Margaret Atwood's Textual Assassination

Wilson, Sharon Rose

Published by The Ohio State University Press


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Talking Back to Bluebeard: Atwood’s Fictional Storytellers

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“A large invisible thumb descended from the sky and pressed down on” Margaret Atwood’s head as she walked home from school one day, and “a poem formed” (Atwood, This Magazine, 43). In this tongue-in-cheek manner, Atwood explains her inauguration as a writer. Well, perhaps. Let’s look at her assertion more closely later. By means of this fiction she authorizes herself as a storyteller. As we read her novels we find that many of her female characters are also writers and/or oral storytellers. Why so many storytellers? What invisible thumbs press down on their heads? (Atwood’s, of course, but how does she explain that thumb imprint?) In many cases, a symbol marks the moment when the thumb presses, turning them into storytellers. Elsewhere I discuss the theme of Atwood’s storytelling from a different perspective (Margaret Atwood Revisited). Here I am interested in what storytelling means to her female protagonists. How and why do they become storytellers? How do their stories function to resolve their conflicts?

Storytelling is a powerful tool that these protagonists employ to develop an understanding of and relationship to the world. By telling her story, a person composes and inscribes her social self. Justine Cassell argues that “storytelling [is] a place where one decides who to be—where one constructs a social self—and where a perspective is maintained on one’s own life—where one resists the attempts by more powerful others to silence that perspective” (Cassell, “Story-
telling as a Nexus of Change,” 310). By telling their stories, Atwood’s female protagonists come to terms with their personal histories, assert their perspectives, and resist the attempts of others to silence them.

Compared to other contemporary novels, a surprisingly large proportion of Atwood’s fiction (especially the more recent works) is told through the protagonists’ narration rather than by dramatization. Most of the action they describe has either already occurred or happens offstage. For example, most of *Alias Grace* takes place in dialogue and exchange of letters many years after the main plot actions, the murders of Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery, have taken place. *The Robber Bride* has almost no “on-stage” action at all in the narrative present; three women meet, eat, and repeat their stories of past betrayals, and witness a death that has occurred. In *The Handmaid’s Tale* Offred describes her rather passive life after a violent revolution; she chiefly waits for others, thinks, or sleeps (excellent conditions for developing into a storyteller). Moreover, Atwood deliberately blurs temporal and spatial references so that the reader may confuse the narrative time and the diegetic present. We learn at the end of several novels that the present-tense narrative is inscribed retrospectively, and perhaps, as in the case of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, has been edited and altered by others. *Bodily Harm*, a detective thriller replete with violence, politics, drugs, and revolution, is the most action-oriented of Atwood’s novels. Yet all of this action has already happened offstage, for we learn that the narrative is recounted in a few hours as two women who share a prison cell tell each other their life stories, using the third-person present tense.¹

Strikingly, when depicting such dramas of violence and struggle, these novels focus on the telling rather than the action. We may suspect that the narrative process is as important as the stories. There may be several reasons for this focus. One reason is that first-person narration allows the reader the possibility of greater empathy for the characters. Because we hear their thoughts and recognize their feelings, we come to understand them, to enter their worlds, and to appreciate their motives. Thus, the stranger becomes more familiar. Atwood writes: “If writing novels—and reading them—have any redeeming social value, it’s probably that they force you to imagine what it’s like to be somebody else. Which, increasingly, is something we all need to know” (*Second Words*, 430). Clearly Atwood does believe in the “redeeming social value” of novels, and her emphasis on storytelling calls attention to the teller’s/novelist’s role.
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Another explanation is that Atwood wishes us to hear women's voices and women's stories, for they have often been unheard, silenced, or ignored. Women have, as Offred claims, lived on the margins rather than in the text. Thus, in Bodily Harm we hear the voice of a woman who would be a minor character in the margins of a detective thriller. In Cat's Eye we hear the portrait of an artist as a young (and middle-aged) woman. In The Handmaid's Tale we hear the voice of a woman bound into sexual slavery.

Women's voices may tell alternative versions of traditional stories or reveal hidden, dangerous knowledge. For example, whereas many of the classic utopian fictions present male narrators delightedly describing male-centered social orders, Offred recounts a woman's vastly different view of such a society. Thus, another reason for using women narrators may be the wish to deconstruct and rewrite traditional plots. In her novels of quest and adventure, Atwood rewrites typical action-driven, male-centered plots from a woman's point of view, thus developing new emphases and critiquing traditional stories. For example, in Surfacing a woman's quest for her mother takes on greater symbolic power than the more traditional male quest for the father (Grace, "In Search of Demeter," 43–44). Rather than accentuate external action, the more recent novels reveal the implications and consequences of action-driven plots, as when Bodily Harm uses thriller strategies to demonstrate "that the thriller style itself may be dangerous" because of its simplistic treatment of "international politics and male-female relationships" (Patton, 163).

