

**Margaret Atwood, *The Testaments*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2019; pp: 432;  
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Occupying that curious literary space of 'unnecessarily needed' is Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019), the long-awaited sequel to her infamously frightening, and ultimately prophetic, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). While the latter introduces the reader to the theocratic Republic of Gilead through the experiences of the Handmaid Offred (i.e. June in the Netflix series by the same name), *The Testaments* instead revolves around the tyrannical Aunt Lydia, Canadian-raised teenager Daisy, and Gilead Wife-in-training Agnes.

Episodic in nature, with each chapter revolving around the three protagonists, the narrative style can be off-putting. Atwood often ends a chapter with a cliff-hanger, and so *Testaments* feels a little disjointed—it's a constant stopping and starting, the erratic electrical disturbance of a heart in cardiac arrest. Yet with all Atwood's commitment to the relaying of the 'bigger picture' of Gilead—including the How, the When and the Why of its inception—the novel flatlines in its last third. Atwood's writing is as formidable as ever, yet she does a disservice to her creation with the novel's final moments. The greatest strength of *Handmaid's Tale* lies in the uncertainty of Offred/June's future—an offering of imagination, a belief in the capability and resilience of the human spirit—and *Testaments* eclipses this power with a single ending, now forever part of the literary canon.

Post-Offred/June's escape to Canada with Baby Nicole (now a Gilead martyr) in *Handmaid's Tale*, the Republic continues to amass military might, holding significant influence over its North American neighbours. Aunt Lydia, one of the founders of the 'Woman's Sphere' within Gilead proper, writes her story of subterfuge and survival down at snatched intervals and hides the manuscript within an 'X-rated' book, Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua: A Defence of One's Own Life*. In Toronto, Daisy lives with parents-who-might-not-be-her-parents—she's not sure. She sees bits and pieces about Gilead on TV, and does a couple of school projects on the regime. Even though she's in Canada, Gilead is ever-present, and no one is safe. A Gileadean, Agnes progresses through the stages of life unique to the daughters of Commanders: Vidala School with its seasonal pink and plum dresses, *petit-point* needlework and bland food; followed by Rubies Premarital Preparatory with its green wardrobe, flower-arranging classes and stories of biblical concubines cut into twelve pieces. As they often do, the three narratives eventually come together and the result is—to say the least—explosive.

In focusing on these three particular characters, Atwood applies a soothing balm to the scars from wounds previously caused by *Handmaid's Tale*—while *Testaments* certainly has its vicious moments (such as when Aunt Lydia is describing

her arrest at the beginnings of Gilead's creation), it focuses less on the torture and general demeaning of female life than it does on the domestic experiences of its three protagonists. Perhaps Atwood has sensed a need for hope in this current political climate, perhaps intuiting that another *Handmaid's Tale* might be all too much right now. Indeed, in her Acknowledgements Atwood shares that *Testaments* was written partly in response to questions around the fall of Gilead, and what happened after *Handmaid's Tale* ended, for, as you may recall, the last we see of Offred/June is her disappearing into the unknown via an unmarked white van.

Where *Handmaid's Tale* sought to teach its lessons through the polarity of evil (Gilead) and good (anywhere else), *Testaments* offers a far greyer and more nuanced version of the morality of Gilead—many people have a hand in the creation of a regime, and likewise many people must work to destroy it—but what about those who live within and around it? Even Canada, seen as a source of hope within *Handmaid's Tale* is shown in *Testaments* as being too reticent, the country's trademark 'niceness' here a weakness in its reluctance to force Gilead's hand. Canada, like so many others ('even New Zealand!' as one character sighs), turns a blind eye to the stories of torture, rape and violence leaking out of the hermit-nation, yet it allows Gilead's 'Pearl Girls' temporary visas to conduct their missionary work. Indeed, as Atwood writes, 'Thirty-five years is a long time to think about possible answers [to the ending of *Handmaid's Tale*], and the answers have changed as society itself has changed, and as possibilities have become actualities'.

*Testaments* is, fittingly, less about the 'what if?' of *Handmaid's Tale* and more about the 'where to from here?'—two questions that ultimately reflect the state of this world, and how we are existing within it, at their respective times. Ending similarly to *Handmaid's Tale* with an extract from future conference proceedings (In this case, the Thirteenth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, June 29-30, 2197), *Testaments* offers hope through a vision—however brief—of the future. A world where the postgraduate student of Aunt Lydia's imagination can work in peace on transcribing these historical primary texts for the generations that follow her own.

Writing dystopias in a time where dystopic tropes are becoming more apparent seems to me a regressive practice, yet *Testaments* confounds this literary trend by offering us a future where even something as simple as friendship can bring down a totalitarian regime. Perhaps right now what we really just need is a happy ending, and *Testaments* injects that optimism into a bloody, brutal and unsettling narrative. Perhaps—as with *Handmaid's Tale*—we'll see the fruits of this hopeful imagination in another 35 years.

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