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# Review-a-Day



Saturday, August 13th, 2005



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## The Handmaid's Tale

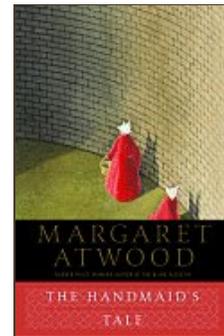
by [Margaret Atwood](#)

A review by Jill Owens

When I recently reread *The Handmaid's Tale*, I was worried that it wouldn't be as strong a novel as I remembered. I first read the book along with a blitz of other dystopian novels, and I was concerned that it might suffer without that larger context, seem dated, or otherwise disappoint. However, I was pleasantly surprised, and impressed; in very minor ways, some details are a little dated, but Offred, the narrator, is so clearly and thoroughly imagined, and the novel is so well-structured, engaging, and suspenseful that I was halfway through the book before I even remembered I'd been worried.

Atwood moves back and forth between the past and the present, filling in the details of Offred's current society, the Republic of Gilead, and her life before "the catastrophe." The society is quite complex, and tracing its history and rise to power is one of the pleasures of the novel, but here are the basics: located over much of North America, Gilead is a religious state, that has overthrown the United States government and made child-bearing and war its two primary concerns. There is a population crisis, due in part to environmental toxicity, and only one in four births survive. Women are not allowed to hold jobs, use money, or read – and if they're healthy and of childbearing age, most of them are conscripted into being Handmaids: surrogate mothers for powerful military families, where the responsibility for bearing a child is solely theirs; men cannot be considered sterile. Offred ("Of-Fred" – their names come from their assigned Commanders) has had her own daughter, and husband, taken away from her; her loss and subsequent isolation are some of the most moving aspects of the novel.

A trademark Atwood trait is her literal unpacking of idioms (or even just a phrase) into images and associations, often stretching it to the absurd – such as "fallen women," "lady-in-waiting," or even "working out," including both exercise and relationship connotations. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, this technique shines as a means of illuminating the dramatic changes between the present and the past -- as one of the characters puts it, it's the difference between the "freedom to" of the previous era and "freedom from" in Gilead. The gap between the possibilities of words and total restriction of action, and the theft and



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usurping of language, create a painful etymology of loss.

The details Atwood imagines are frighteningly precise -- the butter Offred saves from her dinner to use as lotion for her dry skin; the tourists who come to gawk at the Gildeans as though at the Mennonites; the psychological acuity shown by the regime in the "re-education" of this "transitional" generation of women. (In another rather chilling detail, the government coup is at first described as the work of "Islamic fanatics.")

Atwood's novel is obviously as relevant today as it has been since its release; feminist backlashes continue to wax and wane, but the Supreme Court nominations, amongst many other things, have put women's rights back into the spotlight. And *The Handmaid's Tale*, despite its scenarios of great despair, is ultimately a hopeful book -- Offred, and others, simply cannot be human without the possibility of hope, and therein lies the strength of the resistance. Twenty years after it was first published, *The Handmaid's Tale* more than holds its own alongside other uncanny, insightful dystopian visions of the future.

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