

REVIEW

**After the Fall**

By Daniel Mendelsohn

Oryx and Crake

by Margaret Atwood

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**1.**

In a recent article for the Book-of-the-Month Club, the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood describes the moment that inspired the latest of her dystopian fantasies, *Oryx and Crake*, which, as its eponymous allusion to endangered species suggests, is concerned with ecological disaster in the not-too-distant future:

I was still on a book tour for my previous novel, *The Blind Assassin*, but by that time I had reached Australia. After I'd finished the book-related events, my spouse and I and two friends travelled north, to Max Davidson's camp in the monsoon rain forest of Arnhemland. For the most part we were bird-watching, but we also visited several open-sided cave complexes where Aboriginal people had lived continuously, in harmony with their environment, for tens of thousands of years. After that we went to Cassowary House, near Cairns, operated by Philip Gregory, an extraordinary birder; and it was while looking over Philip's balcony at the red-necked crakes scuttling about in the underbrush that *Oryx and Crake* appeared to me almost in its entirety. I began making notes on it that night.

This is an old-fashioned, indeed almost Horatian scenario of writerly inspiration: the idyll in the untamed countryside, offering a respite from the wearying obligations of citified life in the upper ether of High Culture; the wistful invocation of noble savages ("in harmony with their environment"); the sudden epiphany that brings on a torrential creative output which cannot be stemmed.

And yet this dreamy scene of Beauty, Nature, and Creation could not have had a grimmer outcome. Nightmarish visions of alternative worlds are hardly new to Atwood, who has been writing novels for four decades but whose first popular hit was the 1986 fantasy of patriarchy gone wild, *The Handmaid's Tale*, which was subsequently made into a movie. The author's penchant for richly textured fantasy narratives surfaced as recently as her Booker-winning 2000 tour de force, *The Blind Assassin*, the crucial narrative of which, nested Chinese-box fashion within two further narratives—a framing autobiography, a novel-within-a-novel—was a dazzlingly imagined science-fiction mythology which a proletarian agitator dreams up for the amusement of his high-society lover in the Thirties.

These two brief examples, framing as they do the fully mature years of Atwood's career, must suffice to suggest the extent to which the writer's taste for what is now called "fantasy" literature serves, as all good science fiction does, a very serious, larger set of concerns about the nature of contemporary society. For Atwood, the greatest preoccupations have been sexism and class injustice. These, indeed, surface again in the new novel, although it suggests a new focus for the author's moral and political outrage, one that is very up-to-the-minute: abuses not of women or the underclasses, but of Nature itself, by a culture whose intellectual sophistication has outpaced its moral awareness.

Of course, you could say that for Atwood, it all boils down to the same problem. There's a point in *The Blind Assassin* in which Alex, the brooding romantic hero (the novel is, among other things, a slyly self-conscious neo-Gothic tale)—whose story of the civilization of Sakiel-Norn is intended for the political edification of his rich girlfriend—explains to her his authorial philosophy after she complains about the grim turn his story has taken, and pouts because he's rejected her suggestion of a happy ending. "I like my stories to be true to life," he says,

which means there have to be wolves in them. Wolves in one form or another.

Why is that so true to life? She turns away from him onto her back, stares up at the ceiling. She's miffed because her own version has been trumped.

All stories are about wolves. All worth repeating, that is. Anything else is sentimental drivel.

All of them?

Think about it. There's escaping from the wolves, fighting the wolves, capturing the wolves, taming the wolves. Being thrown to the wolves, or throwing others to the wolves so the wolves will eat them instead of you. Running with the wolf pack. Turning into a wolf. Best of all, turning into the head wolf. No other decent stories exist.

It's hard not to feel, in Margaret Atwood's own yarn-spinning in *Oryx and Crake*—a book clearly intended for the political edification of its audience—a bit of the almost sadistic glee that Alex takes in wrenching away from his morally blind lover her few remaining illusions about the world and its inhabitants. The new novel has a darkness, even a meanness, that its post-apocalyptic setting perhaps requires. But for all the (often bitingly funny) inventiveness of its vision of the near future, *Oryx and Crake* lacks the textures, both narrative and psychological, that have made its predecessors in Atwood's oeuvre so rich and full of meaning; this lack ultimately prevents its own attempts to say something profound about Beauty, Nature, and Creation from being fully realized.

