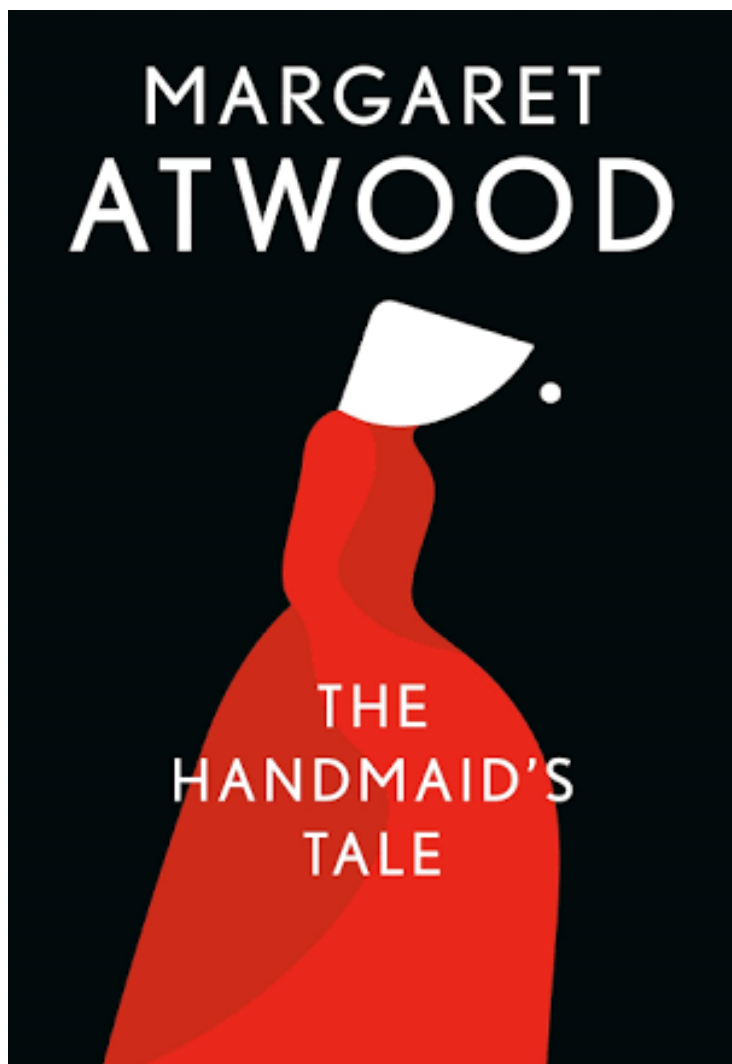




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BANNED BOOKS
WEEK Sept. 22-28, 2024

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, Canada in 1939. Her award-winning collections of poems, novels and essays have been published all over the world and she's one of the twentieth century's most critically acclaimed writers. Running through her novels are strong themes of inequality, feminism and environmentalism, and her books continue to provide powerful comment on the state of society today.

Atwood's father was an entomologist and when she was a child her family spent much of their time in a remote part of Ontario. Her older brother, Carl, and she grew up backpacking in the mountains, and would often miss weeks of school while their father conducted fieldwork. It was Carl who taught Atwood how to read and her love for words grew from there. As children, she and Carl wrote a comic book series, and the young Margaret also wrote poems.

It was in high school that Atwood realised that she wanted to be a writer. Her friends even wrote in her yearbook, 'Peggy's ambition is to write the Great Canadian novel.' Peggy, as she was known by her friends, went through school with ease and was often placed in classes of older students.

Atwood's scientist parents worried about her becoming a writer but that didn't stop her. After high school, Atwood studied English at the University of Toronto. She self-published her first book, a collection of poems called *Double Persephone*. It proved to be extremely popular, quickly winning an award. Atwood went on to study at Radcliffe, the women's college of Harvard, and then started working towards a PhD in Victorian literature.

Atwood's writing career was prolific and her books quickly became bestsellers. Her novels cover murder as in *Alias Grace*, childhood bullying as in *Cat's Eye*, and eating disorders, as in *The Edible Woman*. *The Handmaid's Tale* is one of her most famous and remained on the bestseller list for 23 weeks. Written in 1984, the uneasy dystopian future that it presents still feels as fresh as ever, and remains an iconic and extremely relevant commentary on gender, society and oppression.



