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CAPE TIMES

B.O.O.K.S

FRIDAY JULY 2, 1999

Thrilling tangle of emotional motive and error

THE DROWNING PEOPLE

Richard Mason

Published by Michael Joseph

The hype is long and strong: Richard Mason hit the headlines last year, when as a twenty-year-old Oxford undergraduate he landed a two-book deal with Penguin for R1 million, on the considerable strength of this, his first novel. The sensible lad is now taking a year off the rigours and regime of that ancient university to write his second novel.

On a recent evening in Cape Town, in the high-ceilinged hospitality of St Cyprian's School *voorkamer*, he launched *The Drowning People*. Eager readers, booksellers, publishers, publisher's publicists, friends and his proud parents gathered round to eat, drink, laugh, listen and applaud.

Richard is handsomely packaged, black jacket, white shirt, a tug of forelock on his forehead — he is a Hugh Grant/Rupert Everett lookalike.

Broad, boyish grins show teeth white as a drowned man's bones and his talk is humorous ("If you start sweating in front of this lovely fire, shout and I'll stop."). For hard fact he relies on our questions

"What'll you do with the money?" "I'm not building a swimming pool, but I am taking my girlfriend to Paris."

He has spent, he tells us, half his life in South Africa. His parents, Jane and Tony Mason, packed for Putney (or some place else) in London when he was ten. Left-wingers, they gave up on their battle against apartheid.

Richard reads from the start of the book: "My wife of more than forty five years shot herself yesterday afternoon. At least, that is what the police assume ... It was I who killed her."

It is a story of obsessive love, and it is more than that. As Richard tells us, it is a tale of moral mistakes made when young and left uncorrected.

"It's about the power of falling in love for the first time and crossing boundaries of what should and shouldn't be done. I hope it has an interesting plot, but I also hope it's about deeper things."

It is a 70-year-old man talking to himself high above the seas surrounding the island on which is set Seton Castle. It is a tangle of emotional motive and error. It is a thriller.

Fifty years into the future we meet 70-year-old James Farrell, the morning after he's murdered his wife Sarah. Rationalis-

maturity and you forgive him his few youthful clichés when "green eyes are frank" and "hair is the colour and consistency of straw".

The book is sociably set amongst London's young aristocrats, where James is not entirely at ease. Dark secrets are told in one of Seton Castle's 300 rooms, this one a "small, strange, awkwardly shaped room" and in a Prague "filled with whippers", a place of twisting coils and creeping shadows where James goes with Eric for violin lessons with the redoubtable Eduard Mendl.

Sarah has a cousin, Ella. It is with Ella that James falls fervidly in love, it is Ella that he loves till the end of his narration. While Sarah grew up in England, Ella, after her mother's suicide, was taken to America by her father, to flee from her mother's (and her grandmother's) mental fate. For Ella it was an escape from fealty to the fiefdom of Seton.

But the artless, manipulative Ella returns. Listening to James playing his violin scales and exercises in his cramped attic, she is "all delicately crumpled limbs on a cushion in a corner, where the eaves came almost to the floor".

This then is the construct of the story. Characters — some are maybe a little

and elongated vowels: 'Daaarling, where have you been?'"

Ella's nuzzling, puzzled fiancé Charles Stanhope is educated and more socially adept than the young James. Eric, who persuades James to come to Prague for those violin lessons, in his recently deceased aunt's flat in the old Sherkansky Palace.

The watery metaphor of the title streams through the book, perhaps flooding it a little. There are descriptive delights. You'll take tea with poor doomed Eric in his tiny flat, with its grimy view of Battersea power station. You'll see the sea far below from Seton's high, mullioned windows. And you'll rejoice in the ambience of Prague, which Mason describes as a city such as Paris was in the 1930s.

Prague is where *The Drowning People* began, when Mason went to work on a travel journal. Instead his scribbles became this book.

There are clever cliffhangers teasing us on, our nerve ends aflame. There is delicious menace, there are tragedies almost too terrible to bear, but it is the final intertwine that will truly set your heart aleeping. All the while you admire

