“Pip in the Pacific”

_Different Views on Fiction in Lloyd Jones’s Mister Pip_

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs
Katrín Vilborgar. Gunnarsdóttir
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Summary

The novel *Mister Pip* by Lloyd Jones is set in the early 1990s on Bougainville Island in the Pacific Ocean, in the middle of a civil war. A blockade has been imposed around the island, and the vast majority of non-natives have fled. In a small village, an eccentric old white man, Mr. Watts, has stayed behind with his native, equally eccentric wife. As all the teachers have left, he decides to teach the children what he knows. The only thing he knows, however, is Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. He reads the novel to them, and the children are greatly affected by it. A chain reaction starts, as the children carry on the story to their parents, and when soldiers from the mainland and rebels invade the village a misunderstanding resulting from the novel leads to the destruction of the village. In this essay I will examine these effects that the novel has on both the villagers and the intruders, and the way they perceive fiction. It is new to the whole society – except to Mr. Watts, who is both an outsider and a part of the village – and they all perceive it differently. The children perceive it with fascination and are open to the idea of the imagination. The parents are intrigued but some feel threatened. The soldiers, as a result of ignorance, refuse to believe it when they are told something is fiction. The rebels, all of them teenagers, do not get to listen to *Great Expectations* like the village children, but they get a story that is a mixture of the novel and the storyteller, Mr. Watts’s made-up life. Though it is fiction, they believe it to be a true story and are fascinated, reacting just like the village children initially react to *Great Expectations*. 
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Introduction

Lloyd Jones’s novel *Mister Pip* (2006) brings together two very different worlds: Dickensian England and a Pacific island torn apart by civil war in the early 1990s. A white man introduces Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* to the children of a village on Bougainville island, where a blockade has been imposed and the majority of non-natives – including teachers – have fled, as he assumes the role of a teacher for them. The children perceive this fictional world with fascination and are open to the idea of seeking refuge in the imagination. The fear and uncertainties of war being their whole lives, they are in dire need of it. Matilda Laimo, the thirteen-year-old protagonist of *Mister Pip*, even becomes so involved in the story in her own head that she forms a close bond with the hero of *Great Expectations*, Pip, a fictional character.

All of the characters of *Mister Pip* encounter fiction in one form or another – not just the children having classical literature read out loud to them in school – and they perceive it each in their own way. However, apart from the main characters – the white man, Mr. Watts, Matilda, and Matilda’s mother Dolores – and some of the minor characters, Jones talks about his characters in groups: “the kids,” “the parents,” “the rebels,” and “the redskins.” Therefore, in this essay I will follow Jones’s example and generalise about these groups in my analyses of their perceptions of and reactions to fiction in a society of limited Western-style education, where everything has a practical purpose and literature for pure entertainment purposes is not recognised. I will look in more detail at the central characters, who likewise get a more detailed portrayal in the novel.

*Great Expectations* is a novel about starting over, and Lloyd Jones said in an interview that he chose to introduce it, rather than any other classic novel, to the
Bougainvilleans especially because of that theme of beginning a new life. It would be “the perfect book [...] to position in a society that was broken down and [...] pulled apart by eternal strife and war. Here is [...] the role model, here is the possibility for you to think about your own life. You can reinvent yourselves” (“Lloyd Jones Podcast”). It turns out that nobody takes this to heart – nobody reinvents himself or herself; nonetheless the novel affects people both positively and negatively. Matilda temporarily “reinvents” herself, by starting a new life in Australia after leaving the island, but at the very end of the novel she decides to return home, thereby rejecting the idea of becoming exactly like her idol and childhood friend, Pip, severing all ties with the past and focussing solely on the new life.
1. Context: The Bougainville Crisis

In the South-West of the Pacific Ocean, to the North of Australia, there is a cluster of islands, collectively referred to as Melanesia. Among them is the island of Bougainville, geographically and culturally closer to the Solomon Islands – also a part of Melanesia – than Papua New Guinea, the Melanesian country to which it politically belongs (“Bougainville Island”; Higgs 8). The reason why Bougainville is under Papua New Guinean control is that the two were granted independence from Australia at the same time, as one country (“Bougainville Island”; Higgs 8). Matilda, the protagonist and narrator of Lloyd Jones’s *Mister Pip*, describes the Bougainvilleans’ view in her own plain and simple words: “According to Port Moresby we are one country. According to us we are black as the night. The soldiers looked like people leached up out of the red earth. That’s why they were known as redskins” (Jones 9). In their eyes, merely a different shade of skin colour is enough to separate them from the native people on the bigger islands of Papua New Guinea further away. A shared history of being passed around between colonising nations, including Germany and Australia (Higgs 8), is of no importance to them. Their concern is first and foremost their village; as Charles Hawksley explains, “Melanesian societies […] are primarily village-based and agricultural, comprised of political groupings of no more than a few thousand people” (162).

One of the main reasons why Papua New Guinea held on so tight to Bougainville is that one of the natural resources on the island is copper, which the Australian-owned Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL) had been mining since 1972 (Wesley-Smith 188; “Chronology of Events”). It made a lot of money for Papua New Guinea; in fact, an article published in *Time* magazine in 1975 stated that “last year
generated upwards of $120 million in taxes and royalties – fully half the country’s internal revenue” (“Papua New Guinea: The Reluctant Nation”). However, the Bougainvilleans did not get much of that money. Although this caused resentment, especially as the women in this matrilineal society were excluded when it came to money (Hawksley 167), it was not the islanders’ only complaint against the copper mine. Among other things, they did not like “redskins” – mainland Papua New Guineans – coming over to work in the mine, nor did they like it that “the mine had a devastating environmental impact, displacing people who previously lived in the surrounding area, and poisoning rivers used by thousands on a daily basis” (Norridge 59).