But Atwood also critiques traditional women's plots. Lady Oracle deconstructs the stereotypical woman's Gothic romance plot as its open-ended conclusion sets up a contrast between the reassuringly neat resolutions of the romance fantasies that Joan Foster writes and the messy, unresolved predicaments of Joan's life. A key issue in these reconfigured plots is the amount of power female protagonists obtain. And storytelling turns out to be crucial for gaining power.

BECOMING A STORYTELLER

The theme of power attained through storytelling is a central one in Atwood's recent novels and in her second collection of stories, Bluebeard's Egg (1983). In the early novels the female characters' voices are usually weak and uncertain, perhaps even mute. In the later novels their voices grow stronger, more confident. The stories in Bluebeard's Egg represent characters at different points on the storyteller continuum,
ranging from the silent, almost paralyzed Alma ("The Salt Garden") to the assertive storyteller, the narrator’s mother ("Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother"). Some of these storytellers are tricksters who use narrative self-consciously to draw us into their confidence (perhaps also to con us) and to control the outcomes. How do their lives lead them to become spinners of tales?

Unhappy childhoods frequently predispose the protagonists to become storytellers. As children they may feel alienated or isolated. Their families seem different from others. Their parents are often absent (The Handmaid’s Tale, The Robber Bride, Life before Man), or family members may be abusive (Lady Oracle, The Robber Bride). To escape from their unpleasant situations, the protagonists take refuge in fantasies that may include wordplay, such as Tony Fremont’s reverse code. Thus, when the thumb descends, the women are already primed to be receptive to the imperative of narration.

Many of the protagonists, such as Joan Foster (Lady Oracle) or Rennie Wilford (Bodily Harm) work as writers or symbol makers of one kind or another. Before the revolution that stripped all women of their jobs, Offred (The Handmaid’s Tale) transcribed books onto computer disks. Artists such as the nameless narrator of Surfacing and Elaine Risley of Cat’s Eye tell stories through visual symbols. And even more characters are storytellers, producers of oral narratives.

Starting in childhood and continuing into adulthood, the protagonists feel vulnerable and powerless; they see themselves as victims. Indeed, Atwood claims that a central theme of Canadian literature is victimization, and her texts generate their share of victims. But she asserts that characters may move out of the victim position through reflection, introspection, and personal transformation (Survival, 36–39). Although the most obvious and physically dangerous instances of victimization occur in the most politically oppressive societies, often the victimization happens more subtly as a result of social convention or the workings of sexual politics, and the protagonists may be unaware of or deny their victimization.

An important intertextual motif running through many of Atwood’s novels, the tale-type of Bluebeard, illustrates the sexual politics of victimization and indicates how victims may use storytelling to gain power and become what Atwood terms “creative non-victims.” Folktales frequently exist in several versions, and the Grimm brothers retell several related versions of the Bluebeard tale-type. In these tales of betrayal and murder, an evil man murders a series of young women until the clever heroine outwits him, saves herself, and brings about his
death. “The Robber Bridegroom” version is the most relevant for my purposes here, for in this version the heroine achieves her escape through storytelling, by asserting her perspective and resisting the robber’s attempt to silence (and murder!) her. In this version the villain’s fiancée feels uneasy and does not trust her intended husband. Her suspicions prove to be well founded, for she discovers his penchant for murder and cannibalism. At the wedding feast, when urged to entertain the guests with a story, she divulges her secret knowledge under the pretense that she is telling a dream (Zipes, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, 153–57). Although she presents her information in the guise of fiction, she proves its accuracy by revealing a finger chopped off one of his victims. By means of this tale she saves her own life. This motif of telling a story in order to name and blame an evildoer recurs in different forms in Atwood’s fiction as her protagonists face dangers and struggle—with varying degrees of success—to save themselves and to make their voices heard. Sharon Rose Wilson explains the Bluebeard tales as stories about the woman married to Death in the form of a destructive man, or a culture that is “dead or death-worshipping” (Wilson, *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, 199). To avoid the trap of real or psychic death, women must use their “powers of imagination, cunning, voice or art” (Wilson, *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics*, 260). The successful storyteller saves herself and turns the tables on her victimizer.

