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BARRON'S BOOKNOTES

Animal Farm

George Orwell

1929

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THE AUTHOR AND HIS TIMES

George Orwell was a quiet, decent Englishman who passionately hated two things: inequality and political lying. Out of his hatred of inequality came a desire for a society in which class privileges would not exist. This to him was "democratic socialism." His hatred of political lying and his support for socialism led him to denounce the political lie that what was going on in the Soviet Union had anything to do with socialism. As long as people equated the Soviet Union with socialism, he felt, no one could appreciate what democratic socialism might be like.

And so, he says, he "thought of exposing the Soviet myth in a story that could be easily understood by almost anyone and which could be easily translated into other languages." That story was *Animal Farm*, and it has been translated into many other languages. Understanding Orwell's political convictions- and how they developed- will greatly enrich your reading of *Animal Farm*.

He was born Eric Blair- he took the name George Orwell many years later- in 1903, in India. His father was an important British civil servant in that country, which was then part of the British Empire. He retired on a modest pension and moved back to England a few years after Eric was born. Thus the family was part of the "lower upper-middle-classes," as Orwell was to say: people in the English upper classes who weren't rich, but who felt they should live as the upper classes traditionally did. That's why, when Eric was eight, the Blairs sent him away to boarding school to prepare for Eton, an exclusive prep school. Eric had a scholarship, and yet his father still ended up spending almost a quarter of his pension to send his son to that boarding school! From his parents' point of view, the sacrifice paid off: Eric won a scholarship to Eton. From the boy's point of view, it meant that in a ferociously snobbish, class-conscious world, he twice had the humiliating experience of being the poorest boy in the school. "In a world where the prime necessities were money, titled relatives, athleticism, tailor-made clothes... I was no good," he wrote years later, in a powerful essay on his school experiences called "Such, Such Were the Joys." In his first school, he was repeatedly beaten with a cane for being "no good" in various ways.

And he was made to feel ashamed for "living off the bounty" of the headmaster-owner, that is, for having a scholarship. From the age of eight to eighteen, the boy learned a lot about inequality and oppression in British schools.

He graduated from Eton at eighteen, near the bottom of his class. There was no chance of a scholarship to Oxford, so Eric followed in his father's footsteps and passed the Empire's Civil Service Examination. As a member of the Imperial Police in British-ruled Burma, he was to see inequality and oppression from another point of view- from the top. The fact that he was a part of that top intensified the feelings of distance and anger that he already had toward his own class. After five years in Burma he resigned.

When he came back to Europe in 1927, he lived for more than a year in Paris, writing novels and short stories that nobody published. When his money ran out, he had to find work as a teacher, a private tutor, and even as a dishwasher. He was poor- but of his own choice. His family could have sent him the money to get back to England and find a better job than dishwashing in a Paris hotel. Perhaps he was too proud to ask for help. But there was another, deeper reason: he felt guilty for the job he had done in Burma- for having been part of an oppressive government. He saw his years of poverty as punishment- and as a way to understand the problems of the oppressed and helpless by becoming one of them.

By 1933 he had come up from the bottom enough to write a book about it: *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Probably to save his family embarrassment, Eric asked that the book be published under a pen name. He suggested a few to his publisher. One of them was the name of a river he loved: Orwell. The next year, "George Orwell" published *Burmese Days*, a sad, angry novel about his experiences there. Two more novels followed. In 1936 came another significant experience in Orwell's life. His publisher sent him to the English coal-mining country to write about it. Here he again saw poverty close up- not the "picturesque" poverty of Paris streets and English tramps, but the dreary poverty of tough men killing themselves in the dark mines day after day, or worse still- hungry and out of work. He wrote a powerful piece of first-hand reporting about what he saw there: *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

Afterwards, Orwell described himself as "pro-Socialist," yet he was often bitterly critical of British socialists. To refuse to "join" his own side, to insist instead on telling the unpleasant truth as he saw it, was to become an Orwell trademark.

In 1937, however, Orwell did join a side he believed in, and it almost cost him his life: he volunteered to fight for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War.

Fascism was rising in Europe: Mussolini had taken power in Italy, Hitler in Germany. In Spain, where a shaky democratic Republic had recently been born, a socialist government was elected, promising land reform, voting reform, and separation of Church and State. A group of right-wing generals led by Francisco Franco revolted against the Republic with their armies. The government was forced to arm factory workers to defend itself against the armies- and a long, bloody civil war began.

