

June 17, 2009

The Little Professor: *The Testament of Gideon Mack*

James Robertson's *The Testament of Gideon Mack* is not a historical novel, precisely, but it is a novel haunted by the history of Scottish fiction. And, along those lines, it wonders how Scotland can tell its own story in a world that is, among other things, quite possibly deserted by God. The testament in question belongs to atheist minister Gideon Mack, who, we are told in the "editorial" frame narrative, has died under mysterious circumstances on [Ben Alder](#). During his tenure in (the imaginary rural village) Monimaskit, Mack became a fundraising celebrity of sorts. However, when he falls into the legendary Black Jaws while trying to rescue a fellow minister's dog, Mack encounters the Devil himself. (The devil turns out to be a sympathetic fellow, if somewhat touchy.) When, in a parody of a revival preacher's spiel, Mack insists on testifying to his experience, the Church of Scotland--not to mention everyone else--denounces him as, to say the least, not entirely sane. This testament before us, then, constitutes Mack's final confession before he departs for his rendezvous with the Devil on Ben Alder.

As a child, Gideon Mack reads and rereads the novels of Sir Walter Scott--the only fiction that his father, a clergyman, has allowed to remain in the manse. And while Scott would not necessarily recognize *The Testament of Gideon Mack* as a historical novel, *The Testament* is nevertheless preoccupied with historical transformation and loss in a way that is very much Scott. As the 60s and 70s take hold, Mack's father fades away along with the Church's power; symptomatically, he suffers his first stroke after he catches Gideon watching *Batman* on the Sabbath. Television and film turn out to herald a new and increasingly *global* age, defined above all by America's cultural exports, America's wars, and America's money. "The sixties was an American decade," Gideon muses; "the Americans might have gone home after the war, but they were back in these years, influencing the form of music, books, art, fashion, social attitudes" (51). The result is classic Scott: characters become all too aware that the old ways are dissipating under the pressure of historical change. To what extent, then, is it possible to bridge the gap between "now" and a lost "then"? To some characters, this new global era seems to dissipate all human emotion, all sense of purpose, even all sense of politics. John, one of the historians in the novel, complains that "[n]obody *feels*, nobody cares any more. There are no *causes* left. Even Scotland doesn't feel like a cause anybody's going to get angry about" (219). But John's pessimistic vision of a disenchanting world gone virtual, in which the cinema (220) supplants religion as the primary means of making personal meaning, does not hold sole sway over the novel. The arthritic (and marijuana-smoking) local historian Catherine Craigie proposes that the Mexican Day of the Dead might model a way for the living to commune with those who have gone. Despite being an atheist, Catherine wants to be buried with her family because her lost religion has nevertheless shaped her identity. Meanwhile, the newfangled William Winnyford, who produces

multimedia historical installations, argues that his work enables audiences to see "the world in which people live, bits of it that are always there but which they don't always pay attention to" (184). In this "multi-dimensional" (220) understanding of lived experience, there are moments that Winnyford calls "conjunctions," at which "space, time and narrative overlap" (185). For Winnyford, history always silently informs the present in unexpected and sometimes invisible ways; the gap between past and present remains, yet the past is simultaneously *of* the present as well. Depending on where we are in *The Testament of Gideon Mack*, any or all of these historical models may be in play.

The novel's unwillingness to "say what it means" on this subject suggests that it drifts along *with* modern Scotland, instead of regarding Scotland from some fixed point *outside*. It is not, in fact, clear where "outside" might be. According to the Devil, while both he and God used to have a "purpose," now they too are adrift: "Basically, I don't do anything any more. I despair, if you want the honest truth. I mean, the world doesn't need me. It's going to hell on a handcart, if you'll excuse the cliché, without any assistance from me" (295). While the Devil has stuck around, God has apparently "gone" (295). This is less a death-of-God thesis than a God-has-something-better-to-do-with-his-time thesis. God has apparently abandoned his creation to its own devices, leaving even the Devil to twiddle his thumbs aimlessly while he watches humanity implode. Given that this is the Prince of Lies who's speaking, the reader may wonder if we're to take the Devil straight, especially since he not only kept company with Gideon's father, but also may have been responsible for Gideon's college scholarship. Far from passively watching the Macks, the Devil appears to have been giving things a strategic nudge now and then. Moreover, it's worth noting that the Devil's thoughts *aren't* original to the Devil--his pessimistic view of an unmoored modernity lines up nicely with John's anger over lost "causes." And here is where Gideon's status as a wildly unreliable narrator comes in.

In and of themselves, unreliable narrators don't necessarily tell us anything interesting. Gideon's unreliability, however, goes straight to the novel's core questions: what story does modern Scotland *want* to tell about itself, and where will it find a model? By the time that the frame narrative is over, we have learned that a) Catherine Craigie has lied to Gideon; b) Gideon has lied about his affair with Elsie, to the point that nothing he says on the subject can be trusted at all; and c) Gideon's representation of William Winnyford is, at best, somewhat unfair. This calls everything else into question--like Gideon's encounter with the Devil. But for lack of a better word, Gideon's unreliability is *structured* by other fictions. The encounter with the Devil in the Black Jaws is partly inspired by a possibly faked bit of "traditional" lore (a fiction of a fiction inspiring a fiction in a work of fiction...). The narrative's sense of history, as I said, derives from Scott, as does the neo-Covenanter Peter MacMurray and even Gideon's own father (the "arms that reached almost to his knees" [51] echoes *Rob Roy*--James Mack comes up just a little short of Scott's hero). When he applies for the ministerial position at Monimaskit, Gideon's approach to the sermon

is inspired by Lewis Grassie Gibbon (135). His death on Ben Alder comes out of his fondness for R. L. Stevenson. And, of course, there's Gideon's rueful sense that he has failed to live up to his Biblical namesake. Implicitly or explicitly, Gideon's "testament" braids itself into other narratives; his unreliable voice in part ventriloquizes other, more "authoritative" speakers.

But Gideon never discusses the two most important influences on the testament. As [this interview with Robertson](#) notes, the novel's most obvious affiliations are with *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*; nevertheless, Gideon never mentions the former (odd, since he's so enamoured of Stevenson), and the "editor" claims that there's no sign that he had read the latter (also odd) (355). The reader can tick off the influences as she goes: unreliable narrator, hypocrisy, doubling, chain of textual transmission, Gideon's own initials/the Devil's name ("Gil Martin"), protagonist's decay from respectability to moral outcast, frame narrative (a crossover with Scott), and so on. Given Gideon's track record, it's possible that he suppresses his literary ancestors in order to establish his own narrative voice--a rejection of the past that, in good Gothic form, comes back to haunt the tale. Or, perhaps, Gideon's voice takes its form from novels that have entered the national consciousness--a forgotten past that nevertheless acts on the present. Or, within the world of the novel *as a novel*, literary ancestors themselves become "real"...

Ultimately, Gideon's great sin is to claim that he speaks the truth. After Catherine Craigie's unorthodox funeral, he assembles the mourners and tells "them everything that I have recorded here. I mean everything" (341). This moment of apparently perfect non-hypocrisy ignites a wild storm of speculation, anger, and disbelief; after all, who sees the Devil in twenty-first century Scotland? But the great difficulty, of course, is that "everything that I have recorded here" is unreliable--although, arguably, this problem no longer matters much by the end of the novel. In the end, what the novel captures is the end of a particular form of religious experience: meeting the Devil in twenty-first century Scotland no longer makes any sense, not even to those who actually *believe that the Devil exists* (e.g., Peter MacMurray [372]). Gideon's experience, whether or not he "really" had it, no longer makes sense *as experience*. It can only make sense as fiction. In that sense, Gideon winds up reclaimed by the novels that give shape to his voice.

Comments



As a James Hogg fan, this is one of my favorite novels, thanks so much for your review and reminding me I should reread it.

Posted by: Sharon | [June 17, 2009 at 11:06 PM](#)

FICTION

The Unbeliever

By Reviewed by Ron Charles
Sunday, April 8, 2007

THE TESTAMENT OF GIDEON MACK

By James Robertson (Viking. 387 pp. \$24.95)

Does He or doesn't He? Judging by the religion books on the bestseller list, Americans are up in arms about the existence of God: not so much a Great Awakening as a Great Arguing. It's become an article of faith that the United States is the most religious nation in the developed world, but *The God Delusion*, by atheist Richard Dawkins, is racking up heavenly sales. At the same time, we're fascinated by a 2nd-century Gnostic fragment that claims Judas was the best disciple and a book about two archaeologists who have found *The Jesus Family Tomb* (so much for the Ascension). Sam Harris has written *A Letter to a Christian Nation*, but Stephen Prothero says our *Religious Literacy* has gone to hell. It's as though the whole country -- or at least that part of it still buying books -- is crying, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

Into this anxious cultural moment, *The Testament of Gideon Mack* has arrived like an answer to some demonic prayer. James Robertson's provocative novel claims to present the memoir of a hardworking Presbyterian minister who never believed in God. It's a deeply unsettling story that will prick the faith of the devout, shake the confidence of atheists and haunt those of us who hover uneasily in-between.

Part of the novel's disruption of our sense of what's real and what's not is an introduction by "the editor" -- one of Robertson's clever poses -- who disavows any claims about the story's authenticity. It may be "outlandish enough to attract a cult readership," he speculates, or it may be "a genuine document with its own relevance for our times." He wouldn't presume to judge one way or the other, but he does mention the strange events that recently brought this story to public notice: Gideon Mack, the minister of a small Scottish village, fell into a gorge while trying to rescue a friend's dog. Although presumed dead, he was found alive three days later in what doctors and journalists termed "a miracle." He seemed in good health, but soon after the accident he announced that he had never believed in God, had slept with one of his parishioners and had been rescued from the gorge by the Devil. During the ecclesiastical trial that followed, he vanished, but his body was found many months later in the mountains, and the police recovered the "testament" that constitutes the bulk of this novel.

