

Margaret Atwood 2017

Conferment speeches
Peace Prize of the German Book Trade 2017
Sunday, October 15, 2017

The spoken word prevails.

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Emcke 2016
Kermani 2015
Lanier 2014
Alexijewitsch 2013
Liao 2012
Sansal 2011
Grossman 2010
Magris 2009
Kiefer 2008
Friedländer 2007
Lepénies 2006
Pamuk 2005
Esterházy 2004
Sontag 2003
Achebe 2002
Habermas 2001
Djebar 2000
Stern 1999
Walsen 1998
Kemal 1997
Vargas Llosa 1996
Schimmel 1995
Semprún 1994
Schorlemmer 1993
Oz 1992
Konrád 1991
Dedecius 1990
Havel 1989
Lenz 1988
Jonas 1987
Bartoszewski 1986
Kollek 1985
Paz 1984
Sperber 1983
Kennan 1982
Kopelow 1981
Cardenal 1980
Menuhin 1979
Lindgren 1978
Kotakowski 1977
Frisch 1976
Grosser 1975
Frère Roger 1974
The Club of Rome 1973
Korczak 1972
Dönhoff 1971
Myrdal 1970
Mitscherlich 1969
Senghor 1968
Bloch 1967
Bea/Visser 't Hooft 1966
Sachs 1965
Marcel 1964
Weizsäcker 1963
Tillich 1962
Radhakrishnan 1961
Gollancz 1960
Heuss 1959
Jaspers 1958
Wilder 1957
Schneider 1956
Hesse 1955
Burckhardt 1954
Buber 1953
Guardini 1952
Schweitzer 1951
Tau 1950

Peter Feldmann

Lord Mayor of the City of Frankfurt

Greeting

On behalf of the City of Frankfurt, I would like to welcome you to the presentation of this year's Peace Prize of the German Book Trade to Margaret Atwood.

The Peace Prize is one of the world's most prestigious awards. Each year, by way of our choice of prize recipient, we send out a clear message from Frankfurt to the world – one that seeks to draw attention to the *political* dimension of art. This year, the prize goes to a Canadian author beloved by critics and readers in equal measure. She lives in Toronto, a city we in Frankfurt know well, as it has been our sister city since 1989. Perhaps Margaret Atwood's most famous work, *The Handmaid's Tale*, also has a close connection to our Rhine-Main region; indeed, the novel was made into a film by Volker Schlöndorff, a native son of our neighbouring city of Wiesbaden.

There are reasons for Margaret Atwood's success: her work is versatile and demanding and focuses uncompromisingly on the ambivalences and contradictions of the human condition. In addition, she has consistently used her fame to advocate for equality between men and women, for action against global warming, for the preservation of nature and especially for the protection of animals.

Dear Ms. Atwood, I'm not sure what your personal response would be to the age-old query as to whether books can change the world. However,

what I can say with confidence is that I and many other readers know that your books have changed our world. Among many other things, you have sharpened our notion of feminism and our appreciation of that which you call speculative fiction.

Our ceremony today marks the end of this year's Frankfurt Book Fair and reminds us that this annual gathering for books, stories, ideas and debate is, at its core, devoted to questions of humanity. A writer like Margaret Atwood – that is, one who combines political courage with a clear perspective on the fragility and changeability of social and political conditions – is virtually predestined to become an ambassador for the Peace Prize. Much like our award, she never tires of seizing an opportunity to appeal for peace and international understanding.

With this year's award, we honour a singular and world-class storyteller. Today, the city of Frankfurt expresses its warmest congratulations to Margaret Atwood on receiving the 2017 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade!

Translated into English by The Hagedorn Group.

Heinrich Riethmüller

President of the German Publishers and Booksellers Association

Greeting

*My love, time to get up.
The bridge towards the abyss will collapse.
You are going to burst, please hold on to my will.
Doubt begins from the stone of Sisyphus,
faith begins from the house key you lost.
I hand all my panic and hate
over to you
alone,
so I can raise my head high
one more time
until the darkest hour.*

It would not be fitting for me to award the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade today without taking a moment to remember the Chinese writer, poet and 2010 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, who died on 13th July this year after eleven years in prison and solitary confinement. Not only was he China's most prominent critic, he was also one of that country's most influential poets and creative minds. So much of what is important to us - and so much of what we admire about him - is united in his life and work: on the one hand, virtues such as courage and unbending will and, on the other hand, poetic vigour, analytic precision and a breathtaking eloquence. The essays and poems of Liu Xiaobo are among the most penetrating works of their kind in contemporary Chinese literature.

His case shows clearly and unmistakably the self-aggrandizing and inhuman yet also very frightened ways in which regimes and dictatorships react when challenged by criticism. Indeed, poetry often seems to appear more dangerous to them than open resistance.

Margaret Atwood, whom we honour today, is one of the authors and intellectuals who worked to bring about the release of Liu Xiaobo. She, too, is an artist who admonishes us, who draws our attention to issues of freedom and peace. She, too, works to foster the values of a democratic and pluralistic

society in her work. She is also actively committed to protecting the environment and continues to deliver unambiguous warnings about the fall of civilisation.

