

## Book Review

Doctorow, Cory. 2008. *Little Brother*. London: Harper Voyager or New York: Tor/Tom Doherty Associates.

382 pp, Hardcover, \$17.95 (US), ISBN: 978-0-00728842-7.

## Mike Nellis

Glasgow School of Social Work, University of Strathclyde, UK, <mailto:mike.nellis@strath.ac.uk>

In wanting simply to be free and to do his own thing in his own time, Marcus Yallow, the savvy seventeen year old schoolkid narrator of this novel stands foursquare - among several other lineages - to an American literary tradition that includes Tom Sawyer and Holden Caulfield. Marcus's time, however - San Francisco a few years hence, under the heel of the Department of Homeland Security - is not like their times, and for him staying free requires a level of technological sophistication - a talent for counter-surveillance - that neither they nor their creators could have dreamed of, and would probably have thought an encumbrance. Whether *Little Brother* will one day be cited among American coming-of-age classics remains to be seen - it is actually a thriller written for contemporary teenagers - but it is indisputably a tract for the times, and should be read now.

The background story is simple enough, a reprise of the 9/11 security clampdown following a second terrorist attack on US soil, and a further intensification of surveillance, censorship and control. Even before the second attack, Marcus is chagrined by America's departures from the libertarian promises of its Constitution - epitomised by the pervasive surveillance technologies used in his school, and by its dim, authoritarian Vice-Principal - and has already adopted the code name "w1n5t0n. Pronounced Winston" (p2) for communication among his friends on the net. The novel opens with a terrorist bomb destroying Bay Bridge, killing thousands. Marcus and two friends are bunking off school that day, in possession of some suspicious looking (to adults) electronic gaming equipment. They are taken into custody by Homeland Security, placed in a secret offshore prison, ill-treated and forced to give up various passwords. The three friends have nothing in particular to hide, but they resent the intrusion, and regard the claim that such high-handedness by the federal government is vital to Americans' safety as specious. Marcus's Bill of Rights-inspired passion for privacy and autonomy seriously riles his interrogators, and it is several weeks before he is returned to his anguished parents, sworn to use a cover story about being quarantined by the authorities in Oakland (the opposite side of the Bay to his home) after the bomb went off, unable to contact the outside world.

Angered by this experience, annoyed by his father's dejected acceptance that the security clampdown is actually necessary to prevent terrorism, Marcus - a kid so smart that he not only writes computer code but has already built his own laptop - organises an underground protest movement to challenge the dominion of Homeland Security in his home city. He begins by creating an e-communications network among friends and trusted associates, and their friends and trusted associates, using reverse engineered versions of Paranoid Xbox - a piece of readily available Microsoft gaming equipment with unparalleled encryption capacities, rendering any messages - even the act of message-sending itself - immune from Homeland Security scrutiny.

By such means, plus a bit of hacking here and a bit of RFID cloning there, and with a new girlfriend alongside him, plans are made and taken forward. Marcus exults:

Nellis, Mike. 2009. Review of Doctorow's *Little Brother*. *Surveillance & Society* 6(3): 341-342.

<http://www.surveillance-and-society.org> | ISSN: 1477-7487

© Mike Nellis. 2009 | Licensed to the Surveillance Studies Network under a [Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives license](#).

... Paranoid Xbox was *paranoid*. Every bit that went over the air was scrambled to within an inch of its life. You could wiretap it all you wanted but you'd never figure out who was talking, what they were talking about or who they were talking to. Anonymous Web, email and IM. Just what I wanted. ....

..... The best part of this is how it made me *feel*: in control. My technology was working for me, serving me, protecting me. It wasn't spying on me. This is why I loved technology; if you used it right it could give you power and privacy. (80)

Though he is interned and hurt again before the book's end, the actions of Marcus and his friends, his mother and an investigative journalist play a part in engineering a formal confrontation between the rule of law and Homeland Security. Who wins? Read and see. The overtly polemical element of the novel is more important than the sometimes creaky plot and the precise nature of the denouement. It is a shameless call to arms for those like Marcus who are coming of age in today's America (although when Cory Doctorow wrote it he envisaged a successor to Bush every bit as bad Bush himself - in this respect at least we can hope he is wrong).

*Little Brother* embodies the world view of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), whose European Director the author used to be. Doctorow has been nominated for some serious science fiction awards and has been considered a mover and shaker in the development of the internet, so one presumes that the huge amounts of technical information dropped into the story are accurate, or at least plausible. In a helpful afterword he openly says that *Little Brother* is his homage to Orwell and commends *Nineteen Eighty Four* - as well as Kerouac's liberty-loving *On the Road*. He invites his young readers to join the EFF - "the Internet's most effective freedom fighters" (369) - and to use "TOR, The Onion Router [as featured in the story], which is a real technology you can use *right now* to get out of your government, school or library's censoring firewall (tor.eff.org)". There is a further afterword, endorsing the novel, by Andrew "bunnie" Huang, the man who actually did reverse engineer Microsoft's Xboxes in 2002, while he was a postgraduate at MIT. And there is yet another one by Bruce Schneier, a security consultant who encourages young people to show that they can hack government security systems, on the grounds that if even they can do it, terrorists can too, and that, therefore, ever-escalating levels of surveillance is simply not the way to go. In saying this Schneier reminded me that among *Little Brother's* multiple cultural lineages the 1995 movie *Hackers* (dir. Iain Softley), in which a group of smart kids with computers foil a corrupt corporation, also qualifies. This book improves on that film. It does not address at all the question of how much human freedom has already been lost if such high levels of technological expertise are required to preserve mere residues of it, but whether or not one buys its theoretical assumptions about the nature of state surveillance, or the particular politics of resistance that flow from them, one could not but take heart if young people were reading it.