



Good Bones and Simple Murders

Margaret Atwood

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In this collection of short works that defy easy categorization, Margaret Atwood displays, in condensed and crystallized form, the trademark wit and viruosity of her best-selling novels, brilliant stories, and insightful poetry. Among the jewels gathered here are Gertrude offering Hamlet a piece of her mind, the real truth about the Little Red Hen, a reincarnated bat explaining how Bram Stoker got "Dracula" all wrong, and the five methods of making a man (such as the "Traditional Method": "Take some dust off the ground. Form. Breathe into the nostrils the breath of life. Simple, but effective!") There are parables, monologues, prose poems, condensed science fiction, reconfigured fairy tales, and other miniature masterpieces--punctuated with charming illustrations by the author. A must for her fans, and a wonderful gift for all who savor the art of exquisite prose, "Good Bones And Simple Murders" marks the first time these writings have been available in a trade edition in the United States." [Atwood] proves she is an accomplished miniaturist...She can pack more wallop into less space than any other writer in her weight class".-- "Toronto Globe And Mail"

Good Bones and Simple Murders Details

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From Reader Review Good Bones and Simple Murders for online ebook

Jenny Maloney says

I read the first story of this book, "Murder in the Dark," and when I was finished I turned to my husband, shoved the book in his hand, told him to read it and then he was to tell me HOW DID SHE DO THAT?

He didn't really have an answer but his comment defined what I thought of the rest of the book: "It's written with the confidence of someone who knows she can hit a homerun every time."

Confidence *oozes* through every one of these pieces.

Least faves (because they just seemed a little too *forced* - and I wish I had a better word for that sensation, but that's the best I've got!):

"Gertrude Talks Back": Queen Gertrude gives Hamlet her opinion on her current and former husbands. Fine. But the tone somehow seemed dismissive - and the character of Gertrude never seemed dismissive in the play - which is doubly odd considering the information she is giving her 'priggish' son. And, this may seem an odd critique, but I think the white space between the paragraphs doesn't do the story any favors. It gives it a fragmented feeling and I think that a piece riffing on Shakespeare would work better within the play framework - perhaps shaping the monologue in a block form like Hamlet's own speeches would have allowed the words to have more impact instead of making the reader adjust both the form and the words.

"Poppies: Three Variations": While this is probably the most complex exercise, it reads just like that: an exercise. She riffs on a verse about poppies by John McCrae by using the same words of that verse, in the same order, to tell three different stories. The first words of McCrae's verse is 'in Flanders' and all three mini-stories have with 'in' followed somewhere by 'Flanders' followed somewhere by the next word in the verse. It's a good way to stretch the literary muscle, but it's like watching someone work out - we admire their physique but prefer not to see the huffing and puffing and sweat that go along with it. Just give me the calendar, ya know?

The stories that I absolutely adore are the ones that have a satirical bite to them.

"Simmering": Oh! My FAVORITE by far. (I know, it's unfair to choose favorites, but there you have it, anyway.) It's all about what happens when men take over the kitchen. Go get this book and read that story.

"Murder in the Dark": It set the tone for the rest of the book. Is the author just trying to manipulate the reader throughout (I'm totally okay with the way Atwood manipulates, by the way), is she just a magician showing nothing of reality? Puts the power with the writer...so I think my writerly friends will enjoy this a lot...as well as readers who like to figure out the trick. I still haven't....

"Happy Endings": A choose-your-own adventure marriage!

Atwood also illustrated the collection, and some are as provocative as the stories - which are also dominated by the bits and pieces of male and female anatomy. Interwoven among the stories is the question of objectifying the body: "Making a Man," "Alien Territory," "Dance of the Lepers," and "Good Bones" hit on the question in a more direct way...but it's everywhere.

Well worth reading - and it won't take that long either.

~Jenny
Place for the Stolen
Underground Writing Project

Aj Sterkel says

The synopsis of this book isn't wrong when it says that these stories are hard to categorize. I mean, what even *are* these things? I guess I'd call them flash fiction or prose poetry. Each story/poem/essay/dialogue thing is only a few pages long. They cover a variety of genres, from realism to magical realism to fairytales to sci-fi. Most of them have a strong feminist slant. Some are abstract; some are straightforward. Some are accompanied by Margaret Atwood's weird artwork. **They're all beautifully written.** I guess there's a "thing" for everyone in here.

Here are my favorites:

In "**Murder in the Dark**," the narrator (or author?) explains how she is going to manipulate the reader in this book. The reader shouldn't believe anything she says. This is an attention-grabbing way to start the collection. It sets the dark, weird tone.

