

FOR: THE CANADIAN CLUB

JUNE 16, 2003

*ORYX AND CRAKE*: HOW MUCH IS FICTION?

Honoured guests:

I am very pleased to be here today -- not least because, over the past two and a half months, I've been in four countries and in roughly twenty-five cities, and have taken a commensurate number of airplanes, not one of which has blown up. I have not come down with any communicable disease, nor have I transmitted any, and that is a wonder, because I am in the middle of the infamous Author Book Tour -- usually more than a little toxic.

So my only problem of the moment is that I have no brain. Going on a book tour is like having a vacuum cleaner hose inserted into your ear. The vacuum is then turned on and your brain is vacuumed out, leaving your head completely empty. It then shrivels up, and this shrunken head of yours is wheeled about the country and put on display as a curio. The plus side is that the vacuuming process leaves a lot of space for an entirely new brain to grow. And it does, until of course you do it once too often.

Ordinarily I would never appear in my brainless phase on an occasion like this, filled with a selection of my fellow Canadians who are not only eminent, but have had access to alcoholic beverages. Being an icon leads so quickly to iconoclasm under such conditions. But Nancy Lockhart made me do it. There must be a Canadian equivalent for the expression "steel

magnolia.” “Velvet wolverine,” perhaps, or “lace-covered polar bear,” or “diamond-studded very big swarm of blackflies.” But nothing does justice to the combination of charm, tactfulness, and ruthless inexorability with which Nancy gets you to do what she wants. You have been very lucky to have had Nancy whipping the speakers into shape for you this year, as I’m sure you know. So blame Nancy, not me. I was a helpless lump of Pla-Doh in her hands.

This is not the only appearance I’m going to regret later; for what does a book tour resemble more than a long-drawn-out mind-bending orgy? You wake up afterwards and think, “What did I do? Who did I do it with? Where did I do it?” Except with a book tour you don’t get sex. Rumour has it that there might be sex for certain male authors and even the occasional gay woman, but for a person such as myself, those book-signing lines are like a women’s residence college reunion. It’s not that men don’t read my books – they just don’t like to admit to it in public. And men don’t as a rule stand in book lines. They’re too impatient. You’ve seen them in traffic jams. Scuffles are likely to break out; shouts of, “Back off, pal, that’s MY Handmaid’s Tale,” or even “Who taught YOU how to stand in book-signing lines, eraser-head?”

Also they are afraid of looking dorky. But here’s a secret: no one in this room need fear that, because once you reach a certain level of eminence, you rise above it, and the fear of looking dorky simply vanishes away. You can tell this by a quick survey of the photographs of politicians in newspapers. You can just tell that looking dorky is the last thing on their minds.

But sometimes men do stand in book-signing lines. They've got ten copies, which they will flog later on E-Bay. Or else, lest anyone might think they are kissing up – a thing they hate to do – they will say hastily, "This is for my wife." Or, "This is for my mother." I've even had, "Could you sign this for my dog?" A choice of reader especially appropriate for the current novel, which has lots of animal action in it.

For those who think they might like to be authors and might even find the Author Book Tour a thing of glamour and delight, at least in advance, I do have three tips to offer.

1. Think pink, pack black. It's so much better than the other way around. Also if you start drooling on yourself it doesn't show. While I'm at it, don't let anyone put a glass of water on the table where you are signing. You will upset it, and people will see the puddle under your chair and think the worst.

- 2.

For double-plus-untall people of the female persuasion such as myself: there are only two ways of getting your wheely bag into the overhead rack on planes. A helpful flight attendant is sometimes, but not usually, one of them. A) Get the bag onto the seat. Then in a quick press-and-jerk motion – you've seen Olympic weight-lifting – hoist it onto the top of your head. From there it can usually be slid sideways onto the rack. Or B): A nice man will say "Can I help you with that?" The right answer is not, "Do I look incompetent?" – you

might get an answer you won't like -- or even "I'm not your grandmother." Men vary in their abilities, just like other human beings, but they can be depended on completely for three things: carrying the Y chromosome, taking the lids off jars, and lifting the wheely bag into the overhead rack. A gracious thank-you is in order. If you are a tall woman, with well-developed biceps, none of this need apply.

3.

If you purchase a gel deodorant, you can put enough of the gel substance into an empty screw-lid contact lens case to last you for a week. This saves weight in the wheely bag.

Those are my tips. I hope you will find them useful.

By now you're probably wondering when I'm going to stop fooling around, settle down, and get to the point. My Grade Two teacher used to wonder that as well. So far there's been no clear answer, but I keep trying. So here's my latest try.

The book in aid of which I've been doing all this Death-Of-A Salesman travelling, riding on a shoeshine and a smile, is called Oryx and Crake. As a title, that's like Dombey and Son, or Oscar and Lucinda: all it tells you is that there are likely to be characters in the book that have those names. And so it is with Oryx and Crake.

