Margaret Atwood

Burning Questions

ESSAYS AND OCCASIONAL PIECES 2004–21

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Surfacing

Lady Oracle

Life Before Man

Bodily Harm

The Handmaid's Tale

Cat's Eye

The Robber Bride

Alias Grace

The Blind Assassin

Oryx and Crake

The Penelopiad

The Year of the Flood

MaddAddam

The Heart Goes Last

Hag-Seed

The Testaments

SHORTER FICTION

Dancing Girls

Murder in the Dark

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FOR CHILDREN

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Wandering Wenda

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ESSAYS AND OCCASIONAL PIECES

2004–2021

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Margaret Atwood

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To Graeme—

And for my family

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Introduction

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Burning Questions is my third collection of essays and other occasional pieces. The first was *Second Words,* which began in 1960, when I started publishing book reviews, and ended in 1982. The second was *Moving Targets,* which gathered materials from 1983 to mid-2004. *Burning Questions* runs from mid-2004 to mid-2021. So, twenty years, give or take, for each volume.

Each of these time periods has been tumultuous in its own way. Occasional pieces are written for specific occasions and are thus tightly connected to their own time and place—or at least mine are. They are also linked to my age at the time of writing, and to my outward circumstances. (Did I have a job? Was I a student? Did I need the money? Was I already a well-known writer, indulging my interests? Was I doing a freebie in response to a cry for help?)

In 1960, I was twenty, single, unpublished in book form, and a female undergraduate of limited wardrobe. In 2021, I was eighty-one, a fairly well-known writer, a grandmother, and a widow, also of limited wardrobe, having learned through failed experiments that there are some things better left unworn by me.

Naturally I have changed—my hair's a different colour—but so has the world. The past sixty-odd years have been a roller coaster, with many shocks and upheavals, many uproars and reversals. The year 1960 was only a decade and a half after the end of the Second World War. To our generation, that war felt both very close—we'd lived through it, our families contained veterans and casualties, some of our high-school teachers had been in it—and very far away. Between 1950 and 1960 had come both McCarthyism, giving us a peek at the fragility of democracy, and Elvis, upending song and

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dance. The clothes too had changed radically: the 1940s were sombre, durable, military, boxy; the 1950s, frothy, strapless, bouffant, pastel, beflowered. Femininity was lauded. The cars had gone from the dark, enclosed sedans of the war years to chrome-trimmed convertibles in flamboyant colours. Transistor radios were among us. Drive-in theatres popped up. Plastics arrived.

Then, in 1960, there was another change. Among the earnest young, folk songs replaced formal dances. In the tiny artistic circles that then existed in Toronto coffee houses—inclined as they were to French existentialism rather than Beatniks—black turtlenecks and equally black eyeliner were in vogue.

Still, the early 1960s were the 1950s, in essence. The Cold War was on. Kennedy had not yet been assassinated. There was no birth control pill generally available. There were no miniskirts, though there had just been short shorts. There were no hippies. There was no second-wave women's movement. It was in this period that I wrote my first book reviews, my first collection of poems, my first novel—still in a drawer, happily—and my first published novel, *The Edible Woman*. By the time it came out—in 1969—the world it describes was already gone.

The later 1960s brought uproar. The big civil rights marches in the United States, the anti–Vietnam War protests, the hundreds of thousands of American draft dodgers pouring into Canada. I myself was constantly in transit: for some of these years I was a graduate student in Cambridge, Massachusetts; for others I held minor academic positions in such places as Montreal and Edmonton. I moved sixteen or seventeen times. This period saw the formation of a number of new publishing ventures in Canada, many of them connected with the country's post-colonial struggle to figure itself out. My involvement with one of them gave rise to much essay writing, both at the time and later.

Then came the 1970s: the ferment of the second-wave women's movement, followed by reaction and burnout toward the end; in Canada, Quebec separatism occupied the centre of the political stage. This period saw the arrival of several authoritarian regimes: Pinochet in Chile, and the Argentinian junta, with their murders and disappearances; the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, with its wholesale

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slaughters. Some were "right," some were "left," but no ideology, it was clear, had a monopoly on atrocities.

I continued to write book reviews, as well as the novels, stories, and poems I felt were my real work, but I also branched out into articles and speeches. Quite a few of these were about subjects that still occupy my shrinking brain: "women's issues," writing and writers, human rights. I was now a member of Amnesty International, which worked to free "prisoners of conscience," largely through letter-writing campaigns.

By 1972, I had ceased to have academic jobs and had gone freelance, so I was taking any paid work I could pick up. We were living on a farm and had a small child as well as a small budget. We were not poor, though one visitor told people we had "nothing but a goat." (No goats, in reality; they were sheep.) But we were not rolling in cash. We grew a lot of vegetables and kept chickens and other non-human residents. This mini-agribiz took time, and also lost money, so if I could make a bit of cash from writing rather than egg sales, all to the good.

The 1980s began with our move from the farm to Toronto (for school reasons, among others), the election of Ronald Reagan in the United States, and the rise of the religious right. In 1981, I began thinking about *The Handmaid's Tale,* though I put off writing it until 1984 because the concept seemed too far-fetched. My output of "occasional writing" sped up, partly because it could—with a child in school, I had more free time during the day—and partly because I was getting more requests. Looking back at my sporadic, badly kept, and not very informative journals, I note that one of the leitmotifs is a constant moaning about taking on too much. "This has to stop," I find myself saying. Some of the pieces I was writing were in response to pleas for help, and so it has continued.

"Just say no," people told me and I told myself. However, if you're asked to write ten occasional essays a year and say no to 90 per cent of them, that comes to one essay a year. But if you're asked to write four hundred pieces and you still say no to 90 per cent of them—how firm and virtuous you are!—that's still forty pieces a year. I've been averaging forty a year for the past couple of decades. There's a limit. This has to stop.

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To resume our chronology: the Cold War and the Soviet system crumbled in 1989, as the Berlin Wall came down. The end of history had occurred, we were told: capitalism was the way forward, shopping was king, your lifestyle choices defined you, and what more could women want? Not to mention "minorities"—referred to in Canada among politicians and government bureaucrats, or so my spies told me, as "multi-eths" (people who spoke languages other than French and English) and "visi-mins" (people who were not "white"). They could both want quite a bit more, it was soon to become evident; but it was not very evident in the 1990s. There were stirrings, there were rumblings; there were wars and political coups and conflicts elsewhere; but there were not yet explosions. "It can't happen here" was still the attitude.

After 2001, with the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, everything changed. Former assumptions were challenged, former comforts flew out the window, former truisms were no longer true. Fear and suspicion were the order of the day.

And that is where *Burning Questions* begins.

Why the title? Possibly because the questions we've been faced with so far in the twenty-first century are more than urgent. Every age thinks that about its own crises, of course, but surely this era feels different. First, the planet. Is the world itself truly burning up? Is it we who've been setting fire to it? Can we put those fires out?

