

A WORD
AFTER A
word
after a
WORD
is power.
-Margaret Atwood



ENG 4200:
MARGARET ATWOOD
POETRY & FICTION
DR. HOPE JENNINGS



**UNIT THREE: TRAUMA AND PERSPECTIVE IN
HISTORICAL FICTION**

TRAUMA

"But some people can't tell where it hurts. They can't calm down. They can't ever stop howling."

–*The Blind Assassin*, Chap. 1, p. 2

- According to Sonya Andermahr in her introduction to *Trauma Narratives and Herstory* (2013), contemporary literature has become “increasingly interested in the potential of trauma narratives to disclose silenced accounts of history, experiment with the ways in which trauma can be represented, and attempt to deal with these experiences of human suffering” (3).
- Andermahr explains that trauma narratives “bear witness to and speak about traumatic experiences and how storytelling and representational processes of suffering and pain contribute to the subject’s survival and the ‘healing of hidden wounds’” (4).
- Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* (2000) and her three preceding novels, *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Robber Bride* (1993), and *Cat’s Eye* (1988), have been read by many literary critics as trauma narratives (or, narratives about trauma).
- Certainly, traumatic experiences of the main characters in all of these novels play a significant role in their childhoods, how they remember the past, and how they tell stories about the past.

PERSPECTIVE & STORYTELLING

One of Atwood's enduring interests is in how perspective—how we see the world—not only affects our ways of experiencing the world but also how we tell stories, which in turn shape our realities. For Atwood, fact and fiction are closely intertwined in most types of writing; telling stories can change how we imagine the world; changes in the world can change the kinds of stories we tell.

“The writer is a licensed liar. The difference between the writer and a real liar is that the writer puts on the front, ‘Fiction’, and usually people then believe it’s really disguised autobiography, whereas with autobiographers they believe that the person is telling fibs.”

~ Atwood, Interview with Ann Heilmann and Debbie Taylor, Hay-on-Wye, 27 May 2001



“You may not be able to alter reality, but you can alter your attitude towards it, and this, paradoxically, alters reality. Try it and see.”

— MARGARET ATWOOD
University of Toronto, 1983

In many of her later novels, Atwood begins to engage more explicitly in metafictional narratives, expressing a hyper-awareness of how stories are constructed, of her own fictions as fictions, and how identity itself is a kind of fiction constructed by what we choose to see, believe, and tell.

HISTORICAL FICTION

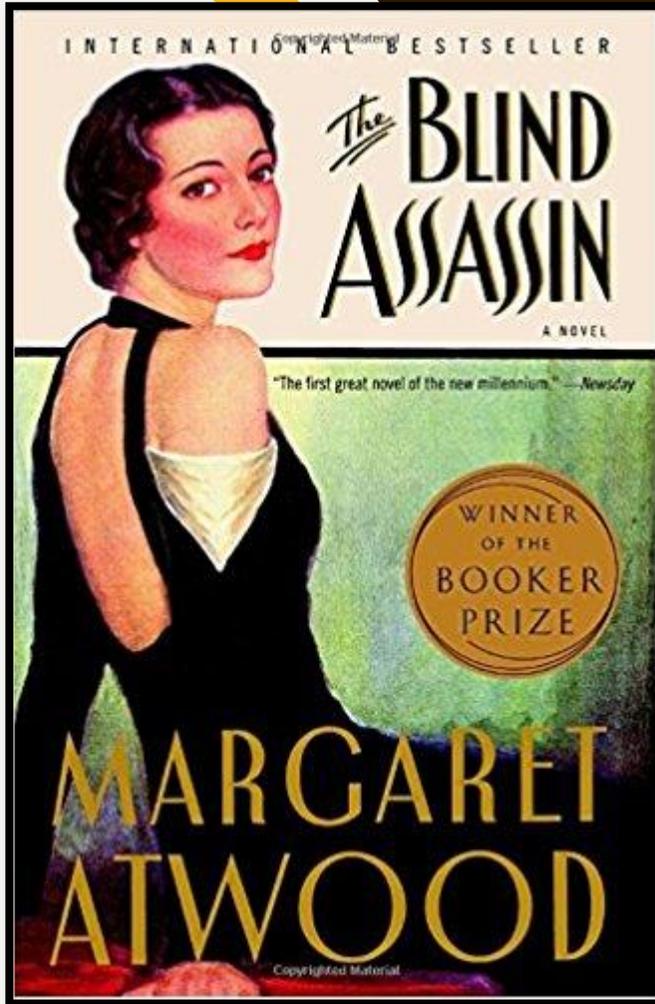
With *Alias Grace* and *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood also engages for the first time with the genre of historical fiction as a vehicle for exploring the relationship between perspective and storytelling—though, of course *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* is an earlier instance of Atwood writing historical narrative (and *Alias Grace* is itself a kind of return to Susanna Moodie, set during the same time period and based on the murder trial of a real person, Grace Marks, whom Moodie writes about in one of her memoirs).

