

MARGARET  
ATWOOD



# The Handmaid's Tale

## Author Background

### Margaret Atwood

**Born:** Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

**Birthdate:** 18 November 1939

**Educated:** University of Toronto; Radcliffe College, Cambridge;  
and Harvard University, Cambridge

**Lives:** Toronto, Canada

Margaret Atwood is a poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, inventor and environmental activist. She began writing her own poetry and plays at the age of six, during a childhood spent travelling around Ontario and the backwoods of Quebec with her father, a forest entomologist. At sixteen, she determined she wanted to become a professional writer.

Atwood's first published works appeared in *Acta Victoriana*, the literary journal of Victoria College at the University of Toronto, where she studied for a B.A. in English. Her privately published book of poetry, *Double Persephone*, won the E. J. Pratt Medal for Canadian Literature in 1961, the first of over twenty-five awards and honours bestowed upon her over the continuing course of her career. Atwood has written more than forty works of fiction, poetry and critical essays, including *Alias Grace* (1996) *The Blind Assassin* (Booker Prize winner, 2000), the *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2013) and *Hag-seed* (2016), a retelling of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

Atwood's works have embraced themes of the power of language, the Canadian identity, gender and identity, religion and myth, climate change, and "power politics". They have been classified in the genres of historical fiction, dystopian fiction, and science fiction, however Atwood has resisted this last term, preferring the designation "speculative fiction". She states that her stories do not spring solely from her imagination:

*I made a rule for myself: I would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time, or for which the technology did not already exist. I did not wish to be accused of dark, twisted inventions, or of misrepresenting the human potential for deplorable behavior.*

Atwood began writing *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1984, while living in West Berlin, still encircled by the Berlin Wall at that time. Published in 1985, the book has never been out of print since.

Atwood is also the inventor of the LongPen - a remote signing device which allows someone to remotely write in ink, using a tablet PC, the Internet, and a robotic hand. The technology was used by Conrad Black to "attend" a book signing while under house arrest.

**Sources:** Author's website, Wikipedia, The Poetry Foundation website

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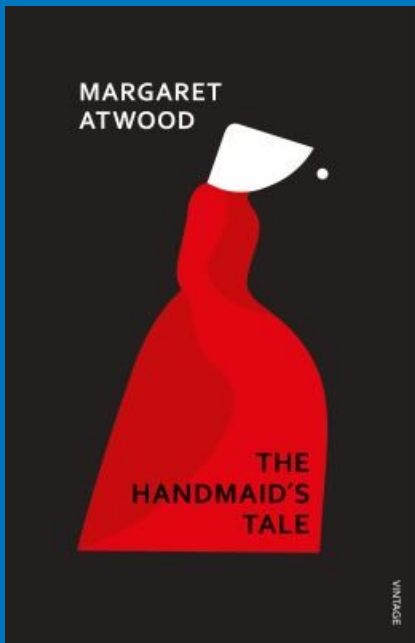
## Book Summary

A gripping vision of our society radically overturned by a theocratic revolution, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has become one of the most powerful and most widely read novels of our time.

Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, serving in the household of the enigmatic Commander and his bitter wife. She may go out once a day to markets whose signs are now pictures because women are not allowed to read. She must pray that the Commander makes her pregnant, for in a time of declining birthrates her value lies in her fertility, and failure means exile to the dangerously polluted Colonies. Offred can remember a time when she lived with her husband and daughter and had a job, before she lost even her own name. Now she navigates the intimate secrets of those who control her every move, risking her life in breaking the rules.

Like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid's Tale* has endured not only as a literary landmark but as a warning of a possible future that is still chillingly relevant.

Source: Penguin Random House website



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## Discussion Questions

1. The book starts with three epigrams. Discuss how you think they relate to the novel.
2. A word used in the opening paragraph, 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, with the past informing the present? Is the book's setting in Cambridge, Massachusetts (the centre of Puritan governance in the 1600s) significant?
3. 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.*” Discuss Moira's role throughout the tale, and what she symbolizes.
4. Aunt Lydia, Janine, and Offred's mother also represent more than themselves. What do each of their characters connote? What do the style and colour of their clothes symbolize?
5. In Chapter Sixteen, Offred reflects on the effect The Ceremony has on two of its three main players: Offred and Serena Joy. She asks herself “*Which of us is it worse for, her or me?*” In ways large or small, everyone in Gilead seems to chafe at the restraints of the new system. What does that general resistance reveal about human nature?
6. The Commander in the novel says you can't cheat nature. How do characters find ways to follow their natural instincts?
7. Why is the Bible under lock and key in Gilead?
8. According to Mary McCarthy's *New York Times* review written in 1986, *The Handmaid's Tale* “*just does not tell me what there is in our present mores that I ought to watch out for unless I want the United States of America to become a slave state something like the Republic of Gilead*”. Thirty years on, can you identify examples of present mores that might promote the novel's vision?

