

Barbara Kay: The problem with *Handmaid's Tale* is that it's not a believable dystopia. It's sci-fi

[National Post](#) - Tuesday May 2nd, 2017

The current Hulu remake of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, is getting rave reviews. But I passed on it.

Handmaids projects a Christian theocracy — the Republic of Gilead — that has replaced American democracy, and consigned women to their most reductive biological roles as forced breeders in a mysteriously infertile society. I'm interested in artistic dystopias — the word always associated with *Handmaids* — but science fiction, the genre to which this story more correctly belongs, isn't for me.

Here's the thing about a dystopia: to offer readers or viewers something more than gimmick-based entertainment — philosophical residue that stays with them, so to speak — the plot should be grounded in some kind of reality, whether of historical fact, or of human psychology. George Orwell's great dystopic novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for example, is an exaggeration of life in a totalitarian regime, but in its essence, it was spot on, because Orwell took his premises from observed reality.

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Where is the observed reality in Atwood's vision? Were the relations between men and women in 1985, or are they now, in such a precarious state that women have any reason whatsoever to entertain fear for the complete erosion of their legal personhood? Did evangelical Christians in 1985, or do they now, wield such influence in public life, and are America's constitutional checks and balances so fragile, that their takeover of the republic's levers of power is imaginable?

Atwood chose evangelical Christians as her villains, because their family structures are patriarchal. But patriarchy doesn't necessarily imply misogyny. In fact, I found Atwood's demonizing scenario rather hilarious. Pious Christians are the last people on earth to dream up a system in which the state has control over everyone's sexual and reproductive lives, and women are forced into sex with random married men. Does anyone really believe the prudish Mike Pence would sign off on that executive order?

According to Atwood's 1985 projection, some relevant gendered horror should be upon us. Well, in an era of falling fertility rates, I can see how the spectre of mass eugenics is a compelling topic for a futurist. Yet 32 years on, there are no signs of a *Handmaids* program in democratic countries, even where immigration is not perceived as an attractive solution to low birth rates. In Japan, for example, the birth rate has fallen so low, there are whole towns bereft of obstetricians, but there is as yet no glimmer of a forced breeding program. Singapore, an authoritarian society, had a fertility rate in 1960 of 5.45; today it is 1.1. A genuine crisis, but no *handmaids* there either. Singapore's most aggressive moves were to require pre-op counselling for women seeking (still legal) abortions, and to urge women via billboards to "Have more children if you can."

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For actual mass eugenics programs, we must look not to Christianity, but to secularists at the top of eugenics' slippery slope, and atheist totalitarians on the bottom. Urged on by "progressive" women, Alberta once endorsed sterilization of the intellectually handicapped. Communist China initiated a horrific forced-abortion program. And of course there were the anti-Christian Nazis and their *Lebensborn* program, which may have been Atwood's inspiration.

Lebensborn had fertile young German women lodged at breeding farms, where they were impregnated by SS officers in order to improve Germany's Aryan stock. On the surface, *Lebensborn* women seem a lot like Atwood's *handmaids*. Except for one enormous, crucial distinction. German women were not forced to breed. They were eager volunteers. In fact, if Atwood had paid close attention to this particular bit of history — and to the traits of human nature it revealed — she might have rethought the value of her novel's driving concept.

In Nazi Germany, both men and women were brought up from first youth to consider promulgation of the Aryan race a glorious cause. For the *Lebensborn* women, induction into the program brought social status, superior medical care and the kind of food other Germans could only dream of in those straitened times. Apparently having sex with Germany's most virile and attractive young men, living in luxury for nine months and reaping the gratitude of a grateful nation was a "sacrifice" many nubile German women were only too willing to make for the fatherland.

History demonstrates time and again that neither sex has a monopoly on virtue, and for the right price members of both

will choose opportunism over morality. But in Atwood's binary world, influential men are misogynistic control freaks, while women are either (ugly) collaborative dupes of the patriarchs, or innocent victims. In real life, it is demonstrably far more complicated. Which is why the plots of dystopic novels based in ideology rather than observed reality can be just plain silly, with *The Handmaid's Tale* a perfect case in point.

