

Big Brother is watching you

from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* George Orwell, 1949

WARM UP

1 Answer the questions.

- How have communication technologies changed the way we live?
- Is there such a thing as privacy in a world where technologies are everywhere?

A What's the weather like?

B What time is it?

C What image dominates the inside of the building?

D Where does the voice come from?

E What information was the voice reading aloud?

Nineteen Eighty-Four, written in 1948 and published in 1949, expresses Orwell's dark vision of the future. It tells the story of Winston Smith, who lives in Airstrip One, under the absolute rule of the Party and its emblem, Big Brother. In the novel Airstrip One, a province of Oceania, refers to Britain.

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions, though not quickly enough to prevent a swirl of gritty dust from entering along with him.

The hallway smelt of boiled cabbage and old rag mats. At one end of it a coloured poster, too large for indoor display, had been tacked to the wall. It depicted simply an enormous face, more than a metre wide; the face of a man of about forty-five, with a heavy black moustache and ruggedly handsome features. Winston made for the stairs. It was no use trying the lift. Even at the best of times it was seldom working, and at present the electric current was cut off during daylight hours. It was part of the economy drive in preparation for Hate Week. The flat was seven flights up, and Winston, who was thirty-nine and had a varicose ulcer above his right ankle, went slowly, resting several times on the way. On each landing, opposite the lift-shaft, the poster with the enormous face gazed from the wall. It was one of those pictures which are so contrived that the eyes follow you about when you move. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption beneath it ran.

Inside the flat a fruity voice was reading out a list of figures which had something to do with the production of pig-iron. The voice came from an oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror which formed part of the surface of the right-hand wall. Winston turned a switch and the voice sank somewhat, though the words were still distinguishable. The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely. He moved over to the window: a smallish, frail figure, the meagreness of his body merely emphasised by



the blue overalls which were the uniform of the party. His hair was very fair, his face naturally sanguine, his skin roughened by coarse soap and blunt razor blades and the cold of the winter that had just ended.

35 Outside, even through the shut window-pane, the world looked cold. Down in the street little eddies of wind were whirling dust and torn paper into spirals, and though the sun was shining and the sky a harsh blue, there seemed to be no colour in anything, except the posters that were plastered everywhere. The blackmoustachio'd face gazed down from
40 every commanding corner. There was one on the house-front immediately opposite. BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU, the caption said, while the dark eyes looked deep into Winston's own.

(Chapter 1)

Glossary

nuzzled	pressed
swirl	a twisting circular movement
gritty	sandy
hallway	the area just inside the door
rag	a small piece of old cloth, for example one used for cleaning things
mat	<i>zerbino</i>
tacked	attached
ruggedly	irregularly
drive	effort
flight	set of stairs
lift-shaft	lift-column
contrived	false and not natural
caption	words printed below a picture to explain what it is showing
fruity	deep and pleasant
pig-iron	iron that is not pure (<i>ghisa</i>)
dulled	not very clear
dimmed	less bright
overalls	a piece of clothing like a shirt and trousers in one piece worn over other clothes to protect them
coarse	not flat or smooth
blunt	not sharp
eddies	circular movement
whirl	to turn or spin around very quickly
harsh	unpleasantly bright
plaster	to completely cover a surface with something, especially large pieces of paper, pictures, etc.
commanding	a position from which you can clearly see a long way

DIGGING INTO THE TEXT

2  2.141 Read and listen to the text. Answer the questions next to each paragraph.

3 List all the information you have about Winston.

- name:
- home address:
- age:
- other information:
- physical appearance:

4 **PERSONAL RESPONSE** Read what the American journalist Lewis Beale, from CNN, wrote. Do you agree with his point of view? Can you find any examples to illustrate what he is describing?

“We live in a world that George Orwell predicted in “1984.” [...] Comparisons between Orwell's novel about a tightly controlled totalitarian future ruled by the ubiquitous Big Brother and today are, in fact, quite apt. [...] when a government agency can monitor everyone's phone calls, we have all become suspects. This is one of the most frightening aspects of our modern society. [...] What this means, unfortunately, is that we are all Winston Smith. And Big Brother is the modern surveillance state.”

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

5 Complete the paragraph with the words below.

controls • true • manipulation • rebellion • totalitarian

Nineteen Eighty-Four was meant as a warning: if nothing were done to avoid it, the society it describes might come ¹ in less than forty years. The setting of the novel is a **dystopia** *. It is about a perfect ² society in which the government monitors and ³ every aspect of human life. Different techniques and instruments are used for this purpose. Among others, technology and the ⁴ of language. The party has absolute control of the press, communication, and propaganda. Any form of ⁵ is punished.

* **Dystopia** An imagined world that is far worse than our own, as opposed to a **utopia**, which is an ideal place or state. A dystopia usually exists in the future. In it the conditions of life are extremely bad due to deprivation, oppression or terror. Science fiction often features dystopias written as warnings because they show what nightmarish consequences current trends may have.

▶ THE CHARACTERS' GALLERY

6 Read the descriptions of the most important characters of the novel. Complete the gaps (1-5) with the missing sentences (a-e).

- a for her own enjoyment
- b who hates the totalitarian control
- c He may not actually exist.
- d with the caption "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU."
- e He has revolutionary dreams.

