

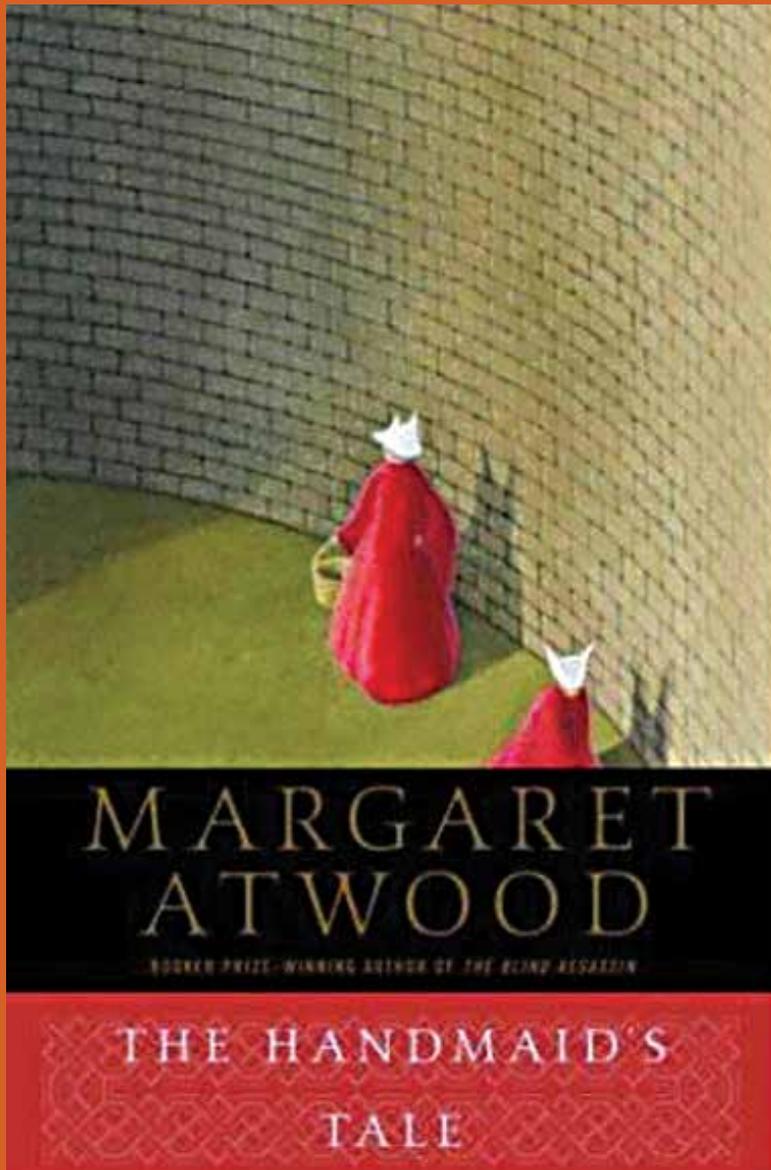


**AMNESTY**  
**INTERNATIONAL**   
**BOOK CLUB**

**MAY 2015**  
**DISCUSSION**  
**GUIDE**

*The Handmaid's Tale*  
By Margaret Atwood

As selected by guest  
reader Gail Bowen



# Women's World

Now that Canada has elected several woman premiers and a woman is running for President of the United States, it is easy to forget that just over 100 years ago, women had very few rights.

The struggle to gain rights for women was long and hard and continues to this day. Around the world, millions of women live in societies that restrict their movement, their education, their freedom of expression, their right to choose who they marry and most other aspects of their lives.

In Canada, women continue to work for pay equity, control over their sexual and reproductive rights and an end to violence against women.

Women's rights are a fairly recent phenomenon and as Margaret Atwood's multi-award-winning novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* illustrates, rights that have been granted can be taken away. Although written 30 years ago, it is a cautionary tale for today.

