Survival in Margaret Atwood’s Novel *Oryx and Crake*

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Two generations ago when the American New Critics preached a concentration on “the work itself” (usually a poem) and a rejection of concerns with everything outside the work, one major item on their agenda was eliminating the author as an authority for “his” work, stressing that once works are completed their authors become mere readers of their own productions. That intrinsic approach has long since disappeared, especially with the commodifying of contemporary authors who have become primary marketers of their work, encouraged by publishers to spend weeks “on the road,” doing readings, signing copies, granting interviews, and generally extending themselves as authorized readers of their most recent publications. As a best-selling novelist, Margaret Atwood is no exception, and on occasion she not only authorizes readings of her own fiction in public readings and in interviews but also writes an “Author’s Afterword” to a novel such as *Alias Grace*, in that particular case teasing readers of her “whodunit” with the possibility she might provide further clues, as Author, to clarify whether Grace was actually guilty of murder.

Recently in the publicizing of her novel *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood has emphasized that the novel functions as a “book end” to *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Her encouragement of readers to connect these two examples of what she likes to term “speculative fiction” seems to provide a kind of carte blanche to read *Oryx and Crake* not only in connection with *The Handmaid’s Tale* but in the context of her other ventures into SF, most notably in the novel-within-a-novel of *The Blind Assassin*. The circles of potential contextualizing widen out to include other fiction with which *Oryx and Crake* will inevitably be compared—Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*—as well as...
Atwood’s own work that has been virtually from the beginning preoccupied with the theme of Survival.

*Oryx and Crake* begins, as have countless SF novels and stories, by dropping readers into a vaguely familiar yet overwhelmingly hostile and alien world in which a viewpoint character is struggling to survive. Readers are immediately encouraged to get involved in some quick Sherlockholmesing to figure out when and where they have been dropped and what’s happened to this world. In dramatic contrast to the near-future and generally more familiar world of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Oryx and Crake* seems to be set somewhere along the coast of the American South—Where would Atwood find a spot that’s warm year-round in Canada?—and the time seems to be later in the 21st century. What has happened takes longer to figure out because this post-apocalyptic world has been some time in the making. The viewpoint character Snowman lives in a tree, wrapped in a dirty bed sheet, gradually starving to death because his only nourishment comes from what he can scavenge in forays through abandoned houses, along with the fish brought to him once a week by the Children of Crake, who are a collective “Friday” to his role as a “Robinson Crusoe.” Indeed, Snowman (the nickname he has given himself, short for The Abominable Snowman, a “throwback” of a sort) may be the most recent in a long line of fictional characters representing The Last Man. And as a Crusoe-figure thrown back on his ingenuity in exploiting the materials at hand to survive, Snowman also draws on the recent obsession in popular culture with The Survivor.

How Snowman ended up in a post-apocalyptic world is answered in part by yet another critical aspect of the publicizing of this new novel. In its brief afterword, “Writing *Oryx and Crake*,” Atwood reveals that she began the project shortly after the publication of *The Blind Assassin* and well before she had expected to write another novel. This admission that she was willing to risk the mainstream horror of being thought “prolific” (one is reminded of Joyce Carol Oates’s burden) speaks to Atwood’s sense of *Oryx and Crake*’s urgent message. She writes of getting inspired to write the novel in Australia, where she was deeply impressed by reminders of how indigenous peoples had lived in close connection with their environment. Yet another stimulus was a journey to the Arctic where she observed evidence of the shrinking polar icecap. She indicates that she postponed the *Oryx and Crake* project because of the demands of the book tour for *The Blind Assassin*. Then that tour was brought to a dramatic halt when she appeared at the Toronto airport one morning, only to be told her flight had been canceled. It was September 11, 2001.

As Atwood herself knows, *Oryx and Crake* faces the risks inherent in any fiction produced by a writer with a “message,” and readers of SF know how long the genre has had to contend with the criticism that attention paid to a “message” restricts, for example, the writer’s ability to create characters. Furthermore, the setting of the action in a brave new world of perhaps almost a
century in the future calls on her to “do the science” to make that projected world scientifically cohesive and credible. As a number of readers have pointed out, the genres of fantasy and science fiction have traditionally been gendered feminine and masculine, respectively, because until very recently young women have not been encouraged to study the sciences. Thus, in contrast to its “book end” *The Handmaid’s Tale* with its near-future of the fundamentalist Christian theocracy Gilead, this new futuristic novel represents a much fuller investment in science than *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which is hardly “sciency” enough to be considered SF. In *Oryx and Crake* Atwood draws on a background in science on which she comments in the afterword. Both her father and brother are scientists, and she grew up surrounded by her father’s students and colleagues, obliging her to “read up on” the popularized science of Stephen Jay Gould and others to have some background for dinner-table conversation. She also argues that all of the science in *Oryx and Crake* represents a mere extension of present knowledge in genetic engineering.

