

More than fifty years ago, on the Manor Farm, a swine power struggle resulted in the ouster of the idealistic pig, Snowball, by the tyrannical pig, Napoleon.

Snowball has been missing until now.

Teacher's Guide

SNOWBALL'S CHANCE

by John Reed

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About the Book

On September 10, 2001, John Reed was walking along Lafayette Street with his wife. “How about *Snowball's Chance*?” he asked her, “for a title.” She didn’t see the appeal, but Reed, one of the most inventive and provocative writers at work, was convinced something was there. On September 13, the windows and vents of their downtown apartment taped up to prevent the dust from seeping in, Reed had a revelation: Snowball returns to *Animal Farm*, to introduce capitalism.

Where Orwell’s allegory covers the first half of the twentieth century, Reed tracks the second half, with a motley array of farm and woodland animals acting out American history and its fallout. At first, Snowball’s regime prospers: heated stalls, running water, and a window for each animal. The farm moves away from its agricultural roots as Snowball and his team of educated goats recreate *Animal Farm* as *Animal Fair*, replete with citizen performers and criminal sideshows.

With clarity, style and humor, Reed takes on the legacy of the *Animal Farm*, the “Cold War,” and the boardrooms of the transnational corporations. In doing so he spins a book that is witty, readable, and better targeted than a “precision” bomb. Continuing a tradition which extends from Aesop, *Snowball's Chance* employs simplicity, elegance, and talking animals to ask very serious and often dangerous questions.

Upon publication in 2002, Reed’s slender volume caused an uproar, was denounced by Christopher Hitchens, and narrowly dodged a lawsuit from the Orwell estate. Now, a decade later, with America in wars on many fronts, readers can judge anew Reed’s visionary masterpiece.

In a whirlwind three weeks, Reed had drafted a novel that would spark a literary debate about parody and canonical writing, fuel an ongoing conflagration about George Orwell and his late-life involvement with Mccarthy-esque investigations, and hold a place on the Small Press Distribution bestseller list for the next decade.

In *Snowball's Chance*, Reed conceived and executed a riposte to George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*; Snowball returns to the farm, takes charge, and implements a new world order of untrammelled capitalism. Orwell’s “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” morphs into the new rallying cry: “All animals are born equal—what they become is their own affair.”

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Critical Responses

“[Reed] not only shanghai Orwell’s story, but amps up and mocks the writer’s famously flat, didactic style—that fairytailish simplicity that has ensured *Animal Farm* a place in high school English classes for the last 50 years.”
—John Strausbaugh, *New York Press*

“John Reed challenges us deeply with his elegant September 11 updating of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. It is a savage satire directed at awakening us from the long nightmare of our response to al Qaeda terrorism, and somehow manages to be entertaining along the way.”
—Richard Falk, Princeton University

“*Snowball’s Chance* parodies Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, dragging it kicking and screaming into the 21st century.”
—Ed Nawotka, *Publisher’s Weekly*

“The novel transcends its particular circumstances ... Snowball’s gambit is to turn the farm into a giant spectacle of happiness, and his Animal Fair represents more than just a place: it names an entire ethos.”
—Craig Epplin, *Guernica*

“[John Reed] has ignited a fierce literary debate; is it ever right to write a book modeled on a classic, that twists the original message into unrecognizable form?”

—David Robinson, Jacqui Goddard,
The Scotsman

A pig returns to the farm, thumbing his snout at Orwell ... the world had a new evil to deal with, and it was not communism.

—Dinitia Smith, *New York Times*

“While reading *Snowball’s Chance*, one plays this terrifying guessing game of animal à clef: which animal am I? Which animal is my neighbor? Which animal is my enemy? Written in lucid, wise, funny, fable-prose, this book brings to mind Spiegelman’s *Maus*—the use of a playful metaphor to reveal truths we might otherwise refuse to see.” —Jonathan Ames

Reed’s tale, crafted amid ground zero’s dust, is chilling in its clarity and inspired in its skewering of Orwell’s stilted style. Whether you liked or loathed the original, there’s no denying Reed has captured the state of the farm today.
—Jay Macdonald, *Fort Myers News-Press*

Selected Excerpts

“Now,” bayed Benjamin, not so much to anyone in particular as to the world he was bidding good-bye, “You see how a donkey dies!” (page 133)

Their livelihoods, and even their existence, would be thrown into question—the future, so solid and impervious the day before, would become newly uncertain. It would be as if the comfortable days of the past had sought their own compensation—and where yesterday had been secure, tomorrow would be perilous. (page 127)