“When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else.”

From a feminist angle, Atwood is especially interested in exploring how historical fiction can work as an effective narrative strategy for telling “herstory,” which works to:

- challenge official versions of history through deconstructing and revising hegemonic discourses and narratives;
- expose the exclusion of female voices, experiences, and versions of history and raise questions about definitions of women's identities and social roles;
- explore strategies of healing that make visible a history of loss, violence, and survival, and give voice to those who have been silenced;
- form new identities and an ethical dimension of relating to the past and others.

THE BLIND ASSASSIN (2000)



OVERVIEW

The Blind Assassin is a complexly structured historical novel, consisting of three narratives nesting within each other, and each of these engaging various genres: autobiography, memoir, family history, pulp romance and science fiction. The timespan of the main novel is from World War I through the end of the 1990s—when the elderly Iris Chase writes down her family history for the benefit of her estranged granddaughter Sabrina. The sub-novel is also entitled *The Blind Assassin*, about two clandestine lovers, simply known as the man and the woman; within this narrative is yet a third novel, a sci-fi story written by the man. It becomes clear that the events in the sub-novel run parallel to the lives of Iris and her sister Laura and that, at the end, the two stories intersect and become one.

Awarded the prestigious Man Booker Prize (2000). *Time* magazine named it the best novel of 2000 and included it in its list of the 100 greatest English-language novels since 1923

SETTING

- The main novel is set in the fictional Ontario town of Port Ticonderoga and in Toronto (1930s and 40s).
- Port Ticonderoga is where the Chase family fortune is made and lost, where Iris and Laura are born and raised, and where many of the key players die. It is also the location of Avilion, the Chase family estate, which represents a paradise and a hell for both sisters.



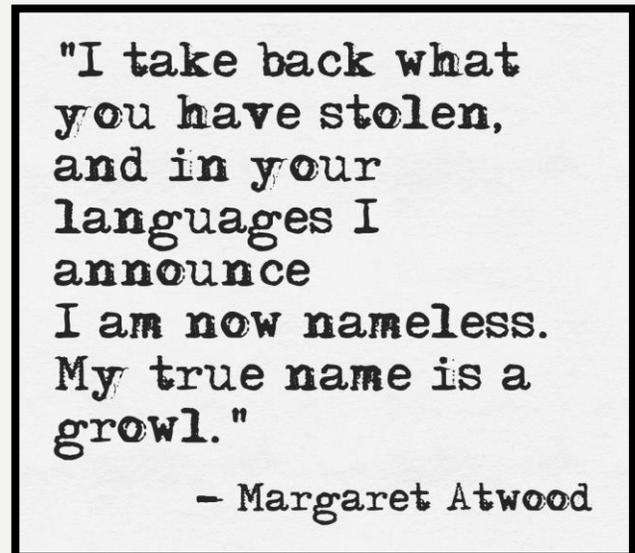
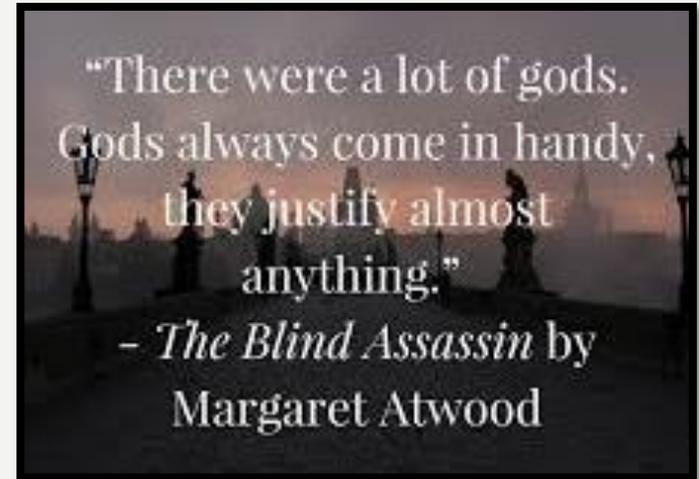
Windermere Hotel, Lake District, Cumbria—built in 1895



