

A writer and his work

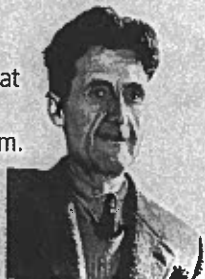


Listen to a radio programme about George Orwell

George Orwell (1903-1950)

is the pen name of Eric Arthur Blair. He was born in India, then part of the British Empire. He attended Eton School in England from 1917 to 1921. Because he could not afford university studies, he went back to India and joined the Imperial Police in Burma. He thus gained first-hand experience of British colonial life and despised what he saw.

His work is marked by his profound awareness of social injustice and an intense opposition to oppression and totalitarianism. Besides novels that have become classics, his works include essays and literary criticism. His influence has been such that the word *Orwellian* now refers to anything politically manipulative and tyrannical.



Selective bibliography

1933 *Down and Out in Paris and London*: his experience of the few years living with very little money in Paris and London.

1937 *The Road to Wigan Pier*: a description of working-class life in Britain during the Depression.

1938 *Homage to Catalonia*: a testimony of his participation to the Spanish Civil War on the Republican side.

1945 *Animal Farm*

1949 *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

→ His two best-known novels. In their different ways, they both show his disappointment with the results of socialist revolutions, especially in the Soviet Union.

About Animal Farm

“A book about talking animals”

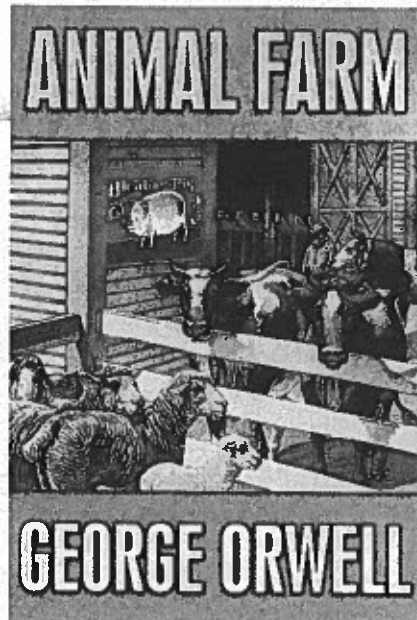
I grew up with George Orwell. I was born in 1939, and *Animal Farm* was published in 1945. Thus, I was able to read it at the age of nine. It was lying around the house, and I mistook it for a book about talking animals, sort of like *Wind in the Willows**. I knew nothing about the kind of politics in the book—the child’s version of politics then, just after the war, consisted of the simple notion that Hitler was bad but dead.

So I gobbled up the adventures of Napoleon and Snowball, the smart, greedy, upwardly mobile pigs, and Squealer the spin-doctor, and Boxer the noble but thick-witted horse, and the easily led, slogan-chanting sheep, without making any connection with historical events.

To say that I was horrified by this book is an understatement. The fate of the farm animals was so grim, the pigs so mean and mendacious and treacherous, the sheep so stupid. Children have a keen sense of injustice, and this was the thing that upset me the most: the pigs were so unjust. I cried my eyes out when Boxer the horse had an accident and was carted off to be made into dog food, instead of being given the quiet corner of the pasture he’d been promised.

The whole experience was deeply disturbing to me, but I am forever grateful to Orwell for alerting me early to the danger flags I’ve tried to watch out for since. In the world of *Animal Farm*, most speechifying and public palaver is bullshit and instigated lying, and though many characters are good-hearted and mean well, they can be frightened into closing their eyes to what’s really going on.