He had drawn his blade, cut the throat of Arthur the poodle, and assumed the controls of the Ferris Wheel—and before anyone could understand what was happening (was it part of the ride?) the Ferris Wheel had accelerated to its top speed. Gears ground. Sparks flew. And two pairs of squirrels were dragging paper bags through the ironwork—up to the axle that held the wheel in place. And then,

in a moment horrifyingly lucid, the squirrels doused themselves with some greasy liquid, and set themselves on fire. The bags exploded, and the Ferris Wheel was loosed—kicked from its moorings. (page 128)

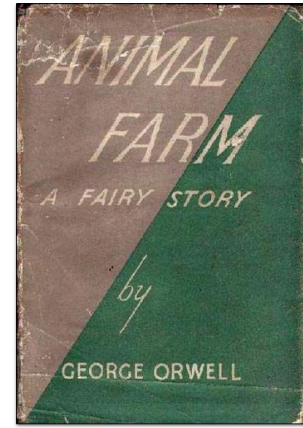
“Revenge, justice, retaliation! The blood of beavers will flow in the river of the Woodlands!” (page 136)

And from the rowdiest of the badgers and geese to the most retiring of the voles and ducks—all the animals were calling out for this deliverance. They foamed at the maw and the beak—and the fangs of dogs pointed through an angry froth. And the divisions of shepherds pouring forth from the Jones House were more fierce and multitudinous than anyone could have ever imagined. And the animals, they received the legions of dogs with heartfelt cheers—and feathers and fur raised in vengeance. They were all big now. (page 136)

Course Implementation

Suggested for use in courses addressing U.S. History, English Literature, Critical Reading/Critical Thinking, and Creative Copyright:

- as a literary examination of 9/11 and/or an introduction to the 21st century;
- as a counterpoint to George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*;
- as an examination of creative freedom as defined by the law, the marketplace, and the academy.



Topics for Discussion

What is the difference between parody, satire and allegory? In these terms what is *Animal Farm*? What is *Snowball's Chance*? How do the two works differ?

John Strausbaugh, of the *New York Press*, wrote that Reed “not only shanghai’s Orwell’s story, but amps up and mocks the writer’s famously flat, didactic style—that fairytale-ish simplicity that has ensured *Animal Farm* a place in high school English classes for the

last 50 years.” How does the language Reed employs differ from Orwell’s language? How does the language of *Snowball's Chance* relate to the author’s satirical and critical view of *Animal Farm*?

What is Reed’s primary objection to *Animal Farm*? How do you think Orwell would respond to Reed’s argument? Is *Snowball's Chance* an objection to *Animal Farm* or a correction?

Guided Reading & Discussion Questions

Chapters 1 & 2

How does Snowball “change history”?

What do the dogs represent, and why does the author write, “dogs didn’t like change”?

How does the song “Beasts of Earth” relate to a contemporary view of the world?” (*Beasts of Earth, it is our fate / To live in one gigantic state / Of happy days and cool, sweet grapes.*)

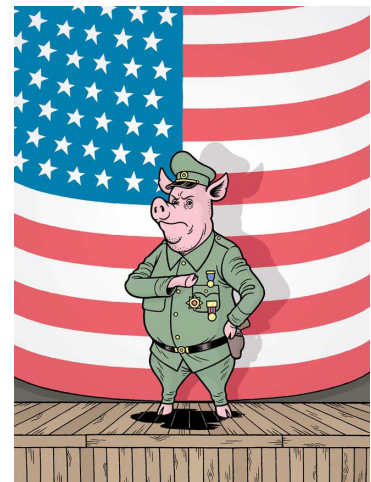
Is the “Freedom Shuffle” a freestyle dance, or are there steps? What does this say about Snowball’s vision of freedom?

“All animals are born equal—what they become is their own affair.” What are the implications of the new commandment?

What class of people does “Thomas the goat” represent?

What does Thomas offer? Does he offer anything besides “creatures comforts”?

What is the real-world analog to the Twin Mills? What do the Twin Mills represent?



Chapters 3, 4 & 5

Who is Moses the Raven? What does he represent?

Who are the beavers? What do they represent?

What does water represent?

Who is Filmont? What does Filmont represent?

Why do the animals decide to put on clothing?

Why do the pigs mount lawsuits against the neighboring farms? In what ways does this represent global economics?

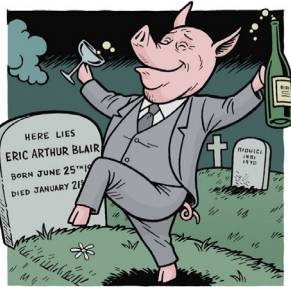
Why is Temescula hired to manage the construction of the Twin Mills?

