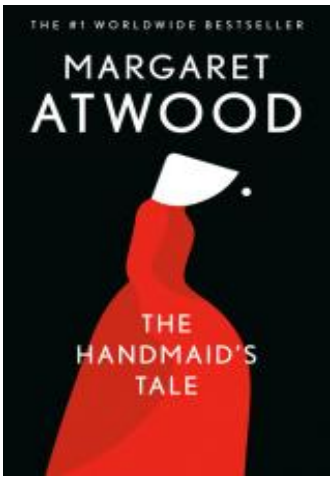
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The Handmaid's Tale

by Margaret Atwood



About the Book

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.

Discussion Guide

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?

Author Bio

Margaret Atwood is the author of more than 50 books of fiction, poetry and critical essays. Her novels include CAT'S EYE, THE ROBBER BRIDE, ALIAS GRACE, THE BLIND ASSASSIN and the *MaddAddam* trilogy. Her 1985 classic, THE HANDMAID'S TALE, was followed in 2019 by a sequel, THE TESTAMENTS, which was a global #1 bestseller and won the Booker Prize.

Atwood has won numerous awards, including the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Imagination in Service to Society, the Franz Kafka Prize, the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, the PEN America Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. In 2019, she was made a member of the Order of the Companions of Honour for services to litera-ture. She lives in Toronto.

Critical Praise

"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."

The Handmaid's Tale

by Margaret Atwood

Publication Date: March 16, 1998
Genres: Science Fiction
Paperback: 311 pages
Publisher: Anchor
ISBN-10: 038549081X
ISBN-13: 9780385490818