

MARTIN, IAN. *Pop-Splat*. Gansbaai: Hubris, 2008.

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Fear and Loathing in Elsinore

According to the acknowledgements page, Ian Martin's self-published novella *Pop-Splat* "is a contemporary take on Shakespeare's Hamlet"; and, according to the blurb on the back cover, the author "looks at today's South Africa through cynical eyes and uses his unique brand of sick humour to satirize a sick society".

There are many books devoted to discussing the varied ways in which Shakespeare's works have been revisited and reworked, for instance *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (2009) by Margaret Jane Kidnie, to name but one recent release; and *Hamlet* itself "is a prime source for sampling. Perhaps no other of Shakespeare's plays has been ransacked for lines, scenes, plot devices, or oblique but telling references as often or as completely" (Smith 136-37). It would thus seem reasonable to expect quite a lot from another such adaptation, given that the field demands originality by virtue of being so well used, and considering the amount of material with which the author has to work.

The main difference between the present work and Shakespeare's is that, apparently, "In the 21st century you don't get tragedy. Only sordid stories of disgraceful behaviour leading to predictable consequences. No, no tragedy, because tragedy is supposed to elicit pity, not disgust" (Martin 1). This is the philosophy of *Pop-Splat* (which takes its name from a particularly brutal scene in which a baby monkey is killed by Matt Dreyer, Martin's Hamlet – this in itself should tell you much about the book) and it is a stage-direction, the attitude that Martin wishes his readers to have towards his tale, as well as towards the South Africa that he evokes. In *Pop-Splat*, tragedy, from the personal to global warming, is nothing more than a symptom of the wilful capitalist excess that Martin justifiably vilifies, though he goes about it in a narrow and unconvincing, and therefore ineffective, manner. That tragedy is somehow a thing of the past is a vision that cannot be sustained even within the novella, and cannot translate in any meaningful way into the real or literary worlds in which tragedy does in fact continue to exist.

Pop-Splat borrows only the most basic plot and character elements from Shakespeare's play. Matt's (Hamlet's) mother Trudy (Gertrude) is estranged from Matt's father Bruce at the start of the book; Bruce has already been shackled up with a woman called Barbara for a year and a half. Instead of the *fait accompli* of old Hamlet's death at the beginning of *Hamlet*, we witness the murder of Bruce. Bruce's status as 'king' comes from possession of wealth and material objects rather than birthright; the modern South African equivalent of Elsinore is the castle-like house with gate-houses and heavily armed guards. Denmark equals South Africa, but more specifically the microcosm of Cape Town's Constantia, in which live "a motley crew of rich rubbish (new and old), rotten politicians (of all persuasions), and brazen Mafiosi (both foreign and local)" (10).

The rest of the cast, who are all English-speaking whites – many of them Jewish – is comprised of friends and neighbours of the Dreyer family. All have names that link phonetically to Shakespeare's characters (for example, Ophelia becomes Ophabia; Laertes, Larry) and all experience events that have some similarity to those in *Hamlet*. Neither the appropriation of these basic elements of *Hamlet*'s plot and cast nor the adaptation of Hamlet's madness to the novella's plot shed any new and revealing light on the play itself. What remains, then, is to consider the ways in which *Pop-Splat* uses *Hamlet* as a vehicle for social satire of South Africa.

The point of an adaptation, surely, is that it transmits the relevance of a 'period piece' into a more recent age, and makes some sort of meaningful point in doing so, illuminating current circumstances and events and offering insight as it mutates the original work to fit a later time. Does Martin achieve this?

Hamlet's madness, perhaps the most debated theme in criticism of the play, is reflected in the character of Martin's Hamlet, Matt Dreyer, the character through which Martin shows his readers his vision of South Africa. As in *Hamlet*, the action in *Pop-Splat* is driven by the madness of the main character. Unlike with Hamlet, however, there are no questions surrounding Matt's psychology. Matt is not driven by personal feeling towards his father and his father's murderers: "He began to think about genuine bereavement and it occurred to him that he was probably incapable of it. He hardly ever saw his father and when he did there was never any display of affection. There was no emotional bond between them so there'd be no sense of loss if Bruce were to kick the bucket" (26). Rather, his madness is a symptom of the unstable, over-medicated, socially and morally bankrupt social clique in which he has been raised (Martin 32), and becomes a vehicle for Martin's social and political position and opinions – although as we shall see this is hampered by the narrowness of Martin's sample of South African society.

Matt's madness has its deepest roots in Martin's conception of "pomo culture" (75), a conception which is thus also the driving force of the narrative of *Pop-Splat*. Kay Smith has noted that it is "widely acknowledged that one aspect of postmodernism is its tendency to recycle, whether it is called 'paratext', 'bricolage', 'sampling' or more old-fashioned terms, like 'parody', 'allusion', and 'literary borrowing'" (Smith 136). Postmodernity is particularly concerned with recycling what is generally referred to as 'high culture', of which Shakespeare is usually regarded as very much a part, and as "*Hamlet's* postmodern status as metatheatre ... is obvious enough" (Bell 310), the play lends itself to such treatment rather well. Furthermore, *Hamlet* is "a play much concerned with the issue of documents and the different kinds of significance that are attached to them by different kinds of readers and writers" (Ayers 423). Martin does not use these opportunities to explore South African fiction or South African society in any meaningful way. Instead, he considers the main feature of postmodern culture to be "its worthlessness ... Everything in this culture has been trivialized and robbed of value and meaning. Even history has been trashed" (Martin 75). This roots Matt's radically aberrant psychology in the uncertainty of the postmodernist perspective, uncertainty which is expressed in *Pop-Splat* as a total absence of metaphysical, social and political value or depth and which Matt experiences as an ability to "see through the insincerity, the hypocrisy and the humbug that masked his world ... It was all just a stupid farce and he wanted no further part in it" (27-28).

