



# Alias Grace

*By Margaret Atwood*

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Sometimes I whisper it over to myself: Murderess. Murderess. It rustles, like a taffeta skirt along the floor.' Grace Marks. Female fiend? Femme fatale? Or weak and unwilling victim? Around the true story of one of the most enigmatic and notorious women of the 1840s, Margaret Atwood has created an extraordinarily potent tale of sexuality, cruelty and mystery.

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## Alias Grace By Margaret Atwood Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Amazon.com Review

In 1843, a 16-year-old Canadian housemaid named Grace Marks was tried for the murder of her employer and his mistress. The sensationalistic trial made headlines throughout the world, and the jury delivered a guilty verdict. Yet opinion remained fiercely divided about Marks--was she a spurned woman who had taken out her rage on two innocent victims, or was she an unwilling victim herself, caught up in a crime she was too young to understand? Such doubts persuaded the judges to commute her sentence to life imprisonment, and Marks spent the next 30 years in an assortment of jails and asylums, where she was often exhibited as a star attraction. In *Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood reconstructs Marks's story in fictional form. Her portraits of 19th-century prison and asylum life are chilling in their detail. The author also introduces Dr. Simon Jordan, who listens to the prisoner's tale with a mixture of sympathy and disbelief. In his effort to uncover the truth, Jordan uses the tools of the then rudimentary science of psychology. But the last word belongs to the book's narrator--Grace herself.

### From Publishers Weekly

Intrigued by contemporary reports of a sensational murder trial in 1843 Canada, Atwood has drawn a compelling portrait of what might have been. Her protagonist, the real life Grace Marks, is an enigma. Convicted at age 16 of the murder of her employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper and lover, Nancy Montgomery, Grace escaped the gallows when her sentence was commuted to life in prison, but she also spent some years in an insane asylum after an emotional breakdown. Because she gave three different accounts of the killings, and because she was accused of being the sole perpetrator by the man who was hanged for the crime, Grace's life and mind are fertile territory for Atwood. Adapting her style to the period she describes, she has written a typical Victorian novel, leisurely in exposition, copiously detailed and crowded with subtly drawn characters who speak the embroidered, pietistic language of the time. She has created a probing psychological portrait of a working-class woman victimized by society because of her poverty, and victimized again by the judicial and prison systems. The narrative gains texture and tension from the dynamic between Grace and an interlocutor, earnest young bachelor Dr. Simon Jordan, who is investigating the causes of lunacy with plans to establish his own, more enlightened institution. Jordan is hoping to awaken Grace's suppressed memories of the day of the murder, but Grace, though uneducated, is far wiler than Jordan, whom she tells only what she wishes to confess. He, on the other hand, is handicapped by his compassion, which makes him the victim of the wiles of other women, too?his passionate, desperate landlady, and the virginal but predatory daughter of the prison governor. These encounters give Atwood the chance to describe the war between the sexes with her usual wit. Although the narrative holds several big surprises, the central question?Was Grace dupe and victim or seductress and instigator of the bloody crime??is left tantalizingly ambiguous. Major ad/promo; author tour.

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### From School Library Journal

YA. In 1843, at the age of 16, Grace Marks, a recent Irish emigre to Canada, was sentenced to life in prison as an accomplice in the murder of her employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper, Nancy Montgomery. The teen confessed to the crime early and later claimed no memory of the events. She was arrested in upstate New York, having run from her employer's house with the handyman, who was hanged for the crimes. Atwood became interested in the case, a true story, and added the involvement of Dr. Simon Jordan. This novel is set 16 years after the crime took place when Jordan, who is interested in the fledgling science of psychology, is recruited by a local Methodist minister intent on proving Grace's innocence to examine her and determine the "truth." Readers are made privy to innumerable details of daily life in that time and place.

The concept is intriguing, and while YAs never actually learn the truth, they certainly become involved in Grace's history as well as Simon's bumbling attempts at independence from a domineering mother. Atwood may be playing a game with her readers, but it is one in which many will willingly participate for the fun and mystery while learning about life in colonial Canada. While long, this story reads quickly and all of the characters are compelling, different, and well developed. Susan H. Woodcock, Kings Park Library, Burke, VA

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## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

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