Although eco-scientists, environmentalists, and geneticists might quibble with the depth of her “homework,” Atwood provides the foundation of a future world that seems a believable extrapolation of contemporary nightmares. The devastation of Snowman’s world began with those nightmares becoming real. Global warming melted the polar icecaps, making most of 20th-century coastal habitation impossible. Metropolises are now under water, and aquifers have become saline. The total destruction of the ozone layer has made mid-day heat unbearable and sunlight carcinogenic. If these calamities were not enough, more are provided by the mushrooming of genetic engineering to become the dominant industry of Snowman’s world, as the corporations that research and market new products are locked into murderous competition for hegemony, making the American “robber barons” of the late 19th century look like the philanthropists many of them mutated into once they had made their killing.

Atwood takes a leaf from Aldous Huxley’s most famous book to provide a boyhood friendship between Snowman (who was then Jimmy) and Crake who develops into the Mad Scientist figure in her own Brave New World. Snowman in part plays the John the Savage or Bernard Marx role as the one who is close enough to The Scientist to provide narrative access to that inner world without accepting the mad extensions of the desire for power, inherent in the professed aims of this monstrous Science to “benefit” humanity. Jimmy’s father was a “genographer,” who began “mapping the proteonome” in post-doctoral work, before contributing to the engineering of the “Methuselah Mouse.” He and other genetic engineers long ago helped to erase the black market in body parts, such as kidneys and hearts, by engineering *sus multiorganifer*, or as it became popularly known, the “pigoon.” This creature might be thought of as an organ factory, or an organ orchard from which an unending supply of, say, kidneys might be harvested. Similarly, Jimmy’s father was part of the team that engineered the
implanting of cells in the skin of those who are no longer young. These implanted cells multiply like algae on the surface of a pond, consuming depleted human skin cells and replacing them with NooSkins. Behind these efforts, of course, are immense profits in a materialistic culture in which looking young and “surviving” as long as possible have become hallowed goals. These efforts in applied science and engineering may seem merely the prostituting of Science to profit-making, but they also speak to the idealism generated by scientific inquiry since its beginnings centuries ago.

Like other dystopic visionaries Atwood also enjoys spoofing the ridiculous ends to which genetic engineering could be put, and her satire is occasionally reminiscent of Jonathan Swift’s in sending up the “projectors” of his time. Given the growing movement toward “fast food”—some pessimistic prognosticators speculating that cooking will become in the 21st century what sewing became by the end of the 20th—Atwood predicts the genetic engineering of the ChickieNob, a creature all breasts or drumsticks, making it unnecessary to discard the unwanted parts of that animal. Traditional meat has virtually disappeared because of the vulnerability of animals to diseases, especially those spread by bio-terrorists. Indeed, Jimmy’s earliest memory is seeing and smelling the burning heaps of animals slaughtered to prevent the spread of a deliberately released microbe. Atwood draws here on the television images of burning carcasses of cattle with “Mad Cows’ Disease” and “Foot and Mouth Disease” in Great Britain.

As the deterioration of the environment has led to the extinction of countless species—Jimmy and Crake as boys played a game called “Extinctathon”—new creatures are created, often by the biotech boys, after hours, as scientific “play.” One of these is the “rakunk,” a splicing of the skunk and raccoon to function as a family pet. Others such as the Snat, the splicing of a snake and rat, are even more the product of a boyish sense of “play,” or, What kind of weird species can we guys dream up? This gendering of genetic engineering as a masculinist pursuit of a goal, regardless of the consequences of that compulsive pursuit, is played out in the conflict between Jimmy’s parents, ending with his mother’s departure. She had become a stay-at-home Mom when she quit her job at the same genetic engineering corporation at which Jimmy’s father works. Eventually, however, she became so angry and depressed by her husband’s boyishly gleeful tampering with Life that she dropped out into an underworld of others who also reject what is happening and protest this brave new world at the risk of their imprisonment and even their death.

