

BOOKS

Bioperversity

Margaret Atwood's genetically engineered nightmare.

by Lorrie Moore

The novelist Margaret Atwood has wandered off from us before: once, in 1986, to the mid-twenty-first century, for a feminist dystopia, "The Handmaid's Tale," in which women are enslaved according to their reproductive usefulness; another time, in 1996, to the nineteenth century, to make thrifty use of her graduate work at Radcliffe in the faux-Victorian novel "Alias Grace." These were forays and raids. In her chronicling of contemporary sexual manners and politics, Atwood has always been interested in pilfering popular forms—comic books, gothic tales, detective novels, science fiction—in order to make them do her more literary bidding. Her previous novel, "The Blind Assassin," is the best example of the kind of narrative pastiche at which she excels.

In her towering and intrepid new novel, "Oryx and Crake" (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday; \$26), Atwood, who is the daughter of a biologist, vividly imagines a late-twenty-first-century world ravaged by innovations in biological science. Like most literary imaginings of the future, her vision is mournful, bleak, and infernal, and is punctuated, in Atwood style, with the occasional macabre joke—perhaps not unlike Dante's own literary vision. Atwood's pilgrim in Hell is Snowman, who, following a genetically engineered viral cataclysm, is, as far as he knows, the only human being who has survived. Snowman (formerly Jimmy) has become arboreal, living in trees and in shelters of junk, roaming the beaches and picnic grounds of a former park—where fungi sprout from rotting picnic tables and barbecues are festooned with bindweed—scavenging for food. His only companions are a dozen or so humanoids, the Crakers—gentle, naked, beautiful creations of Jimmy's old, half-mad scientist friend Crake. Freed from their experimental lab, the Crakers also live near the beach. They eat nothing but grass, leaves, and roots; their sexual rituals have been elegantly and efficiently programmed to minimize both sexual reproduction and unrequited lust. To them, the man they call Snowman is a demigod or a prophet. Unable to tolerate sunlight, Jimmy wears a ghostly bedsheet. For the Crakers, the real gods are Crake, whom they have never seen, and his girlfriend, Oryx, whom they have. The Crakers await their return and listen to stories that Snowman tells them about Crake and Oryx. A holy, yarny scripture is already emerging.

Parallel with this vision of a blighted future is the novel's dramatic story of how the global apocalypse came to pass, told in flashback. Jimmy and Crake grow up as friends in gated communities, safe from the environmental degradation that has already overtaken the outside world. They are the privileged children of scientists who work for top-secret agribusiness and biotech companies with names like HelthWyzer and OrganicInc Farms. The latter, for medical-transplant purposes, makes pigs that are genetically altered with human DNA; after the apocalypse, these extra-clever "pigoons" go hunting for Snowman like hounds after a fox. There are other mistakes, too—creatures called wolvogs, which are exactly what you would expect. Later, Crake's classmates work on developing, for a fast-food venture, headless, legless chickens—"Sort of like a chicken hookworm," Crake says. Such genetic ambitions will not sound outlandish to anyone who has kept abreast of current poultry-farming practices or knows that scientists have experimented with splicing fish genes into tomatoes to prevent freezing.

Although the boys' daily lives are full of swimming pools, bullet trains, completely self-contained shopping malls, and games like Kwiktime Osama, they maintain a curiosity about the world outside in "the pleeblands," of which they have little experience. They have lost parents in the madness of this sinister and isolated life style. Crake's father,

burdened with the knowledge of pharmaceutical conspiracies, “jumped” from an overpass; Jimmy’s mother, critical of her husband’s work, grew depressed, then disappeared. While quite young, both boys come to suspect that their parents have been executed.

In their college years, Crake and Jimmy part ways, Crake being the more scientifically brilliant and ambitious, Jimmy the more verbal and skeptical. Crake goes to the prestigious Watson-Crick Institute (also known as Asperger’s U), where the cafeteria serves shrimp (in contrast to the genetically processed fare available to the general populace), and prostitutes of one’s choosing are available through Student Services: “Once a student there and your future was assured. It was like going to Harvard had been, back before it got drowned.” From then on, Crake is destined to be a prized geneticist. As a student he is able to reap half the profits of anything he creates; thereafter he can name his price. Jimmy, on the other hand, is sent to the crumbling, neglected Martha Graham Academy:

The Martha Graham Academy was named after some gory old dance goddess of the twentieth century who’d apparently mowed quite a swath in her day. There was a gruesome statue of her in front of the administration building, in her role—said the bronze plaque—as Judith, cutting off the head of a guy in a historical robe outfit called Holofernes. Retro feminist shit, was the general student opinion. Every once in a while the statue got its tits decorated or steel wool glued onto its pubic region—Jimmy himself had done some of this glueing—and so comatose was the management that the ornaments often stayed up there for months before they were noticed.

