

Introduction

David Mitchell in the Labyrinth of Time

Paul A. Harris

“In the same way that my novels are built of hyperlinked novellas, I’m sort of building what I’ve taken to calling in a highfalutin way the ‘uberbook’ out of hyperlinked novels, because I’m a megalomaniac, and I like the idea of maximum scale,” Mr. Mitchell said. (Alter)

Oulipians are “Rats who build the labyrinth from which they propose to escape.” —Raymond Queneau (Mathews and Brotchie 201)

“... and so on to the end, to the invisible end, through the tenuous labyrinths of time.” —Jorge Luis Borges (119)

To date, David Mitchell’s fiction comprises six adventurously heterogeneous novels. Three are “cosmopolitan”¹ in scope and structure, composed of sections that skip freely around in time and space: *Ghostwritten* (2001), *Cloud Atlas* (2004), and *The Bone Clocks* (2014). There are two very different coming-of-age tales of teenage boys: *Number9dream* (2003), set in Tokyo, reads like a Haruki Murakami novel unfolding inside a video game; and the semi-autobiographical *Black Swan Green* (2007), narrated by a 13-year old in the English Midlands. The historical novel *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2011) faithfully evokes Dutch contact with Japan in Nagasaki Harbor at the turn into the 19th century, before turning into a romance-thriller.

Both within each text and across his corpus, Mitchell creates a complex dynamical tension by developing disparate stand-alone storylines and weaving these narrative threads into tapestries by turns intricate and fragile. His narratives combine linear and cyclical structures and temporalities in different ways, including having texts begin and end with sections told by the same narrator (*Ghostwritten*, *Bone Clocks*), bearing the same title (*Black Swan Green*), or returning to the same time period (*Cloud Atlas*). Mitchell’s narrative time oscillates between discrete succession and cyclic repetition: time may be broken into episodes causally connected in complete story arcs, or bent into concentric circles like the “infinite matryoshka doll of painted moments” (*Cloud* 393) that Isaac Sachs imagines in *Cloud Atlas*. Because his plotting is iterative and recursive, Mitchell’s

books resist the sense of an ending and a beginning alike: *Number9dream* commences multiple times and concludes with a blank page; *Cloud Atlas* sections begin and end twice and there are arguably two ‘endings’ to the novel. In the apposite last words of *The Bone Clocks*: in Mitchell’s corpus, “For a voyage to begin, another one must end, sort of” (*Bone Clocks* 620).

The Bone Clocks makes explicit Mitchell’s project to integrate all his work into an “uberbook.” His corpus has become a labyrinth he is building by stretching and folding, expanding and filling it in, a creative process reminiscent of his childhood penchant for drawing maps and mazes on large sheets of cartridge paper.² Like Borges, Mitchell builds labyrinths composed in and of time as well as space. But Borges’s labyrinths are multicursal mazes of “forking time” and infinite possible worlds, whereas Mitchell’s uberbook maps out a unicursal labyrinth, a linear path whose twists and turns generate a non-linear, topologically embedded time.³ The metric of clock time and chronological history gives way to a narrative time composed of multiple timescales, from epiphanic existential moments in individual lives to spectral traces of tribal memory, from geological eons to an instantaneously networked globe. Characters and events “distant” from one another on history’s timeline are placed in proximity or echo one another uncannily across generations. These temporal crossings and contacts create a feeling of being “entranced, as if living in a stream of time” (*Cloud* 408), as Luisa Rey puts it when she hears Robert Frobisher’s “Cloud Atlas Sextet” in a record store. While there are many such traces of transmigration in Mitchell’s books, they do not seem to express a fundamental metaphysical or mystical conviction driving the text. They are more like epiphenomenal effects or logical outcomes stemming from the physical and philosophical laws of labyrinthine time and its meandering stream.



The unicursal labyrinth, considered as a conceptual diagram of time, twists linear time into a repetitious

series of doublings back on itself, producing a temporal hiatus, an aporia or pause in which the directional distinction between past and future is lost.⁴ Mitchell constructs his labyrinth in a narrative laboratory that occupies such a niche, an aporia within which one surveys timescapes from a disembodied or transhistorical perspective. This narrative viewpoint assumes different forms in Mitchell's novels, from the *noncorpum* or Zoo-keeper in *Ghostwritten* to Esther Little in *The Bone Clocks*. As the artificer making the labyrinth, Mitchell generates equally vivid renditions of historical settings from the past (19th-century Perm Province in rural Russia) and the future (rural Ireland in 2043). The labyrinth maker's roles as historian and prophet may be intertwined to produce more complex time-bendings: in the three cosmopolitan novels, Mitchell deploys prolepsis to depict and diagnose the global present as a memory of the future.⁵ Ecological disaster and economic collapse are more readily rendered, it would seem, as events foreseen with the clarity of hindsight.⁶

