

ALSO BY MARGARET ATWOOD

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WRITING
with INTENT

*Essays, Reviews, Personal Prose:
1983–2005*

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For my family

Writing Utopia

How did *The Handmaid's Tale* get written? The answer could be, partly on a rented electric typewriter with a German keyboard in a walk-up flat in West Berlin, and partly in a small house in Tuscaloosa, Alabama—which, it was announced to me with a certain pride, is the per capita murder capital of the United States. “Gosh,” I said. “Maybe I shouldn’t be here.” “Aw, don’t y’all worry,” they replied. “They only shoots family.” But although these two places provided, shall we say, a certain atmosphere, there is more to the story than that.

The Handmaid's Tale, I must explain for the benefit of the one person in the audience who may not have read it yet—out in paperback, and a bargain of creepy thrills for only \$4.95—is set in the future. This conned some people into believing it is science fiction, which, to my mind, it is not. I define science fiction as fiction in which things happen that are not possible today—that depend, for instance, on advanced space travel, time travel, the discovery of green monsters on other planets or galaxies, or that contain various technologies we have not yet developed. But in *The Handmaid's Tale*, nothing happens that the human race has not already done at some time in the past, or that it is not doing now, perhaps in other countries, or for which it has not yet developed the technology. We’ve done it, or we’re doing it, or we could start doing it tomorrow. Nothing inconceivable takes place, and the projected trends on which my future society is based are already in motion. So I think of *The Handmaid's Tale* not as

science fiction but as speculative fiction; and, more particularly, as that negative form of Utopian fiction that has come to be known as the Dystopia.

A Utopia is usually thought of as a fictional perfect society, but in fact the word does not mean “perfect society.” It means “nowhere,” and was used sardonically by Sir Thomas More as the title of his own sixteenth-century fictional discourse on government. Perhaps he meant to indicate that although his Utopia made more rational sense than the England of his day, it was unlikely to be found anywhere outside a book.

Both the Utopia and the Dystopia concern themselves with the designing of societies—good societies for the Utopias, bad ones for the Dystopias. There is some of the same pleasure in this, for the writer, that we used to get as children when we built sand cities, or dinosaur jungles from Plasticine or drew entire wardrobes for paper dolls. But in a Utopia, you get to plan everything—the cities, the legal system, the customs, even facets of the language. The Dystopian bad design is the Utopian good design in reverse—that is, we the readers are supposed to deduce what a good society is by seeing, in detail, what it isn’t.

The Utopia-Dystopia as a form tends to be produced only by cultures based on monotheism—or, like Plato’s system, on a single idea of the Good—and that postulate also a single goal-oriented timeline. Cultures based on polytheism and the circularity of time don’t seem to produce them. Why bother to try to improve society, or even to visualize it improved, when you know it’s all going to go around again, like clothes in the wash? And how can you define a “good” society as opposed to a “bad” one if you see good and bad as aspects of the same thing? But Judeo-Christianity, being a linear monotheism—one God and one plotline, from Genesis to Revelation—has generated many fictional Utopias, and a good many attempts to create the real thing right here on earth, the venture of the Pilgrim Fathers being one of them—“We shall be as a city upon a hill, a light to all nations”—and Marxism being another. In Marxism, history replaces God as a determinant, and the classless society replaces the New Jerusalem, but change through time, heading in the direction of perfection, is similarly postulated. In the background of every modern Utopia lurk Plato’s Republic and the Book of Revelation, and modern Dystopias

have not been uninfluenced by various literary versions of Hell, especially those of Dante and Milton, which in their turn go right back to the Bible, that indispensable sourcebook of Western literature.

Sir Thomas More's original *Utopia* has a long list of descendants, many of which I read as I hacked my way through high school, through college, and later through graduate school. This list includes Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and, in the nineteenth century, William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, in which the ideal society is a kind of artists' colony; H. G. Wells's *Time Machine*, in which the lower classes actually eat the upper; Butler's *Erewhon*, in which crime is a sickness and sickness is a crime; and W. H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age*. In our own century, the classics are Huxley's *Brave New World*; Bellamy's *Looking Backward*; and, of course, *1984*, to mention a few. Utopias by women are also of note, though not as numerous. There are, for instance, *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and *Woman on the Edge of Time* by Marge Piercy.

