



MARGARET ATWOOD

Election 2011, a dark fiction

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I am a fiction writer. So here's a fiction.

A vacuum cleaner salesman comes to your door. "You must buy this vacuum cleaner," he says. "Why?" you say. "Because I know what's good for you," he says. "I know things you don't know." "What are they?" you say. "I can't tell you," he says, "because they're secret. You are required to trust me. The vacuum cleaner will create jobs."



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PHOTOS

Elephant in the room

"Where is the vacuum cleaner made?" you say. "In another country," he says. "So the jobs will be created in another country? Not here?" you say. You believe it's your right to query: It's your money and, come to think of it, you pay this guy's salary.

"Stop bickering," he says. "I am competent. That's my story and I'm sticking it to you." "I'm not bickering," you say. "I'm asking relevant questions. How much will the vacuum cleaner cost me?" "I can't tell you that," he says. "Why not? Because it's more than you claimed at first?" you say. "Or because you don't really know the cost?" "I can't tell you that, either," he says. "But you have to pay."

"Just a minute!" you say. "You want me to commit to an unknown, very large sum? That's not fair! And it's not competent, either." "More bickering!" he says. "We need stability!" "But I might have to go on paying huge sums for decades!" you say. "We're already up to our necks in debt! I'll have to give up other things – I won't be able to pay for the doctor, or support for special needs, or drinking water, or care for the elderly, or the kids' education, or ... and what happens if there's a pandemic, or a natural catastrophe such as an earthquake, and you've already spent the money that could have helped in a disaster?"

"You are a very negative person," he says. "You are not welcome here." "Where is here?" you say. "In my country," he says. "These are my mountains, this is my hockey, this is my flag. Mine! All mine! And I'm stamping my image on all of it!" "I like those icons, too," you say, "but I think they should be shared with everyone, don't you?" "What is this 'shared' of which you speak?" he says. "I believe in the individual and nothing but. Talk to the hand! Weak to the wall!"

"I don't want to pay for the vacuum cleaner," you say. "You have to pay for it," he says. "See, it says here on this document. Isn't this your signature?" "Yes," you say, "but the document's been changed to mean the exact opposite of what I signed. If I altered a document like that, I'd end up in jail." "You are double-plus not welcome," he says. "I make the rules around here."

"But –" you say. "Don't interrupt," he says. "In addition to the vacuum cleaner, you will have to pay for several very expensive jails, the cost of which is unknown."

"But the crime rate is falling!" you say. "Not for long," he says. "I'm planning to have it rise again. Once people have their money vacuumed away, with none left for doctors, or the kids' education, or making sure you don't eat poisoned food – all those frills – they'll get scared and depressed and desperate, the middle class will be toast, and the crime rate will rise. Anyway, I will criminalize lots more things. Because we need to fill up those jails!"

"I get the feeling you don't like me," you say. "Is it because I'm a girl? Or because I don't want you to run up huge debts without telling me what the money is for? What happened to accountability? It used to sound so great!"

"You are beneath my notice," he says, giving me the Death Glare. "Once I really get the whip hand, I will never have to answer another question from anyone. Not one question. Not ever again."

"That's a very dark fiction," says the reader. "Surely people won't sign away their right to know how their money is being spent! That would result in tyranny! It can't happen here!"

"Anything can happen anywhere," I say.

Margaret Atwood's latest non-fiction book is Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth.