

Perfect storms: writing *Oryx and Crake*

by Margaret Atwood

Oryx and Crake was begun in March, 2001. 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 traveled 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.

I hadn't planned to begin another novel so soon after the previous one. I'd thought I might take some time off, write a few short pieces, clean out the cellar. But when a story appears to you with such insistence you can't postpone it.

Of course, nothing comes out of nothing. I'd been thinking about 'what if' scenarios almost all my life. I grew up among the scientists — 'the boys at the lab' mentioned in the Acknowledgements are the graduate students and post-docs who worked with my father in the late 1930s and early 1940s at his forest-insect research station in northern Quebec, where I spent my early childhood.

Several of my close relatives are scientists, and the main topic at the annual family Christmas dinner is likely to be intestinal parasites or sex hormones in mice, or, when that makes the non-scientists too queasy, the nature of the Universe. My recreational reading — books I read for fun, magazines I read in airplanes — is likely to be pop science of the Stephen Jay Gould or *Scientific American* type, partly so I'll be able to keep up with the family dialogue and maybe throw a curve or two. ('Supercavitation?') So I'd been clipping small items from the back pages of newspapers for years, and noting with alarm that trends derided ten years ago as paranoid fantasies had become possibilities, then actualities. The rules of biology are as inexorable as those of physics: run out of food and water and you die. No animal can exhaust its resource base and hope to survive. Human civilizations are subject to the same law.

I continued to write away at *Oryx and Crake* during the summer of 2001. We had some other travels planned, and I wrote several chapters of this book on a boat in the Arctic, where I could see for myself how quickly the glaciers were receding. I had the whole book mapped out and had reached the end of Part 7 when I was due to go to New York for the paperback publication of *The Blind Assassin*.

I was sitting in the Toronto airport, daydreaming about Part 8. In ten minutes my flight would be called. An old friend of mine came over and said, 'We're not flying.' 'What do you mean?' I said. 'Come and look at the television,' he replied. It was September 11.

Like *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* is a speculative fiction, not a science fiction proper. It contains no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians. As with *The Handmaid's Tale*, it invents nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent. Every novel begins with a what if, and then sets forth its axioms. The what if of *Oryx and Crake* is simply, What if we continue down the road we're already on? How slippery is the slope? What are our saving graces? Who's got the will to stop us?

I stopped writing for a number of weeks. It's deeply unsettling when you're writing about a fictional catastrophe and then a real one happens. I thought maybe I should turn to gardening books — something more cheerful. But then I started writing again, because what use would gardening books be in a world without gardens, and without books? And that was the vision that was preoccupying me.

'Perfect storms' occur when a number of different forces coincide. So it is with the storms of human history. As novelist Alistair MacLeod has said, writers write about what worries them, and the world of *Oryx and Crake* is what worries me right now. It's not a question of our inventions — all human inventions are merely tools — but of what might be done with them; for no matter how high the tech, homo sapiens sapiens remains at heart what he's been for tens of thousands of years — the same emotions, the same preoccupations. To quote poet George Meredith,

... In tragic life, God wot,

No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:

We are betrayed by what is false within.

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