Gideon begins with a line from St. Paul that quickly slides into his own intense voice: "When I was a child I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: yet I was already, in so many ways, the man I would become. I think back on how cold I was, even then. It is hard to recall, now that I burn with this dry, feverish fire."

The son of a severe, Calvinist minister and a hollow, frightened mother, Gideon grew up in a dreary home divorced from time. While his schoolmates were "listening agog to *Sergeant Pepper*," he was reading "children's classics deemed suitable because they were at least half a century old and their authors dead." When his father catches him watching "Batman" (on the Sabbath!), he thunders, "You have betrayed me and you have betrayed God," and then promptly suffers a stroke right there in front of the TV.

His father survives, but that calamity pushes Gideon -- at the age of 12 -- to question and finally reject the stalking God who would set up such traps and punishments. "I didn't *want* that spooky figure hovering behind me and touching me whenever I tried to make a decision. I wanted to be left alone." But unable to declare his unbelief or leave the church, he develops "hypocrisy down to a fine art," and, in a tragic act of revenge, he follows his father into the ministry. "For nearly forty years," he writes, "I have let the world assume that I believed in God when I did not."

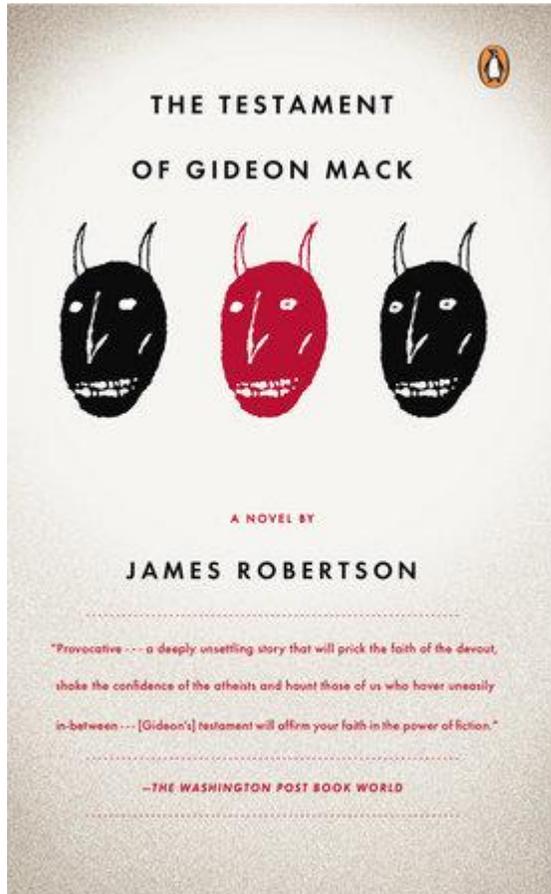
John Updike wrote about a Presbyterian minister who lost his faith in *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), but Updike never quite captured the sticky quality of belief. For his Rev. Wilmot "the sensation was distinct -- a visceral surrender, a set of dark sparkling bubbles escaping upward. . . . His thoughts had slipped with quicksilver momentum into the recognition that . . . there is no such God." Robertson is far more attentive to the prolonged and violent tension between faith and doubt in the mind of a person who once really believed. Gideon fancies himself an effective minister despite his secretly rationalist mindset. He's busy with charity work, handy with an inclusive sermon. But he never can find any peace or love.

And then his world is overturned by a supernatural intercession. You must meet Robertson's droll Devil. He's "suave and fit-looking" but also a little sad. "I used to have a purpose," he tells Gideon with a sigh. "We both had a purpose, God and me. Now? . . . My heart's not in it. Basically, I don't do anything any more. I despair, if you want the honest truth. I mean, the world doesn't need me." This is an arresting encounter, a wry addition to the line of stories that stretches from Jesus's temptation in the wilderness to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." Like God, the Devil never leaves anyone where he finds him, and Gideon returns to his church aflame with a truth he never preached before. What he now knows -- or thinks he knows -- forces everyone to consider the fragile foundation of what they believe.

There's devilry for sure in a story this disquieting. You won't find Robertson blessing the devout or the atheists. But before Gideon departs this world, his testament will affirm your faith in the power of fiction. ·

Ron Charles is a senior editor of Book World. © 2007 The Washington Post Company

READER'S GUIDE



The Testament of Gideon Mack

Written by: James Robertson

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

INTRODUCTION

The Testament of Gideon Mack

When Gideon Mack falls into a ravine while rescuing a fellow minister's dog, he begins a journey that will take him, figuratively and literally, out of this world. Swallowed up in the roaring rapids of the legendary Black Jaws, he is assumed dead by one and all, and when he is spit out three days later, somehow alive, the outrageous story he tells of how he survived is met with disbelief and derision. Gideon claims it was the Devil who saved him, that the Devil healed his broken leg, engaged him in personal and philosophical discussion, and stole his shoes.

Gideon Mack is a man riddled with paradox: a minister who does not believe in God but comes face-to-face with the Devil, a pillar of the community who is widely admired while living a lie but denounced as insane when he tells the truth, a man who has repressed his passions all his life but has an affair with his best friend's wife. In James Robertson's skillful hands, these paradoxes not only make Gideon a fascinatingly complex and continually surprising character but suggest the larger issues that underlie his story. *The Testament of Gideon Mack* takes a multifaceted look at how religious belief manifests in our particular historical and cultural moment. From Gideon's own coldly angry father, for whom the Bible is the only book worth reading, and the self-righteously puffed-up Peter Macmurray to the contemptuously agnostic Miss Craigie and Gideon's own brand of practical hypocrisy, the religious views expressed in the novel cover a wide spectrum. The Devil himself feels sorry for God, given the fickle nature of human faith and the horrors committed in his name. The novel also poses questions about the reliability of human perception and indeed about the nature of belief itself. People, the novel seems to suggest, believe what they want to believe. Gideon claims to find a standing stone on a path he has run for years. One day it is suddenly and inexplicably there. Or is it? No one else sees it, and when Gideon photographs it—using old film—it doesn't show up. But he touches it, embraces it, pounds his fist against it, and it is entirely real to him. But then so is the Devil. Readers must decide for themselves—Robertson is careful not to tip his hand—whether or not Gideon is lying or delusional or, if he is being truthful and accurate about his experience of the supernatural, what that implies about the nature of reality and the relationship of belief to perception.

But *The Testament of Gideon Mack* is much more than an epistemological investigation or a critique of religious belief. It is a fast-moving, beautifully written, often funny and always engaging story of one man's inner life and outer experience as he comes to know the truth of himself. Robertson artfully frames the narrative Gideon spent his final days writing with the skeptical voice of a publisher weighing the potential sales of a scandalous memoir against the likelihood of lawsuits. But what is at stake in the story itself—for “those who have eyes to see,” as Gideon writes—far surpasses mundane considerations of profit and loss.

ABOUT JAMES ROBERTSON

James Robertson is the author of two previous novels published in the UK, *The Fanatic* and *Joseph Knight*, which won the Scottish Book of the Year Award and the Saltire Prize. He lives in Angus, Scotland.

A CONVERSATION WITH JAMES ROBERTSON

Q. The Devil tells Gideon that he likes Scotland. “I like the miserable weather. I like the miserable people, the fatalism, the violence that’s always just below the surface. And I like the way you deal with religion. One century you’re up to your lugs in it, the next you’re trading the whole apparatus in for Sunday superstores.” How accurate a picture of Scotland is this?

A. It's certainly true that Scottish weather is often less than wonderful, although its sheer variety (all four seasons in the space of half a day, for example) can be exhilarating, and when sunshine breaks out we really appreciate it! Of course the Devil's sweeping statement is no more accurate than any other sweeping statement: yes, Scotland has its share of violence and misery, and Scottish people do very often have a fatalistic attitude to life—summed up in the well-worn proverb “What's for ye will no go by ye”—but there are plenty of happy, peaceful, go-getting Scots around too. The real point the Devil is making here is that in the last forty years or so

Scotland has gone from being an apparently very religious society to being an incredibly secular one. Forty years ago only a few corner shops opened on a Sunday. Most pubs, cinemas, and other places of entertainment—including play parks, where the swings and roundabouts were often chained up—remained firmly closed. Now, Sundays are pretty much like every other day of the week, church membership and attendance has fallen massively and so has the authority of ministers and priests and the respect in which these figures are held. The Devil obviously likes this new state of affairs. My interest in this change was to ask the question Does it matter? And if so, why? Does it mean that Scotland is less Scottish or a better or worse place? Gideon himself, although a minister in the Church of Scotland, is very ambivalent about what the answers to these questions are.

Q. Much of the novel forces readers to examine their beliefs about the supernatural. Does the stone Gideon finds really exist? Does he really meet the Devil?, etc. Do you pose these questions for purely literary purposes, do they reflect a deeper interest in the supernatural, or is it the very undecidedness of these issues that you wanted to communicate?

