

# Season two of *The Handmaid's Tale*: Out of steam and it shows

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A year ago, this writer reviewed Season 1 of *The Handmaid's Tale*, based on Canadian author Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel of the same title, as serialized on the online streaming service Hulu.

The artistic and literary genre of dystopia [an imagined time or place where existence is miserable] came to life on the small screen in ten episodes capturing the horror of Atwood's Republic of Gilead, the authoritarian regime that has taken over the US (some American civilian and military officials have survived the coup and fled to Alaska).

With a few embellishments, the Hulu program took Atwood's classic as something to develop through sight and sound. Thematic music and strong performances evoked deep sympathy for the new patriarchal regime's victims, female and male alike.

*The Handmaid's Tale* left the viewer disturbed by the plausibility of a theocratic coup and, at the same time, encouraged by the possibility of resistance.

The series was an important contribution in a period where ecological catastrophe, nuclear war and the rise of the extreme right threaten humanity. None of the vitality or artistic success of the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* disappear because of the flaws of Season 2, but if ever a sequel could destroy an original, it would be this one.

The defining problem of Season 2 is that the creators of *The Handmaid's Tale* have largely run out of things to say about dictatorship and human relationships more generally. Cliffhangers and plot twists paper over a lack of a worked-out perspective on the roots of dictatorship. Old characters zigzag between the unexplained extremes of their personalities, while new characters exist mostly in one dimension.

As a general proposition, Hulu's version of *The Handmaid's Tale* strains and buckles as it strays from

the book. Atwood's novel ends with the protagonist, the handmaid Offred (formerly June), leaving the repressive Gilead regime with the assistance of her paramour, the turncoat Nick, the driver and head of security for the antagonist, Commander Waterford.

Season 2 of the Hulu series *begins* here. During a lengthy escape effort, the now pregnant Offred (Elisabeth Moss) is captured, returned to the clutches of Aunt Lydia (Ann Dowd) at the handmaid brainwashing hub known as Red Center, tortured and returned to the household of Commander Fred Waterford (Joseph Fiennes) and his vengeful wife, Serena Joy (Yvonne Strahovski).

The escape reflects poorly on the Commander, who appears unable to manage his domestic affairs. In a bid for domestic peace, he arranges for his driver and Offred's lover, Nick (Max Minghella), to obtain a child bride in a group marriage ceremony. Nick's new wife comes from a family of true believers.

When things appear bleakest for the handmaids, a bomb plot at Red Center throws the regime into crisis. Handmaids previously sent to die cleaning up radioactive waste in the colonies return to Gilead, filling the vacancies of handmaids killed in the bombing. Offred's friends, the militant Emily (Alexis Bledel) and the childish Janine (Madeline Brewer), come back to her company of handmaids.

Emily's story is one of Season 2's few interesting developments. She was a science professor before Gilead. Several powerful scenes depict her resistance to the encroaching patriarchy. She argues with her department head over his more cautious approach, which has seen Emily removed from lecturing and hidden away in the university's laboratory. Like her department head, Emily is homosexual, but unlike him, she is a fighter.

Offred's storyline becomes tedious and untenable. She makes no less than three escape attempts from Gilead, two of which end in her voluntary return. The last one, at the end of the season, bears the hallmarks of a trivial action movie.

Her relationships with both the Commander and with Serena Joy swing wildly back and forth, from physical violence to first-name basis and back, straining credulity and weakening all three characters.

Hulu's Serena Joy wanders far from Atwood's character, a washed-up televangelist and singer, and ideologue, who walks with a cane, torments Offred and spends most of her time gardening. The new Serena Joy is more sympathetic, with a great deal of screen time depicting her plight.

This version of Serena vacillates between the cruelest hatred for Offred—as Atwood depicted things—and a mutual acceptance that turns into trust and friendship. In the end, Offred convinces her one-time tormentor to let her escape Gilead with the newborn baby. Only a few episodes earlier, Serena was helping the Commander brutally rape Offred in an effort to induce labor.

Here, the creators try to bridge the unbridgeable, failing to develop Serena as a character with the capacity to make such a shift. There is something foul in the show's ongoing sympathy for a ultra-right demagogue whose own "revolution" gobbled her up. While Atwood avoided explicit identity politics in her novel, the creators of the show seem to be saying that powerful women deserve pity, even if they created the conditions of their own oppression.

In another low point of Season 2, billionaire media mogul Oprah Winfrey plays a radio disc jockey for "Radio Free America," broadcasting in "exile," who offers the following soothing message, as Offred listens intently and plans her second escape:

*And now, this news. The American Government in Anchorage today received promises of economic aid from India and China. In the United Kingdom, additional sanctions on Gilead were announced, as well as plans to raise the cap on American refugees relocating from Canada. Now, a tune to remind everyone who's listening, American patriot or Gilead traitor; we are still here. Stars and stripes forever, baby.*

One hardly knows where to begin, except to say that

in this unwelcome blurb the outlook of the complacent affluencia finds expression. Is the point of dystopia to suggest that in the present, everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds? Shouldn't dystopia force one to look for the roots of possible future horrors in the contradictions and dangers of contemporary life?

Oprah's cameo might not even be the most odious of Season 2's forays into world affairs. The episode concerning a trade mission to Canada by Commander Waterford and Serena Joy contains a scene where the latter is wooed by a US Government agent at a hotel bar, politically and romantically. The James Dean-inspired agent strikes up a cigarette, only to have the bartender tell him that smoking is not permitted. "I never did like rules," the agent tells Serena. The scene panders to a rugged individualist conception of America whose validity, if it ever had any, has evaporated.

Even more improbably, the online publication of letters by a number of handmaids to their families causes such a stir in Canada that the government calls off trade negotiations with Gilead, sending the Waterfords unceremoniously packing.

In sum, Season 2 of *The Handmaid's Tale* offers little of enduring value. The entire affair is painful. To see the best elements of the original successively peeled away is like watching a loved one lose him- or herself to dementia in old age.



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