

Breeders, Wives and Unwomen: THE HANDMAID'S TALE By Margaret Atwood. ...

By Mary McCarthy

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THE HANDMAID'S TALE

By Margaret Atwood.

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By Mary McCarthy

SURELY the essential element of a cautionary tale is recognition. Surprised recognition, even, enough to administer a shock. We are warned, by seeing our present selves in a distorting mirror, of what we may be turning into if current trends are allowed to continue. That was the effect of "Nineteen Eighty-Four," with its scary dating, not 40 years ahead, maybe also of "Brave New World" and, to some extent, of "A Clockwork Orange."

It is an effect, for me, almost strikingly missing from Margaret Atwood's very readable book "The Handmaid's Tale," offered by the publisher as a "forecast" of what we may have in store for us in the quite near future. A standoff will have been achieved vis-à-vis the Russians, and our own country will be ruled by right-wingers and religious fundamentalists, with males restored to the traditional role of warriors and us females to our "place" — which, however, will have undergone subdivision into separate sectors, of wives, breeders, servants and so forth, each clothed in the appropriate uniform. A fresh postfeminist approach to future shock, you might say. Yet the book just does not tell me what there is in our present mores that I ought to watch out for unless I want the United States of America to become a slave state something like the Republic of Gilead whose outlines are here sketched out.

Another reader, less peculiar than myself, might confess to a touch of apathy regarding credit cards (instruments of social control), but I have always been firmly against them and will go to almost any length to avoid using one. Yet I can admit to a general failure to extrapolate sufficiently from the 1986 scene. Still, even when I try, in the light of these

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Margaret Atwood.

palely lurid pages, to take the Moral Majority seriously, no shiver of recognition ensues. I just can't see the intolerance of the far right, presently directed not only at abortion clinics and homosexuals but also at high school libraries and small-town schoolteachers, as leading to a super-biblical puritanism by which procreation will be insisted on and reading of any kind banned. Nor, on the other hand, do I fear our "excesses" of tolerance as pointing in the same direction. Liberality toward pornography in the courts, the media, on the newsstands may make an anxious parent feel disgusted with liberalism, but can it really move a nation to install a theocracy strictly based on the Book of Genesis? Where are the signs of it? A backlash is only a backlash, that is, a reaction. Fear of a backlash, in politics, ought not to deter anybody from adhering to principle; that would be only another form of cowardice. The same for "excessive" feminism, which here seems to bear some responsibility for Gilead, to be one of its causes. The kind of doctrinaire feminism likely to produce a backlash is exemplified in the narrator's absurd mother, whom we first hear of at a book-burning in the old, pre-Gilead time — the "right" kind of book-burning, naturally, merely a pyre of pornographic magazines: "Mother," thinks the narrator in what has become the present, "you wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one." The wrong kind, of course.

The new world of "The Handmaid's Tale" is a woman's world, even though governed, seemingly, and policed by men. Its ethos is entirely domestic, its female population is divided into classes based on household functions, each class clad in a separate color that instantly identifies the wearer — dull green for the Marthas (houseworkers); blue for the Wives; red, blue and green stripes for the Econowives (working class); red for

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the Handmaids (whose function is to bear children to the head of the household, like Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid in Genesis, but who also, in their long red gowns and white wimple-like headgear, have something of the aura of a temple harlot); brown for the Aunts (a thought-control force, part-governess, part-reform-school matron). The head of the household — whose first name the handmaid takes, adding the word "of" to show possession — "Offred," "Ofwarren" — is known as the Commander. It is his duty to inseminate his assigned partner, who lies on the spread thighs of his wife.

THE Commanders, presumably, are the high bureaucracy of the regime, yet they are oddly powerless in the household, having no part in the administration of discipline and ceremonially subject to their aging wives. We are not told how and in what sense they govern. The oversight perhaps accounts for the thin credibility of the parable. That they lack freedom, are locked into their own rigid system, is only to be expected. It is no surprise that our narrator's commander, Fred, like a typical bourgeois husband of former times, does a bit of cheating, getting Offred to play Scrabble with him secretly at night (where books are forbidden, word games become wicked), look at his hoard of old fashion magazines (forbidden), kiss him, even go dressed in glitter and feathers to an underground bunny-type nightclub staffed by fallen women, mostly lesbian. Nor is it a surprise that his wife catches him/ them. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. But that cannot be the motto for a cautionary tale, whose job is to warn of change.

