



David Mitchell: 'I've been calling *The Bone Clocks* my midlife crisis novel'

Cloud Atlas author David Mitchell is back with another multi-stranded, time-hopping epic, and he is favourite to win the Booker prize

Steven Poole

Saturday 30 August 2014 08.30 BST

The novelist David Mitchell doesn't believe in the death of the book. "Books take hundreds of years to disappear, once they're printed. That's just a fact, isn't it?" he says, mock quizzically. "But the internet, that depends on a network of power grids. That's not a matter of opinion. And those grids depend on energy sources. That isn't just some liberal sandal-wearing Guardian attitude." He smiles. And as the oil and gas run out, he asks, "Where is the energy coming from?"

That is one of the questions powering Mitchell's new book, *The Bone Clocks*, which is possibly his best novel yet. True to form, it features a set of interlocking stories in multiple genres. There is a teenage girl running away from home in the 1980s, a sociopathic Oxford

undergraduate cavorting in the early 90s, the story of a war reporter, a literary satire about a novelist and his critic enemy, and an epilogue of dystopian near-future science fiction, with civilisation retreating in a global "Endarkenment". Irrupting into these stories, meanwhile, is a supernatural war. The good guys are a group of people who get reincarnated 49 days after they die, with full knowledge of their past lives. The bad guys achieve a kind of pseudo-immortality - they stop ageing, but can still be killed by violence or accident - by murdering psychic children, "decanting" their souls into an evil wine. "A book can't be a half-fantasy any more than a woman can be half-pregnant," a literary agent in the novel says, not having read this one.

Mitchell has lived in Cork, Ireland's second-largest city, since 2004. ("I mean, if you could live here and make a living here, why wouldn't you? It's so beautiful.") We meet in a bar, which he describes as "one of my regular boltholes". Early in our conversation, I gently mention Stephen King, and Mitchell needs no explanation as to what I am getting at. "When it came out, I thought, 'I'd better not read those reviews!'" In *Doctor Sleep*, an evil gang of supernatural beings survives by feeding on the psychic abilities (what in that novel is called "steam") of children. Weird coincidence, huh? But Mitchell has a deeper theory. "Maybe it's not so surprising," he suggests, "that we both hit on the same solution to the same problem. The question of how you motivate evil."

In *The Bone Clocks*, the bad guys offer ordinary mortals a bargain. You'll stop growing old for ever, and all you have to do is source a child for decanting every three years. "I wanted a kind of Faustian contract," Mitchell explains, "which would make a kind, sensitive person pause before rejecting it. I mean, sex, money? Just take control of a hedge fund and you can have all that. But rewriting the terms of existence so you don't have to age? I think most of us would think about it before saying no." Especially, he thinks, "when youth is definitely in the past. And you look in the bathroom mirror and see your father ... " Mitchell, who is 45, chuckles. "I've taken to calling this my midlife-crisis novel." Perhaps not coincidentally, the novel also touches on themes such as Alzheimer's, the Iraq war and occupation, global warming, and the aforementioned future collapse of technological civilisation.

Aficionados of Mitchell's work will not be surprised to learn that *The Bone Clocks* features characters (and an animal) from previous novels. Indeed he thinks of himself as engaged in writing a series of interconnected novels, what he calls the "übernovel" - as if each novel itself weren't complicated enough. "I'm really best at writing novellas," he explains, but "I'm a novella-writer *and* a maximalist." Hence, fat novels made out of novellas such as his extraordinary debut, *Ghostwritten* (1999), whose narrators include a Hong Kong-based lawyer, a London musician and ghostwriter, and a Japanese Aum cult member (Mitchell lived and taught in Japan for nine years), and *Cloud Atlas* (2004), which ranges from the South Pacific in the 19th century to a post-apocalyptic future, and was made into a 2012 film by the Wachowski brothers and Tom Tykwer. Apparently more linear in structure but just as playful are his Japanese romance *number9dream* (2001), the autobiographical *Black Swan Green* (2006), set in the Malvern Hills in Worcestershire where Mitchell grew up, and *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010), set among Dutch traders in late 18th-century Japan. "I don't want to write something on which there are already 500 slight variations in WH Smith." Mitchell explains, before immediately hurrying to avoid giving offence to the unnamed bestseller-writers thronging the shelves of WH Smith. "Of course I have *enormous respect* for those people ... but it's got to be something I'm really thrilled about doing."

