Under Her Eye

PHOTO BY LIAM SHARP

The feverishly anticipated follow-up to *The Handmaid's Tale* has finally arrived, more than three decades later. So what does Margaret Atwood predict for our future?

A YEAR AGO, Margaret Atwood dropped a bombshell. She was finally writing a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, her 1985 bestseller and latter-day surprise TV hit.

"Dear Readers," she stated. "Everything you've ever asked me about Gilead and its inner workings is the inspiration for this book. Well, almost everything! The other inspiration is the world we've been living in."

And now, after being shortlisted for the 2019 Booker Prize before it was even released, *The Testaments* is finally here, topping bestseller lists all around the world, selling a copy every four seconds in the UK.

It has been 34 years since Offred, the eponymous Handmaid and narrator, climbed into the back of a van to an unknown fate at the end of the first book. Was she captured? Did she escape? Will we even find out?

Since the arrival of the multi-award-winning TV adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, there has been incredible enthusiasm for Atwood's tale. When the series debuted in 2017, the novel became the most-read book of the year on Kindle, according to Amazon.

The Handmaid's Tale was Margaret Atwood's sixth novel, written in 1984 while living in West Berlin. It's no coincidence that being in such proximity to the Soviet bloc was what led her to create the fictional Republic of Gilead.

As she wrote in a 2017 article in *The New York Times*: "During my visits to several countries behind the Iron Curtain I experienced the wariness, the feeling of being spied on, the silences, the changes of subject, the oblique ways in which people might convey information, and these had an influence on what I was writing."

The book was also written at a time of great conservatism in the US – Ronald Reagan was in office, lobby groups like Moral Majority and Focus on the Family were wielding increasing power, and women's reproductive rights were being steadily stripped back.

Atwood's Gilead is a totalitarian theocracy established in the US by an extremist religious group, the Sons of Jacob.

In this new world, the patriarchy is in complete control; intimidation, violence and murder are used liberally to control the population, and women are relegated to a handful of primary functions, one being that of a Handmaid. An unnamed climate catastrophe has rendered many women infertile, so those able to bear children are forced to act as reproductive vessels for powerful men and their wives.

Atwood has famously declared that everything she wrote about in *The Handmaid's Tale* came from historical examples. She used to take newspaper clippings along to interviews about the book to prove that everything she was writing was feasible.

"The control of women and babies has been a feature of every repressive regime on the planet," she wrote in *The New York Times*. "One of my rules was that I would not put any events into the book that had not already happened in what James Joyce called the 'nightmare' of history, nor any technology not already available. No imaginary gizmos, no imaginary laws, no imaginary atrocities. God is in the details, they say. So is the Devil."

By using real-world events, Atwood is speculating on how they may play out if nothing is done to stop them.

For three decades Atwood rejected writing a sequel to her book, as she felt Offred's story had already been told. And though we do, somewhat obtusely, find out what happened to her in *The Testaments*,

PHOTOS BY GETTY

LEFT **WOMEN IN LONDON PROTEST A VISIT BY US PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP**
TOP RIGHT **PROTESTORS OUTSIDE THE US EMBASSY IN PARIS**
BOTTOM RIGHT **SILENT WITNESSES TO THE CONFIRMATION HEARING OF BRETT KAVANAUGH**

"Writing is always an act of hope."

– Margaret Atwood

it's the beginning of the end of Gilead that most captured Atwood's imagination in this sequel. In the epilogue of *The Handmaid's Tale*, a scene from the distant future tells us that Gilead is no more, but without any details. Atwood has said that the new book stems from one question: "How do totalitarianisms fall apart?"

"How did these kinds of regimes disappear? I was interested in exploring that, and also what it would be like for the second generation, because second generations in revolutionary regimes are quite different from first generations," she told the *New Statesman*. "They're not engaged in the violent part of the affair. A form of order has been restored."

Once Atwood decided she was going to write a sequel, she contacted Bruce Miller, the TV show's creator. She told him which characters were going to be fundamental to the book, and what he could and couldn't do with them – namely, who he couldn't kill off. The new book also begins 15 years after the end of *The Handmaid's Tale*, giving Miller some latitude to create his on-screen interpretation in seasons two and three.

