
The Handmaid's Tale - too real to be fictional

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Spoiler alert

As a woman, *The Handmaid's Tale* hits a little too close to home. The series, adapted from the book of the same title by Margaret Atwood, contains social commentary so beautifully and frighteningly woven into every episode, the audience is almost always left with something to reflect on once the credits roll. It's no wonder *The Handmaid's Tale* and lead actress Elizabeth Moss have raked in Golden Globe and Emmy Award nominations consistently throughout all four seasons.

If you haven't caught onto the craze that is this mind-blowing primetime television series, *The Handmaid's Tale* is assumed to be based in the near future, following a civil war between the government of the United States of America and Gilead, a conservative, theonomic movement that establishes new laws in the former US once they win the war.

Gilead, hierarchal and totalitarian, is especially dictatorial towards women. Women are forced into limited roles, including that of the subjugated Handmaid. Due to the world's incredibly low fertility rate, Handmaids are kept in the households of the ruling elite class to bear their children, by engaging in a "ceremony" where the male Commander of the house will impregnate the usually non-consenting Handmaid while the Commander's wife holds her down. Handmaids are known as "fallen women", which in this extremely right-wing world, includes women who have been married more than once (as divorce isn't recognised in Gilead), single or unmarried mothers, lesbians (known as "gender traitors"), former politicians and academics, and non-Christians. Once the child is born, although the Handmaid lives in the same home as their child unless they are moved onto a new household in need, the mother can have no relationship with the child, as if they were never hers to begin with.

The story centres around the main character June Osbourne, who is renamed Offred by the Commander of her household and his wife, Fred and Serena Joy Waterford. June, played by Elizabeth Moss, was once a successful career-driven woman in the publishing business and happily married to a man named Luke, who ended up divorcing his wife to marry June, and their daughter Hannah. Now she's a Handmaid, desperate to escape this life and find her first daughter, Hannah. June has one child named Nicole "for" Fred and Serena, and she continues to recognise Nicole as her biological daughter after giving birth to her.

Exceptionally filmed to tug at your heartstrings, while simultaneously shocking the hell out of you, the blatant disregard for human rights in *The Handmaid's Tale* will make any female feel grateful for the bare minimum, such as the right to vote, and of course, the choice to do whatever the hell she likes with her body. In a time like the 21st century, where more and more women are choosing that they don't want to have any children at all, forced and non-consensual reproduction is something most can't even begin to imagine.

Handmaids definitely have it bad in this terrifying storyline but honestly, simply just being a woman at all in Gilead seriously sucks. Women can't own property, handle money, have careers, or read—not even the Bible, which is ironically the very text the state prides all its extremist laws on.

In Gilead, women are solely used for their fertility and ability to reproduce. Brilliant women with incredible minds aren't recognised as useful even though a woman was responsible for the very thing that created this radical state. Serena Joy Waterford, who becomes one of June's biggest tormentors, published a book before the fall of the US called *A Woman's Place*, where she argued that the best kind of feminism came in women acknowledging that their role is one of mother and homemaker, and as the birth rate was at an all-time low, Serena Joy was of the opinion that women ditch their ambitious careers to fulfil their "biological destinies" as mothers.

The book helps Gilead form its foundational values to assist in increasing the birth rate, but the men involved take it one step further by silencing women altogether and removing the two things that gave Serena Joy purpose — her writing and her public speaking. Outstanding women — doctors, scientists, engineers, you name it — are completely stripped of their accolades and their hard work, as if they never even received an education to begin with.

The double standards in *The Handmaid's Tale* are rife, especially considering that Gilead is technically based on Christian principles, taken directly from the Bible. Yet it uses it solely for its benefit, twisting the ancient text to suit whatever brutal point it needs to put across, especially to the women of the nation. The Old Testament is often the justification for the most cruel acts. Murder as punishment for crimes is the norm, and often June walks down the street to find a new group of traitors hanging from trees or on "The Wall", as is called the location where bodies are placed to prove a point to anyone who is even thinking of committing any crime against Gilead. It's no surprise women aren't allowed to read the Bible. They may find the gaps in what Gilead says is the "law of God" and what is actually written in its various books.

If it sounds rough, well, that's because it is. It is so sinister, every second of every episode feels like too much to bare and yet, it's impossible to look away. *The Handmaid's Tale* feels like a tale too real to be fictional. The series is so full of contradictions but one thing remains constant; it never fails to turn the cogs of the brain. It makes me think never say never, because in real life — unpredictable and often relentlessly ruthless — stranger things have happened.