Given that Matt's psychology is intended to relate to a broader social context, the understanding of postmodernism, and of postmodern uncertainty, here seems rather limited. Postmodern uncertainty is not just despairing, but probing, and as for the idea that "history has been trashed", it is far from this simple. Postmodern – and, perhaps more appropriately for a work specifically considering the South African context, postcolonial – ideas of historical value and depth have some deeper implications than simply negation. For instance, the understanding (seemingly missing here) that history is a form of narrative and that its rewriting is a crucial expression of power, is rather more significant. Postmodernity and the postcolonial, opposed as they may often be, each interrogate history and do not summarily dismiss it as Martin implies. Their business is to engage in rewriting in the quest to understand and give new meanings to past and present, and though Martin overtly raises postmodernity as the context within which he conducts his satirical adaptation of *Hamlet*, *Pop-Splat* does not seem to do this.

Instead, having been heavily didactic to this point, the narrative simply changes tack before the climax: "As for the yudder, yudder, yudder concerning heavy subjects like moral decadence and the failure of social, political and economic systems – don't strain your brains with that crap. That was just to give a bit of background; some context for the arty-farty intellectual types who insist on over analyzing [sic] everything. No, don't worry, from here on in it's leave-your-brain-

behind action” (137). This is a clumsy and heavy-handed device through which *Pop-Splat* only skirts the surface elements of the literary theory with which it connects itself. *Hamlet* is multi-layered and self-aware; *Pop-Splat* may be vaguely self-aware but it is certainly not multi-layered, and its metafiction is empty, offering nothing new as it fumbles with the play’s plot and paints it with blood and loathing in a bleak vision of South Africa.

The psychology of Matt Dreyer is the only element that the book explores in any depth; but it is so extreme a psychology and driven by such extreme and unrealistic events, such as his mother preparing him for boarding school by feeding him cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana and cocaine and buying him an inflatable sex doll and a dildo (16-22), that it can only serve as a portrait of a damaged mind, and has relevance only to Matt’s character development. As far as this goes, *Pop-Splat* is good, if you want to explore the growth of a scarred and warped psyche; but there is no broader significance to it. Despite the satirical intent, Matt lives a life isolated from South Africa at large, in a clique of privilege. The broader South African context hardly seems relevant to Matt’s story, as the only people that impact upon him meaningfully are those within his narrow clique.

Pop-Splat depicts a tiny segment of South African society. It is a caricature of a corrupt upper class that is carnivalesque in its awfulness; the characters are disconnected from any everyday reality and isolated from the rest of the nation. South Africa and her people only intrude as an implied sea of faceless, nameless and violent black people that surround the tiny group of white characters and behave in a manner that justifies the latter group’s paranoia and violent psychoses. If there is any irony intended here, it is not obvious. Instead, this seems part and parcel of Martin’s presentation of the experiences of a small clique of privileged whites as somehow representative of South Africa today, as if there is no powerful black elite and there are no black people suffering because of criminal activity. South African authors who choose to deal with political issues need to have a broader and more evocative palette than this.

Satire should be revealing in some way. At the core of Martin’s adaptation of *Hamlet* is the premise, ‘Something is rotten in the state of South Africa’ – but it goes no deeper than that, so what is revealed that we do not already know? This novella simply revels in the terrifying brutality that has carried over from the apartheid past to become part of life in post-1994 South Africa, and for which there is no other word than that which Martin dismisses in such cavalier fashion: tragedy. There is no social commentary or observation of any depth or scope. As for literary satire: mirroring a few names and plot elements does not make a satire, and while *Pop-Splat* is overtly antithetical to *Hamlet*’s intelligence and wit, to the play’s melancholic grace and beauty of language, there is no satirical meaning in this antithesis, nothing to broaden our understanding of the play. *Pop-Splat* seems a nihilistic vision, which is something of a cop-out in a book that is overtly politically and socially aware. Martin dedicates this book to “the youth” who he hopes will “reject the crappy values of their parents”, but despite seeming to wish to position *Pop-Splat* to make some sort of commentary on race, economics, education, gender and environment, he offers no insight and adds nothing to current national debates relevant to “the youth”. There are more things in South Africa than are dreamt of in this philosophy, and the “sprinkling of ‘Hamlet-dust’” (Smith 139) over the narrative seems no more than a ploy to claim some depth for a disenchanting, pseudo-intellectual rant.

There is another, more charitable, possibility – though it is one of which *Pop-Splat* itself seems unaware. The text could be read as a satire of socially aware South African fiction, an arrow aimed, perhaps, at the heart of the works of writers such as J.M. Coetzee and Marlene van Niekerk, writers who do constructively, or deconstructively, examine our nation and society in a way that inspires debate and points some sort of literary way forward. Yet *Pop-Splat*’s specific claims to social and Shakespearean satire would seem to rule this out as a goal that the author had in mind while writing, which is a rather pointed irony – though perhaps also an academic serendipity. The book’s cover blurb proclaims that “Ian Martin looks at today’s South Africa through cynical eyes and uses his unique brand of sick humour to satirize a sick society”. The

problem with this is that the cynicism is so deep it slides beyond cynicism and into a sort of pathological loathing, one that overwhelms the narrative and possibly even blinds the author to the deeper potential of his own work.

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