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## James Robertson, Joseph Knight (2003)

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## **James Robertson, *Joseph Knight* (2003)**

While James Robertson's novel *The Testament of Gideon Mack* deservedly made it onto the list of Scottish novels prepared for the BBC vote and reached fourteenth place in the public vote, there are among this author's works a number of other novels that would have equally deserved to be represented among Scotland's favourite books. In particular, his second novel, *Joseph Knight*, an eminently enjoyable historical novel which tackles a difficult subject matter with astonishing humanity and even-handedness, stands out as deserving of inclusion.

What sets Robertson's novel apart from other historical novels set in the same period is that it links two aspects of Scottish history that are usually not brought together, one fairly often written about, the other usually glossed over, namely the aftermath of the Battle of Culloden and Scotland's complicity in slavery and the slave trade. One of the quotes preceding the novel, taken from Ben Okri's *Birds of Heaven*, offers valuable hints to the reader on what Robertson is aiming to achieve through this linking:

Nations and people are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of these lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings.

Robertson is not accusing the Scots of telling themselves outright lies about their past, but reminding us that in glossing over such a controversial aspect of their history, they are running the risk that they will not "free their histories for future flowerings." In contrast to much historical fiction dealing with the aftermath of Culloden, his novel does not shy away from presenting the way in which his central character, John Wedderburn, got rich in exile before his return to Scotland. Instead, he focuses in particular on those years in exile and tells the story of how the Wedderburns came to own plantations and slaves in Jamaica, rather than concentrating on their return to Scotland and their reintegration into Scottish society.

Robertson's genius can be seen in the balanced view on John Wedderburn that his novel offers. The struggle of 16-year-old John Wedderburn to find his feet in a strange new place and make something of himself after fleeing Scotland following the defeat at Culloden is eminently relatable, while the views he expresses regarding the racial inferiorities of

his black slaves are simply abhorrent to a modern audience. The way he treats his slaves, as his lawyers in the later trial of Knight v. Wedderburn also point out, is not nearly as brutal as the treatment meted out by other slave owners, but the novel never once allows this to absolve Wedderburn of blame. As a reader, you want to like Wedderburn, because he appears to be, at heart, a good man, but it is never quite possible to do so because his attitude towards slavery and to his own slaves in particular never allows such a concession. Especially in moments when he professes to be at his most lenient, e.g. in taking back Charlie after the failed rebellion instead of giving him up to the authorities to be executed, it is shown most clearly that he can be as cruel and unflinching as the other slave owners; in this case, he orders a horrific punishment and tells Charlie he should thank him for the punishment and for saving him from worse, which he would have deserved.

Through John Wedderburn's complex characterization, Robertson complicates the presentation of slavery and slave owners and shows that normal people who otherwise led morally irreproachable lives were involved in it alongside brutal sadists. The novel manages to show how normal, good people became mired in the morally reprehensible mindset of the times and therefore did not see their involvement in the perpetuation of slavery as wrong, but Robertson never once allows the argument that they were "men of their times" to excuse their behaviour or their values.

In the character who makes up the other half of the Knight v. Wedderburn trial, the slave Joseph Knight, James Robertson creates another brilliant character, who allows him to make a point on the cultural silencing of the black slave population. The novel is named after Knight, but for most of its duration, Joseph Knight is an elusive presence felt in the background of the narrative but physically absent from the plot of the novel. Although it is Joseph who starts the ball rolling on the trial that will ultimately set him free, throughout the novel he is shown primarily as reacting to the circumstances around him, not as taking action himself. His lack of discernible action makes it hard to grasp his character, which is compounded by the fact that he is not allowed to speak for himself. Instead, Joseph Knight's story is disclosed to the reader by other characters, not Knight himself. In a clever commentary on the way slavery silenced the voices of the oppressed, Robertson's novel is structured so that Knight's story is told primarily by his white masters Alexander and John Wedderburn, his white wife Ann Thompson, and his white lawyers. Even the one black character who is allowed to speak on Knight's behalf cannot possibly understand his plight or give insights into Knight's thoughts and feelings, because he was born free and never suffered slavery.

Joseph finally does appear as a tangible presence in Part IV of the novel and this part is told from his perspective, but by that time his only function

is to fill in some of the blanks left in the testimony of the other characters. Even Archibald Jamieson, who has been searching for him for the majority of the novel, is by this point no longer interested in Knight's side of the story. For him it is enough to have found Joseph, to know that he is still alive. Joseph Knight is merely a symbol for the other characters of the novel, a blank slate on which they can inscribe their own interpretations of his character. Knight is thus effectively silenced, left to deal with the trauma he suffered in being abducted from his home in Africa as a child and brought to Jamaica on his own, in the dead of the night.

Knight's silencing mirrors that of the black community and other minorities. The structure that showcases this silencing has, evidently, been conceived by a white man; nevertheless, the novel is timely and supremely relevant today. Now, when Black Lives Matter and calls for greater diversity in literature (as well as other cultural products) are ever more frequently heard, this is a novel that highlights the silencing of minority voices.

Ultimately, Robertson's novel opens up a difficult period in Scottish history—Scotland's involvement and complicity in slavery and the slave trade. It does so by presenting a balanced and subtly nuanced account of the issues. Through its structure and its treatment of the character Joseph Knight it draws attention to the silencing of minorities and offers an implicit commentary on issues of diversity in literature. The novel is therefore both topical and thought-provoking, as well as being a great read, and would have more than deserved a spot among the books chosen for BBC Scotland's vote on the country's favourite novel.

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