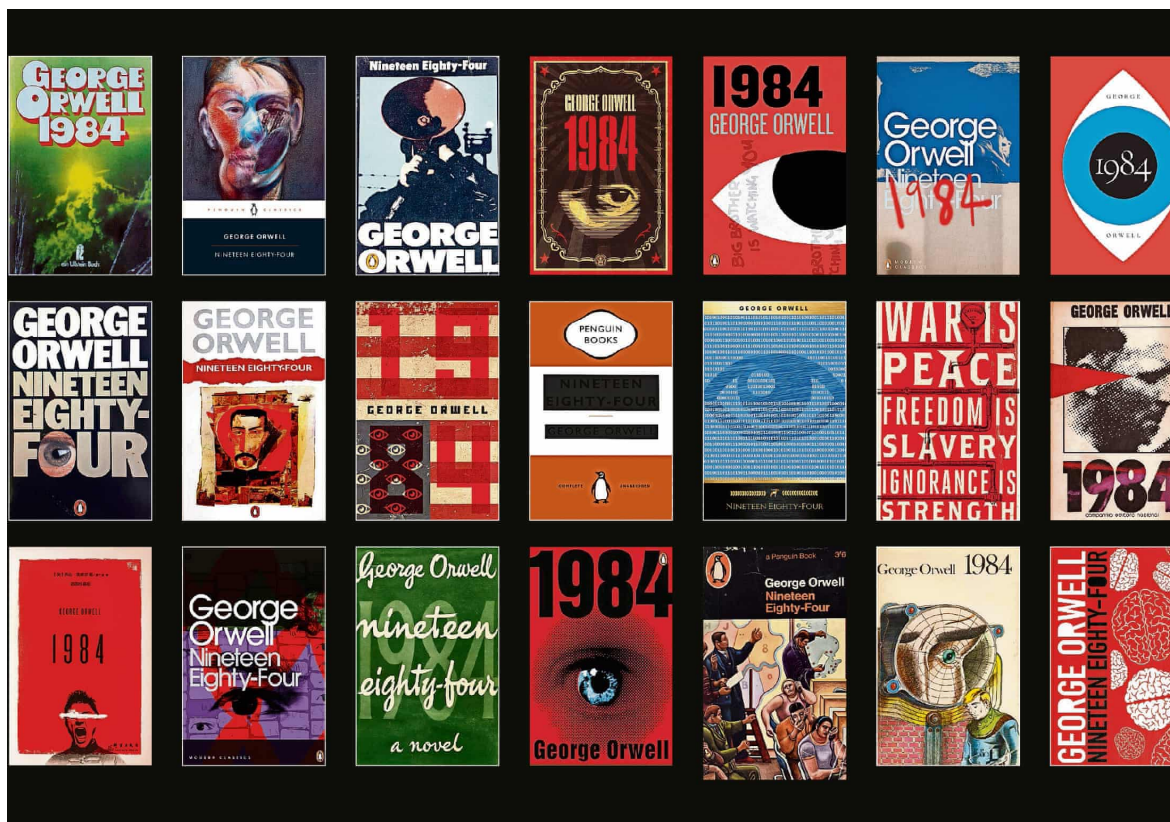


Nothing but the truth: the legacy of George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four

Dorian Lynskey

Sun 19 May 2019 08.00 BST



The many faces of Nineteen Eighty-Four.

Every generation turns to it in times of political turmoil, and this extract from a new book about the novel explains its relevance in the age of fake news and Trump
Read other extracts from the book: · David Bowie's Orwell: how Nineteen Eighty-Four shaped Diamond Dogs · 'He typed in bed in his dressing gown': how Orwell wrote Nineteen Eighty-Four

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 45th president of the United States of America. His press secretary 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%, making it a No 1 bestseller.

When George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published in the United Kingdom on 8 June 1949, in the heart of the 20th 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 its popularity would wane. Another 35 years have elapsed since then, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* remains the book we turn to when truth is mutilated, when language is distorted, when power is abused, when we want to know how bad things can get. It is still, in the words of Anthony Burgess, author of *A Clockwork Orange*, “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 define a calendar year, while the word Orwellian has turned the author’s own name into a capacious synonym for everything he hated and feared.

It has been adapted for cinema, television, radio, theatre, opera and ballet and 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 argued 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.

