

BOOKS

George Orwell's Unheeded Warning

Even the author of *1984* failed to imagine how readily everyone would embrace doublethink.

BY GEORGE PACKER



NO NOVEL OF THE PAST CENTURY has had more influence than George Orwell's *1984*. The title, the adjectival form of the author's last name, the vocabulary of the all-powerful Party that rules the superstate Oceania with the ideology of Ingsoc—*doublethink*, *memory hole*, *unperson*, *thoughtcrime*, *Newspeak*, *Thought Police*, *Room 101*, *Big Brother*—they've all entered the English language as instantly recognizable signs of a nightmare future. It's almost impossible to talk about propaganda, surveillance, authoritarian politics, or perversions of truth without dropping a reference to *1984*. Throughout the Cold War, the novel found avid underground readers behind the Iron Curtain who wondered, *How did he know?*

It was also assigned reading for several generations of American high-school students. I first encountered *1984* in 10th-grade English class. Orwell's novel was paired with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, whose hedonistic and pharmaceutical dystopia seemed more relevant to a California teenager in the 1970s than did the bleak sadism of Oceania. I was too young and historically ignorant to understand where *1984* came from and exactly what it was warning against. Neither the book nor its author stuck with me. In my 20s, I discovered Orwell's essays and nonfiction books and reread them so many times that my copies started to disintegrate, but I didn't go back to *1984*. Since high school, I'd lived through another decade of the 20th century, including the calendar year of the title, and I assumed I already "knew" the book. It was too familiar to revisit.

So when I recently read the novel again, I wasn't prepared for its power. You have to clear away what you think you know, all the terminology and iconography and cultural spin-offs, to grasp the original genius and lasting greatness of *1984*. It is both a profound political essay and a shocking, heartbreaking work of art. And in the Trump era, it's a best seller.

The Ministry of Truth: The Biography of George Orwell's 1984, by the British music critic Dorian Lynskey, makes a rich and compelling case for the novel as the summation of Orwell's entire body of work and a master key to understanding the modern world. The book was published in 1949, when Orwell was dying of tuberculosis, but Lynskey dates its biographical sources back more than a decade to Orwell's months in Spain as a volunteer on the republican side of the country's civil war. His introduction to totalitarianism came in Barcelona, when agents of the Soviet Union created an elaborate lie to discredit Trotskyists in the Spanish government as fascist spies.

Left-wing journalists readily accepted the fabrication, useful as it was to the cause of communism. Orwell didn't, exposing the lie with



eyewitness testimony in journalism that preceded his classic book *Homage to Catalonia*—and that made him a heretic on the left. He was stoical about the boredom and discomforts of trench warfare—he was shot in the neck and barely escaped Spain with his life—but he took the erasure of truth hard. It threatened his sense of what makes us sane, and life worth living. “History stopped in 1936,” he later told his friend Arthur Koestler, who knew exactly what Orwell meant. After Spain, just about everything he wrote and read led to the creation of his final masterpiece. “History stopped,” Lynskey writes, “and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* began.”

THE BIOGRAPHICAL STORY of *1984*—the dying man’s race against time to finish his novel in a remote cottage on the Isle of Jura, off Scotland—will be familiar to many Orwell readers. One of Lynskey’s contributions is to destroy the notion that its terrifying vision can be attributed to, and in some way disregarded as, the death wish of a tuberculosis patient. In fact, terminal illness roused in Orwell a rage to live—he got remarried on his deathbed—just as the novel’s pessimism is relieved, until its last pages, by Winston Smith’s attachment to nature, antique objects, the smell of coffee, the sound of a proletarian woman singing, and above all his lover, Julia. *1984* is crushingly grim, but its clarity and rigor are stimulants to consciousness and resistance. According to Lynskey, “Nothing in Orwell’s life and work supports a diagnosis of despair.”

Lynskey traces the literary genesis of *1984* to the utopian fictions of the optimistic 19th century—Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888); the sci-fi novels of H. G. Wells, which Orwell read as a boy—and their dystopian successors in the 20th, including the Russian Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1924) and Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932). The most interesting pages in *The Ministry of Truth* are Lynskey’s account of the novel’s afterlife. The struggle to claim *1984* began immediately upon publication, with a battle over its political meaning. Conservative American reviewers concluded that Orwell’s main target wasn’t just the Soviet Union but the left generally. Orwell, fading fast, waded in with a statement explaining that the novel was not an attack on any particular government but a satire of the totalitarian tendencies in Western society and intellectuals: “The moral to be drawn from this dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one: *Don’t let it happen. It depends on you.*” But every work of art escapes the artist’s control—the more popular and complex, the greater the misunderstandings.

Lynskey’s account of the reach of *1984* is revelatory. The novel has inspired movies, television shows, plays, a ballet, an opera, a David Bowie album, imitations, parodies, sequels, rebuttals, Lee

Harvey Oswald, the Black Panther Party, and the John Birch Society. It has acquired something of the smothering ubiquity of Big Brother himself: *1984* is watching you. With the arrival of the year 1984, the cultural appropriations rose to a deafening level. That January an ad for the Apple Macintosh was watched by 96 million people during the Super Bowl and became a marketing legend. The Mac, represented by a female athlete, hurls a sledgehammer at a giant telescreen and explodes the shouting face of a man—oppressive technology—to the astonishment of a crowd of gray zombies. The message: “You’ll see why 1984 won’t be like ‘1984.’”

The argument recurs every decade or so: Orwell got it wrong. Things haven’t turned out that bad. The Soviet Union is history. Technology is liberating. But Orwell never intended his novel to be a prediction, only a warning. And it’s as a warning that *1984* keeps finding new relevance. The week of Donald Trump’s inauguration, when the president’s adviser Kellyanne Conway justified his false crowd estimate by using the phrase *alternative facts*, the novel returned to the best-seller lists. A theatrical adaptation was rushed to Broadway. The vocabulary of Newspeak went viral. An authoritarian president who stood the term *fake news* on its head, who once said, “What you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not what’s happening,” has given *1984* a whole new life.

