

BY JOANNA REID
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Distinguished author of more than 50 books, Margaret Atwood is a powerful figure in Canadian arts and media. We know her voice well: She's forthright, wry and starkly realistic about the darker possibilities of human futures. At the same time, she's naturally wise and very funny.

A lifelong bird enthusiast, Atwood often says the decline of wild bird species is an omen of dark days ahead for humankind. Climate change and ecosystem degradation affect birds acutely, and often first. "Canary in the coal mine," she has said, is no empty phrase. Her latest book, "Angel Catbird" from Dark Horse Comics, is her first foray into graphic novels and is also part of her ongoing effort to raise awareness about the plight of wild birds.

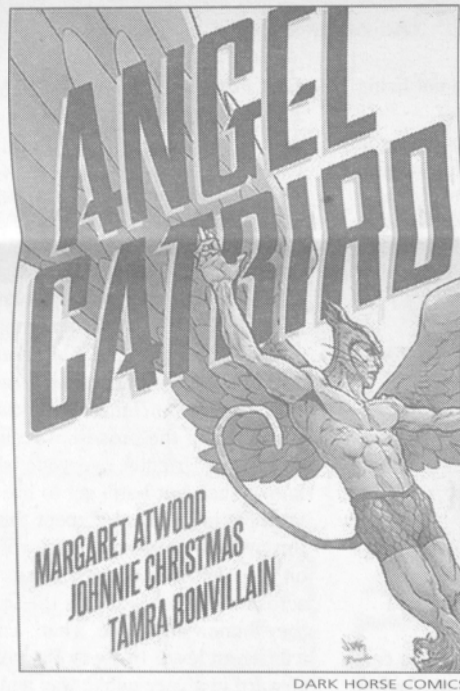
In "Angel Catbird," she introduces a cat-owl-human hybrid superhero, created in an accident involving some genetic supersplicer. This new hero is magnificently drawn by Vancouver-based illustrator Johnnie Christmas and colorist Tamra Bonvillain. First in a three-part series, the book contains many side panels filled with information about cats and wild birds. It's also full of all the tension and humor befitting a character in the midst of an inter-species identity crisis.

As a child, Atwood spent long days birdwatching in Northern Quebec with her parents, who were both naturalists. In a 2010 Guardian article, she recalls sitting in a canoe, pestered by mosquitoes, waiting to see if the "Very Rare Blur will deign to do a flit-by." She was nearsighted, it turned out, but no one in her family had noticed. Eventually, with binoculars, the "Very Rare Blur resolved into something (she) could see," and a connection was made.

Now, all these years later, she is active in several environmental campaigns, and shares many bird-related campaigns, facts and ideas with her 1.3 million followers on Twitter. As avid birders, Atwood and husband Graeme Gibson are honorary joint presidents of BirdLife International's Rare Bird Club. Atwood has even partnered with Balzak's Coffee in Toronto to help create a bird-friendly coffee (called the "Atwood Blend"). This year she was awarded the 2016 PEN Pinter Prize for environmental and political activism.

"Angel Catbird" was developed as part of Nature Canada's "Keep Cats Safe and Save Bird Lives" campaign. Domestic cats kill some 200 million birds in Canada each year, the campaign reports, and Atwood and Nature Canada hope to encourage cat owners to keep their pets from roaming freely.

Atwood's busy Twitter feed



"Angel Catbird" made its debut in September as the No. 1 hardcover graphic novel on the New York Times' best-seller list.

