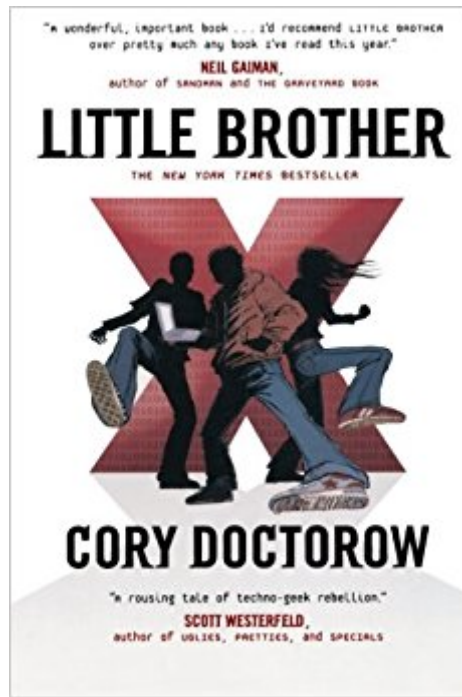


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Little Brother



Synopsis

Marcus, a.k.a "w1n5t0n," is only seventeen years old, but he figures he already knows how the system works "and how to work the system. Smart, fast, and wise to the ways of the networked world, he has no trouble outwitting his high school's intrusive but clumsy surveillance systems. But his whole world changes when he and his friends find themselves caught in the aftermath of a major terrorist attack on San Francisco. In the wrong place at the wrong time, Marcus and his crew are apprehended by the Department of Homeland Security and whisked away to a secret prison where they're mercilessly interrogated for days. When the DHS finally releases them, Marcus discovers that his city has become a police state where every citizen is treated like a potential terrorist. He knows that no one will believe his story, which leaves him only one option: to take down the DHS himself.

Book Information

Paperback: 432 pages

Publisher: Tor Teen; 1 edition (April 13, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0765323117

ISBN-13: 978-0765323118

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 1.2 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (491 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #22,073 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #79 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Genre Fiction > Historical > Alternate History](#) #129 in [Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Action & Adventure > Science Fiction](#) #225 in [Books > Teens > Science Fiction & Fantasy > Science Fiction > Dystopian](#)

Customer Reviews

In some ways, this book harks back to the juveniles of fifties as written by some of the great masters of sf, most especially Heinlein. Like those earlier books, it portrays teenagers that are intelligent, resourceful, game-loving, and confrontational, but are still at times prone to making stupid mistakes in the name of peer-group status. In other words, they are real teenagers. The setting is the near future, when some ill-defined terrorist group decides to blow up the San Francisco Bay Bridge. Marcus, our hero, and several of his friends are picked up in a rather wide sweep by Homeland Security forces as possible suspects. And therein lies the tale, as the actions of the security forces clash violently with Marcus's idea of what is right and proper in the supposed land-of-the-free

