

INTERVIEW

No one's ego is worth more

Last month saw the publication of David Samuel Hudson's debut novel *M*. Here he sits with educator Daniel Xerri to discuss fiction writing in English in Malta, the country's celebration of mediocrity, and the absence of a critical culture.

Your novel is about Damian, a young writer whose hubris and contempt for other writers and the Maltese way of doing things seem typical of someone who believes he is too big for the insular context he was born in. One could argue that the way Damian sees Malta is absolutely necessary because it helps us transcend our limitations. What are your views on this?

I think that in any small parochial community, to have a little bit of arrogance is almost a necessary evil. You can't break the ceiling of the society you live in if you don't believe that you can do something. I do see this quite often in Malta, where young people are told to temper their beliefs. We're told to slow down and temper our thoughts. So, in order for someone to effect change they need to have the arrogance of thought to believe that they can in the first place.

Damian has a highly conflicted relationship with Malta. What are the sources of this conflict?

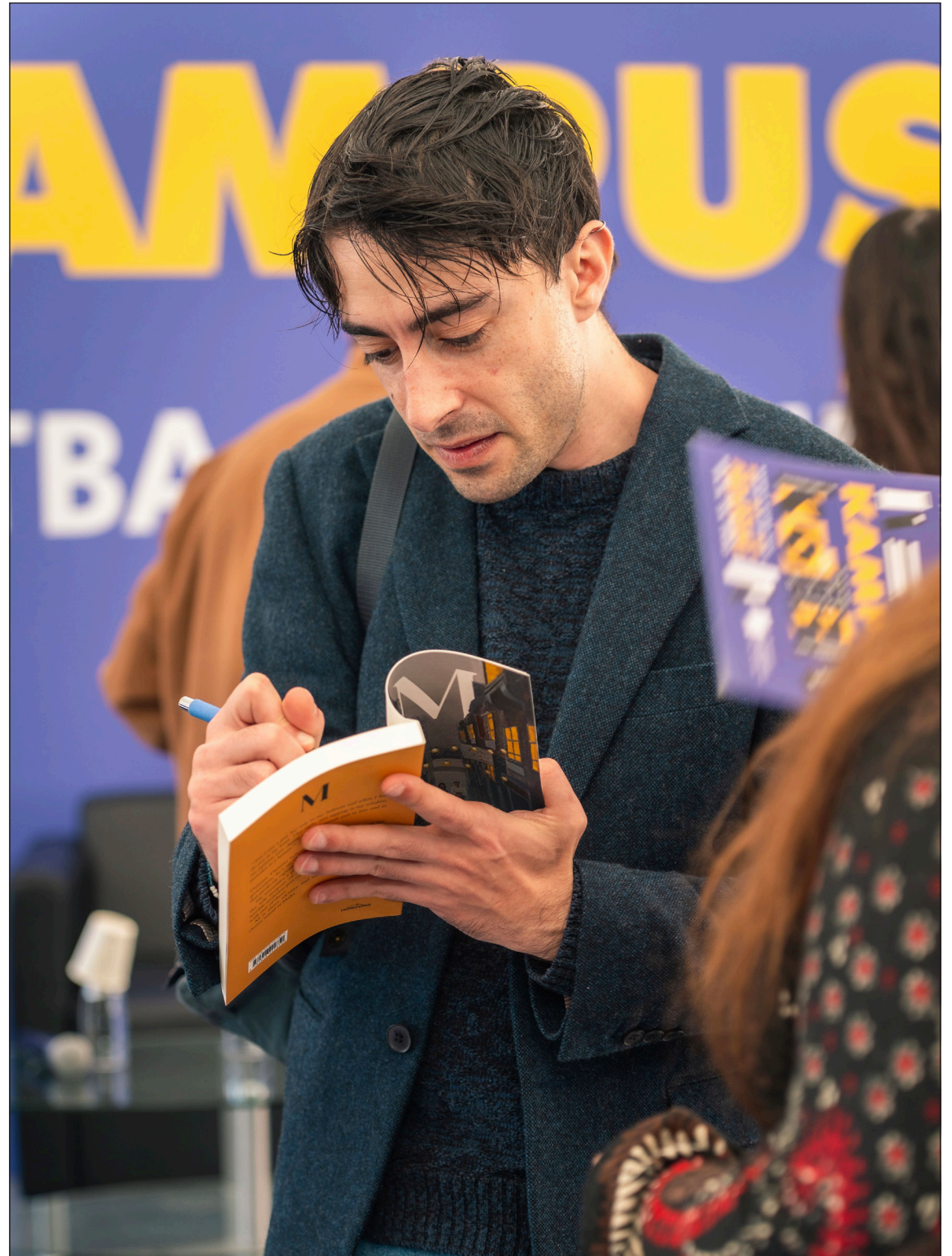
I think all great writers had a conflicted relationship with the country in which they grew up. This is true of James Joyce, William Faulkner and Leo Tolstoy. I think being jingoistic about one's country cannot make you a great writer. Writers question the governments of the day and the country's zeitgeist. In one particular section of my book, there's a character who says that you can't love your country if you're unable to hate it at some point. This is not a new idea; Oliver Friggieri said pretty much the same thing in *Fil-Parlament Ma Jikbrux Fjuri*. My protagonist hates Malta because he sees mediocrity as being rewarded here.

