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› [Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale: Reader's Guide and Companion Manual](#)

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Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

READER'S GUIDE AND COMPANION MANUAL

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1. Introduction to The Handmaid's Tale

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is an instant classic and eerily prescient cultural phenomenon. Set in a dystopian future, environmental disasters and declining birthrates have led to a Second American Civil War. The result is the rise of the Republic of Gilead, a totalitarian regime that enforces rigid social roles and enslaves the few remaining fertile women. Offred is one of these, a Handmaid bound to produce children for one of Gilead's commanders. Deprived of her husband, her child, her freedom, and even her own name, Offred clings to her memories and her will to survive. At once a scathing satire, an ominous warning, and a tour de force of narrative suspense, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a modern classic.

THE #1 WORLDWIDE BESTSELLER

MARGARET
ATWOOD





Image 1: The cover of the paperback edition of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

2. About the Author: Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood is the author of more than fifty 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 number one bestseller and won the Booker Prize. In 2020 she published *Dearly*, her first collection of poetry for a decade. 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 USA 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 literature. She has also worked as a cartoonist, illustrator, librettist, playwright, and puppeteer. She lives in Toronto, Canada.

3. Key Themes and Concepts

The Handmaid's Tale explores several profound themes relevant to society and human nature:

- **Totalitarianism and Oppression:** The novel vividly portrays a society under strict authoritarian rule, where individual freedoms are systematically stripped away.
- **Women's Rights and Bodily Autonomy:** A central theme is the subjugation of women, particularly their reproductive rights, and how their bodies become state property.

- **Religious Extremism and Hypocrisy:** Gilead's regime is founded on a distorted interpretation of religious texts, highlighting the dangers of fundamentalism and the hypocrisy of those in power.
- **Environmental Degradation and Fertility Crisis:** The backdrop of the story is a world suffering from ecological collapse and declining birthrates, which serves as a catalyst for Gilead's rise.
- **Memory and Identity:** Offred's struggle to retain her past identity and memories is crucial to her survival and resistance against the dehumanizing system.
- **Resistance and Rebellion:** Even in a seemingly hopeless situation, subtle acts of defiance and the enduring human spirit of resistance are present.



Image 2: A graphic highlighting critical acclaim for *The Handmaid's Tale*.

4. Plot Overview

In the near future, the United States has been overthrown by a theocratic regime called the Republic of Gilead. Due to widespread infertility, the few remaining fertile women, known as Handmaids, are assigned to high-ranking officials (Commanders) to bear children for them. The protagonist, Offred, is one such Handmaid. She recounts her daily life, which is strictly controlled and devoid of personal freedom, as she navigates the oppressive society of Gilead. Her narrative explores her memories of the time before Gilead, her relationships with other Handmaids, Marthas (housekeepers), and Wives, and her desperate attempts to find meaning and hope in a world designed to strip her of both.

5. Historical Context and Inspiration

Margaret Atwood began writing *The Handmaid's Tale* in the spring of 1984 while living in West Berlin, a city still encircled by the Berlin Wall. Her experiences visiting countries behind the Iron Curtain, such as Czechoslovakia and East Germany, influenced her portrayal of a society under surveillance, where information is conveyed obliquely, and fear is palpable. Having been born in 1939 and coming to consciousness during World War II, Atwood understood that established orders could vanish overnight, and that anything could happen anywhere given the right circumstances.

A key rule for Atwood was that she would not include any events or technologies in the book that had not already happened in history or were not already available. This grounded the dystopian elements in reality, making the narrative more chillingly

plausible. The Republic of Gilead, for instance, is built on the foundation of seventeenth-century Puritan roots, which Atwood notes have always lain beneath modern-day America. The immediate setting of Cambridge, Massachusetts, home of Harvard University, once a Puritan theological seminary, further emphasizes this historical connection. The novel's premise of a shrinking population due to a toxic environment and the resulting premium on viable babies also draws parallels to real-world concerns, such as fertility decline studies.

The biblical precedent for the Handmaids' role is drawn from the story of Jacob, Rachel, Leah, and their handmaids, where the handmaids bore children for the wives. This historical and religious grounding makes the tale a powerful commentary on societal vulnerabilities and the potential for regression.

6. Discussion Questions

To deepen your understanding and engagement with *The Handmaid's Tale*, consider the following questions:

1. How does the narrative structure, particularly Offred's first-person perspective, contribute to the reader's experience of Gilead?
2. Discuss the significance of names (or lack thereof) in Gilead, especially for the Handmaids. How does this impact identity?
3. What role does memory play for Offred and other characters? How do they use it to cope or resist?
4. Analyze the various forms of resistance, both overt and subtle, present in the novel.
5. How does Atwood use language and symbolism (e.g., colors, biblical references) to build the world of Gilead?
6. Consider the ending of the novel. What is its impact, and what questions does it leave unanswered?
7. How relevant are the themes of *The Handmaid's Tale* to contemporary society?

7. Editions and Specifications

This reader's guide pertains to the paperback edition of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Key specifications for this edition include:

- **Publisher:** Vintage
- **Publication Date:** March 16, 1998
- **Edition:** 1st Anchor Books
- **Language:** English
- **Print Length:** 311 pages
- **ISBN-10:** 038549081X
- **ISBN-13:** 978-0385490818
- **Item Weight:** 2.31 pounds
- **Reading Age:** 14 - 18 years
- **Dimensions:** 5.12 x 0.68 x 7.93 inches

Other formats available include Kindle, Audiobook, and Hardcover editions.

8. Further Reading and Related Works

For readers interested in exploring more of Margaret Atwood's work or related themes, consider:

- *The Testaments*: The bestselling sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*.
- Other works by Margaret Atwood, such as *Oryx and Crake* or *Alias Grace*.
- Other classic dystopian novels like George Orwell's *1984* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.

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