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Killing Them Softly: Building the Blind Assassin

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Killing Them Softly: Building the Blind Assassin
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Writer and audience are Siamese twins. Kill one and you run the risk of killing the other. Try to separate them and you may simply have two dead half-people. By ‘audience,’ I don’t necessarily mean a mass audience. (Atwood “An End” 20)

Margaret Atwood’s Blind Assassin is an enthralling novel whose sensationalist mysteries—the circumstances of Laura Chase’s death, the paternity of potentially three babies, and ultimately the authorship of the novel-within-the-novel bearing the same title as Atwood’s novel—could leave some readers feeling manipulated or even resentful towards the relatively unsympathetic protagonist, Iris Chase Griffen. We propose that Atwood self-consciously employs this deftly woven, multi-tiered plot structure to problematize conventional readerly responses to sensationalist fiction. Whereas sensationalist genres can use melodramatic events to lure readers into stories, thus modeling the treatment of other people’s difficult lives as objects from which spectators gain self-satisfaction, Atwood’s novel entices readers into the predictable readerly stance only to criticize that stance. The novel’s symbolism and structure shapes readers into a sympathetic, participatory audience who hold themselves responsible for creating meaning from Iris’s life.

The plot of Atwood’s novel is delivered through a complex, fragmented narrative structure that readers may find frustrating. Yet, only through this structure can the novel’s meaning be conveyed. The novel is physically divided into three main alternating threads: the frame story narrated mainly by elderly Iris, the novel-within-the novel detailing the rather tawdry love affair between an unnamed man and woman, and selected newspaper clippings. In the first and last parts of Atwood’s novel, the three threads each appear once. The middle parts alternate between the elderly Iris sections and the combined novel-within-the-novel and newspaper sections, or in other words, between those sections narrated by Iris and those (potentially) narrated by someone else. To these three threads, John Updike’s review adds two more that are framed by the others: Elderly Iris’s flashbacks to her childhood and young married life, which are framed by the elderly Iris thread, and the main science fiction story the male character tells the female character in the novel-within-the novel, which is an allegorical version of Iris’s betrayal of herself.²

What is most interesting about these levels is the effect they have on the reader. Because none of the levels presents a complete chronological account of Iris’s life all at one time, but rather all provide details about Iris in installments, the reader is placed in a difficult position, both frustrated by the sense that information is being withheld and stimulated by the need to relate the puzzle pieces.³ Of course, to a certain extent, all narratives manipulate readers by

¹Warning: This paper reveals the novel’s mysteries.
²Updike fails to note there is more than one science fiction story included in the novel-within-the-novel. He also characterizes the main science fiction story as “parod[ying] the lovers’ social situation” (Updike 142) without connecting it to Iris’s frame story.
³Roberta Rubenstein labels the novel-within-the-novel a “Scheherezade story” (Rubenstein 239) but fails to note the entire novel functions this way. She also writes, “Like Grace Marks of Alias Grace, Iris Chase Griffen, the protagonist and principal narrator of The Blind Assassin, tantalizes the reader by alternately revealing and concealing the truth” (235), and “Atwood is a fiendishly clever manipulator of the reader’s knowledge” (237).
hiding and revealing details, but in Atwood’s novel the ploy seems blatant.

The sense of manipulation is exacerbated by two other aspects of the novel. The first is the fact that Iris, the protagonist with whom the reader expects to identify, is herself manipulated by her circumstances. To provide for her younger sister Laura, she is virtually sold into a “dynastic marriage” (Rose) to which she resigns herself, relinquishing any responsibility for her own happiness. No 21st-century reader would choose to identify with such a passive protagonist, yet the titillating soap-opera quality of her problems draws us irresistibly onward, even as we are disgusted with our own curiosity.

