

READING GROUP PACK

VINTAGE



MARGARET ATWOOD THE HANDMAID'S TALE

WHO'S WHO IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

OFFRED

The main character and narrator of *The Handmaid's Tale*. It is revealed at the end that her story is transcribed from cassette recordings of Offred's voice. She is part of an underclass, assigned to produce children for high-status couples who cannot reproduce themselves. She has flashbacks to her life before Gilead and we find out that she had a husband, Luke, and a child. She is critical of the Republic of Gilead, though we only know what she has been told.

THE COMMANDER

The head of the household where Offred is Handmaid. Though the Commander appears to be well-meaning it becomes clear that he had political influence in the formation of the Republic of Gilead. He initiates an affair with Offred which begins when he asks her to play Scrabble. At first she is intrigued and even attracted to him, but she soon realises how their relationship fits in to the matrix of Gilead society.



SERENA JOY

The Commander's wife. Serena Joy is as high-status as women can be in Gilead. She speaks very little, though we do learn that she used to be a gospel singer. She spends her time gardening and knitting scarves for soldiers. Despite her status she is deeply unhappy – no matter what their position, all women in Gilead are oppressed.

NICK

The Commander's driver who is also trusted to run personal errands. From the beginning of the book, Offred talks about her attraction to Nick and they have brief but illicit interactions. At the end of the book, Offred has a full-blown affair with him, sneaking to his room to spend time with him. Nick rarely speaks and it is unclear how deep the relationship goes for him. Nick, it appears, is partly responsible for whatever happens to Offred at the end of the novel. Though whether he was working for Gilead, or for the resistance, is left ambiguous.

AUNT LYDIA

An 'aunt' in charge at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Centre, where she patrols the gymnasium with a cattle prod and spouts government propaganda to the women in training. Her mantras frequently run through Offred's head, showing the success of her indoctrination. She fervently supports Gilead and she also leads the ruthless Salvaging.

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WHO'S WHO IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

OFGLEN

Offred's shopping companion. She is the first to make Offred aware of an underground resistance movement. Ultimately she hangs herself when the government begins to suspect her.

RITA

A servant in the Commander's house. She is known as a 'Martha', which means she is infertile, so must take on domestic work instead of reproducing.

CORA

Another 'Martha', working in the Commander's house. She is lower-ranked than Rita and treats Offred with more kindness by, for example, knocking on her door before she comes in.

JANINE

An acquaintance of Offred's from the Re-education Centre. She is vulnerable and easily influenced by Gilead doctrine.

A celebratory spectacle is made when she gives birth but she is quickly dropped when the baby turns out to be 'no good'.

MOIRA

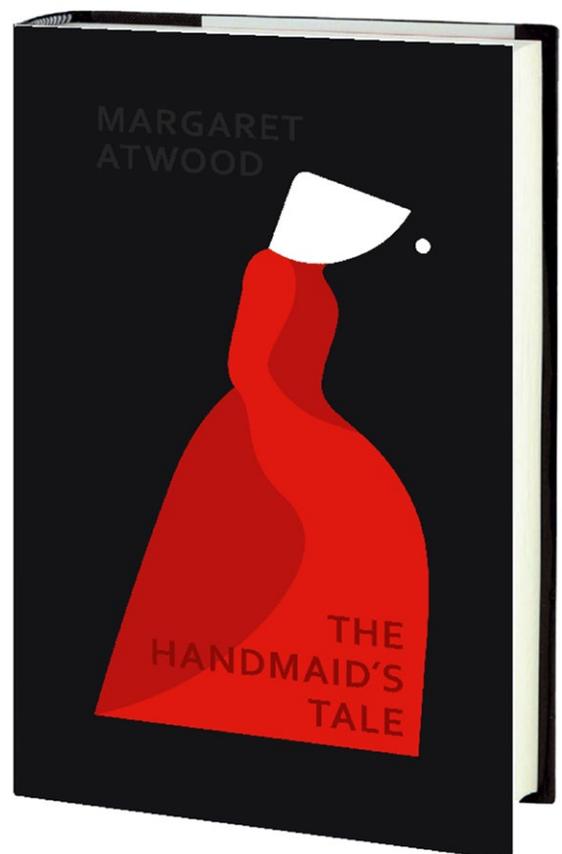
Offred's best friend from college, from the time before Gilead. She is outspoken, vivacious and funny. When Offred comes across her years later, she is working as a prostitute, having tried to flee Gilead.

