows. Conversely, a Western story written under the sign of the post-metaphysical critique of classical metaphysics tends to represent time as circular, and the imagined ending—of the story and of life—is immanent rather than imminent, although imminence is still there in the shadows.

This need of the literary novelist to express imminence or immanence—and their choice to focus on one and relegate the other to the shadows—can be located in an overview of literary history, by contrasting stories written up to and including the Enlightenment with those written after it. Once neoclassicism and romanticism had their day, and God's death had been proclaimed, the modernist and postmodernist author couldn't go back in linear time, whether they wanted to or not, to a point where Western culture still looked towards a future of last things—death, judgment, heaven, hell—which it still took seriously. If the modernist and postmodernist author wanted to be taken seriously, at least in critical circles, and make it into the curriculum if not the canon, they had to write with an eye towards contemporary literary conventions about the psychology of conscious-

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by Margaret Atwood;
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ness and the linguistic turn; metaphysics and allegory were out of favour, if not taboo; they could only go around in immanent circles within an eternal present; for example, like Virginia Woolf.

What does this have to do with Atwood's literary career in general and her latest novel in particular? Let's generalise and say her earlier stories were written with an eye towards contemporary literary conventions and tended towards the immanent rather than the imminent, although the imminent was always there in the shadows. They were subtle explorations of the relationships and emotions of younger people—of children and adolescents and young adults before middle age—and her ability to handle shifts in time, the change from character to character, and the presentation of more than one feminine point of view, have always been admired. Then something happened during her own middle age. Her intellectual and artistic scope expanded. Her sense of the imminent came out of the shadows into the light. Her later stories don't only explore relationships and emotions, they're increasingly engaged with a bigger moral picture: where we came from, what we're doing now, where we appear to be heading, what might happen if we're not careful. The immanence is still there, as powerful as ever, but imminence gives it a new edge. For a literary author such as Atwood, there's no longer a choice to be made between immanence and imminence—a choice to favour one over the other—since they are equally important and depend on each other.

Atwood's latest novel, *The Year of the Flood*, is a good example of the balance between immanence and imminence which she strives for in her maturity. It's a companion rather than a sequel to *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and perhaps *The Year of the Flood* addresses whatever concerns readers may have had with *Oryx and Crake*, since concerns are inevitable when readers are confronted with a mind as original, and a talent as unpredictable, as Atwood's. Some of her earlier fans, conditioned by and accustomed to her earlier work, are unwilling or unable to follow her into this new territory, in which she demonstrates she's neither neoclassical nor romantic nor modernist nor postmodernist. She's something else. She's an immensely intellectual and gifted storyteller, with a broad and impressive knowledge of the history of Western ideas, of the secular and sacred canons, of literary and other genres of fiction, and of other writings from the humanities and the sciences. She wears this knowledge lightly and gracefully. She knows her predecessors were allowed a special status—perhaps even a prophetic status—but since her contemporaries are no longer allowed this status they are expected to behave differently. So she behaves differently. She obeys some conventions and disobeys others. She fulfils some expectations and rejects others. She's simultaneously serious and hilarious, while

reminding us of the bleeding obvious in her magisterial way. Perhaps reminding us of the bleeding obvious is a form of prophecy. Perhaps it's the only form of prophecy left in our anti-prophetic age.

THE END IS IMMINENT

KERMODE SUGGESTS A connection between apocalyptic fiction, linear time, and unified metaphysical systems. Following his line of thinking, in apocalyptic fiction the ending is consonant with the beginning, and the apocalyptic story satisfies the existential or phenomenological or mythological needs of the reader or hearer who accepts linear time and believes in the unified metaphysical system which underpins the story. He believes apocalyptic endings lost their naive imminence in the modern and postmodern world; which was inevitable, perhaps, given the crisis of belief begun in the nineteenth century quickly morphed from philosophy to literary fiction, dominated the twentieth century, and is still influential in the twenty-first century. If apocalyptic fiction hasn't disappeared it's been demoted from its traditional place in high culture to popular culture, and the apocalyptic novelist is unlikely to win a Nobel or Pulitzer or Man Booker Prize.