A. The questions are there because I think they are questions we should all ask ourselves. No matter how rational one is, it seems to me to be very hard to imagine oneself simply not existing. From this strange human characteristic—imagination—many of our ideas about religion and life after death—the supernatural—derive. But even if one accepts the idea that God and other supernatural entities and the worlds they inhabit are merely inventions of the human imagination, the question remains: *Why* have we needed to invent them? Even the most convinced atheist must try to understand his or her place in the universe. What relationship do we, as individuals, have with the rest of creation, and not just with the world in which we live, but with times past and future?

If they were purely literary devices, I think the appearance of the mysterious standing stone and the Devil would be hard to sustain; the reader would simply be bored, thinking, “This guy Robertson is just playing word games here, so why should I care?” By having Gideon recount these things in what is otherwise a largely credible narrative of his life and times, I suppose I’m testing the reader, asking him or her to decide at what point they draw the line and refuse to accept what Gideon is saying. Because it turns out that Gideon is not entirely reliable about other things. Who is telling the truth, for example, about his drinking—him or Bill Winnyford? Who is telling the truth about their affair—him or Elsie? In understanding what life is about, we all build up a story of our own existence, past and present, we all have our own version of events. This creates conflict and contradiction and undermines the very idea of truth. When it comes to these big issues, I suppose, rightly or wrongly, I am in a place where I know only one thing for a certainty, and that is that nothing is certain. Gideon is in that place too. It is a very human locale and a very awkward one for a minister of religion.

Q. Why did you decide to end the novel with Harry Caithness’s interviews with the characters who knew Gideon?

A. Partly this is because the structure of the book is modeled on a classic of Scottish literature, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, written by James Hogg and published in 1824. In that book, Hogg tells the story of a young man who is led to believe that no matter what he does, he will be all right

because he is one of God's elect, predestined to go to paradise when he dies. He is convinced of this by a mysterious person who befriends him, who might be the personification of the Devil, or might be his own doppelgänger, or might be a figment of his increasingly demented imagination. Under the influence of this malign being, he commits murder and other crimes, and eventually wanders off into the hills and takes his own life. Hogg presents this story in three parts: an editor's introduction, explaining the outline of the story, then the sinner's own narrative—his Confessions—and then the editor's epilogue, describing the circumstances that led to the discovery of the sinner's grave and the manuscript of his memoirs. There are all kinds of conflicts of evidence between the editor's version of events and the sinner's, and even within the sinner's own narrative. So *The Testament of Gideon Mack* is very closely modeled on the structure of Hogg's novel: an editor's introduction in which he describes how Gideon's manuscript was found in a remote part of the Scottish Highlands after the minister went missing for several months, and how his body was discovered in the hills, then Gideon's own Testament, which is really the story of his life and in particular his description of how he discovered the stone in the woods and subsequently met the Devil, and then the editor again, this time with a report sent to him by a journalist who goes to visit Monimaskit, Gideon's home town, to try to piece together the story and interrogate some of the key players. So the structure of my book is very like that of Hogg's, and in fact there are a few phrases lifted from Hogg that appear in the book, but I didn't want to be enslaved to Hogg's text. In a way, Gideon is the sinner in reverse. Gideon doesn't believe in God and wants to do good; then he has a crisis of what you might call *unfaith* and realizes that maybe there is another world beyond, or above, or below, or all around, the visible world. That's another Hogg connection: There are lots of references to the legends of Scottish folklore—fairies and the Devil and, through the stone, linking back to the legends surrounding ancient people like the Picts.

But over and above all that, the reason for ending the book with Harry Caithness's interviews is because they subvert the text that the reader has just finished reading. Not only do they cast doubts on the veracity of Gideon's Testament, but they demonstrate the unreliability of the other characters in the book. Even the down-to-earth hard-bitten journalist Harry turns out to be a bit soft-hearted, and also susceptible to "seeing things" when he looks into the Black Jaws. Can we even trust what Harry is telling us? Who can we trust? Judging from Gideon's story, we can't even trust the evidence of our own senses.

I think some readers may find this intensely frustrating. In a novel, all the loose ends are supposed to be tied up, everything resolved, everything explained. But reality isn't like that. I've been asked, "So, did he really meet the Devil? Was the stone really there? Who was telling the truth, Gideon or Elsie?" And the answer to all these questions, I'm sorry to have to admit, is "I don't know."

Q. The nature of belief as it plays out in the tensions between myth and truth, dishonesty and honesty, illusion and reality is one of the novel's central concerns. What is it about belief that interests you?

A. I guess from the answers to the previous questions you may have an idea why I'm interested in belief. It's something I've looked at in my previous novels and I'm sure it will continue to bother me. Belief rests on an assumption that one particular way of understanding or perceiving things is the only correct way. But everybody believes different things, and some of us believe nothing. Sometimes we actually need to believe something in order to survive. Other times it's essential to discredit belief, to demonstrate, as it were, that the

earth is not flat. Hope (to which belief is closely related) and skepticism are two of the greatest human virtues, but they are often mutually exclusive and humans are constantly caught between them.

Q. Did you do a lot of research for *The Testament of Gideon Mack*? Is Gideon based on a real person or purely an imagined character?

A. I researched the workings of the Church of Scotland fairly thoroughly, although I had a head start as that was the faith I grew up in. I'd now describe myself as an agnostic, but a Presbyterian one! Gideon is totally invented, but inevitably there are bits of me in him and bits of other people I have known in some of the other characters. I hope readers who know me can resist the temptation to identify my fictional characters as real living people. The whole point about writing fiction is to explore ideas through invention. Wherever characters in a novel originate, they invariably take on their own personalities and traits and end up like nobody except themselves.

Q. In what ways does your own experience show up in the novel? Did you grow up in a particularly religious environment?

A. I grew up in a middle-class household living opposite an old-fashioned manse in a village in central Scotland; this is not unlike Ochtermill, the village Gideon grows up in in the 1960s. The aged minister was of the evangelical school, but he was a kindly man and nothing remotely like the fierce, dour figure of Gideon's father. I now live in Angus in the northeast of Scotland, roughly where the town of Monimaskit is located. As a child, I went to church regularly and knew my Bible, but my family was not rigidly religious. However, the school I attended, between the ages of six and thirteen, was run on a very Presbyterian ethos, and I imbibed most of my religious faith there. The headmaster had some of the characteristics of Gideon's father. My faith didn't last long, however. By the time I was fourteen I don't think I seriously believed in God anymore, although I also suspect one never entirely shakes off that kind of indoctrination. What I still have, and greatly value, is the philosophical structure of that education and religious upbringing. In a sense, it was religion that gave me my skepticism and my fascination with the really big questions about human existence.

Q. Much has been written recently about the destructive role of religion, Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* and Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* being two prominent examples. What is your own view on the influence of religion today?

A. There's no question that religion has been enormously destructive. But it has also been hugely constructive. Look at the slave trade: Religion was used both to justify slavery and to condemn it. I know many people within the established churches and of no particular faith who are believers and also thoroughly good people whose belief results in their doing things that make the world a better place. Equally, I know there are hypocrites and maniacs whose religious convictions and resultant behavior are repulsive. Exactly the same is true of the many atheists and agnostics I know.

Religion does exert a huge and often unhealthy power over millions of people, many of whom respond to its demands hysterically and without due consideration. But the same has been true of nonreligious beliefs in the twentieth century, and no doubt will continue to be true in the twenty-first. It's not good enough to say that we should all have done with religion and forget it—unless or until we have found other ways of exploring essential philosophical and epistemological issues that address all the aspects of “life, death and the universe,” we will not be able to do without religion, or at least spirituality of some kind. Science and logic do not have all the answers. Nor can you simply abolish something that is responding to a deep-seated human need. The antireligious fascists who insist that all religion is bunk and must be eradicated are no better, and no cleverer in my estimation, than religious fundamentalists of whatever calling who insist that theirs is the only truth.

Q. The emotional power of Astrid and Veronika's friendship leaves a lasting impression with readers. They are from different generations and have led very different lives, yet the bond of being women seems to override all else. Do you agree? Do you think that women have different, or deeper, friendships than men? Could this book have been about two men? In what ways would it have been different?

A. I would like to think that it could just as well have been a story of two men. I have had many interesting responses from male readers, proving that they have reacted deeply and emotionally to the story. If it is true that women have more, and more intense friendships than men, then I think that is due to social roles and behaviors that have been imposed on us more than anything else. I think that more interesting than the gender issue, though, is that of age. In modern Western societies contact between the generations has diminished. There are a number of reasons for this, but sadly it is further encouraged by segregated living and age related categorization. Personally, I find it much easier to relate to young people now than I did when I was in my thirties or forties. Also, it has been a privilege for me to go back to university as a student and find that my fellow students in their early twenties have no issues with my age, while in many other parts of society I am foremost a woman of a certain age.

Q. What differences—if any—do you predict between the reactions of Scottish and American readers of your novel?

A. I suspect some of the subtler nuances of the book may not be picked up by American readers; there are some dry, sly jokes that perhaps will make Scottish readers laugh a little louder. On the other hand I think it is not hard to shift the location of the story from Scotland to somewhere like New England—some of the same virtues and vices of small communities are doubtless easily recognized. I hope that once people have found their way into the book, they are absorbed into the Scottish landscape and kind of forget that that's where they are. The issues the book deals with are not exclusive to Scotland, and the characters, communities, and institutions are not so very different from those in other societies.

Q. What writers have most influenced you?

A. There are numerous references in *Gideon Mack* to classic Scottish writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Sir Walter Scott, and James Hogg. All of these have been important to me. So has the poet Hugh MacDiarmid, not just for his poetry but also for his political and linguistic ideas. But I've been equally influenced, at

different times, by writers such as Flannery O'Connor, Raymond Carver, George Eliot, Emile Zola, Charles Dickens, John Buchan, Don DeLillo, and Flann O'Brien. I don't think I write like any of these writers, but I'm sure all of them have left their mark on me in some way.

