

# Little Brother Discussion Guide:

Cory Doctorow

## About Little Brother

Sometime in the near future, tech-savvy teenager Marcus Yallow finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time and becomes a terrorism suspect. Suddenly his casual objection to being monitored—via his internet use, the school-employed gate sensors, and public transit fast-passes—becomes a critical, life-altering protest. But, how do you thwart the efforts of overzealous watchers without becoming as guilty of invasion of others' privacy as your enemy? Where is the line between public safety and personal freedom? This intelligent romp through the worlds of surveillance, code-writing, and internet communication also offers a compelling examination of the question: What will be the legacy of the young people who grow up in an age of high-tech “anti-terrorism”?

In 2009, *Little Brother* book won the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, the Prometheus Award, the 2009 Sunburst Award, and the White Pine Award.

## About the Author

Cory Doctorow, a coeditor of the influential blog Boing Boing, writes columns for Make, InformationWeek, Locus, and the Guardian. A three-time Locus Award winner, and a Hugo and Nebula nominee, he was named one of the Web's twenty-five influencers by Forbes magazine and a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum.

Doctorow's books are *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* (2003), *Eastern Standard Tribe* (2004), *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town* (2005), *Little Brother* (2008), *Makers* (2009), *For The Win* (2010), *The Rapture of the Nerds* (2012), *Pirate Cinema* (2012) and *Homeland* (2013.)

*Homeland* is the sequel to *Little Brother*.

## Questions For Discussion

1. How does Marcus's comment that he's "one of the most surveyed people in the world" set the tone for the novel? Is the statement true? How does this compare to what you know of our current school systems?
2. In what year or decade do you think *Little Brother* takes place? Do you think the story could happen today? Why or why not?
3. Is Marcus a good kid or a bad kid? Can he be defined by either of those terms?
4. How might Marcus describe his code of ethics regarding being "surveyed" and his right to circumvent the efforts of the surveyors? For example, how might he describe the "moral dilemma" of reprogramming RFIDs, as explained in the novel?
5. Why do Darryl and Marcus leave school in Chapter 2? Have your seemingly harmless actions ever gotten others in trouble?

6. What is Harajuku Fun Madness? Why does Marcus trust HFM organizers, and follow their clues to real-world encounters with “enemy teams,” while he is highly suspicious of government operatives attempting to similarly control him?
7. Marcus is captured and imprisoned. What conclusions does Marcus reach about his government and his community as a result of his imprisonment?
8. What does Marcus’s refusal to give passwords to and answer questions from government interrogators reveal about his character? How are passwords a recurring motif in the novel?
9. How does the author use Marcus’s mother and father to represent different points of view about government oversight of individuals? Which parent best represents your perspective?
10. Marcus describes many technologies in the novel. How much of this information did you already know? How are the explanations in the novel similar to, or different from, your previous encounters with this information? Do you view the internet differently after learning this information?
11. Marcus uses the Xbox Universal and the XNet to undermine government surveillance. He also uses the Internet to organize real-world protests. Is he surprised by the results of his actions? What are the most surprising similarities differences between an ARG crowd and a crowd in a real public space?
12. Marcus and Jolu’s strategies use Bayesian probability to safely encrypt XNet communiqués? How does Pigspleen fit into this plan? Why does this company appeal to Marcus?
13. What historical events inspire Marcus to form a protest community? Is protest the only way to determine the acceptable level of sacrificed personal freedom for the good of the nation?
14. Describe Marcus’s key system for creating an ever-enlarging circle of trusted community members. Is this is a good system? What are its flaws or risks?
15. Why do Van and Jolu break away from Marcus? If you had been part of Marcus’s group, would you have stuck with him? Why or why not?
16. Does the media overemphasize identity theft and internet predators while underplaying the danger of being “watched” by legal government and corporate agencies through credit card use, transportation monitoring, etc.? How has this imbalance occurred and is surveillance the greater danger?
17. “Don’t Trust Anyone Over 25” becomes an XNet motto and then a merchandized slogan. How does today’s Internet quicken public adoption of new ideas? Is this a good thing, a dangerous thing, or both?

19. How does Marcus's physical relationship with Ange affect his actions and attitudes? Is the absence of physical contact an important consideration when studying the Internet? Do people treat others the same way in internet conversations as they do face-to-face? If not, what are the differences?
20. Who ultimately betrays Marcus, and how and why? Whom does Marcus ultimately trust to save himself and his friends? Is this a surprising choice? What actions do Marcus and his confidantes take to help him regain a certain type of freedom? How does Marcus feel about going down this path?
21. Is widely disseminated information always less lethal than a carefully kept secret (e.g., a how-to on weapons building or an encryption method)? Is this a great paradox of the information age?
22. Marcus and his friends all seem to be quite intelligent and share a passion for figuring out how things work. Do these qualities make them safer than other characters in the world of *Little Brother*? Is smarter safer in general?
23. Are government attempts to "protect" citizens through surveillance ridiculous to anyone with an understanding of security technology? Would America be safer if all of its citizens learned more about the computers upon which they rely? How else could/should America be made safe? By whom? From whom?
24. What is Marcus's job at the end of the novel? What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages, satisfactions and frustrations of this job? Is it important to have people like Marcus on the Internet? Why or why not?
25. How does the Afterword affect your reading of *Little Brother*? Has the experience of reading this book changed your understanding of—or your standards for—security, privacy, and freedom? If so, how?
26. Now that you know a little bit more about reality, do you think that this book could be considered reality? How do you see parts of this book in society today? How do you feel this is still way off in the future?
27. What are some of the ways that technology helps and hurts our lives? What role does technology play in *Little Brother*? How does technology help and/or hurt Marcus' life?
28. Ange says to Marcus, "You did become a terrorist when they sent her to your town." So, is Marcus a terrorist?

## References

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