

17 June 2006

After the almost exhibitionistic virtuosity of David Mitchell's wonderful previous novel, *Cloud Atlas*, *Black Swan Green* seems relatively simple: instead of the interlocking narratives of the earlier novel, with its multiplicity of perspectives and styles, we have a single straightforward account of that most familiar of themes, adolescence, seen from the point of view of a thirteen-year-old boy, Jason Taylor. Furthermore, where *Cloud Atlas* is set in a variety of places and periods, *Black Swan Green* is set in, well, Black Swan Green, a very ordinary town in Worcestershire, surely one of the least celebrated of English counties.

South African readers are used to tales of childhood focusing a political situation the child usually does not fully comprehend. The device is less common in English fiction, possibly because political issues have been less pressing in that country since the Second World War. But Mitchell's novel is set in the early eighties, that is, the ascendancy of Thatcher on the back of the Falklands War, and he uses that war as a metaphor for the lesser battles that Jason has to contend with in his family as well as in the Comprehensive School he attends.

If, as Sartre said, hell is other people, then, for a child, hell is other children. Mitchell conveys with chilling accuracy the hell that is childhood and the hellish creatures that children are, and the constant warfare that drives their interrelations. Meeting children from a rival school, Jason knows that they have noted his "enemy uniform". The football games he takes part in after school "are more like battles."

But if schoolboy scraps are like wars, wars are not like schoolboy scraps – or are they? Mrs Thatcher seems to think they are: "The only way to stop a playground bully,' she said, as sure of her truth as the blue of her eyes, 'is to show the bully that if he thumps you, then you can jolly well thump him back a lot harder!'"

Jason has the perspicacity to note the false logic of this: "But the threat of being thumped back never stopped Ross Wilcox and Grant Burch scrapping, did it?" Nevertheless, his adolescent power-worship responds to the appeal of Mrs Thatcher's arrogant bellicosity: "Mrs Thatcher's bloody ace. She's so strong, so calm, so sure."

If, here, Jason is as gullible as any member of the British public at the time, he does learn in the course of the novel to recognise the source of such an appeal. Listening to the vicar's wife, the dreadful Mrs Bendinck, deliver an impassioned plea in the village hall for the eviction of the gypsies from Black Swan Green, Jason "thought how all leaders can sense what people're afraid of and turn that fear into bows and arrows and muskets and grenades and nukes to use however they want. That's power." This is as close as Mitchell comes to spelling out that the vicar's wife is, amongst other awful things, George Bush.

But the warfare is not confined to children on the one hand and politicians on the other: without fully realising it, Jason is also witness to the break-up of his parents' marriage, and if their confrontations are more subtle than those of the playground, they are no less lethal. "Questions aren't questions," he recognises, "Questions're bullets"; and he seems to apprehend something of this almost subconsciously in the poems he writes. The eccentric Madame Crommelynck, whom readers of *Cloud Atlas* will recognise from that novel, asks Jason: "The domesticity in this poem, these kitchens, gardens, ponds ... is not a metaphor for the ludicrous war in the South Atlantic in this year?"

In his own private battles, Jason's Achilles' heel, as it were, is his stammer, which exposes him to ridicule every time he opens his mouth. As stammerer, Jason knows, more bitterly than most, the power of words. "Speaking well is the same as commanding" he says enviously of his super-cool cousin Hugo;

Jason's clandestine writing of poetry is an attempt to harness the power of words that is denied him in speech. But it is a power that in fact disempowers him in the merciless judgement of his peers, because "Writing poems is . . . what creeps and poofers do." By the same token, certain words are taboo; by the inverted standards of adolescence, not four-letter crudities, but anything that smacks of poofterdom: "boys aren't allowed to say 'beautiful' 'cause it's the gayest word going."

The novel, then, is largely about the power of words, and Jason's growing up is largely a matter of turning the power of words to his own account. Meeting his father's over-bearing boss, Craig Salt, he discovers that he can disarm the man with poker-faced sarcasm. "Craig Salt'd scented my sarcasm but couldn't act on it. I stared back, innocent, defiant and surprised at myself."

And in his final triumphant confrontation with his tormentors at school, as he reduces the normally derisive class to stunned silence, Jason feels "That appalled silence was my handiwork. Words made it. Just words."

If the novel exposes the Falklands War for the bogus public relations stunt it was, it's yet not pacifist, in that it recognises that the school bullies have to be dealt with fearlessly, if not necessarily in Mrs Thatcher's way. Battling his way past his own sense of inadequacy and vulnerability, Jason finds

words to rule his own conduct: "Just find what's true, hold it up and take the consequences without whining."

It's a curiously old-fashioned moral, and *Black Swan Green* is a curiously old-fashioned novel: its strength lies not in technical innovation or post-modern tricksiness but in its sure sense of place, of period, of character, of idiom, and above all in its humorous, compassionate, appalled, reverent grasp of the beauty and terror of existence. It is also a joy to read.

Michiel Heyns lectured in English at the University of Stellenbosch, but now writes full-time. He is the author of three novels, the latest of which, *The Typewriter's Tale*, appeared recently.