Q. What other Scottish writers would you recommend to American readers?

A. Ali Smith is a wonderful writer of short stories whose third novel, *The Accidental*, is also well worth reading. She always has interesting things to say. A first novel by John Aberdein, *Amande's Bed*, set in the city of Aberdeen in the 1950s, is also a great read. Bernard MacLaverly, originally from Ireland but long resident in Scotland, writes superb short stories and novels. Others whose names should be better known in the USA than perhaps they are include Liz Lochhead, Brian McCabe, Dilys Rose, Susie Maguire, and James Kelman. And these are just a few of our contemporary writers; in the twentieth century we produced many great writers, from MacDiarmid to Muriel Spark. To select just two: probably our best known and most influential poet, Edwin Morgan, is now in his eighties but still producing wonderful work, and Robin Jenkins, who died a couple of years ago, left more than thirty novels behind him, simple and direct stories about ordinary people grappling with big moral dilemmas. Scottish literature used to be seen as a mere adjunct, a kind of minor footnote, to the glories of English literature. But increasingly it is being recognized as having a tradition and themes of its own, quite apart from the distinctive characteristics of the Gaelic and Scots languages, that make it quite unique and special. In my view literature is *the* jewel of Scottish culture, and there's plenty of it, past and present, for readers from elsewhere to explore and enjoy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Nancy Croy says, "When I think of all the novels I've read, I do wonder if it's been a sensible use of my time. Why would I fill my head with all those made-up stories if it wasn't to try and understand my own story? Every month my book group discusses a novel and its characters as if they were real people making real choices. Life is a story" (p. 220). Is Nancy right in thinking we read novels chiefly to understand our own stories? Why do we tend to talk about fictional characters as if they were real people? In what ways is life itself a story?
- In his introduction, the publisher Patrick Walker writes that Gideon Mack's story, "though some may dismiss it as a tissue of lies or the fantasy of a damaged mind, is a genuine document with its own relevance for our times" (pp. 3-4). What is its relevance for our times?
- How does the narrative frame of the novel affect the way we read it?
- Most of the people in the town believe that Gideon went mad during the three days he was lost in the Black Jaws and that his story about meeting the Devil is either a delusion or a lie. Why do they feel this way? Why is it impossible for anyone other than Gideon to believe that he actually met the Devil? What concrete evidence seems to support his story? Why do those who assert that God exists and the Devil is real consider anyone who claims to have seen either one to be insane?

- After many years of dishonesty in his religious life—playing the role of a minister while disbelieving in God—why does Gideon feel so compelled to tell the truth about his meeting with the Devil? How does the Devil affect Gideon’s ideas about salvation, redemption, and the afterlife?
- The Devil tells Gideon that he feels sorry for God, that when things are going well people forget about him. “They unchain the swings, turn the churches into casinos and mock anybody who still believes in him. He’s a very easy target. And who does he get left with? Fanatics and maniacs of every faith and every persuasion, who want to kill the heretics and blow themselves to pieces in his name” (p. 295). Discuss this argument about how religious belief manifests in our time. Do you find it convincing?
- In what senses is Gideon Mack’s story a “testament”?
- Gideon’s father, James Mack, asserts that “stupidity is rife in this world, and its wellspring is the United States of America” (p. 117). Why does he despise the United States so intensely? Is he right in suggesting that the pursuit of happiness leads to misery? Does it do so for characters in the novel?
- What is the symbolic or mythic significance of Gideon’s “subterranean journey” through the Black Jaws? In what ways does it change Gideon? Are these changes positive or negative?
- Gideon’s wife asks him, “Can you be dishonest in one part of your life but not another?” (p. 155). In what ways does Gideon’s dishonesty about his faith affect the rest of his life? What ironies are involved in the fact that it is Gideon’s honesty about his meeting with the Devil that makes everyone think he’s gone insane?
- Gideon learns early on, from his strict religious upbringing and his parents’ example, that passions should be muzzled. How does this emotional repression affect the rest of his life?
- Gideon says he knew that the stone “was a sign” but that he’d had “no idea what it meant” (p. 341). What does the stone signify? How does it change Gideon’s life?
- What makes Catherine Craigie such an admirably eccentric character? Why is she so likable in spite of her abrasive manner?
- What does *The Testament of Gideon Mack* as a whole suggest about the role of religion in our lives? What different views of religion do Gideon, Gideon’s father, Peter MacMurray, Lorna Sprott, John Moffat, Catherine Craigie, and the Devil express? Does the novel seem to endorse one of these views over the others?

James Robertson: *The Testament Of Gideon Mack*

By Donna Bowman

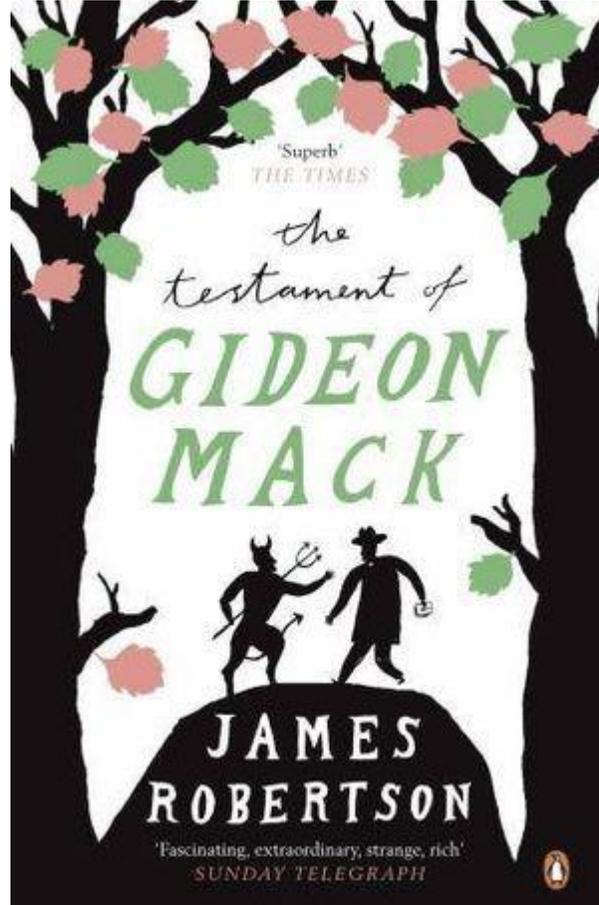
A ratty pair of sneakers is the only physical evidence of the weekend Gideon Mack says he spent at the gates of Hell. The editor who tries to confirm his memoir's details is left with frustrating inconsistencies. But this purported autobiography of a rebellious preacher's kid, faithless minister, and finally confirmed heretic offers a rich narrative spiced with existential angst. In his meditation on devotion to an absentee God, Scottish novelist James Robertson passes on didacticism and dogma, treating his readers to a compulsively readable and sometimes profound story of unrequited love.

Mack speaks from beyond the grave in this manuscript written in the hours before he sets off for his second meeting with the devil—a journey that, according to the preface, ended with his dead body rotting on a hillside. His tale begins with upbringing in the manse (the home provided for ministers in the Scottish Church) with his spare-the-rod father and ineffectual mother. Gideon spitefully plans to crush his father's dreams that his son will follow him into the ministry, only to decide after college that becoming an atheist pastor is too sweet a revenge to pass up. When his wife is killed in a car accident, he begins to lose confidence in his own apostasy and even dallies with his best friend's wife before falling into a chasm on the rocky coast—where, instead of dying from his injuries, he spends three days with a mysterious man who claims to be the devil. Mack emerges determined to be honest about his newfound (albeit topsy-turvy) belief in the supernatural, but instead succeeds in alienating every friend he has left, while pining fitfully for the intimacy he achieved with the hellish trickster in that sandy cave.

Robertson writes with a directness and bleak fatalism appropriate to the harsh Calvinist milieu of the Scottish Kirk. And his protagonist Mack relates his life—familiar Freudian hang-ups and unlikely demonic adventures alike—with a kind of regretful hope. By recovering his motivations and tracing his convoluted changes of heart, Mack tries to leave behind an apology for his life that will humanize him in the eyes of those who have only ever seen his collar or his disgrace. To this confession, Robertson adds the whimsical, postmodern touch of editorial commentary that neither confirms nor disproves his story, but gives it a shifting foothold on pragmatic Scottish soil, somewhere north of hell's outer circles. Mack's journey through the haunted void of his religion isn't necessarily inspiring, but its honesty and strength make it a tonic nonetheless.

Book Review: “The Testament of Gideon Mack” by James Robertson

I read this book because it has wound up in [the canon of Scottish Literature for schools](#)



The Testament of Gideon Mack (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

and I had never heard of it. This is because it was published in 2006 when I had three children under five and no brain for it. It was Sophie Kinsella or nothing back then.

So, [“The Testament of Gideon Mack”](#)...

Plot: An atheist [Church of Scotland Minister](#), Gideon Mack, sees a standing stone that appears to have appeared out of nowhere. He commits adultery with his best friend’s wife after his own wife’s death. He goes for a walk with another friend whose dog needs rescued and in the course of rescuing it he falls down a ravine. He wakes up three days later in hospital and when he sees his shoes he remembers that they were given to him by the devil during a three-day spell in his underground lair. He recovers sufficiently to conduct a funeral for a parishioner based on the

Mexican Day of the Dead and gets banned from preaching. He makes plans to rendezvous with the [Devil](#) and is found dead.

