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Contents

Abbreviations

BH	*Bodily Harm*
BQ	*Burning Questions*
EW	*The Edible Woman*
HGL	*The Heart Goes Last*
HT	*The Handmaid's Tale*
MA	*MaddAddam*
OC	*Oryx and Crake*
T	*The Testaments*
YF	*The Year of the Flood*

CHAPTER 1

Fasting and Feasting: Food in Speculative Fiction Novels by Margaret Atwood

Abstract The chapter introduces Atwood's speculative fiction and discusses the hybridization of genres in her novels. Atwood sees literary genres as porous and she maps the fertile hybridization of utopias and dystopias, slipstream and fantasy. In this context, the food element can be a map of the complex maze of intertextual layers and hybrid genres in her works, it signals shifts and also crossing/subverting of genre boundaries. Her relationship with the science fiction and/or speculative fiction genres, radical cross-pollination with popular genres and engagement with themes of food and survival seem to have become key foci for the late twentieth and twenty-first-century writing.

Keyword Margaret Atwood · Speculative fiction · Dystopia · Utopia · Post-apocalyptic novel · Food · Genre

> *Food consumption habits are not simply tied to biological needs but serve to mark boundaries between social classes, geographic regions, nations, cultures, genders, life- cycle stages, religions and occupations, to distinguish rituals, traditions, festivals, seasons and times of day.* (Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self*, 1)

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> *He clutches on to the reality of those cakes; he closes his eyes, conjures them up, hovering all in a row, their candles alight, giving off their sweet, comforting scent of vanilla, like Dolores herself*. (*OC* 50)

Several of Margaret Atwood's novels—in particular *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, the *MaddAddam* trilogy, and *The Heart Goes Last*—articulate possible future scenarios for humanity's (humble) survival in apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic conditions. Since Atwood crosses genre boundaries, not sticking to one single genre in particular, it is a challenge to label her hybrid genre fiction. One of the major challenges for a critic approaching Atwood's novels is how to situate them in relation to other novels, which includes determining the genre of which they form a part. The question is urgent because the genre question is often part of what her novels are about—juxtaposition of genres and creation of hybrids, games played with genre expectations.

Food in Margaret Atwood's Speculative Fiction proposes that food is one of the crucial thematic elements that readers can trace through the palimpsest of intertextual layers and hybridity in Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction. It has special relevance in her dystopian and post-apocalyptic books, where the characters' hunger, limited food choices and culinary creativity and eating rituals are embedded in the hostile environments of oppressive regimes, post-nuclear catastrophe, pandemics, and prisons. This book shows that food and eating in Atwood's works characterize, define, subvert, construct, and/or reconstruct identities and their gender-specific, class, (post)human, psychological, and bodily issues. Themes of food, hunger, cannibalism, manners of eating/non-eating are explored in the (collapsing) dystopian environments Margaret Atwood builds in her fiction. Moreover, this book argues that Atwood's treatment of food may point not only to the biological link between eating and being/survival, but also to key links between rituals of eating and power. Atwood's post-apocalyptic and dystopian fictions offer a recipe for human survival through rituals of food and storytelling.

The novels mentioned above are usually discussed as dystopias, and/or science fiction novels, although Margaret Atwood herself defines them as speculative fiction[1] rather than science fiction per se (Atwood 2011,

[1] Speculative fiction is an umbrella term for the stories that transgress the strict genre boundaries of science fiction. Lucas (2010) argues that "speculative fiction will often answer an implied 'What if?' question that posits an alternative reality as its primary

6). Nevertheless, Atwood's more recent writings often go deeper into areas associated with science fiction, exploring technological advances (*The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, *MaddAddam*, *The Heart Goes Last*), science experiments, genetic engineering, environmental issues and technologies (*Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, *The Heart Goes Last*), and new ways of organizing society (*The Heart Goes Last*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*). Atwood's fiction has a disturbing effect because it challenges the genre conventions but also because, by revealing the hidden links between food and death, food and power, women and food, (non)-eating and cannibalism, her writing confronts the power structures of our contemporary consumerist society.