The second aspect of Atwood’s novel that increases the reader’s sense of manipulation is the use of several sensationalist or melodramatic genres—murder mystery, science fiction, and Serie Noire or film noir. These genres are fascinated by crime and “designed to scare us, shock us, and make us laugh and cry”—in other words, manipulate our emotions—occasionally for the purposes of social criticism (Gerould ix, xi). They also toy with the reader’s ability to suspend disbelief. Murder mysteries force readers to wait for the whodunnit to be revealed at the end. Science fiction stories, particularly those of the pulp era, demand readers accept versions of reality that fail to challenge readers’ general assumptions—for example, that planets have oceans—while asking them to believe a ridiculous alteration in that reality—e.g. the violet ocean in the Sakiel-Norn setting (10). And, film noir’s shadowy circumstances require readerly patience with plot twists and repeated rewritings of character identities. Even the male character, the author of the Sakiel-Norn story, in the novel-within-the-novel complains of the constraints of writing stories that will sell: “It can’t be a story unless the aliens invade and lay waste, and some dame bursts out of her jumpsuit” (250). Furthermore, because these genres have rarely been accepted as truly literary, the reader has to work to take the novel that includes them seriously. The combination of several such genres evokes a sense of disbelief that Atwood leads us to follow these apparently “gimmick[y]” (Updike 144) events, connecting them to the more traditional literary narrative, and simultaneously captivates us by making us curious about how these elements could possibly fit together.

Although this approach may feel manipulative, it does work. Against our better judgment, we are drawn into Iris’s melodramatic life to see what will happen next. The use of installments keeps us turning pages, and the multiple stories only add to our curiosity as we attempt to put the pieces together, or at least to watch Atwood do it. We resemble the gawkers at an automobile accident who, while disgusted at what they see as they pass by, cannot look away. We want to know: how and why Laura dies; who is the father of Iris’s baby; whether Laura is pregnant and, if so, who is the father; who are the couple in the novel-within-the-novel; who wrote the novel-within-the-novel; and ultimately, what has brought Iris to the circumstances in which she lives at the end of her life. By gathering clues, placing the details into chronology where they belong, and making sense of the symbolism and juxtapositions, we make a whole story out of the pieces.

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4 Sensationalism is, perhaps, a more accurate term since good and evil are more ambiguous than in melodrama (Hughes ix), yet the concept of melodrama suits the sense that the devastating events we witness require exaggeration to capture their reality (this latter idea is adapted from Hughes 22). Cathleen McGuigan characterizes the novel as having a “soap-opera plot.” Updike describes Iris’s husband and sister-in-law as “right out of Dickensian melodrama” (144). We use the term film noir because of the sense that the readerly eye feels like a camera eye, peeping into the lives of the characters.

5 The fact that even reviewers like Barbara Mujica and Thomas Mallon get lost testifies to the risk Atwood takes in juggling these plot elements.
However, long-time Atwood fans may feel betrayed by Atwood’s seeming capitulation to market pressures. Can this be the literary icon who wrote such scathing political commentary as *The Handmaid’s Tale*? Our critical stance toward this betrayal is seconded by the book itself. For example, in the section called “The message,” elderly Iris watches daytime talk shows and confesses, “[. . .] I relish these grubby little sins.” She imagines the audience hankering for more grubbiness: “*Shouldn’t it be less ordinary, more sordid, more epic, more truly harrowing, this flesh wound of yours? Tell us more! Couldn’t we please crank up the pain?*” (448). Such sentiments comment self-reflexively on Atwood’s novel and what the reader must be experiencing. If Atwood shares Iris’s feelings about melodrama, why does she do it to her readers? Why participate in exploitation that merely feeds the audience’s need to derive entertainment from others?

A closer look reveals that Atwood employs melodrama not only as a formal gimmick to entice readers into the novel but also as a means of commenting on such gimmicry. Atwood’s novel curtails the titillating effect of the sensationalist stories by juxtaposing them. In doing so, Atwood evades the pitfalls of sensationalist genres while calling attention to the dangers of conventional passive reader positions. Further, the friction caused by these juxtapositions captures what neither the sensationalist nor realist fictions can.

The installment pattern of the novel seems to force the reader into a passive spectator’s position where Atwood has all the control and uses it to get the reader excited in the same way that soap operas, sensationalist newspapers, and even striptease acts titillate. Rubenstein writes, “Like the fictional Iris, Margaret Atwood selectively withholds crucial details that, when ultimately disclosed late in the narrative, significantly alter the reader’s understanding of events described from what one belatedly realizes is Iris’ self-serving and untrustworthy perspective” (237). However, Rubenstein’s argument doesn’t reflect what we see as reader’s experience. Atwood does withhold details but not for long. Rather, the clues provided to solve the various mysteries are interspersed throughout the novel. Thus, the reader actually knows the answers to the big questions before Iris reveals them; unlike Rubenstein’s claim, we don’t experience an alternation but a confirmation of our suspicions. Thus, the story does not operate like a true murder mystery or a soap opera because the sensationalist qualities are curtailed.

