

# David Mitchell in the Laboratory of Time: An Interview with the Author

*Paul A. Harris*

The following interview was conducted by email from September 2014 to January 2015. I am grateful to David Mitchell for extending himself during a busy book tour marking the publication of *The Bone Clocks*. While email interviews lack a certain conversational spontaneity, the format proved fitting for this more philosophical and literary-theoretical exchange focused on the theme of time.

**Paul Harris:** Thank you for agreeing to do this interview for the special issue of *SubStance*, “David Mitchell in the Labyrinth of Time.” Your fiction is mind-bending and thought provoking in all kinds of ways. One particularly fascinating aspect of your work is its treatment of time. I’d like to begin by asking if you have an interest in time as such – is time something that you think about, or are there ideas, images, or theories of time that you’ve been especially drawn to?

**David Mitchell:** Thanks for the generous remarks in your question. Yes, time is a seductive thing to think about, even if my efforts feel rather doomed from the outset. You’ll know the quotable theoretical physicist John Archibald Wheeler: “Of all obstacles to a thoroughly penetrating account of existence, none looms up more dismayingly than ‘time.’ Explain time? Not without explaining existence. Explain existence? Not without explaining time.” And that’s a respected collaborator of Einstein talking, so what chance does a grubby novelist have of locating any foggy glimmer of objective truth in this “dismaying” field? Wheeler didn’t mention consciousness in this quote, but surely it, too, contributes to time’s ineffability: consciousness is the prism through which we perceive time, yet consciousness is also unbottleable and theorem-resistant. So: while I like to think about time, I don’t expect to capture it in a net of thought, not only because I don’t have the mind of an eminent physicist (or even a philosophy undergraduate) but also because time would seem to be inherently immune to nets.

Time is a paradox-engendering thing, and not just the famous one about going back in time to kill your grandfather. I think that time is to us what the ocean is to marine life, only more so: time, the great enabler of being. Yet time is a slow-burning ‘decay bomb’ not outside us but within us, all the while transforming our newborn selves through biological

maturity into our senescent selves: time, the great dismantler of being. Time, famously, is what stops everything happening all at once (a quote often misattributed to Wheeler), yet isn't time also what allows everything to happen in the first place? Sometimes it's helpful to think of time as linear, such as when trying to grasp why the year 150 BCE happened before the year 87 BCE. English and Latin-rooted grammar is predicated upon time's linearity, with the past perfect, simple past, present perfect, present, future perfect and future tenses lined up in a neat carnival procession. Yet time can also seem mighty circular, repetitive or phase-like for something allegedly linear, from orbits and seasons, to the life-spans of civilizations, to the *deja vu* you feel when confronted with the all-too-familiar fallout of one's own repeated blunders – "Will I never learn?" Time is an ally: it allows us to exist, to allow free will to express itself. Yet time is also an enemy: ultimately, we die of it. The clock insists that time moves at a steady velocity, yet our minds insist that time speeds up during pleasurable activities yet drags during unpleasant or arduous or monotonous ones. What to make of all these contradictions? I don't know: perhaps the best one can do is to relish time's mercuriality, and see within it a kind of baffling beauty.

Fiction requires fictional time, otherwise all the story 'happens at once' and you have an inchoate mess, or a sixties-style 'experimental novel,' saints preserve us. Often, fictional time is merely a matter of B following A, as in this joke: "A skeleton walks into a bar and says, 'I'll have a pint and a mop, please.'" It's a pleasing narrative because it's in the right order, but there can only be a right order because of fictional time. This is a platitude, but it's a platitude that underlies all narrative (readable ones, at any rate) and as such I think it's still worth thinking about. On the larger scale of a novel-length narrative, a novel is a model of a universe, and that universe, like ours, must have integrated into it a working model of time in order for its fictional components (and characters) to function. What are the knobs, dials and sliders available to the deployer of fictional time? Regularity is one: will scenes proceed at a measured, even pace, or will we have a lot of captions saying 'X days/years later'? Direction is another: will the narrative go in for a lot of back-flashes and flash-forwards, or will time walk obediently at the heel of the POV character? Tense is an obvious variable: is the narrative purporting to describe events already happened, or is the narrative surfing along on the never-quite-breaking wave of the Eternal Present? (An anathema to some reviewers, as I've learned at my cost.) A fourth variable could be temporal mimesis: will narrative time obey the same laws that time appears to obey in this, our shared universe, where I'm writing and you're reading these sentences?

