

Humanist Masterpieces No 36

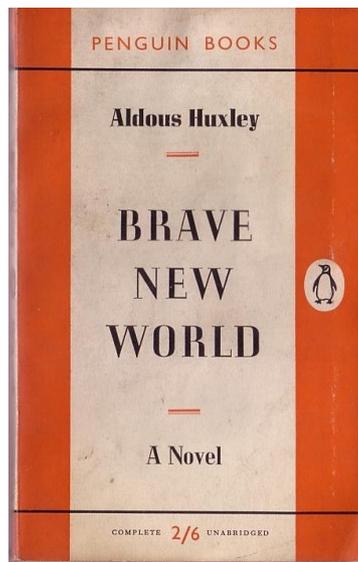
Brave New World

Brian McClinton

ALDOUS HUXLEY was born into a polymathic family in Surrey in 1894. He was the grandson of T.H. Huxley, the 19th century biologist and advocate of evolution who coined the terms ‘agnostic’ and ‘agnosticism’. His father Leonard was a classics teacher at Charterhouse, later biographer (including one of Darwin), and editor of *Cornhill Magazine*. His mother Julia was the niece of the poet and critic Matthew Arnold and granddaughter of Thomas Arnold, the historian and headmaster of Rugby School, immortalised in *Tom Brown’s School-days*. His aunt and Julia’s sister was the novelist Mrs Humphrey Ward. Julia, whose death when he was only 14 was a devastating blow, founded the independent girls’ school Prior’s Field a few years earlier in 1902. His brother Julian Huxley and half-brother Andrew Huxley became outstanding biologists. With this combined scientific and literary background, Aldous was truly a Renaissance man. His brother Julian summed him up well in a Baconian quote: “his uniqueness lay in his universalism. He was able to take all knowledge for his province”.

At first Huxley had ambitions to be a doctor, but at the age of 16 while at Eton he contracted the eye disease keratitis which left him practically blind for a couple of years. He had only partial vision for the rest of his life and read with great difficulty. In 1913 he earned a scholarship to Oxford to study English Language and Literature instead of Biology as he had originally intended. He read with the aid of a magnifying glass and eye drops that dilated his pupils. He graduated in 1916 with First Class Honours and in the same year published his first book, a collection of poems called *The Burning Wheel*.

Huxley’s first job was as a farm labourer at Lady Morrell’s Garsington Manor, where he met D.H. Lawrence, Bertrand Russell, Clive Bell and other Bloomsbury figures, as well as a Belgian refugee, Maria Nys, whom he married in 1919. He also spent a year teaching French at Eton, where one of his pupils was Eric Blair (later to take the pen name of George Orwell). During the 1920s he worked for a time at the Brunner Mond chemical plant in Billingham, County Durham, where his experience was an important source for *Brave New World*, published in 1932. It was his fifth novel, *Crome Yellow* (1921), *Antic Hay* (1923), *Those Barren Leaves* (1925) and *Point Counter Point* (1928) having preceded it.



Like those earlier works, *Brave New World* is a satire but it is much broader and darker and looks beyond the contemporary world to a dystopian future in which the human race is ruined by what it loves. The title is taken from Miranda’s words in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* – “How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world that has such people in’t”. But here of course it is ironic. In the world of 500 years hence, mankind is neither beauteous nor brave.

The novel begins in the World State’s Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre in ‘the year of our Ford’ 632, the number of years after Henry Ford launched his Model T in 1908, making it 2540 in the Gregorian calendar. Immediately we realise that mass production is the order of the day, except that it is not of cars but of people. Students are being given a tour of this baby factory which produces human beings who are then conditioned for their predestined role in the World State. Human embryos do not grow inside their mothers’ wombs but in bottles. In the Fertilising Room the eggs, selected from disembodied ovaries, are mixed with the sperm inside test tubes. The students are then shown the Bottling Room where the eggs are transferred into jars and sent by conveyor belt to the Social Predestination Room, where the embryos are designated into five castes: Alphas, Betas, Gammas, Deltas and Epsilons. Then they move to the Embryo Store where they are kept in a warm, humid environment under red lights and moved through a conveyor belt for 267 days, until they arrive at the Decanting Room to be poured out, into the daylight.

The Alphas and Betas at the apex of the system include the scientists, politicians, and other top minds, while Gammas, Deltas, and Epsilons are at the bottom and represent the world’s industrial working class. These lower castes are multiplied by the Bokanovsky Process, a system of cloning described in the novel as: “One egg, one embryo, one adult – normality. But a bokanovskified egg will bud, will proliferate, will divide. From eight to ninety-six buds, and every bud will grow into a perfectly formed embryo, and every embryo into a full-sized adult. Making ninety-six human beings grow where only one grew before. Progress”. It is also described as a series of ‘arrests of development’ and ‘one of the major instruments of social stability’. You have 96 identical twins working 96 identical machines, and so for the first time in history you achieve ‘Community, Identity, Stability’. —>

Bokanowsky is one of the many names in the novel which may, or may not, refer to real people. Maurice Bokanowski was a French bureaucrat in the 1920s who sought ways to make governments more efficient. In a thesis in 1908 (the year of the first Model T) he posited the idea of a society of nations whose laws would govern states and ensure universal peace – an embryonic world state. Bernard Marx, the main character in the early part, is probably a reference to Bernard Shaw and Karl Marx. Both were socialists and Shaw was also a feminist, which fits the character. Mustapha Mond, Resident World Controller for Western Europe, is partly based on Sir Alfred Mond, founder of the Billingham chemical plant. John the Savage is presumably an allusion to John the Baptist. Lenina Crowne, who is female, refers partly to Lenin, because he represents acceptance of totalitarianism. This name dropping is a device to make us think about the novel's themes. It is also partly a tease.

