

## The 100-year read

**Margaret Atwood is the first contributor to an Oslo art project that is growing trees into books**



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Margaret Atwood – the bestselling Canadian author of dystopian novels such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* and the *MaddAddam* trilogy – will complete her next book in the coming months. If you want to read it, though, you’re out of luck. The new text won’t be able to be read until 2114 – that’s how long it will take to grow the trees that will make the paper on which the book will be printed.

And, it’s not just Atwood who’s writing for the future. Over the next 99 years, 99 more authors from around the world will be commissioned to write secret texts that will be read by no one but the author and sealed inside a specially designed room in the yet-to-be-built Deichman Library in Oslo’s Bjørvika district. In 2114, a forest of 1,000 Norwegian spruce, birch and pine trees that was planted on the outskirts of Oslo in May this year will be cut down and pulped, the paper used to create 3,000 copies of an anthology containing all 100 texts.

It might sound like the elaborate scheme of a sadistic English lit major – commissioning some of the world’s best authors to write books that can’t be read in our lifetime – but it’s all part of Future Library, an ambitious artwork by Scottish-born, Berlin-based artist Katie Paterson.

So, what’s the point of creating an artwork with a conclusion so tantalizingly out of reach for everyone alive today? The answer, according to Paterson and Atwood, is hope: hope that people will still be reading books, that libraries will exist, and – says Atwood – that there will still be a human race.

“The idea for Future Library came a few years ago,” says Paterson. “I was sketching tree rings and it occurred to me that tree rings could be chapters in a book, and I had this vision of trees growing books for the future.”

It was nothing more than an idle musing until last year, when Anne Beate Hovind, the project manager for Slow Space Bjørvika, was asked to commission three public artworks for the rejuvenation of Bjørvika, an old container port that is currently undergoing a transformation into a new harbourside cultural precinct. Hovind approached the artist and Paterson knew that Norway, with its close connection to the forest, would make the perfect home for her future library project.

“When you commission an artist to come up with a work, you have no idea what to expect,” says Hovind. “When Katie proposed her idea, I thought: Oh my god – what am I going to do? It’s my job to make this all happen, and anything could happen in 100 years – Norway might not even be a country!”

So far, however, things are going to plan. The City of Oslo donated the land and trees for the forest, the Deichman Library agreed to include a special room in which to store the books – it will be co-designed by Paterson and clad in timber cleared to make room for the new forest – and Margaret Atwood, a writer famed for her unsettling visions of the near future, agreed to write the first text. “I couldn’t stop screaming when I saw her letter saying yes,” says Hovind.

It’s unlikely that anyone alive today – including, of course, Paterson and Hovind – will live to see the conclusion of the project. So, the Future Library » Trust has been established to ensure that the project continues to be managed until its conclusion. Comprising literary professionals – including the director of the Man Booker Prize and two Norwegian publishers – environmentalists and fundraisers, the trust’s members will change every four years to ensure it remains relevant (the exceptions are Hovind, who will serve two terms, and Paterson, who has lifetime membership).

“Everyone in the trust is desperate to read the texts, but none of the current members will get to,” says Paterson. “We’ve all signed non-disclosure documents, but it is tempting to look – especially since 100 years feels vast, but also very close. I chose that length of time deliberately, as we can almost touch it and can imagine what might exist.”

While those alive today won’t have the chance to read the texts, certificates entitling the bearer to one of the books that will be released in 2114 can be bought for £600 (NOK6,500) from galleries in Oslo, Paris, Edinburgh, London and New York. In keeping with the multilayered nature of the project, the certificates are works of art themselves, designed by Paterson and printed on paper made from the trees cleared for the new forest.

“Future Library makes you think about your own mortality and future generations,” says Hovind. “I might not be able to enjoy the last part of this project, but I can still enjoy the artwork. What an extraordinary gift for my grandchildren, or great-grandchildren to unwrap in 100 years.”

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