"Just remember this, when the scream at last has ended and you've turned on the lights: by the rules of the game, I must always lie." – *Good Bones and Simple Murders*

"**There Once Was**" is a dialogue between two anonymous characters who are trying to rewrite a fairytale in a politically correct way. They get nowhere with their story and eventually give up. It's funny.

"There once was a girl, as average-looking as she was well-adjusted, who lived with her stepmother, who was not a very open and loving person because she herself had been abused in childhood." – *Good Bones and Simple Murders*

"**Stump Hunting**" tells you what to do if you catch a tree stump while fishing and decide to eat it. It's very useful information. I guess. If you like eating stumps.

Another story that gives useful information is "**Making A Man**." It tells you the five different ways to make a man, including out of gingerbread or as folk art.

"**Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women**" is an ode to all the stupid female characters in stories. As always, Atwood's social commentary is on-point. The best-known stories in Western culture do contain a lot of women who make terrible choices.

“Let us now praise stupid women, who have given us Literature.” – *Good Bones and Simple Murders*

“**Simmering**” shows what the world would be like if every man suddenly became very interested in cooking. Knives are status symbols and there are special handshakes involved. This is a funny piece of social satire. It’s also my favorite story in the collection.

Do you like choose your own adventure stories? I do. With “**Happy Endings**,” you can choose to give the couple a happily ever after. Or not.

In “**Cold-Blooded**,” moth-like aliens come to Earth and are baffled by humans. The aliens think moths are clearly the superior species. Sometimes, I agree with them . . .

Finally, there’s “**Poppies: Three Variations**. ” This is like a writing exercise you’d do in school, but when Atwood does something, it’s not an exercise. It’s art. This story takes the words from the poem “In Flanders Fields” by John McCrae and uses them to create three distinct flash fiction stories. It’s hard to describe, but it works brilliantly. Most writers probably wouldn’t be talented enough to pull it off.

This collection reminded me why I fell in love with Margaret Atwood’s writing as a teen. **It’s quirky, hilarious, and points out the absurdities in the world.**

My only complaint is that some of the stories/poems/things are too abstract for my tastes. I don’t like abstract writing because I’m never sure what I’m supposed to get out of it. If I’m going to read something, I want more than just pretty language. I want a plot, characters, or a clear subject. Luckily for me, most of the things in this book aren’t too abstract. This is one of the best collections I’ve read this year.

If you’re a Margaret Atwood fan, then you need to read *Good Bones and Simple Murders*. This book should also be required reading for all wannabe writers. Atwood is one of those authors who always know how to choose the perfect word. She can say a lot in very little space. The things in this book are tight, clever little pieces of . . . something.

Monika Singh says

I love Margaret Atwood. Her witticism is so incongruous that it seems innate. *Good Bones and Simple Murders* is a compilation of harrowing, liberating and reincarnating tales. It debunks what had been firmly holding grounds for years. It is anecdotal at its best.

I picked up this book to read "Gertrude Talks Back", but one thing led to another and now, I am mesmerised by it. It is sharp. It is witty. It is cleverly and poignantly written. Atwood's illustration is as vibrant and provocative as her writing. She is so subtle that a few (read, MOST OF THEM) tales need to be re-read to even catch hold of what's going on. Now I know that the vampires don't like sucking blood from the neck because they dislike hair, that witches are the story and they can't be separated from it, that it wasn't Claudius, but Gertrude who was directly responsible for the demise of King Hamlet.

"Unpopular Gals", "Happy Endings", "My Life as a Bat" and "We Want It All" are my favorite tales in this

collection.

Favourite quote:

"You wonder why I stabbed the blue eyes of my dolls with pins and pulled their hair out until they were bald? Life isn't fair. Why should I be?"

- "Unpopular Gals"

Jamilla Rice says

Although this book of short stories is brief, it is very dense and is not a quick read. In fact, most (if not all) of the stories beg for a re-read in order to catch Atwood's subtleties. As a whole, the pieces have a strong feminist theme threaded throughout, with a gifted writer's sense of humor in the crafting of the written word. Economically sound and imaginative, there's a story in here for everyone, although everyone may not like all of the stories. There were quite a few individual stories that I absolutely fell in love with, like "Happy Endings", "Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women", "In Love With Raymond Chandler", "Simple Murders", and the two listed below.