What about the highly unequal distribution of wealth, not only in North America but virtually everywhere? Can such a top-heavy and unstable arrangement possibly last? How soon before the 99 per cent get fed up and set fire to the figurative Bastille?

Then there's democracy. Is it in peril? What do we mean by "democracy" anyway? Has it ever actually existed, in the sense of equal rights for all citizens? Are we serious about *all*? All genders, all religions, all ethnic origins? Is this system we call democracy worth preserving, or else pursuing? What do we mean by freedom? How much speech should be freely uttered, and by whom, and about what? The social media revolution has given unprecedented power to online conglomerations of people that are called "movements" if

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you like them and "mobs" if you don't. Is this good or bad, or just an extension of old-fashioned crowds in motion?

Does "burn it all down"—a popular slogan in our times—mean all, really?

For instance, does *all* mean all words? What about "the creatives," as some are in the habit of calling them? What about writers and writing? Are they—are we—to be mere mouthpieces, reeling out acceptable platitudes that are supposed to be good for society, or do we have some other function? If it's a function of which others disapprove, shall our books be burned? Why not? It's been done before. There is nothing inherently sacrosanct about a book.

These are some of the burning questions I've been asked, and have asked myself, over the course of the past two decades. Here are some of the answers. Or should I say some of the attempts? That's what *essay* means, after all: an attempt. An effort.

I've arranged this book into five parts. Each is marked by an event or turning point.

Part One begins in 2004. In the aftermath of the Twin Towers and Pentagon attacks, the Iraq War was ongoing. I was still travelling for *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the first book of the MaddAddam trilogy, plotted around a double crisis: the climate crisis and species extinction precipitated by it and a pandemic plague enabled by gene splicing. In 2003–2004, these premises seemed remote; now, not so much. Part One ends in 2009, as the world was still staggering from the big financial crash of October 2008—the very moment at which I was publishing *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth.* (Some people thought I had a crystal ball. I didn't.)

Part Two runs from 2010 to 2013. In these four years Obama was the U.S. president, and the world was slowly recovering from the financial meltdown. I was mostly occupied with the writing of *MaddAddam,* the third novel in the MaddAddam trilogy. Once you've published a book, you are often asked why you did it—as if you've stolen an ashtray—and you will find me, in one of these essays, dutifully trying to account for my crime.

My essay-writing life was varied. I continued to produce reviews, introductions, and, unfortunately, obituaries. The climate crisis was

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becoming an ever-hotter topic, and I found myself writing about it more often.

In 2012, my partner, Graeme Gibson, was diagnosed with dementia. "What's the prognosis?" he asked. "It will go slowly, it will go quickly, it will stay the same, or we don't know," he was told. It was much the same with the state of the world. It was a restless, unsettled period, without any single overwhelming catastrophe. People were fearful, but their fear was unfocused. We were holding our breath. We were carrying on. We were pretending things were normal. But whiffs of a change for the worse were already in the air.

Part Three gathers essays from 2014 to 2016. The run-up to the 2016 election in the United States was already beginning. At the same time, the television series of *The Handmaid's Tale* was in preparation—it would begin shooting in August 2016—and a miniseries of *Alias Grace,* about a nineteenth-century prisoner and possible murderess, was also being filmed.

Freedom and its opposites were thus much on my mind. Around this time I began work on *The Testaments,* the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* that would appear in 2019.

By the end of 2016, a zeitgeist change was surely upon us. With the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president, we had fully entered the strange land of post-truth—a land we would live in until 2020; though some, it appears, are determined to keep living in it.

Part Four begins in 2017, when America feared *The Handmaid's Tale* might not be fiction after all. The inauguration of President Trump was followed immediately by a massive international Women's March. This was a time of much hand-wringing and anguish in the United States: What next? How close to a rollback of women's rights were we? Was an authoritarian regime on the way? When the TV series of *The Handmaid's Tale* launched in April, it found an audience it didn't need to convince. In the same year, the *Alias Grace* miniseries was streamed. *Alias Grace* was how we'd been, *The Handmaid's Tale* was how we might be.

After hackers made a protracted attempt to steal the manuscript online—one of the more bizarre episodes in my writing life—*The Testaments* was published on September 10, 2019.

This period also saw the rise of the #MeToo movement. The over-

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all effect of #MeToo was, I believe, positive, in that notice was given that Harvey Weinsteinish behaviour could no longer expect to pass unreproved. But the pros and cons of social media denunciations are still being debated, and the "culture wars" are ongoing. Against this background, I wrote about the need for truth, fact-checking, and fairness, as did the chroniclers of the Weinstein case, the Bill Cosby case, and many others.

These three years were difficult ones for Graeme and me. Graeme's condition worsened gradually through 2017 and 2018, then more precipitously through the first half of 2019. We knew we had only a limited time left together—months, not years. Graeme wished to depart while he was still himself, and he got his wish. A day and a half after the launch of *The Testaments* at the National Theatre in London, England, he had a massive cerebral hemorrhage, entered a coma, and died five days later.

Some may have been surprised that I carried on with the book tour for *The Testaments* after Graeme's death. But given a choice between hotel rooms and events and people on the one hand, and an empty house and a vacant chair on the other, which would you have chosen, Dear Reader? Of course the empty house and the vacant chair were simply postponed. They came my way later, as such things do.

Part Five begins in 2020. This was an election year in the United States, and a bizarre election year it was—compounded by COVID-19, which struck in earnest in March.

I was asked to write a number of COVID-related pieces—what was I doing all day, what were our prospects?

Totalitarianisms were preoccupying me; the worldwide drift in that direction was alarming, as were various authoritarian moves being made in the United States. Were we yet again witnessing the crumbling of a democracy?

In the fall of 2020, my poetry collection *Dearly* was published; I include one of the pieces I wrote about it. Graeme was much on my mind: it was a pleasure to write the foreword to his *Bedside Book of Birds* and the introduction to his last two novels, both of which were being reissued.

I end *Burning Questions* with pieces about two key conservationists—Barry Lopez and Rachel Carson—whose work, I predict,

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will become increasingly important as we on Planet Earth face an increasingly uncertain future. The inheritors of Lopez and Carson and the many other early voices who warned us about the growing climate crisis are the young generations of post-millennials whose best-known voice is Greta Thunberg. In the mid-twentieth century, when Rachel Carson was first published, it was convenient to deny, avoid, and postpone, but this is no longer possible. That is, if we want to remain a species on this planet.

The post-millennials will soon grow into positions of power. Let us hope they use their power wisely. And soon.

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PART I

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2004 TO 2009

WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT?

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Scientific Romancing

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(2004)

I'm very honoured to have been asked to give the Kesterton Lecture here at Carleton's School of Journalism and Communication.

I note that I'm the fourth in this series, and that I've been preceded by three very eminent men. I have always distrusted the number 4, whereas I do have a preference for the number 3. So I've broken the dubious 4 down into two sets: one of three, a lucky moonstruck set, which includes persons of the male persuasion but excludes me; and a second set of one, which includes persons of the female sort and also, incidentally, me. I am therefore the first in a set that I trust will number many more individuals before long.

