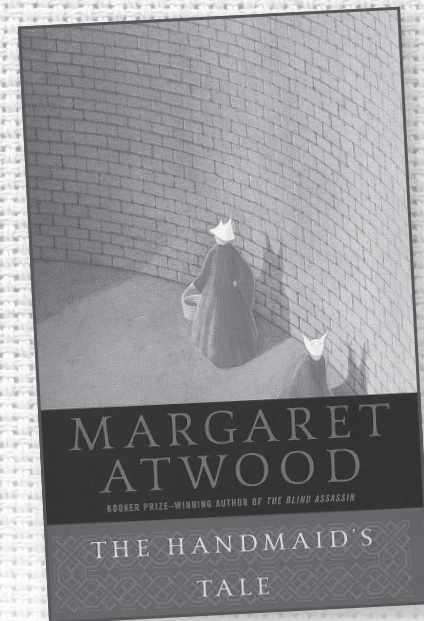


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## Discussion Questions

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?

# Book Club in a Bag



**"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 Handmaid's Tale

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## 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.)



**Margaret Atwood** (source: *LitLovers.com*)

- Birth — November 18, 1939
- Where — Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
- Education — B.A., University of Toronto; M.A. Radcliffe; Ph.D., Harvard University
- Awards — Governor General's Award; Booker Prize; Giller Award
- Currently — lives in Toronto, Canada

**Margaret Eleanor Atwood**, is a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, and environmental activist. She is among the most-honoured authors of fiction in recent history. She is a winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award and Prince of Asturias Award for Literature, has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize five times, winning once, and has been a finalist for the Governor General's Award several times, winning twice. She is also a founder of the Writers' Trust of Canada, a non-profit literary organization that seeks to encourage Canada's writing community.

### Speculative fiction vs. sci-fic:

*The Handmaid's Tale* received the first Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1987. The award is given for the best science fiction novel that was first published in the United Kingdom during the previous year. It was also nominated for the 1986 Nebula Award, and the 1987 Prometheus Award, both science fiction awards.

Atwood was at one time offended at the suggestion that *The Handmaid's Tale* or *Oryx and Crake* were science fiction, insisting to the UK's Guardian that they were speculative fiction instead: "Science fiction has monsters and spaceships; speculative fiction could really happen." She told the Book of the Month Club: "*Oryx and Crake* is a speculative fiction, not a science fiction proper. It contains no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians."

She clarified her meaning on the difference between speculative and science fiction, admitting that others use the terms interchangeably: "For me, the science fiction label belongs on books with things in them that we can't yet do.... [S]peculative fiction means a work that employs the means already to hand and that takes place on Planet Earth." She said that science fiction narratives give a writer the ability to explore themes in ways that realistic fiction cannot