



All That I Am

Anna Funder

Author Background

- Birth— Melbourne, 1966
- Raised—Melbourne and Paris
- Awards—Miles Franklin Literary Award, Victorian Premier's Literary Award , Barbara Jefferis Award, Australian Independent Booksellers Indie Book Award for Literary Fiction, Samuel Johnson Prize
- Currently—lives in Brooklyn USA

Anna Funder was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1966, and grew up there and in Paris. She has worked as an international lawyer and a radio and television producer. In the 1980s, she studied in West Berlin and later worked for a TV station in the city. In 1997, she was writer-in-residence at the Australia Centre in Potsdam. *Stasiland: stories from behind the Berlin Wall*, published by Granta, was her first book. It became an international bestseller which won the 2004 Samuel Johnson Prize and was published in 20 countries and translated into 16 languages.

Anna Funder's writing has received numerous accolades and awards. Her essays, feature articles and columns have appeared in numerous publications. She has toured as a public speaker, and is a former DAAD (Berlin), Australia Council, NSW Writing Fellow and Rockefeller Foundation Fellow.

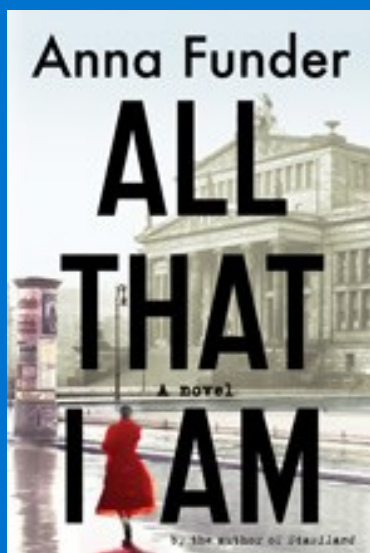
Funder is a Creative Arts graduate of University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) and produced *All that I Am* as the creative component of her Doctor of Creative Arts thesis.

In 2011 she was appointed to the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts.

All That I Am was published in the UK (where it was both *BBC Book of the Week* and *Book at Bedtime*) and Australia. It was released February 2012 in the USA and Italy.

Funder currently resides in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

(adapted from *Wikipedia*, *The Independent* and *The Brooklyn Rail*)



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Book Summary

All that I am

Anna Funder , 2011

Allen & Unwin

368 pp.

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The gripping first novel by Anna Funder, the acclaimed author of *Stasiland*, based on a true story, *All That I Am* is moving and beautifully written, equal parts a love story, thriller and testament to individual heroism. It evokes books like Irene Nemirovsky's *Suite Francaise*, Bernard Schlink's *The Reader* and William Boyd's *Restless* – intelligent, powerful novels that appeal to a wide audience.

'When Hitler came to power I was in the bath. The wireless in the living room was turned up loud, but all that drifted down to me were waves of happy cheering, like a football match. It was Monday afternoon . . . '

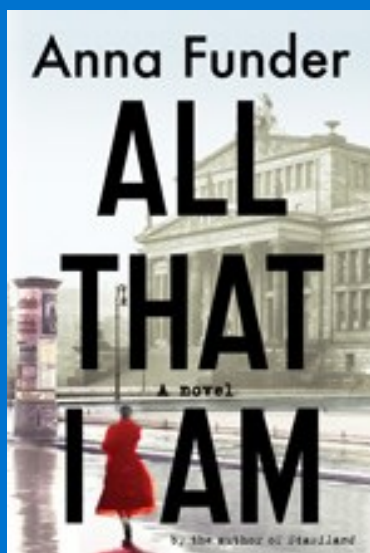
Ruth Becker, defiant and cantankerous, is living out her days in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. She has made an uneasy peace with the ghosts of her past – and a part of history that has been all but forgotten.

Another lifetime away, it's 1939 and the world is going to war. Ernst Toller, self-doubting revolutionary and poet, sits in a New York hotel room settling up the account of his life.

When Toller's story arrives on Ruth's doorstep their shared past slips under her defences, and she's right back among them – those friends who predicted the brutality of the Nazis and gave everything they had to stop them. Those who were tested – and in some cases found wanting – in the face of hatred, of art, of love, and of history.

Based on real people and events, *All That I Am* is a masterful and exhilarating exploration of bravery and betrayal, of the risks and sacrifices some people make for their beliefs, and of heroism hidden in the most unexpected places. Anna Funder confirms her place as one of our finest writers with this gripping, compassionate, inspiring first novel.

