

The Disunited States [C1]

Margaret Atwood riflette sulla politica americana e sul futuro del Paese.

Canadian literary icon Margaret Atwood observes events in her neighbouring North America and the political commentary around it with reservation. While many compare the US today with the totalitarian state of Gilead that Atwood invented for her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), she says that we have to give Americans a chance. In a meeting with the press to present her book of short stories *Old Babes in the Wood* (2023) in translation, Atwood talked about the newly-inaugurated US president and vice president, as well as age, women and uncertainty in North America today. She began by discussing Kamala Harris. **Margaret Atwood:** I think that a lot of people, some women included, were afraid to have a woman president. And why were they afraid to have a woman president, and particularly a Black woman president? Because a lot of people feared that she might do unto them what they had done unto people like her. People were afraid of losing identity, status and power. I think with the history of the United States, people were afraid of her.

CLASS IN POLITICS

Also interesting, Atwood notes, are why working-class Americans have turned their backs on the Democratic Party. **Margaret Atwood:** So the conversation over the past eight or so years has been a lot about identity, and almost nothing about class. I believe that the conversation will now come back to talking about class. Because one of the things that happened in the United States is that the class affiliations of people flipped. It used to be the Democrats represented the working class and Republicans represented rich people. Whether that really flipped or not, the perception was that Republicans were now representing working-class and middle-class people and Democrats were representing elites, and that could mean just about anything, and it certainly didn't mean very rich people, because there

were very rich people on both sides. I think it meant snobby, educated people who thought they knew everything.

JUST FOR FUN?

So will the future be a dystopian one? This comes back to the big lesson of George Orwell's novel Nineteen Eighty-Four, says Atwood. **Margaret Atwood:** Will we have a full blown Hitleresque dictatorship? I kind of doubt it, but it really depends on whether we can believe anything Trump says, and he lies so much that you don't actually know. So if he says he's going to execute the head of the army, is that just fun? Or will he really do it? If he says he's going to build a lot of concentration camps and put illegal immigrants and Democrats into them, do we really think he's going to do that? Do we think that the American public would stand for it?

HEALTH QUESTIONS

In fact, Trump may not even survive his term, says Atwood, which would usher in an even more questionable figure. **Margaret Atwood:** He won't release his health records. So could it be that things are more serious than we think? Could it be that he becomes incapacitated in some way before the four years is up and then we will have J. D. Vance as president. And that is a big unknown. We really don't know how much of the truth he's ever been telling, either. He started out by saying that Trump was a Hitler, he ended up being his vice presidential running mate.

CAESAR OR CALIGULA

American protectionism may also lead to a decline in America's position in the world. **Margaret Atwood:** Is America, who up until now has been number one powerful country in the world, though it's had a few failures... are we watching an empire in decline? If Trump really goes on the rampage, it would make it impossible for the Republicans to get elected next time, so I'm assuming that some people will try to restrain him. The question is, is he restrainable? Are we dealing with Augustus Caesar or with Caligula, who was

quite crazy. So, he could be a very cunning person pretending to be crazy. Or he could be actually crazy! We don't know.

ALL IS NOT LOST

Like every book, though, there are beginnings and there are endings. And the endings aren't necessarily bad ones, says Atwood. Take Nineteen Eighty-Four as an example. **Margaret Atwood:** Everyone thought for years that Nineteen Eighty-Four was very, very negative and that it ended on a really gloomy note, with Winston Smith having been brainwashed. It doesn't end that way. It ends with a note on Newspeak, the language they were trying to get everybody to speak. But this Newspeak note is written in standard English and in the past tense. So by that we know that the world of Nineteen Eighty-Four is over. So it's a much more hopeful book than people at first imagined. Once something is over, it either becomes a subject for a study, or it might become a statue, it might become a park, might become a hospital... So it's memorialised in some way, but it no longer exists.

Glossary

- **full blown** = in piena regola
- **term** = mandato
- **usher in** = dare inizio a, aprire la strada
- **cunning** = astuto, furbo
- **brainwashed** = fare il lavaggio del cervello
- **snobby** = snob
- **stand for** = tollerare
- **health records** = cartelle cliniche
- **four years is up** = finire
- **running mate** = compagno di candidatura
- **to restrain** = contenere
- **flipped** = ribaltare
- **release** = rendere pubblico
- **gloomy note** = tono cupo
- **in the past tense** = al passato
- **goes on the rampage** = scatenarsi