Yet there are several paradoxes involved in achieving a voice. Nathalie Cooke notes the amalgam of power and powerlessness that characterizes many of these protagonists. Using the example of Atwood’s Siren, who lures her victims to their death by proclaiming her helplessness (“Siren Song”), Cooke identifies in many of Atwood’s women a “powerful voice that asserts its own powerlessness” (Cooke, “The Politics of Ventriloquism,” 215). It is important to recognize that the power the protagonists gain does not inhere in their social or political positions; it derives from their own authorization and self-assertion, from their voices. Telling the story is the act that gives them power. The metaphorical thumbs that press on their heads and spur them to tell their stories come from their own insights or compulsions. If the Robber Bridegroom’s fiancée did not tell her story, she would undoubtedly meet the same death as his other wives. If the Siren were silent, she would pose no threat to sailors. Clearly, finding a voice is part of the survival strategy, a means to gain power and control.

How, then, do the heroines find the voices to talk back to the Robber Bridegrooms and Bluebeards who seek to silence them? We can see
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Atwood’s protagonists move from silence and denial toward power and assertiveness as we read her fictions chronologically. In the early novels the characters’ voices are weak and tentative. They feel discomfort but lack the vocabulary to address its causes. As we continue our readings, we see them gathering strength and becoming more self-assertive, better able to tell their stories and to resist oppressive individuals and an oppressive social order. This development parallels the evolution of feminist social and political analyses beginning in the late 1960s. When feminist theorists began to name and define oppressive conditions, many women gained the language and the courage to express their discomfort. Through naming and articulating their experiences, women achieve clarity and focus. This often leads them to take action. As women begin to name the problems, to identify the causes, they may begin to resist those who would silence them, to address personal and social issues, and thus to gain control and power. This is the process of talking back to Bluebeard.

**EARLY NOVELS**

In Atwood’s first two published novels, *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Surfacing* (1972), the protagonists develop awareness of their victimization chiefly through symbols rather than words, largely because they lack the language for analysis. Atwood wrote *The Edible Woman* just as the second wave of the feminist movement was emerging, before it began to articulate its analyses of sexual power relations and of patriarchal oppression. Betty Friedan’s landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique*, appeared in 1963, just two years before Atwood composed *The Edible Woman*. Friedan describes the “problem without a name,” the depression many women felt in those years. She attributes their malaise to their relative powerlessness and their restricted roles as 1950s and early ’60s housewives. Kate Millett’s more analytical *Sexual Politics* appeared in 1970, two years before *Surfacing* was published. Millett gave a name to “the problem” Friedan describes: sexism, sexual politics.

The Bluebeards confronting the heroines of Atwood’s first two novels are their male friends and lovers. Both women are uncomfortable with the conventional courtship process as they struggle with stereotypes of passive women and assertive men. Although she attempts to fit the stereotypically passive feminine role, Marian McAlpin experiences the unnamed malaise that Friedan documents. She fears her fiancé wants to destroy her (*The Edible Woman*). By the novel’s conclusion little has changed. Atwood comments in an interview with Linda Sandler...
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that Marian ends where she began: *The Edible Woman* is “more pessimistic than *Surfacing* . . . *The Edible Woman* is a circle and *Surfacing* is a spiral” (Sandler, 14). Interestingly, although both protagonists work as symbol makers, neither defines herself as a writer or an artist, as do some of the later protagonists.

Although Marian’s job is to translate the obscure language of psychologists into common speech for consumer surveys, she is unable to translate into words her own fears that her fiancé is trying to destroy her. Instead, she becomes anorexic, enacting her resistance to the traditional female romance plot with her body rather than with language. Increasingly concerned over her fiancé’s domination, Marian feels herself shrinking and acts out this fear by consuming less and less food. Afraid that she is becoming an object of consumption, she contrives to test her version of reality: “what she needed was something that avoided words . . . a test” (279). She bakes a cake in the form of a woman and offers it to her fiancé as a substitute. The symbolic cake thus speaks for her, exorcising her demon lover and becoming a festive symbol of Marian’s self-assertion as she enjoys consuming the confection she has constructed.

Similarly, the unnamed narrator of *Surfacing* uses symbolic gestures (a dive, a ritual spirit quest, and a period of silence) rather than language to explore her predicament. The narrator’s quest leads her from the sterile and stultifying world of the city to a green but threatened island and culminates in a vision of symbolic and silent connection with each of her parents. At the book’s end she resolves to enter the world of language again, knowing that it will entail miscommunication, but accepting the risks.

The narrator of *Lady Oracle* (1976), Joan Foster, is a more slippery protagonist, a writer of Gothic romance fictions in which heroines are rescued from Bluebeard and married to Prince Charming. In her own life Joan is unable to manage this feat. Although she escapes from a series of Bluebeards (including her mother: women can also be oppressors), she has not yet found her Prince Charming. Yet she does have a knack for escaping from problems, and it appears that her lively imagination will keep producing new evasions.

