

responsible for some false observations and discoveries. Many of the characters in *First Light* are caricatures rather than serious personalities. Underneath the surface story the novel is concerned with the nature of time and space, but it does not give answers, it is concerned with looking for them.

2 Margaret Atwood

I ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Atwood was born in Ottawa, Canada, in 1939. Her father studied insects and she spent a large part of her childhood with him in the bush of Ontario and Quebec. Only at the age of eleven did she complete a full year at school. She received a BA and MA in English from the Universities of Toronto and Harvard. Her first volume of poetry, *Double Persephone*, won her a medal in 1961. Her first novel was *The Edible Woman* (1969). Another volume of poetry, *The Circle Game*, won her the Governor General's Award in 1976. She taught Canadian literature at several universities before starting to write professionally in 1972. Since then she has published *Surfacing* (1972), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Life Before Man* (1979), *Bodily Harm* (1981), the Orwellian *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and which won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Science Fiction in 1987, and *Cat's Eye* (1989).

II HIGHLIGHT

The Handmaid's Tale

Introduction

Margaret Atwood's female characters are continually threatened, physically or spiritually. Characteristically her heroines dream of being invisible, so that they are invulnerable to violations from the outside. In this respect *The Handmaid's Tale* is her most ambitious novel yet. The future society Margaret Atwood dreams of, described in the form of a diary preserved on tapes, can rightly be called a nightmare for both men and women, but it is mainly a female dystopia, the opposite of an ideal society. Her Gileadean Republic is a theocratic state based on the literal interpretation of the Old Testament and especially of Genesis 30. In this passage Jacob's wife Rachel, barren up to that moment, tells him: "Here is my slave Bilha, get her with child instead of me, and it shall be born on my knees; thus through her means, I shall have a family of my own." Jacob's second wife, Leah, who had stopped bearing him children, did the same with her servant. The practical application of this Biblical text is in the hands of the Aunts at the "Rachel and Leah Re-education Center". The Aunts are a group of sadistic women, keeping watch with metal wires and electric wands.

The Republic of Gilead must have come into existence at the beginning of the third millennium, and has as its centre the state of Maine. By the year two thousand the birthrate had dropped dramatically and the Republic of Gilead, begun with a coup in which the President and Congress were assassinated, decided that more children should be produced at any cost. Women 'guilty' of second marriages or of living



with men without being married were arrested and given the choice to do slave labour in the colonies, or to be sent to the Rachel and Leah Center to be brainwashed. Their function will be that of hatching machines in the service of the Commanders, whose wives are past the childbearing age, or who are sterile.

In the Republic of Gilead colours distinguish the position of women. The Wives are dressed in blue, marriageable daughters go in white, Martha's, the servants in the households of the Commanders, are green and the Handmaids are all in red, apart from two white 'wings' at the side of their heads.

All these women, but also the Gileadean men, are spied on by the Eyes, reminiscent of Orwell's Big Brother. Another aspect from 1984 is the continuous wars: religious wars that are raging all around the country, and the information that is given to the people cannot be trusted.

The main character's name Offred is a patronymic. Her Commander's name is Fred; she is the handmaid "of Fred". Its real meaning may be Afraid, although she is also Not Afraid, because Offred is not her real name.

Summary

The narrative of the Handmaid is frequently interrupted by flashbacks. Together these flashbacks form an incomplete account of the Handmaid's past. For the sake of a better understanding of the text this summary starts with a chronologically ordered synopsis of these flashbacks.

Offred, the Handmaid, remembers a walk in the park with her mother, where women were burning porno books and magazines. Her mother was a liberated woman, leading demonstrations for free sex and abortions. Offred was different, she wanted a decent family life, but when she fell in love with Luke, he had been married already. Offred had a daughter at about the time when books began to be destroyed, when money was abolished, and when the President and many members of Congress were assassinated. Consequently a state of emergency was declared and the Constitution suspended. Shortly afterwards road blocks began to appear and strong measures were announced against morally questionable practices. Bank

accounts held by women were blocked and women could no longer hold jobs. Of course there were protests, but demonstrators were shot at by the army and so the protests stopped. One day Offred and Luke had tried to flee across the border, but at the first barrier Luke quickly returned to the car after the inspection of his papers and drove back the way they had come. Later they abandoned the car and ran. Obviously they were arrested, because Offred sometimes thinks of Luke's death. He will most likely have been shot through the head. At other moments she likes to think that he is not dead, but actively involved in a resistance movement.

