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Good Weekend

A woman’s work: why the story of George Orwell’s forgotten first wife still matters

Acclaimed writer Anna Funder knows she’s a privileged woman in a happy marriage. Yet when she discovered how the “1984” author’s brilliant first wife was rendered invisible by wedlock, she felt an unexpected connection.

Amanda Hooton

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After Anna Funder read a letter written by Eileen Blair shortly after her marriage to George Orwell, she realised that this brilliant woman had drowned in domestic labour. TIM BAUER

This story is part of the July 1 Edition of Good Weekend. See all 17 stories.

Anna Funder sometimes tells a story from her childhood, when her family lived briefly in San Francisco.

She is five years old, camping with her parents at Yosemite. She needs to go to the toilet block, which is down a forest track near the campsite, but her mother is breastfeeding her baby brother. “You can go by yourself,” she tells Funder. Funder duly goes, and swiftly returns. “There’s a bear in front of the toilets,” she says.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” says her mother. “Off you go.“

She goes again, returns again. “The bear is still there,” she announces.

“For heaven’s sake, will you just get on with it,” says her mother.

Funder goes again. And returns with her hand being held by a stranger. “Who keeps sending this child down to the toilet block?” he asks crossly. “There’s a bear down there.“

I worry about telling this story, because I don’t want to steal Funder’s own material. For her, as for most writers, stories are precious: they make sense of life. But perhaps this story makes sense of Anna Funder.

Firstly, it contains a seemingly defenceless individual, in a strange, potentially dangerous environment. Secondly, this person is alone. And thirdly, she eventually returns with information that is absolutely not what you’re expecting to hear, true nonetheless, and changes everything.

Anna Funder did not set out to write a book, let alone a complex, part-memoir, part-biography, part-fiction book about George Orwell’s wife Eileen Blair. Still less did she intend to take on the patriarchy and the way women are erased by a world where men hold power. But in the summer of 2017, she made a discovery. Or, to put it more accurately, she noticed an absence.

At the time, Funder, 56, and her husband of 25 years, urban designer Craig Allchin, were wrangling the classic trappings of middle-class family life: three children, two new schools, house repairs, family visits, orthodontic appointments – “everything from euphonium hire to a depressed French exchange student”, as she puts it.

From left: five-year-old Anna Funder, the age she was when she encountered this bear while alone near her family's campsite in eastern California.

Both she and Allchin were working; both understood the labour involved in keeping the family boat afloat. And yet, “despite Craig and I imagining we divided the work of life and love equally, the world had conspired against our best intentions,” writes Funder in her new book, *Wifedom*.

In fact, “I’d been doing the lion’s share for so long, we’d stopped noticing. For someone who notices things for a living, this seemed, to borrow our nine-year old son’s term, an ‘epic fail’. “

One afternoon, Funder found herself, yet again, trapped in the Dante-esque hell of the Broadway shopping centre’s multi-level car park in Sydney’s inner west (not a unique experience: insert the car park name of your choice). When she finally escaped, she let out a banshee scream and rammed her car into a plate-glass window to express her frustration. No, wait, she didn’t do that. She drove to a secondhand bookshop and bought a collection of George Orwell’s essays.

One of Western literature’s most famous 20th-century writers, Orwell is best known for his two mega-hits, *Animal Farm* and *1984*. Funder had always loved him for what she calls “his laser vision about how power works, and who it works on”. Not just political power, but power relations between people. Reflecting on why he took part in the Spanish Civil War, Orwell wrote in *Homage to Catalonia* that he was fighting for “common decency”: truth and integrity between one person and another.

Funder also read *about* Orwell – the many, many biographies and commentaries of the past 50-odd years. As she did so, she found herself searching for Orwell’s wife. She was sensitised to wives and women’s work, perhaps. Eileen O’Shaughnessy married Orwell in 1936 and became Eileen Blair (George Orwell’s real name was, rather prosaically, Eric Blair). But she was virtually missing from Orwell’s own, often deeply personal, writing about his life. This was odd, Funder thought – especially since, as she dug deeper, she discovered a woman who was, according to seemingly everyone who knew her, a truly remarkable person.

Wifedom is the result of this digging. Eileen Blair was a woman who won a scholarship to and earned an English degree from the University of Oxford, at a time when women were barely admitted to higher education. (Orwell himself was not “recommended” by his school for university, and did not attend.)