Toronto is where Iris lives with Richard Griffen, a marriage arranged by her father to try and keep his business afloat. In the sub-novel, the only setting is Toronto. It is usually the seedier side of the city that readers experience, which symbolizes the act of the affair but also the class division between the lovers.

POINT OF VIEW, LANGUAGE, AND MEANING

- The main novel is a mixture of first person narrative and third person limited omniscient; much of it told in the voice and remembrance of Iris Chase Griffen; the sub-novel is told from the woman's point of view but not in first person.
- The language and meaning in the main novel is simple and straightforward, though Laura's tendency to take many catch phrases literally and ask questions like, "Does God lie?" indicates the opacity of language and its own tendency to be slippery in usage and meaning.
- Arguably, the most interesting pieces of language and meaning are found within the sub-novel, as Atwood plays with pulp romance and sci-fi conventions.
- For the man telling this story, ultimately it does not matter what language is spoken or what planet is described—people with more will always oppress those with less, which gets to the heart of one of Atwood's central themes.



PRIMARY THEMES

- **Oppression & Sacrificial Victims**
 - Women's experiences and identities
 - Marriage as incarceration (fairy tale motif)
 - Rape and sexual/domestic abuse
 - Aging and women's invisibility
 - War = "Supreme Sacrifice" (150)
 - The sacrifice of soldiers in war linked to Laura's obsession with martyrdom
 - links to Atwood's own persistent exploration of female victimhood or self-immolation
 - Class and Labor
 - Economic oppression and gender oppression
 - Also, the sacrifice of the working classes to fulfil the needs/greed of the elite



- **Oppression, Violence, and Trauma**
 - Maternal abandonment/loss
 - linked to sight of dead fetus (91-92)
 - Iris as "bad" mother (437) – because she was a "bad" sister?
 - Insidious trauma of repeated abuse and trauma as public spectacle (448)
 - Trauma of survival (473)
 - 20th century an age of war/trauma (477-78)

PRIMARY THEMES



- **Storytelling** (343-44, 349)
 - Acts as bond (and division) between lovers
 - Strategy for slowing down time (death) – Scheherazade (masculine version of Grace Marks in *Alias Grace*)
 - Pulp/Pop culture as political allegory or propaganda (400)
 - Misreading fiction for truth and vice versa (435)
 - Telling self-stories – happy vs. tragic endings, alternate histories and futures (464)
- **History & Memory – Vision & Blindness**
 - Truth, lies, repression, refusal to see/understand
 - Hand-tinting – “coloring the past” (193)
 - Omissions/repression of the past (395)
 - Invisibility of the past; only seen in hindsight (304)
 - Competing versions of the past (370)
 - Compulsion for truth/knowledge (494)
 - Justice vs. Revenge (497-513)

SECONDARY THEMES

- **Destiny:** It seems that every character to a degree has little or no control over his or her destiny. Destiny is not the same as fate, which is almost happenstance; a twist in one's world. Destiny, on the other hand, is believed to be pre-ordained. For example, Iris believes she was destined to be Laura's care-taker while Laura is certain she is destined to die young.
- **Desolation:** The novel opens with Laura's suicide, which might be interpreted as an act of desolation—the removal of hope, faith and spirit. To be desolate is to have a broken spirit, and both Laura and Iris are confronted with this kind of loss throughout their lives.
- **Family & Class:** Family pride or honor is intertwined with class status throughout the novel. Keeping up appearances, hiding family secrets, remaining in loveless and abusive marriages—all of these are driven by the demands of belonging to “high-class society.” Atwood places this in tension with historical class divisions/warfare/oppression, mirrored in the news articles, clothing as a symbol of one's class, and the lovers' narrative, in which the man and woman belong to different classes.
- **Possession:** This appears in three ways: possession of a person, possession of status, and material possession. More than one character possesses or tries to possess another; status is a commodity for trade and hoarding; and material possessions add an extra dimension to possession of status. Atwood also explores specifically how women and children are economic and physical possessions.

