

OUR DYSTOPIAN REALITY

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It's funny isn't it, how we don't realise what we have until it's gone? How the simple act of giving a friend a hug can be so dearly craved when it is no longer allowed. A lockdown spent away from annoying siblings, and you'll never complain about them again... okay, maybe not never. Despite how difficult the time of Covid has been for so many in terms of being separated from loved ones, we're lucky it didn't

Protagonists in Margaret Atwood's, *The Handmaid's Tale*, William Shakespeare's, *Romeo and Juliet* and George Orwell's, *1984*, all present the dilemmas of love in the world of literature. While the worlds created within these novels are fictional, it is not impossible to imagine our own becoming something similar to this after living through the pandemic that warped our perception of reality. We have previously seen totalitarian governments rule and dictators grow all around the globe, for example, Nazi Germany or even more recent historical events such as Afghanistan or North Korea. Just because it is not happening on our doorstep, does not mean it is entirely a work of fiction. Reading allows us to discover new worlds of imagination and comfort but also ones of apprehension and fear. This is definitely something I craved, snuggling up with some calming music and a new world to explore. But what happens when the words on the page become real? Using books as escapism during lockdown also allow us to reflect and remain grateful for the maintenance of our world and the ability to return to the love we all missed.

Novels such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *1984* feature societies completely different to the one we live in today.

No friends, no family, no freedom of speech and no free thought. Made to live monotonous lives as laid out by the ruling, commanders party. While the dystopian narrative settings are somewhat similar, Offred and Winston use love in different ways. Offred manipulates love to gain her knowledge of Gilead and tries to figure out a way she can leave. 'Staring at the magazine, as he dangled it before me like fish bait, I wanted it. I wanted it with a force that made the ends of my fingers ache', shows that both the Commander and Offred know how to play one another. The Commander knows that if he 'baits' Offred like this, she will be more likely to do what he wants and form a relationship with him. On the other



Offred knows that if she gives into this trap, it'll progress until she gets what she needs. This reflects upon our society and how we are indoctrinated by government games. We go into a lockdown as they bait us with rewards such as walks in the park or sitting outside the pub to keep us in check. The difference, however, is what do we do? Whilst some chose to fight against what the Government dictated, most of us followed blindly. Perhaps we are more like the other Handmaids when we ought to be more like Offred.

Opposingly to Offred, Winston falls in love despite the strict laws and decides not to care about what may happen to him. 'In this game that we're playing, we can't win. Some kinds of failure are better than other kinds, that's all'. He believes being captured by the Thought Police is inevitable and therefore why limit yourself by sticking to the rules of The Party. Winston is old enough to remember life before The Party took over, therefore he believes that his instincts will lead him to be caught either way. It could be suggested that he views living a secluded life is as much of a loss as being captured and so must choose which he would prefer - continue living to societal standards or feel love again before he dies. Have we not had this experience through Covid? Staying away from loved ones seemed just as bad as getting caught and thus, fined, so why not meet up in secret?

Romeo and Juliet is a different story. The restrictions they must face do not stem from a dystopian world or societal control like our pandemic, but from their warring families forbid their love for one another. 'From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.' This is a conflict that -evidently- does not stop to think of the consequences of forbidden love, until both children are willing to sacrifice their lives. It embodies a rivalry that denies Romeo and Juliet from ever having a regular relationship, or one in which their love will ever be accepted.

Despite their love and relationship being forbidden by both families and friends, they risk everything to get married. Once this plan falls apart, neither character fears the consequences of death as they cannot bare to live in a world without each other. 'Here's to my love!' and "...there rust and let me die' are the last words of both characters. While I'm sure this was not the case for many people during the multiple lockdowns, sacrifices were made by hundreds of thousands of people all around the world, showing just how significant love truly is.

Yes, we were not stripped of our identities and told we could neither show nor feel love. But the conditions we faced during the global pandemic does not differ far from the dystopian worlds crafted within these novels. A global pandemic inviting vulnerability into the lives of millions over the world. Any cruel person or party could have taken advantage to make a claim to power. While rules were not as drastic as those in the lives of the characters within these novels, we made it too easy to be controlled; abiding to what we were told by the government, staying indoors, and working from home, not seeing friends and family. Does this go to show that if it were to happen again, we may find ourselves living in a dystopian novel? Stripping back who we are, completing tedious tasks day in and day out to feel that we still have a purpose? Regardless of whether these types of settings are read about in books or seen on the screen, they are not completely fiction. Countries and cities all over the world have seen totalitarian rule over their lives and we should not think that this could not happen to us too.

So, what has Covid taught us? That love is not guaranteed to us. It doesn't matter that it's an abstract feeling, something that cannot be touched and therefore seemingly, cannot be taken away. Nothing can be promised and thus, nothing should be taken for granted. Not the quick hugs given to friends, or the conversations had with teachers, not even the persistent complaining from your mum that you haven't cleaned your room. Perhaps we should treat love as it is forbidden, so we are that much more desperate to keep it within our lives.