EDITOR'S PICK

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A woman who published, in 1934, a dystopian poem called, significantly, *End of the Century*, 1984; who asked for the word “obey” to be removed from her wedding vows, and twice organised co-workers to stand up to bullying bosses in male-dominated workplaces. She was a woman who not only performed every skerrick of the domestic work in her life with Orwell, but also supported him financially for at least two years of their nine-year marriage; who saved one of his manuscripts from destruction in the Spanish Civil War, and was a crucial literary influence in his life. Eileen was the first reader – not to mention typist, rewriter, editor and political educator – of Orwell’s work. She was, Funder argues convincingly, especially important to the creation of *Animal Farm* and *1984*.

How could Orwell have virtually erased her from accounts of his life? How could the man who wrote “in a time of deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act” have failed to tell the truth about his own wife? But equally unsettling was the fact that Eileen was also missing from almost all the biographical writing on Orwell.

This writing includes no less than six comprehensive biographies of Orwell (and one of Eileen, by Sylvia Topp, in 2020). But none of the Orwell works gives more than a cursory glance at Eileen. In fact, they all minimise her role in his life. And none of them credits her with an important role in his creation of two of the world’s most significant works of political fiction.

I have read none of these biographies, and I am the furthest thing imaginable from an Orwell expert, so I have no idea how far Funder’s picture of Orwell diverges from the accepted view; or by what distance she has set herself apart from the people who have made it their life’s work to study him. But judging by *Wifedom*, I’d say pretty far, and a long way.

Eileen Blair won a scholarship to Oxford, whereas her husband George Orwell was not "recommended" for university. "She was just so obviously very funny and very smart," says Funder.

"You can imagine my absolute terror about the reaction," she says several times. She seems to expect she's about to bring the entire worlds of literary biography and feminist scholarship – both fields in which she's a self-confessed novice – down on her head. She might be right, too. But she has done it nonetheless. She has kept going down the path towards that bear.

I**ncluding *Wifedom***, Anna Funder has only written three books and a novella in her career, but if you judge by impact rather than quantity, she's achieved a lot. *Stasiland*, her first book, was published in 2002, and won the prestigious Samuel Johnson Prize (now known as the Baille Gifford Prize for Non-Fiction) for the best non-fiction writing in English. Weirdly, when she won this award, I was sent to Funder's home to ask her a series of off-camera questions for BBC TV. It was a strange experience, but she seemed nice: heavily pregnant, somewhat bemused. A few years later, I inherited her baby travel cot via a mutual friend. It weighed about half a tonne and was the least travel-friendly cot I have ever encountered; no wonder she got rid of it.

On the strength of the quasi-interview, however – not to mention the cot – I was always interested in her. After *Stasiland*, which went on to be a massive hit – published in 26 countries and translated into a dozen languages – she published a novel in 2011, *All That I Am*, which won the Miles Franklin Literary Award. Around the same time, she and her family moved to New York for three-and-a-half years, so the baby-equipment lines were cut. But I occasionally heard of her through another mutual friend. She seemed to be moving in impressively celebrity-laden social circles: this friend once made a starter for one of Funder's dinner parties at which Tom Hanks was a guest.

What I liked about her books was their humanity. Concerned with great arcs of 20th-century history – the totalitarian state of East Germany; the rise of Nazism – Funder nonetheless focused on stories of real people: East German citizens who resisted the terrifying Stasi surveillance system; German refugees who smuggled Nazi secrets to the British parliament. Her characters are often afraid and alone, but they display a kind of heroic individual human decency.

> ***"I say, 'We did this. We organised the dinner party/holiday/healthcare.' But 'we' is not we. We is me."***

"I feel a real love for them," says Funder, laughing. "I think that's a big part of why I write: I love them, and I'm trying to do them justice." This love pertains to Orwell, too, she admits. "He has this beautiful Orwellian honesty about systems of illegitimate power – except for this enormous blind spot about having a wife whose services he got for life, for free."

Funder sits back on the deep sofa in her wide-windowed sitting room. If I wanted to continue the golden-locked-child-engaged-with-bear fairy tale at this point, it would be easy to do. Funder lives in a kind of castle, for starters – a beautiful tall Victorian house in Glebe, in Sydney's inner west, pale pink, with arched windows and emerald grass – and she looks like a fairy queen: slim and pale, with blue, wide-set eyes and Rapunzel-blonde hair. She is quiet, attentive, complimentary.

"Please eat cake," she says several times, gesturing to a giant plate of pastries. "Are you cold? Do you need the heater on? Are you okay on that couch? It's so big, it's awful."

