

Bodily Harm- A Recap

- A Novel by Margaret Atwood
 - First published by McClelland and Stewart in 1981.
 - The violence that human beings inflict on one another and their isolation in an uncaring world are pervasive themes.
 - The novel also suggests that every person falls into this category. All are victims. There is no exemption, no escape for anyone.
- **Rennie Wilford**, the central character, is a university-educated young Canadian woman of Anglo-Saxon heritage. The novel opens with Rennie Wilford, living in Toronto, Canada, and working as a lifestyle journalist. Rennie lives on the surface of things and avoids any emotional or ideological involvement as much as she can. She has successfully avoided making deep commitments to anything or anyone, even *Jake*, the man with whom she lives. Significantly, he too is a person connected chiefly to the surfaces of life; he makes his living as a planner of product packaging.
- She feels secure in her steady job and relationship and is certain that she, like all women, is now in control of her life. However, the discovery that she suffers from breast cancer shakes her certainty that her life has turned out the way she intended. Thus, her sickness-generated crisis provokes a reconsideration of past choices and overlooked conflicts. As she looks back at her life, she turns her attention to her body experience and notions. This mental journey is regarded, for the scope of this work, as deconstruction.
- In the process of deconstruction, Rennie's rigid upbringing in Griswold, Ontario, a small town in Canada, her cold relationships with the women of

her family, and her personal and professional interactions with men come into play.

- Although her surgeon, ***Daniel Luoma***, assures her that her mastectomy is successful, she reacts by withdrawing from Jake and seeing herself as both mutilated and incapable of feeling. Then, a few weeks after her operation, she returns to her apartment to find two policemen there, investigating the presence of an unknown intruder, a “faceless invader” who has made himself a cup of Ovaltine in her kitchen and left a coil of white rope lying on her bed. A dangerous intruder settles in her apartment the way the sickness has invaded her body. Unnerved by this inexplicable assault from outside, as well as by the equally inexplicable attack from her own body, she decides to escape.
- She takes on a writing assignment for a journal's tourism section and travels to a Caribbean island **St. Antoine, a fictitious Caribbean island**, where she believes she will, as a tourist, be “exempt” from involvement in the problems that plague her at home. She learns that no one is exempt from anything.
- On the plane to St. Antoine, Rennie meets a native of the island, ***Dr. Minnow***, who is a presidential candidate campaigning against the current ***dictator, Ellis***, and a young man who is picturesquely known as the Prince of Peace.
- Later, she becomes acquainted with ***Lora, a rather brassy American expatriate***, and ***Paul, a powerful drug smuggler***. Through these three characters, Rennie becomes involved in island politics.

- The decent patriot, Dr. Minnow, is assassinated. Dozens of citizens are tortured and mutilated in a brief political revolt. Yet, Rennie continues to try to detach herself from what is happening, to see herself as a tourist.
- Then, she and Lora are imprisoned by the government—under “suspicion,” she is told. Even under these circumstances, she refuses to see reality.
- When Rennie realizes that Lora is prostituting herself in order to buy small luxuries from the prison guards, she scorns her for cheapening herself. She withholds her sympathy from her companion until Lora finally rebels against their captors and is battered into unconsciousness, perhaps death, by the guards. Here, her own story becomes intertwined with other stories of bodily harm. Once in prison, she witnesses the lasting effect of oppression and brutality upon her cellmate Lora.
- Only then does Rennie realize that she may never be free. She cannot escape bodily harm, whether it comes through her own cancerous cells or from faceless men outside. She tries to help Lora survive a brutal attack, and, in a parallel process of regaining power, decides to speak up and take responsibility for the fate of the oppressed people on the islands.

The novel's ending seems deliberately ambiguous. Rennie is on a flight back to Canada, but it is a flight that is introduced in the future tense, as something that will...

WEB SOURCES--1. <https://www.enotes.com/topics/bodily-harm>

2. http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2175-80262015000200057