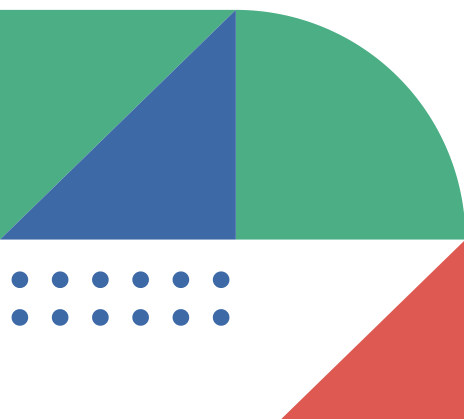
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Margaret Atwood has said for writing *The Handmaid's Tale*, "One of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened...No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities." Discuss.
- We hear the lessons of the Aunts as they teach future handmaids a sort of traditional femininity that requires modesty and submission. This is because, as Aunt Lydia says "They" meaning men, "can't help it." The implication is if certain criteria are met, nothing bad will happen. Gilead creates the criteria. Would you say that nothing bad happens?
- Discuss the contradictions in this quote from Aunt Lydia:

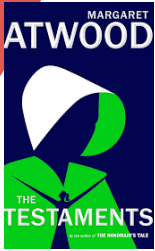
Oiling themselves like roast meat on a spit, and bare backs and shoulders, on the street, in public, and legs, not even stockings on them, no wonder those things used to happen. Things, the word she used when whatever it stood for was too distasteful or filthy or horrible to pass her lips. A successful life for her was one that avoided things, excluded things. Such things do not happen to nice women. And not good for the complexion, not at all, wrinkle you up like a dried apple. But we weren't supposed to care about our complexions anymore, she'd forgotten that.
- Reading was outlawed for women. Why is this detail important? What does it mean that the Commander reads with Offred? What would illiteracy mean for future generations of women?
- Serena Joy had a career but held the opinion that women should not appear in public and focus on being a wife and mother. What do you make of this contradiction? Do you think she is happy under Gilead's regime?
- Before the violent coup that established Gilead, the narrator lives in 1980s America, a democracy. Was a violent coup necessary? Or do you think that a dramatic decrease in individual's rights could occur under the democratic system in America today?
- It seems unbelievable that Offred would accept her new life. But every routine becomes normal. She says,

Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now. We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. Nothing changes instantly: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it.

Why put in the work to actively ignore what's going on?
- Serena Joy had a career but held the opinion that women should not appear in public and focus on being a wife and mother. What do you make of this contradiction? Do you think she is happy under Gilead's regime?
- Unwomen and gender traitors are treated very harshly. What purpose does this serve in Gilead maintaining control?
- Handmaids are "revered" for being able to have children but also can be easily exchanged. Can something be both very important and completely disposable?
- Atwood's narrator cuts back and forth between 1980s America and Gilead three years after the coup. What is the effect of this temporal back-and-forth? Why doesn't the narrative focus only on Gilead?
- The conclusion of the book is ambiguous. What do you think it means?

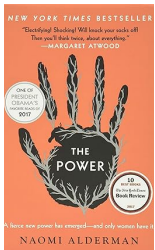


OTHER BOOKS YOU MIGHT LIKE



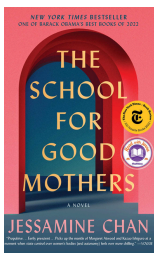
The Testaments by Margaret Atwood

Fifteen years after the events in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the regime running the Republic of Gilead shows signs of collapsing from within as the lives of three women explosively converge.



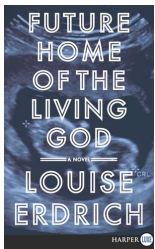
The Power by Naomi Alderman

When a new force takes hold of the world, people from different areas of life are forced to cross paths in an alternate reality that gives women and teenage girls immense physical power that can cause pain and death.



The School for Good Mothers by Jessamine Chan

After one moment of poor judgment involving her daughter Harriet, Frida Liu falls victim to a host of government officials who will determine if she is a candidate for a Big Brother-like institution that measures the success or failure of a mother's devotion.



Future Home of the Living God by Louise Erdrich

A tale set in a world of reversing evolution and a growing police state follows pregnant twenty-six-year-old Cedar Hawk Songmaker, who investigates her biological family while awaiting the birth of a child who may emerge as a member of a primitive human species.



The Children of Men by P.D. James

The human race has become infertile, and the last generation to be born is now adult. The country is under the absolute rule of the Warden. Then by chance, Theo Faron meets a young woman who seeks to challenge the power of the Warden's regime.



Severance by Ling Ma

A survivor of an apocalyptic plague maintains a blog about a decimated Manhattan before joining a motley group of survivors to search for a place to rebuild, a goal that is complicated by an unscrupulous group leader.