▶ Winston Smith

He is a thin, frail, intellectual man of thirty-nine years old

1 and repression that are characteristic of his government.

2 He works at the Ministry of Truth and his job is to rewrite history books. His crime is not to hate Big Brother, but to love Julia and to meet her in secret.

▶ Julia

She is Winston's lover, a beautiful dark-haired girl working in the Fiction Department at the Ministry of Truth. Julia is pragmatic and optimistic. Unlike Winston who has more ideological motivations, she rebels against the Party 3

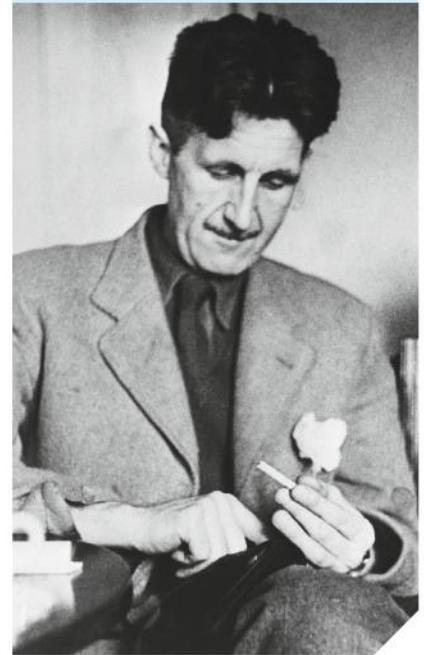
▶ Big Brother

He never appears in the novel. 4 However, Big Brother, the ruler of Oceania, is an extremely important figure. Wherever he looks Winston sees posters of Big Brother's face 5 Big Brother's image is on coins and broadcast on telescreens.

Let's meet the author

George Orwell
(1903-1950)

George Orwell is Eric Blair's pen-name. He was born in India in 1903 and educated in England at Eton. He served in Burma as part of the Indian Imperial Police during the 1920s, an experience that changed him a lot. He used his life experiences – from working in restaurants in Paris to fighting for the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War – to explore social, political, and literary themes. During the Second World War, he worked for the BBC and wrote as a journalist for the *Observer* and the *Tribune*. His health was always fragile. Blair died of tuberculosis at only 47 years old in 1950. Apart from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* he wrote *Animal Farm* and several other books and essays.



7 Answer the questions.

- 1 What does the title "Big Brother" refer to?
- 2 What is the connection between the TV show and the novel?
- 3 What do you think about this kind of reality show?



Lit &
POP

"Big Brother" has given the name to a popular **TV reality show**. In the show the contestants live together in a house under constant surveillance and isolated from the outside world for an extended period of time.

▶ THE BOOK AND ITS TIME

Nineteen Eighty-Four was published in 1949. Several events of the early 20th century contributed to Orwell's mood in writing the novel, including:

- ▶ World War I
- ▶ the Great Depression
- ▶ Stalin's rise to power in the Soviet Union
- ▶ World War II and the 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Nineteen Eighty-Four was not only an attack against the tyrannical political system of Stalinism but also a statement of dissatisfaction with political trends in the "democratic" world of Western Europe and the United States.

▶ THE LANGUAGE OF BOOKS

Language and the use of language as a political tool is a major theme of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Some of the words and expressions Orwell introduced in the book are still used in the English language today.

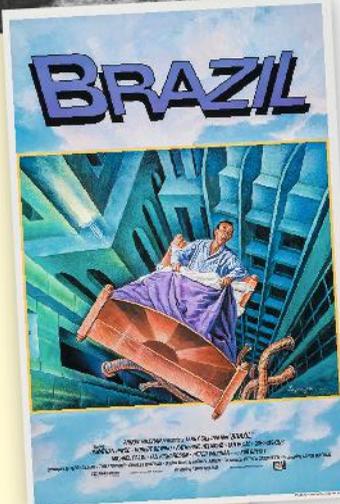
8 Complete each paragraph (1-4) with an appropriate title, choosing from the following words.

Orwellian • doublethink • Big Brother • Newspeak

- 1 *Newspeak*
A form of English that the totalitarian government uses to discourage free thinking. Orwell thought that government could control people through the use of language. Without a word or words to express an idea, the idea itself was impossible to conceive.
- 2
The expression is now used to describe any government or organisation that has complete power, allows no freedom, and carefully watches what people are doing to limit their freedom e.g. *Increasingly, the state is taking a big brother role in this area.*
- 3
A dishonest belief in two opposing ideas at the same time.
- 4
Adjective used to describe writing that expresses a pessimistic view of a world where every aspect of life is controlled and organised by the State.



The BBC adapted the book for television in 1954. It caused lots of protests because people thought the content was disturbing and subversive. Questions were asked in the House of Commons when it was said that one viewer had actually died of shock while watching.

Two film versions were made, in 1956 and (appropriately) 1984. The brilliant and depressing 1984 version of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is often compared to the dystopian movie *Brazil* (which came out one year later, in 1985). *Brazil* takes a much more subversive view of Orwell's themes.

- 9 Surf the Net and watch the first scenes of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984 film version) and of *Brazil*. Compare them to the beginning of the novel you have just read.