Does the *Daily Trotter* publish hard news? What does it publish?

What is “progress” to the pigs?

What is the real-world analog to “Henron”?

Do the pigs mount a “cultural war” on the animals? What is it?



Chapters 6, 7 & 8

What circumstances allow Diso to take power?

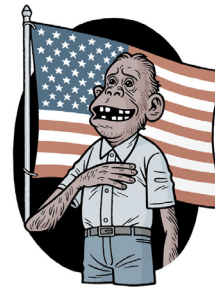
What is the “Beaver Code”? Is it spelled out? What does it represent? How does it differ from the farm’s “commandment”?

Who are the newcomers? What are the attitudes toward them? What are the real-world analogs?

What does the author signify in transitioning *Animal Farm* to “Animal Fair”?

What are the dreams of the animals who live and work at Animal Fair? Are they realistic?

Why does Filmont betray Animal Fair?



How does Animal Fair deal with crime?

Why are the youth of Animal Fair, “sent off to school”?

At the end of Chapter 8, what does the smile represent?

Chapters 9 & 10

Do the beavers have a justifiable view of Animal Fair? Is their world view any “better” than that of the pigs?

What does the incursion of pie shops represent to Diso?

Are the animals, as Snowball says, “enjoying life”?

How does Benjamin, the cynical donkey, change as a character?

How does the author capture the events of 9/11? Has his vision of the future held true?

Foreword & Afterword

How might Orwell’s *Animal Farm* be suddenly relevant in a post Cold War, post 9/11 world? Is there a new “face of evil”?

How might Orwell’s list of “crypto-communists” play into the discussion of *Animal Farm* and *Snowball’s Chance*?



Exercises & Assignments

When *Snowball's Chance* was released in 2002, parody was not protected in the United Kingdom, and various legal actions, most notably against Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone*, a parody of *Gone With The Wind*, foretold the extinction of parody in the United States. With Mickey Mouse coming up for Public Domain, U.S. copyright had been extended, arguably in perpetuity. Following the U.S. administrations of the 80s, the Supreme Court was markedly conservative. Conventional wisdom: why should parody fare any better than copyright? In the end, conservatives embraced parody as part of their own tradition; the Supreme Court unanimously protected parody, and since 2002, the United Kingdom has taken steps to allow for parody. What incentives would there be to protect parody? Creative incentives? Economic incentives?

Investigate and debate the contention that *Animal Farm* is based on the story "Animal Riot," which was written by the Russian historian Nikolai Kostomarov in 1879/1880, and published in 1917. Would Orwell have known about this story? Are the two stories parallel?

Who coined the term "Cold War"? What does it mean? How does it relate to the world today?

What do you think would be the goals of a post-World-War-II "Cultural Cold War"? For further research and discussion, investigate the British Secret Service's "Information Research Department," and the Central Intelligence Agency's "Congress for Cultural Freedom." What is the history of *Animal Farm* and these organizations? What was the rationale? How do you think George Orwell would have felt about the use of his book?

Write your own allegory, based on a current-day subject in the news.

Investigate the controversy around the original release of *Snowball's Chance*. Was the debate literary in nature, or political in nature?

Make up a new story about one of the characters in *Snowball's Chance*.

Write a story about a character or event at Animal Fair, as it would appear in the *Canary*, or the *Daily Trotter*.

Be a pig: explain to the other animals what really happened at the Twin Mills.

Research how the CIA and the British Secret Service utilized *Animal Farm* as a Cold War criticism of communism. (For a start on additional readings, see below.) While Orwell certainly intended to critique Stalinism, do you think Orwell meant to point out the futility of all "revolutions"? If so, what does it say about the governments of the United States and United Kingdom chose to promote the title?

In 1946, Randall Swingler, a poet who served in Italy during World War II (he was awarded the Military Medal of the British Army), published a response to Orwell's essay, "The Prevention of Literature." While Swingler agreed with Orwell that a writer must "dare to be a Daniel," he objected to Orwell's broad sweeps and "intellectual swashbucklery." Moreover, Swingler didn't see Daniel in Orwell: "What in heaven is Orwell really worried about? He appears at the moment to be getting more space than any other journalist to report truthfully..."

