**Margaret Atwood on Why We Should All Read Brave New World**

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*Margaret Atwood is a highly honored Canadian novelist. Her dystopian work The Handmaid’s Tale is a vanguard of the feminist movement. Nominated for the prestigious Booker prize, her work ranges from historical fiction to dystopian fantasy. Read her stuff. Now. You’ll love it.*

Dystopian novels like [*The Handmaid's Tale*](https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/1032806/the-handmaid-s-tale/) seem more relevant today than ever. In light of recent events on the world stage Margaret Atwood's introduction to Huxley's masterpiece, [*Brave New World*](https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/1110001/brave-new-world/9781784870140/)*,* proves it may be the most prescient novel for our current times

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**‘O brave new world, that has such people in’t!’   
– Miranda, in Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*, on first sighting the shipwrecked courtiers**

In the latter half of the twentieth century, two visionary books cast their shadows over our futures. One was George Orwell’s 1949 novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with its horrific vision of a brutal, mind-controlling totalitarian state – a book that gave us Big Brother, and thoughtcrime and Newspeak and the memory hole and the torture palace called the Ministry of Love, and the discouraging spectacle of a boot grinding into the human face forever.

The other was Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*(1932), which proposed a different and softer form of totalitarianism – one of conformity achieved through engineered, bottle-grown babies and hypnotic persuasion rather than through brutality; of boundless consumption that keeps the wheels of production turning and of officially enforced promiscuity that does away with sexual frustration; of a pre-ordained caste system ranging from a highly intelligent managerial class to a subgroup of dim-witted serfs programmed to love their menial work; and of *soma*, a drug that confers instant bliss with no side effects.

Which template would win, we wondered? During the Cold War, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*seemed to have the edge. But when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, pundits proclaimed the end of history, shopping reigned triumphant, and there was already lots of quasi-*soma*percolating through society. True, promiscuity had taken a hit from AIDS, but on balance we seemed to be in for a trivial, giggly, drug-enhanced Spend-O-Rama: *Brave New World*was winning the race.

That picture changed, too, with the attack on New York City’s Twin Towers in 2001. Thoughtcrime and the boot grinding into the human face could not be got rid of so easily, after all. The Ministry of Love is back with us, it appears, though it’s no longer limited to the lands behind the former Iron Curtain: the West has its own versions now.

On the other hand, *Brave New World* hasn’t gone away. Shopping malls stretch as far as the bulldozer can see. On the wilder fringes of the genetic engineering community, there are true believers prattling of the Gen-rich and the Gen-poor – Huxley’s Alphas and Epsilons – and busily engaging in schemes for genetic enhancement and – to go *Brave New World* one better – for immortality.

Would it be possible for both of these futures – the hard and the soft – to exist at the same time, in the same place? And what would that be like?

Surely it’s time to look again at *Brave New World* and to examine its arguments for and against the totally planned society it describes, in which ‘everybody is happy now’. What sort of happiness is on offer, and what is the price we might pay to achieve it?

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**It was Huxley’s genius to present us to ourselves in all our ambiguity**

I first read *Brave New World* in the early 1950s, when I was fourteen. It made a deep impression on me, though I didn’t fully understand some of what I was reading. It’s a tribute to Huxley’s writing skills that although I didn’t know what knickers were, or camisoles – nor did I know that zippers, when they first appeared, had been denounced from pulpits as lures of the Devil because they made clothes so easy to take off – I nonetheless had a vivid picture of ‘zippicamiknicks’, that female undergarment with a single zipper down the front that could be shucked so very easily: ‘Zip! The rounded pinkness fell apart like a neatly divided apple. A wriggle of the arms, a lifting first of the right foot, then the left: the zippicamiknicks were lying lifeless and as though deflated on the floor.’

I myself was living in the era of ‘elasticized panty girdles’ that could not be got out of, or indeed into, without an epic struggle, so this was heady stuff indeed.

