

NOW A MAJOR TV SERIES



**THE
HANDMAID'S
TALE**

MARGARET ATWOOD

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

VINTAGE

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Margaret Atwood

Dedication

Title Page

Introduction

Epigraph

I: Night

Chapter One

II: Shopping

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

III: Night

Chapter Seven

IV: Waiting Room

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve

V: Nap
Chapter Thirteen

VI: Household
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen

VII: Night
Chapter Eighteen

VIII: Birth Day
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three

IX: Night
Chapter Twenty-Four

X: Soul Scrolls
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine

XI: Night

Chapter Thirty

XII: Jezebel'S

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Chapter Thirty-Nine

XIII: Night

Chapter Forty

XIV: Salvaging

Chapter Forty-One

Chapter Forty-Two

Chapter Forty-Three

Chapter Forty-Four

Chapter Forty-Five

XV: Night

Chapter Forty-Six

Historical Notes

Copyright

About the Book

Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead. She has only one function: to breed. If she deviates, she will, like dissenters, be hanged at the wall or sent out to die slowly of radiation sickness. But even a repressive state cannot obliterate desire – neither Offred's nor that of the two men on which her future hangs.

About the Author

Margaret Atwood's books have been published in over thirty-five countries. She is the author of more than forty works of fiction, poetry, critical essays, and books for children. Her novels include *Bodily Harm*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, which won the Giller Prize in Canada and the Premio Mondello in Italy; *The Blind Assassin*, winner of the 2000 Booker Prize; *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. She was awarded the Prince of Asturias Prize for Literature in 2008.

Margaret Atwood lives in Toronto, Canada.

Also by Margaret Atwood

Novels

The Edible Woman

Surfacing

Lady Oracle

Life Before Man

Bodily Harm

Cat's Eye

The Robber Bride

Alias Grace

The Blind Assassin

Oryx and Crake

The Penelopiad

The Year of the Flood

MaddAddam

The Heart Goes Last

Hag-Seed

Short Stories

Dancing Girls

Murder in the Dark

Bluebeard's Egg

Wilderness Tips

Good Bones and Simple Murders

The Tent

Moral Disorder

Stone Mattress

Poetry

Double Persephone

The Circle Game

Speeches for Doctor Frankenstein

The Animals in That Country

The Journals of Susanna Moodie

Procedures for Underground

Power Politics

You Are Happy

Selected Poems: 1965–1975

Two-Headed Poems

True Stories

Interlunar

Selected Poems II: Poems

Selected and New 1976–1986

Morning in the Burned House

Eating Fire: Selected Poetry 1965–1995

The Door

Non-Fiction

Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature

Days of the Rebels: 1815–1840

Second Words

Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature

Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing

Moving Targets: Writing with Intent: 1982–2004

Curious Pursuits: Occasional Writing

Writing with Intent: Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose 1983–2005

Payback: Debt as Metaphor and the Shadows Side of Wealth

In Other Words: SF and the Human Imagination

FOR MARY WEBSTER AND PERRY MILLER

MARGARET ATWOOD

The Handmaid's Tale

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Introduction

IN THE SPRING of 1984 I began to write a novel that was not initially called *The Handmaid's Tale*. I wrote in long hand, mostly on yellow legal notepads, then transcribed my almost illegible scrawlings using a huge German-keyboard manual typewriter that I'd rented.

The keyboard was German because I was living in West Berlin, which was still encircled by the Berlin Wall: the Soviet empire was still strongly in place and was not to crumble for another five years. Every Sunday the East German air force made sonic booms to remind us of how close they were. During my visits to several countries behind the Iron Curtain – Czechoslovakia, East Germany – I experienced the wariness, the feeling of being spied on, the silences, the changes of subject, the oblique ways in which people might convey information, and these had an influence on what I was writing. So did the repurposed buildings. *This used to belong to . . . But then they disappeared*. I heard such stories many times.

Having been born in 1939 and come to consciousness during World War II, I knew that established orders could vanish overnight. Change could also be as fast as lightning. *It can't happen here* could not be depended on: anything could happen anywhere, given the circumstances.

By 1984, I'd been avoiding my novel for a year or two. It seemed to me a risky venture. I'd read extensively in science fiction, speculative fiction, utopias and dystopias ever since my high school years in the 1950s, but I'd never written such a book. Was I up to it? The form was strewn with pitfalls, among them a tendency to sermonize, a veering into allegory, and a lack of

plausibility. If I was to create an imaginary garden, I wanted the toads in it to be real. One of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened in what James Joyce called the “nightmare” of history, nor any technology not already available. No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities. God is in the details, they say. So is the devil.

Back in 1984, the main premise seemed – even to me – fairly outrageous. Would I be able to persuade readers that the United States of America had suffered a coup that had transformed an erstwhile liberal democracy into a literal-minded theocratic dictatorship? In the book, the Constitution and Congress are no longer: the Republic of Gilead is built on a foundation of the seventeenth-century Puritan roots that have always lain beneath the modern-day America we thought we knew.

