

Talking *writing* and *Elvis robots* with Margaret Atwood

By Dawn Fallik
FOR THE INQUIRER

Some writers stick to one genre: mysteries or illustrations or scripts. Margaret Atwood has no such boundaries. At 75, she has produced poetry, comic strips, and children's books. She had a cameo in the fitness app *Zombies, Run!* and is working on a graphic-novel version of her epic *The Handmaid's Tale*. (A stage version is running at West Philadelphia's Curio Theatre.)

She has appeared on several online sites, including Medium, Byliner, and Wattpad. In May, she used the Periscope app to let viewers worldwide watch as, in the middle of Oslo's Nordmarka forest, she handed over her story *Scribbler Moon* to be included in the Future Library, a group of texts not to be published for 100 years.

Her latest novel, *The Heart Goes Last*, is the culmination of the Positron serial novel, most of which was posted online. She prefers the term *speculative fiction* to *science fiction* to describe her dystopian approach, saying that her imagined world is already possible — it's just a matter of time.

From her hotel room in New York, Atwood chatted about what it's like when speculation has become reality, how she has handled feedback from fans and editors, Elvis sex robots, and her Mae West corset. And she wanted to know a few things about Philadelphia before her sold-out visit Tuesday at the Free Library of Philadelphia.

“The Heart Goes Last” seems more in the here and now and less speculative than other Positron novels. Is the world just so crazy now that there's no need to speculate much anymore? Except for the Elvis sex robot?

Well, the robot is probably on the way. I don't put things in my books that haven't happened sometime or someplace. There are a lot of people living that way.

How was writing a serialized novel?

I'll try anything once, just about. It was very interesting to do and increased my admiration of Charles Dickens, who put out work much more speedily from the pen to the page. It wasn't until we got to the Flauberts and Henry Jameses of this world that people regarded the novel as an art form. It was more of a lower form of writing, and poetry was the higher art form. Maybe that's why women could get away with writing novels in the 19th century.

How is the online feedback?

They're not typically very unpleasant to me, probably because I'm an old lady, but if I was a younger lady, they would probably be more aggressive and sexist toward me. But as it is, it'd be like slanging off on your granny.

But I understand all that because I've been through it. So, feedback was like “tell us more.” The place for that kind of feedback now is Wattpad. If Wattpad had been there when I was a teenager, I would have used it.

You have written so many books — what kinds of comments do your editors have? Are you iconic enough now that you can tell them to shove it?

I would hate that because that would mean I could write the telephone book and everyone would say it was great. That is what you don't want. Overall, editors will make general comments. But I work with a copy line editor, and we get down to it for one or two days, sitting side by side. We go through it page by page, on paper, not on a screen. There is a digital version in case we need to search the text: I use *prestdigitation* on Page 48 — do I use it twice? We go over everything: punctuation, word repetition, inconsistency of tone. It's not a hostile thing: We have the same goal in view, and that's to make it better.

Tell me about “The Handmaid's Tale” being turned into a graphic novel.

There's a script, then there's

AUTHOR APPEARANCE

► **Margaret Atwood: “The Heart Goes Last”**

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the first load of pencils. The first pencils are where the pictures are drawn, and the second load comes with more detail. After that comes inking and coloring. We're at the second pencils now. It's more like a movie script: You're writing about what pictures you want people to see and the voice and sound effects. Sometimes, you're writing what people are saying or an underlying description of the action.

Many writers have a trunk of unpublished stories and drafts of tales they haven't quite figured out how to tell yet. Do you have any trunk stories you'd like to see out in the world?

I think it's drawer stories, and mine are in a drawer, although a trunk, that might not be a bad idea. Sometimes they are stories that aren't going anywhere. Some are waiting or crumbling away. Others get started, and then they end somewhere else.



JEAN MALEK

How do you write? Do you have a solitary space?

Do I have a cork-lined room like Proust, or a kind of gentleman's study like Henry James? Sadly not, and I don't have a servant bringing me things on silver trays. Possibly because I grew up in such a peripatetic way, I can write pretty much anywhere, such as this hotel room or on a plane. The main requirement is that I shall not be at a party talking to people while doing it.

SARS hit when you were headed to Japan, and you were on your way to New York on 9/11, and on your way to Los Angeles when they had an earthquake. Should Philadelphia be warned?

Well, what's the truth about Philly right now?

The pope just came and left, and we discovered some Atwoodesque truths about ourselves. We had armed police everywhere, and they closed off bridges and

highways and most of Center City.

Who did they think would hate the pope enough to cause a fracas?

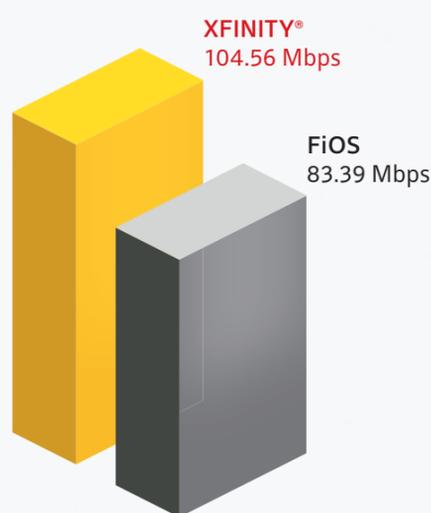
No one would really tell us. They just told us that the Secret Service put it all in.

“This pope is not dying on our watch!”

Exactly. You mentioned that you're not a rock star and no one would want your shoelaces on eBay. Did you ever have a rock-star crush and pine for someone's shoelaces?

I wasn't that kind of teenager. I was certainly very appreciative of Elvis when he turned up, so I put a lot of Elvises in this book, and I also liked Marilyn Monroe. I think *Some Like It Hot* is just a masterpiece. I once bought at a charity auction a corset belonging to Mae West. It was quite tiny around the waist. But it wasn't because I was fetishizing her; it was because I was helping the charity.

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