The girl shedding the zippicamiknicks is Lenina Crowne, a blue-eyed beauty both strangely innocent and alluringly voluptuous – or ‘pneumatic’, as her many male admirers call her. Lenina doesn’t see why she shouldn’t have sex with anyone she likes whenever the occasion offers, as to do so is merely polite behaviour and not to do so is selfish. The man she’s trying to seduce by shedding her undergarment is John ‘the Savage’, who’s been raised far outside the ‘civilized’ pale on a diet of Shakespeare’s chastity/whore speeches, and Zuni cults, and self-flagellation, and who believes in religion and romance, and in suffering to be worthy of one’s beloved, and who idolizes Lenina until she doffs her zippicamiknicks in such a casual and shameless fashion.

Never were two sets of desiring genitalia so thoroughly at odds. And thereby hangs Huxley’s tale.

*Brave New World* is either a perfect-world utopia or its nasty opposite, a dystopia, depending on your point of view: its inhabitants are beautiful, secure, and free from diseases and worries, though in a way we like to think we would find unacceptable. ‘Utopia’ is sometimes said to mean ‘no place’, from the Greek ‘O Topia’; but others derive it from ‘eu’, as in ‘eugenics’, in which case it would mean ‘healthy place’ or ‘good place’. Sir Thomas More, in his own sixteenth-century *Utopia*, may have been punning: utopia is the good place that doesn’t exist.

As a literary construct, *Brave New World* thus has a long list of literary ancestors. Plato’s *Republic* and the Bible’s Book of Revelations and the myth of Atlantis are the great-great- grandparents of the form; nearer in time are Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*, and the land of the talking-horse, totally rational Houyhnhnms in Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, and H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*, in which the brainless, pretty ‘upper classes’ play in the sunshine during the day, and the ugly ‘lower classes’ run the underground machinery and emerge at night to eat the social butterflies.

In the nineteenth century – when improvements in sewage systems, medicine, communication technologies, and transportation were opening new doors every year – many earnest utopias were thrown up by the prevailing mood of optimism, with William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* and Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* foremost among them.

Insofar as they are critical of society as it presently exists but nevertheless take a dim view of the prospects of the human race, utopias may verge on satire, as do Swift’s and More’s and Wells’s; but insofar as they endorse the view that humanity is perfectible, or can at least be vastly improved, they will resemble idealizing romances, as do Bellamy’s and Morris’s. The First World War marked the end of the romantic-idealistic utopian dream in literature, just as several real-life utopian plans were about to be launched with disastrous effects. The Communist regime in Russia and the Nazi takeover of Germany both began as utopian visions.

But as most literary utopias had already discovered, perfectibility breaks on the rock of dissent. What do you do with people who don’t endorse your views or fit in with your plans? Nathaniel Hawthorne, himself a disillusioned graduate of the real-life Brook Farm utopian scheme, pointed out that the Puritan founders of New England – who intended to build the New Jerusalem – began their construction efforts with a prison and a gibbet. Forced re-education, exile, and execution are the usual choices on offer, in utopias, for any who oppose the powers that be. It’s rats in the eyes for you – as in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – if you won’t love Big Brother. (*Brave New World* has its own gentler punishments: for non-conformists, it’s exile to Iceland, where Man’s Final End can be discussed among like-minded intellects, without pestering ‘normal’ people – in a sort of university, as it were.)

Utopias and dystopias from Plato’s *Republic* on have had to cover the same basic ground that real societies do. All must answer the same questions: Where do people live, what do they eat, what do they wear, what do they do about sex and child-rearing? Who has the power, who does the work, how do citizens relate to nature, and how does the economy function? Romantic utopias such as Morris’s *News from Nowhere* and W.H. Hudson’s *A Crystal Age* present a Pre- Raphaelite picture, with the inhabitants going in for flowing robes, natural settings in abodes that sound like English country houses with extra stained glass, and lots of arts and crafts. Everything would be fine, we’re told, if we could only do away with industrialism and get back in tune with Nature, and deal with overpopulation. (Hudson solves this last problem by simply eliminating sex, except for one unhappy couple per country house who are doomed to procreate.)

