

***The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017)**

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1 In 2017, Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* garnered 13 Emmy nominations, making it one of the highest performing series for Hulu in terms of award nominations (Miller).

2 This series, based on the 1985 Margaret Atwood novel, resonated deeply with viewers worldwide in 2017. Audiences saw startling similarities to their contemporary world and culture in *The Handmaid's Tale*'s flashback sequences (for example, the Women's March and related protests). The most affecting factors for them were, more often than not, the heartbreaking world view presented by *The Handmaid's Tale*, that seemed all too possible (Reilly). *The Handmaid's Tale* follows a year or so in the life of Offred (Elisabeth Moss), once called June. She is an indentured servant in the new nation of Gilead, once the United States, where an ultra-conservative religious movement has toppled the government and divided citizens into varying categories according to their usefulness and behaviour. In an age of infertility, all women of childbearing age who have previously had children become Handmaids. Their sole responsibility it is to bear the children of their Commander and his wife. Once a month, the household (including all service staff) gather to pray, then the Handmaid is routinely raped by her Commander in a ceremony involving his barren wife, with the intention to conceive a child. In day-to-day lives, Handmaids (or women in general) may not read, learn, discover or create. Once a day they meet an allocated shopping partner (in Offred's case, the former university teacher and married lesbian, Ofglen, played by Alexis Bledel) to visit specific shops to buy produce for their masters.

3 The routine drudgery of this daily re-enactment is one that both Atwood's novel and the 2017 Hulu series convey well. In a world where women, in most locations, take for granted the ability to read, surf the internet, study, write and speak out, the imprisonment and

silence of Offred's reality is affecting. We imagine a world where we could not check our Twitter account or wish a friend a happy birthday via Facebook.

4 However, the updates to the original text are what make this series feel so relevant. In an early episode there is a reference to the dating app, Tinder, which, in 2017, has an estimated 50 million active users (Ward).

5 In Trump's America, with issues of gender and race at the forefront of world attention, it is alarmingly easy to imagine the gentle turning of screws that might lead to domination by the male sex. In fact, Michael Sainato and Chelsea Skojec point out that many comparisons can be drawn between women's lives in the fictional Gilead and real-life Saudi Arabia (Sainato and Skojec).

6 Much of the feminist discourse surrounding *The Handmaid's Tale* has been more about the series' addressing of race rather than gender.

7 In Atwood's original Gilead, white supremacy had taken hold. People of colour were sent to the far-off National Homelands to be enslaved, presumably. The creative team here decided that the 2017 Gilead had another angle: a world in which fertility trumped everything else. Race, sexual orientation, crime. Women with viable uteri were Handmaids and, if they misbehaved, punished rather than removed.

8 Showrunner Bruce Miller shared that they did not want to present a television series that omitted people of colour: "What's the difference between making a TV show about racists and making a racist TV show where you don't hire any actors of color?" he asked (Dockterman). But critics now accuse *The Handmaid's Tale* team of making a series that does not address race appropriately or, indeed, at all.

9 One specific criticism argues that the experiences of the Handmaids as displayed here mirrors almost exactly the experiences of Black women during America's near three hundred years of slavery (Jones). That parallel, however, not referenced here, even though Atwood

herself indicates that her Gilead is modelled heavily on America's history of Slavery (Berlatsky).

10 Showrunners, cast and viewers all agreed (Biddlecombe) that *The Handmaid's Tale* was not a series to binge-watch. It was too heavy, meant to be digested slowly, meditated upon. That is a big call in an age of habitual binge-watching, but this is not a series to be taken lightly. From the violence against women to the regimented rape of Handmaids in the homes of their Commanders, to the execution of LGBTQ+ people and doctors who perform abortions, *The Handmaid's Tale* serves up confronting violence and terror that is extremely affecting. When Ofglen is discovered having an affair with a 'Martha' (a housekeeper), the Martha is brutally lynched in front of a traumatized Ofglen. However, instead of meeting her own death, Ofglen is brought to the hospital. Under general anaesthetic, and with no warning, Ofglen is subjected to medical female genital mutilation, justified by the evil Aunt Lydia (Ann Dowd) with the cold line, "you won't want what you can't have".

11 This series adaptation is conflicting. On the one hand, it feels somehow representative of 2017 America, presenting a future view that seems shockingly possible. Donald Trump's America presents us with a real-world situation in which not only women and LGBTQ+ people but also people of colour and those of non-Christian faiths are increasingly demonized. Given that, there is a sense in which racial and other discriminations are not addressed adequately in this adaptation, or for this point in time. The character of Moira, for example, played excellently by Samira Wiley, conveys a fighter who refuses to accept the status quo, but there is little more that mirrors the activism currently so essential in the present, real world. While the Women's March brought millions together, it was still dominated and claimed by white women. And, while Elisabeth Moss, Alexis Bledel and Madeline Brewer (electric as mentally-ill Janine) are strong actors and do justice to their

written roles, there is a sense of something missing. Race, racism and the overt sense of white supremacy are ignored in this adaptation.

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