Francis Ona was among the unhappy Bougainvillean landowners, and along with his sister Perpetua Serero he founded in 1987 the New Panguna Landowners Association which fought for reform. In 1988, Serero told a journalist:

> We don’t grow healthy crops any more, our traditional customs and values have been disrupted and we have become mere spectators as our earth is being dug up, taken away and sold for millions [...]. Our land was taken away from us by force; we were blind then, but we have finally grown to understand what’s going on. (qtd. in Moody)

Therefore, they wanted compensation from BCL for the environmental destruction caused by the mine, but their immense demands were unrealistic and negotiations with BCL came to a dead-end (Braithwaite et al. 17; Higgs 8). In addition to the ten billion kina (the PNG currency) they wanted for environmental destruction, they demanded “50 per cent of BCL profits and transfer of BCL to Bougainvillean ownership within five years” (Braithwaite et al. 17).
When the peaceful method of negotiating with BCL failed, Ona resorted to another method, which, although never a good solution to a problem, is always bound to evoke some sort of reaction: violence. Protests planned by the New Panguna Landowners Association resulted in the vandalising of BCL estate and eventually the bombing of power pylons along the Panguna Highway in November 1988 (Braithwaite et al. 20). The power pylon explosion, John Braithwaite argues, and “the vigorous reaction of the PNG security forces to it [might be called] the triggers for the formation of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) led by Francis Ona and of the civil war” (20).

The BRA succeeded in closing down the mine in May 1989, though the war did not stop along with the mining operations. The riot police and the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) kept fighting the BRA until March 1990, when the Papua New Guinean government came up with a new plan: they pulled the police, the PNGDF and all civil services out of Bougainville and imposed a blockade on the island (Higgs 8). The main action of Mister Pip takes place in Bougainville after the blockade was imposed; the first two short chapters summarise the state of the island, the things most important to the villagers, and then the development of the main body of the story proceeds, covering the period from December 1991 to September 1993.

All non-Bougainvilleans – save for people married or adopted into clans – had left the island by the middle of 1990 (Braithwaite et al. 23). However, with the support of a few clan chiefs on Buka, an island connected to Bougainville in the North, where the administrative centre of Bougainville was located before it was moved to Arawa when the mine was opened (Norridge 60), the PNGDF re-entered Bougainville in April 1991 (Braithwaite et al. 26). The BRA were becoming increasingly violent; for example, they “torture[d] and murder[ed] […]"
Bougainvilleans who had once worked for the civil service, many of them in fact BRA supporters” (26), and the Buka chiefs wanted the PNGDF back “to protect them from the BRA” (26). The PNGDF acceded, but not with the support of the Papua New Guinean government, and as time went on, they were less and less under control from Port Moresby – the capital of Papua New Guinea – and more their own bosses. Nevertheless, they were aware that their job was to wipe out the rebels and try and restore peace, and they did it however they pleased (26).

Lloyd Jones has redskin soldiers – the PNGDF – play a major part in *Mister Pip*. Jones himself went on a journalistic journey sailing around Bougainville in 1990. On the boat with him was a PNGDF soldier who told him what was going on on the island – things that inspired articles for both New Zealand and Australian newspapers and later *Mister Pip* (“Lloyd Jones Podcast”). Among the atrocities he heard of and used in *Mister Pip* were the helicopters, which the PNGDF used to dispose of rebels: “We were used to the redskins’ helicopters buzzing in and out of the cloud around the mountain peaks. Now we saw them head out to sea in a straight line. […] We could not see the men thrown out. But that’s what we heard” (Jones 12). This must have been in early 1990, before the Papua New Guinean forces had completely cleared out of Bougainville prior to re-entering.

*Mister Pip*’s Matilda escapes Bougainville in 1993, after a bloody encounter with the rebels and the redskins, but in reality, the Bougainville Crisis was far from over at that time. The conflict did not end until 1997, when peace negotiations were held at Burnham Army Camp, New Zealand (Higgs 9), leading to a truce and eventually a peace agreement in January 1998 (Hawksley 168). New Zealand was an ideal place for a meeting, as it was neutral and had no interests to protect on either side (Norridge 60). However, as W. J. Hudson writes, “Even New Zealanders have at
times beheld a vision of themselves as the standard bearers of civilization in heathen Oceania” (1). They had no connections, but they must have felt superior, being the accommodators for peace.
2. The People of the Village

2.1 Mr. Watts and Mr. Dickens

Tom Christian Watts, mockingly nicknamed Pop Eye, moves from his home in New Zealand with his wife Grace to her village in Bougainville, for reasons not revealed until at the very end of *Mister Pip*. The novel opens with a description of him and his wife that portray them the way the villagers see them: as eccentrics who should best be left alone:

> Some days he wore a clown’s nose. […] And on those days he wore the clown’s nose you found yourself looking away because you never saw such sadness. He pulled a piece of rope attached to a trolley on which Mrs. Pop Eye stood. She looked like an ice queen. Nearly every woman on our island had crinkled hair, but Grace had straightened hers. She wore it piled up, and in the absence of a crown her hair did the trick. She looked so proud, as if she had no idea of her own bare feet. (Jones 1-2)

Lloyd Jones, the author of *Mister Pip*, has said that this scene is the one that came to him and inspired him to write the novel (“Lloyd Jones Podcast”). From the very beginning it is obvious to the reader that there is something in both Mr. and Mrs. Watts’s past that makes them so eccentric. There must be a reason why Mr. Watts emanates “such sadness” (Jones 1); there must also be a reason why “Mrs. Watts was as mad as a goose” (2).

