George Orwell : *Animal Farm*

INTRODUCTION

@real_kimkash:

Move over, babe, there's a new talking pig in town!

In fact, there are a lot of talking pigs. And talking horses and birds and cows, for that matter. But George Orwell's Animal Farm is no Jim Henson-inspired comedy about a pig who just wants to be a sheepdog, or bittersweet tale about interspecies love—it's a biting satire about tyrannical governments and a dark warning about the perils of Russian communism.

Today, Animal Farm is a classic. (In fact, we have a sneaking suspicion that you're here because you're being required to read it.) But when Orwell wrote the book in 1943-44, he could hardly find a publisher. In fact, no one took him up on it until 1945, and even then readers weren't too keen on it.

You see, Animal Farm takes a blow at the Soviet Union, especially its leader Josef Stalin—but the Soviet Union was an ally in the U.S.'s fight against Nazi Germany in World War II. Criticism of Stalin wasn't banned in wartime British press, but it wasn't exactly encouraged, either. Stalin may have been bad, but Hitler was worse. When publishing house Faber & Faber rejected Orwell, an editor pointed out that it was simply distasteful to depict Stalin as "a pig."

But Orwell was no knee-jerk anticommunist. In fact, he was a socialist, a simple word for a complex and varied set of beliefs. Let's just say that socialists believe that the means of production (like factories or businesses) should be controlled by the workers for the good of everyone, rather than controlled by a tiny subset of owners for their own profit. In other words, Wal-Mart should be owned by Wal-Mart employees, rather than by the Walton family. (Does that sound crazy? There are co-ops and employee-owned business today that operate in just that way.)

Since communism is an extreme form of socialism, Orwell actually fought alongside communists in the Spanish Civil War during the 1930s. Their enemy was Spanish leader Francisco Franco and his fascist followers, who believed in strong, militaristic national identity united under an authoritarian leader—think the Wizard World under Voldemort, or Mordor under Sauron. But Orwell quickly realized that the communists he was fighting for could be just as totalitarian and oppressive as the fascists.

In fact, his time in Spain made him realize "how easily totalitarian propaganda can control the opinion of enlightened people in democratic countries" (source). And that's where Animal Farm comes in: it shows Stalin's version of communism as the exact opposite of socialist values—as a brutal, oppressive, and unequal regime. Not that he saw Western leaders as much better. Brutal, drunken humans represent western leaders in Animal Farm—and the animals are more afraid of the humans regaining control than they are of the Stalinist pigs.

Orwell satirizes all political tyranny. He's just generous like that.

Okay. But why animals? Why not just write an essay? (Orwell was pretty good at the ol' essay-writing gig, after all.) Or why not write a novel with actual people, like his 1949 political satire Nineteen Eighty-Four?

Well, come on. If you're going to get a lecture about the evils of political tyranny, wouldn't you rather hear it from a talking horse?

What is Animal Farm About

Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror and said, "I'm going to be the President of the United States one day"? Or—let's take it down a notch—have you ever run for class president on a platform of better cafeteria food and free sodas for all?

As your election gift, we'll wrap up for you our very own dog-eared copy of Animal Farm. Using barnyard animals, it provides (practically in bullet point form, and in less than 200 pages) over 200 years of knowledge about leadership and power, distilling all of the mistakes great (and not-so-great) leaders have made over time. Chief among them? Letting the power go to your head and keeping all the free soda for yourself.

Seriously, Mr. or Ms. Future President. Go read this book right now.

Summary

Animal Farm begins with a very drunk Mr. Jones (owner of Manor Farm) doing a really crummy job of, you know, his job. Luckily, there's a wise pig on the farm: Old Major. Old Major encourages the neglected animals to rebel and run the farm themselves with one important qualification: everyone should be equal.

Then he dies.

This seems like a grand idea to everyone except Benjamin, a cynical donkey whose main job in life is to be, well, cynical. So, they rebel. The pigs, being the smartest animals, naturally take the leadership role. So much for that equality business. So much for Old Major's vision of a peaceful coup, too, because there's immediate conflict between two pigs, Napoleon and Snowball. Napoleon wants to sit around and be in charge of everything, while Snowball wants to teach the other animals and build a windmill. Obviously, Snowball's plan is way better, so he wins.

Not. Instead, Napoleon uses his private army of nine ferocious and enormous dogs to become the All Powerful Dominant Boss Leader Chief Pig. Okay, he doesn't call it that, but you know it's in the back of his mind somewhere.

With Snowball out of the picture, the other pigs blame everything on him. They exploit the other animals shamelessly, breaking all the rules about equality that they had established after the Rebellion. Life on the farm gets worse and worse, the animals forget old Major's original dream, and the pigs make some poor management decisions when dealing with the neighboring farms. The culminating miserable moment comes when the pigs send Boxer, a hardworking and loyal horse who is ready for retirement, to his death. Ouch.

In short, the pigs are starting to look a lot like the horrible human owners that we started with at the beginning of this whole mess, walking on two legs and everything. In fact, they may even be worse.

Hm. It looks like grumpy old Eeyore—we mean, Benjamin—was right after all.