Offred is taken to the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center, a former college, where the women are taught by the "Aunts". The gymnasium has been transformed into a dormitory with army cots set up in rows. Aunt Sarah and Aunt Elizabeth patrol during the nights with electric prods hanging from their belts. The Handmaids are only allowed outside the building twice a day for short walks around the former football field, which is enclosed by barbed wire fences guarded by the "Angels". The Handmaids are not allowed to talk, but they learn to lipread.

One day Moira, a former friend of Offred's is brought into the dormitory. During Testifying, when each of the Handmaids has to reveal something disgusting from her own past, Offred and Moira visit the washrooms, the only place where they can talk without running the risk of being caught, although an "Aunt" is keeping watch outside the lockless stalls. Moira tells her that she simply must try to escape. The next thing Offred remembers is Moira being dragged out of an ambulance into the building. After receiving some form of torture she cannot walk for a week.

At the Rachel and Leah Center the future Handmaids watch movies weekly, sometimes an old porno film to show the way women were treated in the past, or an Unwoman documentary, in one of which Offred sees her own mother demonstrate to promote abortion.

The torture she received cannot stop Moira from trying to escape again. She surprises Aunt Elizabeth in the washrooms and threatens her with something sharp. She undresses her, ties her up and she puts on Aunt Elizabeth's clothes. Then she walks out of the front door. Offred has no idea whether her escape was successful or not.

From here onwards this summary continues with the story of the Handmaid as it develops.

Offred gets up when the bell rings and dresses according to prescription. One of the servants, who are called Marthas, hands Offred some tokens with pictures on them of eggs, cheese and meat, for which articles they can be exchanged. She walks through the garden, the domain of the Commander's Wife, who has been hostile to her since her arrival five weeks before, and whom Offred has recognized as Serena Joy, a former singer of Gospel songs. Leaving the garden she passes Nick, a Guardian, who takes a risk by winking at her. At a corner she waits for another Handmaid, called Ofglen, who is dressed exactly like Offred. They have been partners on their walks for a fortnight and are supposed to spy on each other. They walk to the central part of the town, passing barriers on the way. Behind the barriers there are the Guardians of the Faith who check and stamp their passes before letting them through into the heart of the Republic of Gilead. They are asked by Japanese

tourists to pose for photographs, but they do not answer. On the way back Ofglen proposes to go via the church, which is in use as a museum, but Ofglen's proposal is only a pretext to see the Wall, from which six bodies are hanging, dressed in white coats and with sacks over their heads. The bodies are the result of a Men's Salvaging and the victims must have been doctors at the time when abortions were still allowed; they must have been accused of crimes which are retroactive. The two women watch as they are supposed to. On a next visit to the Wall there are three new bodies, one of them a priest, the others obviously convicted for Gender Treachery or homosexuality because of the way they look. On the way back the two Handmaids encounter a funeral procession with a mother carrying her stillborn baby, a frequent sight these days. Back at the house Offred notices the Commander standing in the hall, where he is not supposed to be. She does not understand what he wants and goes up to her room, where she has on a first investigation found a note saying *nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. Although writing is strictly forbidden and she does not know any Latin, she keeps the note. For her it is a kind of communication with the previous inhabitant of the room, a Handmaid she knows nothing about. All that Rita, one of the Marthas, is willing to tell her is that the woman had not worked out.

When summer arrives the Handmaids all change into cotton summer dresses, which cover their bodies completely as a reaction to the past when the female body was often exposed to a large extent.

Once a month the Handmaids are taken to a doctor who does tests to find out if they are pregnant or not. In his waiting-room the women watch each other's bellies for signs of this much desired state. The doctor examines Offred with her face hidden by a sheet, in order to make his task completely impersonal. When the result of the test is negative again, he offers to help her to become pregnant because most of the Commanders have become sterile. Officially sterile men do not exist, only barren women. But Offred is afraid to accept his offer, because if this illegal practice is found out, the penalty is death.

At the house the monthly Ceremony is to take place. The household assembles in the drawing-room, the Marthas Rita and Cora, Nick, the guard and the Commander's wife. When they are all there they watch the news, although Offred doubts whether it is really news. The items include the arrest of members of the sect of the Quakers, and the resettlement of the children of Ham, the term used for negroes. Then the Commander enters the room and reads to them from the Bible, the same passages as always, which include the story of Jacob's wives Rachel and Leah, with Leah demanding from Jacob that her maid Bilhah bears children on Leah's knees, so that Leah has children. When the Commander has given the sign, the Ceremony begins, with Offred lying between Serena Joy's legs to signify that they are one flesh, and the Commander doing his duty by trying to make Offred pregnant. If there is a baby it will be Serena Joy's, because she is barren herself, just like Leah in the Biblical story.

