

The Blind Assassin, by Margaret Atwood

Reviewed by [Ann-Janine Morey](#) in the [February 28, 2001](#) issue

Canadian writer Margaret Atwood may be most familiar to religious audiences for her 1986 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, which satirizes the religious hypocrisy of the right, the political pretensions of the left and the dangerous complacency of the vast uncommitted middle. Earlier, in *Surfacing* (1992), Atwood had explored the spiritual vacancy of contemporary culture through the eyes of a woman whose resources for renewal consist of a peculiar bricolage of Protestant dogma, Catholic ritual, scientific rationalism and fragments of Native American myth--none of which helps her through her spiritual crisis. In the typical Atwood text a bewildered, cynical female narrator senses the horror of her own spiritual emptiness and tries to alter her condition by telling her story.

The Blind Assassin picks up this thread through Iris, a mature distillation of many Atwood heroines. The setting is upper-crust Canadian society before and after World War I. The story of two sisters, Iris and Laura, unfolds through complicated multiple texts that move between Iris's narration, a science-fiction tale told by a nameless man to his female lover, and newspaper obituaries and society notices. The title--the same for the novel and for the science-fiction story-within-the-story--refers to the haunting image of enslaved children who, blinded by their work as carpet weavers, become effective paid killers because their other senses are so acutely developed.

Iris's story shows how devastating the death of a mother can be. Unlike the mother, God apparently is not dead. But as seen through the eyes of the caustic Iris, her housekeeper Reenie or her spiritually precocious sister, Laura, whatever God is isn't very reassuring. He appears to them variously as an eccentric uncle, a radish ("raw and plain"), an irascible tyrant, a carnivorous angel, or a malign presence who relishes our sins because they give us something to struggle against, nobly but futilely. Ironically, the one person who offers stability and love to the two sisters, Reenie, speaks and thinks only in platitudes.

Like Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Iris is looking for a word that can be trusted. "In the beginning was the word, we once believed. Did God know what a flimsy thing the word might be? How tenuous, how casually erased?" She recites a list of words that

have revealed their "hollow centres. . . . God. Trust. Sacrifice. Justice. Faith. Hope. Love." Yet Iris, closing in on her own death, tells her story for her granddaughter and brings it to its end on her own terms.

In paradise, the omniscient narrator concludes, there are no stories because there are no journeys. Loss and yearning drive our tales. This is not a stunning new insight, nor does it require so complicated a structure to deliver it. But Atwood's elderly narrator is well worth our time, as is the vintage question Atwood poses: What happens to women and children under the eye of God and his authorized representatives, men?