(from Miles Franklin Literary Award)



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Reviews

In her latest book, 'a novel', Funder's majestic journalistic capabilities delve into an intoxicating period in Berlin, just before and immediately after Hitler's election to power. She invokes that permissive, sophisticated era of Berlin between the wars with the same frenetic pace of Christopher Isherwood. This is where Ernst Toller, expressionist playwright, World War I veteran and political prisoner, meets two young women, Dora and Ruth, and their lives irrevocably intertwine. Young intellectuals and artists discuss politics and philosophy through a haze of smoke; they meet in clubs where they converse with one another between booths by

telephone and finally they meet in exile, in bedsits, impoverished and powerless, to mobilise against the Nazi party. Dora is a powerful character, both on the page and in her impact on the lives of others. She wears her hair defiantly bobbed, is often in trousers and believes in giving love freely, but suffers greatly from her ideology – the world wasn't ready for her, but she is the glue that binds this novel.

Many years later, Toller is completely paralysed by his realisation of the depth of his love for Dora. He is dictating his memoirs in a hotel room in New York to a kind young woman, Clara. Unwilling to leave his hotel room and unable to pay his hotel bill, he remembers his life to her in fragments before it becomes too painful to bear. Both his life and Dora's are connected to Ruth and it is through her eyes, both as a young woman and as an elderly retired school teacher, that most of the novel is told. Funder writes beautifully, with a telling sensitivity towards her characters that makes her novel an exceptional meditation on politics, loss and memory.

Readings

"Between *Stasiland* and *All That I Am* Funder asks an important question about how we tell stories of other people's moral courage: how can an author properly navigate the line between invention and truth? The famously cool reception of *Stasiland* in Germany, particularly in East Germany, revealed some anxiety about Funder's own answer...In *All That I Am*, Funder achieves the right balance between truth and invention to pay tribute to those people who tried to get the message out about what shape the future would take under Hitler. That their warnings were ignored for so long was a tragedy, one that we ignore at our own peril. Funder reminds us of this truth with certainty and moral force."

The Adelaide Review

"This vast life – the real, interior one, in which we remain linked to the dead... this vast life is not under our control." These are the words of Ruth Blatt, one of two narrators in Anna Funder's first novel, the follow-up to her acclaimed non-fiction debut, *Stasiland*, which won the Samuel Johnson prize in 2004. *All That I Am*, too, is inspired by fact – drawn from interviews, memoirs and autobiographies detailing the lives of a group of (mostly) Jewish Germans who resisted Hitler in the 1930s. The group's central figures were Blatt, her cousin Dora Fabian and the playwright Ernst Toller.

The story is very interesting: after Hitler comes to power in 1933, Blatt, Toller and Fabian, along with Blatt's husband, Hans Wesemann, flee to London, where they continue with their resistance work. After the burning of the Reichstag, Hitler prepares a show trial in Berlin. In London, Fabian stages a rival trial and arranges for witnesses to be smuggled out of Germany. She contacts a prominent Nazi who leaks crucial documents from Germany. Menaced throughout by the Gestapo (who are also operating in London), Fabian and another group member are found dead in their flat. An inquest returns a verdict of suicide; Blatt and Toller are convinced that they were murdered.



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Reviews (continued)

Funder's prose is clear, easy to read, scrupulously lacking in stylistic idiosyncrasies. Toller and Blatt's narratives are written in a retrospective stream of consciousness – Toller in New York in 1939, remembering the events of the 20s and 30s; Blatt dying in Sydney at the beginning of the 21st century, "a vessel of memories in a world of forgetting". We are locked into their interior lives until the moment of their deaths. The real-life Toller committed suicide in a New York hotel; Funder's Toller explains: "I tie a slipknot firmly around the hook on the door, and make another, wider one for my head... I feel the exact same feeling – hesitation and blind purpose – as before jumping into a cold pool. The fall off the block. Nothing more –"

The novel is tailed by a note from the author. Funder supplies citations for certain incidents in the narrative and tells us that the story has been "reconstructed from fossil fragments, much as you might draw skin and feathers over an assembly of dinosaur bones, to fully see the beast..." The skin and feathers are impressive, but these are daring, contradictory claims. There is a slippage in Funder's account of her book as she writes: "Most characters' names are their true names, others have been changed." But "characters", surely, have no "true" names; they are the creations of a novelist. Funder has taken first-person narratives of real people – Blatt and Toller – and "reconstructed" them into the first-person narratives of her characters, "Blatt" and "Toller". I don't know to what extent she has quoted from the originals and to what extent she has rewritten them. It doesn't matter if one is merely assessing her book as a novel. However, the claims of authenticity, of "reconstruction", are risky and complicating, as Funder seems to acknowledge as she urgently seeks to define the enterprise, each attempt raising further questions.

