

Escaping from the Prison-House of Language and
Digging for Meanings in Texts among Texts:
Metafiction and Intertextuality
in Margaret Atwood's Novels
Lady Oracle and *The Blind Assassin*

Andrea Stolz

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ibidem-Verlag
Stuttgart

Bibliografische Information Der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <<http://dnb.ddb.de>> abrufbar.

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Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem, säurefreiem Papier
Printed on acid-free paper

ISBN-10: 3-89821-643-8
ISBN-13: 978-3-89821-643-2

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Stuttgart 2006
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Printed in Germany

The true story lies
among the other stories,

a mess of colours, like jumbled clothing
thrown off or away,

like hearts on marble, like syllables, like
butchers' discards.

The true story is vicious
and multiple and untrue

after all. Why do you
need it? Don't ever

ask for the true story.¹

¹ Margaret Atwood, *True Stories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981) 11.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AG</i>	<i>Alias Grace</i>
<i>BA</i>	<i>The Blind Assassin</i>
“BA”	<i>The Blind Assassin</i> by Laura Chase (embedded novel)
<i>BH</i>	<i>Bodily Harm</i>
<i>CE</i>	<i>Cat’s Eye</i>
<i>CG</i>	<i>The Circle Game</i>
<i>HT</i>	<i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i>
<i>LO</i>	<i>Lady Oracle</i>
“LO”	<i>Lady Oracle</i> by Joan Foster (embedded poems)
<i>O&C</i>	<i>Oryx and Crake</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>The Robber Bride</i>
<i>SW</i>	<i>Second Words</i>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe many thanks to Prof. Wolfgang Zach for his continuing support. I would also like to thank Dr. Helga Ramsey-Kurz for her critical reading of the manuscript.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study analyses two novels written by Margaret Atwood, Canada's most eminent and versatile author, who is also an international celebrity and translated into more than twenty languages. As Coral Ann Howells remarks, Atwood is "the most written about Canadian writer ever", and the academic interest in her work is no longer limited to North America and Great Britain but growing in continental Europe, Australia and India (6). An expert at various genres, Atwood has written twelve novels so far: *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Life Before Man* (1979), *Bodily Harm* (1981), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Blind Assassin* (2000), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and *The Penelopiad*² (2005). Several of Atwood's novels were short-listed for the Booker-Prize; in 2000 *The Blind Assassin*³ eventually won this most prestigious prize for novels in English⁴. Atwood has published numerous poetry and short story collections, including "prose poems" or "short fictions"⁵, and also children's books. Among her works of non-fiction, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), which "catapulted Atwood to fame and controversy as a critic⁶" (VanSpanckeren xxi), is certainly the most famous one, and *Curious Pursuits* (2005), *Writing with Intent* (2005), and *Negotiating With the Dead* (2002), are the most recent ones. The latter extends some of her theories already postulated in 1982 in *Second Words*, a collection of some of her reviews and essays⁷. Last but not

² Atwood stated in her reading at the Goettinger Literary Festival in Germany, 22 October 2005, that she chose the title in analogy to *The Iliad*.

³ Hereafter referred to as *BA* in the text with the appropriate page numbers.

⁴ Among other prizes it also won the International Association of Crime Writers' Dashiell Hammet Award.

⁵ as in *Murder in the Dark* (1983, 1984), *Good Bones* (1992), or *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (1994)

⁶ In *Survival* Atwood states that the key pattern in Canadian literature is that of victimisation, which consists of four positions: denying victim status, claiming victimisation as inescapable fate, combating the victim-role, and becoming a non-victim (32-8). As she does not consider Canadian regionalism, Atwood has been accused of a "rather self-conscious single-mindedness" (Woodcock 225), and criticised for using "overtly narrow cultural definitions which represent a [...] centralist view of literature" (Hill Rigney 124).

⁷ Recent editions of Atwood's reviews and essays are *Curious Pursuits* and *Writing with Intent*. Both were published in 2005.

least, Atwood is a most acclaimed visual artist⁸; she has produced a rich body of paintings and illustrated some of her own work, e.g. her poetry collection *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970). Visual art is often a significant element in Atwood's fiction, to the largest extent in her novel *Cat's Eye*.

This analysis considers her Booker Prize-winning novel and one from her most creative period, the 1970s. All of Atwood's novels are – to a greater or lesser extent – concerned with the relationship between fiction and reality; they also discuss the role of art in contemporary society and the relationship between the (woman) artist and her audience. *Lady Oracle*⁹ is Atwood's first novel with a strong metafictional and intertextual character, created especially by means of parodying the popular Gothic romance. *BA* can be considered a climatic achievement in regard to metafictional, structural and thematic complexity. It echoes the form of dystopian fiction already explored in *HT* and many themes the Canadian author employs in earlier novels.

At the centre of both *LO* and *BA* is a woman writer who is also the first person narrator; both artists produce different genres and describe their engagement in the writing process. The predominant subject matter in both novels is the problematic relation of art to life (or of fiction to reality). The relationship between reality and its representation is discussed explicitly, i.e. on a content level, and implicitly, i.e. on a structural level. As *BA* was published 23 years after *LO*, I will also look at differences in the author's use of metafiction and intertextuality. The framework and starting point for this analysis are recent theories of metafiction and intertextuality. I will discuss metafictional features and intertextual relations in the two novels to debate how intertextuality (incl. intratextuality) relates to metafictional issues within Atwood's work, and within *LO* and *BA* in particular. As regards the intertextual quality of *LO* and *BA*, I will concentrate on the following questions¹⁰: How does Atwood employ intertextual connections in the novels and how does she weave intertextual references into the novels?¹¹ How does Atwood facilitate the readers' recognition of the intertexts, i.e. how does she guarantee communicativity? What is

⁸ See the studies by Sharon Rose Wilson for in-depth analyses of Atwood's visual art. Wilson stresses that Atwood's paintings introduce us to some of her prevalent intertexts and her theme of sexual politics (1996:56).

⁹ Hereafter referred to as *LO* in the text with the appropriate page numbers.

¹⁰ The terminology will be explained in chapter 3.5.

¹¹ I am aware that my approach to this field of research is limited, and that it is hardly possible to notice every intertextual reference in Atwood's work.

the function of intertexts and how do they relate to general metafictional issues? Do the novels also treat intertextuality as a theme, i.e. are they *meta-intertextual*?

I start with an introduction into the concepts of metafiction and intertextuality (chapters 2 and 3) before the focus shifts to metafictional features and prevalent intertexts in Atwood's work (chapters 4 and 5). The main reason for why I consider theories both of metafiction and intertextuality is that the two strands of postmodern thought are interrelated in postmodernist metafictional writings. The theoretic discussion is followed by a close analysis of the selected novels: *LO* (chapter 6) and *BA* (chapter 7). I conclude with a comparative analysis of the two writings (chapter 8).