Besides revealing the solutions to the mysteries halfway through the novel, another way the novel curtails the sensationalist aspects it employs is by emphasizing that the melodramatic is real and no one is immune. For example, although Iris reads detective magazines where white slavers take heiresses captive and comments, “[. . .] but we weren’t too afraid of them, because we knew what to expect. They would have large, dark motor cars, and would be wearing overcoats and thick gloves and black fedoras, and we would be able to spot them immediately and run away” (153), the ironic truth is that white slavers look just like people Iris knows, even her own father. Moreover, Iris constantly discounts reality because it seems too melodramatic and thus is not prepared to acknowledge dangerous circumstances. “But I thought it was just adolescent melodrama,” Iris says about Laura’s fears. But Laura was right. Iris reflects, “I didn’t see the danger. I didn’t even know they [Richard and Winifred] were tigers. Worse: I didn’t know I might become a tiger myself. I didn’t know Laura might become one, given the proper circumstances” (328). Exposing the reality behind melodrama truncates the sensationalist effect. Readers are treated to the shock of cold water thrown over their heated expectations, forcing

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6It is a commonplace to note that readers are never passive, but in the sense we mean, the passive reader is not a critical reader but reads only to be entertained.
them out of an entertainment mode. The curtailing of the melodramatic aspects of Atwood’s novel comments on melodrama itself. Popular genres like mystery, romance, and science fiction employ melodrama to keep readers reading. And obviously, readers like this kind of manipulation, or such genres wouldn’t appeal to a mass market so successfully. Yet, in these texts, plots become stylized, which accounts for their predictability, and characters become commodified. For example, the murder mystery reader essentially purchases a standardized fictional corpse, stripped of all its privacy to reveal the cause of death, merely for the purpose of entertainment. Similarly, pulp science fiction like that written by “him” in the novel-within-the-novel peddles stereotypical characters—particularly short-skirted, metal-brassiere-wearing women (152-53)—to the gratification-seeking reader.

Even as the characters become fixed types, so too does the reader become fixed in the position and function of voyeur. Of course, the reader reading any text is a kind of voyeur, but in sensationalist genres, the voyeurism does violence to the characters by objectifying them and even to the readers by manipulating their emotions in rote ways. Atwood admits the dangers of such voyeurism in the novel: “We’re voyeurs, all of us. [. . .] We’re all grave robbers [. . .]” (494). The voyeurism in these genres provides readers, from a safe distance, an insidious sense of self-satisfaction by objectifying the tragic lives of protagonists. After all, our lives are not like the characters’ lives we passively view, and if they were, our assumed superiority would enable us to master those circumstances. Such superiority breeds a kind of violence in the way we treat people and think of ourselves.

Through modeling an innovative form, the novel also suggests that we need to find new ways of writing that do not perpetuate violent ways of viewing other people. Atwood’s novel models postmodern techniques that remind readers of their responsibility in the novel and outside it.

In particular, the fragmentation of the novel into multiple plot levels, an increasing trend in Atwood’s fiction, presents reality as complex and multiplicitous rather than as singular and unified. Such fragmentation occurs not only in the structure of the novel but also in stories told within the novel itself. For example, in the main science fiction story, various tribes each tell a different narrative about what happened to Sakiel-Norn, and in each version, the teller is the victor (11-12). Significantly, these histories number five, the number of levels in Atwood’s novel. While each of the five histories creates a single power relationship between the teller and the destroyed people of Sakiel-Norn, those who recognize there are five different variations know that the power relationships established in the various histories are not fact but custom. Thus, they can be changed. In the same way, Atwood’s novel offers various ways of looking at the same events, which provide the reader with the tools to make meaning and to realize that meaning is his or her own construct and can change.

This self-reflexive quality, where aspects of the novel symbolize how writing operates or the narrator even explicitly comments on writing, is another postmodern technique that can avoid objectifying people. This technique avoids objectification by consistently reminding the reader of the reading experience, which keeps the reader from relaxing into a non-critical readerly stance. Thus, the reader cannot merely accept the illusion of fiction but must examine its operations.