Atwood wrote her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1984, the year we all associate with the work of the same name by George Orwell. It was the era of the Cold War, and West Berlin happened to be one of the places where Atwood was living and writing. Her gloomy dystopian story went on to become an international bestseller and shape an entire generation. In her novel, she describes a cold, totalitarian society in which religious fundamentalists have seized the reins of power, women are oppressed and exploited as birth machines, and people are subject to ubiquitous surveillance. *The Handmaid's Tale* is as much a plea for democracy and women's rights as a compelling statement against racism and disenfranchisement.

Several weeks ago, when we visited Margret Atwood in Canada to discuss today's ceremony, we very quickly came to the topic of the extraordinary political developments in the USA. At that point, she said with a sigh, "I'm probably the only person in the world profiting from Donald Trump". Of course, she was referring to the surprising and sudden success of a novel she had written several decades ago, one that was undergoing not only a renaissance but also a frighteningly renewed rele-

vance in many countries. Indeed, many readers are drawn to the visions Atwood sets forth; they discover parallels to our own social order and uncover similarities in today's power structures and power holders.

The fact that people continue to turn to literature for guidance – especially when seeking answers to urgent questions in an age of insecurity, danger and fear about the future – is a truly amazing phenomenon. When we sense that our world is losing its equilibrium, that is, when we feel our trusted environment is being threatened, we reach out to books in hopes of confirmation, consolation and new insight. Books are escape vessels, buoys we hold onto in times of uncertainty. They help us reflect upon where we stand. They synthesise and store the knowledge and experience of thinkers and poets who portray the world as it is or might soon become, often in the hopes of bringing about some sort of change in their readers.

In 1950, in light of the atrocities perpetuated by the Nazi regime and the complete failure of the book industry to take any action to prevent them – indeed, the industry even sought to curry favour with the Nazis –, publishers and booksellers established the Friedenspreis, that is, the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade we are awarding today. They did so with the conviction that the book industry bore a unique responsibility to foster peace and freedom from that moment on. Since that ini-

tial ceremony, Friedenspreis prize-winners have used their speeches to provide testimony of a world that has always been far from perfect. They have denounced injustice, oppression, hatred and war. They have reminded us time and again that those of us who are privileged enough to live in safe and secure environments have an obligation to work towards a peaceful, ecological, diverse and just world.

Margaret Atwood's poems sharpen the way we look at life in all its facets, uncertainties, contradictions and beauty. Her novels open our eyes to how bleak the world becomes when we fail to fulfil our obligation to work in the service of peaceful coexistence. And it is precisely for this – the vigilant consciousness driving her literary and poetic work – that we have gathered here to honour her today. In doing so, we are also celebrating the spirit of Liu Xiaobo, who once wrote: "The beauty of the written word is that it shines like a light of truth in the dark".

Thank you very much.

*Translated into English by The Hagedorn Group.
The poem by Liu Xiaobo (1997) was translated by
Martin Winter.*

Eva Menasse

»The Knife-thrower's Precision«

Laudatory speech

What a joy and an honour it is to deliver a speech in praise of Margaret Atwood! She has long been a role model and a source of motivation for me, first and foremost thanks to her literary oeuvre. This makes it all the more painful to have so little time today, since I cannot possibly do justice to her body of work in the few minutes I have. Indeed, I would much prefer to give several hour-long lectures about the knife-thrower's precision with which she sketches her characters and renders them utterly unforgettable in the space of only three or four sentences. I would much prefer to delve deeply into the dramaturgical genius with which she sashays from one temporal level to the next, especially in her short stories. And, of course, I would much prefer to spend hours elucidating her famous x-ray vision – that unique perceptive faculty that compels her to leave no stone unturned amongst the wealth of human subterfuge and ignominy, only then to provide us with some comfort via her trademark mischievous humour.

Equally as worthy of praise and admiration is Margaret Atwood's political voice. This voice speaks directly out of her literature, but it can also be heard time and again outside of her fiction, that is, in pointed interviews and, most recently, in *Payback*, her intelligent and entertaining piece on the subject of financial debt. In this book, she shows how economic missteps have often enough precipitated a hero's downfall in works of literature, too. Indeed, she proves that this fall is not always brought about by moral failings alone. And yet, somehow, we neglect the fact that Madame Bovary – to name just one example – was not only deep in despair, but also deeply in debt. Who knows what might have happened to her otherwise? Might she have survived? No doubt as a heavily damaged soul, but still. In novels, we tend to overlook these things – the complicated and poisoned relationship between creditor and debtor, the whole budgetary disaster of it all, etc. – preferring to focus our attention on the emotional drama taking place. This is precisely what Margaret Atwood – an almost frighteningly well-read writer – examined with Cassandra-like prophecy in this outstanding series of non-fiction essays written in the summer of 2008, that is, only months before the collapse of Lehman Brothers sparked the global financial crisis.

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Margaret Atwood is also an immensely creative and prolific author. Her work is characterised by a tropical diversity that stretches from delicately sketched autobiographical stories all the way to elaborately designed novels of speculative fiction. I'm not sure whether she herself knows how many books she's written. Either way, she has achieved something that remains an exception for women in our day; she has become a world star on the global stage of literature. Many of you are likely familiar with the game "Women & Literature"; perhaps we can even play it at lunch after the ceremony. One person names a country and the others try to name a contemporary female author of international fame and standing from that country. The game goes fast in some of the world's most popular languages, and there are a couple of lucky countries; indeed, for Margaret Atwood's home country of Canada, another female author comes quickly to mind, much like that adage about London buses. (For those not familiar with the saying about London buses, it goes like this: *You wait ages for a bus and then two come along at once.*) And yet, as we all know, a spontaneous game of Women & Literature will no doubt display a world map containing some huge blank spots. We also all know that this is not the fault of women.