Damian is very much aware that the writing he's producing and the medium he's using make him an outsider. At one point he admits to himself, "The Maltese would eventually reject my writing too because it is unpatriotic. And in English." Was this a fear you had when you started writing in English?

I've always felt isolated because I write in English. When I was younger, I approached a local publisher with a manuscript. The first thing he asked me was, "Is the novel in English or in Maltese?" When he learnt that it was in English, he said, "We won't even bother looking at it." When I asked why, he replied that there are plenty of novels in English. I was indignant because my novel would be different from everything else. I've had modest success publishing abroad and I won international competitions. There are other Maltese authors who have had similar experiences, but we don't really hear about them.

I would argue that we've had a much more difficult time publishing internationally than local writers have when publishing here. For example, in one of the international competitions that I won I was competing against 1,700 submissions. A Maltese author competing locally is up against seven. But while that person's name is splashed all over the media, people like me remain unknown. I do feel that unless I write a novel about Malta and publish it locally, I'm still nobody in the literary circles in this country. This is why I have always felt on the margins.

Your novel's protagonist and his friends have their own reasons for writing in English rather than Maltese. What are



David Samuel Hudson (Photo: Nathan Camilleri Photography)

your reasons?

The question is not as complicated as some people assume it to be. When I was younger, I read novels in both Maltese and English. Of course, you can run out of children's literature in Maltese fairly quickly whereas you'd need a dozen lifetimes to do so in English. While growing up, I devoured as much English literature as I possibly could. I suppose I find myself more comfortable writing in English because the source language of what inspires me the most is

English.

I think I'm representative of a particular demographic. Ever since I started teaching creative writing, I've been meeting many young writers who are choosing to write in English. I would argue that they have tremendous talent and that some of them are better than established writers who have been writing in Maltese for many years. I think it's a mistake for publishers to miss out on talent and some very solid storytelling about Malta. I do envisage this changing in the fu-

ture though. I believe that they should introduce an imprint that just publishes Maltese writing in English. I see this as potentially being a very successful venture, but obviously, I'm not a publisher.

Why did you feel compelled to include some Maltese in your novel?

Francis Ebejer wrote a novel in the 1960s called *The Evil of the King Cockroach*. It's a story about a pastizzi-maker but not once does he use the word pas-

than the literary industry

tizz in the novel; he uses cheese-cakes and peacakes instead. I think this is a mistake because the word pastizz has so much cultural currency that you can condense all of Malta in that one word. Even simple words like sorry and thank you are replacing their Maltese equivalents today, especially with younger people. I won't be prescriptive and say whether this is right or wrong because language is organic and develops in the most efficient way possible, but it is a reality.

It's the same case with international novels in translation. An example would be Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels. The English translator, Ann Goldstein, left some Italian phrasings in the narrative. For example, instead of the word neighbourhood, she kept the Italian *Il Rione* because it is so culturally significant for the Neapolitan context. I felt that I wanted to capture the Maltese reality of people speaking a mix of both languages and to write an authentic Maltese book.

You've often said that Maltese literature is largely invisible in the world. Why do you think this is?

The short answer is that there's no critical culture to speak of. I genuinely believe that critical culture is a safe space for both good writers and good readers. If there is a well-oiled mechanism or filter that helps us distinguish between good books and ones that aren't so good then writers would feel vindicated when they do a good job. Readers would learn to trust writing again.

Imagine if a local writer publishes a book which is immediately hailed a masterpiece. Its blurb describes it as the best work in recent years. A reader picks it up, reads it and secretly thinks, "This is not a masterpiece; this is rubbish." What you're doing there is losing the trust of your reader. That contributes to a lack of reading culture.

