

## **EARLY FAME EARNED. MASON'S 'DROWNING' AN AWESOME START**

Complete inability to resist a challenge

By Tom Walker, Denver Post Books Editor

If ever the world were someone's oyster, it's Mason's. Over dinner a few months back, with the author in town on a sort of pre-publicity tour, Mason, who physically resembles actor Hugh Grant, was charming, witty, erudite and very British (read: polite. "Enough about me, let's talk about you").

But is all the brouhaha worth it? Is "The Drowning People" any good?

Yes, it's very good.

The book, the tale of a 70-plus-year-old violinist who murders his wife of 45 years, then looks back at his life through flash-backs to justify the killing, is a literary work with a mystery thrown in for good measure to make it more palatable to more people. "The Drowning People" is set among England's upper crust, and Mason seems to revel in skewering its fustiness and stiff upper lip. At the same time, it's a story of the torments of youth, the blush and bravado of first love and the anchoring bonds of friendship. It's about how people, without the wisdom that comes with age, react when the world around them turns into something they couldn't imagine.

The story is told from the point of view of 70-year-old violinist James Farrell, but Mason proves he's no fool, following the adage to beginning writers to "write what you know." Almost all of the story is told from the perspective of James' younger days, when he meets and falls in love with the enigmatic Ella and befriends a pianist named Eric. He also meets and eventually marries, then kills, Ella's lookalike cousin, Sarah.

The reader learns of the murder on the first page. James then relates his life's story as a sort of catharsis. He wants us to know why he killed Sarah and to help him understand as well.

As a young man, James meets Ella in a park and is immediately attracted to her. He can't get her out of his mind and, learning at a party that she is engaged to another, is crushed.

When James finds out that she is looking for a way out of the engagement, his hopes are buoyed. They see more and more of each other and fall passionately in love.

Meanwhile, James is embarking on a promising musical career. When he gets his first public performance he meets Eric, a wild, fun-loving Frenchman with an infectious laugh and a talent for the piano. While Ella is left behind in London to devise a plan to bail out of her engagement gracefully, the two young musicians head to Prague, where James can study with one of the great musical minds of the day. While in Prague, Eric and James get to know one another better, solving the troubles of the world and making the rounds of Bohemian haunts where the artsy crowd hangs out.

When Ella shows up in Prague, having rid herself of her wedding plans, things begin to go south. Eric is clearly uncomfortable around Ella, and James, in his passion for Ella, is naively unaware of the friction between the two.

Ella forces James to betray his friend to prove his love for her, and tragedy strikes. But it's only the first of more tragedies to come, and this is where Sarah comes more fully into the picture. To tell more would give more of the story away than would be fair.

Since the reader knows the denouement going into the story, it's a credit to Mason's storytelling talent that he keeps us enthralled. There is an overriding feel to "The Drowning People" that the shoe is about to drop, but Mason never hurries; he lets the story develop of its own accord.

He deftly drops hints here and there of what is to come, as when the elements of the enmity between Ella and Sarah and the reasons behind it are introduced. He has the discipline and sensitivity of a writer with much more experience.

There are times, however, when all the pondering and nail-biting by the characters gets in the way of the story. There are times, too, when the earnestness is palpable, but that can be chalked up to youth. Let's give the guy a break.

There are other times when Mason's take on the world and the human condition is often more sagacious than many people twice his age, and the scope of his writing talent is broader than some writers with many books in their cannons.

The young author has a lot to live up to with his second book, and time will tell if he can meet the challenge. Unlike athletes his age, whose stars shine bright and then flame out, Mason has a chance to be something special - for a long time...