

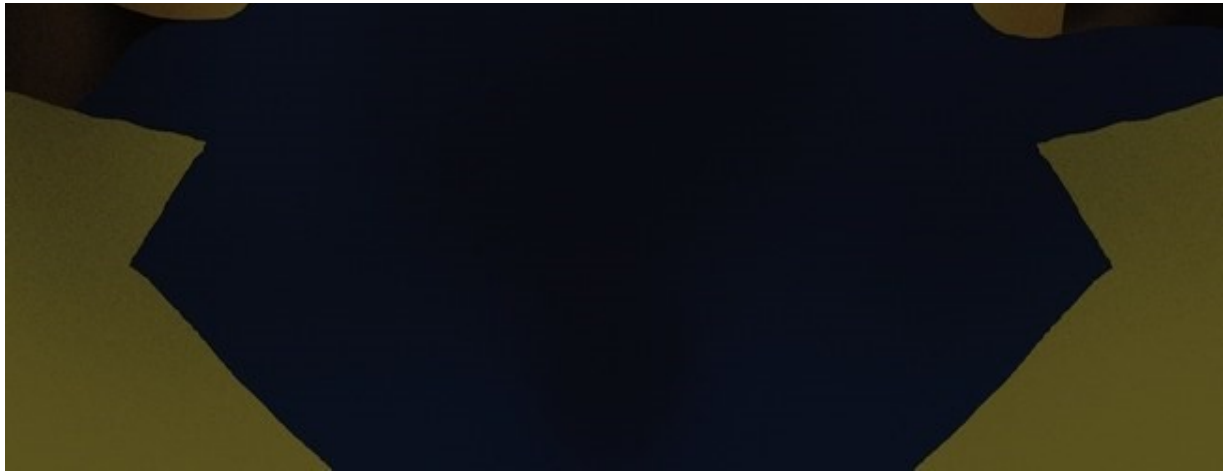
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# MARGARET ATWOOD EXPANDS THE WORLD OF “THE HANDMAID’S TALE”

*In “The Testaments,” the novelist examines the kinds of complicity that are required for constructing such a frightening future.*

By Jia Tolentino 5:00 A.M.





*Atwood has said that the new book was inspired by questions she got from readers, and by “the world we’ve been living in.”*

Illustration by Daniel Zender

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The political deployment of imagery from Margaret Atwood’s novel “The Handmaid’s Tale” began in Texas, in the spring of 2017, at a protest against the state’s ongoing campaign to restrict abortion rights. The TV adaptation of the book would soon begin streaming, on Hulu. The show stars Elisabeth Moss as the novel’s narrator and protagonist, Offred, a woman stripped of her job, her family, and her name in a near-future American theocracy called Gilead. Offred is a Handmaid, forced to live as a breeding concubine; each month, she is ceremonially raped by her Commander, a man of high status, in the interest of rebuilding a population that has dwindled owing to secular immorality, environmental toxicity, and super-S.T.D.s. Like all Handmaids, she wears a scarlet dress, a long cloak, and a face-obscuring white bonnet, a uniform that Atwood based, in part, on the woman on the label of Old Dutch Cleanser, an image that had scared her as a child.

Women wore this uniform to the protest in Texas, and they have since worn it to protests in England, Ireland, Argentina, Croatia, and elsewhere. When “The Handmaid’s Tale” was published, in 1985, some reviewers found Atwood’s dystopia to be poetically rich but implausible. Three decades later,

the book is most often described with reference to its timeliness. The current President has bragged about grabbing women “by the pussy,” and the Vice-President is a man who, as governor of Indiana, signed a law that required fetal remains of miscarriages and abortions, at any stage of pregnancy, to be cremated or buried. This year, half a dozen states have passed legislation banning abortion after around six weeks; Alabama passed a law that would ban abortion in nearly all circumstances, including cases involving rape or incest. (All these laws have yet to take effect.)

At first, I found it moving to see women at protests in Handmaid garb. Sometimes they carried signs with the dog-Latin phrase “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*,” which, in Atwood’s novel, is scribbled in Offred’s closet, a message from a previous Handmaid: Don’t let the bastards grind you down. The costumes could be read as an expression of inter-class solidarity: women with the time and the resources to protest tend not to be those who suffer first when reproductive rights are restricted, but the former were saying, on behalf of the latter, that they would fight for us all.

