

# Is this a novel of genuine anguish?

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*Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, New York: Doubleday, 2003, 376 pp.

Margaret Atwood is one of the eminences of Canadian literature. An international audience reads her poetry and fiction, which often takes a feminist stance. In Canada itself, as a critic and publisher, she has helped to create the notion of a national literature. In general she plays a relatively important role in public intellectual life, one that would be inconceivable for an artist in Canada's neighbor to the south at present.

Her most popular work is the 1985 dystopia—fiction about an imaginary and undesirable society—*The Handmaid's Tale*, set in an America of the near future. In this world democratic rights have been expunged by a theocracy that has a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. Jews and blacks have been “resettled.” The environment has poisoned the human reproductive system; women, particularly fertile ones, have become virtual slaves to a Christian patriarchy. One woman, Offred, rebels.

Now Atwood has attempted an even grimmer view of the future with *Oryx and Crake*. This novel describes a world intended to resemble our own shortly before and shortly after a biological disaster wipes out most human life from the planet.

The protagonist, Snowman, is a survivor of the disaster. He lives by a beach, unwashed and bug-bitten. The world is full of terrible laboratory-created animals, and Snowman is kind of deity to a tribe of primitive, genetically altered human-like creatures.

Scenes of this dismal life alternate with those of society before the disaster, which is equally unappealing. The suspense of the novel turns on how this society obliterates itself. Atwood follows Snowman from childhood to adulthood in this world. Entwined in his life are his best friend, Crake, and the woman they both love, Oryx.

The planet is an ecological wreck. As Snowman (whose given name is Jimmy) grows up, on the news are “more plagues, more famines, more floods, more insect or microbe or small-mammal outbreaks, more droughts ...”

Corporations have an undisguised hold on social life. Capital has flowed into the creation of new bio-products that can extend and enhance life, and society is ruled by corporations with names like CryoJeenyus, Genie-Gnomes, HealthWyzer, RejoovenEsense. A special unit of HealthWyzer even invents new diseases and slips them into its vitamins.

Social inequality is institutionalized. Most people in North America live in dingy communities called “pleeblands,” and hopeless poverty exists in other parts of world.

On the other hand, the privileged executive class and its elite biotechnocracy live in protected, semiautonomous Compounds. A private security force, CorpSeCorps, guards these and mercilessly roots out opposition to the system there and in the pleeblands.

The culture of this society is debased. The state executes people on live Internet feeds. As boys, Crake and Jimmy play a computer game called Extinction in which players vie to destroy various species.

In other words, the world is a good deal as Atwood apparently imagines ours might become if present trends continue.

Snowman-Jimmy passes from a dejected childhood—his mother runs away to join environmentalist rebels and he is raised by his conventional

father and stepmother—to an unglamorous high-school life to a youth in a second-rate, shabby college, to a job as copywriter.

His best friend Crake, on the other hand, excels at nearly everything. He goes to a well-funded college and becomes a corporate geneticist. He rises to become the director of a powerful bio-products company.

Oryx is a former child prostitute whom Crake rescues to become his agent, performing missions for him around the world. She is loved by both Jimmy and Crake, but exists in a relative emotional disconnect, presumably because of her abusive past. She eventually becomes the teacher of Crake's genetically altered humans.

Jimmy catches glimpses of his mother throughout the novel, accidentally and through routine interrogations by the CorpSeCorps. She is a reminder (though not much more) that people do rebel in this world. We never learn much about her politics; they seem to be confined to rioting and terrorism.

However, Crake later shows Jimmy another outlet of dissent: the subversive designing of animals and microbes that destroy products and infrastructure.

There are also demonstrations and violence when a coffee company engineers a new breed of bean that throws millions of peasants out of work. The CorpSeCorps conducts massacres in response. All of these types of rebellion are ineffectual. Opposition seems to be token or fanatic or mysteriously conspiratorial—and not a potential threat to the dominance of the Compounds.

Most people acquiesce to the system, and Atwood herself does not hold up the possibility of a revolutionary transformation of this society. Jimmy's roommates in college come closer to setting the tone of the novel:

“Human society ... was a sort of a monster, its main byproducts being corpses and rubble. It never learned, it made the same cretinous mistakes over and over, trading short-term gain for long-term pain.”

This world collapses. Nearly all of the characters die. The only apparent note of hope might be the new sentient species that Crake has created and Oryx has raised.

These people have been designed to avoid all of the ostensible lures to human depravity: they do not eat meat, they have a wide range of skin colors, and lead ritualized, non-individualistic reproductive lives. They are intelligent but naive, existing in an unalienated state with nature. But they do not seem likely to develop, and it appears that intelligent life can exist only in a relatively primitive state.

Dystopian literature over the last century has criticized contemporary society or at least provided some valuable insights into its workings. It has warned of things to come. However, *Oryx and Crake* does not succeed as a critique of current social life, as a plausible prediction of the future, or as a cry of anguish from an artist that sees a civilization threatening to destroy itself. There is something warmed-over and thin here.

For much of the book, Snowman/Jimmy and Crake do not stand much above the television stereotype of middle-class youth in America today: addicted to computer games, overly affected by casual violence in the media, myopically concerned with a fairly limited sphere of life and ideas. Add some sex and drugs to their lives and Atwood gives the impression of

being as out of touch with our youth as MTV.

Oryx is similarly a character from a television science-fiction program: a secret agent with a tragic past, here as a child prostitute, that has no genuine psychological resonance whatever. Oryx is beautiful, dangerous and empty. Jimmy's father is a self-satisfied suburbanite, completely out of sync with his era and environment.

The characters do not rise above generalities: there is no insight into the complexity and contradictoriness of what it might be like to live in a dying world. Today's realities are far more painful and complicated than anything Atwood conjures up.

