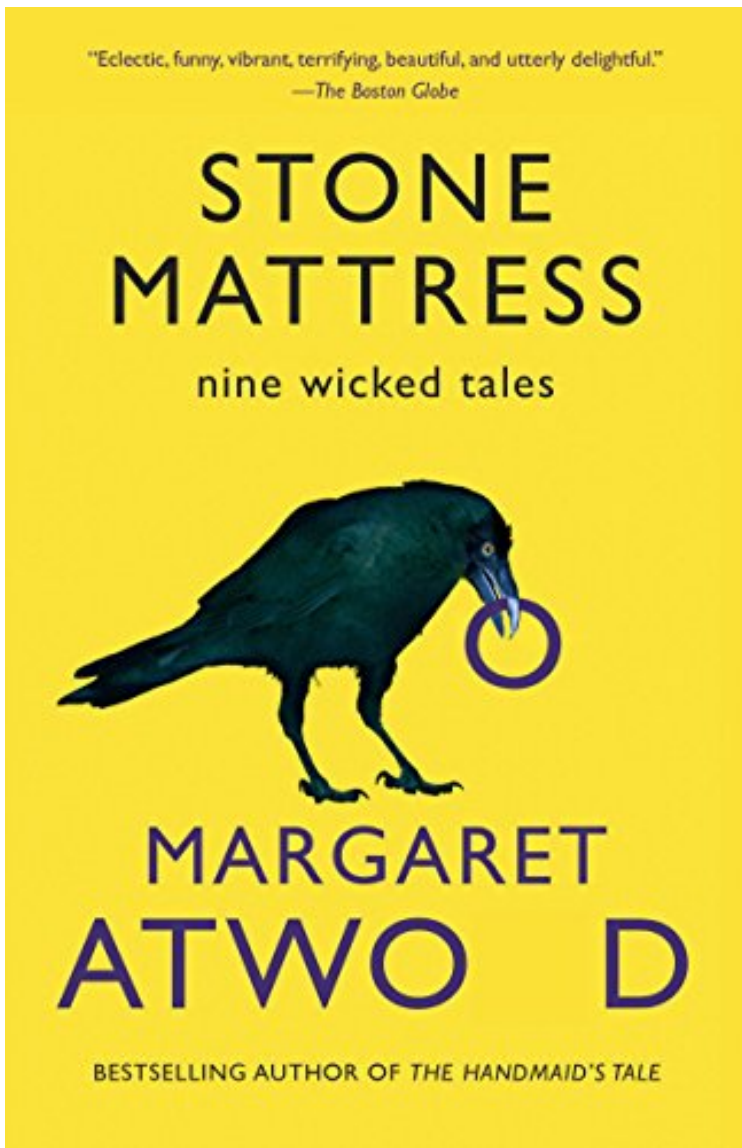


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Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales



Par Margaret Atwood
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(Pdf free) Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales

Par Margaret Atwood : Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Stone Mattress: Nine Wicked Tales:

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFrom the #1New York Timesbestselling author ofThe Handmaid's Tale In this extraordinary collection, Margaret Atwood gives us nine unforgettable tales that reveal the grotesque, delightfully wicked facets of humanity. Alphinland, the first of three loosely linked tales, introduces us to a fantasy writer who is guided through a stormy winter evening by the voice of her late husband. In Lusus Naturae, a young woman, monstrously transformed by a genetic defect, is mistaken for a vampire. And in the title story, a woman who has killed four husbands discovers an opportunity to exact vengeance on the first man who ever wronged her. By turns thrilling, funny, and thought-provoking, Stone Mattress affirms Atwood as our greatest creator of worldsand as an incisive chronicler of our darkest impulses. A Best Book

