

The Multitalented Margaret Atwood

Reingard M. Nischik, *Engendering Genre: The Works of Margaret Atwood*. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 2009. 315 pp.

Al Purdy's poem "Concerning Ms. Atwood" (1988) is a playful spoof of Margaret Atwood as an eerily omniscient force. Wiser (and more recognizable) than even God himself, Purdy's Atwood stands as a formidable authority on "the relative importance of YIN and yang" and yet she appears content to let her celebrity status speak for itself as she "modestly" accepts the praise bestowed upon her by everyone from the Premier of Ontario to the fawning reporters covering her induction as a winner of the Nobel Prize (496-97). In *Engendering Genre: The Works of Margaret Atwood* (2009), Reingard Nischik offers a portrait of this renowned writer that resembles Purdy's poem in its recognition of Atwood's productivity and reigning popularity (but without the humour provided by his satirical perspective). For Nischik, "Atwood's overwhelming publication record, her status as Canada's leading writer and as one of the best and best-known contemporary writers worldwide, her political consciousness and critical awareness, coupled with her media-savvy and media-friendly personality" make her a powerful literary figure indeed (2). "With her vast knowledge and sharp wit, her humour and engaging presence of mind," Nischik continues, "Atwood must be one of the most frequently interviewed writers" on the planet (2). Purdy pushes this claim one step further by imagining a celestial Atwood being interviewed by "neutered blessed seraphim" somewhere "beyond the last lonesome uninhabited galaxy" (497). But where Purdy takes the liberty of teasing "Ms. Atwood" as a friend and fellow writer, Nischik presents her famed omnipotence in more serious (if sometimes equally effusive) terms by highlighting Atwood's significant literary output in a variety of genres over the last several decades.

Engendering Genre begins with a direct acknowledgement of Atwood's breadth as a writer whose "extraordinary creativity and productivity" shine through most readily in the "wide range of genres in which she has been productive," from poetry to short stories to novels, and beyond (1). Nischik also names Atwood's wide-ranging "oeuvre" as "a remarkable cultural document of our times"—one that exposes shifting societal approaches to gender in particular (x). Exploring the relationship between gender and genre as they apply to Atwood's work is the central aim of *Engendering*

Genre. The book “traces Atwood’s frequent involvement with gender, significant changes in her representation of gender, as well as her innovative linking of gender and genre” during the course of a lengthy—and still very active—career (x).

Nischik fashions herself as a scholar with a longstanding interest in what she describes as Atwood’s “shrewd and level-headed gender consciousness” (x). *Engendering Genre* locates evidence of this “gender consciousness” in nearly all of Atwood’s writing. By pinpointing gender as a recurring topic in Atwood’s art (no matter what the genre), Nischik strives to demonstrate in her introduction that “the interaction of genre and gender” is a fundamental component Atwood’s work as a whole (4). The book’s title phrase—“engendering genre”—thus refers not only to the “foregrounding of gender in a specific generic format” but also to “the role gender plays in constituting genre” and “the role genre plays in constituting gender” (5). At first glance, Nischik’s premise sounds a little circular; her argument, in basic terms, might be summarized as follows: since Atwood is a (woman) writer who is both interested in gender issues and prolific in a range of different genres, there must necessarily be a correlation between them. As her overall argument is fleshed out in the book’s subsequent chapters, however, Nischik’s thesis turns out to be more nuanced than this admittedly simplified formula suggests. She convincingly applies Atwood’s predilection for “subversion and transgression” to both “generic boundaries” and “deeply ingrained gender images and prejudices” by variously reading the “interaction between genre and gender” in Atwood’s work in terms of continuity, development, and disruption (6).

At the same time, the “innovative linking” (x) of gender and genre that Nischik sets out to establish is insufficiently realized by the close of the text. She writes cogently of Atwood’s “frequent involvement with gender” (x) and of her artistic facility in an array of generic forms, but the contours of the connection between these categories are not always made clear. That Nischik’s definition of gender is similarly fuzzy also contributes to this conceptual imprecision. She observes what might be labelled as a progressive trajectory in Atwood’s writing when it comes to “the representation of women and men, the relationship between the sexes, and gender hierarchies” while simultaneously noting that Atwood’s “explicit concern with gender” has declined in some of her later works (3). Privileging gender consciousness as an elemental part of the Atwood canon and then acknowledging its spotty appearance in Atwood’s more recent texts does not make for a very persuasive rhetorical strategy; moreover, it could easily be argued that Atwood retains a keen interest in gender issues in recent years:

Oryx and Crake (2003), for example, is nothing if not concerned with “the representation of women and men, the relationship between the sexes, and gender hierarchies” (Nischik 3), as is Atwood’s follow-up novel, *The Year of the Flood* (2009).