"Unpopular Gals" was the first that I adored in that she interprets the female villain characters, archetypal icons in various pieces of literature, using first person point of view to tell their opinions of how they have been characterized. In one, the archetypal "evil stepmother" pronounces, "The thing about those good daughters is, they're so good. Obedient and passive. Sniveling, I might add. No get-up-and-go. What would become of them if it weren't for me? Nothing, that's what . . . I stir things up, I get things moving . . . You can wipe your feet on me, twist my motives around all you like, you can dump millstones on my head and drown me in the river, but you can't get me out of the story. I'm the plot, babe, and don't ever forget it." (11)

The other that I really liked was "Gertrude Talks Back" where Atwood gives Hamlet's mother a voice, using a mixture of first and second person point of view, re imagining a more powerful and decisive Queen of Denmark who is frustrated with her unaffectionate husband and chooses to rectify the situation herself. In her one-sided dialogue (we only imagine the lines that Hamlet is saying, from Gertrude's responses) she states, "Oh! You think what? You think Claudius murdered your Dad? Well, no wonder you've been so rude to him at the dinner table! If I'd known that, I could have put you straight in no time flat. It wasn't Claudius, darling. It was me."

These two stories remind me of her Penelopiad, where she tells Penelope's side of the events which occurred after Odysseus left Ithaca to fight in the Trojan War, while she was left alone for the 10 years of the war's duration and the 10 additional years it took her husband to return. The other stories are interesting, extremely well-crafted and delightfully experimental.

One, "Poppies: three Variations" is a collection of three short stories which use the words of John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields" poem in order, (surrounded by other words of course) to tell three distinct tales. It's hard to describe, but very cool.

Favorite/Memorable Quotes:

" . . . stupid women are not so stupid as they pretend: they pretend for love. Men love them because they

make even stupid men feel smart: women for the same reason, and because they are reminded of all the stupid things they have done themselves, but mostly because without them there would be no stories . . . Let us now praise stupid women, who have given us Literature.”

“An affair with Raymond Chandler, what a joy! Not because of the mangled bodies and the marinated cops and hints of eccentric sex, but because of his interest in furniture.”

“Only after we had sniffed, fingered, rubbed, rolled on, and absorbed the furniture of the room would we fall into each other’s arms, and onto the bed (king-size? peach-colored? creaky? narrow? four-postered? pioneer-quilted? lime-green chenille-covered?), ready at last to do the same things to each other.”

“Whether he’s making her like it or making her dislike it or making her pretend to like it is important, but it’s not the most important thing. The most important thing is making her. Over, from nothing, new. From scratch, the way he wants.”

“What men are most afraid of is not lions, not snakes, not the dark, not women. Not any more. What men are most afraid of is the body of another man. Men’s bodies are the most dangerous thing on earth.”

“In the gap between desire and enactment, noun and verb, intention and infliction, want, and have, compassion begins.”

Gary says

Funny, creative, irreverent short essays, unlike just about anyone else.

Rauf says

23 Things that yours truly learned from reading Good Bones And Simple Moiduh:

1. In the game of mystery, the murderer is the writer. The detective is the reader. And the victim is the book.
2. But sometimes, the murderer is (still) the writer. The detective is the critic. The victim is the reader.
3. Your depression, my friend, is the revenge of oranges.
4. It wasn't Claudius who killed the King of Denmark. 'Twas Gertrude!
5. Repression breeds sublimation.

6. When you're having sex with **Raymond Chandler** caressing the furnitures is considered foreplay.
7. Stupid women who will fall for a stupid trick that can't fool a gerbil give us Literature.
8. Vampire bats won't suck blood from your neck because bats hate hair and neck is too close to your hair.
9. The Angel of Suicide is faceless, like a grey egg.
10. The Earth is an eighteenth-century ship with stowaways but without destination.

11. Men are made out of dusts. Women, out of ribs.
12. A man is chained to unpredictability therefore he's prone to sadness.
13. Say 'Pass the sugar' and hear the guns.
14. We never know the line between Love and Greed.
15. The color red is compelling to a nation of metamorphs.

16. If stock market exists, so does previous lives.
17. Male brains are objective. That's why they think they're orphans, cast adrift.
18. Men's novels are about getting power. Women's novels are about getting men...so they can get power.

19. You can't get the witch out of the story because SHE IS the story.
20. The phrase "a glimpse of pink through the gloom" only has one meaning.

21. Everything you've ever wanted I want it also.
22. No Devil, no Fall, no Redemption. That's grade two arithmetic.
23. No news is good news and everyone knows that.

When I first got this book, I noticed that the stories were short so I thought: flash fiction.

And when I think of flash fiction, I think of **O.Henry**and The Flash.