Because the 21st century of this novel is the century of the terrorist and the literally murderous competition between the dominant genetic engineering corporations, this future world has become even more stratified than our own. The cities, or “Pleeblands,” have been abandoned to the masses by the elite who are protected in corporation compounds, futuristic versions of “company towns.”
where employees live with their families in corporation-owned spaces with little need or desire for contact with the Plebs. The power of scientific and technological knowledge further genders this futuristic society, as it becomes evident when Crake is identified as a boy-genius at genetic engineering and admitted to Watson-Crick Institute where he trains to become a major player in constructing the future, while Jimmy is relegated to Martha Graham Academy, where the arts and humanities have been prostituted into training schools to market what corporations produce. What can an English major do?

When Crake invites Jimmy to visit Watson-Crick, the narrative opens up a discussion of the roles the Arts can play in this future. Crake begins the discussion with the observation that human sexuality produces much misery and violence as the result of unfulfilled desire. When Jimmy responds that lack of sexual gratification has been the generator of some great art, Crake dismisses this traditional “Freudian” rationalization of creativity as “compensation,” asserting: “What is it Byron said? Who’d write if they could do otherwise?” Jimmy becomes so tongue-tied from frustration at Crake’s decision “to poach on his own shoddy, threadbare territory,” when he should “stick to science and leave poor Byron to Jimmy,” that he ends up agreeing with his opponent: “I mean, when you can’t get the otherwise, then. . .” to which his friend retorts: “Wouldn’t you rather be fucking?” (167). Tellingly, Jimmy’s face gets even redder at Crake’s blunt demolition of his “feminized” argument, and he proposes the standard humanist argument for the arts as the finest flower of any civilization: “When any civilization is dust and ashes art is all that’s left over. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning—human meaning, that is—is defined by them” (167). Although Jimmy wants to know, “Why are you always putting me down?” he asks, instead, what Crake has against art, to which his friend responds: “Nothing. People can amuse themselves any way they like. If they want to play with themselves in public, whack off over doodling, scribbling, fiddling, it’s fine with me” (167). Once again, Jimmy and his defense of “the arts” are positioned as “feminine” and self-indulgent, while Crake and science are gendered “masculine,” in a blatantly masculinist performance of power. As a result, readers may be just as surprised as Jimmy that Crake eventually hires him to advertise his corporation’s new line; however, just as Crake amuses himself by introducing his friend to other students at Watson-Crick as a “neurotypical,” he also enjoys the power of confirming Jimmy’s “femininity” in working “under” him.

Crake, on the other hand, seems doomed to the illusion of mastery, a kind of masculinist arrogance, masquerading as an idealistic mission to “save the world,” even if he must destroy that world in order to save it. He knows that even *homo sapiens* cannot survive in an environment devastated by the 20th century’s insistence on burning fossil fuels and by a mushrooming population. Because the species is headed for extinction, along with all the others unable to adapt to a hostile environment, Crake concludes that science must create a species with a
better chance of surviving in a damaged ecosystem. Atwood has cleverly drawn her readers into enough sympathy with Crake through Jimmy’s having been this Mad Scientist’s friend from boyhood and admired the Whiz Kid aspects of Crake’s budding genius to prevent a total rejection of Crake as either evil or hopelessly insane, just as Mary Shelley maintains her reader’s sympathy for Dr. Frankenstein, even though his project is misguided. Although from boyhood Crake has had some of the iciness conventionally associated with The Scientist, Jimmy helps to humanize him enough so that readers will attend to the “what if” Crake proposes: What if our species is doomed to extinction? If life can survive only in the form of the Children of Crake, doesn’t that survival outweigh the loss of some of what readers are likely to consider their “humanity”?

No, in thunder! Atwood seems to be shouting. If traditional human qualities have to be sacrificed in order to survive, it may not be worth surviving. It is her brilliant imagining of Crake’s creatures that makes this dystopia most meaningful. First of all, these Children of Crake, or “Crakers,” are genetically engineered to withstand a devastated environment, ranging from the carcinogenic effects of sunlight, air, and water, down to the annoyance/health hazard of a mosquito bite—they have a built-in insect repellant. Because farming and even hunting can lead to the complications and destructive potential of civilization, the Crakers graze on grass, leaves, and the shoots of plants. Without a reasonable justification for the behavior, other than a possible shortage of food, these creatures have digestive systems allowing them to recycle their own excrement. But then Crake does have a fetish for excrement, as he revealed earlier in the narrative when he demolished Jimmy’s argument for art as the text through which future students read a civilization by retorting that it is much more likely to be “ossified shit” than artifacts that yields an understanding of a vanished civilization.

