

Book Report:  
*The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood

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8<sup>th</sup> period

Novelist, poet, and essayist Margaret Atwood is one of the most celebrated writers of the last fifty years. The Canadian is a seven-time finalist for the Governor General's Award and has been on the shortlist for the Man Booker Prize five times; she won the distinguished Booker Prize in 2000 for her novel *The Blind Assassin*. One of her best-loved and most critically-acclaimed works, the novel is an exploration of family, money, love, and war that makes use of Atwood's ability to weave layers of stories that span generations. The story also incorporates elements of science fiction, another hallmark of Atwood's work, and contains an ingenious novel-within-a-novel that both anchors the story emotionally and provides its most fantastical moments.

The story opens with the suicide of Laura Chase, the youngest daughter of a once-rich, now down-on-his-luck Ontario factory owner. Her death is recounted by her sister, Iris Chase, the narrator of the book. Through her retelling the reader watches the sisters grow up and begin to chaff under the control of their father, who is struggling to right his business. Into this tense atmosphere comes Alex Thomas, a young leftist whom the girls shelter from the police after he is scapegoated for a fire at their father's factory. Eventually, Iris leaves to marry the wealthy Richard Griffen, and Laura continues on the troubled path that leads to her suicide.

The novel also contains a novel-within-a-novel: "The Blind Assassin" is presented as the posthumously published work of Laura Chase. Throughout the book the reader is given excerpts from the work, which tells the story of the heroine's clandestine affair with a struggling Marxist who, in a story within a story within a story, tell the woman the fantastical tale of a blind alien assassin. Toward the end of the book it is revealed that in fact it was Iris who wrote the acclaimed novel, and Iris who carried on the real-life affair with Alex Thomas. It was the discovery of this affair that led Laura to the suicide which opens the book.

This intriguing structure is one of the most exciting and successful aspects of the book. The chapters switch back and forth between Iris's narration of her present day and childhood, newspaper excerpts detailing the public perception of her family's drama, and excerpts from "The Blind Assassin." These layers of story work to successfully build an air of mystery by not explicitly telling the reader how all three fit together, but by hinting that there is more to each section than Iris is letting on. Sordid details from the Chase family are casually alluded to in newspaper clippings, while elements of Iris's life are reflected in "The Blind Assassin." Atwood is a master at slowly dolling out details in a way that would seem contrived and stingy in the hands of a lesser writer, and indeed, as reviewer Karen Houppert points out, "stoking readers' frustration is, of course, intentional on Atwood's part." It's not until the book is done and the reader can see all these sections woven together that the story becomes clear. In the hands of someone else this structure could be confusing, but Atwood is adept at this kind of novelistic balancing act.

A significant reason that this storytelling style works so well is that the writing itself is beautiful, detailed, and engaging. For example, when Iris tries to imagine her sister's suicide, she asks "What had she been thinking of as the car sailed off the bridge, then hung suspended in the afternoon sunlight, glinting like a dragonfly for that one instant of held breath before the plummet? Of Alex, of Richard, of bad faith, of our father and his wreckage; of God, perhaps, and her fatal, triangular bargain" (2). In just this few lines, the reader is made to take in the whole scope of the book, from broken loves to family heartbreak to faith in God, all while seeing the beautiful, haunting image of Laura's shining car held still for single second before she plunges to her death. On almost every page the reader can find examples of such amazing craft.

Also on display in *The Blind Assassin* is the careful attention to women's issues that have marked Atwood's work since her award-winning novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Iris and her sister both suffer from their prescribed fates as the daughter of a wealthy factory owner, with Iris forced into a loveless marriage and Laura driven to suicide. Iris in particular, as the narrator, is able to give a voice to the dissatisfaction of the women of her generation, and the reader comes to sympathize with the choices she has been forced to make to protect her father, sister, husband, and lover.

What really shines in *The Blind Assassin*, however, more than the stunning craft Atwood displays, is her obvious love of storytelling. At its core the entire novel is an ode to stories: Iris is telling this story in her memoirs for her granddaughter; Alex tells his mistress the engaging, heartbreaking story of the blind assassin. There are even acolytes of Laura Chase who hound Iris and haunt Laura's gravesite because they are so consumed by the novel she is supposed to have written. The power and magic of storytelling hold the entire novel together and keep the audience, and the characters, under its spell.

For those unfamiliar with Atwood's work, *The Blind Assassin* provides a satisfying introduction to the defining characteristics of her work. There are strong, complex female characters; science fiction elements that are both interesting and thoughtful; beautiful writing; a complex, layered story with multiple intersecting viewpoints; and above all a deeply entertaining and moving story. Even if you're not a fan of this style or find the book intimidating, *The Blind Assassin* is still well worth your time.

## Works Cited

Atwood, Margaret. *The Blind Assassin*. New York: Random House, 2000. Print.

Houppert, Karne. "The Blind Assassin by Margaret Atwood." *Salon*. September 12, 2000. Web. Accessed November 9, 2012.