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Survival through Song

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If you lived in the future world of Canadian writer [Margaret Atwood's](#) *Maddaddam* trilogy, you might learn about the properties of plants through song rather than in a biology class: "The Dandelion shoots, for spring, / Before their flowers burst; / The Burdock root is best in June / When it is fat with juice." Throughout Atwood's trilogy, song plays an important role in transmitting knowledge in a place and time where the communications structures we take most for granted—the Internet, phones, and even books—are gone or hard to come by.

When to eat your dandelions, acorns, and milkweed, in song. Orville Stoeber accompanies himself singing his setting of Atwood's "Oh Sing We Now the Holy Weeds" from the "Oral Hymnbook of the God's Gardeners" in The Year of The Flood.

Just as you might have learned about copper mining from The Decemberists' "[Rox in the Box](#)" or about the collapse of London Bridge from the nursery song, the characters of Atwood's books learn through music and rhymes. The known world has been transformed into a global culture focused on youth and beauty. The rich live in luxurious compounds, where they can work, shop, and go to school protected from the lower classes—called "[pleebs](#)"—by armed, private security forces. In laboratories, researchers create animal hybrids like pigeons, which are enormous, telepathic pigs grown for human organ replacements. [Headless chickens](#) with extra body parts are bred and raised in dishes to feed people without waste. But while science works toward discovering a way for humans to achieve immortality, much of the natural world is dying off. When cataclysm does come, the survivors use song to preserve the knowledge and views they think are worth saving.

In *Oryx and Crake* (2003), the first book of the series, the scientist Crake decides that the world is beyond help. He adds a permanent birth-control element to the popular recreational drug BlyssPluss; creates a new, vegetarian, peaceful, communal species of human ("Crakers"); and then releases a plague that kills the vast majority of the rest of mankind in an effort to wipe the Earth clean and begin civilization again. In creating his new people, Crake tries to eliminate their desire to create art—including music—and their ability to take pleasure in it, but he finds that they're inexplicably "hard-wired for singing."¹ Indeed, the Crakers are capable of creating original music together — songs described as "strange" and "awful" by the remaining *homo sapiens*—and sing frequently, which ends up reinforcing their communal values. Even by the end of the trilogy, music does not evolve into the individualistic, pleasure-making activity that Crake feared would lead to rivalry and dissent among the group. Instead, it serves as a form of communication for the Crakers and remaining humans alike.

The second book, *The Year of the Flood* (2009), takes place at the same time as *Oryx and Crake* and follows a small group of hard-core environmental cultists called God's Gardeners. Isolated from the BlyssPluss-worshipping, compound-living majority, they meet up with Jimmy, Crake's old school pal, searching for safety and answers to their questions about the plague, which they call the "Waterless Flood." The final book, *Maddaddam* (2013), sees

Jimmy and a handful of other human survivors and the Crakers learning about one another, the new animals in their midst, and the new world in which they live. In the last two books of the series, Atwood's characters pass on knowledge in the form of song in order to find and grow food, heal the sick and injured, and even communicate with the pigeons.

Atwood includes the words for a dozen or so hymns in *The Year of the Flood*. She originally wrote the lyrics to **existing hymn tunes**, giving each song a similar flavor with simple melodic lines and regular phrases. Shortly after the book was published, Atwood found that readers as well as religious institutions wanted to know what tunes went with the hymns so they could sing her new words to the old melodies. At the same time, the composer **Orville Stoeber** asked her if he could write **new music** for the lyrics, and she agreed. Conservation groups, churches, and bookstores were all equally enthusiastic about the new music and **began performing it** as part of meetings, services, and book readings, **lectures**, and signings.

Atwood's hymns to the earth and its champions have moved from fictional performances to factual ones. Here she is joined mid-reading by Stoeber who sings "When Adam First" from the "Oral Hymnbook of the God's Gardeners."

Atwood has used song before in her work: in her 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, Christian hymns are used to indoctrinate citizens of a United States overthrown by a totalitarian Christian fundamentalist theocracy. In the *Maddaddam* trilogy, song serves as a device for remembering events and people, scientific facts, and beliefs. *The Year of the Flood* contains the most songs and references to song as a means of transmitting information about the past and present, basic herbal remedies and other nature lore, and environmental philosophy. God's Gardeners are led by two brothers who have developed self-sustaining communities in areas abandoned by the elite. In deserted buildings, playgrounds, and other enclaves of the mostly ruined "pleeblands," the Gardeners grow food and medicinal plants, compost everything including human bodies, and honor "saints" like **Rachel Carson** (a real-world biologist whose findings on the effect of certain pesticides on bird and other animal life led to the ban on DDT and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency). The leaders of the cult have developed an "oral hymnbook" of songs and, as one character reflects in *Maddaddam*, "once the Gardener Adams and Eves [senior leaders] taught you something, you stayed taught."²

The Gardeners relate the history of environmentalism through hymns such as "Today We Praise Our Saint Dian," which refers to real-life primatologist **Dian Fossey**. They sing: "She tracked the wild Gorilla bands / Until they learned to trust her Love, / And take her by the hand. / The timid giants, huge and strong, / She held in her courageous arms; / She guarded them with anxious care, / Lest they should come to harm." In "**We Praise the Tiny Moles**," the song's simple structure and repetitive nature makes it easy to understand and familiar in shape for listeners acquainted with ballads and popular music from cabaret, vaudeville, and Broadway.

In "The Earth Forgives," the Gardeners explain their belief system in which they must reject violence and anger: "The Deer at length forgives the Wolf / That tears his throat and drinks his blood; / His bones return to soil, and feed / The trees that flower and fruit and seed." And

in songs like “[The Peach or Plum](#),” young Gardeners are taught about pollination: “For every Nut or Seed or Fruit, / A tiny golden particle / Has winged its way, and taken root.”

Atwood has always rejected the “science fiction” label for her work, claiming that she writes about things that have already happened or are in progress in the real world. Certainly the way she has her characters incorporate song into their lives as a method for teaching and learning is drawn from reality. Children everywhere learn their letters by singing alphabet songs; “Old MacDonald’s Farm” teaches sorting skills; students have used [Tom Lehrer’s “Elements Song”](#) to memorize part of the periodical table; and teachers and students have used rap to memorize everything from [the prologue of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*](#) to the order of the American presidents to algebraic formulas. In any world, we can learn through music.

For Discussion

1. What kind of music would you use or write for sharing information like Atwood does, and why?
2. What real-life songs help us remember information or pass on knowledge, and why are they effective?

1 Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 352.

2 Margaret Atwood, *Maddaddam* (New York: Anchor, 2013), 10.