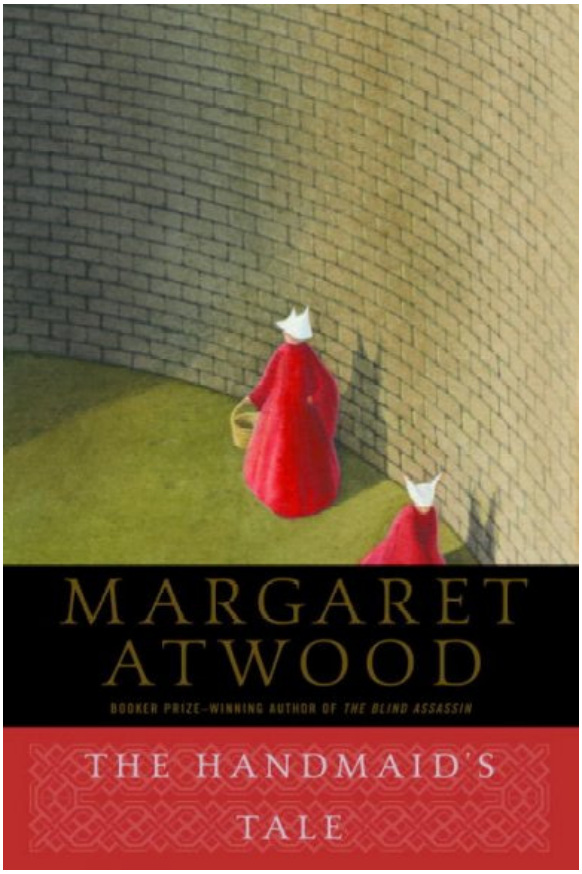

Books in a Box

Reading Guide

Blaine
Bookmobile
Deming
Everson
Ferndale
Island
Lynden
Maple Falls
Point Roberts
Sumas
wcls.org

the best place to begin

whatcom county
library system

Books in a Box Information

We hope you will enjoy the convenience of having multiple copies of the same title to share—either with your official book group or with an unofficial friends-and-family group!

Some general information about the kits:

- Kits check out for six weeks.
- Kits are available to reserve, but we cannot guarantee their availability for specific dates.
- One person in the group is responsible for the kits full return.
- Return kits in person at any Whatcom County library

How do I find a list of all your kits?

- Go to www.wcls.org
- Click on “catalog”
- In the Subject Keyword Search type “book club kit”

This list includes kits owned by both Whatcom County and Bellingham Library Systems. Please note that the Bellingham kits must be picked up and returned to the Bellingham Library. Whatcom County kits can be reserved and sent to any location for pickup.

Suggested 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 story-telling 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 the publisher*.)

More questions from lesson plan by Anja Breuer (http://www.heliweb.de/telic/breuer.htm)

1. Does the state of Gilead only use biblical quotations to justify the role of the Handmaids?

2. How exactly does the state use quotations from the Bible?

3. Why, do you think, is only the Commander allowed to read the Bible?

4. Does Offred care about the literal meaning of prayers when she prays in private?

5. What does Offred's version of the Lord's Prayer reveal about her feelings?

More questions from SparkNotes (http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/handmaid/)

1. How does *The Handmaid's Tale* depict the intersection between politics and sexual reproduction? How is Gilead's political order defined by this intersection, and how does it affect the lives of women?

2. Discuss the significance of setting in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Why does Atwood choose to set the novel where she does?

3. How does Gilead create and use a new vocabulary to buttress its totalitarian order?

4. Discuss the role of the Aunts and of Serena Joy in the novel. How do they relate to other women, and how does this make them fit into the hierarchy of Gilead?

5. Is the Commander a sympathetic character, a monster, or both?

6. Is Atwood's novel ultimately a feminist work of literature, or does it offer a critique of feminism?

7. What role does Moira play in the novel? How does her significance change as the story progresses?

Interview with Atwood Excerpt

(From a Knopf-Random House interview)

When "The Handmaid's Tale" was published, Contemporary Authors listed your religion as "Pessimistic Pantheist," which you defined as the belief that "God is everywhere, but losing." Is this still an accurate description of your spiritual philosophy?

I expect you don't have the foggiest what I meant in the first place. On bad days, neither do I. But let's argue it through.

Biblical version, see Genesis: God created the heaven and the earth -- out of nothing, we presume. Or else: out of God, since there was nothing else around that God could use as substance.