After some detective work years later, Matilda finds out that this regular procession of the couple in Bougainville was a recreation of a scene they acted together in an amateur production of *The Queen of Sheba* (Jones 242), which Grace
had been particularly fond of. In fact, she was so fond of it that she, as Mr. Watts’s first wife June put it, “‘couldn’t snap out of it […] Couldn’t. Wouldn’t. Take your pick’” (243), and was subsequently admitted to a mental hospital in New Zealand (238). June Watts is evidently bitter towards Grace; understandably, as Mr. Watts started his relationship with her while he and June were still married. It is never made clear whether they got divorced, but since Matilda always addresses her as Mrs. Watts – as opposed to Ms. Watts – and talks about her as Mr. Watts’s wife – as opposed to ex-wife – it is safe to assume they did not, in fact, get divorced, and Mr. Watts had an affair with Grace and ran away with her. The reader does not find out about this until the end, however, so the sympathy – and curiosity – lies all with Mr. Watts and Grace, and throughout most of the novel, Grace is the one and only Mrs. Watts.

Days before his death, Mr. Watts says he had a child with Grace, a girl who died of meningitis (195). Considering the final revelations of Mr. Watts’s real past, it is most likely that this daughter was made up, and that Mr. Watts and Grace were never married. Although Mr. Watts presents a convincing story of Grace becoming depressed after the death of her daughter (196), which could be one of the reasons why the couple had moved to Bougainville, and why Mr. Watts had felt she needed to “reinvent herself” (196), it is difficult to believe it once June has told her side of the story. She never mentions an extramarital baby – she does not seem like a person who would be embarrassed to admit her husband had a child with another woman while they were still married; she certainly is not afraid to tell Matilda that he and Grace, who was their next door neighbour, had an affair – and says rather that “he should have left [her] rather than carry on the way he did” (237). He had managed to conceal their affair before he eventually left, but a baby would probably not have passed by her unnoticed.
There is no apparent reason for Mr. Watts’s decision to take the place of teacher for the children of the village, other than that the children have not had a teacher in an undefined amount of time – so long that most people cannot remember what day of the week it is anymore (14). He has no experience as a teacher and his knowledge of anything but *Great Expectations* and Charles Dickens is limited (27-28). However, Matilda makes an observation at the end of the novel, after she has left Bougainville, that Mr. Watts “was whatever he needed to be, what we asked him to be. We needed a teacher, Mr. Watts became that teacher” (245); he was a method actor by nature, albeit not by profession. As a result of a misunderstanding when the redskins and the rebels respectively arrive in the village, Mr. Watts assumes the roles of both Mr. Dickens (for the redskins) and Pip (for the rebels), showing how easily he can “slip inside the skin of another” (24), a true actor. This role results in his death, and Matilda says of it: “When we needed a savior, Mr. Watts had filled that role. When the redskins required a life, Mr. Watts had given himself” (245).

Mr. Watts introduces *Great Expectations* to the children as “the greatest novel by the greatest English writer of the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens” (21). He has a close relationship with Dickens, whom he can never refer to as anything but Mr. Dickens (28), and as an expatriate – an exile, almost, but not quite – away from his home in New Zealand he seeks comfort in literature he knows by heart (67). He perceives fiction as a refuge from the real world, when it becomes too much to bear and he is feeling lonely. When the redskins have burnt down the village, Mr. Watts tries to comfort the children and himself by telling them that “‘these losses, severe though they may be, remind us of what no person can take, and that is our minds and our imaginations’” (123). From this it is clear that fiction and the imagination are a comfort to him.
His situation and relationship with Dickens is similar to Abel Magwitch’s relationship with Pip, in Mr. Watts’s beloved novel. Magwitch’s situation is different in that he has not chosen to leave his home in England; he is sent to Australia as a prisoner (Dickens 243). However, like Mr. Watts, Magwitch has something to obsess over and comfort him: Pip. During the years he spends making a life for himself in Australia, he thinks of nothing but Pip and how he helped him by giving him food and a file to remove his shackles (20-22). Pip had not prevented him from getting caught by the police, but all the money he earns in Australia, he sends anonymously to Pip, via Mr. Jaggers the lawyer, to make a gentleman of Pip (109, 240). Lloyd Jones has said in an interview that he wanted to give the people of Bougainville *Great Expectations* as a role model for them to “reinvent” themselves (“Lloyd Jones Podcast”). In Dickens’s novel, Magwitch is the catalyst for Pip’s transformation into a gentleman, for his social climbing – his new beginning – by sharing his wealth. Mr. Watts is his parallel in that he wants to share his love of his favourite novel and perhaps even change someone’s life with it. In Matilda’s case that proves to be true (Jones 237). Mr. Watts is also somewhat similar to Pip, because he manages to move away from a situation he was unhappy in, and reinvent himself, just like Pip.

Anthropological research into personhood in Melanesia has produced results in relation to which *Mister Pip* can be interpreted. According to Edward LiPuma, Those who hold a relational view of Melanesian personhood [...] read the following contrasts from the ethnography:

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An individual’s behavior and intentions are interpreted as the public expression of inner qualities (greed, honesty, etc.). (132-33)

