



TELLING TALES

Margaret Atwood

Lattes Grinzane Special Prize 2021

© 2021 Margaret Atwood

All rights reserved. Reproduction prohibited

Care signore et cari signori,

Grazie per essere qui oggi. Sono così contenta!

Receiving this valued award is both an honour and a pleasure for me. I was worried at first about whether the journey might be too difficult for me, but I was lured here by Matteo Columbo from Ponte alle Grazie, who frequently talks me into madcap adventures unsuitable for a person of my age. He is also a magician, so when things get tedious on a book trip he can always pull a banana out of your ear.

Magicians are artists of illusion, and so are novelists, so I'm always hoping I might pick up a few tricks from him.

It's thrilling to be in this part of Italy, so close to where Hannibal crossed the Alps with elephants in the third century BCE. How amazing it must have been to look up from your breakfast to see a lot of armed Carthaginians, plus a squad of elephants, appearing suddenly



out of nowhere! Especially if you had never heard of an elephant before! I expect you yourselves have vivid personal memories of that event.

You don't? You weren't there? You aren't two and a half thousand years old? Oh. Then you must have learned about this Hannibal episode in a story. That story was called either a history – we are supposed to believe it is true – or a work of fiction, which is supposed to be true in a different way. True to life, and true to art. In either case, the story is always happening to specific characters – Carthaginians, middle class ladies, elephants, orphans, hobbits, vampires, Gargantua, Little Red Riding Hood, Dr. Spock from Planet Vulcan – who experience events in a certain order, which always includes a beginning, a middle, and an end.

There are many kinds of stories, and many ways of arranging a story – telling it, as we say, or writing it, which, these days, is more often what we mean – and it is stories and their variations that I will attempt to discuss here today.

During the past two years of COVID, I've been spending much time with stories written in Italy. For instance, I participated in a project on Dante's Divine Comedy, in which many writers from many languages read this epic poem in translation, and then discussed their chosen canto and the significance of Dante to them. My friend Alberto Manguel and I divided the last canto of the Inferno – I read as far as the three heads of Satan, and he then read the ending, in which Dante and Virgil climb up Satan's hairy thighs and follow a river out of the Inferno to the surface of the earth, where they see the stars again – and this is a good place to begin to talk about stories, their narrators, and their writers.



In a way, the progress of the *Inferno* is like the writing and reading of a novel. We (writer, and then reader) begin in darkness, in a tangled wood. We don't know where we are or what's happening. Then we encounter a gateway – let's call it the first chapter. If we are writers and we are starting to write a book, we ask ourselves, is this going to work out? If we are readers beginning to read a book, we may wonder, shall we go on? The first task of the writer is to lure the reader through the gateway and past the first five pages. If that can't be done, nothing else will follow, and your amazing insights into life, love, and the nature of the universe will never be read by that reader.

Dante is the writer. He is writing the *Inferno*. He is also the narrator of it: the star of it, you could say. We feel his feelings, we hear his thoughts, we travel along with him. But he's not the only individual taking this journey. Luckily for Dante, there is a spirit guide. This person is Virgil, author of the *Aeneid*, which your present narrator – me – studied in high school, and had to attempt to translate. I was not very good at it, which is possibly why I remember parts of it very clearly.

As you will recall, this epic poem contains a descent into the infernal regions. Aeneas too has a guide—the Sybil of Cumae – and it's a good thing he does, because, as she says – I'm paraphrasing – going to Hell is easy, but it's difficult to get out again. Aeneas descends into Avernus, and sees many horrifying and educational things; and his author, Virgil, describes it all for us. It's as if he was there. (The best authors are like this: It's as if they were there. And if they are there, the reader can be there as well.)



For his hero's encounter with the dead, Virgil had his own model: the passage in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus fills a trench with blood, calls up the dead, and consults a spirit guide, namely the seer Tiresias. One story becomes another, which becomes another. We tale tellers spin tales, yes; we make new things; but the materials we refashion are often very old.

So this is why Dante has as his spirit guide the author of the *Aeneid*, for whom he expresses great admiration: Virgil has already been to Hell. He knows the terrain. Dante is in good hands: Virgil will see him safely through, and keep him from being devoured by monsters and drowning in lakes and so forth, and make sure he gets back up again to the world outside the *Inferno*.

