

BOOK CLUB To Go!

The Handmaid's Tale

By Margaret Atwood

Introduction

In the world of the near future, who will control women's bodies?

Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead. She may leave the home of the Commander and his wife once a day to walk to food markets whose signs are now pictures instead of words because women are no longer allowed to read. She must lie on her back once a month and pray that the Commander makes her pregnant, because in an age of declining births, Offred and the other Handmaids are only valued if their ovaries are viable.

Offred can remember the days before, when she lived and made love with her husband Luke; when she played with and protected her daughter; when she had a job, money of her own, and access to knowledge. But all of that is gone now....

Funny, unexpected, horrifying, and altogether convincing, *The Handmaid's Tale* is at once scathing satire, dire warning, and tour de force.

(readinggroupguides.com)

About the Author

When Margaret Atwood announced to her friends that she wanted to be a writer, she was only 16 years old. It was Canada. It was the 1950s. No one knew what to think. Nonetheless, Atwood began her writing career as a poet. Published in 1964 while she was still a student at Harvard, her second poetry anthology, *The Circle Game*, was awarded the Governor General's Award, one of Canada's most esteemed literary prizes. Since then, Atwood has gone on to publish many more volumes of poetry (as well as literary criticism, essays, and short stories), but it is her novels for which she is best known.

Atwood's first foray into fiction was 1966's *The Edible Woman*, an arresting story about a woman who stops eating because she feels her life is consuming her. Grabbing the attention of critics, who applauded its startlingly original premise, the novel explored feminist themes Atwood has revisited time and time again during her long, prolific literary career. She is famous for strong, compelling female protagonists -- from the breast cancer survivor in *Bodily Harm* to the rueful artist in *Cat's Eye* to the fatefully intertwined sisters in her Booker Prize-winning novel *The Blind Assassin*.

Perhaps Atwood's most legendary character is Offred, the tragic "breeder" in what is arguably her most famous book, 1985's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Part fable, part science fiction, and part dystopian nightmare, this novel presented a harrowing vision of women's lives in an oppressive futuristic society. *The Washington Post* compared it (favorably) to George Orwell's iconic *1984*.

As if her status as a multi-award-winning, triple-threat writer (fiction, poetry, and essays) were not enough, Atwood has also produced several children's books, including *Princess Prunella and the Purple Peanut* (1995) and *Rude Ramsay and the Roaring Radishes* (2003) -- delicious alliterative delights that introduce a wealth of new vocabulary to young readers.

(barnesandnoble.com)

Author Interview by Random House

Q: RH: Was there any special research involved in writing *The Handmaid's Tale*?

A: A: I clipped articles out of newspapers. I now have a large clippings file of stories supporting the contentions in the book. In other words, there isn't anything in the book not based on something that has already happened in history or in another country, or for which actual supporting documentation is not already available.

Q: RH: It's hard to pin down a genre for this novel. Is it science fiction?

A: A: No, it certainly isn't science fiction. Science fiction is filled with Martians and space travel to other planets, and things like that. That isn't this book at all. *The Handmaid's Tale* is speculative fiction in the genre of *Brave New World* and *1984*. *1984* was written not as science fiction but as an extrapolation of life in 1948. So, too, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a slight twist on the society we have now.

Q: RH: You seem to see a role for the novel beyond entertainment.

A: A: I was once a graduate student in Victorian literature and I believe as the Victorian novelists did, that a novel isn't simply a vehicle for private expression, but that it also exists for social examination. I firmly believe this.

Q: RH: The way the reader comes into *The Handmaid's Tale* is through a diary or a journal, memories rescued and viewed from a time in the future. The curtain is drawn back slowly. Why did you choose to write it that way?

A: A: What I've written is only the view of one woman who lives in that society. I reveal Gilead through the eyes of that one woman. It would be cheating to show the reader more than the character has access to. Her information is limited. In fact, her lack of information is part of the nightmare.

