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## Main content

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George Orwell has left us with many of the terms that have helped to define the horrors of the twentieth century -- "Big Brother," "Newspeak," "doublethink," "Ministry of Truth." He made 1984 much more than a calendar designation, and his books, novels, reportage, and essays are assigned reading in high schools and universities around the world. And so, in a certain sense, the question addressed by Christopher Hitchens' new book, *Why Orwell Matters*, seems an easy one. But George Orwell was not an easy thinker to deal with when he was alive, and in the half century since his death he seems to have become even more complicated.

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MICHAEL ENRIGHT: Where does your book's title come from: *Why Orwell Matters*?

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS: The cheap and opportunist answer -- and the one I shouldn't forbid myself -- is that next year will be his centennial. I thought someone should mark the hundredth anniversary of his birth. He only lived to be 46, and he got a great deal done in that time. Consider his consistent opposition to fascism and to Stalinism -- to the totalitarian temptation, if you like -- and his constant critique of empire and the class system. He is one of the few people who lived during the mid-twentieth century who got all three of the major questions of that century right. And he did this not just by having opinions that turned out to be correct, but by struggling within himself -- with mistakes he'd made, with illusions he had nurtured. Many others made similar mistakes, but he worked hard to achieve a clarity of mind about this kind of thing, and he demonstrated considerable intellectual courage and moral fortitude -- and physical courage, too, when he joined the fight to save the Spanish Republic.

He was shot in the throat there.

Shot in the throat by the fascists at the front line -- and very nearly shot in the back by the communists in the rear.

We have known all this about Orwell for a long time. But is something happening now that puts his reputation in danger -- somewhat under attack?

I started to believe that his reputation was in danger for two reasons. One is that he has become a set-book author. He is now such a respectable thinker that his works are taught to schoolchildren, and the author held up as a good example. No worse death can envelop a man of principle. And I felt sure that a lot of these children in school were made to read Orwell -- *Animal Farm* or *Nineteen Eighty-Four* -- as simple Cold War propaganda, as anti-communist parable. This simplistic reading certainly is not what the author intended. The second danger is that Orwell is taught and presented as a sort of insufferable example of a good man -- as if he were a plaster saint. And I thought he should be rescued from that. Because he always believed that there should be argument, confrontation, disagreement....

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