of the Year: NPR, BookRiot, Extrait ALPHINLAND

The freezing rain sifts down, handfuls of shining rice thrown by some unseen celebrant. Wherever it hits, it crystallizes into a granulated coating of ice. Under the streetlights it looks so beautiful: like fairy silver, thinks Constance. But then, she would think that; she's far too prone to enchantment. The beauty is an illusion, and also a warning: there's a dark side to beauty, as with poisonous butterflies. She ought to be considering the dangers, the hazards, the grief this ice storm is going to bring to many; is already bringing, according to the television news. The tv screen is a flat high-definition one that Ewan bought so he could watch hockey and football games on it. Constance would rather have the old fuzzy one back, with its strangely orange people and its habit of rippling and fading: there are some things that do not fare well in high definition. She resents the pores, the wrinkles, the nose hairs, the impossibly whitened teeth shoved right up in front of your eyes so you can't ignore them the way you would in real life. It's like being forced to act as someone else's bathroom mirror, the magnifying kind: seldom a happy experience, those mirrors. Luckily, on the weather show the personnel stand well back. They have their maps to attend to, their broad hand gestures, like those of waiters in glamorous films of the 30s or magicians about to reveal the floating lady. Behold! Gigantic swaths of whiteness plume across the continent! Just look at the extent of it! Now the show moves outside. Two young commentators--a boy, a girl, both of them wearing stylish black parkas with halos of pale fur around their faces--hunch under dripping umbrellas as cars grind slowly past them, windshield wipers labouring. They're excited; they say they've never seen anything like it. Of course they haven't, they're too young. Next there are shots of calamities: a multiple car-crash pileup, a fallen tree that's bashed off part of a house, a snarl of electrical wires dragged down by the weight of the ice and flickering balefully, a row of sleet-covered planes stranded in an airport, a huge truck that's jackknifed and tipped over and is lying on its side with smoke coming out. An ambulance is on the scene, a fire truck, a huddle of raingear-clad operatives: someone's been injured, always a sight to make the heart beat faster. A policeman appears, crystals of ice whitening his moustache; he pleads sternly with people to stay inside. It's no joke, he tells the viewers. Don't think you can brave the elements! His frowning, frosted eyebrows are noble, like those on the wartime bond-drive posters from the 1940s. Constance remembers those, or believes she does. But she may just be remembering history books or museum displays or documentary films: so hard, sometimes, to tag those memories accurately. Finally, a minor touch of pathos: a stray dog is displayed, semi-frozen, wrapped in a child's pink nap blanket. A gelid baby would have been better, but for lack of one the dog will do. The two young commentators make Aw cute faces; the girl pats the dog, which wags its sodden tail feebly. Lucky guy, says the boy. This could be you, it's implied, if you don't behave yourself, only you wouldn't get rescued. The boy turns to the camera and solemnifies his face, even though it's clear he's having the time of his life. There's more to come, he says, because the main part of the storm hasn't even hit! It's worse in Chicago, as it so often is. Stay tuned! Constance turns off the tv. She crosses the room, dims the lamp, then sits beside the front window, staring out into the streetlight-illuminated darkness, watching the world turn to diamonds--branches, rooftops, hydro lines, all glittering and sparkling. Alphinland, she says out loud. You'll need salt, says Ewan, right in her ear. The first time he spoke to her it startled and even alarmed her--Ewan having been no longer in a tangibly living condition for at least four days--but now she's more relaxed about him, unpredictable though he is. It's wonderful to hear his voice, even if she can't depend on having any sort of a conversation with him. His interventions tend to be one-sided: if she answers him, he doesn't often answer back. But it was always more or less like that between them. She hadn't known what to do with his clothes, afterwards. At first she left them hanging in the closet, but it was too upsetting to open the door and see the jackets and suits ranged on their hangers, waiting mutely for Ewan's body to be slipped inside them so they could be taken for a walk. The tweeds, the woollen sweaters, the plaid work shirts... She couldn't give them away to the poor, which would have been the sensible thing. She couldn't throw them out: that would have been not only wasteful but too abrupt, like ripping off a bandage. So she folded them up and stored them away in a trunk on the third floor, with mothballs. That's fine in the daytimes. Ewan doesn't seem to mind, and his voice, when it turns up, is firm and cheerful. A striding voice, showing the way. An extended index-finger voice, pointing. Go here, buy this, do that! A slightly mocking voice, teasing, making light: that was often his manner towards her before he became ill. At night, however, things get more complex. There have been bad dreams: sobbing from inside the trunk, mournful complaints, pleas to be let out. Strange men appearing at the front door who hold out promises of being Ewan, but who are not. Instead they're menacing, with black trench coats. They demand some garbled thing that Constance can't make out, or, worse, they insist on seeing Ewan, shouldering their way past her, their intentions clearly murderous. Ewan's not home, shell plead,