That's the feminism for this evening, which, as you can see, I have cunningly combined with the initial fooling around so you won't feel too threatened by it. I've never known why people have sometimes felt threatened by me. After all, I'm quite short, and apart from Napoleon, what short person has ever been threatening? Second, I'm an icon, as you've doubtless been told, and once you're an icon you're practically dead, and all you have to do is stand very still in parks, turning to bronze while pigeons and others perch on your shoulders and defecate on your head. Third, I am—astrologically speaking—a Scorpio, one of the kindest and gentlest of astrological signs. We like to lead quiet lives in the dark and peaceful toes of shoes, where we never give any trouble unless someone attempts to cram an aggressively large yellow-toenailed foot in on top of us. And so it is with me: no bother at all unless stepped on, in which case I can't answer for the consequences.

The title of my small talk tonight is "Scientific Romancing." Its

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cover story is that it's about science fiction. Its subtext is probably *What is fiction for?* or something like that. The subtext under that will be a few paragraphs on the two scientific romances I myself have written. And the sub-sub-subtext might turn out to be *What is a human being?* So this lecture is like those round candies you could once ruin your teeth on for two cents: sugar coating on the outside, with descending layers of various colours, until you come to an odd, indecipherable seed at the very centre.

First, I'll tackle the peculiar form of prose fiction often called "science fiction," a label that brings together two terms you'd think would be mutually exclusive, since *science*—from *scientia,* meaning "knowledge"—is supposed to concern itself with demonstrable facts, and *fiction*—which derives from a root verb meaning "to mould," as in clay—denotes a thing that is feigned or invented. With *science fiction,* one term is often thought to cancel out the other. The book is evaluated as something intended as a statement of truth, with the fiction part—the story, the invention—rendering it useless for anyone who really wants to get a grip on, say, nanotechnology. Or else it's treated the way W.C. Fields treated golf when he spoke of it as a good walk spoiled—that is, the book is seen as a narrative structure cluttered up with too much esoteric geek material when it should have stuck to describing the social and sexual interactions among Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice.

Jules Verne, a granddaddy of science fiction on the paternal side, and the author of such works as *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea,* was horrified by the liberties taken by H.G. Wells, who, unlike Verne, did not confine himself to machines that were within the realm of possibility—such as the submarine—but created other machines—such as the Time Machine—that were quite obviously not. "Il invente!" Jules Verne is said to have said, with vast disapproval.

Thus the node of this part of my talk—a node is sometimes a nasty thing you get on your vocal cords from giving too many lectures, but I use it here in its other sense, a point of intersection—its node is that curious locus where science and fiction meet. Where did this kind of stuff come from, and why do people write it and read it, and what's it good for anyway?

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Before the term *science fiction* appeared, in America, in the 1930s, during the golden age of bug-eyed monsters and girls in diaphanous outfits, stories such as H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* were called "scientific romances." In both terms—*scientific romance* and *science fiction*—the science element is a qualifier. The nouns are *romance* and *fiction,* and the word *fiction* covers a lot of ground.

We've fallen into the habit of calling all examples of long prose fiction "novels," and of judging them by standards developed for evaluating one particular kind of long prose fiction, namely the kind that treats individuals embedded in a realistically described social milieu, and which emerged with the work of Daniel Defoe—who tried to pass it off as journalism—and that of Samuel Richardson and Fanny Burney and Jane Austen during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and which was then developed by George Eliot and Charles Dickens and Flaubert and Tolstoy, and many more, in the mid- and late nineteenth centuries.

This kind of work is found superior if it has "round" characters rather than "flat" ones, round ones being thought to have more psychological depth. Anything that doesn't fit this mode has been shoved into an area of lesser solemnity called "genre fiction," and it is here that the spy thriller and the crime story and the adventure story and the supernatural tale and the science fiction, however excellently written, must reside, sent to their rooms—as it were—for the misdemeanour of being enjoyable in what is considered a frivolous way. They invent, and we all know they invent, at least up to a point, and they are therefore not about Real Life, which ought to lack coincidences and weirdness and action/adventure—unless it is about war, of course—and they are therefore not solid.

The novel proper has always laid claim to a certain kind of truth—the truth about human nature, or how people really behave with all their clothes on except in the bedroom—that is, under observable social conditions. The "genres," it is thought, have other designs on us. They want to entertain, a bad and escapist thing, rather than just rubbing our noses in the daily grit produced by the daily grind. Unhappily for novelists, the larger reading public quite likes being entertained. There's a poverty-stricken writer in George Gissing's masterpiece, *New Grub Street,* who commits suicide after the failure

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of his slice-of-life realistic novel entitled *Mr. Bailey, Grocer*. *New Grub Street* came out at the height of the craze for such adventure-romance novelties as Rider Haggard's *She* and the scientific romances of H.G. Wells, and *Mr. Bailey, Grocer*—if it had been a real novel—would have had a thin time of it. If you think this can't happen now, take a look at the sales figures of *Life of Pi*—pure adventure-romance—and *The Da Vinci Code,* ditto, and the long-running vampiramas of Anne Rice.

The setting of the realistic novel proper is Middle Earth, and the middle of Middle Earth is the middle class, and the hero and heroine are usually the desirable norms, or could have been in—for instance—tragic versions such as Thomas Hardy, if Fate and society hadn't been so contrary. As publishers' readers say, "We *like* these people." Grotesque variations on the desirable norms appear, of course, but they take the form, not of evil talking clams or werewolves or space aliens, but of people with character defects or strange noses. Ideas about—for instance—novel and untried forms of social organization are introduced through conversations among the characters, or in the form of diary or reverie, rather than being dramatized, as in the utopia and the dystopia. The central characters are placed in social space by being given parents and relatives, however unsatisfactory or dead these may be at the outset of the story. These central characters don't just appear as fully grown adults, but are provided with a past, a history. This sort of fiction concerns itself with the conscious waking state, and if a man changes into an arthropod in such a book, he'll do so only in a nightmare.

But not all prose fictions are novels in this stick-to-realism sense of the word. A book can be a prose fiction without being a novel. *The Pilgrim's Progress,* although a prose narrative and a fiction, was not intended as a "novel"; when it was written, such things did not yet exist. It's a romance—a story about the adventures of a hero—coupled with an allegory—the stages of the Christian life. (It's also one of the precursors of science fiction, although not often recognized as such.) Here are some other prose-fiction forms that are not novels proper. The confession. The symposium. The Menippean satire, or anatomy. The utopia and its evil twin, the dystopia.

Nathaniel Hawthorne deliberately called some of his fictions

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"romances," to distinguish them from novels. What he might have been thinking of was the tendency of the romance to use a somewhat more obvious form of patterning than the novel was thought to do—the blond heroine versus her dark alter ego, for instance. The French have two words for short stories—*contes* and *nouvelles,* "tales" and "news"—and this is a useful distinction. The tale can be set anywhere, and can move into realms that are off limits for the novel—into the cellars and attics of the mind, where figures that can appear in novels only as dreams and fantasies take actual shape, and walk the earth. The news, however, is news of us; it's the daily news, as in "daily life." There can be car crashes and shipwrecks in the news, but there are not likely to be any Frankenstein monsters; not, that is, until someone in "daily life" actually manages to create one.

