

THE MAGICAL WORLDS OF DAVID MITCHELL

David Mitchell once more works his world-creating magic on a Japanese historical epic – Ed Wood asks him how

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An old man teaches a young woman piano, while between them lies an unexplained key; peasants celebrate the new harvest while in the background a lone figure watches from a hill; a couple embrace while a shadowy figure watches from a doorway across the street. These are not scenes from David Mitchell's latest novel, but some of his favourite Dutch paintings from the Wallace Collection in London, which we take in after our interview. But his interests are clear: each of these images carries a mystery, a subtext dictating larger events offstage – they hold a sense of magic.

But let's rewind by a few hours. I bump into Mitchell – wrapped up against the cold; rangy, with a face happy with laughter lines – outside the restaurant in which we're due to meet ten minutes later. He, like I, arrived early to make sure he would be on time and, when I mention the cold, he toys with offering me his hat. This politeness shows how grounded is the author who, in 2007, was named as one of *Time* magazine's most influential 100 people in the world. *Time* credited Mitchell with the creation of the 21st-century novel, perhaps not such an extraordinary claim when one considers the impact of his time-jumping, country-hopping novels, most of all *Cloud Atlas* (whose structure is a spin on an Italo Calvino story). Mitchell shrugs off the accolade. 'I can't think of myself in those terms,' he says. 'I love my job, and my vocation pushes me into making those decisions.'

With *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, his vocation has 'pushed him' into a maturation of his previous themes and techniques. Set over 1799 and 1800 in the Dutch trading post of Dejima – a tiny man-made island perched on the great mass of isolationist Japan in the Nagasaki harbour – it's one part historical comedy, two parts epic romance. Its eponymous hero »



Jacob de Zoet is a clerk of the Dutch East Indies Company who, against impossible odds, tries to rout the endemic corruption in Dejima. As Mitchell says, 'Jacob's the John Entwistle of the piece, the stable anchor.' However, this married clerk's arrival on the island also begins his love-at-first-glance of burn-scarred Orito Abigawa, a midwife training with the taciturn Doctor Marinus. At a time when Christianity was outlawed in Japan and its lands considered a fortress, any real contact would be disastrous, but a kind and clever interpreter, Uzaemon Ogawa, plays go-between for them – until a local lord takes more than a passing interest himself in Orito.

Mitchell has touched on Japan in previous books, but *The Thousand Autumns* is the first time he has set an entire book in the country he

taught in for eight years and where he met his wife, Keiko. 'It's been patiently waiting at the front of the queue,' he laments, 'but it's been queue-jumped twice by *Cloud Atlas* and *Black Swan Green*.'

The book is substantially built on real events. 'Nothing on Dejima is made up, or very little,' Mitchell explains. 'Dejima existed, it still exists – it's slowly being rebuilt, though the only industry now is tourism.' In fact, through his magnificent descriptive powers and the colourful international cast of characters he has assembled, each of which has an impressively distinct voice, the setting feels authentic without veering into box-ticking surface research. Later in the book, the Napoleonic Wars cast a shadow across Dejima with the arrival of an English ship. 'HMS *Phaeton* sailed around 1808,' he says.

'The Dutch found themselves on the wrong side of the Napoleonic Wars overseas, so the English cherry-picked their positions. They sent a ship to see what they could make of Dejima. They didn't carry out a full bombardment as I describe, but they did some damage to the smaller Dutch ships. I brought it forward by eight years, too.'

This faithfulness to history makes me wonder whether Mitchell would ever write a novel about Hiroshima, where he lived. But, no. 'The turf's already been very well staked by Japanese writers,' says Mitchell, 'and John Hersey, who wrote *Hiroshima*, whereas there's nothing worthwhile, my wife says, about Dejima.'

