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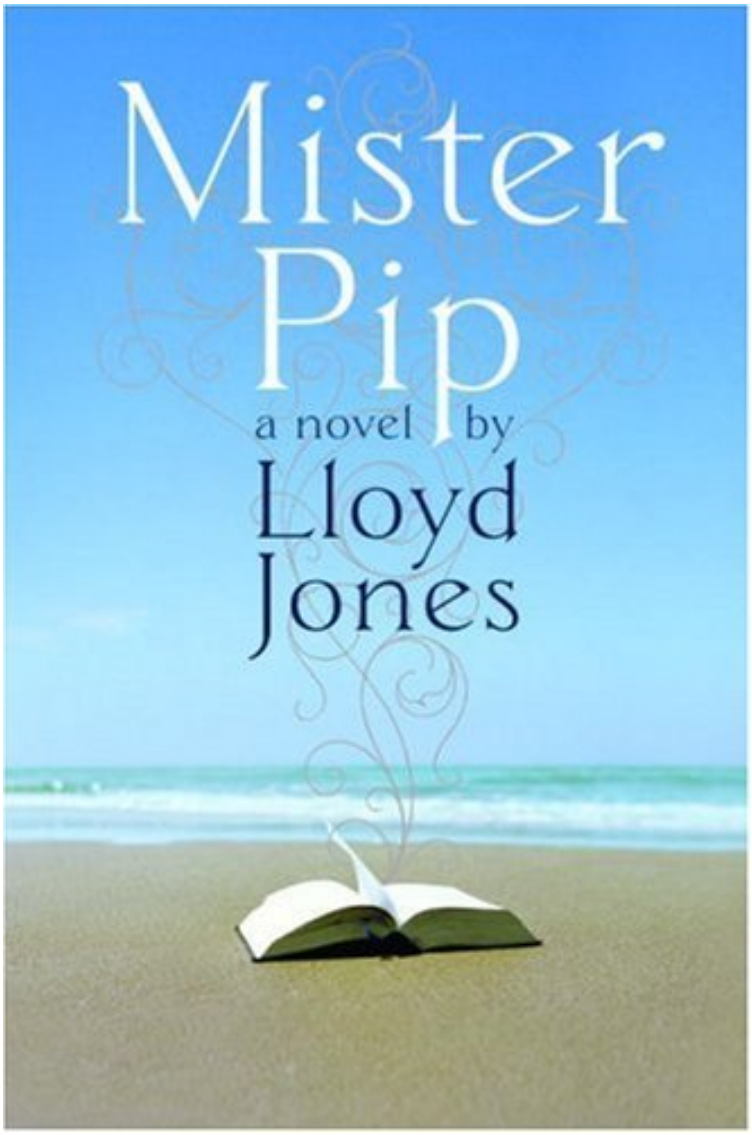
Mister Pip



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn a novel that is at once intense, beautiful, and fablelike, Lloyd Jones weaves a transcendent story that celebrates the resilience of the human spirit and the power of narrative to transform our lives.On a copper-rich tropical island shattered by war, where the teachers have fled with most everyone else, only one white man chooses to stay behind: the eccentric Mr. Watts, object of much curiosity and scorn, who sweeps out the ruined schoolhouse and begins to read to the children each day from Charles Dickenss classic Great Expectations. So begins this rare, original story about the abiding strength that imagination, once ignited, can provide. As artillery echoes in the mountains, thirteen-year-old Matilda and her peers are riveted by the adventures of a young orphan named Pip in a city called London, a city whose contours soon become more real than their own blighted landscape. As Mr. Watts says, A person entranced

by a book simply forgets to breathe. Soon come the rest of the villagers, initially threatened, finally inspired to share tales of their own that bring alive the rich mythology of their past. But in a ravaged place where even children are forced to live by their wits and daily survival is the only objective, imagination can be a dangerous thing.From the Hardcover edition.ExtraitChapter OneEVERYONE CALLED HIM POP EYE. EVEN IN those days, when I was a skinny thirteen-year-old, I thought he probably knew about his nickname but didn't care. His eyes were too interested in what lay up ahead to notice us barefoot kids.He looked like someone who had seen or known great suffering and hadn't been able to forget it. His large eyes in his large head stuck out further than anyone else's--like they wanted to leave the surface of his face. They made you think of someone who can't get out of the house quickly enough.Pop Eye wore the same white linen suit every day. His trousers snagged on his bony knees in the sloppy heat. Some days he wore a clown's nose. His nose was already big. He didn't need that red lightbulb. But for reasons we couldn't think of he wore the red nose on certain days--which may have meant something to him. We never saw him smile. 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. You saw her huge bum and worried about the toilet seat. You thought of her mother and birth and that stuff.At two-thirty in the afternoon the parrots sat in the shade of the trees and looked down at a human shadow one-third longer than any seen before. There were only the two of them, Mr. and Mrs. Pop Eye, yet it felt like a procession.The younger kids saw an opportunity and so fell in behind. Our parents looked away. They would rather stare at a colony of ants moving over a rotting pawpaw. Some stood by with their idle machetes, waiting for the spectacle to pass. For the younger kids the sight consisted only of a white man towing a black woman. They saw what the parrots saw, and what the dogs saw while sitting on their scrawny arses snapping their jaws at a passing mosquito. Us older kids sensed a bigger story. Sometimes we caught a snatch of conversation. Mrs. Watts was as mad as a goose. Mr. Watts was doing penance for an old crime. Or maybe it was the result of a bet. The sight represented a bit of uncertainty in our world, which in every other way knew only sameness.Mrs. Pop Eye held a blue parasol to shade herself from the sun. It was the only parasol in the whole of the island, so we heard. We didn't ask after all the black umbrellas we saw, let alone the question: what was the difference between these black umbrellas and the parasol? And not because we cared if we looked dumb, but because if you went too far with a question like that one, it could turn a rare thing into a commonplace thing. We loved that word--parasol--and we weren't about to lose it just because of some dumb-arse question. Also, we knew, whoever asked that question would get a hiding, and serve them bloody right too.They didn't have any kids. Or if they did they were grown up and living somewhere else, maybe in America, or Australia or Great Britain. They had names. She was Grace and black like us. He was Tom Christian Watts and white as the whites of your eyes, only sicker.There are some English names on the headstones in the church graveyard. The doctor on the other side of the island had a full Anglo-Saxon name even though he was black like the rest of us. So, although we knew him as Pop Eye we used to say "Mr. Watts" because it was the only name like it left in our district.They lived alone in the minister's old house. You couldn't see it from the road. It used to be surrounded by grass, according to my mum. But after the minister died the authorities forgot about the mission and the lawnmower rusted. Soon the bush grew up around the house, and by the time I was born Mr. and Mrs. Pop Eye had sunk out of view of the world. The only times we saw them was when Pop Eye, looking like a tired old nag circling the well, pulled his wife along in the trolley. The