Without giving too much away, *The Testaments* is a much more expansive read than *The Handmaid's Tale*. Instead of Offred's chillingly claustrophobic view of her new world order, there are three women in the sequel who continue the story. There is an element of hope in these pages. As Atwood said to *New Statesman*: "Writing is always an act of hope."

We are reintroduced to Aunt Lydia, the seemingly evil matriarch who oversees the training of new Handmaids. One of the few women still allowed to read and write in Gilead, she's taken it upon herself to record her version of events, how she rose to her powerful position following the coup, and how she manipulates the other Aunts and the Commanders to both retain and expand that power.

The other narrators, written as testimonies, are two teenaged girls – Daisy, who lives over the border in the free state of Canada and has connections to Gilead; and Agnes, who is being brought up under the regime – and both, in their own ways, are potentially instrumental in its destruction.

The Gilead regime, however, is not going to go down without a fight. It remains populated by powerful men who continue to use religious doctrine as an excuse to subjugate, attack and abuse women and girls.

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* are simply chilling, Atwood's story is being used as a symbol of resistance around the world. In a recent speech at a *Variety* Power of Women event, Atwood said that Donald Trump's election in 2016 brought the old story into a new light: "It was no longer a story about something that wouldn't happen, it had become a story already in process."

She pointed to how activists have been donning the iconic white bonnets and crimson red coats of the Handmaids as a powerful uniform of resistance to governments seeking greater control over women's bodies and reproductive capacities.

In the US, women wore the costumes in striking visual protests against the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh amid allegations of historical sexual misconduct. Pro-choice protestors in Ireland wore the costume during the 2018 referendum on abortion legislation. A letter written by Atwood was read by cloak-and-bonnet-clad women calling for the decriminalistion of abortion in front of the National Congress in Buenos Aires, Argentina. An op-ed in *Wired* deemed the Handmaid's uniform "the Guy Fawkes mask of 2019".

As Atwood said in her speech: "We have not seen such a blatant pushback against women for a very long time. Some women are fighting for rights they've never had but others are fighting the threatened removal of such rights. Now is not the time to take anything for granted."

But her sequel does offer "tons of hope" – for those suffering under the fictional Gilead regime, and those who are frightened about where the real world may be heading.

"The repressive regime of *The Handmaid's Tale* did not last," said Atwood. "There *was* a resistance. It *was* ultimately successful. Because people did retain in their hearts the idea of what a free and fair society, a society rooted in truth and justice, ought to be like. Let us hope that this part of my fictional future does come true."

While Atwood's sequel does offer hope, it doesn't offer the reader, or today's society, a free pass. It is a striking reminder that things should never be allowed to get to such a totalitarian extreme point in the first place. As Aunt Lydia warns us in *The Testaments*: "You don't believe the sky is falling in until a chunk of it falls on you."

by **Kate McAuley**, with **Katherine Smyrk**

» The Testaments *is out now.*

Want More Atwood?

The Edible Woman (1969)

Atwood's startling debut addresses the notions of 60s gender roles and rising concerns of unadulterated consumerism. Marian McAlpin, her protagonist, is at first unable to eat and then feels herself consumed by the oppressive forces around her.

Alias Grace (1996)

In this historical novel based on true events, Atwood brings to life Grace Marks, the domestic worker who was accused and convicted of two murders in Canada in 1843, and the fictional Dr Simon Jordan, who is intrigued by the inner workings of Grace's mind.

Oryx And Crake (2003)

The first in a trilogy – *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013) were to follow – Atwood once again enters into the realms of dystopia where biotech companies reign supreme, child pornography passes as entertainment and new life is created to become nothing more than a vessel for scientific experimentation.

The Penelopiad (2005)

A retelling of Homer's *The Odyssey* from the perspective of his wife Penelope and her 12 hanged maids. A welcome alternative, Atwood's perspective also gives Penelope a voice, who though central to the narrative, was mostly silent in the original.

The Blind Assassin (2000)

This intricately plotted book within a book about science fiction landed Atwood the Booker Prize in 2000. It is a multi-layered suspense story that will keep readers guessing until its final pages.