

# James Clelland

Cell: +27 (0)82 490 7136  
Email: jamesclelland@thistle.co.za  
Web: www.jamesclelland.co.za



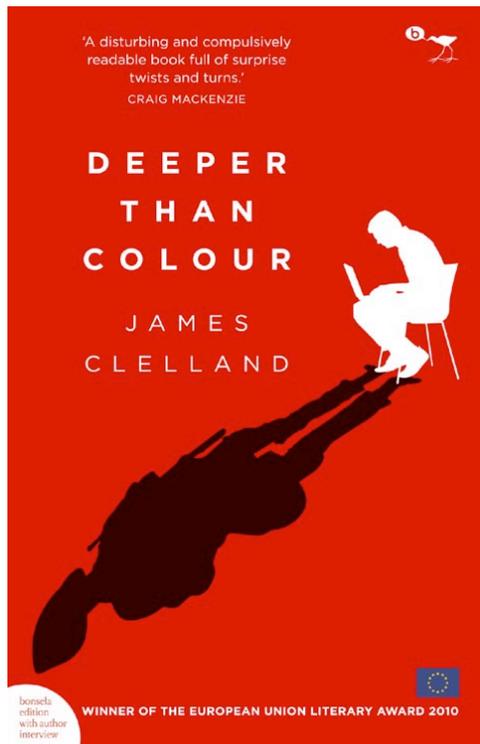
## Review

June 20, 2011

Page 1 of 2

## Deeper Than Colour

by Kavish Chetty



James Clelland is a South African novelist – although of Scottish extraction – who has recently won the European Union Literary Award for 2010. Is it rather too oblique to remark on the globalised character of some of our most recognisable literary icons? Lauren Beukes grew up overseas, JM Coetzee lives in Australia, Zakes Mda was exiled before writing *Ways of Dying*, and now former ex-Scotsman Clelland is the recipient of international attention for his novel *Deeper than Colour*. The EU Literary Award has as its foremost desire the promotion of “fresh South African literature that speaks not only to South Africans but also to an international audience.”

A little distance between myself and this novel made the heart grow fonder, if only mildly. While reading it I was struck by the paranoia of its prose; the sense of powerlessness and anger it produces. It is from this angle that Clelland simply rephrases one of the reigning trajectories of contemporary literature: modern man and his search for a soul. It is a novel whose primary character is alienated, dejected – even rejected – depressed, repressed, displaced, confused... a string of unpleasant adjectives which

belong to large parts of our planet, the social experiments in humankind and human life which have become thoroughly fucked up en route to death. Clelland aims modern technology at this problem. Angus, a burnt-out paranoid border-war veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and protagonist/sometimes-narrator of the book, undertakes the numbing project of secretly filming his life and its inhabitants. He screws in surveillance equipment into his bedroom and offices. And at night he retreats from his sexless marriage into his study, where he devotes his attention to replaying life itself: observing and obsessing over its minor details and what they mean.

As a protagonist Angus Smith is like Travis Bickle (of *Taxi Driver*) without the raw existentialism and murderous monologues. You could veer in your reception of him between the sort of condescending empathy reserved for the psychotic and asylum-bound, to a total absence of sympathy. He is a misogynist, a racist, arrogant and self-centred: isn't the idea of filming your entire life, this excessive visual diarising, the absolute core of modern solipsism? Is it the tech-savvy war-veteran's acting out, which simply magnifies and amplifies the narcissistic attractions of Facebook, Twitter and the whole host of other Web 2.0 applications which aim to preserve celebrity in its most unlikely and most uninteresting incarnations? This is Angus Smith.

# James Clelland

Cell: +27 (0)82 490 7136  
Email: jamesclelland@thistle.co.za  
Web: www.jamesclelland.co.za



## Review

June 20, 2011

Page 2 of 2

Although, such a description fails to reveal the complexities that are at work in the narrative. Angus gives us a portrait of a failed marriage and a portrait of a failed 'rainbow nation'. He remarks continuously on 'masculinity', drawing attention to its constructed nature. His unfailing impotence with his wife is another symbolic marker which raises attention to itself throughout the work. Some of his theorising also gives a certain deterministic spin on history. This mirrors a far more artistic treatment given to the same theme in Ivan Vladislavic's latest book *Double Negative*. Who and what is Angus Smith? Is he simply a war veteran nutcase? Is he supposed to stand in as some kind of off-angle metaphor for white males in South Africa? Is his point to show us how the rejected modern man gets his own back? I won't reveal the ending here, although the novel thrums with a violent energy from its middle onward.

*Deeper than Colour* is well-written and sometimes quite gripping, although the introspection it offers into its immediate themes are quite simply performed better elsewhere. The superlatives latched onto this work by the EU Literary Award committee are perhaps the most intriguing phenomenon about the book – because, quite frankly, it's good but it's not that good. The prose is high-calibre and Angus makes sure to reference Sartre and Camus and other European icons of bourgeois prestige, but there is still something almost adolescent about the angst which he experiences. Angst, possibly, is simply a childish thing. It's irrational, excessive, consuming. If you can look past some of this angst (or more accurately, look through it) you will find a dark perspective on modern life, full of acerbic and sarcasm.