Every reader of a book is a Dante, going into darkness. Then wondrous sights are seen—we hope they are wondrous – and exciting events take place – we hope they are exciting – and truths about human nature are revealed – we hope they are true. All of which is taking place in amazing and inventive language – we hope the language is amazing and inventive.

And every novel writer is a Virgil to the reader's Dante. It is the task of the writer to guide the reader through Hell – or possibly just through the plot, which may well be a comedy, though no comedy is without its misunderstandings and mishaps for the characters – while allowing the reader to ask their own questions and come to their own conclusions. There's an implicit pact between writer and reader. "Come into this book," the writer is promising silently. "You'll meet intriguing people, some of whom will behave badly – you'd be very disappointed if everyone behaved well -- you'll have adventures and even maybe be frightened, but I'll make sure you get out again. I won't leave you trapped in Hell."



Though as an aside, being trapped in Hell might be more interesting than being trapped in Heaven. As Mark Twain used to joke, Heaven for the climate, Hell for the company. And that, dear Readers, is why it is easier to write dystopias, about societies we would not like to live in, than it is to write utopias – perfect societies. We are well aware of the evil deeds of which human beings are capable, having been given plenty of examples by history and the news media, but we don't find it easy to believe in the perfectibility either of human nature or of society. We have seen too much evidence to the contrary. This is not to say that things might not be improved. But Perfected? Dubious. In any case, one person's perfect human being is another person's boring roommate, another person's insufferable monster of moral righteousness, and yet another person's tactful robot companion. Jonathon Swift, in *Gulliver's Travels*, did create some morally impeccable beings. But they were horses.

What about the writer's own spirit guides? We novelists and poets all have one, or two, or many such guides – many Virgils, if you like. These guides tend to be books we have read. As the *Aeneid* is to the *Divine Comedy*, so are our spirit guide books to our own work. Usually they are books we read when quite young, though you never know when another striking book will turn up in your life. I am finding that, at my age I have been a spirit guide now to many younger writers, or so they tell me. I appear in their dreams and give them significant omens. Often I am wearing exotic costumes, or white robes. But I have not yet sprouted a halo. I thought you might like to know that.

Recently I was consulted about another writer's dream. In it there was a handsome man who looked like the young Tennyson, and the word NAUTILUS, visible through water. Whatever



could this dream signify? The well-read will recognize the answer immediately. NAUTILUS is the name of the submarine in Jules Verne's novel, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. The handsome man must be Captain Nemo, the hero of that book – a brilliant inventor, among other things. The dream meant that the writer – who had just embarked upon the writing of a new and challenging book – was about to take a deep dive into the underworld, and like all such divers and descenders, she was hoping to discover treasures. Captain Nemo was her spirit guide, representing creativity, bravery, and adventurousness.

Captain Nemo took his name from an earlier voyager – Odysseus, who named himself that – Nemo, or Nobody – while stealing from the one-eyed Cyclops. Odysseus is an ambiguous figure – he tells a lot of lies, and Dante really disapproves of him, though of course for a writer having a liar as a spirit guide is a good thing, since the art of fiction consists of licensed and convincing lying – and Nemo is an ambiguous name, and Captain Nemo is an ambiguous character. Admirable in some ways, deplorable in others. Very interested in vengeance, just for instance – like a lot of writers, who have said themselves that they write in order to get back at people who were mean to them in school. Though others say that they write in order to justify the ways of God to Man. The only writer I know of who has managed to combine the two is in fact Dante – he got back at people who were mean to him in Florence, and also justified the ways of God to man, and also the ways of his lost love-object, Beatrice, to him. But that's another story.

Back to my Covid-time exploration of Dante. It was conducted over Zoom, as you may well imagine – me in Toronto, Alberto Manguel in Portugal. Such are the wonders of the



modern age – you can be in a place without actually being there. Mediaeval writers often wrote dream vision poems and stories – they went to Faeryland, or to the House of Rumour, and came back to tell us about it. The social historian Carlo Ginzburg – who was born near here, in Torino, in the very same year that I was born – 1939 -- which must be why we both have such an interest in witches, 3 and 9 being numbers that witches are very pleased with – Carlo Ginzburg has written about this kind of journey in his excellent book, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*. Here is what he said:

“To narrate means to speak here and now with an authority that derives from having been (literally or metaphorically) there and then. In participation in the world of the living and of the dead, in the sphere of the visible and of the invisible, we have already recognized a distinctive trait of the human species. What we have tried to analyze here [namely the night journeys of fairies, witches, and shamans, to other worlds] is not one narrative among many, but the matrix of all narratives.”

