

Margaret Atwood is no murderer

BY PIA PACE-ASCIAK

"People often want to know how much of your own personal experience you've put into a book," said writer Margaret Atwood. She was speaking to a sold-out crowd during her October 9 reading at the Lord Nelson Hotel. She assured her dedicated readers — "I can truthfully say I've never murdered anyone or run away with the hired man."

Atwood's work is internationally acclaimed and her numerous awards include honorary degrees from a dozen universities throughout the world. Her latest offering, *Alias Grace*, is her 9th novel — her 33rd book — and is already topping national bestseller lists. The fifty-six year old Atwood is being heralded as one of today's literary giants. Peter Kempt from the London Sunday Times declared: "*Alias Grace* has confirmed that Atwood is the outstanding novelist of our age. And *Alias Grace* is that outstanding novel."

The inspirational source for *Alias Grace* is a double-murder that occurred in Richmond Hill, Ontario in 1843. Grace Marks, a 15-year-old servant girl, and James McDermott, a 22-year-old servant, brutally murder their employer Thomas Kinnear, a well-to-do landowner, and his mistress/housekeeper Nancy Montgomery, in the cellar of their home. Grace and James then escape to the United States, taking with them many of Kinnear's valuables. Their escape is short-lived, and they are arrested and brought back to trial in Canada. James is tried, convicted, and hung for murder, while Grace is jailed as an accessory. Just before James is executed, he claims that Grace was an accomplice, rather than an accessory, and the reader is left to decide whether Grace is really guilty.

How does one stumble across such a unique court case 150 years later?

In the 1960's Atwood discovered *Life in the Clearings*, an account of Grace's story written in 1853 by a woman named Susan Moody. It is based on Moody's meetings with Grace, while Grace was a prisoner in the Kingston Penitentiary.

Atwood was intrigued by the labelling of Grace as a "murderess", despite never being tried for murder. And a decade later, Atwood used Susan Moody's version of the story to write a script for television, but that was not the end for Grace.

"Grace Marks was still wandering around in my head, and was insisting on being given a fuller hearing; so I began to write the novel," said Atwood.

Atwood clearly represents

Grace's naive, childlike characteristics, taking the reader back to the asylums where Grace resided. One of the passages presented during the reading was Grace's interpretation of the other patients in her asylum:

"One of them was in there to get away from her husband because he beat her black and blue. He was the bad one but nobody would lock him up. Another said she went mad in the autumns because she had no house and it was warm in the asylum. And if she didn't do a fair job of running mad she would freeze to death, but then in the spring she would become sane again because it was good weather. Another was very religious, always praying and singing. When she found out what they said I had done she would plague me whenever she could. 'Down on your knees, thou shalt not kill.' She was just like a preacher in church. And once she tried to baptize me with soup. Fancy soup it was and with cabbage in it. And once she poured a spoonful of it over my head..."

Atwood claims that once she finishes writing a book there is a certain kinship or relationship with the characters she has created.

"I have a family relationship with the characters, I feel as though I understand them quite well. Even the most roguish characters are to be admired" said Atwood.

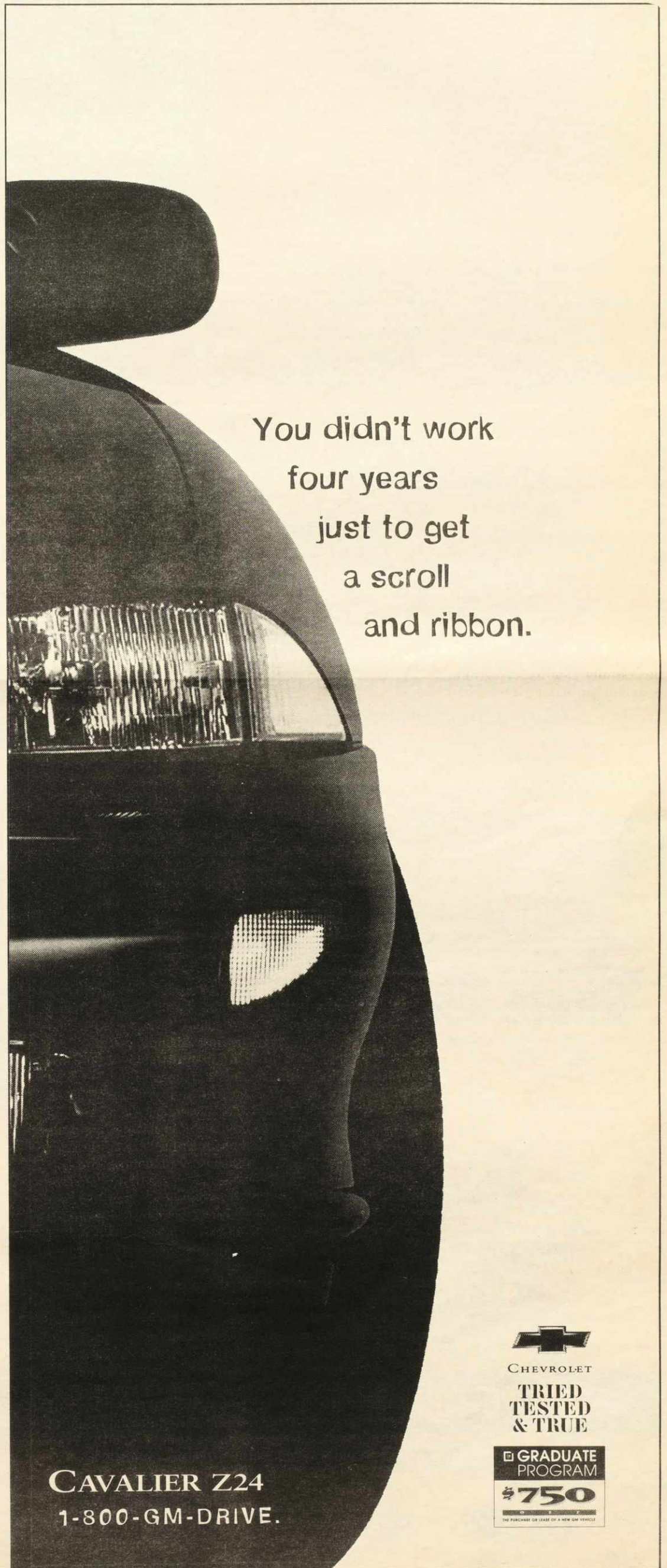
It is clear, however, that Atwood does not want to tell the reader how to read her novel. She has given both sides of the murder story, and wants the reader to make a personal decision about Grace.

So what is Margaret Atwood up to these days? It takes her some time after writing a novel to gather her thoughts for her next one. She made an analogy relating to her reading: "The function of the dreaded book tour is as such: it sucks out your brain, puts it out on the line, and then you put back in your head — a clean brain."

She left with some advice for aspiring young writers. First, "Write, write, write and read, read, read," and make one of the books you read be the one called *The Gift* (By Lew Hyde, published by Vintage). It's not about how to write, but describes the relationship between the artistic process and money.

By the way, for all of you who attended the reading, the mysterious woman who dressed up as a man and begged to take Margaret Atwood for a quickie at the Holiday Inn was Cathy Jones from *This Hour has 22 minutes*.

The Gazette arts section is interested in doing features on starving student artists who are doing interesting and exciting work. If this is you or someone you know stop by room 312 of the SUB and ask for Andrew or John.



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