In simpler terms: Western people analyse other people’s behaviour and intentions as showing how they feel, while Melanesians analyse them by looking at their actions in a given circumstance. The Western interpretation corresponds to Mr. Watts’s own reasons for reading *Great Expectations* to the children. His intention, presumably, is to give the village children an alternative world to the one they live in: an imaginary world where everything is new and different, as opposed to their own world of constant fear and want. He expresses it through his heartfelt reading, his obvious and honest admiration of Dickens, thereby successfully spreading his love of *Great Expectations*. The Melanesian interpretation corresponds to how Matilda – a Melanesian girl – understands Mr. Watts’s decision to pretend to be Mr. Dickens when the redskins ask him if it is true. His intention is to protect the village, and especially the boy Daniel, who has inadvertently caused the misunderstanding that Mr. Watts is Dickens (Jones 99). Daniel is “slow” (204) and does not know any better. Mr. Watts’s action, which can be interpreted thus, is to say with absolute confidence, “‘Yes, I am that man’” (99). Another Melanesian view of personhood is that “persons grow transactionally as the beneficiary of other people’s actions” (LiPuma 133). This applies directly to the relationship between Mr. Watts and the village children. Mr. Watts reads to the children from a book they have never heard of in a language in which they have never been read to before (Jones 20) and through it he teaches them about a world different from theirs. They engage in active discussion
about the novel in class and ponder it by themselves, and it is clear that the children learn a lot from it.

Although an avid worshipper of Mr. Dickens and his work, Mr. Watts does not consider *Great Expectations* so holy that it must not, under any circumstances, be changed. Matilda finds out after she has escaped Bougainville and gets her hands on a library copy of the novel that he had simplified it when he read it to the children, so much that even some characters were left out: “he’d straightened out sentences, ad-libbed in fact, to help us arrive at a more definite place in our heads” (225). Matilda assumes that Mr. Watts had taken the decision to do this after a debate with Matilda’s mother Dolores (226-28), who always welcomes an opportunity to criticise Mr. Watts and his white world. However, the particular sentence that Dolores criticises, “As I had grown accustomed to my expectations, I had insensibly begun to notice their effect upon myself and those around me” (Dickens 207), is at the start of chapter 34 in *Great Expectations*, quite late in the novel. It occurs after the introduction of the character Orlick, which Matilda mentions was left out (Jones 225). Matilda says of reading the novel by herself in the library that “it was more wordy than I remembered” (224). However, if Mr. Watts had read the first 33 chapters as they were, she would no doubt have remembered them perfectly well.

It is more likely that before the debate with Dolores, Mr. Watts was already reading a simplified edition of the novel to the class. Such editions are available of all the classics, especially intended for classroom use for younger children and foreign learners – both of which apply to Mr. Watts’s class. After Mr. Watts finishes reading the novel for the first time, he decides to let the children take turns reading it out loud themselves. He does it both because it would be a good way for them to practice their English (93), and also because he has no clue what else to do with them. The children
are miserable, with “nothing to look forward to anymore” (92). If he had had an unabridged copy of *Great Expectations*, it is unlikely he would have made that decision, as the full version would have been much too difficult for the children. In addition to that, they would not have recognised it, just like Matilda does not recognise it when she sees it in her Townsville school library, as he himself has changed it so much, supposedly as he goes along.

It is easy for Mr. Watts to assume the role of a teacher – it is just that to him: a *role*. Acting is his passion, and it is natural to him to play the roles of a teacher, Mr. Dickens and Pip. While there is no obvious reason why he decides to take responsibility for the village children’s education, it is clear why he chooses that particular method of teaching, reading his favourite novel to them. He wants to share with the children the joy it has brought him in a lonely situation, hoping it can do the same for them. He perceives this work of fiction as a shelter from the real world and he knows that is what these children need. He himself had sought shelter from the real world by coming to Bougainville with Grace, a woman who is more likely to have been his mistress rather than his wife, it turns out. He reinvents his life, just like Pip does in his favourite novel, and just like Matilda will do after she leaves Bougainville. Behind the façade, however, he is still just an old man with a passion for pretending.
2.2 The Kids and Pip

Matilda tells her story years after she has left Bougainville, when she is in England writing her doctoral thesis on Dickens’ orphans (Jones 232, 253). The novel is told in the past tense but the narrator’s “present,” as it were, is not revealed until the very end; it is not a frame narrative. Although Pip is Matilda’s idol and to an extent, she follows in his footsteps, starting a new life far away from home, she eventually decides to do what he did not: try to go home (256). The novel ends on those words, but Matilda’s tale of the events that lead up to her leaving Bougainville is in a manner her going home, psychologically.

Matilda’s father, Joseph Laimo, a miner, moves to Townsville in Australia to work when Matilda is eleven (7), before the main action of the story starts. Dolores is therefore left a single mother to take care of Matilda on her own, and does so to the best of her abilities. As the story is told from Matilda’s point of view, it is easy to assume that of all the children in the village, she is the one who was most deeply affected by Mr. Watts and Pip. She forms a bond with Pip from the start of the first reading of *Great Expectations*, and feels as if she “had been spoken to by this boy Pip. This boy who [she] couldn’t see to touch but knew by ear. [She] had found a new friend” (23). She talks about how the children perceive this new imaginary world with wonder: “Nobody had told us to look [in a book] for a friend. Or that you could slip inside the skin of another. Or travel to another place with marshes, and where, to our ears, the bad people spoke like pirates” (24). Just like Dickens himself would act out scenes from his own novels when he read to audiences (Fadiman 106), Mr. Watts plays the characters, each with a different voice. The fact that the children simply have to close their eyes to see the characters right in front of them (Jones 24) shows that they are ready to accept the imaginary world with open arms. It is not difficult to
believe they want to escape their daily life of fear and uncertainty, waiting for the war to reach their tiny village (12).