MOTIFS

- **Hands** – linked to possession, theft, and stealing
 - How do hands appear in the text? How does Atwood play on the connections between “sinister” and “left-handedness”? How is this motif linked to Atwood’s poem, “The Right Hands Fight the Left”? In what ways are the left and right hands symbolic of the Chase sisters?
- **Photographs** – linked to history/memory and vision/blindness
 - What is the significance of the photograph taken at the Chase family picnic? How does it encapsulate many of the other themes and motifs in the text? How might we connect this photograph with the one in Atwood’s poem, “A Photograph Taken of Me”?



- **Cellars & Attics** – linked to family secrets, trauma, and vision
 - How are these spaces representative of the womb and/or grave? In what ways do they represent characters’ desires to *not* be seen, to remain hidden? Are these protective or dangerous spaces? How do these spaces appear in other works we’ve read by Atwood?

The only way you can write the truth is to assume that what you set down will never be read. Not by any other person, and not even by yourself at some later date.

Otherwise you begin excusing yourself. You must see the writing as emerging like a long scroll of ink from the index finger of your right hand; you must see your left hand erasing it.

-Margaret Atwood

STRUCTURE



Tamara de Lempicka, "Autoportrait" (1929)

- *The Blind Assassin* is told through the structure of a sub-novel within the main novel and a story within the sub-novel. Through this device, readers get to learn who Laura Chase is perceived to be by others, what Iris Chase does to stay sane in an insane marriage and the truth behind who wrote *The Blind Assassin*. The main novel uses quotation marks to delineate dialogue, while the sub-novel never uses them—the words "he says" and "she says" are the only tools by which readers have to identify pieces of dialogue.
- The main story, told from the point of view of Laura's elder sister, Iris, weaves the Chase family history through and amid the chapters of the sub-novel. While the two stories seem to be at odds at first, they carry along on a similar time line until the tales intersect and become one at the time of Laura's death. Laura's death opens the novel, and her death and notification to Iris is repeated at the end.

STRUCTURE

- Interspersed throughout the novel are news clippings from local papers that detail public life in Toronto; some are society gossip pieces and some are political, but all are connected in some way to the main characters.
- Atwood has said that the form or structure of *The Blind Assassin* was influenced by early 20th century collages, in which newspaper excerpts were glued onto canvas and then painted around and over—thus framing two ways of representing reality, each of which contradicted the other but also complemented it.



While reading, identify some of the different “kinds” of writing in *The Blind Assassin*. How do these multiple levels or forms interact with one another? What does the use of this narrative technique reveal about Atwood's methods of storytelling, particularly in relation to the themes of history, memory, and trauma?

