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AHR Forum: Histories and Historical Fictions
In Search of *Alias Grace*:
On Writing Canadian Historical Fiction

MARGARET ATWOOD

IT'S A GREAT HONOR, AND ALSO A GREAT PLEASURE, to be delivering the Bronfman Lecture at the University of Ottawa—that is, it's a great pleasure for me. I hope it will be a pleasure for you as well, but I must put you on notice that you have invited a writer of fiction to speak to you, and these are a suspicious bunch of people. Consider what they do all day: they concoct plausible whoppers, which they hope they can induce the public to swallow whole.

In a town of politicians, this may seem like a respectable enough way of earning your living, but fiction writers do not come with the usual props and backups designed to add verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing tale: that is, the graphs, the studies, the statistics, the blue and red books, the Royal Commissions and omissions, and so forth. Fiction writers do not pretend to be specialists or experts at anything except what Dylan Thomas termed their “craft and sullen art.” About all they really know anything about is the writing of their latest book, and they're usually not even sure how they managed that, having done it in a sort of stupor; and if they do know, they aren't about to tell, any more than a magician will hasten to reveal exactly how he made the pigeon come out of your ear.

But here I am, advertised as a person who will communicate to you something or other having to do with Canadian Studies; and having been brought up by the Girl Guides, where we were taught that the boxes of cookies we were peddling had to contain actual cookies, however eccentric in texture and taste, I always try—unlike some of more political avocation—to live up to the claims on the package.

So what I am going to talk about this evening does have to do with Canadian Studies—more particularly the Canadian novel, and even more particularly, the Canadian historical novel. I will address the nature of this genre insofar as it has to do with the mysteries of time and memory; I will meditate on why so many of this kind of novel have been written by English-speaking Canadian authors lately; and after that I'll talk a little about my own recent attempt to write such a novel. At the end I'll try to add on some sort of meaning-of-it-all nugget or philosophical summation, as such a thing is implicitly called for in the list of ingredients on the cookie box.

This essay was originally delivered as the Bronfman Lecture, Ottawa, November 1996. It was published by and is available in volume form from the University of Ottawa Press, 1997, and is reprinted here with permission.

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