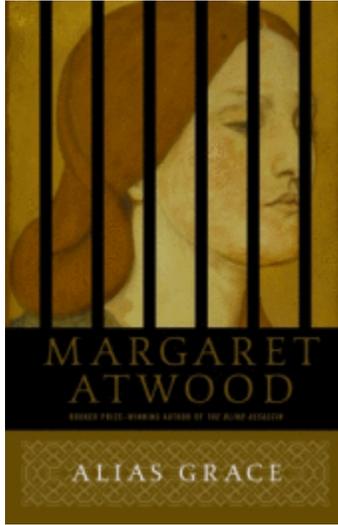


# Alias Grace



A Novel

Written by [Margaret Atwood](#)



Published by [Anchor](#)

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

In **Alias Grace**, bestselling author Margaret Atwood has written her most captivating, disturbing, and ultimately satisfying work since **The Handmaid's Tale**. She takes us back in time and into the life of one of the most enigmatic and notorious women of the nineteenth century.

Grace Marks has been convicted for her involvement in the vicious murders of her employer, Thomas Kinnear, and Nancy Montgomery, his housekeeper and mistress. Some believe Grace is innocent; others think her evil or insane. Now serving a life sentence, Grace claims to have no memory of the murders.

Dr. Simon Jordan, an up-and-coming expert in the burgeoning field of mental illness, is engaged by a group of reformers and spiritualists who seek a pardon for Grace. He listens to her story while bringing her closer and closer to the day she cannot remember. What will he find in attempting to unlock her memories? Is Grace a female fiend? A bloodthirsty femme fatale? Or is she the victim of circumstances?

## Reader's Guide

1. This novel is rooted in physical reality, on one hand, and floats free of it on the other, as Atwood describes physical things in either organic, raw terms (the "tongue-colored settee") or with otherworldly, more ephemeral images (the laundry like "angels rejoicing, although without any heads"). How do such descriptions deepen and reinforce the themes in the novel?
2. The daily and seasonal rhythm of household work is described in detail. What role does this play in the novel in regard to its pace?
3. Atwood employs two main points of view and voices in the novel. Do you trust one more than the other? As the story progresses, does Grace's voice (in dialogue) in Simon's part of the story change? If so, how and why?
4. Grace's and Simon's stories are linked and they have a kinship on surface and deeper levels. For instance, they both eavesdrop or spy as children, and later, each stays in a house that would have been better left sooner or not entered at all. Discuss other similarities or differences in the twinning of their stories and their psyches.
5. Atwood offers a vision of the dual nature of people, houses, appearances, and more. How does she make use of darkness and light, and to what purpose?
6. In a letter to his friend Dr. Edward Murchie, Simon Jordan writes, "Not to know--to snatch at hints and portents, at intimations, at tantalizing whispers--it is as bad as being haunted." How are the characters in this story affected by the things they don't know?
7. How and why does Atwood conceal Grace's innocence or guilt throughout the novel? At what points does one become clearer than the other and at what points does it become unclear?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa and grew up in northern Ontario, Quebec, and Toronto. She received her undergraduate degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto and her master's degree from Radcliffe College. The daughter of a forest entomologist, Atwood spent a large part of her childhood in the Canadian wilderness. At the age of six she began to write "poems, morality plays, comic books, and an unfinished novel about an ant." At sixteen she found that writing was "suddenly the only thing I wanted to do." Throughout her career, Margaret Atwood has received numerous awards and several honorary degrees including the Canadian Governor General's Award, Le Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France, and the National Arts Club Medal of Honor for Literature. She is the author of more than thirty volumes of poetry, nonfiction, and fiction, including children's books, and short stories. Her most recent works include **The Handmaid's Tale** (1986), **Cat's Eye** (1989), and **Alias Grace** (1996), the story collection **Good Bones and Simple Murders** (1994), and a volume of poetry, **Morning in the Burned House** (1995). Ms. Atwood's work has been published in more than twenty-five countries. She has traveled extensively and has lived in Boston, Vancouver, Montreal, London, Provence, Berlin, and Edinburgh. Margaret Atwood now lives in Toronto with novelist Graeme Gibson and their daughter.

