Margaret Atwood in Conversation with Coral Ann Howells

The Eccles Centre for American Studies

The Twelfth Eccles Centre for American Studies Plenary Event at the British Association for Canadian Studies Annual Conference, 2017

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Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, Canada, and grew up in northern Ontario, Quebec, and Toronto. She received her undergraduate degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto and her master’s degree from Radcliffe College. She is the author of more than forty books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays, including the MaddAddam trilogy, *The Blind Assassin* (winner of the Booker Prize), *Alias Grace* (winner of the Giller Prize in Canada and the Premio Mondello in Italy), *The Robber Bride*, *Cat’s Eye*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which has recently been made into a television series. Her most recent novel, *Hag-Seed*, is a re-imagining of *The Tempest* for the Hogarth Shakespeare Project. Atwood’s many awards include the Radcliffe Medal (2003), the Prince of Asturias Award for Letters, Spain, (2008), the Governor General of Canada’s Golden Jubilee Medal (2012), the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Imagination in Service to Society (2015), and the PEN Pinter Prize (2016). She has received honorary degrees from more than twenty institutions, including Harvard University, Oxford University, Cambridge University, Smith College and the University of Edinburgh. She currently lives in Toronto with writer Graeme Gibson.

Coral Ann Howells is Professor Emerita at the University of Reading and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of English Studies, University of London. She has lectured and published widely on English Canadian literature, especially on contemporary Canadian women writers, including Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, and Carol Shields. She has also held Visiting Professorships in Europe and India. Editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (2006), and co-editor with Eva-Marie Kroller of the *Cambridge History of Canadian Literature* (2009) now translated into Japanese, she has also co-edited volume 12 of the *Oxford History of the Novel in English* (2017) with Paul Sharrad and Gerry Turcotte. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

Their Conversation took place at Canada House on 7 October 2016. The video of the conversation was made by John Cobb. It was screened at the British Association for Canadian Studies Annual Conference on 21 May 2017. The Association thanks the Canadian High Commission for its support.
Introduction to the Conversation

As Canada’s most famous literary celebrity Margaret Atwood has done more than anyone else to establish a high profile for Canadian literature internationally.

Reading Atwood is like taking a tour through the social and cultural history of Canada over the past 50 years. Her first novel was published back in 1969, and since then she has written over 40 books – novels, poetry, short stories, non-fiction, children’s stories, and most recently she has published a series of graphic novels about an eco-friendly superhero called Angel Catbird. As she says, ‘I always wrote more than one type of thing. Nobody told me not to’.

I’m going to speak briefly about her novels. She is always absolutely topical, and her fiction offers a socio-cultural context in which to think about our present times. The topics she talks about on the video are the ones that she has treated from the beginning. She has revisited these themes over decades in response to changing fashions and circumstances. As you will hear, her main topics are: Environmentalism (urgent warnings about global warming and environmental pollution); Human Rights (with an emphasis on Indigenous rights and, always, women’s rights); Multicultural Canada; and Dystopias.

What she did not know back in October was that her most famous novel The Handmaid’s Tale (1985), set in the United States, would be on the bestseller lists again 30 years later; with the new fashion for dystopias since the American Presidential election it has once again become a political fable for our times. Margaret has just written an introduction to the new Anchor paperback edition, and a 10-part television adaptation of The Handmaid’s Tale is scheduled to appear at the end of April. It is a feminist novel, but it’s also about political tyranny and the loss of human rights; as she commented in her Anchor introduction, the belief “It can’t happen here” could not be depended on: Anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances’. Intriguingly, she has suggested that she might write a sequel to The Handmaid’s Tale, given current circumstances.¹

¹ This TV series, shown by Hulu in Canada and the US and by Channel 4 in the UK, starring Elisabeth Moss as Offred, has been widely acclaimed, described in the Guardian as ‘the best thing you’ll watch all year’. A second TV series going beyond the novel is scheduled for 2018. When asked what she thought about this, Atwood replied, ‘I’ve often wondered what happened to Offred’.
Atwood has always had two overriding concerns. She is concerned with **Survival**: What choices are we going to make for our survival as a species, for non-human life, and for our planet? And the other question: **What does it mean to be Human?** This is a question that’s going to arise more frequently in the near-technological future, and one that she has already imagined in her MaddAddam trilogy.

