

A library that won't be read for 100 years

Tracy Mumford · May 29, 2015

The Thread

Margaret Atwood and Katie Paterson explored the Nordmarka forest outside Oslo, where the Future Library trees were planted in 2014. *Giorgia Polizzi | Commissioned by Bjorvika Utvikling and produced by Situations*

Margaret Atwood just finished her latest book — but no one will read it for 100 years.

The trees have to grow first.

Atwood's book is part of the [Future Library \(http://futurelibrary.no\)](http://futurelibrary.no), a literary collection being created entirely from scratch — right down to the paper it will be printed on.

At the moment, the Future Library is nothing but a forest of Norway spruce saplings, planted outside Oslo last year. But by 2114, the trees will mature, the forest will be harvested and the fibers will be turned into paper. That paper will be printed with the collection that took 100 years to compile: The Future Library.

Atwood's work is only the beginning. Every year for the next century, a new writer will be selected to add to the collection. All of their work, written over the course of the next century, will be sealed and held in trust at an Oslo library until the forest is fully grown.

In 2114, when the Future Library finally goes to print, the forest will have produced enough paper to print an estimated 3,000 copies of each text.

And someone will finally read Atwood's new book.

In 2014, 1,000 Norway spruce saplings were planted for the Future Library. *MJC | Commissioned by Bjorvika Utvikling and produced by Situations*

The Future Library is the brainchild of Scottish artist Katie Paterson, who planted 50 of the 1,000 trees herself.

"I could never have imagined it would go beyond the dreaming stage," Paterson said. But the dream is now a fledgling forest, and the first manuscript is finished — Atwood handed it over on Tuesday. The title is "'Scribbler Moon'," Atwood [said \(http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may/27/margaret-atwood-scribbler-moon-future-library-norway-katie-paterson\)](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may/27/margaret-atwood-scribbler-moon-future-library-norway-katie-paterson). "And that's the only part of it you will know for 100 years."

Atwood is the ideal writer for such a literary time capsule. The award-winning Canadian author was Paterson's first choice for the project. Her fiction is known for its searing and sometimes unsettling view of the future, as in "The Handmaid's Tale" or "Oryx and Crake."

Atwood predicts her future readers may need some assistance by the time the Future Library finally goes to print. They might call in "a paleo-anthropologist to translate some of it for them," she told [The Guardian \(http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/05/margaret-atwood-new-work-unseen-century-future-library\)](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/05/margaret-atwood-new-work-unseen-century-future-library). "Language of course will have changed over those 100 years."

Those changes are what Paterson finds herself trying to anticipate. She spends much of her time troubleshooting a printing process that will take place in the distant future. With the future come questions: "What language will people be speaking in 100 years? What kind of technologies will exist?" Paterson asks. "What will the status of the printed book be? The written word?"

For all the time Paterson is devoting to the project, she knows she will never see its completion. "I knew instantly it would outlive me," she said. "It is a work conceived for an unknown, future generation."

The manuscripts for the Future Library will be held in trust at the Oslo Public Library until 2114. *Atelier Oslo and Lund Hagem*

To ensure the project continues as planned until 2114, Paterson has partnered with the city of Oslo to establish a Future Library committee that will continue without her when the time comes. The final committee members likely won't even be born for several decades.

Each year, the committee will continue to select a new writer based on "outstanding contributions to literature or poetry, and for their work's ability to capture the imagination of this and future generations." The writer will produce a new work, which will be safely stowed alongside the words of Atwood and others as they wait for the trees to mature.

On Tuesday, Paterson announced that David Mitchell, best known for his book "Cloud Atlas," will be the next author.

The writers are given no precise guidelines for their Future Library contributions. Paterson hopes they find this delayed publication process inspiring — even liberating.

"Maybe it gives a freedom to speak to a reader you will never know."