

Books of The Times

By Christopher Lehmann-Haupt

THE HANDMAID'S TALE. By Margaret Atwood. 311 pages. Houghton Mifflin. \$16.95.

IT's a bleak world that Margaret Atwood opens up for us in her new novel, "The Handmaid's Tale" — how bleak and even terrifying we will not fully realize until the story's final pages. But the sensibility through which we view this world is infinitely rich and abundant. And that's why Miss Atwood has succeeded with her anti-Utopian novel where most practitioners of this Orwellian genre have tended to fail.

To begin with, there's the matter of technique, which Miss Atwood, a Canadian with an international reputation, has honed in five previous novels ("Surfacing," "The Edible Woman" and "Life Before Man" are the best known of them), two works of short fiction and 10 volumes of poetry. Confined as we are in "The Handmaid's Tale" to the viewpoint of an anonymous woman living in some oppressive society of the near future, we

realize only gradually and with the utmost dramatic effect that she is a slave whose sole function is to bear children for the underpopulated theocracy called the Republic of Gilead that was once the United States.

She doesn't even have a name. She is a cipher called Offred, presumably because the Commander of the household in which she is the only fertile member has the given name of Frederick.

Fortunately, however, she is an incompletely successful product of the Rachel and Leah Re-education Center, literally named for the passage in Genesis where Rachel tells Jacob, "Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her." While she partly enjoys her oppression, which lends the novel an arresting ambiguity, she also knows better, understands the psychology of tyranny and feels guilty for submitting.

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She is sensitive to the landscape around her, which is not a mere deco-

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Jerry Bauer

Margaret Atwood

orative background but plays a role in the novel's thematic development. She never stops scheming to escape, occasionally considering the route of suicide that her predecessor turns out to have taken. Most important of all, she never loses her acute sense of language; she never gives up her freedom to play with words.

"I wait," she muses, "for the household to assemble. *Household*: that is what we are. The Commander is the head of the household. The house is what he holds. To have and to hold, till death do us part. The hold of a ship. Hollow." Later, as the book approaches its chilling climax, she comments: "Today there are different flowers, drier, more defined, the flowers of high summer: daisies, black-eyed Susans, starting us on the long downward slope to fall."

This sensitivity to language is vital, and not only because it keeps the book alive. Women are absolutely forbidden literacy in the Republic of Gilead; "Our big mistake was teaching them to read," says the member of the Sons of Jacob who is thought to have orchestrated the massacre of the President and Congress (as we learn from an epilogue called "Historical Notes"). "We won't do that again." Or, as one of the Center's mottos puts it, "Pen Is Envy."

It's of special meaning that the only clue to her predecessor's existence that Offred finds in her bedroom, besides the decoration on the ceiling where the light fixture from which she hanged herself was once attached, is the old joke-Latin sentence, "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" ("Don't let the bastards grind you down"). And one of the novel's wittiest touches is that when Offred's Commander has her brought to him illegally, at great risk to her, late at night, it is because, as he explains when she arrives, "I would like — I'd like you to play a game of Scrabble with me."

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What usually works against this genre of fiction — one thinks of Marge Piercy's "Woman on the Edge of Time," Ira Levin's "This Perfect Day," one or two of Doris Lessing's later novels and, to a lesser extent, Thomas Berger's "Regiment of Women" — is that what makes the imagined society narrow and oppressive also serves to limit the work in which it is described. This can also be said of "The Handmaid's Tale"; among other things, it is a political tract deploring nuclear energy, environmental waste, and antifeminist attitudes.

But it so much more than that — a taut thriller, a psychological study, a play on words. It has a sense of humor about itself, as well as an ambivalence toward even its worst villains, who aren't revealed as such until the very end. Best of all, it holds out the possibility of redemption. After all, the Handmaid is also a writer. She has written this book. She may have survived.

Finally, if it is an ideological jeremiad, it happens also to be a sado-masochistic fantasy, what one might even call a cerebrated version of Pauline Réage's "Story of O." The tension between these two ways of reading it makes even more interesting what is already a rich and complex book. "The Handmaid's Tale" is easily Margaret Atwood's best novel to date, and the long-awaited fulfillment of the earlier promise of "Surfacing."