OFFRED'S MOTHER

A feminist activist who campaigned against pornography and for abortion in pre-Gilead times. She raised Offred alone and taught her to question society.

LUKE

Offred's husband from pre-Gilead times. She associates him with deep feelings of love and connection. All through the book she wonders what has happened to him and fears that it will be his body hanging on the Wall.



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WHO IS MARGARET ATWOOD?

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 where he could do his research. 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, and performed her own poetry at a local coffeehouse. She self-published her first book, a collection of poems called *Double Persephone*, using a small printing press that she had at home and she sold it for 50 cents. 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.

Her 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.

Atwood has a daughter, Eleanor, and currently lives in Toronto. She continues to give lectures and do public readings of her books. Her recent book, *The Heart Goes Last*, presents a dystopian future where the law-abiding are locked up while gangs roam free. Her latest book, *Hag-Seed*, is a re-telling of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Atwood was also the first author to have taken part in the exciting Future Book Projects, which takes one writer's contribution a year, to be published in one hundred years' time – that's a while to wait then, for Atwood fans!

Margaret Atwood had a cameo role as an Aunt in the 2017 TV series.



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YOU'VE BEEN BANNED

Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred wistfully recalls things from her past that are now banned under Gilead rule. Of course, the biggest loss of all is her freedom and her family. But forbidden objects from everyday life also take on a powerful new meaning. They crop up through the novel as bargaining tools and they even put Offred's life at risk. The memories of these things are often painful but Offred is defiant in her descriptions of them.

HAND LOTION

Handmaids are banned from using skin creams so they use butter instead to moisturise. Offred saves a wad from her meals and keeps it in her shoes. On her secret visits to the Commander, it is the first thing that she asks for. But she knows, even then, that keeping it in her room would put her life at risk. This is a terrifying thought and a reminder of the puritanical, totalitarian regime that the Handmaids live under.

To consider . . .

What does the hand cream represent?

How does access to it show differences between characters?

WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

These magazines, which centre on fashion and sexual expression, represent everything that the Handmaids cannot have and everything that Gilead society is against. Not only are women banned from reading them, but all material like this was meant to have been burnt. During Offred's visits to the Commander, he gives her some women's magazines that he has acquired, perhaps on the black market. Offred devours the words on the pages and she notices that the Commander seems to derive some sort of sexual pleasure in watching her read.

To consider . . .

Why do you think the Commander enjoys watching Offred read these magazines?

Are women's magazines really in opposition to what Gilead society stands for?



YOU'VE BEEN BANNED

SINGING

Most music is banned in Gilead though there are some sanctioned anthems that play on television or state radio. Offred sometimes sings songs to herself that she remembers her mother playing or hymns that she grew up with but she wouldn't dare to sing in public. Even Serena Joy, who used to be a gospel singer, plays her old records very quietly so she doesn't get caught.

To consider . . .

Why might rulers of a society like Gilead think music is dangerous?

Why is it significant that Serena Joy hides her music too?

NAMES

Higher-class members of society are given names but even those don't appear to be their real ones. Handmaids are expressly forbidden to be called by their names and are instead named after the Commanders who own them – in Offred's case, Fred. If they move households their names change. Offred herself never reveals her real name to the reader, though she does tell it to Nick.

To consider . . .

What does the changing of names achieve in Gilead society? Why do you think Offred tells Nick her old name?





HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

The Handmaid's Tale tells of a dystopian future where women's sexuality is controlled and everyone is subject to rigid societal rules. The book is set in the near future in the United States, where the old government has been overthrown by a totalitarian regime. Although the Republic of Gilead is not real, some chilling historical parallels can be made. Here are some examples to consider.

