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Review

August 11, 2010

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Morbid but irresistible

Craig Mackenzie

James Clelland is the winner of the 2009-10 European Union Literary Award for his novel *Deeper than Colour*.

The Award, which consists of a R25 000 cash prize and publication by Jacana Media, aims to promote fresh South African literature that speaks not only to South Africans but also to an international audience.

Now in its fifth year, it has established a reputation for uncovering new and talented South African fiction writers.

Deeper than Colour is a morbid but irresistible work that deals with the inexorable passage of its protagonist from terminally disaffected husband to perversely inspired engineer of his own fate.

From the outset the reader is seduced by the paranoidly obsessive world of architect Angus Smith, who, we later discover, is suffering from untreated post-traumatic stress disorder arising from a harrowing experience in the Angolan border war.

It is only some way into the narrative that we realise that Angus's perspective is unreliable, but by then it's too late. Like him, we have to see it through to the end.

The novel uses multiple narrative strands in an adroit way. Angus's is the primary voice, conveyed through the pages of a daily log that his psychiatrist suggests he keep.

We also hear the voice of his caustic wife, whose verbal skills at abuse are probably the most interesting thing about her. That the two speak from such diametrically opposed positions is in itself a comment on the nature of their 12-year relationship.

Another voice is that of the psychiatrist, who tries ineffectually to mediate the disconcertingly disparate views on Angus of his lover, his work colleagues, his mother and so on.

An underlying philosophical issue that emerges almost imperceptibly in the novel is the question of ultimate veracity. Whose take on Angus are we to believe? In the end there is no consoling and stabilising God's-eye view.

In the course of Angus's musings (recorded in his log) we get his acerbic but entertaining views on a variety of topical subjects, but the central issue that emerges, and one that makes this novel a most

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welcome addition to South African literature, is the fate of all those border war veterans who were silently and no doubt inadequately reabsorbed into democratic South African society after 1994.

Angus's obsession with documenting everything turns really pathological when he starts secretly filming his everyday life. This medium introduces a bizarre dimension to the novel and allows it to work towards its shocking, and thoroughly 21st-century, denouement.

His filmic subjects (his wife, lover, mother and colleagues) suddenly start acting out of character, as though they've rumbled his secret and are mocking him, and the abyss opens up beneath him. His solution is chilling.

A bitter and disturbing but also compulsively readable book full of surprise twists and turns, *Deeper than Colour* raises unsettling questions about our domestically and socially fractured society.

Craig MacKenzie was a judge on this year's EU Literary Award jury. He is professor of English at the University of Johannesburg