America. What Marcus decides to do about this situation is an instructional manual to the reader in just how personal freedom and privacy have been restricted and what can be done about it in today's very high-tech world of security cameras, RFIDs, cryptography, computer databases, and the insidious insinuation of propaganda both at our schools and into everything we see and hear on the internet and our TVs and from the mouths of our political leaders. The story bubbles with suspense, and the actions that Marcus takes are very believable as something a seventeen-year old could actually do. It is very easy to identify with Marcus and become very sympathetic to his cause, while the situation itself is stark enough to frighten the daylights out of the reader as being all too possible. The info-dumps along the way not only impart some very necessary information to the reader, but are handled very much the way Heinlein did it, as things that are necessary for the hero to either know or learn about to accomplish his desires, making them easy to swallow. The techniques and technology presented are real, as some of the afterword material to this book details. The other characters of this book, while not presented with the detail that Marcus is (almost always given in any first-person narration), are both intriguing and in some cases frightening. Marcus's father is a major case in point, as a man with liberal leanings who nevertheless finds himself driven to support the majority view out of fear for his son, and Marcus's social studies teacher, who is very reminiscent of some of the 'mentors' of Heinlein's books, as her willingness to engage her students in free-wheeling debate and attempts to get them to think for themselves leads to a very plausible and ugly fate. It is just such touches that make the whole situation ring with that touch of reality that marks excellent science fiction. The politics of this book are decidedly left-wing. The Patriot Act and the Department of Homeland Security come in for some merciless beatings, but the reasoning behind such depictions is carefully laid out and form a clarion call to all Americans to look carefully at just what we are giving up in the name of 'security'. Perhaps it should be compared and contrasted (as one of those infamous school assignments I don't fondly remember) with something like Tom Clancy's *Executive Orders*, which presents the right-wing rationale of why and when the government should be allowed to exceed the boundaries of the Constitution and its amendments. Unlike the YA material of the fifties, this book does not ignore an item of great concern to almost every teenager, namely sex. I found the presentation of this material both appropriate to the characters and handled realistically without being too graphic. However, it might make this book inappropriate for pre-teens. Teenagers should find this book a riveting read, with characters they can identify with, and like all really good YA books, adults should find this book just as riveting, with concepts and philosophies presented that require thought and contemplation. This is the best book I've read out of the 2008 crop so far, and I'd be very much surprised if it doesn't at least make the

Probably the biggest hurdle to overcome when reading young adult fiction is the fact that I'm not a young adult. As most adults know, things look very different from this part of the timeline, and it's often very difficult to remember not only how you thought when you were younger, but why you thought the way you did. And it's not a matter of just denying the feelings and emotions of youth - it's that we literally cannot reset our minds to that state. We know too much, we've experienced too much. The best we can do is an approximation of how we think we remember how things were when we were still young enough not to know better. It was with this in mind that I started to read *Little Brother*, and while I thought the book was a lot of fun to read, it probably wasn't nearly as cool as it would have been if I were fourteen years old. Young Marcus Yallow, AKA w1n5t0n, AKA m1k3y, is a senior at Cesar Chavez high school in San Francisco, and he's what we used to call a "computer whiz" back when I was a kid. Marcus has an excellent grasp of how systems work, and finds great pleasure and thrill in either strengthening or outwitting those systems. Thus, he is able to fool the various security measures in place in his school building so that he can do the things his teachers don't want him to do - send IMs in class, sneak out whenever he wants, steal library books, that kind of thing. He's a hacker supreme, a trickster, and a very big fish in his little pond. He's so confident and cocky, in fact, that within twenty pages I wanted nothing more than to see him get his comeuppance. Which is pretty much what happens. A series of bombs go off, destroying the Bay Bridge and killing thousands of people in an attack that dwarfs 9/11. In the chaos that ensues, Marcus and his friends get picked up by Homeland Security, taken to an undisclosed location (which turns out to be Treasure Island) and interrogated within an inch of their lives. They quickly break Marcus' smug self-confidence and assure him that there is no way he can win against them if they decide he's a threat to national security. When he is sufficiently cowed, Marcus is released back into the city, which has become a zone of hyper-security. In this post-attack San Francisco, the police and Homeland Security have unprecedented powers to search and seize, access to every trace of electronic records of citizens' movements and transactions. In other words, everyone is a suspect until proven otherwise, and DHS is confident that the security they provide is worth the loss of liberty. Marcus, of course, disagrees. His natural tendency to buck authority meets his desire to get back at DHS for what they did to him and his friends, and comes together in a plan to not only subvert the Department of Homeland Security, but to actively drive them out of his city. To that end, he creates a youth movement, powered by a secret internet known as the XNet and kept safe by means of complex cryptography. The youth of the city come together to cause chaos, to show