Set a few generations into the future—the date is never given—*Oryx and Crake* depicts the aftermath of an ecological catastrophe the precise nature of which is not revealed until the final pages of the book. Its principal character, who now calls himself Snowman but was once known as Jimmy, appears to be the sole human survivor of this catastrophe; the narrative proceeds as a series of flashbacks to his youth and young manhood—flashbacks which ultimately illuminate precisely what happened—interwoven with scenes from the bleak present. In that present, Snowman must make a journey from his ramshackle hut near the sea to the now-ruined headquarters of the genetic-engineering firm at which he once worked and which, it's all too clear, had a hand in the disaster that's taken place. This journey, from the bleak locus of his present Robinson Crusoe—like abjection to the formerly hypercivilized setting where (we learn) the catastrophe originated, constitutes the narrative backbone of the book and establishes its thematic poles.

The novel's beginning sections are its best: they very effectively suggest, in anxiety-provoking increments of detail, the aftermath of the disaster; by refraining from laborious explanations and descriptions such as a less skilled writer might be tempted to provide, Atwood plunges the reader into this nightmare world, leaving him just as realistically confused and anxious as poor Snowman is. Half-starving, he stumbles about wrapped in a sheet and wearing a pair of sunglasses with only one lens, constantly fearful of exposure to the sun, and of being attacked by wild animals—the exact nature of which Atwood cannily avoids describing, although their names ("wolvogs," "pigoons," "snats") suggest,

creepily, that they are the result of human meddling with genetic codes. This character knows only too well that he is “all, all alone. Alone on a wide, wide sea.”

Alone and, rather pointedly, “primitive”: Snowman’s life in the present has been reduced to increasingly desperate forays for food near the sea-side shelter, where he acts, rather grudgingly, as a sort of custodian and shaman for a tribe of genetically engineered creatures resembling humans who were, apparently, immune to the plague that has wiped out the human race. The novel begins in earnest when Snowman decides he needs to make his way back to the ruins of the city in order to procure the supplies and weapons (the pigeons are getting restless) that will keep him alive for another little while.

As Snowman trudges back toward the world he once knew, he recalls life before the apocalypse; this past is a nightmare extrapolation of the present day and its assorted ills. Atwood’s mordant vision of our future serves her fictional and ideological aims quite well. As she paints it, the near future is an era when corporate greed, allied with technological hypersophistication in the realm of genetics, has led to the unbridled and unprincipled use of new technologies. The author lavishes particular care (and no little black humor) on descriptions of the various new moneymaking species, “creations” that make today’s debates over genetically improved cattle look very quaint indeed. (The “NeoAgriculturals” division of a company that one character works for has developed a genetically engineered tuber that grows twenty chicken breasts at a time. “That’s the head in the middle,” the character explains. “There’s a mouth opening at the top, they dump the nutrients in there. No eyes or beak or anything, they don’t need those. . . . You get chicken breasts in two weeks.”)

Predictably, those citizens whose intellectual gifts suit them for employment at the genetic-engineering firms that now run the country are well treated. Little Jimmy, we learn, grew up in one of the exclusive gated “compounds” owned by OrganInc Farms, his scientist father’s employer (Atwood has amused herself with the names of the corporations of the future: other companies have names like AnooYoo and RejoovenEsense). In such compounds the educated and wealthy live in hermetic splendor, ensconced in lavish reproduction Tudor or Italian Renaissance houses. (*Plus ça change.*) This elite, protected by sophisticated genetically engineered vaccines, is completely isolated from the outlying “Pleeblands” and their infection-prone inhabitants. Jimmy’s first childhood memory is the smell of burning hair from genetically engineered cows that had to be destroyed because they’d been infected—by a competitor, apparently—with a genetically engineered disease. This, needless to say, is a dark hint of things to come.