Atwood sees literary genres as porous and she maps the fertile hybridization of utopias and dystopias, slipstream and fantasy. In this context, the food element can be a map of the complex maze of intertextual layers and hybrid genres in her works, it signals shifts and also crossing/subverting of genre boundaries. In *Burning Questions*, Atwood herself discusses the role of food in particular genres. She claims that in utopias "we are likely to find the kinds of things we are thought to like and appreciate: personal freedom, delicious and wholesome food, lovely natural surroundings, friendly animal life, beautiful people who are also kind, long life, jolly and risk-averse sex, attractive clothing, an absence of disease and famine, a strange lack of liars, cheaters, stealers, and murderers, and not a single war in sight" (*BQ* 209). On the other hand, in dystopias, "we find all the things we are thought to dislike, including totalitarianisms, torture, starvation, gruesome food, weapons of mass destruction in the hands of those who don't like us, horrible and usually coerced sex, bad smells, inferior decorative schemes, the destruction of nature, discordant sounds, and every other thing that we find repellent" (*BQ* 209). Therefore, dystopias are typically associated with food shortages, rationing, and bad quality/taste of food. Moreover, a change in the protagonists' diet can signal a shift to a different genre as is evident in *The Heart Goes Last*, where prison food is of gourmet quality and thus signals a shift to a comedy. Furthermore, prison fights with cakes and scrambled eggs prepare the reader for a further shift to the grotesque.

narrative drive" (4). This book uses the terms post-apocalyptic, dystopia, science fiction to point to a great variety of prevailing genres in Atwood's writing.

In the post-apocalyptic genre, food occupies a dual role: a significant part of the day must be dedicated to scavenging to allow survival. Food and eating/preparing food are not pleasurable. Cannibalism is another typical feature of the post-apocalyptic experience. Junk food is emblematic of this genre because high levels of non-natural chemicals and preservatives allow energy bars and cans to stay intact in various catastrophic scenarios. For example, Snowman lives on Joltbars, cans of No-Meat Sausages, and bottled alcohol.

In *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food*, Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien argue that

> [c]onnected as they are to the ritual structures of both celebration and the everyday, and refusing to be taken as simple supplements to add realism to the narrative, food, cooking, and eating are linked to both cultural anxieties and desires in relation to human experience, from economic and political constructs, to symbolic transmigrations of gender, class, ethnicity, family, race, and, of course, the body. (2018, 3)

In Atwood's novels, however, food, cooking, and eating function as both literal and symbolic representations of dystopian worlds on the brink of ecological, economic, and moral collapse. The treatment of food is a good example of Atwood's ambiguity: "Atwood views everything through her double vision, where on the one hand, her fiction focuses on contemporary socio-political and ethical issues, and on the other, she destabilises realism by hinting at hidden worlds and dark psychological impulses beneath civilised surfaces" (Howells 2020, 21). Thus, food is used as more than a realistic touch in her speculative scenarios; it is much more complex because she deals in symbolic and metaphorical aspects of food, too. Before we move to analysing the thematic and metaphorical uses of food, it is necessary to reflect a little on the genre relations and specific characteristics of the dystopian and post-apocalyptic novels that we discuss under the umbrella term as speculative fiction novels.

1.1 Feasting on Genres: Genre Hybridity

Despite the focus of science fiction on space and "intergalactic gun-fights" (Makinen 2001, 129) in its post-WWII age, postmodernist writers have transformed the genre with extensive repatterning and highly personal dashes of humour. Atwood has used ironic strategies to refashion the

traditional characters of the genre, such as the mad scientist or dictator, into very dynamic and ambiguous postmodern versions of themselves. While her texts can be classified at least partly as science fiction since they contain elements of speculation, they do not represent the hard science fiction genre. Atwood's novels transgress genre boundaries and resist rigid categorization. Atwood also saturates her genre writing with "a political slant that offsets the conventions and boundaries that the genres initially suggest" (Macpherson 2010, 25).

Literary scholars have identified speculative fiction elements ("*What if…?*" questions) in Atwood's works, and especially in the novels that form the focus of *Food in Margaret Atwood's Speculative Fiction—The Handmaid's Tale* [1985], *The Testaments* [2019], *Oryx and Crake* [2003], *The Year of the Flood* [2009]), as well as *MaddAddam* [2013], and *The Heart Goes Last* [2016]—which all resemble "a pastiche of genres and styles" as Fiona Tolan puts it (2007, 118). For Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as well as for *Oryx and Crake* (and, consequently, *Year of the Flood*), Howells, following Atwood's resistance of the "ghetto of science fiction," suggests using the term dystopia and speculative fiction, "which rehearses possible futures on the basis of historical and contemporary evidence" (2006, 162). I agree with Howells's description of the genre because the novels clearly refer to the contemporary world and, moreover, the novels reflect on contemporary ethical questions, which is one of Atwood's greatest contributions to speculative fiction.