*The Handmaid's Tale* takes place in the near future and explores themes of women in subjugation and the various means by which they attempt to free themselves. It won the 1985 Governor General's Award and the first Arthur C. Clarke Award in 1987. It was also nominated for the 1986 Nebula Award, the 1986 Man-Booker Prize, and the 1987 Prometheus Award. It has been adapted for the cinema, radio, opera, and stage.

In keeping with the novel's themes, our action this month focuses on Iranian activist Bahareh Hedayat who has been sentenced to ten years in prison for her work on women's rights. Please take action on her behalf on page 9.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. If you have any questions, suggestions or comments, we'd love to hear from you. Just send us an email at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).

- The Book Club Team

## Reader's choice

### Do you have a favourite Canadian book that you would like to see featured in the Amnesty Book Club?

Then send us an email at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca), let us know the title and author, and your selection could become the Reader's Choice selection for November/December of this year.

We'll review your suggestions then create a shortlist of the most popular books you can vote for. Let us know your choice by July 31, 2015.

We'll email you the short list and you can vote for your favourite by the end of August 2015.



## About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than three million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit [www.amnesty.ca](http://www.amnesty.ca) or write to us at: **Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.**

## MAY 2015 BOOK: *The Handmaid's Tale*

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**BOOK CLUB  
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### About this month's author **Margaret Atwood**



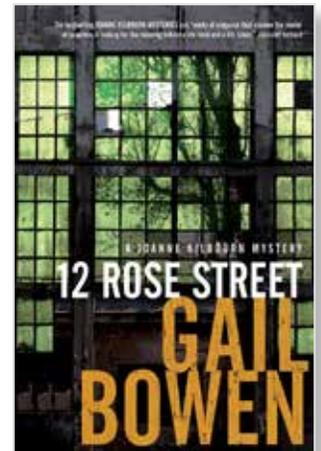
Margaret Atwood is the author of more than 40 volumes of poetry, children's literature, fiction and non-fiction. She is probably best known for her novels, which include *The Edible Woman* (1969), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *The Robber Bride* (1994), *Alias Grace* (1996), and *The Blind Assassin*, which won the prestigious Man-Booker Prize in 2000. Her latest work is a book of short stories called *Stone Mattress: Nine Tales* (2014). Her newest novel, *MaddAddam* (2013), is the final volume in a three-book series that began with the Man-Booker prize-nominated *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and continued with *The Year of the Flood* (2009).

Margaret Atwood has been recognized internationally for her work, having won the Governor General's Award (for *The Handmaid's Tale*, as well as for poetry), the Giller Prize, the Man-Booker Prize, Italy's Premio Mondello, the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Commonwealth Writers Prize, to name just a few. She is a Companion of the Order of Canada and her work has been published in more than forty languages, including Farsi, Japanese, Turkish, Finnish, Korean, Icelandic and Estonian.



### About this month's guest reader, **Gail Bowen**

Gail Bowen's first Joanne Kilbourn mystery, *Deadly Appearances* (1990), was nominated for the W.H. Smith/Books in Canada Best First Novel Award. *A Colder Kind of Death* (1995) won the Arthur Ellis Award for best crime novel. All 13 books in the series have been enthusiastically reviewed. In 2008, Reader's Digest named Bowen Canada's Best Mystery Novelist; in 2009 she received the Derrick Murdoch Award from the Crime Writers of Canada. Bowen has also written plays that have been produced across Canada and on CBC Radio. Her latest Joanne Kilbourn mystery novel is *12 Rose Street*. Now retired from teaching at the First Nations University, Bowen lives in Regina. Visit her web site at [www.gailbowen.com](http://www.gailbowen.com).





## Gail Bowen on *The Handmaid's Tale*

Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is a dystopia set in the near future in the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic military dictatorship formed within the borders of what was once the United States. The situation is bleak. Sterility from pollution and sexually transmitted diseases has driven the birth rate to a dangerous low. To combat this threat, women who have previously proven to be fertile are rounded up and 're-educated' to become handmaids.

The 're-education' process is both simple and diabolical. Because all financial records are stored electronically and labeled by gender, a woman's financial independence can be eradicated with a few keystrokes. Gilead's dictatorship reasons that, without family or financial resources, a woman must accept the option she is offered.