Mr. Watts keeps the children interested by reading only one chapter a day, and the rest of the time, *Great Expectations* is all they think about. Matilda tells of how years later, when she works as a substitute teacher, she very effectively uses the same method to keep her own class of high school boys quiet (232). Matilda’s obsession is clear from the start; at one point she even makes a “shrine” to him on the beach. She draws his name in the sand in capital letters, puts “white heart seeds into the groove of the letters of his name” and decorates it with shells (45, 68). Although it is hinted at, the other kids’ close relationship with the novel and Pip is not revealed until later on, after the first reading, and it surprises Matilda. After the redskins burn the village down to the ground, leaving nothing but Mr. Watts’s house and the schoolhouse (121-122), and Mr. Watts’s copy of *Great Expectations* is lost, the children spend the subsequent months trying to remember the novel, bit by bit (126). This is when Matilda finds out that she is not the only one who has been enamoured by Pip: “I hadn’t stopped to think someone else might also treasure the book and actively inhabit that world” (128).

It is not surprising that she had not thought of this, as she does not appear to have any close friends other than Pip, the fictional character. Although it is impossible in such a small village not to know everybody by name, Matilda is, throughout the novel, never shown playing with or talking to the other children outside the classroom. Living alone in the house with her mother, without any siblings or her father, she must have been lonely before she is introduced to *Great Expectations*. Mr. Watts seems to have come with his lessons as a godsend at the perfect time, not just
because he “had given us kids another world to spend the night in” (23), but also because Matilda desperately needed a friend, which she finds in Pip.

Matilda’s devotion to Pip appears at its strongest when she places him next to her own relatives and ancestors in the family tree she draws in the sand on the beach at her mother’s request (75). She justifies this to Dolores by telling her she “felt closer to him than the names of those strangers she made [her] write in the sand” (76). It is the presence of this fictional character in the family tree on the beach that eventually leads to the destruction of the village houses and the death of Mr. Watts. The redskins arrive in the village, ready to believe everything bad about its inhabitants. They see the name Pip on the beach, but nobody has introduced himself as Pip. The villagers cannot give them a flesh-and-blood person with that name (96), and as a result the redskins inflict upon them the aforementioned atrocities. They refuse to give up – and be made fools of – until they have found this Pip.

Matilda never admits to feeling guilty for having unintentionally given the redskins the name Pip. However, it is obvious that she knows they got it from her “shrine” on the beach; the novel is a first person narrative from her point of view, and she sees a soldier coming from the beach right before they ask the villagers where this Pip person is (96) and she later sees that the “shrine” has been destroyed (110). When thinking back to that day when the redskins first asked for Pip, Matilda chooses to focus on her mother’s part of the blame: she discovers that Dolores had stolen and hidden Mr. Watts’s copy of *Great Expectations* (108). Mr. Watts could therefore not prove to the redskins that Pip really was a character in a book, as he claimed, by showing them the book itself (103). Rather than thinking she herself could have prevented all this from happening by not writing Pip’s name in the sand, Matilda blames her mother for not speaking up when the redskins are asking for the book and
telling them where it is (109). She is angry at her mother not just because she could have saved the village from losing all their possessions, but also because of Dolores’s bitterness towards Mr. Watts, *Great Expectations* and Pip. This bitterness towards these things that are so important to Matilda has come to such extremities that it has caused a deep rift in their mother-daughter relationship. They stop talking to each other, and Matilda says that if she “had been willing or able to break [her] silence [she] would have thrown her own language back at her. [She] would have said the devil had gotten into her” (113).

The children all perceive *Great Expectations* and the idea of another world that they can escape to whenever they like with fascination. The novel especially affects Matilda, who immerses herself in it and forms a bond with the fictional character, Pip. A more negative effect of the novel is that even though Matilda finds there the friend whom she needs, her mother passionately dislikes it and as one bond forms, another bond breaks.
2.3 The Parents

The society in Bougainville is matrilineal (Higgs 8), which can clearly be seen in *Mister Pip*. Apart from Matilda’s absent father Joseph, the only father named in the novel, is Wilson Masoi, the father of a boy called Gilbert (Jones 37). Mr. Masoi is a fisherman and owns a boat, the one on which Matilda eventually escapes from Bougainville. This is probably why he is introduced in the novel; there is no reason to include any other fathers, as it is the mothers who take care of their children and are the heads of their families. When Mr. Watts asks the children to bring their family members to school to teach the class about things he does not know (29), they bring mothers, grandmothers and aunts – and one uncle – but no fathers. The young men of the village have gone to join the rebels in the mountains (96), but the nameless fathers stay in the background, probably fishing and gathering fruit, and their longest, most memorable scene is about them being irresponsible, getting drunk on jungle juice: “They sounded like men who wouldn’t care if the world ended tomorrow, and they shocked the night with their ranting” (51). It seems that the adult men of the village are the least responsible grown-ups there.

Matilda’s mother, Dolores, is an opinionated and religious woman. Generally, Western people like the idea of indigenous tribes in the Pacific islands still practicing their ancient religions and customs, and while it is true that they all have their own different customs, the greater part of them has converted to Christianity: “The Pacific Council of Churches, for example, reported in 1980 that 85 percent of Papua New Guineans declared themselves Christians” (Barker 145). Among the white people that have left Bougainville are missionaries, and some of the stories that Dolores tells Mr. Watts’s class are related to the Bible, though not from the Bible itself. She wants to teach the children the importance of religion and the “Good Book,” which she knows
as well as they know *Great Expectations* (Jones 42-44). She tries to explain to Mr. Watts’s class that his story is pointless, telling them, “Stories have a job to do. They can’t just lie around like lazybone dogs. They have to teach you something” (86). It is obvious she does not think Mr. Watts’s story falls into the category of stories that something is to be learnt from, unlike her own parables about the devil (87).