And Japanese writers do have an effect on the author's writing – most of all, Mitchell has been compared to Haruki Murakami, that great cult writer of off-kilter, day-glo romance. For *The Thousand Autumns*, says Mitchell, there were other influences: 'A book called *Samurai* by Shusaku Endo, who people like to call the Japanese Graham Greene – I think it would be more appropriate to call Greene the English Endo. That's a great book set about 100 years before mine, when the prohibition of Christianity was a new thing. Tanizaki I admire, he's probably the pick of Japanese writers in translation who you don't have to make allowances for in the way you do for [Yukio] Mishima. Murakami is in a category on his own, I think.'

There is, of course, a more personal 'real' aspect to this book: like Jacob, Mitchell is a European man in love with a Japanese woman. But the author denies any autobiographical similarities – though he says that the relationship did help with empathy, if not as one might expect. 'More importantly than with Jacob, I found it easier to put myself in *her* shoes. Male writers have a harder time writing female characters than vice versa, mainly because we don't have to spend many of our formative years protecting ourselves from "The Other". Women have to work out how men tick much sooner than vice versa – at least before they get married – so already men are at a disadvantage. And if it's a woman from another culture, then an insider informant is probably a necessity, just because of the consequences of getting it wrong.' Mitchell, thankfully, says he was 'very lucky' with the family he married into, but Japan's isolationist attitude – which is central to *The Thousand Autumns* – still helped him to make the decision about where he and his family would live.

'The Dutch writer Cees Nooteboom says, "All countries are different, but Japan is differently different",' says Mitchell. 'It still considers itself a fortress: there's no immigration to speak of. A town has a doctor, a dentist, an electrician... and "Ooh look! There's the town's white person going by". I can handle that, but it guards what it sees as the purity of its identity very jealously.'

Mitchell therefore moved the family to Cork, in Ireland, where, he says, 'The kids have a much better quality of life. It's ordinary for a house in the country to have a third of an acre of scrubland, whereas in Japan that would be home to 200 souls. 'And in Ireland my wife is odd because she's the only Japanese person in town – but in West Cork it's OK to be from somewhere else. They even have a name for us, "blow-ins", and there are loads of us. In Japan, though, my wife is thought of as weird for a different reason – because of me

and the kids. In a thousand and one subtle ways she would be reminded of the difference of her marital condition every single day, and that's not nice.'

The hero and heroine of *The Thousand Autumns*, Orito and Jacob, are not as fortunate as their creator. Dejima is their home and their prison, the place that keeps them apart. 'It's also a machine to kill plots,' Mitchell adds. 'It's a place where there are spies everywhere; they can't get a good affair going, not unless I were to drift off into fantasy territory, a *Madame Butterfly* cliché, which just drives my wife crazy. As she puts it, "Suppose it were the other way around and a dumpy, little, uninteresting businessman arrives in Portland Square and loads of models just drape themselves on him..." So I wanted to avoid *Memoirs of a Geisha*-land [we agree that Arthur Golden probably did well enough with the book not to mind the negative connotations], and in a way the price I have to pay is a lack of consummation... but then, that opens the way to a relationship that's based on haunting.'

That 'haunting' transforms into tangible danger as Orito is abducted in a magnificent *volte face* that comes a third of the way through the

book, radically taking the book's palette into darker territory and reminding readers that Mitchell is the master of the episodic structure – though critics have also pulled at this thread as an overly frequently used ace in his hand. I tell Mitchell I was even a little irritated with him for the change of direction.

'Good,' he says. 'I'm attracted by the aesthetics of the jolt.' So you like that moment when a reader is annoyed at you for leaving behind a favourite character? 'As long as you don't throw the book across the room – or, if you do, you retrieve the book to find out

what happens. I don't do it consciously to provoke. It's more because there was so much I wanted to do in the book. It was going to be six sections long [rather than its three]. It's a chance to bring in a new cast and a new world.'

World creation is a key aspect of Mitchell's work, with characters and story threads running through and between his novels like spun silk. To me, I tell him, it feels as though he is building a grand narrative. 'Yes, I am,' he replies. 'Each of the novels is in fact a chapter.' In what? '*Mon oeuvre, mon garçon!*' He laughs, but then, more seriously adds, 'My life work.'