trolley had bamboo rails. Mrs. Pop Eye rested her hands on these.o be a show-off you need an audience. But Mrs. Pop Eye didn't pay us any attention. We weren't worthy of that. It was as if we didn't exist. Not that we cared. Mr. Watts interested us more.Because Pop Eye was the only white for miles around, little kids stared at him until their ice blocks melted over their black hands. Older kids sucked in their breath and knocked on his door to ask to do their "school project" on him. When the door opened some just froze and stared. I knew an older girl who was invited in; not everyone was. She said there were books everywhere. She asked him to talk about his life. She sat in a chair next to a glass of water he had poured for her, pencil in hand, notebook open. He said: "My dear, there has been a great deal of it. I expect more of the same." She wrote this down. She showed her teacher, who praised her initiative. She even brought it over to our house to show me and my mum, which is how I know about it.It wasn't just for the fact he was the last white man that made Pop Eye what he was to us--a source of mystery mainly, but also confirmation of something else we held to be true.We had grown up believing white to be the color of all the

important things, like ice cream, aspirin, ribbon, the moon, the stars. White stars and a full moon were more important when my grandfather grew up than they are now that we have generators.When our ancestors saw the first white they thought they were looking at ghosts or maybe some people who had just fallen into bad luck. Dogs sat on their tails and opened their jaws to await the spectacle. The dogs thought they were in for a treat. Maybe these white people could jump backwards or somersault over trees. Maybe they had some spare food. Dogs always hope for that.The first white my grandfather saw was a shipwrecked yachtsman who asked him for a compass. My grandfather didn't know what a compass was, so he knew he didn't have one. I picture him clasping his hands at his back and smiling. He wouldn't want to appear dumb. The white man asked for a map. My grandfather didn't know what he was asking for, and so pointed down at the man's cut feet. My grandfather wondered how the sharks had missed that bait. The white man asked where he had washed up. At last my grandfather could help. He said it was an island. The white man asked if the island had a name. My grandfather replied with the word that means "island." When the man asked directions to the nearest shop my grandfather burst out laughing. He pointed up at a coconut tree and back over the white's shoulder whence he had come, meaning the bloody great ocean stocked with fish. I have always liked that story.Other than Pop Eye or Mr. Watts, and some Australian mine workers, I'd seen few other living whites. The ones I had seen were in an old film. At school we were shown the visit by the duke of something or other many years before in nineteen-hundred-and-something. The camera kept staring at the duke and saying nothing. We watched the duke eat. The duke and the other whites wore mustaches and white trousers. They even wore buttoned-up jackets. They weren't any good at sitting on the ground either. They kept rolling over onto their elbows. We all laughed--us kids--at the whites trying to sit on the ground as they would in a chair. They were handed pig trotters in banana leaves. One man in a helmet could be seen asking for something. We didn't know what until he was brought a piece of white cloth, which he used to wipe his mouth. We roared our heads off laughing.Mostly, though, I was watching out for my grandfather. He was one of the skinny kids marching by in bare feet and white singlets. My grandfather was the second to top kid kneeling in a human pyramid in front of the white men in helmets eating pig trotters. Our class was asked to write an essay on what we had seen, but I had no idea what it was about. I didn't understand the meaning of it so I wrote about my grandfather and the story he told of the shipwrecked white man he had found washed up like a starfish on the beach of his village, which in those days had no electricity or running water and didn't know Moscow from rum.Chapter TwoWHAT I AM ABOUT TO TELL RESULTS, I think, from our ignorance of the outside world. My mum knew only what the last minister had told her in sermons and conversations. She knew her times tables and the names of some distant capitals. She had heard that man had been to the moon but was inclined not to believe such stories. She did not like boastfulness. She liked even less the thought that she might have been caught out, or made a fool of. She had never left Bougainville. On my eighth birthday I remember thinking to ask her how old she was. She quickly turned her face away from me, and for the first time in my life I realized I had embarrassed her.Her comeback was a question of her own. "How old do you think I am?"When I was eleven, my father flew off on a mining plane. Before that, though, he was invited to sit in a classroom and watch films about the country he was going to. There were films on pouring tea: the milk went in the cup