For fertile women that means becoming a handmaiden, a 'walking womb' who wears a red nun-like habit to distinguish her status and whose sole duty is to have sex with her Commander during her fertile period and ultimately deliver a healthy child. A handmaiden is stripped of her birth and given names and is identified only by the name of her commander prefixed by the word 'of'. The protagonist of Atwood's novel is known as Offred because the given name of her commander, a member of Gilead's powerful political elite, is Fred. In the eyes of the state, Offred is his possession.

The ease with which the rights of previously independent women are taken away, rendering the women powerless and without legal recourse is a timely reminder that, despite the 1995 Beijing Declaration promising to protect the rights of women and girls everywhere,

women's freedom is still threatened.

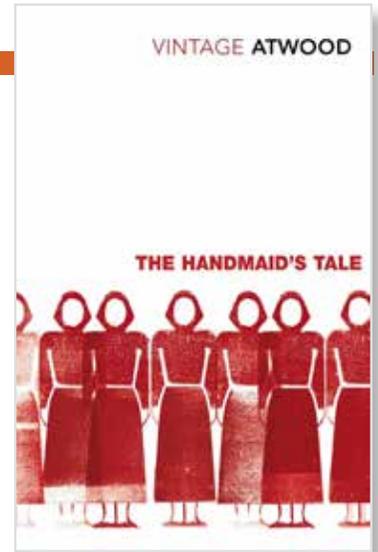
The *Handmaid's Tale* is an unsparing indictment of a community that regards females as chattels, but it is also a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit. The novel opens in a gymnasium filled with women who have lost their connection to loved ones and whose skills and talents are devalued by the new society. The government's aim in re-educating these previously independent women is to break their spirit so that they will meekly accept their changed status. Ideally, the women will forget that there ever was a world different from the Republic of Gilead.

But memories of the past refuse to be obliterated. In fact, the knowledge of what society once was gives the women the determination to fight back. The opening chapter ends with the newly interned women, lying side by side on their army cots in the gymnasium taking their first small steps towards rebellion:

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"We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June."— p. 14.

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# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Discussion questions from Gail Bowen

1. In the opening paragraph of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood's protagonist describes the gymnasium that houses the women being 're-educated' by the totalitarian Christian theocracy that has overthrown the U.S. Government.

*"Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail, garlands made of tissue-paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of mirrors, powdering the dances with a snow of light."*

The word "palimpsest" is defined as "a very old document from which writing has been partially or completely erased to make room for another text". How does the concept of palimpsest, of the past informing the present, drive Atwood's novel?

2. In Chapter Seven, Offred says, *"The night is my own time, to do with as I will, as long as I am quiet."* How does Atwood use night and day to tell Offred's story?
3. In Chapter Sixteen, Offred reflects on the effect The Ceremony has on two of its three main players:

Offred and Serena Joy. She asks herself *"Which of us is it worse for, her or me?"* In ways large or small, everyone in Gilead seems to chafe at the restraints of the new system. What does that general resistance reveal about human nature?

4. The narrative of *The Handmaid's Tale* ends with questions, not answers. Does this satisfy you? If not, why not?
5. Do the Historical Notes at the end of *The Handmaid's Tale* add or detract from the novel as a whole?

## Further discussion questions

1. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a work of speculative fiction. In what ways does it reflect what is happening in the world today?
2. What do you think happens to Offred in the end?
3. The book starts with three quotes. How do they relate to the novel?
4. Moira is a character who refuses categorization. What does she symbolize?



*The Handmaid's Tale* has been adapted for the cinema, radio, opera, ballet and stage.

# BACKGROUND

*The Handmaid's Tale* explores the role of women in a totalitarian and fundamental regime, and offers a haunting tale of the loss of freedoms. However, it is not just women and handmaids like Offred who have lost their freedoms. In this totalitarian regime, everyone's freedoms have been curtailed, and every character in their own way is finding a way to fight back.

The bending and breaking of the rules, and the risks the characters take, demonstrate their determination to be unique and independent in spite of tight controls on almost all aspects of their life.

