**Which Dystopian Novel Got It Right: Orwell’s ‘1984’ or Huxley’s ‘Brave New World’?**

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In Bookends, two writers take on questions about the world of books. This week, Charles McGrath and Siddhartha Deb debate which classic dystopian vision rings truest at the beginning of 2017: George Orwell’s “1984” or Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World.”

**By Charles McGrath**

*Was Orwell right after all? Not yet. Trump would be much more comfortable in Huxley’s world.*

Photo



Charles McGrath Credit Illustration by R. Kikuo Johnson

A month ago I would have said that not only is “Brave New World” a livelier, more entertaining book than “1984,” it’s also a more prescient one. Orwell didn’t really have much feel for the future, which to his mind was just another version of the present. His imagined London is merely a drabber, more joyless version of the city, still recovering from the Blitz, where he was living in the mid-1940s, just before beginning the novel. The main technological advancement there is the two-way telescreen, essentially an electronic peephole.

Huxley, on the other hand, writing almost two decades earlier than Orwell (his former Eton pupil, as it happened), foresaw a world that included space travel; private helicopters; genetically engineered test tube babies; enhanced birth control; an immensely popular drug that appears to combine the best features of Valium and Ecstasy; hormone-laced chewing gum that seems to work the way Viagra does; a full sensory entertainment system that outdoes IMAX; and maybe even breast implants. (The book is a little unclear on this point, but in “Brave New World” the highest compliment you can pay a woman is to call her “pneumatic.”)

Huxley was not entirely serious about this. He began “Brave New World” as a parody of H.G. Wells, whose writing he detested, and it remained a book that means to be as playful as it is prophetic. And yet his novel much more accurately evokes the country we live in now, especially in its depiction of a culture preoccupied with sex and mindless pop entertainment, than does Orwell’s more ominous book, which seems to be imagining someplace like North Korea.

Or it did until Donald Trump was inaugurated. All of a sudden, as many commentators have pointed out, there were almost daily echoes of Orwell in the news, and “1984” began shooting up the Amazon best-seller list. The most obvious connection to Orwell was the new president’s repeated insistence that even his most pointless and transparent lies were in fact true, and then his adviser Kellyanne Conway’s explanation that these statements were not really falsehoods but, rather, “alternative facts.” As any reader of “1984” knows, this is exactly Big Brother’s standard of truth: The facts are whatever the leader says they are. If you’re a rereader, thumbing through your old Penguin paperback, those endless wars in “1984,” during which the enemy keeps changing — now Eurasia, now Eastasia — no longer seem as far-fetched as they once did, and neither do the book’s organized hate rallies, in which the citizenry works itself into a frenzy against nameless foreigners. Even President Trump’s weirdly impoverished, 12-year-old’s vocabulary has an analogue in “1984,” in which Newspeak isn’t just the medium of double talk; it’s a language busily trying to shed itself of as many words (and as much complexity) as possible.

So was Orwell right after all? Well, not yet. For one thing, the political system of “1984” is an exaggerated version of anticapitalist, Stalin-era Communism, and Trump’s philosophy is anything but that. He would be much more comfortable in Huxley’s world, which is based on rampant consumerism and where hordes of genetically modified losers happily tend to the needs of the winners.

Huxley believed that his version of dystopia was the more plausible one. In a 1949 letter, thanking Orwell for sending him a copy of “1984,” he wrote that he really didn’t think all that torture and jackbooting was necessary to subdue a population, and that he believed his own book offered a better solution. All you need to do, he said, is teach people to love their servitude. The totalitarian rulers in Huxley’s book do this not by oppressing their citizens but by giving them exactly what they want, or what they think they want — which is basically sex, drugs and rock ’n’ roll — and lulling them into complacency. The system entails a certain Trump-like suspicion of science and dismissal of history, but that’s a price the inhabitants of Huxley’s world happily pay. They don’t mourn their lost liberty, the way Orwell’s Winston Smith does; they don’t even know it’s gone.

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**By Siddhartha Deb**

*Why stop at one of two books, as if the literary realm must mimic the denuded, lesser-of-two evils choices of electoral politics?*

Photo



Siddhartha Deb Credit Illustration by R. Kikuo Johnson

There exists a comfortably predictable and, to my mind, uninspired approach to the dystopic novel and its powers of prognosis, a Pavlovian response that involves reaching for a copy of George Orwell’s “1984” or Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World” whenever extreme turbulence hits the West. Together they make up a short reading list, if a rather familiar one, redolent of high school literature classes and expanding, if forced, to Yevgeny Zamyatin’s “We” and Ray Bradbury’s “Fahrenheit 451.” That’s it, we’re done — a brief tour in four books to dystopias where the individual’s sense of freedom is always under threat from the totalitarian state.

The last few months have been hard, no doubt, the news more distressing by the hour, but there is still something perversely groupthinkish in the fact that the impulse of resistance has homed in on the same book, and that a measure of opposition to the horrors of the Trump administration is the climb of “1984” to No. 1 on Amazon. There is much in Orwell’s novel, in fact, that translates poorly into the contemporary moment. From its texture of material deprivation, the loosely packed cigarettes and boiled cabbages recalling wartime rationing in Britain, to its portrayal of Ingsoc, Big Brother and various Ministries (Truth, Peace, Love, Plenty), all of which assume control by a heavily centralized State, it is a work very much of the ’40s as experienced by an English intellectual.

In “Amusing Ourselves to Death,” the American media critic Neil Postman in fact argued that Huxley’s novel was far more relevant than Orwell’s when it came to the United States, where the dominant mode of control over people was through entertainment, distraction, and superficial pleasure rather than through overt modes of policing and strict control over food supplies, at least when it came to managing the middle classes. Three decades after Postman’s account, when we can add reality television, the internet and social media to the deadly amusements available, “Brave New World” can still seem strikingly relevant in its depiction of the relentless pursuit of pleasure. From the use of soma as a kind of happiness drug to the erasure of the past not so much as a threat to government, as is the case in Orwell’s dystopia, but as simply irrelevant (“History is bunk”), Huxley marked out amusement and superficiality as the buttons that control behavior.

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His relentless focus on the body, too, seems inspired, his understanding of what Michel Foucault identified as “biopolitics,” extending to the individual body as well as to entire populations and, in “Brave New World,” playing out as a eugenic system based on caste, class, race, looks and size. As for his depiction of the “savage reservation” in New Mexico, this seems to foreshadow the fetishization of the natural on the part of one of the most artifice-ridden populations in the history of the world.

A great deal funnier, subtler and darker than Orwell’s book, Huxley’s satire nevertheless has its limitations. A World State? Games of escalator squash? In any case, why stop at one of two books, as if the literary realm must mimic the denuded, lesser-of-two-evils choices of electoral politics? There are other powerful fictional dystopias that speak to the United States of today, including a significant portion of the oeuvre of Philip K. Dick and Octavia E. Butler. There is J.G. Ballard’s hallucinatory Reagan-era “Hello America,” with a future United States that has many contending presidents, including President Manson, who plays nuclear roulette in Las Vegas. Why not read Cormac McCarthy’s “The Road” and Sandra Newman’s “The Country of Ice Cream Star” and Anna North’s “America Pacifica” and Emily St. John Mandel’s “Station Eleven” and Claire Vaye Watkins’s “Gold Fame Citrus” and Vanessa Veselka’s “Zazen” and Paolo Bacigalupi’s “The Water Knife”? If the world is going dark, we may as well read as much as possible before someone turns off the light.

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