Infertility is the big problem of the new world and the reason for many of its institutions. A dramatically lowered birth rate, which brought on the fall of the old order, had a plurality of

causes, we are told. "The air got too full, once, of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules." During an earthquake, atomic power plants exploded ("nobody's fault"). A mutant strain of syphilis appeared, and of course AIDS. Then there were women who refused to breed, as an antinuclear protest, and had their tubes tied up. Anyway, infertility, despite the radical measures of the new regime, has not yet been overcome. Not only are there barren women (mostly shipped to the colonies) but a worrying sterility in men, especially among the powerful who ought to be reproducing themselves. The amusing suggestion is made, late in the book at a symposium (June 25, 2195) of Gileadean historical studies, that sterility among the Commanders may have been the result of an earlier gene-splicing experiment with mumps that produced a virus intended for insertion into the supply of caviar used by top officials in Moscow.

"The Handmaid's Tale" contains several such touches of deft sardonic humor — for example, the television news program showing clouds of smoke over what was formerly the city of Detroit: we hear the anchorman explain that resettlement of the children of Ham in National Homeland One (the wilds of North Dakota) is continuing on schedule — 3,000 have arrived that week. And yet what is lacking, I think — what constitutes a fundamental disappointment after a promising start — is the destructive force of satire. "Nineteen Eighty-Four" had it, "A Clockwork Orange" had it, even "Brave New World" had it, though Huxley was rather short on savagery. If "The Handmaid's Tale" doesn't scare one, doesn't wake one up, it must be because it has no satiric bite.

The author has carefully drawn her projections from current trends. As she has said elsewhere, there is nothing here that has not been anticipated in the

United States of America that we already know. Perhaps that is the trouble: the projections are too neatly penciled in. The details, including a Wall (as in Berlin, but also, as in the Middle Ages, a place where executed malefactors are displayed), all raise their hands announcing themselves present. At the same time, the Republic of Gilead itself, whatever in it that is not a projection, is insufficiently imagined. The Aunts are a good invention, though I cannot picture them as belonging to any future; unlike Big Brother, they are more part of the past — our schoolteachers.

But the most conspicuous lack, in comparison with the classics of the fearsome-future genre, is the inability to imagine a language to match the changed face of common life. No newspeak. And nothing like the linguistic tour de force of "A Clockwork Orange" — the brutal melting-down of current English and Slavic words that in itself tells the story of the dread new breed. The writing of "The Handmaid's Tale" is undistinguished in a double sense, ordinary if not glaringly so, but also indistinguishable from what one supposes would be Margaret Atwood's normal way of expressing herself in the circumstances. This is a serious defect, unpardonable maybe for the genre: a future that has no language invented for it lacks a personality. That must be why, collectively, it is powerless to scare.

ONE could argue that the very tameness of the narrator-heroine's style is intended as characterization. It is true that a leading trait of Offred (we are never told her own, real name in so many words, but my textual detective work says it is June) has always been an unwillingness to stick her neck out, and perhaps we are meant to conclude that such unwillingness, multiplied, may be fatal to a free society. After the takeover, she tells us,

there were some protests and demonstrations. "I didn't go on any of the marches. Luke [her husband] said it would be futile, and I had to think about them, my family, him and her [their little girl]." Famous last words. But, though this may characterize an attitude — fairly widespread — it does not constitute a particular kind of speech. And there are many poetical passages, for example (chosen at random): "All things white and circular. I wait for the day to unroll, for the earth to turn, according to the round face of the implacable clock." Which is surely oldspesk, wouldn't you say?

Characterization in general is

weak in "The Handmaid's Tale," which maybe makes it a poet's novel. I cannot tell Luke, the husband, from Nick, the chauffeur-lover who may be an Eye (government spy) and/ or belong to the "Mayday" underground. Nor is the Commander strongly drawn. Again, the Aunts are best. How sad for postfeminists that one does not feel for Offred-June half as much as one did for Winston Smith, no hero either but at any rate imaginable. It seems harsh to say again of a poet's novel — so hard to put down, in part so striking — that it lacks imagination, but that, I fear, is the problem. | |