

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Vintage Living Texts: Margaret Atwood

Jonathan Noakes and Margaret Reynolds
with Louise Joyner

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About the Book

In Vintage Living Texts, teachers and students will find the essential guide to the works of Margaret Atwood. Vintage Living Texts is unique in that it offers an in-depth interview with Margaret Atwood, relating specifically to the texts under discussion.

This guide deals with Atwood's themes, genre and narrative technique, and a close reading of the texts is accompanied by likely exam questions as well as providing a rich source of ideas for intelligent and inventive ways of approaching the novels.

Also included in this guide are detailed reading plans for all three novels, questions for essays and discussion, contextual material, suggested texts for complementary and comparative reading, extracts from reviews, a biography, a bibliography and a glossary of literary terms.

Whether a teacher, student or general reader, Vintage Living Texts gives you the chance to explore new resources and enjoy new pleasures.

The Vintage Living Texts series includes: Sebastian Faulks, Louis de Bernieres and Ian McEwan.

About the Authors

Jonathan Noakes has taught English in secondary schools in Britain and Australia for fifteen years. For six years he ran A-level English studies at Eton College where he is a house-master.

Margaret Reynolds is Reader in English at Queen Mary, University of London, and the presenter of BBC Radio 4's *Adventures in Poetry*. Her publications include *The Sappho Companion*, *The Sappho History* and (with Angela Leighton) *Victorian Women Poets*.

Gillian Alban wrote her doctoral thesis on the works of A. S. Byatt and the Melusine legend.

Also available in Vintage Living Texts

Louis de Bernières

Focusing on

Captain Corelli's Mandolin

The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts

Señor Vivo and the Coca Lord

The Troublesome Offspring of Cardinal Guzman

Sebastian Faulks

Focusing on

Birdsong

Charlotte Gray

The Girl at the Lion d'Or

Ian McEwan

Focusing on

The Child in Time

Enduring Love

Atonement

Series Editors
Jonathan Noakes and Margaret Reynolds
with Louisa Joyner

VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS: MARGARET ATWOOD

The Essential Guide to Contemporary Literature

The Handmaid's Tale
Bluebeard's Egg
The Blind Assassin



VINTAGE LIVING TEXTS

Preface

About this series

Vintage Living Texts: The Essential Guide to Contemporary Literature is a new concept in reading guides. Our aim is to provide readers of all kinds with an intelligent and accessible introduction to key works of contemporary literature. Each guide suggests techniques for reading important contemporary novels, and offers a variety of back-up materials that will give you ways into the text - without ever telling you what to think.

Content

All the books reproduce an extensive interview with the author, conducted exclusively for this series. This is not to say that we believe that the author's word is law. Of course it isn't. Once his or her book has gone out into the world he or she becomes simply yet another – if singularly competent – reader. This series recognises that an author's contribution may be valuable, and intriguing, but it puts the reader in control.

Every title in the series is author-focused and covers at least three of their novels, along with relevant biographical, bibliographical, contextual and comparative material.

How to use this series

In the reading guides that make up the core of each book you will see that you are asked to do two things. One comes from the text; that is, we suggest what you should focus on, whether it's a theme, the language or the narrative method. The other concentrates on your own response. We want you to think about how you are reading and what skills you are bringing to bear in doing that reading. So this part is very much about you, the reader.

The point is that there are many ways of responding to a text. You could concentrate on the methods you might use to compare this text with others. In that case, look for the sections headed 'Compare'. Or you might want to do something more individual, and analyse how you are reacting to a text and what it means to you, in which case, pick out the approaches labelled 'Imagine' or 'Ask Yourself'.

Of course, it may well be that you are reading these texts for an examination. In that case you will have to go for the more traditional methods of literary criticism and look for the responses that tell you to 'Discuss' or 'Analyse'. Whichever level you (or your students) are at, you will find that there is something here for everyone. However, we're not suggesting that you stick solely to the approaches we offer, or that you tackle all of the exercises laid out here. Choose whatever most interests you, or whatever best suits your purposes.

Who are these books for?

Students will find that these guides are like a good teacher. They introduce the life and work of the author, set each novel in its context, explain key ideas and literary critical terms as they arise, suggest comparative exercises in a number of media, and ask focused questions to encourage a well-informed, analytical approach to reading the novels in a way that is rigorous, but still entertaining.