There is no single conversation in the novel that affects us. The dialogue moves the story along, but it does not reveal much. Perhaps this is because the characters don't have much to say to each other. There are no serious conflicts about anything like love, money or ideas.

Sometimes the dialogue simply lacks credibility. Here is a cop interviewing Jimmy about his rebel mother:

"She belong to any, like, organizations? Any strange folk come to the house? She spend a lot of time on the cellphone?"

Atwood simply sidesteps authentic impulses in characters, whether it is fear or opportunism. Here is Jimmy's father's reaction to his wife's activities:

"His father was rattled, you could tell; he was scared. His wife had broken every rule in the book, she must've had a whole other life and he'd had no idea. That sort of thing reflected badly on a man."

The society of the near future is not particularly well imagined. Clichés have spilled out. Here is a description of the pleeblands:

"... sheds and huts put together from scavenged material ... rows of dingy houses; apartment buildings with tiny balconies, laundry strung on the railings; factories with smoke coming out of the chimneys; gravel pits."

This society is relatively history-less. Events serve to mark time, but society does not evolve in any direction, at least not in the characters' lifetimes. It stays at a low level of social inequality, misery, and vulgarity. This may be why the characters hardly develop over a period of decades.

These problems came from somewhere. On the aesthetic level, there tends to be a one-sidedness in Margaret Atwood's work. Her fiction often neglects to treat people as genuine complexities. Villains are all too wicked, women all too oppressed. People tend to be mechanical products of their histories.

The accidental element of life is subordinated to a rigid notion of how things are or how they should be. There is a feeling of pat order in Atwood's work. We sense that she is not meeting life on its own terms, willing to be surprised or even contradicted by what emerges from realistic portrayals.

Atwood also introduces a theme of biological determinism here, as well. Crake and Oryx's tribe of genetically engineered neo-humans? At first there seems to be some possibility that intelligent life can start over again in a new form. But the plot of the novel makes this impossible, and, in any case, the success of this new species depends on the possibility that it will not progress beyond a rudimentary level.

If humans can be engineered to be different, then at least some of the causes of their social woes must be based on inherited characteristics. As Crake says:

"How much misery ... how much needless despair has been caused by a series of biological mismatches, a misalignment of the hormones and pheromones? Resulting in the fact that the one you love so passionately won't or can't love you."

This is a regressive idea in social thought, if not an outrightly reactionary one. Just how seriously does Atwood take it? Her earlier work in emphasizing the role of gender in society suggests that Crake's ideas on this score have been influenced by the author's, at least in general orientation.

In fact, sex plays a gratuitous but central role in the novel. At the best, this seems to flow from surface impressions of culture today.

There is also something helpless about the tone of *Oryx and Crake*, a surrender to or reconciliation with a disastrous reality. This stance has also had its history, but it lies in the political traumas of the twentieth century, and, in Atwood's case, in how that history has been reflected in the dystopian genre of fiction.

Without dwelling on the many dystopian novels of the last century, it is enough to say that Atwood has acknowledged a deep-set imprint of the more pessimistic conclusions of dystopian fiction. Speaking of George Orwell's *1984*, she has said:

"A revolution often means only that: a revolving, a turn of the wheel of fortune, by which those who were at the bottom mount to the top, and assume the choice positions, crushing the former power-holders beneath them."

[<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,978474,00.html>]

This is hardly a new thought. W.B. Yeats, the Irish poet, put it famously in 1938: "Hurrah for revolution and more cannon-shot! / A beggar on horseback lashes a beggar on foot. / Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again! / The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on."

This banal and wrongheaded view may be held sincerely by people who have simply not made a serious study of history. However, such an outlook can also serve a successful professional, who leads a comfortable middle class existence, as a justification for not lifting a finger about the present state of the world ("After all, it wouldn't make a difference anyway.")

An artist truly gripped by the appalling state of things and the conditions in which millions of human beings find themselves, even if he or she did not see clearly how the social order might be changed, would have a different attitude.

A writer might both perceive dangerous and even potentially disastrous social trends and still be desperate to change them or at least create desperate characters. Desperation exists where the desire for change conflicts with the actual possibility of change. A writer can depict a hopeless future in order to shake up the reader—"This is what will happen if we don't change course!" Disaster on the page doesn't necessarily spell pessimism, if it's a means of forestalling disaster in real, social life.

But not only is genuine rebellion blotted out from social possibility, so is any sense of alarm, dissent, or anger. *Oryx and Crake* operates at a shockingly low artistic and intellectual level.

Twenty years have passed since Margaret Atwood published *The Handmaid's Tale*. That novel, too, is damaged by its sociological view. It focuses on gender as the center of human oppression. From the point of view of predicting the future, it was less plausible than many other developments that have been suggested. (After all, it ends in a future world in which there are still academic conferences.)

But the book did raise the alarm against the Christian right. In a sense, Atwood's Republic of Gilead was a credible projection of the fantasy world of the Robertsons and Falwells. We felt Atwood's repulsion and horror at the sort of regime these people would install if they could. It was prescient in assuming that democratic life might not always be the norm of America, and it gave us a protagonist, Offred, who reacted in a complex, compassionate, and active way to the world in which she found herself.

Two decades, though, are long enough for a working out of the weak sides of an author's work. Overall, times have not been friendly to the creative imagination of the future and the people who might inhabit it. Add to this that the social polarization in North America is not likely to have helped a prominent liberal writer understand what is happening beneath her feet. *Oryx and Crake* smacks of success and money that have stifled urgency.

We are dealing with a difficult reality today and quite likely we will be tomorrow. If authors are lacking solutions as to what to do about it, then at least they might shout out their anger at where society is headed. But there is nothing to shout out in *Oryx and Crake*.



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