GENRE—METAFICTION

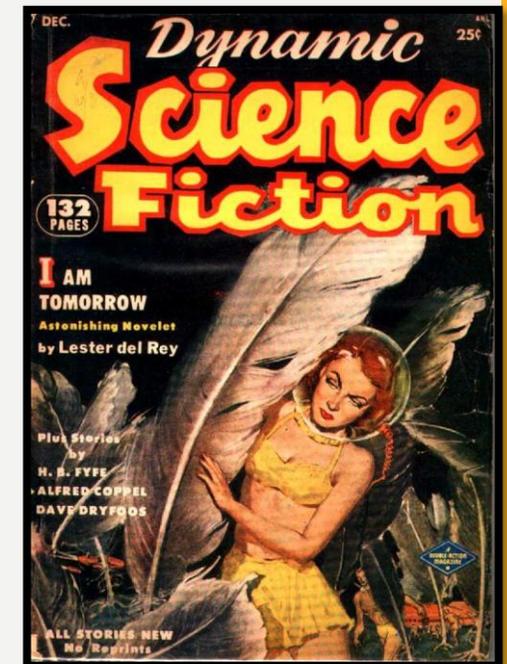
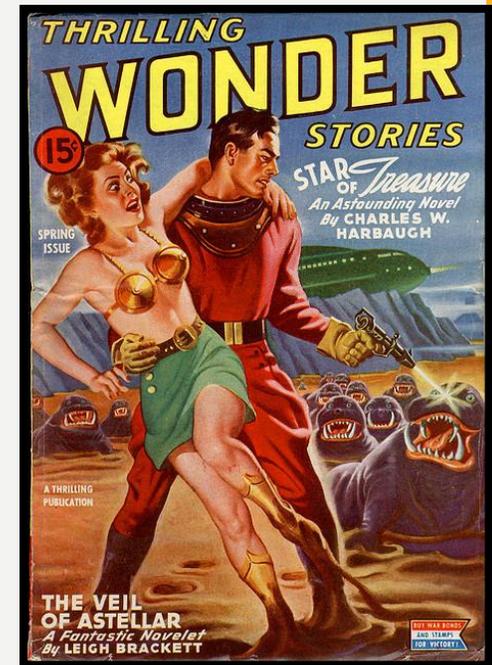
In *The Blind Assassin* there are three narratives titled "The Blind Assassin," arranged like Chinese boxes (though also "interstitched"—Atwood's term), and each explores a different genre.



- The outermost box is Atwood's novel as a whole, the gigantic life narrative of Iris Chase Griffen, who is at pains to reveal her secrets in a complex, oblique way. Her deceptively linear, realistic memoir focuses particularly on her childhood and early adulthood with her sister Laura, who apparently wrote a novel published posthumously by Iris.
- Laura's novel is the second or middle "Blind Assassin" text, the subject of which is a forbidden romance in Depression-era Canada between a young political agitator on the lam and his upper-crust girlfriend, both unnamed.
- Apart from sex and wary conversations, their furtive rendezvous produce installments of the third, innermost "Blind Assassin" tale, a science-fiction concoction with which the fugitive seeks to hold his lover's attention, rather like a male Scheherazade.

GENRE—(META) SCIENCE FICTION

- This interior, incomplete, serialized novel is a study in the evolution of a sci-fi plot, as well as questions concerning gender, authorship, and narrative style.
- The man is a published writer of pulp sci-fi, and at nearly every tryst he presents his beloved with several narrative elements and possibilities, inviting her participation in the construction of his tale.
- The woman expresses preference for less technological and more romantic options, and while she usually defers to the man's experience in the genre, at several critical points she offers a dramatically different version of his tale, a female rewriting of the male conventions of science fiction and fantasy.
- Atwood, through her lover-storytellers, also imagines another clandestine love affair that mirrors the lovers' situation: this couple are a sacrificial virgin, daughter of the elite (her tongue cut out to avoid any protests), and a blind hired killer, one of a cadre of enslaved children.
- The lovers together escape the doomed city, which is about to be crushed by invading barbarians, and then face other challenges; finally, two conclusions—female/happy vs. male/tragic—compete, as the lovers disagree on the proper ending for the story born of their assignations.



CRITICAL RECEPTION

- Reviewers have varied widely in their opinions of the quality of the innermost "Blind Assassin" tale as science fiction, the degree of success in its integration into the larger narratives of the same name, and the usefulness of that strand in Atwood's tapestry as a whole.
- Some reviews have paid the science-fiction tale little or no attention, or have given peculiarly muddled and flawed little summaries almost as an aside to the dominant narratives of Iris's life and Laura's novel.
- The sci-fi stories, to be sure, comprise less than ten percent of the total narrative; they are included in only six of the fifteen sections of Atwood's novel—however, whether "pulp" or "literature" (it has been called both "drivel" and "masterful"), the science-fiction segments of *The Blind Assassin* play a crucial role as a structural key to the many-layered fiction into which they are folded.
- Further, the multidimensional blindness at the heart of the core story joins many other thematic elements—sacrificial women, doomed lovers, vicious exploitations, all sorts of assassinations, silence and secrets, flight and freedom, death, memory, and myth—reverberating importantly through the two "Blind Assassin" narratives that encase it (and also through Atwood's entire body of work).
- In *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood uses and subverts science fiction to play with ideas of authorship, to dissect social and historical realities, and to present readers with a powerfully allegorical and cautionary tale.