Homeland Security that they are not all-powerful and that if anyone is terrifying American citizens, it's not al-Qaeda. In the end, of course, the good guys win, though not without some losses and some disappointment. Freedom triumphs over security, but how long that triumph will last is unknown. All we do know is that the right of the citizens to tell their government what to do - as enumerated in the Declaration of Independence - is maintained. So in that sense, all is well. It's a fun book to read, and I'll admit, there were times where I could feel anger building and my heart racing as the story moved along. Perhaps that's because, like Marcus, I have a solid distrust of authority. I don't automatically assume that governments act in their citizens' best interests, so in that sense, this book is targeted at people just like me. Or, if it's a younger reader, at creating more people like me. The narration is well done, a believable 17-year-old voice, and it's a pleasure to read. Moreover, it all holds together very well. In some ways, this book reminded me a lot of Neal Stephenson. Doctorow has clearly done a lot of research on security, both electronic and otherwise, cryptography, politics and history, and found a lot of cool stuff that he's incorporated into the novel. Unlike Stephenson, however, Doctorow makes sure the story is more important than the trivia. All the cool stuff serves to support the plot, rather than having a plot built up around all the cool stuff the author's found, which is what Stephenson seems to do a lot. So there are some asides where Marcus takes a few pages to explain, say, how to fool gait-recognition software or how public and private keys work in electronic cryptography, but he does it in an interesting way and you can be sure that what he's telling you will feed into the story sooner or later. With a couple of caveats, and a pretty major plot hole, I'd be glad to hand this off to a nearby teenager and say, "Read this." But the caveats are kind of big. So let's get to them. First, the plot hole, which bugged me from the moment I saw it. And as with all plot holes, I may have missed something, so let me know if I did. After the bombing of the Bay Bridge, Marcus and his friends are picked up by DHS and given the Full Guantanamo Treatment. While it looks like they were picked up randomly, the Homeland Security agent who puts them through the wringer implies that they were specifically looking for Marcus and his buddies, seeing them as a very real and imminent threat to national security. My question is: Why? It's never explained why DHS picks them up, nor why they treat them as severely as they do. If DHS knew something about Marcus' activities as a hacker, why weren't we told what they knew? It looked like DHS was just picking up random citizens and trying to scare the piss out of them. Which, given the characterization problem that I will discuss later, is entirely possible. Before that, though - this is a book of its time, and is ultimately less about Marcus than it is about the time in which Marcus lives, i.e. about ten minutes in our future. It was published in 2008, which means it was being written during a period in American history where the debate over privacy versus security

hit its peak. After September 11th, after the creation of Homeland Security and the Iraq War, Americans had to answer a lot of questions about how safe they wanted to be. It was possible, they said, to be very safe, but only if we sacrificed some of our freedoms. Thus the no-fly list, warrantless wiretaps, and waterboarding. It's a dilemma that mankind has faced since we started organizing into societies, and it seemed, in the opening years of the 21st century, that America was willing to give up a good deal of its personal liberty in exchange for not having thousands of citizens die. Doctorow believes this is a very bad exchange to make, and has been publicly vocal in saying so. On Boing Boing, a webzine that is decidedly in favor of intellectual and informational freedom, Doctorow has repeatedly railed against ever-intrusive technology measures by both governments and corporations. He, and the other editors of Boing Boing, champion the personal liberty of people, both as citizens and consumers, and I tend to agree with them. But that makes *Little Brother* less a book about the issues that affect young people than a book about what it's like to live in a hyper-security culture. And that's not a bad thing, mind you - like I said, it makes for a very exciting book. I just don't know how long it will last once we stop having the liberty/security argument as vocally as we are now. Which brings me to my other caveat, and one that bothers me more than the book being period fiction - bad characterization. Marcus is great, as are his close friends and his eventual girlfriend, Ange. They're real, they're complex and they're interesting. In fact, most of the "good guys" in this book are well-drawn. Depending on your definition of "good," of course - after all, Marcus is technically a terrorist, so long as you define "terrorist" as "someone who actively operates to subvert, disturb or otherwise challenge the government by illegal means." If Marcus and his subversive friends are the good guys, then that makes the Government the bad guys, and this is where Doctorow falls flat on his face. The characters who operate in support of security culture, whether they're agents of Homeland Security or just in favor of the new security measures (Marcus' father being a prime example), are cardboard cut-outs that just have "Insert Bad Guy Here" written on them in crayon. There is no depth to their conviction, no complexity to their decisions. Doctorow makes it clear that anyone who collaborates with DHS is either a willful idiot or outright malevolent, without considering any other options. He gives a little in the case of Marcus' father, but not enough to make me do more than roll my eyes when he came out with the hackneyed, "Innocent people have nothing to fear" line. Any character who acts against Marcus in this book (and, it is implied, disagrees with Doctorow) is a straw man, a villain or a collaborator straight from central casting with all the depth of a sheet of tinfoil. They are all easy to hate and make Marcus look all the better, even though he's acting as, let's face it, an agent of chaos. While this may make the story easier to tell (and, from my readings of Boing Boing, turning those who disagree with you into objects of ridicule

