

# Black box

A revealing notebook is lost and **Anna Funder** finds the watchful eye of Big Brother everywhere.

**S**OMEWHERE OUT THERE – HOPEFULLY IN landfill – there’s a black moleskin-bound notebook containing six months of my mental life. I left it on a plane from Stavanger to Oslo in September and, unlike other things I’ve left on planes – noise-cancelling headphones, books, jewellery – it can be of absolutely no value to anyone else.

I’ve never lost a notebook before. I tried quite hard to get this one back, but no such luck. Landfill in Norway is – please god – its last resting place, because the thought of all those scraps of my inner life in someone else’s hands feels like a violation. (I don’t flatter myself that they would be of any actual interest to that person, even if they could decipher the strange, runic code that has body-snatched my handwriting. But still.)

Fleeting thoughts were warehoused there, ’til I could work out whether there was anything to them, or whether, like junk mail, they were junk thoughts. Slightly more importantly, there were sketches of the architecture, characters, plot points and dialogue for a novel, and notes on the US, in all its vivid newness to me. (Some of those I do remember: can the security guard at the elementary school handle that gun in her holster with those long, fake, bubblegum-pink fingernails? And translations of the local idiom: “Good luck with that” would be the gloriously succinct “Fat chance” in Australian; “We need to talk” is “I’m going to give you a piece of my mind.”)

The notebook was a private space in which thoughts could be conceived, gestate and, possibly, later see the light of day. From January to September, it was the black box of my life.

And what a time it was. During those few months, our relationship to our private lives, all our personal black boxes, was radically changed. I have a slew of reasons for writing in notebooks, but I had not counted among them a fear that the contents of my computer are searchable and readable by the government and corporations. Since the revelations of Edward Snowden about the widespread surveillance by the US government of its citizens and others around the world (all phone records – numbers called, duration of calls – and all emails – full



contents searchable without warrant), we can no longer think of our computers as our own private black (or silver) boxes. The connection to the internet, which seemed like our window onto the world, is actually the world’s window into us.

Recently I went to hear Glenn Greenwald speak at a public forum in Manhattan. Greenwald is the American former *Guardian* journalist to whom Edward Snowden gave the National Security Agency files revealing, as Greenwald put it, “by far the largest surveillance mechanism built in human history to surveil people without suspicion”.

Greenwald, also a former constitutional lawyer, began by focusing on the sense of violation we should have. “Some people say,” he said at the forum, “‘If I’m not doing anything wrong, I’ve got nothing to hide.’” He would say to them, “Then why don’t you give me all your email passwords and social media accounts and let me trawl through them?” An audible shudder went through the room. “Misuse,” Greenwald said, “is inevitable.” Then he distilled three reasons why our privacy is so important.

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First, because we need to preserve the possibility of challenging government or corporations, and the ability to communicate in private is essential for this.

Second, as the adage has it, “knowledge is power”. The more you know about someone, the more you can manipulate them. In democracies, people in public office should be acting in the public interest and, for the most part, in ways that are transparent, so they can be called to account. But private individuals should be shielded from scrutiny. “We have completely reversed that,” Greenwald said. “It’s a one-way mirror: they see more of us and we see less of them.”

And third, without privacy, people can’t “test limits, engage in creativity, explore, dissent”. These essential parts of our humanity, “reside exclusively in the private sphere”.

IN A WORLD OF SURVEILLANCE, WHETHER OR not you are actually being watched at any particular moment is not the main issue. It is the fact you could be that ruins your private life, which is to say, your life. George Orwell put it best. This, from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: “There was no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment. How often, or on what system, the Thought Police plugged in on any individual wire was guesswork. It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time... You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinised.”

We are indeed developing new behaviours, habits, perhaps even instincts both of the self-censoring and self-protecting kind. Journalists are disabling cameras on laptops. The Indian Embassy in London has gone back to using typewriters for important correspondence. A distinct professional chill has crept into emails, which are now, as we know, as private as graffiti.

But the people whose behaviour has been most altered are those who have brought us this news. Whether as whistleblowers (Edward Snowden, exiled in Russia), publishers (Julian Assange holed up in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London) or respected journalists (Greenwald), their lives have now been ruined for any normal course. Oh, did I not say? The Rio-based Greenwald could only appear by video link at the Manhattan forum from somewhere outside the US, because the Justice Department refuses, despite repeated requests, to assure him safe passage home. **GW**



COMPILED BY  
STEPHEN SAMUELSON

1. Which mountain range lies close to Alice Springs?

2. In what decade of the 20th century was the Nasdaq electronic stock exchange founded?

3. What is the world’s largest mollusc?

4. Which villain did Jack Nicholson portray in the 1989 film *Batman*?

5. Which English monarch started building Windsor Castle in circa 1070 AD?

6. In which 1947 film did Edmund Gwenn win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for portraying Santa Claus?

7. The name of which New Zealand city is derived from the Gaelic name for Edinburgh?

8. What is the name of the muscular tube between the throat and stomach?

9. Which World War II general was known as the Desert Fox?

10. What word beginning with “B” is both the name of a sausage and nonsensical talk?

11. Who wrote the popular Australian history book *The Fatal Shore*, published in 1987?



12. In what year was Nelson Mandela born?

13. By what name is the American singer Robert Zimmerman better known?

14. Name three countries that end with the letters “ay”.

15. Which Australian band had hits in 1983

with *Send Me An Angel* and *Catch Me I’m Falling*?

16. What is the longest athletics event at the Olympic Games?

17. Which continent has hosted the Dakar Rally since 2009?

18. Which Germanic tribe’s sacking of Rome in 455 AD gave rise to the word that means destruction of property without permission?

19. How many hulls can be found on a traditional catamaran boat?

20. Which country is known as *Les États-Unis* in French?

## GET IT?

BY GREG BAKES

Use the sequence of pictures to guess the answer

### A PLAYGROUND FAVOURITE



FOR SUDOKU, QUIZ ANSWERS AND GET IT? SOLUTION, SEE PAGE 36