



The Heart Goes Last: A Novel

By Margaret Atwood

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Margaret Atwood puts the human heart to the ultimate test in an utterly brilliant new novel that is as visionary as *The Handmaid's Tale* and as richly imagined as *The Blind Assassin*.

Stan and Charmaine are a married couple trying to stay afloat in the midst of an economic and social collapse. Job loss has forced them to live in their car, leaving them vulnerable to roving gangs. They desperately need to turn their situation around—and fast. The Positron Project in the town of Consilience seems to be the answer to their prayers. No one is unemployed and everyone gets a comfortable, clean house to live in . . . for six months out of the year. On alternating months, residents of Consilience must leave their homes and function as inmates in the Positron prison system. Once their month of service in the prison is completed, they can return to their "civilian" homes.

At first, this doesn't seem like too much of a sacrifice to make in order to have a roof over one's head and food to eat. But when Charmaine becomes romantically involved with the man who lives in their house during the months when she and Stan are in the prison, a series of troubling events unfolds, putting Stan's life in danger. With each passing day, Positron looks less like a prayer answered and more like a chilling prophecy fulfilled.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Captivating. . . . Thrilling. . . . Margaret Atwood [is] a living legend.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“Quintessential Atwood. . . . The writing here is so persuasive, so crisp, that it seeps under your skin.” —*The Boston Globe*

“An arresting perspective on the confluence of information, freedom, and security in the modern age.” —*The New Yorker*

“A gripping, psychologically acute portrayal of our own future gone totally wrong, and the eternal constant of flawed humanity.” —*Huffington Post*

“Dystopia virtuoso Margaret Atwood turns her effortless world-building, deft humor and grim commentary on the depths of human hubris to the prison industrial complex, love and free will.” —*The Denver Post*

“Rare apocalyptic entertainment. . . . Not only does Atwood sketch out an all-too-possible future but she also looks to the past, tapping into archetypes from fairy tales and myth, giving the novel a resonance beyond satire.” —*The Miami Herald*

“Another Atwood classic.” —*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“Poignant. . . . Gloriously madcap. . . . You only pause in your laughter when you realise that, in its constituent parts, the world she depicts here is all too horribly plausible.” —*The Guardian* (London)

“Engrossing.” —*The Austin Chronicle*

“Wonderful. . . . Explores the idea of a powerful system and its discontents. . . . Atwood’s *The Heart Goes Last* is a riveting addition to her oeuvre.” —*Electric Literature*

“Atwood’s creepy but entertaining vision of a possible future.” —*The Washington Times*

“Fast-paced and funny. . . . True love ultimately endures in *The Heart Goes Last*, but so do the real terrors present in Atwood novels, all too often manifesting in ours.” —*PopMatters*

“Eerily prophetic. . . . A heady blend of speculative fiction with noir undertones that is provocative, powerful and will prompt all readers to reassess which parts of their humanity are for sale.” —*BookPage*

“Ever-inventive, astutely observant, and drolly ironic, Atwood unfurls a riotous plot. . . . This laser-sharp, hilariously campy, and swiftly flowing satire delves deeply into our desires, vices, biases, and contradictions, bringing fresh, incisive comedy to the rising tide of postapocalyptic fiction . . . in which Atwood has long been a clarion voice.” —*Booklist* (starred review)

About the Author

Margaret Atwood, whose work has been published in thirty-five countries, is the author of more than forty books of fiction, poetry, and critical essays. In addition to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, her novels include *Cat’s*

Eye, short-listed for the 1989 Booker Prize; *Alias Grace*, which won the Giller Prize in Canada and the Premio Mondello in Italy; *The Blind Assassin*, winner of the 2000 Booker Prize; *Oryx and Crake*, short-listed for the 2003 Man Booker Prize; *The Year of the Flood*; and her most recent, *MaddAddam*. She is the recipient of the Los Angeles Times Innovator's Award, and lives in Toronto with the writer Graeme Gibson.

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CRAMPED

Sleeping in the car is cramped. Being a third-hand Honda, it's no palace to begin with. If it was a van they'd have more room, but fat chance of affording one of those, even back when they thought they had money. Stan says they're lucky to have any kind of a car at all, which is true, but their luckiness doesn't make the car any bigger.