Teachers will find in this series a rich source of ideas for teaching contemporary novels and their contexts, particularly at AS, A and undergraduate levels. The exercises on each text have been tailored to meet the various assessment objectives laid down in the subject criteria for GCE AS and GCE A Level English Literature, and are explained in such a way that they can easily be selected and fitted into a lesson plan. Given the diversity of ways in which the awarding bodies have devised their specifications to meet these assessment objectives, a wide range of exercises is offered. We've had fun devising the plans, and we hope they'll be fun for you when you come to teach and learn with them.

And if you are neither a teacher nor a student of contemporary literature, but someone reading for your own pleasure? Well, if you've ever wanted someone to introduce you to a novelist's work in a way that will let you trust your own judgement and read more confidently, then this guide is also for you.

Whoever you are, we hope that you will enjoy using these books and that they will send you back to the novels to find new pleasures.

All page references to *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Bluebeard's Egg* in this text refer to the Vintage edition. Page references to *The Blind Assassin* refer to the Bloomsbury edition.

Margaret Atwood

Introduction

MARGARET ATWOOD GOES to some strange places. She keeps company with people who do strange things. She goes to places that even she knows nothing about. And she goes there with people she does not even know.

Atwood is a phenomenon. She is one of the most important writers of her generation. For more than twenty years she has published a body of work – novels, poetry and essays – that is consistently challenging, innovative, original, intelligent and uncompromising. She has won just about every prize going; she has been lauded and fêted with accolades. Her work has been translated into many languages and is read all over the world. It is created by a fiery intellect, but it also has tremendous popular appeal.

When we interviewed Atwood for this series, we asked her to tell us about the strangest episodes she could recall in which people – fans – had taken her books and used her themes or her arguments for their own purposes.

Atwood understood at once. ‘Oh yes, yes,’ she said:

There are some wonderful things like that. Actually there are several with cult followings of that kind. One is *The Edible Woman* in which people make Edible Woman cakes, get their pictures taken around the cake, and then get pictures taken of themselves eating it, and then send me the pictures. In fact, I was in France for my birthday the year that they put *The Handmaid's Tale* on with More's *Utopia*, so I did a few little things, speeches on it. And the French are sentimental about birthdays, and I was at the Sorbonne and these French professors had made me an Edible Woman cake. So there's that. People have dressed up as characters in *The Handmaid's Tale* quite a bit. They've dressed up in the costume. Usually in connection with book bannings, and things like that. And they will even, in a more frivolous way, dress up for costume parties. Last Halloween, four people – not all of them women – arrived at my house dressed as the four characters from *The Robber Bride*. And I suppose it's

really quite a compliment, because it means that the people in the book have taken on a life of their own in the popular imagination. I'll tell you an unlikely thing to do with *The Handmaid's Tale*. When it first came out, someone went to the sea wall along Santa Monica, California Venice Beach. And they wrote, in big letters, 'The Handmaid's Tale is Here'. I know people who live there, they saw it. I did a talk show in San Francisco when it first came out there – that would be 1985. And the presenter decided to be devil's advocate and said, 'Well, surely all of this is very silly? I mean, none of it will happen.' And the switchboard lit up. It just lit up like a Christmas tree with people phoning in saying, 'It's already happening.'

In some ways these sound like disconnected stories, but in fact they all tell us the same thing. For Atwood's readers, her fiction often seems to be about their own lives, or rather, it provides a way of thinking critically about the world and their place in the world.

There is a reason for this. On the one hand, Atwood's writings are grounded in acute observations of the physical world: the flowers, the clothes, the smells, the recipes, the landscapes, the weather – everything is vividly realised in the cocoon that is spun around the consciousness of her characters, even if (as in *The Handmaid's Tale*) we are intentionally disorientated with regard to the bigger picture. On the other hand, not one of Atwood's fictions comes to us just by itself. There is always another story behind the story, or inside the story, or reflected in the story. Pick any Atwood fiction, and you will see that one of her specialities is the remaking and revising of myths and archetypes. Sometimes it's fairy tales that she's rewriting, sometimes it's ancient Greek myth, or Romantic fiction, or Utopian fiction, or Gothic fiction. All of these have come under her scrutiny. So when a reader takes up one of her books, there is a background frame that means they know at once that this is a book about the stories that have made the world what it is. And therefore they also know that this is a book which will give them space to think about the world and what it is.

This is not to say that readers always need to know all the references and allusions that Atwood may be invoking. But