



Margaret Atwood (*The Testaments*) and Bernardine Evaristo (*Girl, Woman, Other*) share the Man Booker Prize for Fiction 2019.

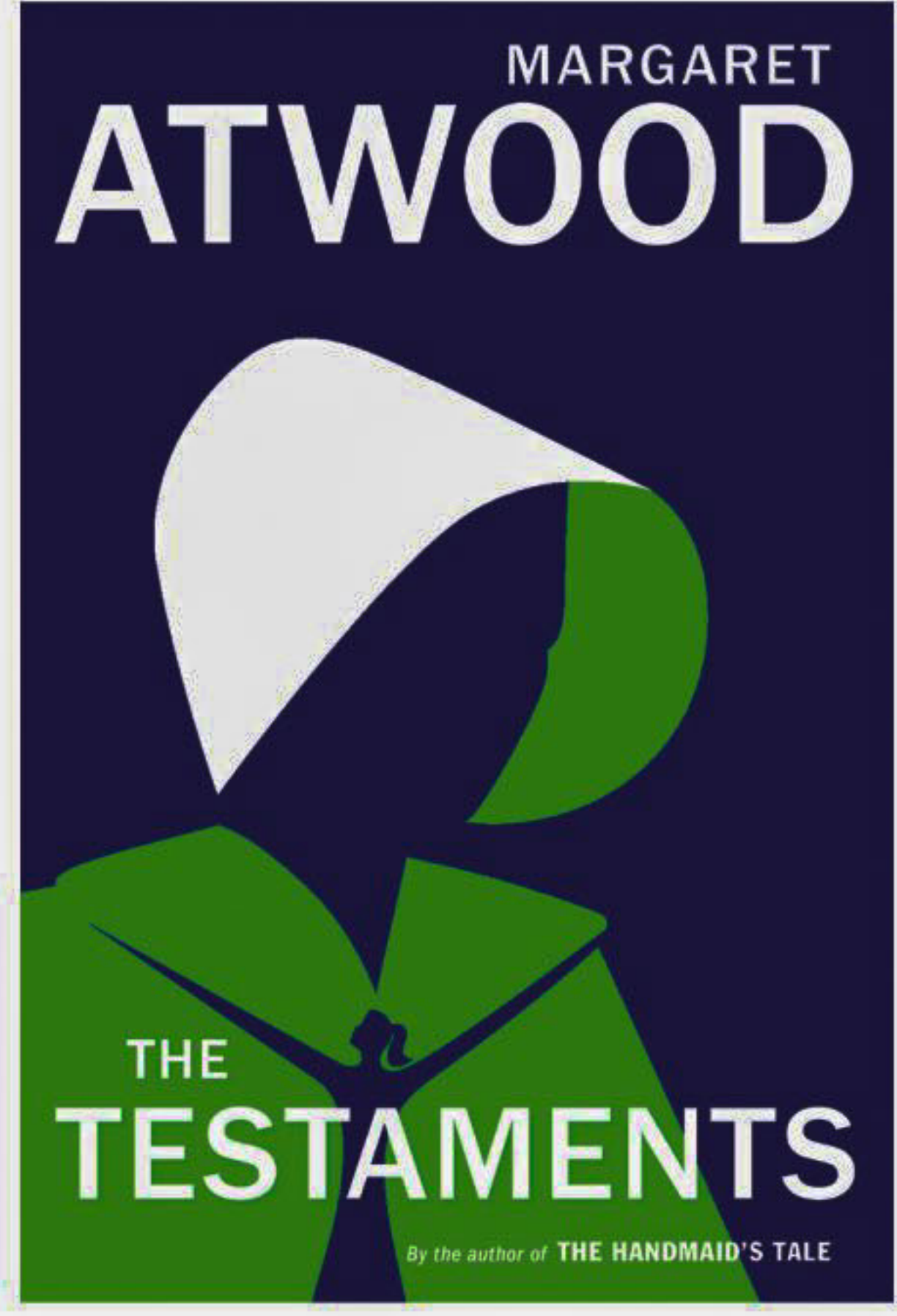
Did we need two Booker Prize winners?

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After six months of reading 151 books longlisted into 11, narrowed down further to six, the Booker Prize judges on October 14 announced this year's winner—the “best novel” produced in English in the UK and Ireland (regardless of the author's nationality) over the past one year. In a startling twist of events—and Prize rules—the 2019 prize would be shared by two authors. Bernardine Evaristo for *Girl, Woman, Other* and Margaret Atwood for her sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments*. Cue arguments over why, how, and what it entails. More importantly, why should we care?

For the uninitiated: Atwood's *Testaments* opens 15 years after the events of *The Handmaid's Tale*, a conveniently long enough leap to free it from most of the TV adaptation's plotlines, save for the smuggling of Commander Waterford and his wife's baby Nicole to Canada. The sequel features the cracks appearing in Gilead as handmaids are helped to freedom by the Underground Femaleroad on the one hand, and a hunt for Nicole by the republic on the other. Guiding the reader are three female narrators: Aunt Lydia penning her hidden memoir, Agnes in preparation to marry a commander, and Daisy, a teenager in Canada who recalls being raised like a “prize cat they were cat-sitting”. The novel comes in response to the decades of questions about Gilead plaguing Atwood's readers and, like its predecessor, as a stark reflection of the increasingly suffocating world that we inhabit.

Girl, Woman, Other, which shares the prize with *Testaments*, is a “verse” novel that opens the stage on to 12 British characters scattered across time, most of them women and black. A 10-year-old



orphan in Newcastle in 1905. A young bride from Barbados arriving in Cornwall in 1953. A theatre director looking to “Smash The Patriarchy” in 1980 London. A Nigerian grappling with her culture as she adjusts to Oxford University in 2008. The lives are all connected, loosely, by a play that they come into contact with in different capacities across space and time. A professor of Creative Writing at Brunel University in London and an author of eight novels and countless other genre-spanning poetry, short fiction, non-fiction, criticism, radio, and drama, Evaristo wrote this novel specifically to “write black British women into existence” through fiction.

In light of the quality and sheer scope of the two winning novels and their fel-

low shortlisted contenders, the issue with the Booker decision isn't so much the flouting of the rules. If anything—subjectivity and critical thought being such a vital part of such a decision—the failure of a system to agree unanimously on one work of fiction seems fitting. If you're asking people to read just one book this year—as this award seems to do—asking them to read two seems commendable and almost triumphant.

The issue lies in the more real implications of the award being split two ways, in knowing how much each of the authors “needed” the Prize, and what it will mean for their fiction and its readers.

Even before being shortlisted for the Booker this year, Atwood (already a Booker-winner from 2000 for *The Blind Assassin*) had sold 103,177 copies within five days of its release. Her publisher Vintage announced it to be the biggest and fastest seller of 2019. As if it weren't already anticipated enough, the book's publicity was further stoked by a “retail error” by Amazon that allowed copies into the hands of some readers before its official release date. As a result, some media platforms were able to read and review the book earlier than others, while smaller and independent bookstores spoke out about the injustice of the debacle on the retail end—Amazon stands to lose little from breaking such an embargo issued by the publishers, but smaller business such as themselves would have suffered a much tougher fate in a similar situation. Alternately, being able to sell *The Testaments* ahead of time this way would have made a much bigger difference to their businesses than for a giant such as Amazon.

