

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985): Cultural and Historical Context

Lisa Jadwin

Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* has been both controversial and influential in the decades since its publication. The novel reached best-seller status in the mid-1980s and has continued to sell well in North America and abroad and has been translated into more than thirty-five languages, including Chinese and Serbo-Croatian ("Poised"). *The Handmaid's Tale* has been made into a feature-length film, an opera, a full-cast radio adaptation, and a stage play. Perhaps most important, it has been introduced to many young readers in secondary and postsecondary English and language-arts curricula across the United States and Canada. *The Handmaid's Tale* has been compared favorably to some of the greatest dystopian works of all time, including Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921); the early-twentieth-century works of Franz Kafka; Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932); and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). At the time of the novel's publication, *Publishers Weekly* decreed that *The Handmaid's Tale* "deserves an honored place on the small shelf of cautionary tales that have entered modern folklore." Its sternest critics, including conservative taxpayers seeking to ban the novel from school curricula and liberal writers dismayed by its critique of feminism, have admitted that Atwood's novel derives its power from an accurate, if disturbing, critique of contemporary cultural norms. Furthermore, the cultural issues Atwood explores in *The Handmaid's Tale*—religious fundamentalism, feminism, consumerism, environmental decline, and rampant technology—have become more intensely debated since the mid-1980s, making the novel seem increasingly prescient and relevant. Atwood herself has said, "The thing to remember is that there is nothing new about the society depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* except the time and place. All of the things I have written about have—as noted in the 'Historical Notes' at the end—been done before, more than once." She adds, "His-

tory proves that what we have been in the past we could be again” (“A Note to the Reader”).

In nearly a dozen interviews and essays, Margaret Atwood has discussed the events and ideas that inspired *The Handmaid's Tale*. Readers who remember the era will recognize the novel as a cultural roman à clef teeming with thinly disguised ideas and personalities from the mid-1980s. Decoding their identities is one of the pleasures of linking the novel to its historical roots. Atwood notes that her own lifetime has been characterized by political upheavals and radical social change. The Nazi Holocaust began just before her birth in 1939, and World War II dominated her early childhood. A controversial act of mass destruction ended the Second World War when the allied forces deployed atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. Though Atwood may have been too young to comprehend these events, her sense of political injustice intensified as she matured. She was intensely aware of the anti-Communist purges of the 1950s, and as a teenager she devoured Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The political was also personal: “As a college student,” she has said, “I was a volunteer worker with immigrants wishing to improve their English, and my charge was a woman doctor who'd escaped from Czechoslovakia. She was a wreck. I got an earful” (“Note to the Reader.”) The horrors of atomic warfare have evidently so permeated Atwood's epistemology that she uses a nuclear metaphor to characterize the act of creating *The Handmaid's Tale*:

Every book is a sort of mushroom cloud thrown up by a large substance of material that has been accumulating for a lifetime. I had long been interested in the histories of totalitarian regimes and the different forms they have taken in various societies; while the initial idea for *The Handmaid's Tale* came to me in 1981, I avoided writing it for several years because I was apprehensive about the results—whether I would be able to carry it off as a literary form. (“Note to the Reader”)