But there's more to the news than "the news." Fiction can bring us another kind of news; it can speak of what is past and passing, and also of what's to come. When you're writing about what's to come, you could be engaged in journalism of the dire-warning sort, which used to be known as prophecy and is sometimes termed agit-prop—elect that bastard, build that dam, drop that bomb, and all hell will break loose, or, in its milder form, tut-tut—but as a person who has all too often been asked, "How did you know?," I'd like to make it clear that I don't go in for prophecy, not as such. Nobody can predict the future. There are too many variables. In the nineteenth century, Tennyson wrote a poem called "Locksley Hall," which appeared to predict—among other things—the age of airplanes, and which contains the line, "For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see"; but no one can really do that. You can, however, dip into the present, which contains the seeds of what might become the future. As William Gibson has said, the future is already with us, it's just unevenly distributed. So you can look at a lamb and make an educated guess, such as, "If nothing unexpected happens to it along the way, that lamb will most likely become (a) a sheep or (b) your dinner," probably excluding (c), a giant wool-covered monster that will crush New York.

If you're writing about the future and you aren't doing forecast journalism, you'll most likely be writing something people will call either science fiction or speculative fiction. I like to make a dis-

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tinction between science fiction proper—for me, this label denotes books with things in them we can't yet do or begin to do, like going through a wormhole in space to another universe—and speculative fiction, which employs the means already more or less to hand, such as credit cards, and takes place on Planet Earth. But the terms are fluid. Some use *speculative fiction* as an umbrella covering science fiction and all its hybrid forms—science fiction fantasy, and so forth—and others choose the reverse.

Here are some of the things that these kinds of narratives can do that "novels" as usually defined cannot do:

- They can explore the consequences of new and proposed technologies in graphic ways, by showing them as fully operational.
- They can explore the nature and limits of what it means to be human in graphic ways, by pushing the envelope as far as it will go.
- They can explore the relationship of man to the universe, an exploration that often takes us in the direction of religion and can meld easily with mythology—again, an exploration that can happen within the conventions of realism only through conversations, reveries, and soliloquies.
- They can explore proposed changes in social organization, by showing what they might be like for those living within them if we actually did them. Thus, the utopia and the dystopia.
- They can explore the realms of the imagination by taking us boldly where no man has gone before. Thus, the spaceship; the inner space of *Fantastic Voyage;* the cyberspace trips of William Gibson; and *The Matrix*—this last, by the way, an adventure-romance with strong overtones of Christian allegory and thus more closely related to *The Pilgrim's Progress* than to *Pride and Prejudice.*

More than one commentator has mentioned that science fiction as a form is where theological narrative went after *Paradise Lost,* and this is undoubtedly true. Supernatural creatures with wings and burning

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bushes that speak are unlikely to be encountered in a novel about stockbrokers, unless the stockbrokers have been taking quite a few mind-altering substances, but they are not out of place on Planet X.

I myself have written two works of "science fiction" or, if you prefer, "speculative fiction": *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Oryx and Crake.* Although lumped together by commentators who have spotted those things they have in common—they are not "novels" in the Jane Austen sense, and both are set in the future—they are in fact dissimilar. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a classic dystopia, which takes at least part of its inspiration from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—particularly the epilogue. In a BBC piece I did in June 2003 on the occasion of Orwell's centenary birthday, I said:

> Orwell has been accused of bitterness and pessimism—of leaving us with a vision of the future in which the individual has no chance, and where the brutal, totalitarian boot of the all-controlling Party will grind into the human face, for ever.
>
> But this view of Orwell is contradicted by the last chapter in the book, an essay on Newspeak—the doublethink language concocted by the regime. By expurgating all words that might be troublesome—"bad" is no longer permitted, but becomes "double-plus-ungood"—and by making other words mean the opposite of what they used to mean—the place where people get tortured is the Ministry of Love, the building where the past is destroyed is the Ministry of Information—the rulers of Airstrip One wish to make it literally impossible for people to think straight.
>
> However, the essay on Newspeak is written in standard English, in the third person, and in the past tense, which can only mean that the regime has fallen, and that language and individuality have survived. For whoever has written the essay on Newspeak, the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is over. Thus, it's my view that Orwell had much more faith in the resilience of the human spirit than he's usually been given credit for.
>
> Orwell became a direct model for me much later in my life—in the real 1984, the year in which I began writing a somewhat different dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale.*

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The majority of dystopias have been written by men, and the point of view has been male. When women have appeared in them, they have been either sexless automatons or rebels who've defied the sex rules of the regime. They've acted as the temptresses of the male protagonists, however welcome this temptation may be to the men themselves: Julia of *Nineteen Eighty-Four;* Lenina, the camiknicker-wearing, orgy-porgy seducer of the Savage in *Brave New World;* I-330, the subversive femme fatale of Yevgeny Zamyatin's 1924 seminal classic, *We.* I wanted to try a dystopia from the female point of view—the world according to Julia, as it were. However, this does not make *The Handmaid's Tale* a "feminist dystopia," except insofar as giving a woman a voice and an inner life will always be considered "feminist" by those who think women ought not to have these things.

In other respects, the despotism I describe is the same as all real ones and most imagined ones. It has a small powerful group at the top that controls—or tries to control—everyone else, and it gets the lion's share of available goodies. The pigs in *Animal Farm* get the milk and the apples, the elite of *The Handmaid's Tale* get the fertile women. The force that opposes the tyranny in my book is one in which Orwell himself—despite his belief in the need for political organization to combat oppression—always put great store: ordinary human decency, of the kind he praised in his essay on Charles Dickens.

At the end of *The Handmaid's Tale,* there's a section that owes much to *Nineteen Eighty-Four.* It's the account of a symposium held several hundred years in the future, in which the repressive government described in the novel is now merely a subject for academic analysis. The parallels with Orwell's essay on Newspeak should be evident.

The Handmaid's Tale, then, is a dystopia. What about *Oryx and Crake*? I would argue that it is not a classic dystopia. Though it has dystopian elements, we don't really get an overview of the structure of the society in it; instead, we see its central characters living their lives within small corners of that society. What they can grasp of the rest of the world comes to them through television and the Internet, and is thus suspect, because edited.

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I'd say instead that *Oryx and Crake* is an adventure-romance coupled with a Menippean satire, the literary form that deals in intellectual obsession. The Laputa or floating island portion of *Gulliver's Travels* is one of these. So are the Watson-Crick Institute chapters of *Oryx and Crake.* The fact that Laputa never did and never could exist—though Swift put his finger correctly on the advantage of air superiority—but that the Watson-Crick Institute is very close to being a reality doesn't have much to do with their functions within a literary form.

