Margaret Atwood

The Handmaid's Tale

THE HANDMAID'S TALE

Margaret Atwood. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986.

Ann Yeoman

Over the past few months, I have heard a bewildering number of differing, but invariably strong, opinions of Margaret Atwood's latest novel: "It works;" "It doesn't work;" "Terrifying and marvellous: it depicts a possible future — Gilead can happen here;" "Too close to the present: the Republic of Gilead needs to be set in the more distant future and it needs its own language, its own version of Orwell's Newspeak;" "Clever, but too pat to be believable, so it failed to shock me, if shock is what was intended," etc., etc. However contradictory, these reactions, I believe, are all valid. What this says about *The Handmaid's Tale* is that it is at once more controversial, more problematic, and therefore more inherently interesting than it might at first appear. Atwood unfolds her tale with consummate skill, delicately sustaining the suspense to the last line. So on a first reading one is compelled to read on in order to discover the secrets of Gilead and to find out what could possibly become of the sympathetically drawn heroine, Offred. On a second reading this compulsion is, of course, missing: there can be no suspense, for the outcome is already known, but one finds oneself led to question the credibility of Atwood's anti-Utopia, which in many of its details does not seem to stand up to close scrutiny. Yet from her previous work, Atwood has proven herself to be a highly intelligent, conscious artist; and so, the following questions: how far is the author deliberately frustrating our expectations of what a "good" dystopia might be? Is she more interested in disson-ance than in resolution? Is her novel intended to raise more questions than it answers?

Atwood presents us with a futuristic society — the Republic of Gilead. It is located in the northeastern United States (presumably in and around Cambridge, Massachusetts) some time after the President has been shot and Congress overthrown in a coup by the Fundamentalist New Right. A totalitarian theocracy has replaced a liberal democracy. The biblical Gilead, a rocky region east of Jordan, was part of the land promised to the Israelites; Moses sees it but does not enter it, dying in Moab, the other side of the Jordan. Atwood's Gilead, the new regime, in its attempt to eliminate the liberal excess it saw thrive under democratic tolerance, has established a sterile, Puritanical and essentially stereotypical hierarchy in which traditional roles have been reinstated: the men serve as commanders, warriors and guardians of the state; the women as mothers, "breeders" and housemaids. All individuality has been repressed. People are known by their functions and identified by the uniform appropriate to that function: "Wives" wear blue; "Handmaids" wear red; the disciplinarian "Aunts" wear khaki; the "Marthas", or housekeepers, wear green, etc. Communication is minimal, and between some groups it is prohibited by law, any infringement of which results in the severest penalty. The Commanders, who comprise Gilead's ruling elite, are practically faceless, and strangely powerless in their own homes where the Wives control all discipline and ceremony. Atwood's heroine describes the "ceremony" in great detail: as a Handmaid it is her duty, according to Old Testament tradition, to serve as a "vessel" to produce the child that the Commander and his Wife are unable to conceive on their own. The historical reason for the need of Handmaids is that previous chemical and nuclear disasters have rendered many Wives, and Commanders, sterile or unable to produce healthy offspring.

We gradually discover that the tale, a reflective account of the heroine's existence under the new regime, is set close to the year 2,000 — only, in fact, about twelve years in the future. Offred, the narrator, is 33 and attended university during the 1980s. Much of her narrative concerns her teenage and college years in the '70s and '80s as she looks back nostalgically to pre-Gilead times, to the "time before," comparing the freedom she then took for granted to the repressive system under which she currently suffers. Set historically so close together, the Gilead "era" and the "time before" are by no means distinct from one another and Atwood must surely have intended this. If all tales set in the past or in the future are actually about the present, certainly *The Handmaid's Tale* subtly shatters any preconceptions the reader may hold concerning self-contained utopias or dystopias: Atwood refuses to present Gilead as a satiric inversion of our own world or as an hermetically-sealed "alternate" world. The "time before" is slowly revealed as having held for Offred friends, mother, lover, husband, child and job. Yet in the heroine's picture of life in the late 1980s, Atwood juxtaposes incongruities and improbabilities to the familiar and commonplace: we learn that Pornomarts, Bundle Buggies and Feels-on-Wheels vans were a constant presence in what was soon to become Gilead's "capital," and that the credit card was the sole form of currency. The Epilogue, a shallow, academic lecture on "The Handmaid's Tale" that takes place in the year 2195, tells us that the tale we have just read was in fact the transcription of Offred's taped story that she lost or hid sometime after escaping from Gilead. So, in the year 2195 Gilead is an historical curiosity. It no longer exists. A society of such extremes could not last forever: it carried within it the seeds of its own destruction.