(*randomhouse.com*)

Reviews

"A novel that brilliantly illuminates some of the darker interconnections between politics and sex . . . Just as the world of Orwell's *1984* gripped our imaginations, so will the world of Atwood's *handmaid!*" –*Washington Post Book World*

"*The Handmaid's Tale* deserves the highest praise"–*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Atwood takes many trends which exist today and stretches them to their logical and chilling conclusions . . . An excellent novel about the directions our lives are taking . . . Read it while it's still allowed." –*Houston Chronicle*

(*randomhouse.com*)

Movie Adaptation

In this dystopian fable, a librarian wife and mother becomes the childbearing pawn of a Christian theocracy. In the near future, as war rages across the fictional North American Republic of Gilead and pollution has rendered 99 percent of the female population sterile, Kate (Natasha Richardson) sees her husband killed and her daughter kidnapped while trying to escape across the border. Kate herself is transformed into a handmaid -- a surrogate mother for one of the privileged but barren couples who run the country's fundamentalist regime. Although she resists being indoctrinated into the bizarre cult of the handmaids, which mixes Old Testament orthodoxy and misogynist cant with 12-step gospel and ritualized violence, Kate soon finds herself ensconced at the home of the Commander (Robert Duvall) and his frosty wife, Serena Joy (Faye Dunaway). Forced to lie between Serena Joy's legs and be penetrated impersonally each month by the Commander, Kate longs for her vanished earlier life; she soon learns that since many of the nation's powerful men are as sterile as their wives, she may have to risk the punishment for fornication -- death by hanging -- in order to sleep with another man who can provide her with the pregnancy that has become her sole *raison d'être*. When that other man turns out to be Nick (Aidan Quinn), the Commander's handsome, sympathetic driver, Kate grows attached to him -- and eventually pregnant with his child. Only the mysterious rebel affiliations of her fellow handmaid, Ofglen (Blanche Baker), seem to offer any chance of giving her unborn child a life of freedom -- or finding the daughter she already lost. Loosely adapted by Harold Pinter from the novel by Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* also features Elizabeth McGovern in a small but pivotal role as Moira, a "gender traitor" who befriends Kate at the handmaids' reprogramming center. - Brian J. Dillard –*All Movie Guide*

(*moviefone.com*)

Movie Reviews

"*The Handmaid's Tale*" is less a reproductive horror story than a blanked-out bodice ripper, another femme fatality. –Rita Kempley - *The Washington Post*

"*Handmaid's Tale*" does turn out to be an otherworldly bad dream, with a time-delayed effect that hangs with you for days afterward, rapidly improving -- or alarming -- with age. –Desson Howe - *The Washington Post*

At the end of the movie we are conscious of large themes and deep thoughts, and of good intentions drifting out of focus. –Roger Ebert –*Chicago Sun-Times*

(*rottentomatoes.com*)

Further Reading

I, Robot by Isaac Asimov

Timeline by Michael Crichton

The Stepford Wives by Ira Levin

The Time Machine by H. G. Wells

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. The novel begins with three epigraphs. What are their functions?
2. In Gilead, women are categorized as wives, handmaids, Marthas, or Aunts, but Moira refuses to fit into a niche. Offred says she was like an elevator with open sides who made them dizzy, she was their fantasy. Trace Moira's role throughout the tale to determine what she symbolizes.
3. Aunt Lydia, Janine, and Offred's mother also represent more than themselves. What do each of their characters connote? What do the style and color of their clothes symbolize?
4. At one level, *The Handmaid's Tale* is about the writing process. Atwood cleverly weaves this sub-plot into a major focus with remarks by Offred such as "Context is all," and "I've filled it out for her...", "I made that up," and "I wish this story were different." Does Offred's habit of talking about the process of storytelling make it easier or more difficult for you to suspend disbelief?
5. A palimpsest is a medieval parchment that scribes attempted to scrape clean and use again, though they were unable to obliterate all traces of the original. How does the new republic of Gilead's social order often resemble a palimpsest?
6. The commander in the novel says you can't cheat nature. How do characters find ways to follow their natural instinct?
7. Why is the Bible under lock and key in Gilead?
8. Babies are referred to as "a keeper," "unbabies," "shredders." What other real or fictional worlds do these terms suggest?
9. Atwood's title brings to mind titles from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Why might Atwood have wanted you to make that connection?
10. What do you feel the historical notes at the book's end add to the reading of this novel? What does the book's last line mean to you?

(readinggroupguides.com)