Margaret Atwood’s next project is due in the 22nd century

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It’s not unusual for an author, after completing a manuscript, to wait an entire year, perhaps two, for a book to be published. But Margaret Atwood won’t be alive when her newest project arrives in bookstores – and neither will almost everyone else currently on the planet.

The celebrated Canadian author is the first participant in the Future Library initiative, an ambitious art project that is part Noah’s Ark and part time capsule. An exercise in both creativity and patience, the Future Library plans to collect 100 original works from 100 authors over the next 100 years, to be published a full century from now.

“It goes right back to that child part of us that used to bury things in the ravine, or in the backyard, and think, ‘Maybe someone will come along and dig this up,’” says Ms. Atwood, whose latest book, the short-story collection Stone Mattress, will be published much sooner – Tuesday.

The Future Library project was conceived by Katie Paterson, a 33-year-old Scottish artist. Along with the Future Library Trust, which includes a number of leading figures in the literary world, Ms. Paterson was granted a two-acre parcel of land in Nordmarka, a forest on the outskirts of Oslo, where 1,000 Norwegian spruce trees were planted this summer. The trees, which will be cut down in 100 years, will supply paper for an estimated 3,000 anthologies featuring the contributions of all participating authors.

Each year, a new author will be invited to participate in the project, meaning many of the contributing authors have likely not even been born. (Ms. Paterson says trustees have not begun discussing next year’s author.) After accepting an invitation from the trust, authors have one year to submit their manuscript. No one, not Ms. Paterson nor the trustees, who will change every four years, will be permitted to read the contributions of Ms. Atwood or any of the other participating authors. The unread manuscripts will be stored in a purpose-built room in a new public library scheduled to open in Oslo in 2018. The room, which will be partly built using wood harvested from the same forest, will feature a list of participating authors along with the title of their contribution. Everything else – the plot, genre, even whether their contribution is a novel or a poem, a short story or a play – will remain secret until 2114. In a sense, the room will function as a reverse-museum; instead of gazing upon artifacts from the past, visitors will encounter objects from the future.

“It’s a very hopeful project,” says Ms. Atwood. “It assumes, number one, that there are going to be people. Number two, that there’s going to be an Oslo. Number three, that there’s going to be a
library. And number four, that people will still be reading. And number five, that they'll still be able to understand what you are writing now.”

Ms. Atwood, whom Ms. Paterson describes as an “incredible, visionary author,” was the first writer invited to participate.

“I think that her work throughout the last decade has always been so very of the moment and very prescient,” says Ms. Paterson on the phone from Glasgow. “I’m just fascinated with the idea of what Margaret might write. None of us are going to know. But I wonder if she’ll write to a future, or about a future, and what ways these futures might overlap or become true over the years. Because, if she does write a kind of dystopian tale, you never know – maybe people in 100 years’ time will be reading it and it will all have happened. We hope not, of course.”

To ensure Kindle-toting future generations will have the tools to publish the manuscripts on paper, a printing press will be stored in the library, as well. “Just in case,” says Ms. Paterson. “Who knows what will happen in 100 years’ time? I mean, hopefully books are going to exist, but who can say?”

Iain Trewin, a trustee who serves as literary director of the Man Booker Prize, is convinced the publication of the manuscripts 100 years from now is “surely going to be one of the most-anticipated events, because it won’t only be this particular work of fiction, it’ll be others that have been written during the coming years. And what critics will be saying about what has been written will be, I think, absolutely fascinating. Sadly, none of us will be around to see it.”

Because of this, Ms. Atwood knows that, for as long as she’s alive, “everybody’s going to try” to find out what she’s written. She is allowed to tell one person. According to Ms. Paterson, the authors will be permitted to share their work with a trusted editor or translator, but Ms. Atwood says she will do no such thing.

“I’m not putting any trust in that. Everything leaks like a sieve,” says Ms. Atwood.

She doesn’t even plan to divulge any details to her husband, the writer Graeme Gibson. “He wouldn’t be interested anyways. He only reads my things once they’re published.”