
Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

Magill Book Review: The parting "Historical Notes" clarify this tale's supposed genesis as a series of cassette tapes found in a footlocker along the Femaleroad in Maine. Similar to the Underground Railroad that spirited slaves from the South to safety in Canada over 150 years earlier, this Underground Femaleroad led women out of their theological and social bondage in America to a free life in Europe. Now, these tapes have been transcribed and authenticated, with the results of this effort being presented to the "Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies" in 2195.

As a thirty-three-year-old Handmaid, Offred had but one role in her society, one function to perform: produce babies. Her life was the ultimate denial of choice or, seen otherwise, the ultimate glory. This latter interpretation was that which enlivened her household world within the Christian theocracy that was America in the early twenty-first century. Hers was the Gileadean society.

Seizing power in the late twentieth century, the Guardians killed off the Congress, President, and Constitution, replacing them with a society built on strict biblical teaching and radical social adjustment. Working then across this tableau of upheaval, *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* is strongest when centered on Offred's assignment and the household where she is expected to give birth. Here Atwood develops the personalities that enliven the novel: the Commander, with his urge for surreptitious Scrabble; Nick, the Guardian/chauffeur with the latter trade's stereotypic roving eye; and Serena Joy, the gospel television starlet turned wizened hag.

Unfortunately, this novel flags because it lacks both a credible explanation for the abrupt collapse of constitutional government and a clear sense of the good which has been replaced by the present evil. Although Atwood makes a feeble attempt to supply this information, it is inadequate; we must take her usurpation premise on faith. She may expect such faith and understanding from readers who have followed her through five previous novels, but this assumption cripples a novel which will, thus, be variously labeled a feminist nightmare or a prescient statement of Christian Right extremism. It is neither.

Library Journal Review: In a startling departure from her previous novels (*Lady Oracle* , *Surfacing*), respected Canadian poet and novelist Atwood presents here a fable of the near future. In the Republic of Gilead, formerly the United States, far-right Schlafly/Falwell-type ideals have been carried to extremes in the monotheocratic government. The resulting society is a feminist's nightmare: women are strictly controlled, unable to have jobs or money and assigned to various classes: the chaste, childless Wives; the housekeeping Marthas; and the reproductive Handmaids, who turn their offspring over to the "morally fit" Wives. The tale is told by Offred (read: "of Fred"), a Handmaid who recalls the past and tells how the chilling society came to be. This powerful, memorable novel is highly recommended for most libraries. BOMC featured alternate. Ann H. Fisher, Radford P.L., Va.