

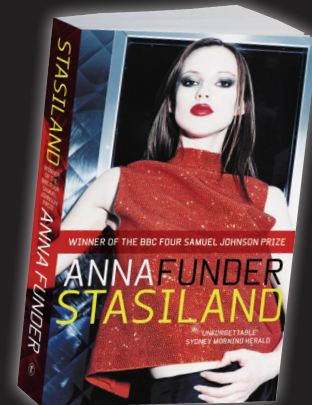
Stasiland

Anna Funder

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Praise for *Stasiland*

'Moving and exhilarating, *Stasiland* is the kind of book that makes us love non-fiction.' Helen Garner

'The author is a not-so-naïve Australian Alice wandering around an East German Wonderland that is littered with the debris from the Stasi.' Alison Lewis, *Age*

'[Funder's] portraits are by turns funny, heartbreaking and stirring. She tells the story of the collapse of a way of life with wit, style and sympathy.' Jose Borghino, *marie claire*

About Anna Funder

Anna Funder was born in Melbourne in 1966. She has worked as an international lawyer and documentary film-maker. In 1997 she was writer-in-residence at the Australia Centre in Potsdam. *Stasiland* is her first book. She lives in Sydney.

A reader's introduction to *Stasiland*

'On the night of Sunday 12 August 1961 the East German army rolled out barbed wire along the streets bordering the eastern sector, and stationed sentries at regular intervals. At daylight people woke to find themselves cut off from relatives, from work, from school. Some made a dash through the wire. Others who lived in apartments overlooking the borderline started to jump from the windows into blankets held out by westerners on the footpath below. Then the troops made residents brick up their own windows. They started with the lower floors, forcing people to jump from higher and higher windows.' (p.171)

'The Stasi was the internal army by which the government kept control. Its job was to know everything about everyone, using any method it chose...It was a bureaucracy metastasized through East German society: overt or covert, there was someone reporting to the Stasi on their fellows and friends in every school, every factory, every apartment block, every pub.' (p.5)

In *Stasiland* Anna Funder records with aching detail the impact that the Stasi had on the lives of people walled

into East Germany from August 1961 to November 1989. She explores how many people are still walled emotionally.

Miriam, a dissenter at sixteen, attempted escape. After capture she was imprisoned and treated in ways that stripped her humanity. Years later, the Stasi took her husband, Charlie, in for questioning. They informed Miriam that he had committed suicide; she is still waiting for proof that they killed him.

Funder's journey into Miriam's story and others like it raises questions about what it means to be human. Why do some people obey orders without question? Where do some people find the courage to follow their conscience? How does a person hold onto their sense of self when the state is creating fictions about them? What happens to an individual when there is no personal sphere left? What happens to a country that has lost its identity?

The Stasi's methods were ridiculous at times and brutal at others but always they were terrible. Funder interviews members of the Stasi and her writing gives insight into their motives. As the victims are sums of their pasts, so are the informers. They are human but their actions are not. It's interesting to consider whether a line can really be drawn between these two things.

The reader, along with Funder, searches for reasons and answers. She examines historical, political, social, economic and sociological factors that contributed to the strength of the regime. She contrasts the small detail of people's lives with the huge scale of the operation. She exposes her own weaknesses. The result is an exploration of an ugly time told with great beauty.

Funder is like Julia, one of her East German friends: a woman who talks and 'has the finely articulated voice... which can turn this barking language into a song of aching beauty and finesse.' (p.95)

Questions for Discussion

'I think about the feeling I've developed for the former German Democratic Republic...This feeling needs a sticklebrick word: I can only describe it as horror-

romance. *It's a dumb feeling but I don't want to shake it. The romance comes from the dream of a better world the German Communists wanted to build out of the ashes of their Nazi past: from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs. The horror comes from what they did in its name.*' (p.4)

