

explorations



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REVIEW

Margaret Atwood. 2003. *Burning Questions. Essays and Occasional Pieces 2004-2022*. Dublin: Penguin Random House.

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Can questions ignite curiosity to the point when they spark a flame of urgency in the mind, leaving the interlocutor or the reader restless until they are answered? *Burning Questions*, Margaret Atwood's third collection of essays, lectures and drafts (after *Second Words* in 1982 and *Moving Targets* in 2004), proves that these are more than pressing questions that demand immediate attention.

Atwood compares writing to a manual craft, drawing a parallel to sewing: "Writing, like sewing, took one thing and made it into another; and that writing, like sewing, was always for someone, even if that someone was yourself in a future form. It was a way of putting your voice on paper and sending it to someone you might know, or else, to someone you might never meet, but who would be able to hear you anyway" (Atwood, 35). She refers to Dylan Thomas's poem "In My Craft or Sullen Art" in which the Welsh poet highlights the interconnection between art and craft (Atwood, 39). Thomas asserts that while art starts with inherent talent, craft involves refining and perfecting that talent through dedicated discipline. *Burning Questions* invites readers to reflect through multiple thought-provoking questions: "Why do we have such a thing as literature?" or "Where did it come from?", "Does it still serve the same purposes today" (Atwood, 140)? Atwood does not immediately provide the answers, allowing readers to ponder them first. She later explains that language and thought, fundamental to storytelling and novel writing, are deeply rooted in human history. Writing and storytelling are intrinsic to our nature; they are inseparable from us and impossible to reject or remove. Like art, they are fundamental elements of our human experience, woven into the core of who we are (Atwood, 145).

Importantly, Atwood delves into the themes of time and memory, particularly from a writer's perspective. She observes that literary prose often grapples with the past or speculates about the future. Addressing the challenge of writing about the future, she offers a thoughtful insight: while we cannot predict the future, we can "dip into the present, which contains the seeds of what might become the future" (Atwood, 7). She then cleverly notes that the present is already unfolding around us. The author challenges readers by asking what we truly mean when we talk about the future, ultimately concluding that discussions of the future are inherently grounded in the present, our only

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point of reference. She also suggests that writing about the future offers writers more freedom than writing about the past as future narratives cannot be fact-checked, allowing for limitless creativity.

It becomes evident that time holds significant importance for the novelist. She frequently reflects on its passage, and in the chapter “The Writer as Political Agent? Really?” she acknowledges both her present and future readers with the words: “Dear Mysterious Reader, whoever you may be: whether near or far, whether in the present or the future or even – in your spirit form – in the past” (Atwood, 131). At another point, she recalls a memorable aeroplane advertisement, which, though humorous, left a lasting impression on her. Reflecting on the ad, she writes that the present moment is insignificant; it is the next moment that matters. She notes that if now is “merely a prologue, which won’t count, since only the next next will count, and so on, ad infinitum” (Atwood, 172). This idea that the present instantly turns into the past resonates with Bergson’s concept of time. While it is unclear if Atwood is familiar with Bergson’s *durée*, her familiarity with Sartre, who studied Bergson, might suggest a possible indirect connection.

Women play a pivotal role in Atwood’s essays. In “Scientific Romancing” she addresses the gender imbalances in society, noting that men often dominate dystopian literature, where women are typically depicted as rebels who ensnare and overcome male characters. She delivers a powerful statement: “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” (Atwood, 10). The novelist explores the evolution of women’s roles, from early suffrage movements to the post-war shift to domesticity, while emphasising Betty Friedan’s critique of passive female stereotypes. Atwood also reflects on her own work, particularly *The Handmaid’s Tale*, questioning who benefits from the systemic oppression of women. She tackles the controversial issue of abortion compelling parallels between the control of women’s bodies and state dominance over soldiers’ bodies, presenting a sharp critique of gender politics.

The author dedicates considerable attention to the environment, exploring its connection to literature from various angles. She highlights the difficulty authors face in blending the worlds of humans and animals in their narratives, as readers tend to focus predominantly on human stories. Addressing the link between the environment and literature, Atwood asserts that literature cannot exist without people, and people cannot survive without the essentials provided by nature – air, water, and food. She argues that literature’s future is tied to the health of our planet. Also, she highlights that language itself is rooted in nature, as the creation of alphabets often drew inspiration from natural shapes and forms. The novelist stresses that the destruction of our planet will inevitably lead to our own demise, reminding us that air, land, and water are shared resources – we can either protect them or lose them together.

Summing up, *Burning Questions* offers a sobering and realistic portrayal of the world, addressing critical issues such as the environment, governance, and the ongoing struggle for women’s rights. However, this candid examination can leave readers feeling somewhat disillusioned, as the perspective often leans toward the pessimistic. While Atwood thoroughly explores challenges women face, her analysis seems to overlook the significant progress women have made over time, portraying them as perpetual victims. Furthermore, the book tends to neglect the contemporary challenges and pressures faced

by men in today's society. This absence creates an imbalance in her exploration of gender issues as the difficulties of modern masculinity are largely left unexamined.

Atwood boldly shares her perspectives, drawing from her own life experiences, interactions with other writers and reflections on her own narratives. Her distinctive sense of humour adds a relatable touch to the serious issues she addresses, making the book accessible and engaging for a wide audience. Whether young or old, regardless of background or status, readers can find value in Atwood's insights and the breadth of topics she covers. The book's thought-provoking questions invite readers to pause and reflect, creating a conversational tone that resonates like a meaningful dialogue with a cherished friend.

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