

When my daughter got her hands on *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* she devoured it in a week. I was as insatiable when the Castlegar & District Library called to say that they were holding *The Blind Assassin* by Margaret Atwood for me. Three days later I'm writing this review. Atwood tells a captivating story. No, beginning with opaque fragments, she distils three stories into a single, addictive brew.

Her pantheon of characters starts with an entrepreneur who was lucky to be at the right place at the right time until he married an ambitious bride. Ironically, she hails from similar luck, but can only see herself as divinely anointed. She has three sons, initially wastrels. One is unfortunately fortunate and becomes a benign capitalist sympathetic to his workers. There are trade unionist agitators or that's how Atwood mirrors their portrayal by the unctuously obsequious Toronto media. The only nasties are secretly hired by capitalist fiends to ignite dirty tricks. There are two granddaughters raised by a Canadian Aunt Jemima. This white, Upper Canadian matron of respectable, hard-working Irish stock, or so she says, dispenses sensible advice and sensible food to nourish sensible minds and bodies. One granddaughter narrates; the other suffers every pain inflicted on us by us. There is an unscrupulous, sexually-bent business rival from Toronto - from where else could such a villain be hatched in a Canadian novel? - who is assisted by his socialite, cheapskate and frigid sister in toppling an empire. The characters perform as historical events transpire.

The action oscillates between Port Ticonderoga and Toronto beginning in 1900 and proceeding to the present. Port Ticonderoga is a fictitious village by Lake Erie. It's a composite of villages like Elora, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Port Dover and Port Stanley. Elora and Niagara-on-the-Lake have been recently gentrified as weekend destinations for suits escaping Toronto. Both have thriving summer theatre and beautifully restored architecture. However, all retain the strict, Protestant, conservative values of rural Ontario. Toronto, on-the-other-hand isn't disguised. Once it was just a larger version of Port Ticonderoga, but it has more than grown, it has transmogrified into, as Atwood describes it, "a medieval city." Toronto now is populated by folk of every race and colour, animated by street vendors hawking all manner of goods, but controlled by a nobility of duplicitous jackals, "not too big for their boots, but too small" and who "do anything for a profit."

The novel begins with the opening of south-western Ontario, it moves through the Great War, the Hong Kong flu epidemic, the depression, the Spanish Civil War, World War II and into the present. The pacing is perfect; the writing superb. There is an interesting mixture of poetry: some Atwood's, some lyrics, and Coleridge's *Xanadu*. There is entertaining graffiti allegedly transcribed from the washroom walls of a Canadian institution - the donut shop - where an orange crueller is described as a "wodge of fat and sugar."

This book is a delight. It's written with the help of a large staff. When I read Atwood's acknowledgments I realized that she is able to hire researchers and support staff to give her work the depth and polish that all good writing deserves. Vanquish the image of solitary writers, burning the midnight oil, listening to their Muse, and tapping manuscripts on portable typewriters. Team work and mutual support are as powerful for a writer as they are for other vocations. And yet, being Canadian, I'm annoyed at myself for disbelieving that others will find *The Blind Assassin* as compelling as I did.