It's a somewhat hard book to describe. One could say that it's a joke-filled, fun-packed picaresque adventure story about the end of the human

race. One could also say that it's a description of the perfect storm, the point where the human population peaks at 10 billion --- scheduled roughly for the year 2050 – and we run out of arable land and stuff to eat, coupled with the fact that we've just opened the biggest toy box in the world – genetic manipulation. Will we allow the results of all three to be driven entirely by market forces, and if so, what will result, and if not, why not?

Or one could say that, like Gulliver's Travels – a book from which it borrows one of the two epigraphs at the beginning – Oryx and Crake at the same time an outrageous tall tale and a serious but occasionally lyrical examination of the limits of human nature. (The man who wrote of Gulliver's Travels that he didn't believe the part about the talking horses either wildly missed the point or was engaged in a bit of leg-pulling of his own.) Or you could say that it's about the life and times of Jimmy, its protagonist – a word person in a world in which numbers people are valued more highly – and his best friend Crake, and the woman who is the romantic interest for both of them. In addition to which, it could be called – and has been -- a cautionary tale about what lies around the bend in the road we happen to be travelling down at this moment in human history.

And you could say, as well, that like Book Three of Gulliver's Travels – the one about the floating island populated by scientists doing peculiar experiments -- said to have been based on real experiments being done by scientists at Swift's time -- it embeds at least some of the features of the Menippean satire. What is a Menippean satire? you well may ask. But I won't

tell you, because one of the good works to which I am dedicated is the support of that cottage industry known as academic research in the humanities, and at least some of those impoverished but dedicated PhD students will be happier investigating the Menippean satire than they would be peddling chocolate bars or other things on street corners. So I will leave that particular weed-filled corner for them to cultivate. Suffice it to say that we have slid into the habit of calling all prose fictions “novels,” which is of course not true. Gulliver’s Travels is not a novel in the same way that George Eliot’s and Thomas Hardy’s and Jane Austen’s prose fictions are novels. And Oryx and Crake is not much like Sense and Sensibility. It has more swearing in it, just for starters.

So instead of an analysis of form and craft, I’ll attempt to answer three of the questions I’ve been asked most frequently during this book tour. They are:

First: Where did you get the idea?

Second: How much of it is true?

And third: Is there any hope?

First: Where did I get the idea? Short answer: same place I got the other ideas. I have this cupboard full of ideas. When I need an idea, I open the door and all the ideas fall out onto the floor, and I kick them around until I find the one with my initials on it.

Long answer: it came to me on a previous book tour, when I was in Australia. We were doing a little bird watching, and I happened to be looking over the balcony at a small bird of limited habitat called the Red-necked Crake. It was this bird that supplied the pseudonym for one of my characters. His real name is Glenn, two N's, like Glenn Gould. Did you know that Glenn Gould as a child wrote an opera in which all the human beings have been wiped out and only the animals remain? I didn't know that either until after I'd finished writing my book. Some coincidences are quite weird.

But these looking-over-the-balcony Eureka moments don't themselves come from nowhere. I grew up among the scientists, I was almost a scientist myself, my top marks in Grade 13 were in Biology, not English – they took marks off for spelling -- and for relaxing reading on airplanes I'm just as likely to pick Scientific American or Discover, or a new one called Seed. (Seed, as you might expect, has more of an emphasis on the life sciences.) Some of the stories in these magazines and in science-based books such as Edmund O. Wilson's The Future Of Life will make your hair stand up on end just as effectively as murder mysteries, but without the comfort level: you don't always get told whodunnit, and you certainly don't know how it comes out. How you long for a Hercule Poirot to say, "Aha! It is you, monsieur, who are causing the ice caps to melt, and you who introduced the West Nile Virus, which is decimating the bird population and the horse population and the population of friends of friends, and you as well who have caused the

extermination of at least three species of rare Amazonian beetle! You shall not escape!”

“But how did you know?”

“It was – the matchbox! Your gun is useless, I have removed the bullets.”

Alas, we have no such detective. In this planet-earth-sized boat and possible shipwreck, we’re all in it together. As Alistair MacLeod has said, “Writers write about what worries them,” and a lot of the trends in Oryx and Crake worry me a lot.

Which brings me to the second question: How much of it is true?

Well, it does say Fiction on the front of the book. And it does begin with that epigraph from Gulliver’s Travels. And it does take place in the future; and nobody can predict the future, because there are too many variables, and the Doctrine of Unintended Consequences applies to most human activities. And as Ursula LeGuin has said, nobody writing about the future is really writing about the future, because we haven’t been there yet: and as Robertson Davies has said, historical novels are not really about the past, because we can’t go there either. Books about the future are about us, here, now. Us, and our dreams and desires and fears, and the emotions that drive all human action.

