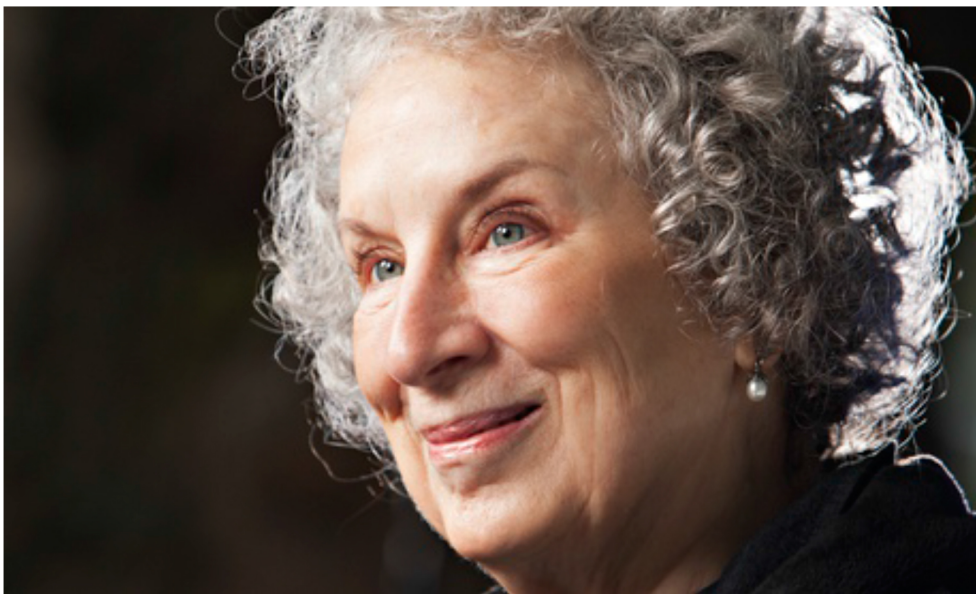


Margaret Atwood's new work will remain unseen for a century

Novelist says it is 'delicious' to be first contributor to the Future Library, which will compile 100 texts for publication in 2114

Alison Flood

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Margaret Atwood: 'Books really are a message in a bottle.' Photograph: Murdo MacLeod for the Guardian

Depending on perspective, it is an author's dream – or nightmare: Margaret Atwood will never know what readers think of the piece of fiction she is currently working on, because the unpublished, unread manuscript from the Man Booker prize-winning novelist will be locked away for the next 100 years.



'I'm not telling' ...

Margaret Atwood with Katie Paterson near where the Future Library trees will be planted. Photograph: Bjørvika Utviklingay

Atwood has just been named as the first contributor to an astonishing new public artwork. The Future Library project, conceived by the award-winning young Scottish artist Katie Paterson, began, quietly, this summer, with the planting of a forest of 1,000 trees in Nordmarka, just outside Oslo. It will slowly unfold over the next century. Every year until 2114, one writer will be invited to contribute a new text to the collection, and in 2114, the trees will be cut down to provide the paper for the texts to be printed – and, finally, read.

"It is the kind of thing you either immediately say yes or no to. You don't think about it for very long," said Atwood, speaking from Copenhagen. "I think it goes right back to that phase of our childhood when we used to bury little things in the backyard, hoping that someone would dig them up, long in the future, and say, 'How interesting, this rusty old piece of tin, this little sack of marbles is. I wonder who put it there?'"

The award-winning author said she was unbothered by the fact that, during her lifetime at least, no one but her will ever read the story she has already started writing. "What a pleasure," she said. "You don't have to be around for the part when if it's a good review the publisher takes credit for it and if it's a bad review it's all your fault. And why would I believe them anyway?"

Author of novels including *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood said "when you write any book you do not know who's going to read it, and you do not know when they're going to read it. You don't know who they will be, you don't know their age, or gender, or nationality, or anything else about them. So books, anyway, really are like the message in the bottle."

