

EATING AFTER THE APOCALYPSE:  
MARGARET ATWOOD'S DYSTOPIAN FOODSCAPES

**Food in Margaret Atwood's Speculative Fiction.** By Katarína Labudová.  
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What will food be like after the apocalypse? Will the few remaining humans roam a foodless wasteland until they finally collapse from hunger? Will they be reduced to diets of unpalatable, industrially produced food substitutes? Will they turn to cannibalism to survive? Or will a select few enjoy lavish Michelin-starred dinners in gated compounds while the rest perish beyond the gates? Food is one of the very few things essential to human survival, and consequently, issues surrounding food and eating feature prominently in our imaginings of the apocalypse. This is certainly true in Margaret Atwood's fiction, as Katarína Labudová skillfully demonstrates in her latest book titled *Food in Margaret Atwood's Speculative Fiction*. Atwood has shown a keen interest in food and consumption already in her literary debut, *The Edible Woman*, published in 1969. This novel centers around a protagonist who develops an eating disorder because of feeling suffocated by the social expectations and rigid gender roles forced upon her after her engagement. Although not a dystopian or apocalyptic novel, *The Edible Woman* already foreshadowed many of the food-related concerns that became prominent in Atwood's later apocalyptic writing. These include such issues as meat eating and cannibalism, the gendered nature of food and diet, or the interconnection between the consumption of food and consumption in general in corporatised, post-industrial societies.

It is precisely these concerns that Labudová brings to the forefront in *Food in Margaret Atwood's Speculative Fiction*. Labudová is an expert on Atwood's work, and she has published extensively on the topic. In addition, she is one of the few scholars in eastern Europe who critically engage with food in literary fiction. These two interests merge in her new monograph and provide fertile ground for an innovative and insightful discussion of Atwood's literary oeuvre. The monograph is based upon the premise that "food is one of the crucial thematic elements that readers can trace through the palimpsest of intertextual layers and hybridity in Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction" (2). Labudová notes that food is particularly significant in these novels because they depict worlds "where the characters' hunger, limited food choices and culinary creativity and eating rituals are embedded in the hostile environments of oppressive regimes, post-nuclear catastrophe, pandemics,

and prisons” (ibid.). These observations serve as a starting point for an exploration of the various roles that food and drink have played in Atwood’s speculative novels throughout her writing career.

Labudová’s monograph is divided into seven parts: an introduction, five chapters containing analyses of Atwood’s speculative novels, and a conclusion. Each of the chapters which form the main body of the monograph focuses on a different novel: the second chapter is devoted to *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Testaments*; chapters three through five discuss the three parts of the MaddAddam trilogy, namely *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, and *MaddAddam*; and finally, in chapter six, Labudová turns her attention to *The Heart Goes Last*. Although the individual chapters form part of a single book, they can equally be read as stand-alone essays. Not only does each focus on a different novel, but each also introduces different food-related concepts and themes, ranging from the gendered nature of various foodstuffs in chapter two, through real versus ersatz foods in chapter three, to hunger and food rituals in chapter five, and feasting and alcohol drinking in chapter six. The individual analyses are always grounded in a sound theoretical background and are well supported by a close reading of the respective novels. A reading of the monograph as a collection of separate essays is also suggested by the layout of the book, as each chapter begins with an abstract and a list of key words and ends with a separate bibliography section.

Out of the many thought-provoking discussions in the book, the two that stand out most are the analysis of the relationship between food and sex in *The Year of the Flood* conducted in chapter four, and the discussion of the role that food plays in creating the grotesque mood in *The Heart Goes Last*, which is part of chapter six. In chapter four, Labudová highlights the interconnections between food and sex as the two elements necessary for the survival of any species. Since human survival is the central topic of Atwood’s apocalyptic fiction, it is only natural that she should dwell on both, the alimentary and the sexual. Drawing on theoretical concepts put forth by Elsebeth Probyn and Deborah Lupton, Labudová demonstrates how food and sex have both “gone bad” (82) in the post-apocalyptic world of the MaddAddam trilogy, in which “[m]ost of the practices of sexual intercourse are depicted as unfulfilling and the food is inedible” (85). In chapter six, Labudová uses Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque to show how Atwood employs the motif of feasting to blend dystopia with farce in *The Heart Goes Last*. Food imagery enables her to create a carnivalesque atmosphere in which characters and readers alike are provided at least temporary relief from the perpetual gloom of a dystopian world ruled by ruthless corporate greed.

In analyses such as the two mentioned above, Labudová deftly employs theoretical ideas developed by various food studies and literary scholars, ranging from Michel

Foucault and Julia Kristeva to Fabio Parasecoli and Warren Belasco, in order to uncover the layers of meaning associated with food in Atwood's novels, and also to demonstrate how Atwood used food imagery as a strategic tool in constructing her dystopian and post-apocalyptic worlds. Such individual analyses are the book's strongest point. However, Labudová aims for the volume to offer a comprehensive analysis, which, paradoxically, proves to be its main drawback. Labudová's attempt to provide an exhaustive discussion of all culinary aspects of the novels under study results in a monograph that has an encyclopedic feel. While the book provides a plethora of inspiring, thought-provoking discussions, it lacks a central argument. As a result, Labudová's conclusion is rather weak despite the many insightful analyses conducted throughout the book. In the final paragraph, Labudová introduces the concept of domestication, claiming that food "domesticates the unfamiliar, alien environment of [Atwood's] speculative fictions" (133), however, such a conclusion might come as a surprise to readers, since domestication was not something that featured prominently in any of the analyses presented up to that point.

Despite these reservations, *Food in Margaret Atwood's Speculative Fiction* is undoubtedly a book worth reading. It represents not only a very interesting contribution to Margaret Atwood scholarship, but also a valuable addition to the burgeoning field of the critical study of food in literature. While all literature can be studied through the lens of food, apocalyptic fiction such as Atwood's lends itself particularly well to a food-based reading, as it deals with the issue of survival and is populated by characters stripped down to a primal form of existence, in which hunger and eating loom large. Labudová's volume does a great job of tracing these concerns throughout Atwood's oeuvre, and as such it is sure to become a valuable resource for anyone studying Atwood's writing, the (post-)apocalyptic genre, or food in literature in general.