Because of the novel’s fragmentation and self-reflexiveness, the novel’s reader must be more active than the conventional reader. Atwood hands you, the interactive reader, a

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Sarah Mitchell also problematizes voyeurism in Atwood’s work as “appropriating someone else’s story for the purposes of the narrative” (25).
hodgepodge of events and possible readings, like a hypertext, and you bridge the gaps between the juxtaposed ideas, generating a third meaning of your own. In other words, you choose the novel you wish to make from the puzzle pieces. You, as reader, decide if the ending is happy (Iris finally gets to tell her story, something we all need to do) or if it is not because she has experienced so much tragedy and loss, and so little love. This active quality emphasizes the writer-reader relationship. Atwood cultivates a reader who is active, not comfortable, and not a mass audience reader but an individual, so that the insidious dangers of passive reading do not become a part of Atwood’s reader’s experience.

The postmodern elements of Atwood’s novel argue against the conventional realities assumed in sensationalist fiction. Combined with the curtailed use of sensationalism, these postmodern qualities undermine the stereotyping of characters and non-critical readerly stance that can model simplistic, objectifying ways of treating people in the real world. Atwood’s novel challenges the simplistic use of others to make ourselves feel good.

In commenting on the dangerous effects of passive reading, Atwood’s centerpiece is the unappealing Iris. Iris is unappealing because she makes herself a victim, and yet by the end of the novel, readers must grudgingly admit Iris has earned their sympathy. Through our intimate knowledge of Iris, not as a stereotypical woman or protagonist, Atwood demonstrates that empathy for others’ lives is necessary and also that, as readers, we ourselves are capable of a version of the passivity that we scorn in Iris.

Typically, main characters command reader sympathy by default; we relate to their problems, imagine ourselves acting as they do, and either mourn their tragedies or glory in their successes. However, many of Atwood’s female protagonists chafe against a conventional protagonist prototype, emitting a spectrum of gray shadows rather than predictable black or white portraits. In particular, these characters’ failure to act makes them difficult to relate to or even like. Historically, while Atwood’s women trust (however skeptically) that societal structures will protect the oppressive but seemingly stable worlds they inhabit, this blind insistence toward passivity eventually wreaks havoc in their lives and the lives of those around them. Because we readers envision ourselves taking action in the same circumstances, we find their spiralling troubles difficult to relate to. Rennie in Bodily Harm flaunts her obliviousness by travelling frivolously to an island fraught with political unrest in order to escape personal issues she refused to confront at home, with frightening consequences; Lady Oracle bumbles from one love affair and identity to another even if it means living a lie to protect this fragile, unrealistic existence. The Handmaid’s Tale narrator knew of the rising social order that stole her freedom and imprisoned her (and so many other women like her); yet even after she had her bank card refused because women no longer had the right to own money, she waits to leave the country until it becomes too late and she, along with her family, are captured. Although these characters make as powerful impressions on readers as traditional proactive heroines, we find the resolutions of their stories more troubling than happy or sad.

Iris Chase-Griffen follows suit. Although Iris differs from her predecessors in that she is openly confessional, repentant of her passivity in retrospect, and most importantly, cognizant of her responsibility for allowing what took place in her life, we have trouble respecting her. In a still-helpless tone of recollection, Iris points out that her refusal to pay attention to Laura’s neediness, Richard’s totalitarianism, or Alex’s pleas to exchange the same life Iris was barely living for true feeling and passion, indeed caused her to become, as Atwood explicitly identifies

8[“[. . .] Iris is not a particularly lovable or even likable narrator [. . .]” (Rubenstein 242).]
her (Gussow 7), a blind assassin. It is only by the end of her life, and her story, when Iris takes responsibility for her passive resistance to see the world around her clearly, that we can begin to empathize, but we do so because of the way the novel has been structured. Throughout the novel, Atwood challenges herself, as well as her reader, to help the milquetoast Iris make meaning of the life. Answering this challenge is important for the reader because it represents practice at respecting other people’s lives. To realize this goal, Atwood wields an arsenal of repetitive symbolic imagery threaded throughout that, at once, forecasts and revisits the circumstances that bring Iris to the point where she is today. Atwood’s symbolism combines with a deft weaving of timely and moving revelations about the events which would culminate to construct Iris, the blind assassin, and what we are calling a *deus ex machina* voice Atwood lends the storyteller to address her audience outside the boundaries of the novel’s several stories in a postmodern fashion, writer to reader; teller to listener. These devices open the aperture that is Iris, promising an imperfect, very human, and ultimately, sympathetic, protagonist.

