

CULTURE

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* a Generation Later

By JAY A. FERNANDEZ

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Faye Dunaway and Natasha Richardson in 'The Handmaid's Tale'/Image © MGM Home Entertainment

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A generation has passed since [Margaret Atwood](#)'s incendiary dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* was published and adapted for film, and it would appear that conditions for women, here and abroad, are, sadly, not markedly different from those at the time she felt inspired to write it. Published at the height of Moral Majority political power in 1985, the book describes a disturbingly imagined American future wracked by environmental destruction, war, and infertility in which women have been severely restricted and codified under a fundamentalist dictatorship. Those critical of the novel, which won the first Arthur C. Clarke award and scored a Booker Prize nomination, and its movie version -- released exactly twenty-five years ago, on March 9, 1990 -- often dismissed it as unjustifiably alarmist. In her [New York Times review](#) at the time, for example, *The Company She Keeps* author Mary McCarthy wrote that Atwood's purported cautionary tale prompts "no shiver of recognition."

Reviews of the film -- which stayed true to Atwood's stark vision of a biblically defined society where women's bodies and lives are confined to specific subservient roles, including forced sterilization and procreation -- were equally mixed. For the most part, viewers simply couldn't believe that such a fundamental shift in values and gender victimization could ever be possible. But dismissing the scenario Atwood invented as something that

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"could never happen" perhaps misses the point. It's already happened. Patriarchal control of women's money, power, minds, bodies, and rights has been the norm throughout the entirety of history -- the only thing missing has been the color-coded robes. (For Tamar's sake, it hasn't even been *a hundred years* that women have had the right to vote in *this* country!) The "slightly less extreme" version still exists in many places around the world. And the everyday First World version -- the indefensible scourge of unequal pay, the vicious war on reproductive rights, the sickeningly persistent sex crimes, the relentless daily incidents of sexism, misogyny, shaming, objectification, and cyberbullying -- permeates every facet of female existence in America *today*, in 2015. Our current "evolved" political and social context makes Atwood's "speculative fiction" no less relevant or damning.

In any case, a redo is seriously in order, if only for the simple fact that the film was produced, written, and directed by men. Yes -- insert eye roll -- this matters. While it's true that screenwriter Harold Pinter was an Oscar-nominated Nobel Prize winner and director Volker Schlöndorff had won the Palme d'Or for "The Tin Drum," who doesn't believe that a version of "Handmaid's Tale" directed by Lynne Ramsay or Andrea Arnold or Sally Potter or Kimberly Peirce or Catherine Breillat would have much more bite and authenticity? In [a 2006 appraisal of Atwood's oeuvre in *The New York Review of Books*](#), Joyce Carol Oates describes *Handmaid's Tale* as "a psychologically 'realistic' and persuasive exploration of a counterworld bearing a significant if surreal relationship to reality" and as a work of "raw, urgent power." Whatever one thinks of the book's legacy (or the film's), when it comes to fashioning an improved fate for our mothers, friends, wives, and daughters, *urgent* is the keyword.

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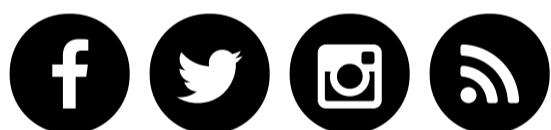
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