

# explorations



Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

## REVIEW

**Slawomir Kuźnicki. 2017. *Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Fiction: Fire Is Being Eaten*.  
Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.**

DOI: 10.25167/EXP13.19.7.13

*Jacek Gutorow (University of Opole)*

ORCID: 0000-0002-7053-7829

Slawomir Kuźnicki's *Margaret Atwood's Dystopian Fiction: Fire Is Being Eaten*, a study devoted to selected works of Margaret Atwood, a renowned Canadian writer, is both an interesting contribution to the rapidly burgeoning area of the Canadian studies and a no-nonsense attempt at situating Atwood's later novels in "contexts of different sorts" (Kuźnicki 1), the most important being those associated with the issues of "science, women and religion" (as it is formulated in the first chapter). Kuźnicki's book is relatively short but rich in conjectural insights which manage to build an in-depth profile of one of the greatest transatlantic novelists of the postmodern (or is it post-postmodern) era. It can be read as a standard academic research work but it may also appeal to the general reader interested in contemporary literature. Its clear structure and lucid presentation of arguments add up to offer a credible interpretation of an artist famously reluctant to yield to any critical classifications.

Kuźnicki opens his book with a short excerpt from Atwood's poem "More and More": "More and more frequently the edges/ of me dissolve and I become/ a wish to assimilate the world" (1). Such words seem to me to speak of an existential challenge but the Polish critic interestingly sees in them an invitation to interpret Atwood's works in the light of various theoretical approaches. This gesture deserves a special attention. What the critic constantly emphasizes is the Canadian writer's "immersion in the world's problems." In the same breath, he underlines the significance of Edward Said's category of "worldliness," a concept particularly relevant to Atwood's *oeuvre*. As a matter of fact, numerous references to the idea of dystopian/speculative fiction and Said's postcolonial theory set up the book's basic methodological framework. It should be added that Atwood's dystopias are rooted in the present moment. Thus, Kuźnicki points to the novelist's scathing critique of contemporary science (seen as a threat to man and the natural environment) and highlights her remarks on the role of religion and religious sentiments in the apparently nihilistic world of today and tomorrow. He also notices in Atwood a discernible ethical edge. As the Canadian novelist has it, each writer should be held accountable for his/her artistic creation. Accordingly, the first chapter of Kuźnicki's monograph closes with some telling words taken from one of her essays: "Is there a self-

*Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature*, 7 (2019), pp. 134-136

identity for the writer that combines responsibility with artistic integrity? If there is, what might it be? Ask the age we live in, and it might reply – the witness. And, if possible, the eyewitness” (20). This is not only one of the tersest descriptions of Atwood’s literary ideal but also her artistic credo and a plea to contemporary intellectuals.

In the main part of the book, the Polish scholar focuses on selected works by the Canadian writer. In Chapter Two, he offers an interpretation of the early dystopian narrative *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). This is followed by a lengthy and nuanced analysis of the novels constituting the so-called *MaddAddam* trilogy (subsequent parts were published in the years 2003-2013): *Oryx and Crake* (Chapter Three), *The Year of the Flood* (Chapter Four) and *MaddAddam* (Chapter Five). The chapters are both informative and suggestive, challenging us to rethink and recalibrate much of Atwood’s work. On the minus side, the critic’s decision to base each analysis on the threefold interpretative pattern announced at the book’s outset (first, the perspective of the contemporary science and its impact on man and his natural environment; second, the feminist position; finally, the religious context) results in repetitions of arguments and sometimes makes Atwood’s novels look like strained exercises in contemporary theory. Nevertheless, Kuznicki manages to compensate for the structural simplifications with his acute critical sensitiveness and attentiveness. As a matter of fact, the book’s greatest strength lies in individual readings which are not only competent in their focus on textual and narrative details but provide us with fresh and credible opinions and insights.

In the concluding sixth chapter (“Negotiating with the Living”) Kuznicki combines various critical threads and proposes a few general assumptions about the Canadian novelist’s work. After quoting Atwood’s apparently rhetorical question “Was it possible to write a story with no moral implications at all?”, the critic notes: “for Atwood writing is synonymous with a moral vocation because it carries faith in the possibility of making the world a better place. Rejecting the assumption that literature is written only for aesthetic purposes, that it is created only for its own sake, she occupies the position that literary texts have an ability to influence – and hence alter – reality” (199). This strong thesis is convincingly reinforced by a reference to Edward Said’s description of the contemporary intellectual and followed with a recognition of the ultimately optimistic character of Atwood’s speculative dystopias. The Polish critic closes his book with a tentative idea of the “ethics of the dystopian project” (206-208), finding in Atwood’s later novels the “conveyors of ideas aimed at changing the world and us – its inhabitants – for the better” (206).

*Margaret Atwood’s Dystopian Fiction: Fire Is Being Eaten* is a competent and engaging monograph on one of the most interesting writers of our era. Not a breakthrough work, perhaps, but definitely a satisfying read and a helpful reference text for the readers interested in contemporary literature and culture.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Jacek Gutorow is Professor of American Literature at the University of Opole. His academic interests concern American and British modernism; he also writes extensively on contemporary Polish literature. He is the author of seven critical books, most recently *Peknięty kryształ. Szkice o modernistach* (*The Flawed Crystal. Essays on the Modernists*, 2019), and seven books of poems. He has translated American and British poets (Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery, David Jones, Charles Tomlinson, Simon Armitage, Mark Ford and others). His recent critical works deal with the ambivalences and dilemmas of the modernist sensibility.

E-MAIL: [gutorow@uni.opole.pl](mailto:gutorow@uni.opole.pl)