Joan identifies the moment when she experiences the metaphorical thumb press, her transformation into a writer, as the moment when she moves into an ornate hotel. In that setting her fantasies of villains and heroines bloom (136). This moment also indicates her conflation of the fantasy romance world with the real, external world: Both her fictions and her life are built on disguise and trickery. At the novel’s conclusion
she wonders if such an identification with her Gothic romance novels is bad for her. Her fiction may also encourage her readers to embrace society’s idealization of romance. Nevertheless, her writing provides her with the money to escape from threats against her life and to flee to Italy, where she narrates the story of her past escapades that comprises the novel. A self-confessed Houdini, Joan does not so much talk back to Bluebeard as evade him. While *Lady Oracle* is a comic novel with a focus on sexual politics, Atwood’s next two novels are more serious explorations of human rights issues that raise questions about the individual’s responsibility to bear witness and thus to expose Bluebeard publicly.

**LATER NOVELS**

*Bodily Harm* (1981) and *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) examine institutional politics and human rights issues. The Bluebeards here are not only demon lovers as in the earlier novels; they are corrupt politicians, despotic rulers, political revolutionaries, men who love power and danger. The female protagonists here have little power; they are at the mercy of often corrupt male authorities. In response to these threats, they determine to bear witness to social evils, to expose the political dangers. And, by making their voices heard, they become somewhat more powerful themselves.

*Bodily Harm* speaks explicitly about the writer’s duty to be a voice for social justice. The novel’s protagonist, Rennie Wilford, ultimately decides to become an investigative reporter, to point the finger at Bluebeard. She has resisted this mandate, preferring her superficial role as a lifestyle reporter. But her trip to a West Indian nation seething with poverty, violence, and political turmoil convinces her of the necessity to become an investigative reporter and to speak out. For much of the novel she is surprisingly oblivious to the political dangers that surround her, and she seems almost willfully determined to remain a victim. It takes a metaphorical sledgehammer rather than a thumbprint to move her to a position of resistance. She is deliberately blind to much of the brutality, corruption, and abuse she sees. The turning point arrives when her cellmate, Lora, is brutally beaten, perhaps killed. Rennie grasps her hand and licks her wounds, allowing herself to feel more deeply than she has previously and to become “massively involved.” She vows to write the story of what she has seen if she returns home alive.

In contrast to Rennie’s prolonged reluctance to write the story of political corruption and violence, Offred in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is
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eager to tell her story. She paints a dystopian picture of Gilead, a fundamentalist totalitarian regime that denies literacy to women and hangs its “political criminals” in public view. In Gilead, storytelling is a rebellious act, yet it may gain Offred’s salvation. It is a way for her to “compose herself,” to give coherence to her experiences. It enables her to keep memories of her friends and family alive. Moreover, telling her stories may empower her to create new possibilities and new selves, to inscribe her perspective, and to resist the attempts of more powerful people to silence her. Telling her story may also be a way to spread the word about Gilead to other countries, and thus bear witness to its destructiveness.

Among Gilead’s crimes are its denial of reading and writing to women. The government attempts to enforce one story on its subjects; therefore it erases and rewrites history. Women are supposed to remain in their homes and be silent. Offred comments wryly that enforced silence doesn’t seem to agree with the wife of her Commander, and she speculates that the Commander’s life must be a silent one as well. In telling her story, especially in speaking of her desires, Offred inscribes a story that runs counter to the official narrative.

Storytelling becomes an absorbing project for Offred. It is important to her that there be a listener, a person who receives the story. She is ambivalent and wishes her tale were more coherent, less fragmented, less shameful. She wishes it were fiction, because “then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. It isn’t a story I’m telling. It’s also a story I’m telling” (52).

As we read the book, Offred’s present-tense narrative appears to be an inner monologue recounting her daily life. Yet in the epilogue, we learn that the tale is really a composed narrative, spoken into a tape recorder some time after the fact. Indeed, as the narrative proceeds, Offred becomes increasingly conscious of herself as a narrator, sometimes worrying about how accurately she renders remembered events, sometimes proffering several versions of an incident (such as her initial tryst with Nick). Many scholars have examined Offred’s narrative strategies. Lee Briscoe Thompson makes several interesting observations about Offred as author. She notes that the groups of young women being trained (reeducated) to be handmaids are required to inform on others or to testify against themselves. To comply with these demands they start to invent stories about themselves (59). Thus, ironically, the oppressive institutions of Gilead train Offred to become a better storyteller and to perfect her means of resistance. Thompson points out that Offred experiences “anxieties about artistic goals” (40).
In fact, the emphasis of the book shifts “from her longing to escape to her much more often mentioned anxiety to tell her story as accurately as possible” (59). She is becoming an author. As Hilde Staels explains: “Gilead censors the threatening force of creative self-expression. Yet Offred defies the strict rules of authoritative discourse by giving life to a silenced discourse” (459). Glenn Deer points to a paradox inherent in Offred’s narration: “Atwood’s text compels us to see her narrator in two ways that are not entirely congruent: as an innocent recorder and as a skilled, self-conscious rhetorician and storyteller” (226). Where Deer perceives this paradox as a flaw in the novel, I argue it is the key to Atwood’s storytelling here. For Offred’s narration models that of the novelist, the professional storyteller. To achieve her aims the novelist must often appear to be the innocent recorder at the same time that she is the skilled rhetorician. Therein lies her authorial power. Offred’s narrative gains credibility from her status as “innocent recorder,” innocent witness to the events she reports, but it gains in artistry and impact from her rhetorical skill.