Structure: This is a text within a text. A freelance journalist is wondering what to do with it or make of it and presents it in that light. So, from the start we know that he is found dead and that people had thought he had gone mad. The bare bones of the narrative are no mystery from the outset. Gideon narrates most of it and we believe him as he writes, but in the epilogue, inconsistencies are found which concern various matters of fact – so he, with hindsight, was an unreliable narrator – making the reader sigh and think that they'll have to probably read it again some day... but not making them terribly motivated to actually do that.

Character: Gideon Mack likes to think of himself as honest – but he isn't. He would always have rather married his friend's wife. He goes into the ministry fully aware of his own hypocrisy. He likes to run for a variety of reasons and it is this hobby that leads him to the standing stone that first unsettles him. He was brought up in a manse in a loveless family. I don't know if I liked him or not. He was hard to root for. I think the only likeable character was his wife Jenny – as she was straightforward and honest – but she wasn't fully developed.

Setting: The events described take place over a lifetime and charted the decline of the [Church of Scotland](#) and described changes in Scottish society over the last five or so decades. Real events globally were alluded to, anchoring the text in reality. Gideon's parish is a seaside town, with places to run and a ravine to fall down.

Main ideas: The book is about faith and who believes what and why. Gideon starts off an atheist and ends up an agnostic with a firm belief in the Devil. But, he's more than likely insane.

I think the writer wants to look at the role of religion in society. The event portrayed most positively was the funeral of an agnostic lady in the town. She did a kind of postmodern DIY funeral with global influences and a humanist thrust.

It was like the baby and the bathwater thing. She couldn't believe in God for sure and so had withdrawn from religion – but to her religion was an important part of her culture and her personal history and her identity – in human terms, so she wanted to be a part of it in death. She threw the baby out with the bathwater, but wished she could have kept the bathwater, as it were.

Other themes... families, father/son relationship, love, honesty, insanity, truth and experience.

Symbolism:

The [Standing Stone](#) – it is something unexplained and unprovable that Gideon absolutely believes in. It confronts him with its tangible reality, but he cannot record it by photography for anyone or bring anyone to see it. In the epilogue, Elsie claims to have seen it, but then she lapses into uncertainty. I

think the standing stone symbolizes mystery – anything that can be believed in, but cannot be proved. Also the standing stone may represent pre-Christian religion – other faith, more ancient faith – faith that has been left behind, just like belief in fairies in the book described below. There is the link of the physical things of religion and the way that has interplay with human history and identity.

Three days with the Devil – there has to be a parallel “he descended into Hell” – and spends three days wrestling with the devil and discussing the nature of God and faith. Like Jonah in the whale or like Jesus in the tomb. Then, after being presumed dead, he has his ‘resurrection’ and wakes up in hospital. He gave his life, effectively while rescuing the dog.

A book about fairies – there is a book that was given to his father, written by a theologian about fairies, from the standpoint of faith. As a young man, Gideon asks to read it, but he is not allowed. Near the end of his life, the book turns up in his own study. Apparently it had been given to his father by the Devil. It was signed “GM” – for [Gil Martin](#). This is a reference to the character symbolizing Satan in James Hogg’s novel “The Memoirs and [Confessions of A Justified Sinner](#)” – a novel which I have heard of... but hadn’t read. It has a similar idea and structure to this ‘testament’. So the book about fairies I think is meant to show the naivety of theism, ironically making intertextual reference to show the fictional reality of the Devil.

So.... What do I think of it?

Well, I felt under represented in it. Not a single straightforward theist amongst them. The one chap I sympathized with for a page or so turned out to be horrid and just as hypocritical as Gideon, if not more so.

I think the novel suffered because it was so unlikely that Gideon would have become a minister, against the backdrop of his own upbringing – so it didn’t ring true.

I think the novel was effective in describing the changes in [Scottish culture](#) and by presenting a largely accurate portrait of Scotland’s (and maybe the world’s) increasing doubt and uncertainty about all things.

In the end, the book didn’t really do it for me. I wasn’t left wondering whether or not the stone was real or the interview with the Devil was real. He was clearly insane... and that explained everything. I’d rather not have had the option to think that. Although maybe that was Elsie sort of seeing the stone. Hmm...

10 thoughts on “Book Review: “The Testament of Gideon Mack” by James Robertson”



1. [Anna Belfrage](#) on [February 19, 2013 at 9:18 pm](#) said:

Interesting to read that there is a canon of Scottish literature for schools – that in itself bodes well, even if, judging from the above, you weren't too taken by the book as such. In general, don't you think there's a tendency in our neck of the wood (Europe) to sort of snigger at people who state they have faith? I would say that at times not being an atheist is somewhat of a drawback – it's as if professing faith = to being a superstitious fool with no grounding in reality. I'm sorry; I'm VERY grounded – and a theist. Contradiction? Not in my book! Liked the review, and I agree that there is a major flaw in Gideon ever becoming a minister. It sort of kills the rest ...

[Reply ↓](#)



- [sanstorm](#) on [February 19, 2013 at 10:44 pm](#) said:

Thanks for the comment.

Very odd book. Full of interest, but not altogether appealing.

[Reply ↓](#)



2. [laurieanichols](#) on [February 19, 2013 at 11:17 pm](#) said:

What an odd minister. I'd be curious about how real the conversation with the devil actually was; odd that he turns agnostic yet has faith in the devil. I really like your review, I feel as if I got to read the important parts.

[Reply ↓](#)



- [sanstorm](#) on [February 20, 2013 at 9:14 am](#) said:

It reminded me of “Meet Joe Black”, if you've seen that?

The devil was quite like Joe Black.

[Reply ↓](#)



- [laurieanichols](#) on [February 20, 2013 at 12:25 pm](#) said:

If the devil looks like Brad Pitt, that can't be so bad. lol I saw it and I liked it. Interesting.

3. Pingback: [You're being watched: new in bookstores | Call of the Siren](#)
4. Pingback: [Book Review: The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner by James Hogg](#)

[Wee Scoops](#)

5. Pingback: [Sailing close to the wind](#) Wee Scoops



6. [sackerson](#) on [August 5, 2014 at 10:32 pm](#) said:

I'm commenting on this so late because I've just read the book myself! I remember a minister (one who did believe) once telling me "we have an unspoken agreement, the congregation and I. I don't ask them what they believe and they don't ask me." I was repeatedly reminded of this while reading GM. I have to say I don't find the idea of a doubter becoming a minister that surprising – a view shared (when she reflected on it) by GM's fictional friend, the retired teacher, Catherine Craigie.

As for straightforward theists, Lerna Sprout was one such. I felt. She might be a bit of a twerp, but then -theist or otherwise- aren't we all?

[Reply ↓](#)



- [sanstorm](#) on [August 6, 2014 at 1:47 pm](#) said:

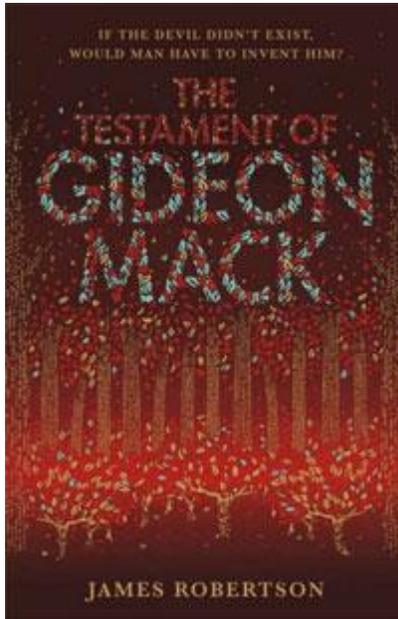
Thanks for the comment – it's all a bit hazy – but I do remember distinctly not relating to the Sprout character. Although, granted, I was more represented in this novel than in Robertson's other novel "And the Land Lay Still". Of course, if I ever got around to writing my own novel, I could totally be represented to my heart's content... so I can't really complain...

The Testament of Gideon Mack by James Robertson

BY ROBERT R. CALDER

16 January 2007

Moral ambition



THE TESTAMENT OF GIDEON MACK

JAMES ROBERTSON

(HAMISH HAMILTON)

James Robertson's third novel is his first set exclusively within times he has himself lived through. Since I lived through them too and in the same places, maybe it's because they're so familiar (I'd testify also to accurate) that I find the scene-setting chronicle material of earlier chapters rather drawn out. Regardless of that: for the book's sake, it's worth saying that everything, including the writing, gets better as it goes.

The central narrative is the supposed autobiography of the Reverend Gideon Mack. Mack's early artless worthy prose is much like that of the prologue's fictional author, a fictitious publisher who says he's putting Mack's memoirs before the public because they're important. Given the current confederacy of academic aesthetic formalism and intellectual dumbing-down in the Scottish literary milieu, it's refreshing to encounter claims to importance beyond a work's being "a good read."

The name of the author of the prologue is Patrick Walker, and circa 1730 an earlier Patrick Walker (fl. c.1666-1745) published what's been called a *Lives of Presbyterian Saints*: narratives and documents of legalistic-minded Protestant divines given to doctrinal hair-splitting like that of the German puritan pedant who vanishes up a chimney (and good riddance!) in Stefan Heym's novel *The Wandering Jew*. Heym was trying to dramatize a postwar German liberal humanism of a sort Thomas Mann willed. Robertson seems dissatisfied with that sort of thing, like Peter Shaffer in *Equus*, or in Scotland, at a deeper intellectual level, the philosopher Adam Ferguson.