With these caveats, I can however say that I used the same rules for Oryx and Crake as I used for The Handmaid’s Tale: I didn’t put anything into

it that's unsupported by real-life trends, trains of thought already underway, or inventions we already have or are working on. There's a box in the office we refer to simply and ominously as *The Brown Box*. In it are the clippings and references I and others collected during the writing of the book. We're continuing to add to it as things come true. Categories include geological and weather changes, diseases, genetic modification, technologies such as iris-scanners and new bio-based materials, and so forth.

Thus the luminous green rabbit incorporating the jellyfish gene and the goat/spider are already with us, although a luminous green fish – now selling like hotcakes in Taiwan – has been put together since; the pigeons are in process, as is the kanga-lamb, a blend of kangaroo and lamb; the ability to create viruses from scratch is with us now, though it wasn't when I began the book. The fish-finger Jimmy eats at high school is billed as “20% real fish,” leaving you to wonder what the other 80% may be. That could be generous: we've run through 90% of ocean fish stocks in the past 50 years, and are busily Hoovering up the rest of them right now.

And should you not believe the level of interest in genetically modifying human beings, as well as our ability to do so, I urge you to read Bill McKibbin's book *Enough*, just published. Had I known while writing my own book that eyes in the backs of our heads were being seriously proposed, I would have put some in. (Whoever's pushing that particular bright idea hasn't considered the hair-do problems.)

Just as an aside -- no, Oryx and Crake is not anti-science. "Science," like Art or Religion, is a very large category. It includes good and useful science and bad and destructive science, and sometimes science that thinks it's the first and turns out to be the second. (Remember the Skinner Box?) Often a piece of science is so narrowly goal-driven or grant-driven that the down-the-road results haven't been taken into consideration, or even contemplated. And scientists are human beings, and subject to error, and subject also to all the emotions that other people have, including -- some of them -- the desire for status and the love of money.

Science itself, however, is morally neutral. It cannot supply from within the discipline the moral criteria by which its products must be judged. It's a tool, like electricity or a hammer, both of which can be used for destructive ends and well as constructive ones. Though as Abraham Maslow said, if the only tool you have is a hammer, then you treat everything as if it were a nail.

Which brings me to the third question: Is there hope? This was the question I was asked most frequently, especially in the United States.

Albert Camus thought hope was a delusional dirty trick placed at the bottom of Pandora's Box, which otherwise contained a lot of plagues and evils. But surely one needs at least a little hope as the basis for action. In relation to Oryx and Crake: this story will make you feel much better, because no matter how awful things are in your life, they're worse in the

book. And after all, it's set in the future. Like the depressing Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come in the story of Scrooge, it hasn't happened yet. It's only a dark shadow cast by the present. We can still wake up and dance around in our nightshirts and reform our ways. The good news is that human fate is in human hands. (That also happens to be the bad news, but nobody's perfect.)

Here are three signs of hope that aren't in my book:

- 1) The trend towards organic farming. It's gathering speed. Support it.

Anyway, the apples and broccoli taste like real apples and broccoli again, and you don't want to find you've been eating chicken breasts injected with dead pig and cow goo, see the story in the Guardian, last week of May. Note also that the first green golf course has just opened. If all golf courses were to go green, there'd be a drop in non-Hodgkins lymphoma, not to mention testicular cancer, otherwise known as the lost-balls problem.

- 2) The movement to save habitat. World Wildlife Fund and Nature Conservancy Canada are active in this field, in this country, among many other NGO's. When asked, Canadians place environmental worries in the eightieth percentile of their concerns, but only two and a half percent of their charitable-donation money goes there. What's wrong with this story?

So write a cheque. Otherwise you'll have no cause for complain when everything's a parking lot and you choke to death. While I'm at

it: keep your pussycats indoors, especially at dawn and dusk, and help combat West Nile. See this weekend's Globe and Mail for the reasons why.

3) New technologies. Invention is often driven by necessity and perceived scarcity, and so it is today. Hybrid cars, solar and wind energy are the tip of the iceberg. One of the best gizmos I've heard about recently was in Discover magazine a couple of issues ago – you put any carbon-based form in the front end – old turkey parts, plastic bottles, phone books, human sewage – and out the back end come oil, water, and other useful by-products. This would help solve Western dependence on Middle-eastern oil, as well as the garbage and sewage crisis; and it would mean that carbon from underground would not constantly be added to the atmosphere. Incidentally, they're working on a product for cows – sort of like Bean-O – that would cause them to produce less methane gas, thus cutting the Greenhouse Effect. I'm all for it.

And on that cheerful note I'll end, pausing only to tell you the title of Studs Terkel's new book – on the subject of activists – forthcoming in November. That title is, Hope Dies Last. And it's true: hope does die last.

Or so we must hope.