The study’s core chapters are organized by genre, beginning with poetry and ending with Atwood’s lesser-known role as a cartoonist; with the notable exception of chapter 1 (more of which in a minute) and chapter 8 (an interview with Atwood), each chapter acts as a “comprehensive analysis of the genre in question by focusing on gender issues in these genres as practised by Atwood” (6). The fact that “such a comprehensive approach is possible” in the first place only serves to confirm, in Nischik’s estimation, the critical role that gender plays in Atwood’s writing (6). Of course, this claim to comprehensiveness can be used to undermine the force of Nischik’s argument as well as bolster it: if Atwood is a writer uniformly interested in gender (as Nischik seems to suggest), then it should come as no surprise that her work in various genres reveals some level of concern with gender issues. Nischik’s reference to the “omnipresence of gender” (6) in Atwood’s work is also somewhat reductive in the sense that it limits this versatile writer to a single literary, critical, and/or theoretical concern. Additionally, the book’s treatment of gender may, to some readers, feel like familiar terrain; a basic *MLA* search of the terms *Margaret Atwood* and *gender* results in a list of nearly fifty articles, books, and essays, many of which also touch on genre-related issues. What *Engendering Genre* brings to the well-stocked Atwood table is an assessment of gender in relation to a wide variety of genres and changing social contexts.

Chapter 1 contains the book’s central discussion of Atwood’s poetry. Followers of her writing will know that Atwood has published more books of poetry than works in any other genre. In Nischik’s words, Atwood’s body of poetry is “as impressive in quality and quantity as it is varied” (17). Given Atwood’s productivity as a poet (and Nischik’s opening claim that *Engendering Genre* aims to be as comprehensive a study as possible), readers might be surprised to discover that chapter 1 concentrates on a single volume of poetry. Nischik focuses on the subgenre of love poetry, selecting Atwood’s *Power Politics* (1971) as a text that “disassembles all the ideals and conventions of love poetry” (6-7) through a “blending of genre and gender revisions” (18). After carefully analyzing Atwood’s insightful “diagnosis” of gender relations and romantic love in the later twentieth century, Nischik concludes that *Power Politics* should invariably be treated as “one of the seminal, groundbreaking texts of literary gender studies” (34). While this assertion is convincingly argued throughout much

of the chapter, Nischik occasionally gives *Power Politics* too much credit at the expense of Atwood's other poetic works, not to mention other poets. In designating *Power Politics* as "the most complex, innovative, and radical work dealing with romantic love in Western poetry up to its time of publication" (34-35), Nischik implicitly dismisses the strides made by earlier women writers such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Dorothy Livesay, and Adrienne Rich (although she does give cursory mention to these women in her endnotes). Nischik's omissions in chapter 1 are perplexing on a number of fronts: her absence of attention to *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), for example, seems strange in a chapter dedicated to gender and poetry, especially in light of Atwood's decision in that collection to portray a pioneer woman's experience in journal form as a (stereo)typically feminine discursive mode; and, in a chapter that purports to be an assessment of *Power Politics* as a book of revisionist love poems, it would have made sense to allude—however briefly—to some of Atwood's other revisionist love poems as well. ("Variations on the word *love*" from the 1981 collection *True Stories* comes immediately to mind.)

To her credit, Nischik returns to Atwood's poetry in chapter 2 where she provides a compelling examination of the short fiction and prose poems that appear in *Murder in the Dark* (1983) and *Good Bones* (1992). The chapter helpfully frames Atwood's rewriting of conventional gender images taken from "world literature" and "popular culture" as "counter-representations" that encourage us to "laugh about and question biased constructions of gender" (8). Nischik's suggestion that Atwood is responsible for "introducing the genre of the prose poem to the English Canadian literary scene" is substantiated, to some degree, by her detailed and original reading of Atwood's prose poetry as a form of "intertextual dialogue" (58) with one of the genre's most influential practitioners, the French poet Charles Baudelaire; however, it is worth remembering that poets such as Michael Ondaatje, Frank Davey, Daphne Marlatt, and Leonard Cohen have been experimenting with other forms of prose poetry in Canada since at least the 1970s. Gender and genre come together nicely in Nischik's analysis of Atwood as a writer who resists, in both form and content, the clichéd axiom that bigger is better. According to Nischik, Atwood's short fictions and prose poems successfully deconstruct the idea that a small amount of narrative space is somehow less worthy than more substantial literary forms just as they reject the outdated notion that women should be treated as second-class citizens in a world historically governed by men.