If Robertson's or Mack's early wordiness maybe follows Sir Walter Scott, without that literary charm of the virtuoso Scott's prose has, the novel's core deliberately parallels the undoubted masterpiece of Scott's contemporary James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. It too was the fictional autobiography of a soul in a unique religious predicament, but Robertson doesn't come near to matching Hogg's concision except after the efforts at contemporary chronicling, in the imaginative sections of the book, or where the events are farthest from anything most people would like to have lived through.

Also, where the events of Hogg's novel dated to the early 18th century, about a hundred years before the book was completed, Robertson's reference is more recent; and he wants to ground the strange tale in his book, and presumably establish its relevance, with a lot of recent historical chronicling. The chronicling is I think overdone, the landmarks specifying dates and political events seem even to connive at a pact with Scottish readers, not merely in knowing what happened when, but in the assumption of a consensus of interpretation. Since some of the more public statements of current Scottish academic critics show signs of having taken in others' washing without noticing that it isn't clean, the consensus aspect isn't beyond being questioned.

How far is there an over-reliance on the familiarity of readers in other respects too? I've read Hogg's masterpiece a few times and it's clear that in the prologue and the fictional autobiography Mack's final days are set out as parallel to those of Hogg's damned protagonist. This could be Hoggian, in fact I think it is: the issue is not of postmodernist intertextuality, but of the relations of each text to an actual reality. This book is intended to be about something, it's not sheerly a play of language. So I do also recall press reports of human remains being found on Scottish mountains, bones of one walker whose status as missing hadn't been duly recognized round the time of his accident; and bones of one suicide. Mack had been in the news, and then he was out of the news, a general theme of the still recent and very distinguished *The Missing* of another Scot, Andrew O'Hagan. There was a possibility that becoming apparently no longer newsworthy Mack might have disappeared (like, died). It was amazing that he had left a bigger story, meaning not just the autobiographical memoir that turned up.

Gideon Mack, whose memoir glosses his forename's biblical reference, was the late-born son of a Protestant clergyman on the model of the earlier Walker's heroes. Mack Sr. wasn't an archaism but a minority case. There were some but not many clergy in the Church of Scotland (to which Mack Sr. belongs, rather than the fissiparous so-called Free Kirk, which split after one very prominent member—Lord Chancellor of the United Kingdom—in line with duties of his post, likely not against personal inclinations, attended a Roman Catholic funeral).

Mack Sr. was a special case, and this raises problems in respect of Robertson's apparent desire to offer the chronicle section of Mack Jr.'s fictional autobiography as a conspectus of Scottish spiritual history during the 20th century. The result would be caricature anyway, if Robertson hadn't fallen into bad habits which amounted to de-characterization of at least Daddy Mack. Who is for too long and too wholly a stock caricature. He emerges only later as an individual, after Gideon has come home with his fiancée. It's probably fair enough that Gideon's mother in widowhood reflects that her joyless marriage was no more and no less than she expected, or would have asked for, but there are predictables, and a telescoping of history amounting to distortion. Of course some of that would be covered by that fact that it is after all Gideon who's speaking, or writing. It's still a bit much, and would Gideon really put in all those pointers to recent history? Perhaps?

The immediate occasion of interest in Gideon is his having followed his father into the ministry of the Church of Scotland, after a period as a student in Edinburgh, which might have been expected, would have ruled that out.

Before university, the schoolboy Gideon had read widely and deeply his father's prescribed canon, making use of public library facilities which seem already to have become history. Once polymathic liberal clergy did good work on municipal library committees, and now old men are pleased at their command of the Internet among schoolboys and newer and fewer books.

Four years at university and Gideon has a degree in English Literature, secured atheist convictions—theological doctrines seem to him so much mumbo jumbo—and thoughts of a teaching career. His father would have liked him to follow him into the church, and now that Robertson's into the proper business of characterization the reader can speculate about Gideon's other motives. Or perhaps Robertson has known clergy of Gideon's generation whose views were like Gideon's: who could equally have supposed they could function perfectly efficiently as clergy, win money for charity by running sponsored marathons, as well as perform the social work and therapeutic work of the post: reciting orthodoxies as a matter of course.

However reliable or otherwise Gideon might be as a narrator, as in the early caricatures of his father and perhaps of his dealings with his father, not all statements he makes are on his own cognizance. Besides what he says of his domestic life, there's enough in the novel to

verify statements about his public performance as a liberal clergyman. Only a pedantic doctrinaire traditionalist official of his church is critical, in contexts the Scottish churchman Ian Henderson called 'coronary-producing'. Why's this ecclesiastical conservative called Peter Macmurray? Saint Peter? Peter Macmurray is however miles away from the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray. The name of the village whose pastor Gideon was, before and during the strange events at the novel's heart, isn't implausible. There's an actual Monymusk, for whose ancient etymology cf. placename scholarship. Monymusk can be rendered in a standard English or American dialect as many-masked.

As for Gideon's private life, did his fiancée really declare that she would support him as a minister's wife, and fully aware of his actual convictions? More at issue if his account of a period of marital tension (the grass-widowhood of the wife whose husband runs marathons for charity) and its resolution. Perhaps it's self-deception? True or not, that story capably underlines Gideon's self-engrossment. His report of his wife's death in a car crash is public, checkable; that of a single reactive adultery with her best friend isn't. The consequent apparent revelation that he'd married his wife as second-best to this woman has struck a couple of reviewers as some sign of falseness or inauthenticity (ouch!) in Gideon, but if you're 20 and haven't yet realized you love the girl and she accepts your best friend's proposal of marriage? It's probably more to the point that Gideon wasn't essentially duplicitous. This is the bit of the novel where everything's functioning well, and it makes more sense to see Gideon as a 'poor image of us all'.

The novel's funny business (not comedy, Gideon's memoir has no comedy) begins with Gideon's apparent discovery of a prehistoric monolith where nobody had ever seen one before: not exactly in a forest, but not where it seems at all likely to have been missed, especially by the author of the comprehensive scholarly guide to such old stones in the neighborhood, a retired local schoolmarm.

She has the sort of reputation half-wits foster regarding local people who're a bit different: intellectuals, perhaps. Gideon visits her, and finds her not at all the walking stereotype. Not just because she's crippled by arthritis and thus unable to go see, or not see, the mysterious stone for herself. And she's not the militant atheist of local legend suggests, she just rejects official church religion. She has traveled, and literate in anthropology she probably she has more feeling for religion than Gideon. He has a certain half-educatedness not at all uncommon.

The nearest we get to satire is the account of a conceptual artist who has been commissioned to concoct a pageant of the neighborhood's history and prehistory. What's to be made of Gideon's assertion that the novel's Wise Woman—the more intelligent stereotype to which the crippled ex-teacher conforms—would have nothing to do with that artist, and the artist's claim reported in the postlude that she'd in fact helped him a lot with his trendy project?

Fairly accurate, hardly overdrawn, out with the experience of some reviewers, is Lorna Sprott, dog-loving young lady pastor of an adjacent parish, She has no notion that Gideon doesn't share her simple evangelical convictions, until pretty well the end of Gideon's tale. Very sympathetic following his wife's death, Lorna seems quite genuinely innocent in no more than hoping that maybe the Lord could bless her by eventually making her Lorna Mack. Strolling with Lorna, Gideon the widower has his big physical adventure. Lorna has seen her dog disappear down the side of a gully through which a smoky cataract rushes. The cataract funnels into a pothole of a nasty sort which like other geographical features keeps the Devil on the map of Scotland. At great personal risk, not a bad chap really. Gideon goes down after the beast, rescues it, and then falls from sight.

Three days later his body is found in the pool into which the waters of the cataract debouch on the far side of the rock-mass from the pothole. He's alive but not well, and beside the three days' Jesus' allusion his mysterious leg wound and limp might suggest Jacob's wrestling with the angel at Peniel. Robertson has apparently a healthy interest in reinterpreting such old stories.

The book pivots around Gideon's spiritual adventure, recovered from what people had tended to think had killed him—deliberately or otherwise, the novel underplays the fair prospect that a young fit man with a history of endurance trials, running marathons, might have survived three days' exposure: been swept into a cave, crawled out of a slowed stream, and finally lowered himself back into the current, with a faint hope of being carried out as the alternative to trapped shivering and certain death. When Gideon has an account of what happened during these three apparently lost days, the question is whether he has a memory of very strange events, or falls into a fabulization which by going beyond the precise physical details of what happened nonetheless includes all his experience of that time as no other account would seem to.

Since blurb and other material mention an encounter with the Devil, it gives little away to speak of his being rescued, kept warm, and informed by dialogue with such a being, and by other experience, of a spiritual reality beyond what he suspected. Gideon's Devil has parallels in the Mephistopheles of Valery's *Mon Faust*, and indeed the Peter Cook-Dudley Moore film *Bedazzled*, the latter perhaps with some inspiration from a discussion within the Church of England at the time, and much ridiculed, about whether to continue talking about *him*. Not shy of allusions, Robertson elaborates his novel's devilology by identifying him of Gideon's acquaintance with the Gil-Martin of Hogg's masterpiece. The same being apparently presented Gideon's father, whom he had known in the past, with the copy Gideon found in his father's library, and retained, of the account of account of native Scottish supernatural creatures, published by Robert Kirk's some centuries back, a work sometimes claimed not only authoritative but written on a basis of personal encounter: the end of Kirk's earthly life has been said to be unknown. He was taken away by the people he had written about.