Only a portion of the women in Gilead are Handmaids; others are Marthas, who cook and clean, or Aunts, who indoctrinate other women into the life style of subjugation, or Wives, obedient trophies who smile graciously while other women do all the work. But the novel confines you within Offred’s perspective—it suggests, even demands, identification with the Handmaids. The TV show, with its lush cinematography and its sumptuous art direction and its decision to have Moss say things like “*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum, bitches*,” turned this suggestion, perhaps inevitably, into a marketing angle: we are all Handmaids. It has reinvented the subdued Offred of the novel as the destructive, mesmerizing, apparently unbreakable June. (That’s the name Offred had before Gilead—though, in Atwood’s original conception, Offred’s real name had disappeared.)

As the show became popular, and the iconography spread, its meaning became diffuse. The Handmaid seemed to evolve from a symbol of advocacy for victims into a way of playacting victimhood. Women were buying red cloaks and white bonnets on Amazon, leaving four- and five-star

reviews with tongue-in-cheek Gilead greetings. “Blessed be the fruit,” one customer wrote, noting that she “got lots of compliments.” Another review: “Perfect. Can’t wait for Halloween!” M-G-M, which produces the TV adaptation, briefly attempted to sell a line of Handmaid-themed wine. The twenty-two-year-old billionaire cosmetics entrepreneur Kylie Jenner threw a “Handmaid’s Tale”-themed party for her best friend’s birthday. An instinct toward solidarity had been twisted into what seemed like a private fantasy of persecution that could flatten all differences among women—a vision of terrible equality, which, in an era when minute gradations of power are analyzed constantly, could induce a secret thrill.

Sometimes I found myself wondering how many of the women indulging this fantasy would, in some future real-life Gilead, become not Handmaids but Wives. This was, it turns out, not only a judgmental thought but a simplistic one. Atwood has now written a sequel, “The Testaments” (Nan A. Talese), set fifteen years after the first book ends. The new novel, like its predecessor, is presented as a story assembled from historical artifacts, with an epilogue that depicts a twenty-second-century academic conference about Gilead. But, in “The Testaments,” Handmaids and Wives hardly enter the picture at all. Instead, it is about the Aunts, and three of them in particular: one whom we already know from the first book, and who, we learn, helped to establish Gilead’s shadow matriarchy, within a thicket of rapists; one who was raised inside Gilead, and who grew up devout and illiterate and expecting to be married by the age of fourteen; and one who is sent to Gilead, as a teen-ager, by the resistance, which is based in Canada, and which carries out reconnaissance missions and helps citizens of Gilead to escape.

The book may surprise readers who wondered, when the sequel was announced, whether Atwood was making a mistake in returning to her earlier work. She has said that “The Testaments” was inspired by readers’ questions about the inner workings of Gilead, and also by “the world we’ve been living in.” But it seems to have another aim as well: to help us see more clearly the kinds of complicity required for constructing a world like

the one she had already imagined, and the world we fear our own might become.

**A**twood, who was born in Ottawa in 1939, has been the most famous Canadian author for decades. She published her first book, a collection of poems, in 1961, and has since written, among other things, seventeen novels, sixteen poetry collections, ten works of nonfiction, eight short-story collections, and seven children’s books. As a novelist, she has a wide tonal range, moving from sarcasm to solemnity, austerity to playfulness; she can toggle between extremes of subtlety and unsubtlety from book to book. In her “MaddAddam” trilogy, begun in the early two-thousands and set in a near-future world where overpopulation leads society to reduce everything to its base functionality, Atwood takes aim at technocracy and corporate control: people eat “ChickieNobs,” the product of genetically engineered chickens that consist of a mouth surrounded by twenty breast-meat tubes; the Crakers, a humanoid race designed for a minimum of trouble and a maximum of efficiency, have giant penises that turn blue when the females of the species are in heat. “Cat’s Eye,” on the other hand, which was published in 1988, is a quiet study of the ways that women and girls are gently and devastatingly cruel to one another. I reread it recently, and felt a sensation I associate with reading Atwood: nothing was really happening, but I was riveted, and fearful, as if someone were showing me footage of a car crash one frame at a time.