His willingness to essay the unusual also resulted in a Twitter short story, set in the same world as *The Bone Clocks*, which appeared over a week at the end of July. Called "The Right Sort", it is narrated by a boy tripping on his mother's Valium pills. This gave Mitchell the narrative justification for the form: the Valium, he explains, causes the boy's perceptions to be

packaged in "blips" or pulses, the length of tweets. "I wanted to make it work as a Twitter story, not despite the fact that it was in tweets," he explains. "I like these kinds of restrictions." This leads to a discussion of Oulipo, the group of French writers who imposed bizarre straitjackets on their writing, as a way to get something done rather than nothing at all. "Perc is great!" Mitchell exclaims. "Have you read *Life: A User's Manual?* The story of the artist who makes the jigsaw. What a beautiful metaphor! And yet you can hold your hands up and say, 'It's not a metaphor at all, it's just what it appears to be.'"

Mitchell himself resists being described as an "experimental" novelist, perhaps because "experimental" can sound so arid and forbidding - not at all, in other words, like his raucously enjoyable fiction. ("I'm a plot'n'character guy," he insists.) Yet close readers of Mitchell's oeuvre will be happy to find, in *The Bone Clocks*, a clutch of apparently throwaway callbacks to previous volumes of the übernovel. (There is, for example, a Chinese takeaway called the Thousand Autumns Restaurant that refers to his previous novel.) These seem to function as what programmers call Easter Eggs - gratuitous hidden pleasures that don't affect the functioning of the whole. Does Mitchell put them in as deliberate fan-service? He smiles. "It's really meservice, but I take the view that if it pleases me, it might please other people."

One of the most satisfying rhetorical coups de théâtre of the book is the belated explanation of the title. John Le Carré employs a similar effect in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* - only late in the novel does it become clear, with spectacular frisson, what the title means. Here, too, you won't know what bone clocks are until page 501. It's an exercise in "delayed gratification", Mitchell says, something novels are especially good at. "In this 'long form'," he says, deliberately holding the words apart and trying to reinvest them with the weight of meaning, "you don't have to show everything immediately."

Actually isn't it strange, he observes, that our culture describes itself as addicted to instant gratification? "If you were writing one of those books where every chapter is named after a different song from a different decade ... then this decade would be "Skip to the Good Part". [A 2011 pop hit by He Is We.] We're supposedly in this "Skip to the Good Part" age!" And yet, he points out, people read very long novels (whether by him or, say, George RR Martin), and they watch TV shows such as *True Detective*, *Mad Men* ("where four episodes later you say, 'Ah, that made sense'") or even *Sherlock*: "Despite all the hurly-burly - the fast cutting and so on - it also trusts the audience enough to do slow reveal." Slow reveal, it turns out, is one of Mitchell's favourite things. They do it, too, in serial comics, and we discuss the British comic *2000 AD*, home of Judge Dredd and other deathless characters. "Mega-City One is so huge, so dense, so consistent!" Mitchell enthuses. "That taught me a lot of things about storytelling."

Has he thought of writing for TV himself? He's been sounded out, but it's a Faustian bargain rather like that offered by the devils in his novel. "The pact is," he explains, "that you spend two or three years in development, and then someone up the executive chain gets fired" - and the project collapses. So he'll stick to novels. "I know how the production process works with this 300-year-old form ... And I've got my next five books planned out. That's probably going to take me till I'm 60." (Mitchell tries to publish a book "every World Cup cycle". He nearly missed it this year, as he was working on *The Bone Clocks* until March, but it all worked out.)



Susan Sarandon in the 2012 film adaptation of *Cloud Atlas*.

Photograph: Sportsphoto/Allstar

That's not to say he hasn't enjoyed his brushes with the TV and film worlds. When they were making the film of *Cloud Atlas* - "I was sitting right here with the Wachowski brothers ... " he remembers, not trying to namedrop - he was busy noticing things. "Hollywood agents have this term 'kill clause'," he remembers brightly. "If you hire an actor, and it becomes clear he's unreliable, and you need to get him off the production, that will be written into the contract as the 'kill money'." Mitchell impersonates an agent talking on the phone: "We've got our finger on the trigger, but are you sure you really want us to pull it? Because it'll cost you six figures in kill money." He is delighted by the mafioso posturing of it. "Every tribe has its own secret language!" That is equally true for the tribe of quasi-immortals or "atemporals" in *The Bone Clocks*.