Her spoken voice, which is very soft, is a surprise, because it's at odds with her writer's voice, which is lyrical but also unwavering, an unusual combination that means she can describe awful things with real beauty.

"She is not openly combative," says Josh Bornstein, head of employment law at Maurice Blackburn in Melbourne, who has known her since they were teenagers. "But she has a ferocious side. She will enter the fray in pursuit of the truth. She will be genuinely apprehensive, but she'll also relish the argument, and she will hold her ground."

Funder began fighting for Eileen Blair from the moment in 2017 that she read a letter written by Eileen to her best friend from Oxford, Norah, after her marriage to Orwell.

"I lost my habit of punctual correspondence during the first few weeks of marriage," Eileen confessed, "because we quarrelled so continuously & really bitterly that I thought I'd save time & just write one letter to everyone when the murder or separation had been accomplished."

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"I read that letter, and I was gone for all money," says Funder. "She was just so obviously very funny and very smart: such an attractive sort of person. But I wondered why I felt this connection with her situation. ‘Why do I have this fellow-feeling, given that I’m, you know, a massively privileged white woman in a happy marriage in a rich country?’ And I realised it’s because all this domestic labour that I’m doing, that I’m drowning in, has been made invisible – just as Eileen has been made invisible – by male privilege and patriarchy. Eileen died more than 70 years ago, but she’s still relevant because we’re all still caught in it – women as well as men. The patriarchy is a code by which we are all written.”

While writing *Wifedom*, Funder began noticing this, not only in her own life, but also in those of her female friends: everyone colluding in the patriarchal aim of making female work invisible.

NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR
GEORGE ORWELL
ORWELL
The Authorised Biography
life in letters

Funder’s collection of books by George Orwell. “I can like and admire the work,” she says, “but also have an accurate and not hagiographic idea of the man.” TIM BAUER

“I do it, too,” she confesses. “I say, ‘We did this: We organised the dinner party/holiday/healthcare.’ But ‘we’ is not we. We is me.”

George Orwell, according to Funder, was a genuine truth-teller and defender of human decency. But he was also profoundly hypocritical: oblivious to both his wife’s achievements and her suffering, and monumentally blind to the sexism, even misogyny, of his behaviour towards women in general. When she was only 39, less than a year after they had adopted a baby boy, Eileen died during a hysterectomy, after years of ill-health. George Orwell’s response to her death was to “pounce on and propose to at least four women”, Funder claims, in the space of a few months.

All his advances were rejected, perhaps because the women knew, in Funder’s words, that the “previous incumbent died of overwork and neglect”. He did eventually remarry, an impressive woman called Sonia Brownell, three months before his own death of tuberculosis in 1950.

Despite these unsavoury details, there is an argument that it’s unfair to judge Orwell’s behaviour by modern standards. So many men have behaved abominably to women throughout history: why is this news?

But what about the biographies – supposedly careful, definitive, truthful records of Orwell's life? According to Funder, they all participate in erasing, reframing or justifying his behaviour, and "passive-tensing" not only Eileen, but all the women in his life: women like his friend Mabel Fierz and aunt Ellen Limouzin, who found him jobs, paid his rent, got his work published.

This removal is untenable to Funder. It makes the biographies, at least in part, "works of fiction, not fact". Love Orwell or loathe him, she maintains, modern readers deserve to understand the truth of who he really was.

How does Funder maintain her own love for Orwell, incidentally, given all this?

"Oddly, I use Orwell's own idea from 1984, called doublethink, which is holding two contradictory ideas simultaneously." Funder smiles. "I can like and admire the work, but also have an accurate and not hagiographic idea of the man."

Halfway through demolishing the patriarchy, Funder suddenly asks if I'm hungry. She has some "very boring" soup: which is, predictably, delicious, and homemade by her (though she disclaims all credit in a way that would make the patriarchy proud).

While we're eating, her eldest child, Imogen – as dark-haired and vivid as her mother is pale – appears in the kitchen, laughing at her mother's urging towards the soup. "It's vegetarian … although it does have chicken stock in it. Does that count?"

Funder (centre), with husband Craig Allchin and children Max, Imogen and Polly.

As well as Imogen, who is 21, Funder has another daughter, Polly, 18, and a son, Max, 14. She was the eldest of three children (she has two brothers).