### *Just for fun*

Many people have had the mock-latin phrase “Nolite de bastardes carborundorum” tattooed upon themselves, as a permanent expression of resistance and rebellion against tyranny. What literary quote would you most likely choose as a tattoo, and why?

Most questions adapted from the Penguin Random House website, and the Amnesty International Book Club Discussion Guide, May 2015

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## Reviews

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a novel that brilliantly illuminates some of the darker interconnections of politics and sex, and it will no doubt be labelled a "feminist 1984." Yet it is Atwood's achievement to have produced a political novel that avoids the pitfall of doctrinaire writing.

Offred lives and breathes. She is defiant in her own way, but no Superwoman. She resembles neither her mother, a militant feminist leader of drives against pornography, nor her friend Moira, a gay activist who refuses to become a handmaid and briefly manages to join the underground. She is simply a warm, intelligent, ordinary woman who had taken for granted the freedoms she was to lose -- the freedom to love, the freedom to work, the freedom to have access to knowledge.

Joyce Johnson, *The Washington Post*, 1986

...Among other things, [*The Handmaid's Tale*] is a political tract deploring nuclear energy, environmental waste, and antifeminist attitudes.

But it so much more than that - a taut thriller, a psychological study, a play on words. It has a sense of humour about itself, as well as an ambivalence toward even its worst villains, who aren't revealed as such until the very end. Best of all, it holds out the possibility of redemption. After all, the Handmaid is also a writer. She has written this book. She may have survived.

Finally, if it is an ideological jeremiad, it happens also to be a sadomasochistic fantasy, what one might even call a celebrated version of Pauline Reage's *Story of O*. The tension between these two ways of reading it makes even more interesting what is already a rich and complex book.

Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, *The New York Times*, 1986

[With her] trying novel [...] Atwood has taken both the socioecological excesses and the burgeoning conservatism that exist within the contemporary U.S. and has extrapolated them to their most extreme point, furnishing us with a lesson on how terribly monitored our future lives might be. This *cri de coeur* is certainly impassioned, and Atwood's adept style renders the grim atmosphere of the future quite palpably. But the didacticism of the novel wears thin; the book is simply too obvious to support its fictional context. Still, Atwood is quite an esteemed fiction writer, the author of such well-received novels as *Surfacing* (1973) and *Life before Man* (1980). Demand for her latest effort, therefore, is bound to be high; unfortunately, the number of disappointed readers may be equally high.

Brad Hooper, *Booklist*, 1986

## Reviews (continued)

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Surely the essential element of a cautionary tale is recognition. Surprised recognition, even, enough to administer a shock. We are warned, by seeing our present selves in a distorting mirror, of what we may be turning into if current trends are allowed to continue. That was the effect of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with its scary dating, not 40 years ahead, maybe also of *Brave New World* and, to some extent, of *A Clockwork Orange*.

It is an effect, for me, almost strikingly missing from Margaret Atwood's very readable book *The Handmaid's Tale*, offered by the publisher as a "forecast" of what we may have in store for us in the quite near future. A standoff will have been achieved *vis-a-vis* the Russians, and our own country will be ruled by right-wingers and religious fundamentalists, with males restored to the traditional role of warriors and us females to our "place" - which, however, will have undergone subdivision into separate sectors, of wives, breeders, servants and so forth, each clothed in the appropriate uniform. A fresh postfeminist approach to future shock, you might say. Yet the book just does not tell me what there is in our present mores that I ought to watch out for unless I want the United States of America to become a slave state something like the Republic of Gilead whose outlines are here sketched out.

Mary McCarthy, *The New York Times*, 1986

Atwood, to her credit, creates a chillingly specific, imaginable night-mare. The book is short on characterization - this is Atwood, never a warm writer, at her steeliest - and long on cynicism - it's got none of the human credibility of a work such as Walker Percy's *Love In The Ruins*. But the scariness is visceral, a world that's like a dangerous and even fatal grid, an electrified fence. Tinny perhaps, but still a minutely rendered and impressively steady feminist vision of apocalypse.

*Kirkus Reviews*, 1985

Margaret Atwood's cautionary tale of postfeminist future shock pictures a nation formed by a backlash against feminism, but also by nuclear accidents, chemical pollution, radiation poisoning, a host of our present problems run amok. Ms. Atwood draws as well on New England Puritan history for her repressive 22nd-century society. Her deft sardonic humor makes much of the action and dialogue in the novel funny and ominous at the same time.

*New York Times* Editor's Choice 1986