

1984 SparkNotes Summary Book 1

Summary: Chapter I

On a cold day in April of 1984, a man named Winston Smith returns to his home, a dilapidated apartment building called Victory Mansions. Thin, frail, and thirty-nine years old, it is painful for him to trudge up the stairs because he has a varicose ulcer above his right ankle. The elevator is always out of service so he does not try to use it. As he climbs the staircase, he is greeted on each landing by a poster depicting an enormous face, underscored by the words “BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU.”

Winston is an insignificant official in the Party, the totalitarian political regime that rules all of Airstrip One—the land that used to be called England—as part of the larger state of Oceania. Though Winston is technically a member of the ruling class, his life is still under the Party's oppressive political control. In his apartment, an instrument called a telescreen—which is always on, spouting propaganda, and through which the Thought Police are known to monitor the actions of citizens—shows a dreary report about pig iron. Winston keeps his back to the screen. From his window he sees the Ministry of Truth, where he works as a propaganda officer altering historical records to match the Party's official version of past events. Winston thinks about the other Ministries that exist as part of the Party's governmental apparatus: the Ministry of Peace, which wages war; the Ministry of Plenty, which plans economic shortages; and the dreaded Ministry of Love, the center of the Inner Party's loathsome activities.

WAR IS PEACE

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH

From a drawer in a little alcove hidden from the telescreen, Winston pulls out a small diary he recently purchased. He found the diary in a secondhand store in the proletarian district, where the very poor live relatively unimpeded by Party monitoring. The *proles*, as they are called, are so impoverished and insignificant that the Party does not consider them a threat to its power. Winston begins to write in his diary, although he realizes that this constitutes an act of rebellion against the Party. He describes the films he watched the night before. He thinks about his lust and hatred for a dark-haired girl who works in the Fiction Department at the Ministry of Truth, and about an important Inner Party member named O'Brien—a man he is sure is an enemy of the Party. Winston remembers the moment before that day's Two Minutes Hate, an assembly during which Party orators whip the populace into a frenzy of hatred against the enemies of Oceania. Just before the Hate began, Winston knew he hated Big Brother, and saw the same loathing in O'Brien's eyes.

Winston looks down and realizes that he has written “DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER” over and over again in his diary. He has committed thoughtcrime—the most unpardonable crime—and he knows that the Thought Police will seize him sooner or later. Just then, there is a knock at the door.

Winston opens the door fearfully, assuming that the Thought Police have arrived to arrest him for writing in the diary. However, it is only Mrs. Parsons, a neighbor in his apartment building, needing help with the plumbing while her husband is away. In Mrs. Parsons's apartment, Winston is tormented by the fervent Parsons children, who, being Junior Spies, accuse him of thoughtcrime. The Junior Spies is an organization of children who monitor adults for disloyalty to the Party, and frequently succeed in catching them—Mrs. Parsons herself seems afraid of her zealous children.

The children are very agitated because their mother won't let them go to a public hanging of some of the Party's political enemies in the park that evening. Back in his apartment, Winston remembers a dream in which a man's voice—O'Brien's, he thinks—said to him, "We shall meet in the place where there is no darkness." Winston writes in his diary that his thoughtcrime makes him a dead man, then he hides the book.

Summary: Chapter III

Winston dreams of being with his mother on a sinking ship. He feels strangely responsible for his mother's disappearance in a political purge almost twenty years ago. He then dreams of a place called The Golden Country, where the dark-haired girl takes off her clothes and runs toward him in an act of freedom that annihilates the whole Party. He wakes with the word "Shakespeare" on his lips, not knowing where it came from. A high-pitched whistle sounds from the telescreen, a signal that office workers must wake up. It is time for the Physical Jerks, a round of grotesque exercise.

As he exercises, Winston thinks about his childhood, which he barely remembers. Having no physical records such as photographs and documents, he thinks, makes one's life lose its outline in one's memory. Winston considers Oceania's relationship to the other countries in the world, Eurasia and Eastasia. According to official history, Oceania has always been at war with Eurasia and in alliance with Eastasia, but Winston knows that the records have been changed. Winston remembers that no one had heard of Big Brother, the leader of the Party, before 1960, but stories about him now appear in histories going back to the 1930s.

As Winston has these thoughts, a voice from the telescreen suddenly calls out his name, reprimanding him for not working hard enough at the Physical Jerks. Winston breaks out into a hot sweat and tries harder to touch his toes.

Summary: Chapter IV

Winston goes to his job in the Records section of the Ministry of Truth, where he works with a "speakwrite" (a machine that types as he dictates into it) and destroys obsolete documents. He updates Big Brother's orders and Party records so that they match new developments—Big Brother can never be wrong. Even when the citizens of Airstrip One are forced to live with less food, they are told that they are being given more than ever and, by and large, they believe it. This day, Winston must alter the record of a speech made in December 1983, which referred to Comrade Withers, one of Big Brother's former officials who has since been vaporized. Since Comrade Withers was executed as an enemy of the Party, it is unacceptable to have a document on file praising him as a loyal Party member.

Winston invents a person named Comrade Ogilvy and substitutes him for Comrade Withers in the records. Comrade Ogilvy, though a product of Winston's imagination, is an ideal Party man, opposed to sex and suspicious of everyone. Comrade Withers has become an "unperson:" he has ceased to exist. Watching a man named Comrade Tillotson in the cubicle across the way, Winston reflects on the activity in the Ministry of Truth, where thousands of workers correct the flow of history to make it match party ideology, and churn out endless drivel—even pornography—to pacify the brutally destitute proletariat.

