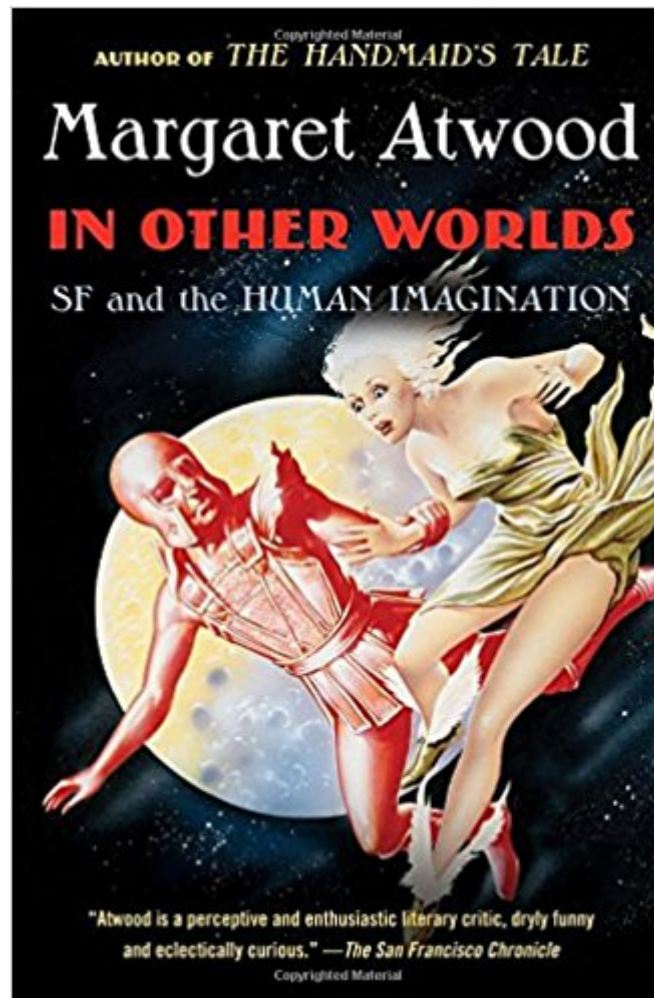




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In Other Worlds: SF And The Human Imagination



Synopsis

The author of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* engagingly explores her lifelong relationship to science fiction, both as a reader and as a writer. At a time when the borders between literary genres are increasingly porous, Margaret Atwood maps the richly fertile crosscurrents of speculative and science fiction, slipstream, utopias and dystopias, and fantasy, and muses on their roots in the age-old human impulse to imagine new worlds. She shares the evolution of her personal fascination with this branch of literature, from her days as a child inventing a race of flying superhero rabbits, to her graduate study of the Victorian ancestors of SF to her appreciations of such influential writers as Marge Piercy, Rider Haggard, Ursula K. LeGuin, Kazuo Ishiguro, Aldous Huxley, and Jonathan Swift. As humorous and charming as it is insightful and provocative, *Other Worlds* brilliantly illuminates “the wilder storms on the wilder seas of invention.”

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Customer Reviews

“Atwood is a perceptive and enthusiastic literary critic, dryly funny and eclectically curious.”
• The San Francisco Chronicle “Interesting, entertaining and thoughtful. . . . Atwood fans, sci-fi fans, indeed fiction fans, have reason to rejoice. In *Other Worlds* is a delightful read full of Atwood’s well-honed prose and sly sense of humor.”
• The Miami Herald “Margaret Atwood is a valiant champion [of

science fiction]. . . . Her prose is addictive. . . . She crafts sentences with grace and pitch-perfect highbrow humor. • The Plain Dealer • “A smart and often playful book. • Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel • “In Other Worlds is an eminently readable and accessible clarification of [Atwood’s] relationship with SF and the SF tradition. . . . The lectures are insightful and cogently argued with a neat comic turn of phrase. . . . [Atwood’s] enthusiasm and level of intellectual engagement are second to none. • Financial Times • “It’s a delight to see Atwood revisit Mischiefeland, both because of the lovely details she remembers (the flying bunnies kept cats as pets and ate only ice cream), and because this retelling leads Atwood to speculate on the origins • cultural, literary, mythic, religious • of the science fiction genre. . . . In Other Worlds reminds us that all genres are capable of deepening and developing this one human story. • The Boston Globe • “Atwood gives us a bracing tour of the writers and books she admires (like Ursula Le Guin and • She • by H. Rider Haggard), her interest in utopia (a mix of utopia and dystopia) in her fiction, as well as some autobiography. . . . Explains how the genre fits into a continuum dating to the world’s oldest myths and continuing today with authors who use the genre to examine social ills, not run away from them. • Los Angeles Times • “Atwood certainly has read a fair bit of and thought deeply about science fiction, and she shares generously with her readers. • The Christian Science Monitor • “Fascinating. . . . Vibrant. . . . Compelling. . . . Not only is In Other Worlds powerfully readable and mentally refreshing, it’s also one heck of a joyride through the limitless imagination of a national (and international) treasure. • Bookreporter