Mitchell had fun settling on the right jargon: horologists, scansion (for reading a person's thoughts), redaction (for deleting them: "Of course it would be 'redact'," Mitchell says contentedly), metalives and psychosoterica. The atemporals can sometimes be free-floating consciousnesses getting inside other people's heads - rather like, you might think, the novelist at work.

Another example of the power of language to convey thought was the surprise bestseller that Mitchell had last year. He and his wife, Keiko Yoshida, translated a memoir of autism by a 13-year-old Japanese boy named Naoki Higashida, which was published in English as *The Reason I Jump*. They had the Japanese text in the house because they have a son with autism. "It's not just a myth that people with autism have a richer and more intellectual experience than they are usually able to get across ... they really do!" Mitchell says. "And he [Higashida] proved it by writing this book, by pointing to kanji [Japanese characters] one at a time on a board." It seemed the universe was asking Mitchell to get involved. "My wife's Japanese, I'm a writer, we have a kid with autism ... all the little fruit-machine slots lined up." So he made it happen, and the book was a huge success. "It's more important than any of my novels. In terms of something that's useful."

Mitchell and Higashida are now collaborating on another book, based on their email correspondence. "Just the other day I was asking him about smells - how he perceives smells, whether he has a favourite smell," he says. "We're both writers, and we're talking about writerly things."

As he enjoys talking to writers about writerly things, I later wonder aloud whether, when he gets together with his friend Lawrence Norfolk, the two like to discuss the technical minutiae of writing historical fiction. Mitchell giggles in surprised assent. "We do! We do geek out about about historical-fiction technique! Of course we talk about a lot of other things as well, but it's

something I really value, the chance to see other writers and talk shop, which I don't get to do much here."

Of talking shop, meanwhile, there is much - in a comic vein - in the part of *The Bone Clocks* that centres on a novelist called Crispin Hershey, who seems a little redolent of Martin Amis to me, though Mitchell insists that there is more of himself in the character. (Hershey's first *épater-la-bourgeoisie* novel was called *Desiccated Embryos*, a title that Mitchell explains he stole from a piece by the composer Erik Satie: "It's horrible - it's not one of the beautiful pieces you're supposed to listen to, it's one of the ones you're not supposed to listen to.") At one point, Hershey is teaching a creative-writing class:

"My only cavil is the, uh, violation scene. Still a little adverb-rich, I felt."

"Fine." Devon uses a breezy tone to prove she's unoffended. "The violation in the flower-shop or the violation in the motel?"

"The one in the car-wash."

This passage has the ring of hard-won experience, just as do Hershey's deliciously embarrassing experiences on the literary-festival circuit. And, indeed, Mitchell did some teaching, purely as research for this section. I ask him what he thinks of the kerfuffle earlier this year when Hanif Kureishi, a professor of creative writing, said that creative-writing courses were "a waste of time", but he is reluctant to be drawn on the value of such courses, since he didn't do one himself. Nor does he offer much about his own writing ritual. "I've got kids instead of a daily word-count target," he explains wryly.

He talks about the question of whether one suffers "the writer's nerdism" ("If you're spacing out during a meal thinking, 'How do I make that part work?'; if you feel slightly uncomfortable when you're not doing it; if it's what you're thinking about first thing in the morning and literally last thing at night ... "). "The things that are keeping you from writing - that's the material. Whether you're nursing an ill grandma, or you've got a kid with autism ... You know, there's that saying, 'Life is what happens when you're making other plans'. Well, it's the 'what happens', not the plans for writing." He grins.

Mitchell's latest report from the (one hopes allegorized) frontier of "what happens", *The Bone Clocks*, actually ends twice. First there is a kind of supernatural superhero battle between the warring parties. And then there is an elegiac sixth novella, a sombre coda. But what Mitchell wants to emphasise is that, unlike a movie (which would have to end shortly after the battle), a novel can reconcile the "artistic logic" of the exciting climax with the "humanistic logic" of showing how ordinary, humdrum existence continues.

"People's lives don't end at climaxes," he points out. "The minutiae of life go on, in a banal way - which is good for most of us." And with that, Mitchell is off to pick up some fish from the market on the way home.

The Bone Clocks is published by Sceptre on 2 September. Join David Mitchell for a discussion of his new novel at the Royal Geographical Society, 1 Kensington Gore, London SW7, on Wednesday. Tickets £20. theguardian.com/reader-events.

More interviews

Topics

David Mitchell Fiction Cloud Atlas

Save for later Article saved

Reuse this content