

Margaret Atwood's 1980s novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, I found listed as the seventh most challenged book so far—on the issue of book banning and burning. Now, in this era of renewed efforts of censorship through removing books from school and public library shelves, I thought it was time for me to re-read *The Handmaid's Tale* and Atwood's 2019 sequel, *The Testaments*. I had read *The Testaments* when it came out, decades after reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, but now, in reading both books again, I saw how important it was to pick up the earlier novel and at least scan it before reading the sequel.

I did much more than scan *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*. I read every word of both books in a marathon read over about three days, once again amazed at the talent of Margaret Atwood and the perceptive qualities that allowed her to draw out the issues and beliefs that have led to so much dissension and strife in our country these past several decades. At times, reading the earlier book, it seemed that Atwood was almost prophetic as her story was intimately concerned with much of what is going on today.

Women's loss of autonomy and all power is, to me the overriding theme of these two books. Overthrowing the government of the United States led, in these fictional accounts, to the establishment of the country of Gilead, an autocratic theocracy where the place of women in the society was strictly regimented. Fueled by environmental degradation, low birth rates, war with neighboring areas that had not joined the nation of Gilead, a society emerged that was truly frightening. Highly militarized even in civil society, everyone and everything were basically under surveillance of some kind.

Margaret Atwood focused on the lives of the handmaids in this society in the first book. A falling birth rate had produced a policy that degraded even further the independence and worth of women. In a family where no healthy babies were born, a young woman was assigned as a handmaid, her duty to be impregnated by the man of the household. When and if a baby was born—not a certainty as many men were sterile— it became part of that man's family. The handmaid went on to another household to perform the same duty. She was not doing this of her own free will. She was not what today we would call a "surrogate." She was forcibly providing this "service" to the higher up elements in the society.

The second book recounts the building of this strange and unequal society, again through the eyes of the women who populated Gilead. There were the Aunts, the women in charge of the female part of the culture. They were mostly women who had been in the professions in the earlier society—lawyers, doctors, teachers. There were the Wives, spouses of the men who held power in Gilead; there were also the Marthas, those women who cooked and cleaned for the elite residents. And, then, there were the Handmaids.

This is fiction, of course. The story is not yet our story. But, it is a frightening tale of what can go wrong when one segment of society loses all power—in this case, the women. And, it is made worse when belief in the form of a perverted version of any of the mainstream religions begins to dominate society.

It seems to me that banning and/or burning books is a useless and particularly odious form of controlling some segment of the population. Instead, we should be encouraging reading of all kinds of books and accompanying that reading with teaching readers to evaluate what they read. And, among the books that should be recommended reading for people in our society, I'd put Atwood's Handmaid novels high on the list.