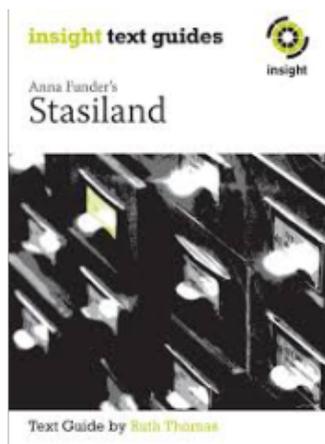


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Reference:

Thomas, R. (2012). *Stasiland, Anna Funder : insight text guides* (pp. 68-75). Cheltenham, NSW: Insight Publications.

Essay topics

- 1 'Anna is not an objective observer, but this is not a problem. Her subjectivity enhances the impact of *Stasiland*.' Discuss narrative point of view in *Stasiland*.
- 2 'Frau Paul is the most damaged character in the text.' Discuss.
- 3 "I was disappointed in the state. I realised ... that it wasn't really the good father state you have in the back of your mind." How do different characters demonstrate the legacy of broken trust?
- 4 "Suddenly the landscape seems crowded with victims." Are *Stasiland*'s major characters victims?
- 5 'Memory is often less about the truth than about what we want the truth to be.' What is the relationship between truth and memory in *Stasiland*?
- 6 'Heroes achieve something. *Stasiland*'s key characters cannot be called "heroes" because they don't undermine or destroy the system they resist.' Discuss.
- 7 In an interview, Funder stated that 'The fundamental thing about writing a novel is to create a believable world and then to have people in it living believable emotional lives.' How does the author create a believable world and believable characters in *Stasiland*?
- 8 'The key themes and ideas of *Stasiland* are developed as much by the structure of the text as they are by description and dialogue.' Discuss.
- 9 'Courage is resistance to fear, not absence of fear.' Discuss the different kinds of courage demonstrated by the characters in *Stasiland*.
- 10 'This text demonstrates that fact is sometimes stranger than fiction.' Discuss.

Vocabulary for writing on *Stasiland*

Literary journalism: A form of nonfiction that combines factual reporting with narrative techniques traditionally associated with fiction.

Objective: Not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing facts.

Subjective: Based on or influenced by personal feelings, tastes or opinions.

Analysing a sample topic

In an interview, Funder stated that 'The fundamental thing about writing a novel is to create a believable world and then to have people in it living believable emotional lives.' How does the author create a believable world and believable characters in *Stasiland*?

- Begin by identifying the key words in the question. You might like to underline them. This will help you clarify what the question is really asking. Here, you would probably identify 'believable world', 'believable characters' and 'how' as the key words.
- Spend a few moments considering what these words mean. It is helpful to list some definitions, either your own or those offered by the text or other sources. List some synonyms for each of the key words to help you think about the topic more broadly and to help you vary your vocabulary in your response. Be sure to look up any words that you are not familiar with. This step is all about clarifying the question, so make sure you are very clear about what you are being asked.
- Look for different elements to the question. Is there more than one aspect that needs to be addressed? If a question has multiple elements, a strong answer will need to consider all aspects and examine the tensions among them.

- Think about what the question assumes. Does Funder create a believable world? Are the characters believable? Are both aspects equally convincing, or is one aspect more so than the other? Again, a strong answer must consider all the underlying assumptions of a question.
- Form your own opinion about the statement. Do you agree or disagree? Remember, you are not required simply to agree with the statement. You need to form your own contention and develop a convincing argument using evidence from your reading of the text.
- Note examples from the text that support your opinion, as your response requires textual evidence. Jot down notes about *why* you agree or disagree, too.
- All this will help you form your own contention, which you will argue in your response. A good way to form your contention is to modify the statement so that it reflects your ideas. Your modified statement should encapsulate the argument you intend to make and will guide you as you write. A response to this question might contend that 'Funder creates equally realistic characters and settings in *Stasiland* through descriptive and figurative language, attention to detail, clever structuring and a skilfully managed narrative point of view.'

Sample introduction

Funder re-creates a lost world in *Stasiland*, one from which many contemporary readers are removed by both time and place. For such readers to comprehend the Stasi's impact, the text's settings and characters must be believable. Funder achieves this through her use of highly descriptive and figurative language, her precise attention to detail, the structure of the text and her skilful management of a complex narrative point of view. Through these techniques, Funder brings the imaginative features of fiction writing to a nonfiction text and, in so doing, creates an absorbing and compelling narrative world that credibly documents the horrors the Stasi inflicted upon its own people.

Body paragraph outline

Funder's highly descriptive and frequently figurative language paints vivid portraits of people and places so that the reader can identify with an otherwise alien world.

- The use of simile and metaphor in descriptions (Miriam's haircut, pp.14–15; Herr Christian's smile, p.149; Herr Winz, p.81) enables the reader to visualise distinct characters and helps to convey complex emotions so that the reader can empathise (Julia as hermit crab, p.90; Miriam as a fairytale maiden, p.228; Herr Bohnsack, p.243).
- Descriptive language convincingly conveys foreign and terrifying settings (long corridors and multi-purpose rooms, pp.123–4; Mielke's office, pp.72–3; torture devices, pp.226–7).

The precision of Funder's language and her attention to detail enable her to construct thoroughly convincing characters and settings.

- The descriptions of streets (p.72, p.122), Hohenschönhausen (p.224, p.226), the station (pp.1–2) and the weather (p.214) enable the reader to clearly visualise Berlin.
- Detailed observations of both major and minor characters render them realistic and believable (von Schnitzler, p.129; Frau Paul and house, p.205; punks and drunks, pp.248–52).

The structure of the text focuses attention on individuals in turn, enabling the reader to come to know the characters in depth.