In *Oryx and Crake,* there are some people who have been designed, and they have been designed as an improvement on the current model: ourselves. Anyone who engages in such design—and designing people is very close to being something we can really do now—such a designer has to ask: How far can you go in the alteration department? What features are at the core of our being? What is it to be human? What a piece of work is man, and now that we ourselves can be the workmen, what bits shall we chop off?

Which brings me back to the node I mentioned earlier—the point of intersection between science and fiction. "Are you against science?" I am sometimes asked. What a curious question. Against science, as opposed to what, and in favour of what? Without that thing we call "science," a lot of us would be dead of smallpox, not to mention tuberculosis. I grew up among scientists; I know their ways. I almost became a scientist myself, and would have done so had I not been kidnapped by literature. Some of my best relatives are scientists. They are not all like Dr. Frankenstein.

But science, as I've said, is about knowledge. Fiction, on the other hand, is about feeling. Science as such is not a person, and does not have a system of morality built into it, any more than a toaster does. It is only a tool—a tool for actualizing what we desire and defending against what we fear—and like any other tool, it can be used for good or ill. You can build a house with a hammer, and you can use the same hammer to murder your neighbour. Human toolmakers always make tools that will help us get what we want, and what we want hasn't changed for thousands of years because, as far as we can tell, human nature hasn't changed either.

How do we know? We know if we consult the myths and stories.

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They tell us how and what we feel, and how and what we feel determines what we want.

What do we want? Here's a partial list. We want the purse that will always be filled with gold. We want the Fountain of Youth. We want to fly. We want the table that will cover itself with delicious food whenever we say the word, and that will clean up afterwards. We want invisible servants we'll never have to pay. We want the seven-league boots so we can get places very quickly. We want the Cloak of Invisibility so we can snoop on other people without being seen. We want the weapon that will never miss, and that will destroy our enemies utterly. We want to punish injustice. We want power. We want excitement and adventure; we want safety and security. We want to be immortal. We want to have a large number of sexually attractive partners. We want those we love to love us in return, and to be loyal to us. We want cute, smart children who will treat us with the respect we deserve, and who will not smash up the car. We want to be surrounded by music, and by ravishing scents and attractive visual objects. We don't want to be too hot. We don't want to be too cold. We want to dance. We want to drink a lot without having a hangover. We want to speak with the animals. We want to be envied. We want to be as gods.

We want wisdom. We want hope. We want to be good. Therefore we sometimes tell ourselves stories that deal with the darker side of all our other wants.

An educational system that teaches us only about our tools—the how-to of them, their creation, their maintenance—and not about their function as facilitators of our desires, is, in essence, no more than a school of toaster repair. You can be the best toaster-repair person in the world, but you will cease to have a job if toast is no longer a desirable food item on the human breakfast menu. "The arts"—as we've come to term them—are not a frill. They are the heart of the matter, because they are about our hearts, and our technological inventiveness is generated by our emotions, not just by our minds. A society without the arts would have broken its mirror and cut out its heart. It would no longer be what we now recognize as human.

As William Blake noted long ago, the human imagination drives the world. At first it drove only the human world, which was once

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very small in comparison to the huge and powerful natural world around it. Now we're next door to being in control of everything except the weather. But it's still the human imagination, in all its diversity, that directs what we do. Literature is an uttering, or outering, of the human imagination. It lets the shadowy forms of thought and feeling—Heaven, Hell, monsters, angels, and all—out into the light, where we can take a good look at them and perhaps come to a better understanding of who we are and what we want, and what the limits to those wants may be. Understanding the imagination is no longer a pastime or even a duty, but a necessity; because increasingly, if we can imagine it, we'll be able to do it.

Or we'll be able to try it, at least. We've always been good at letting cats out of bags and genies out of bottles and plagues out of Pandora's box. We just haven't been very good at putting them back in again. But we're children of narrative, every one of us. Perhaps what impels us forward, and, yes, gets us out of bed and downstairs to read the morning paper, is that simple question every writer of fiction and every journalist—you notice I make a distinction—has to deal with every writing hour. That question is:

What will happen next?

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Frozen in Time

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INTRODUCTION

(2004)

Frozen in Time by Owen Beattie and John Geiger is one of those books that, having once entered our imaginations, refuse to go away. It made a large impact, devoted as it was to the astonishing revelations made by Dr. Owen Beattie—including the high probability that lead poisoning had contributed to the annihilation of the 1845 Franklin expedition.

I read *Frozen in Time* when it first came out in 1987. I looked at the pictures in it. They gave me nightmares. I incorporated story and pictures as a subtext and extended metaphor in a short story called "The Age of Lead," published in a 1991 collection called *Wilderness Tips.* Then, some nine years later, during a boat trip in the Arctic, I met John Geiger, one of the book's authors. Not only had I read his book, he had read mine, and it had caused him to give further thought to lead as a factor in northern exploration and in unlucky nineteenth-century sea voyages in general.

Franklin, said Geiger, was the canary in the mine, although unrecognized as such at first: until the last years of the nineteenth century, crews on long voyages continued to be fatally sickened by the lead in tinned food. He has included the results of his researches in this expanded version of *Frozen in Time.* The nineteenth century, he said, was truly an "age of lead." Thus do life and art intertwine.

Back to the foreground. In the fall of 1984, a mesmerizing photograph grabbed attention in newspapers around the world. It showed a young man who looked neither fully dead nor entirely alive. He was dressed in archaic clothing and was surrounded by a casing of

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ice. The whites of his half-open eyes were tea-coloured. His forehead was dark blue. Despite the soothing and respectful adjectives applied to him by the authors of *Frozen in Time,* you would never have confused this man with a lad just drifting off to sleep. Instead, he looked like a blend of *Star Trek* extraterrestrial and B-movie victim-of-a-curse: not someone you'd want as your next-door neighbour, especially if the moon was full.

Every time we find the well-preserved body of someone who died long ago—an Egyptian mummy, a freeze-dried Incan sacrifice, a leathery Scandinavian bog-person, the famous ice-man of the European Alps—there's a similar fascination. Here is someone who has defied the general ashes-to-ashes, dust-to-dust rule, and who has remained recognizable as an individual human being long after most have turned to bone and earth. In the Middle Ages, unnatural results argued unnatural causes, and such a body would have been either revered as saintly or staked through the heart. In our age, try for rationality as we may, something of the horror classic lingers: the mummy walks, the vampire awakes. It's so difficult to believe that one who appears to be so nearly alive is not conscious of us. Surely—we feel—a being like this is a messenger. He has travelled through time, all the way from his age to our own, in order to tell us something we long to know.

The man in the sensational photograph was John Torrington, one of the first three to die during the doomed Franklin expedition of 1845. Its stated goal was to discover the Northwest Passage to the Orient and claim it for Britain; its actual result was the obliteration of all participants. Torrington had been buried in a carefully dug grave, deep in the permafrost on the shore of Beechey Island, Franklin's base during the expedition's first winter. Two others—John Hartnell and William Braine—were given adjacent graves. All three had been painstakingly exhumed by anthropologist Owen Beattie and his team, in an attempt to solve a long-standing mystery: Why had the Franklin expedition ended so disastrously?