The first few days of the reading, Dolores is intrigued and insists Matilda tell her “everything that happens in that book” (27). However, when she realises she is losing her daughter to an imaginary world (35) – a world that she, Dolores, is not familiar with – she starts to perceive the novel as a threat. She directs her counter-attack towards Mr. Watts. She talks condescendingly about him to Matilda, calls him Pop Eye again, when everyone had stopped calling him by his disrespectful nickname, not realising that by doing that she is alienating her daughter instead of turning her against Mr. Watts. She even steals and hides Mr. Watts’s copy of *Great Expectations*, coincidentally right before the redskins enter the village and burn all the villagers’ belongings. It is ironic that as she hides the book in the rafters of her house, the redskins miss it when they are ransacking the houses, but her Bible they find and cast on the bonfire (111). Her favourite book turns to ash while Matilda’s favourite book, which she hates, is still whole and safe. Her contempt for Mr. Watts runs deep, as when she looks at the man she does not see the good-hearted old man he is, but, as Matilda’s narration explains, “only […] a white man. And white men had stolen her husband and my father. White men were to blame for the mine, and the blockade […]. By now it was also clear the white world had forgotten us” (49). Dolores connects Mr. Watts with everything that is wrong, simply because he is different – white.

The parents of the other children perceive with equal interest this new story that Mr. Watts is telling the class, and as Matilda does for her mother, all the children
recount *Great Expectations* in their own words when they get home (32). Although it does not appear that any of them take such a loathing to Mr. Watts as Dolores does while he is still reading to the children, his popularity drops significantly after the incident with the redskins and the Pip misunderstanding. It is not surprising; they lose all their things on the bonfire (104) and later their houses (119), and his apology, though heartfelt, cannot bring anything back: “‘please believe me when I say Pip is a confusion I failed to see coming until it was too late. I am so sorry.’ Those he spoke to couldn’t meet his eye. Those who did, my mum included, let the white man bake in the hot sun without the courtesy of a reply” (107). After some days of silence, however, some of the parents let their children come back to class. They must have realised that despite the misfortune that reading *Great Expectations* has caused, their children like it and it makes them feel better.

Out of all the villagers, *Great Expectations* essentially has the most negative effect on the parents. They initially perceive the novel with interest and are intrigued, but eventually their children’s familiarity with it results in the destruction of their village. Those few parents who are introduced show active interest when they turn up in class (31) and the interest of the others is indicated through the children’s passing the story on to their families in the evenings. Dolores Laimo has her own personal reasons for perceiving *Great Expectations* with hostility; she feels it is causing the growing distance between her and Matilda. After the redskins’ raid, Dolores’s hatred towards Mr. Watts – for he is the one who brought *Great Expectations* to her daughter – only escalates. After a suitable mourning period, however, the other parents assume an apathetic stance towards him.
3. The Intruders

3.1 The Redskins

Although the redskin soldiers in *Mister Pip* are all fictional characters, they are based on actual militia, the Papua New Guinea Defence Force. The PNGDF was sent to Bougainville in 1989, when the rebellion became violent (Braithwaite et al. 20). In the novel, one of the atrocities they inflict upon the villagers was a regular occurrence in reality: “In the Highlands of New Guinea, it was standard practice for the riot police to burn villages in payback for violence. It became a routine tactic for both the police and the military in Bougainville to set fire to houses during patrols” (21).

The reason why Lloyd Jones’s redskins burn down the village can be traced right back to *Great Expectations*. The redskin soldiers arrive in the village to register the villagers’ names, looking for a rebel, and one of the soldiers discovers Matilda’s “shrine” to Pip. None of the villagers have written down “Pip” as their name (Jones 96) and nobody can tell them where Pip is, so the redskin soldiers assume the villagers are hiding a rebel (103). They have come to the village expressly to find a rebel – although they never admit that, it is implied, and Matilda herself assumes it (95) – and there they believe they have found a name that could be attributed to a rebel. They have no idea who or where Pip is, therefore he must be a rebel. When the idea that Pip is actually a fictional character is presented to them, they perceive it with suspicion, and need proof of it (100).

The redskin soldiers are all – as their nickname indicates – natives of mainland Papua New Guinea. Like most of the Bougainvilleans, they seem to have received limited education, as they are not at all familiar with the name Dickens or the book *Great Expectations*. Because of their unfamiliarity, they perceive this piece of fiction
with suspicion and doubt. Both Dickens and *Great Expectations* are standards in Western education and most people in Western civilization have at least heard of them, if not learnt about them at some point during their school years. When Mr. Watts – pretending to be Mr. Dickens, which the boy Daniel has indicated is his name – says that Pip is a fictional character from a novel, the PNGDF officer’s lack of worldliness is revealed: “The officer looked angry. The interrogation was drifting away from his control. He would have to ask what character, which book, and thereby reveal his ignorance” (100). It is not hard to understand why he is angry about this. He senses that the white man and the villagers know something that he does not know, and because of this he feels he cannot control them and is thus losing his power. The Western view of a person’s power is that it “lies in his/her control over others; power is a possession” (LiPuma 133). Although the redskins are Melanesian, like the Bougainvilleans, up until 1991 the PNGDF answered to the government in Port Moresby (see ch. 1), which, receiving financial and other kinds of assistance from Australia (Hawksley 163), must be influenced by Western thought.