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VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

How to Write a New Yorker Cartoon Caption: Kumail Nanjiani & Dave Bautista  
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Atwood’s best novels bring to bear a psychologist’s grasp of deep, interior forces and a mad scientist’s knack for conceptual experiments that can draw these forces out into the open. “The Blind Assassin,” published in 2000, does this: a novel about two sisters growing up in rural Ontario, it contains a novel-within-the-novel, which itself contains another novel, a science-fiction story set on a planet called Zycron. So does “The Handmaid’s Tale,” which had become required reading by the time I bought it for an English class in college. I was acquainted with theocracy, and the sick appeal of female subservience: I had grown up Baptist in Texas, with the idea that girls should consecrate their bodies for God and for their future husbands. At the religious school that I attended for twelve years, we regularly stood and pledged allegiance to the American flag, the Christian flag (white, with a red cross on a blue canton), and the Bible. In this context, Gilead seemed a little effortful: you didn’t need to rename the butcher shop All Flesh and rebrand rape as a supervised monthly ceremony in order to bend a society to someone’s bad idea of God’s will. But, such broad strokes aside, the novel is characterized by remarkable patience and restraint. Coming across the book’s offhand mention that oranges have been scarce “since Central America was lost to the Libertheos,” you can spend twenty pages wondering about Gilead’s import-export structure—and, all the while, the

existential diminishment of the utterly ordinary Offred is quietly lighting you on fire.

Christianity and white supremacy are intertwined and foundational ideas in America, and, in the novel, Jews who refuse to convert are shipped off to Israel, while the “Children of Ham” are resettled in the Midwest. The precedent of slavery in the conception of Gilead, which is alluded to in the epilogue of “The Handmaid’s Tale” and acknowledged by Atwood in an introduction to a recent edition, has been consistently underplayed in the book’s reception. In the TV adaptation, in a seeming attempt at deference to contemporary concerns about representation, Gilead is uneasily and halfheartedly post-racial; Moira, June’s best friend, who is also a Handmaid, is played by Samira Wiley, who is black. The show depicts a purity-obsessed society in which the powerful—who are all white in the book, and virtually all white on the show—mostly don’t care about having white children, or maintaining the appearance of “pure” lineage. Atwood is a producer on the show, and she has noted that racial dynamics have changed since she wrote the book. Bruce Miller, the adaptation’s showrunner, has said that he saw little difference between “making a TV show about racism and making a racist TV show.” That’s an odd line to draw, given the series’ willingness—its requirement and mission, really—to be unpleasant. Season 3 features a scene in which June has to patiently persuade her new Commander to rape her. The difference between making a TV show about female punishment and making a TV show that punishes women may also be smaller than Miller thought.

The adaptation has moved well past where the novel ends. According to Hulu, viewership increased seventy-six per cent between Seasons 1 and 2, and forty per cent between Seasons 2 and 3. The show has dragged out Offred’s plight beyond all reason—Season 3 takes place some five years after the rise of Gilead, and Season 4 is in the works—while taking a tremendously long time to provide details about how, precisely, Gilead was established and, later, destabilized. Learning such things is one of the only possible upsides, to my mind, of staying in this world beyond the condensed period required for reading a novel. How was Gilead’s freaky nomenclature

decided on? Aren’t Gileadeans worried about incest, since kids rarely know who their real parents are?

“The Testaments” addresses these and other questions in sidelong mentions, which help to make more concrete a world that, in the first novel—partly because of Offred’s fiercely enforced ignorance—felt abstract, like a landscape obscured by fog. (The publisher has emphasized that “The Testaments” is “not connected” to the TV show, though certain plot elements overlap.) We learn that four founding Aunts invented “laws, uniforms, slogans, hymns, names” for Gilead, and allowed the Commanders to take credit. They maintain a genealogical registry that records both the official and unofficial parentage of each child. They have begun to send Aunts-in-training to Canada, to recruit women as replacements for the steady stream of female refugees flowing out of Gilead. (In the sequel, as in the TV adaptation, the sharpest contemporary resonances are with the plight of asylum seekers at the southern U.S. border.)

