

# MY CAREER AS AN INVENTOR

By Margaret Atwood



Yes, the rumours are true: I invented something. Something, that is, apart from the items I've fabricated in novels and stories. I'd intended to keep this invention under wraps until the fall, when the improved version might have been ready, but after a small closed-door demonstration something leaked, and I and my invention found ourselves deluged with interest. We were getting inquiries, not only from New York and London and Los Angeles, but also from Taiwan. So here's the story.

Innovation proceeds from need or desire, and in this case the need was mine. Author tours had become difficult—demand was high, an author has only one body, and this cannot be in three places at the same time. Publishers also needed my invention, as travel expenses were becoming prohibitive, especially in North America, due to its vast distances. As Harold Innes and Marshall McLuhan said back in the 60s, communication systems have long been high on Canada's list of concerns.

So as I was crawling around a hotel room in the United States in April of 2004, worrying about my 6 a.m. plane, I thought, "There must be a better way." (I also thought—to be frank—"When I'm 70, I won't be able to do this.") I remembered video conferencing, and the thing used by package deliverers. What if an author could communicate with a bookstore far away, see and talk with the customers, and actually sign books in that store—long distance—with real ink?

It turned out that the package-delivery item did not whiz your signature through the air, as I'd hoped. However, maybe something could. So I went to some techno-geniuses, and commissioned the answers to two questions:

- 1) Does the thing I have in mind already exist?
- And 2) if not, could it be made?

The answers were a no and a qualified yes. And so we went ahead.

The first thing I did was to set up a corporation: Unotchit Inc. I got some advice from a man with one foot in business and the other in the arts, Jack Rabinovitch, who set up the Giller Prize. (I've since expanded the informal advisory board to include representatives from publishing, book-selling, the music business, business as such, and film.) "Unotchit" is a



re-arrangement of intTouch, for “Internet Touch.” That was too close to existing names, so we re-arranged the letters. In Blackberry speak this says “You-No-Touch-It,” which points to one of our aims: signing at a distance.

Then I hired a Project Developer, Matthew Gibson. Then the techno-geniuses outlined a prototype research project. The companies we worked with were HFB5 Ltd. and Gut Level Productions. They produced the Model A Ford-level gizmo we demonstrated in November of '04: slow and clunky, but it worked. Meanwhile I'd acquired a brilliant patent lawyer, Anthony de Fazekas of Miller, Thompson. It helped that all of these people found the project interesting and fun.

Right now, the next phase is going ahead—the one that will result, we hope—in something that will work faster and better. There are many hurdles to be jumped and wrinkles to be ironed out, but if the adventure turns out well, publishers will be able to inexpensively “tour” many more authors—not just top names—and authors will be able to “visit” cities and towns and indeed countries where they would never normally be sent. Readers now excluded could interact with authors whose books they love, and could learn about new authors, and could acquire books signed by them. And all without the frenzy and wear-and-tear of the book tour as it exists today.

This doesn't mean authors will never go anywhere. Writers' festivals will not be affected, for instance. But in general there will be more book-related interaction, for more people, for less money. Not a bad thing.

Some journalists have asked me—jokingly, I think—whether I'm now going to trade in writing for a career as an inventor. I don't think so. First, I'm not a business person. I expect someone else to take this over and run it, eventually. Second, the whole point of helping the Unotchit remote book signer to enter the world was to give authors more time to write. So let's say I'm trading in my career as a travelling salesperson for a career in writing.

In novels, you can think up innovations without having to actually make them. It's easier.

**Margaret Atwood is the author of over forty books. Her work has been translated into forty languages. Her latest novel is *Oryx and Crake* (Seal), her latest work of non-fiction is *Moving Targets* (Anansi).**

*Photo by Jim Allen.*

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