

Franschhoek Literary Festival 2012

[For SlipNet]

Report on a session entitled *The Price of Fame*, with Richard Mason, Alexandra Fuller, Gareth Cliff, chaired by Ndumiso Ngcobo.

It is always diverting to witness a really robust ego at play, and through some inspired programming this session provided three such, in the persons of Richard Mason (author of the million-selling *The Drowning People*, and most recently *The History of a Pleasure-Seeker*), Alexandra Fuller (*Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* and *Cocktail Hour Under the Tree of Forgetfulness*) and Gareth Cliff (Radio 5), ably and wittily chaired by Ndumiso Ngcobo. Coming towards the end of a full three days, the session provided a large audience with much-needed light relief, no more taxing than watching three brightly-coloured beach balls bouncing off each other on a summer's afternoon. ('The rock 'n roll session of the FLF,' according to its chair.)

In a sense, of course, the Franschhoek Literary Festival, like all literary events, gives authors an opportunity, indeed imposes upon them the duty, of promoting themselves; and in that sense, too, this session was exemplary. Of the three egos on display, Gareth Cliff, perhaps surprisingly, came across as the most restrained, or the least rampant, although Alexandra Fuller was the most adept at self-ironic under-cutting. She is very good at making the most of a somewhat limited stock-in-trade – her mother's drunkenness or her own forming the basis of most of her deadpan anecdotes, enlivened by the odd reference to haemorrhoids ('I'm just an average anonymous citizen, famous in my home town for things like having haemorrhoids').

Richard Mason ('as verbose as ever', according to Chairman Ngcobo) was the most bouncy of the three, deftly incorporating the other two into his own act, which is basically the Richard Mason Show, with occasional forays, together with Alexandra Fuller, into Will and Grace. Morphing into the Graham Norton Show, he also made the most of Gareth Cliff's fame as an Idols judge.

One of Ndumiso Ngcobo's inspired questions was 'Do you consider yourself an extrovert or an introvert?' This elicited some of the more soul-searching answers of the

afternoon. Nobody, it seems, is just one or the other: Gareth Cliff is a fifty-percenter, whereas Richard Mason is 'an introvert who's learnt to be an extrovert'; he spent a miserable time in Paris after his first novel, which he wrote at the age of eighteen, sold a million copies 'for some reason'. Alexandra Fuller, too, was eloquent on the subject of the loneliness of the long-distance writer: 'one hotel room after another, one flight after another.' Fame is hell.

Indeed, all three fought shy of the idea of being famous. 'We're none of us really famous,' said Alexandra Fuller, and the others concurred, though Gareth Cliff generously accorded the other two a degree of fame he could not match: 'I feel like some Zombie extra wandered onto the set with Meryl Streep and George Clooney'. (Fuller objected that she was about thirty years younger than Streep.) Mason, also deprecating the notion of his own fame, noted that 'Every time I turn up for one of my talks, they ask me for my ticket.' This, though, does not perturb him: 'I don't write for millions of people, I write for one person. I don't bother with fame.' That one person could be his ideal reader or it could also, it seems, be himself: speaking, as he not infrequently did, of his latest novel, *The History of a Pleasure Seeker*, he declared: 'I decided to write this book entirely for me: this gave me back a true part of myself.' (What part that is, you will have to read the book to discover.)

Cliff, too, performs for an audience of one: 'When you're broadcasting, you talk to one person.' When actually face-to-face with that one person, he can feel guilty 'because you're not as connected with your listeners as they are with you.' He confesses, though, that it's sometimes inconvenient, when rushing to catch a plane, to be stopped by a fan wanting an autograph; Mason, by contrast, would rather miss the plane than disappoint a fan. He confesses to liking human beings.

Richard Mason brought the session to a close on an inspiring account of his discovery and nurturing (with a Fellowship that includes an iPad and wireless keyboard, and the use of Mason's Cape Town apartment) of a young black talent who is destined for the fame that, it seems, these three writers have, in their different styles, shunned. As he did at the launch of his book at the Book Lounge, he concluded on a ringing declaration of faith in the future of his and our country. (He lives in New York.)

'Wake me when this is over,' pleaded Alexandra Fuller, when her fellow-panelists started quoting from the classics. But there was nothing sleep-inducing in this most lively of

sessions. Such doubts as one might have about the modesty of the participants are irrelevant in the face of their undoubted skill at entertaining an audience: accomplished anecdotalists as they all are, they were never dull, as self-absorbed people all too often are. The true price of fame is probably that one ends up at its mercy; but these three are as yet firmly in control of its pleasures and perils.