In the middle of the night Offred goes down to the sitting-room, which is strictly illegal and therefore she is startled when she finds Nick there. His presence, too, is illegal, but he only tells her that the Commander wants to see her in his office the next day.

In the morning Offred wakes up with the sound of a siren announcing the arrival of the Birthmobile. She hurries downstairs and clambers into the van, where she finds three other women, who tell her it is Ofwarren who is having her confinement. The question is if there will be a Baby or an Unbaby, the chances being one to four due to chemicals and radiation. The Handmaids get out in front of Commander Warren's house. Another Birthmobile arrives with the Wives, who are treating the Wife of Warren as if she herself is going to deliver a baby. Inside the house Ofwarren is sitting on the Commander's bed surrounded by thirty women who function as a choir singing "breathe", "hold" and "expel" to the count of five. When the actual birth sets in they change their tune to "push", "relax" and "pant" until the baby is born, which unfortunately is a girl. The child is placed into the arms of Commander Warren's Wife, who has been helped from the birthing-stool onto a bed. The Wife then gives the baby its name, while the Handmaids are blocking the bed from the view of the real mother, who will only be allowed to nurse the baby for a time. When all is over the Handmaids are taken back to their households. When it is dark Offred goes downstairs, obeying the Commander's order to come to his office. She realizes that no female ever enters this room, but to her surprise it is quite a normal room. The most conspicuous objects in it are books, which are officially forbidden. The Commander wants her to play Scrabble with him, a forbidden game, but playing it gives Offred a guilty feeling of freedom. After two games the Commander wants her to kiss him and then she is told to go back to her room. Here she reflects on what she has been taught about men at the Rachel and Leah Center and she cannot quite fit the Commander into the picture of men as sex-

machines. The next morning Offred is woken by the sound of a crashing tray. The Martha has dropped it because she has found Offred asleep on the floor. Offred cannot explain, says that she must have fainted, but to the Martha this is one of the first signs of pregnancy.

From that time onwards Offred visits the Commander two or three nights a week, whenever she sees Nick giving a certain signal. They always play Scrabble and sometimes the Commander gives her a present. Once he gives her an old *Vogue* magazine, which surprises Offred because officially such magazines have all been destroyed. The Commander explains by saying that he has retained an appreciation for old things. Offred asks him for hand lotion, but when she gets it she has no idea where to keep it, because her room is often searched, so she decides to keep it in the Commander's room.

During the next Ceremony Offred feels a new awkwardness, as she can no longer consider the Commander's sexual act as a mere job. Suspicion or discovery might send Offred to the Colonies.

During the summer Offred regularly walks with Ofglen to do the shopping. They have gradually become accustomed to each other and often make detours, all within certain limits, however. In front of a Soul Scroll, a kind of shop where prayers are printed, Ofglen makes a treacherous remark. They feel certain they cannot be overheard in front of the shop, so they feel free to discuss all kinds of forbidden subjects. Ofglen advises Offred to join a resistance group. When they walk on they see a black car approaching. It belongs to the "Eyes", the spy network,

and they fear it is coming for them, but to their relief a man is picked up.

On her next visit to the Commander he explains that the Latin phrase *Nolite te Bastardes Carburandum* is just a schoolboy joke. It means "Don't let the bastards grind you down". He also tells her that the Handmaid who had lived in her room had committed suicide, because the Wife had found out about her and the Commander.

When Offred and Ofglen next walk by the wall, there are two new bodies hanging there. One is a Catholic and the other one is marked with a J, perhaps a Jehovah witness. Ofglen gives Offred the password, so that she can find out who belongs to the resistance movement.

On Offred's return Serena Joy inquires after signs of pregnancy, adding that her time is running out. Unexpectedly she whispers that perhaps the Commander is infertile and she suggests that Offred tries it with Nick in spite of the terrible risk. Serena Joy offers to show Offred a picture of her daughter if she cooperates.

The next time she walks with Ofglen they head for the Prayvaganza, a group marriage service. Wives and Marthas are also present. It is seen as a kind of entertainment. While Offred and Ofglen are secretly talking to one another they see Ofwarren coming in, which means that she must have lost her baby, her third one already. When the Commander in charge arrives the ceremony begins. Twenty "Angels" enter and twenty veiled daughters are led forward by their mothers. The Commander tells the daughters what is expected of them, rings are exchanged and veils are lifted. If the new wives cannot produce children they will qualify for Handmaids.