despite the muted cries for help coming from the trunk on the third floor. As they begin to tromple up the stairs, she wakes up. She's considered sleeping pills, though she knows they're addictive and lead to insomnia.

Maybe she ought to sell the house and move to a condo. That notion was being pushed at the time of the funeral by the boys, who are not boys any more and who live in cities in New Zealand and France, too conveniently far for them to visit her much. They'd been backed up in spades by their brisk but tactful and professionally accomplished wives, the plastic surgeon and the chartered accountant, so it was four against one. But Constance stood firm. She can't abandon the house, because Ewan is in it. Though she'd been smart enough not to tell them about that. They've always thought she was slightly borderline anyway because of Alphinland, though once such an enterprise makes a lot of money the whiff of nuttiness around it tends to evaporate. Condo is a euphemism for retirement home. Constance doesn't hold it against them: they want what is best for her, not merely what is simplest for them, and they were understandably perturbed by the disorder they'd witnessed, both in Constance--though they'd made allowances because she was in the throes of mourning--and in, just for example, her refrigerator. There were items in that refrigerator for which there was no sane explanation. What a swamp, she could hear them thinking. A wash in botulism, a wonder she hasn't made herself seriously ill. But of course she hadn't, because she wasn't eating much in those final days. Soda crackers, cheese slices, peanut butter straight from the jar. The wives had dealt with the situation in the kindest way. Do you want this? What about this? No, no, Constance had wailed. I don't want any of it!

Throw it all out! The three little grandchildren, two girls and a boy, had been sent on a sort of Easter egg hunt, searching for the half-drunk cups of tea and cocoa that Constance had left here and there around the house and that were now covered with grey or pale-green skins in various stages of growth. Look, Maman! I found another one! Ew, that's gross! Where is Grandpa? A retirement home would provide company for her, at least. And it would take away the burden from her, the responsibility, because a house like hers needs upkeep, it needs attention, and why should she be saddled with all those chores any more? That was the idea set forth in some detail by the daughters-in-law. Constance could take up bridge-playing, or Scrabble, they suggested. Or backgammon, said to be popular again. Nothing too stressful or exciting to the brain. Some mild communal game. Not yet, says Ewan's voice. You don't need to do that yet. Constance knows this voice isn't real. She knows Ewan is dead. Of course she knows that! Other people--other recently bereaved people--have had the same experience, or close. Aural hallucination, it's called. She's read about it. It's normal. She isn't crazy. You're not crazy, Ewan says comfortingly. He can be so tender when he thinks she's having some anguish. He's right about the salt. She ought to have stocked up on some form of ice melt earlier in the week but she forgot, and now if she doesn't get some, she'll be a prisoner inside her own house because the street will be a skating rink by tomorrow. What if the layer of ice doesn't melt for days and days? She could run out of food. She could become one of those statistics--old recluse, hypothermia, starvation--because, as Ewan has pointed out before now, she can't live on air. She'll have to venture out. Even one bag of salt mix will be enough to do the steps and the walk and keep other people from killing themselves, much less herself. The corner store is her best bet: it's only two blocks away. She'll have to take her two-wheeled shopping bag, which is red and also waterproof, because the salt will be heavy. It was only Ewan who drove their car; her own licence lapsed decades ago because once she got so deeply involved in Alphinland she felt she was too distracted to drive. Alphinland requires a lot of thought. It excludes peripheral details, such as stop signs. It must be quite slippery out there already. If she tries this escapade, she might break her neck. She stands in the kitchen, dithering. Ewan, what should I do? she says. Pull yourself together, Ewan says firmly. Which isn't very instructive, but which was his habitual way of responding to a question when he didn't want to be pinned down. Where've you been, I was so worried, did you have an accident? Pull yourself together. Do you really love me? Pull yourself together. Are you having an affair? After some rummaging, she finds a large zip-lock freezer bag in the kitchen, dumps out the three shrivelled, whiskery carrots inside it, and fills it with ashes from the fireplace, using the little brass fireplace shovel. She hasn't lit a fire since Ewan ceased to be present in visible form, because it didn't seem right. Lighting a fire is an act of renewal, of beginning, and she doesn't want to begin, she wants to continue. No: she wants to go back. There's still a stack of wood and some kindling; there are still a couple of partially burnt logs in the grate from the last fire they had together. Ewan was lying on the sofa with a glass of that disgusting chocolate nutrient drink beside him; he was bald, due to the chemo and the radiation. She tucked the plaid car rug around him and sat beside him, holding his hand, with the tears running silently down her cheeks and her head turned away so he couldn't see. He didn't need to be distressed by her distress. This is nice, he'd managed to say. It was hard for him to talk: his voice was so thin, like the rest of him. But that isn't the voice he has now. The voice he has now is back to normal: it's his

