Dear All,

Margaret Atwood has long been one of my favourite writers. Her latest work is clearly a tribute to her husband Graeme Gibson as Moral Disorder is the title of a novel he was writing in 1996, when he decided to stop writing novels. I recommended Moral Disorder as an introduction to her work because it is more accessible than her longer, more substantial novels. We get a flavour of her perceptive, economic style from this collection of semi-autobiographical linked stories.

What one expects from a short story collection, and what one encounters in Moral Disorder are distinctly different. We might read the stories in a collection at random, beginning at the end, or in the middle of the book and sampling stories here and there throughout. We soon learn that these stories are focused on one woman's life but the collection is surprisingly out of step in time. The first story The Bad News begins towards the end of Nell's life when she has been with her partner Tig for many years. We then follow the protagonist, Nell, from childhood, through adolescence, middle age, and finally, again to old age.

We agreed that this was a clever way of making us curious about the development of Nell and Tig's partnership. However, a few of us were put off a little by this story. It was rather disjointed and confusing. Nell's stories are also about other stories -- the ones she's read in novels, ones from history, ones she's been told, or discovers in family photo albums. Nell's story is about the way in which narratives -- our own, and those of others -- help us to read, and thus to understand, the world around us. How we are effected by time. Snapshots of a life giving significance to the meaning of a life.

In the first story, we meet Nell as an elderly woman, waking up to her husband's pronouncement of the "bad news" from the morning paper. This curious chapter, told in Nell's voice, describes the rhythms of the couple's life -- their voiced and unvoiced concerns, their unresolved pet peeves, their breakfast table. They have developed a deep understanding of how to live harmoniously together. We get a picture of how close their bond is, their pleasure in each other's company.

The pace is steady and slow and makes its way deliberately. Very deliberately. Atwood, whose approach is always measured and precise, establishes a domestic scene of absolute comfort, then deftly yanks the tablecloth from under the tea service. The elderly couple, arguing about assassins, are privately terrified by an unimaginable but inevitable future known as "not yet," a future in which only one of them remains.

The political world seems uncertain. There is bad news that the leader of an interim governing council has been killed--are these hints of Iraq or of a future closer to home? We suddenly revert to Roman times when the barbarians are advancing--but as Nell says--please--not before breakfast. We wondered if Atwood is hinting at living during the fall of the American empire.

The bringer of bad news--the grade four schoolteacher with the sparse bun, rancid teeth, wrinkly frown and pursed mouth--like a huge bird with the wings of a crow is a powerful image. We all have memories of a cruel teacher we didn't like. Atwood has a skill at helping us to identify personally with her characters. The influence of our inspirational teachers, like Miss Bessie, in the story My Last Duchess, stays with us throughout our lives. We discussed the sense of fear of being on our own--going out into the dark tunnel--the whole world stretching ahead of us. The teacher staying behind, another pupil sitting at our desk, being guided by our teacher through the meaning of a poem. We will have to find our own meanings and our own way in future. But will we miss our own future?

"But what if I missed a turn somewhere. missed my own future? That would be frighteningly easy to do. I'd make one hesitation or one departure too many and then I'd have run out of choices; I'd be standing all alone."
Atwood has written some of the stories in the first person and some in the third person. We discussed this method. The stories in the first person are more intimate. Nell is at the centre of these stories. She expresses her experiences as an adolescent, adjusting to having a baby sister, choosing to move from place to place. Atwood's humour shines through especially when describing Nell's embarrassment at having breasts.

"Merely to have breasts was degrading. But not to have any at all would have been worse."

All the teenage girls lug their briefcases around firmly on their chests to avoid the catcalls of the boys. "get a load of the knockers!"

Nell also believes that covering her face with frozen mentholated skin cream would stimulate the blood flow to her brain and make it more possible for her to study. I remember always eating fish before an exam in the hope of making my brain more efficient! We nearly all had some crazy habits in our teen years.

Nell's relationship with her boyfriend Bill is also a realistic example of a teenage romance. They clash over their approach to poetry. Bill is more rational than Nell and can't see the point of being an attentive reader. Being an attentive reader wouldn't get him a job, he says. They often have stupid arguments and eventually break up over one. Under Bill's influence, Nell even begins to doubt the value of studying literature - curled up in bed with Tess of the d'Urbevilles she worries that all the girls in novels she is studying are too weak, too trusting and let themselves drift. What kind of role models are they?