Early on, to plant the seeds for later revelations, Atwood takes readers on a prologue walk through Iris’s perennial rock garden where the ironic juxtaposition of life and stone coexisting represents Iris’s life as a living death. The fact that the rock garden is her only happiness in her marriage and that ghosts are her only companions in old age helps us see her life as not tepid but tragic. This vital introduction implants imagery Atwood dangles as bait for the reader to peel the layers of Iris’s complicated story. *Perennials for the Rock Garden* functions as the title of the book that hides the only picture of “him” the female character in the novel-within-the-novel allows herself. In the parallel frame story that follows, Iris tends a real-life rock garden that is the only hobby she eventually cultivates in her otherwise vapid life as socialite. More images of life clinging to stones follow in the next chapter’s science fiction story, “The Hard Boiled Egg,” where the still unnamed male lover invents the tale of a king whose city has been destroyed but who keeps the knowledge to himself as he struggles to keep his former reality and position intact. To do so, he shrinks his subjects, convincing them that they are still alive, under a sacred heap of stones (12). Obviously, the inhabitants of the city symbolize the ghosts which Iris insists on making “perennial” (of Laura, Alex, Aimee, and even Richard and Reenie) who return to haunt her with nightmares much as the city’s inhabitants haunt the King. The sacred heap of stones corresponds to Iris’s rock garden where life co-exists with stones, a marked graveyard teeming with ghosts of memory who never die. Iris, her own name, a perennial flower, tells her story to make peace with her ghosts to make sense of her life before she dies. Once readers combine these juxtaposed images, Iris’s deep sense of guilt begins to play upon our sympathies.

Similarly, while the frame story portrays Iris as a cool, practical young woman, Atwood hints that fire lies beneath this ice. Fire imagery is seeded, most especially, in Iris’s story as a young child. Even at an early age, her fascination with the passion, danger, and possibly even, temptation or evil, of the “F” word belies itself in her favorite letter of the alphabet book.

> The picture in the book is of a leaping man covered in flames--wings of fire coming from his heels and shoulders, little fiery horns sprouting from his head. He’s looking over his shoulder with a mischievous, enticing smile, and he has no clothes on. The fire can’t hurt him, nothing can hurt him. I am in love with him for this reason. I’ve added extra flames with my crayons. (82)

This early manifestation of Iris’s desire for passion and danger softens the view of Iris as a
spoiled adult ice queen. These initial longings, however, are replaced quickly after sister Laura’s birth and her mother’s death; now fire comes to represent something into which her father gloomily stares at the fireplace (probably with the secret knowledge that the family fortune is collapsing), and later, as the fire that burned down the family’s factory, forcing the accused Alex Thomas into a fugitive life forever. Reader sympathy rises after these events as Iris’s personal longings lie doused and smoldering.

After the deaths of Iris’s mother and later, her father, squelching natural passions complements her newly mandated role as Laura’s sole protector. Although Iris’s passive-aggressive stance frustrates readers, we learn to care for Iris’s feelings as the science fiction story echoes her experience. As dictated by the patriarchal dynasty into which she is born, Iris literally is sold into a wedded slavery, through the dynastic marriage her father arranges to Richard Griffen. Like the child slaves whose youthful dexterous fingers are required to weave exquisite carpets in the novel’s science fiction story, Iris, too, is forced to perform her work of being Richard’s society wife. The child slaves and Iris are coerced into their situations through circumstances of birth and gender expectations of the period, until both are literally or figuratively blinded by their work. “The stories the children whispered to one another--while they sat weaving their endless carpets, while they could still see--was [sic] about this possible future life. It was a saying among them that only the blind are free” (22). Unfortunately, their blindness offers no respite from their tragic circumstances. After they lose their vision, they are forced into prostitution. Those who managed to escape prostitution became highly-skilled murderers. Similarly, the figuratively blinded Iris turns from the prostitution of her marriage to Richard to the role of a deadly assassin who kills inadvertently with her “blind eye.” The parallel story reveals similar events shaping Iris, as the daughter of a once-wealthy industrialist. Little more than a child, Iris, too, must be made blind in order to fetch a good price (her marriage to Griffen) as a bride; blindness to her own needs is requisite if she is to fulfill her parents’ wishes that she marry well enough to care for Laura. This lifelong obligation bars Iris from ever being able to be anything but a protector, meaning that she cannot afford the luxury Laura enjoys of seeing the world clearly on its own terms. Instead, Iris’s world must be a blur, enshrouded in gauze, as her defaced wedding picture depicts, if she and her family’s dynasty is to survive, much as the blind child assassins must continue blinding themselves, and then killing, for their only hope of survival.