Beattie's search for evidence of the rest of the Franklin expedition, his excavation of the three known graves, and his subsequent discoveries gave rise to a television documentary, and then—three

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years after the photograph first appeared—to *Frozen in Time.* That the story should generate such widespread interest 140 years after Franklin filled his freshwater barrels at Stromness in the Orkney Islands before sailing off to his mysterious fate was a tribute to the extraordinary staying powers of the Franklin legend.

For many years the mysteriousness of that fate was the chief drawing card. At first, Franklin's two ships, the ominously named *Terror* and *Erebus,* appeared to have vanished into nothingness. No trace could be found of them, even after the graves of Torrington, Hartnell, and Braine had been found. There is something unnerving about people who can't be located, dead or alive. They upset our sense of space—surely the missing ones have to be somewhere, but where? Among the ancient Greeks, the dead who had not been retrieved and given proper funeral ceremonies could not reach the Underworld; they lingered in the world of the living as restless ghosts. And so it is, still, with the disappeared: they haunt us. The Victorian age was especially prone to such hauntings, as witness Tennyson's *In Memoriam,* its most exemplary tribute to a man lost at sea.

Adding to the attraction of the Franklin story was the Arctic landscape that had subsumed leader, ships, and men. In the nineteenth century, very few Europeans—apart from whalers—had ever been to the Far North. It was one of those perilous regions attractive to a public still sensitive to the spirit of literary Romanticism—a place where a hero might defy the odds, suffer outrageously, and pit his larger-than-usual soul against overwhelming forces. This Arctic was dreary and lonesome and empty, like the windswept heaths and forbidding mountains favoured by aficionados of the Sublime. But the Arctic was also a potent Otherworld, imagined as a beautiful and alluring but potentially malign fairyland, a Snow Queen's realm complete with otherworldly light effects, glittering ice palaces, fabulous beasts—narwhals, polar bears, walruses—and gnome-like inhabitants dressed in exotic fur outfits. There are numerous drawings of the period that attest to this fascination with the locale. The Victorians were keen on fairies of all sorts; they painted them, wrote stories about them, and sometimes went so far as to believe in them. They knew the rules: going to an Otherworld was a great risk. You

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might be captured by non-human beings. You might be trapped. You might never get out.

Ever since Franklin's disappearance, each age has created a Franklin suitable to its needs. Prior to the expedition's departure there was someone we might call the "real" Franklin, or even the Ur-Franklin—a man viewed by his peers as perhaps not the crunchiest biscuit in the packet, but solid and experienced, even if some of that experience had been won by bad judgment (as witness the ill-fated Coppermine River voyage of 1819). This Franklin knew his own active career was drawing toward an end, and saw in the chance to discover the Northwest Passage the last possibility for enduring fame. Aging and plump, he was not exactly a dream vision of the Romantic hero.

Then there was Interim Franklin, the one that came into being once the first Franklin failed to return and people in England realized that something must have gone terribly wrong. This Franklin was neither dead nor alive, and the possibility that he might be either caused him to loom large in the minds of the British public. During this period he acquired the adjective *gallant,* as if he'd been engaged in a military exploit. Rewards were offered, search parties were sent out. Some of these men, too, did not return.

The next Franklin, one we might call Franklin Aloft, emerged after it became clear that Franklin and all his men had died. They had not just died, they had perished, and they had not just perished, they had perished miserably. But many Europeans had survived in the Arctic under equally dire conditions. Why had this particular group gone under, especially since the *Terror* and the *Erebus* had been the best-equipped ships of their age, offering the latest in technological advances?

A defeat of such magnitude called for denial of equal magnitude. Reports to the effect that several of Franklin's men had eaten several others were vigorously squelched; those bringing the reports—such as the intrepid John Rae, whose story was told in Kevin McGoogan's 2002 book, *Fatal Passage*—were lambasted in the press; and the Inuit who had seen the gruesome evidence were maligned as wicked

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savages. The effort to clear Franklin and all who sailed with him of any such charges was led by Lady Jane Franklin, whose social status hung in the balance: the widow of a hero is one thing, but the widow of a cannibal quite another. Due to Lady Jane's lobbying efforts, Franklin, in absentia, swelled to blimp-like size. He was credited—dubiously—with the discovery of the Northwest Passage, and was given a plaque in Westminster Abbey and an epitaph by Tennyson.

After such inflation, reaction was sure to follow. For a time in the second half of the twentieth century we were given Halfwit Franklin, a cluck so dumb he could barely tie his own shoelaces. Franklin was a victim of bad weather (the ice that usually melted in the summer had failed to do so, not in just one year, but in three); however, in the Halfwit Franklin reading, this counted for little. The expedition was framed as a pure example of European hubris in the face of Nature: Sir John was yet another of those Nanoodles of the North who came to grief because they wouldn't live by Indigenous rules and follow Indigenous advice—"Don't go there" being, on such occasions, Advice #1.

But the law of reputations is like a bungee cord: you plunge down, you bounce up, though to diminishing depths and heights each time. In 1983, Sten Nadolny published *The Discovery of Slowness,* a novel that gave us a thoughtful Franklin, not exactly a hero but an unusual talent, and certainly no villain. Rehabilitation was on the way.

Then came Owen Beattie's discoveries, and the description of them in *Frozen in Time*. It was now clear that Franklin was no arrogant idiot. Instead, he became a quintessentially twentieth-century victim: a victim of bad packaging. The tins of food aboard his ships had poisoned his men, weakening them and clouding their judgment. Tins were quite new in 1845, and these tins were sloppily sealed with lead, and the lead had leached into the food. But the symptoms of lead poisoning were not recognized at the time, being easily confused with those of scurvy. Franklin can hardly be blamed for negligence, and Beattie's revelations constituted exoneration of a kind for Franklin.

There was exoneration of two other kinds, as well. By going where Franklin's men had gone, Beattie's team was able to experience the physical conditions faced by the surviving members of Franklin's

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crews. Even in summer, King William Island is one of the most difficult and desolate places on earth. No one could have done what these men were attempting—an overland expedition to safety. Weakened and addled as they were, they didn't have a hope. They can't be blamed for not making it.

The third exoneration was perhaps—from the point of view of historical justice—the most important. After a painstaking, finger-numbing search, Beattie's team found human bones with knife marks and skulls with no faces. John Rae and his Inuit witnesses, so unjustly attacked for having said that the last members of the Franklin crew had been practising cannibalism, had been right after all. A large part of the Franklin mystery had now been solved.