Or to what degree will it diverge from what we're used to, permitting othernesses like time travel, or granting certain characters immunity to its effects (AKA immortality) or even 'backwards-living' characters like Scott Fitzgerald's Benjamin Button, or TH White's Merlin?

Sorry if all this feels a bit like one of those deathly, humorless essays about humor, Paul: my point is that time can either ('merely') be the fabric within which a narrative occurs, or it can be seen as a primal element of the narrative, along with character, plot, style, structure and theme, and as such can alter the nature of the narrative itself.

What do you think?

**PH:** Even if time cannot be captured in a net of thought, your answer captures very acutely the many maddening joys and sorrows of time and thinking about it. Time, taken as an 'object' of thought, seems to induce self-entanglement from the outset – it is both the condition of our thinking and what our thought pursues; it precedes us and puts the period on our death sentence, without letting us know when we'll arrive at that point. So time just reminds us how in-between we are – we want the clarity of beginnings and origins and an arc to anticipated endings, but we get loopy recursions instead. Your pithy riff, "time is to us what the ocean is to marine life, only much more so," immediately brought to mind Borges's famous ending to his "New Refutation of Time": "Time is the substance I am made of. Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges" (221).

Your remarks broach the relation between time and self: from the standpoint of a self, time is indeed a "decay bomb"; but from the standpoint of time, selves are but little eddies that take form and disappear in the ever-flowing river. The more we cling to self, identity, and a lifetime, the more time becomes the devourer. Conversely, one thinks of a view often associated with Buddhism: the self is an illusion, only the now is real, suffering follows from attachment. *The Bone Clocks* is intriguing in this regard, as it explores different configurations of self and time: the through-line in the novel is Holly Sykes, who fights fiercely for family and suffers the loss of loved ones; there are the Anchorites, who defuse the decay bomb by drinking souls; and then there are the Atemporals, who transmigrate from one identity to another, and can only form certain kinds of attachments. In previous interviews, you have said that you don't

believe in reincarnation, so I wonder what the function of these different figures might be. Can these characters be seen as elements in a kind of ongoing thought-experiment about time and self?

Your interesting formulation that the “novel is a model of a universe” and “must have integrated into it a working model of time in order for its fictional components (and characters) to function” makes me wonder whether you had “a working model of time” in mind when you wrote *The Bone Clocks*. The “horologist’s labyrinth” motif seems to be suggestive in this regard, and again brings to mind Borges, with the crucial difference being that Borges’s characters perish in labyrinths, whereas your characters can find a way out: Holly memorizes the route through Jacko’s “diabolical” maze and dodges death once again.

**DM:** I know I’m going to die, either before I finish this sentence or with a degenerated body in fifty years’ time or somewhere in between, and I don’t want this to happen. Life’s all we know, it may be all there is, and decay and death are not states we are hardwired to wish for. What can we do we about our inevitable mortality? Let’s make a list.

Method 1, I’ll call Distraction. “Can’t we talk about something more pleasant?” Samsara’s myriad plasma screens fill our fields of vision with distraction after distraction after distraction – where there’s muck there’s brass, as they say in Yorkshire, and where there’s distraction there’s gold, as they (may) say in Hollywood. It’s not impossible to spend most of your waking hours anaesthetizing yourself against thoughts about your own mortality by immersing yourself, body and soul, in these distractions – TV, YouTube, Candy Crush, Twitter and a thousand-and-one others I’m too old to know about. The problem with Method 1 is that it requires the death of curiosity, and there’s only so much toxic distraction I can ingest before I gag. (I hasten to add, curiosity-reviving art also exists on TV and YouTube, Twitter isn’t always trivial and some apps are intellectually nourishing: in this paragraph I’m talking about the 95% that isn’t.)