A novel that has been claimed by socialists, conservatives, anarchists, liberals, Catholics and libertarians of every description cannot be, as Kundera

alleged, merely “political thought disguised as a novel”. Orwell’s famously translucent prose conceals a world of complexity. Normally thought of as a dystopia, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 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 it when they’re 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 remember.



Donald Trump's inauguration in 2017 ushered in a new era of populism - and a resurgence of interest in Orwell's book. Photograph: Jim Bourg/Reuters

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 analysing and explaining a tumultuous period in human history. Written down, his core values might seem too vague to carry much weight - honesty, decency, liberty, justice - but no one else wrestled so tirelessly, in private and in public, with what those ideas meant during the darkest days of the 20th 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 admirers: “It matters not what you think, but how you think.”

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 for ever. 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 applied 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.

In 2016, the world changed. As Trump took the White House, Britain voted for Brexit and populism swept across Europe, people took to talking anxiously about the upheavals of the 1970s and, worse, the 1930s. Bookshop shelves began filling up with titles such as *How Democracy Ends*, *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 adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s *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 any more. 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.

It was the first 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 borders. Those regimes are 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 it 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. “Every age sees itself reflected.” For singer-songwriter Billy Bragg: “Every time I read it, it seems to be about something else.”

After President Trump’s adviser Kellyanne Conway first used the phrase “alternative facts” on 22 January 2017, *The Hollywood Reporter* called *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “the hottest literary property in town”. Scores of cinemas across the US announced that they would be screening Michael Radford’s 1984 on 4 April, because “the clock is already striking 13”. And theatre producers Sonia Friedman and Scott Rudin asked British playwrights Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan to transfer their hit play *1984* to Broadway as soon as possible. “It went from zero to a hundred in the space of five days,” Icke told me. “They said, ‘We think it’s important this play is on Broadway now.’”



Olivia Wilde and Tom Sturridge as Julia and Winston in the Broadway run of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Photograph: Julieta Cervantes

When the play was in the West End, each of its three runs inhabited a different political context - the third opened during the Brexit referendum, just before the murder of Jo Cox MP by a far-right terrorist. During the run at New York's Hudson theatre, which began on 18 May 2017, the directors noticed that the audience's reaction each night was affected by whatever Donald Trump had done that day. The night after Trump tweeted the nonsense word *covfefe*, there was such a desire for humour that one actor was distraught: "I've been in comedies that have had less laughter than this." On another night, the news was so bad that people passed out. At a third performance, when Winston Smith's chief antagonist O'Brien asked: "What year is it?", a woman shouted: "It's 2017 and this is fucked up!"

It must be said that Trump is no Big Brother. Nor, despite his revival of such toxic phrases as "America First" and "enemy of the people", is he simply a throwback to the 1930s. He has the cruelty and power hunger of a dictator but not the discipline, intellect or ideology. His closest fictional precursor is probably Buzz Windrip, the oafish populist from *It Can't Happen Here*. In the real world, Trump's forefather is Joseph McCarthy, who displayed comparable levels of narcissism, dishonesty, resentment and crude ambition and an uncanny ability to make journalists dance to his tune even as they loathed him. Still, Orwell would have recognised the type. "I think Dad would've been amused by Donald Trump in an ironic sort of way," said Orwell's son, Richard Blair, in 2017. "He may have thought, 'There goes the sort of man I wrote about all those years ago.'"

There are precedents in Orwell's writing. During Trump's campaign against Hillary Clinton, it was hard to watch the candidate whipping supporters into a cry of "Lock her up!" without being reminded of the two minutes' hate. The president also meets most of the criteria of Orwell's 1944 definition of fascism: "Something cruel, unscrupulous, arrogant, obscurantist, anti-liberal and anti-working-class... almost any English person would accept 'bully' as a synonym for 'fascist'." Orwell contended that such men can only rise to the top when the status quo has failed to satisfy citizens' need for justice, liberty and self-worth, but Trump's victory required one more crucial ingredient.

He did not seize power through a revolution or coup. He was not potentiated by a recession or a terrorist atrocity, let alone a nuclear war or a fertility crisis. His route to the White House passed through America's own "Versionland", which is Russia expert Luke Harding's name for the post-truth politics of Vladimir Putin's Russia. In Versionland, flagrant lies become "alternative facts". Trump creates his own reality and measures his power by the number of people who subscribe to it: the cruder the lie, the more power its success demonstrates. It is truly Orwellian that the phrase "fake news" has been turned on its head by Trump and his fellow authoritarians to describe real news that is not to their liking. Trump's lawyer Rudy Giuliani accidentally provided a crude motto for Versionland USA when he snapped at an interviewer: "Truth isn't truth!" In the words of O'Brien, reality is inside the skull.