But when Huxley was writing *Brave New World* at the beginning of the 1930s, he was, in his own words, an ‘amused, Pyrrhonic aesthete’, a member of that group of bright young upstarts that swirled around the Bloomsbury Group and delighted in attacking anything Victorian or Edwardian. So *Brave New World* tosses out the flowing robes, the crafts, and the tree-hugging. Its architecture is futuristic – electrically lighted towers and softly glowing pink glass – and everything in its cityscape is relentlessly unnatural and just as relentlessly industrialized. Viscose and acetate and imitation leather are its fabrics of choice; apartment buildings, complete with artificial music and taps that flow with perfume, are its dwellings; transportation is by private helicopter. Babies are no longer born, they’re grown in hatcheries, their bottles moving along assembly lines, in various types and batches according to the needs of ‘the hive’, and fed on ‘external secretion’ rather than ‘milk’. The word ‘mother’ – so thoroughly worshipped by the Victorians – has become a shocking obscenity; and indiscriminate sex, which was a shocking obscenity for the Victorians, is now de rigueur.

‘He patted me on the behind this afternoon,’ said Lenina.

‘There, you see!’ Fanny was triumphant. ‘That shows what he stands for. The strictest conventionality.’

Many of *Brave New World’s* nervous jokes turn on these kinds of inversions – more startling to its first audience, perhaps, than to us, but still wry enough. Victorian thrift turns to the obligation to spend, Victorian till-death-do-us- part monogamy has been replaced with ‘everyone belongs to everyone else’, Victorian religiosity has been channelled into the worship of an invented deity – ‘Our Ford’, named after the American car-czar Henry Ford, god of the assembly line – via communal orgies. Even the ‘Our Ford’ chant of ‘orgy-porgy’ is an inversion of the familiar nursery rhyme, in which kissing the girls makes them cry. Now, it’s if you refuse to kiss them – as ‘the Savage’ does – that the tears will flow.

Sex is often centre stage in utopias and dystopias – who can do what, with which set of genital organs, and with whom, being one of humanity’s main preoccupations. Because sex and procreation have been separated and women no longer give birth – the very idea is yuck-making to them – sex has become a recreation. Little naked children carry on ‘erotic play’ in the shrubberies, so as to get a hand in early. Some women are sterile –‘freemartins’ – and perfectly nice girls, though a little whiskery. The others practise ‘Malthusian drill’ – a form of birth control – and take ‘pregnancy surrogate’ hormone treatments if they feel broody, and sport sweet little faux-leather fashionista cartridge belts crammed with contraceptives. If they slip up on their Malthusian drill, there’s always the lovely pink-glass Abortion Centre. Huxley wrote before the Pill, but its advent brought his imagined sexual free-for-all a few steps closer. (What about gays? Does ‘everyone belongs to everyone else’ really mean everyone? We aren’t told.)

Of course, Huxley himself still had one foot in the nineteenth century: he could not have dreamed his upside- down morality unless he himself also found it threatening. At the time he was writing *Brave New World*, he was still in shock from a visit to the United States, where he was particularly frightened by mass consumerism and its group mentality and its vulgarities.

I use the word ‘dreamed’ advisedly, because *Brave New World* – gulped down whole – achieves an effect not unlike a controlled hallucination. All is surface; there is no depth. As you might expect from an author with impaired eyesight, the visual sense predominates: colours are intense, light and darkness vividly described. Sound is next in importance, especially during group ceremonies and orgies, and the viewing of ‘Feelies’ – movies in which you feel the sensations of those onscreen, ‘The Gorillas’ Wedding’ and ‘Sperm Whale’s Love-Life’ being sample titles. Scents are third – perfume wafts everywhere, and is dabbed here and there; one of the most poignant encounters between John the Savage and the lovely Lenina is the one in which he buries his worshipping face in her divinely scented undergarments while she herself is innocently sleeping, zonked out on a strong dose of *soma*, partly because she can’t stand the awful real-life smells of the ‘reservation’ where the new world has not been implemented.

Many utopias and dystopias emphasize food (delicious or awful; or, in the case of Swift’s Houyhnhnms, oats), but in *Brave New World* the menus are not presented. Lenina and her lay-of-the-month, Henry, eat ‘an excellent meal’, but we aren’t told what it is. (Beef would be my guess, in view of the huge barns full of cows that provide the external secretions.) Despite the dollops of sex-on-demand, the bodies in *Brave New World* are oddly disembodied, which serves to under- score one of Huxley’s points: in a world in which everything is available, nothing has any meaning.