Orwell's posture of lonely rebel hounded by monstrous pro-Soviet monopolists has a somewhat crocodile appearance." In a 1971 collection of essays about Orwell, Raymond Williams—novelist, critic, and the driving force of Cultural Materialism—drew a portrait of Orwell as an architect of orthodox thinking who mounted a "successful impersonation of the plain man who bumps into experience in an unmediated way, and is simply telling the truth about it." Salman Rushdie, in his 1984 essay *Outside the Whale*, echoed the position: "Orwell ... is advocating ideas that can only be in the service of our masters." A common critique of Orwell, 1945 and today, is that he was the pre-eminent spokesman of orthodox thinking, wearing the mask of a contrarian. Are there contemporary political analysts who employ such a model? (Hints: Rush Limbaugh, Bill O'Reilly, Howard Stern ...)

Comment on Lord Bertrand Russell's outline of cultural education, as presented in his 1951 book, *The Impact of Science on Society*:

"The subject which will be of most importance politically is mass psychology. ... Its importance has been enormously increased by the growth of modern methods of propaganda. Of these the most influential is what is called 'education'. Religion plays a part, though a diminishing one; the Press, the cinema and the radio play an increasing part. What is essential in mass psychology is the art of persuasion. If you compare a speech of Hitler's with a speech of (say) Edmund Burke, you will see what strides have been made in the art since the eighteenth century. What went wrong formerly was that people had read in books that man is a rational animal, and framed their arguments on this hypothesis. We now know that lime-light and a brass band do more to persuade than can be done by the most elegant train of syllogisms. It may be hoped that in time anybody will be able to persuade anybody of anything if he can catch the patient young

and is provided by the State with money and equipment. ... Anaxagoras maintained that snow is black, but no one believed him. The social psychologists of the future will have a number of classes of school children on whom they will try different methods of producing an unshakeable conviction that snow is black. Various results will soon be arrived at. First, that the influence of home is obstructive. Second, that not much can be done unless indoctrination begins before the age of ten. Third, that verses set to music and repeatedly intoned are very effective. Fourth, that the opinion that snow is white must be held to show a morbid taste for eccentricity. But I anticipate. It is for future scientists to make these maxims precise and discover exactly how much it costs per head to make children believe that snow is black, and how much less it would cost to make them believe it is dark grey. ... The completeness of the resulting control over opinion depends in various ways upon scientific technique. Where all children go to school, and all schools are controlled by the government, the authorities can close the minds of the young to everything contrary to official orthodoxy. ... Education should aim at destroying free will, so that, after pupils have left school, they shall be incapable, throughout the rest of their lives, of thinking or acting otherwise than as their schoolmasters would have wished. ... Any serious criticism of the powers that be will become psychologically impossible."

John Reed, author

Born in 1969 in New York City, and growing up in the vacant Tribeca of the late 70s and early 80s, Reed went on to a fellowship at the MFA in Creative Writing at Columbia University. He's author of the novels *A Still Small Voice* and *The Whole*, a play, *All the World's a Grave*, and the cult reportage, *Tales of Woe*. His essays, short fictions and poems have been published in *The Paris Review*, *Paper Magazine*, *the New York Press*, *Timeout New York*, *Artforum*, *Bomb Magazine*, *Playboy*, *Vice Magazine*, *Out Magazine*, *Art in America*, the PEN Poetry Series, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Believer*, the *Rumpus*, the *Daily Beast*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and many other venues. He has developed original, award-winning programming for MTV and other networks. He is currently a member of board of directors of the National Book Critics Circle, teaches creative writing at The New School, and is a senior editor at *The Brooklyn Rail*.

Alexander Cockburn, foreword

Alexander Cockburn (1941-2012), *The Nation's* "Beat the Devil" columnist and one of America's best-known radical journalists, was born in Scotland and grew up in Ireland. He was co-editor, with Jeffrey St Clair, of the newsletter and radical website CounterPunch, and the author of many books.

James Sherry, afterword

James Sherry is the author of 10 books of poetry and prose. In 1977, he founded the Segue Foundation, a multi-arts publishing and presenting organization. His imprint, Roof Books, was instrumental in introducing L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing, flarf poetry, new Conceptual writing and most recently Environmental Poetics to wide audiences. In 2012, he became one of the founders of The Occupy Bank, a response to the financial crisis of 2008 that operates in the interest of its customers rather than in the interest of the financial institution.

Additional Resources

- George Orwell, *Animal Farm*: 1946.
- Christopher Hitchens, *Why Orwell Matters*: 2002.
- The CIA-backed film, "Animal Farm," Halas & Batchelor: 1955.
- Timothy Ash, *Facts Are Subversive*: 2010.
- Paul Lashmar and James Oliver, *Britain's Secret Propaganda War 1948-1977*: 1998.
- Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*: 1999.
- Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus*: 2001.