• Margaret Atwood’s books have been published in over forty countries. She is the author of more than forty books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays. In addition to The Handmaid’s Tale, her novels include Cat’s Eye, shortlisted for the Booker Prize; Alias Grace, which won the Giller Prize in Canada and the Premio Mondello in Italy; The Blind Assassin, winner of the 2000 Booker Prize; Oryx and Crake, shortlisted for the 2003 Booker Prize; and her most recent novel, The Year of the Flood. She lives in Toronto with writer Graeme Gibson. • www.margaretatwood.ca

You can always expect Margaret Atwood to come at a topic sideways, and this collection of essays is no exception. It opens with a series of three evocative pieces on the relationship between the human imagination and the development of a genre many only begrudgingly title and shelve as

"science fiction." What sets these early essays apart is Atwood's considered interpretation that the lines between genres are not nearly as hard and fast as we might think. Furthermore, she sees origins of the drive to write science fiction and fantasy differently than other authors, because she sees it a natural outgrowth the habits and activities of childhood. One theory she offers from her own childhood, that since she kept failing to build a windmill from her Tinkertoy set (she missed some of the necessary parts), she built fantastical structures and creatures instead. Atwood continues this (might we call it Jungian?) analysis of science fiction writing throughout. She sees archetypes washing between the various genres--comparing superheroes to Greek mythology and modern fantasy. She sees her own early imaginative world influencing what she writes as an adult. And in one of her most intriguing theses, she coins the term "ustopia": "A word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia--the imagined perfect society and its opposite--because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other" (66). I find this incredibly helpful, because as we know certain individuals thrive in dystopias and find their place there, whereas every utopia is only the perfect society for those who belong to it, certainly not those who feel excluded from it. Finally, Atwood in this early section helpfully defines "myth": "Myths are stories that are central to their cultures and that are taken seriously enough that people organize their rituals and emotional lives around them, and can even start wars over them" (55). Atwood offers this definition in a wide-ranging essay that considers origin myths as well as contemporary sci-fi movies, and everything in between. It's really a lovely essay. The middle section of this book is a collection of short reviews Atwood has written over the course of her career, all on "classics" in science fiction (H. Rider Haggard, Ursula K. Le Guin, George Orwell, H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and Jonathan Swift but also a bit more surprisingly Kazuo Ishiguro and Bill McKibben). I found this section very helpful because it introduced me to some important works with which I was unfamiliar, and also expanded my cartography of what I might map as "science fiction." Somehow the full range of what she included is perfectly indicative of the philosophy of science fiction she offered in the first section. Finally, she concludes with six crisp selections from her own fiction. Although these don't move the argument forward per se, they do illustrate what Atwood has been pondering in her book. It isn't every day that science fiction readers get the pleasure of reading sustained reflection on the craft by one of its outstanding practitioners. I recommend this book highly for that reason.

Margaret Atwood is one of my favorite writers. And, though I've enjoyed many of her novels, the top of the list would have to be her SF-influenced novels: *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake*. So, I was very interested to see what she had to say about this genre that, despite its literary gains,

remains often disrespected by the establishment. As it turns out, her thinking follows along the same lines as mine, making it very difficult for me not to like this book. My experience of getting into reading echoed hers, though with some different authors. Her thinking about Orwell and Huxley, two writers I much admire, is quite similar to mine. Also, she has useful things to say about a number of important writers in the genre such as Wells, Poe, and LeGuin. Even better, for me, was her discussion of writers I knew little or nothing about. I knew of the character Allan Quatermain, for example, but couldn't have told you the author who created him is H. Rider Haggard. And, clearly, Haggard's novel *She* had a great impact on Atwood. I feel almost embarrassed to say that I'd never heard of this novel before. But good books lead you to other good books and now I've almost finished reading Haggard's book (and seen the movie, no less!). So, I have to compliment Ms. Atwood on opening my eyes. In fact, my only complaints are small ones. First, the endnotes of each section would have been more useful as footnotes. (Or the text should have had marks indicating an associated note.) Second, and more importantly, in some ways, this is a book too late. With top writers like Cormac McCarthy, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Jim Crace (and Ms. Atwood herself) taking on the field, SF is bordering on respectable. This book would have had more impact on me 30 years ago, when I felt my love of SF was more isolating. Still, I'm glad to have the book now.

A collection of works and commentary by the impressive intellect of Margaret Atwood. If you are a science fiction fan, this is well worth your reading.

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