voice of twenty years ago, deep and resonant, especially when he laughs. She puts on her coat and boots, finds her mittens and one of her woolly hats. Money, she'll need some of that. House keys: it would be stupid to lock herself out and be turned into a frozen lump right on her own doorstep. When she's at the front door with the wheeled shopping bag, Ewan says to her, Take the flashlight, so she trudges upstairs to the bedroom in her boots. The flashlight is on the nightstand on his side of the bed; she adds it to her purse. Ewan is so good at planning ahead. She herself never would have thought of a flashlight. The front porch steps are sheer ice already. She sprinkles ashes on them from the zip-lock, then stuffs the bag into her pocket and proceeds down crabwise, one step at a time, holding on to the railing and hauling the wheeled shopper behind her with the other hand, bump bump bump. Once on the sidewalk, she opens the umbrella, but that's not going to work--she can't manage those two objects at once--so she closes it again. She'll use it as a cane. She inches out onto the street--it's not as icy as the sidewalk--and teeters along the middle of it, balancing herself with the umbrella. There aren't any cars, so at least she won't get run over. On the especially sheer parts of the road she sprinkles more of the ashes, leaving a faint black trail. Perhaps she'll be able to follow it home, if push comes to shove. It's the kind of thing that might occur in Alphinland--a trail of black ashes, mysterious, alluring, like glowing white stones in a forest, or bread crumbs--only there would be something extra about those ashes. Something you'd need to know about them, some verse or phrase to pronounce in order to keep their no doubt malevolent power at bay. Nothing about dust to dust, however; nothing involving last rites. More like a sort of runic charm. Ashes, bashes, crashes, dashes, gnashes, mashes, splashes, she says out loud as she picks her way over the ice. Quite a few words rhyme with ashes. She'll have to incorporate the ashes into the storyline, or one of the storylines: Alphinland is multiple in that respect. Milzreth of the Red Hand is the most likely provenance for those spellbinding ashes, being a warped and devious bully. He likes to delude travellers with mind-altering visions, lure them off the true path, lock them into iron cages or shackle them to the wall with gold chains, then pester them, using Hairy Hank-Imps and Cyanoreens and Firepigglers and whatnot. He likes to watch as their clothing--their silken robes, their embroidered vestments, their fur-lined capes, their shining veils--are ripped to shreds, and they plead and writhe attractively. She can work on the intricacies of all that when she gets back to the house. Milzreth has the face of a former boss of hers when she worked as a waitress. He was a rumpslapper. She wonders if he ever read the series. Now