She predicted that the readers of 2114 might need "a paleo-anthropologist to translate some of it for them", because "language of course will have changed over those 100

years. Maybe not so much as it changed between say 1400 and now, but it will have changed somewhat".

Paterson said Atwood was her "dream" author with whom to kick off the project. "I imagine her words growing through the trees, an unseen energy, activated and materialised, the tree rings becoming chapters in a book," said the artist, who won the visual arts category of the 2014 South Bank Sky Arts awards.

Atwood's work will be stored in a specially designed room in the Deichmanske public library, opening in 2018 in Bjørvika, Oslo. The room will be lined with wood from the forest, with the names of the authors and the titles of their work on display – but none of the manuscripts available to read.

Each year, the Future Library trust, made up of literary experts – and Paterson, while she's alive – will name another "outstanding" writer who will be contributing to the artwork. The trust is also responsible for the maintenance of the forest, and for ensuring the books are printed in a century's time. A printing press will be placed in the library to make sure those in charge in 2114 have the capability of printing books on paper.

"For some writers I think it could be an incredible freedom – they can write whatever they like," said Paterson, "from a short story to a novel, in any language and any context ... We're just asking that it be on the theme of imagination and time, which they can take in so many directions. I think it's important that the writing reflects maybe something of this moment in time, so when future readers open the book, they will have some kind of reflection of how we were living in this moment."

Paterson said that Future Library "has nature, the environment at its core – and involves ecology, the interconnectedness of things, those living now and still to come. It questions the present tendency to think in short bursts of time, making decisions only for us living now."

The 100-year timescale is "not vast in cosmic terms", said the artist. "However, in many ways, the human timescale of 100 years is more confronting. It is beyond many of our current lifespans, but close enough to come face to face with it, to comprehend and relativise."

"It freaks me out a bit when I think that many of these writers aren't born yet," she said. "Sometimes it does hit me – oh my God, if I live to 90, what will it be like then? It's very exciting as an artist."

Atwood refused to reveal anything about what she's writing. "Wild horses would not drag it out of me. It's part of the contract you can't tell anybody what you're writing. I'm finding it very delicious, because I get to say to people like you [the Guardian], I'm not telling," said the Canadian writer. "But I will say that I've bought some special archival paper, which will not decay in its sealed box over 100 years."

Margaret Atwood on a Haida folk tale that laid dormant for 100 years



Haida totem poles

Haida Gwaii, off the northwest coast of British Columbia. Photograph: Alamy

"I'm going to tell you an interesting story, maybe. About a language called Haida. It belongs to a language group of one, off the west coast of Canada. Haida was a flourishing language and culture until it encountered European diseases, when it went from quite a large population down to a population of fewer than 100 people. That was in 1900. But among these survivors of small pox, tuberculosis and all other things that killed them, among these 100 people, there were two bardic poets.

"Haida didn't have a written language, it was an oral culture, but they had, like a lot of oral cultures, including the one that produced *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, they had a tradition of long, memorised, recited and performed oral poems that were epic in nature. These two poets probably thought, 'Our culture's going to die out and we have no way of transmitting our poems.' But along came an American anthropologist, who didn't speak any Haida, and he worked with a translator who spoke both Haida and English, and the poets recited their poems line by line, word by word. He wrote them down in phonics in Haida, and then he wrote a rough translation of what they meant.

"All of that sat in a library for 100 years, nobody reading it. And then along came a polylingual polymath named Robert Bringhurst, who discovered this archival material in the library, taught himself Haida, transcribed the phonics back into Haida and did a new translation. They were then regarded as folk tales because the person recording them had written them out in prose, but it was his theory that they were poetry, although the poetic form was different than one we'd recognise, it was more like Japanese poetic forms. And he wrote the whole thing out, he did his own translations and you can read them to this very day in a collection called *A Story as Sharp as a Knife*.

"So that is an example of something lying dormant for 100 years, whereupon it comes to new life."

As told to the Guardian.