

Introduction

December 1948. A man sits at a typewriter, in bed, on a remote island, fighting to complete the book that means more to him than any other. He is terribly ill. The book will be finished and, a year or so later, so will the man.

January 2017. Another man stands before a crowd, which is not as large as he would like, in Washington, DC, taking the oath of office as the forty-fifth president of the United States of America. His press secretary later says that it was the “largest audience to ever witness an inauguration—period—both in person and around the globe.” Asked to justify such a preposterous lie, the president’s adviser describes the statement as “alternative facts.” Over the next four days, US sales of the dead man’s book will rocket by almost 10,000 percent, making it a number-one best seller.

When George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published in the United Kingdom on June 8, 1949, in the heart of the twentieth century, one critic wondered how such a timely book could possibly exert the same power over generations to come. Thirty-five years later, when the present caught up with Orwell’s future and the world was not the nightmare he had described, commentators again predicted that the book’s popularity would wane. Another thirty-five years have elapsed since then, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* remains the book we turn to when truth is mutilated, language is distorted, power is abused, and we want to know how bad things can get, because someone who lived and died in another era was clear-sighted enough to identify these evils and sufficiently talented to present them in the form of a novel that Anthony Burgess, author of *A Clockwork Orange*, called “an apocalyptic codex of our worst fears.”

Nineteen Eighty-Four has not just sold tens of millions of copies; it has infiltrated the consciousness of countless people who have never read it. The phrases and concepts that Orwell minted have become essential fixtures of political language, still potent after decades of use and misuse: Newspeak, Big Brother, the Thought Police, Room 101, the Two Minutes Hate, doublethink, unperson, memory hole, telescreen, $2 + 2 = 5$, and the Ministry of Truth. Its title came to dominate a calendar year, while the word *Orwellian* has turned the author's own name into a capacious synonym for everything he hated and feared. The book has been adapted for cinema, television, radio, theatre, opera and ballet. It has prompted a sequel (György Dalos's 1985), a postmodern rewriting (Peter Huber's *Orwell's Revenge: The 1984 Palimpsest*) and innumerable retorts. Even the writing of the book has inspired a 1983 BBC drama, *The Crystal Spirit: Orwell on Jura*, and a 2017 novel, Dennis Glover's *The Last Man in Europe*. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has influenced novels, films, plays, television shows, comic books, albums, advertisements, speeches, election campaigns and uprisings. People have spent years in jail just for reading it. No work of literary fiction from the past century approaches its cultural ubiquity while retaining its weight. Dissenting voices such as Milan Kundera and Harold Bloom have alleged that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is actually a bad novel, with thin characters, humdrum prose and an implausible plot, but even they couldn't gainsay its importance. As Orwell's publisher Fredric Warburg observed, its success is extraordinary "for a novel that is not designed to please nor all that easy to understand."

For any artist, the price of immense popularity is the guarantee that you will be misunderstood. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is more known about than truly known. This book is an attempt to restore some balance by explaining what Orwell's book actually is, how it came to be written, and how it has shaped the world, in its author's absence, over the past seventy years. The meaning of a work of art is never limited to its creator's intentions but in this case Orwell's intentions, too often distorted or ignored, are well worth revisiting if the book is to be understood *as a book* and not just a useful cache of memes. It is both a work of art and a means of reading the world.

This, then, is the story of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. There have been several biographies of George Orwell and some academic studies of

his book's intellectual context but never an attempt to merge the two streams into one narrative, while also exploring the book's afterlife. I am interested in Orwell's life primarily as a means to illuminate the experiences and ideas that nourished this very personal nightmare in which everything he prized was systematically destroyed: honesty, decency, fairness, memory, history, clarity, privacy, common sense, sanity, England, and love. This means starting with his decision to fight in the Spanish Civil War in 1936, because Spain was where he first became acutely conscious of the ways in which political expediency corrupts moral integrity, language and truth itself. I'll follow him, via the Blitz, the Home Guard, the BBC, literary London and post-war Europe, to the island of Jura, where he finally wrote his novel, so as to explode the myth that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was a protracted wail of despair issuing from a lonely, dying man who couldn't face the future. I want to draw attention to what he was actually thinking, and how he came to think it.

