

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

MARGARET
ATWOOD

AUTHOR OF
THE
HANDMAID'S
TALE

THE TESTAMENTS
WINNER OF THE BOOKER PRIZE

BOOK CLUB KIT



DEAR READER

Photo © Luis Mora

Dear Reader,

I'm so pleased that you've chosen *The Testaments* for your book club.

It's the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, set sixteen years later. In *The Testaments*, we watch the beginning of the end for the totalitarian state of Gilead, as we follow the journeys of three very different women—a young woman from inside Gilead, a younger one from beyond its borders, and the scheming, complex Aunt Lydia, who terrorized many in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but who now has some surprises in store.

I've been interested in dictatorships all my life. Writing this book was a difficult joy for me, as much in it has become a little too close to reality. But *The Testaments* is still fiction, and I hope it remains so.


And I hope you'll enjoy reading it, and discussing it as well. Lots to talk about!

All best wishes,

Margaret

“You don’t believe the sky is falling
until a chunk of it falls on you.”

“Where there is an emptiness, the mind will
obligingly fill it up. Fear is always at hand to
supply any vacancies, as is curiosity.”

A large, stylized abstract shape on the left side of the page. It features a white, curved, horn-like or petal-like shape at the top, which transitions into a dark blue, curved shape. Below this, there are several green, angular shapes that resemble petals or leaves, some pointing upwards and others downwards, creating a complex, organic form.

“It’s better that way,
and I am a great
proponent of better.
In the absence of best.”

THE TESTAMENTS
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DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR THE TESTAMENTS

1 Clothes play a dual role in the novel. They signal life stages as well as status and class: the pink, white, and plum dresses worn by “special girls”; the drab prison-like stripes of the Econofamilies; and the green dresses of the betrothed girls. Did this aspect of the novel strike you as odd? Or is it actually not very different from our own obsession with brands and logos that convey a certain level of wealth and status?

2 Aunt Lydia tells us that Gilead actually has “an embarrassingly high emigration rate.” Can those who manage to leave Gilead ever truly “escape”?

3 Daisy/Jade is, to say the least, a reluctant revolutionary. But if you were her age and were asked to absorb all of the shocking information she has to process in a very short period of time, would you have reacted any differently?

4 After Agnes is assaulted, she recalls other girls who reported such incidents having been told that “nice girls did not notice the minor antics of men, they simply looked the other way,” which is a troubling parallel between Gilead and reality. Do you think there will ever come a time when women will feel unashamed to speak out when they are sexually assaulted? Or has this time already arrived in the age of #MeToo?

5 When Aunt Lydia dons the garb of the female stadium shooters, she says, “I felt a chill. I put it on. What else should I have done?” What would you have done?

6 Agnes’s interpretation of “Dick and Jane” showcases Margaret Atwood’s trademark wit, but there is more to it than that. Discuss the ways in which the author cleverly builds the sense of suspicion and fear that informs the way Agnes processes the events in her life at Ardua Hall.

7 Several references are made to shortages of basic necessities such as food and electricity. Birth defects and juvenile cancer also seem to plague Gilead. What do you think has caused this? Possibly environmental issues? Or the ongoing war?

8 Agnes considers her admittance to Hildegard Library to be a “golden key” that will reveal “the riches that lay within.” But it is here that she learns the truth about the Concubine Cut into Twelve Pieces, as well as the truth about her half-sister. Is there any book that provided you with a similar pivotal and eye-opening experience?

“Votaries have taken to leaving offerings at my feet: eggs for fertility, oranges to suggest the fullness of pregnancy, croissants to reference the moon. I ignore the breadstuffs – usually they have been rained on – but pocket the oranges. Oranges are so refreshing.”
–AUNT LYDIA IN *THE TESTAMENTS*

Aunt Lydia’s Rum and Orange Cocktail

“Aunt Lydia declines a shot of rum in her coffee while watching a Particicution, but who’s to say she might not keep some handy for private use? And she certainly has oranges: women leave them at the feet of her statue. At the end of a hard day, she might like a drink, but out of sight of the other Aunts in Ardua Hall.”

—Margaret Atwood

Here’s how:

1. Furtively remove rum bottle from hiding place in underwear drawer.
2. Pour a shot into toothbrush glass.
3. Remove orange from hiding place in pocket.
4. Cut in two, using knife filched from refectory.
5. Squeeze into glass as best you can. Flush rinds down toilet.
6. Add a dash of mint mouthwash. Not too much.
7. Don’t bother with a garnish, nobody’s going to see this.
8. Knock it back.
9. Rinse glass.
10. Hide bottle.
11. Enjoy!



“I was the age at which parents suddenly transform from people who know everything into people who know nothing.”

“Once a story you’ve regarded as true has turned false, you begin suspecting all stories.”

“Still, I wanted to believe; indeed I longed to; and, in the end, how much of belief comes from longing?”

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A CONVERSATION WITH MARGARET ATWOOD

Photo © Luis Mora

Q: How does it feel to see your red cloaks being used as a symbol of the fight for women's health?

A: The handmaids as a protest symbol, which first popped up in Texas in recent times, is brilliant because nobody can kick you out, you're not causing a disturbance because you're not saying anything, nobody can accuse you of being dressed immodestly because you're all covered up, but everybody looking at you knows what it means. So, I think, it was a stroke of genius for whoever thought of it and it has certainly taken off.

Q: How long have you been planning to write a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*?

A: Off and on for a number of years, with off being, "You have to be crazy," and on being, "You have to do this." So that went back and forth for a while, and then I finally did it.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about how the experience of writing *The Testaments* compared to the experience of writing *The Handmaid's Tale*?