first--though when you prepared your bowl of cornflakes the milk went in after. My mum says she and my father argued like roosters over that last one.Sometimes when I saw her sad I knew she would be thinking back to that argument. She would look up from whatever she was doing to say, "Perhaps I should have shut up. I was too strong. What do you think, girl?" This was one of the few times she was seriously interested in my opinion and, like the question concerning her age, I always knew what to say to cheer her up.My father was shown other films. He saw cars, trucks, planes. He saw motorways and became excited. But then there was a demonstration of a pedestrian crossing. You had to wait for a boy in a white coat to raise his sign with "sticks up!"My father got scratchy. There were too many roads with hard edges and these kids in white coats had the power to control traffic with their stop signs. Now they argued again. My mum said it was no different here. You couldn't just walk where you liked. There was a clip over the ear if you strayed. 'Cause, she said, it was as the Good Book says. You might know about heaven but it didn't mean you had entry as of right.For a while we treasured a postcard my father sent from Townsville. This is what he had to say: Up to the moment the plane entered the clouds he looked down and saw where we lived for the very first time. From out at sea the view is of a series of mountain peaks. From the air he was amazed to see our island look no bigger than a cow pat. But my mum didn't care about that stuff. All my mum wanted to know was if where he had gone to there were pay packets. A month later there was a second postcard. He said pay packets hung off factory rafters like

breadfruit. And that settled it. We were going to join him--that's what we were going to do, when Francis Ona and his rebels declared war on the copper mine and the company, which, in some way that I didn't understand at the time, brought the redskin soldiers from Port Moresby to our island. 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.News of war arrives as bits of maybe and hearsay. Rumor is its mistress. Rumor, which you can choose to believe or ignore. We heard that no one could get in or out. We didn't know what to make of that, because how could you seal off a country? What would you tie it up in or wrap around it? We didn't know what to believe, then the redskin soldiers arrived, and we learned about the blockade.We were surrounded by sea, and while the redskins' gunboats patrolled the coastline their helicopters flew overhead. There was no newspaper or radio to guide our thoughts. We relied on word of mouth. The redskins were going to choke the island and the rebels into submission. That's what we heard. "Good luck to them," said my mum. That's how much we cared. We had fish. We had our chickens. We had our fruits. We had what we had always had. In addition to that, a rebel supporter could add, "We had our pride."Then, one night, the lights went out for good. There was no more fuel for the generators. We heard the rebels had broken into the hospital in Arawa, further down the coast, and taken all the medical supplies. That news really worried our mums, and soon the littlest kids came down with malaria and there was nothing that could be done to help them. We buried them and dragged their weeping mothers away from their tiny graves.Us kids hung around with our mums. We helped in the gardens. We stalked each other beneath trees that rise several hundred feet in the air. We played in the streams that tumble and spill down steep hillsides. We found new pools in which to look for our floating faces of mischief. We played in the sea and our black skins got blacker under the sun.From the Hardcover edition.From Publishers WeeklyA promising though ultimately overwrought portrayal of the small rebellions and crises of disillusionment that constitute a young narrator's coming-of-age unfolds against an ominous backdrop of war in Jones's latest. When the conflict between the natives and the invading redskin soldiers erupts on an unnamed tropical island in the early 1990s, 13-year-old Matilda Laimo and her mother, Dolores, are unified with the rest of their village in their efforts for survival. Amid the chaos, Mr. Watts, the only white local (he is married to a native), offers to fill in as the children's schoolteacher and teaches from Dickens's Great Expectations. The precocious Matilda, who forms a strong attachment to the novel's hero, Pip, uses the teachings as escapism, which rankles Dolores, who considers her daughter's fixation blasphemous. With a mixture of thrill and unease, Matilda discovers independent thought, and Jones captures the intricate, emotionally loaded evolution of the mother-daughter relationship. Jones (The Book of Fame; Biografi) presents a carefully laid groundwork in the tense interactions between Matilda, Dolores and Mr. Watts, but the extreme violence toward the end of the novel doesn't quite work. Jones's prose is faultless, however, and the story is innovative enough to overcome the misplayed tragedy. (July) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.