As we know, Margaret Atwood is above all else, Canadian, but over the years she has evolved from being an Ontario-centred novelist who started writing in the heyday of Canadian nationalism, to becoming a Canadian voice on the world stage, and her books have been translated into more than 50 languages.

Her fictional worlds are strange and getting stranger, though that strangeness is masked by her wit and humour, and her novelistic imagination. She has written in a wide variety of narrative forms, splicing different genres together. Her first novel *The Edible Woman*, written at the beginning of Second Wave Feminism, was a social comedy ironically reworking the Jane Austen marriage plot. She has written Gothic romance and spoofs of Gothic romance (from *Lady Oracle* to *The Robber Bride*); wilderness survival narratives, starting with *Surfacing* (1972) and then returning with a vengeance in the MaddAddam trilogy where the wilderness has turned into a jungle, thanks to global climate change, and where the human race is on the verge of extinction; speculative fiction and fantasy; spy thrillers (*Bodily Harm*); crime stories (*The Blind Assassin*); historical novels (*Alias Grace*, which is also a crime story about a nineteenth-century double murder committed outside Toronto); and dystopias. The Atwoodian aesthetic is a mixture of realism and fantasy, verbal artifice and moral engagement.

Interestingly, since around 2000 Atwood has become increasingly fascinated with digital technology, and we find references to it throughout her recent fictions. In 2009 she launched her *Year of the Flood* blog (now her environmental website) and established her Twitter account. She now has around a million and a half followers, engaging with a whole new generation of readers which I see as her response to changing reading practices and conditions of publishing and marketing. She also uses social media as a way to highlight ecological issues; she is an environmental activist with a laptop, using the internet to get her message across.
Since her big Canadian novels of the 1990s (The Robber Bride, Alias Grace and The Blind Assassin) you might have noticed a marked shift of emphasis in her work towards popular fiction genres. Though she has always used them, they have now come centre stage, brilliantly reinvented to suit her current agendas. She finds popular forms interesting because, as she remarked back in 1984, ‘they are collective mythology... It contains the cultural patterns of the society, and what novels are using are the themes of their culture. Every time’.²

And it is the popular genre of the dystopia (always set in the United States) to which she has returned. First there was the epic global disaster scenario of the MaddAddam trilogy between 2003 – 2013 (Oryx and Crake, The Year of the Flood, MaddAddam) where she presents a world wrecked by climate change, bioterrorism, and genetic engineering (where the world has become ‘one vast uncontrolled experiment’). Then we have the more localised Swiftian satire of The Heart Goes Last (2015) set in the rust bucket area of north eastern USA, which is about a privatised prison disguised as a safe gated community. However, if you think about the shifty title you might be a bit suspicious: The Heart Goes Last sounds like a women’s popular romance, but it is also the current medico-legal definition of death. She is asking hard questions here about choice and free will, referring to Milton’s Paradise Lost, and also how much of our freedom we are willing to give up for the illusion of security. The plot twists are absolutely wild, and the novel is a kind of surreal version of A Midsummer Night’s Dream where Atwood does what she often does – she fuses popular culture with literary tradition.

That brings us to her latest novel Hag-Seed, her retelling of Shakespeare’s The Tempest for twenty-first century readers, where she stages a performance of Shakespeare’s play in a men’s prison in Ontario in 2013. (Hag-Seed, by the way, is one of the abusive names that Prospero gives to Caliban, the misshapen creature who is forced to become his slave on the magic island. Not surprisingly, it is Caliban’s story which interests the prisoners most.) Atwood’s Tempest is a revenge play staged as a musical, but it is also a comic version of her human rights agenda, focused here on her concern with prison reform, education programmes in prison, together

² ‘How to spot a killer’. Interview with Deborah Phillips, City Limits, 2–8 March, 1984: 17.
with the possibilities of redemption and the hope of second chances for the inmates.

Margaret talks a lot about *Hag-Seed* on our video, so you’ll hear all about it from her. Interestingly, I had conscientiously prepared a whole list of interview questions; I think we got through three, and then Margaret gave BACS the interview she wanted to give us. I just listened, and I invite you to do the same, as we feel ourselves in the presence of a mind thinking. And now the video.

**Coral Ann Howells**
Margaret Atwood in Conversation with Coral Ann Howells

Coral Ann Howells: Margaret, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview for our 42nd conference of the British Association for Canadian Studies in 2017. It’s also our way of celebrating 150 years of Canadian Confederation, so it’s a special time and you are our very special guest.

