

Book Club Kit Discussion Guide
Handmaid's Tale
By Margaret Atwood

Author:

Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa, and grew up in northern Ontario and Quebec, and in Toronto. She received her undergraduate degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto and her master's degree from Radcliffe College.

Margaret Atwood is the author of more than forty books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays. Her latest book of short stories is *Stone Mattress: Nine Tales* (2014). Her *MaddAddam* trilogy – the Giller and Booker prize-nominated *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013) – is currently being adapted for HBO. *The Door* is her latest volume of poetry (2007). Her most recent non-fiction books are *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* (2008) and *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (2011). Her novels include *The Blind Assassin*, winner of the Booker Prize; *Alias Grace*, which won the Giller Prize in Canada and the Premio Mondello in Italy; and *The Robber Bride*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Handmaid's Tale* – coming soon as a TV series with MGM and Hulu – and *The Penelopiad*. Her new novel, *The Heart Goes Last*, was published in September 2015. Forthcoming in 2016 are *Hag-Seed*, a novel revisitation of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, for the Hogarth Shakespeare Project, and *Angel Catbird* – with a cat-bird superhero – a graphic novel with co-creator Johnnie Christmas. (Dark Horse.) Margaret Atwood lives in Toronto with writer Graeme Gibson. (*From author's website.*)

Summary:

In the world of the near future, who will control women's bodies?

Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead. She may leave the home of the Commander and his wife once a day to walk to food markets whose signs are now pictures instead of words because women are no longer allowed to read. She must lie on her back once a month and pray that the Commander makes her pregnant, because in an age of declining births, Offred and the other Handmaids are only valued if their ovaries are viable.

Offred can remember the days before, when she lived and made love with her husband Luke; when she played with and protected her daughter; when she had a job, money of her own, and access to knowledge. But all of that is gone now.

Funny, unexpected, horrifying, and altogether convincing, *The Handmaid's Tale* is at once scathing satire, dire warning, and tour de force. (*From the publisher.*)

Discussion Questions:

1. The novel begins with three epigraphs. What are their functions?
2. In Gilead, women are categorized as wives, handmaids, Marthas, or Aunts, but Moira refuses to fit into a niche. Offred says she was like an elevator with open sides who made them dizzy; she was their fantasy. Trace Moira's role throughout the tale to determine what she symbolizes.
3. Aunt Lydia, Janine, and Offred's mother also represent more than themselves. What do each of their characters connote? What do the style and color of their clothes symbolize?

4. At one level, *The Handmaid's Tale* is about the writing process. Atwood cleverly weaves this sub-plot into a major focus with remarks by Offred such as "Context is all, " and "I've filled it out for her," "I made that up," and "I wish this story were different." Does Offred's habit of talking about the process of storytelling make it easier or more difficult for you to suspend disbelief?
5. A palimpsest is a medieval parchment that scribes attempted to scrape clean and use again, though they were unable to obliterate all traces of the original. How does the new republic of Gilead's social order often resemble a palimpsest?
6. The Commander in the novel says you can't cheat nature. How do characters find ways to follow their natural instincts?
7. Why is the Bible under lock and key in Gilead?
- 8 Babies are referred to as "a keeper, "unbabies, " "shredders." What other real or fictional worlds do these terms suggest?
9. Atwood's title brings to mind titles from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Why might Atwood have wanted you to make that connection?
10. What do you feel the "Historical Notes" at the book's end add to the reading of this novel? What does the book's last line mean to you? (*Questions issued by publisher.*)