The imminence that permeates *The Year of the Flood* is dystopian rather than apocalyptic, and this difference needs to be understood. Apocalyptic imminence, from Kermode's perspective, is a feature of a unified metaphysical system: it's divinely inspired. After the biblical flood, God makes a covenant with Noah and promises he will never again destroy the earth, provided humanity keeps its part of the bargain. After the apocalypse described in the Book of Revelation, a new worldly and other-worldly order appears, following a struggle that was inevitable, or perhaps predestined, according to the logic of the same unified metaphysical system. Atwood can't work with the kind of apocalyptic imminence Kermode suggests without being disloyal to her ideological-aesthetic tradition, and without violating the sensibilities of her readers and critics. That's why she works with dystopian imminence instead. We need to be careful, though, when defining or limiting what her dystopias mean, especially in relation to the existence of God, his-her nature, how he-she relates to creation, and the persistent questions of human free will and human necessity. Atwood has spoken about God a lot since her middle age. Her dystopias aren't expressions of atheism.

The novel focuses on a sect, God's Gardeners, which is trying to reconcile science and religion. They see nature as an organic unity with all creatures interconnected. They are pan-en-theistic rather than pantheistic, which means they see God as a part of creation

rather limited to creation, although his-her ability to act is circumscribed, or perhaps has been eclipsed by humans. Are their beliefs incompatible with mainstream Judaism, through which we inherit the myth of the fall, or mainstream Christianity, through which we inherit a doctrine of sin? Not as incompatible as one might assume. Are they imitating indigenous belief or nature religion? Not really, as Atwood's purpose is to investigate an attempted synthesis of Western science and monotheistic religion; she isn't sending up Westerners who've gone native or green.

The Gardeners are struggling to protect the environment while prophesying an imminent waterless flood they believe will destroy the human race. Unlike the biblical flood, the waterless flood, when it eventually comes, will be man-made, not divinely sent. Indeed, what's man-made is fundamental in this dystopia, as it is in Atwood's other dystopias. She's scrupulous in limiting herself to what's humanly possible; to what's already happened, or about to happen, or likely to happen, through human intervention: gene-splice life forms are proliferating and include lion-lamb blends, sheep with human hair, pigs with human brain tissue, meat that grows like fruit, and cloned humans who are innocent and immortal. All levels of elected representative government have disappeared; nation-states have been replaced by different corporations who control different continents and are in conflict with each other; there are no armies or police forces; order is maintained by private security firms employed by the corporations; the seasons have disappeared, the days are hot and humid, and there's a heavy thunderstorm every afternoon. All this has occurred through a market economy, in which everything is driven by consumer demand, or by individual and collective desires, which isn't to say Atwood is anti-capitalist. She's just warning us of the possibilities and the dangers.

A super-intelligent loner named Glenn—who's also Crake from *Oryx and Crake*—is responsible for the human gene splice that created the innocent immortals. He also develops the pandemic virus, which he arranges to be put into a sex pill called BlyssPluss. The pill results in the best sex ever but also causes serious side-effects such as death in plague proportions. What's the motivation for this misanthropy: maternal abandonment; the inability to socialise or maintain relationships? These may be important motivations, but equally important are his extreme rationalism and nihilism. His explanation of God is a lot different from the Gardeners'. He believes anything spiritual is meaningless because it isn't rational and can't be measured. He believes God

is simply a brain mutation caused by the FoxP2 gene; the same gene that gave us language and grammar; the same gene that birds need for singing. God may well be knitted into us, and can't be amputated from us, because he-she is an essential part of us, like water; but he-she hasn't done us any good.

Glenn isn't responsible for creating the dystopia, and while he created the pandemic virus and placed it in the sex pill, he didn't create the market for BlyssPluss, and he didn't force people to take it. His response to the dystopia he didn't make—and his inability to find meaning or happiness within it—is to “kill the king”, as in chess. The king isn't a single person, though; it's the centre of power; it's the “technological connections”, such as coding and splicing, which gave him the god-like power to create the innocent immortals, and the pandemic virus. Glenn kills the king, and himself too.