Three experiences were crucial for Orwell in the Spanish Civil War. The first was what he saw when he got there. In Barcelona, Orwell found an exhilarating atmosphere of "comradeship and respect," everyone addressing each other as "comrade," treating each other as equals. The same thing was true, he said, of the militia group he joined. Orwell believed he was seeing the success of socialism in action.

The second thing that marked Orwell was what happened to his fellow fighters. They were jailed and shot- not by Franco, but by their own "comrades," Communist-dominated elements of the same Republican government they were fighting for! The Communists disagreed with some of the views of the militia group Orwell belonged to; they suspected the men of being disloyal to Communist ideas. Luckily for Orwell, he was not rounded up with his fellow soldiers. He had been shot through the throat on the front lines and was shipped back to England for treatment.

The third experience that would stay with Orwell for the rest of his life was what happened when he returned to England and reported what he had seen. None of the socialists wanted to hear it; nobody believed it. He was an eyewitness? No matter. It was not the right time to say something that might hurt the Republican side.

So Orwell had seen the socialist ideal in action, and he had seen it crushed- not by its natural enemies on the Right, but by Communists on the Left. And he had seen the infuriating incapacity of the Left, even the non-Communist Left, to accept that truth. All of this was very much on his mind when, in the middle of World War II, he resigned his job on the BBC (the Army wouldn't take him because of his bad lungs) and began writing *Animal Farm*, in November 1943.

Once again it looked like the wrong time for a story to "expose the Soviet myth." The Soviet Union was Britain's ally in the war against Nazi Germany. And in fact four publishers would turn down *Animal Farm*. But what was "the Soviet myth"? Why did enlightened, humane people not want to believe ill of the Soviet Union? To see what

Animal Farm is about, we must look at what happened in Russia, and what it meant for people who were in many ways Orwell's political friends.

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Ideas play a part in any revolution, but the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917- the one that changed "Russia" into the "U.S.S.R."- was noteworthy for being principally inspired by one idea. It was a revolution consciously made in the name of one class (the working class, the "proletariat") and against another class (the owners, the "bourgeoisie"). The Revolution was made by men who believed with Karl Marx that the whole history of the world was the history of a struggle between classes- between oppressors and oppressed.

Marx, like other socialist thinkers of the 19th century, denounced the cruel injustices of industrial capitalist society as he saw it. He had a vision of ending "the exploitation of man by man" and establishing a classless society, in which all people would be equal. The only means to this end, he thought, was a revolution of the exploited (the proletariat) against the exploiters (the bourgeoisie), so that workers would own the means of production, such as the factories and machinery. This revolution would set up a "dictatorship of the proletariat" to do away with the old bourgeois order (the capitalist system) and eventually replace it with a classless society. Lenin took this idea and further focused on the role of the Communist Party as the leader of the working class. When Lenin reached Russia in 1917 a first revolution against the crumbling regime of the Czar had already taken place. The new government was democratic, but "bourgeois." Lenin victoriously headed the radical socialist (Bolshevik) revolution in October of that year. This was immediately followed by four years of bloody civil war: the Revolution's Red Army, organized and led by Leon Trotsky, had to defeat the "Whites" (Russians loyal to the Czar or just hostile to the Communists) and foreign troops, too.

At Lenin's death in 1924, there was a struggle between Joseph Stalin and Trotsky for leadership of the Communist Party and thus of the nation. In 1925, Stalin clearly gained the upper hand; in 1927, he was able to expel Trotsky from the Party. Later Trotsky was exiled, then deported, and finally assassinated in Mexico, probably by a Stalinist agent, in 1940. All this time, Stalin never stopped denouncing Trotsky as a traitor. Power in the Soviet Union became increasingly concentrated in Stalin's hands. In the 1930s, massive arrests and a series of public trials not only eliminated all possible opposition, but loyal Bolsheviks and hundreds of thousands of other absolutely innocent Russians.

Still, people all over the world who felt the pull of Marx's ideal- an end to exploitation and oppression, as they saw it- thought of the Soviet Union as the country of the Revolution. It was hard for many people on the Left (who think of themselves as on the side of the exploited, and want major changes in society to attain social justice) to give up this loyalty. That's one reason why Orwell wrote *Animal Farm*.