Such as: if a novelist aims at drawing "skin and feathers" over the "dinosaur bones" of her sources, then what is the "beast" she is allowing us to "fully see"? A reconstruction of the past, to be judged on how realistic or convincing it is? Or an impossible fantasy, to be judged solely on the extent to which it entertains the reader?

Funder's title, *All That I Am*, echoes Toller's autobiography, *I Was a German*, and Primo Levi's account of his imprisonment in Auschwitz, *If This is a Man*. Levi described his "psychological need" to write about the Holocaust, as well as what he felt was a moral imperative to tell others what had happened. Is it possible for an author who inevitably lacks the same psychological urging, the same first-hand experience, convincingly to "reconstruct" the interior life of Ernst Toller – a man whose friends, lovers, associates had been murdered, one by one, who had recently heard that his brother and sister had been sent to concentration camps? Is it possible to "reconstruct" his dying thoughts?

As Funder's "Blatt" thinks, the vast interior life is "not under our control". The stream of consciousness is a literary contrivance, a fantasy of control. The gap between it and consciousness itself is immeasurable – as anyone knows who has tried to set down memories and thoughts as they really occur, and has struggled with half-words, images, ellipses, general confusion. Funder's novel seeks to control the uncontrollable, as all novels do. At the same time, her characters muse on the inadequacies of language: "I want Dora's voice in my ear and her scent in my face. I need for her to live on, outside the limitations of my scribbling," says "Toller".

Clever, intriguing, incoherent, *All That I Am* is cinematographic pseudo-realism, a studiously researched fantasy about the past that stages an almost self-annihilating debate about reconstruction. It is most effective, most moving, when it surrenders all claims to authenticity and offers itself as a febrile "dream of those who are no longer here".

The Guardian



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Discussion Questions

1. *All That I Am* deals with a part of history that has slipped into obscurity for many of us. Does the novel suggest that we've failed to learn the lessons of this history?
2. The author has invented a plot using elements which are real, but it points to different causes for certain events, particularly those in the room in Bloomsbury, from which the real-life inquest drew another conclusion. To what extent do you think that Funder has written *All That I Am* as a kind of detective work? Can it be argued that the work of a novelist and a detective are similar, both having to imagine the motivations of others?
3. Consider the ways in which the novel addresses the act of seeing – of looking, engaging, perceiving, misapprehending, ignoring, intuiting, interpreting ...
4. Anna Funder has said of her characters that sometimes people have so much courage they don't know how to save themselves. What relevance does the novel's insights into courage and cowardice have for the contemporary world?
5. To what degree do you think the characters in *All That I Am* are ordinary people doing extraordinary things? Is your reading of the novel affected by knowing that some of the characters are based on real people?
6. One of the ideas this novel implicitly returns to is responsibility – both in the sense of the ability to respond in a given situation as well the sense of liability. How responsible – in both senses – is Ruth? Do you think she's too hard on herself?
7. With reference to Toller, Dora asks Ruth, 'Do you think if you love someone there are parts of them you should pretend are not there?' How does the novel deal with the way in which loving someone can blind you to the reality of them?
8. When Ruth is given painkillers after her accident, her sense of what she knows and what she believes she knows becomes increasingly fluid. How does this merging of her realities play out in the novel?
9. Towards the end of *All That I Am*, Ruth comments, 'Imagining the life of another is an act of compassion as holy as any.' Do you agree?

A reviewer in *The Spectator* wrote: 'Funder has not merely told the story of these forgotten people ... It is not just a book about German political exiles in London. It is a novel about confronting grievous loss, and the horror of realising, as history closes over you, that you will never be understood. It is a magnificent irony that, by rescuing those brave people with such consummate artistry, Funder has enabled them to reach into the future after all.' Do you agree that this is 'a magnificent irony'? Why?

(from the publisher)