This book also made me think of **Monday or Tuesday: Eight Stories by Virginia Woolf** . I read that a couple of months ago and that one was done entirely in stream of consciousness. I didn't like it one bit. I hated it.

With Good Bones..., Atwood didn't sit down and write conventional fiction. Most of the pieces presented in this collection were her random thoughts, half-finished first drafts, snatches of her imagination. Sometimes the sentences can be stream of consciousness-like but I still love them.

Can't imagine people would want to read this unless he/she is a fan of Atwood.

BTW, most of those 23 items I listed above were sentences that Atwood wrote.

Katie says

This was dark, twisted, and magnificent. It gently caressed the darkest parts of me.

Yet, in this strange place there was great humor and wit.

I appreciate the chance to laughingly embrace the unacceptable.

Jim says

I re-read these short stories, many of which would now be called flash fiction, and although they are not my favorite of her work, I did appreciate the frequent sarcasm and at times humorous commentary from the feminist perspective. A quick read.

Beverly says

I love Margaret Atwood's books, especially Cat's Eye, The Handmaid's Tale, The Robber Bride, and Alias Grace, but this book of short essays and poems, not as much. There are some witty passages and astute messages here about women's life and feminism and I enjoyed the skewed retelling of fairy tales, like "The Little Red Hen Tells All" and "Unpopular Gals" about wicked witches and ugly step sisters. This especially sums up the genre:

"Catch it. Put it in a pumpkin, in a high tower, in a compound, in a chamber, in a house, in a room. Quick, stick a leash on it, a lock, a chain, some pain, settle it down, so it can never get away from you again."

Here is a comic passage from "Cold-Blooded" about an alien moth culture trying to figure out humans, "Picture our nausea and disgust when we discovered that it is the male, not the egg-bearer, which is the most prized among them!"

Frances says

The beginning chapters definitely seemed to be in defense of the villains in fairy tales such as Cinderella's evil stepmother. It was quite riveting and easy to follow.

However, towards the middle and end the tone changed to something more serious. There were more scathing comments about the way society views relationships and gender roles. It was quite interesting, but not what I was expecting when I first downloaded the e-audiobook.

I guess it would have been easier to follow if I was reading it. Nevertheless, there were some bites of insight about human relationships and human existence that made me ponder about the topic on the commute home (unfortunately a lot of it was lost on me as fatigue settled in on the train).

The descriptions in the last few chapters kind of stopped making sense to me, as well. I wasn't sure about the meaning behind these descriptions, about the 'third hand', or the 'angels', but I would like to think that I would have understood it better on paper. But I don't know :P

All in all, I definitely enjoyed the first part of the novel so I recommend people read that, but I can't guarantee the middle to end. I think they are considered short stories, so you can skip to any of the other stories that pique your interest (particularly the ones about the alien perceptions of humans).

Sarah says

Atwood's books tend to really be hits or misses for me. This collection was more of a hit than a miss, and a thematically sound. *Good Bones and Simple Murders* is a phenomenal title and encapsulates the spirit of the stories. But for every story I really enjoyed, there was a story that exemplified what often frustrates me about Atwood's work.

My favorites were "Stump Hunting," "Making a Man," and "Poppies: Three Variations." "Stump Hunting" and "Making a Man" are both how-to guides. "Stump Hunting" is eerie and fun, and "Making a Man" is tongue-in-cheek and incisive. "Poppies" is an expansion on the John McCrae poem of the same name, and it is both beautiful and haunting.

My least favorite stories were, to my surprise, those that Atwood wrote from the perspective of women who are barely given voices in famous works. "Unpopular Gals" is told by various "evil" fairytale women: Cinderella's stepsister, the witch in Rapunzel, the stepmother in any number of fairytales. "Gertrude Talks Back" is a Hamlet refutation. As apt as both of these works are about the unfair treatment of women in literature, I didn't feel they suggested anything new or interesting about patriarchy. Additionally, the women she writes are dismissive and condescending of other women. Case in point: Gertrude tells Hamlet, "A real girlfriend would do you a heap of good. Not like that pasty-faced what's-her-name, all trussed up like a prize

turkey in those touch-me-not corset of hers." There's something intensely depressing about a "woke" Gertrude belittling Ophelia.

This collection was first released in 1983, over thirty years ago. Maybe back then it was revolutionary to just say "men suck, the patriarchy sucks" and leave it at that, but these days it's not subversive and when poorly executed reads as prescribing certain kinds of femininity. That said, Atwood's writing is always very technically impressive, and I learn something about writing every time I read her work.

Carol ?? says

I've always been a huge fan of Margaret Atwood, but I'm not always a fan of short stories. & when I do read them I prefer to read them one at a time - maybe in a magazine.