The truth is that the characters and the story are not memorable. One reviewer at the time said that “nothing can bring it alive”. Huxley himself admitted that he was weak at characterisation, but of course it is not his main concern in *Brave New World*. As for the story and plot, they too are unimportant. E.M. Forster, in his series of lectures *Aspects of the Novel*, first published in 1927, says: “Yes – oh dear yes – the novel tells a story... and I wish that it was not so”. The story is the highest factor common to all novels, but Forster wishes that it could be melody or perception of the truth, ‘not this low atavistic form’. Perhaps Huxley sought to prove the truth of Forster’s verdict. His interest is in ideas, particularly fantasy and prophecy, also subjects of Forster’s lectures.

After the newly-born humans leave the Decanting Room, they enter the Nurseries or Conditioning Rooms. In one a Pavlovian technique of slight electrical shocks is employed to make babies dislike books and roses since a love of books and nature keeps no factories busy. Another technique is hypnopaedia, a form of classical conditioning where children are indoctrinated in their sleep by receiving information that is repeated over speakers positioned close to their cots. And, since the World State seeks to ‘form’ the people to be happy and obedient, sexual promiscuity is fostered by having the children play erotic games and teaching them that it is wrong to refuse the advances of others.

Sex and indeed every physical desire are encouraged for all adults because they serve as distractions and pacifications, reinforcing conformity. Other principles to be instilled include the Fordian notion that “history is bunk” since it is not good to compare the present with anything that might be considered better. It is also important to minimise painful emotions. Happiness can be stimulated by soma, a wonder pill which provides an escape from sadness or pain, calms the individual and produces a feeling of well-being – it has all ‘the advantages of Christianity and alcohol; none of their defects’. Alternatively, feelies, the cinema of sensation, are movies that provide a sense of touch and sense of smell as well as sight and hearing through two metal knobs on the armrests.

E.M. Forster described Huxley as a ‘humanist who disliked humanity’. This is harsh. Huxley saw with astonishing clarity how the human race has an infinite capacity for self-destruction. *Brave New World*, a dystopia disguised as a utopia, is a counter to all those fictional utopias from Thomas More to H.G. Wells in which poverty, war and disease are practically eliminated but which fail to consider the price that may be paid. In Huxley’s World State concepts such as family and religion are banned and there is no freedom, art, culture, love, ideals, spirituality or even personality. Instead there are living automata amusing themselves with instant gratification, promiscuity and an idiot culture – much like today’s world of *Big Brother*, *Love Island* or social media servitude. In this sense the novel is more than a satirical fantasy: it is also a prophecy and a warning.

Brave New World is often lumped with Orwell’s *1984*. Yet, as Huxley himself wrote to Orwell, his disturbing vision of a scientifically engineered Dystopia is more prescient than Orwell’s imposed dictatorship. “An all-powerful executive of political bosses and their army of managers control a population of slaves who do not have to be coerced because they love their servitude”. As Neil Postman suggests (*Amusing Ourselves to Death*), what Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. And, as Postman also says, what Huxley teaches is that in the

age of advanced technology, spiritual devastation is more likely to come from an enemy with a smiling face than one from whose countenance exudes suspicion and hate. People come to love their oppression and adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think. Truth is drowned in a sea of trivia, distractions and irrelevance.

The themes and predictions that Huxley packs into his 1932 novel are astounding: society versus the individual; social class; the misuse of science (Hiroshima was only 13 years away); genetic engineering, IVF and cloning; psychological conditioning; euthanasia; the hidden persuasion of advertising; pornography and the commercialisation of sex; a drug that combines the best features of valium and ecstasy; viagra-type chewing gum; space travel; private helicopters; pop entertainment; 3D cinema screens; and much more. It is a gallimaufry of modernity.

Orwell’s *1984* is a cautionary tale about what we in the western capitalist world avoided, whereas Huxley’s *Brave New World* is a satire on what we have experienced instead: a consumerist, dumbed down culture living off an infantile happiness of sex, drugs and rock ‘n roll. Yet ironically the novel was banned in many countries, including Ireland, because it was deemed pornographic (the censors ignored Huxley’s attack on promiscuity and loveless sex). He believed that it might take 600 years for his ‘brave new world’ to become fully operational. In *Brave New World Revisited* (1958) he suggested that this was his only prophetic error and a better estimate was less than a century. The world isn’t entirely in his dystopia... yet. But it’s getting there and time is running out. □

Huxley himself admitted that he was weak at characterisation, but of course it is not his main concern in *Brave New World*
