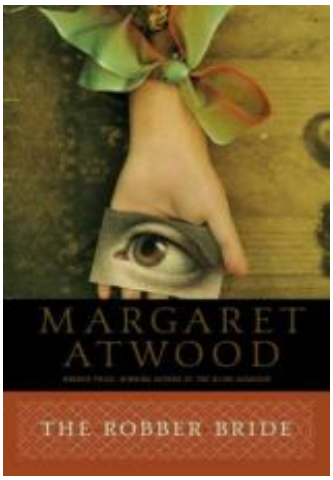
The Robber Bride

by Margaret Atwood



About the Book

The Robber Bride opens on Tuesday, October 23, 1990, as Libra moves into Scorpio, as Atwood informs us. Three middle-aged Toronto women--Tony, a military historian; Charis, a flower child; and Roz, an entrepreneur--who have been friends since university, are meeting for lunch in a trendy Queen Street restaurant called The Toxique. The seemingly disparate trio are bonded by their mutual hatred and fear of a fourth classmate, the evil marauder Zenia, who has the power to bridge their defenses, steal their lovers, and even to come back from the dead and bewitch their children with her nefarious wiles.

No fairy tale, not even Grimms' version of "The Robber Bridegroom" (which Atwood has shamelessly appropriated and combined with various body parts and peccadilloes associated with contemporary Canadian sirens), has a villain more dastardly than Zenia. Neither were there ever victims with such compelling and grisly tales of childhood neglect and sexual abuse as the three friends. They are the raw stuff of encounter groups and feminist consciousness-raising. Zenia systematically befriends and betrays each of the women, metaphorically slaying one a decade, enabling Atwood to romp and rampage through the sexual and cultural history of the past 30 years.

Discussion Guide

1. In *The Robber Bride* Tony says that people like Zenia don't get into your life unless you invite them in. What devices does Zenia use to first gain entry into the lives of Tony, Charis, and Roz? How does she alter her techniques to attract and control men?

2. Is there one character you identify with more than others? Why?

3. On the surface, Tony, Charis, and Roz are not a bit alike yet similarities exist. For example, during their childhoods they each developed what could be called "dual" identities. How do the psychological devices they developed as children

help or hinder them? In what ways do their own children differ from them?

4. While seeming all powerful, the constantly changing Zenia lacks a center of her own. Is it possible for women to achieve the same kinds of power that men do in today's society, or do they have to break rules and operate as outlaws? Discuss Charis's grandmother. Do women have a kind of power that is different from male power?

5. Magic can mean two things: sleight of hand played by stage magicians, and true "magic," or supernatural ability. What role does each kind of "magic" play in the novel, if any?

6. The name of the restaurant where Zenia reappears is called The Toxique. What role does naming--of persons and places--play in this novel?

7. War provides a subtext, and even possibly a framework, for this novel. The male characters are not the only ones affected by it. How are the others affected? How is Zenia affected? Which wars are mentioned?

8. Read the poem "The Robber Bridegroom," reversing gender as you read. What does this poem, taken together with the poem "She," tell us about the nature of evil?

9. Discuss the poem "The Loneliness of the Military Historian". What does it tell us about differences between the way men and women traditionally deal with violence? Does Atwood make a value judgment?

10. The American writer Lewis Hyde has asked, "Why is the Trickster the Messenger of the Gods?" Is Zenia a trickster? Is she also a messenger of the gods, and how?

11. Is there a difference between the lies others tell and Zenia's lies? Are there "good" lies and "bad" lies? Do the hearers play a role in the construction of these lies?

12. Think of female villains from literature and film. What do they seem to have in common? Is female villainy different from the male variety?

13. William Blake said of Milton's *Paradise Lost* that Milton often seemed to be of the devil's part without knowing it. Does Atwood have a sneaking sympathy for Zenia? Do 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

"Moving amid these three women, touching up their portraits with one perfect detail after another, conjuring Zenia from their memories and tears, Atwood is in her glory. What a treasure she is, and what a fine new book she has written "

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