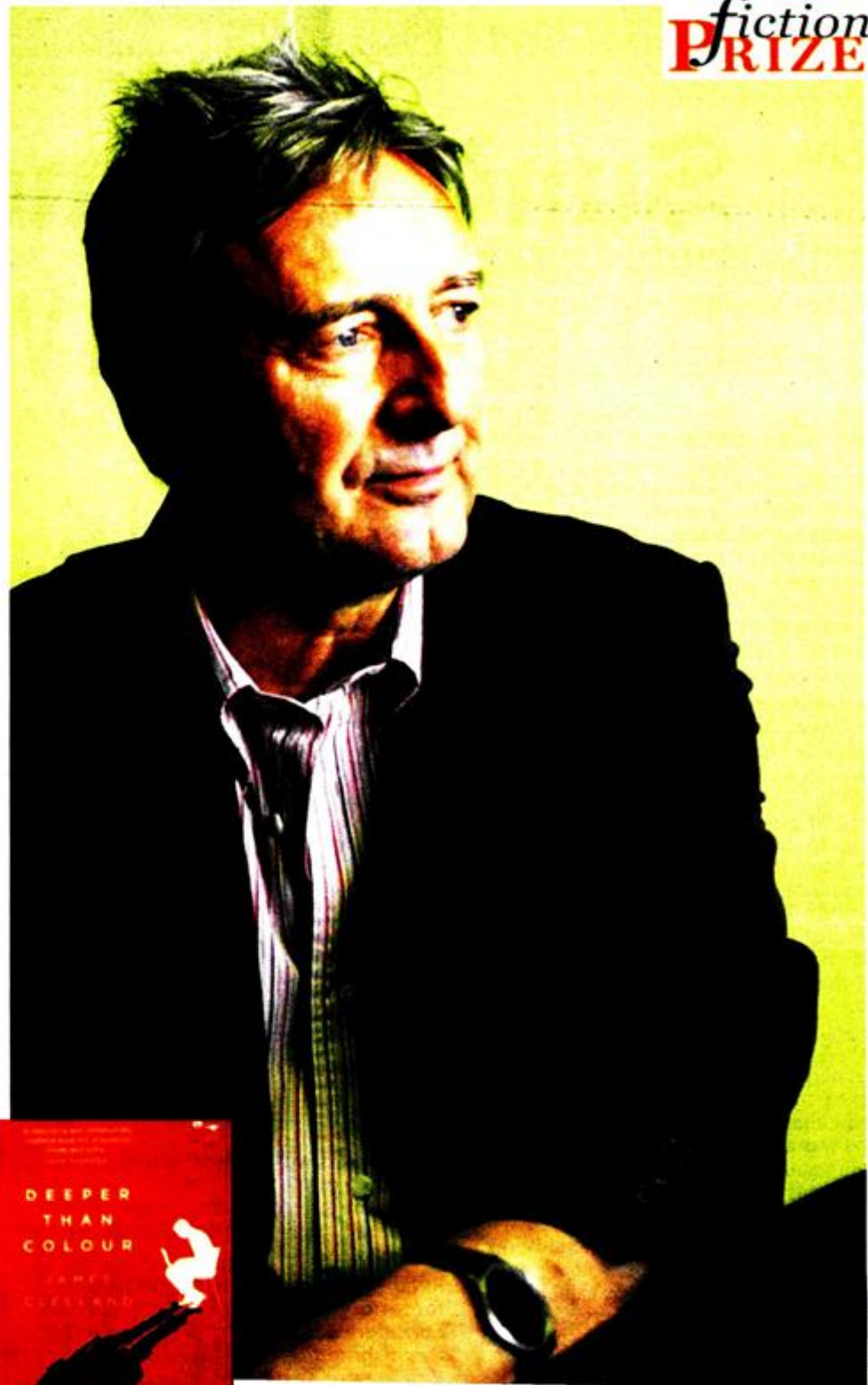


Reality and delusion

Tymon Smith talks to James Clelland, whose debut novel is about a man deeply traumatised by the border war



DANIEL BORN

JAMES Clelland was born in Scotland but has lived most of his adult life in Joburg, having emigrated here in 1982 as a research biochemist. He is a doctor of biochemistry and became a South African citizen in 1992. He has been writing most of his adult life and has published about a dozen short stories in UK literary magazines. He also wrote for Women's Forum, worked as a fiction reviewer for the Rand Daily Mail, and as a short-story writer for Springbok Radio. *Deeper than Colour* is his first novel and was the winner of the 2010 European Literary Award. It tells the story of Angus Smith, an architect whose experiences during the border war have left him suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and alienated from his everyday life.