Because Crake is a variety of Dr. Frankenstein, “playing God” with “Life,” readers might expect him to create the Crakers in his own image. Crake bears witness, however, to at least a century’s disenchantment with human intelligence. One thinks, for example, of the mythologizing of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist as tragic hero, devastatingly aware of the consequences of his own genius as a “father” of the atomic bomb that could destroy hundreds of thousands in seconds. Records from World War II indicate that the Japanese massacred more Chinese in the “Rape of Nanking” than were destroyed by the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki; however, the Japanese bear less guilt because they killed through more primitive technology. Similarly, Stalin deliberately allowed millions of peasants to starve to death when they refused to participate in his effort to collectivize agriculture, but it was the engineering skills and the perversion of human intelligence that in part made the Nazis the greater criminals, even though “the numbers” were similar. In any case, the Children of Crake are programmed to have limited intelligence, unlike their maker who knows the problems the mind can create.
Like Crake, however, these creatures are essentially without desire, because eros, even more than intelligence, makes for human discontent. Like Huxley’s *Brave New World*, set in 632 A.F., “After Ford,” but also “After Freud,” Atwood’s futuristic world aims at the elimination of eros as anything more than mere sexual reflex. The Children of Crake represent a restoration of the sexuality once shared with other mammals. To ensure the future of the species the female goes into heat about every three years, cuing the males through the release of the appropriate pheromones, accompanied by visual signals of her readiness to mate: her genitalia and the adjacent area turn blue, an adaptation Crake copied from other higher primates. To guarantee impregnation the mating ritual requires that three males copulate with the female in turn, following a courting dance in which they woo her by waving their erect penises that have turned blue to mark their readiness to mate. Atwood draws here on the laughable mating rituals of other species, but also *homo sapiens* whose courtship rites have had their own bizarre eccentricities. There seems little concern with issues such as why this female in heat does not arouse the other males and why none of the males competes for mating rights, but cooperatively waits his turn. The author may be so successful in making her readers laugh at the spectacle of human-like creatures with waving blue penises that no one is likely to ponder the engineering-in of cooperation in this courting ritual, thus, ensuring the elimination of paternity, since none of the three males can know who actually impregnated the female. This easy assurance that the less intelligent primates are “morally” superior to *homo sapiens* may be disturbing to some who recall how much intellectuals enjoyed the appearance of cooperation in chimpanzee “culture” until anthropologists began to observe that male chimps also rape and even kill their own kind. Much as intelligence and eros can be disruptive agents in human culture, the Children of Crake remain just that—Crake’s children, and like children tremendously vulnerable. Crake, the clever anticipator of his children’s needs knew that, however, and enlisted his friend Jimmy to be their shepherd, at least for the first generation or so.

As Jimmy discovers, Crake has had designs on him for some time, ironically “designs” very similar to those Crake has had on Oryx. Oryx is yet another chilling reminder of the reader’s world. As young adolescents, Crake and Jimmy encountered “Oryx” while surfing the Web for pornography and landing on HottTotts, a website for pedophiles. Although only eight, Oryx is a “sex worker,” sold to her handler, along with her brother, by their mother. From the beginning, the narrative starkly distinguishes the two friends in their responses to Oryx: for Jimmy she is an icon of desire, while for Crake she remains pretty much a “sex worker” to be used for his own purposes. Those purposes become clearer as Crake begins to set the stage for the Apocalypse, and Oryx is pressed into service as a surrogate mother to the Children Crake has “fathered.” She is the one who teaches these “wondrous creatures,” as Miranda calls the “aliens” she first sees on Prospero’s island in the “brave new world” passage Huxley drew on for
his own satiric purposes. Crake appropriately constructs her as a variety of Mother Goddess, bringing together the only two versions of the female in the economy of his desire—mother or whore. Oryx teaches Crake’s creatures to reverence hers, the Children of Oryx, or other animals. Not coincidentally in this new cosmogony the human-like creations are made in the Garden by their Father, while the other fauna can be relegated to the Earth-Mother, whom this male deity suppliants and dominates as his consort.