Amnesty International has reported on human rights abuses around the world which are similar in nature to those Atwood references in this book. We have also reported on the thousands of human rights defenders

who have been, and continue to be, willing to take risks and break rules in order to obtain or re-claim their fundamental human rights.

Like Offred, not everyone starts out with strong political or social convictions. Many victims of human rights violations are paralyzed by fear of the harm which they or the ones they love may suffer if they show resistance. Like Offred, they may want to ensure their own survival and safety rather than break the rules. And like Offred, many victims do not know who they can trust or where they can turn to find safety.

Those who dare to resist are often initially motivated by a desire to improve their personal circumstance. It is only as they take small steps of resistance, and claim freedoms for themselves, that they realize that they are also claiming freedoms for others.

**WOMEN  
FIGHTING  
BACK**



## Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world that bans women from driving. The ban on driving is only one of the many areas of life where women in Saudi Arabia have their human rights denied. Women are also unable to travel, engage in paid work or higher education, or marry without the permission of a male guardian. Women in Saudi Arabia have publicly campaigned to lift the ban on driving since 1990, when around 40 women drove their cars down a main street in Riyadh, the capital. Since then, women's human rights activists have launched several internet-based campaigns calling on women with international driver's licences to take to the roads in defiance of the ban. Despite threats and intimidation, scores of women drove cars to support the campaign, filming themselves and posting the videos online. Some were arrested but most were released after a short period of time. They were made to sign pledges that they would refrain from driving in future.



Activist Manal Al Sharif drives her car in solidarity with Saudi women and the campaign 'Driving is a Choice' in October 2013.

In December 2014 Amnesty International campaigned on behalf of Loujain al-Hathloul and Maysaa al-Amoudi who were detained at a border crossing after attempting to drive their cars into Saudi Arabia from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Both women were brought to trial before the Specialized Criminal Court in Riyadh, a court set up to deal with terror cases. The list of charges related to their driving and online activism in support of the campaign for Saudi women drivers. They were released after spending 10 weeks in detention and told that the case against them had been closed.

## El Salvador

El Salvador has one of the most restrictive abortion laws in the world. Abortion is totally banned in all circumstances and those accused of terminating a pregnancy face harsh prison sentences.

At least 15 women are serving up to 30 or 40 years imprisonment in El Salvador as a result of the country's oppressive ban on abortion, which disproportionately impacts women and girls living in poverty. Women who have had miscarriages have been charged with aggravated homicide, a charge which can bring a sentence of up to 50 years in prison.

Amnesty International has documented the cases of many women who have been sentenced to decades in prison after having a miscarriage. Guadalupe was 18 years old when she was jailed and sentenced to 30 years in prison after suffering a miscarriage. She was accused of having an abortion.

Morena Herrera and the Citizenship Group for the Decriminalization of Abortion have campaigned for Guadalupe's release. In spite of threats, they continue to campaign for others who are imprisoned in El Salvador for pregnancy-related complications. *"People say we are committing a crime by raising awareness, supporting women and advocating on their behalf. We respond by saying we are fighting to change an unfair law. That can't be illegal. We don't accept that,"* she says.



Morena Herrera, Director of Agrupacion Ciudadana, El Salvador

## Colombia

In the course of Colombia's long-running armed conflict, millions of hectares of land have been illegally acquired, often through violence, from their rightful occupants, especially Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and peasant farmer communities. The various parties to the conflict – paramilitaries and the security forces, either acting alone or in collusion, and guerrilla groups – have driven almost six million people from their homes since 1985.

Leaders of displaced communities and those seeking the return of illegally acquired lands have been killed or threatened, especially since the Victims and Land Restitution Law (Law 1448) was approved in June 2011 and came into force at the beginning of 2012.

A land grant in the Playones de Pivijay, northern Colombia was given to 75 women from the Women's Association of Rural Producers (Asociación de Mujeres Productoras del Campo, ASOMUPROCA) in 1996 as part of a pilot project to boost female income. A law allowed landless peasant farmers to buy land through subsidies and credits. When the women arrived on the land they found an armed guerrilla presence which controlled the territory and the lives of the ASOMUPROCA members. Some of their leaders were killed, but despite repeated threats and intimidation, the women of ASOMUPROCA presented a land restitution claim in June 2013.



