



# The handmaid's tale

**By Margaret Atwood**

First published in 1986

## Genre & subjects

Canadian fiction

Feminist fiction

Literary fiction

## Synopsis

*The handmaid's tale* is an imaginatively audacious novel that is at once a page-turning psychological thriller, a moving love story, and a chilling warning about what might be waiting for us around the corner. What ultimately makes it stand out is Atwood's ability to balance a passionate political statement with finely wrought literary fiction. *The handmaid's tale* is a remarkable work by one of Canada's most inventive writers.

## Author biography

Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa and grew up in northern Ontario, Quebec, and Toronto. She received her undergraduate degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto and her master's degree from Radcliffe College.

The daughter of a forest entomologist, Atwood spent a large part of her childhood in the Canadian wilderness. At the age of six she began to write "poems, morality plays, comic books, and an unfinished novel about an ant." At sixteen she found that writing was "suddenly the only thing I wanted to do."

Throughout her career, Margaret Atwood has received numerous awards and several honorary degrees including the Canadian Governor General's Award, Le Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in France, and the National Arts Club Medal of Honour for Literature. She is the author of more than thirty volumes of poetry, non-fiction, and fiction, including children's books, and short stories.

*Author biography provided by Random House Books*

## Discussion starters

- The novel begins with three epigraphs. What are their functions?
- 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.
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- The commander in the novel says you can't cheat nature. How do characters find ways to follow their natural instinct?
- Why is the Bible under lock and key in Gilead?
- Babies are referred to as "a keeper," "unbabies," "shredders." What other real or fictional worlds do these terms suggest?
- Atwood's title brings to mind titles from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Why might Atwood have wanted you to make that connection?
- 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?

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*Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

*When She Woke* by Hillary Jordan

*A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf

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