

# The Handmaid's Tale

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# Plot

- Offred is a handmaid, who is a servant in a household. Her purpose is to breed with the commander, and also to help out with household chores.
  - Offred walks to the market to buy groceries with Ofglen
  - Throughout the novel, Offred has many flashbacks of her past life, including her dead husband Nick, and her childhood attending the Handmaid school
- Red Center*
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# Genre and Significance

- Genre: Dystopian Fiction
  - Imagined world and societies not ideal but actually terrifying or restrictive
  - Feminist dystopian
  - “Speculative fiction”
  - Cautionary, a warning of something that could happen
- Significance:

# Historical Context

- Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher had been elected shortly before *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1986, so there was a wave of conservatism
  - Afraid that Reagan's policies would reverse progress in feminism
- More than 40% of women around the world aged 15-44 live in a country where abortion is highly restricted
  - El Salvador, Chile, Nicaragua, Vatican City and Malta do not allow abortion under any circumstances,
- The concept of female genital mutilation is not confined to the pages of Atwood's book: 140 million women and young girls all over the world are believed to have undergone the procedure, which sees their outer labia, inner labia, and clitoris removed, often without anaesthesia or pain relief
- reminder of the horrors of Nazi Germany, in which the Jews would have to wear a yellow band around their arm, which sported a star of David. This was used to separate the Jewish from those who were not Jewish. It also served as a reminder to the Jews that they had no rights under German law.

# Religious Context

- In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a small but vocal percentage of fundamentalists known as the Christian Right became interested in the idea of rebuilding the United States as a Christian theocracy. This movement was a response to changes in U.S. culture that fundamentalists viewed as direct threats to biblical practice, such as the civil rights and women's movements
- Atwood shines a harsh light on the hypocrisy of these fundamentalists, who manipulate biblical text for their own selfish political gains
- Dedicated to Mary Webster, Atwood's Puritan ancestor that was tried as a witch

# Themes and Purpose

- Themes in the Novel:
  - Stolen Identity
  - Chastened Femininity
  - Subjugated love
  - Patriarchy
  - Systematic societal oppression
  - Victimhood and survival
- **Purpose:** Meant for novel to be a anti-prediction rather than a prediction—if the terrible future could be denoted, then maybe it wouldn't come to be

# Fun Facts

- The Handmaid's Tale was originally titled "Offred". Aside from its immediate significance (the name is composed of a man's first name, "Fred," and a prefix denoting "belonging to," so it is like "de" in French or "von" in German, or like the suffix "son" in English last names like Williamson) there is also another meaning: "offered," denoting a religious offering or a victim offered for sacrifice.