

Book Review: Deeper than colour
Author: James Clelland
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Reviewed by Kibo Ngowi

"I don't expect normal people to understand... I know it should be satisfying and peaceful out here in my own space, being me, but because there's no earth, no attachment, no focus, no certainty, all is bleak and fearful and empty. There is no peace out here. There is no peace being me."

Angus Smith is a deeply disturbed man. On the surface, he seems to have a rather comfortable life – he is a senior partner in a successful Johannesburg-based architecture firm and he has a beautiful wife with a career of her own, in film. Deep down, he has a cynical disdain for life and all the people around him – he loathes his wife and her two children to whom he is stepfather. He finds little comfort in his mistress and his weekly visits to his mother, who has barely

constructed a coherent sentence since suffering a mental breakdown. His psychiatrist judges this as a severe form of Post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from his days as a soldier in the Apartheid regime South African Defence Force fighting a doomed war against militants in Namibia. The memories he recounts of inhumanity witnessed during that period of his life may very well be the cause of his pessimistic outlook but it could easily be the residual effects of being raised the only child of an emotionally detached mother and an abusive,

alcoholic father.

James Clelland's novel is by no means light-hearted fare but the surprising thing is that rather than feeling the urge to slit your wrists, you may find yourself unable to stop reading this enthralling examination of a disturbed individual. Far from melancholy, there may be times when you laugh to yourself as you enjoy

Clelland's sharp sense of humour, expressed through Angus' increasingly dark point of view. The book moves back and forth between two formats: a first-person narrative from the eyes of Angus Smith himself and a series of interviews in which his loved ones describe Angus and the relationship they had with him. Angus has met an untimely end and it is not until the end of the book that Clelland

reveals how Angus died. The bulk of the book can be best described as a thorough analysis of Angus, the man, his attitude to the world, to himself and to the people around him. Oddly enough, the more Clelland pulls back the layers of Angus' persona, the less one feels you truly understand him.

Adding spice to an already intricate mix is that Angus has decided to start secretly recording his life with the use

of a series of hidden video cameras. He plants them everywhere, from his mistress's apartment to his mother's nursing home. He becomes obsessed with watching the interactions he has with other people in his life and is unpleasantly surprised at what he discovers. The image he had of himself and of the attitude other people have towards him is slowly revealed as a sham, which leads him to become

even more reckless and insensitive, the very behaviour pattern that put him in this precarious position.

Clelland's novel has a stark similarity to watching a car accident – the sheer horror is enough to make one wince but it is impossible to look away, not to be eager to find out how the tale will unfold. An unfortunate weakness of the novel's style is that Angus is the only character who garners any legitimate character development through the course of the story while everyone else exists merely to help shape our understanding of his personality.

Another negative side effect is that quite a few potentially powerful themes are touched on but are never explored in any detail; instead, they are left as little more than passing thoughts in Angus's gloomy mind. All that said, "Deeper than colour" is a delightfully unique novel that delivers a simultaneously engaging and thought provoking read.

Navigating the depths of a tormented mind