National Post

kaybarb@gmail.com

Twitter.com/BarbaraRKay

(--image--)

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```
CommentsnpReady(function(){npJ('.npStoryShare .npIconComments').unbind().bind('click',function(){npJ('html, body').animate({scrollTop:npJ('#disqus_thread').offset().top});return false})})
```

LinkedIn

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Topics: Full Comment, Christianity, evangelicalism, George Orwell, Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood, Nazi Party,

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googletag.cmd.push(function() {

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'loc'
, "top" )

; pnJustInTime.route(
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);

});

});
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Full Comment Videos(function() { pnShowVideo("1_9hi1opyb", 897897, "", "", "false", "", "", "kultura", "playlist",
"http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/video/{videoId}", null, "", "false"); })(); Post Picks
Rihanna reigns as Best Dressed Celeb at the 2017 Met Gala, others pale in comparison as usual (--image--) Remember:
the sorts of outfits gallivanting up the steps of the Met should look as though they'd be sending you toppling right back

down and into the emergency room

Great Comet leads 71st Annual Tony Award nominations, Canadian musical Come From Away major contender (--image--) The ceremony will take place at on June 11 in New York City, and will be hosted by former Tony winner and generally hilarious guy Kevin Spacey

For Sale: Greta Garbo's \$5.95M, midtown NYC apartment (--image--) The apartment's on a quiet cul-de-sac, while still being near restaurants, shopping and health and fitness facilities

Tristin Hopper: Caillou is an aggressively bad show ruining the world's children ... and it's all Canada's fault (--image--)

Parents complain that Caillou has an almost supernatural ability to turn their children into shrill monsters

Greek style lemony roasted potatoes make a delicious side dish (--image--) Lemony roasted potatoes are one of the dependable delights on the menu at a Greek restaurant. They're crispy outside, but tangy and creamy inside ... and surprisingly easy to make

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```
jQuery( document ).ready( function() {
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  googletag.cmd.push(function() {
```

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    var gpt_bigboxbot = googletag.
```

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    defineSlot ("/3081/npo_opin/full-comment/story", [[300,250],[300,253],[300,600],[300,603]] , 'gpt-bigboxbot');  
    adSlots.push( gpt_bigboxbot ); gpt_bigboxbot.addService( googletag.pubads() )
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.setTargeting(  
'loc'  
, "bot" )
```

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; pnJustInTime.route(  
{  
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pixels_away_count:1,  
mode:'down',  
lazy_loading_enabled:"on",  
refresh_enabled:"on",  
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});
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```
var NPFreeScreen = NPFreeScreen || {};  
NPFreeScreen.ajaxUrl = 'http://news.nationalpost.com/wp-admin/admin-ajax.php';  
NPFreeScreen.nonce = '5f010a0302';_fskparameters=[];
```

```
if ( localStorage && localStorage.getItem("janrainCaptureToken") ) {
  _fskparameters['_sid'] = localStorage.getItem("npPostPointsSid");
}
if ( ! _fskparameters['_sid'] ) {
  _fskparameters['_sid'] = "";
}
} else {
  _fskparameters['_sid'] = "";
}
}
```

```
janrain.settings.borderColor = '#ffffff';
janrain.settings.fontFamily = 'Helvetica, Lucida Grande, Verdana, sans-serif';
janrain.settings.width = 300;
janrain.settings.actionText = '';
janrain.settings.capture.modalCloseHtml = '';
janrain.settings.capture.noModalBorderInlineCss = true;

janrain.settings.capture.flowName = 'standard';
```

[Sign Up / Sign In](#)

With your existing account from:

```
{* loginWidget *}
```

or with your account:

```
{* #signInForm *}
```

```
{* signInEmailAddress *}
```

```
{* currentPassword *}
```

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[Create Account](#)

