

A slap heard around the world

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While plenty of people claim to hate it, *The Slap* by Australian writer Christos Tsiolkas is out-selling its competition on the Booker longlist – what is it about race, class and sexism that we find so fascinating?

RACISM. MISOGYNY. Sex (and quite a lot of it). Class. Ethnicity. Infidelity. Money. Domestic Violence. Alcoholism. As Christos Tsiolkas orders a sandwich in a Dublin hotel, it seems as if no issue, taboo or theme has been left out of his fourth novel, *The Slap*. Narrated by eight characters, the slap of the title takes place at a suburban barbecue, when a bawling child is smacked – but not by one of his parents. The divisive act is a fulcrum for the story and the multiple ideas Tsiolkas challenges in the book.

“I wanted to write a novel about how we live now and I was really interested in the idea of what the Australian middle class has become. There is a huge shift in what represents that middle class, and it’s not the people we see in books, films or on TV.” In the pages of his novel, these people are Indian, Aborigine, “wog” and Greek. Hector, the barbecue host is Greek and his cousin Harry delivers the slap. Both men are unfaithful to their wives and Harry represents a brutish chauvinism. The parents of the child are white, the mother a breast-feeding “new ager”, his father an alcoholic. After the key scene, they decide to press charges against Harry, which pits friends and family against each other.

Born in 1965 to immigrant Greek parents, Tsiolkas’ parents were working class manual workers. Like the child of many migrants, he was the first in his family to go to university. On the day he started, his uncle, who worked as a labourer on the university building, reminded him to never forget that, or his working class roots. The conflict between class, generations and cultures is what gives *The Slap* its momentum. Tsiolkas grew up and still



Christos Tsiolkas: ‘I expected the response. I knew people would feel uncomfortable about recognising versions of themselves.’ Photographs: Bryan OBrien

lives in Melbourne, a city that boasts many of the tensions of a mixed-race urban centre. “I find it impossible to believe that people don’t have biases; that they don’t walk into a room and notice if there’s someone there who’s a different race or ethnicity to them. Most Australians will notice an Aborigine if they enter a room. This is a book about public life and private life and the differing views people hold.”

Rosie, a middle-class mother who is still breastfeeding the four-year-old son who is slapped,

privately acknowledges her own prejudices and struggles publicly with her shame about those feelings. “Part of me is Rosie,” admits Tsiolkas, “as are many of my friends but they wouldn’t ever share something like that with you. It would only be said after knowing you for a long time and probably after a bottle of wine. I

don’t think we should be scared of being able to work through what these tensions are, because otherwise multiculturalism will fail. And that would create resentment because it’s not being addressed.”

The book has been hugely divisive,

facing accusations of misogyny, pornography and racism. Male characters cheat on their wives, women are objectified, when they’re not calling themselves “sluts”. Was he surprised at the criticism? “I expected the response. I knew people would feel uncomfortable about recognising versions of themselves. In Australia, the response from people who hated the characters is that they will talk to me about Manolis [Hector’s world-weary father]. He represents a lot of people of my generation who grew up with immigrant parents.” Even the smartest women in the book – Aisha, Hector’s Indian wife and Anouk, a TV scriptwriter – are their own worst critics, but Tsiolkas points out that the male characters are more objectionable.

The controversy hasn’t harmed sales. Already a winner of the prestigious Commonwealth Prize, *The Slap* has been longlisted for this year’s Man Booker Prize and is outselling the other longlisted nominees. “I’m delighted, but daunted by it,” smiles Tsiolkas, “but I’m grateful for a very simple reason, which is that it gives a certain amount of pleasure to my family.” The writer has shyed away from reading the other nominated books, although he has met David Mitchell (“a genuinely lovely guy”) and says that he would “shout him a drink if he won”.

The Slap is a compulsive read; the pages whizz by and the interior monologues of several characters are rendered in language that pulls no punches. The c-word appears frequently, as do culturally sensitive shorthand words like “wog” “bogan” (lower working class) and “slopes”. For Tsiolkas, it would have been unauthentic if he had self-censored.

“People have told me the language has offended them and I usually ask

in what way they’ve been offended. If they tell me it’s because they don’t like seeing the word ‘wog’ on the page, I tell them that they shouldn’t read my work. But if someone is offended because they think I have used a word exploitatively or gratuitously, then I’m happy to engage in an argument. We all have strong views on those words, but I do think they’re the texture of how we speak in Australia.”

The word “faggot” is a recurring slur, and one of the most tender portrayals in the novel is of Richie, a recently-out gay youth. Tsiolkas is gay and has been with his cartographer partner Wayne, for 25 years. Growing up within the perceived machismo of Greek culture, his own experiences of coming out were positive.

“There was a courage needed to confront that old tradition. Books were one of the sources of that courage for me, but there was an equal courage for my parents not to refute me. It was a huge thing to have to deal with. In *The Slap* Hector never levels with his own parents, so there is an infantilism to his relationship with his mother. There’s a truth there.”

Despite the Australian setting, Tsiolkas sees the book as placeless, universal. We speak about Dublin’s move from being white, mono-cultural to burgeoning multicultural city and he gets excited. “It will be really interesting to see what happens in Ireland in a decade or two, when you have Polish-Irish or African-Irish writers writing novels.” His trip to Dublin comes on the back of a three-month residency in coastal Scotland where he has been writing his next novel.

“Being there gave me an escape from white noise. I fell in love with Scotland and when you fall for a place, it takes hold of a very specific part of your imagination.” A small section of the book is set there, but most of it occurs in his native Melbourne. The time away from the city, like the quintessential writer in exile, has sharpened his view of his hometown. Distance and engaging with European values over the course of his stay has made him more aware of the problems raised in the book.

“Racism runs so deep in the Australian psyche and history. I’m fearful of going home to that parochialism, to that xenophobia. I think we – as Australians – are more racist and that’s reflected in the language of the book. We’re almost more honest. We’re bound by certain forms of politeness and it’s been interesting to look at the European responses to *The Slap*. I don’t know what angers people more – what it reveals about racism or what it reveals about class.”

Article from the Irish Times

The Slap by Christos Tsiolkas is published by Tuskar Rock and is longlisted for the 2010 Man Booker Prize

