



1984

by George Orwell

## In a Nutshell

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*1984* is a famous novel by [George Orwell](#) about an ideal or "utopian" society gone bad. In literary terms, you would call this a "dystopian" society. Its primary message is something along the lines of "don't let the government have too much power or they will make your lives completely miserable and possibly torture you for extended periods of time." Orwell is a master satirist and *1984* is a textbook example of his scathing exaggerations. The book is so famous that we hear its language everywhere - all those "Big Brother" jokes? This is where they came from.

## Why Should I Care?

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A bald [Natalie Portman](#), a sunglasses-sporting [Keanu Reeves](#), and a pale [Christian Bale](#). Believe it or not, even if you've never read *1984*, these superstars have burned its premise and plot onto your Shmoopster brain.

Oh yes indeed, you know *1984* like the back of your hand, and more than likely it hits home for you.

Still not quite sure what we're talking about? [V for Vendetta](#), [The Matrix](#), [Equilibrium](#) - we've been imagining what life would be like if it were ruled by an oppressive, tyrannical government for years, and probably will continue to imagine it for a long time to come. But the question on our minds is, *why* ?

Why is this plot so continually compelling to us, to authors, to moviemakers, and to artists? Isn't America the land of the free, the home of the brave? The place with spacious skies, amber waves of grain, opportunity at every corner, where dreams come true? So what are we so worried about - what's with all of the anxiety?

Well, if you've read our discussion on "[Making the Constitution](#)" in Shmoop History, you'll know that a constitution is a tricky thing to make, a good government is a hard thing to pin down, and the protection of civil liberties and basic rights (like free speech), is not always clear cut.

Take, for example, the syndicated talk show host, Michael Savage, who, on July 21st, 2008, exclaimed to eight million listeners, "I'll tell you what autism is. In 99 percent of the cases, it's a brat who hasn't been told to cut the act out. That's what autism is" ([source](#)). Savage, who holds two masters degrees in the medical field and a PhD in nutritional ethnomedicine, argued that more and more children are being misdiagnosed with autism as a way of increasing funding for schools, doctors, and

pharmaceutical companies.

As you can imagine, Savage's words sparked heated debate and outrage from people all over the world, especially from those who battle or know someone who battles this neurological disorder.

Many demanded that he be fired, that he apologize, or that he be punished.

Radio stations across the country dropped his show.

But here's where it gets muddy.

The First Amendment in the [Bill of Rights](#) grants all U.S. citizens the right to free speech:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

Just as Savage's listeners can petition against him, he has the right to say whatever he chooses.

Sure, he has a responsibility as a talk show host to be balanced and thoughtful in his remarks, but, ultimately, he can exercise free speech.

Tricky stuff, no? But can you imagine how easy it would be for us to ban Savage from the radio or to prevent him from ever speaking publicly again?

These are difficult questions that, in a society that values civil liberties, will arise over and over again.

*1984* shows us what happens when we stop struggling with these questions and allow a small group of people in power to make all of the judgment calls.