One reason it took Orwell so long to write *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is that it synthesised ideas that he had been developing for most of his writing life. The book was the consummation of years of thinking, writing and reading about utopias, super-states, dictators, prisoners, propaganda, technology, power, language, culture, class, sex, the countryside, rats and more, often to the point where it becomes impossible to attribute a particular phrase or idea to a single source. Although Orwell said little about the evolution of the novel, he left a paper trail thousands of pages long. Even if he had lived decades longer, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would have been the end of something: as a writer, he would have needed to start again.

In Part One, I will be telling the story of Orwell and the world he inhabited: the people he met, the news he followed and the books he read. I will also devote three chapters to crucial influences on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: H. G. Wells, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, and the genre of utopian (and anti-utopian) fiction. Every book, play or film cited is one that Orwell was familiar with, unless otherwise noted. Part Two will follow the political and cultural life of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from Orwell's death to the present day. Along the way, we will encounter Aldous Huxley and E. M. Forster; Winston Churchill and Clement Attlee; Ayn Rand and Joseph McCarthy; Arthur Koestler and Hannah Arendt; Lee Harvey Oswald and J. Edgar Hoover;

Margaret Atwood and Margaret Thatcher; the CIA and the BBC; David Bowie and *The Prisoner*; *Brazil* and *V for Vendetta*; *A Clockwork Orange* and *Children of Men*; Edward Snowden and Steve Jobs; Lenin, Stalin and Hitler. Throughout, connections to the current political situation are sometimes stated and sometimes implied. I'd rather not repeatedly dig the reader in the ribs but do keep our present rulers in mind.

A few words about terminology. *Orwellian* has two opposing definitions: either work that reflects Orwell's style and values, or real-world developments that threaten them. To avoid confusion, I will use only the latter meaning and substitute *Orwell-like* for the former. I will also use the novel's British title, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, rather than *1984*, except when quoting others. It carries more weight, I think.

"Orwell was successful because he wrote exactly the right books at exactly the right time," wrote the philosopher Richard Rorty. Prior to *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell was a man to watch in British political and literary circles but he was far from a household name. Now all of his books, even those that he dismissed as failed experiments or hack work, are never out of print, and it is possible to read every surviving word he wrote, thanks to the Herculean scholarship of Professor Peter Davison, whose twenty-volume *The Complete Works of George Orwell* runs to almost nine thousand pages and two million words. Readers of the first edition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1949 knew only a fraction of what is now available.

Knowing how carefully Orwell chose what to share with the public, I haven't been able to read it all without the occasional shiver of guilt. He would have been mortified to see most of his journalism republished, let alone his private letters, yet almost none of it is worthless. Even when he was sick, or overworked, or desperate to be writing something else, his brain was actively engaged with big problems and small consolations, many of which fed into *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Because he refused to outsource his judgement to an ideology or party line, even when he was wrong, which was quite often, he was wrong in a sincere and interesting way. He possessed what he praised Charles Dickens for having: a "free intelligence." He was by no means a unique genius (I also want to shine a light on some

of his less celebrated contemporaries) but he was the only writer of his era to do so many things so well.

Orwell's schoolfriend Cyril Connolly remembered that "something shone through about him which made you want him to like you a little bit better." That same quality shines through his writing and makes his admirers crave his imagined approval. But I have no desire to sanctify a man who was sceptical of saints, utopias and perfection in general. Only by being frank about his errors and shortcomings—as he usually was—can I explain both the man and the book. Although his prose created the illusion that he was a decent, commonsensical chap telling you an obvious truth that you knew in your gut but just hadn't acknowledged yet, Orwell could be rash, hyperbolic, irritable, blinkered and perverse. We value him despite his flaws because he was right about the defining questions of fascism, communism, imperialism and racism at a time when so many people who should have known better didn't.

Orwell felt that he lived in cursed times. He fantasised about another life in which he could have spent his days gardening and writing fiction instead of being "forced into becoming a pamphleteer," but that would have been a waste. His real talent was for analyzing and explaining a tumultuous period in human history. Written down, his core values might seem too vague to mean much—honesty, decency, liberty, justice—but nobody wrestled more tirelessly, in private and in public, with what those ideas meant during the darkest days of the twentieth century. He always tried to tell the truth, and admired anyone who did likewise. Nothing built on a lie, however seductively convenient, could have value. Central to his honesty was his commitment to constantly working out what he thought and why he thought it, and never ceasing to reassess those opinions. To quote Christopher Hitchens, one of Orwell's most eloquent disciples: "It matters not what you think, but *how* you think."