But I just jumped into this one and at first I couldn't put it down. All my favourite stories in this collection were at the start. They were sharp witty & clever. But it is the same strong yet enigmatic voice right through, so I did have to keep putting this collection down. So while I loved *Murder in the Dark* & Gertrude talks back, I didn't love every story. In fact, by the end I was a little bored.

But I still enjoyed renewing my acquaintance with my favourite Canadian author. My next book of hers will be a novel.

Kathleen says

Watch a brilliant imagination at work.

Margaret Atwood creates men in her kitchen, convinces us she was a bat in a former life, makes lepers dance. There's some weird stuff in here. It's seriously playful, and playfully serious.

"Put yourself in a different room," she says in the story *Bread*. *"That's what the mind is for."*

Melissa says

I enjoyed these very short stories, though the book physically was a mess. The printing was off kilter so a lot of the pages had letters cut off. Oh well. Some of these stories took my breath, others were just meh.

p.15 The I'll do it myself, I said, as the nun quipped to the vibrator. Nobody was listening, of course. They'd all gone to the beach. (What???? Lol this made me ask WTF)

p.16-17** They said it was my fault, for having a loaf of bread when they had none. ... Here, I said. I apologize for having the idea in the first place. I apologize for luck. I apologize for self-denial. I apologize for being a good cook. I apologize for that crack about nune. I apologize for that crack about roosters. I apologize for smiling, in my smug hen apron, with my smug hen beak. I apologize for being a hen. Have some more. Have mine.

p.22 - "There Was Once"

p.30 If there must be deaths, let there be resurrections, or at least a Heaven so we know where we are.

p.65 They don't live in the real world, we tell ourselves fondly: but what kind of criticism is that? If they can manage not to live in it, good for them. We would rather not live in it either, ourselves.

p.66 They are far too clever, not for their own good but for ours.

p.67 She talks with wolves, without knowing what sort of beasts they are: Where have you been all my life? they ask. Where HAVE I been all my life? she replies.

p.70: We forgive you! we cry. We understand! Now do it some more!

p.83 The right brain doesn't know what the left brain is doing. Good for aiming though, for hitting the target when you pull the trigger. What's the target? Who cares? What matters is hitting it.

p.83 This is why men are so sad, why they feel so cut off, why they think of themselves as orphans cast adrift ... not just alone but Alone, lost in the dark, lost in the skull, searching for the other half.

p.98-99 It was because of the chocolate bars. It was because of the stars. It was because of a life behind bars. It was her hormones. It was the radioation from the wires and phones. It was his mother saying You'll never amount to a hill of beans. It was because he was so all-fired mean. It was the sleeping pills. It was the frills, on the blouse, under the jacket, over the breasts. It was the blood tests. It was the sigh, the cry, the hand on the thigh. It was the hunger, it was the rate, it was the spirit of the age. It was a coincidence. It was the wrong bottle. My hand slipped. How was I to know it was loaded?

p.123: If the bats had been used after all, would there have been a war memorial to them? It isn't likely. If you ask a human being what makes his flesh creep more, a bat or a bomb, he will say the bat. It is difficult to experience loathing for something merely metal, however ominous. We save these sensations for those with skin and flesh: a skin, a flesh, unlike our own.

p.123: Perhaps it isn't my life as a bat that was the interlude. Perhaps it is this life. Perhaps I have been sent into human form as if on a dangerous mission, to save and redeem my own folk. When I have gained a small success, or died in the attempt - for failure, in such a task and against such odds, is more likely - I will be born again, back into that other form, that other world where I truly belong.

p.134: In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row.
That mark our place: and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below - John McCrae

p.141: "Homelanding"

p.150: ...the page closes over their heads without a sound, with a seam, and is immediately as whole and empty, as glassy, as enticing as before.

p.161: I know I look like hell. But it's still me in here.

p.175: Today I speak to my bones as I would speak to a dog. I want to go up the stairs, I tell them. ...Good bones, GOOD bones, I coax, wondering how to reward them; if they will sit up for me, beg, roll over, do one more trick, once more.

There. We're at the top. GOOD bones! Good BONES! Keep on going.

Chris Dietzel says

A great collection of short stories that felt much more experimental in style and approach than most others I've read. Reading most of this felt like the equivalent of listening to a great band as they practice in a garage before going to a studio to record a finished, polished product. Coming from an author I love that was an incredibly neat experience. There were one or two stories that fell flat for me but there were also stories like "Gertrude Talks Back" that I absolutely loved.
