Writers have ideas, which can be politically partisan of different ideologies. These ideas are exposed in fiction or documentary texts. Writers are dangerous. Their propensity for ideas drove the FBI to investigate many of them in the twentieth-century United States of America. Writers Under Surveillance: The FBI Files—a 375-page volume, published by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press—unveils poignant, frightening, and provocative stories about the intersection of surveillance and freedom. The volume focuses on the FBI files of sixteen prominent writers, among which are Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin, Truman Capote, Allen Ginsberg, Ernest Hemingway, Aldous Huxley, Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, and Gore Vidal. Edited by JPat Brown, B.C.D. Lipton, and Michael Morisy, this volume is an archival collection of investigation files made available with Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests made by MuckRock, a US-based 501 non-profit organization that assists anyone in filing governmental requests for information through the Freedom of Information Act. In 2010, MuckRock “started to make it easier for citizens to understand what their government is up to in their name” (xi). This led to unlocked filing cabinets of government agencies and revealed the FBI files on various twentieth-century writers, all since deceased.

The investigations contained in this volume are as varied and broad as the writers’ own work, ranging from political affiliations and affinities to ordinary meetings, encounters, and daily routines. For some, surveillance lasted years but for others just a few days. Some narratives are harrowing, others lead nowhere. Some are light, others quite dramatic. In carrying out their research, the editors worked closely with MuckRock, which “published its first FBI files a little under a year after the site was founded in 2010” (xi). The reader is reminded that “under the federal Freedom of Information Act, you may request the FBI files on deceased individuals. … The releases often include contradictions, unsubstantial gossip, intrigue, and, almost always, heavy redactions” (xi). Additionally, the files have been edited for length and clarity. Beyond that, the visuals are pulled directly from investigatory files.

The collection is divided into three parts: an introductory section made up of a Foreword by Cory Doctorow, an Introduction, Notes on Selections for this Collection, a Guide to Exemptions, and a Glossary; secondly a section that contains the writers’ investigation files; and finally, the Afterword by Trevor Timm. In the second part, each writer’s file opens up with a bio-bibliographical note followed by the FBI archival documents providing an interesting overview into that person’s life, their relationship to the law, or a certain cultural moment in American history, such as the Vietnam War or the Beat Generation. Through this introductory vignette, Brown, Lipton, and Morisy offer a close reading of the investigation of each writer.
carefully dissecting the structure of each investigation, its length, and its purpose. Thus, the editors are able to point out numerous intertextual references (between the scrutiny and the author’s writing) and share comments on the writer’s past work and life experiences.

The investigated writers appear in alphabetical order, thus James Baldwin is the second, after Hannah Arendt. If the literary history recorded Baldwin as a powerful voice capturing the racial strife in twentieth-century America, to the FBI, he was “something else entirely: a radical danger to the status quo” (9)—black, gay, sympathetic to social causes, critical of the government. His writings triggered the American fear of intimacy and of the psychosocial politics of class and race. Furthermore, we find out that Baldwin’s surveillance record, started in 1946, went on for decades and stretches for thousands of pages. “He was the most dangerous man in America, despite living … armed with only a pen” (9).

Each chapter dedicated to one writer deals with the control apparatus and censorship of literature in the FBI-controlled twentieth-century United States of America. Using archival material as the main source and a one-page introduction to each writer under scrutiny, the editors of this volume reconstruct the lives and writing practices of men and women of letters, providing a rare look behind the scenes of what readers know about them, charting both the cultural–political charges in the FBI surveillance and their effect on personal lives and on writing.

*Writers Under Surveillance: The FBI Files* provides intriguing new insights into contemporary culture at the crossroads of freedom of expression and surveillance. It could well serve as a catalyst to refocus and broaden the scholarship on this highly stimulating topic at the intersection of Criminal Justice and Cultural and Literary Studies. The collection is meticulously structured and documented; it is carefully written and easy to follow. I would consider it a “must” to those doing research in contemporary American literature and society, as well as those interested in social justice and freedom of expression.