In Atwood’s next four novels, *Cat’s Eye*, *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, and *The Blind Assassin*, her most accomplished storytellers appear to be innocent recorders, yet they use their rhetorical skills to achieve their goals: to trick others, to teach valuable lessons, to gain revenge for past slights, to heal themselves, to assert their perspectives, to resist those who would silence them, and to gain power. These are the tricksters, figures that Atwood associates with all writers (“Murder in the Dark,” in Atwood, *Murder in the Dark*). The trickster has a long history in traditional folklores. He or she typically teaches, tricks, and entertains using a combination of story, parody, gesture, and joke. Elaine Risley of *Cat’s Eye* obtains revenge on her childhood tormentors by painting parodic portraits. Zenia in *The Robber Bride* is the consummate trickster, who cons her friends and steals their men. Grace Marks in *Alias Grace* uses her rhetorical skill to win a temporary respite from prison and to convince influential supporters that she is innocent. Iris Chase Griffen in *The Blind Assassin* exposes her husband’s treachery through her storytelling.

All of the characters in *The Robber Bride* (1993) create fictions. They change their names to shed unhappy pasts and they create new life stories, new identities for themselves. Zenia is the most proficient of these storytellers. She has a story for every occasion, and she devises a new identity for every situation. Yet we never hear her stories directly; they come to us filtered through the narratives of the three other protagonists. As a result, she remains mysterious, a dark stranger,
while the others sustain their roles of innocent recorders. She is the perceived enemy, a sexy Siren who lures men away from other women and then abandons them. Like the Siren in Atwood’s poem, she gains her power by professing that she is powerless and asserting that her listener is powerful and unique; she asks for help that only the listener can provide. By means of her stories, she charms each of the characters in succession. She is the consummate trickster, a tale teller, and a liar. The novel’s other women (Roz, Charis, and Tony) believe that she is evil. Yet her function is crucial. For through her fabrications, she rescues the good women from their Bluebeards; Roz’s womanizing husband, Mitch; and Charis’s freeloading lover, Billy. She is uncannily aware of the other characters’ secret dreams and aspirations. In turn, in their mixture of fear and admiration for Zenia, they grow to understand that she represents unacknowledged parts of themselves, their desires for power, their secret wishes for revenge.

In her introduction to *The Robber Bride* Atwood explicitly links tricksters such as Zenia and novelists: “Zenia is, among other things, an illusionist. She tells stories so plausible that each of her listeners believes her. . . . but isn’t this the goal of every novelist—to deceive? Doesn’t every novelist play Zenia to every reader’s willing dupe? We writers like to feel there is another kind of truth concealed in the stories we tell, though each of our stories is—we say so ourselves!—a pack of lies. And perhaps Zenia, too, arch-liar though she is, tells a form of truth” (4).

Grace Marks in *Alias Grace* is a similar trickster. She is apparently powerless, yet she contrives to liberate herself from prison through her carefully crafted storytelling. She gains a temporary furlough from prison in order to talk to Dr. Simon Jordan, a young physician who utilizes the new techniques of psychotherapy in hopes that by encouraging her storytelling he will elicit her suppressed memories of the events surrounding the Kinnear and Montgomery murders. Her stories are plausible, yet we never know whether or not they are true. She holds Jordan spellbound, yet she does not reveal the information he most wants to learn. Literally incarcerated (where other Atwood protagonists have been figuratively imprisoned in their own fears or in oppressive cultures), Grace Marks seems to be the most trapped of the women. She is imprisoned for a murder she may or may not have committed. Yet she uses her talents as a storyteller and her gift for role-playing (she is a “model prisoner”) to win advocates who may use their influence to obtain her freedom. As her story unfolds in dialogue with Dr. Jordan, we are aware of her control of her narrative. She
chooses her words carefully, deciding what to reveal and what to conceal. She tells a compelling story rich in details about her life, yet when she has finished, the crucial questions about her complicity in the murder remain unanswered.