The end of the novel is a new beginning. The innocent immortals have survived, of course, but they are childlike and don't have the same intellectual capacity the mortals have for good and for evil: that is, the innocent immortals haven't fallen and can't sin. We don't know how many mortals have survived, or how they will fare in this very different world. There's a glimmer of hope, but it's slim and easily extinguished, since there's no covenant between divinity and humanity to sustain it. But there's still music. The same gene that gave us language and grammar, the same gene that birds need for singing, is still knitted into humans, whether mortal or immortal. So God is still there, somewhere, somehow, if only as a brain mutation caused by the FoxP2 gene; and, ironically, the fact that the mortals have fallen, and are still falling, is what may save them in this new world.

THE END IS IMMANENT

THE GOD OF classical metaphysics doesn't have anything to do with the dystopia, or the waterless flood; neither of which happen by divine fiat; both of which evolve in the human sphere. Human nature and human nurture are the immanent cause of the imminent problem. Atwood makes the imminent problem the novel's frame and fills the frame with the immanent cause. Her focus here is the myth of the fall and doctrine of sin, which she reworks in ways that make sense to her in an age which is still post-metaphysical. She doesn't need to look beyond the Gardeners for examples of both the fall and sin.

According to Adam One, the Gardeners' wise spiritual leader, the fall was multi-dimensional:

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A SENSE OF THE ENDING

The ancestral primates fell out of the trees; then they fell from vegetarianism into meat-eating. Then they fell from instinct into reason, and thus into technology; from simple signals to complex grammar, and thus into humanity; from firelessness into fire, and thence into weaponry; and from seasonal mating into an incessant sexual twitching. Then they fell from a joyous life in the moment into an anxious contemplation of the vanished past and the distant future. The Fall was ongoing, but its trajectory led ever downward. Sucked into the well of knowledge, you could only plummet, learning more and more, but not getting any happier.

This fall is still happening. The Gardeners aren't exempt from it. They have fallen and are still falling. We see this in many ways: in the compromises they make when struggling to adhere to their values; in their difficult and unsolved debates over how to reconcile evolution with the early chapters of Genesis; in how they interact with the outside world; in their relationships with each other; in being human. It's useful comparing their dilemma to that of the ancient Jews and early Christians; how to be loyal to your core principles and survive. It isn't easy.

The Gardeners live in a variety of dispersed cells throughout North America and they are stockpiling provisions in secret "Ararats" to carry them through and beyond the waterless flood. While they do witness and proselytise, they are left alone by the corporations, provided they don't represent a threat to the corporations, and because the corporations need to maintain a facade of tolerance and are unwilling to force the possible public relations disaster that would follow the liquidation of an apparently harmless pacifist sect. Pacifist doesn't mean naive, though; the Gardeners know they're being watched, and they have their own contacts within the corporations. They aren't subversive but they are careful.

The Gardeners' dilemma is what to do about the imminent end: remain pacifists who pray and forgive their enemies, or become militants who pray and try to stop the imminent end. The prevailing view, promoted by Adam One, is to remain pacifist, since to meet threat with threat would violate the integrity of the sect's mission. Significant opposition comes from the charismatic Zeb, one of the male elders, who favours strategic militancy and becomes the sect's freedom fighter. When the signs suggest the waterless flood is approaching—the

end is imminent—parts of the sect become more militant, come to the attention of the corporations, and Zeb forms a breakaway sect. Who does Atwood favour: Adam One's pacifism or Zeb's militancy? We don't know, as she's even-handed with them, and one suspects she has immense respect for both. Perhaps a clue comes to us at the end of the story. Adam One's followers appeared to have all perished, praising God and praying for their enemies until the last moment. Zeb's followers, an unknown number of them, have survived with some chance of rebuilding the human race. It's significant that Atwood places the future in the hands of mortal humans who were once God's Gardeners; however, the religion that inspired them and protected them will no doubt become quite different in the future—if there is a future—in which they will continue to fall.

