

## A CAPE TIMES - JUNE 2004

### Complete inability to resist a challenge

June 29, 2004 Edition -1

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I arrive to find Richard being ministered to by the three graces - the publicist, the maid and the doctor all solicitously tending to him.

The strain of travelling has taken its toll and left Richard with the flu. The romantic days of the roguish, wrinkled, reclusive, wine-drinking, cigarette-guzzling writer are gone and being replaced by young fresh-faced pipsqueaks that down nothing stronger than Perrier and homeopathic pills.

Richard hopped on the literary bandwagon with his first book *The Drowning People* at the tender age of 18. He recounts spending a year and a half in 14 countries speaking three different languages to promote the book.

"I don't know how I survived it," he says, in homage to himself. "Early on in your life you do things that require so much energy you can only do them once."

He describes the anomalous position of writers today: "You write books because you love sitting by yourself in your study playing with words. No one tells you have to be in *Italian Vogue* and have to give speeches to hundreds of people night after night and be on chat shows."

I squirm in my seat, guilty of being part of the media circus but Richard recovers and regales me with his new plans. "One of the things I like least about myself is a complete inability to resist a challenge," says Richard, appearing to like himself nonetheless.

He describes writing *Us* as a "bloody traumatic process".

With second novels, writers tend to fall into two groups - get it out of the way or take what Richard calls "a big technical stride".

He chose the last-mentioned, describing *Us* as "structurally very ambitious compared to *The Drowning People* which was very keen to please and wanted to be easy to read". This time he "wanted to write in a way that required just a little more work from my readers. You don't want to write anything impenetrable or difficult to follow but I feel intelligent people want to be engaged in fiction".

*Us* is written in three voices and "it's not all there on the page - you have to weigh competing accounts".

Most novels with three voices tend to be set in one time and place with localised action.

Richard uses the example of *Love etc* by Julian Barnes. "I wanted a chronological sweep and quite a complex plot."

To get that to work was, he found, "very difficult" and there are 400 pages of manuscript that no one will ever read. The writing process was tedious and Richard found himself starting to think "I'm never going to get out of this novel. My life's going to be in this continual twilight zone of continual effort and no result".

The writing was a long-drawn-out affair and the novel was in his head "24/7 for five years".

The effect is at times confusing; at others exhilarating. The rapidly shifting perspective adds a restlessness, a youthfulness that at times feels a bit uplifting. It prevents us from settling into any of the characters and leaves them all a bit superficial.

This has the effect, intended or otherwise, of making Maggie, who never speaks directly to the reader, a stronger, shadowy presence.

It's a sexy book that charts the intrepid journey of the undergraduate into the realms of sexuality. All over the characters are erotically drawn to Maggie who is charismatic and oddly dangerous and emits an invisible charge, electrifying the atmosphere around her.

There is a subtle, sexual undertow between her and her brother that reminds me of *The Dreamers*, echoing, at times, the bored, banal, erotic interplay between the sophisticated and privileged Parisian youth and the gauche American that Bertollucci depicts.

I kept waiting for them to all jump into bed together. But Richard deals the death card instead. Beneath the obvious and central subject of bullying is the theme of power. The bully is a cruel figure who exists only because of his victims' weakness.

The two dance a terrible tango together that culminates in a seemingly destined end. Mason turns the theme of power like a Rubik's cube, asking: "What is authentic power?"

It is something all the characters, except Maggie, lack. Her power is a mysterious quality, a boon that seems to have been granted at birth: her brother remembers, "She had a way of taking the lead and making people love her for it."

Like all fascinating characters she is complex. Her influence echoes beyond her existence.

One character, at the point of death, "wondered whether Maggie would have approved".

The dead continue to exert an influence, long after they are gone.

Decades after her death Maggie still influences the others. Their lives have been fragmented. One becomes a hopeless drunk and his art, influential as it may be, is questionable. If power is measured by the effect one exerts over others, Maggie possesses it in abundance.

Not only dead people but dead things - tomes of books and traditions, even - exert influence.

The novel measures the old, traditional and established against the new. Adrienne, the beautiful, insecure, neurotic American, lands tearfully in the urbane world of self-possessed, streetwise English and flounders despite her immediately apparent assets.

Jake, after a bizarre streak of luck, gets to cross the class lines, but is as insecure as though he had come from another country like Adrienne. The art world is being dominated by

drunken, angry young men who sweep dust into a pile and call it art.

The winners are the American producers who beat back middle age by marrying young beauties and jogging before breakfast. The Oxford graduates from old money are the losers.

The outcome of the book is nihilistic, death and destruction radiating out of a tragic epicentre, positing life as ludicrous, "from Latin ludicer meaning playful".

Mason at times writes like an old man looking sentimentally over his shoulder at the halcyon days of innocence and a refined erudite way of life that is being eroded. His fuddyduddiness, subtle snobbishness and lingering descriptions of differences between class aesthetics are irritatingly pretentious.

He is a South African Rupert Everett, in thrall to Englishness and as such will appeal to Anglophiles.

It is debatable whether autobiographical detail about the author is relevant to the appreciation of a book. Knowing that Richard's sister died an untimely death and seeing him work through this theme in his second work explains the emotional honesty and integrity of *Us*.

Despite a certain public schoolboy prissiness, it is a good book with a plot that twists and turns in sophisticated and surprising ways.