Margaret Atwood, *The Guardian*, June 16, 2003



**Wind in the Willows*: a British 1908 classic of children’s literature with anthropomorphised animal characters

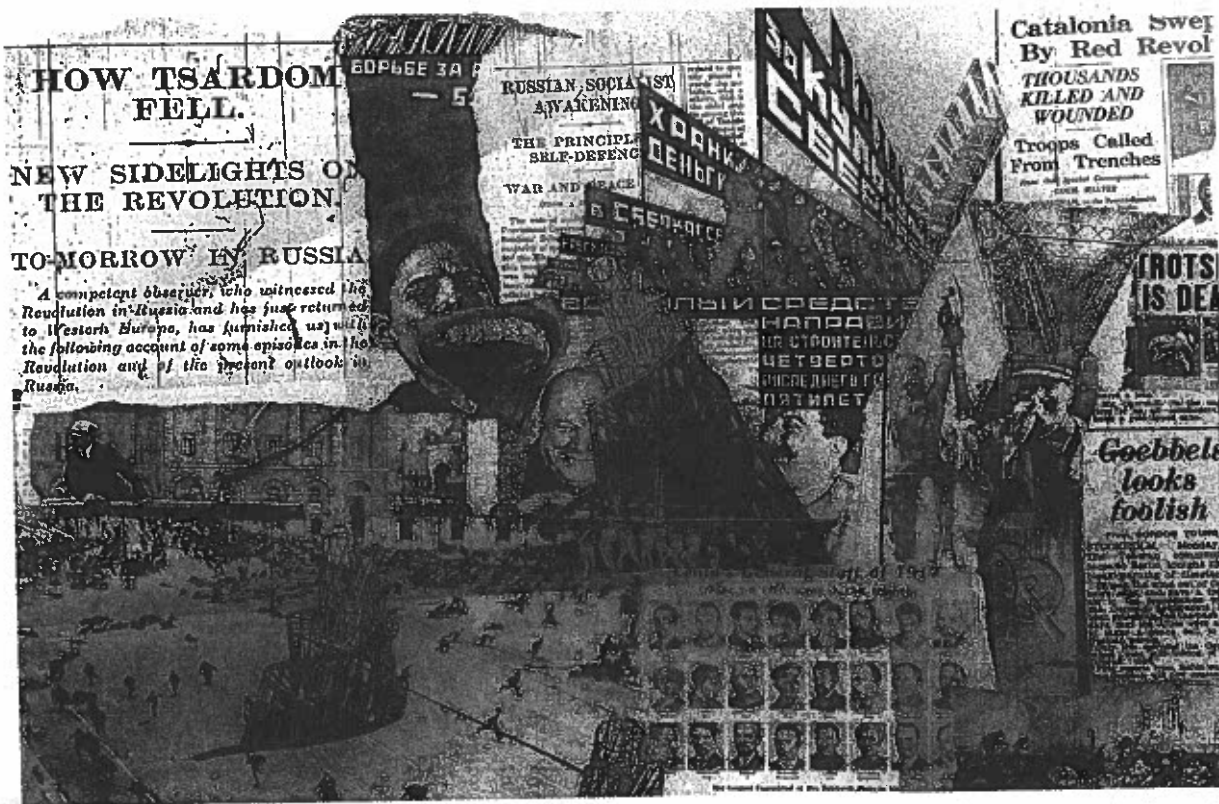


Illustration for the inner cover of *Animal Farm*, ↑
Ralph Steadman, 1996 (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

“A fundamental modern myth”

Animal Farm: A Fairy Story—surely the most important work of fictional political satire to be written in twentieth-century Britain—was first published on 17 August 1945, just as what we have come to call “the post-war world” began. It appeared in the month when US atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and when the ensuing Japanese surrender brought six years of world-wide hostilities to an end. [...]

Animal Farm [...] was initially largely directed into persuading British liberals about the real nature of Stalinism. At the same time the book is a direct encounter with the processes of totalitarianism, and in it all the machinery of modern state oppression is brought to bear, not least the silencing and calumniating of those who have alternative visions [...].

The plain fable of *Animal Farm*—on the one hand reassuringly English, on the other worldly-wise and universal—radiated through the fifties, when writing often became a form of moral politics. [...]

The sign of a good book is that it is endlessly re-read and, in a sense, endlessly rewritten. Today, around

fifty years after its time of writing, *Animal Farm* retains its power. It has never been out of print; it has penetrated many societies and transformed many imaginations. Indeed, it has just been published in its sixty-eighth language. It has continued to comment on a series of late twentieth-century revolutions that have followed the inexorable course of the fiction itself. [...]

Though it remains a very English book, smelling both of the British farmyard and a distinctive and traditional sense of liberalism and decency, neither extreme in form nor unexpected in its moral urges, its meaning has stretched out into contemporary history and into world culture; we have all lived or risk living somewhere close to *Animal Farm*, or *Manor Farm* as it becomes again at the end. It is one of the great modern political allegories, and the story it tells, of innocent and necessary revolution turning into dictatorship and betrayal, is not just a striking piece of political intelligence but a fundamental modern myth.

Malcolm Bradbury, Introduction to
Animal Farm (2000)

Before reading *Animal Farm*

1. Read the documents on these pages. From what you have learnt about the type of story it is, the author's beliefs and engagement, and the political context of *Animal Farm*, say what sort of story you expect to read.
2. Start reading the story until you reach the beginning of the passage p. 64 of this book (Text 1). Explain what events took place in *Manor Farm*.