I don't understand how we then have the gall to complain that Maltese people don't read local literature. Maybe it's our fault that we haven't been producing literature that is worth their time. I think we're produc-



Daniel Xerri (left) with David Samuel Hudson (Photo: Nathan Camilleri Photography)

ing a lot of work that is not up to scratch because some publishers are too afraid to say no to established Maltese writers. However, no one's ego or pride is worth more than a literary industry and its capacity to bridge boundaries. If we normalise criticism, everyone stands to benefit.

Why is it that we're still so wary of critique in this country?

In Malta, we see critique as a personal attack. It's understandable for a small, parochial, insular island community to be afraid of critique. I may criticise you today, but because of the island's geography I may encounter you in the supermarket tomorrow. Nobody wants that. Critique can be seen as a learning experience, as something productive. In Malta, it doesn't work that way though. We either take things far too seriously immediately, or we never react because we are afraid of awkwardness. These are extremes and there doesn't seem to be a middle road in this country. I've had people tell me that they were threatened for either writing a review or refusing to do so. I know people who have been ostracised from the writing community in Malta for providing negative feedback on a particular author's work.

The threats make you think that there's something larger

at play here. If you're an established author in Malta, you're more likely to be chosen for events, you're more likely to be hired, and you're more likely to get funding. So, while the spirit of debate in this country is neither healthy nor thriving, the entrepreneurial spirit is alive and kicking. You can rest assured that when there's money involved, there's going to be some element of viciousness.

If we normalise criticism, if we include it as part of our collective consciousness, if we come to believe that it's fine to disagree and to criticise one another, then things don't have to become poisonous and toxic. However, at present, we're far from normalising criticism in Malta.

Last year, you were embroiled in the controversy surrounding the Malta Literary Review. You were accused of being one of the people behind the website and that you were using anonymity to attack some of the established writers in the contemporary Maltese literary scene. Why did the MLR cause so much controversy?

I think the fuss that was made over it was because its reviews were anonymous. If someone is wearing a mask, then that person's an easy target. If something is anonymous, it's going to invite

hate, it's going to invite easy attacks. I believe critique shouldn't be anonymous. But then again, assuming the people behind the MLR feared ostracisation, I don't blame them for choosing anonymity.

One person on social media said the MLR's reviews were nothing more than graffiti or slogans on a bus stop. I think this person is rather clueless; as history shows us, graffiti is a very valid form of expression. It was highly significant for the US civil rights movement, for example. When the powers that be are ostracising you for simply having a voice, I think graffiti and anonymity are highly valid forms of expression.

Recently I became aware that one particular author secretly made edits to their work in line with the MLR's critique. But in public, they were one of the most vociferous voices against the publication; they wanted to shut it down. I think this excessive pride contributes to delusions of grandeur. Even Shakespeare wrote *Love's Labour's Lost* and it's a terrible play. The fact that we think that everything we write is golden, that it's a masterpiece, is not doing the writing or the reading any favours.

The MLR controversy didn't just lead to anonymous threats

against you, but it also led to the literary establishment attacking you and the people in your life on a personal level. How do you feel about that?

A particular public officer and young writer said that the literary sector in Malta suffers from the same issues that many other social structures in this country suffer from: nepotism, favouritism and back scratching. She said that some writers sell themselves to become successful. I think it was a fair comment, one we make on a daily basis about other sectors. She didn't mention any specific names or call out anyone in particular.

In 2021, Transparency International told public officers across the entire world that if the stakeholders for whom they work are suspect, they have an obligation to go public. So, you're encouraged to speak your truth and you're protected. In Malta, the opposite happened. PEN Malta, which according to its by-laws should protect young writers and should provide a space whereby they can elucidate their remarks, told this young writer that she should shut up, resign and apologise.

You see this a lot in Malta. In fact, before you're about to take on an institution, you're told by your loved ones to be careful. The opposite happens if you benefit from a rigged system or if you benefit from corruption. Your loved ones will likely tell you that you're doing right since everyone is doing this kind of thing. No wonder Malta's moral compass is so skewed, and no wonder we sometimes write, "M for mediocrity."

Because of PEN Malta's statement, young people are not encouraged to break the ceiling, they're not encouraged to stray from the path. The leadership of PEN Malta should resign based on that statement. Imagine the message they're sending to young people out there: They're essentially telling them to shut up and stay within the confines of the status quo, they're attempting to crush their spirit. It's a heinous remark because it's telling freethinking young people who are brave enough to tell their truth to be afraid. I think that is absolutely horrendous.