The immediate location of the book is Cambridge, Massachusetts, home of Harvard University, now a leading liberal educational institution but once a Puritan theological seminary. The Secret Service of Gilead is located in the Widener Library, where I had spent many hours in the stacks, researching my New England ancestors as well as the Salem witchcraft trials. Would some people be affronted by the use of the Harvard wall as a display area for the bodies of the executed? (They were.)

In the novel, the population is shrinking due to a toxic environment, and the ability to have viable babies is at a premium. (In today’s real world, studies in China are now showing a sharp fertility decline in Chinese men.) Under totalitarianisms – or indeed in any sharply hierarchical society – the ruling class monopolizes valuable things, so the elite of the regime arrange to have fertile females assigned to them as Handmaids. The biblical precedent is the story of Jacob and his two wives, Rachel and Leah, and their two handmaids. One man, four women, twelve sons – but the handmaids could not claim the sons. They belonged to the respective wives.

And so the tale unfolds.

When I first began *The Handmaid's Tale* it was called *Offred*, the name of its central character. This name is composed of a man's first name, Fred, and a prefix denoting "belonging to," so it is like "de" in French or "von" in German, or like the suffix -son in English last names such as Williamson. Within this name is concealed another possibility: "offered," denoting a religious offering or a victim offered for sacrifice.

Why do we never learn the real name of the central character, I have often been asked. Because, I reply, so many people throughout history have had their names changed or have simply disappeared from view. Some have deduced that Offred's real name is June, since, of all the names whispered among the Handmaids in the gymnasium/ dormitory, June is the only one that never appears again. That was not my original thought, but it fits, so readers are welcome to it if they wish.

At some time during the writing, the novel's name changed to *The Handmaid's Tale*, partly in honor of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, but partly also in reference to fairy tales and folktales: the story told by the central character partakes – for later or remote listeners – of the unbelievable, the fantastic, as do the stories told by those who have survived earth-shattering events.

Over the years, *The Handmaid's Tale* has taken many other forms. It has been translated into forty or more languages. It was made into a film, in 1989. It has been an opera, and it has also been a ballet. It is being turned into a graphic novel. And in April of 2017 it launched as an MGM/Hulu television series.

In this series I have a small cameo. The scene is the one in which the newly conscripted Handmaids are being brainwashed in a sort of Red Guard re-education facility known as the Red Center. They must learn to renounce their previous identities, to know their place and their duties, to understand that they have no real rights but will be protected up to a point if they conform, and to think so poorly of themselves that they will accept their assigned fate and not rebel or run away.

The Handmaids sit in a circle, with the Taser-equipped Aunts forcing them to join in what is now called (but was not, in 1984) the “slut-shaming” of one of their number, Jeanine, who is being made to recount how she was gang-raped as a teenager. *Her fault, she led them on* – that is the chant of the other Handmaids.

Although it was “only a television show” and these were actresses who would be giggling at coffee break, and I myself was “just pretending,” I found this scene horribly upsetting. It was way too much like way too much history. Yes, women will gang up on other women. Yes, they will accuse others to keep themselves off the hook: we see that very publicly in the age of social media, which enables group swarmings. Yes, they will gladly take positions of power over other women, even – and, possibly, especially – in systems in which women as a whole have scant power: all power is relative, and in tough times any amount is seen as better than none. Some of the controlling Aunts are true believers, and think they are doing the Handmaids a favor: at least they haven’t been sent to clean up toxic waste, and at least in this brave new world they won’t get raped, not as such, not by strangers. Some of the Aunts are sadists. Some are opportunists. And they are adept at taking some of the stated aims of 1984 feminism – such as the anti-porn campaign and greater safety from sexual assault – and turning them to their own advantage. As I say: real life.

Which brings me to three questions I am often asked.

First, is *The Handmaid’s Tale* a “feminist” novel? If you mean an ideological tract in which all women are angels and/or so victimized they are incapable of moral choice, no. If you mean a novel in which women are human beings – with all the variety of character and behavior that implies – and are also interesting and important, and what happens to them is crucial to the theme, structure, and plot of the book, then yes. In that sense, many books are “feminist.”

Why interesting and important? Because women are interesting and important in real life. They are not an afterthought of nature, they are not secondary players in human destiny, and every society has always known

that. Without women capable of giving birth, human populations will die out. That is why the mass rape and murder of women, girls, and children has long been a feature of genocidal wars, and of other campaigns meant to subdue and exploit a population. Kill their babies and replace their babies with yours, as cats do; make women have babies they can't afford to raise, or babies you will then remove from them for your own purposes, steal babies – it's been a widespread, age-old motif. The control of women and babies has been a feature of every repressive regime on the planet. Napoleon and his “cannon fodder,” slavery and its ever-renewed human merchandise – they both fit in here. Of those promoting enforced childbirth, it should be asked: *Cui bono?* Who profits by it? Sometimes this sector, sometimes that. Never no one.

