

Perhaps not since Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has there been a novel whose title as clearly spelt out its subject matter as Jonathan Raban's *Surveillance*. Set in the near future in Seattle, the novel presents a frightening picture of post 9/11 America as a country in which the government spies on its citizens in the name of the War on Terror, and the citizens spy on one another in the name of whatever cause they adhere to. Teachers are sacked because they criticise the doctrine of Intelligent Design, and parents are urged to monitor their children's television monitors, lest the little darlings are cooking up computer viruses. "We're all spooks now," says one character. "Look at the way people Google their prospective dates. Everybody does it. Everybody's trying to spy on everybody else."

Raban centres his fable on several protagonists: Lucy Bengstrom, a free-lance journalist and single mother, living with her eleven-year old daughter Alida in amiable symbiosis with their next-door neighbour, Tad, a mostly out-of-work HIV- positive gay actor. Lucy is a wishy-washy liberal, perturbed about the growing paranoia of her society, but half-believing it may be necessary: "Sure, we'll sometimes get acts of terrorism, like we had Oklahoma City, but I don't buy the smoke and mirrors of the bogeyman stuff; it's so Wizard of Oz."

Tad, veteran of a hundred protest marches, is a rabid opponent of an administration he believes to be as crooked as it is moronic, "bad guys whose badness took his breath away, as they heedlessly despoiled the planet, killed people on an industrial scale, plotted with their cronies over billion-dollar no-bid contracts, and casually subverted the ever-more-brittle fabric of democracy."

The novel's main intrigue is Lucy's commission from GQ magazine to scoop an interview with a reclusive best-selling novelist named August Vanags, living on Widbey Island across the bay from Seattle. A retired Political Science professor, Vanags has caused a sensation with a memoir called *Boy 381*, purporting to be an account of his childhood on the run in Hitler's Germany and Poland.

Making contact with Vanags, Lucy discovers that he is not reclusive at all: his shying away from publicity, he explains, is in fact a publicity stunt contrived by his publishers. Meeting the man, Lucy realises the wisdom of the publishers: far from being the haunted hollow-eyed survivor of unmentionable atrocities, Vanags comes across as prosperously and gregariously American, "a dapper little American retiree": "Put him on Larry King, and he'd unsell *Boy 381* at the rate of thousands a minute." Vanags is also, it turns out, a neo-con, convinced that the War on Terrorism is justified and just: "I think like a terrorist," he says. "Somebody has to."

Of more concern to Lucy than Vanags's political views is the authenticity or otherwise of his memoir, especially when she comes across a British Amazon.com reader who claims that the book is a hoax and that Vanags spent the war on their chicken farm in Norfolk. Now Lucy turns into the spy, trying to unearth the truth about Vanag's past.

In the meantime, Tad, the arch-paranoid, convinced that the Department of Homeland Security has tabs on him and all other Americans, that "the Patriot Act gave government unlimited power to snoop on private citizens", is doing his own snooping, on their landlord, a go-getting Chinese-American entrepreneur called Charles O Lee, who also just happens to want to marry Lucy. Tad suspects him of being an identity thief, and tracks him down through the Office of Vital Statistics. Charles, again, is keeping tabs on his employees, whom he suspects of short-changing him ...

Raban's America, in short, has much in common with the Oceania of Orwell's 1984, with this difference that it's not set more than thirty years in the future. Its future is upon us, and its ills are familiar from the daily news: apart from the ubiquitous War on Terror, there is the Religious Right, global warming,

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computer viruses, pollution, mindless property development, media hype. There are times, indeed, when the novel reads like a Tract for our Times, with the characters set up as mouthpieces for Opinions rather than reacting like free agents. Even eleven-year old Alida is given an innings: "And America won't even sign the Kyoto proto-thing," she opines. "It's like we don't care about the world at all, we just want to fight a bunch of stupid terrorists."

This ventriloquising is a pity, because when Raban allows his characters free rein, they are interesting, often amusing, and likeable. It may be the ultimate irony, not necessarily intended, that this is the story of Three Characters Trying to Escape from Their Author.

In the end they do achieve some freedom from authorial intention. Lucy decides that whatever the "truth" about August Vanags, it would be betrayed by the kind of journalism she has been writing: "The judicious tone, the summing up, the obituary-like placing of a terminal period at the end of your subject's 'life', it was all flummery and hokum, the smoke-and-mirrors of the journalist's trade." She adopts Flaubert's warning as her motto: "Woe to those who conclude!" And Raban, following Lucy's lead, leaves us with an ending as inconclusive as it is unexpected. After which, no literary journalist dare conclude with an obituary-like summing up of this intriguing novel.