In other words, all narration is a kind of shamanistic journey. You go out of your body to another place and time, you bring back the story and place it in the here and now – in which the reader is reading or the listener is listening.

The journey of Dante to the otherworld is part of what I was discussing with the ghostly image of Alberto Manguel on my computer screen, on the bewitched platform of Zoom.

Could it be that Zoom is a modern form of being transported by an eagle, or going through a gateway marked *Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here?* Is a Zoom call the equivalent of the *Inferno*? That was a joke. Zoom, please don't sue me.



But on the subject of hope: writers never abandon hope, at least not while they continue to write. Did you notice how many times I used this word, when talking about the writer's entry into the composition of a book? Even though the content of a piece of writing may be gloomy and pessimistic, the act of writing in itself is inherently hopeful, since it assumes a future reader. Even those who write journals in code are assuming such a reader. Otherwise, why write things down, or why not burn them? The writer and the reader are always in different times: writing is a magical act of throwing your voice across a void, the void that separates the act of writing from the act of reading. That void may be small – I may write an email, you may read it the same day – or very large – the poet Ovid writes the *Metamorphoses* over two thousand years ago, I read it in 1957 – but that time gap always exists. The opera singer giving a live performance is always in the same time and place as the ones listening. The writer writing – unlike the oral storyteller or the bard - never is. Oral storytellers modified their stories while they were telling them, according to the requirements of the audience or its reactions to them. They could tell when the listeners were bored, scared, or offended and likely to pelt them with rotten vegetables. The writer of books has no such easy access to the reader, and certainly not while the writing is taking place.

Nor can the writer of books predict who might read the book, or when. Did Ovid know I'd be reading his poem two thousand years into the future? He did not. He would probably have been dismayed if he could have looked into the future and seen teenage me. Not only dismayed, but very puzzled. What was that codex book I was holding? Proper writing should be on a scroll! What were those strange clothes I was wearing, such as shorts? Outrageous! Why



were my legs showing? A scandal! What was that electric light? How frightening, light coming from nowhere – not an oil lamp, not a candle! What was that typewriter? Some demonic magical apparatus! What was that telephone? A voice coming out of the air -- sorcerers must be at work!

Worse: How was it that I, a non-aristocratic female, a barbarian speaking an unheard-of language – and, as a barbarian female, by definition capable only of animal-like wailings and howlings, not rational thought – how was it I was even able to read? A being such as myself could not possibly understand him! What a disaster!

Rest in peace, dear Ovid. Your stories are in good hands. Or good enough. And I think I understand you quite well. Or well enough. Which is all one should hope for in a reader.

The most recent iteration of the time gap between writing and reading is the Future Library of Norway. This library has only begun its existence. It is the brainchild of the Scottish artist Katie Paterson – and is a meditation on the nature of time.

North of Oslo, a forest has been planted that will grow for a hundred years. In each of those years, an author from any country and any language in the world will contribute a secret text, which shall be made of words – no images. A single word, a story, an essay, a novel, a poem, a letter, a grocery list – anything made of words. The author cannot reveal anything about the text, apart from the title. Only two paper copies may exist, and they shall be placed in the hands of library, at a ceremony in the forest. All other copies and drafts shall be destroyed. Also there shall be two digital copies – they'll have to redo those every five years, because the technology will change, and the paper will have to be archival paper – otherwise the text will



crumble. In a hundred years from the start of the project—in 2014 – the hundred boxes will be opened, the secret texts will be revealed, and the trees that have grown in the forest will be made into paper to print the anthology of the Future Library of Norway.

I was the first author to be invited to contribute to the Future Library. Having been a child who buried glass marbles in jars in the back yard for some future child to dig up, I accepted this challenge with pleasure. I wrote my text. I made the required copies. At the appointed time I travelled to Norway. I had my secret text in a box, tied with a blue ribbon. I feared that the Customs officials of Norway would ask me what was in the box, and I would have to say, “I can’t tell you,” and then I would be arrested, but this did not happen.

On the day of the ceremony, we walked into the forest, where the trees were so small that they had blue ribbons tied on them so we would not step on them. The Mayor of Oslo made a speech, the Librarian made a speech, the Forester made a speech, I made a speech, and then I handed over my closed box. It is now in the new Oslo library, in the beautifully designed Future Library room, where you can see only the title.