- Each character has their own chapter, except those who have several (Miriam, Julia, Frau Paul, Koch). This allows Funder narrative space to provide detail and to convey emotional impact, and also absorbs the reader in a personal narrative.
- Settings are given meaning and context and thereby rendered realistic (Fall of the Wall at Stasi HQ, pp.61–6; construction of the Wall and meeting Koch, p.171; Mielke's background at Stasi HQ, pp.57–9).

The narrative point of view guides the reader through unfamiliar terrain and the reader's understanding of this world grows as Anna's own understanding does.

- Anna is a foreigner/stranger – everything is new to her as much as to the reader (conversation with Miriam, p.28; swimming pool, pp.145–7; Nuremberg, pp.262–4). We sympathise with certain characters and situations because she takes the reader with her.
- The narrator frequently lets characters speak uninterrupted (Julia, pp.141–5; Koch, pp.158–60; Frau Paul, pp.217–20). This gives characters voice, building full and believable emotional lives for them in the text.

Sample conclusion

Creating a believable world peopled with characters who have full, believable emotional lives might be the foundation of a successful novel, but it is also essential to Funder's nonfictional portrait of a vanished time. Funder brings techniques from fiction – including the use of figurative language, precise detail in characterisation and setting, an asynchronous structure and a first-person narrator – to her history and, through these, develops convincing characters and vivid settings. In doing so, she rescues real people from the injuries inflicted by the Stasi, restoring identity and humanity where the Stasi took it away, and creates a narrative world so memorable that this vanished time cannot be forgotten or denied. *Stasiland* is, consequently, a powerful and restorative act of remembering.

SAMPLE ANSWER

'Frau Paul is the most damaged character in the text.' Discuss.

Frau Paul, 'a lonely, teary guilt-wracked wreck', is a striking example of the damage perpetrated by the Stasi in *Stasiland*. However, to say she is definitively the most wounded is to ignore the many harms illustrated by the text's other characters, and to overlook Frau Paul's strength. *Stasiland*, as an investigation of the many 'kinds of courage' exhibited by people in the GDR, is populated with injured characters from both inside and outside the Stasi. Examining other major characters shows that Frau Paul cannot be singled out as the text's most damaged character.

Frau Paul is inarguably wounded. Fragile and tearful, she cannot talk to Anna without 'holding onto notes on her own life'. She 'loses her thread' and is unable to tell the truth about her own life, as evidenced by her denial of involvement in the smuggling syndicate in which she appears to have been a hero. Perhaps her self-image is the greatest indicator of damage: she sees herself as the Stasi constructed her, as 'a criminal'. Despite these injuries, Frau Paul is also resilient, and to cast her as the text's most damaged character discounts her obvious strength. She refused the Stasi's deal, choosing her conscience over her son. She takes Anna to Hohenschönhausen – 'the place that broke her' – where she works as a tour guide, and she bravely campaigns for the prison's preservation despite the threatening actions of an ex-Stasi man. She is damaged, but also principled, courageous and 'steely'.

The text's other female characters, Julia and Miriam, are similarly courageous. In fact, their composure – neither cry during their meetings with Anna – make them appear outwardly stronger than Frau Paul, but this belies the damage that so obviously shapes their lives. Julia is incapable of trust, reacts 'strongly to harassment' (real or imagined), and is 'only part-attached to the world'. While Frau Paul works as a dental technician and is active in community groups, Julia is capable only of

part-time, temporary work, well below the career her natural abilities promised. She is 'unable to go forward into her own future', resistant to intimacy (conveyed in the simile likening her to a hermit crab 'ready to whisk back into its shell at the slightest sign of contact') and 'regards fixed appointments as intolerable constraints on her freedom'. Miriam similarly regards fixed appointments as 'an unbearable obligation'. She, like Julia and Frau Paul, is imprisoned by her past, and lives her life as an 'epitaph to a life that was', illustrated by her refusal to give up searching for answers about Charlie's death and her inability to have a 'partner in life'. All three women are irreparably damaged in equally devastating and lasting ways.

Stasiland's male characters are not impervious to injury, and the curious behaviour of some challenges the assertion that Frau Paul is the text's most damaged character. Hagen Koch, for example, for all his confidence and exuberance, exhibits the same incapacity to move forward as Julia, Miriam and Frau Paul. Raised as a 'poster boy for the new regime' with a belief in the GDR that bordered on religious faith, Koch lives his life in the shadow of the vanished Wall. His devotion to the state betrayed, he fixates on the Wall, commemorating it in his 'Wall Archive' with a maniacal fervour that renders him incapable of embracing the future. As Anna observes, like Frau Paul, Koch simply will not – cannot – let go. He, too, is consumed and defined by his past, a past created for him by the Stasi.

Other male characters are also imprisoned by the identities forged by the Stasi. Herr Winz, with his disguise, his covert plans and his insistence on seeing Anna's identity card, is a man still playing 'spy games seven years after the fall of the Wall'. Herr Bock similarly insists Anna follow the rigmarole of a Stasi interview, instructing her not to use his name and enjoying his menacing power. Both men refuse to concede the invalidity of their dearly held views and are consequently pitifully out of touch with the world in which they find themselves. The more open Herr Bohnsack fares little better, for all his candidness. He is socially isolated, friendless,

'fallen between two stools'. Though the damage may be less obvious, each of these characters is as irrevocably damaged as Frau Paul.

Torsten, Frau Paul's son, declares that 'there are no people who are whole'. *Stasiland's* many characters show this to be true. Not one is unscarred. Funder's text is a catalogue of damage that indicts the Stasi, its activities and its methods. To say one character is more or less damaged than another is to miss the full picture expressed by the text's cumulative horrors, a picture that acts as a 'warning from the past' to diminish the 'risk of doing it all again'.