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# The Handmaid's Tale



## **Synopsis**

Audie Award, Fiction, 2013 Margaret Atwood's popular dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* explores a broad range of issues relating to power, gender and religious politics. Multiple Golden Globe award-winner Claire Danes (*Romeo and Juliet*, *The Hours*) gives a stirring performance of this classic in speculative fiction, one of the most powerful and widely read novels of our time. After a staged terrorist attack kills the President and most of Congress, the government is deposed and taken over by the oppressive and all controlling Republic of Gilead. Offred, now a Handmaid serving in the household of the enigmatic Commander and his bitter wife, can remember a time when she lived with her husband and daughter and had a job, before she lost even her own name. Despite the danger, Offred learns to navigate the intimate secrets of those who control her every move, risking her life in breaking the rules in hopes of ending this oppression.

## **Book Information**

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 11 hours

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: July 20, 2012

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B008X6SZ0K

Best Sellers Rank: #25 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Science Fiction #180 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Fiction & Literature #231 in Books > Science Fiction & Fantasy > Science Fiction

## **Customer Reviews**

I have read "The Handmaid's Tale" a number of times, both in English original and in Croatian translation (a pretty good one). First time I read it, it was because I have found it in a library of a Women's Study Centre in Zagreb, Croatia, so I expected it to be "feminist literature", and was therefore a bit cautious about it, thinking it would be some kind of pamphlet for women's liberation. Of course, I did not know anything about Margaret Atwood back then. First thing this book taught me is that M. Atwood is, above all, a great author, and that "The Handmaid's Tale" is a piece of plain good literature. The somewhat circular narrative centres around and is being told from the

perspective of Offred, a woman living in Republic of Gilead, the dystopian, future theocracy established on the territory of today's United States of America. Gilead's government is organized by a group of very specific religious fanatics, basing their theology on a couple of chapters from the Old Testament, specifically the story about Sarah, Abraham's wife, who could not bear children, and therefore had given Abraham her handmaid, Hagar, to concieve children with her. Also written in that chapter is God's command to Hagar to completely submit to her mistress, and Abraham's observation that Sarah is to do whatever she pleases with her handmaid. That is the point from which the treatment of handmaids is derived in the Republic of Gilead. As the increasingly polluted land caused infertility withing majority of women, the fertile ones, especially those who have been either married to divorced men (theocracy of Gilead does not recognize divorce), or single, but not virgins, are taken as "handmaids" to be awarded to high ranking families without children.

"I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happiness, then at least more active." So says master writer Margaret Atwood regarding her tour de force, *The Handmaid's Tale*. Set in the present-day Massachusetts of the future, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is the chilling portrayal of a totalitarian society as told through the eyes of a Handmaid named Offred. Offred, who can remember the time when she had a home, a husband and a daughter, now serves as a "birth vessel" and is valued only for her powers of reproduction. Offred (her name was derived from "of" and the name of her own Commander, "Fred") is forced to live her life in a new dictatorship called the Republic of Gilead. Offred is allowed to leave her Commander's home only once each day; her freedom, like that of other ordinary civilians, has been stripped from her and she exists at the mercy of the heads of state who are known as the Commanders. The Republic of Gilead, however, is a society in the midst of crisis. Its land and atmosphere have been polluted by nuclear waste and all but a handful of the population has been rendered barren. Those infertile women, women who will never, or never again, reproduce, are known as "Unwomen," and are sent to the Colonies where they must toil as laborers with no privileges, working to clean up the nuclear waste. The only exceptions are the infertile Wives of the Commanders. Women lucky enough to still retain their fertility, like Offred, are considered a treasured "object" of society and one whose role is to bear children for the Wives of the Commanders who cannot.

The Handmaid's Tale - by Margaret Atwood THE HANDMAID'S TALE is a frightening look at a not too distant future where sterility is the norm, and fertile woman are treated as cattle, to produce

children for the upper class who cannot have any. The narrator Offred, as she is called in her new life, is the Handmaid for a top Commander in the new government. Once a month she is tested by a gynecologist to ensure that she is healthy, and then is taken to the Commander and his wife in the hopes of becoming pregnant. Offred, along with the other handmaid's, are not allowed to look directly at anyone else. They all wear the same outfits; red long dresses and headgear that cover their bodies. They live together, spend most of their time together, and are taken care of, in the hopes that they will produce children for this barren society. In this society, most women are not allowed to read, and are treated as if they have no minds. The government dictates their role in society. If they disobey, they are punished severely. Offred's memories often go back to a time when she was happily married to Luke, and with their daughter they were looking forward to a long and happy life together. Things changed when a military group took over the government, and immediately their lives as they knew it were over. Women lost all rights to ownership; bank accounts were frozen, land was taken away; fertile women were taken away from their husbands and families. A handful of older women were made into 'Aunts', and their duties were to instruct and guide the handmaids, reminding them of their role on this earth, which is to procreate. I have to say that my feelings during this book were of shock.

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