Chapter one

Mr. Jones is drunk. Again. He owns Manor Farm, by the way. Also, the animals talk. Work with it.

"Old Major" is a sort of revered, older, wiser boar-pig-dude on the farm. He has a dream, and the others, acknowledging his age, wisdom, and all-around general superiority, gather around (campfire-style) to listen.

The cast of characters is introduced. You've got Jessie, Bluebell, and Pincher (three dogs), Boxer and Clover (horses, male and female, respectively), Muriel (a goat), Benjamin (an old and cynical donkey, good friends with Boxer), Mollie (a silly mare), Moses (a raven), chickens, hens, ducks, two turtledoves, and a partridge in a pear tree.

Old Major suggests that they have an uprising against the lazy, resource-sucking capitalists—ahem, we mean humans—and run the farm themselves.

He introduces some rules for the animals about loyalty (have it), alcohol (don't drink it), money (don't use it), and killing other animals (um, don't do it).

Get out your highlighters, Shmoopers. We have a feeling these rules are going to be important.

After this rousing vision of equality, all the animals sing "Beasts of England," a lovely tune eliciting warm and fuzzy feelings of togetherness.

Chapter 2

Old Major dies, which would have been all jarring and climax-esque if he hadn't predicted it before he gave his speech.

We are told that the pigs, particularly Snowball and Napoleon, are more intelligent than everyone else. (Truth: pigs are wicked smart. Too bad bacon is so delicious.) Well, and then there's Squealer, who's sort of like a used car salesman, only tastier.

Anyway, since they're the geniuses of the farm, the pigs start running the show.

First order of business is to found "Animalism," a system of thought summarizing old Major's teachings.

Moses the crow adds his own twist by coming up with a paradise-like place called Sugarcandy Mountain, which sounds pretty sweet if you ask us. Both literally and slang-ily.

Turns out the horses Boxer and Clover are stupid, but trusting and hard working.

Hm, we're starting to get the feeling that Orwell might be a little speciest.

Mr. Jones gets drunk. Again. So, the animals choose an opportune moment of being (1) underfed and (2) really ticked off as the time to rise up.

So, they rise up—successfully, kicking Mr. Jones out and setting up shop for themselves.

They make more rules: no clothes (including ribbons...brutal) and no sleeping in the house.

They also rename Manor Farm, calling it Animal Farm instead.

The pigs, who apparently can read and write, come up with Seven Commandments. We like you, so we're going to write them out:

(1) Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy. (2) Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings, is a friend. (3) No animal shall wear clothes. (4) No animal shall sleep in a bed. (5) No animal shall drink alcohol. (6) No animal shall kill any other animal. (7) All animals are equal.

Pretty straightforward, right? So it's weird when the pigs steal all the fresh milk from the cows.

We get the feeling that this isn't going to be a communist utopia after all.

Chapter 3

The animals start the great task of running the farm. The pigs supervise. Things seem to be going well. This, of course, is just the set up for disaster.

Boxer, it turns out, is a huge asset. He's big, and not particularly smart, but he works harder than everyone else. In fact, to emphasize this point, he walks around all day repeating, "I will work harder" over and over. Like we said... not too smart.

Mollie the mare, however, is extraordinarily lazy. She also has this odd predilection for ribbons.

Benjamin, we see, is this really cool, cryptic, apathetic guy. (And by guy, we mean donkey.) For example, when asked his opinion on the Rebellion, Benjamin says, "Donkeys live a long time. None of you has ever seen a dead donkey."

The pigs try to educate the farm animals, only to find that their pupils are better at manual labor than, you know, being educated.

To make things easier, the Seven Commandments get condensed to a single maxim: "Four legs good, two legs bad."

Meanwhile, Napoleon the pig sequesters nine newborn puppies. Keep an eye out for those suckers.

The pigs are taking the milk and apples every day, but it's cool, really. See, as the leaders, they have to maintain their health. They don't even like milk and apples.

At this point, please imagine Orwell ROFLing and wiping tears of hilarity off of his typewriter.

Chapter 4

We are introduced to Mr. Pilkington and Mr. Frederick. Each owns one of the neighboring farms. In short, the animals are working on their public image.

But it's not really working. See, the neighboring humans are worried that their animals will rise up if they don't squash Animal Farm.

Snowball, a tactician extraordinaire, prepares the animals for the impending invasion of the humans.

Blood! Battle! Exclamation Points! There are some minor casualties (animals that don't really matter, like sheep) and Snowball is wounded.

Boxer thinks he kills a man and feels super guilty about it. (The stable-lad was only temporarily knocked out though, so he ends up being fine.)

Snowball gets a prize. Rather, he gives himself a prize: "Animal Hero, First Class.

Chapter 5

Something is rotten in the state of the Animal Farm, and it's not the dead sheep from the battle.

Mollie has been cavorting with one of the men on the neighboring farms in return for frivolities like sugar and ribbons. (Hey, we get it.)

Then she abandons the farm altogether. Oops.

Snowball and Napoleon start fighting with each other like two bullies on a playground arguing about who's bigger and who should be captain of the dodge ball team.

