

The Handmaid's Tale: more harrowing, more horror

The TV adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel returns for a second season as a formidably dark tale

JOHN DOYLE

OPINION



TELEVISION

If you want your nerves jangled and your optimism shattered, you will find what you want in the second season of *The Handmaid's Tale* (returns Sunday, Bravo, 9 p.m. with two consecutive episodes).

Like the first season, this one — on the evidence of the early episodes — is also beautifully made, alert to light and colour and painterly in its depiction of the setting. It still has Elisabeth Moss, of course, as June/Offred. It still has Ann Dowd as the terrifying Aunt Lydia. And by heavens it is still set in a horrifying world. In fact, if the first season was loosely structured as a thriller in which a mother



The second season of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which returns on Sunday, is still set in a horrifying world. In fact, it is relentlessly disturbing. Now, beyond Margaret Atwood's original story, the series sets out to explore further and deeper the United States that is now Gilead.

aimed to reunite with her child and husband, the second season is closer to a horror story; a formidably dark tale, relentlessly disturbing.

Last year, the TV adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel didn't so much strike a chord as it instantly became iconic, a cultural phenomenon, alive with

meaning in the first months of Donald Trump's administration and acting as a grim cautionary tale for those who imagined the situation of women would only get worse. But it wasn't the political and social resonance that won all those Emmy Awards. It was the skill in acting, directing, writing, as well as the stunning visual impact. After the series aired came the #MeToo movement and the dethroning of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein and so many other men. It all seemed inextricably linked.

The first season had an aura of being about resistance — never let it happen, this Gilead in which women are enslaved to bear children, and have no rights. Now, beyond Atwood's original story, the series sets out to explore further and deeper the United States that is now Gilead, a war-ravaged place run under the puritanical dictates of authoritarian church and state.

The opening episode of this season has a scene that lasts many minutes and says an enormous amount about Gilead. June/Offred and other handmaids are taken to Fenway Park. The Boston baseball stadium is now a gloomy, dilapidated space, a place for the mass execution of people. The venue for sport, dreams and joy is now the venue where you end in your worst nightmare.

It is a terrifying scene and much of the season's start is just as terrifying. The group of handmaids who rebelled by refusing to stone to death one of their own are punished. There is so much horror, that the viewer is either enthralled by the power of the scenes and staging, or repulsed by the sheer, unrelenting viciousness in the treatment meted out to the handmaids. It is an unnerving experience to be both seduced by the exquisite visual orchestration and aghast at the cruelty. Even more than last season, this *Handmaid's Tale* is deeply disturbing viewing and there will be

some viewers who, understandably, find it too ceaselessly dark.

What is just as chilling as the outright acts of misogynistic sadism is the casual way in which women, the handmaids, are infantilized. "Such spoiled girls, such spoiled brats," Aunt Lydia clucks before unleashing barbaric punishment. Watching the series, one becomes highly alert for subtle sexism lurking everywhere.

This season there are more expansive flashbacks to the pre-Gilead world. In these scenes and vignettes we get a clearer picture of the fraught society in which the erosion of women's rights was at first slow and tentative, more about attitude than doctrine. And then some attitudes became law.

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"We get so comfortable with laws. It doesn't even take that long," one handmaid says. Unsettling, too, is the apparent ease of the overthrow of normal government — a couple of terrorists attacks — and installation of authoritarianism.

Also in this season the drama shifts at times to the "colonies," which were only referenced before this. There, in scenes that are especially disturbing, Emily/Ofglen (Alexis Bledel) toiled on a chain gang with other enslaved women, clearing hazardous waste until they are killed by the job they do. And Canada remains part of the drama, as a free land where Moira (Samira Wiley), who escaped there last season, remains traumatized by her experiences.

If you want harrowing drama, it's here in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Admirably so, if you are prepared to be horrified.

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