Tonally, “Oryx and Crake” is a roller-coaster ride. The book proceeds from terrifying grimness, through lonely mournfulness, until, midway, a morbid silliness begins sporadically to assert itself, like someone, exhausted by bad news, hysterically succumbing to giggles at a funeral. Atwood begins to smirk and deadpan: “There was a lot of dismay out there, and not nearly enough ambulances.” She invents an assisted-suicide site called nitee-nite.com. Of Crake’s experimental BlyssPlus Pill, she writes, “They hadn’t got it to work seamlessly yet. . . . A couple of the test subjects had literally fucked themselves to death, several had assaulted old ladies and household pets, and there had been a few unfortunate cases of priapism and split dicks.” Here she is on the scientifically designed mating rituals of the Crakers:

Courtship begins at the first whiff, the first faint blush of azure, with the males presenting flowers to the females—just as male penguins present round stones. . . . At the same time they indulge in musical outbursts, like songbirds. Their penises turn bright blue to match the blue abdomens of the females, and they do a sort of blue-dick dance number, erect members waving to and fro in unison, in time to the foot movements and the singing: a feature suggested to Crake by the sexual semaphoring of crabs. From amongst the floral tributes the female chooses four flowers, and the sexual ardour of the unsuccessful candidates dissipates immediately, with no hard feelings left. Then, when the blue of her abdomen has reached its deepest shade, the female and her quartet find a secluded spot and go at it until the woman becomes pregnant and her blue colouring fades. And that is that.

No more *No means yes*, anyway, thinks Snowman.

In the world of “Oryx and Crake”—a future rendered pre-civilized by catastrophe—one can feel the influences of Denis Johnson’s “Fiskadoro,” or Walter M. Miller, Jr.’s “A Canticle for Leibowitz.” In the novel’s whimsical fantasies of biological evolution and technology, one can discern the dark left hand of Ursula K. Le Guin, and in its shrugging,

eschatological amusement it channels the spirit of Kurt Vonnegut. In fact, the sick joke and the botched experiment are offered up as rough equivalents and become, through the technical alchemy of the novel, a kind of trope for life itself.

Seventeen years ago, Mary McCarthy, reviewing “The Handmaid’s Tale,” found it unconvincing as a jeremiad: “Surely the essential element of a cautionary tale is recognition. . . . It is an effect, for me, almost strikingly missing.” She complained, too, about the weak characterizations, and suggested that the novel’s lack of a new language for its future, such as Orwell had created in “1984,” left its world less than fully imagined. But a dystopian novel is not intended as a literal forecast, or even necessarily as a logical extension of our current world. It is simply, and not so simply, a bad dream of our present time, an exquisitely designed horror show in which things are changed from what we do know to a dream version of what we don’t. Atwood does this well. To ask a novel to do more is to misunderstand its nature. Besides, given what is known about fish-gene-enhanced tomatoes—or those genetically modified goats that produce spider silk—the biologically reengineered world of “Oryx and Crake” ceases to seem very far-fetched. As for the characters here, McCarthy would be more pleased. They are mostly male, Atwood being rare among feminist writers in apparently liking her men—if not their institutions—better than her women. (Not since Edith Wharton has a female writer filled her oeuvre with so many unpleasant female characters.) Jimmy is not only complex, sympathetic, and anchoring; he is also the observer of the new language that abounds in this new world, and the curator and lexicographer of the old words that no one uses anymore—“Knell. Kern. Alack.” Atwood does Orwell, and McCarthy, one better. She even devises a kind of exuberant elegy for the word “toast.”

With such a portrait of devastation, it may be important for the reader both to know and to feel what it is that Atwood values. (It is, arguably, immoral of an author not to share.) Given all that has been destroyed, and what has survived, has she discovered anything of worth from the old world that is ours? What is enduring and significant? What can be remembered and held dear? Clearly, she tells us, language. Also lovemaking, a jazz horn solo, the attractiveness of an imperfect body, and twelve thousand years of man-canine devotion. But there is a more pervasive and recurrent idea, one that would be sentimental if it were not for its inherent animal truth, and that is the power of maternal love. Jimmy scans the world—news footage, postcards sent in code—for his lost mother. Oryx, too, reflects, “She herself would rather have had her mother’s love—the love she still continued to believe in, the love that had followed her through the jungle in the form of a bird so she would not be too frightened or lonely.” In this we have a theme reminiscent of Margaret Wise Brown’s “The Runaway Bunny,” that children’s parable of maternal devotion which is also a gender Rorschach test—the masculine perspective finding the ubiquitous and undeterrable love of the mother suffocating, the feminine finding it beautiful. Atwood takes the feminine view; here mother love is the great sustainer, the protean protector, the tender magician, and its loss the great loss.

The ur-mother in “Oryx and Crake” is, of course, Mother Nature herself—captured, tortured, and mocked, in classic gothic fashion, but elusive and indestructible, in her way. As a curious aside in this year’s fiftieth-anniversary celebration of the discovery of DNA by Watson and Crick, it was reported recently that Crick’s wife, a professional illustrator, did only two scientific drawings in the course of her career. One was of her husband’s famous double helix. The other was of a woman running.