This leaves me wondering about the links in this book, and he is happy to elucidate: 'The Irish carpenter Twomey, whose real name is Muntervary, is a distant relative of the particle physicist in *Ghostwritten*. Then the boat is the same one that Adam Ewing is on in *Cloud Atlas*, on which the young midshipman here eventually becomes the captain then.' With so many links between his growing bibliography, it seems amazing that he, as he says, 'doesn't necessarily keep track.'

'I guess a Darwinian process happens in the memory,' he confides. 'Ideas that you really want to keep will win in the jungle of forgetfulness over ideas that you don't or which aren't that good. In the past, if I had an idea it would go in my notebook. Now I don't. I leave it a couple of days and I find that if it's a really good one it sticks. It's the same principle with my ongoing oeuvre project. There's a "job centre" process, too: if I have an opening for a character I think >>

'EACH OF MY NOVELS IS IN FACT A CHAPTER IN MY LIFE'S WORK'

Mitchell's oeuvre:
the story so far

about those I've already written and see if any are suitable for the appointment. If they are, I interview them further. And if they pass the audition, they can have the part.'

At this point dessert arrives, a very indulgent tiramisu, and I discover that David Mitchell is also a man with a fine taste in sweet puddings. 'Paradise,' he utters, sinking his spoon into the cream.

'I TELL HIM
I WAS A LITTLE
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"GOOD," HE SAYS'

As I talk to Mitchell, I begin to understand that his stories really do maketh the man. Several times throughout our interview he pulls out a hardback notebook, replete with neat lists in neat writing, to scribble down ideas or names that he likes: everything around him, including my opinions, is a source of inspiration. Like Murakami, he refashions the everyday into something otherworldly and magical, nowhere more so than in *The Thousand Autumns*, where the richness of his writing is more intense than in previous books, with descriptions of nature that Robert MacFarlane would be proud of. A moon is 'yeasty'; on a hillside, 'the aches and creaks of beeches and oaks give way to heavy-breathing evergreens'; 'thunder splits the rift where the sun floods in'; 'dark clouds clot and the dusk is silted with insects and bats'.

'Maybe I'm a frustrated landscape artist,' suggests Mitchell. 'I love the challenge and satisfaction of representing landscapes in words. What could be more different than a physical view of a vista and a bunch of words on the page? Yet you can make this connection between them, somehow evoking the former with the latter. That's my weakness, I love doing that.'

One thrilling aspect of *The Thousand Autumns* is his experiment with style. Much to my surprise, as well as the wit of Jacob's internalised asides there are moments of straight-up farce, one of which memorably involves a pell-mell chase after an ape (named William Pitt) that has stolen an amputated leg, and who eventually urinates on Jacob's head to show his displeasure at losing the race. Yet at the other end of the spectrum, we have David Peace-style broken-up paragraphs in which single lines of internal thought intersperse with dialogue; or, most unusually of all, there's a daring passage towards the end of the book told entirely in verse, a

**Ghostwritten**

PAPERBACK SCEPTRE

£7.99 OUT NOW

The cast list of Mitchell's first novel ranges from a member of a cult

which has launched a gas attack on the Tokyo Underground to a quantum physicist and a teenage jazz buff. His succession of intertwining stories, linked by an incorporeal being, transports the reader around the world.

**Number9dream**

PAPERBACK SCEPTRE

£7.99 OUT NOW

Reality and fantasy endlessly collide and interact in Mitchell's story of

a young man arriving in Tokyo to search for his missing father. As his quest for the truth takes him deeper and deeper into the darker underworlds of the city, his dreams, nightmares and manga-inspired fantasies loom ever larger.

**Cloud Atlas**

PAPERBACK SCEPTRE

£7.99 OUT NOW

From an American voyager in the Pacific in the mid-19th century

to a genetically engineered fast food waitress in a dystopian future, Mitchell's characters are linked in a narrative chain that moves brilliantly back and forth through the centuries to combine intellectual adventure with the delight of great storytelling.