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It has often been said that women's issues are one of Margaret Atwood's central themes. I would like to disagree. Based on my own woeful experience, I am highly aware that in the case of women writers, much more attention is paid to the statistical relationship between male and female characters and men's and women's issues. I would even submit that only female authors are asked questions such as "Do you find it difficult to empathise with your male protagonists?" and "Why are there so many patchwork families in your work?"

I would argue that the author of *The Handmaid's Tale* – probably Atwood's most well-known novel – automatically overqualifies herself and thus prevents her from being pushed into the "women's issues" corner. Indeed, this novel, which is supposedly about the oppression of women, is

actually a novel about totalitarianism, an ideology whose first victims always happen to be women.

I believe Margaret Atwood's work is particularly suited to showing the guise in which literature must appear in order to achieve a political effect. In fact, her work shows how scrutiny of political and social issues can be introduced without bending literature or weighing it down. On the contrary, the grounding that emerges via the contemporaneity of fiction is what gives rise to the urgency and depth in the first place.

In this sense, in the work of Margaret Atwood, the idea of so-called "women's issues" - which almost always carries a tinge of condescension - is automatically extended to questions of power and impotence, that is, to those issues that have been the subject of literature since the very beginning, from Homer to the Nibelungenlied and from Shakespeare to our present day.

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I read *The Handmaid's Tale* about one-and-a-half years ago by chance, 32 years after it was first published and for reasons completely unrelated to our happy occasion today. It was one of those books I'd always wanted to read, one of those books that somehow finds its way into your hands. It is a fascinating read and a memorable literary experience, especially thanks to the one-person perspective rigorously implemented by the author, which provides the reader with only as much knowledge as the protagonist herself has. She apparently used to be called June, but is now simply addressed with a patronym indicating which man she currently belongs to. As narrated by this recently enslaved woman, the story generates a deep sense of claustrophobia. Margaret Atwood somehow manages to transfer her protagonist's experiences directly onto us; indeed, as soon as we open the book, we immediately find ourselves in an archaic world full of oppression and surveillance. In an instant, we realise that we, too, might wake up one day to a world changed into something that is not entirely foreign and unknown, but radicalised in a direction that seems merely to lie dormant in our present day. Much like democracy, equality between men and women is not an irreversible state.

While I read *The Handmaid's Tale*, I asked myself on almost every page whether this was one of those novels that had become more pertinent thirty years after its first publication. I asked myself whether our way of reading had changed over the

decades and whether the appeal of the novel lies precisely in this fluidity. Indeed, the image of a brutal surveillance state in which the few still-fertile women are forced to work as birthing machines - enslaved as surrogate mothers for the new upper class - varies from page to page. At times, it recalls fundamental Christian sects, then Islam in its worst form; at times, it feels like the Middle Ages, then like a not-too-distant future in which the effects of environmental catastrophe have merged with a new form of prudery. These images are interwoven in such a way as to force a fatalistic question: If we human beings, at some point, actually cause enough destruction to actually ruin our world, wouldn't it be imperative that we devote ourselves to preserving our species at any cost? Wouldn't it make sense to consider sacrificing the freedom of one still-fertile woman for the greater good? As in all of Margaret Atwood's dystopias, the focal point of the narrative is the destruction of the environment, not the oppression of women. Indeed, when the habitat critical to our survival becomes scarce, it is only logical that we relapse into all imaginable forms of totalitarianism.

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Some of the book's most disconcerting yet exquisitely comical passages are contained in flashbacks to the liberal world - highly familiar to contemporary readers - that existed before the merciless Puritans seized power. The effortless combination of these two contrasting sentiments - i.e., discomfort and wit - is additional proof of Margaret Atwood's mastery. These flashbacks shine a light on our well-known debates surrounding feminism: When a woman dresses in a permissive way that flaunts her body, is this solely an expression of self-confidence, a true expression of freedom? Or can it be seen as an unintentional submission to an entirely sexist image of women? Was June's mother's generation made up of grumpy, overalls-wearing feminist ideologists - in Germany, we would refer to them as the "Emma Generation"? Or has the new generation of women taken a dangerous step backwards by thinking that equality between men and women has long since been achieved and that early feminist pioneers are unpleasant bores? Margaret Atwood places these thorny issues like pin pricks at the edges of her actual story. Indeed, I would argue that the strength of this novel from start to finish lies in the fact that it does not specify its intention; it remains open for contradictions and interpretation. While it is quite clear that the human-breeding regime is repugnant and brutal, we nevertheless feel tangi-

ble sympathy with some of its representatives, many of whom soon find themselves caught in the very unfree system that brought them to power in the first place.