When did you come up with the idea for the novel?

I finished it in 2008. The story was bubbling. I had lots of friends who'd been in the border war. It was something I had never experienced, but I had been to many braais where people were speaking about it and I just listened and absorbed. I started reading books about the war and accumulating information. I started taking it seriously when I had this concept of a deeply traumatised man and I needed to give him a background that would justify that trauma. It was easy to pick the war. He's a bit of a freak, so I had to give him a freak wife and I think the two matched each other beautifully.

How have people who experienced the border war reacted to your handling of it in the book?

Reactions to the book are usually quite extreme. People either like it or loathe it. Of the people who've mentioned the war scenes, one said it was unrealistic and the rest were actually quite impressed, so it's been a mixed reaction, as have the reviews. I think that's normal. The first response I had when I started speaking was: "What can you possibly know about the border war?" Well I came to South Africa as a research biochemist and I've used those research skills for the book, so maybe I'm using more of my biochemist skills than I realise. I've used that research facility to just dig and dig and dig, and I've checked it with people.

What made you use the device of the main character filming his life?

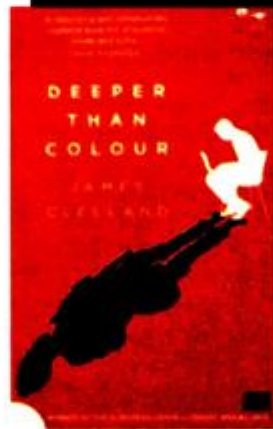
I saw a review in the Times Literary Supplement a few years ago of a French movie where people were being filmed doing their normal life things — getting out of their car, getting into their car, driving to work. I've never seen the movie, but the idea stuck in my head. I thought, well, I'm going to give this guy more of an obsession and he's going to tape himself. I expanded on that and I thought it was a real demonstration of someone becoming introverted, someone who's participating in a clinical drugs trial, suffering from PTSD. I've been involved in clinical trials and so I threw in some of my own experience.

When you were writing the book did you think about how people might react to such an unlikable, pessimistic and cynical character?

I realised that Angus was unlikable, but he wasn't meant to be. In the little experience I've had of clinical trials and the psychiatric world I found that people are desperate to talk about themselves, desperate to have someone to read what they write. I thought that this chap could just be himself and express himself, and I've given him extreme views. Someone interviewed me and addressed me as "Angus". I had to tell them that I'm not Angus. It wasn't difficult to write it. We've all got light and dark, we're all ying and yang, we're all balanced and obviously I have a dark side and that comes out in my novels. I'm interested in people with problems, because nice people don't make interesting novels.

Do you think Angus is typical of a particular psyche that exists in a place like South Africa, where we have a traumatic history that people try to brush under the carpet, but still affects the way we live our lives?

I had a very good friend who died a few years ago and I used to go to braais with him and I was always amazed by how much racism still exists in the white



YIN AND YANG: 'I'm interested in people with problems, because nice people don't make interesting novels', says James Clelland

community. I don't mix in those circles at all. It's not me, but I can recognise plenty of them. Speaking to them, I find that there's an illogicality about the way they tackle everything and I don't think they'll ever grow out of that, so I've put Angus in that category. I made him English-speaking, not Afrikaans, but I gave him all the problems that I've heard people discuss. He's racist, he's misogynist, he's everything.

Another of the book's themes is reality and our obsession with reality TV. How do you feel about the genre?

I can't watch it. I cannot believe that anyone with a camera on them can act like a normal person. I know these things are scripted, I know they're not reality, they're just another form of entertainment. Angus is affected by watching the clips of himself and I think that's the way it would have to be. You can't imagine yourself being filmed on a 24-hour basis without being affected. The filming was designed to let him analyse himself, but it's a false way to analyse himself because he can't possibly be normal if he's fiddling with the cameras all the time and distracted by them. He's never going to get to the truth.

Are you writing another novel and what can readers expect?

It's finished. It's about child prostitution, drug addiction and incest, so your typical family drama. The next one's about snuff movies and I'm working on that one now.

● *Deeper than Colour* is published by Jacana, R145.

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