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LIVING IT

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND JUSTICE

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BOOK REVIEW

The Panopticon

Jenni Fagan, 2012, London: Windmill. 336 pp ISBN 978-0099558644



CRIMINOLOGISTS will know the 'Panopticon' as Bentham's perfect prison, where every inmate can be seen at all times from the watchtower above. The surveillance, or simulation of surveillance, is a constant reminder that the lives of the occupants are not really their own as they are viewed and judged from on high. Here though, the Panopticon is (not uncontroversially) the name of the children's home, and the same feelings apply.

The heroine of the novel, Anais Hendricks, is a new resident of the facility: a move which is yet another move in a series of moves which make up her short but chaotic existence.

She travels light in life with only three bin bags to her name, but is also heavily weighted with the labels of 'orphan' and 'offender' which threaten to crush the true person she is.

The Anais that the reader has the privilege to meet is fierce, funny, fashionable, caring, articulate, perceptive and intelligent. Very quickly you love her, making the fact that she is not loved seem all the more unjust.

The story is complex and wrestles with difficult issues such as loss, abandonment, bereavement, mental health, and substance misuse, and at times it threatens to engulf the reader and lose sight of the fact that this is all happening to a young woman. Indeed, maybe this is the point that Fagan wants to make, that there is a danger that those who appear capable are responsabilised at a much earlier stage than what is appropriate. But, this is also a story about friendship and is ultimately hopeful.

Unlike Bentham's prison, the residents in the children's home are generally each other's salvation, and one worker, Angus, highlights the ripple effect of being a decent human being. His small words of encouragement help Anais realise her potential and, importantly, retain her fragile identity of being a 'good' person. It is sad to say though, but all the other services she encounters, that is other workers in the children's home, the police, children's hearings panel members and social workers are presented as being far from 'human'. Angus therefore emerges as a lone voice, someone who has defied the system rather than a product of it.

This debut novel by Fagan is beautifully and poetically written in a Lothian dialect, which embellishes both the harsh reality endured and the softer dreams or experiences conjured by Anais or her substance misuse which she uses to escape her oppressive environment. Arguably such 'trips' can seem necessary, if not at least justified.

It is an excellent read for anyone and particularly for those working or involved in the youth justice or care system in Scotland and beyond. The 'insider view' articulated from the perspective of Anais gives a rare and convincing opportunity to try to understand the lived realities of the impact of the system, and what it actually means to be 'cared for' by the corporate parent. Big and small challenging questions arise throughout this novel, and even unforeseen or less thought about ethical considerations, such as the implications of involving a social work student in a young person's case, are all formulated and left unresolved.

In short, Fagan has constructed a compelling story about a young woman in care who doesn't know who she is or where she is going, and although worrying the reader is rewarded with a thought provoking and insightful journey. To anyone working in the field of children and young people and justice, there is an urge which resonates that we must and can do better.

Briege Nugent is studying for a PhD at the University of Edinburgh. Her research focuses on how to enable young people to disengage successfully from reliance upon support services after the age of 18, and how progress towards desistance from crime fares in the face of major life transitions and critical events.

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6 May 2012 to 5 May 2013

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