

My favourite book – *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell

Abir Mukherjee

On my shelf are two copies of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – a pristine hardback, and a dog-eared Penguin Classic paperback with yellowed pages that I have had for as long as I can remember. The first copy I read, though, belonged to my father. It was a formidable-looking tome with a brown cover, and the title inscribed in large, black letters. It was 1984 and I was ten. I remember his reaction when he saw me reading it: 'That's probably a little advanced for you'.

He was right. It was a difficult read for a ten-year-old. Since then, however, I have read it many, many more times, at all stages of my life, sometimes even a couple of times a year. It is, quite simply, my favourite novel, and one which has shaped the collective consciousness over the last seventy-odd years in a way few other works of fiction have. It has given us words such as *Newspeak*, *doublethink*, *thoughtcrime* and, of course, the term *Big Brother*.

I've thought about why I love this book, and I think it comes down to the notion of 'truth'. I am the child of immigrants, and when your parents come from a different culture, with a different view of history, you realise, at a very early age, that one person's truth may be very different to someone else's.

Written by Orwell in the late 1940s and set in a dystopian future London, the novel tells the story of Winston Smith, a minor functionary in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth, his forbidden love affair with a young woman called Julia, and his personal rebellion against the Party, the all-powerful body that controls every aspect of life in Oceania, the massive super-state encompassing Britain and the Americas. Winston's job is to rewrite articles in *The Times* which no longer chime with the views of the Party, so that the past is always in line with the present and the Party's aura of infallibility remains untarnished. Winston, however, doesn't believe in the Party's omniscience, and engages in a futile and ultimately doomed struggle against it.

As with all the best books, it works on many levels: it's a love story; a story of rebellion; a lesson as to the evils of totalitarianism and the pernicious effects of propaganda; most of all, it's a story of power and what happens when power becomes an end in itself. What makes *Nineteen Eighty-Four* so special, though, is what it tells us about the human condition, and how it plays on our fear that its conclusions might well be all too true.

The novel examines the pernicious allure of totalitarianism. Orwell's Oceania is a society driven by fear, by hatred of the outsider and violence against enemies of the state. It's a puritanical society run by fanatics, always ready to vilify and proscribe anything they can't control, a society driven by the perversion of love and the sex drive. The only love permitted is the love of Big Brother, a devotion powered by the orgiastic ritual of the Two Minutes Hate.

Most terrifying is Orwell's questioning of what it means to be sane. Winston considers himself sane, possibly the last sane man in the world. He believes that sanity is founded upon the acceptance of certain

fundamental truths – for example, that two and two equals four, or the physical reality that the stars are light years away. It's an external reality that doesn't change according to one's beliefs. But in a world where the truth is constantly falsified, and all 'facts' are dictated by the Party and any evidence to the contrary purged, how could anyone objectively say what is wrong or what is right? If all records say that two and two equals five, and not four, and everyone else agrees, then how could you be sure that they were insane and that you were sane?

The historian Ben Pimlott described *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as 'above all... a protest against the tricks played by governments' and 'an account of the forces that endanger liberty and of the need to resist them'. He stated that 'most of these forces can be summed up in a single word: lies'. And that message is as relevant to us today as it was in 1948 or in 1984.

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A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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