The second question that comes up frequently is: Is *The Handmaid's Tale* anti-religion? Again, it depends what you may mean by that. True, a group of authoritarian men seize control and attempt to restore an extreme version of the patriarchy, in which women (like nineteenth-century American slaves) are forbidden to read. Further, they can't control money or have jobs outside the home, unlike some women in the Bible. The regime uses biblical symbols, as any authoritarian regime taking over America doubtless would: they wouldn't be Communists or Muslims.

The modesty costumes worn by the women of Gilead are derived from Western religious iconography – the Wives wear the blue of purity, from the Virgin Mary, the Handmaids wear red, from the blood of parturition, but also from Mary Magdalene. Also, red is easier to see if you happen to be fleeing. The wives of men lower in the social scale are called Econowives, and wear stripes. I must confess that the face-hiding bonnets came not only from mid-Victorian costume and from nuns, but from the Old Dutch Cleanser package of the 1940s, which showed a woman with her face hidden, and which frightened me as a child. Many totalitarianisms have used clothing, both forbidden and enforced, to identify and control people – think of yellow stars and Roman purple – and many have ruled behind a religious front. It makes the creation of heretics that much easier.

In the book, the dominant “religion” is moving to seize doctrinal control, and religious denominations familiar to us are being annihilated. Just as the Bolsheviks destroyed the Mensheviks in order to eliminate political competition, and Red Guard factions fought to the death against one another, the Catholics and the Baptists are being targeted and eliminated. The Quakers have gone underground, and are running an escape route to Canada, as – I suspect – they would. Offred herself has a private version of the Lord’s Prayer and refuses to believe that this regime has been mandated by a just and merciful God. In the real world today, some religious groups are leading movements for the protection of vulnerable groups, including women.

So the book is not “anti-religion.” It is against the use of religion as a front for tyranny; which is a different thing altogether.

Is *The Handmaid’s Tale* a prediction? That is the third question I’m asked – increasingly, as forces within American society seize power and enact decrees that embody what they were saying they wanted to do, even back in 1984, when I was writing the novel. No, it isn’t a prediction, because predicting the future isn’t really possible: there are too many variables and unforeseen possibilities. Let’s say it’s an anti-prediction: if this future can be described in detail, maybe it won’t happen. But such wishful thinking cannot be depended on either.

So many different strands fed into *The Handmaid’s Tale* – group executions, sumptuary laws, book burnings, the Lebensborn program of the S.S. and the child-stealing of the Argentinian generals, the history of slavery, the history of American polygamy . . . the list is long.

But there’s a literary form I haven’t mentioned yet: the literature of witness. Offred records her story as best she can; then she hides it, trusting that it may be discovered later, by someone who is free to understand it and share it. This is an act of hope: every recorded story implies a future reader. Robinson Crusoe keeps a journal. So did Samuel Pepys, in which he chronicled the Great Fire of London. So did many who lived during the Black Death, although their accounts often stop abruptly. So did Roméo Dallaire,

who chronicled both the Rwandan genocide and the world's indifference to it. So did Anne Frank, hidden in her secret annex.

There are two reading audiences for Offred's account: the one at the end of the book, at an academic conference in the future, who are free to read but not always as empathetic as one might wish; and the individual reader of the book at any given time. That is the "real" reader, the Dear Reader for whom every writer writes. And many Dear Readers will become writers in their turn. That is how we writers all started: by reading. We heard the voice of a book speaking to us.

In the wake of the recent American election, fears and anxieties proliferate. Basic civil liberties are seen as endangered, along with many of the rights for women won over the past decades and indeed the past centuries. In this divisive climate, in which hate for many groups seems on the rise and scorn for democratic institutions is being expressed by extremists of all stripes, it is a certainty that someone, somewhere – many, I would guess – are writing down what is happening as they themselves are experiencing it. Or they will remember, and record later, if they can.

Will their messages be suppressed and hidden? Will they be found, centuries later, in an old house, behind a wall?

Let us hope it doesn't come to that. I trust it will not.

February 2017

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.

And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel: and he said, Am I in God's stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb?

And she said, Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.

– Genesis, 30:1-3

But as to myself, having been wearied out for many years with offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts, and at length utterly despairing of success, I fortunately fell upon this proposal ...

– Jonathan Swift, A Modest Proposal

In the desert there is no sign that says, Thou shalt not eat stones.

– Sufi proverb

I
NIGHT

CHAPTER ONE

WE SLEPT IN what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone. A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in mini-skirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair. Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail, garlands made of tissue-paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of mirrors, powdering the dancers with a snow of light.

There was old sex in the room and loneliness, and expectation, of something without a shape or name. I remember that yearning, for something that was always about to happen and was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then, in the small of the back, or out back, in the parking lot, or in the television room with the sound turned down and only the pictures flickering over lifting flesh.

We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability? It was in the air; and it was still in the air, an afterthought, as we tried to sleep, in the army cots that had been set up in rows, with spaces between so we could not talk. We had flannelette sheets, like children's, and army-issue blankets, old ones that still said U.S. We folded our clothes neatly