Margaret Atwood: Well, thank you!

CAH: We’d also like to welcome you back, because it’s almost 25 years since you gave the keynote address at our Cambridge conference in 1993.

Now, I know you’re here for the launch of your new novel, Hag-Seed, and I want us to talk about that. But I also want to ask you a few broader questions first, if I may.

You have been witness to the last 50 years of Canadian history and you’ve charted the huge changes in the national profile since the 1967 Centennial. What, in your opinion, are the main issues that Canadians, and the rest of us, should be concerning ourselves with now, 150 years after Confederation?

MA: Alright. Two main things: one of them for Canada, and one of them for everybody. The one in Canada is the rise of the Indigenous Rights movement, accompanied by a huge outburst of Indigenous writing by Indigenous people themselves. There had been writing about them before, but now we are having much more writing by them. There were some pioneering solitary figures earlier such as Thompson Highway, the playwright, but now we have a whole new generation of very interesting Aboriginal writers. Topmost, who comes to mind is Joseph Boyden; but there is a whole list of people, some of them with debut novels, and others who have been around for a while. So, I would say that’s the most important thing right now: Indigenous Rights, and bringing Indigenous people into the idea of Confederation as founding peoples, as they always should have been. Canada wasn’t founded just by French people and English people; there is this whole other presence without which they wouldn’t

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3 Since this interview was recorded, Boyden’s identity as Indigenous has been challenged by various individuals, but he has recently been vindicated by the Rama First Nation: http://www.orilliapacket.com/2017/07/20/storytellers-to-converge-on-rama
have made any progress whatsoever. Because, remember, Canada began with
the fur trade; that’s where it first built its fortunes. After that was whaling, and
in both of these, Indigenous people were key.

So, that is number one for Canada. It has to come to terms with its
relationship with first peoples – originally positive, then very negative. The
whole residential schools question, as in Australia – the nineteenth century
wasn’t good for children, anywhere – but it was particularly bad in that
context; I should say, poor children. Missing and murdered Aboriginal
women is a big thing in Canada now. And the movement called ‘Idle No
More’. And there’s the whole other issue which is: Where shall oil pipelines
be built? Shall you drive them right through Indigenous territory? I wouldn’t
advise it.

Which brings us to number two, which is the whole problem of carbon
emissions, global warming, and our survival as a species. We all know
we have to get off our oil addiction sooner or later; but how is that going
to transition? And just to help us out, we have a new Canadian addition
to the kind of thinking that was done earlier in the century by Marshall
McLuhan and Northrop Frye and Edmund Carpenter and Harold Innis,
and this is a book by Barry Lord called Art and Energy. It posits that any
society’s art and culture is joined at the hip with whichever energy system
is sustaining it. Lord goes through the whole list – from fire, wind and
water; and slavery, which was very big in the ancient world; and then coal,
a culture of workers and production; oil, a culture of consumption, because
oil made things very cheap; and now sustainable energy, which is fostering
a culture of stewardship. You can already see that happening. So, this is
another major, ‘thinking-big’ idea that is just arriving on the scene: Barry
Lord, Art and Energy.

A lot of this thinking comes out of the arts, Coral. Marshall McLuhan was
a James Joyce scholar; Northrop Frye, as you know, was a William Blake
scholar; and Barry Lord is an art historian. So, these are not the energy
guys thinking this stuff up. It is coming out of the liberal arts, the home of
lateral thinking.

CAH: What drove you back to dystopias 20 years after The Handmaid’s Tale?
I’m thinking about the MaddAddam triology, and then about the delightful
The Heart Goes Last...
MA: Delightful?

CAH: It is delightful …

MA: It’s a bit dark, Coral. It’s a little bit dark, you have to admit.

CAH: I do admit, in its wonderfully gothic dimensions.

MA: Do you think it’s acting out every woman’s secret fantasy: ‘Should I kill my husband?’ [Collapses laughing.]

CAH: I thought it was acting out male fantasies …

MA: ‘Will my wife kill me⁈’

CAH: Indeed!

MA: Well, one way or the other! Back to dystopias. You’re familiar with the oeuvre of Leonard Cohen and you know his song called ‘The Future’? It has the line, ‘I have seen the future, and it’s murder.’