Doesn't this approach imply that society had already long since set itself on a direct path to the fundamentalist revolution? This is a question we ask ourselves today more urgently than thirty years ago, and this is one of the reasons why *The Handmaid's Tale* is now experiencing an almost unlikely renaissance in the U.S.; that is, of course, in addition to having an American president who boasts of sexually harassing women. The novel is now best known as a television series, the genre that many consider to have replaced the serialised novels highly popular in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In fact, *The Handmaid's Tale* just won five Emmys, including the award for Outstanding Drama Series. What more could a writer want than to have an "old" work become more relevant and successful than ever, over three decades after it was first published? Perhaps only that the course of the world would not seem to follow one's own fearful visions.

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As I mentioned, we have too little time to even approximate the riches found in Margaret Atwood's work. This is why I wanted to focus on the highly successful combination of literature and socio-political analysis she demonstrates so impressively in *The Handmaid's Tale*. When this combination is successful – that is, when political and socio-political consciousness flows into the art of narration – each element grows far beyond its respective realm.

Political insight, however, cannot be sprayed over a narrative like water from a sprinkler. Indeed, it's quite the opposite. An author like Margaret Atwood is primarily a storyteller. She uses her deep familiarity with the essence and political mindset of human beings as the groundwater for enriching her stories. We see this in many of her short – but by no means small-scale – stories just as much as in her grand futuristic novels, such as the MaddAddam trilogy, which takes place at a time when mankind has almost entirely eradicated itself due to the unrestrained manipulation of human, animal and plant genes.

This is the point at which a second fundamental talent comes in very handy, one that is just as indispensable to good writers as a keen eye for detail. One might even refer to it as the very oppo-

site of detail, namely a talent for calculation, a foresight that allows an author to draw the entire line from start to finish. Indeed, when Margaret Atwood takes note of an erratic water drip, she is more than capable of narrating us all the way to the tidal wave.

Using less mathematical terms, one might refer to this talent simply as a capacity for imagination, that is, as an imagination that grows and spreads out in all directions. It is the vital organ this writer uses to process, digest and mould everything – including autobiographical elements.

There is a special charm in reading several books by the same author over a short period of time. After a while, one starts to notice definite correlations, motif variations and autobiographical mycelium. Canada's wild and raw nature is one such motif in Margaret Atwood's work. However, this nature, although potentially deadly, is never hostile; only human beings are capable of having hostile intentions. In fact, for those who know and respect it, nature becomes a mighty protector, as we see in *Surfacing*, one of her first novels; a girl who grew up in and around the forests and lakes of Canada – much like the biologist's daughter Margaret Atwood – experiences a life crisis and literally digs herself into the ground in an attempt to crawl back into the arms of nature.

A number of other characters pop up time and again in Margaret Atwood's books: for example, an older brother who is portrayed as a much-admired yet emotionally unreachable scientific genius. There is also a bright and clever mother who is nearing the end of her life, has lost the ability to see and can only hear a bit in one ear, forcing her children to speak loudly into this remaining ear as if down a long tunnel, never knowing whether the things they say even arrive. Another recurring character is the figure of the Eastern European refugee; charming and sympathetic to women, he only barely escapes distant wars to then carefully conceal his trauma from an unsuspecting Canadian society. The most dazzling specimen of this type plays the leading role in "Wilderness Tips", one of my favourite Margaret Atwood stories. The tour de force she achieves here on only thirty pages is almost impertinent; it is the story of the complicated relationship of three sisters among themselves as well as with that heartbreaking rascal, this time embodied by a Hungarian who marries the youngest sister – a pure but naive beauty – but also sleeps with the insolent, life-loving middle sister for decades out of pure habit. The story takes place

on a single morning over a maximum of two hours, with the author using her magic hand to simultaneously reveal stories of decades past. And she does all of this in a splendidly overblown tone that crackles with irony. She entertains us to such an extent that it alleviates the moral indignation we feel over the monstrous act performed in the final pages by our George – this is not his real name, but nobody would have been able to pronounce his real name.

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There is another recurring theme in the oeuvre of Margaret Atwood, one that is neither in the foreground nor exactly hidden: women as creative beings. Be they painters, poets, editors or illustrators, none of her female characters have very high opinions of themselves or their freelance professions, even if these careers nevertheless make it possible for them to earn a living. Not only do they battle their own critical eye, they are also constantly playing down their success in front of men. In her novel *Cat's Eye*, this predicament leads to a number of delightful scenes in which the main character, a successful painter, stays for a couple of days in her ex-husband's studio decades after their divorce. Back in the day, her ex used to see himself as an uncompromising artistic genius; today, he crafts body parts out of plaster for horror films. When they were young, he had not concealed the fact that he thought her art was irrelevant. She, in turn, had been forced to face the question as to whether she should even continue to work creatively. At the time she had said: "There is *freedom* in this: because it doesn't matter what I do, I can do what I like." And now, in the days leading up to the vernissage for a large-scale retrospective of her artwork, she finds herself living between his half-heads and ripped-off arms.