Those “purposes” include Crake’s boyhood friend as well as when Jimmy becomes a major player in the Apocalypse Crake is planning. By hiring Jimmy, purportedly to oversee the marketing of BlyssPluss, Crake opens the door on the corporate strategies and practices of HelthWyzer for which his father worked, and presumably its competitors in the pharmaceutical industry. Crake is strangely ambivalent about his father and the “accident” that ended his life. If anything, Crake learns from and exploits corporate behavior to further his own ends. In a culture led to believe virtually from infancy that there is precious little that cannot be “cured” by taking a pill, future pharmaceutical conglomerates will be forced, Atwood predicts, to become more innovative to survive. The pharmaceuticals of the future, like HelthWyzer, will have to pay attention to the lesson of dentistry in the 20th century: dentists have been so successful in improving dental hygiene that they face dwindling practices. The pharmaceutical industry will be forced to direct its research efforts toward discovering, if not actually creating, new diseases to keep their pills and their profits rolling. Thus, future research will push the industry into competition among corporations to find the most effective new diseases to be cured by a whole new line of products. Atwood must have felt a chill as the SARS epidemic turned her own Toronto into a metropolis that the World Health Organization warned travelers to avoid, just as Oryx and Crake was moving into its production stage.

As Crake discloses, his father died when he refused to be an accomplice to HelthWyzer’s introduction of diseases through the vitamin supplements it was marketing worldwide. Fearful that public confidence would be shaken in all their products, Management decided Crake’s father had to be eliminated. (He had made the mistake of confiding in his friend and boss Pete that he intended to blow the whistle on the corporation’s machinations.) The narrative may be making a gesture toward Hamlet in Crake’s discovery that his “Uncle Pete” conspired in his father’s murder and that his mother may have quickly remarried her dead husband’s boss out of fear that she, too, could become the victim of a mysterious “accident.” The gesture toward Shakespeare’s tragedy is provocative because Hamlet’s revenge plot leaves the stage at the end of Act V looking a bit post-apocalyptic, too.

Readers ought to be suspicious about Crake’s invention of BlyssPluss, but then Jimmy is equally willing to trust his old friend, underlining once again Jimmy’s value to the narrative as the one who has known Crake since youth. As
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Crake describes it, BlyssPluss packs a triple punch as a protection against sexually transmitted diseases, as a powerful aphrodisiac, and as an elixir of youth. Like most other things that sound too good to be true, BlyssPluss is as well. The ultimate manipulator, Crake sends Oryx off on a worldwide promotion of the pill that Jimmy has taken charge of marketing—a task so easy that any “neurotypical” could succeed at it—with both Oryx and Jimmy totally unaware that the pill contains a virus so virulent that human life will be wiped off the Earth to provide space for the Children of Crake. Crake may have learned something from the bobkitten, a genetically engineered creature whose males eliminate not only their rivals but also their rivals’ progeny to monopolize the gene pool.

As the scientist who believes that he has the best of intentions in wiping out *homo sapiens* to make room for the Crakers who are engineered to live in harmony with their environment, Crake will remind most readers of the Father of all Mad Scientists, Frankenstein, as we have been noting. The appearance of *Oryx and Crake* and other narratives of dystopian futures can be understood in part as the result of the tremendous power that genetic engineering could have for the 21st century. As Nancy Kress and others have predicted, genetics will be for this century what physics was for the last. Once again, the world has become aware of the great potential for change that Science is offering/threatening, and it is no surprise that writers, who tend to be cultural conservatives, are likely to look at the darker consequences of Science’s influences.

We need to remind ourselves, however, that Shelley’s Dr. Frankenstein grew out of her husband’s and Lord Byron’s excitement with the potential of science to improve the condition of humanity, as indicated by the remainder of *Frankenstein*’s title—or, *The Modern Prometheus*. Like the high hopes of an H. G. Wells for a future made more livable through science and technology, a future that gave Orwell nightmares, this idealism of Shelley’s circle can also excite notions of the monstrous. Indeed, it might be argued that the monster is a logical outcome of the idealist who is intent on rarefying human experience, aspiring to the sacred, or the ideal, at the cost of the actual, or the profane. Once again, it is probably no coincidence that Crake has only enough body to house his intellect and demonstrates a revulsion against the body in his perverse attraction to excrement and to sex as mere physicality. In Atwood’s earlier novel *The Blind Assassin*, the aged Iris comes to see the interdependency of the sacred and the profane when she recalls her nanny’s adage, “No flowers without shit.” Taken to its logical extreme, idealism may be a form of madness, as is demonstrated by Conrad’s Kurtz whose idealistic impulses to bring the sweetness and light of civilization to the heart of darkness may lead him in the end to discover “the horror, the horror” of the monster into which he has transformed himself.