Utopias are often satirical, the satire being directed at whatever society the writer is currently living in—that is, the superior arrangements of the Utopians reflect badly on *us*. Dystopias are often more like dire warnings than satires, dark shadows cast by the present into the future. They are what will happen to us if we don't pull up our socks.

What aspects of this life interest such writers? To no one's surprise, their concerns turn out to be much the same as those of society. There are, of course, the superficial matters of clothing and cuisine, partial nudity and vegetarianism making regular appearances. But the main problems are the distribution of wealth; labor relations; power structures; the protection of the powerless, if any; relations between the sexes; population control; urban planning, often in the form of an interest in drains and sewers; the rearing of children; illness and its ethics; insanity ditto, the censorship of artists and suchlike ruffraff and antisocial elements; individual privacy and its invasion; the redefinition of language; and the administration of justice—if, that is, any such administration is needed. It is a characteristic of the extreme Utopia, at one end, and the extreme Dystopia, at the other, that neither contains any lawyers. Extreme Utopias are communities of spirit, in which there cannot be any real disagreements among members because all are of like and right mind; extreme Dystopias are absolute tyrannies, in

which contention is not a possibility. In Utopia, then, no lawyers are needed; in Dystopia, no lawyers are allowed.

In between, however, is where most Utopias-Dystopias as well as most human societies fall, and here the composers of these fictions have shown remarkable fecundity. Relations between the sexes exhibit perhaps the widest range. Some Utopias go for a sort of healthy-minded communal sex; others, such as W. H. Hudson's *Crystal Age*, for an antlike arrangement in which most citizens are sexually neutral and only one pair per large country mansion actually breed, which is how they cut down on the birth rate. Still others, such as Marge Piercy's, allow men to participate almost equally in childrearing by allowing them to breast-feed via hormone injections, an option that may not rejoice your hearts but at least has the virtue of novelty. Then there are Huxley's ritualistic group sex and bottle babies, Skinner's boxes, and various minor science fictions—written by men, I hasten to add—in which women devour their mates or paralyze them and lay eggs on them, à la spiders. Sexual relations in extreme Dystopias usually exhibit some form of slavery or, as in Orwell, extreme sexual repression.

The details, then, vary, but the Utopia-Dystopia as a form is a way of trying things out on paper first to see whether we might like them, should we ever have the chance to put them into actual practice. In addition, it challenges us to reexamine what we understand by the word *human*, and above all what we intend by the word *freedom*. For neither the Utopia nor the Dystopia is open-ended. Utopia is an extreme example of the impulse to order; it's the word *should* run rampant. Dystopia, its nightmare mirror image, is the desire to squash dissent taken to inhuman and lunatic lengths. Neither are what you'd call tolerant, but both are necessary to the imagination: if we can't visualize the good, the ideal, if we can't formulate what we want, we'll get what we don't want, in spades. It's a sad commentary on our age that we find Dystopias a lot easier to believe in than Utopias: Utopias we can only imagine; Dystopias we've already had. But should we try too hard to enforce Utopia, Dystopia rapidly follows; because if enough people disagree with us we'll have to eliminate or suppress or terrorize or manipulate them, and then we've got *1984*. As a rule, Utopia is only safe when it remains true to its name and stays nowhere. It's a nice place to visit, but do we really want to live there? Which may be the ultimate moral of such stories.