```
{* /signInForm *}
```

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Sign in to your account

Welcome back, { * welcomeName * }!
{ * loginWidget * }
Not { * welcomeName * }? Switch Account

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Sign in to your account

Welcome Back, { * welcomeName * }!

{ * #signInForm * }
{ * signInEmailAddress * }
{ * currentPassword * }

Sign In

{ * /signInForm * }
Not { * welcomeName * }? Switch Account

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Account Deactivated

Your account has been deactivated.

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Account Reactivation Failed

Sorry, we could not verify that email address.

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Account Activated

Your account has been reactivated.

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Email Verification Required

You must verify your email address before signing in. Check your email for your verification email, or enter your email address in the form below to resend the email.

{* #resendVerificationForm *}
{* signInEmailAddress *}

{* /resendVerificationForm *}

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Almost Done!

Please confirm your details below.

{* #socialRegistrationForm *}

{* firstName *}
{* lastName *}
{* emailAddress *}
{* displayName *}

Postmedia wants to improve your reading experience as well as share the best deals and promotions from our advertisers with you. The information below will be used to optimize the content and make ads across the network more relevant to you. You can always change the information you share with us by editing your profile.

Birthdate{* birthdate *}

Gender{* gender *}

Attention Print Newspaper SubscribersFor verification of Print Subscriber offers (e.g. epaper, Digital Access, Subscriber Rewards), please input your Print Newspaper subscription phone number and postal code.

{* phone *}

{* addressPostalCode *}

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I also accept and agree to be bound by Postmedia's Terms and Conditions with respect to my use of the Site and I have read and understand Postmedia's Privacy Statement. I consent to the collection, use, maintenance, and disclosure of my information in accordance with the Postmedia's Privacy Policy.

{* backButton *}

{* /socialRegistrationForm *}

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Almost Done!

Please confirm your details below. Already have an account? [Sign In](#).

{* #registrationForm *}

{* firstName *}

{* lastName *}

{* emailAddress *}

{* displayName *}

{* newPassword *}

{* newPasswordConfirm *}

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Birthdate{* birthdate *}

Gender{* gender *}

Attention Print Newspaper SubscribersFor verification of Print Subscriber offers (e.g. epaper, Digital Access, Subscriber

Rewards), please input your Print Newspaper subscription phone number and postal code.

{* phone *}

{* addressPostalCode *}

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{* backButton *}

{* /registrationForm *}

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Verfiy your email

We have sent you a confirmation email to {* emailAddressData *}. Please check your inbox and follow the instructions to confirm your email address.

[Close](#)

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Create a new password

Follow these simple steps to create a new password:

1. Enter your email address below
2. Wait for the instructions to arrive in your inbox
3. Follow the instructions to update your password

{* #forgotPasswordForm *}

{* signInEmailAddress *}

{* backButton *}

{* /forgotPasswordForm *}

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Create a new password

We've sent an email with instructions to create a new password. Your existing password has not been changed.

Close

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```
{* mergeAccounts {"custom": true} *}
```

Merge Your Accounts

```
{| rendered_current_photo |}
```

```
{| current_displayName |}  
{| current_emailAddress |}
```

```
{| foundExistingAccountText |} {| current_emailAddress |}.
```

```
{| moreInfoHoverText |}  
{| existing_displayName |} - {| existing_provider |} : {| existing_siteName |} {| existing_createdDate |}
```

```
{| moreInfoText |}
```

```
{| existing_displayName |}  
{| existing_provider_emailAddress |}
```

```
Created {| existing_createdDate |} at {| existing_siteName |}
```

{| connectLegacyRadioText |}

{| createRadioText |} {| current_provider |}

Validating

{| connect_button |}

{| create_button |}

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Sign in to complete account merge

{* #signInForm *}

{* signInEmailAddress *}

{* currentPassword *}

{* backButton *}

Sign In

{* /signInForm *}

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Resend Verification Email

Sorry, we could not verify your email address. Please enter your email below, and we'll resend the instructions for email verification.

{* #resendVerificationForm *}

{* signInEmailAddress *}

{* /resendVerificationForm *}

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Verification Email Sent

Check your email for a link to verify your email address.

Close

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FAQ

Email Verified

Thank you for verifying your email address.

Close

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Change Password

{* #changePasswordFormNoAuth *}

{* newPassword *}

{* newPasswordConfirm *}

{* /changePasswordFormNoAuth *}

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Password Changed

Your password has been successfully updated.

Close

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Create New Password

We didn't recognize that password reset code. Please enter your email below, and we'll send you a new code to reset your password.

{* #resetPasswordForm *}

{* signInEmailAddress *}

{* /resetPasswordForm *}

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Create New Password

We've sent you an email with instructions to create a new password. Your existing password has not been changed.

