I discovered Margaret Atwood not long after she’d won the Booker Prize for *The Blind Assassin* (2000), got hooked, and began reading her backwards: *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Cat’s Eye* (1988), *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), all the way back to *The Edible Woman* (1969). I sense a shift with *The Handmaid’s Tale*, into what some might call her literary maturity, coinciding with her middle age. After the shift, she began pushing her literary boundaries. Each subsequent novel is different. Each is engaged with a bigger picture: where we came from, what we’re doing now, where we might be heading, what might happen if we’re not careful, and, with *MaddAddam* (2013), what might happen after that. She keeps going. She’s unpredictable. There are always surprises. In *The Blind Assassin*, for example, the elder protagonist Iris—the muscle controlling the eye; the messenger of the gods—chose “between classicism and romanticism” in her youth, preferring “to be upright and contained—an urn in daylight”, while her younger sister Laura becomes a romantic prototype and all that implies canonically. The chronology is correct, as neoclassicism comes before romanticism, and both are “like bookends” framing Alex Thomas, the revolutionary face of modernity. But Atwood subverts the canonical roles of neoclassicism and romanticism, in ways easily overlooked.

Iris turns out to be different from a neoclassical prototype. She had the clandestine affair with the revolutionary Alex, not her romantic sister. She wrote the novel within the novel, famously attributed to Laura. She chose anonymity and allowed history to regard Laura as a tragic heroine. So her true identity remains a mystery. Conversely, Laura’s true identity also remains a mystery. She commits suicide because of an excess of feeling—how romantic!—while Iris lives on to narrate their story, which is also Canada’s story, which only Iris has the strength to tell.

In *Alias Grace* there’s also this mystery of female identity, based on a true story, brilliantly described but never solved. Grace was one of the most notorious Canadian women of the 1840s, convicted of murder at the age of sixteen. As public opinion was divided from the start, her death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, and during her long incarceration she continued to polarise public opinion. Was she “a female fiend and temptress, the instigator of the crime” or “an unwilling victim, forced to keep silent” by threats from her co-accused for fear of her own life? As attitudes toward Grace reflected an ambiguity about women, Atwood had nothing to work from, when attempting to reconstruct the historical Grace, apart from contemporary constructions of her identity.

Like all the novels of Atwood’s literary maturity, *Alias Grace* functions on several levels, from seemingly simple ideas to deceptively complex art. Grace’s aliases are traceable to the Hegelian master–servant dialectic, grounded as it is in the Greek myths of rationality and irrationality, which belong to Plato’s model of mind in *The Republic* (c.380 BC). One alias allows Grace to be a servant embodying the heart’s noble feeling. Another allows her to be a servant embodying the lower abdomen’s base appetite. As she’ll never be allowed that other Platonic–Hegelian alias, a master with a rational mind, where’s the real Grace on this Madonna–Whore spectrum?

Around the time *The Blind Assassin* appeared, Atwood gave the Empson Lectures at Cambridge University, later published as *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002). This is where we learn about her early influences, in the 1940s and 1950s, and how she’s evolved as a writer. Comparisons between Canada and Australia can be made, here, given their similar colonial relationships with Britain and their post-colonial trajectories. She studied literature as an undergraduate at Toronto University and a postgraduate at Radcliffe College. She’s deeply familiar with literary genres and has a broad and impressive knowledge of the sacred canon, the classics, the humanities, the sciences, and the history of ideas, all of which she
wears lightly and gracefully.

Chapter 1 provides the most autobiography and describes the range of Atwood’s references, both of which are interconnected, as writers adopt the terms of their discourse early in their lives. Chapter 2 deals with the post-romantic writer’s double consciousness, as she assumes we’re still living in romanticism’s shadow. Chapter 3 discusses the struggle between the gods of art and those of commerce, which confronts every writer who considers herself an artist. Chapter 4 considers the writer as illusionist, artificer, and participant in social and political power. Chapter 5 probes the eternal triangle of writer, text, and reader. Chapter 6 is about the dark and winding ways of the narrative journey.