How far is Robertson in command of his complex material? Is it worth trying to work that out? The material in question isn't simply the supernatural material, but also the characterization of individuals and of Monymaskit and indeed the publisher Robert Walker, in a book which definitely does come into focus in other respects the more it moves from the initial chronicle into degrees of fantasy. The funeral of the Wise Woman (as Robertson doesn't call her, although the archetype's blatant) really strikes a discordant note in relation to the earlier chronicling. I prefer the funeral. Gideon's public confession? The journalist who is Patrick Walker the publisher's research assistant, and his revelations or at least reports of claims challenging Gideon's testimony as regards indeed earthy events?

This novel's ambitions rendered inevitable various faults and excesses. Yet, as Andrew O'Hagan has been wont to ask at readings, how much does anybody remember getting from polished flawless works of literary art? Something of Samson, maybe, in the outcast Gideon at the end being long-haired (like all other Monymaskit bodies the village barber shuns him)? Forget that, this novel winds up having been overambitious in a good way.

[Editor's note: This review refers to the UK edition of this book, released November 2006.]

Read more: <http://www.popmatters.com/review/the-testament-of-gideon-mack-by-james-robertson/#ixzz4J0749nZC>

Posted by [David Wood](#) Thursday, December 11, 2014

The Testament of Gideon Mack by James Robertson

The Testament of Gideon Mack by James Robertson has a single unambiguous theme: doubt. That is the only unambiguous feature of the book. Robertson manages masterfully to question every aspect of his own story until one is forced to question nearly everything. Upon finishing the book, I was almost certain that I had, in fact, read it.

The book's notional plot describes the fantastic story of the eponymous Gideon Mack, a Presbyterian minister in a small Scottish seaside village, and his encounter with the Devil. At least, it might have been the Devil. Mack thought so. Sometimes. He might have just been insane. Many of the signs were there, from the fantasies of his loveless childhood to his literal howling at the base of a standing stone that might, or might not, have been imagined. Mack wrote his testament and it supposedly made its way to a publisher who doubted whether he should publish it. The publisher's notes frame Mack's version and supply both context and, following Mack's death, a conclusion of a sort. In a nice twist in the endnotes, the supposed publisher assures us that each sale of *The Testament of Gideon Mack* will benefit an aged care home in the fictional town described in the story. Robertson leaves us little choice but to doubt his word from beginning to end. This is fiction that will demand that you think.

Mack himself is a classic anti-hero, a characterization that Robertson uses in a footnote to describe another author's character. Robertson draws on many literary references. His characters read, and are influenced by, novels and histories both real and fictional. The author himself holds a Ph.D. in history from [Edinburgh University](#); His dissertation on the works of [Sir Walter Scott](#), a fellow Scotsman and author of such famous early nineteenth century works as [Ivanhoe](#), echoes in *The Testament*. The women in Mack's life, Jenny the unloved and now deceased wife, Elsie the lover, and diseased Catherine the disputant, find their archetypes in nineteenth century English and French literature such as Gustave Flaubert's [Madame Bovary](#) and Lord Byron's [Don Juan](#).

The real publisher, [Hamish Hamilton](#) in Scotland, part of [Penguin Books](#), assures us in a standard disclaimer, "This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental." I would personally be saddened to think that our playful Dr. Robertson did not sneak in an intentional resemblance to a living person or two, just to carry his device to its logical conclusion.

Robertson authored two novels prior to *The Testament* and has authored two since. Hamish Hamilton is [publishing](#) a new short story by Robertson every day of 2014, each one 365 words long. None of the dozen or so I read included Robertson's broad Scottish vernacular. *The Testament* relies upon it. Having a copy of the Oxford English Dictionary handy is critical for American readers and others who are unfamiliar with the meanings of *hunkers*, *boaks*, or a *smirr* of rain. He is forced to explain commonly used words such as *kirk* (church) and *manse* (minister's house). Where the Scots Gaelic becomes too thick, Robertson helpfully supplies footnotes from his fictional publisher. The scene feels Scottish, from the persistent rain and angry young men to the shale beaches and craggy topology. The result is a novel that is fresh and genuine in its love of setting.

Robertson is also a partner in the grant-funded Scots language children's publisher [Itchy Coo](#). Itchy Coo's Web site proudly offers a *Hame* page and an *About Us* description. A character in *The Testament* amusingly pokes fun at authors who try to set Scots down in print. In fact, *The Testament* fairly brims with jibes at authors. One character is a perennially unpublished novelist. Another complains that

"everybody thinks they have a novel in them" before declaring that writing is "a refuge from confusion". The process of writing does facilitate a certain clarity of thought, in my experience, if only because one must decide what to say.

Robertson holds out much hope for the written word, as if warding off a merely spoken evil. Mack laments the premature telling of his story by saying, "if people could have read this full and honest account rather than heard me announce it amid the din and confusion of that day, then perhaps they might have reacted with more open minds." At least three of his characters are writers.

The core of the book, though, is our relationship to truth. What is it? Can we know it? Would we understand it if it were presented to us? Why do people believe as they do? What are the costs of their beliefs? *The Testament* asks the big questions, explores them from many angles, and leaves you to answer them as you see fit. Robertson explores truth from many angles, including the ability to trust "facts" as they are presented, asks what we can truly perceive, informs on the limitations of human thought, wonders about the wisdom of teaching fairy stories to children, and worries about passions left uncontrolled.

Mack's justification for writing his testament is repeatedly referred to as a drive toward truth. But the absolute truth can be amazingly harmful to a community, as Robertson explores. Mack is shunned by everyone by the end of his truncated life for his effort. Robertson's story does not lend credence to Sam Harris' more recent thesis that we should all just tell the unabashed truth at all times (in *Lying*).

Naturally enough for a book set in Scotland, the central pole around which the book swings in its discussion of truth is religion, and its antipode, doubt of religion. "What is religion if not a kind of madness, and what is madness without a touch of religion?" Robertson asks.

We are told, "Human beings are at one and the same time utterly splendid and utterly insignificant." Could there be a more succinct description of the confusion of our times? Our Western civilization has advanced from an ego-centrism under the sky of the only world to one in which we are simultaneously the only intelligent life form we know and yet a mere speck in the vastness of an impossibly large universe.

Robertson plays on our confusion from all angles. He gives us the character of Peter Macmurray, elder of the church and Mack's institutional nemesis, who represents the authority of religious institutions, and the character of Lorna Sprott, a fellow minister who is both a true believer and a sad alcoholic crushed under the authority to which she has submitted herself.

Robertson's tight writing shines in his description of Macmurray: "By day he is an accountant and by night, as Jenny used to say, he adds the saved and subtracts the damned, and always comes out with a minus figure."

Robertson deeply questions the role of the Church of Scotland and its relationship with Scottish culture. The nasty element of control in Western religions does not escape Robertson's notice. He has Mack speak of "the overwhelming weight that bears down on most people who enter a church - the weight of years of learning not to disrupt, not to object, not to speak out against authority." At one point he declares that, "The great age of religion had passed", only to suggest that the Kirk could still have a role in society. It is this Gaelic sensitivity to culture and identity that makes *The Testament* a wonderfully human book. Robertson recognizes and acknowledges non-traditional roles for traditional institutions but can only hope that they will come to see the world in the doubting way that he does. To not is tantamount to denying our recently-won knowledge and risks living with a permanently entrenched cognitive dissonance. Such dissonance is clearly evident in America's science-denying evangelicalism. Robertson informs us that the same stresses exist within other societies.

Lest one consider Robertson's religious beliefs clearly defined, he dithers. His characters are true believers, agnostics, fakers, atheists, vacillators. Elsie's husband John exclaims, "There are no answers, don't you see?", but John is a troubled and desperately unhappy man. He has not replaced religion with a working philosophy that might, as Aristotle suggested, provide him a replacement comfort. Robertson subtly pokes at the religious who express belief in the Devil while steadfastly finding Mack's claims to have met him utterly ridiculous. "The whole religion thing - not being able to reject it and not being able to embrace it", as Elsie says, seems to come closest to his position.

"The present", Robertson says, "was a mere waiting room for the future." That lovely observation is the exact opposite of the mindfulness of the present encouraged by Buddhism. It is also perhaps an unintended or unwanted consequence of our society's current affair with invention and discovery. The scientist or the engineer works toward a future in which the *Eureka* moment will happen. The teenager waits for the new model mobile phone. The salaryman waits for retirement. We are a society of delayed gratification. Those who defer gratification until after death are religion's real losers.

There are many minor recurring themes in *The Testament*. Perhaps the most central to the book's exploration of truth is the tendency of people to see intelligent action where it is not. This is known to psychologists as hyperactive agency detection. If I suppose a tiger is responsible for the rustling of leaves I just heard and I am right, I might save my life by running away. If I am wrong, little harm is done. This instinctive survival trait causes no end of confusion for the modern person, living as we do with the distinct absence of tigers.

Gideon Mack's life is dominated by hyperactive agency detection. Upon seeing a bee fly out of a drawer, Mack "wondered if there was a message in it; any kind of meaning at all." When confronted with the appearance of the standing stone, he noted:

- "It seemed to me that the Stone had provoked this crisis, had engineered it in some way."
- "Because the Stone prevented it."
- "Perhaps the Stone was wielding some strange power over events and had brought her to my door at this moment."
- "The Stone did not want to be photographed. I no longer wished to share the Stone with anybody."

The last, of course, makes one immediately think of J.R.R. Tolkien's characters Bilbo and Frodo Baggins and the One Ring.