she's reached the end of the first block. This outing was maybe not such a good idea: her face is streaming wet, her hands are freezing, and meltwater is dribbling down her neck. But she's underway now, she needs to see it through. She breathes in the cold air; pellets of blown ice whip against her face. The winds getting up, as the tv said it would. Nonetheless there's something brisk about being out in the storm, something energizing: it whisks away the cobwebs, it makes you inhale. The corner store is open 24/7, a fact that she and Ewan have appreciated ever since they moved to this area twenty years ago. There are no sacks of ice melt stacked outside where they usually are, however. She goes inside, trundling her two-wheeled shopping bag. Is there any salt left? she asks the woman behind the counter. It's someone new. Constance has never seen her before; there's a high turnover here. Ewan used to say the place had to be a moneylaundering joint because they couldn't possibly be making a profit, considering the low traffic and the state of their lettuces. No, dear, the woman says. There was a run on it earlier. Be prepared, I guess is what they had in mind. The implication is that Constance has failed to be prepared, which in fact is true. It's a lifelong failing: she has never been prepared. But how can you have a sense of wonder if you're prepared for everything? Prepared for the sunset. Prepared for the moonrise. Prepared for the ice storm. What a flat existence that would be. Oh, says Constance. No salt. Bad luck for me. You shouldn't be out in this, dear, the woman says. It's treacherous! Although she has dyed red hair shaved up the back of her neck in an edgy style, she's only about ten years younger than Constance by the look of her, and quite a lot fatter. At least I don't wheeze, thinks Constance. Still, she likes being called dear. She was called that when very much younger, then not called it for a long time. Now it's a word she hears frequently. It's all right, she says. I only live a couple of blocks away. Couple of blocks is a long way to go in this weather, says the woman, who despite her age has a tattoo peeking up above her collar. It looks like a dragon, or a version of one. Spikes, horns, bulgy eyes. You could freeze your ass off. Constance agrees with her, and asks if she can park her shopping bag and umbrella beside the counter. Then she wanders up and down the aisles, pushing a wire store cart. There are no other customers, though in one aisle she encounters a weedy young man transferring cans of tomato juice to a shelf. She picks up one of the barbecued chickens that revolve on spits inside a glass case, day in and day out like a vision from the Inferno, and a package of frozen peas. Kitty litter, says Ewan's voice. Is this a comment on her purchases? He disapproved of those chickens he said they were probably full of chemicals though he'd eat