The four founding Aunts are Vidala, Helena, Elizabeth, and Lydia—the last of whom is the central character in “The Testaments.” Formerly a judge, she once presided over cases about expanded rights for sex workers; she briefly volunteered at a rape crisis center. (In the TV show, she is a former schoolteacher with a background in family law.) Aunt Helena was a P.R. executive for a high-end lingerie company; Aunt Elizabeth was a Vassar-educated executive assistant to a female senator. Only Aunt Vidala was a true believer, working for Gilead before it overthrew the U.S. government. The rest were rounded up at gunpoint, along with all other women of post-childbearing age and high professional status, and taken to a stadium that had been repurposed as a prison. “Some of us were past menopause, but others were not, so the smell of clotting blood was added to the sweat and tears and shit and puke,” Aunt Lydia recalls. “To breathe was to be nauseated. They were reducing us to animals—to penned-up animals—to our animal nature. They were rubbing our noses in that nature. We were to consider ourselves subhuman.”



Confined in this torture chamber, Aunt Lydia finds it ridiculous that she’d “believed all that claptrap about life, liberty, democracy, and the rights of the individual I’d soaked up at law school.” One day, she’s thrown into an isolation cell, beaten, and Tasered. Tears pour out of her eyes, and yet, she writes, a third eye in her forehead regards the situation, as cold as a stone. “Behind it someone was thinking: *I will get you back for this. I don’t care how long it takes or how much shit I have to eat in the meantime, but I will do it.*” She is taken to a hotel room, where, after three days of recuperation, she finds a brown dress waiting for her—a dress she’s seen on the women, future Aunts, who have been ceremonially shooting other women in the stadium as a way of proving their loyalty. She puts it on, picks up a gun, and passes the test. When a Commander assembles the founding Aunts in his office and tells them that he wants them to “organize the separate sphere—the sphere for women,” Aunt Lydia tells him that such a female sphere must be “truly separate.” She understands that this is her chance to establish a part of Gilead that will be free from interference or questioning by men.

She does not do this out of feminist instinct: she’s seeking a structure that will permit her to acquire leverage over as many people as possible. By the time she begins writing the account that constitutes her portion of “The Testaments,” she has amassed enough power to act like a free agent. “Did I hate the structure we were concocting?” she writes. “On some level, yes: it was a betrayal of everything we’d been taught in our former lives, and of all that we’d achieved. Was I proud of what we managed to accomplish, despite the limitations? Also, on some level, yes.”

It’s not exactly plausible that Aunt Lydia has been waiting all this time to join the resistance. But her story functions as a parable: the tale of a woman who, in trying to save herself, erects the regime that ruins her. “The Testaments” is the story of her excruciatingly belated turn away from Gilead—of the final days of her plan to bring down the empire, which draws in the other two narrators and relies on their willingness to put their lives on the line. No one but Aunt Lydia, who has been weaving a network of strings to be pulled at her pleasure, could undermine Gilead so effectively. Still, her actions are not presented as redemptive. “What good is it to throw

yourself in front of a steamroller out of moral principles and then be crushed flat like a sock emptied of its foot?” she’d once told herself. She is a vortex of ambiguity, pragmatism, and self-interest—the true literary protagonist of Atwood’s Gilead. “Making poison is as much fun as making a cake,” Atwood once wrote, in a short story. “People like to make poison. If you don’t understand this you will never understand anything.”

One of the oddest things about watching the Handmaid become a figure as much a part of the *Zeitgeist* as Rosie the Riveter—whom one character in “The Testaments” describes as a woman “flexing her biceps to show that women could make bombs”—is seeing Gilead transform, in the journey from novel to television show, from a niche world that commanded mainstream interest into a mainstream phenomenon that seems to target a shrinking niche. On the show, the couple who imprison Offred as their Handmaid, Commander Waterford and his wife, Serena, are played by attractive actors in their forties and thirties, respectively. I’m not sure what is gained—other than, perhaps, additional viewers—by transforming them into sexy rapists. I also don’t quite grasp who benefits from the sight of a pack of Handmaids strutting in slow motion, fresh off the victory of having resisted orders to kill one of their own in a public stoning, their red skirts swaying to the tune of Nina Simone’s “Feeling Good.”

Precisely who is being addressed is a crucial and carefully considered matter in the novel. Offred writes to a nebulous “you” that sometimes feels like God, sometimes like her husband, sometimes like a figure she’s invented to keep her from believing that she’s already dead. In the academic symposium that serves as a coda to the novel, Atwood plants a reminder of how inevitable it is that we would interpret Offred’s story in a way that serves our own interests. Delivering the keynote speech, Professor James Darcy Pieixoto—after calling Gilead’s escape network, known as the Underground Femaleroad, the “Underground Frailroad”—urges his audience to “be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans. . . . Our job is not to censure but to understand.”

