

## Deeper Than Colour

By James Clelland  
(Jacana) R145

**T**HE RISK of writing about a protagonist who talks about boring somebody – anybody – in this case his own tedious wife, enraged because he has become impotent in her wake, is that you bore your readers to death.

James Clelland is apparently not inhibited by this possibility. He is not going to stop there anyway; he is going to show us just how the boredom that is the theme of Angus Smith's marriage masks a hatred borne of problems and complexities bred in the bone – and the country.

He is also going to reveal that this boredom lay at the crux of the "Border war" he went to fight in Angola as a determined 18-year-old. But boredom may be another word for the nihilism and deep destruction that is unleashed in the face of a life propelled by hatred, and this middle aged "white ex-youth", who was damaged by his experiences as a "reccie" in the infamously belligerent non-permanent sector of the South African Defence Force makes his wife feel uneasy when her children are home from boarding school.

It's the nastiness and the simmering violence she fears. He's a drudge now, turned on by the hits of Pink Floyd and Radio Highveld and remains untransformed. Bemoaning today's "politically correct, self flagellating world", he asks, if he wants to remember "the childish joy of finding metal-badge-niggers in my Robinson's jam jars, what can be wrong with that? Unless you're a nigger, or what was formally known as a nigger, I suppose, in which case you would be justifiably pissed off?"

"Race bores" such as Angus battle to accommodate the shifting reality more than a decade after the dawn of democracy; his virulently anti-Black Economic Empowerment rant includes a refusal to embrace guilt and, even though he is clearly "bosbefok" – messed up by the war – nobody seems to "get" him.

"A sick, racist pig" is how Radnor Chepe, one of Angus's partners in a successful architectural company saw him. Once insulted and degraded by Angus, Radner declares that he is now "a partner solely on merit, not because of my skin colour".

Not unsurprisingly, colour is at the root of this sorry, gory, lonely,

# Too much Ugliness

*Hatred and confusion proliferate in the psyche of Angus Smith, the paucity of his language infesting the pages, writes Maureen Isaacson*

ugly tale because it is told by a South African male who was reared by emotionally deranged white patriotic parents who visited the first trauma upon him in an alcohol-drenched atmosphere.

His father raped his mother, with the assistance of implements, in his presence and his "emotionally dead" mother refused his attempted solace. It's all bad!

Clelland has unleashed the hatred and confusion that proliferates in the psyche of this rampant hater, setting his character free to swear, the paucity of his language infesting the pages, as he spills his

reader.

Angus lives like an alien in the hostile marriage where his days of freedom are charted by the remaining tampons his wife has lined up on the bathroom shelf. We learn that although he claims impotence, he has in fact chosen to withhold sex from his wife, Dinah, a "very sexual woman" by her own admission – apparently in retaliation for the power she has seized over his life.

That the Smiths are not "nice people" is evident in the way they speak about each other and from Dinah's crude approach to the psychiatrist in a conversation following Angus's shocking death.

One of the messages of this crammed novel is that apartheid South Africa wrecked its white children and imposed an exaggerated, warped militaristic masculinity that has failed to transform in a new society. It may be that the symptoms of the PTSD Angus can no longer bear because the condition was not treated early enough has led him to seek consolation in technology. By making a "me-film", a film about his own life, he resolves nothing and the digital world that is the last resort for the disconnected, in the end, claims him.