In her light-hearted way, Atwood keeps returning to the eternal triangle of writer, text, and reader, which could have been a treatise on its own, about hermeneutical theory, specifically about the hermeneutical circle. She also keeps returning to the shadow of romanticism, and could have written a treatise about that, also, since the shadow has determined how many authors understand themselves and how many readers understand them. She clearly recognises the myriad of obvious and not-so-obvious ways in which post-romantic literature (and post-romantic criticism) has been critical of pre-romantic mimesis and taken its cues from romanticism’s critique of neoclassicism. Negotiating the pitfalls of that critique explains why she subverts the canonical roles of neoclassicism and romanticism, has Iris describing this risk, central to the post-romantic writer’s double consciousness, creating as they do within romanticism’s shadow.

Who’s meant to read this important story? Atwood tells us there’s an implied reader, an ideal reader, for whom she’s writing, who exists on a continuum somewhere between a real person in her life and God, who commands her to write but refuses her the security of knowing the certainty of the command.

The dawn of the new millennium found Atwood entering her sixties; approaching an age where many of us slow down, and rest on our laurels, of which she’d already attained more than most novelists. Instead, she kept pushing her literary boundaries. She decided Homer’s Odyssey needed to be rewritten from a different perspective, since the canonical story doesn’t hold water, as there are too many inconsistencies. Operating on the principle that mythic material was originally oral, local, and would have been told one way in one place and differently in another, she used other material—non-canonical material—to re-tell the story from Penelope’s perspective. In The Penelopiad (2005), she used the details of Penelope’s parentage, her early life and marriage, and the scandalous rumours about her, to answer a question any close reading of The Odyssey must pose: What was Penelope really up to?

In Moral Disorder (2006) we find short stories, breath-taking and diverse, some of which add up to a novella about a couple, Nell and Tig, at different stages of their lives, as they deal with the ironies and ambiguities of their country life, city life, current families, ex-partners, ageing parents, and ageing selves. The dark but hilarious story of their attempt to reproduce a bucolic life on a rented farm, “Moral Disorder”, begins with an owl teaching her young to hunt. They buy twelve ducklings for their pond, and watch the owl carry off one duckling a day—to be rent, shared and gobbled down—an ominous sign of things to come. Then there’s “My Last Duchess”, a brilliant and complex story about Browning’s poem, about when and why it was taught, about the teacher who taught it, and about two students who break up after arguing over its meaning.

In The Door (2007) we find poetry, awe-inspiring and dissimilar, which reminds us of why Plato banned the poets from his ideal republic; because of the difference between poetry and philosophy, between the head (neoclassical reason) and the heart (romantic feeling). The rhetorical principle here, essential to the Platonic model of mind, is that the heart can easily be corrupted by base appetite (the lower abdomen), so feeling is risky. In Negotiating with the Dead, Atwood describes this risk, central to the post-romantic writer’s double consciousness, creating as they do within romanticism’s shadow.
In Atwood’s words:

for his beloved, the beautiful and enigmatic Oryx. Snowman-Jimmy’s one-time best friend and rival humanoid species bioengineered by Glenn-Crake, bal pandemic. The Crakers live nearby, a gentle reader she’s lost to her speculative fiction she’s col-
lected others. She’s not the fulfiller of their desires. She must be faithful to her vocation as an author. And for every reader she’s lost to her speculative fiction she’s collected others.

Then there’s Atwood’s excursions into prescient social commentary, such as her Massey Lectures, Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth (2008), clairvoyantly delivered as the global financial crisis was unfolding. In “Ancient Balances”, she discusses the history of our human sense of fair exchange and what constitutes unfair exchange. In “Debt and Sin”, she explores different translations of the Lord’s Prayer and considers whether “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” is the same as “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us”. In “Debt as Plot”, she suggests there can be no debt without narrative as a way of remembering it. In “The Shadow Side”, she addresses the question: What happens when people don’t, can’t, or won’t pay their debts? In “Payback”, she explores the many kinds of debt that have to be paid back, moral and ecological as well as financial.