So, I have seen the future, and it could possibly be murder; Leonard agrees with me, so it must be true! People all of a sudden – I mean, after – I have to say Oryx and Crake – and after The Handmaid’s Tale, because when I was writing those there weren’t many dystopias – but we have seen an outburst of them in the recent decade. I think that is because young people in particular are looking at the future and seeing murder. And the dystopias that have arrived have been of every kind, from pure fantasy, such as the zombie apocalypse, to things that are based pretty much on reality, like Water Knife.

We have seen a lot of them and I think that comes straight out of reality; just as the utopias of the nineteenth century came out of the feeling that, ‘We’ve invented all these new things and we’ve made all of these improvements, and surely it can only get better’. It was the age of the invention of vaccinations, sewer systems, steam energy, trains, etc. And people were thinking, ‘Surely we are on a path that will just lead to a much better future’. That’s what people thought then, and they poured out utopias to such an extent that Gilbert & Sullivan even wrote a satire
of it, called ‘Utopia Limited’. But then along came the Russian Revolution, World War I, Hitler and World War II. Both Stalinism and Nazism began as utopias, as did Mao’s China and Pol Pot’s Cambodia. Then they went pear-shaped. That made it much more difficult to invest imaginative energy in the idea of a perfectible human order, and much easier to think of utopias gone wrong, which gives us of course, dystopias.

So, I think that’s one of the things that happened. Plus, the real life situation which is, unfortunately, that the planet is getting warmer. If it gets too warm and kills the oceans, we will die, simply because it’s the oceans that make 60-80% of the oxygen that we breathe, through the marine algae which made the oxygen in the atmosphere in the first place. This did not used to be an oxygen planet.

CAH: Now your warnings have got more and more urgent, haven’t they, Margaret?

MA: Everybody’s warnings have gotten more urgent, Coral. It’s not just me.

CAH: Even thinking back to Surfacing, you were talking there about the disease coming up from the south.

MA: I grew up in a family of early environmentalists. So, things such as tree diseases, insect infestations, all of those sorts of things were dinner table conversation. And, of course, as things get warmer, more insects come up. We have a lot of invasive species now and the more insects come up, the fewer birds there are to eat them; the more dead trees you have; the more likely you are to get big forest fires; and the more carbon will pour into the atmosphere, thus making the eventual death of oceans more probable.

But just to reassure you, there is no ‘The Future’. There are an infinite number of futures, and the model for this kind of thinking is always A Christmas Carol, in which Scrooge says to the Ghost of Christmas Future: Is this inevitable? Is this carved in stone? Will I really be this miserable old person for whom nobody cries when they’re dead? And the Ghost of Christmas Future, as it should, does not answer. Because that choice is not the choice of the Ghost of Christmas Future; it is the choice of Scrooge. He’s given a chance to make a choice, and in that book he makes the right
choice and becomes jolly old Mr Scrooge with turkeys. But he could have made the other choice and remained miserable old Mr Scrooge. So, which choice are we going to make?

CAH: Yes, and it is interesting that you are talking about using the Dickens model. I had always thought about your dystopias as being much more like Pope’s *Dunciad*.

MA: Had you? [Laughs.] That thought has never occurred to me. I mean it’s occurred to me that they’re much more like Jonathan Swift; but not Pope.

CAH: In *The Dunciad* ‘universal darkness buries all’; but it’s still only a staged performance and there’s still the possibility of an alternative.

MA: Hmmm. I’m going with Scrooge.

CAH: I can see that this is slightly more reassuring.

MA: Well, when Pope said, ‘Whatever is, is right’; you know, I do have qualms about that!

CAH: Yes, I can see that you might.

MA: [Laughs].

CAH: I’m fascinated by all the variations on genre fiction, such as speculative fiction, crime fiction, comic fiction, that you have been writing since *MaddAdam*. Why now?

MA: You know, it’s always a matter of stuff that happens in life. So, *The Heart Goes Last*; my old editor, Amy Grace Lloyd, put me up to it because she was working on this digital platform called ‘Byliner’ and she said why don’t we try something on Byliner? So, I just wrote one episode to begin with. And then it turned into a serial. I’ve always been interested in serials – in the nineteenth century they were a standard way of presenting. *War and Peace* was written as a serial, which accounts for the fact that it is so extremely long. And Dickens, of course, wrote in serial form, which only
causes one to admire him the more because he was writing without editing; it was page to printer, which is quite a feat.