If all goes as planned, my text will be read by readers who are not yet born, nor are their parents born. This project has caught the attention of people around the world – partly, I think, because of the many layers of hope it embodies. It assumes that in a hundred years, there will still be an Oslo. There will still be people. The people will know how to read. The people will wish to read. There will be a Library. The forest will grow. Someone will still know how to make paper. You can see how many things might go wrong, and therefore how much hope is involved: really a lot.



Sometimes people ask me what it feels like to have written something that nobody will read until after I am dead. Sometimes I frighten them by saying, “How do you know I will be dead?” More often I say, “It’s the same as now, except the time gap is longer.” You never know who may read your book, or where, or when. You never know who the Dear Reader will be.

Another Italian feature of my two Covid-19 years was of course The Decameron, by Giovanni Boccaccio. As you know, this highly influential collection of stories was written just after the Great Mortality – the Black Death or plague that struck in the middle of the fourteenth century and killed between a third and two thirds of the inhabitants of Europe. After suffering devastating family losses, ten young people seclude themselves in a villa near Florence and tell stories – altogether, a hundred stories – refashioned by Boccaccio from stories that already existed.

In the first months of COVID 19, and especially when lockdowns began happening, it didn’t take long for editors and writers to remember the Decameron and to set about creating and publishing modern versions – secluded tale-tellers amusing other secluded individuals with stories of all kinds. I was asked to provide several of these stories. The first request was for a story inspired directly by the Decameron, and I did so. I will now describe this one for you, and how I went about it.

The first thing I did was to revisit the Decameron itself. What story would be my starting point? The last story in the Decameron is “Patient Griselda,” a story I have always particularly disliked. Patient Griselda, having been married by a sadistic duke, puts up with all kinds of abuse from him. This is supposed to be a test of her loyalty as a wife. She passes the test, and is



then held up as a model of what a wife should be – in other words, a stick to beat other women with, because they are not as patient and long-suffering as she is.

Before telling my version of this story I had to make the same decisions that any teller of any story has to make. First: Who is telling or writing the story? Second: To whom is this person or entity telling the story? Third: What mode will the story be in? Will it be a romance – that is, an adventure story – a comedy, a tragedy, or an irony? Will it be a satire? Will it be a melodrama?

I chose to tell a very different version of Patient Griselda. The narrator is an octopus-shaped alien from another planet, who has been sent to entertain some unhappily quarantined Earth people -- they are the listeners, the audience. The story told is not Patient Griselda, but Impatient Griselda. As to whether it is a satire or a tragedy, the reader may decide.

Here is how it begins.

Impatient Griselda.

Do you all have your comfort blankets? We tried to provide the right sizes. I am sorry some of them are washcloths – we ran out.

And your snacks? I regret that we could not arrange to have them cooked, as you call it, but the nourishment is more complete without this cooking that you do. If you put all of the snack into your ingestion apparatus – your, as you call it, mouth – the blood will not drip on the floor. That is what we do at home.

I regret that we do not have any snacks that are what you call vegan. We could not interpret this word.



You don't have to eat them if you don't want to.

Please stop whispering, at the back there. And stop whimpering, and take your thumb out of your mouth, Sir-Madam. You must set a good example to the children.

No, you are not the children, Madam-Sir. You are forty-two. Among us you would be the children, but you are not from our planet or even our galaxy. Thank you, Sir or Madam.

I use both because quite frankly I can't tell the difference. We do not have such limited arrangements on our planet.

Yes, I know I look like what you call an octopus, little young entity. I have seen pictures of these amicable beings. If the way I appear truly disturbs you, you may close your eyes. It would allow you to pay better attention to the story, in any case.

No, you may not leave the quarantine room. The plague is out there. It would be too dangerous for you, though not for me. We do not have that type of microbe on our planet.

I am sorry there is no what you call a toilet. We ourselves utilize all ingested nourishment for fuel, so we have no need for such receptacles. We did order one what you call a toilet for you, but we are told there is a shortage. You could try out the window. It is a long way down, so please do not try to jump.

It's not fun for me either, Madam-Sir. I was sent here as part of an intergalactic crises aid package. I did not have a choice, being a mere entertainer and thus low in status. And this simultaneous translation device I have been issued is not the best quality. As we have already experienced together, you do not understand my jokes. But as you say, half an oblong wheat flour product is better than none.



Now. The story.

I was told to tell you a story, and now I will tell you one. This story is an ancient Earth story, or so I understand. It is called Impatient Griselda.

