

I wrote This personal essay for uni about the influence of two books, 1984 and Stephen Donaldson's Lord Foul's Bane, on my reading and writing.

The best books, he perceived, are those that tell you what you know already.
Winston Smith in 1984.

In my mid-teens, George Orwell's novel *1984* told me what I already suspected. It confirmed my thinking that everyone I knew – my iffy schoolmates and, more definite school hates, as well as my teachers and my parents – were all just like me, desperate to fit in because they were too scared not to. *1984* was also full of ideas about how society could be manipulated and had me thinking about what our future world might be like.

A few years later, I escaped to university and found myself surrounded by outsiders. One shoved Stephen Donaldson's *Lord Foul's Bane* into my hand. It had a very flawed hero with whom I identified. Both books greatly affected my future reading as I searched for more stories with flawed outsider characters exploring ideas about future societies. I soon found that science fiction novels and magazines were full of such characteristics.

In an introduction to *1984*, Professor of Politics and Contemporary History Ben Pimlott claims most of its characters are only two-dimensional. As a teenager with limited life experience, I can't remember thinking the characters needed to be more fleshed out; they seemed real enough to me. Pimlott goes on to claim that without its political ideas, *1984* is just an adolescent fantasy "of lonely defiance, furtive sex and deadly terror". I identified with the "lonely defiance". Winston Smith seemed to be a lot like me, who didn't fit into the world, but unlike me, he resisted the pressure to fit in. His resistance made me question my desire to conform and accept my allotted space in society. *1984* had me wanting to read more about outsiders who rejected the need to fit in. Outsiders who were not so much rebelling, more just living their own versions of life.

1984 was much more than a call to defy my peer's low expectations for me. It was a novel full of ideas that sparked my imagination and metaphors that explained the world. Ideas like Newspeak and how language could be used to influence and censor thought. Ideas like the Ministry of Truth and how history could be changed to justify those in power. Ideas like Big Brother and how we are all under surveillance and being scrutinised. *1984* had me wanting to read more idea-driven books. It also had me thinking about whether future societies would be oppressive, utopian, or something in between. At the time I read it, I was an avid fan of *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek* on television, which were shows full of outsiders, such as the Doctor and Spock, and ideas, such as time travel and transporters. Those shows also explored what future societies might be like. Maybe in the future, the world will have one government, like *Star Trek's* Federation. These thoughts led me to read science fiction.

I soon found that science fiction novels and magazines were full of what I was searching for. They are full of ideas, like genetically engineered immortality or living in virtual worlds. They are full of characters who don't fit in, such as child maths prodigy Francis Conway in George Turner's *The Sea and Summer* or the genderless clone Breq in Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice*. Science fiction suggests we might colonise other planets, like in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars*, or an outsider scientist might create a virus that nearly kills everyone, like in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. Science-fiction novels and magazines had me hooked.

Three years after I read *1984*, I appeared to have escaped the clutches of Big Brother to live in a residential college at La Trobe University. A fellow escapee recommended and loaned Stephen Donaldson's *Lord Foul's Bane* to me. In that novel, Thomas Covenant is magically transported from

modern-day America into a world full of sorcerers, spirits, giants, demons and medieval-type humans. Covenant was brought to the land to battle the evil sorcerer Lord Foul. There was an obvious reason for him being chosen: the magical power of his white gold wedding ring, but why did they choose such a flawed human being?

Covenant must be one of the most flawed heroes of literature. Rejected by society due to his leprosy, he is bitter at his treatment and hates himself. He still wears a wedding ring in the deluded hope that his wife might return. Once transported to a new world, a teenager befriends him, and he rapes her. At the time, he did not think the world was real, while as a reader, I was also trying to decide if it was "real". Covenant doesn't trust himself for most of the novel, yet by the end of the story, this very flawed character sacrifices himself to save a world that he is beginning to think is real. Stephen Donaldson says a fantasy world is an expression of its characters, so Lord Foul is an expression of Covenant's contempt for himself. Therefore, Covenant is battling himself. This battle within himself had me identifying with him. On many occasions, my real-life emotions and uncertainty have mirrored Covenant's. He was one of the first really flawed characters I identified with.

Lord Foul's Bane had me wanting to read more novels with flawed characters. It had me rejecting a lot of American science fiction due to its formulaic heroes: alpha males full of moral certainty. They usually have a token flaw, like an inability to talk to women, in an attempt to make them appear more than two-dimensional. One nearly flawless hero in Ben Bova's *Moonrise* infuriated me so much that I cheered when he died, suffocating alone on the moon's surface. In my search for more realistic characters, I found Australian science fiction full of flawed characters, such as Spider, a penniless, divorced and unmotivated repairman in KA Bedford's *Time Machines Repaired While-U-Wait*.

1984 and *Lord Foul's Bane* affected not only what I read but also what I write. I predominately read and write science fiction stories, usually set in the future, that explore ideas about society through flawed characters. In my writing, many of my main characters don't care about fitting in. Like Winston Smith, I hope my writing will tell many outsiders what they already know.