Another mystery has since arisen: Why has Franklin become such a Canadian icon? As Geiger and Beattie report, Canadians weren't much interested at first: Franklin was British, and the North was far away, and Canadian audiences preferred oddities such as Tom Thumb. But over the decades, Franklin has been adopted by Canadians as one of their own. For example, there were the folk songs, such as the traditional and often-sung "Ballad of Sir John Franklin"—a song not much remembered in England—and Stan Rogers's well-known "Northwest Passage." Then there were the contributions of writers. Gwendolyn MacEwen's radio drama, *Terror and Erebus,* was first broadcast in the early 1960s; the poet Al Purdy was fascinated by Franklin; the novelist and satirist Mordecai Richler considered him an icon ripe for iconoclasm, and, in his novel *Solomon Gursky Was Here,* added a stash of cross-dresser women's clothing to the contents of Franklin's ships. What accounts for such appropriation? Is it that we identify with well-meaning non-geniuses who get tragically messed up by bad weather and evil food suppliers? Perhaps. Or perhaps it's because—as they say in china shops—if you break it, you own it. Canada's north broke Franklin, a fact that appears to have conferred an ownership title of sorts.

It's a pleasure to welcome *Frozen in Time* back to the bookshelves in this revised and enlarged edition. I hesitate to call it a groundbreaking book, as a pun might be suspected, but groundbreaking it has been. It has contributed greatly to our knowledge of a signal

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event in the history of northern journeying. It also stands as a tribute to the enduring pull of the story—a story that has passed through all the forms a story may take. The Franklin saga has been mystery, surmise, rumour, legend, heroic adventure, and national iconography; and here, in *Frozen in Time,* it becomes a detective story, all the more gripping for being true.

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From Eve to Dawn

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(2004)

From Eve to Dawn is Marilyn French's enormous three-volume, sixteen-hundred-page history of women. It runs from pre-history until the present, and is global in scope: the first volume alone covers Peru, Egypt, Sumer, China, India, Mexico, Greece, and Rome, as well as religions from Judaism to Christianity and Islam. It examines not only actions and laws, but also the thinking behind them. It's sometimes annoying, in the same way that Fielding's *Amelia* is annoying—enough suffering!—and it's sometimes maddeningly reductionist; but it can't be dismissed. As a reference work it's invaluable: the bibliographies alone are worth the price. And as a warning about the appalling extremes of human behaviour and male weirdness, it's indispensable.

Especially now. There was a moment in the early 1990s when, it was believed, history was over and utopia had arrived, looking very much like a shopping mall, and "feminist issues" were supposed dead. But that moment was brief. Islamic and American right-wing fundamentalisms are on the rise, and one of the first aims of both is the suppression of women—their bodies, their minds, the results of their labours—women, it appears, do most of the work around this planet—and, last but not least, their wardrobes.

From Eve to Dawn has a point of view, one that will be familiar to the readers of French's best-selling 1977 novel, *The Women's Room*. "The people who oppressed women were men," French claims. "Not all men oppressed women, but most benefited (or thought they benefited) from this domination, and most contributed to it, if only by doing nothing to stop or ease it."

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Women who read this book will do so with horror and growing anger: *From Eve to Dawn* is to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as wolf is to poodle. Men who read it may be put off by the depiction of the collective male as brutal psychopath, or puzzled by French's idea that men should "take responsibility for what their sex has done." (How responsible can you be for Sumerian monarchs, Egyptian pharaohs, or Napoleon Bonaparte?) However, no one will be able to avoid the relentless piling up of detail and event—the bizarre customs, the woman-hating legal structures, the gynecological absurdities, the child abuse, the sanctioned violence, the sexual outrages—millennium after millennium. How to explain them? Are all men twisted? Are all women doomed? Is there hope? French is ambivalent about the twisted part, but—being a peculiarly American kind of activist—she insists on the hope.

Her project started out as a sweeping television series. It would have made riveting viewing. Think of the visuals—witch-burnings, rapes, stonings-to-death, Jack the Ripper clones, bedizened courtesans, and martyrs from Joan of Arc to Rebecca Nurse. The television series fell off the rails, but French kept on, writing and researching with ferocious dedication, consulting hundreds of sources and dozens of specialists and scholars, although she was interrupted by a battle with cancer that almost killed her. The whole thing took her twenty years.

Her intention was to put together a narrative answer to a question that had bothered her for a long time: How had men ended up with all the power—specifically, with all the power over women? Had it always been like that? If not, how was such power grasped and then enforced? Nothing she had read had addressed this issue directly. In most conventional histories, women simply aren't there. Or they're there as footnotes. Their absence is like the shadowy corner in a painting where there's something going on that you can't quite see.

French aimed to throw some light into that corner. Her first volume—*Origins*—is the shortest. It starts with speculations about the kind of egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies also described by Jared Diamond in his classic *Guns, Germs, and Steel.* No society, says French, has ever been a matriarchy—that is, a society in which women are all-powerful and do dastardly things to men. But socie-

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ties were once matrilineal: that is, children were thought to descend from the mother, not the father. Many have wondered why that state of affairs changed, but change it did; and as agriculture took over, and patriarchy set in, women and children came to be viewed as property—men's property, to be bought, sold, traded, stolen, or killed.

As psychologists have told us, the more you mistreat people, the more pressing your need to explain why your victims deserve their fate. A great deal has been written about the "natural" inferiority of women, much of it by the philosophers and religion-makers whose ideas underpin Western society. Much of this thinking was grounded in what French calls, with wondrous understatement, "men's insistent concern with female reproduction." Male self-esteem, it seemed, depended on men not being women. All the more necessary that women should be forced to be as "female" as possible, even when—especially when—the male-created definition of "female" included the power to pollute, seduce, and weaken men.

With the advent of larger kingdoms and complex and structured religions, the costumes and interior decoration got better, but things got worse for women. Priests—having arguably displaced priestesses—came up with decrees from the gods who had arguably replaced goddesses, and kings obliged with legal codes and penalties. There were conflicts between spiritual and temporal power brokers, but the main tendency of both was the same: men good, women bad, by definition. Some of French's information boggles the mind: the "horse sacrifice" of ancient India, for instance, during which the priests forced the raja's wife to copulate with a dead horse. The account of the creation of Islam is particularly fascinating: like Christianity, it was woman-friendly at the start, and supported and spread by women. But not for long.

The Masculine Mystique (Volume Two) is no more cheerful. Two kinds of feudalism are briskly dealt with: the European and the Japanese. Then it's on to the appropriations by Europeans of Africa, of Latin America, of North America, and thence to the American enslavement of Black people, with women at the bottom of the heap in all cases. You'd think the Enlightenment would have loosened things up, at least theoretically, but at the salons run by educated

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and intelligent women the philosophes were still debating—while hoovering up the refreshments—whether or not women had souls, or were just a kind of more advanced animal. In the eighteenth century, however, women were beginning to find their voices. Also they took to writing, a habit they have not yet given up.

Then came the French Revolution. At first, women as a caste were crushed by the Jacobins despite the key role they'd played in the aristocracy-toppling action. As far as the male revolutionaries were concerned, "Revolution was possible only if women were utterly excluded from power."

Liberty, equality, and fraternity did not include sorority. When Napoleon got control, "he reversed every right women had won." Yet after this point, says French, "women were never again silent." Having participated in the overthrow of the old order, they wanted a few rights of their own.