Margaret Atwood brings this rich constellation to new satirical heights in *Stone Mattress*, her latest book of stories. The first three tales are woven into a type of triptych: we are introduced to Constance, a wonderful old woman who, when she doesn't know what to do, receives instructions from her dead husband from the great beyond. She prefers to retreat to her computer, that is, into a file called Alphinland, and only slowly does the reader come to know that confused Constance is actually

a rather famous woman and the creator of a popular worldwide fantasy series that has been turned into a film and computer game. The second story focuses on the love of her youth, Gavin, a prize-winning poet, whose fame is based on the rather explicit love poems he wrote years back, as a Canadian wannabe Ovid, to "my lovely" – the *nom de plume* of our young Constance. Now old and ill, he has had his fill of women, even of his third wife, who is 30 years his junior and has once again brought a devoted doctoral student home to visit; but our poet is nevertheless stunned to find out that the young lady is not at all interested in his sonnets, but rather in the sci-fi crap produced by his first girlfriend, Constance, whom he eventually weeps for – in moments of deep self-pity – as his only true love and muse. These three stories once again showcase Margaret Atwood's dramaturgical talent in its full splendour. Her compositional mastery stands in staggering contrast to the crude and bawdy humour with which she delves into the horrors of aging, down to its most embarrassing details. But the most comical element remains her hidden reference to her own life's work, namely, that women who write are and will forever be quirky and crotchety figures who lack the talent to stylise themselves the way men do. At least in this sarcastic triptych, the pompous man must own up to his own shameless self-presentation in the end, that is, when death comes knocking at the door.

Is this really a hidden ironic reflection on the author herself, or is it just a very entertaining story? As everywhere in Margaret Atwood's work, it is both. Her stories are realistic, true and always paradigmatic. Above all, they reveal to us other possibilities. They show us that possibilities lie everywhere and in all things. Simply by living, we constantly make decisions that destroy possibilities, day by day, year by year. Only in writing can we bring such possibilities back to life, that is, shed a light on the alternatives and laugh and cry about what might have been. One such possibility was that this great writer, this mischievously giggling wise woman, would receive the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. And now, this possibility has become a richly deserved reality.

Translated into English by The Hagedorn Group.

Margaret Atwood

»Stories in the World«

Acceptance speech

It is a great honour as well as a joy to be here with you today, and to have been given this very highly regarded award – the Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels. I am conscious that I am joining a long list of supremely talented and accomplished and indeed brave international writers, stretching all the way back to 1950. It's an especial honour because booksellers are, by their very natures, attentive readers – they are therefore among the Dear Readers for whom every writer is writing – the Dear Reader who will find the bottle with the message in it that you, the writer, have thrown into the ocean of words and stories, and will open it, and will read the message, and will think it actually means something. For a writer from a recently colonial country such as Canada – a country where writing, and the arts in general, were not taken seriously until the past few decades—it is almost incredible to me to be receiving this acclaimed honour at your hands.

When this prize was begun in 1950 – surely as a gesture of hope in a world so recently torn apart by the most lethal war in history – I myself was only ten years old, and knew nothing about booksellers, and not much about writing, although I had done some of it. But I had given up my writing ambitions, having abandoned my second novel in midstream at the age of seven. It was literally midstream: the heroine was an ant, and she was on a raft, floating off to an adventure that never materialized. This often happens to novel writers: the beginning, so promising. Then the middle, so daunting or perhaps even boring. And even more so when one's hero is an insect, though this is a problem that Kafka managed to overcome.

By the age of ten, I wanted to be a painter, or, even better, a fashion designer. I was fond of drawing sophisticated women in elbow-length gloves, with cigarette holders. I had never seen such a person, but I had seen pictures of them. Such is the enchanting influence of art.

But after a few unsatisfactory encounters with an oil-painting set, and some complex adventures with a sewing machine – in other words, after reality had replaced fantasy – by the age of sixteen I was pursuing the path of science – like my older brother, Dr. Harold Atwood, the neurophysiologist,

who is here in this audience today. Odd though it may seem, I intended to become a botanist. Plants were silent and easy to observe, and did not bleed when you cut them up, unlike frogs, so I felt easy in my conscience about it. If that had happened, I would be cloning your glow-in-the-dark potatoes right now. But then I suddenly morphed into a writer, and began scribbling furiously. I don't know why that happened, but it did, and fantasy once more took first place in my life.

Being Canadian, I cannot take personal credit for my appearance on your excellent list. Canadians shy away from taking personal credit. If told we have won something, we look behind us to see who was really meant, since it surely could not have been us. Nor can I take any credit for being an activist, which I am often labeled as being. I am not a real activist – a real activist would view her writing as a conduit for her activism – for her important Cause, whatever it is – and that has not been the case with me. It's true that you can't write novels without looking at the world, and that when you look at the world you will wonder what's going on, and then try to describe it; I think a lot of writing is an attempt to figure why people do what they do. Human behaviour, both saintly and demonic, is a constant amazement to me. But when you write down an account of human behaviour, that account may look a lot like activism, since language has an inherent moral dimension, and so do stories. The reader will make moral judgments, even if the writer claims only to be bearing witness. What may seem like activism on my part is usually a kind of blundering puzzlement. Why DOES the emperor have no clothes, and why is it so often considered bad manners to blurt it out?

So, after thanking you very much for all the nice things you have said about me, I will ascribe this happy moment to luck and to the stars, and to the collusion of my admittedly strange work – especially my strange dystopian work – with the admittedly strange historical moment we are living through.

What is this strange historical moment? It is one of those times when the ground – which only a little while ago seemed steady enough, with seed-time following harvest, and birthdays succeeding

one another, and so on – that ground shifts beneath our feet, and mighty winds blow, and we are no longer sure of where we are. Also, we are no longer sure of *who* we are. Whose face is that in the mirror? Why are we growing fangs? Just yesterday we were filled with such goodwill and hope. But now?