All this—the “science” part of this ambitious science fiction—is both entertaining and edifying in just the ways you imagine Atwood had hoped. Somewhat less successful is the “fiction,”—the aspects of her narrative devoted to more traditional elements like characterization and plotting, the former of which tends to be superficial and often clichéd, and the latter rather too conveniently schematic. As a child, Jimmy was a misfit in his technology-mad world: a poet rather than a scientist, a child who loved to recite long lists of archaic words (“*wheelwright, lodestone, saturnine, adamant*”) whose “precision and suggestiveness . . . no longer had a meaningful application.” He is, in other words, meant to be the “soul” of the novel. Hardly surprising, then, that he is thrown together with a character who just as obviously represents soulless technology: a boy-genius whom Jimmy nicknames Crake. The only thing this unlikely pair seems to have in common is that both boys are ghoulishly amused by extinct species, and obsessively play a thematically pertinent Internet game called Extinctathon.

It’s Crake, a science whiz, who eventually goes on to become the kingpin of RejoovenEsense, a gene-splicing outfit that has, it emerges, diabolical designs on all kinds of species, not least our own. Crake is the figure who represents technology gone amok: creativity without any moral, or even aesthetic, sensibility whatever. Through Snowman’s flashbacks we learn that immediately before the catastrophe, Crake had successfully en-

gineered both a new race of superior humans (the ones for whom Snowman must later act as a leader)—no jealousy, no rage, no greed, and wholly vegetarian to boot—and the deadly virus that eventually kills off the old species. In the book’s post-apocalyptic present, Snowman ruefully refers to the plague-immune new race as Crakers; among their many genetically engineered charms include private parts that turn blue during mating season.

One reason, perhaps, for Crake’s obsession with developing a jealousy-free species is a disastrous love triangle in which he and Jimmy become involved, and which is also rather too conveniently symbolic for the author. Snowman recalls how one day, when he and Crake were still teenagers, the two boys were indifferently surfing a pedophilia Internet site called “HottTotts.” (Internet culture, with its casual voyeurism and exhibitionism, its insidious erosion of the notion of the private, is a frequent target of some of Atwood’s most mordant barbs: she dreams up sites with names like deathrowlive.com and nitee-nite.com, on which you can watch people kill themselves; there’s also dirtysock-puppets.com, “a current-affairs show about world political leaders.”) On this site, it turns out, the youthful Jimmy glimpsed a beautiful Asian child prostitute, a girl called Oryx, with whom he becomes inexplicably obsessed and whose lovers both he and Crake will later become.

It is against the backdrop of this ill-fated triangle that Crake’s maniacal plan takes shape: the end of their affair will spell the end of the world. The final apocalypse—the outbreak of the plague which Crake designed and inserted (more dark humor here) into a Viagra-like product; the mass panic; the widespread, horrible, Ebola-like deaths—is recalled toward the end of the novel, as Snowman makes his way through the wreckage of a civilization to whose downfall he unwittingly contributed. The dénouement makes it clear that the book is supposed to be a parable about Nature, Beauty, and Creation, albeit in a far darker key than the one described in the author’s letter to the subscribers to the Book-of-the-Month Club.

## 2.

And yet—as often with parables—this one is long on symbolism and short on texture and persuasive characterization. *Oryx and Crake* is “true to life” much as the tale told by the dashing storyteller in *The Blind Assassin* is: it represents, rather broadly, some truths about the way the world works. But there the verisimilitude ends.

Atwood’s snats and wolvoogs and pigeons are not, indeed, the only improbable creatures lurking in this novel. One of the big problems here is Snowman/Jimmy: an oddly vacant protagonist, he remains an intellectual and psychological cipher throughout, and therefore a leaky vessel for the moral and cultural insights that must be reached by the end of the book. What little we do know about him isn’t, indeed, very appealing. Despite the hints that this character is supposed to represent the artistic or literary impulse—his low scientific aptitude lands him in a college called the Martha Graham Academy, where he trains to become an advertising copywriter—but apart from his fondness for lexicographical arcana, there’s nothing about him or his narration of what has happened to him that suggests any particular intellectual or artistic or moral substance. This is odd, because Atwood has created other narrators who, through the stories they relate in old age, come to see the truths that eluded them during the events which they now so vividly narrate: *The Blind Assassin*’s Iris Chase Griffin is such a one, as is Elaine Risley, the artist heroine of the 1988 novel *Cat’s Eye*; there are others as well.