All this was by way of background, to let you know that I'd done the required reading long before launching myself into *The Handmaid's Tale*. There are two other lots of required reading I would like to mention. The first had to do with the literature of the Second World War—I read Winston Churchill's memoirs when I was in high school, not to mention a biography of Rommel, the Desert Fox, and many another tome of military history. I read these books partly because I was an omnivorous reader and they were there; my father was a history buff, and these things were just lying around. By extension, I read various books on totalitarian regimes, of the present and the past; the one that sticks out was called *Darkness at Noon*, by Arthur Koestler. (This was not my only reading when I was in high school; I was also reading Jane Austen and Emily Brontë and a particularly lurid book of sci-fi called *Donovan's Brain*. I would read anything, and still will; when all else is lacking, I read airline in-flight magazines, and I have to say, I am getting tired of those articles on billionaire businessmen. Don't you think it's time for some other kinds of fiction?)

This "political" area of my reading was reinforced later by travel to various countries where, to put it mildly, certain things we consider freedoms are not universally in force, and by conversations with many people; I remember in particular meeting a woman who had been in the French Resistance during the war, and a man who had escaped from Poland at the same time.

The other lot of required reading has to do with the history of the seventeenth-century Puritans, especially those who ended up in the United States. At the front of *The Handmaid's Tale* there are two dedications. One is to Perry Miller, who was a professor of mine at the dreaded Harvard Graduate School, and who almost single-handedly was responsible for resurrecting the American Puritans as a field for literary investigation. I had to take a lot of this stuff, and I needed to "fill my gap" to pass my comprehensives, and this was one area I had not studied as an undergraduate. Perry Miller pointed out that contrary to what I had been taught earlier, the American Puritans did not come to North America in search of religious toleration, or not what we mean by it. They wanted the freedom to practice *their* religion, but they were not particularly keen on anyone else practicing his or hers. Among their noteworthy achievements were the

banishing of so-called heretics, the hanging of Quakers, and the well-known witchcraft trials. I get to say these bad things about them because they were my ancestors—in a way, *The Handmaid's Tale* is my book about my ancestors—and the second dedication, to Mary Webster, is indeed to one of these very same ancestors. Mary was a well-known witch, or at least she was tried for witchcraft and hanged. But it was before they had invented the drop, which breaks your neck—they merely strung her up and let her dangle, and when they came to cut her down the next morning, she was still alive. Under the law of double jeopardy, you couldn't execute a person twice for the same crime, so she lived for another fourteen years. I felt that if I was going to stick my neck out by writing this book, I'd better dedicate it to someone with a very tough neck.

Puritan New England was a theocracy, not a democracy; and the future society proposed in *The Handmaid's Tale* has the form of a theocracy, too, on the principle that no society every strays completely far from its roots. Stalinist Russia would have been unthinkable without Czarist Russia to precede it, and so forth. Also, the most potent forms of dictatorship have always been those that have imposed tyranny in the name of religion; and even folk such as the French Revolutionaries and Hitler have striven to give a religious force and sanction to their ideas. What is needed for a really good tyranny is an unquestionable idea or authority. Political disagreement is political disagreement; but political disagreement with a *theocracy* is heresy, and a good deal of gloating self-righteousness can be brought to bear on the extermination of heretics, as history has demonstrated, through the Crusades, the forcible conversions to Islam, the Spanish Inquisition, the burnings at the stake under the English queen Bloody Mary, and so on through the years. It was in the light of history that the American constitutionalists in the eighteenth century separated church from state. It is also in the light of history that my leaders in *The Handmaid's Tale* recombine them.

All fictions begin with the question *What if . . . ?* The *What if?* varies from book to book: *What if John loves Mary?* *What if John doesn't love Mary?* *What if Mary gets eaten by an enormous shark?* *What if the Martians invade?* *What if you find a treasure map, and so forth—but there is always a *What if . . . ?* to which the novel is the answer. The *what if* for*

The Handmaid's Tale could be formulated: What if it *can* happen here? What kind of "it" would it be? (I have never believed any fictions about the Russians taking over. If they can't get their refrigerators to work, they quite frankly wouldn't stand much of a chance. So that, for me, is not a plausible "it.")