In this novel, Atwood's reworking of the doctrine of sin has a signature quality about it. Some male characters are evil, in the extroverted and testosterone-driven way males can be evil, but they aren't Gardeners. Many male characters sin, because it's in human nature to sin, including male Gardeners who commit adultery, grope children, and grow and sell marijuana. But Atwood has never been a fan of female-as-victim, and her mature work is increasingly focused on the creative potential of female-as-oppressor with an equal claim on evil and sin as the male. Hence the novel's two female protagonists who survive the waterless flood, Ren and Toby, whose different perspectives—along with Adam One's homilies, and the many astonishing hymns which narrate Gardener theology—dominate the story.

Ren is brought to the Gardeners as a young girl, by her neurotic mother who becomes Zeb's jealous and possessive wife. She befriends an orphan, Amanda, and the two girls grow up with each other, assimilating Gardener values but also discovering a shared potential for sin: "How easy it is, treachery," Ren reflects later. "You just slide into it." Her mother eventually leaves Zeb and takes Ren away from the Gardeners. After graduating from a liberal arts college, Ren becomes a trapeze dancer in a high-end sex club, Scales and Tails, where she survives the waterless flood, as she's been locked away in quarantine for several months. Amanda eventually rescues her from quarantine. They're forced to leave the club, in search of other survivors, but they're soon captured by a sadistic monster.

Several years before the waterless flood, the Gardeners rescued Toby from the same sadistic monster,

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A SENSE OF THE ENDING

who had been using her as a sex slave and was about to kill her. Over the years, Toby gradually becomes indispensable to the Gardeners and is elevated to the status of elder, although she accepts her elevation unwillingly, as she's unsure of her commitment to the sect's beliefs. She's forced to leave the Gardeners, once the sadistic monster discovers and pursues her. She's given a new physical identity and finds work in a luxury spa for women named AnooYoo. She survives the waterless flood, barricaded in the spa. After several months of isolation, she discovers Ren on her doorstep, near death, and nurses her to a measure of health. They're also driven by necessity to leave the spa, to seek others, and try to save Amanda from the sadistic monster.

The different perspectives of Ren and Toby are best read alongside the perspectives of Atwood's other female protagonists in earlier novels, at least since *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), and *The Penelopiad* (2005). Ren and Toby are on a journey—existential and phenomenological, and mythological too—into the limits of their freedom, into their necessity. Who's out there? Can they save Amanda? Or will they need to be saved themselves? Toby makes a poignant observation, near the end of the novel, just as she feels certain she and Ren are about to die: “The Human moral keyboard is limited, Adam One used to say: there's nothing you can play on it that

hasn't been played before. And, my dear Friends, I am sorry to say this, but it has its lower notes.” But they don't die, at least not then; although how long they can survive is another story. Perhaps that story will be told in Atwood's next novel.

AS A WORK of speculative fiction; as a logical extension of our present world; as an exploration of what might happen once humans finally usurp the gods; as a perfect balance of the imminent and the immanent, *The Year of the Flood* is destined to become a classic. It's worth remembering Atwood has been writing since the mid-1950s and the latter half of her career has been dedicated to pushing the boundaries of her personal achievements; to turning out a body of fiction in which each new novel, as idea and as art, is unlike any of its predecessors. As she's never been one to rest on her laurels, or write to a formula, each new novel is a virtuoso performance. Are there many literary authors who have achieved this? Where will Atwood take us next? And, if her fiction really is about “the power of language to transform our perception of how the world works”, can it influence us, and help us make the world a better place?

*Dr Michael Giffin is a priest in the Anglican diocese of Sydney. He reviewed William Paul Young's novel **The Shack** in the March issue.*

ON READING ROBERT FISK

Lately I have not slept that well
particularly when books and TV
echo the dark logic of Hell.

Yet a woman walking through a field
found a severed head face down
in mud. She picked it up, turned

it over, and gently placed it down again,
offering him the dignity of sunlight
and a vision of the broad, open sky.

Gary Clark