

Sarah Howland
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Dear Margaret Atwood,

I have a shameful confession to make: I judge books by their covers. I know, I know, not only am I succumbing to glossy, mass marketed drivel, but I'm passing up thousands of excellent books that have the misfortune of being uninterestingly packaged. Surprisingly, it was while perusing the alluring cover art in a local bookstore that I happened upon your excellent book, *The Handmaid's Tale*. On the front, a woman dressed in red with great white wings over her face stood in the shadow of a curved stone wall. I wondered why the woman was dressed as she was, and what she was doing behind the oppressive wall, so I opened the book and began to read.

The story of Offred's enslavement thrilled me at first. I reveled in the delicious paranoia that her narrative provided. I think that most people enjoy a good worst-case scenario fantasy, something along the lines of *if I were stranded on a desert island, how would I cope?* At least, I do. I wanted to know more and more about the restrictions in Gilead, and how Offred struggled against them. It was a good dystopia story, one in which the main character didn't miraculously throw off her shackles and defeat all of her oppressors in one fell sweep. There was enough realism to make the story almost believable. And then, when Offred and the Commander visited the sleazy underworld at Jezebel's, I started to hate the story.

What made me unhappy was the turn that the story had taken. I wanted to hear more of the Aunt's pious explanations and witness more Particutions by the enraged women. Instead, I got Offred's tiredness, the careless chances she was taking, and her inability to remember exactly what had occurred. If she was going to have an affair with Nick, at least she could do so boldly, romantically, and defiantly. But this affair could have been the story of any complacent, tired woman, no longer awake enough to fight circumstance. Shouldn't Offred, the handmaid daring enough to tell her story, be angry at

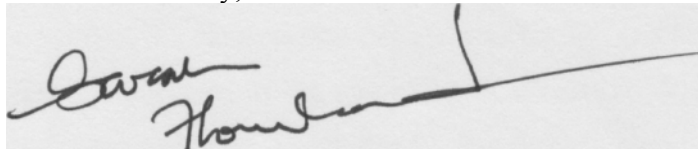
her oppressors? If she couldn't actively resist the power of Gilead, shouldn't she at least resist internally? Wasn't she supposed to be a heroine?

Slowly it dawned on me. Offred was just an average woman. Her main concern had been reduced to staying alive, and even that didn't seem do important anymore. Furthermore, the situation Offred found herself in didn't seem so fantastical anymore. Surely, if Gilead were a more one-dimensional place, meant to be toppled by the likes of a handmaid, it would not allow itself indulgences like Jezebel's. The possibility of complete hypocrisy on the part of Gilead's tipper echelons made the regime more believable. There were other credible things about Gilead. The way it employed terms like "values" that are already thrown around in American politics. The stealth and abruptness with which the regime acted to overthrow the old government. The way that even Luke, whom Offred trusted, couldn't help but enjoy the new power he had over his wife.

The fact that a regime like Gilead could really take power scared me, but by far the most unnerving thing about *The Handmaid's Tale* was that I began to believe some of Gilead's doctrine. Perhaps women were safer when they were sheltered, protected, concealed. And if the only way to protect women and their dignity was to seclude them and enforce a code of conduct and dress, perhaps that was what needed to be done.. Wait, no, I didn't believe that! Offred also mentioned several times that she was beginning to see things through the eyes of the "believers." The worst thing *The Handmaid's Tale* revealed was not the specific oppression it mandated, it was its message that, after a while, even your mind cannot resist.

After reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, my eyes were opened to the dangers lurking in plain sight in society.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light background. The signature is written in a cursive style and appears to read "Sarah Howland".

Sarah Howland