Charmaine feels that Stan ought to sleep in the back because he needs more space--it would only be fair, he's larger--but he has to be in the front in order to drive them away fast in an emergency. He doesn't trust Charmaine's ability to function under those circumstances: he says she'd be too busy screaming to drive. So Charmaine can have the more spacious back, though even so she has to curl up like a snail because she can't exactly stretch out.

They keep the windows mostly closed because of the mosquitoes and the gangs and the solitary vandals. The solitaires don't usually have guns or knives--if they have those kinds of weapons you have to get out of there triple fast--but they're more likely to be bat-shit crazy, and a crazy person with a piece of metal or a rock or even a high-heeled shoe can do a lot of damage. They'll think you're a demon or the undead or a vampire whore, and no kind of reasonable thing you might do to calm them down will cancel out that opinion. The best thing with crazy people, Grandma Win used to say--the only thing, really--is to be somewhere else.

With the windows shut except for a crack at the top, the air gets dead and supersaturated with their own smells. There aren't many places where they can grab a shower or wash their clothes, and that makes Stan irritable. It makes Charmaine irritable too, but she tries her best to stamp on that feeling and look on the bright side, because what's the use of complaining?

What's the use of anything? she often thinks. But what's the use of even thinking What's the use? So instead she says, "Honey, let's just cheer up!"

"Why?" Stan might say. "Give me one good fucking reason to cheer the fuck up." Or he might say, "Honey, just shut it!" mimicking her light, positive tone, which is mean of him. He can lean to the mean when he's irritated, but he's a good man underneath. Most people are good underneath if they have a chance to show their goodness: Charmaine is determined to keep on believing that. A shower is a help for the showing of the goodness in a person, because, as Grandma Win was in the habit of saying, Cleanliness is next to godliness and godliness means goodliness.

That was among the other things she might say, such as Your mother didn't kill herself, that was just talk. Your daddy did the best he could but he had a lot to put up with and it got too much. You should try hard to forget those other things, because a man's not accountable when he's had too much to drink. And then she would say, Let's make popcorn!

And they would make the popcorn, and Grandma Win would say, Don't look out the window, sugar pie, you

don't want to see what they're doing out there. It isn't nice. They yell because they want to. It's self-expression. Sit here by me. It all worked out for the best, because look, here you are and we're happy and safe now!

That didn't last, though. The happiness. The safeness. The now.

WHERE?

Stan twists in the front seat, trying to get comfortable. Not much fucking chance of that. So what can he do? Where can they turn? There's no safe place, there are no instructions. It's like he's being blown by a vicious but mindless wind, aimlessly round and round in circles. No way out.

He feels so lonely, and sometimes having Charmaine with him makes him feel lonelier. He's let her down.

He has a brother, true, but that would be a last resort. He and Conor had followed different paths, was the polite way of saying it. A drunken midnight fight, with dickheads and douchebags and shit-for-brains freely exchanged, would be the impolite way of saying it, and it was in fact the way Conor had chosen during their last encounter. To be accurate, Stan had chosen that way too, though he'd never had as foul a mouth as Con.

In Stan's view--his view at that time--Conor was next door to a criminal. But in Con's view Stan was a dupe of the system, an ass-kisser, a farce, and a coward. Balls of a tadpole.

Where's slippery Conor now, what's he doing? At least he won't have lost his job in the big financial-crash business-wrecking meltdown that turned this part of the country into a rust bucket: you can't lose your job if you don't have one. Unlike Stan, he hasn't been expelled, cast out, condemned to a life of frantic, grit-in-the-eyes, rancid-armpit wandering. Con always lived off what he could mooch or filch from others, ever since he was a kid. Stan hasn't forgotten his Swiss Army knife that he'd saved up for, his Transformer, his Nerf gun with the foam bullets: magical disappearances all, with Con's younger-brother head going shake shake shake from side to side, no way, who, me?

Stan wakes at night thinking for a moment that he's home in bed, or at least in a bed of some sort. He reaches for Charmaine, but she isn't there beside him and he finds himself inside the stinking car, needing a piss but afraid to unlock the door because of the voices yammering toward him and the footsteps crunching on gravel or thudding on asphalt, and maybe a fist thumping on the roof and a scarred, partly toothed face grinning in the window: Lookit what we got! Cockfodder! Let's open 'er up! Gimme the crowbar!

And then Charmaine's terrified little whisper: "Stan! Stan! We need to go! We need to go right now!" As if he couldn't figure that out for himself. He keeps the key in the ignition, always. Rev of motor, screech of tires, yelling and jeering, pounding of heart, and then what? More of the same in some other parking lot or sidestreet, somewhere else. It would be nice if he had a machine gun: nothing any smaller would even come close. As it is, his only weapon is flight.

