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Studying Margaret Atwood: Shifting the Boundaries of Genres

Katarína Labudová

Ružomberok: VERBUM, 2021, 118 pp. ISBN 978-80-561-0890-1 (paperback)

Food in Margaret Atwood's Speculative Fiction

Katarína Labudová

Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 146 pp. ISBN 978-3-031-19167-1 (hardback)

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Oh, no – not another book on Margaret Atwood? Yes, and what's more – two of them. Atwood is an indefatigably prolific writer, and the academic world seems to be eager to match and even better her. But it must be acknowledged that not every book on Atwood needs necessarily to have seen the light of day. Fortunately, this is definitely not the case with these two books by Katarína Labudová, who lectures in Slovakia at the Department of English Language and Literature of the Catholic University in Ružomberok.

The two books under review here are very different. *Studying Margaret Atwood: Shifting the Boundaries of Genres* is intended as a textbook for students, with the permutations of genre and their shifting nature serving as the axis running through the treatment of Atwood's texts. Following a succinct, perceptive introduction on the wider context of Atwood's writing, Labudová explains and comments on her sixteen novels, as well as her short fiction and fairy tales, under six groupings: Gothic romances and fictional autobiographies; historiographic metafiction; speculative fiction novels; environmental dystopias; prison narratives; and fairy tale intertexts. Her treatment is meant to open up the texts for students, to suggest ways to explore them, and this she does very well, providing the necessary minimum of factual information, making her own comments, and referring to the views of a wide range of academic commentators on Atwood's work. The division into groupings is the key tool for introducing students to the breadth of Atwood's fictional styles and, more importantly, the way different genres function, which is crucial for a full understanding



of the individual works. This will recall Northrop Frye's discussion in *Anatomy of Criticism* of what he identifies there as the four forms of continuous prose fiction – the novel, the romance, the anatomy and the confession – and the need to grasp their respective conventions in order to appreciate their distinctive shapes and what they are trying to achieve. Expecting a confession (internally focused, intellectually oriented) to function like a novel (extraverted, and highlighting the personal) will inevitably lead to disappointment; an anatomy and a romance are at opposite poles from each other, intellectual exuberance vs. intense emotion and myth. In a similar way, Labudová's approach enables the students, and not only them, to perceive and appreciate more fully the differing generic strategies Atwood employs in her various works of fiction.

Each chapter of *Studying Margaret Atwood* also includes a variety of practical ways in which the students can engage with Atwood's texts. After every individual sub-section within a chapter, which usually deals with one novel, there is "Check-in," a series of questions and instructions designed stimulate ways of thinking about that particular text. This is followed by "Check-out" – questions on what has been treated in the sub-section. "Key terms" tests the students' understanding of the main concepts and individuals at play in the work. Then come suggestions for further reading. Finally, at the end of each chapter, there are "Study questions." Their purpose is to stimulate group discussions and discussions in pairs, or to form the basis for a short response paper. At the end of the book there is a handy glossary with concise discussions and definitions of words and terms employed in literary criticism (for example "cli-fi," "intertextualiiy," "witness narratives," and so on), critical approaches, a few leading writers and critics mentioned in the book, and genres. This is followed by a bibliography of Margaret's Atwood's works and translations of them into Czech and Slovak, and a long list of the "Works cited" in the book. Taken together, all these items on the menu enable students to respond more knowledgeably to Atwood's works, whether on their own or in pairs and groups, through writing and through discussion, and to broaden their intellectual and literary horizons in general. This follows from both the intellectual richness of Labudová's texts as well as the felicitous methodological strategies she has employed.

Food in Margaret Atwood's Speculative Fiction is a different kettle of fish. Here Katarína Labudová offers a series of very close readings of food motifs in six of Atwood's dystopic novels – *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*, the *Maddaddam* trilogy, and *The Heart Goes Last*. The theme may seem surprising – is there really so much about food in these fictions? My short answer, after reading the book, is "Yes." My slightly longer answer is "Yes – and how could I have missed so much?" The book begins with an introductory chapter in which Labudová sets the table by discussing how different scholarly disciplines have dealt with the complex phenomenon of



food, the way Atwood views genres as “porous” and “hybridized,” and the presence of the topos of food as a thread running through Atwood’s fictional menu from the very beginning, where it in fact shapes the title of her first novel, *The Edible Woman*. Her approach in all this is “to apply the metaphors of food, cooking and eating to Atwood’s textual strategies,” with the aim of showing how through the fusion of existing literary “recipes” (dystopia, utopia, thriller, romance, and so on) she “cooks up rich novels.”

Four of the five chapters that form the bulk of the book deal with a single novel; one looks at both *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*. In each case some particular theme forms the focus. “Women as White Meat: *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*” explores the way the patriarchal social hierarchy in the Republic of Gilead is reflected in the society’s food pyramid, how food is used as a tool of manipulation and reward. The subject of “Canned Meat and Canned Death: *Oryx and Crake*” is pseudo foods – how, despite the mass production and consumption of these food-like substances, human beings remain hungry and unsatisfied; in fact they serve as a metaphor for the mass death and destruction that marks the novel. In “Corporate Cannibalism: *The Year of the Flood*,” God’s Gardeners and their complicated dietary rules offer an alternative to the exploitation of animals and ecological devastation. The chapter on the *Maccaddam* trilogy links food, sexuality and storytelling as an essential strategy designed to preserve and reproduce human society. Finally, “Junk Food and Prison Food: *The Heart Goes Last*” explores the paradox of the only alternative to the tasteless junk food in the novel’s dystopian society being to surrender one’s rights as individuals by spending time voluntarily in prison, where the food is quite tasty. Each of these chapters in the book functions on its own, while the final chapter in the book is a summation by Labudová of what has come before, bringing together several stands developed separately – how food is used “to signal hierarchy, dominance and tyranny based on class and gender,” and how the problem of hunger, literally and metaphorically, is a sign of loss of contact with the natural world (as well as its destruction) and in a larger sense, with what is authentic.

This is not the place to go into a detailed description of the individual chapters and the way Labudová develops her arguments. Suffice it to say that her analyses are subtle and wide-ranging, shedding unexpected light on a whole buffet of issues facing the world in the twenty-first century. They also remind us that the zany surface of much of her later fiction occludes Atwood’s unparalleled skill in mixing and manipulating and undermining genres, from “high” to “low,” and that much of the punch of these works derives precisely from this genre promiscuity. In doing so, Katarína Labudová joins the somewhat select group of critics who say something that actually needs to be said about that rich feast that is Atwood.