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## <interview>

### *an interview with* **margaret atwood**

*Although people at the time may have set down a version of events you can't actually go back and question them.... People don't have the consideration to foresee that you might be interested in this stuff in 150 years.*

In this interview, Margaret Atwood shares some insights into her work on *Alias Grace* and the reaction it has received.



**D**eborah Rozen: Many of the characters in *Alias Grace*, including Grace Marks, are historical figures. How did you first discover this story?

Margaret Atwood: I came across it a long time ago when I was writing a series of poems about one of the people who makes an appearance in the book--Susanna Moodie, who wrote the story down. But she wrote it, as she says, from memory, and she got a lot of it wrong, as I found when I went back to the actual newspapers of the time and went into things such as the prison records. It always bothered me that the story Moodie told was so theatrical. It made you wonder, could it really have been like that? And when I went back to check, in fact, it wasn't. She had done a certain amount of embroidery.

**DR:** How did you determine when to stick to the facts, and when to fictionalize?

MA: When there was a known fact, I felt that I had to use it. In other words, I stuck to the known facts when they were truly known. But when there were gaps or when there were things suggested that nobody ever explained, I felt I was free to invent. For instance, Mary Whitney was the name that appears as Grace's alias in the picture that accompanies her confession, but none of the commentators ever mentions a thing about it. Although people at the time may have set down a version of events you can't actually go back and question them. And they leave out the things that you would most like to know. People don't have the consideration to foresee that you might be interested in this stuff in 150 years.

**DR: What was the most challenging bit of history for you to find?**

MA: The most difficult thing I had to discover was at the very beginning--I tried to find Thomas Kinnear. It turned out there were two Thomas Kinnears, and one of them would have been about 73 years old at the time of the murders. I figured it couldn't have been him--otherwise you wouldn't have had the steamy element of the story, with Thomas Kinnear having a mistress who was his housekeeper, and some people feeling that he was also flirting with Grace. So I went looking for him, and I couldn't find his grave or Nancy's grave, although I knew where they were supposed to be buried. I discovered that they really were buried there, but were not marked. I did finally trace Kinnear back through the Scottish end, and it appears that he was the half brother of a man who lived in Scotland. But the Burke's Peerage listing for the family shows Thomas as dying in the year when he turns up in Canada. In other words, it's the age-old English point of view that going to Canada is the same as death. It's also true, however, that Scottish families often felt that it was as scandalous to be murdered as to do the murdering, and the Kinnears may have tried to cover up the murder.

**DR: How reliable was the news coverage then?**

MA: Very unreliable. Sort of like now--when a story first broke what you got is what you get now, which is rumor. In this case, there was a great deal of speculation about who had murdered Kinnear. At first they thought that one of the murdered people had done it, because they hadn't found her yet. They thought she had run off with the two other servants and that if they could find her, they would know the truth. But then they did find her, and she was dead. So there was speculation about that; there was also a lot of editorializing, with political factions taking different points of view. That is, the very conservative ones were against Grace Marks, and the reformers were more for her; in their eyes, she was a victim. So you've got two quite distinct points of view, as well as a lot of digressions. People were talking about letting too many immigrants in--sound familiar? And the need for better letters of reference for servants.

**DR: Has the growth of TV journalism improved or decreased the reliability of the news?**

MA: You will always have partial points of view, and you'll always have the story behind the story that hasn't come out yet. And any form of journalism you're involved with is going to be up against a biased viewpoint and partial knowledge. Also, there's the very human need to shape a story and make it mean something. One person telling the story may have one spin on it and another person may have quite a different one. You saw that a lot in the O.J. Simpson trial. And it's particularly evident when it's a matter of a crime. When a crime has been committed, opinions get extreme.

**DR: How differently do you think Grace would have been treated today--psychiatrically and judicially?**

MA: It would be a very different kind of trial. Today you would have expert witnesses. There weren't any then, you didn't have any of that at all. And certainly psychiatry as we have it today was not recognized as a science in the same way then. There were medical practitioners who were interested in it and people who were studying mental conditions, but there's nothing like the kind of establishment we have today.