On the way back Ofglen reveals that she knows about Offred and the Commander, and she wants Offred to find out anything that might seem important. Having returned to her room Offred is surprised to see Serena Joy bring up a tray of food. She gives Offred a polaroid print of her daughter, which she can only have for a minute as it has to be returned in a hurry.

That night the Commander has a dress for her, one adorned with feathers. All dresses like this are supposed to have been burned. He also gives her some make-up. He says that he is taking her out that evening. The pass he has secured for her does not raise any suspicion at the barriers. Nick drives them into a small alleyway, where they get out and walk through some corridors into a courtyard. Offred remembers that the building used to be hotel. There are many women dressed like Offred and men in uniforms or suits. The Commander tells her the place is a club, officially strictly forbidden, and only accessible to officers and senior officials. The women are prostitutes from the old days, or women who prefer working here to the alternatives. Suddenly Offred sees Moira. They arrange to meet in the washroom, where Moira asks Offred what she has done wrong. Moira tells her what happened after she had tied up Aunt Elizabeth at the Rachel and Leah Center. She had reached the home of former acquaintances, who promised to help her get out of the country. But when trying to cross the border by boat, she was caught and tortured. She expected to be sent to the Colonies to do cleaning up work, where radiation would soon get hold of her, but she was offered a choice, and that was how she had come to this place, where she is called a Jezebel. Later that evening Offred accompanies the Commander to a room, but she feels unable to make love to him.

At midnight, when Offred is back in her own room, Serena Joy comes up to her, and leads her downstairs and out through the kitchen from where she walks to Nick's place. The guards have been bribed and are out of sight. Afterwards she cannot remember exactly what happened in Nick's room, all she is sure of is that she went there to get pregnant. From then on she often visits Nick without Serena Joy knowing about it. Offred hates herself for doing this because it makes her feel cheap. On her walks with Ofglen she hardly listens any more. When she is offered a key to the Commander's desk, she tells Ofglen she is afraid. Ofglen also tells her that she could get help to escape, if she is in danger, but Offred no longer wants to leave, now she is with Nick.

One day there is a Women's Salvaging. Handmaids are standing in the front where they can be watched by the Wives and daughters and the Marthas. Two Handmaids and a Wife who are to be salvaged, have been sitting on a stage, drugged, waiting for the procession of Aunts and two black-robed Salvagers. The Aunt in front is Aunt Lydia, who explains that the crimes of the three women will not be made known as has been the custom, because she does not want to give other women certain ideas. After the address the three women are hanged. Then Aunt Lydia speaks to the Handmaids about a Particution that is to take place immediately. A Guardian is dragged forward and Aunt Lydia reveals that rape is the crime he has been found guilty of. Her speech makes the Handmaids so bloodthirsty, that when Aunt Lydia blows a whistle, they all attack the man. Ofglen reaches him first and knocks him unconscious with some violent kicks. She whispers to Offred that he is no rapist at all, but a member of an underground movement. By kicking him she wanted to save him from suffering. In the meantime his body is torn to pieces. On the next walk Ofglen's place has been taken by a different Handmaid, a new Ofglen, who tells Offred that her predecessor hanged herself when she saw the van coming for her. Offred panicks, because now she fears for her own life. There is more reason for panic when it becomes clear that Serena Joy has found out about her visits to the Commander. From her room she watches the approach of a black van. Some minutes later Nick knocks on her door and tells her to go with the men who have come for her, because they belong to Mayday, the secret organization. When she is taken away, the men tell the Commander and Serena Joy that the accusation is "Violation of State Secrets".

Here ends the narrative of the Handmaid. What follows in the book are Historical Notes, being a partial transcript of a speech at a convention of the Gileadean Research Association in 2195 by Professor Pieixoto, dealing with the authentication of the Handmaid's Tale. He tells his audience that the manuscript was unearthed at what was once the city of Bangor in the State of Maine. Bangor was a station on The Underground Female Road. Found in a metal case were thirty cassette tapes on which the same woman's voice was heard. The finders of the tape tried to establish the woman's identity. The most promising line of investigation were the records of the period, with the help of which they tried to correlate known personages with people in the account. The author must have been among the first group of women recruited for reproduction. The recruitment was simple: the Gileadean regime declared second marriages and non-marital liaisons adulterous and the female