Summary: Chapter V

Winston has lunch with a man named Syme, an intelligent Party member who works on a revised dictionary of Newspeak, the official language of Oceania. Syme tells Winston that Newspeak aims to narrow the range of thought to render thoughtcrime impossible. If there are no words in a language that are capable of expressing independent, rebellious thoughts, no one will ever be able to rebel, or even to conceive of the idea of rebellion. Winston thinks that Syme's intelligence will get him vaporized one day. Parsons, a pudgy and fervent Party official and the husband of the woman whose plumbing Winston fixed in Chapter II, comes into the canteen and elicits a contribution from Winston for neighborhood Hate Week. He apologizes to Winston for his children's harassment the day before, but is openly proud of their spirit.

Suddenly, an exuberant message from the Ministry of Plenty announces increases in production over the loudspeakers. Winston reflects that the alleged increase in the chocolate ration to twenty grams was actually a reduction from the day before, but those around him seem to accept the announcement joyfully and without suspicion. Winston feels that he is being watched; he looks up and sees the dark-haired girl staring at him. He worries again that she is a Party agent.

Summary: Chapter VI

That evening, Winston records in his diary his memory of his last sexual encounter, which was with a prole prostitute. He thinks about the Party's hatred of sex, and decides that their goal is to remove pleasure from the sexual act, so that it becomes merely a duty to the Party, a way of producing new Party members. Winston's former wife Katherine hated sex, and as soon as they realized they would never have children, they separated.

Winston desperately wants to have an enjoyable sexual affair, which he sees as the ultimate act of rebellion. In his diary, he writes that the prole prostitute was old and ugly, but that he went through with the sex act anyway. He realizes that recording the act in his diary hasn't alleviated his anger, depression, or rebellion. He still longs to shout profanities at the top of his voice.

Summary: Chapter VII

Winston writes in his diary that any hope for revolution against the Party must come from the proles. He believes that the Party cannot be destroyed from within, and that even the Brotherhood, a legendary revolutionary group, lacks the wherewithal to defeat the mighty Thought Police. The proles, on the other hand make up eighty-five percent of the population of Oceania, and could easily muster the strength and manpower to overcome the Police. However, the proles lead brutish, ignorant, animalistic lives, and lack both the energy and interest to revolt; most of them do not even understand that the Party is oppressing them.

Winston looks through a children's history book to get a feeling for what has really happened in the world. The Party claims to have built ideal cities, but London, where Winston lives, is a wreck: the electricity seldom works, buildings decay, and people live in poverty and fear. Lacking a reliable official record, Winston does not know what to think about the past. The Party's claims that it has increased the literacy rate, reduced the infant mortality rate, and given everyone better food and shelter could all be fantasy. Winston suspects that these claims are untrue, but he has no way to know for sure, since history has been written entirely by the Party.

In the end the Party would announce that two and two made five, and you would have to believe it.

(See [Important Quotations Explained](#))

Winston remembers an occasion when he caught the Party in a lie. In the mid-1960s, a cultural backlash caused the original leaders of the Revolution to be arrested. One day, Winston saw a few of these deposed leaders sitting at the Chestnut Tree Café, a gathering place for out-of-favor Party members. A song played—“Under the spreading chestnut tree / I sold you and you sold me”—and one of the Party members, Rutherford, began to weep. Winston never forgot the incident, and one day came upon a photograph that proved that the Party members had been in New York at the time that they were allegedly committing treason in Eurasia. Terrified, Winston destroyed the photograph, but it remains embedded in his memory as a concrete example of Party dishonesty.

Winston thinks of his writing in his diary as a kind of letter to O’Brien. Though Winston knows almost nothing about O’Brien beyond his name, he is sure that he detects a strain of independence and rebellion in him, a consciousness of oppression similar to Winston’s own. Thinking about the Party’s control of every record of the truth, Winston realizes that the Party requires its members to deny the evidence of their eyes and ears. He believes that true freedom lies in the ability to interpret reality as one perceives it, to be able to say “ $2 + 2 = 4$.”

Summary: Chapter VIII

When memory failed and written records were falsified . . .

Winston goes for a walk through the prole district, and envies the simple lives of the common people. He enters a pub where he sees an old man—a possible link to the past. He talks to the old man and tries to ascertain whether, in the days before the Party, people were really exploited by bloated capitalists, as the Party records claim. The old man’s memory is too vague to provide an answer. Winston laments that the past has been left to the proles, who will inevitably forget it.

Winston walks to the secondhand store in which he bought the diary and buys a clear glass paperweight with a pink coral center from Mr. Charrington, the proprietor. Mr. Charrington takes him upstairs to a private room with no telescreen, where a print of St. Clement’s Church looks down from the wall, evoking the old rhyme: “Oranges and lemons, say the bells of St. Clement’s / You owe me three farthings, say the bells of St. Martin’s.”

On the way home, Winston sees a figure in blue Party overalls—the dark-haired girl, apparently following him. Terrified, he imagines hitting her with a cobblestone or with the paperweight in his pocket. He hurries home and decides that the best thing to do is to commit suicide before the Party catches him. He realizes that if the Thought Police catch him, they will torture him before they kill him. He tries to calm himself by thinking about O’Brien and about the place where there is no darkness that O’Brien mentioned in Winston’s dreams. Troubled, he takes a coin from his pocket and looks into the face of Big Brother. He cannot help but recall the Party slogans: “WAR IS PEACE,” “FREEDOM IS SLAVERY,” “IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.”