But whereas you suspect that Atwood has a good deal of sympathy with those narrators, she is curiously hostile to Jimmy: her imagining of his adolescence and young adulthood is filled with offhand clichés of thirtysomething literature. (He’s lonely but emotionally unavailable, he has nice abs, he’s a user of women, he’s wretched in his day job.) Such occasional attempts at characterization as there are feel intended not so much

to provide psychological insight into the main character as to suggest, yet again, the sinister nature of the moral, economic, and even aesthetic future that awaits us. When we learn at the beginning that Jimmy is the conflicted offspring of a scientist father who's sold out to the corporations—he chooses not to see the perfidy that his employers are up to—and a morally and intellectually overprincipled mother who abandons her family and is eventually executed as an anti-corporate terrorist, it's all too clear that we're getting this information simply to underscore how rotten the corporation-run fascistic government of the future is.

The result is a narrator whose moral awakening at the novel's end feels inauthentic and unearned; there's none of the sense of deeply achieved evolution that you get with the other characters in Atwood's work. When Jimmy sees the chicken parts—producing tuber, he wonders vaguely whether “some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed,” but he never explores this notion further. Here and elsewhere, Atwood relies rather too casually on what she assumes the reader to know (and to think) to get her larger points across. Jimmy wasn't the only one who ruefully wondered why Crake chose him to be the Moses of the new Craker race; I asked myself more than once whether Atwood would have created a female protagonist so lacking in depth.

As for Oryx and Crake themselves, they are, if anything, even flatter than the character who we're told (but never made to feel) loves them. Crake is demonically brilliant and geeky in a way that's also a bit too predictable (he's indifferent to food and sex, etc.), and Oryx is beautiful and remote, and toys seductively with poor Jimmy while maintaining vast reserves of what you can only call inscrutability; but in neither case is the psychological background provided for their adult actions, on which so much depends. (There's an awkwardly inserted suggestion that Crake's doomsday plan was partly a gesture of revenge for the murder of his conscience-stricken father by corporate bad-dies, but you don't really buy it because Crake is painted as being almost wholly without emotions, filial or otherwise.)

That Oryx should have ended up in the arms of either Crake or Jimmy is, if anything, typical of the structural artificiality of this novel. Like too much else in *Oryx and Crake* that doesn't contribute directly to Atwood's imaginative lampoon of corporate venality and technological hubris, the motivation—to say nothing of the mechanics—of the crucial relationship between the three main characters remains sketchy. We learn that Oryx (who, in any event, reappears so late in the book as to make this entire plot-line feel like an afterthought) was eventually rescued from her sex-slave life by a married couple in San Francisco who also saw her on the HottTotts site. From San Francisco it was, presumably, just a hop and a jump to Crake's laboratory; Atwood never bothers to explain just how. Things happen, people appear or disappear, not out of any organic necessity, but because Atwood needs them to happen—because Jimmy needs to be obsessed with his two improbable friends merely in order that the book may contain a Science figure, a Love/Beauty figure, and a Humanist figure. These clanking schemas leave you cold: it is odd to read a work of fiction that envisions the end of the world and to find yourself not caring that the world has ended.

There are signs that Atwood herself is aware that there's something patchy and inconclusive about the way she's constructed her book. In the novel's closing pages, she resorts—significantly, you can't help thinking—to a lengthy (two-paragraph-long) string of rhetorical questions about the sinisterly godlike Crake and the meaning of his final acts of creation and destruction:

Had Oryx loved him, had she loved him not, did Crake know about them, how much did he know, when did he know it, was he spying on them all along? Did he set up the grand finale as an assisted suicide, had he intended

to have Jimmy shoot him because he knew what would happen next and he didn't deign to stick around to watch the results of what he'd done?

Or did he know he wouldn't be able to withhold the formula for the vaccine...? How long had he been planning this? ... With so much at stake, was he afraid of failure, of being just one more incompetent nihilist? Or was he tormented by jealousy, was he addled by love, was it revenge, did he just want Jimmy to put him out of his misery? Had he been a lunatic or an intellectually honourable man who'd thought things through to their logical conclusion? And was there any difference?

This is rather too convenient a way of articulating issues that should have been brought out by the story itself; the fact is that the answer to none of these intriguing questions can be found in Atwood's book. It is an irony that the author cannot have intended that her ambitious but only intermittently effective novel ends up by resembling, in too many ways, the culture it excoriates: one that is good at creating special effects, but seems indifferent to the part of us that is human.