

Review of *One True Void* by Dexter Petley (Two Ravens Press, £8.99)

Lesley Mcdowell, The Scotsman Jan 2008

The 'bildungsroman' is almost a rite of passage in an author's life itself - appearing near the start of a writing career, it's often semi-autobiographical, written in the first-person, full of adolescent angst and misdirected passion. More recently though, writers like David Mitchell, with *Black Swan Green*, have delved into their teenage past much further along their career paths, and this has had an important effect on the genre, changing a youthful memory of the near past into a much more distanced, less emotionally charged, less experimental, history.

So it's all the more remarkable that Petley, who like Mitchell is a seasoned novelist who also has three novels under his belt at this point, manages to retain so much of that dizzying, combustible combination of rage, confusion, passion and resentment that seethes inside the average spotty-faced, greasy-haired 'misunderstood' teenage boy, and, what's more, turn it into the kind of story you know you've read a hundred times before but that still seems brand new.

Henry Chambers is a working-class boy in 70s' Kent, trapped inside the small-minded village of Hawkhurst. He's too bright for a school that sees lads like him purely as cannon fodder in the war against declining values (the nearest factory is where he's expected to work for the rest of his life, if he's lucky), but the bright, middle-class boys don't want to know him, and even the rebellious 'smash the state' kids don't have time for him.

Henry's rage against social inequities – which his parents represent in their ready acquiescence to anyone in a big house – was a feature of some of the early work of the late Dennis Potter too and Petley doesn't add any special new insight into the choice someone in that situation is given: fight, flee or surrender. The young Potter could flee to Oxbridge and London; the young Henry can only fight or give in.

What Petley does do though, with a noticeable lack of forgiveness for anyone or anything, is to scratch with every word across the page, the sheer impotence of Henry's situation: "When you're sixteen/seventeen, you don't know what it is... You reach for poetry but that's just sprinkling iron filings on your own magnetic field. You analyse yourself but that's just brass-rubbing your own personality. You don't see it or nothing, you're in state of double negatives. You've got lead flashing on your collars, a lost voice, contracting walks. Every Sunday's a Wednesday afternoon. It's walk walk walk walk."

But Henry does have a way out – he's a poet, and what every young poet needs, of course, is a love interest. And to his great good fortune, Fate decides to hand him just that, in the shape of the mentally disturbed, unhappily married, middle-class Maxine Pollenfex. When Henry first meets her, she has bandages down to her elbows, to disguise a recent suicide attempt; she initiates sex between them soon after, and once she returns to her husband in London, sends him passionate love letters. Henry, it's soon clear, is out of his depth and doesn't stand a chance.

As with all doomed love affairs it's not so much will this end badly? But rather, just how badly will this end? Both Petley's wonderfully acerbic style as well as the disturbed mental state of Maxine herself, pretty much ensure that it's not going to end very prettily. The novel suggests that only a catastrophic event can bring about change in such a stultifying environment, and Henry, only half-realising the truth of this situation and in the guise of doomed lover, is constantly attempting to make this happen, constantly defying the universe and the earth that keeps spinning, in spite of all his efforts to stop it.

Both Henry and Maxine are the kind of utterly believable characters you almost wish weren't so real, so painful is their situation, but Petley's injections of twisted humour are enough to keep it from spilling into melodrama, or worse, the kind of kitchen-sink realism so beloved of the Angry Young Men of yesteryear. This is a different kind of story altogether, breathing new life into the rather jaded form of the bildungsroman, and that's ultimately because it has been written by someone at a high point in their writing career, not at the beginning of it. If you liked David Mitchell, then you must read Dexter Petley; he's a hundred times better.