

# Clelland has pulled off a coup

The author's 'Deeper Than Colour' is an EU winner, writes **BEVERLEY ROOS MULLER**

**N**EW NOVELIST James Clelland pulled off a coup last year, winning the EU Literary Award 2010 for *Deeper Than Colour*; a novel so often rejected that it had not even been published when it was submitted for the prize. He is a tall, friendly man in a bright Indian-style shirt and with a strong Scottish accent.

His unusual book has rightly caught the eye of critics but not, apparently, of book journalists.

James – I'm going to call him that because his real name is Dr Jim McCulloch, PhD in biochemistry, and that's a mouthful – sounded delighted when I contacted him late last year after the EU book announcement.

"I'm in Scotland," he said.

After a number of hits and misses, we finally meet on a hot summer morning and his first words are frank.

"You were the first person to ask to interview me," he said, "and you still are. This is the first interview I've done apart from one on email."

I'm stunned. *Deeper Than Colour* is a mature, accessible book with an intriguing structure and conclusion (though it is robust, so not for the prudish). It has also won a major award.

Yet I had hesitated for a moment over the dustjacket blurb that involved a traumatised veteran of South Africa's border war. Not another bossies veteran justifying his dodgy history, I wondered.

Never fear. *Deeper Than Colour* may have its kernel in that murky past, but its centrality is a full-frontal domestic warfare waged with modern technology and ancient, archetypal hatreds.

It is nothing if not in-your-face but it is, certainly, deeper than colour, the clever title being clarified as part of the plot.

It contains a series of voices, including Angus Smith, his awful self-serving wife, colleagues and family, recounting a train of circumstances which, one quickly realises, is not going to end well – though I didn't foresee just how the author would achieve this surprising denouement until close to the end.

Reclining on plush seats overlooking Table Bay, our location is a far cry from where young James first went to work as a postman in Eyr, Scotland, at a time when jobs were scarce. He married at 19, and came to South Africa in 1982 as a research biochemist. Quickly realising that "you can't raise a family of four children on that salary", he moonlighted as a writer mainly of short stories, including some broadcast on Springbok radio.

He is an open, warm personality.

## DEEPER THAN COLOUR

James Clelland  
(Jacana)



Yet he is also a meditative, curious intellectual who took 40 years to get his PhD and who, as a vegetarian, grows his own crops.

Two divorces and several grandchildren later, he owns a string of laboratories which manage the quality assessment of South Africa's medical and forensic laboratories. How are we doing, I ask, given what we read about in our newspapers? Excellent, he says, though he adds that he does not "measure the backlogs – that's not my job. But the quality – that's going well."

He wrote three novels ("which will never see the light of day: maybe they were rehearsals for this") before *Deeper Than Colour* – an object lesson in persistence for aspirant novelists.

He first began plotting it when he read about a movie in which a French couple started receiving tapes and recordings of them doing the ordinary things in life: putting out garbage, entering their home and so on. They never discovered who had them under surveillance but it inevitably altered their lives.

Mix into this an unravelling border war survivor, Angus, challenged at work by political realignments and at home by a wife so mean that she feels as if she could have won the Angolan war single-handedly, and his increasing paranoia and compulsive recording of every moment of his life and those around him. To what end? Certainly not the several ways in which the recordings are finally used. Though it does vindicate him, in an odd, boomeranging sort of way.

James uses his middle name – Clelland – as his writing name: "because there is another (professional) me, it seemed right to have a different identity for this. I write for about two hours at a time, anywhere. Then I have to get up and do something – watch cricket, drink coffee, move around."

"I didn't want to write a dreary book. I read books to learn stuff, about structures, people. I wanted to write a 'clever' book – that's a derogatory term these days. But I'm curious about everything."

He is also devoted to music – from classical to Leonard Cohen, and this passion is reflected in the novel.

"I wanted to write a book that I would like to read," he says.

As it turns out, he has written one that the EU judges liked too. So did I.



**DOMESTIC WARFARE:** In his first ever interview author James Clelland – his other name is Jim McCulloch, who is a chemist – talks about his unusual and clever award-winning book.

PICTURE: JEFFREY ABRAHAMS