A drawing from a social cartography workshop at ASOMUPROCA. Roughly translated it reads *"Women spin peace, snap out violence and weave rights"*.

# TAKE ACTION

## Release Iranian women's rights activist Bahareh Hedayat



Iran has tried to silence activist Bahareh Hedayat by sentencing her to 10 years in Iran's notorious Evin Prison. The charges against her include:

- encouraging the participation of women in student groups
- promoting gender equality in the law
- supporting political reform
- opposing human rights violations
- speaking to the foreign media about all of these issues.

Student activist Bahareh Hedayat was arrested on December 31, 2009 in the wake of the 2009 presidential election. She was charged with a range of "offences" related to her activism as part of the Campaign for Equality and as a member of Iran's largest student organization, the Central Committee of the Office for the Consolidation of Unity. She was sentenced to 10 years in prison. Amnesty International considers Bahareh to be a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful expression of her political beliefs.

In an effort to deter other activists, authorities have regularly housed Bahareh in the harsh conditions of the prison's "methadone" wing. She is regularly denied visits from her husband, a fellow student activist. Bahareh has suffered a variety of ailments which have been caused or exacerbated by prison conditions.

Iran has not succeeded in silencing Bahareh. Join us and call on authorities to free Bahareh Hedayat.

## Act now

In your own words or using the wording below, please write to the Head of the Judiciary Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani.

His Excellency Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani,  
Bahareh Hedayat, an activist with The Campaign for Equality and a member of the Central Committee of the Office for the Consolidation of Unity, is currently serving a 10 year prison sentence for promoting the elimination of gender discrimination in Iranian law. She was detained on the basis of legislation which restricts the internationally recognized right to freedom of belief, expression, and association.

I urge you to order the immediate and unconditional release of Bahareh Hedayat. She is a prisoner of conscience held solely for peacefully exercising her rights to freedom of expression and association.

Sincerely,  
[Name]

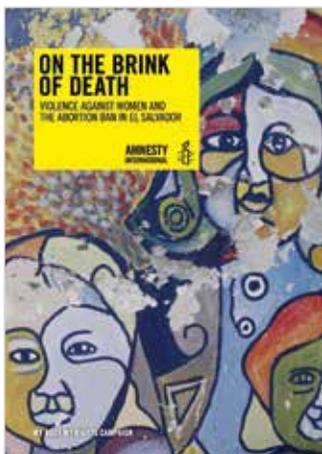
## Write to:

Head of the Judiciary  
Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani,  
c/o Public Relations Office Number 4, 2 Azizi Street  
Vali Asr Ave., above Pasteur Street intersection  
Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran

Email: [bia.judi@yahoo.com](mailto:bia.judi@yahoo.com) (*In the subject line, write  
FAO Ayatollah Sadegh Larijani*)

Salutation: Your Excellency

# RESOURCES



Amnesty International's new report, *On the brink of death: Violence against women and the abortion ban in El Salvador*, charts how these restrictive laws are destroying the lives of women and girls.

Saudi Arabia must not thwart campaign for women drivers, <http://www.amnesty.ca/news/news-releases/saudi-arabia-must-not-thwart-campaign-for-women-drivers>

Colombia: Death threats to women land claimants,

UA: 209/14 Index: AMR 23/028/2014 Colombia

## COMING UP JUNE 2015S

AMNESTY  
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SELECTION**



### *China Dog* by Judy Fong Bates Recommended by guest reader Shyam Selvadurai

With a focus on the Chinese community in Canada, the eight stories in *China Dog* evoke the role that home and memory play in our lives. Bates' characters are caught between the life they left behind in China and the harsh realities of their new life in Canada. They are torn between the traditions of the past and their hopes for the future. The stories are rendered by Bates with compassion and insight and remind us of the universal longing for understanding and acceptance.

**The discussion guide will be sent out in early June.**

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).

