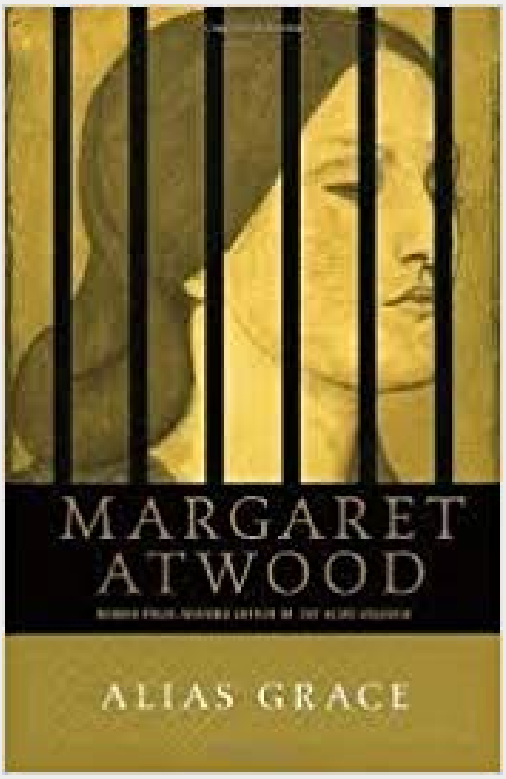
Alias Grace *by* Margaret Atwood



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Reviews of the Alias Grace *by* Margaret Atwood

1. Jothris

   Alias Grace by Margaret Atwood tells the true story of 19th century alleged murderess Grace Marks.

   At age 15/16, Grace Marks was convicted of killing her employer and his mistress with a fellow member of “the help”, James McDermott. Grace’s trial was highly publicized across Canada, the US, and Europe (she was an

Amanda Knox of her time, if you will, more on that later.) Her story soon became both sensationalized and romanticized, and the true story seemed to fall by the wayside as the years went on.

Throughout Alias Grace, Atwood illustrates a system inherently skewed against someone like Grace because of her sex, age, and socio-economic status. At one point, a character notes that if Grace had come from a wealthy family her "madness" wouldn't have been handled as it truly was. After the murder trial, Grace's death sentence was changed to life in prison. However, for the first part of her imprisonment she was committed to an asylum, where Atwood alludes to abuse and sexual assault. I do not doubt it of that period, especially with a woman in that situation.

Alias Grace is a framed story, with Grace recounting her side of the story to young Dr. Simon Jordan. Dr. Jordan has foregone a traditional medical practice in favor of studying the mind and mental illness. As a forerunner of the field (although Dr. Jordan is fiction), he seeks to prove Grace's innocence by uncovering the truth of the events, as well as Grace's mental state. It goes without saying that in the 19th Century, the majority of mental illnesses were not yet "discovered", researched, and diagnosed–thus, the individual likely would have been locked up and forgotten.

I particularly enjoyed Grace's friendship with fellow maid Mary Whitney, as well as her doctor-patient relationship with Simon Jordan. Mary Whitney is often a foil to Grace; an outspoken young woman in a time when such behavior was viewed with suspicion. In fact, Grace and Mary were so close that I sometimes wondered if there was a Fight Club situation going on with them. I won't get into spoilers, but there is a hypnosis event that occurs toward the end of the book that will both jolt and chill the reader. For some reason, and perhaps just because of my own world view, I did not go into this book thinking Grace was guilty. On the contrary, I viewed her as an innocent up until the hypnosis, and even after that I wasn't entirely sure of its validity. I know Atwood is fond of using isolated, perhaps unreliable narrators (i.e. pedestal in Handmaid's Tale in which we don't get the full picture, just her perspective). In reality, no one is truly sure if Grace was guilty or innocent. Although the system worked against her, much of the public opinion was that she was innocent–an opinion which would later precipitate her pardon after 29 years in prison. The reader often aligns with Dr. Simon Jordan's evaluation of Grace, as we are figuring her out alongside him. And in the end, even we do not know the truth.

Simon was an interesting character in his own right, as there are a few chapters from his point of view and even letters from and to him from family members and colleagues. If Simon is reflective of the reader, then we along with him are brought face to face with what anyone might do, or

could do, in Grace’s situation. Can dreams and the unconscious so heavily influence our waking actions?

Atwood’s main theme seems to be a comment on society’s pre-conceived notions about women, especially those imprisoned: if a woman is young and pretty, are people more inclined to believe her innocence? And if a woman is old and ugly, does that make her guilty? At the same time, can society accept a young and pretty woman to be evil enough to manipulate people into believing her while she did the crime after all? Is society threatened by a clever woman, full stop, and would they inherently be suspicious of her because of that trait? If Grace had not been so young and pretty, would she still have been given a life sentence? Perhaps if she was ugly she would have been hanged, because society is apt to treat women who do not align with traditional beauty standards poorly. If James McDermott was not involved at all, could society have accepted that Grace may have done it all herself? If James McDermott was not involved, would society still think Grace a manipulative whore or a besotted lovesick girl? Femme fatale or innocent maiden? These two roles are often perpetuated not only in media, but in our society as a whole, as if a woman cannot be anything but one of these two archetypes and nothing more. The greater point I believe Atwood is trying to argue is that women are more complex than falling solely into one category. And the people judging Grace Marks clearly wanted her to fit into one box, regardless of facts vs. the desired narrative. But women cannot be seen as one or the other, nor sensationalized or romanticized, cast entirely aside nor placed on a pedestal. Rather, women should be viewed with all strengths and weaknesses in tact.

Sadly, we will probably never know the truth about Grace Marks, but Atwood’s novel calls attention to issues still prevalent today. How we view Grace will inevitably reflect our own worldview, as it was at the time of Grace’s trial. People will always believe what they want to believe, regardless of the truth.

2. Kelerana

   Having really enjoyed The Handmaid's Tale, I was very excited to read Alias Grace and to see that it is a new series on Netflix. I really enjoyed The Handmaid's Tale but I have to say that I actually liked Alias Grace more. It might have been because it was based on a true story but the story was fascinating to me.

Grace Marks is a prisoner, having been found guilty of the grisly murder of her employer and his housekeeper. She is said to have committed the murders of Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear with her coworker, James McDermott, who is a surly and jealous man. While she was initially sentenced to hang like McDermott, she is saved by her lawyer, who pleads with the court to consider her youth, and her sentence is commuted to a life term. Soon after she is imprisoned, she is committed to an asylum on account of fits and her amnesia surrounding anything to do with the crime. While she is treated with the worst of the time's psychiatric treatments, she still does not remember anything about the time when Montgomery and Kinnear are murdered. Years later, a young psychiatrist is brought in by a group trying to prove her innocence to try to help her remember more about the crime.

My favorite part of this book would have to be the characters that Atwood has created, Nancy being one of my favorites. She is the perfect narcissist. She is jealous, manipulative and overly sensitive. One never knows where they stand with her as she can love you or hate you from day to day and minute to minute. Grace, herself, is actually quite likeable. She comes off as very intelligent in a very street smart way. I also think that she could be a very relatable character for many of us in that she is but a product of her past. While I didn't feel that Dr. Jordan's story added very much to the overall feel of the book, Grace's story was sad but very interesting. I was left wanting to know more. The writing style is sophisticated but still very easily readable. I really enjoyed this book and I believe that anyone who enjoys historical fiction, true crime or medical mysteries will enjoy this book, too.

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