

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

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THE HANDMAID'S TALE -- The drama series, based on the award-winning, best-selling novel by Margaret Atwood, is the story of life in the dystopia of Gilead, a totalitarian society in what was formerly part of the United States.

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.

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