The scales on which Mitchell's historical and speculative explorations unfold ultimately mark him as a novelist of the Anthropocene.⁷ His work is mapping the deep past of the human species; its evolution into an active force in natural history; and its future prospects in light of its technological innovations and the voracious exploitation of resources that comes with them. The myth of Theseus and the Minotaur figures the labyrinth as a site in which humanity confronts and conquers its animal nature. Mitchell's fiction could be seen as a labyrinth of Anthropocene time stretching from the deep past to the foreseeable future in which humanity is confronted with its predacious nature, an evolutionary drive that fuels the rapacious colonial-capitalist consumption of the earth's resources and species, including its own. In other words, Mitchell shows us humanity caught in a labyrinth of its own construction; the power of predacity has won in the past and, in the glum glimpses he gives us of our future, it continues to win out on the global level, with local pockets of resistance. Still, the archives of the future⁸ are incomplete, and so the end of the journey remains invisible in Mitchell's labyrinth of time.

The essays in this issue examine Mitchell's corpus from several theoretical perspectives, and touch on time in Mitchell's fiction in different ways. In his interview, David Mitchell writes compellingly of novels as model universes with their own temporal laws, and characters as components in thought-experiments in a laboratory of time. Jonathan Boulter reads *Ghostwritten* with Heidegger to sound the haunted depths of posthuman temporality it depicts, while Sean Hooks returns to the novel to mark the prescient qualities it reveals in retrospect. Rose Harris-Birtill traces the dynamic of entrapment and escape in the nested panopticons of *Number9dream* that ends in an unwritten future. Scott Dimovitz explores

the tensions between language and silence in *Cloud Atlas* that point to an eschatological limit or moment of literary extinction. Casey Shoop and Dermot Ryan treat *Cloud Atlas* through the lens of Big History, uncovering an internal fissure between the novel's evolutionary view of human predacity and an individualism that points to "a tranhistorical and transmigratory community that resists the will-to-power." Jo Alyson Parker compares the treatment of time in Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and the 2012 film version of the novel, showing how the "boomerang" structure of nested episodes in the former becomes a "pointillist mosaic" in the latter. Lynda Ng examines the "self-cannibalizing" dimension of narrative time in *Cloud Atlas* and its ouroboros structure as a subversion of the logic of colonization. Claire Larssonneur argues that *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* depicts a moment of critical historical contact between 'east' and 'west' in a complex fashion that goes beyond colonial and post-colonial cultural economies. In my review-essay on *The Bone Clocks*, I argue that Mitchell's integration of multiple timescales in a linear structure marks his latest narrative innovation in constructing a labyrinth of Anthropocene time.

Given the cosmopolitan scope of David Mitchell's fiction, it is fitting that this publication includes authors from many countries and continents, and just as Mitchell has explored several genres, the authors encompass a range of critical approaches. Many of the essays are, like Mitchell's fiction, both academically *de rigueur* and popularly accessible. This issue of *SubStance* invites fans as well as scholars to explore David Mitchell's labyrinthine uberbook of fiction and discover new ways of thinking about time, narrative, and human beings, at this tenuous point in the history of our species.

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Notes

1. For criticism that treats Mitchell's fiction as "cosmopolitan" see Schoene, McCulloch, and Childs & Green.
2. See Wagner.
3. Borges may also be read in topological terms: see Weissert, who reads Borges's "Garden of Forking Paths" through the lens of bifurcation theory and nonlinear dynamics.
4. See Harris for detailed treatment of time and the labyrinth.
5. See Currie.
6. See Oreskes and Conway for an interesting "science-based fiction" take on the post-apocalyptic or speculative fiction genre.
7. Schulz makes this point nicely: "You could call Mitchell a global writer, I suppose, but that does not quite capture what he is doing. It is closer to say that he is a pangaic writer, a supercontinental writer. What is for geologists a physical fact—that the world is everywhere interconnected, bound together in a cycle of faulting and folding, rifting and drifting, erosion and uplift—is, for Mitchell, a metaphysical conviction."
8. Boulter discusses *Cloud Atlas* as an archive of the future.

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