I want to give the reader an accurate picture of where Orwell stood on the vital issues of his time, and when and why some of those positions changed, without claiming to know what he would have thought about, say, Brexit. Such claims can only be achieved by selective quotation which often verges on fraud. I remember in 1993 hearing Conservative prime minister John Major quote Orwell's line about "old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the

morning mist,” as if it had not come from *The Lion and the Unicorn*, a passionate argument for socialism. When the hosts of InfoWars, the website notorious for disseminating outrageous conspiracy theories, routinely cite Orwell, you know that doublethink is real.

A novel that has been claimed by socialists, conservatives, anarchists, liberals, Catholics, and libertarians of every description cannot be, as Milan Kundera alleged, merely “political thought disguised as a novel.” It is certainly not a precise allegory like *Animal Farm*, where every element slots into the real world with a neat click. Orwell’s famously translucent prose conceals a world of complexity. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is usually described as a dystopia. It is also, to varying and debatable degrees, a satire, a prophecy, a warning, a political thesis, a work of science fiction, a spy thriller, a psychological horror, a gothic nightmare, a postmodern text, and a love story. Most people read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* when they are young and feel bruised by it—it offers more suffering and less reassurance than any other standard high-school text—but don’t feel compelled to rediscover it in adulthood. That’s a shame. It is far richer and stranger than you probably remember, and I urge you to read it again. In the meantime, I’ve briefly summarised the plot, characters and terminology in the appendix to this book.

I first encountered *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a teenager in suburban south London. As Orwell said, the books you read when you’re young stay with you forever. I found it shocking and compelling, but this was circa 1990, when communism and apartheid were on the way out, optimism reigned, and the world didn’t feel particularly Orwellian. Even after 9/11, the book’s relevance was fragmentary: it was quoted in reference to political language, or the media, or surveillance, but not the whole picture. Democracy was on the rise and the internet was largely considered a force for good.

While I was planning and writing *The Ministry of Truth*, however, the world changed. People took to talking anxiously about the political upheavals of the 1970s and, worse, the 1930s. Bookshop shelves began filling up with titles such as *How Democracy Ends*, *Fascism: A Warning*, *The Road to Unfreedom* and *The Death of Truth*, many of which quoted Orwell. Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

merited a new edition, pitched as “a nonfiction bookend to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*”; so did Sinclair Lewis’s 1935 novel about American fascism, *It Can’t Happen Here*. Hulu’s television adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* was as alarming as a documentary. “I was asleep before,” said Elisabeth Moss’s character Offred. “That’s how we let it happen.” Well, we weren’t asleep anymore. I was reminded of something Orwell wrote about fascism in 1936: “If you pretend that it is merely an aberration which will presently pass off of its own accord, you are dreaming a dream from which you will awake when somebody coshes you with a rubber truncheon.” *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a book designed to wake you up.

Nineteen Eighty-Four was the first fully realised dystopian novel to be written in the knowledge that dystopia was real. In Germany and the Soviet bloc, men had built it and forced other men and women to live and die within its iron walls. Those regimes may be gone, but Orwell’s book continues to define our nightmares, even as they shift and change. “For me it’s like a Greek myth, to take and do with what you will—to examine yourself,” Michael Radford, the director of the 1984 movie adaptation, told me. “It’s a mirror,” says a character in the 2013 stage version by Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan. “Every age sees itself reflected.” For singer-songwriter Billy Bragg, “Every time I read it, it seems to be about something else.”

Still, the fact that the novel speaks to us so loudly and clearly in 2019 is a terrible indictment of politicians and citizens alike. While it’s still a warning, it has also become a reminder of all the painful lessons that the world appears to have unlearned since Orwell’s lifetime, especially those concerning the fragility of truth in the face of power. I hesitate to say that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is more relevant than ever, but it’s a damn sight more relevant than it should be.

To paraphrase Orwell’s disclaimer in *Homage to Catalonia*, his book about the Spanish Civil War: I warn you of my biases but I have tried to tell the truth.