Atwood has also indicated dissatisfaction with the "dystopian" label. In her own reflection on her work, the essay "Dire Cartographies," she coined the term "ustopia" to combine "utopia and dystopia—the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other" (2011, 66). In *Food in Margaret Atwood's Speculative Fiction*, the most important genre category, however, blurred its boundaries, will be such "ustopian" writing, which I interpret as speculative fiction concerning a coming (or already occurring) apocalypse and humanity's survival in transformed ecological and environmental conditions. The novels could be considered "post-apocalyptic" and they share genre features with other sub-genres, such as alternate history, cyberpunk, biopunk, testimonial literature, and, above all, dystopia.

There is a distinction between the apocalyptic and dystopian. Benjamin Kunkel (2008) describes them as "opposed futuristic scenarios" (90). According to "Dystopia and the End of Politics," apocalypse is usually

about "the collapse of order," while dystopia "envisions a sinister *perfection* of the order" (90). Following Atwood's argument that every utopia contains a seed of dystopia and vice versa, thus creating "ustopia," it could be claimed that every dystopia/utopia is linked to an apocalypse and vice versa. The sinister order of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* is justified as rebuilding humanity in the wake of a collapse of order, which the regime blames on individual sinfulness but appears to have more to do with the environmental effects of pollution and warfare.

J. Brooks Bouson (2015) and other critics recognize the place of the *MaddAddam* trilogy (*Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, and *MaddAddam*) in the tradition of (eco) apocalyptic, speculative fiction, dystopia, but they also note the presence of satirical tones. Atwood's use of (black) humour is indeed a factor that makes their texts even more open and inviting for various interpretations without being shackled to specific ideologies. The trilogy satirizes the voracious appetites of omnipresent consumerism. Parasecoli (2008) notices that "food is prominently featured in sci-fi literature, often in connection with changes and evolutions in science and technology" (65). One of the constant threats in her dystopian revelations is a power-hungry, invasive and omnipresent (corporate) hierarchy eating away at humanity's bodies and lives.

Another complicating factor in the genre classification of Atwood's dystopian futures is the novels' engagement with ecological and environmental challenges and apocalypses that draw in ingredients from climate fiction, petroleum fiction and biopunk. Her wide-ranging interests inspire Michelle Gadpaille to suggest that "a newer candidate for the classification of some of Atwood's work is 'slipstream' fiction" (2018, 21). This term applies to all fiction that stands in opposition to mainstream fiction. Frelik claims that "slipstream is what falls through the cracks of exclusionary definitions" (2011, 27).

The apocalyptic rhetorical strategies of religions and religious sects, with vivid images of the imminent end of the world, has found a new home in the green movement. Margaret Atwood, who is deeply committed to the environmental movement, is aware of the utopian and dystopian oscillation in Western civilization and comments on the specific function of apocalyptic narratives:

> In the background of every modern Utopia lurk Plato's Republic and the Book of Revelation, and modern Dystopias have not been uninfluenced by various versions of Hell, especially those of Dante and Milton, which in their turn go right back to the Bible, that indispensable sourcebook for Western literature. (2006, 93–94)

Atwood's comment points out how the contours of apocalyptic literature have been outlined. Atwood's speculative fiction is intertextually deeply rooted in this historical and biblical tradition although she also makes use of elements of more recent genres (cyberpunk, petroleum fiction, biopunk, romance, horror, thriller, farce, testimony) to criticize contemporary culture's consumerism, exploitation of dwindling sources, resource depletion, global warming, genetic mutation, abuse of biotechnology.

In "Apocalypse, Utopia, and Dystopia: Old Paradigms Meet a New Millennium," Dale Knickerbocker discusses representations of post-apocalyptic utopias and/or utopias. He considers how speculative fictions invoke and alter the biblical apocalypse narrative. Although Atwood's novels are not mentioned in this article, we can clearly see how Knickerbocker's concepts could apply to them. Atwood also invokes "the biblical paradigm" and, ambiguously, opens it to dystopian futures in the cases of all our selected novels. Mark Bosco examines the apocalyptic visions in *Oryx and Crake*: "*Oryx and Crake* is one of Atwood's most apocalyptic novels, placing it in a long line of oracular literary texts in Western culture" (2010, 157).

The *MaddAddam* trilogy clearly belongs under the umbrella of post-apocalyptic writing as its key event is Crake's pandemic, the Waterless Flood, which wipes out almost all the human species. From an "ustopocalyptic" point of view, it would be worth pointing out that Crake's pandemic is made possible by a promise of Utopia in the Blyss Plus Pill and the secret of immortality, which the Paradice project was meant to unlock. He also created the plague for his personal vision of a post-human/post-apocalyptic utopia in which our problematic heritage is disposed of.

Although it is somewhat more difficult to see *The Heart Goes Last* as an example of apocalyptic writing, it is possible to read it as an example of a slow apocalypse. In a slow apocalypse, as Frederick Buell describes it in *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century*,