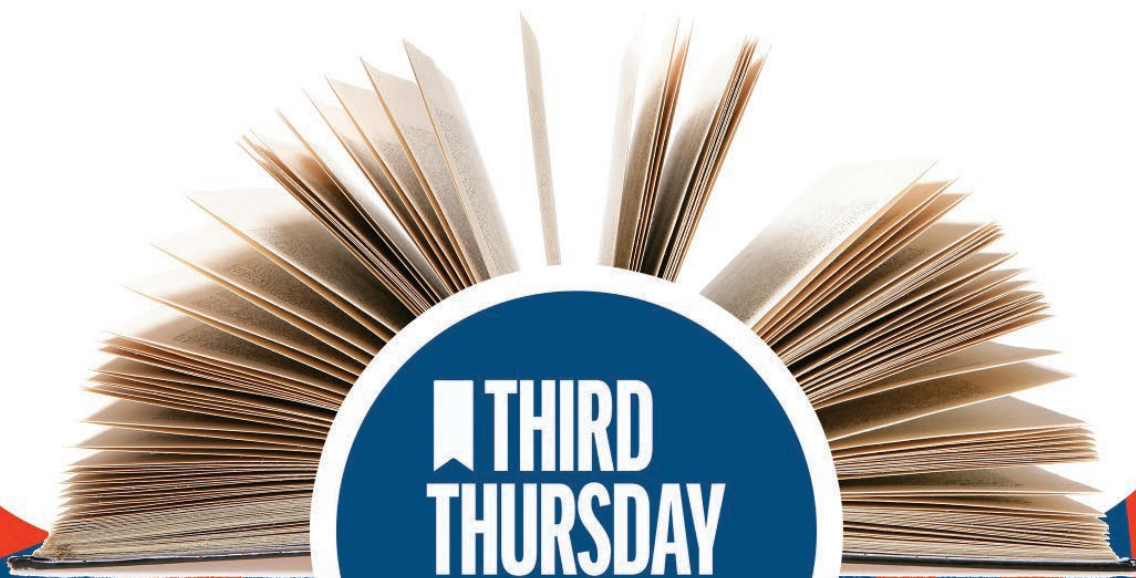


BEN'S GUIDE TO:
1984
BY GEORGE
ORWELL



THIRD
THURSDAY
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GEORGE ORWELL'S *1984*

George Orwell's *1984*¹ is rightly regarded as both a searing description of Soviet communism and as a shocking warning about the future of freedom under a totalitarian regime. But what gives *1984* its power is the human drama at its center: the drama of an individual human mind, assaulted by the forces of government and culture, driven into embrace of the unthinkable precisely because it is unthinkable. *1984* may have been designed as a critique of power, but at its root, it is a critique of the frailties of human beings and the need for deep-seated institutions to protect human beings against those frailties. In the end, no individual can stand up to Big Brother. Something more is required – something deeper, more lasting, and more binding.

GEORGE ORWELL: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

George Orwell (Eric Blair) was born in 1903 in Bengal, India. His family was of good birth, but with little wealth; in 1911, he was deployed back to Britain for his schooling. At Eton, he studied under Aldous Huxley, author of *Brave New World*; he forewent university and instead became an administrator for the Indian Imperial Police in Burma. He left that service in 1928, upset with British imperialism, and decided to live in the poorest areas of the East End in London. There, he began writing in earnest. He also developed sympathies with socialism.

Those feelings about socialism led him to write *The Road to Wigan Pier*, a dyspeptic take on the shortcomings of British socialism. Though Orwell was highly critical of the impoverished state of Britain's underclass, he saw that utopian socialism would fail. "This is the inevitable fate of the sentimentalist," Orwell wrote. "All his opinions change into their opposites at the first brush of reality."²

That sense was reinforced by Orwell's experiences in the Spanish Civil War, documented in *Homage To Catalonia* (1938), about Orwell's experiences with the Stalin-backed Republican communists in Spain. According to Orwell, he arrived in Spain filled with high ideals – but those ideals were shattered on the rocks of communist reality. After fighting on behalf of the communists and being shot in the neck for his trouble, his wife met him in Barcelona. He spotted her across the room, and she hugged him – and then told him to run. The reason: the Stalinists were targeting anyone suspected of heresy. "It did not matter what I had done or not done," Orwell wrote. "This was not a round-up of criminals; it was merely a reign of terror. I was not guilty of any definite act, but I was guilty of 'Trotskyism.'"³

It took until 1944 for Orwell to write *Animal Farm*; in 1949, *1984* was published.

A year later, he died.

Orwell was a complex character: a man of the political Left, but clear-eyed about the abuses of the Stalinist communists and the dangers of utopianism. This made him a heretic on the Left without allowing him full acceptance by the political Right.

BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU

The main theme of *1984* is the danger of totalitarianism. Communist totalitarianism, Nazi totalitarianism...these were distinctions without meaningful differences, Orwell believed. Thus, the wars between Oceania and Eastasia and Eurasia are merely about power, not about principle; they are about ensuring that those in power remain in power. The only thing that matters is maintenance of the status quo by those who have won the last revolution.

With that said, Oceania is clearly meant as a stand-in for the Soviet Union. In Oceania, INGSOC is the sole political power. That power is telescoped into the persona of Big Brother, a stern yet attractive figure meant to evoke Stalin: “The black-mustachio’d face gazed down from every commanding corner...the dark eyes looked deep into Winston’s own.”⁴ Big Brother’s eyes are everywhere, both imaginatively and in practical terms: “You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized.”⁵ To Western ears, such power sounds strangely alarmist; to those who lived under Soviet control, such power was a daily reality. As historian Peter Holquist writes, “Surveillance, then, was not designed to uncover popular sentiments and moods, nor was it intended merely to keep people under control; its whole purpose was to act on people, to change them.”⁶

True relationships are impossible in a state of constant surveillance and betrayal. Even family members must fear each other, thanks to the state’s determination to turn daughters against mothers and fathers against sons. “[H]ardly a week passed in which the *Times* did not carry a paragraph describing how some eavesdropping little sneak – ‘child hero’ was the phrase generally used – had overheard some compromising remark and denounced his parents to the Thought Police.”⁷ In the Soviet Union, the most famous of such “child heroes” was Pavel Morozov, a 13-year-old boy who supposedly informed on his father to the GPU; his father received a ten-year-sentence, and then death. Morozov was then supposedly murdered in revenge by

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