is a popular method of dealing with criticism - see disemvowleing), it cheapens it. As much as I - and Doctorow - may hate the idea of security infringing on liberty, as much as we hate the reversals in personal freedoms that we've seen over the last eight years, and as much as we may want Marcus to come out on top, it has to be acknowledged that sometimes people who want to restrain liberty aren't doing it out of malice. There are those whose desire to see a safe, orderly nation is so strong and so honest that they're able to make the decision to curtail those liberties that make order harder to attain. And they're not doing it because they hate young people, or because they're some cinema villain out for power or just to see people suffer. They're doing it because they truly, honestly believe it is the right thing to do. To write them off as "Bad Guys," as this book does, is to ignore the reality of the situation and boil it down to an "Us vs Them" scenario, which is not how the world works. Now it could be argued that this was a reasonable artistic decision - after all, Marcus is the narrator of this tale, therefore we're seeing things through his eyes and his perceptions. But that doesn't wash. Marcus is obviously an intelligent person who understands complexity, and if Doctorow had given him the opportunity to see shades of gray, he could have been able to handle it. More importantly, though, that argument is a cheat. A book like this is meant to open eyes and minds, and that can't be done by reducing the issue to us versus them. Doctorow does his readers a disservice by not allowing them the opportunity to question their own attitudes towards the issue. I really think the book would have been better, and had a deeper meaning, if Doctorow had made an honest attempt to show the other side in a more honest light. I still would have rooted for Marcus, and hated the DHS, but his ultimate victory would have been more meaningful if it had been a fairer fight. Of course, I say this as an adult, who understands things in a different light than a teenager. Perhaps if I had had this book when I was thirteen it would have changed my life. And despite my misgivings about the characters and the universality of the story, I still think it's a great book and well worth reading - probably one of those books that will be a model of early 21st century fiction. Indeed, the core lesson of Little Brother - that citizens have the responsibility to police their government - is a lesson whose time has come. The G20 protests in London this year are a great example - many incidents of police abuse were clearly and unambiguously recorded by citizens armed with cell phones. The ability for information to be quickly and reliably distributed is the modern countermeasure against government abuse, though I doubt it'll end as cleanly as it did in this book. Reading this book in the context of the last ten years or so gave me some hope for the power of the populace. But it also served to remind me that I'm not that young anymore. The rallying cry of the youth in this book is "Don't trust anyone over 25," and I'm well past that stage in my temporal existence. The rebels of the day are young. They're tech-savvy and unafraid, with nothing

to lose but their lives. In this age of rapidly evolving technology, in a time where youth is everything, is there a place in the revolution for people who have advanced in age to their *shudder* mid-thirties? Other people pull muscles trying to play sports like they did in high school, I have existential dilemmas reading young adult fiction. I never claimed to be normal.-----"They'd taken everything from me. First my privacy, then my dignity. I'd been ready to sign anything. I would have signed a confession that said I'd assassinated Abraham Lincoln."- Marcus, Little Brother-----

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