One of our favourite stories was "The art of cooking and serving". Nell's adolescent fantasy of frilly white curtains and an ordered domestic life is contrasted with her chaotic, disorganised homelife. The cluttered and untidy dinner table. She dreams of beautiful table centres and pristine, gleaming doilies. Very typical of the fifties. Her exhausted mother uses Nell too much to look after her younger sister. Nell is unable to have a social life like her friends. Those of us with younger siblings identified strongly with Nell's dilemma. Many of us have been expected to play the role of substitute mothers in large families. Eventually Nell breaks free by confronting her mother.

"She's not my baby. I didn't have her. You did."

In response Nell's mother slaps her hard across the face. Both are shocked but the atmosphere has shifted and Nell is released from many domestic responsibilities. "In spirit she is off and running - to the movies, to the skating rinks, to the swooning blue-lit dances."

We were in some disagreement about Nell's mother. Some of us felt sorry for her because she was obviously finding it difficult to cope with lack of sleep and being an older mother in her forties. It seemed natural for Nell to help her mother. Others felt strongly that Nell was being exploited and that Nell's mother had behaved very badly.

Nell continues to support and help others throughout her life - notably Tig's manipulative first wife Oona. She even buys Oona a house. Nell is the peacemaker and the giver in all of her relationships. Yet by her behaviour she buys herself peace of mind and earns the approval of her stepsons and of Tig. But we asked - were these acts of wisdom? We were divided on this. Some felt she had done the right thing. Others were sure that she was being too accommodating.

She seems to drift into the relationship with Tig. Oona sets Nell up to be a suitable lover for Tig. Oona wants to have her freedom from Tig and to travel. Nell senses that Oona does not feel threatened by her and will be a good influence on the boys. Indeed she feels like the governess. In the beginning she only joins Tig at the farm when the boys are not there. Later Oona gives her specific instructions on how to treat the boys. We agreed that it is always a sensitive area where children of former marriages are concerned. Nell seems to have got it right, because the boys are never seen to be critical of her.
The stories of the life on the farm had mixed reactions. Some of us enjoyed these the most—relating to the varied accounts of farm life—especially how Nell has to adjust to the harsh reality of killing the animals and learning it is better not to give them names. The strutting male peacock was a very popular character. Others found the farm scenes boring and even skipped these stories. Nell seemed to have given up her academic career which frustrated some of us. But she plucks up the courage to tell Tig that she would like to have a child. Strangely there is only one reference to their daughter in the first story—there is a photo of her on the refrigerator—Nell says she is now off busy with her own life somewhere. There is more attention given to their cat Drumlin than to their own daughter.

We unanimously felt that the sisters’ relationship was well drawn. The maturity of their relationship is shown in their ability to share the burden of their parents’ decline. On visiting their mother together they reminisce about their childhood—sharing the memories of the headless horseman. Liz apologises for being a whining child. Nell reassures her that she just had a sensitive nervous system. It is clear that they have become good friends as well as sisters.

The significance of unchanging material objects in our lives—when we have changed ourselves—is movingly expressed by Nell.

"The persistence of material objects is becoming an amazement to me. It’s the same door—the one I used to go in through, out through, year after year, in my daily clothing or in various outfits and disguises, not thinking at all that I would one day be standing in front of the very same door with my grey-haired little sister. But all doors used regularly are doors to the afterlife."

In the final, most moving chapters of the book, Nell watches her parents slowly deteriorate with age, and in these moments the importance of knowing the stories of others, and reading with care, becomes the only way to communicate with them.

In "The Labrador Fiasco" Nell’s father, having suffered a stroke, wants to hear the same story of two hapless explorers over and over again. Atwood sets the story of the explorers side-by-side with the story of Nell’s father, placing both tragedies—one a matter of historical record, and one deeply personal—on the same dramatic level.

This chapter, along with the final chapter, "The Boys in the Lab," which is about Nell’s mother, bring Moral Disorder full circle. That first, strange glimpse at Nell’s old age, with its “not yet,” paralleled with the “back then” of her parents. Nell’s mother has always liked happy endings. Nell struggles to ensure that her mother in her final years is protected from sad endings. Nell’s mother places news of the deaths of people she loves in an appropriate place.

"She’s got them safe inside her head somewhere, in a form she prefers. She’s got them back in the layer of time where they belong."

The stories we know, Atwood suggests, help us make sense of the "other stories," the stories yet to come.

"But what else could I do with all that?" Nell wonders at the end of ``The Entities." "All that anxiety and anger, those dubious good intentions, those tangled lives, that blood. I can tell about it or I can bury it. In the end, we’ll all become stories."

Just as Nell’s stories helped her parents return to the people they used to be, the stories Atwood tells in "Moral Disorder" help us to understand who we are, where we have come from and who we can be.

A very happy Christmas and New Year to everyone!