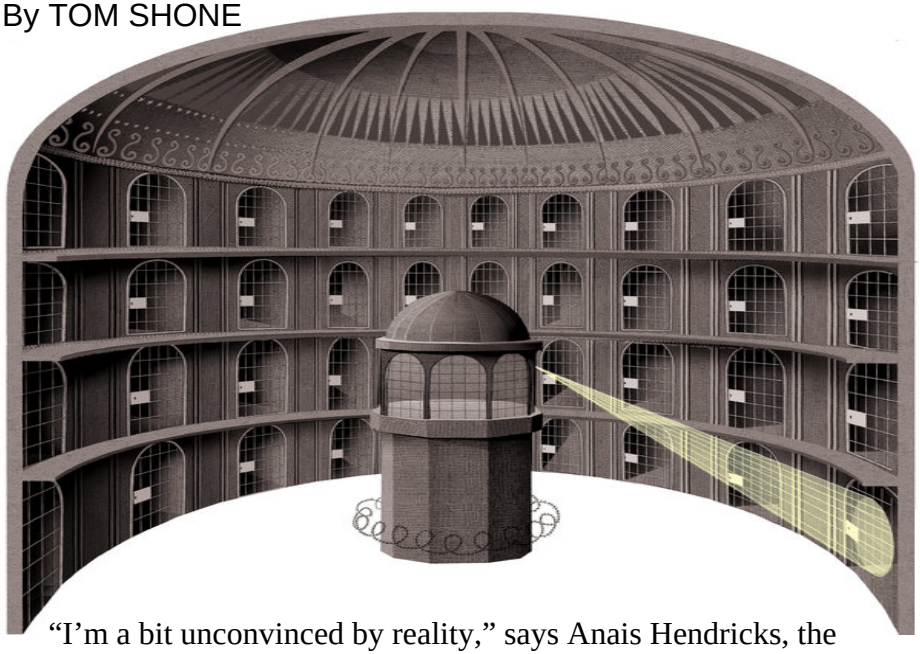
Surveillance State

By TOM SHONE



Adam Simpson

"I'm a bit unconvinced by reality," says Anais Hendricks, the heroine of Jenni Fagan's debut novel, "The Panopticon." "It's fundamentally lacking in something, and nobody seems bothered." When we first meet Anais she is handcuffed in the back of a police car, her school uniform covered in blood, on her way to an institution for young offenders. She has no family, and has never seen so much as a photograph of any relatives. Her hobbies include joy riding, tripping on school days, painting CCTV cameras fluorescent pink and hand-delivering the lights from police cars, covered with glitter, to the desk of her local constabulary. Now 15, she still feels "2 years old and ready tae bite." She is, in summary, "totally and utterly" messed up—"but I like pillbox hats."

She is also the best reason to pick up "The Panopticon," Fagan's pugnacious, snub-nosed paean to the highs and lows of juvenile delinquency. A student of Andrew Motion's with several books of poetry to her name (a name that calls to mind the patron saint of literary street urchins), Fagan has given us one of the most spirited heroines to cuss, kiss, bite and generally break the nose of the English novel in many a moon.

The novel takes its title from the imposing rehab facility, located deep in a forest, that waits for Anais at the end of that car ride: four floors high, in the shape of a C, and in the center a hidden core that looks out, through one-way glass, onto every cell, every landing, every bathroom. Students of 18th-century English penology will instantly recognize the reformer Jeremy Bentham's infamous plans for an omniscient prison, never built but later turned by the French philosopher Michel Foucault into a metaphor for the oppressive gaze of late capitalism. Students of 21st-century reality television will, on the other hand, instantly recognize the layout from the program "Big Brother," in which a bunch of undesirables argue, in close quarters, over who redecorated the living room lampshade with a pair of underpants.

Where does Fagan's structure rest on the Bentham-to-"Big Brother" scale? Somewhere in the middle. The inmates are locked up at night, but during the day are free to roam a lounge area, dining space and game room, all painted magnolia by well-meaning staff members who say things like "we practice a holistic approach tae client care at the Panopticon." Winston Smith never had it so good. Anais lands there after she's suspected of putting a policewoman into a coma, a crime for which she is regularly hauled into the interrogation room—but she cannot remember anything, having been on the tail-end of a four-day ketamine bender at the time. "I didnae tell the polis that," she confides. She also does not tell them she was so wrecked on drugs at the time, "I couldnae even mind my own name."