CAH: You had that, didn’t you, with the Positron Series?

MA: Not nearly; not nearly. Because we were editing before we put episodes up on the site; so, it was not page to printer, though it was a serial. When I made it into a novel I had to unknit it, and reconstitute it as a novel. Because with a novel you can’t just keep repeating ‘as you – as we – know’; repeating what you had in the last episode to clue the reader in as to what they might have forgotten. If you put that in a novel it becomes extremely irritating. That all had to come out. It had to be reformulated: the novel had to have a beginning; it had to have an end, etc. So, it started as an experiment and turned into a novel.

What next? The Hogarth Shakespeare project is not a dystopia; it’s not a utopia; it is something else altogether. So, that was simply because Becky Hardie, whom I already knew, put it to me that I should do this. And since I know her Dad, and knew my name would be mud if I said no …

CAH: It is absolutely brilliant. And maybe we should think a little about Hag-Seed now …

MA: Let’s think a little bit about Hag-Seed, now; because it is, after all, set in Canada, so it fits right in with your programme.

CAH: In what ways does Hag-Seed, which is set in a men’s prison and focuses on Caliban, actually reflect your interest in human rights?

MA: Well, let’s see now. I was part of the protest march when the previous government – not the one we have now, but the previous one – closed the prison farms all across Canada. We thought that was really quite a bad idea because among the things that prison farms taught people was how to take care of a being that is not yourself, and how to understand a being that is not yourself, even though it might be a cow. So, in teaching empathy it was really very valuable.

CAH: Why close such a programme?
MA: Because they wanted to! You don’t know why people do these things. Maybe they are just vindictive.

CAH: They do it because they can.

MA: Yeah, partly. I actually own part of a cow because this was a heritage herd of award-winning cattle and it was all going to be sold off and dissipated and who knows what. So, some people got together and bought some of them and provided them with a safe haven; and I own half of one of those cows.

CAH: Do you know which cow it is?

MA: Yes, I do. But I have not been to visit it. I know it’s being well taken care of.

CAH: Did your protest have the desired effect?

MA: No, it did not; but it got a lot of publicity. People have to re-think prisons. They have to decide what they’re for. And as we know – you being from Australia will know – prisons and penal colonies have a long and varied history, and sometimes there’s a very fine line between putting people there to keep society safe, and putting them there because they’re useful labour. And we know – having read Damned Whores and God’s Police, that excellent book about women and the Australian penal colony system – that a lot of women ended up there because the powers-that-be felt there should be more women there to civilise the men prisoners. But women didn’t do a lot of house-breaking; so they had to invent new crimes that would get them transported. Men got transported for house-breaking and what have you, and women got transported for sneezing! [Laughs.] They lowered the bar! So, we really have to think about why we are doing this and what effect we are hoping to have.

Some prisons – and I am thinking of Bard College in the United States which has an educational programme with the nearby prison that allows people to actually get their BA there. And there are a number of programmes like that. There are programmes that teach Shakespeare in prison. One of the books I cite at the end is called Shakespeare Saved My Life, in which this woman was going into maximum security prisons. She wasn’t acting the plays, but
she was teaching the plays to people in tiny little cells who had to shove their papers through a mail-slot so she could read them. And she said, ‘I got better papers out of those students than I got out of my university ones because they’d been there, done that’. She was teaching *Macbeth*, so she was getting people who were saying ‘Yes, that’s what it’s like. You do see the dagger before you; except in my case it was a gun’. So, from the inside out. And the amazing thing about Shakespeare is that he is able to imagine what it is like to be those characters, either from observation or in some amazing feat of imagination. Looking at Lear, you just know that he knew somebody who had some form of dementia; it’s so accurate.

So, yes. What was the question?!

**CAH:** I think the question looked at human rights.

**MA:** Oh, human rights. What do we mean by human rights? There isn’t an authority in the clouds who is doling out human rights. Human rights are what you can achieve.

**CAH:** Even though you’ve recently got a prize, Margaret, the PEN Pinter Prize.

**MA:** That’s very true. But God did not decree what human rights should be and is not laying down that law. It is people who achieve rights and often they have to fight very hard for them. But once they have them, they’re quite reluctant to let them go. However, if a serious dictator gets in, he – and it usually is a he, but not always – can throw those rights out of the window very quickly. So, it is a question of eternal vigilance; the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. And human rights vary, of course, from culture to culture and from moment to moment. There is nothing set in stone. How shall we treat other people? That is the question. And which other people?