**Black Swan Green**

PAPERBACK SCEPTRE

£7.99 OUT NOW

Mitchell's autobiographical novel turns its

back on some of the narrative experimentation of his earlier work (though here each chapter marks a month) to tell a much simpler story of an adolescent boy growing up in a sleepy village in Worcestershire in the 1980s and struggling to cope with the changes in his life.



Dylan Thomas-esque moment that sweeps us towards the climactic moment of tragic drama.

But there is also an overarching and unique aspect to the magic David Mitchell creates in his novels: the knowledge that something could be going on that you have missed, that his staging only allows you to see a fraction rather than the greater narrative occurring around the book – the hand of ‘god the author’, even. What might be happening offstage, even if it’s just in the reader’s mind, is as important as what’s on the page.

‘I think at an artisan level I like that,’ says Mitchell. ‘The best short stories do this, carrying the conviction that they are a tiny fragment of a massive world that was there before the short story and will continue after it.’

‘To use one of Nabokov’s great metaphors, it’s like you’re on a train going through a mountainous area and there are flashes of light as the train leaves one tunnel and before it enters the next, followed by darkness and another flash of light, then more darkness.’

‘The best short stories also make you feel that this is just a glimpse, but the line is vast. It is an artisan’s trick, part of the illusion of a novel, that it’s not just the world of the book that’s real, but the whole world in which the book is set and is part of. The metaworld of the novel... Maybe that’s what novel writing is, the creation of a world and its people in your head, and then the re-creation of that on the page.’

As someone who wants to push the concept of story in novels, I wonder what Mitchell makes of the film adaptation

of *Cloud Atlas*, currently struggling to come to fruition at the hands of Tom Tykwer (who directed the movie version of the similarly ‘unfilmable’ *Perfume*) and produced by the Wachowski brothers (*The Matrix*). ‘They wrote a very good screenplay of it, but it’s also massive, about three-and-a-half hours,’ says Mitchell. ‘At that length you have to get people of such magnitude that the studios are happy to put in lots of money. But I ask to be informed on a need-to-know basis only. It’s an active possible.’

Thankfully for readers rather than watchers, David Mitchell’s metaworld oeuvre project is set to continue in his next two books, the first of which will get those interested in mould-breaking fiction salivating. Without giving away the game, *Marinus* – the heroically grumpy but unusually

enlightened doctor of *The Thousand Autumns* – will be the thread running through all three books via a *Ghostwritten*-like process of soul transference. ‘I’m interested in ways to cheat death,’ Mitchell explains. ‘I want to smudge the pencil lines somewhat between sci-fi and non-sci-fi. So the second in the trilogy will be a book of 70 short stories, told one per year, starting in 1969 and ending in 2039. I want each one to be a standalone, but they would also be part of a series.’

My head filled with characters who never truly die and history that may or may not have occurred, I head out to the Wallace Collection beside Mitchell the artisan, Mitchell the magician, Mitchell the worldmaker – once more sporting his warm hat – to seek out more secrets.



The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet
by David Mitchell
HARDBACK SCEPTRE £18.99 MAY

To read an extract from *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, go to Wbqonline.com, or for more details see Waterstones.com/mitchell

Reader review

In 1799, young Jacob de Zoet arrives in Dejima with the Dutch East India Company, eager to set up a future with his wife back home. Set against the backdrop of Japanese isolationism at a time of European colonialism, Mitchell tells us the story of a man who cannot reconcile what he wants with what he must do.

Overall, I enjoyed the book despite a slow start. Once the sub-plot of the monastery is introduced in the second third, the pace picks up and the reason for many of the secondary characters becomes clear.

Jacob de Zoet seems to be more the fortuitous beneficiary of the decisions and

misfortunes of others than an active hero, and for me, it was strange to read a book where the protagonist is quite bland, yet where two cultures are so skilfully blended in the writing.

Audrey Christophory,
Waterstone’s Cardholder, Dundee