Once there were some twin sisters. They were of low status. Their names were Patient Griselda and Impatient Griselda. They were pleasing in appearance. They were Madams and not Sirs. They were known as Pat and Imp. Griselda was what you call their last name.

Excuse me, Sir-Madam? Sir, you say? Yes?

No, there was not only one. There were two. Who is telling this story? I am. So there were two.

One day a rich person of high status, who was a Sir and a thing called a Duke, came riding by on a – came riding by, on a – If you have enough legs you don't have to do this riding by, but Sir had only two legs, like the rest of you. He saw Pat watering the – doing something outside the hovel in which she lived, and he said, come with me, Pat. People tell me I must get married so I can copulate legitimately and produce a little Duke. He was unable to just send out a pseudopod, you see.

A pseudopod, Madam. Or Sir. Surely you know what that is! You are an adult!

I will explain it later.

The Duke said, I know you are of low status, Pat, but that is why I want to marry you rather than someone of high status. A high-status Madam would have ideas, but you have none. I can boss you around and humiliate you as much as I want, and you will feel so lowly that you won't say boo. Or boo-hoo. Or anything. And if you refuse me I will have your head



chopped off. This was very alarming, so Patient Griselda said yes, and the Duke scooped her up onto his ... I'm sorry, we don't have a word for that, so the translation device is of no help. Onto his snack. Why are you all laughing? What do you think snacks do before they become snacks?

I shall continue the story, but I do council you not to annoy me unduly. Sometimes I get hangry. It means hunger makes me angry, or anger makes me hungry. One or the other. We do have a word for that in our language.

So, with the Duke holding onto Patient Griselda's attractive abdomen very tightly so she wouldn't fall off his – so she wouldn't fall off, they rode away to his palace.

Impatient Griselda had been listening behind the door. That Duke is a terrible person, she said to herself. And he is preparing to behave very badly to my beloved twin sister, Patient. I will disguise myself as a young Sir and get a job working in the Duke's vast food preparation chamber so I can keep an eye on things.

So Impatient Griselda worked as what you call a scullery boy in the Duke's food preparation chamber, where she or he witnessed all kinds of waste – fur and feet simply discarded, can you imagine that, and bones, after being boiled, tossed out as well – but he or she also heard all kinds of gossip. Much of the gossip was about how badly the Duke was treating his new Duchess. He was rude to her in public, he made her wear clothes that did not suit her, he knocked her around, and he told her that all the bad things he was doing to her were her own fault. But Patient never said boo.



Impatient Griselda was both dismayed and angry at this news. She or he arranged to meet Patient Griselda one day when she was moping in the garden, and revealed her true identity. The two of them performed an affectionate bodily gesture, and Impatient said, “How can you let him treat you like that?”

“A receptacle for drinking liquid that is half full is better than one that is half empty,” said Pat. “I have two beautiful pseudopods. Anyway, he is testing my patience.”

“In other words, he is seeing how far he can go,” said Imp.

Pat sighed. “What choice do I have? He would not hesitate to kill me if I give him an excuse. If I say boo, he’ll cut off my head. He’s got the knife.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Imp. “There are a lot of knives in the food preparation chamber, and I have now had much practice in using them. Ask the Duke if he would do you the honour of meeting you for an evening stroll in this very garden, tonight.”

#

That is the first part of the story. If you find yourself wishing to know what happens next, then I have successfully performed my function as a story-teller; for the primal question asked by the listeners to stories, and the readers of them, is: What happens next? In its broadest sense, of course.

Boccaccio found the Patient Griselda story where he found many of his stories – in pre-existing folklore. He refashioned it and put it into the Decameron. Chaucer of England also used it, and Charles Perrault in France; and now I have used it too, although somewhat differently. This is how stories travel and transform; and if they stop doing that, they will die.



What would Boccaccio think of my version if he were alive today? Since he himself was fond of stories in which people play tricks and get away with deceptions, I like to think he would approve of me. At any rate, he would probably approve of me more than Ovid would... we are closer in temperament. Both of them are among my spirit guides, however. So thank you, esteemed Ovid and dear Boccaccio. I may not be the inheritor you expected – to say the least – especially in my other form, that of a carnivorous octopoid alien from outer space – but I'm the Inheritor you got. Right now, that is. I am sure you will have many more literary descendants.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have very much enjoyed my time among you.

Thank you again.