When the redskins enter the village and encounter the effects of *Great Expectations*, it has dire consequences: the village is burnt down. Ashamed of their own lack of knowledge, the redskins refuse to put their trust in the words of people to whom they feel they should be superior. They refuse to believe that Pip is a character out of a book; admitting that they are less knowledgeable than the villagers would be showing a weakness. To establish their power, they burn all the villagers’ possessions and then all their houses, each time they visit and they villagers deny any knowledge of the fictional Pip’s whereabouts.
3.2 The Rebels

The rebels are members of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, led by Francis Ona (9). Ona himself never shows his face in the village and plays no part in the novel; it seems like the rebels are an independent group. In fact, in reality, as the civil war progressed Ona kept himself more and more hidden away. According to a Siwai woman, “Francis never came out openly and talked to the people” (qtd. in Braithwaite et al. 24). Rather, he let his subordinates, the commanders of each group of rebels, run free, which was not always a good thing:

Commanders in some localities had operated more as raskol [criminal] gangs than as a liberation army. […] They could be arbitrary and capricious in the way they exacted revenge against those they believed might have collaborated with the PNGDF. Many innocent people were tortured and sexually assaulted. (24)

The rebels that invade the village in *Mister Pip* are somewhat of a raskol gang, and the nickname that the Bougainvilleans have given them, rambos, reflects that. They are undisciplined, crude – one of them vainly threatens to “‘fuck [Mr. Watts] up the arse’” (Jones 161) – and seem to have no actual mission of liberating the island from white and PNG power. However, most of them are teenaged boys simply excited about carrying guns – restored rifles that the Japanese left in Bougainville after WWII (151) – and drunk on power. Edward LiPuma’s findings on the Melanesian view of a person’s power applies to them: it “lies in his/her ability to do and act; power is a relation” (133). The rebels are able to use their guns and therefore they have power.

Because the rambos (I will refer to the rebels as rambos from now on, to avoid confusion about quotations from the novel) are only teenagers, it is difficult for the villagers to know how to react to them. Though many people support the rambos’
cause – or the cause they are supposed to stand for – others are tired of the war and
the uncertainty that comes with it. Whether the villagers support the rebellion or not,
however, they are all afraid of it. They are afraid, as they know how other villages
have been treated, but still the people think, “They were our boys” (158). They are
only ever referred to as “boys” or “rambos”; never as “men.” This makes it easier to
understand why the villagers are so conflicted about them. They are supposed to act
like soldiers, but deep down they are only boys: “Behind their betel-stained mouths
and crazed stares, maybe they weren’t so different after all” (159).

While Mr. Watts’s earlier reaction to the redskins is understandable, it comes
as a surprise when he, with no reason to lie, introduces himself to the rambos as Pip
(161). The rambos, like the redskins before them, have never heard of Great
Expectations, so they accept this name as “simply another white man’s name” (162).
What is more surprising is that Mr. Watts completely immerses himself in the role of
Pip and starts performing the first lines of Great Expectations – which naturally he
knows by heart – where Pip explains how he got this nickname. It soon becomes clear
why he chose to lie about his identity: he offers to tell the rambos the story of his life
(164), and it is easier for him to tell a story as someone else. It turns out to be mostly
fabrication; a mixture of Great Expectations, the stories and advice that the parents of
the children had shared with his class, and some exaggerations of his own life. He
decides to tell this story over seven nights in order to buy time until a boat comes to
secretly take him, the Masoi family, Matilda and Dolores away from Bougainville to
the Solomon Islands (175-76).

The rambos, being only teenagers, are easily entranced by the story: “Those
rambos had not heard a storytelling voice for years. The boys sat there, with their
mouths and ears open to catch every word, their weapons resting on the ground in
front of their bare feet like useless relics” (165). They perceive this piece of fiction with great interest; however, they have no reason to believe it is not a true story, like they have been told, and not fiction. Enchanted by Mr. Watts, they are like the village children were when they were sitting in Mr. Watts’s classroom, listening to him read *Great Expectations* to them; only this is a slightly altered version. The entire village joins the rambos, sitting on the ground around Mr. Watts to listen to his story, and Matilda translates for him from English into pidgin (164). It is obvious that Mr. Watts feels he has natural authority over the rambos, setting conditions for his storytelling – that he will not be interrupted and that it will take seven evenings (164) – and interestingly, they do not refute it. It is a reminder that they are only teenagers, and a confident, older white man can easily defy them and unquestionably be entitled to their respect. It also shows their naïvety that they do not question his story and seem to believe it all to be true – perceive it as reality. The villagers who do not know about *Great Expectations* seem to take it at face value, as well.

The reader never finds out whether Mr. Watts’s combination of stories by Mr. Dickens, himself and the village children’s parents would have enthralled the rambos enough to leave the village in peace. During the night after the sixth evening by the fireside, the redskins discover the rambos and chase away all but one of them, who points out Mr. Watts – or Pip, as he knows him to be (202). The rambo does not know what had happened during the redskins’ earlier visits, and much less the significance of identifying Mr. Watts as Pip. He can probably imagine that the man will be executed, but he has no idea that Pip is in fact a fictional character and everything is based on a misunderstanding. When the villagers stand silently by and let Mr. Watts introduce himself to the rambos as Pip, they are unconsciously also allowing this eventual result: a rambo betraying Mr. Watts/Pip to the redskins.
It is possible that Mr. Watts foresaw this himself; he must have been aware of the risks of pretending to be Pip, considering that the redskins were looking for a person with that name. Matilda says at the end of the novel that, “When we needed a saviour, Mr. Watts had filled that role. When the redskins required a life, Mr. Watts had given himself” (245), but there is nothing heroic about his death. The redskins shoot him in his house, then drag the body outside so the village people can watch them chop it up and throw the pieces to the pigs (202-3). It is quick, brutal and humiliating. Dolores suffers a similar death after being raped, but Matilda is spared from watching it (209). The redskins probably consider throwing the bodies of their victims to the pigs as doubly humiliating. The people of the Kaulong village in Papua New Guinea see pigs as parallels to humans: “Both are found in the clearing of the hamlet and in the forest. Both may act as solitary nonsocial and nonhuman individuals, roaming the forests, impregnating females, and attacking gardens and hamlets in a destructive manner” (Goodale 250). This applies directly to the redskins – and, incidentally, the rambos – and so by letting the pigs eat the people they kill, it is also a symbolic act of cannibalism. Although the Kaulong is just one tribe, it is not impossible that by other tribes hold this view as well, or even that some of the redskins are Kaulong. For the villagers, the pigs are no longer pets, nor source of food, so they kill them and bury as if they are Mr. Watts and Dolores: “It was the only thing we could think to do to give a decent burial to Mr. Watts and my mum” (Jones 211).