Infernos and Paradises is the third and longest volume. It takes us through the growing movement for the emancipation of women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the gains and reverses, the triumphs and the backlashes, played out against a background of imperialism, capitalism, and world wars. The Russian Revolution is particularly gripping—women were essential to its success—and particularly dispiriting as to the results. "Sexual freedom meant liberty for men and maternity for women," says French. "Wanting sex without responsibility, men charged women who rejected them with 'bourgeois prudery.' . . . To treat women as men's equals without reference to women's reproduction . . . is to place women in the impossible situation of being expected to do everything men do, and to reproduce society and maintain it, all at the same time and alone."

It's in the final three chapters that French comes into her home territory, the realm of her most personal knowledge and her deepest enthusiasms. "The History of Feminism," "The Political Is Personal, The Personal Is Political," and "The Future of Feminism" make up the promised "dawn" of the general title. These sections are thorough and thoughtful. In them, French covers the contemporary ground, including the views of anti-feminist and conservative women—who, she argues, see the world much as feminists do—one half of humanity acting as predators on the other half—but differ in the degree of

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their idealism or hope. (If gender differences are "natural," nothing to be done but to manipulate the morally inferior male with your feminine wiles, if any.) But almost all women, she believes—feminist or not—are "moving in the same direction along different paths."

Whether you share this optimism or not will depend on whether you believe the Earth *Titanic* is already sinking. A fair chance and a fun time on the dance floor for all would be nice, in theory. In practice, it may be a scramble for the lifeboats. But whatever you think of French's conclusions, the issues she raises cannot be ignored. Women, it seems, are not a footnote after all: they are the necessary centre around which the wheel of power revolves; or, seen another way, they are the broad base of the triangle that sustains a few oligarchs at the top. No history you will read, post-French, will ever look the same again.

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Polonia

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(2005)

What advice would I give the young? I have trouble answering this question. Here's why.

Just before Christmas I was in a cheese store, purchasing some cheese, when a very young man of—oh, say, between forty and fifty—entered, manifesting bewilderment. His wife had sent him out to get something called "meringue sugar," with strict instructions to buy no other kind, and he didn't know what the stuff was and couldn't find it, and nobody in any of the shops he'd so far wandered into had any idea either.

He didn't say this to me. He said it to the cheese shop person. She too appeared to be without a clue as to the meringue sugar mystery.

None of this was any concern of mine. I could have—should have—simply pursued my own personal goal of cheese acquisition. Instead, I found myself saying: "Don't buy icing sugar, that isn't what your wife wants. What she probably wants is something like fruit sugar or berry sugar, which is sometimes called powdered sugar but it isn't really powdered, it's a finer grind than ordinary white sugar, though you'll have a hard time finding it at this time of year. But really, ordinary white sugar works just fine for meringues as long as you beat it in very slowly, I use it all the time myself, and it helps if you add just a tiny bit of cream of tartar and maybe a half teaspoon of white vinegar, and . . ."

At this point my daughter—who'd succeeded in identifying the required cheese—got me in a hammerlock and dragged me over to the cash register, where a lineup was building. "The white vinegar, not the brown," I called in closing. But I was already appalled at

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myself. Why had I spewed out all this unasked-for advice to a complete stranger, albeit a helpless and confused one?

It's an age thing. There's a hormone in the brain that kicks in when you see a younger person in a state of shell shock over meringue sugar, or how to get the lids off jars or the beet stains out of tablecloths, or the right way of dumping the bad boyfriend who should be disposed of immediately because as anyone with half a wit can see the man is a psychopath, or which candidate is the best bet in the local election, or any number of other things on which you appear to yourself to have an overflowing fund of useful knowledge that may vanish from the planet unless you dish it out right and left, on the spot, to those in need. This hormone automatically takes over—like the hormone in a mother robin that forces her to cram worms and grubs down the gaping maws of plaintively cheeping nestlings—and reams of helpful hints unscroll out of your mouth like a runaway roll of toilet paper falling down the stairs. You have no way of stopping this process. It just happens.

It's been happening for centuries; no, for millennia. Ever since we developed what is loosely called human culture, the young have been on the receiving end of instruction from their elders whether they liked it or not. Where are the best roots and berries? How do you make an arrowhead? What fish are plentiful, where and when? Which mushrooms are poisonous? The instruction must have taken pleasant forms ("Great arrowhead! Now try it this way!") or unpleasant ones ("You idiot! That's no way to skin a mastodon! Do it like this!"). Since we've still got the same hardware as Cro-Magnon man, or so we're told, it's merely the details that have changed, not the process. (Hands up, everyone who's ever taped laundry instructions to the washer-dryer for the benefit of their teenage kids.)

There are mountains of self-help books testifying to the fact that the young—and not only the young—are fond of securing advice on every possible subject, from how to get rid of pimples, to the suave way of manoeuvring some youth with commitment issues into marriage, to the management of colic in infants, to the making of the perfect waffle, to the negotiation of an improved salary, to the purchase of a rewarding retirement property, to the planning of a really knockout funeral. The cookbook is one of the earliest forms of self-

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help book. Mrs. Beeton's enormous nineteenth-century tome, *The Book of Household Management,* expands the tradition, and includes not only recipes but advice on everything, from how to tell a real fainting fit from a sham one, to the proper colour choices for blondes and brunettes, to which topics of conversation are safe for afternoon visits. (Stay away from religious controversy. The weather is always acceptable.) Martha Stewart, Ann Landers, and Miss Manners are Mrs. Beeton's great-granddaughters, as is Mrs. Rombauer Becker of *Joy of Cooking* fame and every home handywoman, interior decorator, and sex expert you've ever watched on television. Look at the shows and read the books and authors quickly, in sequence, and you'll feel the need of some cotton wool to stuff in your ears as a defence against the endless stream of what would sound like relentless finger-waving, hectoring, and nagging if you hadn't chosen to let these folks in the door yourself.

With how-to books and self-help shows, you can absorb the advice if and when you want it, but relatives or friends or acquaintances or mothers cannot be so easily opened and then closed and put back on the shelf. Over the centuries, novels and plays have given us a stock character: the older female, or male—both versions exist—who's a voluble interfering busybody, deluging the young folk with unasked-for tips on how to conduct their lives, coupled with sharp-tongued criticisms when the advice is not heeded. Mrs. Rachel Lynde in *Anne of Green Gables* is a case in point. Sometimes this type of person will have a good heart—Mrs. Lynde does—although, just as often, he or she will be a sinister control freak like the Queen of the Night in Mozart's *The Magic Flute.* But good or bad, the meddlesome busybody is seldom entirely sympathetic. Why? Because we like other people—well-meaning or not—to mind their own business, not ours. Even helpful advice can be indistinguishable from bossiness when you're on the receiving end.

My own mother was of the non-interference school unless it was a matter of life and death. If we children were doing something truly dangerous and she knew about it, she would stop us. Otherwise she let us learn by experience. Less work for her, come to think about it, though there was of course the work of self-restraint. She later said that she had to leave the kitchen when I was making my first pie

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