"Both my parents had PhDs [her father in endocrinology, her mother in psychology] – so the atmosphere around the dinner table was sort of high-powered and intellectually combative. But actually, I think underneath that was a lot of emotional stuff that was not being discussed." She pauses. "I was a child obsessed with reading from about five – reading fiction, which is essentially a way of expressing emotion. So maybe, if you're that child, it makes sense that you grow up wanting to write books that say, 'Here are all the hidden facts about what was actually going on.' "

Her mother, Kathleen, was a particularly memorable, albeit enigmatic, presence. "Anna's mum was always 'Mrs Funder'," recalls childhood friend and insurance claims manager Susan Rawling. "Her dad was John, but she was 'Mrs Funder'."

Funder herself describes Kathleen, who died when she was Funder's age, as loving, funny, engaged – and also, clearly, a woman to be reckoned with.

"When I was about five, I was playing dress-ups one day, and my mother gave me her wedding dress and a pair of scissors. I actually remember thinking, 'Well, what is it you want me to do here, Mum?' "

Just before Funder started school, her family moved to Paris for her father's work. "And Mum didn't say to me, 'Now, you're going to turn up for your very first day of school, and you won't understand a word.' She just sent me off! According to her, she didn't want to make me anxious. But actually, I think it was a psychological experiment. One of many!" She leans forward.

"She was actually very funny about it – she said when I came home that day, she was the one who was anxious, sort of hovering over me, asking, 'So, how was school?' And I apparently just said, 'Fine.' " Funder mimes elaborate six-year-old unconcern.

"And that was all I would give her. 'You didn't tell me, so now I don't tell you.' Fine."

On their return from France, her parents moved to Carlton, Melbourne. Despite her peripatetic childhood – and being, as Josh Bornstein remembers it, "just disgracefully gorgeous; I mean, intimidatingly so" – she fitted in easily.

"She was just one of our gang of kids piss-farting around," says Susan Rawling. "Riding our bikes, going to each other's houses after school, practising our dance moves. I remember she had this epic party in year 9 when everyone ended up kissing whoever happened to be in their patch of garden at the end of the night."

She graduated dux of her high school, Star of the Sea College in Brighton, and, as many bright humanities students do, studied arts/law at the University of Melbourne, despite a lack of enthusiasm for law. Justice Hilary Charlesworth is a judge at the International Court of Justice at the Hague. She was one of Funder's law tutors in Melbourne, and remains a close friend.

"In a very bright class, Anna was extraordinarily gifted," she says from the

Netherlands. “And precisely because she had a certain scepticism about the law, she was very thoughtful and inquiring. I remember she wrote such a wonderful honours thesis that I encouraged her to publish it, which is very unusual for an undergraduate.”

She did a brief stint at a big-city law firm in Melbourne, during which various incidents (a sleazy partner, alleged sexual harassment – not involving Funder – and dubious billing practices) confirmed her doubts about private legal practice. In 1994, she moved to Canberra for a job in the Attorney-General’s office.

Up to this point, you could argue, Anna Funder’s life had followed a conventional middle-class narrative: strong nuclear family, private schooling, high-status degree and a good job in a competitive profession. But then she did something completely out of left-field. In 1996, despite her position offering “the best international law work I could have done”, she quit her job, abandoned her career, left her boyfriend, and moved, by herself, to Berlin.

Funder (right), with brother Hugh and mum Kathleen in 1970.

It came as a massive shock to most people who knew her. “I remember saying to friends, ‘What the *hell* is Anna doing?’ ” recalls Bornstein. “It was *such* an unusual thing to do. I didn’t know anyone who’d done anything like it; I had no way of understanding it; I didn’t even know how to talk to her about it. I mean, East Germany? The Stasi? It was like me saying, ‘I’m heading to Mars.’ ”

“It was crazy,” agrees Funder. “But I had known from the age of about six that I wanted to be a writer. So I think of it now as really trying to put myself in a situation where it was now or never. I had to give writing a chance. But it was still a crazy plan: I didn’t even have a story. And I was leaving Craig behind – we were together, but we weren’t married, and we thought we’d do the long-distance thing, but you know how those things usually go. So looking back, it was very high stakes.”

So are all bear-hunts, of course.

As well as the publicity for *Wifedom*, which will occur on three continents (the US, the UK and here), Funder is currently busy with a streaming series treatment of *Stasiland* starring Elizabeth Debicki as Funder, and a part-time role at University of Technology Sydney (UTS), where she co-runs an events series called The Vice-Chancellor's Democracy Forum. A few days after our interview, she and I attend a talk by Tim Winton at NIDA in Sydney.