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```
/* */

/* */

/* */

//

_tkq = window._tkq || [];
_stq = window._stq || [];
_tkq.push(['storeContext', {'blog_id':'37979189','blog_tz':'-4','user_lang':'en','blog_lang':'en','user_id':'0'}]);
_stq.push(['view', {'blog':'37979189','v':'wpcom','tz':'-4','user_id':'0','post':'1368107','subd':'nationalpostcom'}]);
function st_vt() {var
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4&user_id=0&post=1368107&subd=nationalpostcom&rand="+Math.random();}
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(--image--)

if ( 'object' === typeof wpcom_mobile_user_agent_info ) {
wpcom_mobile_user_agent_info.init();
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if( false !== wpcom_mobile_user_agent_info.matchedUserAgentName )
mobileStatsQueryString += "&x_" + 'mobile_devices' + '=' +
wpcom_mobile_user_agent_info.matchedUserAgentName;

if( wpcom_mobile_user_agent_info.isIPad() )
mobileStatsQueryString += "&x_" + 'ipad_views' + '=' + 'views';

if( "" != mobileStatsQueryString ) {
new Image().src = document.location.protocol + '//pixel.wp.com/g.gif?v=wpcom-no-pv' + mobileStatsQueryString +
'&baba=' + Math.random();
}
}

//right rail native ads position
jQuery(document).ready(function(){
if (jQuery("#npContentSide .pn_kaltura").length>0) {
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.npGutterBot:not(.npAd)").removeClass("npGutterBot").css("margin-bottom","30px");
}
});

jQuery(document).on('keydown', '.sponsored-icon img', function() {
jQuery(this).click();
});

jQuery(document).on('click', '.sponsored-icon>img', function() {
var popUpBox=jQuery(this).next(".sponsored-icon-popup");
if (popUpBox.css("display")==='none') {
popUpBox.fadeIn("slow");
} else {
popUpBox.fadeOut("slow");
}
});

jQuery(document).on('click', '.sponsored-icon-popup>img', function() {
jQuery(this).parent().fadeOut("slow");
});

jQuery(document).on('click', '.sponsored-icon>input[type=image]', function() {
var popUpBox=jQuery(this).next(".sponsored-icon-popup");
if (popUpBox.css("display")==='none') {
popUpBox.fadeIn("slow");
}
}
}

```

```
popUpBox.focus();
} else {
popUpBox.fadeOut("slow");
}
});
```

```
jQuery(document).on('click', '.sponsored-icon-popup>input[type=image]', function() {
jQuery(this).parent().fadeOut("slow");
});
```

```
window.fbAsyncInit = function() {
FB.init({
appId : '114466555268868',
xfbml : true,
version : 'v2.4'
});
};
(function(d, s, id){
var js, fjs = d.getElementsByTagName(s)[0];
if (d.getElementById(id)) {return;}
js = d.createElement(s); js.id = id;
js.src = "//connect.facebook.net/en_US/sdk.js";
fjs.parentNode.insertBefore(js, fjs);
}(document, 'script', 'facebook-jssdk'));
```

(--image--)

```
var _sf_async_config = {uid: 34988, domain: 'postmedia.com', sections:'nationalpost.com,nationalpost_full comment',
path: window.location.pathname};
_sf_async_config.authors = 'Barbara Kay';(function(){
function loadChartbeat() {
window._sf_endpt = (new Date()).getTime();
var e = document.createElement('script');
e.setAttribute('type', 'text/javascript');
e.setAttribute('src',
(('https:' == document.location.protocol) ? 'https://a248.e.akamai.net/chartbeat.download.akamai.com/102508/' :
'http://') +
'static.chartbeat.com/js/chartbeat_video.js');
document.body.appendChild(e);
}
var oldonload = window.onload;
```

```
window.onload = typeof window.onload !== 'function' ? loadChartbeat : function () {
oldonload();
loadChartbeat();
};
})();

var _gaq = _gaq || [];
_gaq.push(['_setAccount', 'UA-17097415-1']);
_gaq.push(['_setDomainName', document.location.hostname]);
_gaq.push(['_trackPageview']);
(function() {
var ga = document.createElement('script'); ga.type = 'text/javascript'; ga.async = true;
ga.src = ('https:' == document.location.protocol ? 'https://ssl' : 'http://www') + '.google-analytics.com/ga.js';
var s = document.getElementsByTagName('script')[0]; s.parentNode.insertBefore(ga, s);
})();

var _comscore = _comscore || [];
_comscore.push({ c1: '2', c2: '10276888' });
(function() {
var s = document.createElement('script'), el = document.getElementsByTagName('script')[0]; s.async = true;
s.src = (document.location.protocol == 'https:' ? 'https://sb' : 'http://b') + '.scorecardresearch.com/beacon.js';
el.parentNode.insertBefore(s, el);
})();

(--image--)

/* */

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```