The United States is experiencing such a moment. After the 2016 election, young people in that country said to me, “This is the very worst thing that has ever happened;” to which I replied, both “No, actually it’s been worse,” and also, “No it isn’t; not yet.” Britain is also having a difficult time of things right now, with much weeping and gnashing of teeth. And – in a less drastic way, but still – in view of its recent election – so is Germany. You thought that crypt was locked, but someone had the key, and has opened the forbidden chamber, and what will come creeping or howling forth? Sorry to be so Gothic, but there is cause for alarm on many fronts.

Every country, like every person, has a noble self – the self it would like to believe it is – and an everyday self – the good-enough self that gets it through the mundane weeks and months when everything is going on as expected – and then a hidden self, much less virtuous, that may burst out at moments of threat and rage, and do unspeakable things.

But what causes these times of threat and rage – or what is causing them now? You will have heard many theories about that, and you will doubtless hear many more. It is climate change, some will say: floods, droughts, fires, and hurricanes affect growing conditions, and then there are food shortages, and then there is social unrest, and then there are wars, and then there are refugees, and then there is the fear of refugees, because will there be enough to share?

It is financial imbalance, others will say: too few rich people control too much of the world’s wealth, and they are sitting on it like dragons, and causing large financial disparities and resentments, and then there will be social unrest, and wars, or revolutions, and so forth. No, say others: it is the modern world: it is automation and robots, it is technology, it is the Internet, it is the manipulation of news and opinion that is being done by an opportunistic few for their own advantage: the army of Internet trolls and astroturfers, for instance, who took such pains to influence the German election, and, it seems, the similar Russian efforts in the United States via Facebook. But why are we sur-

prised? The Internet is a human tool, like all others: axes, guns, trains, bicycles, cars, telephones, radios, films, you name it – and like every human tool it has a good side, a bad side, and a stupid side that produces effects that were at first not anticipated.

Among those tools is possibly the very first uniquely human tool: our narrative capability, enabled by complex grammar. What an advantage stories must once have given us – allowing us to pass along essential knowledge so you didn’t have to find out everything for yourself by trial and error. Wolves communicate, but they do not tell the story of Little Red Riding Hood.

Stories, too, can have a good side, and bad side, and a third side that produces unanticipated effects. As a writer of stories I am supposed to say how necessary they are, how they help us understand one another, how they build empathy, and so forth – and that is true. But because I am a writer of stories, I am also aware of their ambiguities and dangers. Let us just say that stories are powerful. They can change the way people think and feel – for better or for worse.

So what is the story we are telling ourselves about this present moment and its tribulations? Whatever the cause of the change we are living through, it is the kind of moment when the rabbits in the meadow perk up their ears, because a predator has entered the scene.

Along will come a wolf in sheep’s clothing, or even a wolf in wolf’s clothing, and that wolf will say: Rabbits, you need a strong leader, and I am just the one for the job. I will cause the perfect future world to appear as if by magic, and ice cream will grow on trees. But first we will have to get rid of civil society – it is too soft, it is degenerate -- and we will have to abandon the accepted norms of behaviour that allow us to walk down the street without sticking knives into each other all the time. And then we will have to get rid of *Those* people. Only then will the perfect society appear!

Those people vary from place to place and from time to time. Maybe they are witches, or lepers, both of whom were blamed for the Black Death. Maybe they are Huguenots, in eighteenth century France. Maybe they are Mennonites. (But why Mennonites? I asked a Mennonite friend. You seem so harmless! We were pacifists, he answered. In a continent at war, we set a bad example.)

Anyway, the wolf says: Do as I say and all will be well. Defy me, and snarl snarl, gobble gobble, you will be crunched into tiny bits.

The rabbits freeze, because they are confused and terrified, and by the time they figure out that the wolf does not in fact mean them well but has arranged everything only for the benefit of the wolves, it is too late.

Yes, we know, you will say. We've read the folktales. We've read the science fictions. We've been warned, often. But that, somehow, does not always stop this tale from being enacted in human societies, many times over.

Here I must apologize to the wolves. I used your name, dear wolves, only as a metaphor. Please don't swarm me on social media, with messages such as: You Privileged Human Idiot! What do you know about the inner lives of wolves, you anthropocentric élitist snob? Have you ever had *your* paw caught in a trap? If it weren't for us wolves you'd be over-run by deer and rabbits, and then what?

Point taken. And I realize that you wolves are kind at heart, at least to other wolves, or at least to wolves of your own pack. I have experienced your polyphonic music, and find it haunting. Perhaps I should have used dinosaurs; but they would have been less well understood and possibly not as entertaining. That is always a consideration, for storytellers. We are a devious lot, and given to frivolous decision-making.

*

This little fable I have concocted comes from my deep past - from the time when I was a young child growing up in the northern Canadian wilderness, far from villages and towns and cities, but quite close to rabbits and wolves. Up there, when it was raining, there were three forms of activity: writing, drawing, and reading. Among the books I read was the collected, unexpurgated Grimm's Fairy Tales - complete with the pecked-out eyes and the red-hot shoes. My parents had got it by mail order, and when they saw what was inside it, they worried that this book might warp their children. It probably did warp me. It must have warped me in the direction of being a writer, for without Grimm's Fairy Tales - so crafty, so compelling, so complicated, so frightening, so many-layered, but with notes of hope at the ends of the stories that are heartbreaking, because so unlikely - how could I ever have written - you know I am going to say this - how could I ever have written The Handmaid's Tale?

