An interview with Margaret Atwood

Q: Most of your previous novels have female protagonists. Was it a conscious decision to have a male protagonist for Oryx and Crake, or did Snowman simply present himself to you?

A: Snowman did present himself to me, yes, dirty bedsheet and all. For this novel, a woman would have been less possible. Or let's say that the story would have been quite different. If we are writers, we all have multiple selves. Also, I've known a lot of male people in my life, so I had a lot to draw on.

Q: You've mentioned the fact that while you were writing about fictional catastrophes in Oryx and Crake, a real one occurred on September 11. Did that experience cause you to change the storyline in any way?

A: No, I didn't change the plot. I was too far along for that. But I almost abandoned the book. Real life was getting creepily too close to my inventions — not so much the Twin Towers as the anthrax scare. That turned out to be limited in extent, but only because of the limitations of the agent used. It's an old plot, of course — poisoning the wells. As for blowing things up, the Anarchists were at it for fifty years in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. Joseph Conrad has a novel about it (The Secret Agent). So does Michael Ondaatje (In the Skin of a Lion). And the Resistance in World War Two devoted itself to such things. The main object of these kinds of actions is to sow panic and dismay.

Q: When The Handmaid's Tale was published, Contemporary Authors listed your religion as 'Pessimistic Pantheist,' which you defined as the belief that 'God is everywhere, but losing.' Is this still an accurate description of your spiritual philosophy?

A: I expect you don't have the foggiest what I meant in the first place. On bad days, neither do I. But let's argue it through. In the Biblical version, Genesis — God created the heaven and the earth — out of nothing, we presume. Or else out of God, since there was nothing else around that God could use as substance.Big Bang theory says much the same, without using the word 'God.' That is: once there was nothing, or else 'a singularity.' Then poof. Big Bang. Result: the universe.So since the universe can't be made of anything else, it

must be made of singularity-stuff, or God-stuff — whatever term you wish to employ. Whether this God-stuff was a thought form such as a series of mathematical formulae, an energy form, or some sort of extremely condensed cosmic plasma, is open to discussion. Therefore everything has 'God' in it.The forms of 'God,' both inorganic and organic, have since multiplied exceedingly. You might say that each new combination of atoms, molecules, amino acids, and DNA is a different expression of 'God.' Therefore each time we terminate a species, 'God' becomes more limited. The human race is terminating species at an alarming rate. It is thereby diminishing 'God,' or the expressions of 'God.' If I were the Biblical God, I would be very annoyed. He made the thing and saw that it was good. And now people are scribbling all over the artwork.

It is noteworthy that the covenant made by God after the flood was not just with Noah, but with every living thing. I assume that the 'God's Gardeners' organization in Oryx and Crake used this kind of insight as a cornerstone of their theology. Is that any clearer?

Q: You grew up among biologists; the 'boys at the lab' mentioned in the novel's acknowledgments are the grad students and post-docs who worked with your father at his forest-insect research station in northern Quebec. Does being a novelist make you an anomaly in your family?

A: My brother and I were both good at science, and we were both good at English literature. Either one of us could have gone either way. My father was a great reader, of fiction, poetry, history — many biologists are. So I wouldn't say I was an anomaly in the family. We all did both. We were omnivores. (I read then — and still read — everything, including cereal packages. No factoid too trivial!)

Science and fiction both begin with similar questions: What if? Why? How does it all work? But they focus on different areas of life on earth. The experiments of science should be replicable, and those of literature should not be (why write the same book twice?). Please don't make the mistake of thinking that Oryx and Crake is anti-science. Science is a way of knowing, and a tool. Like all ways of knowing and tools, it can be turned to bad uses. And it can be bought and sold, and it often is. But it is not in itself bad. Like electricity, it's neutral. The driving force in the world today is the human heart — that is, human emotions. (Yeats, Blake — every poet, come to think of it — has always told us that.) Our tools have become very powerful. Hate, not bombs, destroys cities. Desire, not bricks, rebuilds them. Do we as a species have the emotional maturity and the wisdom to use our powerful tools well? Hands up, all who think the answer is Yes.

Q: Though the book's premise is serious, you included many wordplays and moments of deadpan humour. Was this difficult to achieve, or did it arrive naturally during the storytelling process?

A: My relatives are all from Nova Scotia. That's sort of like being from Maine. The deadpan humour and the skepticism about human motives are similar. The French have an expression, 'Anglo-Saxon humour.' It isn't the same as wit. It's dark; it's when something is funny and awful at the same time. 'Gallows humour' is called that partly because highwaymen about to be hanged were much admired if they could crack a joke in the face of death. When things are really dismal, you can laugh or you can cave in completely. Jimmy tries to laugh, though some of the time he's out of control, as most of us would be in his position. But if you can laugh, you're still alive. You haven't given up yet.

Q: What advice do you have for readers who would like to prevent your cautionary tale from coming true?

A: I'm including a small list of books for further reading. There's lots of advice in there. If you're going to read just one book, and just one chapter of that one, try the last chapter of The Future of Life, by Edmund Osborne Wilson. It's kind of encouraging. I didn't read this book in its entirety until after I'd finished Oryx and Crake, but it's a very good summation of our current position on Earth as a species.