A: *The Handmaid's Tale* was written in 1984–85 and, at that time, there were no personal computers, there was no email

and there were no lattes. So, the experience of writing this one was much different technically and was enabled by a different kind of caffeine.

But that's probably not what you meant. You probably meant how was the actual text different. I think it's quite different when you're writing a three-person narrative because you're bouncing the voices off one another and so there's also a lot more action in it because the characters have a different kind of freedom from the one in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Q: You're often cited as an influence for many writers, which authors influence your work?

A: Just about everything you can imagine, but for this particular book you'd have to say the Bible, *Paradise Lost*, *Richard III*, and some other books about bad behavior.

Q: If you were to host a book club meeting to discuss *The Testaments*, what would be the first question you'd ask the group?

A: I think the first question I'd ask is, "Have you finished it?" Because if the answer is no then we're not gonna have a very good discussion.

SIPPING SIMPLE OR SPIKED LATTES WITH MARGARET ATWOOD



A Simple Latte for Margaret Atwood

“[In 1984–85] there were no personal computers, there was no email and there were no lattes. So, the experience of writing [*The Testaments*] was much different technically and was enabled by a different kind of caffeine.”

—Margaret Atwood

Ingredients

- 2 cups milk
- 1½ cups hot freshly brewed dark roast espresso coffee

Method

1. Heat milk in a saucepan set over medium-low heat.
2. Whisk briskly with a wire whisk to create foam.
3. Brew espresso and pour into 4 cups.
4. Pour in milk, holding back the foam with a spoon.
5. Spoon foam over the top.

Recipe source: <https://www.allrecipes.com/recipe/96629/cafe-latte/>

A *Testaments* Spiked Iced Coffee

“Oh joy! A cup of coffee! I would have liked a martini, but I guessed that alcohol was not going to be on the women’s menu in this new era.”

—Aunt Lydia in *The Testaments*

Ingredients

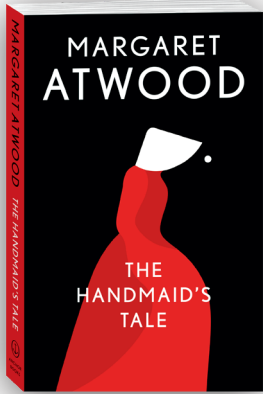
- ¼ cup whipping cream (for Agnes, try to make it like Zilla did)
- 1 cup double-strength coffee, cooled to room temperature (coffee, such a luxury)
- ¼ cup half-and-half (to tease Aunt Vidala)
- 3 tablespoons pure maple syrup (for Daisy and all the Canadians working to topple Gilead)
- 1½ tablespoons dark rum or ½ teaspoon rum extract (for Aunt Lydia to make it through a conversation with Commander Judd)
- An orange peel for garnish, if desired (a stolen offering)

Method

1. Whip cream to soft peaks, set aside.
2. In a pitcher, combine the coffee, half-and-half, maple syrup and rum or rum extract.
3. Fill 2 tall glasses with ice; pour coffee mixture over ice. Top with whipped cream.
4. Garnish with an orange peel, if desired.

Recipe adapted from: <https://oukoshier.org/recipes/maple-rum-iced-coffee-dairy/>





A TRIP TO THE ARCHIVE WITH MARGARET ATWOOD

Excerpted from the new material for the paperback edition

Margaret Atwood took a trip to the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto, where *The Handmaid's Tale* archives are kept. We went with her to ask her more about the inspiration for the book and its highly anticipated sequel, *The Testaments*.

Q: What are all these newspaper clippings?

MA: They are *Handmaid's Tale* background material. They're nicely sorted and laminated. "Women forced to have babies." This is an article about Ceaușescu and Romania. He passed laws that said women had to have four babies. They had to have pregnancy tests every month, and if they weren't pregnant, they had to explain why. "The latest sicko Red ruling was announced by cold-blooded Romanian president Nicolas [sic] Ceaușescu, who wants women to have more babies so the country will get richer." It was this policy that filled up the Romanian orphanages, which then became a scandal around the world for their inhumane conditions. Here's another piece: "Conservatives are out to get the women's movement. They wish to attack birth control and voluntary sterilization. Their eventual target is to wipe out the women's movement." And this is a good headline that highlights religious tensions: "Catholics say cult taking over." It's about a cult called the People of Hope that "subordinates its women, discourages social contact with non-members, arranges marriages, moves teenage disciples to households for indoctrination." [. . .]

This is a particularly good one: "Birth dearth is a deliberate myth. The super-patriotic, hyper-capitalists running America these days are deciding that we must do 'it' more often. . . . We're not breeding fast enough to keep ahead of the dirty commies and dusky third worlders." This was in 1986, but it's the same stuff that's happening now. Though I don't think you'd get quite such plain speech in a newspaper these days.

Q: What was your intention in collecting all these clippings?

MA: My intention was just to document what I was doing and had done. As somebody on Twitter put it, "How do you come up with this shit?" As if I invented it. [. . .] "Slavery and human progress," "Missing children," "Baby stealing," "Disappearing children." Right. Gives a pretty vivid picture of what was on people's minds then, doesn't it?

“I, too, was once like you:
fatally hooked on life.”

“Being able to read
and write did not
provide answers to
all questions. It led to
other questions, and
then to others.”

“You’d be surprised how quickly
the mind goes soggy in
the absence of other people.
One person alone is not
a full person: we exist
in relation to others.”

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