Big Bang theory: says much the same, without using the word "God." That is: once there was nothing, or

else "a singularity." Then Poof. Big Bang. Result: the universe.

Author Bio: Margaret Atwood

Source: *Encyclopedia of World Biographies: Notable Biographies*, 2007.

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, in 1939. She moved with her family to Sault Ste. Marie, Canada, in 1945 and to Toronto, Canada, in 1946. Until she was eleven she spent half of each year in the northern Ontario wilderness, where her father worked as an entomologist (insect scientist). Her writing was one of the many things she enjoyed in her "bush" time, away from school. At age six she was writing morality plays, poems, comic books, and had started a novel. School and pre-adolescence brought her a taste for home economics. Her writing resurfaced in high school, though, where she returned to writing poetry. Her favorite writer as a teen was Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), who was famous for his dark mystery stories.

Atwood was sixteen years old when she made her commitment to pursue writing as a lifetime career. She studied at Victoria College, University of Toronto, where she received a bachelor's degree in 1961. Then she went on to complete her master's degree at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1962. Atwood also studied at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, from 1962 to 1963 and from 1965 to 1967.

Atwood has received more than fifty-five awards, including two Governor General's Awards, the first in 1966 for *The Circle Game*, her first major book of poems; the second for her 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, which was made into a movie. In 1981 she worked on a television drama, *Snowbird*, and had her children's book *Anna's Pet* (1980) adapted for stage (1986). Her recognition is often reflective of the wide range of her work. She is also a major public figure and cultural commentator.

Most of Atwood's fiction has been translated into several foreign languages. A new Atwood novel becomes a Canadian, American, and international bestseller immediately. There is a Margaret Atwood Society, a *Margaret Atwood Newsletter*, and an ever-increasing number of scholars studying and teaching her work in women's studies courses and in North American literature courses worldwide.

Reviews

***Library Journal* Review by Ann H. Fisher**

★ Atwood, Margaret. The Handmaid's Tale. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986.

In a startling departure from her previous novels (*Lady Oracle*, *Surfacing*), respected Canadian poet and novelist Atwood presents here a fable of the near future. In the Republic of Gilead, formerly the United States, far-right Schlafly/Falwell-type ideals have been carried to extremes in the monotheocratic government. The resulting society is a feminist's nightmare: women are strictly controlled, unable to have jobs or money and assigned to various classes: the chaste, childless Wives; the housekeeping Marthas; and the reproductive Handmaids, who turn their offspring over to the "morally fit" Wives. The tale is told by Offred (read: "of Fred"), a Handmaid who recalls the past and tells how the chilling society came to be.

"A novel that brilliantly illuminates some of the darker interconnections between politics and sex . . . Just as the world of Orwell's *1984* gripped our imaginations, so will the world of Atwood's handmaid!" (***Washington Post Book World***)

"Atwood takes many trends which exist today and stretches them to their logical and chilling conclusions . . . An excellent novel about the directions our lives are taking . . . Read it while it's still allowed." (***Houston Chronicle***)

"The most poetically satisfying and intense of all Atwood's novels." (***Maclean's***)

"*The Handmaid's Tale* is in the honorable tradition of *Brave New World* and other warnings of dystopia. It's imaginative even audacious, and conveys a chilling sense of fear and menace." (***The Globe and Mail***)

"*The Handmaid's Tale* brings out the very best in Atwood--moral vision, biting humor, and a poet's imagination." (***Chatelaine***)

Suggested Readalikes

Feed, by M.T. Anderson.

Fahrenheit 451, by Ray Bradbury.

Lilith's Brood, by Octavia Butler.

Daughters of the North, by Sarah Hall.

Dune, by Frank Herbert.

The Children of Men, by P.D. James.

The Telling, by Ursula K. LeGuin.

1984, by George Orwell.

Woman on the Edge of Time, by Marge Piercy.

The Gate to Women's Country, by Sheri S. Tepper.

Uglies, by Scott Westerfield.

The Stone Gods, by Jeanette Winterson.

Web Resources

Margaret Atwood Reference Site: http://www.owtoad.com/home.html

LitLovers Guide: http://www.litlovers.com/guide_handmaidstale.html

Luminarium Reader's Companion: http://www.luminarium.org/contemporary/atwood/handmaid.htm

Chapter study guide: http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/science_fiction/handmaid.html

Atwood discusses *Handmaid's Tale* on BBC: http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/specials/133_wbc_archive_new/page2.shtml

Video—Atwood on Religion: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMrz_ivl8jo