Or *what if* you wanted to take over the United States and set up a totalitarian government, the lust for power being what it is? How would you go about it? What conditions would favor you, and what slogan would you propose, what flag would you fly that would attract the necessary 20 percent of the population, without which no totalitarianism can stay in power? If you proposed communism, you'd be unlikely to get many takers. A dictatorship of liberal democrats would be seen even by the slightly dull-witted as a contradiction in terms. Although many dubious acts have been committed, let's face it, in the name of the great god democracy, they've usually been done in secret, or with a good deal of verbal embroidery covering them up. In this country you'd be more likely to try some version of Puritan Fatherhood if you wanted a takeover. That would definitely be your best plan.

But true dictatorships do not come *in* in good times. They come in in bad times, when people are ready to give up some of their freedoms to someone—anyone—who can take control and promise them better times. The bad times that made Hitler and Mussolini possible were economic, with some extra frills such as a shortage of men in proportion to women, due to the high death rates during the First World War. To make my future society possible, I proposed something a little more complex. Bad economic times, yes, due to a shrinking area of global control, which would mean shrinking markets and fewer sources of cheap raw materials. But also a period of widespread environmental catastrophe, which has had several results: a higher infertility and sterility rate due to chemical and radiation damage (this, by the way, is happening already) and a higher birth-defect rate, which is also happening. The ability to conceive and bear a healthy child would become rare, and thus valued; and we all know who gets most—in any society—of things that are rare and valued. Those at the top. Hence my proposed future society, which, like many human societies before it, assigns more than one woman to its favored male members.

There are lots of precedents for this practice, but my society, being derived from Puritanism, would, of course, need biblical sanction. Luckily for them, Old Testament patriarchs were notoriously polygamous; the text they chose as their cornerstone is the story of Rachel and Leah, the two wives of Jacob, and their baby competition. When they themselves ran out of babies, they pressed their handmaids into service and counted the babies as their own, thus providing a biblical justification for surrogate motherhood, should anyone need one. Among these five people—not two—the twelve tribes of Israel were produced.

Woman's place, in the Republic of Gilead—so named for the mountain where Jacob promised to his father-in-law, Laban, that he would protect his two daughters—woman's place is strictly in the home. My problem as a writer was, given that my society has stuffed all women back into their homes, how did they go about it? How do you *get* women back into the home, now that they are running around *outside* the home, having jobs and generally flinging themselves around? Simple. You just close your eyes and take several giant steps back, into the not-so-very-distant past—the nineteenth century, to be exact—deprive them of the right to vote, own property, or hold jobs, and prohibit public prostitution in the bargain, to keep them from hanging out on street corners, and presto, there they are, back in the home. To stop them from using their gold Amex cards to make quick airplane escapes, I have their credit frozen overnight; after all, if everyone is on computers and cash is obsolete—which is where we're heading—how simple to single out any one group—all those over sixty, all those with green hair, all women. Of the many scary features of my future society, this one seems to have gotten to the most people. That their beloved, friendly, well-trained credit cards could rise up against them! It is the stuff of nightmares.

This, then, is part of the core of what I hope you will think is relentless logic running like a spine through *The Handmaid's Tale*. While I was writing it, and for some time after, I kept a scrapbook with clippings from newspapers referring to all sorts of material that fitted in with the premises on which the book was based—everything from articles on the high level of PCBs found in polar bears, to the biological mothers assigned to SS troops by Hitler, in addition to their legal wives, for purposes of child production,

to conditions in prisons around the world, to computer technology, to underground polygamy in the state of Utah. There is, as I have said, nothing in the book without a precedent. But this material in itself would not constitute a novel. A novel is always the story of an individual, or several individuals; never the story of a generalized mass. So the real problems in the writing of *The Handmaid's Tale* were the same as the problems involved in the writing of any novel: how to make the story real at a human and individual level. The pitfalls that Utopian writing so frequently stumbles into are the pitfalls of disquisition. The author gets too enthusiastic about sewage systems or conveyor belts, and the story grinds to a halt while the beauties of these are explained. I wanted the factual and logical background to my tale to remain background; I did not want it usurping the foreground.

Part Two 1990–1999