The image of the monster, on the other side of the mirror into which Dr. Jekyll peers, aptly describes Crake as he stands holding Oryx in the air hatch of
Paradice, expecting Jimmy, his friend and Oryx’s lover, to assist him in suicide, once Crake has slain his Bride of Frankenstein, whom he is sacrificing to the Mother cult she will eventually represent for the Crakers. As the full extent of his mad machinations become apparent in this moment of recognition for which the novel’s readers as well as Jimmy ought to have been prepared, Crake reminds us also of Orwell’s O’Brien, the avatar of Big Brother, who has similarly maddened himself in his pursuit of an ideal future in which society will hum along like a harmonious bee hive, where death has been eliminated with the erasure of an awareness of self, the individual being absorbed into an everlasting (w)hole. And like the beings in Huxley’s brave new world, the Children of Crake will know no death or aging, for, once they have propagated themselves, the Crakers will simply die off, without any warning, at the age of thirty. Given their short and “happy” lives, the Children of Crake will have no use for much of what Atwood’s readers are likely to treasure as high culture. Art will be utterly irrelevant—indeed, dangerous to the stability and well-being of Craker culture.

Accordingly, art, religion, and learning in all forms will disappear. In the context of Survival this narrative offers extremely bleak prospects for the very transaction of writing and reading in which the author and her readers are participating in *Oryx and Crake*. Unlike *The Blind Assassin* whose narrator and central figure, Iris, is not only an “eye” but also an “I,” preserving the history of her family (and Canada’s in the 20th century), Snowman is disabled from being an “I” in this novel. (Interestingly, Atwood has not a single male first-person narrator, and Snowman is her first male viewpoint character.) As a result, *Oryx and Crake* loses some of the rationale of the earlier novel in which an Iris is telling the story while outracing time, ticking away in her “bad heart.” Even if Snowman were author-ized to record the history of this Apocalypse in the making, the future offers no prospect of anyone able to read what he might write. He is a castaway in a culturally vacant cosmos, with no hope that his message-in-a-bottle could ever find a reader. If Iris introduces readers to the nightmare of an Author who could herself end before her novel, Snowman opens up the mother of all nightmares—a future in which no one can, or will, read what the Author writes.

In this special category of literary Survival, *Oryx and Crake* is exposing some particularly painful authorial anxieties. In one sense Atwood, like many other contemporary writers, is an heir of the Modernists who enshrined the Work of Art as monument to the Artist’s being. As noted earlier, Jimmy speaks to that point of view in the debate with Crake over what the future will seek in the remains of the present—*objets d’art* or “ossified shit.” In a number of ways, Iris represents the archetypal Modernist, constructing her family history as a tragic monument to love, a monument requiring, as it turns out, her own agency as a Blind Assassin, even sacrificing a sister to her artistic masterpiece. Furthermore, the novel-within-the-novel that Iris writes but whose authorship she attributes to
her dead sister introduces themes to be developed in Oryx and Crake. The Iris-figure tells the Alex-figure, who supports himself by writing “sci-fi,” that she wants him to tell her a happy story. He offers the “Peach Women of Aa’A,” with adventurers Will and Boyd who come upon a paradise in which no wish goes unfulfilled. They are happy until Will gets suspicious: “It must be a trap…. It’s Paradise, but we can’t get out of it. And anything you can’t get out of is Hell” (355).

Oryx and Crake, on the other hand, is the production of a late-Modernist author who received the warning of 9/11 that civilization itself is vulnerable not only to “natural” eco-catastrophes but also to terrorists maddened by their desire to cleanse the world of the infidel who has besmirched the purity of God. In the context of a new Armageddon, Survival through one’s Work of Art can seem rather precious and self-indulgent, as even W. B. Yeats, the quintessential Modernist, may have sensed in his late poem Lapis Lazuli, written on the brink of the Second World War, with full awareness that this Apocalypse could totally eradicate his civilization’s finest flowers, including the very poem he was composing. With that perception, the poet abandoned his earlier faith in the artifact as the sole promise of Survival and began to embrace, instead, the process of creating per se as the only enduring monument to humanness. Oryx and Crake makes gestures in that direction; however, this novel seems in the end not quite sure how to end and what kind of future it wants to project.

