Margaret Atwood

- b. 1939 Ottawa, Ontario
- B.A. English Victoria University, Toronto
- M.A. English Radcliffe College (1962)
  - Begins but does not finish PhD at Harvard
- Journal: Margaret Atwood Studies (2007)

Selected Works:
- The Edible Woman (1969)
- Surfacing (1972)
- The Handmaid's Tale (1985)
- The Year of the Flood (2009)
- MaddAddam (2013)
- Future library project (2114)

"Science fiction has monsters and spaceships; speculative fiction could really happen."
Science fiction vs. speculative fiction

What I mean by "science fiction" is those books that descend from HG Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, which treats of an invasion by tentacled Martians shot to Earth in metal canisters – things that could not possibly happen – whereas, for me, "speculative fiction" means plots that descend from Jules Verne's books about submarines and balloon travel and such – things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books.

*The Year of the Flood* online

- Things of Interest
- Reading List
- music
Climate fiction, or “cli fi,” can be a dreary genre. Storytellers like to make a grim business of climate change, populating their narratives with a humorless onslaught of death, destruction, drowned monuments, and starving children. Margaret Atwood is the conspicuous exception, somehow managing to tackle the subject, including these familiar elements, with deadpan wit and an irreverent playfulness, making it both more interesting and believable. The flood is coming, her *MaddAddam trilogy* promises, but there is hope.
Atwood goes “cli-fi” (Slate)

Atwood’s intensely literary, human focus on environmental issues and the future of the planet is shaping a more optimistic vision of cli-fi, one that sidesteps the blame games and the “will-they, won’t-they” battles over carbon emissions. Her response is clear and compelling: The planet is changing. We need creativity, ambition, and some powerful new stories to understand how we can change with it.
Frederic Jameson:

“It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism”

- *Seeds of Time*
The apocalypse is the only thing in our time that seems to have the capacity to shake the foundations of the system and “jumpstart” a history that now seems completely moribund—the only power left that could still create a renewed, free space in which another kind of life might be possible. Apocalypse (especially eco-apocalypse) is increasingly the frame we use for imagining an end to capitalism, precisely because (after the “end of history”) we can’t imagine any other possible way for it to end.
Apocalypse reminds us that the logic of consumer capitalism is not, in fact, timeless and eternal; there was a time before it, and there will be a time after it. History does, indeed, go on. [...] Oryx and Crake (2003) and its 2009 “midquel,” The Year of the Flood ... seek to open up new space for imagining a post-capitalist future through a satirical, science-fictional staging of capitalism’s final, catastrophic breakdown—and the subsequent emergence of other kinds of lives, after the end of history.
Questions for Discussion

- Atwood’s portrayal of religion has been called “seriocomic” – what role do you think religion plays in the novel? What’s Atwood’s attitude towards it? What’s its relationship to visions of apocalypse? **Key passages: 51-54 / 89-92 / 275-278 / 423-427**
  - How are the Gardeners different from “doomsday preppers”?

- Does cli-fi work better when using a flashback structure? (*Parable of the Sower, Year of the Flood*)
  - Or when the past is a memory? (*The Windup Girl, The Collapse of Western Civilization*)
  - Or when it’s set in the present or near-present? (*Flight Behavior, Forty Signs of Rain*)

- (via Darrek’s review) a Google search of the phrase “climate change humor,” results primarily in poorly put together right-wing memes which mock the entire belief in man’s impact on the global climate. So the grand question here is: **does the humor work?** Can a cli-fi novel take a seriously effective look at mankind’s negative environmental impact and still be incredibly humorous?

- Should the goal of cli-fi be to warn us about the future—so as to avoid it—or to teach us how to live in a drastically changed world?