Iris Chase Griffen tells her story in an intricately layered text that provides her the means of escaping from her abusive husband and avenging herself on him (see “Left-Handed Story” in this volume).

We have seen that the protagonists of Atwood’s novels often gain power and escape the victim role through telling stories. We will now turn to her short story collection *Bluebeard’s Egg*, for that is where Atwood sets forth a fictional representation of a family history shaping the narrator into a storyteller.

**BLUEBEARD’S EGG**

Although there are plenty of Bluebeards in this book, few of the women in this collection have developed into assertive storytellers. For example, in the title story, “Bluebeard’s Egg,” Sally abdicates her power and keeps silent because she focuses on her husband to her own exclusion. Afraid to confront him with her suspicions that he is unfaithful, Sally is voiceless and powerless, unable to talk back to Bluebeard, unable to write her own story. In another story, Loulou struggles against the linguistic artifice and arrogance of the male poets who freeload in her house (“Loulou, or, The Domestic Life of the Language”).

“The Sin Eaters,” a richly symbolic fiction about the healing power of storytelling, appears in the 1983 McClelland (Canadian) edition and the 1998 Anchor (U.S.) edition of the *Bluebeard’s Egg* collection. The narrator of “The Sin Eaters” links storytelling with confession and redemption from sin. She laments the death of her therapist, Joseph, for he was the person to whom she told her stories. After his funeral the reader presumably becomes the listener to whom the narrator tells her story, and thus, by implication, serves as confessor and “sin eater” (Stein, *Revisited*, 132–33).

The first and last stories in this collection depict a consummate storyteller and indicate how the narrator’s childhood prepared her to become a writer, to interpret that thumbprint as a poem. Her family’s summers in the bush without the distractions of a city—movies, television, radio—encouraged her to read and sharpened her sense of observation and her imagination: “most of the time I lived a life of contemplation. Insofar as was possible I sneaked off into the woods to read books and evade tasks” (311).
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The narrator’s parents are skilled storytellers, as well as self-sufficient, imaginative, resourceful, and energetic people. The family depicted here avoids the conventional and limiting stereotypes of femininity: passivity, consumerism, narcissism, and powerlessness. In contrast to the dysfunctional families in much of Atwood’s fiction, this family is supportive and creative; children and parents share stories and enjoy each other’s company. When we look for a model of a creative nonvictim, the mother represented in these stories is Atwood’s best example. She is a self-confident, vibrant, unconventional, and courageous woman.

The family stories in this collection are purportedly autobiographical fictions (Atwood interview with Lyons, 225). Autobiography, of course, is always told in retrospect; it is filtered through memory, and is a construct, a choice, a selection, and therefore always to some degree fictional. The narrator speaks in the first person, in the role of innocent reporter, although she is a skilled rhetorician who shapes the narrative to achieve her purposes. She accentuates her mother’s capability and energy in contrast to her own (self-proclaimed) incompetence and lethargy. Through her self-deprecation she invites the reader to identify with her and to share her admiration, even awe, of her resourceful and practical mother.

The narrator spent her childhood living alternately in the bush and the city. This connection to the bush is significant because in the Atwood canon the city is Bluebeard’s domain and the bush is its antithesis. The bush is a green world of curves, of possibilities, of boundary crossings, whereas Bluebeard’s territory is the gray urban world of straight lines and grids, of rules and fences. The city’s linearity is stifling and deathlike; those who attempt to live by its codes suffer constraint, ennui, despair, and madness. The city stands for a sterile and regimented rationality, the bush for imagination and the irrational. The bush is the site of spontaneity, of connection to a vibrant life force; it is the home of the trickster. Certainly the bush harbors dangers—treacherous terrain, extreme weather, and wild animals—but it is a world that allows greater freedom from conventions, that offers room for individuality, for recognition of mystery. In contrast, the culture of the city promotes rigidity, constraint, stultifying conventionality, and stereotyped sex and gender roles. In these texts Bluebeard lurks metaphorically as the deadening urban culture that some of the heroines, chiefly the mother of “Significant Moments,” are able to resist.

The first story in Bluebeard’s Egg, “Significant Moments in the Life of My Mother,” establishes the mother’s childhood as the daughter of
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a highly respected country doctor. The narrator recognizes the conventional family power hierarchy but acknowledges the special insights and secret lore of women, thus preparing us for the stories to come. The grandfather was the patriarch, at the top of the household hierarchy, but the house’s “secret life . . . was female” (4). The house itself is presented as a powerful repository of secrets, untold stories: “The house, and all the objects in it, crackled with static electricity; undertows washed through it, the air was heavy with things that were known but not spoken. Like a hollow log, a drum, a church, it amplified, so that conversations whispered in it sixty years ago can be half-heard even today” (4). In telling her stories, the mother gives form and voice to these echoes.