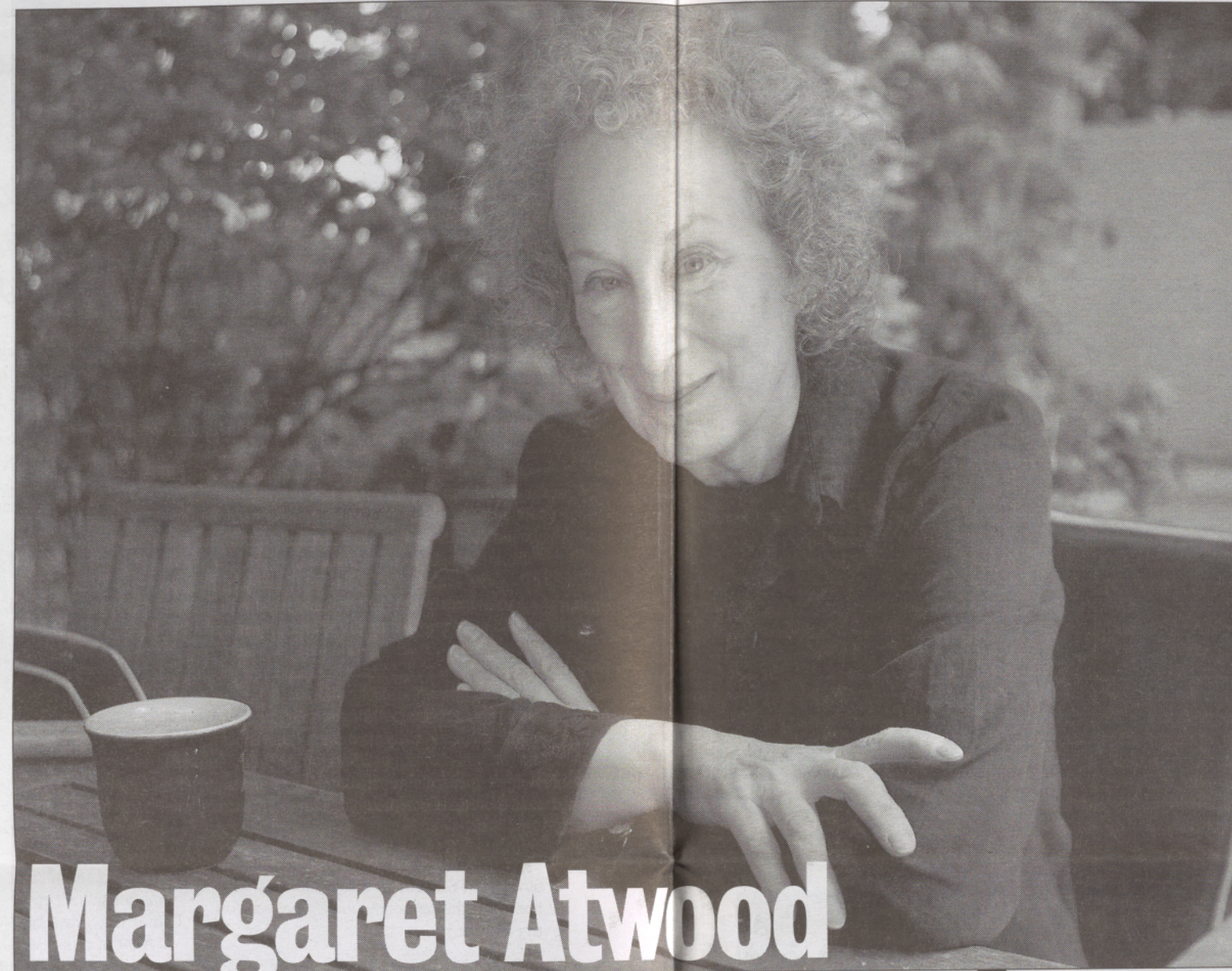


PHOTO BY MARK BINCH/REUTERS

Margaret Atwood spreads her wings

The Canadian literary icon makes her first foray into graphic novels with "Angel Catbird." She talks about her new book and her passions: birds, storytelling and the environment.

(@MargaretAtwood) also reflects her activities as a writer, citizen, activist, traveler, and graphic novel and comic enthusiast. Her account also recently revealed her new role: actor. She tweeted a picture of herself in full costume for her cameo in the upcoming six-part miniseries version of "Alias Grace," adapted by Sarah Polley for CBC and Netflix. Her character's name, according to a picture she took from the sign on her trailer door, was Disapproving Woman. "#Typecasting!" Atwood wrote.

In our interview, she describes her work with Johnnie Christmas on "Angel Catbird," reflects on inequality and poverty in Canada, and considers which two natural enemies she'd like to see spliced together. She also tells us the comics and TV miniseries she loves, showing her passionate engagement

with the fast-changing world of storytelling in its many forms.