Nischik moves on to Atwood's short stories and novels in chapters 3 and 4 respectively. Both chapters seek to confirm a sense of development

in Atwood's representation of gender from her early fiction to her later work. Nischik provides strong close readings of Atwood's stories along with a useful chronological survey of the gendered language at work in her novels from *The Edible Woman* (1969) to *The Penelopiad* (2005), yet it remains unclear whether the progression that Nischik observes in Atwood's fiction with respect to gender is a sign of Atwood's own developing understanding of gender relationships and inequalities or simply a reflection of the cultural and political changes that were already occurring in North-American society writ large (namely, the burgeoning women's movement of the 1960s and 70s). Chapter 5 opens with an informative historical overview of Atwood's interest in and involvement with a variety of different media. For the remainder of the chapter, Nischik profiles one of Atwood's best-known novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and its adaptation into film by the German director Volker Schlöndorff. Nischik astutely explores the problems of adaptation by tracing the process by which *The Handmaid's Tale* was regrettably transformed from "a (feminist) dystopia" into "a (Hollywood) thriller" (148). She then turns, in chapter 6, to Atwood's expository prose, much of which deals with "the special problem of being a woman writer in Canada" (174). In her focused attention to Atwood's "gender awareness" (185) as a literary and cultural critic, Nischik risks falling into the same kind of essentialist trap that she aims to critique when it comes to the "sexist prejudices" (184) too often faced by women writers. While her introductory summary of the chapter rightly highlights Atwood's efforts to depict women "as individuals, just as men are, rather than as predominantly typical representatives of their gender," Nischik proceeds to undercut this statement by referring in general terms to the "female view" that Atwood embodies in so many of her critical essays (12).

The book's most engaging and original contribution comes in chapter 7, where Nischik presents a rich examination of Atwood's comics as "an unjustly neglected part of her vast oeuvre" (245). The chapter begins with a condensed history of cartoon art, followed by a rigorous investigation of Atwood's *Kanadian Kultchur Komix* series (1975-80)—featuring the figure of Survivalwoman as "an ironic pictorial self-stylization of her creator" (206)—and her later, more sporadic, *Book Tour Comics* (1993-2006). Nischik reproduces several of Atwood's comics in their entirety, greatly adding to the value of both the chapter and the book as a whole. (Her complete "List of Margaret Atwood's Comics," included as an appendix, is also worthy of note.) Nischik's reading of the *Kanadian Kultchur Komix* as a "critical national chronicle of the 1970s" (239) nicely augments existing

conceptions of post-1967 Canadian cultural nationalism and Atwood's role as one of the period's most prominent literary players. "In this series," writes Nischik, "Atwood combines the comics genre with the political cartoon, making funny yet biting statements about Canadian culture and politics at the time" (244). Although the chapter is sometimes more descriptive than it is overtly analytical, Nischik delves into relatively uncharted territory in the expansive field of Atwood scholarship and places on view a version of Atwood that supplies readers with an as-yet-unseen aspect of her public persona as one of Canada's most celebrated writers. *Engendering Genre* closes with an abridged version of Nischik's 2006 interview with Atwood on everything from cartooning to Toronto's literary community in the 1970s to the daily realities of life as a writer. The interview ultimately has very little to do with gender, but it nonetheless acts as a fitting complement to Nischik's in-depth analysis of Atwood's comics in chapter 7.

To some extent, the connection between gender and genre that Nischik endeavours to maintain throughout *Engendering Genre* is accomplished more fully in chapter 7 than in the book's previous chapters. Nischik's approach in much of the rest of the book remains unsatisfactory, not because it turns out that gender and genre are mutually exclusive concerns (they're not), but because she tends to focus less on their interaction than on their individual properties as they relate to Atwood's work. Early in the book, Nischik identifies "inversion" as "[o]ne of Atwood's representative principles" (7) for reimagining conventions of both genre and gender. She defines this strategy of inversion as Atwood's signature "technique of undermining conventional thought patterns, attitudes, values, or textual norms by turning them on their heads" (51) without explaining exactly what Atwood is inverting in each case. Nischik's reliance on inversion is thus drained of its potential in the absence of a more thorough discussion of just what these inverted patterns or values might be. Chapter 1 stands as a case in point: while Nischik writes confidently about *Power Politics* as a revolutionary text that "presents a new, challenging perspective within the framework of a time-honoured literary genre" (36), she seems to take for granted that her audience will already know the history of this "time-honoured" genre, allowing her to sidestep any kind of detailed look at its formal conventions or foundational (and traditionally male) poetic voices, with the result that readers are left with only a vague impression of the nature of Atwood's confrontation with her literary predecessors.

In the end, *Engendering Genre* is a welcome addition to Atwood scholarship (despite the shortcomings in Nischik's methodology); with its admi-

rably comprehensive coverage of Atwood's writing in a diversity of genres and its reconsideration of gender as a recurring subject in her work, the study acts as a testament to this Canadian writer's vast literary corpus by addressing in a single volume two key components of her impressive career.

Works Cited

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