

Review: Little Brother



It's not often that I read a book that makes me smile and wince for all the right reasons.

Cory Doctorow's latest novel, *Little Brother*, has been available for some time now. I have had the Creative-Commons licensed on-line version for months but being handed a tree-ware copy gave me an excuse to read it.

Having read reviews, and having heard the cheers from the techno-geek rebel wannabes that clip on red-copycat-capes as they seed the blogosphere with attempts at profundity, I wasn't surprised at the story or the plot. In fact it is a rather a linear plot with some clumsy sequences and character introductions – but right on the money for the apparent mid-teen audience. (Note to the discerning parent: my classification would be an Australian M-Rated, adult themes, mild violence, drug use, nudity, sex scenes)

But it's not the literary weight of *Little Brother* that gives its value – it is its subject matter. Set in a very slightly futuristic San Francisco in the days and weeks following a significant terrorist bombing it explores the very topical and present issues of freedom and security. Questions are raised about the fundamentals of (American) political freedom – and the psychology behind giving up freedoms for the sake of security only to arrive at the reality of security *theatre* that masks an ever-growing bureaucratic control of society. As I was reading it I was constantly thinking about issues that Bruce Schneier often raises only to find that he had written

an afterword in the book itself!

Doctorow teases open issues of how the so-called War on Terror™ gets used for manipulation and places this within a generational and cultural milieu that draws from San Francisco hippiedom alway through to the technological ubiquity of the latest generation weaving the values of the hacker into the whole thing. Surveillance, privacy, civil rights, generational angst, and a little bit of Hollywood-esque action are thrown together in just the right way to make me smile and wince for all the right reasons.

This book is bit absolutist but deliberately so. I think that what it does best is point at the hypocrisies of Western societies and state clearly in the words of a seventeen year-old hacker "The Emperor has no clothes." It takes current thin wedge-ends and plays them out to an extreme. It is an excellent summary of the values, the angst, and the serious philosophy of a generation and sub-culture that riles at a protectionist-by-increment cancer creeping into our civilisation.

Even Doctorow's decision to release it through creative-commons – *giving* away his book in the face of old-style mercantile establishment who gasp at the audacity of such a business plan – is part of the message of this book. Although it does make me wonder if they'll ever be a movie.

From a Christian point of view: Well it's not exactly from the same crowd behind *Veggie Tales* and *Guitar Praise Hero* if you know what I mean. And it's certainly wouldn't be held up as wholesome by those who confuse American patriotism with Christian spirituality. But it does remind us that all government and nations rule only at God's pleasure. It paints a picture of what humans do to each other. I agree with much of its critique, then rest with gladness on the truth that God is in control and in him is safety, security, and sometimes the energy for counter-cultural proclamation.

Anyway. Download it. Pick it up. Enjoy it. And ponder.

