ORIGIN.
Science fiction and tech-oriented narratives have long been a “boys with toys” club. You and other writers, as diverse as Ursula K. LeGuin, Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, and Pat Cadigan, have dramatically changed the landscape. What sent you on this path?

Science fiction went through a period that was mostly object-oriented (space tools, robots, and so forth) or inventions for distant galaxies (Star Wars, Star Trek, cyborgs, and more). But when we cracked the genetic DNA code, opened the big Pandora’s box, and it really did become possible to produce chimeras, my ears shot up. Having been brought up among the biologists and having followed various debates about ways to improve the human template and other debates about the true nature of our nature, I began seriously to wonder: What if? We hold in our hands a tool that is more powerful – for good or ill – than any we have wielded before.

The book that sparked a tremendous amount of interest in your work was The Handmaid’s Tale. This is speculative fiction that was highly influential. Canada has long had a deeply ambiguous relationship to America, and your writings have helped theorize Canadian literary life. If there’s anything you think of as a core issue in Canada, “surviving” seems to keep popping up. What’s your take on Canada these days?

Canada. Let’s just say that we’ve been concerned with it for a while. Canada, at the moment, is going through a Lord of the Rings moment. Having been a lowly Hobbit with furry feet and fun parties, with fireworks and beer, it has now been handed the Ring of Power: a large supply of fossil fuel, in the form of oil/tar sand and coal. Will it shrivel into an evil RingWraith? Will it become an addicted Golum? Will it refuse the Ring, like Galadriel, fearful of what So Much Power (in both senses of the
word) will do to its inner being? Will it try to deal with the Ring responsibly, like Gandalf? Will it side with the Ents? And let’s say for the record: if all fossil fuel were to go POOF! tomorrow, the result would be a cataclysmic social upheaval, with food riots, warlords, shutdowns, breakdown of social order, water shortages, and outbreaks of bloodshed and disease.

So the responsible treatment of this particular Ring of Power is not necessarily to toss it into the Cracks of Doom. But we have to come up with something rather quickly, or what we’ll get is the Land of Mordor.

I won’t be around for the answer. It’s around the corner, and I won’t get that far. But I doubt that Canada will be seen forever on the international stage as Mr’s Boring Niceperson, as has been the habit. Maybe it will change to Mr’s Boring Badperson, lose its considerable sense of humour, and stop exporting comic actors to the US.

Your recent film collaboration with Jennifer Baichwal’s Payback, along with fellow Canadian Mark Akbar’s The Corporation, makes a really intriguing connection between the way corporations have shaped modern life and the role that finance scripts for itself in the “theater of the everyday.” Your fellow Canadian director Mark Akbar’s film, The Corporation, used psychoanalytic techniques to look at how modern international companies function. The ideas driving your film-collaboration with Jennifer Baichwal led to everything from an analysis of Rousseau’s concept of “the social contract” that holds societies in a Western context together, to the ways that debt creates an almost mythic sense of participating in the production of culture. I’d love to hear how you got to this point.

It was exciting to work with director Jennifer Baichwal, who made Manufactured Landscapes and others, on the film of Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth. It’s called, simply, PAYBACK. Jennifer didn’t want to do a transliteration of the book, a kind of illustrated version, but to go into the core of the book: owing and being owed, paying and paying back, on all sorts of levels. So she found real-life, visceral stories that embodied the themes of the book. The film opens with an Albanian blood feud and goes on to delve into, for instance, prison systems, underpaid tomato pickers, the gulf oil spill. It’s all woven together in a sensuous, oblique way that’s not the same as the single-message kind of documentary we’re used to, with an “answer” at the end. It’s more like an exploration. Sort of like what you do with Birth of a Nation. I

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PHOTOS: COURTESY NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA TOP: MARGARET ATWOOD PREPARING FOR A READING BOTTOM: INDUSTRIAL TOMATO FIELDS, SOUTHERN FLORIDA
was delighted with the film; it almost made me want to be a film-maker!

You’ve often been extremely supportive and generous to younger writers. Was there a mentor that encouraged this generosity of spirit?

My family was big on sharing. I guess it was just the way I was brought up. Or maybe, I read those fairy tales in which one good turn elicits another. But in writing, yes, some older writers were kind to me when I was young; although some others were not. One good maxim to keep in mind, and I can’t remember who said it, “You meet the same people on the way down that you meet on the way up, but you’re going the other way.”

For an in-depth view of how gift exchange works among artists, I’d recommend Lewis Hyde’s The Gift.

What writers from the Commonwealth do you read? Any suggestions for other territories, such as China, Brazil? Just curious...

Always good to take a look at the long list for the Mann Booker, for the Commonwealth. It gives you an overview.

There is so much going on all over the world that it’s impossible for one person to keep up.

“I’m not an activist by nature. I am suspicious of Utopian thinking and equally suspicious of its alternate. I would prefer to stay in the Writing Burrow and play with my imaginary friends and enemies.”

And I can’t.

With your most recent film project, you stepped into the realm of documentary advocacy. You’ve often been politically active, from helping save libraries to raising awareness about the crisis in the Arctic Circle. Where did this political activist side come from? And what movements are you checking out these days?

I’m not an activist by nature. I am suspicious of Utopian thinking and equally suspicious of its alternate. I would prefer to stay in the Writing Burrow and play with my imaginary friends and enemies. I get sucked into these things. It probably comes from selling Girl Guide Cookies in youth.

What do you think is the future of the book?

The future of narrative? Built in, part of the human template. Not going away. The future of the codex book, with pages and so forth? A platform for transmitting narratives. There are others. The scroll is coming back (Twitter is a scroll.) Short forms are returning online. Interactivity is coming back; it was always there in oral storytelling. Each form has its pluses and its minuses. Now ask about the future of reading – a different question!

What do you think about the dynamic between text and cinema?

One is made of words. The other is made of pictures. I’ve worked in film; it’s a very different thing. Fun, though, when you like the people.

Is there a favorite place in the world you go to relax? Does that place affect your writing?

What is this “relax” you speak of, Earthling, and where can I get some? (I did try that on my hair once. It was a screaming disaster.)