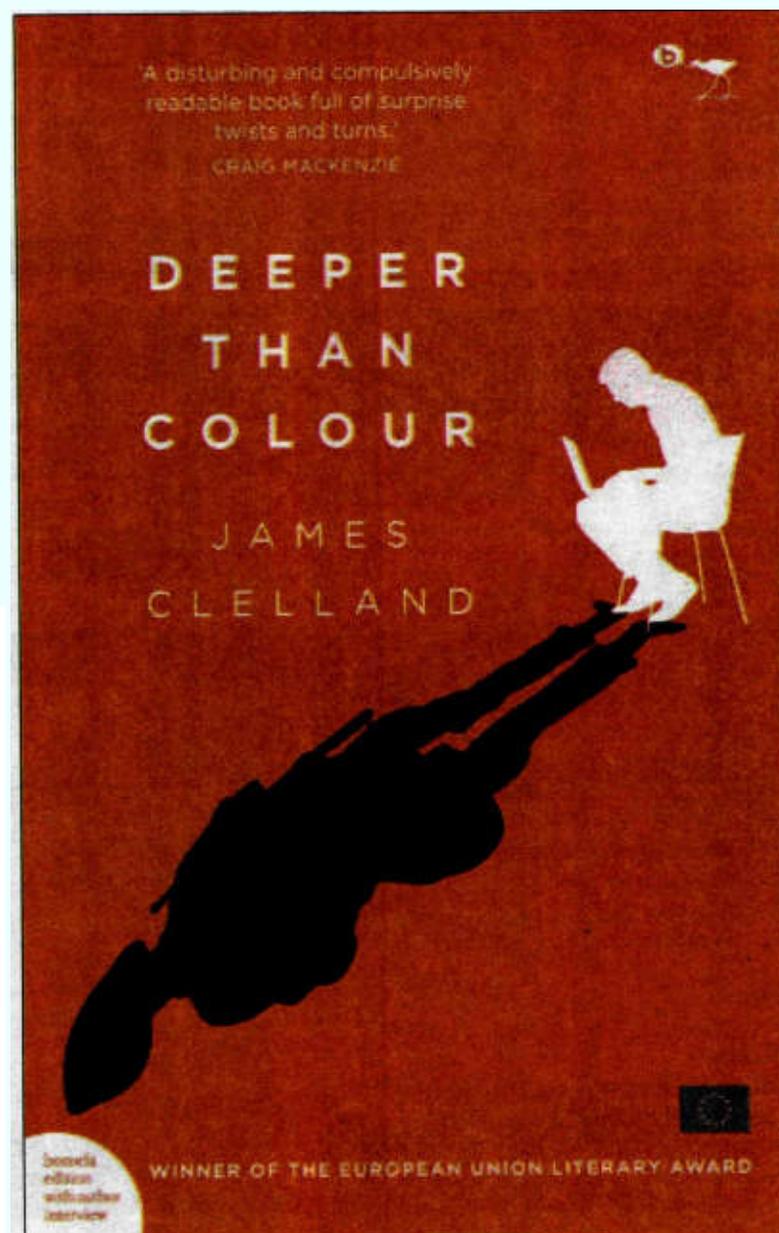
By presenting several contrasting views of Angus, Clelland illustrates the unreliability of perception.

For instance, Dinah complains that Angus cannot kiss. His lover, Marcella finds Angus's kissing rapturous. This, too, is captured on the film about himself. Marcella enjoys sex with Angus but is bored by the regularity of their relationship. Boredom is in fact the only consistency in this novel that in its weird alienation recalls the atmosphere of the 1989 film *sex, lies, and videotape*, directed by Steve Soderbergh. Its protagonist, played by James

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guts.

The language may be realistic in its description of a fractured personality glued together by multilateral hatreds and racism, but it sticks in the craw – and his troubled sexuality, Viagra-assisted or not, becomes a burden on the



Spader, unable to consummate relationships, turns to videotaping interviews with women about sex and is transformed in the process.

In *Deeper than Colour* there is no such transformation. We are saturated in ugliness. There is too much of it, no matter what the author wants to tell us in the interview the publisher has inserted at the end of the book.

Why would a reader want to read an interview about the author's own inspirational authors and his own feelings about the Border war? What's going on here? Think Thomas Mann adding an explanation for his inspirations for *The Magic Mountain*, think Kafka explaining *Amerika*. Even, Martin Amis explaining *Money*. Or JM Coetzee explaining *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Does the publisher not trust us? Here is Dinah, she is as dumb in her denigration of her husband's perceived literary pre-

tensions about Camus as Marcella is about Flaubert. The women are super-boring and their tone is Brakpan-flat. Di, who won't buy into the fact of Angus's PTSD, misses the point of the accompanying panic attacks and suicidal tendencies he is experiencing.

This is the larger point the book is making, which is really apparent without this explanation from the man who names a chapter "Barbarians at the Gate", letting us in on the origins of the title *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

It was Cavafy who wrote the poem about the need to change "the stultifying boredom of routine life"... in Rome, you know. Clelland's book won the 2010 European Literary Award.

Could the judges have been swayed by his penetrating questions, such as "Fuck, why does the present time fuck about with our memories?"