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An Urgent Realm

Mallory Tater's dark debut

Cecily Ross

The Birth Yard

Mallory Tater

HarperAvenue

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A pandemic is not a dystopia, Margaret Atwood recently said in an interview with the BBC. A dystopia is “an arranged unpleasant society you don’t want to be living in”—a frightening and usually totalitarian place. It is a cautionary tale that says, This is the house you could be living in if things continue this way. How do you like this house? But the COVID-19 outbreak, she pointed out, is an emergency situation that, for all its terrifying and disagreeable aspects, was not deliberately engineered by malign forces trying to control us.

Despite the distinctions Atwood makes, it sometimes feels as though the lines between the world of fiction and the world of this epidemic are beginning to blur, and that we are all captive in an alarming story we are writing together. Maybe, pandemic-wise, this is the house we are *already* living in — a real-life dystopia playing out in real time. Indeed, Atwood admits that her own most famous foray into the genre, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, has in recent years graduated from the realm of “Here it comes” to the rather more urgent realm of “This could really happen,” now.

In the tradition of the subjugated handmaids of Gilead and with striking overtones of Miriam Toews’s *Women Talking* — another harrowing account of abuse — Mallory Tater’s *The Birth Yard* is the latest addition to the dystopian canon. Tater’s gripping debut portrays a patriarchal society run amok, where women are valued only as breeders and servants, are minimally educated, and are subjected to forced marriages, rape, and violence at the hands of the Men (the noun appears in upper case throughout the text) who control them. Events in the United States since the election of Donald Trump remind us that women’s rights to control their own bodies are precarious indeed. As is the case all over the globe, women have historically lived, and in some cases continue to live, a version of the dystopia Atwood thought up thirty-five years ago.

Could it be that *The Handmaid’s Tale* and now *The Birth Yard* are not merely cautionary tales but are the tale, albeit fictional, itself? Consider George Orwell’s novel *1984*, where mass state surveillance and the degradation of language are omnipresent — an imagined society that long ago merged with reality. The book burnings in Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* and the docility--inducing balm of Soma in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* both have frightening modern-day parallels too. The warnings implicit in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* have been rendered explicit as today’s technology flirts with the dubious benefits of artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. Similarly, another prescient Shelley novel, *The Last Man*, which portrays a post-pandemic world where all traces of civilization have been destroyed, seems a little too close to our present reality for comfort. It’s become a cliché, but Oscar Wilde’s observation that “life imitates art far more than art imitates life” certainly applies here.



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depict societies that are substantially worse than anything they are living through. Surely this is true of *The Birth Yard*. It is difficult to imagine such an excessively cruel and oppressive world ever existing: a world in which Men's dominion over women is absolute. The Den, as the novel's breakaway society is called, is lorded over by a charismatic leader named Feles, who inherited his mantle from Lynx, his late father and the community's founder. We meet the narrator, Sable, on her eighteenth birthday. Like everyone in the Den — which goes back three generations since the group broke away from Main Stream, as the outside world is known — Sable was born in September. She is now ready to breed. Like the other virgins her age, Sable is assigned a Match: in her case, Ambrose, a kind and handsome former schoolmate who hopes to become a doctor one day. Sable's friend Mamie is not as fortunate; her Match, Isaac, routinely beats her and forces her to engage in unspecified sexual perversions.

“‘Dystopia’ has been overused and is often taken to describe almost anything unpleasant.”

Following the Den's month-long September birthday celebrations, which involve copious amounts of alcohol and the ecstasy-inducing effects of a drug called Reposey, the official breeding takes place. The girls, whose menstrual cycles have been carefully synchronized with the help of another drug, DiLexa, reach peak fertility at the same time. The deflowering occurs during an elaborate candle-lit, flower-strewn public ceremony in specially erected “breeding tents” presided over by a televised image of Feles, who instructs the couples. “You have half an hour. The Man must ejaculate into His Match in that time. It must be sufficient,” and so on. Sable's “breeding” results in conception, sparing her the necessity of a repeat performance. And although she finds satisfaction in the knowledge that, like her mother and grandmother before her, she is fulfilling her proper destiny as a woman, a nagging curiosity about life outside her community makes her begin to question this role. When Sable prevents a Boy from sexually assaulting one of her former schoolmates, she is punished by being publicly spat upon by all the Men in the colony, in a scene reminiscent of ritual stonings.

As Sable and her friends enter their third trimester, they are taken to the Birth Yards, a labour camp in the woods, where they are subjected to healthy diets, fresh air, hard work, and more humiliation and degradation. In one of many bizarre rituals, the pregnant girls are made to drink a murky brown tea made from the blood and hair of Feles. “We get to ingest a Man who loves us,” Sable observes. “Protects us. Keeps us.” (There is also a violent scene involving a pig that I could barely read.) And they are dosed into docility with another drug, DociGens, which Sable refuses to take — an act of rebellion that ultimately allows her to escape what awaits her back at the Den once she is no longer suitable for breeding. For women past child-bearing age, their fate is to be gradually poisoned with micro-doses of a chemotherapy pill called Afterol.

If, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, Tater's *The Birth Yard* is a cautionary story, it isn't clear what the novel is warning against. The excesses of patriarchal society? The siren call of charismatic leaders? The perils of drug use? These things are already with us. With all their horrors, we recoil at the idea that societies like the Den, an isolated Mennonite-like sect (minus the religion) entirely under male control, could actually exist. And yet the real-life Bolivian inspiration for Toews's *Women Talking* reminds us that indeed they can, they have, and they probably still do. Today, as we ponder the causes of a pandemic, a situation few of us imagined, though the warnings were everywhere; as we wait for an unknowable future to arrive; as we try to imagine the forms that future might take — we should remember that in life, as in literature, anything can happen.

Cecily Ross, a contributing editor with the magazine, wrote *The Lost Diaries of Susanna Moodie*, a novel.

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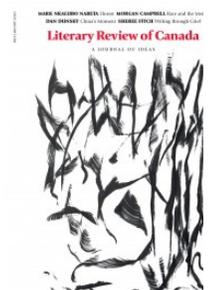
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