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WHAT DOES the novel mean for us? Not Room 101 in the Ministry of Love, where Winston is interrogated and tortured until he loses everything he holds dear. We don’t live under anything like a totalitarian system. “By definition, a country in which you are free to read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is not the country described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,” Lynskey acknowledges. Instead, we pass our days under the nonstop surveillance of a telescreen that we bought at the Apple Store, carry with us everywhere, and tell everything to, without any coercion by the state. The Ministry of Truth is Facebook, Google, and cable news. We have met Big Brother and he is us.

Trump’s election brought a rush of cautionary books with titles like *On Tyranny*, *Fascism: A Warning*, and *How Fascism Works*. My local bookstore set up a totalitarian-themed table and placed the new books alongside *1984*. They pointed back to the 20th century—if it happened in Germany, it could happen here—and warned readers how easily democracies collapse. They were alarm bells against complacency and fatalism—“the politics of inevitability,” in the words of the historian Timothy Snyder, “a sense that the future is just more of the present, that the laws of progress are known, that there are no alternatives, and therefore nothing really to be done.” The warnings were justified, but

their emphasis on the mechanisms of earlier dictatorships drew attention away from the heart of the malignancy—not the state, but the individual. The crucial issue was not that Trump might abolish democracy but that Americans had put him in a position to try. Unfreedom today is voluntary. It comes from the bottom up.

We are living with a new kind of regime that didn't exist in Orwell's time. It combines hard nationalism—the diversion of frustration and cynicism into xenophobia and hatred—with soft distraction and confusion: a blend of Orwell and Huxley, cruelty and entertainment. The state of mind that the Party enforces through terror in 1984, where truth becomes so unstable that it ceases to exist, we now induce in ourselves. Totalitarian propaganda unifies control over all information, until reality is what the Party says it is—the goal of Newspeak is to impoverish language so that politically incorrect thoughts are no longer possible. Today the problem is too much information from too many sources, with a resulting plague of fragmentation and division—not excessive authority but its disappearance, which leaves ordinary people to work out the facts for themselves, at the mercy of their own prejudices and delusions.

During the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, propagandists at a Russian troll farm used social media to disseminate a meme: "The People Will Believe What the Media Tells Them They Believe." — George Orwell. But Orwell never said this. The moral authority of his name was stolen and turned into a lie toward that most Orwellian end: the destruction of belief in truth. The Russians needed partners in this effort and found them by the millions, especially among America's non-elites. In 1984, working-class people are called "proles," and Winston believes they're the only hope for the future. As Lynskey points out, Orwell didn't 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."

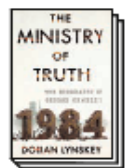
WE STAGGER UNDER the daily load of doublethink pouring from Trump, his enablers in the Inner Party, his mouthpieces in the Ministry of Truth, and his fanatical supporters among the proles. Spotting doublethink in ourselves is much harder. "To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle," Orwell wrote. In front of my nose, in the world of enlightened and progressive people where I live and work, a different sort of doublethink has become pervasive. It's not the claim that true is fake or that two plus two makes five. Progressive doublethink—which has grown worse in reaction to the right-wing kind—creates a more insidious unreality because it operates in the

THE CULTURE FILE

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THE MINISTRY OF TRUTH: THE BIOGRAPHY OF GEORGE ORWELL'S 1984
DORIAN LYNKEY
Doubleday

name of all that is good. Its key word is *justice*—a word no one should want to live without. But today the demand for justice forces you to accept contradictions that are the essence of doublethink.

For example, many on the left now share an unacknowledged but common assumption that a good work of art is made of good politics and that good politics is a matter of identity. The progressive view of a book or play depends on its political stance, and its stance—even its subject matter—is scrutinized in light of the group affiliation of the artist: Personal identity plus political position equals aesthetic value. This confusion of categories guides judgments all across the worlds of media, the arts, and education, from movie reviews to grant committees. Some people who register the assumption as doublethink might be privately troubled, but they don't say so publicly. Then self-censorship turns into self-deception, until the recognition itself disappears—a lie you accept becomes a lie you forget. In this way, intelligent people do the work of eliminating their own unorthodoxy without the Thought Police.

Orthodoxy is also enforced by social pressure, nowhere more intensely than on Twitter, where the specter of being shamed or "canceled" produces conformity as much as the prospect of adding to your tribe of followers does. This pressure can be more powerful than a party or state, because it speaks in the name of the people and in the language of moral outrage, against which there is, in a way, no defense. Certain commissars with large followings patrol the precincts of social media and punish thought criminals, but most progressives assent without difficulty to the stifling consensus of the moment and the intolerance it breeds—not out of fear, but because they want to be counted on the side of justice.

This willing constriction of intellectual freedom will do lasting damage. It corrupts the ability to think clearly, and it undermines both culture and progress. Good art doesn't come from wokeness, and social problems starved of debate can't find real solutions. "Nothing is gained by teaching a parrot a new word," Orwell wrote in 1946. "What is needed is the right to print what one believes to be true, without having to fear bullying or blackmail from any side." Not much has changed since the 1940s. The will to power still passes through hatred on the right and virtue on the left.

1984 will always be an essential book, regardless of changes in ideologies, for its portrayal of one person struggling to hold on to what is real and valuable. "Sanity is not statistical," Winston thinks one night as he slips off to sleep. Truth, it turns out, is the most fragile thing in the world. The central drama of politics is the one inside your skull. **X**

George Packer is an Atlantic staff writer.