Then there’s Atwood’s explanation of where she’s heading—In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination (2011)—which no longer seems far-fetched. The SF means “speculative fiction” not “science fiction”, as she confesses to no longer knowing what the latter means. There’s a trajectory here, or perhaps an entanglement, which originated in her youth, continued in her unfinished PhD thesis, and remained an undercurrent throughout her literary career. The undercurrent has now become a current, but not all readers want to ride the current with her. She’s not the fulfiller of their desires. She must be faithful to her vocation as an author. And for every reader she’s lost to her speculative fiction she’s collected others.

So we come, finally, to the MaddAddam Trilogy.

As Oryx and Crake (2003) begins, Snowman-Jimmy is living in a tree by the seashore. He believes he’s the last human alive after a global pandemic. The Crakers live nearby, a gentle humanoid species bioengineered by Glenn-Crake, Snowman-Jimmy’s one-time best friend and rival for his beloved, the beautiful and enigmatic Oryx. In Atwood’s words:

The Crakers are free from sexual jealousy, greed, clothing, and the need for insect repellent and animal protein—all the factors Crake believed had caused not only the misery of the human race but also the degradation of the planet. The Crakers mate seasonally, when parts of them turn blue. Crake tried to rid them of symbolic thinking and music, but they have an eerie singing style all their own and have developed a religion, with Crake as their creator, Oryx as mistress of the animals, and Snowman as their reluctant prophet. It is he who has led them out of the high-tech Paradice dome where they were made to their present home beside the ocean.

In his pre-pandemic life, Snowman-Jimmy’s world was divided into the Compounds—fortified Corporations through which a technocratic elite control society—and the “pleeblands” outside the Compounds, where non-elite society live, shop and scam in their slums, suburbs and malls.

Snowman-Jimmy first met Glenn-Crake at high school, where they bond over internet porn and complex online games. They lose touch when Glenn-Crake, who’s got neoclassical attributes (reason), is accepted at the prestigious Watson–Crick Institute, while the less intellectually endowed Jimmy, who’s got romantic attributes (feeling), makes do at the shabby Martha Graham Academy of Liberal Arts. When they reconnect years later, Crake is in charge of Paradice dome, where he’s gene-splicing the Crakers. At the same time, he’s developing a pill, BlyssPluss, which promises sexual ecstasy, birth control, and prolonged youth, but also contains a hidden ingredient, which creates the pandemic that erases humanity. In the resulting chaos, Oryx and Glenn-Crake perish, leaving Snowman-Jimmy alone with the Crakers.

What was Glenn-Crake’s motive for creating the Crakers and developing the virus, which he puts into a sex pill, which causes the pandemic? While parental estrangement and a parallel misanthropy may be important motives, so is his extreme rationalism. He believes anything spiritual is meaningless. God is simply a brain mutation caused by the FoxP2 gene, which gave us language and allows birds to sing, but this mutation hasn’t done us any good. Also, while he created the virus and placed it into the sex pill, he didn’t create the market for BlyssPluss, and he didn’t force anyone to take it. His response to Atwood’s dystopia, which he didn’t create, and isn’t responsible for, is to “kill the king”, like in chess, understood here as the “technological connections” that gave him a god-like power.