The narrator’s mother here is an unconventional woman who, in marrying, opted for an adventurous life, joining as a full partner with her husband, who spent a large part of each year living in different areas of the bush, where he conducted entomological fieldwork. She worked with him each year to set up tents for the family to live in while they built a more permanent cabin in which she cooked, cleaned, and managed family life without electricity, telephone, or running water. She kept the children fed, entertained, and comfortable during the times when her husband’s field trips took him away for days or weeks.

The narrator’s mother is a gifted storyteller who acts out the parts and even provides the sound effects: “my mother’s face turns to rubber. She takes all the parts, adds the sound effects, waves her hands around in the air. Her eyes gleam, sometimes a little wickedly, for although my mother is sweet and old and a lady, she avoids being a sweet old lady” (8). Moreover she has a keen sense of audience and tailors her tales to appeal to particular audiences. The darkest stories of emotional drama and tragedy she reserves for women, because she believes men would be too upset by them. From her the narrator learns to be a storyteller, to listen to women’s voices, and to resist the bourgeois world of stultifying conventionality.12

The events identified as “significant moments” seem not very important: getting permission to get her hair cut, playing in a tree house. Yet, cumulatively, the anecdotes of the mother’s childhood in the book’s first story, and the incidents of her adult life in the closing story, “Unearthing Suite,” are significant, for in the telling the mother builds connections with her daughter and creates a shared past. Moreover, she models the storyteller’s art. Most significantly, her anecdotes describe her life journey, pointing out how she escaped a life of boring
conventionality in a middle-class urban setting to become her own person, a creative nonvictim: “Her marriage was an escape from its alternatives. Instead of becoming the wife of some local small-town professional and settling down, in skirts and proper surroundings, to do charity work for the church as would have befitted her status, she married my father and took off down the St. John’s river in a canoe. . . . She . . . must have felt that she had been rescued from a fate worse than death: antimacassars on the chairs” (312).

A contrasting pair of trivial incidents will illustrate this passage from repressed young woman to powerful, unconventional adult. In “Significant Moments” the mother tells of a youthful misadventure. As a student at Normal School (teacher’s college), she participated in an amateur theater production. For the role, she brought a cat needed as a prop. She wrapped the cat in a burlap sack and carried it on her lap as she and a male friend drove to the theater. During the drive, the cat became frightened and peed, soaking the sack and her skirt. “We didn’t talk about such things then,” confesses the mother as she remembers how she stared ahead in embarrassment and horror. Unable to break the conventional silence surrounding such an incident, both she and her friend were embarrassed and uncomfortable (11). But she was eventually able to surmount such constraining conventions, chiefly by marrying her husband and taking up a life that the narrator describes as nomadic, alternating between city and bush.

The book closes with another trivial incident that dramatically contrasts with the earlier cat incident. At the book’s close, the narrator explains how her mother, still active now at seventy-three, was “clambering nimbly about” on the steeply pitched roof of their house, sweeping off the leaves, when she found the droppings of a fisher (a rare, small furry mammal) on her roof. She sees the droppings as a sign of grace, “a miraculous token” (323). Happy to see them, she joyfully shares this information. In her role as storyteller the mother reads nature’s signs and invests the incident with symbolic importance. She communicates her perspective to others who might have perceived the occurrence differently. To her husband, in contrast, the events are simply a fact of nature.

The embarrassing cat incident took place in a car, a constrained enclosed space identified with the urban world and its technology. In contrast, the inspiring fisher event occurs out of doors as the mother is climbing on the roof, symbolically on top of her house, restoring order. Whereas she was previously locked into urban conventions and forced to be uncomfortably silent about the cat urine, she now participates in the
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natural world and is free to be happily vocal about the fisher droppings. Of course, there is a historical factor operating here as well; taboos about what may be said in polite company have loosened. Nevertheless, the contrasting anecdotes work symbolically to make a point. The narrator’s mother now successfully asserts her own perspective, lives the active and adventurous life she has chosen, resists the deadening social conventions that would try to constrain and silence her, and passes her legacy of independence, power, and storytelling to her daughter.