Surrounded by exactly the sort of people who read her books (I see several people looking at her in a kind of "*Is that …?*" way), she's surprisingly unobtrusive, just another Winton fan. She says she knows him "the tiniest bit", which might be true or might be modest understatement, since as well as Tom Hanks, she seems to be friends with lots of famous people – everyone from Julia Louis-Dreyfus (Elaine of *Seinfeld* fame) to famous French #MeToo journalist Hélène Devynck (whom she has known since childhood) to David Malouf (who apparently loves Broadway shopping centre – thus forcing me to revise my previously high opinion of his judgment).

Perhaps helpfully when being friends with celebrities, "she's always genuinely delighted by other's successes", says Justice Charlesworth. "I read a lovely word for it in German: *freudenfreude* – the opposite of *schadenfreude*. That's Anna."

But the sharp edge is there, too. A few days after the Winton event, I attend a lunch in the august surrounds of the Union, University & Schools Club in Sydney, where Funder does a reading from *Wifedom* before taking comments.

A white-haired man in a dark blazer asks a question. To my shame I don't write it down, but the thrust of it is, "Why don't women just stop complaining about their lot?" Funder, in her soft voice, gently annihilates him.

During our own interview, and all through *Wifedom*, Funder enumerates the reasons why women can, do, and should feel exercised (read, massively pissed off) about the inequalities between the genders.

"There is not one place on the planet where women as a group have the same power, freedom, leisure or money as their male partners," she points out. "And *that's* the comparison – not comparing women in wealthy countries with women in poor places as a way of shutting wealthy women up. If you compare women directly with their male peers, there is no place on earth where they are equal."

"And Australia is especially bad," adds Sam Mostyn, a longtime friend of Funder and chair of the Albanese government's Women's Economic Equality Taskforce.

While writing "Wifedom", Funder began noticing her female friends colluding in the patriarchal aim of making female work invisible. TIM BAUER

"Women here rate first internationally for educational attainment but 38th for economic participation. So Orwell and his wife are not a historical quirk, they are a cautionary tale. Eileen was a highly educated, highly intelligent woman whose work was unpaid and invisible. That's why these issues raised by Anna remain so important."

At the risk of giving the patriarchy the final word, one of the last people I speak to for this profile is Anna's husband, Craig Allchin. I'd met him briefly at the pink house – dark-haired and smiling, like his daughter. "Ah, yes, the patriarchy," he laughs when I call him. "It was good while it lasted! No, obviously it's something we've talked about a lot over the years – though I did sharpen my game a little bit when she started writing this book! But there's no question that it's a disastrous system. And men should be trying just as hard as women to change things, because we'd all be better off without it. Being more involved, doing more of that family stuff, gives all of us a better, fuller life – a proper life."

Why does he think Funder has been driven to take on these huge topics – totalitarianism, the Nazi regime, the patriarchy? "I know: no such thing as a couple of straightforward detective novels, is there," he agrees. "I think she's driven by social justice; but in her heart of hearts she's a creative writer. And so she's always wrestling to use that ability to fix the real world."

Playwright Nick Drake, who adapted *Stasiland* for the National Theatre in London (though it was never produced), agrees.

"Revealing intensely personal stories [as Anna does] may have its own power to shift things, to bring change," he explains. "Because telling stories invokes imagination, which is the single most powerful tool we have to conceive a better world."

Speaking of better worlds: "I've got Anna's next book all planned," says Allchin. "I'm going to get her onto climate change."

“I think climate change might be beyond me,” says Funder, some weeks after our first meeting. I’ve returned to check some details, and I find the pink house looking unexpectedly eviscerated. There are bulging bin bags piled on the emerald grass, roof insulation and building detritus everywhere, and the path to the front door is blocked by an enormous, Sean Tan-esque machine, complete with conical roof and snaking vacuum cords.

Funder is standing wild-eyed in the hallway. “Oh my god!” she calls when she sees me. “Can you believe it? Craig told me some men were coming today, but I … I had no idea!”

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We retreat to the rear of the house, where Funder produces yet more cakes. I confess I’ve used her bear story in my article.

“Use it!” she says. “You know, the most important thing about that story to me is how my mother handled it. She made photo albums for each of us before she died, and in mine she included a picture of that bear. It was such a loving, graceful thing to do: to acknowledge she was wrong, to poke fun at herself.”

In 2013, Funder told her bear story when she gave the closing address at the Perth Writers Festival. As she said then, “The bear is there [for my mother] to say, ‘I did my best. It wasn’t enough. But it could have been worse.’ ”

A decade later, when it comes to sharing life’s labour and achievements more equally with those we love, Funder might add another sentence: It could also be a great deal better.

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