One observation ought to be made, which I’ve never heard discussed, or read in reviews. It’s to do with Oryx’s relationship with her past and her present. Atwood provides us with a detailed story of her childhood, in a remote and impoverished part of Asia, and the way her family sold her into sexual slavery, and her life as a sex slave. That story would once have been considered harrowing and not long

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They're forced to leave the deserted club, in search of. Amanda eventually rescues her from quarantine, but while locked away in quarantine for several months. Scales and Tails, where she survives the pandemic, becomes a trapeze dancer in a high-end sex club, and, after graduating from a liberal arts college, she into it. "She's eventually forced to leave the sect, it is, treachery," Ren reflects later, "You just slide cover a shared potential for treachery: "How easy other, assimilating Gardener values, but also dis- an orphan, Amanda, and they grow up with each other, genetically-modified humanoids, the genetically-

In The Year of the Flood (2009), which takes place during the same timeframe as Oryx and Crake, the focus is on the God's Gardeners, a green sect which reconciles science and religion while prophesying the man-made pandemic. Their dilemma is whether to remain pacifists, who pray and forgive their ene- mies, or become militants who pray and try to stop the pandemic. The prevailing view, promoted by their charismatic celibate leader, Adam One, is to remain pacifists, since meeting threat with threat would violate their integrity. Significant opposition comes from one of the male elders, the charismatic non- celibate Zeb, who favours strategic militancy and becomes a kind of freedom fighter. When their intel- ligence suggests the pandemic is approaching, sides are taken. What does Atwood favour: Adam One's pacifism or Zeb's militancy? We don't know, as she's even handed, and always pragmatic.

The novel has two female pro-tagonists, Ren and Toby, whose different perspectives dominate the story, along with Adam One's homilies, and the many magni- ficient hymns that narrate the Gardener's theol- ogy. (There's a CD you can buy, Hymns of the God's Gardeners, which I play all the time. My favourite hymn is "Let me not be proud.") Ren was brought to the Gardeners as a young girl. She befriends an orphan, Amanda, and they grow up with each other, assimilating Gardener values, but also dis- cover a shared potential for treachery: "How easy it is, treachery," Ren reflects later, "You just slide into it." She's eventually forced to leave the sect, and, after graduating from a liberal arts college, she becomes a trapeze dancer in a high-end sex club, Scales and Tails, where she survives the pandemic, while locked away in quarantine for several months. Amanda eventually rescues her from quarantine, but they're forced to leave the deserted club, in search of other survivors, and they're soon captured by a sadis- tic cannibal Painballer.

Several years before the pandemic, the Gardeners had rescued Toby from the same Painballer, who'd been using her as a sex slave and was about to kill her and eat a few choice bits (apparently Painballers are fond of their dead slaves' kidneys). 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 Painballer discovers and pursues her. She's given a new physical identity and finds work in a luxury spa for women, epony- mously named AnooYoo. She survives the pandemic, quarantined in the spa. After several months of isola- tion, she discovers Ren on her doorstep, near death, and nurses her back to health, but they're also driven by necessity to leave the deserted spa, to seek others, and to try to save Amanda from the Painballer.

The different perspectives of Ren and Toby are best read alongside the perspectives of other female pro-tagonists in Atwood's earlier novels. They're on a journey into their freedom and their constraint. Who's out there? Can they save Amanda? Or will they need to be saved them- selves? The omniscient narrator makes a poignant observation, near the end of the novel, just as Toby 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, which Atwood tells in the next and last volume.

In MaddAddam (2013), we have something different, not the end of the world but a new beginning. The novel's economy is remarkable, as Atwood leaves out anything non-essential. Her ideas are large but her scale is small, since she's dealing with remnants. The surviving bad guys are represented by two Painballers, off-stage most of the time. The surviving good guys are made up of a few former God's Gardeners, a dozen or so MaddAddamites, and the romantic Snowman–J immy, who's seriously ill and delirious for most of the novel. Apart from these humans, there are the genetically-modified humanoids, the genetically-
modified flora and fauna, and the permanently-altered ecosystem quietly absorbing the ruins of what passed for civilisation before the pandemic.

In case we hadn’t noticed, this is a redemption story, subversive but salvific, in the tradition of North American religious allegory. If it’s best to not make too much of that observation, don’t dismiss it either. Atwood’s point is that salvation is a chameleon. It changes colour to blend in with its surroundings. So it’s harder to see and more difficult to kill.

