

urban women, often with creative impulses, fighting to define themselves in society. Deep moral and ethical inquiries underpin all of her work.

Born in 1939, Atwood grew up in northern Ontario and Quebec. Because her father was an entomologist, the family spent much of Atwood's childhood in the forest, with books as the primary entertainment, before moving to Toronto. Atwood then earned her undergraduate degree from the University of Toronto and her master's degree from Radcliffe College. Her first publication was a book of poetry, the award-winning *The Circle Game* (1964). Five years later, she published her first novel, the "protofeminist" *The Edible Woman* (1969), about gender stereotypes. Her breakout novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, was short-listed for the Booker Prize and gave her a worldwide readership. Since then, Atwood has won or been short-listed for numerous literary awards, including the Arthur C. Clark Award, the Governor General's Award, and the Booker Prize. She lives with her husband, novelist Graeme Gibson, in Toronto and Ontario.

## THE SPECULATIVE FICTION

### *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985)

- ◆ ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD
- ◆ GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD
- ◆ BOOKER PRIZE FINALIST



More than just a feminist work of speculative fiction, the best-selling *Handmaid's Tale* offers a dystopian vision on par with George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Atwood explores the subjugation of women, the politics of reproduction (particularly after the triumphs of the 1970s, including legalized abortion), and totalitarian regimes while critiquing contemporary feminism and fundamentalist religious movements. The novel remains one of the most powerful critiques of totalitarianism and one of the most powerful explorations of social control and gender politics.

**THE STORY:** A totalitarian theocracy has overthrown the U.S. government, and in the new Republic of Gilead, in a reversal of women's rights, women are assigned to various classes—the childless wives, the housekeepers, and, in a world of declining birthrates, the highly valuable reproductive handmaids. In late 20th-century Massachusetts (in 1985, the near future), a fertile woman has been arrested for her marriage to a divorced man. Sent to a retraining center to learn her new role, the handmaid, renamed Of-fred, is brainwashed and, with no rights to her own body,

In *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Canadian author Margaret Atwood imagined a dystopian future where genetic technology supplanted human civilization. *The Year of the Flood*, her newest novel and companion piece, continues this nightmarish vision. It takes place on an Earth where a terrible pandemic has annihilated most of human life, where genetically engineered forms dominate, and the few people left—including a sex-club dancer and a woman devoted to the God's Gardeners, a religion meshing science and Judeo-Christianity—try to survive.

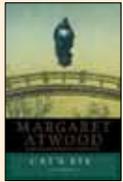
Canada's preeminent novelist and one of the era's most versatile, prophetic, and accessible writers, Atwood has written more than four dozen books in various genres—from romance to poetry, criticism, historical fiction, social satire, speculative fiction, short stories, children's books, and non-fiction. Perhaps best known for the novels *The Handmaid's Tale* (1983), a critique of contemporary feminism; *Alias Grace* (1996), which reimagines a real-life murder; and the Booker Prize-winning *The Blind Assassin* (2000), Atwood explores universal issues—from good and evil to freedom of expression, environmental devastation, sexual politics, and feminism. Indeed, many of her novels feature modern

is forced to try to bear children for the Commander and his wife. Offred narrates the story of her past—her job, her husband, and her child—while recounting a chilling tale of the present.

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL NOVEL

### Cat's Eye (1988)

◆ BOOKER PRIZE FINALIST



Written mostly in flashbacks, *Cat's Eye* reflects on how the treacherous influences of shifting childhood friendships and traumas influence adult identity. Atwood's most autobiographical novel (her protagonist is the daughter of a forest entomologist), *Cat's Eye* explores feminism, art movements, and the subjective nature of time, memory, and identity between the 1940s and 1980s. Although not as extreme as *The Handmaid's Tale*, it offers another critique of a conformist society.

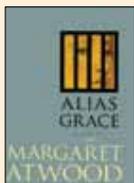
**THE STORY:** When middle-aged, avant-garde Canadian painter Elaine Risley attends a retrospective show of her work in her hometown of Toronto, the changed city leads her to reflect on her youth. Her painful childhood relationship with the cruel Cordelia, whose friendship she craved after traveling around with her itinerant family, comes into sharp focus. Still affected by Cordelia's cruelty and detached from life, Elaine struggles to come to terms with her own identity as a woman, artist, and wife—to understand her victimhood and move on from her haunted past.

## THE TRUE CRIME NOVEL

### Alias Grace (1996)

◆ GILLER PRIZE

◆ BOOKER PRIZE FINALIST



One of the most sensationalized stories of the mid-19th century involved the murders of a man and his housekeeper. Atwood, who wrote about Grace Marks in a 1974 TV scenario produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, revisited the subject 20 years later. Although she does not cast new light on the mystery of the crime—many of the details remain unknown—Atwood offers a compelling psychological portrait of the accused woman and new interpretations of the story, with many fictional elements thrown in.

**THE STORY:** In 1843, 16-year-old Irish immigrant Grace Marks was tried and convicted of the murder of her employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper and lover, Nancy Montgomery. While the enigmatic Grace, who changed her story numerous times, spent 30 years in jails and asylums, public opinion remained divided over her role in the murders: was she a victim of society, or a true seduc-

ress? Atwood reconstructs Grace's experience as she paints a chilling portrait of prison and asylum life and creates a psychological portrait of an unreliable narrator working with a young doctor to uncover her repressed memories.

## THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

### The Blind Assassin (2000)

◆ BOOKER PRIZE



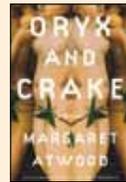
This Booker Prize-winning work of historical fiction, set in present-day Canada, looks back over a century of Canadian history to tell one family's saga. Stories within stories, newspaper accounts, and a nested novel create a complicated, rich story about self-delusion, complexity, and isolation.

**THE STORY:** Ten days after World War II, Iris Chase's 25-year-old sister Laura drove her car off a bridge. Iris, now a lonely octogenarian, recalls the major events and experiences of her long life—including her relationship with her sister and her unhappy marriage to a ruthless husband. Nested in her story is an excerpt from Laura's posthumous science fiction novel, *The Blind Assassin* (1947), about a wealthy woman's doomed tryst with a radical, much-poorer man. Alternating stories shed light on the social and political milieu, Iris's troubled family history, and the secrets, betrayals, and tragedies that marked her family's life. But nothing is quite what it seems.

## THE DYSTOPIAN NOVEL

### Oryx and Crake (2003)

◆ BOOKER PRIZE FINALIST



Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* is a dystopian work of speculative fiction/adventure romance. However, written almost two decades later, the novel places greater emphasis on genetic technology, social upheaval, and cataclysmic climate change.

**THE STORY:** In a postapocalyptic future, the hermit Jimmy "Snowman," one of the last people on Earth, struggles to stay alive in a world populated by genetically engineered animals. He resides close to the humanlike Crakers, who rely on him for knowledge of the past world of computers, biotech advances, and devastating plagues. While Snowman looks for supplies to keep from starving to death, he searches for answers and tries to understand his new world. He recalls his best friend, the genius Crake, inventor of the Crakers; Oryx, the sexually abused love of his life; and the events leading up to the cataclysm that produced this wasteland. ■