The cover of the first United States edition is suggestive. There are the two Handmaids, in their red garments, resembling two Red Riding Hoods

with their baskets over their arms. There behind them is a high brick wall - like THE wall, the famous Berlin wall. And there are the shadows of the two women cast on the wall - and these shadows are the shadows of wolves.

I began writing that novel in West Berlin, in the year 1984 - yes, George Orwell was looking over my shoulder - on a rented German typewriter. The Wall was all around us. On the other side of it was East Berlin, and also Czechoslovakia, and also Poland - all of which I visited at that time. I remember what people said to me, and what they did not say. I remember the meaningful pauses. I remember the sense that I myself had to be careful of what I said, because I might unwittingly endanger someone. All of that made its way into my book.

This book was published in 1985 in Canada, and in 1986 in Britain and the United States. Although my rule for it was that I could put nothing into it that human beings had not done, somewhere, at some time, it was regarded by some critics with disbelief. Too feminist, yes, with all its talk of controlling women and their never-ending bodies, but also too far-fetched. It could never happen *there* - not in the United States - because then, during the Cold War, wasn't the United States viewed as a power for good? Didn't it stand for democracy, liberty, and freedom - however imperfectly enacted on the ground? Confronted by closed systems such as the Soviet Union, America was open. Confronted by top-down tyrannies, America promised the dream of opportunity, based on merit. Even though America had some very sinister history to overcome - weren't those the ideals? Yes. They were.

But that was then. Now, some thirty-odd years later, this book has returned, because suddenly it no longer seems like a far-fetched dystopian fantasy. It has become too real. Red-clad figures are appearing in state legislatures in silent protest at the laws being enacted there, largely by men, to control women. Their aim seems to be to push back the clock, to the nineteenth century if possible. What sort of world do these legislators want to live in? They want a very unequal one: so much is clear. An unequal one in which they themselves will have more power, and other people will have less. If you put the ants in charge of the picnic, the ants will rearrange the picnic for themselves: there will be no people, only egg sandwiches and cookies. The ants at least know what sort of a world they want to live in, and they are very frank about it. Ants are not hypocritical.

The citizens of every country must ask themselves the same question: what sort of world do they want to live in? Being of a Plutonian and sinister cast of mind, I would reduce that sentence to: Do they want to live? Because, drawing back from our human picture - drawing back so that the borders between countries disappear, and the earth becomes a blue marble in space, with much more water on it than land - it is evident that our fate as a species will be determined by whether or not we kill the oceans. If the oceans die, so will we - at least 60 percent of our oxygen comes from marine algae.

But I will try not to depress you too much. There is hope, there is hope: brilliant minds are already at work on such problems. But meanwhile, what is an artist to do? Why make art at all, in such disturbing times? What is art, anyway? Why should we be bothered with it? What is it for? Learning, teaching, expressing ourselves, describing reality, entertaining us, enacting truth, celebrating, or even denouncing and cursing? There's no general answer. Human beings have engaged in the arts - music, visual imagery, dramatic performances - including rituals - and language arts, including tale telling - ever since they have been recognizably human. Children respond to language and music before they themselves can speak: those capabilities seem to be built in. The art we make is specific to the culture that makes it - to its location, to its driving energy system, to its climate and food sources, and to the beliefs connected with all of these. But we have never not made art.

For a great many centuries, art was made in the service of the rulers - the kings, the emperors, the popes, the dukes, and such. But ever since romantic and post-romantic times there has been a different expectation of the artist. Surely she or he should speak truth to power, tell the stories that have been suppressed, give voices to the voiceless. And many writers have done that; it has frequently gotten them into trouble, and sometimes it has got them shot. But create they must. They have written in secret, they have smuggled their manuscripts out of unsafe places at risk to their lives. They have arrived from afar, like the messenger in the Book of Job, fainting from exhaustion, to say: *I only am escaped alone to tell thee.*

To tell thee. To tell thee, Dear Reader, singular. A book is a voice in your ear; the message is - while you are reading it - is for you alone. Reading a book is surely the most intimate experience we can have of the inside of another human being's

mind. Writer, book, and reader - in this triangle, the book is the messenger. And all three are part of one act of creation, as the composer, the player of the symphony, and the listener are all participants in it. The reader is the musician of the book.

As for the writer, his or her part is done when the book goes out into the world; it is the book that will then live or die, and what happens to the writer is at that point immaterial, from the point of view of the book.

Any award winner in the arts is the temporary representative of all the practitioners of that art, and of the community that allows that art to exist - those who have gone before, those from whom we ourselves have learned, those who have died before they were recognized, those who have had to struggle against racial discrimination to find their writing voice, those who have been killed for their political views, and those who have managed to live through periods of oppression and censorship and silencing. Then there are those who never became writers at all because they were not given the possibility - such as the many North American and Australian and New Zealand story-bearers and oral poets from indigenous cultures of the past and even the present. Doors are opening for such voices all around the world; but other doors are being closed. We need to pay attention to that.