Kellyanne Conway, an early purveyor of Trump's 'alternative facts'. Photograph: Mark Wilson/Getty Images

How did this happen? On the eve of 1984, the science-fiction writer Marta Randall argued that one thing Orwell didn't predict was the spread of cynicism: "It would be very hard for 'Big Brother' to convince anyone of anything post-Watergate and post-Vietnam." In the 1980s, she suggested, Orwell's target would have been the trivialisation of the news media. "We may quit relying on 'authoritative' news stories entirely." Over time, this distrust of establishment narratives led many people to seek the truth but many others to choose their own "truths". Combining cynicism with credulity, people who were proudly sceptical of CNN or the *New York Times* were perfectly happy to take unsourced Facebook posts and quack science at face value. Social media made this process all too easy. Facebook's former chief of security, Alex Stamos, pointed out that using the blunt instrument to eliminate fake news could turn the platform into "the ministry of truth with ML [machine-learning] systems", but by failing to act in

time, Facebook was already allowing “bad actors” such as Russia’s Internet Research Agency to spread disinformation unchecked.

The problem is likely to get worse. The growth of “deep fake” image synthesis, which combines computer graphics and artificial intelligence to manufacture images whose artificiality can only be identified by expert analysis, has the potential to create a paranoid labyrinth in which, according to the viewer’s bias, fake images will pass as real, while real ones are dismissed as fake.

During a speech in July 2018, Trump said: “What you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not what’s happening.” A line from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* went viral: “The party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command.”



John Hurt in the film adaptation.
Photograph: Allstar/Cinetext/MGM

One might feel wistful for the days when Big Brother was a joke and Orwell had “won”, as many commentators thought after the fall of the Berlin Wall. An era plagued by far-right populism, authoritarian nationalism, rampant disinformation and waning faith in liberal democracy is not one in which *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be easily dismissed.

Orwell was both too pessimistic and not pessimistic enough. On the one hand, the west did not succumb to totalitarianism. Consumerism, not endless war, became the engine of the global economy. But he did not appreciate the tenacity of racism and religious extremism. Nor did he foresee that the common man and woman would embrace doublethink as enthusiastically as the intellectuals and, without the need for terror or torture, would choose to believe that two plus two was whatever they wanted it to be.

Nineteen Eighty-Four is about many things and its readers’ concerns dictate which one is paramount at any point in history. During the cold war, it was a book about totalitarianism. In the 1980s, it became a warning about technology. Today, it is most of all a defence of truth.

Orwell’s fear, incubated during the months he spent fighting in the Spanish civil war, that “the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world” is the dark heart of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It gripped him long before he came up with Big Brother, Oceania, newspeak or the telescreen, and it’s more important than any of them. In its original 1949 review, *Life* correctly identified the essence of Orwell’s message: “If men continue to believe in such facts as can be tested and to reverence the spirit of truth in seeking greater knowledge, they can never be fully enslaved.” Seventy years later, that feels like a very large if.

. *The Ministry of Truth: A Biography of George Orwell’s 1984* by Dorian Lynskey is published by Pan Macmillan (£16.99) on 30 May. To order a copy go to guardianbookshop.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £15, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99

Since you’re here...

... we have a small favour to ask. More people are reading and supporting our independent, investigative reporting than ever before. And unlike many news organisations, we have chosen an approach that allows us to keep our journalism accessible to all, regardless of where they live or what they can afford.

The Guardian is editorially independent, meaning we set our own agenda. Our journalism is free from commercial bias and not influenced by billionaire owners, politicians or shareholders. No one edits our editor. No one steers our opinion. This is important as it enables us to give a voice to those less heard, challenge the powerful and hold them to account. It’s what makes us different to so many others in the media, at a time when factual, honest reporting is critical.

Every contribution we receive from readers like you, big or small, goes directly into funding our journalism. This support enables us to keep working as we do - but we must maintain and build on it for every year to come. **Support The Guardian from as little as NZ\$1 - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support The Guardian



Topics

- George Orwell
- The Observer
- Politics books
- Data and computer security
- extracts