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### HE IS WAVING, NOT DROWNING.

At 19, Richard Mason was Britain's most hyped young novelist, but his literary success became a 'nightmare'. Six years on, he tells Cassandra Jardine how he has conquered his personal demons and, with a new book, is ready to face his critics again.

Six years ago, Richard Mason was the focus of one of publishing's biggest hype campaigns. At the age of 19, when his first novel, *The Drowning People*, was bought by Penguin, he was hailed as the new Martin Amis or F Scott Fitzgerald and tipped for the Booker Prize. Rumours about his advance (in fact, £100,000 for a two-book deal) ran so wild that they sparked a debate on Newsnight.

In interviews, the Old Etonian in his first year at Oxford came across as a cocky young man with a foppish, Hugh Grant air. A star debater, sportsman, polyglot and academic, he described himself (though he now denies it) as an "obsessive achiever". He said he expected to get a first, row for Oxford and party with debutantes by night. As for writing, he claimed to dash off 5,000 words a day. In short, he seemed the kind of precocious, privileged brat whom others long to see fall flat on his face.

When the book came out in 1999, reviewers had their chance to floor him. Some ended up admiring his maturity and probing prose, but most took savage pleasure in finding his tale of love and murder both contrived and pretentious. It was, says Mason, now 25, "a sledgehammer experience": "Writing had come spontaneously to me. It had been what made me me and, suddenly, I was judged."

The Brideshead image made him feel miscast in the stereotypes of others. "I was depicted as this glittering, effortlessly successful, upper-class Englishman and it crystallised my feelings of foreignness. I'm from South Africa. My great grandmother was in a concentration camp [during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1901]. My family moved here when I was 10.

"At Eton, I found myself inside, but also divorced from, an interesting part of England, surrounded by rules and rituals. I didn't understand that it just wasn't done to throw someone two years older into a bath of cold water for bullying, but I had grown up in a family that stood up against injustice. It was complete war; a boys' boarding school is a ruthless place."

But the worst part of the "nightmare" was becoming a celebrity - "and to think, people seek it out," he says, incredulous. "I was the centre of attention and all the energy had to come from me. On a publicity tour in Rome, I remember staying in a lovely hotel, being driven around in a sleek car. People were grabbing me and I had to smile, when all I wanted was to be alone. It's quite strange being envied when you are not having a good time. I rang my mum from my hotel bedroom in tears.

Since then, I've often thought of the Aristotelian injunction: 'Be careful what you ask of the Gods, lest they grant it.'"

Articulate, intellectual, endlessly dissecting what happens to him with nervy precision, Mason comes across as slightly shaken, but far from bowed. He is quick to point out that *The Drowning People*, though not invariably well received, sold five million copies in 120 countries, was translated into 20 languages and won the Italian equivalent of the Booker prize.

His long-awaited second book, *Us*, he explains, doesn't have an American publisher because he wasn't going to write a simple follow-up that would sell well in the Midwest. As for the film rights for the first book, which, when last heard of, were being fought over with enormous cheques, he says he didn't like any of the directors who were interested and wanted to move on. "I didn't want my whole life to be *The Drowning People*."

So what, then, has he been doing for the past five years? Why has it taken him so long to finish *Us* - a dark story, told from several viewpoints and in flashes and forwards and backwards, about Oxford students whose lives are defined by a death? The

answer seems to be: sorting out what really matters to him, and coming to terms with the family tragedy that has overshadowed his life from the age of 10.

After a year off to promote the first book and start the second, he returned to Oxford to find people talking about him in pubs, when all he wanted was to be an ordinary student. Socially exhausted from publicity tours, he avoided parties and stuck to a small group of loyal friends who didn't care about the hype - or his "freak-outs" about his second book. Once he had stopped worrying about what people thought of him and whether he would get a first, he became immersed in his work and pulled it off.

He also sorted out his love life. *The Drowning People* is about a man who suffers an obsessive passion for a girl, but is blind to the love of a homosexual friend. The message seems to have got through. Five years ago, he paired up with fellow student Benjamin (Benj) Morse - for whose patient nurturing of his fragile writer's ego he is deeply grateful.

But there remained one big, unresolved problem in his life, the hole left by the suicide of his sister, Kay, 15 years ago. Both his novels examine the long-term effects of an unnatural death - the grief, the legacy, the fears that you might do the same - that emanate from such a trauma. Both books are pervaded by a sense of loss and a fascination with the unknowability of others' motives. "I don't think you can tell too much about someone's psyche from their books," he says, but he is clearly a young man gnawing at a personal problem.

When his first book came out, he would not talk about his sister; he still won't say how she died, but he wants to be open about her mental illness. Kay, 11 years his senior, suffered from bipolar disorder (which used to be called manic depression).

"People discuss death from a heart attack," he says, "but, although a third of people encounter depression, there is still a huge taboo about it. I respect people's right to decide whether to bear the burden of consciousness or not, but there are a lot of people in Kay's position who could be helped. Because mental illness is not discussed, they don't get that help."

He denies idolising Kay, but he variously describes her as the practical one, the one who got things done in his family, and someone of great emotional acuity who knew him so well because they were similar in many ways. She understood his merciless self-discipline, his inability to forgo a challenge, his

determination to do everything as well as he possibly can. But he found it hard to grieve openly for her. "When she died, I couldn't cry about it," he says. "Family friends would keep clutching me and telling me to let go but, of course, when you are expected to, you can't."

Doing something in Kay's name - feeling the joy that comes from helping others rather than being famous - has released some of those feelings. In 1999, using some of the money from his overwhelming success, he set up the Kay Mason Foundation ([www.kaymasonfoundation.org](http://www.kaymasonfoundation.org).) Brought up in a deeply Christian home but critical of many of the things done in God's name, Mason says, "I believe you should give away not just a tenth of your money, but also give of what you're good at; your talent, your passion."

He has chosen to create a fund to send disadvantaged South African children to the excellent schools set up for the white minority. "I've often seen that little acts of evil come together and form a bigger one" - a theme in his books - "and the same is true of little acts of kindness. The 30 children we have helped so far will help many more and that's how change comes about."

The tears that he had bottled up for so long first began to trickle out in 2002. When choosing the students to benefit from the foundation, whose patron is Archbishop Desmond Tutu, he felt a rare moment of damp-eyed joy.

"Then, that Christmas Day, a strange thing happened. I was on my own before family lunch and I sat down to write a light-hearted description of my family for Benj and I found myself having a conversation with Kay. It was like someone else was leading me through my own head. I ended up with a 20-page account of sending the afternoon with her and was so wracked with sobs I didn't go to lunch until four in the afternoon. She talked a lot about my family. She said that we were still laying a place for her at the family's emotional table, but she was dead and she couldn't play that role."

Since then, he has been following "to the letter" Kay's advice to the family: "The other day, we were all having dinner at my elder brother's house in Cape Town and we were shrieking with laughter. It reminded me of the meals we used to have together when I was a child. I thought then, 'We've done it.'"

But on that Christmas Day, he says, Kay also offered him some important personal advice. "When I read the letter to a friend who knew her well, she said that it was exactly what Kay had wanted to say to me before she died."

What could the mysterious message from the dead older sister to the youngest of her three siblings have been? Mason does not want to say - it is too personal - but, later, it emerges that her message was a simple one: "Relax".

The frantic achiever looks embarrassed. It has been hard for me to accept that advice. I am very quick to feel lazy," he says. But it did help him finish his second novel. And start his third.