

Ka-Ching!

Margaret Atwood

Internationally acclaimed author Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario, in 1939. She received a bachelor's degree from the University of Toronto in 1961 and a master's degree from Harvard University in 1962. Since the mid-1960s, Atwood has received continuous critical acclaim for more than thirty books of fiction, poetry, essays, literary criticism, and children's literature. She is the recipient of dozens of awards, including most of the major literary prizes in Canada, as well as many from around the world, including the British Booker Prize in 2000 for her novel *The Blind Assassin*. Atwood is known for her careful craftsmanship, her precision with language, her erudition, and her stinging wit. In "Ka-Ching!" Atwood wittily describes her first job. What was your first job? What did you learn from it? Which skills required for that job are necessary for all your future jobs?

I'll pass over the mini-jobs of adolescence—the summer-camp stints that were more like getting paid for having fun. I'll pass over, too, the self-created pin-money generators—the puppet shows put on for kids at office Christmas parties, the serigraph posters turned out on the ping-pong table—and turn to my first real job. By "real job," I mean one that had nothing to do with friends of my parents or parents of my friends but was obtained in the adult manner, by looking through the ads in newspapers and going in to be interviewed—one for which I was entirely unsuited, and that I wouldn't have done except for the money. I was surprised when I got it, underpaid while doing it, and frustrated in

the performance of it, and these qualities have remained linked, for me, to the ominous word “job.”

The year was 1962, the place was Toronto. It was summer, and I was faced with the necessity of earning the difference between my scholarship for the next year and what it would cost me to live. The job was in the coffee shop of a small hotel on Avenue Road; it is now in the process of being torn down, but at that time it was a clean, well-lighted place, with booths along one side and a counter—possibly marble—down the other. The booths were served by a waitressing pro who lipsticked outside the lines, and who thought I was a mutant. My job would be serving things at the counter—coffee I would pour, toast I would create from bread, milkshakes I would whip up in the obstetrical stainless-steel device provided. (“Easy as pie,” I was told.) I would also be running the customers’ money through the cash register—an opaque machine with buttons to be pushed, little drawers that shot in and out, and a neurotic system of locks.

I said I had never worked a cash register before. This delighted the manager, a plump, unctuous character out of some novel I hadn’t yet read. He said the cash register, too, was easy as pie, and I would catch on to it in no time, as I was a smart girl with an M.A. He said I should go and get myself a white dress.

I didn’t know what he meant by “white dress.” I bought the first thing I could find on sale, a nylon afternoon number with daisies appliquéd onto the bodice. The waitress told me this would not do: I needed a dress like her *uniform*. (“How dense can you be?” I overheard her saying.) I got the uniform, but I had to go through the first day in my nylon daisies.

This first humiliation set the tone. The coffee was easy enough—I just had to keep the Bunn filled—and the milkshakes were possible; few people wanted them anyway. The sandwiches and deep-fried shrimp were made at the back: all I had to do was order them over the intercom and bin the leftovers.

But the cash register was perverse. Its drawers would pop open for no reason, or it would ring eerily when I swore I was nowhere near it; or it would lock itself shut, and the queue of customers waiting to pay

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would lengthen and scowl as I wrestled and sweated. I kept expecting to
be fired for incompetence, but the manager chortled more than ever.
Occasionally, he would bring some man in a suit to view me. "She's got
an M.A.," he would say, in a proud but pitying voice, and the two of them
would stare at me and shake their heads.

An ex-boyfriend discovered my place of employment, and would
also come to stare and shake his head, ordering a single coffee, taking an
hour to drink it, leaving me a sardonic nickel tip. The Greek short-order
cook decided I would be the perfect up-front woman for the restaurant
he wanted to open: he would marry me and do the cooking, I would
speak English to the clientele and work—was he mad?—the cash regis-
ter. He divulged his bank balance, and demanded to meet my father so
the two of them could close the deal. When I declined, he took to pho-
ning me over the intercom to whisper blandishments, and to plying me
with deep-fried shrimp. A girl as scrawny as myself, he pointed out, was
unlikely to get such a good offer again.

Then the Shriners hit town, took over the hotel, and began calling
for buckets of ice, or for doctors because they'd had heart attacks: too
much tricycle-riding in the hot sun was felling them in herds. I couldn't
handle the responsibility, the cash register had betrayed me once too
often, and the short-order cook was beginning to sing Frank Sinatra
songs to me. I gave notice.

Only when I'd quit did the manager reveal his true stratagem:
they'd wanted someone as inept as me because they suspected their real
cashier of skimming the accounts, a procedure I was obviously too igno-
rant to ever figure out. "Too stunned," as the waitress put it. She was
on the cashier's side, and had me fingered as a stoolie all along.

Notes

serigraph a print made by the process of silk-screening, a stencil method
in which a design is imposed on a screen of silk or other fine mesh material.
Blank areas are coated with an impermeable substance and ink is forced
through the mesh onto the printing surface.

ominous menacing; something related to an omen foreshadowing
trouble

obstetrical related to the branch of medicine dealing with childbirth
unctuous characterized by exaggerated or insincere earnestness; something that feels oily or soapy when touched, greasy

appliquéd fabric that has been stitched onto another fabric as an ornament

perverse determinedly going against what is right; wayward or difficult to get along with

sardonic mocking, bitter, or scornful

blandishments cajoling, flattering compliments

stratagem a method that is formulated and executed to achieve a specific goal; originally referred to as a trick devised to deceive the enemy

stoolie a person acting as a decoy or informer, such as one who is a spy for the police; sometimes referred to as a "stool pigeon"

Activities

1. List all of the details that Atwood reveals about herself in the essay, from both the perspective of her past and her perspective at the time she wrote this essay. What, according to Atwood, are her strengths and weaknesses? Which are stated overtly and which are implied? How can you tell that Atwood is looking back with some nostalgia at a past experience?
2. With a partner, use the glossary in this anthology and other reference tools to create a working definition of the term *irony*. Then reread the essay and identify each time Atwood uses irony in this essay. Have a class discussion in which you explore questions such as the following: What is the tone of this essay and in which ways has the author's use of irony contributed to it? Is there a relationship between Atwood's subject matter in this essay and her decision to use irony? What are the differences between irony, satire, and parody? Are any elements of satire or parody used in this essay?
3. With a partner, use the Internet to identify and do research on any specific field of study in a master's degree program at a university. Then choose a job that is unrelated to this field of study and do research on that occupation. With your partner, write a comedic script for two people in which a master's program student does not have the appropriate skills to fulfill the job requirements. With your partner, act out your script to a group and invite their feedback on what elements of the script and the performance enhance the humour of your production.