one readily enough if she brought it home, back in his eating days. What do you mean? she says. We dont have a cat any more. Shes discovered that she has to talk out loud to Ewan because most of the time he cant read her mind. Though sometimes he can. His powers are intermittent. Ewan doesnt expand hes such a tease, he often makes her figure out the answers by herself and then it comes to her: the kitty litter is for the front steps, instead of salt. It wont work as well, it wont melt anything, but at least it will provide some traction. She wrestles a bag of the stuff into the cart and adds two candles and a box of wooden matches. There. Shes prepared. Back at the counter she exchanges pleasantries with the woman about the excellence of the chicken its an item the woman likes herself, because who can be bothered with cooking when theres only one, or even only two and stows her purchases in her wheeled shopper, resisting the temptation to get into a conversation about the dragon tattoo. This topic might swiftly veer into complexities, as shes learned from experience over the years. There are dragons in Alphinland, and they have numerous fans with many bright ideas they are eager to share with Constance. How she ought to have done the dragons differently. How they would do the dragons if it was them. Subspecies of dragons. Errors she has made about the care and feeding of dragons, and so on. Its astonishing how folks can get so worked up over something that doesnt exist. Has the woman overheard her talking to Ewan? Most likely, and most likely it didnt bother her. Any store thats open 24/7 must get its share of people who talk to invisible companions. In Alphinland, such behaviour would call for a different interpretation: some of its inhabitants have spirit familiars. Where exactly do you live, dear? the woman calls after her when Constance is halfway out the door. I could text a friend, get you a walk home. What sort of friend? Maybe shes a bikers girl, thinks Constance. Maybe shes younger than Constance thought; maybe shes just very weathered. Constance pretends she didnt hear. It could be a ruse, and next thing you know there will be a gang member bent on home invasion standing outside the door with the duct tape ready in his pocket. They say their car has broken down and can they use your phone, and out of the goodness of your heart you let them in, and before you know it youre ducttaped to the banister and theyre inserting pushpins under your fingernails to make you cough up your passwords. Constance is well informed about that sort of thing: she doesnt watch the television news for nothing. The trail of ashes is no use any more its iced over, she cant even see it and the wind is stronger. Should she open the kitty litter bag right here in midjourney? No, shell need a knife, or some scissors; although theres usually a pull string. She peers inside the shopper with the flashlight, but the battery must be low because its too dim in there to see. She could get chilled to the bone struggling with such a bag; better to make a dash for it. Though dash is hardly the word. The ice seems twice as thick as when she started out. The bushes in the front lawn look like fountains, their luminous foliage cascading gracefully to the ground. Here and there a broken tree branch partially blocks the road. Once shes reached her house, Constance leaves the shopper outside on the walk and hauls herself up the slippery steps by clinging to the railing. Happily the porch light is shining, though she cant remember turning it on. She wrestles with the key and the lock, opens the door, and tramps through to the kitchen, shedding water. Then, kitchen scissors in hand, she retraces her route, descends the steps to the red shopper, cuts open the kitty litter bag, and spreads lavishly. There. Wheeled shopper up the steps, bump bump bump, and into the house. Door locked behind her. Drenched coat off, soaking wet hat and mitts set to steam on the radiator, boots parked in the hall. Mission accomplished, she says in case Ewan is listening. She wants him to know she got back safely; he might worry otherwise. Theyd always left notes for each other, or else messages on the answering machine, back before all the digital gadgets. In her more extreme and lonely moments shes thought of leaving messages on the phone service for Ewan. Maybe he could listen to them through electric particles or magnetic fields, or whatever it is hes using to throw his voice through the airwaves. But this isnt a lonely moment. Its a better moment: shes feeling pleased with herself for carrying out the salt mission. Shes hungry too. She hasnt been this hungry ever since Ewan has failed to be present at meals: eating alone has been too dispiriting. Now, however, she tears off pieces of the broiled chicken with her fingers and wolfs them down. This is what people do in Alphinland when theyve been rescued from something dungeons, moors, iron cages, drifting boats: they eat with their hands. Only the very upper classes have what youd call cutlery, though just about everyone has a knife, unless they happen to be a talking animal. She licks her fingers, wipes them on the dishtowel. There ought to be paper towels but there arent. Theres still some milk, so she gulps it down right out of the carton, spilling hardly any. Shell make herself a hot drink later. Shes in a hurry to get back to Alphinland because of the trail of ashes. She wants to decipher it, she wants to unravel it, she wants to follow it. She wants to see where it will lead. Alphinland currently lives on her computer. For many years it unfolded in the attic, which shed converted to a workspace of sorts for herself once Alphinland had made enough money to pay for the

