

The Handmaid's Tale

By Margaret Atwood

First published in 1986



Genre and Subject

Dystopian fiction

Feminist fiction

Synopsis

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 valued only if their ovaries are viable. Offred can remember the years 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.

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.

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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