

Behind the texts #4

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“We Can Hear the Voice – Or So It Seems”:
Margaret Atwood’s Multi-Voiced Poetics in *Alias Grace*

Tuesday, 26th February 2019

College of St. Hild & St. Bede, Collier Room, 6:30pm

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for more information about this event.

Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) seems to be obsessed with multiple voices in and beyond the text. Set in mid-nineteenth century Canada, the historical novel tells the story of servant girl Grace, who has allegedly participated in the murder of her employer and his housekeeper and has been imprisoned in Kingston Penitentiary for these crimes. A young American neurologist is hired to solve the mystery behind her deed, of which she claims to have no memory. The resulting therapeutic relationship, however, is not the only means through which Grace's story is told. Atwood weaves snippets from historical and literary sources into the text and uses multiple intradiegetic perspectives and voices to explore Grace's psyche, which may or may not harbor its own plurality of voices: the novel insinuates but never ultimately confirms that Grace suffers from multiple personality disorder. Incidentally, voice is also a central category of Atwood's poetics: For her, writing and reading literature is a process in which we grapple with shadowy voices within and outside ourselves. In her novel, Atwood explores such a multi-voiced poetics both through form and metaphor and extends them into a critique of authorship, the reader's participation in the text's construction, and the impossibility of fixing interpretations to a single meaning—linking historiographical, psychological, and narrative discourses within the dialogic image of the therapeutic relationship. Atwood thus promotes a pragmatic, relational approach toward literature, history, and identity that acknowledges the multiplicity of voices in and around us.