He feels pursued by bad luck, as if bad luck is a feral dog, lurking along behind him, following his scent, lying in wait around corners. Peering out from under bushes to fix him with its evil yellow eye. Maybe what he needs is a witch doctor, some serious voodoo. Plus a couple of hundred bucks so they could spend a night in a motel, with Charmaine beside him instead of out of reach in the back seat. That would be the bare minimum: to wish for any more would be pushing it.

Charmaine's commiseration makes it worse. She tries so hard. "You are not a failure," she says. "Just because we lost the house and we're sleeping in the car, and you got?..?" She doesn't want to say fired. "And you haven't given up, at least you're looking for a job. Those things like losing the house, and, and ..??. those things have happened to a lot of people. To most people."

"But not to everyone," Stan would say. "Not to fucking everyone."

Not to rich people.

They'd started out so well. They both had jobs then. Charmaine was in the Ruby Slippers Retirement Homes and Clinics chain, doing entertainment and events--she had a special touch with the elderly, said the supervisors--and she was working her way up. He was doing well too: junior quality control at Dimple Robotics, testing the Empathy Module in the automated Customer Fulfillment models. People didn't just want their groceries bagged, he used to explain to Charmaine: they wanted a total shopping experience, and that included a smile. Smiles were hard; they could turn into grimaces or leers, but if you got a smile right, they'd spend extra for it. Amazing to remember, now, what people would once spend extra for.

They'd had a small wedding--just friends, since there wasn't much family left on either side, their parents being dead one way or another. Charmaine said she wouldn't have invited hers anyway, though she didn't elaborate because she didn't like to talk about them, but she wished her Grandma Win could have been there. Who knew where Conor was? Stan didn't look for him, because if he turned up he would probably have tried to grope Charmaine or do some other attention-grabbing stunt.

Then they had a beach honeymoon in Georgia. That was a high point. There are the two of them in the photos, golden and smiling, sunlight all over them like mist, raising their glasses of--what had that been, some tropical cocktail heavy on the lime cordial--raising their glasses to their new life. Charmaine in a retro flower-patterned halter top with a sarong skirt and a hibiscus blossom tucked behind her ear, her blond hair shining, ruffled by the breeze, him in a green shirt with penguins on it that Charmaine had picked out for him, and a panama; well, not a real panama, but that idea. They look so young, so untouched. So eager for the future.

Stan sent one of those photos to Conor to show that there was, finally, a girl of Stan's that Con couldn't poach; also as an example of the success Con himself might expect to have if he'd settle down, go straight, stop doing minor time, quit fooling around on the fringes. It's not that Con wasn't smart: he was too smart. Always playing the angles.

Con sent a message back: Nice T&A, big brother. Can she cook? Dumb penguins though. Typical: Con had to sneer, he had to disparage. That was before he'd cut the lines, dumped his email, refused to share his address.

Back up north, they'd made a down payment on a house, a starter two-bedroom in need of a little love but with room for the growing family, said the agent with a wink. It seemed affordable, but in retrospect the decision to buy was a mistake--there were the renovations and repairs, and that meant extra debt on top of the mortgage. They told themselves they could handle it: they weren't big spenders, they worked hard. That's the killer: the hard work. He'd busted his ass. He might as well not have bothered, in view of the

fuck-all he's been left with. It makes him cross-eyed to remember how hard he'd worked.

Then everything went to ratshit. Overnight, it felt like. Not just in his own personal life: the whole card castle, the whole system fell to pieces, trillions of dollars wiped off the balance sheets like fog off a window. There were hordes of two-bit experts on TV pretending to explain why it had happened--demographics, loss of confidence, gigantic Ponzi schemes--but that was all guesswork bullshit. Someone had lied, someone had cheated, someone had shorted the market, someone had inflated the currency. Not enough jobs, too many people. Or not enough jobs for middle-of-the-road people like Stan and Charmaine. The northeast, which was where they were, was the hardest hit.

The Ruby Slippers branch where Charmaine worked ran into trouble: it was upscale, so a lot of families could no longer afford to park their old folks in there. Rooms emptied, overheads were cut. Charmaine applied for a transfer--the chain was still doing well on the West Coast--but that didn't happen, and she was made redundant. Then Dimple Robotics packed up and moved west, and Stan was out without a parachute.