**DR: Grace often felt that people were curious about her less because she was a "celebrated murderess" than McDermott's "paramour." What role did the Victorian attitude towards sex play in her treatment?**

MA: About the same as it would now. She certainly was celebrated, by the way. People went to see her the way you would go to see the elephant in the zoo. In those days you could visit prisons and insane asylums as a tourist attraction. People would go to the prison and say, "Here I am, and I'd like to see Grace Marks." And she would be trotted out for them to look at.

The question was, would they have been as interested if there hadn't been a sex angle? Well, probably not, same as now. The big question for them was: Did she or didn't she? And there were things to be said on either side. For instance, although she had run off with McDermott, when they got to the tavern in Lewiston, they had separate rooms. It was generally assumed that it was that kind of relationship, but Grace is not on record anywhere as having said so.

**DR: In your afterword, you write that the attitudes people had towards Grace "reflected contemporary ambiguity about the nature of woman." What do you mean by that?**

MA: One group felt that women were feeble and incapable of definite action; that is, that Grace must have been compelled by force to run away with McDermott and that she was a victim. Other people took the view that women, when they got going, were inherently more evil than men, and that it was therefore Grace who had instigated the crime and led McDermott on. So you had a real split between woman as demon and woman as pathetic.

--Deborah Rozen

*People went to see her the way you would go to see the elephant in the zoo. In those days you could visit prisons and insane asylums as a tourist attraction.*

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From the Special Collections of Toronto Public Library: This is a scanned copy of the official report "The Trials of James McDermott and Grace Marks". Digitally inserted into the document are photos and notes identifying important people & buildings mentioned in the report. This ebook looks exactly like the original paper document – you can even turn the pages!

**Oryx & Crake** by Margaret Atwood

After an ecological disaster caused by environmental unconcern, genetic engineering, and bioterrorism, "Snowman" becomes guru to the strangely passive & unaware Children of Crake. Recalling his former life of self-indulgence, and his friendships with emotionally remote genius Crake and enigmatic Oryx, he recognizes each of their roles in the destruction of the natural world.

**Rebecca** by Daphne DuMaurier

The naive, young second wife of mysterious Maxim de Winter is terrified by his sinister house keeper who is strangely devoted to Rebecca, her first mistress whose ghost seems to haunt Mandalay.

**The Last Child** by John Hart

In poverty stricken, rural North Carolina, Johnny, age 13, relentlessly searches for his missing twin sister as his depressed mother sinks into a world of drugs and booze, driven by an abusive, wealthy boyfriend. When a second girl is snatched, Johnny is convinced that the same person took Alyssa. Unearthing dangerous secrets, Johnny finds town leaders and even friends obstructing his mission.

**Upstairs, Downstairs** by John Hawkesworth (also on DVD)

In the late 1900's, two symbiotic but often conflicting worlds existed within one English home. The very different lives, aspirations and problems of the genteel family upstairs, and the impoverished servants below stairs who made their gracious lifestyle possible; are revealed with sympathy, exquisite detail and a touch of humor gently poking fun at the foibles of Victorian society.

**When We Were Orphans** by Kazuo Ishiguro

Christopher spent his early years in turbulent Shanghai, barely aware of his mother's outspoken criticism of the ruinous opium trade on which her husband's employer depended. 20 years later, prominent detective Banks returns to investigate his parents' suspicious disappearance. His search reveals a bitter irony of what was sacrificed that the boy might live.

**The Lovely Bones** by Alice Sebold

Susie, raped and murdered when she is 14, finds her way in a new existence while trying to lead her grieving family to her attacker and allow them to recover from the tragedy of her attack.

**The Thirteenth Tale** by Diane Setterfield

In failing health, the mysterious author Vida Winter hires Margaret Lea, to write her biography. When Vida's history of telling outlandish tales prompts Margaret to investigate corners of Vida's past she never intended to reveal; a strange and tangled family life is uncovered, peopled with mysterious strangers, good & evil intensions, and the dark secret of Vida's troubled existence.

**The Alfred Hitchcock Premiere Collection** (DVD)

8 suspenseful movies originally released 1927-1947 based on novels by Joseph Conrad, Josephine Tey, John Steinbeck, etc; including *Rebecca*, *Notorious*, *Lifeboat*, *The Paradine Case* and more.

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