**CAH:** I think it’s fascinating that you should be asking these questions through *The Tempest*, rather than a play like *Julius Caesar* or *Macbeth*.

**MA:** Well, *The Tempest* has that wonderful hinge moment in which Ariel, who is not a human being, says to Prospero, ‘These people that you’ve enchanted are really suffering, and they make me feel very sad, and my
affections are moved and so should yours be.’ And Prospero says, ‘Oh, really.’ And Ariel says, ‘Mine would, sir, were I human.’

So, what is it to be human? What is it to be human? According to Ariel, to be human is to have empathy; among other things. And without empathy, there are no human rights, by the way. Knowing that, I give my little speech about why people should teach the liberal arts.

CAH: Please do.

MA: Yes, because that is what increases empathy; studies have now been done. So reading – not just adventure novels, but novels that give you the inner life of the characters – allows you to imagine what it is like to be a human being different from yourself. And if you can’t see that, if you can’t know that, you’re going to have scant room in your head for anything except xenophobia.

CAH: Margaret, you’ve known this for a very long time. I remember something you wrote in Second Words where you said that it’s necessary when reading and writing novels to be able to imagine what it’s like to be somebody else, ‘which, increasingly, is something we all need to know’.

MA: Well, increasingly it is. Now, of course, coming from a country as multicultural as Canada and a city – Toronto – which is said to be the most multicultural city in the world, it allows you to encounter a lot of people who are unlike you. To the outward view they may not be like you. But does that mean that they are somehow not human?

CAH: It takes imagination to engage empathetically, doesn’t it?

MA: It depends how many other people not like you you’ve known. If you’ve known a lot of them it takes less imagination; if you haven’t known any, it takes a lot.

CAH: What was the most difficult thing about writing that novel?

MA: Ok. The most difficult thing was solving for Miranda. And the reason that was difficult is, here we have in the play, a Dad – rather an over-
protective Dad, or maybe not over-protective but a protective Dad – stuck on an island where he doesn’t want to be. And once you hear what they have to eat, you’ll realise why he might be extremely eager to get back to proper Italian cooking …

CAH: It sounds very …

MA: … basic! Very basic. So, he’s on this island and there is nobody else on it except his teenage daughter, who is now 15, and an air spirit that nobody can see but him, and an earth-affiliated creature who has tried to rape his daughter and is intent on murdering him. So, what would be the modern novel equivalent of that? What kind of situation are you going to have a teenage girl who doesn’t know about – has never seen – a young man of her own age, and that the only two men available to her are her Dad and this guy who wants to rape her. What would that be in modern life?

CAH: Gosh.

MA: Gosh, indeed! Gosh, indeed! So, I think somebody has done The Tempest in outer space: you are stuck on a planet where your space ship has crashed. But then you would have to solve for, ‘Along comes another space ship with your enemies on it, what a coincidence! And somehow also crashes!’

CAH: Yours is much more feasible than that …

MA: Yes, but you still have to solve for Miranda. So, is this going to be a Dad who has somehow locked his daughter up in a high rise somewhere and won’t let her watch TV? He would turn into a tyrant in that situation. So I solved for Miranda by doing what Shakespeare often does, which is doubling the character. In fact a couple of characters are double: there are two islands for Prospero; there are several dédoublements of the characters, namely the ones being enacted in the play and the real ones who come along; and there are two Mirandas.

CAH: You read that play incredibly closely.

MA: As one has to. In fact, I read it backwards, beginning with the last three words from that very, very strange epilogue, which are: ‘Set me free’.
CAH: Ah, yes.

MA: So when you read it backwards and then you read it forwards again, a lot of things come out.

CAH: They do. And some things are still not totally resolved, are they, even then.

MA: You mean, what happens to Prospero once he gets back on the boat?

CAH: Yes.

MA: Well, I provide five versions of that!

CAH: That is a brilliant ending! It did strike me that you keep very closely to the play and the action, but then you also have your own re-jigging of emphases, do you not?

