ABOUT MARGARET ATWOOD

Margaret Atwood (1939–) was born in Ontario, Canada. Though her early years coincided with the Second World War, she was sheltered from its effects by the significant amount of time her family spent in the backwoods of Canada. Her father, an entomologist, often took the entire family with him on trips into the wilderness. These extended vacations were a creative haven for Atwood. After morning school lessons from her mother she was free to pursue her own interests: reading fairy tales, legends, and mysteries; writing and illustrating comics; and playing imaginative games outside under the instruction of her older brother, Harold. So much of her early life was spent in this idyllic isolation that she was well into her elementary education before she completed her first full year in a traditional school. Although from a family of scientists, Atwood declared, while still in high school, that she intended to write the great Canadian novel.

In pursuit of this lofty goal, she obtained a bachelor’s degree in English from Victoria College at University of Toronto in 1961 and a master’s degree from Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. On the advice of one of her professors, Northrop Frye, she pursued doctoral work at Harvard University, but never completed her doctoral dissertation. Years later, Harvard would become one of many institutions to award her an honorary degree. 5 While still a student, she published her first book, the poetry collection Double Persephone (1961). This was to be followed over the course of her career by another twenty anthologies of poetry, sixteen novels, and numerous other works ranging from radio plays to essays to children’s books.

Among her recent publications is a post-apocalyptic trilogy—Oryx and Crake (2003), The Year of the Flood (2009), and MaddAddam (2013)—that draws on some of the same dystopian themes she first established in The Handmaid’s Tale. Her interest in identifying a purely Canadian literature, presaged by her intention to write the country’s first great novel, has persisted through the entirety of her career. She has given life to the idea of a national voice both through her own fiction and in nonfiction commentaries such as Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (1972).