Meaning has in fact been eliminated, as far as possible. All books except works of technology have been banned – *pace* Ray Bradbury’s 1953 novel *Fahrenheit 451*; museum-goers have been slaughtered, *pace* Henry Ford’s ‘History is bunk.’ As for God, he is present ‘as an absence; as though he weren’t there at all’ – except, of course, for the deeply religious John the Savage, who has been raised on a Zuni ‘reservation’ off- limits to normal Brave New Worlders. There, archaic life carries on, replete with ‘meaning’ of the most intense kinds. John is the only character in the book who has a real body, but he knows it through pain, not through pleasure. ‘Nothing costs enough here,’ he says of the perfumed new world where he’s been brought as an ‘experiment’.

The ‘comfort’ offered by Mustapha Mond – one of the ten ‘Controllers’ of this world and a direct descendant of Plato’s Guardians – is not enough for John. He wants the old world back – dirt, diseases, free will, fear, anguish, blood, sweat, tears, and all. He believes he has a soul, and like many an early twentieth-century literary possessor of such a thing – such as the missionary in Somerset Maugham’s 1921 story, ‘Miss Thompson’, who hangs himself after sinning with a prostitute – John is made to pay the price for this belief.



Margaret Atwood, author of *The Handmaid's Tale*

In the foreword to *Brave New World* written in 1946, after the horrors of the Second World War and Hitler’s Final Solution, Huxley criticizes himself for having provided only two choices in his 1932 utopia/dystopia – an ‘insane life in Utopia’ or ‘the life of a primitive in an Indian village, more human in some respects, but in others hardly less queer and abnormal’. (He does, in fact, provide a third sort of life – that of the intellectual community of misfits on Iceland – but poor John the Savage isn’t allowed to go there, and he wouldn’t have liked it anyway, as there are no public flagellations available.) The Huxley of 1946 comes up with another sort of utopia, one in which ‘sanity’ is possible. By this, Huxley means a kind of ‘High Utilitarianism’ dedicated to a ‘conscious and rational’ pursuit of man’s ‘Final End’, which is a kind of union with the immanent ‘Tao or Logos, the transcendent Godhead or Brahmin’. No wonder Huxley subsequently got heavily into the mescalin and wrote *The Doors of Perception*, thus inspiring a generation of 1960s hopheads and pop musicians to seek God in altered brain chemistry. His interest in *soma*, it appears, didn’t spring out of nowhere.

Meanwhile, those of us still pottering along on the earthly plane – and thus still able to read books – are left with *Brave New World*. How does it stand up, seventy-five years later? And how close have we come, in real life, to the society of vapid consumers, idle pleasure-seekers, inner-space trippers, and programmed conformists that it presents?

The answer to the first question, for me, is that it stands up very well. It’s still as vibrant, fresh, and somehow shocking as it was when I, for one, first read it.

The answer to the second question, Dear Reader, rests with you. Look in the mirror: do you see Lenina Crowne looking back at you, or do you see John the Savage? If you’re a human being, you’ll be seeing something of both, because we’ve always wanted things both ways. We wish to be as the care- less gods, lying around on Olympus, eternally beautiful, having sex and being entertained by the anguish of others. And at the same time we want to be those anguished others, because we believe, with John, that life has meaning beyond the play of the senses, and that immediate gratification will never be enough.

It was Huxley’s genius to present us to ourselves in all our ambiguity. Alone among the animals, we suffer from the future perfect tense. Rover the Dog cannot imagine a future world of dogs in which all fleas will have been eliminated and doghood will finally have achieved its full glorious potential. But thanks to their uniquely structured languages, human beings can imagine such enhanced states for themselves, though they can also question their own grandiose constructions. It’s these double-sided imaginative abilities that produce masterpieces of speculation such as *Brave New World*.

To quote *The Tempest*, source of Huxley’s title: ‘We are such stuff / As dreams are made on.’ He might well have added: and nightmares.

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