It is in the Epilogue that Atwood's bleakest pronouncement lies. A cold, factual account, it is totally lacking in compassion and entirely misses the reason why Offred, the Handmaid, was forced to tell her tale: "Because I'm telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are. ... So I will go on. So I will myself to go on." Offred craves communion, relationship with others and with the world around her. She clings to the sensual, glorying whenever she can in colours, smells, textures, and refusing to fall into the trap of believing that the distorted shadow she sees in the convex hall mirror is the true image of herself. She endangers her life by having a forbidden affair with Nick, the Guardian assigned to the Commander; and it is this love that finally gives her courage to attempt an escape, and affords Nick human

dignity as he moves to help her. *The Handmaid's Tale* has been described as a woman's novel, but I believe that Atwood's perspective — and indictment — is more widely reaching: it is a tale of virtue and power, of claustrophobia and outrage, of the importance of story-telling and the possibility of individual redemption, of women *and* men and the perverse, inhuman creatures they become in a world that outlaws the emotional life. Offred has a cushion in her room on which is embroidered "Faith"; throughout the novel she wonders what became of the cushions embroidered with the words "Hope" and "Charity." She is taught that Gilead is "within" and Aunt Lydia instructs the Handmaids to be silent and unseen for "To be seen — is to be — penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable." But Offred knows that to be impenetrable is to be invulnerable and to be invulnerable is to be inhuman and incapable of love. Atwood gives us hope when she shows that Offred's faith in human love enables her to endure; she chills us when she shows in the Epilogue that this essential quality of the Handmaid is not even noticed by the historians and anthropologists of the year 2195. If the novel does not close on a note of abject despair, it certainly ends on one that is enigmatic and dissonant. When at the end of his talk the lecturer asks his audience: "Are there any questions?," the answer must surely be that yes, *The Handmaid's Tale* raises many questions — both ominous and disturbing.

Doris Lessing

THE GOOD TERRORIST

Doris Lessing. London: Jonathan Cape, 1985 (Canada: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).

Kitty Mattes

Anyone who has ever cared enough about a political issue to carry a sign about it will find some or all of *The Good Terrorist* offensive. Lessing treats us to characters who go to demonstrations for fun, call everyone they dislike "fascists," and get adolescent thrills out of blowing things up. She makes activism look ridiculous.

Most of the story is told from the point of view of a thirty-six-year-old child named Alice, though there are inconsistent lapses when we see her through the author's eyes, as in the last words when she is "poor baby." Alice takes over a condemned house in London with all the bourgeois homesteading passion her revolutionary group disdains. None of them recognizes the discrepancy, including Alice. The group includes her homosexual boyfriend, Jasper, lesbians Faye and Roberta, a black man named Jim, and two heterosexual couples, one of which is "the other kind," that is, working middle-class as opposed to unemployed anarchist. The story begins when they take over the house and ends when they leave it.

Events include methods both cunning and desperate to acquire money, strategies to stop demolition of the house, encounters with mysterious communists next door (who may or may not be professional revolutionaries), a futile attempt to join the IRA, some demonstrations and a couple of bombings. But emotions overshadow events -- emotions and relationships. Alice is constantly in tears of either rage or frustration. She rants against her parents and "the fascist capitalist system" in the same breath and tone. Every time she needs something she goes to one of her parents (who live separately). Most of the time they deny her requests and she screams "fascist capitalist!" at them, but they obviously love her and are dazed with hurt. If Alice were sixteen, it would not be quite so pitiful, but she is, as a family friend puts it, "a case of arrested development."

Simply, as a political novel *The Good Terrorist* is a failure. It fails to make a statement or indicate an ideological direction of any kind. The ridicule heaped upon its central characters hardly qualifies as persuasion. It can't begin to compare to Lessing's brilliant series, "Children of Violence," the Martha Quest epic that pays powerful respect to political commitment, nor to her *Memoirs of a Survivor*, about the relentless rending of all social fabric in the wake of an unnamed global catastrophe. As a crusader, Lessing has been replaced by Nadine Gordimer, whose *Burger's Daughter*, for example, chronicles resistance in contemporary South Africa in as intense and steady a light as Lessing's early works.

But then, *The Good Terrorist* is not a political novel. It is a sort of reverse Bildungsroman, a Peter Pan tale about not growing up. As Wendy, the child-mother of Never-Never Land, Alice is persuasive. The story from this angle becomes a grotesque portrait of the female as nurturer and caretaker. As her mother tells Alice near the end, "...you spend your life exactly as I did. Cooking and nannying for other people. An all-purpose female drudge."

Indeed, the central image of the novel is Alice's house, a presence of more consequence than any one of the characters, looming over all the action. The story begins with it: "The house was set back from the noisy main road in what seemed to be a rubbish tip. A large house. Solid." By far the most important room in this momentous house is the kitchen; the action that takes place there makes all the connections. And central to the kitchen is Alice's soup, with which she endlessly nourishes everyone. The house inspires Alice with bravery and even a certain passion, but this reader found it difficult to care about Alice, or any of the characters for that matter. They are all absurd and pitiful.

Did Doris Lessing know what she was doing? Did she know that she was creating a caricature of woman's role as child/nurse, or did she believe she was exposing the dangers of communist conspiracy? In any case, what a pity that she chose to belittle political activism. There are better things to do, and she is still a superb writer. It's as if someone with an exquisite voice were to sing "Ninety-nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall:" on one level it would be beautiful.