

## **New York Times - 1999**

BY DOUGLAS CENTURY

"I can't really believe I'm here," said Richard Mason, a novelist and Oxford University student, as he toured the book party thrown for him at the offices of the New Yorker magazine last Monday night. "I keep expecting that at some point I'm going to wake up and be a 12-year-old back at boarding school."

Mr. Mason, 21 and not that far removed from a daydreaming Eton schoolboy, has landed inside New York's velvet ropes. His debut novel, "The Drowning People," written when he was 18, has just been published with all the promotional muscle of Warner Books. Mr. Mason, born in South Africa, wrote the novel of murder and revenge among the English upper class just after graduating from Eton. It hit the best-seller list of The Times of London in its first week of release last month, and foreign rights have gone to 21 countries.

Though his Hugh Grant-meets-Rupert Everett look, extreme youth and overnight success may have some book reviewers sharpening their knives, at his party Mr. Mason stepped into the role of lit-world it-boy with casual ease.

In a white V-neck T-shirt and black velvet suit, hand-tailored for him by a London clothier, Favourbrook, Mr. Mason sauntered through the cocktail party unrattled by the CNN camera crew that has been documenting his American tour. He was chaperoned by Laurence J. Kirshbaum, chairman of Time Warner Trade Publishing, who whisked his author around the room like a proud father.

Mr. Mason is being lavished with a red-carpet treatment reserved for celebrity authors. But these are strange times in the book business as publishers prize authors with youth and photogenic appeal who can look as natural in Publisher's Weekly as in a glossy fashion magazine (Mr. Mason appeared lounging in the April issue of Vogue). One editor confided that Mr. Mason's precocious, if sometimes naïve, charm opens

doors for him. She cited the time he came to a sales luncheon and breezily ordered a gin and tonic, though he was under age and no one else was drinking. "Everyone fell in love with him," she said.

By 8 P.M., the party had migrated to the White Horse Tavern in Greenwich Village. In the taxi ride, Mr. Mason showed his self-deprecating side, describing how his outsider status at Eton inspired him to write his novel. "Being a barbarian colonial, I was very taken by all the traditions and history," he said. "It's no accident that foreigners enjoy writing about the closed, rarefied world of the English upper class."

Nonetheless, seated at a sidewalk table at the White Horse, he found himself at the center of a circle of English transplants to New York, like Clementine Hambro, an acting student who is Sir Winston Churchill's great-granddaughter. Mr. Mason regaled them with his impression of a flat California accent, acquired at the Sky Bar in Los Angeles. He made knowing references to the New York scene, to Lot 61, where the troupe had been a few nights earlier, and to the Hamptons, where he would be having his farewell party.

"I'm afraid I'm being terribly rude to the rest of my party," he said, then returned inside to where Mr. Kirshbaum was on his cellular phone, telling his daughter to hurry over and join them.