renovation. But even with the new floor and the window theyd punched through, and the air conditioning and the ceiling fan, the attic was small and stuffy, as the top floors of these old brick Victorians are. So after a while after the boys were in high school Alphinland had migrated to the kitchen table, where it unscrolled for several years on an electric typewriter once considered the height of innovation, now obsolete. The computer was its next location, and not without its hazards things could disappear from it in an infuriating manner but theyve improved the computers over time and shes become used to hers now. She moved it into

Ewans study after he was no longer in there in visible form. She doesnt say after his death, even to herself. She doesnt use the Dword about him at all. He might overhear it and be hurt or offended, or perhaps confused, or even angry. Its one of her not fully formulated beliefs that Ewan doesnt realize that hes dead. She

sits at Ewans desk, swathed in Ewans black plush bathrobe. Black plush bathrobes for men were cutting edge, when? The 90s? Shed bought this bathrobe herself, as a Christmas present. Ewan always resisted her attempts to make him cutting edge, not that those attempts had lasted much beyond the bathrobe; shed run out of interest in how he looked to others. She wears this bathrobe not for heat but for comfort: it makes her feel that Ewan might still be in the house physically, just around the corner. She hasnt washed it since he died; she doesnt want it to smell of laundry detergent instead of Ewan. Oh Ewan, she thinks. We had such

good times! All gone now. Why so fast? She wipes her eyes on the black plush sleeve. Pull yourself together, says Ewan. He never likes it when she snuffles. Right, she says. She squares her shoulders, adjusts the cushion on Ewans ergonomic desk chair, turns the computer on. *Revue de presse Eclectic*, funny, vibrant, terrifying, beautiful, and utterly delightful. *The Boston Globe* A tour de force of wit, style, and discernment.

O, *The Oprah Magazine* Astonishing. . . . Powerful. . . . I loved these strange, sharp and wild stories. Meg Wolitzer, *NPR* Pure, simple and stunning. . . . Endearing, subtle, quite brilliant. *San Francisco Chronicle* Powerful. . . . Witty and frequently biting, *Stone Mattress* is keen to the ways in which we choose,

all our lives, to love and to hurt and in Atwoods world these two actions are always choices, creating consequences for which we will one day be held to account. *The New York Times Book* [These] stories have the caustic wit and giddy deviance . . . along with the probing interiority and flinty insights of Atwoods novels. *Minneapolis Star Tribune* Danc[es] over the dark swamps of Horror on the wings of satirical wit. . . .

Look at these tales . . . as eight icily refreshing arsenic Popsicles followed by a baked Alaska laced with anthrax, all served with impeccable style and aplomb. Enjoy! Ursula K. Le Guin, *Financial Times* Stylish, acerbic and wickedly funny. . . . With wit, sympathy and precision, Atwood draws readers into a reflective frame of mind. *The Miami Herald* The collection is surprisingly unsettling, gripping and at once laugh-out-loud hilarious. It attains its laudable goal: Myths last over time, and the stories in this book have that very quality. They are timeless, memorable and quite simply fun. *Chicago Tribune* Absorbing. . . . Impressive. . . .

. *Stone mattresses* make for restless sleep, but in this elegant collection, everyone expresses that restlessness differently. *The A.V. Club* Powerful. . . . Extraordinary. . . . Realism and ridiculousness, play and deadly seriousness, are held in fine balance throughout. *The Guardian* (London) Wise and witty. . . . Atwood writes essentially intellectual fiction, spryly coiled around solid themes, yet borrowing the amusements of pulp

genres, from science fiction to horror. *The Times Literary Supplement* (London) Compelling. . . . Astonishing. . . . Atwood illuminates heavy themes with a lightness of touch, giving insight not only into the nature of stone but the trials and tribulations of flesh and blood. *The Observer* (London) A collection rich in sly humour and pulpy thrills. *The Telegraph* (London) This collection of short stories is charged with a delightful cheekiness, as well as a full awareness of the subjectivity of notions of justice and value. . . .

Witty, weird, chirpily irreverent, somewhat hard-hearted, and hugely insightful. *The Independent* (London) [Atwoods] ability to surprise and her sparkling language are on full display. . . . *Stone Mattress* not only showcases its authors talents at their most refined, it also affords a glimpse behind the curtain to the woman working the megaphone. *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto) Wickedly funny, mordantly observed ruminations on how the sexes interact. . . . With *Stone Mattress*, Atwood brilliantly returns to her literary roots as a

deliciously funny observer of the human comedy. *The Toronto Star*