

THE ORWELL PRIZE 2008

**LONGLISTED ENTRY:
CLIVE JAMES, BBC RADIO 4
A Point of View**

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About ten years back there were a few newspaper stories in Australia about a young Aboriginal woman – in the northern Territory, I think – who had graduated in law. In addition to her cleverness she was very good looking. Stand by for the media brouhaha. If the young and gifted are black too, they don't often get to choose the rest of their destiny: for good or ill, they become representatives. But not much more was heard of the young lawyer. The media somehow forgot her, and eventually so did I, until the whole subject came alive for me again last weekend when Britain's new star racing driver Lewis Hamilton, in Adelaide for the first grand prix of the new Formula 1 season, and the first grand prix in which he had ever driven, got a podium finish.

It takes a petrol-head like me to fully appreciate how unusual it is for a driver of any colour to do this on his first drive. Even a non-car-nut will appreciate that it can't be easy, because all those other drivers want it too, and they can all drive. There were other British drivers who finished further down the field who had been at it for years and had never done what young Hamilton did. Two of them had won F1 races but they hadn't reached the podium on their first time out.

Jenson Button, who has spent seven years in harness and won exactly one grand prix so far, could console himself that some very good drivers go their whole career and never win anything, but there he was down there in Adelaide getting nowhere in his eco-friendly Honda that apparently offsets its carbon emissions by going slowly. And David Coulthard, who has won thirteen races in his time, is now in a car that seems to have developed a passive-aggressive personality.

A nice man in real life, David Coulthard will live to laugh at his bad day, but at the moment he probably doesn't find anything very amusing about the spectacle of yet another young Briton taking his turn as Britain's boy wonder. And this boy –wonder automatically gets more press than any previous British boy –wonder of whatever height, class and degree of good looks, because this boy –wonder is black.

Luckily, for the other drivers and for everybody else in the formula one world, skin-colour won't enter into it. Race has got nothing to do with racing. For a long while there wasn't a single black contender to help prove this to be so, but finally there is one, and he seems to have all the other qualities too: qualities which drivers as gifted as he is usually develop later, or never. Naturally wise, considerate and modest, he's as graceful in his deportment as Denzel Washington. He hasn't even got Barrack Obama's ears problem. But there's the potential problem for him, because the press, regaled with such an impeccably wrapped package, will find it irresistible to make him a representative. It will be his destiny. A black destiny, however, can be a tough destiny to have.

To put any doubt of that at rest, there was the case of young Adam Regis, a 15 year old black London schoolboy who was stabbed to death recently. Young Adam was understandably

written up as a young man with a future. He was a reading mentor at school, and came from a prominent sporting family. He was going places.

Young people who stab people are going nowhere. Young Adam represented black hope. Young people who stab people represent nothing except what the press usually calls the gun culture, unless, as in this case, there are no guns in evidence, whereupon it gets called the knife culture.

After these ghastly events there were was a lot said by black people in the area about how the young lack role models. Yet young Adam was a role model, and he got killed. It's a fair bet that his very qualities made him a target.

If young men who carry knives are to put the knives away and follow the glorious course of Lewis Hamilton, they will need a lot more than to be told that the knife culture is a dead end. Ron Dennis, the boss of McLaren, Hamilton's wealthy grand prix team, laid down the law: if Hamilton didn't study, he couldn't drive. But who will lay down the law to the young and stupid? Can the role model do it, just by example? It sounds a heavy burden.

When the graceful and gracious black American tennis player Arthur Ashe became Wimbledon champion he found no lessening of the pressure on him to be a perfect character as well as a perfect stroke-maker. He could go as far as his great talent could take him in the direction of money and prestige. That kind of discrimination was over, and there was no longer any danger of second class treatment. But the first class treatment came at a price which was a kind of discrimination all on its own. He couldn't go as far as behaving like John McEnroe. If Arthur Ashe had thrown a single tantrum, he would have been headline news for a week. A single swear word to an umpire would have

brought on a debate in congress. It was because he was a representative.

Arthur Ashe has gone now but Tiger Woods, in another sport, has risen in his place to adopt the duties of the black champion who wins everything but is also the perfect gentleman at all times. Just occasionally Tiger allows himself to bounce a misbehaving putter off the green but if he even once called it a dirty name he knows what would happen next. He'd better not be caught eating even one extra hamburger. There are white American golfers who can barely fit into the bunker along with the ball, but Tiger has an obligation to go on looking gorgeous, and, above all, behaving like a saint. The part about the behaviour applies equally to our newscaster Sir Trevor McDonald. The late Reggie Bosanquet used to read the news when he was as drunk as a man can be and still speak, but if Sir Trevor ever availed himself of the same privilege, he would be forcibly reminded of his duties as a representative.

When I was still working full time in mainstream television I had a lot of stars for guests and a few of them were hard to handle. Diana Ross was one of them. If you wanted her to cross the studio diagonally, her lawyers had to agree to it beforehand. Later on, when she got officially hassled at Heathrow, I found myself chortling at the news. Then I reflected that it had probably been a few experiences like that early on that had made her so touchy. So I got my opinion of her back in balance, or I thought I did.

But then, just the other night, I realised all over again that where it belonged was out of balance. I was watching one of those cable channels where they run hits forever, and one of them was a compilation video of Diana Ross singing "Chain Reaction" at various times in her Tamla career, and she was so terrific that I was out of my chair dancing as if I could still dance. So she was

never a black obliged to behave well even when whites behaved badly towards her. She was never a representative of a race. She was an individual, and gifted beyond belief.

You can't really say that last thing about Naomi Campbell, who has just started a stint cleaning floors in New York to pay off the misdemeanour of bouncing her mobile phone off somebody's head. While cleaning the floors she will have to walk up and down, which is really what she does for a living, apart from looking lovely. But I did a TV show with her once, and I saw her in tears, and it wasn't because she'd just read her own novel for the first time.

The attention – the extra attention because she was a black model in a snow-white world – had got to her all over again, and it's not much of a defence of our callousness to say that she asked for it. So did Cathy Freeman, the Australian 400metres champion. She wanted to be hailed as a winner. But at the Sydney Olympics she was asked to win not just for herself and for Australia but for aboriginal destiny. She won anyway, but I'll never know how. I have noticed, though, that since her Olympic triumph I've ceased to notice her. I'm not even sure she's still in Australia. She's worked the disappearing trick. She's managed to come back from where that young law graduate never went.

She should be famous, that young lawyer: famous for being not famous. Somehow she staved off the over-meaningful life where everything you do isn't just for you, but for all the people who look even vaguely like you. It's too big a category. The biggest fight that lies ahead for Lewis Hamilton will be to prove that he doesn't want to make it as a black driver, any more than I want to

make it as a bald broadcaster. That why we call it making a name for yourself.