

Atwood's Big Tent: Queen of CanLit is exposed in tiny tales worth the ticket

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Some books simply don't make a strong first impression. The Tent by Margaret Atwood is one. Something is just too cutesy about the inclusion of her own drawings, and the forced feel of some of the pieces. It's as if Atwood is playing Atwood, distracting us by acting mythical or oracle-like, perhaps so we don't notice the morsel of truth in each of these tiny tales is really opinion or raw observation, and fairly banal at that. Even if you're a fan, the first cursory read-through gives way to doubt. One wonders if perhaps she could get anything she lays pen to published. Grocery lists. Half-finished crossword puzzles. The mean-spirited might ponder if her next book will be the definitive collection of cancelled cheques she's written to her dentist, snide notes to Revenue Canada and postcards from her last vacation.

Luckily, The Tent is a tiny book. So small that cynical readers will check their bookstore receipts several times, compelled by a sneaking suspicion they've parted with large dollars for some brief but biting monologues, of which they, her faithful followers, are the brunt of several of the jokes. Granted, The Tent is full of the terse satire, dark humour and other unsettling, yet somehow charming, qualities we've come to expect from the Queen of CanLit. But reading through the bent bits of myth and fairytales, written with the kind of selective detail and sharp detachment she crafts so well, Atwood seems to be doing more than simply letting the reader eavesdrop on her thought process or comb through her discontentment at being a private writer/public icon; it appears at times she is using these parodies to take shots at readers and critics.

"Voice" calls attention to the one thing those who have heard her speak never forget and usually write about, what she describes as "my voice, ballooning out in front of me like the translucent green membrane of a frog in full trill." One wonders how literal she's being in "No More Photos" and "Encouraging the Young." "Plots for Exotics" is prickly with her frustration at readers' expectations and "Life Stories"

feels almost vampirish, as if each story a writer tells diminishes them a shade more.

For balance, several of the tiny tales send up her own writing, such as "Three Novels I Won't Write Soon" which outlines how characters Chris and Amanda brave a laundry list of natural disasters and cataclysmic societal changes while having great sex. And even (or especially) if you're a diehard Atwood fan, it's hard to miss the irony of "Chicken Little Goes Too Far" coming from someone who has so often written so bleakly about the future. In fact, the future fares badly in *The Tent*, perhaps it's the leftover angst from *Oryx and Crake*, which creeps into "Eating the Birds."

However, when one reaches the title story, buried near the back of the collection, everything changes. "The Tent" is a barely disguised analogy of the chaos of the writing process, a intimate lament in which she pulls back the curtain and allows the reader to glimpse the kind of effort, struggle and yes, even self-doubt, that lays beneath her usual wizardry -- a rare insider view that is well worth the price of admission.

At this point, the truly fair-minded reader will take a breath, realize that perhaps this is why the book is so brief, that it demands to be read more than once, and like in the myths it parodies, you have to make an effort to go looking for the big ideas. Yes, Atwood is poking fun at her "image," yes, she is reveling in the gloomy dark bits of human nature, and spooky futuristic landscapes recognizable from several of her books, and she appears to be enjoying it, perhaps a little too much. But she is also giving us something new, a chance to look at the raw workings of her mind, a shortcut to how her visions come to her and the sometimes overwhelming responsibility of pushing them out on to the page. There's nothing small about it -- *The Tent* is a rare invitation to see the humanity beyond the myth, to see how to trick is done, to read the writing on the (fragile) tent walls.

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The Book

The Tent

By Margaret Atwood

McClelland & Stewart

168 pages, \$24.99

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