

CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S WRITING ASSOCIATION (CWWA)

MARGARET ATWOOD BIRTHDAY SYMPOSIUM

18th November 2020, 3-6.30pm GMT,
Zoom

PROGRAMME



"Margaret Atwood at TRU on Feb. 15, 2013" by Thompson Rivers is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

3.00pm **Welcome and Zoom housekeeping**

3.10pm **Dr Fiona Tolan (*Liverpool John Moores University, U.K.*)**

'Twenty-first Century Gileads: Feminist Dystopian Fiction after Atwood'

35 years after its publication, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is more relevant and more urgent than ever. In this paper, I return to Atwood's modern classic and examine its influence and legacies in contemporary feminist dystopian writing. With some examination of Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* (2015) and Sophie Mackintosh's *The Water Cure* (2018), I consider how Atwood's second-wave feminist concerns around liberty, sisterhood, bodily autonomy and resistance to the patriarchy are re-imagined in the twenty-first century by a later generation of "post-feminist" women writers. Atwood's novel casts a long shadow. Like Atwood, Wood and Mackintosh place their female protagonists in a largely female-dominated space that is nevertheless delimited by the logics of patriarchy, and they explore the manner in which women can perpetuate the violence of patriarchal systems, even in the absence of men. By reading these three texts together, and alongside *The Testaments* (2019)—Atwood's own twenty-first century return to Gilead—I examine how women writers use dystopian narratives to explore contemporary feminist politics and to expose contemporary anxieties around the accretion and erosion of women's rights.

4.00pm **Break**

4.05pm **Professor Gina Wisker (*University of Brighton*)**

CFP: New Companion to Margaret Atwood

4.10pm **Dr. Alice Ridout (*Algoma University, Canada*)**

'Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Heart Goes Last*'

Dr. Alice Ridout's talk for the Contemporary Women's Writing Association, Margaret Atwood Mini Birthday Symposium is entitled "Revisiting the wellness imperative and the quantified self in end times: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Heart Goes Last*." This talk is part of a larger study Alice is currently undertaking to explore wellness in contemporary women's writing. Her talk will explore the relationship between personal wellness and the public good in these two dystopian and apocalyptic novels by Margaret Atwood. This analysis is informed by what we have learned during this COVID-19 pandemic in which health has very much become public and under surveillance. It also asks how gender complicates the intersection of

surveillance and wellness. On the one hand, women's bodies have been notoriously put under surveillance for the purposes of policing women's sexuality and agency. On the other hand, women's bodies are woefully under-studied and much widely-accepted medical knowledge has been based on studies only of men. How does Atwood help us think through this paradox of the simultaneous hyper-visibility and invisibility of women's bodies in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Heart Goes Last*?

5.00pm **Break**

5.10pm **Postgraduate and Early Career Researcher Showcase**

Chair: Dr Mariana Thomas (*University of Southampton*)

Laura-Jane Devanny (*University of Northampton*)

'The Possibilities and Pitfalls of the Literal 'Post'human: Atwood's Paradise Project'

The concept of the posthuman is a fascination within contemporary culture, with the various impacts of technological and scientific advances giving way to questions about the type of subject that will inherit and inhabit the consequences of these developments. This talk will examine how Margaret Atwood utilises speculative fiction as a site of critical engagement in her MaddAddam trilogy to interrogate the social consequences of projected technologies through her depiction of the Crakers. As a literal embodiment of the posthuman, the Crakers address some of the more urgent questions posed by the intersection between the posthuman and feminist theory, particularly the possibilities of changing embodiment and genetic engineering. Considering how the posthuman is constructed and imagined reveals whether Atwood positions the Crakers as a symbol of hope for the future of humankind, or merely as the logical conclusion of an unquestioned corporate and commercial ethos.

Melanie Graham (*University of Lancaster*)

Everyone Else: Violated Women as "Other" in Atwood's poetry

With the success of Hulu's cinematic version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood has become a mainstream pop culture icon and her critical feminist lens celebrated around the world. But Atwood, the poet, is less known. This lightning talk will examine Atwood's poems 'Christmas Carols' and 'Half-Hanged Mary', two culturally relevant works that illustrate women's experiences of patriarchal violence, both as victim and observer. I will address how the work challenges female

stereotypes of pregnancy and autonomy, and how violence within the poems works to separate women when used as a tool for both oppression and self-liberation.

Sonakshi Srivastava (*University of Delhi*)

'Corpo(reality) in the Select Novels of Margaret Atwood'

"The body must be regarded as a site of social, political, cultural and geographical inscriptions, production or constitution. The body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past; it is itself a cultural, the cultural product" (Elizabeth Grosz).

The female body functions as the sight and site of patriarchal negotiations of power. In Margaret Atwood's novels, *Bodily Harm*, and *The Edible Woman*, it is precisely the bodies of the female protagonists which function as the locus of contesting power relations, regulated through diet and surveillance. The aim of the paper is to take into consideration the function of body – the corpo(real)ized entity of existential anxieties in the novels by placing them primarily in conversation with the works of Elizabeth Grosz, and Julia Kristeva, so as to delineate the question of being, and the existence of being and the self in the novels.

Tahera Zobaida Maliha (*Independent University, Bangladesh*)

The intertwined relationship between women and economy based on *The Handmaid's Tale*

Woman, the second sex, has been suppressed and oppressed from time immemorial. In Christianity, Islam, or even Greek mythologies, women are portrayed as deceitful, shameful, manipulative, and a scourge to man. Following such beliefs, the patriarchal society has been created where women are the subordinates to their male counterparts. In prolific novelist, Margaret Atwood's classic dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1996), all the tropes that patriarchy has at its command have been exercised to oppress Gilead's women with the suppression of their economic power capturing the center space. How the economy can change, affect, and shape women's lives is very intricately depicted in the novel. Using Marxist feminist theory and materialist feminism, Atwood's famous novel and the Hulu Television series (2017-2019) by the same title will be evaluated to identify the formidable strength of the economy in the oppression of women that works towards relegating women as mere commodities.

Jade Hinchliffe (*The University of Hull*)

'Atwood's Impact on Contemporary Women's Dystopian Fiction and Surveillance Studies'

In my PhD thesis, I examine the portrayal of surveillance and inequality in twenty-first-century dystopian fiction from the global north and global south within the multidisciplinary field of surveillance studies. This paper will firstly examine the influence of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) on the dystopian genre. Then, the impact of *The Handmaid's Tale* on Surveillance Studies will be considered. Finally, the ways in which contemporary women dystopian authors from the global north and global south engage with the dystopian tropes and themes that Atwood uses in her novel will be discussed. I will be analysing two contemporary women's dystopian novels in relation to *The Handmaid's Tale*: Christina Dalcher's *Vox* (2018) and Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018).

6.30pm

Ends.