Clearly, for Atwood storytelling has value in itself. She believes narrative has moral authority and may teach as well as entertain:

I believe that poetry is the heart of the language, the activity through which language is renewed and kept alive. I believe that fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community. Especially now that organized religion is scattered and in disarray, and politicians have, Lord knows, lost their credibility, fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects; through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge them and ourselves. (Second Words, 346)

She takes a strong moral stance, as evidenced by her essays on politics and human rights in Second Words and by her work on behalf of Amnesty International and PEN. Yet she conveys her position primarily in fiction and only secondarily in essays. For fiction is the medium of the illusionist, the trickster. As we have noted, the trickster employs story, parody, and joke. The novelist is simultaneously an illusionist, a seemingly innocent recorder, and a rhetorician. Accordingly, fiction may operate on many levels at once. It may both make assertions and question them; it may suggest many possibilities; it may be simultaneously serious and parodic or comic; and it may convey moral concerns as well as psychological and symbolic material. Atwood’s fiction is many-layered, rich with allusion, and open-ended. Thus it remains open to multiple interpretations and to innuendo. Fiction allows the writer to present experience in all its complex richness.

As Atwood’s successive narrators grow more self-aware, they approach the role of the trickster, the illusionist. They may develop
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narrative strategies to further their own storytelling goals, to move from victimization to positions of power. They may speak in the voice of the innocent recorder even as they employ their rhetorical skills to create complex and multifaceted fictions. In creating her female storytellers Atwood gives voice to the formerly silent, allowing them to express their encoded wisdom, their dangerous knowledge. She presents them as innocent reporters or even sometimes as airheads, but she empowers them to expose sexual politics and dangers to human rights, to resist those who would silence them, and to talk back to Bluebeard.

NOTES

I wish to thank Elena Gonzales, Karen Markin, Larry Rothstein, Linda Shamoon, Jon Sutinen, and Sharon Wilson for their suggestions and comments on successive drafts of this paper. Thanks also to Marta Dvorak and Lee Briscoe Thompson for their careful readings.

1. In fact, Lorna Irvine suggests that the novel’s action may all take place in Rennie’s imagination, as she lies anesthetized after surgery (Irvine, 96–99).

2. See also Grace Epstein’s discussion of Bodily Harm.

3. Particularly in consciousness raising and in various forms of psychological therapy, storytelling is a recognized strategy for personal growth and awareness. Consciousness raising is a feminist strategy based on sharing stories as a means of gaining insight into oppressions and developing assertiveness; the process may lead to resistance. Traditional psychological therapies also use storytelling as a tool for analysis. In both of these models, telling stories in supportive environments enables the individual to understand uncomfortable situations and to gain self-awareness and empowerment. Muriel Rukeyser writes of the power of storytelling in her poem “Kathe Kollwitz”: If even one woman were to tell her life story truthfully, “The world would split open.”

4. Atwood writes of The Edible Woman:

   I myself see the book as protofeminist rather than feminist: there was no women’s movement in sight when I was composing the book in 1965, and I’m not gifted with clairvoyance, though like many at the time I’d read Betty Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir beyond locked doors. . . . [M]y heroine’s choices remain much the same at the end of the book as they are at the beginning: a career going nowhere, or marriage as an exit from it. . . It would be a mistake to assume that everything has changed. In fact, the tone of the book seems more contemporary now. (Second Words, 370)

5. Moreover, scholars who discover Offred’s tapes over a hundred years later and piece the narrative together, perhaps inaccurately, have modified the text we read. This raises questions beyond the scope of this paper about who has final control of the text, the author or Bluebeard.

6. Nathalie Cooke responds to Deer’s comment in a different way, identifying this narrative strategy as the confessional form (217).

7. Atwood expounds this paradox in Murder in the Dark. The writer must appear to be telling the truth but is really lying.
8. Atwood has long been interested in the trickster. She reviewed Lewis Hyde’s study of the trickster figure for the *Los Angeles Times*. For a fuller discussion, see her review and Hyde’s book, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art*.

9. Although Atwood describes both parents as gifted storytellers, the focus here is on her mother. Her relationship to her father is spelled out more fully in the fourth section of *Morning in the Burned House* and a portrait of him appears in *The Labrador Fiasco*.

10. This critique of the city is directly articulated in two poems: “The City Planners” and “Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer.” Most of Atwood’s novels, especially *Life before Man* and *Cat’s Eye*, reiterate this city-bush dichotomy in one form or another.

11. Similarly, in *Cat’s Eye* Bluebeard also represents the sexual politics of a death-worshipping culture. Probably because she has spent her earlier life living in the bush, Elaine Risley is finally able to resist her friends’ attempts to enforce rigid social codes. By becoming a painter Elaine gains a measure of freedom, and in her paintings she both avenges herself on her childhood tormentors and heals her own pain.

12. Barbara Godard discusses this story from a somewhat different perspective. She reads the anecdotes as a way to build community. She analyzes the intertwining of the mother’s and daughter’s stories, and describes the levels of interpretation possible.