MA: Well, there are various ways of thinking about what happens to Prospero once he gets back on the boat. Let me put it to you this way: he forgives evil brother Antonio, who thereafter says nothing. There is nothing to say. He doesn’t say, ‘I’m sorry’. He doesn’t say, ‘Are you going to put me on trial when we get back?’ He doesn’t say anything. So, Prospero then breaks his staff, drowns his book, dismisses his special-effects magic illusion-maker, and gets on the boat with a guy who tried to kill him, who has not said ‘I’m sorry’. Would you do that, Coral?

CAH: No.

MA: No, you would not. You would at least keep the book!

CAH: I found it quite strange, given that these were the only weapons that he had, that he would then divest himself of them.

MA: Well, he thinks he’s pals with the King of Naples now. That’s what he thinks. Is that bargain going to hold?

CAH: I think you were so right in *Hag-seed* to make sure that everything
was actually videoed, Margaret. There is good old-fashioned blackmail in there, as well as your digital effects.

**MA:** Yes! Prospero uses blackmail in the play. Because he says to Antonio, ‘At this time, I’m not going to tell about your plot to kill the king’. So, ‘I know about it; I could tell; but at this time I’m not going to. But I could, so just behave yourself’.

**CAH:** Ahhh! That’s one of the difficulties of the play resolved.

**MA:** Well, but it isn’t resolved.

**CAH:** Not really resolved.

**MA:** Because what would you do to a person who has the capability of blackmailing you? You’d shove them overboard the first chance you got…

**CAH:** I thought it was perhaps a little incautious at the end of *Hag-Seed* for Felix to take up Estelle’s offer of going on a sea cruise.

**MA:** Why did you think it incautious?

**CAH:** Well …

**MA:** She is of course ‘auspicious star and bountiful Fortune’. She’s been very lucky for him.

**CAH:** And he was able to get the early parole for his special-effects man.

**MA:** That would be Ariel, yes; who is liberated at the end of *The Tempest*.

**CAH:** You do have those lovely liberations at the end, don’t you? Just one other thing I wanted to say. *Hag-seed* has all these spectacular theatrical effects; Shakespeare would die of envy, Margaret; those amazing, 3-D virtual reality scenes that you create. Now I wonder, could you tell us a bit more about how you imagined those dimensions of 3-D virtual reality?

**MA:** It’s there. We have it already; I’ve done it myself.
CAH: Have you?

MA: I’ve also done a holographic projection to Sweden, in which I was a holographic projection sitting in Sweden being interviewed by somebody who actually was in Sweden. Little beknownst to us, we shut down all of the internet for everybody else in the building because it used so much bandwidth; this was a little while ago. But they can now do this much more effectively. So, I’ve done that. And I’ve also been to a thing called ‘Future of Story-telling’ which takes place in New York in which you put on this headset and you get to fly over New York. You even have some wings that you can flap to make yourself go higher or lower. These things now exist; and more of them every day. There is an extremely funny YouTube in which the New Yorker says, ‘We’ve created this virtual reality for the New Yorker. You can read the New Yorker in virtual reality’. So, you see these people with the headsets on, turning invisible pages: ‘It’s just like the real magazine!’

CAH: You are so endlessly curious, aren’t you?

MA: Yeah. But not everything works for everything. Things are good for certain effects but they are not that good for something else. For instance, there is something called PinIt [Pinterest], which is mostly pictures; that’s great for interior designers, fashion designers, all of those sorts of things. It’s not so good for novel writers. So, how do you use PinIt? Well, you could pin up a cover of your book. But … [shrugs]?  

CAH: But you have the imagination to use this digital technology very flexibly.

MA: Yes, but I don’t use a lot of it because it doesn’t work for the things that I want to do. So, similarly Shakespeare. I think that one of the things that probably happened was ‘Hey, now we know how to make thunder, let’s do … ’ They doubtless did it for Lear, so they already knew how to make thunder, and the storm. They also knew how to make the banquet disappear. It says, ‘By a quaint device.’ We don’t know what the quaint device was but it was probably a trap door. And Ariel probably had the big wings so that he could stand in front of the banquet, so then when he stepped away it was gone, so it looked as if it had just vanished. That is what we assume.
CAH: I wondered about the disappearing banquet. But it would have to be a trap door wouldn’t it?

MA: You would think. But we also know, having read a book called *How to Be a Tudor*...

CAH: A what?