Snowball's speeches are better, but Napoleon does this clever campaigning business in the downtime between animal votes: when Snowball makes plans for a windmill for the farm, Napoleon pees on them.

Literally, he actually pees on the plans. Or "urinates," as Orwell so delicately puts it. We're not kidding.

Benjamin pops back up again to say that life is terrible either way, windmill or no windmill. Snowball and Napoleon give speeches about the windmill; Snowball's is superior. But before the vote, Napoleon brings in his private army of puppies, now all grown-up and tooth-baring and vicious, and they chase Snowball out of the farm. Napoleon wins by default.

Or by brute force, depending on your point of view.

Once he's in charge, Napoleon abolishes the meetings. Squealer makes him seem like a god by "explaining" things to the dumber animals.

Oh, and then Napoleon decides to build the windmill after all. How convenient.

Chapter 6

The animals work "like slaves." Heavy irony ensues.

Napoleon's trading with the neighboring farms. But what about the rule against trade?

Yeah. The animals are wondering about that, too. It's cool, though: Squealer has an explanation.

And then the pigs move into the farmhouse. Again, Squealer has an explanation.

Snowball becomes the scapegoat, which is particularly convenient when the windmill blows down in a gale.

Chapter 7

Since the collapse of the windmill, the animals are starving. Still, they put on a good face for the outside world.

The hens find out that their eggs will be taken. When they try to rebel, they're starved (via control of the teeth-baring dogs) and nine die.

What was that we said about irony?

More scapegoating at Snowball's expense. Boxer seems, amazingly, to remember history the way that it occurred, but Squealer quickly convinces him that his memory is faulty.

At a meeting, several animals confess to having been in league with Snowball, or with Jones, or both. (We think the teeth-baring dogs might have had something to do with the confession.)

After they confess, Napoleon… has them killed.

Uh-oh. This Revolution is going downhill fast.

And then, due to Boxer's doubt regarding the new and rewritten history, Napoleon tries (and fails) to have him killed by the dogs.

There's a lot of subtlety here—none of the animals, and especially not Boxer, think for a moment that Napoleon actually ordered the attack. On the surface, it just looks like the dogs went rogue and attacked him.

But some of the animals have picked up on the fact that things aren't quite working out.

Clover looks over the farm and thinks to herself that these scenes of bloody terror are certainly not what the animals have worked so hard for.

The final straw? "Beasts of England" is abolished.

Chapter 8

Okay, wait, but wasn't there some rule about not killing other animals?

Yeah, the animals thought so, too.

It's weird, though: when they read the rules now, they're different: now rule 6 just says something along the lines of not killing without cause.

Napoleon gets a new name, as "Napoleon" is not majestic enough. Now it is "Our Leader, Comrade Napoleon."

He's also becoming a total snob about the amount and consistency of the foam on his cappuccinos. Okay, we made that last part up. But he totally would, if he drank cappuccinos.

Napoleon sells timber to neighboring farmer Frederick, refusing to take payment by check (or rather, "cheque," since this is England), demanding cash instead.

Oops. Turns out the money was fake. That Frederick—such a prankster.

And then the humans attack again, this time dynamiting the windmill the animals were building.

Did we mention they were rebuilding the windmill?

Also, some bloodiness is involved in the battle, and Boxer is injured.

The pigs celebrate their "victory" by dressing up in clothes (not allowed) and drinking alcohol (also not allowed) inside the farmhouse (you got it—not allowed

Chapter 9

Things continue to go downhill. The animals have to rebuild the windmill again, and they have no food and it's winter and Boxer is hurt and it's cold and they have to walk to school every day in the snow, barefoot, uphill both ways.

The pigs, however, seem to be doing just fine in their fat and alcoholic state.

Boxer overexerts himself and collapses; apparently, he is ready for retirement.

The pigs send him to the "hospital," and by hospital they really mean glue factory. No, really, glue factory, as Benjamin reads off the side of the departing van.

Old Benjie finally shows some emotion—namely, rage—as he sees his dear friend being taken to the slaughter.

The pigs use the money they earned off Boxer to buy themselves whiskey.

Chapter 10

Time passes, as Orwell subtly and artistically informs us with the line, "Years passed."

The animals are still happy about the fact that they no longer work for tyrannical masters, even though they're, um, working for tyrannical masters.

Orwell is winking at you, and occasionally nudging you with his (pointy) elbow.

The pigs start walking on two legs and then get the sheep to say, "Four legs good, two legs

better," which we all can agree has a nicer ring to it than version 1.0.

Then comes the big, famous line from the book—the line that, for the rest of your life at cocktail parties, people will say in hopes of sounding smart, and you, thanks to us, will now be able to identify and laugh along into your shrimp with everyone else: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."

The pigs meet inside the farmhouse with the neighboring farmer Pilkington, who congratulates them on running a farm with the hardest working and most underfed animals in England.

More nudging of ribs. Ouch, that one hurt.

The name Animal Farm is done away with and the pigs go back to calling it Manor Farm.

What with the clothes and alcohol and the standing on two legs, the animals peeking through the window realize that there's now literally no way to tell apart the humans and pigs.

Dun dun dun. Orwell: Animal Farm