I love the way Atwood saves Toby, salvages the religious vision of the God’s Gardeners, and gives her the central role of narrating the next creation story, which the romantic Snowman–Jimmy couldn’t have narrated. That creation story is what philologists and anthropologists call Theogonic, since the ages of the more recent creation stories—of the Tragic Hero, of the Exiled Soul, of Adam—are well and truly over; however, if she invents (or re-invents) this Theogony, it’s composed of her human experience. She’s simply making sense of that experience, putting it into an oral form, so it can be passed on. I also love the way Atwood develops the Toby and Zeb relationship, which is easier to understand if you’ve been keeping up with relationships in her earlier novels, with Iris and her men, with Grace and her men, with all women and all men, each of which has elements of pain about them.

Unpredictable things happen, when humans attempt to usurp the gods, or God, or try to be anything more than human. One of the most powerful and poignant moments in the novel, for me, was when the malevolent, powerful pigoons, the genetically-modified pigs, went from being enemies to allies, and spoke to the humans through a young Craker named Blackbeard. They say they are concerned about their future. They want the killing of their species to stop. We can no longer call this an appeal to a common humanity, since it’s become something else, something different. I also love the way Atwood subverts Crake’s legacy. We know he was a genius, in an über kind of way, but even über genius has its limits. Did he think he could predict the form his legacy would take and control how it would evolve? How much of this future did he intend?

Did Crake intend to control his Crakers from beyond the grave? Who were they? Who they could become? Did he know they’d go on to develop their language and evolve their religion through Toby and Blackbeard? Did he know they’d eventually interbreed with the remnants of the God’s Gardeners and the remaining MaddAddamites? The latter helped to genetically-design the Crakers, in Paradise dome, before Crake launched the pandemic. Did they have any idea they’d eventually become the genetic experiment, outside the dome, after the pandemic? While we can only speculate about Atwood’s speculation, one basic principle is certain, which isn’t speculative, since Atwood constantly reminds us of its reality. Her speculative future is our real past and our real present, as she says in her acknowledgments: “Although MaddAddam is a work of fiction, it does not include any technologies or biobehinds that do not already exist, are not under construction, or are not possible in theory.”

Where will Atwood take us next? Actually, she’s in the middle of another project, Positron, being published in instalments, a chapter at a time, like those nineteenth century serialisations. It’s a clever idea—publishing e-book instalments as a prelude to the final book—which harnesses her interest in new technologies. Like her LongPen, a remote signing device which allows her to autograph books, anywhere in the world, during an internet conversation with her fans. As with any innovative technology, LongPen had its teething problems, as has the innovative way of publishing Positron. Those serialising Victorian authors lived in a simpler world. They wrote for a single print medium. They had regular deadlines which helped them focus. There are many media now, and Positron has obviously been competing with Atwood’s other priorities. It’s frustrating waiting for instalments to appear, irregularly, and I’ve already forgotten the previous instalments.

I’ll wait, though, because I’m a loyal fan, regardless of whether I’m wearing my public hat, academic hat, or priestly hat. This last hat, a biretta, is interesting, as far as Atwood’s speculative fiction is concerned, as many assume I should object to her in some way, since isn’t she supposed to oppose everything Christianity stands for? We don’t know whether she does or doesn’t. As it happens, my parish includes several Atwood fans, some of whom teach English in Christian high schools, and we’re happy to include her within the landscape of Christianity as we understand it. It isn’t that we’re trying to claim her extraordinary vision for ourselves. It’s more that her extraordinary vision doesn’t necessarily exclude Christianity, although many of her readers probably wish it did. Sometimes, in fact, during Benediction, while kneeling at the altar rails, I feel her presence, and God’s presence, smiling at me.

Michael Giffin is a priest in the Anglican diocese of Sydney. He also wrote on Margaret Atwood in the April 2010 issue. Margaret Atwood’s latest anthology of short stories, Stone Mattress, was released in September 2014.