In the end the narrative introduces two factors that complicate its inevitable function of prediction. Crake’s mad strategy to replace homo sapiens with the Crakers whom he has constructed as eternal children in “Paradice” advertises the “dicey-ness” of this project in its cutesy adaptation of “Paradise.” And his Paradise project seems, for better and for worse, to be coming undone in the latter scenes. First, when Snowman returns from his scavenging trip for food and supplies—as well as a weapon—he is dismayed to see the Children of Crake, chanting or praying to a figure they have constructed. He thinks he hears a crude “Amen,” opening the possibility of a cultural “throwback” to traditional religion. Instead, he discovers something potentially more disruptive of Crake’s plan for their eternal “innocence.” In addition to their deities Oryx and Crake, they seem to be developing symbolic representation and possibly another deity—Snowman, to whom they were praying for his safe return. Accordingly, when Snowman eventually dies, the narrative opens the door to exactly what Crake attempted to eliminate: Art. Jimmy recalls:

Watch out for art, Crake used to say. As soon as they start doing art, we’re in trouble. Symbolic thinking of any kind would signal downfall, in Crake’s view. Next they’d be inventing idols, and funerals, and grave goods, and the afterlife, and sin, and Linear B, and kings, and then slavery, and war. (361)
In this way the narrative posits the impossibility of constructing human-like creatures with a safe dose of intelligence—enough to survive but not so much that they will self-destruct, as *homo sapiens* may sometime in the 21st century.

The other factor is potentially just as devastating. Although he has received no confirmation that anyone else in the world has survived the Plague that Crake unleashed—readers may be reminded of the eerie silence of the world outside to the survivors in Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach*—Snowman encounters a roving band of survivors, one of whom has a “spraygun,” like his own. The question arises, Will these Others eliminate Snowman on their way to wiping out the defenseless Children of Crake? Atwood seems content to have her cake and eat it, too. She seeks to frighten readers into accepting the deadly seriousness of the threats to ecology and the potential menace of genetic engineering. At the same time, she wants to offer the hope of failure, as other creators of dystopian futures have urged readers to accept the possibility that the great projects of Science and Technology will not succeed because of unforeseen outcomes, or even the saving grace of human imperfection. It is the sort of ambivalence that many reveal in relation to the Machine: it awes with its capacity to outperform humans, but it will ultimately break down and thereby vindicate human insufficiency.

Atwood’s encouragement of her readers to see *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Oryx and Crake* as “book ends” is instructive once again. In an interview, following the publication of the earlier novel, she was asked about its last section, “Historical Notes on *The Handmaid’s Tale*.” The question moved Atwood to talk about Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with which *The Handmaid’s Tale* had been paired by its reviewers. She responded:

> In fact, Orwell is much more optimistic than people give him credit for. He did the same thing. He has a text at the end of *1984*. Most people think the book ends when Winston comes to love Big Brother. But it doesn’t. It ends with a note on Newspeak, which is written in the past tense, in standard English—which means that, at the time of writing the note, Newspeak is a thing of the past. (Conversations 217)

This bizarre (mis)reading of Orwell’s “note”—Orwell entitles it “Appendix”—not only contributes to the problematical function of her own “notes” and “afterwords” but also credits Orwell’s novel with grounds for “optimism” that few readers would share. As many readers of *The Handmaid’s Tale* have pointed out, Gilead may now “be history”; however, its roots in patriarchy remain in the farther future of the last section. And it is troubling that the ending of *Oryx and Crake* may be contaminated with a similar “optimism” for which readers may have difficulty finding any firm basis.

Following so quickly her novel *The Blind Assassin*, in which an author/narrator is battling a “heart” to finish her story before death finishes her, *Oryx and Crake* confirms that Atwood is very concerned with the fullest dimensions
of Survival. On the other hand, both novels remind readers that this author has been concerned with Survival from the beginning, and that surviving is inherent in her identities as a woman, an author, and a Canadian. That awareness of the multiple areas of survival with which she had to be concerned began in her youth. From the largely autobiographical first essay in her collection *Negotiating with the Dead*, it becomes very clear how much she had to struggle to survive as a young woman with aspirations to become a writer in Canada.

