

Review: 1984

Book Summary:

The novel, published in 1949, takes place in 1984 and presents an imaginary future where a totalitarian state controls every aspect of life, even people's thoughts. The state is called Oceania and is ruled by a group known as the Party; its leader and dictator is Big Brother.

Winston Smith, the central character, is a thirty-nine year old man living in London. He secretly hates the Party and decides to rebel by starting a diary in which he reveals his rebellious thoughts. Through keeping a diary, Winston commits thoughtcrime and knows that one day he will be discovered by the Thought Police and probably killed.

Winston is fascinated by "proles," the lowest class in the social hierarchy of Oceania. They are the only group allowed to live pretty much as they like without heavy police surveillance. He befriends Mr. Charrington, the prole owner of a junk-shop, who shares his interest in the past and life before the rule of Big Brother.

At work, a dark-haired girl who works in another department approaches Winston in the corridor. She pretends to fall and hurt herself; when he helps her up she slips a piece of paper into his hand. It says "I love you." Winston is surprised and disturbed by this; any sexual relationship between Party members is strictly forbidden. Nevertheless, he is intrigued. They secretly arrange to meet in the country. He begins a love affair with the girl, who finally introduces herself as Julia. They have to be very cautious and meet in places that aren't watched: a clearing in the woods, an old church. Winston and Julia eventually rent the room above Mr. Charrington's junk-shop as a long-term private place for the two of them.

A member of the Inner Party, O'Brien, finds an excuse to give Winston his home address, an unusual event. Winston, noticeably excited, has always believed O'Brien may not be politically orthodox and could sympathize with his hatred of the Party. Winston and Julia go to see O'Brien and he enlists them into the Brotherhood, a secret organization dedicated to fighting Big Brother. He arranges to give Winston a copy of "The Book," a document that contains the truth about Big Brother and the development of the super-states. Winston and Julia go to their room above the junk-shop to read the book. The Thought Police burst in to arrest them and they discover that Mr. Charrington is a Thought Police agent. They are taken separately to the Ministry of Love. There, Winston learns that O'Brien is in fact an orthodox government agent and has deliberately tricked him. O'Brien takes charge of the process of "re-integrating" Winston, torturing and brainwashing him until he fully believes in the Party and its doctrines. As the final step of this process, Winston is forced to betray his love for Julia, and his feelings for her are destroyed.

Winston is released to live out his final days as a broken man. Soon, the Thought Police will execute him. Winston has submitted completely and loves Big Brother.

Plot Overview:

Winston Smith is a low-ranking member of the ruling Party in London, in the nation of Oceania. Everywhere Winston goes, even his own home, the Party watches him through telescreens; everywhere

he looks he sees the face of the Party's seemingly omniscient leader, a figure known only as Big Brother. The Party controls everything in Oceania, even the people's history and language. Currently, the Party is forcing the implementation of an invented language called Newspeak, which attempts to prevent political rebellion by eliminating all words related to it. Even thinking rebellious thoughts is illegal. Such thought crime is, in fact, the worst of all crimes.

As the novel opens, Winston feels frustrated by the oppression and rigid control of the Party, which prohibits free thought, sex, and any expression of individuality. Winston dislikes the party and has illegally purchased a diary in which to write his criminal thoughts. He has also become fixated on a powerful Party member named O'Brien, whom Winston believes is a secret member of the Brotherhood—the mysterious, legendary group that works to overthrow the Party.

Winston works in the Ministry of Truth, where he alters historical records to fit the needs of the Party. He notices a co-worker, a beautiful dark-haired girl, staring at him, and worries that she is an informant who will turn him in for his thought crime. He is troubled by the Party's control of history: the Party claims that Oceania has always been allied with Eastasia in a war against Eurasia, but Winston seems to recall a time when this was not true. The Party also claims that Emmanuel Goldstein, the alleged leader of the Brotherhood, is the most dangerous man alive, but this does not seem plausible to Winston. Winston spends his evenings wandering through the poorest neighbourhoods in London, where the proletarians, or proles, live squalid lives, relatively free of Party monitoring.

One day, Winston receives a note from the dark-haired girl that reads "I love you." She tells him her name, Julia, and they begin a covert affair, always on the lookout for signs of Party monitoring. Eventually they rent a room above the secondhand store in the prole district where Winston bought the diary. This relationship lasts for some time. Winston is sure that they will be caught and punished sooner or later (the fatalistic Winston knows that he has been doomed since he wrote his first diary entry), while Julia is more pragmatic and optimistic. As Winston's affair with Julia progresses, his hatred for the Party grows more and more intense. At last, he receives the message that he has been waiting for: O'Brien wants to see him.

Winston and Julia travel to O'Brien's luxurious apartment. As a member of the powerful Inner Party (Winston belongs to the Outer Party), O'Brien leads a life of luxury that Winston can only imagine. O'Brien confirms to Winston and Julia that, like them, he hates the Party, and says that he works against it as a member of the Brotherhood. He indoctrinates Winston and Julia into the Brotherhood, and gives Winston a copy of Emmanuel Goldstein's book, the manifesto of the Brotherhood. Winston reads the book—an amalgam of several forms of class-based twentieth-century social theory—to Julia in the room above the store. Suddenly, soldiers barge in and seize them. Mr. Charrington, the proprietor of the store, is revealed as having been a member of the Thought Police all along.

Torn away from Julia and taken to a place called the Ministry of Love, Winston finds that O'Brien, too, is a Party spy who simply pretended to be a member of the Brotherhood in order to trap Winston into committing an open act of rebellion against the Party. O'Brien spends months torturing and brainwashing Winston, who struggles to resist. At last, O'Brien sends him to the dreaded Room 101, the final destination for anyone who opposes the Party. Here, O'Brien tells Winston that he will be forced to confront his worst fear. Throughout the novel, Winston has had recurring nightmares about rats; O'Brien now straps a cage full of rats onto Winston's head and prepares to allow the rats to eat his face. Winston snaps, pleading with O'Brien to do it to Julia, not to him.

Giving up Julia is what O'Brien wanted from Winston all along. His spirit broken, Winston is released to the outside world. He meets Julia but no longer feels anything for her. He has accepted the Party entirely and has learned to love Big Brother.

P.S.

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