

The literary island of Margaret Atwood

A remote island off Canada's southernmost point has become a beacon for writers, and the ultimate in offline living.

BY DANIEL SCHEFFLER

One might say, it's the year of Margaret Atwood. Not only has her home country of Canada turned 150, she also has a hit show, "The Handmaid's Tale," on Hulu which is based on her book - with the same name—that was written more than 30 years ago. Alas, with overtures of fundamentalist theocratic dictatorships creeping up all over the world from the Americas, to Europe and Asia, Atwood has a vantage point like no other.

But even so, for Atwood, this resurgence in interest in her dystopian novel and its real-world emulations, fortunately hasn't startled her. "Nothing much surprises me—I'm too old," she says.

A place that Atwood has used to escape this thronged world, in order to create her own fictional worlds, has been a little island hidden away: Pelee Island, Ontario, right in Lake Erie in Canada's most southern point. With a population of roughly 170, there is a small ferry that runs from the mainland and delivers you on this vineyard filled island. The biggest noise here comes from its bird population, for which Atwood has a particular passion. This island is part of two major migratory bird routes, the Atlantic Flyway and the Mississippi flyway. And if you're a birder, you'll understand the significance as Atwood does.

"I have written on Pelee Island since 1987, so any book that has come out since then has been at least partly written on Pelee," says Atwood, who has a cottage on the island. "It offers 'time out'—time out of the usual appointments and activities—and also time out of internet connection, if you so desire." And there is a larger community of creative minds - like Atwood - seeking exactly that: time out. Their very own version of a quiet, creative place where moments with birds

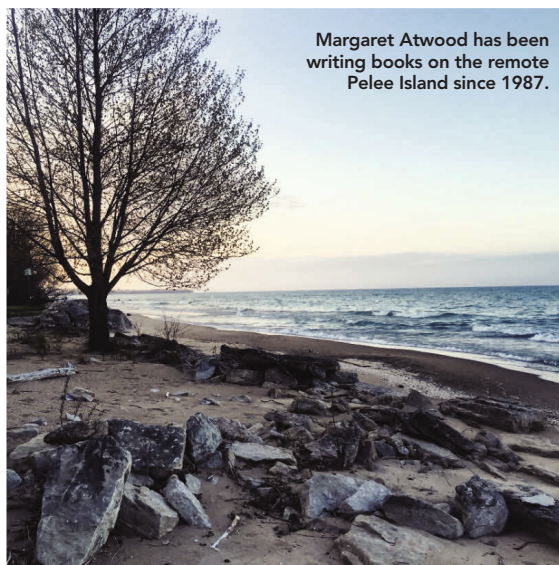
are valued more than any kind of awards, or even fans or admirers.

In more recent years, she's also helped open Pelee Island up to a few more temporary residents in the form of an intensive writer's retreat. The Pelee Island Book House accepts just a handful of writers every year for its six annual workshops—where you can stay on the water and just write. Besides evasion of the internet, the island is known for these avian residents who then become the most ideal writing companions.

So this important stop for migratory birds is reason enough for Atwood to host an annual fundraiser for Pelee's Bird Observatory. Atwood and her partner, writer Graeme Gibson, are, needless to say, also on the board of the Pelee Island Bird Observatory. She has written at length about the need to preserve her sanctuary along this lake, comparing her beloved Lake Erie to actor Robert Mitchum's eyes.

In fact, her careful attention to her bird friends and their interactions is absolutely evident in her work, most recently in the installments of Atwood's graphic novel "Angel Catbird"—the third volume, "The Catbird Roars" was released over the summer. And even though she won't talk about her next project, she did spend a lot of time of Pelee Island as of late.

So as an ornithology semi-expert, Atwood is, in fact, always ready to chat about her winged friends who, if we pay close attention, are teaching us lessons every day. "Birds are key to a number of other species—they plant trees, devour decaying animal life that would otherwise give rise to outbreaks of rats, wild dogs, rabies and other diseases, help break down plant materials so their nutrients can re-enter the ecosystem, and that's just for starters," says Atwood. "We should pay attention to the birds because they are the messengers. If it's killing birds, it will ultimately kill you, too."



COURTESY OF PELEE ISLAND