Later, in a museum exhibition, "I got up on the wooden step, and this seemed to trigger the tape." Mack jumps to unfounded conclusions quickly, seemingly just to avoid missing one. Robertson, whether consciously or not is impossible for me to say, seems to warn against such actions.

Failures of imagination, and another attendant willingness to jump to conclusions, similarly haunt Robertson's characters. Chance appearances of plot devices seem "incredible" to them. When faced with an experience that he cannot readily explain, Mack races to cognitive closure. He seems unwilling or incapable of keeping an open mind until additional facts are acquired. The unnamed being that he (possibly) encounters must be the Christian Devil. God must exist if the Devil does. All of this is wrapped in layers of tortured logic by means of justification. When Mack feels that he could not have reasonably survived his near death experience, he proclaims, "I was of the opinion, therefore, that I must be dead."

Robertson's characters are not an unrealistic stretch from everyday human experience. We have all met the gullible, but Robertson's exploration goes deeper than pedestrian gullibly. He probes the limits of humankind to judge likelihood. It is something that we do poorly.

Radiolab, a weekly radio show syndicated across the United States by National Public Radio, recently illustrated our intuitive problem with comprehending statistics in an episode called Stochasticity. Stochasticity is a florid academic word for randomness. The study of stochasticity provides techniques to understand events whose results can only be measured statistically. We cannot know whether a particular coin toss will result in a "heads" or a "tails", but we can know that, given a high number of tosses, the results should be about half of each.

My caveats (a *high number, about half*) are important and point to our difficulties in understanding the random world. Radiolab interviewed Deborah Nolan, a professor of statistics at UC Berkeley, who demonstrated how poor we are at understanding random acts. She asked a group of students to make up a list of 100 coin tosses. Simultaneously, the Radiolab hosts were asked to toss a real coin 100 times and record the results. Nolan immediately spotted which list constituted the real coin tosses. How? By choosing the list that contained a run of seven "tails" in a row. The students felt that such a run would not appear to be random, but real random sequences include such *apparent* patterns quite often. Our misunderstanding of randomness stems from the simple fact that the human cortex is a very effective pattern recognition engine. We seek patterns for our own survival. They guide our actions. Lack of patterns, randomness, confuses us. We seek, and often find, patterns that do not exist.

The phenomenon of seeing patterns that aren't there is common enough that there is a word for it: apophenia. Psychologists associate the onset of such persistent delusional thinking with schizophrenia - unless it is associated with an established religion.

Pascal's Wager appears and reappears throughout *The Testament*. The French mathematician Blaise Pascal famously argued that everyone should believe in God because "If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing." The problem with Pascal's Wager is that it postulates a lack of cost to belief in a god. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Pascal did not acknowledge that belief requires a separation from reality, and that bad things happen to the human brain when it is forced to close cognitive dissonance based on too few facts. Wild leaps of the imagination or other mental gymnastics are required to make sense of nonsense. Robertson compares authorial leaps of imagination, which are the very basis of creativity, to leaps of faith. But in admittedly extreme cases, leaps of faith may also lead to anything from standing on a street corner with a sign reading, "The End is Nigh" to suicide bombing to the Toronto family that left a corpse in their house for six months expecting resurrection. We do ourselves no favors by encouraging delusion.

Or do we? We often think of evolution as a search algorithm that fits an animal to its environment. People have been around long enough to evolve to fit people-dominated environments. We have evolved to cooperate with other people. Sometimes, really quite often in fact, that means that we need to compromise our understanding of the world in order to get along with others. Robertson explores the prices of compromise and failures to compromise by presenting us with characters who span the gamut. Both real and fictional Presbyterian ministers make their appearance in *The Testament*. Their interests, with the single exception of the true believer Lorna, transcend those of traditional Christianity. Robertson neatly brings in the nineteenth century minister Robert Kirk and his book of folk tales, *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies* to make this point. The book makes a variety of appearances

across the generations. Robertson intertwines folk myths, mainstream religion, doubt, love, lust, friendships, vanity, and self-obsession into a tapestry that approaches the complexity of real-life thought. It is almost not worth bothering to mention the fatherhood obsession shared by Gideon and, more subtly, his father James. It is too obvious. However, this does lead to some brilliant foreshadowing with Elsie's daughter Katie and her imaginary friend. The friend seems to be Mack's Devil, lending yet another bit of support for the reality of an illusion that one had just decided was an illusion. Similarly, Elsie's eleventh-hour admission of the length of her affair with Mack, and the depth of it, questions Mack's veracity just after others had established it. Robertson's misdirection took some careful construction.

Robertson, while pillorying religious belief, does not spare non-religious thought. The atheists in *The Testament* are generally unhappy, and the one professed agnostic is depicted as physically crippled and verbally vitriolic. Robertson asks, but does not answer, what makes one happy to live one's life. Perhaps, being Scottish, he has no idea. More likely he simply was not aware of modern scholarship which has started to unravel this conundrum, such as [this study](#) of coping strategies of the irreligious.

Robertson employs some beautiful metaphors throughout *The Testament*. My personal favorite is this:

"Walking through a deserted city in the hours before dawn is sobering way beyond the undoing of the effects of alcohol. Everything is familiar, and everything strange. It's as if you are the only survivor of some mysterious calamity which has emptied the place of its population, and yet you know that behind the shuttered and curtained windows people lie sleeping in their tens of thousands, and all their joys and disasters lie sleeping too. It makes you think of your own life, usually suspended at that hour, and how you are passing through it as if in a dream. Reality seems very unreal."

Walking past the sleeping multitudes is a wonderful depiction of the atheist experience. One often feels the weight of the mass delusion that grips our world. Naturally, and very Robertson, true believers must feel the same way. One is left to make of it what one will.

My one substantial criticism stems from an experience that Robertson could presumably not personally explore. Mack's character undergoes a near death experience, but Robertson, it seems, could not pull from observation to make his description plausible. My own near drowning left me uncomfortable with Robertson's portrayal. Although I recognized Mack's reported lack of panic, I experienced no flashing of my life before me, nor a feeling that I had left too much unresolved. The immediacy of the situation dominated my mind, even as I began to think that perhaps I should try breathing water after all. Those who told me I could not could have been mistaken. I do not fault Robertson overly much for his reliance on clichés for this part of his story. I am glad for him that he has not gained the insight.

The Testament of Gideon Mack should not have been long-listed for the 2006 [Man Booker Prize](#). It should have won it. Perhaps it didn't because some members of the review committee were themselves religious. The book is designed in a certain sense to offend. It would not offend a doubter, but it threatens the homey comfort of the believer. "How can it be blasphemous? It's the truth. There isn't a word of a lie in what you've heard." Gideon Mack tells his friend and fellow minister Lorna. She replies, "Of course it's blasphemous. It goes against everything we stand for. You simply mustn't repeat it." I urge you to ignore her advice.

<http://prototipo.blogspot.nl/2014/12/the-testament-of-gideon-mack-by-james.html>

The Testament of Gideon Mack by James Robertson

The devil isn't such a bad chap, really

- [By Murrough O'Brien](#)
- Sunday 3 September 2006

What if you were an atheist who happened to be a minister? In early middle age, widowed for 11 years, feeling the pinch of your compromises (if not the stab of your conscience), you encounter the reality of the mystic world in a violently unambiguous form. That in itself would be world-reversing; but the being you encounter is not the longed-for, long-feared God of the kirk, it's the devil. And he's not such a bad chap really.

This novel stands in the honourable tradition of the invented history, the feigned memoir. Gideon Mack, a church of Scotland minister, has caused scandal on several counts: he has disappeared, reappeared, denied God, claimed acquaintance with the devil, and disappeared again. And he has left a testament recording everything.

A "son of the Manse", who knows God exists, but has never believed in him, he becomes a minister; not from conviction, but from a perverse desire both to please and to spite his magnificent but forbidding father. He can't do faith, but he can do charity. Someone, somewhere, is about to rumble him. His wife Jenny is killed in a car accident, and he yearns for her best friend, his best friend's wife - as he always has. Then, out running, he sees a great standing stone where none stood before. Perhaps only he can see it. A strange tremor afflicts his left arm,

and this same tremor sends him down into a gorge, where, for three days, he converses with the devil, who has rescued him from the water.

Though the book is weak on belief, it is fascinating on atheism. The whole clan is present in all its diversity: from the fierce agnosticism of Catherine Craigie, Mack's sour but sassy confidante, the restless scepticism of John, his best friend, the tolerant humanism of Jenny, the hard, hectoring faith of Peter MacMurray, which represents another kind of unbelief. Mack's father, the minister, could easily have remained a kirk cliché, but Robertson is in some ways on his side: he gives him some of the novel's most powerful insights. The passage describing his wife's death is simply written but heart-rending. The narrator remains sympathetic despite his avowed hypocrisy, his agonising, and his treachery to his best friend. When the devil assures Mack that he will see Hell when he next visits his declining mother, he is proved right in a chillingly persuasive passage.

But as the novel advances, the strong, lyrical voice of Mack increasingly gives way to tepid dialogue. Everyone seems to be speaking in an idiom at least 10 years too young for them. The long-awaited devil is brilliantly described, but his insights are coffee-table commonplaces.

This is a hard novel to dislike, but a still harder one to praise from the gut. Beneath all the tragedies, the intimations of mystery and magic, the intense and essentially undergraduate pontifications about faith, lies a fluffy message itself all too reminiscent of an earnest, erring, perhaps secretly agnostic vicar's homily.

Read more: <http://www.popmatters.com/review/the-testament-of-gideon-mack-by-james-robertson/#ixzz4J06k5nRI>