MA: A Tudor. There’s also one called *How to Be a Victorian*; they are both terrific. She does whatever it is and then comes back and tells us how that went. What is it like not to have a bath all year? She’ll tell you. It’s fine as long as you change your underclothing every day, as they did. And wear wool socks, which have antibiotic properties.

But a banquet in those days was not what we think of as a banquet at all. What we think of as a banquet would have been a feast. A banquet was more like a cocktail reception in which you had nibbles, but you didn’t have a boar’s head with an apple in its mouth or anything like that. So, when they were disappearing the banquet they didn’t have to disappear an entire table laden with goodies, they just had to disappear something really quite a lot smaller.

CAH: That’s interesting. Because I had thought of a great long banquet table and how do you get rid of that.

MA: No, more like little hors d’oeuvres.

CAH: Well, you do it fascinatingly. And I also loved the way there were two versions of the play.

MA: Well, as there are in the play. It is the play above all in which Shakespeare is writing about what he actually did all day, which was putting on plays. Prospero is quite pre-eminently a director-producer, and he is working with the special-effects man called Ariel. He is unseen for most of the action, as a director is, and he is controlling the action. So, he’s a director. The whole *Tempest* is the play that he’s directing, and within that there’s this other play which is the masque of the goddesses, always a somewhat difficult moment. How do you do that in any sort of interesting, plausible ...
CAH: What is the solution?

MA: Well, it’s the Disney princesses in knitted outfits. Yes, so that is the essence of it. It is a play about a person putting on a play.

There is a wonderful documentary, which I mention at the end of the book, about a director called Robin Phillips – unfortunately, dead. The people who made that documentary said, ‘We made it because nobody ever sees what directors do; it’s all invisible. You don’t see them working; you have no idea how they’re achieving what they’re achieving’. In this documentary they got hold of Robin Phillips towards the end of his life, and they gave him an actor to work with who had never played Shakespeare and had only ever played comedy. The challenge was: get him to be Richard III. So, we see Robin Phillips working with this guy and you think at the beginning, ‘This will never happen’. He is just this kind of gangly comedian and he’s never going to be Richard III; he doesn’t even know how to speak the lines. So, they work on that; we see them working on that. Then there is a moment when this guy is looking at the window – you see his back, so, he’s silhouetted somewhat – and he turns around [Atwood mimes the action] and he starts to deliver one of Richard’s speeches. And he is Richard III, in a very sinister way. So, before your eyes, Robin Phillips the director has transformed this man – of whom you thought at the beginning, ‘There is no hope’ – he’s transformed him into Richard III; and that’s magic!

CAH: You have done the first book for this Norwegian Future Library. Could tell us something about that Future Library?

MA: It’s called Future Library Norway. And you can find it online at FutureLibrary.no – which doesn’t mean ‘No’, it means Norway! It’s the brainchild of Katie Paterson, a conceptual artist.

CAH: She doesn’t sound Norwegian.

MA: She’s Scottish; and really quite astonishingly young. She’s done a number of pieces of very outside-the-box art. But she was thinking about time, and she was thinking about trees, and she was thinking about tree rings, and then she was thinking about how tree rings count time, and then she was thinking ‘paper is made from trees’, and then she was thinking ‘leaves of trees, it’s the same word as leaves of a book’, and then
she thought of the leaves of books coming out through trees. And she then came up with the following: a forest has been planted in Norway, which will grow for a hundred years and in each year of that 100 years a different author from around the world – any language – will write a manuscript and contribute it to the Future Library in a sealed box.

**CAH:** I can see exactly why you would want to be involved in such a project.

**MA:** Well, I think it’s the kind of thing you are either going to say yes immediately or you’re going to say no immediately: ‘Why would I do something so crazy? Why would I write something that will not be seen for 100 years?’ But it did grab the imagination of people all around the world because it is a very hopeful project: it assumes there will be people; there will be a Norway; there will be a library in Norway; people will still know how to read; they will still be interested in reading. And therefore it will all unfold as Katie has envisaged.

**CAH:** Margaret, we’ve come to the end of our time, unfortunately. It’s been a great pleasure – a privilege and a pleasure – to talk to you here at Canada House and I know that BACS will be extremely grateful to you.

**MA:** But meanwhile [turns to camera and waves], good-bye!

**CAH:** Thank you so much.

**MA:** You’re so welcome!
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