1. *Stasiland* is compelling because of our need to understand aspects of political situations and people that cannot always be put into words. Along with Funder, we try to make sense of the strangeness and brutality of this world. What sense can be made? What factors led to the establishment of the regime? What factors allowed the Stasi to become so powerful?
2. In an interview with Anna Funder on Radio National (14/5/06), Terry Lane commented that *Stasiland* makes us ask questions about 'our veneration for law, our craving for law and order and our willingness to obey.' Does this answer the question of how the Stasi kept control? What other explanations are there for such a high number of informers?
3. In the same interview, Funder comments, 'I'm interested in obedience, but I'm interested in it from the point of view of what it takes to be disobedient. ...how it is that some human beings have the courage to do what their conscience tells them.' What does it take to be disobedient? What were the physical and emotional costs of disobedience?
4. Herr Koch poses the question to Funder during his interview, 'What would you do?' Funder replies that she would choose, 'wife and life, of course.' (p.164) *Stasiland* explores a complicated world. What would you have done if asked to choose between conscience and family? Between safety and informing?
5. Why is disobedience more interesting than obedience? Is it easier to believe that humans are more capable of inhuman acts than they are of human ones?
6. On page 74, Funder relates the comments of a Stasi psychologist who is '... accounting for the willingness of people to inform on their countrymen...It comes down to something in the German mentality...a certain drive for order and thoroughness and stuff like that.' *Stasiland* reveals that his answer is much too simple. Do you agree?
7. On 4 December 1989, the demonstrators took the Stasi building. What do you find surprising about the end of the regime? What does its end reveal about human nature?
8. There's great beauty in the image of people dancing on the wall but there's something terrible about it, too. Discuss.
9. "When I got out of prison, I was basically no longer human,' Miriam says." (p.30) The Stasi had so many ways to strip a person's humanity; many were much more subtle than torture. Discuss the things that were taken from people under the regime.
10. 'We are here to inform you today, that you don't exist anymore.' (p.189) The committee's comments to Klaus illustrate the regime at its most ridiculous and most frightening. There are Orwellian parallels to be drawn. There are also parallels to be drawn between the lies told in East Germany and the lies told by Australian and American governments.
11. What conditions must exist for torture or the mistreatment of people to occur? Discuss the idea that this act aspect of the regime in East Germany can be found in many countries, western ones included. How does it become possible for people to justify brutality?
12. 'Optimists and believers are happier and healthier in their unreal worlds.' (p.96) Discuss the fictions that the Stasi created. Discuss the impact that a shifting truth had on people.
13. 'A man turns from the wall, smiling and zipping up his fly. He is missing shoelaces and some teeth; his face and his shoes are as loose as each other.' (p.1) Anna Funder's language is precise. She records the smallest details about people. Discuss the reasons for this level of detail in her work. What comparisons, if any, can be drawn between her writing style and George Orwell's in 1984?
14. Discuss how Funder uses metaphor to highlight irony, absurdity, pain and loss. What do we learn of Julia through her late night stripping of Funder's apartment? How does Funder explore the world of Herr Christian, driving through his 'neat sad forest'?
15. The power of *Stasiland* is the aching sadness of the personal stories. Julia's rape. Charlie's death. Frau Paul's separation from her son. The loss of self. How do people heal after all of this? How does a country heal after it has lost its identity?
16. 'Tomorrow bruises will develop on my skin, like a picture from a negative.' (p.2) Why is Funder's frailty so comforting and compelling?
17. The love stories in *Stasiland* are incredibly sad. But they show that there are other aspects of humanity that are enduring other than brutality.
18. Discuss Funder's interviews with the Stasi men. Are there similarities in the things that motivate them? Discuss the symbolism of Hagen Koch's drawing of the line. Does his story show that the line between victim and violator is sometimes blurred?
19. How did men like Mielke and Honecker come to be? Is it too easy to explain them away as sociopaths? Are they more guilty than the individuals who informed for the Stasi? Are there levels of guilt? Or is the level of guilt the same, regardless of what role a person played in the regime?
20. Is there always a necessary compromise to be made between freedom and safety? What burdens has freedom given to the people of East Germany? What freedoms have we surrendered in the west in recent times? What have we lost as a consequence?