3 Saul Bellow

I ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Saul Bellow was born in Quebec, Canada, on June 10, 1915. He was the youngest of the four children of Abraham and Liza Bellow, who had emigrated to Canada from St Petersburg in 1913. In Montreal Saul Bellow learned Yiddish, Hebrew, French and English. When he was nine, the family moved to Chicago. He attended Chicago, Northwestern and Wisconsin Universities. He has a B.Sc. in anthropology, but left the university of Wisconsin before he had finished his studies to marry and to become a writer. For a time he supported himself with teaching and by doing odd jobs. During World War II he served in the merchant marine and published *Dangling Man* (1944), his first novel. His second novel, *The Victim* (1948) won him a Guggenheim Fellowship, which allowed him to travel through Europe and to work on his third novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). For this novel he received the National Book Award for Fiction. He spent several years teaching and writing (*Seize the Day* (1956) and *Henderson the Rain King* (1959)) in New York City before returning to Chicago, where he published *Herzog* (1964). In 1966 he published *The Last Analysis*, to be followed by *Mosby's Memoirs* in 1969, *Mr Sammler's Planet* in 1970 and *Humboldt's Gift* in 1975 before receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976, as the first American to be awarded that prize since John Steinbeck in 1962. As an ardent supporter of the state of Israel, Bellow published an account of a journey through that country in *To Jerusalem and Back* (1976). *The Dean's December* was published in 1982. In 1989 he published two short novels, *A Theft* and *The Bellarosa Connection*. Bellow, who has been married four times, lives in Chicago, where he enjoys publicity.

II HIGHLIGHT

The Dean's December

Introduction

The plot of *The Dean's December* is very simple: Albert Corde, a Dean of Studies at the University of Chicago, and his wife Minna, an astronomer, are in Bucharest waiting for the death of Valeria, Minna's mother. Corde spends most of his time thinking. After Valeria's death they attend the funeral and return to America. Although the plot is simple, the novel is very complex, because its central character, Albert Corde, is a complex man. He has warm feelings for many people, he observes the world, he reflects on human nature and human destiny, he does not play according to the rules of his university or of Chicago, so that he is often distrusted by his colleagues and other Chicago people. One of his "crimes" is the publication of two articles about Chicago, in which he describes its barbarism,

partners were arrested. Men could choose from among these women and try to produce some healthy children at a time when Caucasian birthrates had dropped dramatically due to abortion, R-strain syphilis and the Aids epidemic. Chemical, biological and nuclear pollution were responsible for stillbirths, miscarriages and genetic deformities. The Gileadean government, a theocratic regime, introduced the Old Testament form of polygamy. It also pursued racist policies. The author of the tape does not provide her original name and Records at the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center have been destroyed. The names in the story are probably pseudonyms. With the help of official records it has been possible to find two candidates for the Commander, a Frederick Waterford and a Frederick Judd. Both men were childless and had a succession of Handmaids. The name Serena Joy gives no clue as to which of the two men was the Commander, but on the whole evidence points to Waterford who met his end in one of the early purges; he was accused of liberal tendencies and of harbouring a subversive, either Offred or Nick, who must have been a member of Eyes, the official informers of the regime. But only crumbs of evidence remain, so it is all guesswork. Offred's ultimate fate is also obscure. She may have fled to Canada or England, but she may also have been recaptured.

III SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER READING

Cat's Eye

Elaine Risley, a painter nearing 50, is living in Vancouver.

A retrospective of her work has brought her back to Toronto where she spent a large part of her youth, but which she had left after the failure of her first marriage. During her stay in this much changed city, she tells the story of her youth in a series of detailed flashbacks. Her father is a field naturalist, who does his research in the Canadian North. He always takes his family with him, so Elaine and her brother never receive any formal education until their father gives up the field work for a university job. Now Elaine and Tom have to survive in the urban wilderness of Toronto. Tom does this by withdrawing into himself and becoming a kind of scholarly recluse, whereas Elaine seeks for acceptance by classmates, among whom there is a mean spirited girl, Cordelia, who victimizes and terrorizes her. The cruelties and humiliations suffered by Elaine at the hands of Cordelia and two other "friends" cut deeply into her personality, until Elaine as the smarter person eventually gets the upper hand. Then Cordelia becomes a complete failure almost begging for the support and friendship of Elaine. But the bad treatment by her friends has made Elaine a melancholic person for the rest of her life, who is hardly capable of new emotions after her puberty. She is no success as a lover or as a wife. Only as a mother is she capable of deeper emotions.

