



Commissioner's Book Club: On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century

Discussion guide

Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#).

Author Bio

Timothy Snyder is the Richard C. Levin Professor of History and Global Affairs at Yale University and a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. His books, which have been published in over forty languages, include *Bloodlands*, *Black Earth*, *On Tyranny*, *Road to Unfreedom*, *Our Malady*, and *On Freedom*. His work has inspired poster campaigns and exhibitions, sculptures, a punk rock song, a rap song, a play, and an opera, and he has appeared in over fifty films and documentaries. He lives in New Haven, Connecticut.¹

Summary

Timothy Snyder offers twenty practical strategies to protect democracy, emphasizing the importance of individual action and responsibility. These include defending institutions, valuing truth, engaging in community and resisting symbols of hate. The book argues that democracy is fragile and requires active effort from its citizens to

¹ [Penguin Random House Canada 2025](#)

prevent the rise of tyranny, urging readers to be attentive, proactive and courageous in safeguarding freedoms.

This concise and thought-provoking look at the fragility of our democracies speaks to me now more than ever. With the rise of hate in politics and the erosion of our foundational institutions of democracy, it seems to me that the call for action goes beyond those who might consider themselves politically active and extends to every single person to educate ourselves and take a stand for the world we want to live in.

This book invites critical thinking. For me, this includes thinking critically about the interplay between true equality (or equity) and freedom. The author speaks powerfully about preserving freedom and the responsibility to take individual actions that he sees as essential to subverting tyranny. But what is our responsibility to work alongside others and to take collective action? Whose voices against tyranny might be louder and which ones might be silenced? What role does our political system have in determining who has power or privilege and who is oppressed? While this simple book does not contain all the answers, it provides a clarion call : when tyranny arrives on our doorstep, we are not powerless to act. In fact, it is our moral imperative to do so.

- Commissioner Govender

Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

There are three levels of human rights laws.

International human rights

These human rights include the right to food, education and a place to live. The [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) is an example of international human rights law. If you live in a country like Canada that has committed to this law, you have these rights.

Constitutional human rights

These human rights are specific to Canada. They protect rights like your right to vote, to equality and to freedom of expression. Constitutional rights are part of Canadian law and most of our rights are written in the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#).



Statutory human rights

These human rights help protect you from harmful treatment by other people or by organizations. All provinces and territories in Canada have statutory human rights laws. In B.C. that law is called the [*Human Rights Code*](#).

Take three and a half minutes to watch this [Intro to human rights video](#) (<https://youtu.be/-1Kxw5g-TMc?si=keyi1O3MGteyW0hK>) and learn more about human rights systems that apply to you.

Tyrannical governments defy basic human freedoms, suppress dissent, and promote inequality. On Tyranny links the fight against authoritarianism directly to the protection of human rights—in how governments treat citizens, and how we treat each other.

Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

1. Which of Snyder's lessons resonates most with your own values?
 - Answers will vary
2. What role does fear play in the rise of tyranny?
 - Fear often drives people to trade freedoms for promises of security, enabling authoritarian control.
3. How does tyranny affect access to basic freedoms and rights?
 - Authoritarian regimes often suppress free speech, assembly and equality.
4. How can people in Canada apply Snyder's lessons to ensure their rights under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* are respected and upheld?
 - By actively opposing measures that undermine equality, free expression and judicial independence.
5. Why does Snyder emphasize the importance of language in resisting tyranny?
 - Language shapes public perception and can either challenge or reinforce propaganda.
6. What historical examples resonate most with current global challenges?
 - The use of propaganda to spread false ideas and control public opinion. Control of the press. Fear can be used to attack freedoms and misinformation or fear of "enemies" can be used to control citizens.
7. How do digital platforms complicate Snyder's lessons on resisting tyranny?
 - Technology amplifies propaganda but also enables global resistance.



8. Does Snyder seem to value freedom or equality as more important to human rights? Which do you think is more important? When might we have to choose?
 - Answers may vary.
9. What is missing from Snyder's framework for resisting tyranny?
 - Answers could suggest exploring economic inequality, global solidarity or other aspects.
10. What role does community play in resisting authoritarianism?
 - It builds solidarity and collective action against oppressive forces.
11. How do small, everyday acts of resistance contribute to larger change?
 - They disrupt the normalization of authoritarian practices and empower collective action.