THE FABLE

THE PLOT

One night when Farmer Jones has gone to bed drunk, all the animals of Manor Farm assemble in the barn for a meeting. Old Major, the prize pig, wants to tell them about a strange dream he had. First, he tells them in clear, powerful language "the nature of life" as he has come to understand it. Animals toil, suffer, get barely enough to eat; as soon as they are no longer useful, they are slaughtered. And why? Because animals are enslaved by Man, "the only creature that consumes without producing." There is only one solution: Man must be removed. And animals must be perfectly united for their common goal: Rebellion.

After a brief interruption caused by the dogs chasing after some rats and a vote proposed by Major to decide if rats are comrades (they are), Major sums up: All animals are friends, Man is the enemy. Animals must avoid Man's habits: no houses, beds, clothes, alcohol, money, trade. Above all, "we are brothers. No animal must ever kill any other animal. All animals are equal."

He cannot describe his dream to them, "a dream of the earth as it will be when Man has vanished." But he does teach them an old animal song, "Beasts of England," which came back to him in his dream. The repeated singing of this revolutionary song throws the animals into a frenzy.

Major dies soon after, but the animals feel they should prepare for the Rebellion he preached. The work of teaching and organizing the others falls on the pigs, thought to be the cleverest animals. Snowball and Napoleon are "pre-eminent among the pigs"; and then there is Squealer, "a brilliant talker."

Mr. Jones drinks and neglects his farm more and more. One evening, when he has forgotten to feed them for over a day, the animals break into the store-shed and begin helping themselves. Jones and his men charge in, lashing with their whips. This is more than the hungry animals can bear. They all fling themselves on their tormentors. The surprised and frightened men are driven from the farm. Unexpectedly, the Rebellion has been accomplished. Jones is expelled; Manor Farm belongs to the animals.

The joy of the animals knows no bounds when they realize that they're now the owners of the farm they've worked on all their lives. They're enthusiastic when the pigs, who have taught themselves to read and write, change the sign MANOR FARM to ANIMAL FARM, and paint the Seven Commandments of Animalism on the barn wall:

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.

Now the cows must be milked. The pigs manage to do this. "What is going to happen to all that milk?" says someone. "Never mind the milk, comrade," cries Napoleon. "The main thing is to get the harvest in." When they come back from the fields, the milk has disappeared.

Despite the newness of running the farm by themselves, the animals succeed in doing all tasks in record time. The pigs' cleverness, everyone's enthusiasm, and hard work- especially the work of Boxer, the huge cart-horse- pull them through.

On Sundays there are ceremonies to celebrate the Rebellion, and meetings to plan work. (Here, Snowball and Napoleon never seem to agree.) The animals are taught to read, but the dumber ones can't even learn the Seven Commandments, so Snowball reduces them all to one maxim: FOUR LEGS GOOD, TWO LEGS BAD. The sheep like to bleat it for hours on end. Snowball also organizes Committees, but Napoleon is not interested; he's concerned with the education of the young, and takes two litters of puppies away as soon as they're weaned, saying he'll educate them. As for the missing milk, it goes to the pigs, as do the new apples. Squealer explains that this is absolutely necessary for all the brainwork the pigs do; otherwise Jones might come back, and nobody wants that to happen.

Jones and his men do try to retake the farm. But Snowball has prepared the animals, and thanks to his cleverness and courage- and Boxer's great strength- they fight off the invaders.

There is growing conflict between Snowball and Napoleon. Snowball comes up with the idea of a grand project: building a windmill; Napoleon says it will come to nothing. Snowball says they should stir animals to rebel on other farms; Napoleon says they should get guns for their own. Finally, when Snowball concludes an eloquent speech about labor-saving electricity to be produced by the windmill, Napoleon gives a signal. Then nine huge dogs- the pups he had raised- bound in and charge at Snowball, who barely escapes from the farm with his life. Napoleon, surrounded by his fierce dogs, announces that there will be no more time-wasting debates: a special Committee of pigs, chaired by himself, will simply give the animals their work orders each week. Four young pigs begin to protest, but growls from the dogs silence them, and the sheep bleat FOUR LEGS GOOD, TWO LEGS BAD over and over, preventing discussion.