“The Testaments” ends with another speech from Professor Pieixoto, at a symposium held two years after the one in “The Handmaid’s Tale.” He’s introduced, as he was in the first book, by Professor Maryanne Crescent Moon, and her words lightly nod to the mania for Handmaid costumes: Moon tells her fellow-academics about a planned Gilead reënactment, but advises them “not to get carried away.” Pieixoto then begins his talk by noting the changed cultural climate, in which “women are usurping leadership positions to such a terrifying extent,” and hopes that his “little jokes” from the previous symposium will not be held against him. Gilead Studies has become surprisingly popular: “Those of us who have laboured in the dim and obscure corners of academe for so long are not used to the bewildering glare of the limelight,” he says. “The Handmaid’s Tale” has long been canonical, but it was once a novel. It is now an idea that is asked to support and transubstantiate the weight of our time.

The other narrators of “The Testaments” are girls who have no knowledge of life before the existence of Gilead. They speak in a manner that suggests that they have made it to a safe place, with a sympathetic listener—which feels like an act of generosity, or political encouragement, on Atwood’s part. Agnes, the older of the two, grew up in a Commander’s family, and recounts her childhood with sadness and a trace of longing, explaining the way that being trained into subservience can feel like being honored, and blessed. “We were custodians of an invaluable treasure that existed, unseen, inside us,” she remembers. “We were precious flowers that had to be kept safely inside glass houses, or else we would be ambushed and our petals would be torn off and our treasure would be stolen and we would be ripped apart and trampled by the ravenous men who might lurk around any corner, out there in the wide sharp-edged sin-ridden world.” She remembers her mother, Tabitha, singing a song about angels watching over her bed—which made her think not about wings and feathers but about Gilead’s Angels, the men in black uniforms with guns. Tabitha asks her, Isn’t it wonderful to be so cherished? “What could I say but yes and yes?” Agnes says. “Yes, I was happy. Yes, I was lucky. Anyway it was true.”

Agnes has a secret identity, which viewers of the TV show will grasp right away. Readers who haven’t seen the show will catch on fairly quickly. The same is true for the other narrator. She is called Daisy when she is in Canada and goes by Jade after she is smuggled into Gilead, but her real name is suggested early on in her portion of the narrative, when she rants about Baby Nicole, the child of a Handmaid and a Commander who became a national figure after her mother smuggled her into Canada and disappeared. (Baby Nicole, a sort of hybrid of Elián González and JonBenét Ramsey, features prominently in Seasons 2 and 3 of the show, though her story plays out somewhat differently there.) “I’d basically disliked Baby Nicole since I’d had to do a paper on her,” Jade says. “I’d got a C because I’d said she was being used as a football by both sides, and it would be the greatest happiness of the greatest number just to give her back.”

Aunt Lydia has Gilead wired; she knows how to get Baby Nicole back into the country, and she knows how to get her out again. Like Offred in “The Handmaid’s Tale,” she is addressing an unknown audience—at least, until the end of her story, when she begins speaking to the reader in a way that made me shiver: for the first time in Gilead, Atwood was writing through a character who’d drawn an arrow and shot it straight across the divide. “I picture you as a young woman, bright, ambitious,” Aunt Lydia writes, as the end approaches. “You’ll be looking to make a niche for yourself in whatever dim, echoing caverns of academia may still exist by your time. I situate you at your desk, your hair tucked back behind your ears, your nail polish chipped—for nail polish will have returned, it always does. You’re frowning slightly, a habit that will increase as you age.”

She goes on, “How can I have behaved so badly, so cruelly, so stupidly? you will ask. You yourself would never have done such things! But you yourself will never have had to.” The breakthrough of “The Testaments” lies here, in the way it solves a problem that “The Handmaid’s Tale” created. We were all so busy imagining ourselves as Handmaids that we failed to see that we might be Aunts—that we, too, might feel, at the culmination of a disaster we created through our own pragmatic indifference, that we had no real

choice, that we were just aiming for survival, that we were doing what anyone would do. ♦

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