FERTILITY CONTROL IN CHINA

In the late 1970s the Chinese government introduced the one-child rule as part of their family planning policy. The goal was to reduce a rapidly rising population by banning families from having more than one child. The policy was implemented through propaganda, freely available contraception and monetary incentives. However, there were also reports of forced abortions and involuntary sterilisation of women. More chilling still was the rise of infanticide, where unwanted female babies were left to die, sometimes in state-run orphanages.

In the Republic of Gilead, the Handmaids' sole role is to produce offspring. Though the goal of this is to increase population, a parallel can be drawn in the state control of women's fertility.

THE DISAPPEARED IN ARGENTINA

In 1976 there was a military coup in Argentina resulting in a right-wing dictatorship. In the nine years of military rule, a war was waged against the left, with subversives and academics being hunted down and tortured or killed. The kidnappings would happen at night and the bodies were often never found. During this time, an estimated 30,000 people were 'disappeared'. If they had children, they would be taken and given to military families unable to have kids. Some of these

children would never find out their true identity. When the government fell, a collection of grandparents started campaigning in Buenos Aires to find their stolen grandchildren. Known as the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, they have been instrumental in reuniting some of these children – who are now grown-up – with their biological families.

Offred speaks often about her daughter, though we never find out her name. All we know is that she was taken from her by the government, much like the children of the Disappeared in Argentina, and was given to another family. Towards the end of the book, Serena Joy produces a photo of Offred's now teenage daughter, leaving her to wonder if her child has any memory of her.

THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS

The Salem Witch Trials took place in colonial Massachusetts from 1692–1693. They were planned as a crusade against those practising 'witchcraft' and during that time more than 200 people were prosecuted and 20 were executed. The suspicions arose out of puritanical Christianity that held that certain people were able to practise the 'devil's magic' and harm others. The accusations were based on rumour and most of the implicated were young women. The Salem Witch Trials are one of the most infamous cases of mass hysteria in American history.

There are numerous parallels between the trials and life for women in Gilead. All through the book, we hear of Handmaids who are hung for their crimes and are used as public warnings to others. We also see mass hysteria in action at the Salvaging where women voraciously take part in the slaughter and dismembering of dissidents.

Can you think of any more historical parallels to *The Handmaid's Tale*?

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FURTHER READING

If *The Handmaid's Tale* has whet your appetite for dystopian novels, why not give these a try . . .

1984, GEORGE ORWELL (1939)

One of the most famous dystopian novels. In a society watched over by 'Big Brother', Winston makes the mistake of falling in love.

BRAVE NEW WORLD, ALDOUS HUXLEY (1931)

A book set in the future, where human beings are created to comply with society and are engineered to feel happiness. Life is governed by reproductive technology, mind-numbing drugs and brainwashing from birth.

FARENHEIT 451, RAY BRADBURY (1953)

Follows fireman Guy Montag, who burns books in futuristic America. There is no joy in this society, but then Montag meets 17-year-old Clarisse McClellan, who opens his eyes up to the world around him.

A CLOCKWORK ORANGE, ANTHONY BURGESS (1962)

A bleak future is presented here, where society is ravaged by violent youth-gangs. The book is narrated by gang leader Alex, who tells of their horrifying rampages, and what happens when the state tries to subdue him.

NEVER LET ME GO, KAZUO ISHIGURO (2005)

This science-fiction dystopian novel follows three students who went to the mysterious Hailsham boarding school. At first it sounds idyllic but we soon learn that they live in an alternate world where people are cloned for their organs.

THE ROAD, CORMAC MCCARTHY (2006)

In post-apocalyptic America, a father and his young son take a journey across a landscape that has been entirely destroyed, along with almost all life on earth.

ONLY EVER YOURS, LOUISE O'NEILL (2014)

This book is set in a world where women are trained in schools to please men. It focuses on two teenage friends, who, depending on their success, will soon be chosen as 'companions' to powerful, wealthy men.