Matilda emphasises that during the blockade, “we lost all sense of time” (Jones 159), but estimates that the rambos arrive in the village about three years after the closing of the mine (159). For people not familiar with the history of Bougainville, it should not be important. People who know that the mine closed in May 1989 (Higgs
8; Braithwaite et al. 18) can calculate that if Matilda is correct, this event takes place in April or May 1992. It is not an impossible timing, as the redskins’ visits took place in February 1992, but those are more accurately timed (94). However, when Matilda finally sees a calendar after escaping Bougainville, assumably about two weeks after the rambos’ arrival, it is September 1993. Although Matilda has already assured the reader she did not, at the time, know the date, she does not correct herself when she sees the calendar – for example by mentioning that, in fact, more than four years had passed since the closing of the mine, and more than a year had passed between the visits of the redskins and the rambos. As Matilda is telling the story years later and not as it happens, she would know these facts, and the informed reader expects this much from her – or to be exact, from Lloyd Jones. Jones himself has, in his own words, “some sort of personal experience of the island, in terms of what happened there” (“Lloyd Jones Podcast”), as he has visited the island, researched events and met powerful people in the BRA, so he cannot plead ignorance.

The rebels, or the rambos, are teenagers, seemingly without a purpose, and after a while the villagers see them merely as threatening rather than actually dangerous. It does not take much for Mr. Watts to convince them to let him tell his story on his own conditions, and as they are so young, they are quickly entranced by the story. It brightens up their gloomy and weary lives and they get some joy from it. Just like it was easy for Mr. Watts to win over the rambos, they are quick to flee when the redskins arrive again. The redskins, however, no-nonsense men with military training and little Western-style education, are used to having the power wherever they go, and so they refuse to be fooled into thinking some rebel is in fact a fictional character. The rambos and the redskins show that although fiction gives the villagers much-needed temporary joy, it causes their eventual fall.
Conclusion

The eccentric white man in the little village on Bougainville – who also happens to be the last white man on the island at the time the novel takes place – surprises the whole village with his kindness and knowledge, after ten years as an outsider. The children are his main beneficiaries, as he shares with them a work of fiction, *Great Expectations*, by “the greatest English writer of the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens” (Jones 21). They perceive the novel with fascination, and Mr. Watts and Mr. Dickens turn out to be their saviours from danger and mundanity respectively. Mr. Watts sacrifices himself to PNGDF soldiers when they insist the villagers are hiding a rebel, and Mr. Dickens provides an exotic imaginary world for the children to escape to when they are lonely, afraid or simply bored. He does exactly what Mr. Watts had hoped. He gives them a friend: Pip, and a shelter: their imagination. Perhaps Mr. Watts also wanted to show them that it is possible to change their lives – Pip did it, and even though the children don’t know it, Mr. Watts did it, too. He left New Zealand for Bougainville and reinvented himself completely, with a new woman whom he may or may not have married.

The children’s parents are, to an extent, included in the *Great Expectations* experience, as the children tell them the story in their own words. They perceive it with interest, but still feel that stories must have a purpose. Dolores, especially, perceives the novel with great hostility, but for her own personal reasons. Her daughter is so caught up in the novel, placing fictional characters on an equal level with her relatives, that she is drifting away from Dolores. Dolores blames both the novel and Mr. Watts, but her contempt for them does not help her win back her daughter.
Two groups of intruders invade the little village in the course of the novel: the redskins and the rebels, or rambos, respectively. The redskins are PNGDF soldiers, natives of mainland Papua New Guinea who have come to look for rebels. They find none, but are instead confronted with the fact that the villagers are better educated than they are. They perceive with suspicion, doubt and finally anger the claim that this “Pip” is a fictional character. This suspicion and anger leads to the burning of the villagers’ possessions, their houses and eventually the brutal murders of Mr. Watts and Dolores. During the civil war in Bougainville, these things were happening all over the island, but in the context of *Mister Pip*, it is obvious that *Great Expectations* is the catalyst for these particular events. If it had not been for the misunderstanding about Pip, the redskins would probably have found another reason to burn the village and murder some of the villagers. That, however, is a subject for another novel and another thesis.

The rebels, nicknamed rambos by the villagers, come to the village to look for redskins, but when the redskins arrive the rambos flee like the children they are. During the six days the rambos stay in the village, they listen to Mr. Watts tell the story of his life, which is in fact a mixture of *Great Expectations* and exaggerations of Mr. Watts’s own life. The rambos are only teenagers, and listening to the story they are much like the village children: they perceive it with wonder and fascination. They believe it to be truth, but though it is mostly fabrication it does not make any difference to them. They have been living in the jungle for two or three years and they welcome the opportunity to sit down and listen to a good story.

Matilda Laimo, best friends with a fictional boy born approximately a century and a half before her, shows the reader of *Mister Pip* that it is possible to get lost in a
story; to find the help that one needs in fiction; to start anew. She also shows that it is possible to go back home, if not by way of ship or airplane, then by way of literature.

*Mister Pip* is a novel that shows how literature can change lives, for the better or for the worse.
Works Cited