She is soon bonding with her fellow inmates, swapping stories and swinging joints attached to shoelaces between the cells after lights out. There's the sicko who raped a dog, the boy who burned down the special-needs school where his foster mother taught. "We send e-mails, start legends—create myths," she says. "It's the same in the nick or the nuthouse: notoriety is respect." What we have here is a fine example of Caledonian grunge, wherein writers north of the River Tweed grab the English language by the lapels, dunk it in the gutter and kick it into

filthy, idiomatic life, thus leaving terrified book reviewers with no option but to find them “gritty” or “authentic.”

I have no way of knowing if the acid trip described here—which starts on the walk to school, then lurches sideways to a tower block for another drug run before concluding with a police bust—is authentic, having spent most of my school years protecting my privates from oncoming soccer balls, but there is no resisting the tidal rollout of Fagan’s imagery. Her prose beats behind your eyelids, the flow of images widening to a glittering delta whenever Anais approaches the vexed issue of her origins: “Born in the bushes by a motorway. Born in a VW with its doors open to the sea. Born in Harvey Nichols between the fur coats and the perfume, aghast store staff faint. . . . Born in an igloo. Born in a castle. Born in a tepee while the moon rises and a midsummer powwow pounds the ground outside.”

Solving this mystery—cracking Anais open—soon supplants the cop-in-a-coma as the book’s main narrative focus, as is only right, since “The Panopticon” is primarily, and triumphantly, a voice-driven novel.

Fagan’s prose rhythm and use of the demotic may owe something to Irvine Welsh, but there is a poet’s precision to some of the novel’s more plumed excursions. I, for one, was as grateful for those fur coats and that perfume as I was for the acid trips and dog rapes, the school of Welsh having long ago seized up, sclerotically, with its own druggie braggadocio. “Celebrity is a mask that eats into the face,” Updike said. Reading Welsh’s most recent work, you sense a writer trying, but unable, to break out of the rough bark in which early success has encased him.

He could do worse than to study the warmer emotional temperature of Fagan’s book, or the way she uses it to defrost her battle-hardened heroine—the “girl with a shark’s heart” who cleaves to her own moral code (“you dinnae bully people, ever”) and who finds herself fighting back unaccustomed tears when a fellow inmate commits suicide. “I wish that would stop,” she says of this “teary” stuff. But it won’t. Under the guidance of Angus, the one support worker she likes—possibly because of his green dreadlocks and Doc Marten boots—Anais retraces her tangled journey: her 147 criminal charges, her years in foster care, her possible birth in an asylum, where they find a mad old monk, guarded by gargoyles, who claims to have laid eyes on her “bio mum,” although Anais remains convinced that “in all actuality they grew me—from a bit of bacteria in a petri dish. An experiment, created and raised just to see exactly how much . . . a nobody from nowhere can take.”

Sometimes Anais catches glimpses of men behind the prison windows, men with no noses in shiny shoes and black wide-rimmed hats—or are they just an acid flashback? Do we really believe she is being watched? Anais and her fellows are too free to come and go (there are boat trips and double dates, even spending money) for the Panopticon to strike a truly Orwellian note. If this is Orwellianism it’s the well-meaning Orwellianism of the modern European welfare state. With its orphaned heroine, retro prison design and Gothic accouterments, “The Panopticon” glances instead back to “Jane Eyre” and all those other 19th-century novels in which children trace their parentage through a perilous maze of orphanages and poorhouses, those hulking, soot-stained establishments now having made way for the bright, Formica-covered spaces of the modern-day detention center and rehab facility.

Like Stieg Larsson, to whose Lisbeth Salander the spunky Anais also owes a small debt, Fagan plugs into our fears of youth brutalized by the very system that is supposed to care for it, while upending those fears with a heroine who would rather choke than ask for our pity: “I hate saying please,” Anais tells us. “It makes me feel cheap. I hate saying thank you. I hate saying I need anything.” But Fagan’s voice is her own, a pure descant, rising from the fray like a chorister in a scrum. “*Vive* le girls,” she writes, with “hips and perfumes and perfumers. *Vive* absinthe and cobbled streets, *vive* le sea! *Vive* riots and old porn, and dragonflies; *vive* rooms with huge windows and unlockable doors. *Vive*flying cats and cigarillo-smoking Outcast Queens!” *Vive* them all, yes indeed, and*vive* Jenni Fagan, too, whose next book just moved into my “eagerly anticipated” pile.

From The New York Times, July 21, 2013