Joanna Reid: You've written that you've always lived in "the birdy world," and "Angel Catbird" is published in partnership with Nature Canada's Keep Cats Safe and Save Bird Lives campaign. How responsive are people to the campaign's message (of stopping cats from roaming freely outdoors), and what do you say to them when you explain why the campaign is important?

Margaret Atwood: So far, all the interviewers have been very positive about the campaign and have said they have learned a lot about cats, and also about birds. I'm excited about the positive response.

J.R.: The hero of "Angel Catbird" is a cat-owl

hybrid, created after some genetic supersplicer was spilled. Which other two common enemies would you like to see spliced together, and why?

M.A.: Liberals and conservatives, because it would make the world a less grumpy place. Or how about lions and lambs, as in "The Year of the Flood?" I would still like a skunk-raccoon, although those two aren't enemies. The peacefulness of the skunk, the fragrance of the raccoon — well, maybe not fragrance exactly.

J.R.: I understand that you are not only a longtime fan of comics and a past attendee of Comic-Con but also over 30 years drew your own comics. What was the impulse behind these early comics, and what were they about?

M.A.: Kids drew comics. I was a kid. Later

I was a fan of Ronald Searle and drew caricatures. It's just something I like to do. I haven't stopped; my latest four-panel strips can be seen in Hope Nicholson's "Secret Loves of Geek Girls," due out from Dark Horse this fall.

J.R.: How has your understanding of the graphic novel form changed over the course of working on this book?

M.A.: Maybe better to ask, how has the graphic novel changed? The most recent game-changers were "Maus" and "Persepolis." But earlier than that — there were a lot of examples in France. I'm a big fan of Claire Bretécher. "Agrippine" is genius. So is Kate Beaton. The form is now being used in all sorts of ways, from deeply serious to madcap comic to a blend.

J.R.: Poverty is a feature of many dystopias you've written. Given rising rates of homelessness, poverty and inequality, is it your sense that we are standing on the edge of one of those dystopian futures? Do you see any signs that people are heeding the warnings of the kind we see in your fiction, or is widespread poverty inevitable?

M.A.: When you have a top-heavy society with wealth concentrated at the apex of the pyramid and a large poverty-stricken or struggling base and then the price of food goes up, as it does in times of bad harvests — see "predictable effects of climate change" — you are likely to get the French Revolution.

Canada is nowhere near that point, but other parts of the world are already experiencing it. Yes, I'd say the present government is reading those runes better than the previous one; hence the infrastructure spending.

But time will tell. Long story short: We can't keep doing climate-impact things that will toast our food supply — and that includes, especially, poisoning and warming up the oceans. Dead oceans equal catastrophic loss of atmospheric oxygen, and that would be the end of our story.

J.R.: "The Handmaid's Tale" is being made into a 10-part TV miniseries that will be released in 2017, 27 years after the movie adaptation of the novel. The main concerns of the book are clearly still as relevant as they were in 1990, but do you think they are relevant now in different ways?

M.A.: In 1985, when the book was published, the kind of thinking that's built out in "The Handmaid's Tale" was so far just ideological thinking. Now some of it has been actualized.

J.R.: "Alias Grace" and the "MaddAddam" trilogy are also being adapted for the small screen. What opportunities do streamable miniseries, as a form, create for the adaptation of novels?

M.A.: What I like about the form is the room that's in it. Unless a novel is very short, it's hard to get it all into a 90-minute space. Things get left out. With a miniseries, you can unfold the story at something more like the pace of the book. "Wolf Hall" is a really good example.

It's not just car chases and explosions. We follow the character's thinking, his development, his downward slide. "Breaking Bad" wouldn't have worked nearly as well as a single-shot film.

J.R.: You often write about the darker possibilities of social control and environmental degradation, and yet you remain very funny, prolific and engaged. How is it that you maintain this balanced perspective?

M.A.: Culturally, I'm from Nova Scotia. They're like that: gloomy, but funny. If you mean hope — it's built into our species. Without it, why get up in the morning?

Courtesy of Megaphone / INSP.ngo

"Long story short: We can't keep doing climate-impact things that will toast our food supply — and that includes, especially, poisoning and warming up the oceans. Dead oceans equal catastrophic loss of atmospheric oxygen, and that would be the end of our story."

MARGARET ATWOOD