Surprisingly, a few days later Napoleon announces that the windmill will be built after all. The animals slave and sacrifice for the project. Some of their food has to be sold to buy building materials. The pigs, however, have moved into the farmhouse, where they sleep in beds. This is absolutely necessary, says Squealer. But isn't it contrary to the Fourth Commandment? The animals check: "No animal shall sleep in a bed with sheets," it says. Meanwhile a storm topples the half-built windmill. Napoleon blames the destruction on Snowball.

In fact, although Boxer refuses to believe Snowball was a traitor from the start, there seem to be signs of Snowball's sabotage all over when things go wrong. One day, Napoleon orders all animals to assemble in the yard. The dogs rush forward and grab four young pigs by the ear and drag them before Napoleon. (They also rush at Boxer, but he simply pins one to the ground and lets him go.) The terrified pigs confess they were in league with Snowball to destroy the windmill and hand the Farm over to Man. After they confess, the dogs tear their throats out. The same thing happens to three hens, a goose, etc. The confessions pile up and so do the corpses. The depressed, frightened animals creep away when the executions are over.

Some of the animals think they remember that these killings violate the Sixth Commandment. But on the barn wall they read: "No animal shall kill any other animal without cause." Later, still more animals are executed for

conspiring to kill Napoleon. He is now constantly surrounded by dogs, and showered with honors: for example, a poem to his glory is inscribed on the barn wall.

Animal Farm is attacked by its neighbor, Mr. Frederick, and his armed men; the men take possession of the whole pasture, and blow up the windmill. But after a bitter fight, the animals repel the invaders, though some animals are killed and almost all are wounded. The pigs celebrate with a drinking party.

Soon after, there's a mysterious crash one night. Squealer is found on the ground next to a ladder at the barn wall, with a pot of paint near him. A few days later, the animals notice there's another commandment they had remembered wrong: it reads "No animal shall drink alcohol to excess."

Times are hard, rations short for everyone (except for the pigs, who need their food), the windmill must be rebuilt, and a schoolhouse built for the young pigs. Boxer works tirelessly, although he is getting old. He wants to lay up a good store of building stone before he retires. One day as he's pulling a cartload, he collapses.

Squealer announces that Comrade Napoleon is making special arrangements to have Boxer treated at a nearby hospital. When the van comes to take him away, however, his friend Benjamin the donkey reads the sign on its side: in fact, he discovers, they're taking Boxer to the horse slaughterer. But it's too late; the van drives away.

Three days later, Squealer paints a moving picture of Boxer's death in the hospital. The pigs will hold a banquet in his honor, he says. There is raucous singing in the farmhouse that night; somewhere the pigs have acquired the money to buy another case of whiskey.

Years pass. The animals work hard and often go hungry. There are many new buildings and machines on the farm, and also many new dogs and pigs. Maybe this is why the animals have no more to eat than before. But at least it's their farm.

One day Squealer takes the sheep to a secluded spot for a whole week. When they return, the animals see something strange and frightening: a pig walking on its hind legs. Yes, first Squealer, then the other pigs, walk upright out of the farmhouse. Finally Napoleon himself appears. He is carrying a whip in his trotter (foot). The animals are perhaps about to protest- when all the sheep burst out into a bleating of **FOUR LEGS GOOD, TWO LEGS BETTER!**- and the pigs file back into the house. Clover the mare asks Benjamin to read the Commandments to her, and he does. All that's left on the wall is one slogan:

ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL, BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS.

From then on, the pigs all carry whips; they buy a radio, dress in Jones' clothes. Soon they receive a visit from neighboring farmers. Loud voices and song are heard coming from the farmhouse that night. Despite their fear, the animals are curious; they creep up to the windows to watch. Men and pigs are sitting around the table, drinking and speech-making. When a farmer toasts the success of Animal Farm- its discipline and enforced work leave nothing to be desired by any standard- Napoleon replies that he will take some more measures to cement normal business relations with their neighbors: the custom of animals addressing one another as "comrade" will be abolished, for example (singing "Beasts of England" had been forbidden long ago) and the farm will go back to its original name: Manor Farm. But the party soon degenerates into a quarrel. When the animals peek in again, they find that as they look from pig to man, from man to pig, it is impossible to say which is which.

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