



Critical Views

MARGARET ATWOOD ON THE CREATION OF *THE HANDMAID'S TALE**

Some critics have called the novel a feminist tract. “Novels are not slogans,” Miss Atwood responds. “If I wanted to say just one thing I would hire a billboard. If I wanted to say just one thing to one person, I would write a letter. Novels are something else. They aren’t just political messages. I’m sure we all know this, but when it’s a book like this you have to keep on saying it. The book is an examination of character under certain circumstances, among other things. It’s not a matter of men against women. That happens to be in the book because I think if it were going to happen in the United States, that’s the form it would take. But it’s a study of power, and how it operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within that kind of regime.

“You could say it’s a response to ‘it can’t happen here.’ When they say ‘it can’t happen here,’ what they usually mean is Iran can’t happen here, Czechoslovakia can’t happen here. And they’re right, because this isn’t there. But what could happen here? It wouldn’t be some people saying, ‘Hi, folks, we’re Communists and we’re going to be your new Government.’ But if you were going to do it, what would you do? What emotions would you appeal to? What groups would you utilize? How exactly would you go about it? Well, something like the way the religious right is doing things. And the ultimate result of that process would be the union of church and state, which this country since 1776 has striven to keep apart, with great difficulty, because the foundation of this country was not separation of church and state. We’re often taught in schools that the Puritans came to America for religious freedom. Nonsense. They came to establish their own regime, where they could persecute people to their heart’s content just the way they themselves had been persecuted. If

you think you have the word and the right way, that's the only thing you can do."

* Interview conducted by Mervyn Rothstein for the *New York Times*.

BARBARA EHRENREICH
ON FEMINIST DYSTOPIA

The feminist imagination has been far more productive of utopias (from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* to Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*) than of dystopias, and for good reason. Almost every thinkable insult to women has been tested and institutionalized at one time or another: foot-binding, witch-burning, slavery, organized rape, ritual mutilation, enforced childbearing, enforced chastity, and the mere denial of ordinary rights to own property, speak out in public, or walk down a street without fear. For misogynist nastiness, it is hard to improve on history.

Yet there has been no shortage of paranoid folklore about what the future may hold for women. Since the early 1970s, one important strand of feminist thought (usually called "cultural" or radical" feminist) has tended to see all of history as a male assault on women and, by proxy, on nature itself. Hence rape, hence acid rain, hence six-inch high heels, hence the arms race, hence (obviously) the scourge of pornography. Extrapolating from this miserable record, cultural feminists have foreseen women being driven back to servitude as breeders and scullery maids, or else, when reproductive technology is refined enough to make wombs unnecessary, being eliminated altogether. The alternative, they believe, is to create a "women's culture," envisioned as intrinsically loving, nurturing, and in harmony with nature—before we are all destroyed by the toxic effects of testosterone.

Margaret Atwood's new novel is being greeted as the long-awaited feminist dystopia and I am afraid that for some time it will be viewed as a test of the imaginative power of feminist paranoia. (...)