They sat in their newly bought home on their newly bought sofa with the flowered throw pillows that Charmaine had taken such trouble to match, and hugged each other, and said they loved each other, and Charmaine cried, and Stan patted her and felt useless.

Charmaine got a temporary job waiting tables; when that place went belly up, she got another one. Then another, in a bar. Not high-end places; those were drying up, because anyone who could afford to eat fancy food was gobbling it farther west, or else in exotic countries where the concept of minimum wage had never existed.

No such luck for Stan, with the odd jobs: overqualified, was what they told him at the employment office. He said he wasn't picky--he'd clean floors, he'd mow lawns--and they smirked (what floors? what lawns?), and said they'd keep him on file. But then the employment office itself closed down, because why keep it open if there was no employment?

They held on in their little house, living on fast food and the money from selling the furniture, skimping on energy use and sitting in the dark, hoping things would take an upturn. Finally they put the house on the market, but by then there were no buyers; the houses on either side of theirs were already empty, and the looters had been through them, ripping out anything that could be sold. One day they had no mortgage money left, and their credit cards were frozen. They walked out before they were thrown out, and drove away before the creditors could grab their car.

Luckily Charmaine had saved up a little stash of cash. That, and her tiny pay packet at the bar, plus tips--those have kept them in gas, and a post-office box so they can pretend to have an address if anything does come up for Stan, and the odd trip to the laundromat when they can't stand the griminess of their clothes.

Stan has sold his blood twice, though he didn't get much for it. "You wouldn't believe it," the woman said to him as she handed him a paper cup of fake juice after his second blood drain, "but some people have asked us if we want to buy their babies' blood, can you imagine?"

"No shit," says Stan. "Why? Babies don't have that much blood."

More valuable, was her answer. She said there was a news item that claimed a total blood renewal, young

blood for old, staves off dementia and rolls your physical clock back twenty, thirty years. "It's only been tried with mice," she said. "Mice aren't people! But some folks will clutch at anything. We've turned away at least a dozen baby-blood offers. We tell them we can't accept it."

Someone's accepting it, Stan thought. You can bet they are. If there's money in it.

If only the two of them could find some place where the prospects are better. There's said to be a boom in Oregon--fuelled by a rare earth discovery, China's buying a lot of that--but how can they get out there? They'd no longer have Charmaine's trickle of money coming in, they'd run out of gas. They could ditch the car, try hitching, but Charmaine is terrified by the thought. Their car is the only barrier between them and gang rape, and not just for her, she says, considering what's out there roaming around in the night with no pants on. She has a point.

What should he do to pull them out of this ditch? Whatever he has to. There used to be a lot of jobs licking ass in the corporate world, but those asses are now out of reach. Banking's left the region, manufacturing too; the digital genius outfits have migrated to fatter pastures in other, more prosperous locations and nations. Service industries used to be held out as a promise of salvation, but those jobs too are scarce, at least around here. One of Stan's uncles, dead now, had been a chef, back when cheffing was a good gig because the top slice was still living onshore and high-end restaurants were glamorous. But not today, when those kinds of customers are floating around on tax-free sea platforms just outside the offshore limit. People that rich take their own chefs with them.

Another midnight, another parking lot. It's the third one tonight; they've had to flee the previous two. Now they're so on edge they can't get back to sleep.

"Maybe we should try the slots," says Charmaine. They'd done that once, and come out ten dollars to the good. It wasn't much, but at least they hadn't lost it all.

"No way," says Stan. "We can't afford the risk, we need the money for gas."

"Have some gum, honey," says Charmaine. "Relax a little. Go to sleep. Your brain's too active."

"What fucking brain?" says Stan. There's a hurt silence: he shouldn't take it out on her. Dickhead, he tells himself. None of this is her fault.

Tomorrow he'll eat his pride. He'll hunt down Conor, help him out with whatever scam he's engaged in, join the criminal underclass. He has an idea about where to start looking. Or maybe he'll just hit Con up for a loan, supposing Con is flush. That shoe used to be on the other foot – it was Conor who'd done the hitting up when they were younger, and before Conor had figured out how to game the system – but he'll need to avoid reminding Conor of their former positions now.

Or maybe he should remind him. Con owes him. He could say *Payback time* or something. Not that he's got any leverage. But still, Con's his brother. And he is Con's brother. Which must be worth something.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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