



Encounters

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Reviewer:

[Geoff Fox](#) [3]

Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Alternating narrators, reporting on events and characters from different perspectives, are familiar enough to readers of YA fiction. But six narrators, with around 40 consecutive pages apiece, covering experiences ranging from aliens landing their spaceship in the grounds of a Zimbabwean prep school to the machinations of a paedophile ? well, you wouldn't accuse Jason Wallace of lacking ambition.

The six are a varied bunch: an eight year old white girl who attends the school; a black teenage boy with hopes of becoming a long-distance runner at national level; the authoritarian headmaster's 18 year old gay son, recently expelled from a prestigious boarding school despite being head boy and a potential international cricketer; Sixpence Chaparadza, a lad from the local village repeatedly forced to thief for his drunken father; 12 year old Gary whose outward arrogance and white supremacist values protect his lonely vulnerability; and Holly, the flame-haired, freckled-faced daughter of a couple of American psychiatrists, visiting the school to explore the phenomenon of more than fifty students claiming to have seen the spaceship and even some of its occupants. There's an extra twist here; in 1994, 62 terrified children between five and twelve from a Zimbabwean school did indeed claim to have witnessed such a landing, and nothing would shift most of them from their story.

Each of these narrators requires a narrative voice, which Mr Wallace manages with remarkable skill, wavering only into cliché perhaps in the case of Holly, the girl from California. All have their own anxieties and dilemmas, which the arrival of the spacecraft ? if that is what it was ? brings to a crisis. In some instances, the encounters between the narrators result in clarification and moments of empathy; elsewhere, there is only sharpened conflict. The adult characters are also varied: a wise old African groundsman, several uncomprehending and repressive parents, a grandfather who knows how to listen, the autocrat who rules the prep school, his unhappy wife who knows she's failed her son and herself; and in the shadows the sexual predator who pretends to love working with young people so much that he's given access to the school, its students and their activities.

Inevitably, readers will be challenged by a book so diverse in its perspectives on characters, plot and critical moments, which include the moving death of one of the narrators. Wallace leaves the facts of the alien landing unresolved (I think); often through the American psychiatrists, he prefers to invite his readers to reflect and speculate alongside some of his narrators about the universe and its possible inhabitants. There is no room for a loss of concentration, for

information of little significance to one narrator acquires intense meaning for another. For the many readers who will become engaged by the different crises faced by each of the narrators, the book offers a demanding read with many rewards. Mr Wallace's debut [Out of Shadows](#) [4] was a multiple award winner; this second novel reflects an exploratory mind, uncompromising yet respectful towards his readers' capacity for agile response.

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