The seeming inevitability of Iris’s fate solidifies with a backdrop of the newspaper accounts serving as reminders of the very limited options available to women during this period. They also comment ironically on our inability to know people from the outside. For example, seeing Iris in the society section playing Coleridge’s Abyssinian maid distances us from her and obscures her real-life sexual slavery. Atwood uses the juxtaposition of the newspaper reports with the parts that detail Iris’s real life to reveal that the newspaper’s objectivity, too, can objectify.

With a softened reader ready to hear more, Atwood reveals Iris’s cards one at a time, with calculated timing. As the novel’s many mysteries unravel: the identity of the lovers; paternity matters; the identity of Laura’s “killer,” and the true author of the novel-within-the-novel, their placement and clarification draw reader sympathy by force.

In addition to symbolism and the juxtaposition of plot levels, what we are calling a deus ex machina voice, an authoritative narrative voice that seems to emanate from beyond Iris, enhances reader empathy by commenting on the content and function of storytelling. Just as the reader feels ready to pass judgment on Iris’s choices, this voice twists the knife of sentiment: “In
Paradise there are no stories, because there are no journeys. It’s loss and regret and misery and yearning that drive the story forward, along its twisted road” (518). This comment reminds us to value Iris’s experiences.

For those who remain unconvinced that Iris’s life story is worth a second look, this postmodern voice ultimately forces readers to see Iris’s passivity as a self-reflexive comment on themselves, which results in both sympathy for Iris and the desire to change one’s readerly vision. This new dialogue between reader and writer once again forces the question of reader responsibility in this relationship. Even if, as the novel posits, the act of writing inevitably contains the element of voyeurism, Atwood takes a serious step to bring attention to the passive roles of “watchers” of conventional reading and writing patterns through postmodern conversations between narrator and reader. These outside jolts from the narrator force the reader to participate actively rather than passively (as Iris regretfully acted in her life) and compare him- or herself consciously with the protagonist rather than play the traditional role of voyeur. It is in the narrator’s stepping back from the events, stories, articles, and even characters, that Atwood reminds readers that because she has attempted to reach beyond the role of voyeur in creating the complex and very human, Iris Griffen, that they, too, must be prepared to clear their own vision and through the use of Iris, as aperture, let in light that exposes conventional passive patterns of reading. Through Iris, Atwood offers a parting request: “What is it that I’ll want from you? Not love: that would be too much to ask. Not forgiveness, which isn’t yours to bestow. Only a listener, perhaps; only someone who will see me. Don’t prettify me though, whatever else you do” (521). Thus, these narrative comments and directives demand sympathy that nurtures an appreciation for the complexities of a universal humanity in the form of Iris Chase Griffen.

Through careful placement of parallel stories, Atwood conveys Iris’s complex, tragic life by allowing readers to experience it intimately. The manipulation and frustration Iris suffers are thrust palpably upon us. We see that she is a blind assassin whose blindness to her own circumstances makes her an inadvertent killing machine, sending those she loves and hates alike to their deaths. Thus, the surface plot’s mysteries dramatize Iris’s deeply ingrained sense of guilt for the self-sacrifice that unintentionally victimizes others. We read on not only to solve the mysteries or to witness the elaborate, tawdry scenes unfold but to hear Iris confess actions she sees in retrospect as murder. By the time Iris unburdens herself of her lifelong guilt, we are ready to be the sympathetic audience who can make meaning of her life, and we are grateful that Iris, sacrificial victim though she is, does not lack a tongue with which to tell her tale. In building The Blind Assassin, Margaret Atwood renovates the reader’s role, insisting that the reader become more than a spectator, thus making us aware of our own potential through inaction, to fall prey to Iris’s plight.

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