So to my teachers, both dead and alive, by whom I mean the very many writers in my life and library; my readers, into whose hands I have entrusted my stories; to all my publishers, who have not considered my work a waste of paper, and who have taken a chance on me; to my agents, companions on this journey; and to all those friends and professionals who have helped and supported me over the years, including my family, both immediate and extended, my mother, a wonderful reader-aloud - thank you for those gifts you have given me.

A gift should be returned or passed on - it should pass from hand to hand, like a book. Let us hope for a world in which such gifts remain possible. Let us not close the doors or silence the voices. One day I will be walking along a beach, or inside a bookstore, and I will find a bottle, or a book, and I will open it, and I will read the message to me from you - yes, you out there, a young writer who perhaps has just been published. And I will say: Yes. I can hear you. I can hear your story. I can hear your voice.

Thank you all, very much, again.

Winners of the Peace Prize and their laudatory speakers

| | | | |
|------|--|------|--|
| 1950 | Max Tau - Adolf Grimme | 1985 | Teddy Kollek - Manfred Rommel |
| 1951 | Albert Schweitzer - Theodor Heuss | 1986 | Władysław Bartoszewski - Hans Maier |
| 1952 | Romano Guardini - Ernst Reuter | 1987 | Hans Jonas - Robert Spaemann |
| 1953 | Martin Buber - Albrecht Goes | 1988 | Siegfried Lenz - Yohanan Meroz |
| 1954 | Carl J. Burckhardt - Theodor Heuss | 1989 | Václav Havel - André Glucksmann |
| 1955 | Hermann Hesse - Richard Benz | 1990 | Karl Dedecius - Heinrich Olschowsky |
| 1956 | Reinhold Schneider - Werner Bergengruen | 1991 | György Konrád - Jorge Semprún |
| 1957 | Thornton Wilder - Carl J. Burckhardt | 1992 | Amos Oz - Siegfried Lenz |
| 1958 | Karl Jaspers - Hannah Arendt | 1993 | Friedrich Schorlemmer - Richard von Weizsäcker |
| 1959 | Theodor Heuss - Benno Reifenberg | 1994 | Jorge Semprún - Wolf Lepenies |
| 1960 | Victor Gollancz - Heinrich Lübke | 1995 | Annemarie Schimmel - Roman Herzog |
| 1961 | Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan - Ernst Benz | 1996 | Mario Vargas Llosa - Jorge Semprún |
| 1962 | Paul Tillich - Otto Dibelius | 1997 | Yaşar Kemal - Günter Grass |
| 1963 | Carl F. von Weizsäcker - Georg Picht | 1998 | Martin Walser - Frank Schirrmacher |
| 1964 | Gabriel Marcel - Carlo Schmid | 1999 | Fritz Stern - Bronislaw Geremek |
| 1965 | Nelly Sachs - Werner Weber | 2000 | Assia Djebar - Barbara Frischmuth |
| 1966 | Kardinal Bea/Visser 't Hooft - Paul Mikat | 2001 | Jürgen Habermas - Jan Philipp Reemtsma |
| 1967 | Ernst Bloch - Werner Maihofer | 2002 | Chinua Achebe - Theodor Berchem |
| 1968 | Léopold Sédar Senghor - François Bondy | 2003 | Susan Sontag - Ivan Nagel |
| 1969 | Alexander Mitscherlich - Heinz Kohut | 2004 | Péter Esterházy - Michael Naumann |
| 1970 | Alva und Gunnar Myrdal - Karl Kaiser | 2005 | Orhan Pamuk - Joachim Sartorius |
| 1971 | Marion Gräfin Dönhoff - Alfred Grosser | 2006 | Wolf Lepenies - Andrei Pleşu |
| 1972 | Janusz Korczak - Hartmut von Hentig | 2007 | Saul Friedländer - Wolfgang Frühwald |
| 1973 | The Club of Rome - Nello Celio | 2008 | Anselm Kiefer - Werner Spies |
| 1974 | Frère Roger - (keine Laudatio) | 2009 | Claudio Magris - Karl Schlögel |
| 1975 | Alfred Grosser - Paul Frank | 2010 | David Grossman - Joachim Gauck |
| 1976 | Max Frisch - Hartmut von Hentig | 2011 | Boualem Sansal - Peter von Matt |
| 1977 | Leszek Kołakowski - Gesine Schwan | 2012 | Liao Yiwu - Felicitas von Lovenberg |
| 1978 | Astrid Lindgren - H.-C. Kirsch, G. U. Becker | 2013 | Swetlana Alexijewitsch - Karl Schlögel |
| 1979 | Yehudi Menuhin - Pierre Bertaux | 2014 | Jaron Lanier - Martin Schulz |
| 1980 | Ernesto Cardenal - Johann Baptist Metz | 2015 | Navid Kermani - Norbert Miller |
| 1981 | Lew Kopelew - Marion Gräfin Dönhoff | 2016 | Carolin Emcke - Seyla Benhabib |
| 1982 | George Kennan - Carl F. von Weizsäcker | 2017 | Margaret Atwood - Eva Menasse |
| 1883 | Manès Sperber - Siegfried Lenz | | |
| 1984 | Octavio Paz - Richard von Weizsäcker | | |

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