

MADDADDAM

REVIEWED BY ARIELLA VAN LUYN

*MadAddam* (2013) completes the trilogy Margaret Atwood began in 2003 with *Oryx and Crake* and continued with *The Year of the Flood* (2009). The three novels envision a post-apocalyptic world created by Crake, an evil genius figure who attempts to cleanse the world—which Atwood presents as an exaggerated version of contemporary Western society—by unleashing a laboratory-created virus. The only survivors are Crake’s creations, humanoid beings he called the Crakers; a handful of humans; and an array of gene-spliced animals.

With a ten-year gap between the first and final novels, Atwood’s choice to have “the narratives remain in constant dialogue with each other” (Benczik) may be demanding for readers who, like me, read *Oryx and Crake* when it was first released. However, *MaddAddam* begins with a summary of the first two novels and provides enough clues for the reader to read the work as an entity on its own, one that uses the apocalypse narrative to both savagely and humorously critique as well

as offer hope. Atwood’s prose is, as always, witty and elegant, but the occasionally heavy-handed absurdity in *MaddAddam* somewhat diminishes the criticism she doles out.

Katarina Labudova classifies the *MaddAddam* trilogy as “speculative fiction” (28), an umbrella terms that encompasses Atwood’s use of the tropes of science fiction and her visions of dystopia and utopia. In this book, Atwood continues the work she began in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985): using the speculative fiction form to critique the destructive power of conservative religion when entangled with politics and governance, and, in Atwood’s vision, the linked obsession with pornography that creates an underground culture of sexual exploitation and violence towards women.

In *MaddAddam*, the sexual exploitation has moved from the illicit playboy parties of *The Handmaid’s Tale* to the digital realm. For example, one character describes in disturbing and lurid language, the “feel-iT-enabled porno installations,” including “historical enactments of beheading sites ... Mary, Queen of Scots: Feel this Hot Red-Head Spurt!” (117-8). Redirected towards the seedy elements of the Internet, Atwood’s critique of this element of patriarchal culture is still as pointed.

But *MaddAddam* does not have the level of personal and emotional sensitivity of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Benczik describes the characters as “lightweight” and I agree. In *MaddAddam*, Atwood moves away from the gritty detail of *The*

*Handmaid's Tale* to parody and absurdity as vehicles for critique. And critique she does. While, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, a female narrator is at the centre of *MaddAddam*, she serves more as a mouthpiece for Atwood's cynicism about current cultural trends, from the West's warped sense of charity to its worship of petrol.

In one section, Atwood shows a character working for "operation bearlift," a charity established to drop rubbish to starving "pizlies" and "grolars," crosses between grizzlies and polar bears pushed out of their natural habitats because of global warming. While the bears get fat and aggressive on donated rubbish, the charity workers are forced to live on rations. Here, Atwood points to the "too little too late," Band-Aid approach of many charities, which fail to address the underlying problems of poverty and environmental degradation.

Atwood also blatantly satirises the global reliance on petrol by representing it literally as a form of worship:

The Rev had his very own cult. That was the way to go in those days if you wanted to coin the megabucks ... Tell people what they want to hear, put the squeeze on for contributions, run your own media outlets and use them for robocalls and slick online campaigns, befriend or threaten politicians, evade tax ... the Rev had a megachurch ... The Church of PetrOleum. (111)

In the character of the Rev, Atwood heavily underlines the corruption when politics,

petrol and religion are intertwined. The prose in this example, and much of the book, has the speed and jargon redolent of an information-saturated era.

Atwood has also developed the themes of *The Handmaid's Tale* to include concepts of the posthuman; at one level, *MaddAddam* is a novel about what it means to be human. The Crakers, Crake's genetically modified creations, are far less human than the pigoons, pig-like animals that have been genetically spliced with a human cerebral cortex, who skirt the edges of the human survivors' compound. The pigoons have burial rites, a language, and are capable of devising complex strategies. On the other hand, the Crakers engage in behaviour more often associated with animals: for example, when female Crakers are ovulating, their abdomen turns blue and they engage in polysexual acts (139).

The Crakers are Crake's attempt at making an ideal race, although he was unable to breed out their desire to sing without turning them into vegetables (45). Atwood shows the Crakers as more satisfied, happier and more capable of survival than the humans who have survived the apocalypse. Yet she positions the reader to feel more for the pigoons, who, later in the novel, seek revenge on the painballers, a group of men bred in the pre-apocalyptic world to fight for the entertainment of wealthy elites, gladiatorial style. The novel opens with the painballers' rape of one of the surviving humans, Amanda, who spends the rest of the novel in an almost comatose state of shock; in the concluding battle between the painballers and the now unified pigoons and human survivors,

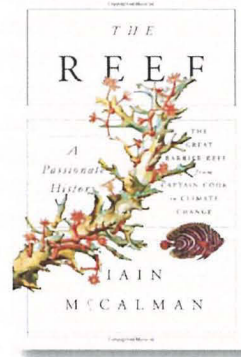
the reader is far more sympathetic to the animals. By dissolving the boundaries between the human and the animal in this way, Atwood points to the way the current desire for perfection and happiness—in particular sexual happiness and simplicity—represented by the Crakers, is actually eroding human qualities. It is, in fact, the human qualities of the narrator, her jealousy, uncertainty about Zeb's love, and her struggles to overcome the sexist attitudes of pre-apocalyptic society, that make their relationship feel truly genuine.

At the same time as critiquing contemporary trends, Atwood also offers hope for both the apocalypse survivors and, by extension, contemporary society. At the conclusion of the book, hope rests in the next generation of human and Craker babies—a symbolic erosion of the human and animal boundaries. Yet, the women's announcement of their pregnancies to the Craker males has a heavy-handed feel. Similarly, Toby's ability to be self-sufficient and turn to nature for survival is offered as another form of resilience, but one which is almost too obvious. In addition, Atwood points to both the danger and the power of narratives to salvage and create intimacy; Toby's simplistic narrative to the Crakers about their origins gives them a sense of purpose, and it is Zeb's sharing of his story with Toby that cements their relationship. In this more multi-faceted representation, Atwood better utilises the themes raised by the apocalypse narrative.

In *MaddAddam*, Atwood uses the metaphor of the apocalypse to critique but also to offer alternatives: the symbolic cleansing allows Atwood to re-create the

world (Marinette Grimbeek extends this analysis in her essay on the trilogy). Ultimately, *MaddAddam* is funny, entertaining, and biting, but its exploration of the nature of the posthuman is not fully developed without the complex characterisation and raw emotions of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

*MaddAddam* by Atwood, Margaret. New York: Nan A. Talese, 2013. ISBN 978-0385528788. RRP \$15.95. pp. 416.



## THE REEF: A PASSIONATE HISTORY

REVIEWED BY MICHELLE WOOD

Coral reefs worldwide are under threat from a combination of anthropogenic factors: climate change, overfishing and habitat degradation, and water quality impacts from land-based activities such as broad-scale agriculture. Scientists estimate that if the current rate of loss continues, there are likely to be no coral reefs left by 2050. Meanwhile, conservationists describe the plan outlining measures to arrest damage to the Great Barrier Reef and appease world