It is no coincidence that in her early career she published *Survival*, a sort of primer of Canadian literature that she put together in response to questions she was continually asked after her public readings, questions such as: Is there a Canadian literature, and if there is a Canadian literature, what makes it “Canadian”? She began to answer those questions with her observation that being Canadian meant confronting an immense and formidable environment. To be “Canadian” is to be aware of that potentially hostile environment and to develop strategies to survive in it. But that was only the beginning, because she was also responding to the question of how to survive as a woman and as a writer. Struggling against the post-War Fifties culture, with its attempt to recuperate the housewife/mother construction of femininity, how was she as an independent woman to survive outside that construction? How was she to avoid the sense that her society considered women commodities to fulfill the needs of others, or even “edible,” as her lead character in *The Edible Woman* feels? And how was she to survive as a writer in a nation whose 3,000-mile border exposed it to the most powerful nation in the world that both dominated and absorbed her culture so completely that not only Americans but even Canadians were hard put to recall the names of more than one or two Canadian writers, or painters, or composers?

As a leader of the movement to establish Canada’s cultural identity who has distinguished herself as a pre-eminent Canadian writer, Atwood has become increasingly drawn to the notion of the retrospective in her work. A dozen years ago in *Cat’s Eye* she may have been using her viewpoint character Elaine Risley’s art exhibit—a “retrospective”—as a parallel to her own looking backward at her growing accomplishment. However, it is probably Iris of *The Blind Assassin* who strikes the most resonant chord in Atwood’s retrospective impulse. Like Snowman, Iris is a “survivor,” representing Atwood’s own later-life perspective on survival: What of me will survive in my writing? Will my writing survive in a future where visual and sound images have supplanted the printed word? To those writerly concerns are added those of *Oryx and Crake*, as suggested in her essays *Negotiating with the Dead*: Why construct Palaces of Art and “monuments of unageing intellect” for a future that looks like a nightmare waiting to happen? It may be some of these concerns that have moved Atwood’s writing toward “speculative fiction” and even encouraged her to risk the ire of “mainstream” literary culture by incorporating elements of science fiction into her writing. As she becomes more intensely concerned with the survival of the civilization that
generates and celebrates art, including her own writing, it ought to be no surprise that she will continue to find it difficult to contain her fascination with what-if propositions within the confines of conventional fiction. It is not unlikely that the theme of survival will impel her toward writing more speculative fiction, perhaps further troubling her relationship with mainstream fiction.

Notes

1. I borrow the term “Sherlockholmesing” from Corinna del Greco Lobner.
2. Atwood’s two title characters draw their names from the oryx, an African antelope, and the crake, a bird of the rail family. The author indicates she saw a red-necked crake in Australia.
3. In her London Review of Books piece on Oryx and Crake, Elaine Showalter projects her own feminist views on Atwood, writing: “The elusive Oryx is the vehicle in the novel for Atwood’s indignation at child slavery, prostitution, sex tourism and other extreme forms of female victimisation.” Her point is in part true; however, Showalter has missed the subtlety of Oryx’s own complicated relationship with her owner and the complexity of her attitudes to being a “sex worker.” Ms. Showalter is not likely to endear herself to readers of Atwood when she champions this “breakthrough” into “sci-fi,” to use Showalter’s terms, once “Atwood’s themes were becoming predictable, and her politics losing their ability to shock,” anymore than Showalter endeared herself to veterans of the earlier venture in Iraq when she posited that “Gulf War Syndrome” was really only a form of “male hysteria.”
4. As Sharon Wilson has ably demonstrated, Atwood draws extensively on myth and legend in her writing.
5. There is also the lingering “conspiracy theory” that AIDS was created by the CIA as a potential “weapon of mass destruction.”
6. This is what Atwood would identify as “science fiction” because it takes place on another planet and has extraterrestrials.
7. It is difficult to believe that Atwood is unaware of the rumors that Doris Lessing lost her position on the short-list for a Nobel Prize by persisting in the publication of what she termed “space fiction.” Indeed, at a recent conference some members of the Atwood Society speculated that Iris, her closeted writer of “sci-fi,” may be a gesture toward Lessing. Like Lessing, Atwood is a fiercely independent writer, who has fought off the efforts of various groups and movements to infringe on her integrity as an artist.