Method 2 is often termed Religion. Most sects of most of the world’s religions issue passports to an afterlife in return for an unwavering faith in that sect’s precepts. A part of me envies true believers, but I can’t emulate them. What believers call a leap of faith would be, to me, akin to giving consent for electrotherapy on my rational self, on what I regard as my “core me.” (There go my chances of ever successfully running for office in the US.) In our New Age times, of course, we can leave traditional religions out of it, and cultivate a more pick’n’mix solo faith in which death is not the end of consciousness, but a god-less, God-less, metamorphosis of it; in which we’ll meet all our friends “on the ledge” (obscure Fairport

Convention reference) – in a kind of humanist Hereafter. This picture is less gaudy than most of the oven-ready Hereafters, but it's still just as evidence-less, still indigestible to my rational self, and it's still Method 2.

Method 3 for handling death we might call the Philosopher's Stone, in honor of late medieval alchemists and a thousand twentieth-century genre-writers who have deployed the device. This method involves the universal (as far as I know) folkloric belief that somewhere exists hidden knowledge that permits the cognoscenti (or Illuminati?) to outfox mortality. In the seventies the Philosopher's Stone rebooted itself as the pseudoscience of Cryogenics, and in our century we have the Singularity – a time just around the corner when cyberscience will allow us to convert our personalities to digital format and store ourselves online for all eternity. The only snag with the Philosopher's Stone method is that it's predatory baloney. I'll recant immediately after the first successful 'wet-load' of a person onto a computer is authenticated: but it's in the nature of Method 3 that the key breakthrough is forever just around the corner, so I for one won't be holding my breath.

This leaves us with Method 4, which we might call Acceptance. This involves me trying to cultivate a lifelong relationship with death so that when it happens, it won't be the worst, most nightmarish, fearful moment of my existence, but something I can experience with equanimity and preparedness. So much easier said than done, but it's the only method on the menu that doesn't require me to reconfigure a part of my mind – of what makes me, me – so it's Method 4 for me. I'm not alone. I'm also not alone in wondering how one cultivates this acceptance and makes it strong and resilient in the face of doubts and fear. You mentioned Buddhism, and as it happens, I do find some Buddhist writers helpful in my efforts to embrace my mortality. Equally, however, I'm helped by humanist texts – Montaigne's great – and by conversation with wiser souls, by nature, and by the arts.

I know my menu smacks a little of a green undergraduate's essay, or even of a self-help book, but I also know that tens or hundreds of millions, maybe billions, of my fellow Homo sapiens have followed the same paths of thought. Many have produced probing art or top-notch essays on the same theme, or neighboring themes. Lucky us: we can read them. Ultimately, though, while guidebooks can enrich your journey and save you trouble, it is your journey and no one else's, and only you can cultivate an Acceptance of your own mortality. One part of my process has been writing *The Bone Clocks*. My novel was a kind of private laboratory where I explore the merits and demerits of each method on the above menu. Holly's my avatar: she's an ordinary mortal in a world made of ever-morphing distractions. Not all of these distraction are products of

consumerism, of course – they may be family disputes, money troubles, growing pains, love affairs, marital problems, maternal responsibilities, or the ego saying “What about me?” The Anchorites are, as you suggest, a sort of thought-experiment that poses these questions: “What if Method 3 were *not* baloney? Would it be as desirable as it appears to be, at first? Is life still life if it doesn’t end in death, or is it something else?” Perhaps, the Anchorites are an attempt to inoculate myself against futile hankerings for Method 3, so that I can concentrate more whole-heartedly on Method 4. The Horologists, especially Marinus who is closest to my heart, are role models for me, of a type. They face death with the equanimity and preparedness. Sure, the Horologists know they’re coming back with their memories and aggregate identities intact, but I still found it instructive to build them, wind them up and watch them go. I value the notion of reincarnation as a kind of metaphor for a single life. In our life we do, metaphorically, die and experience rebirth quite often, depending on how high you want to set the bar. Each major formative experience, rite of passage, near-death experience, Dear John letter, wedding day (hopefully not too many of them), deathbed scene, conversion, behavior-modifying mortification and every January 1st – these are deaths and rebirths, of varying magnitudes. Marinus’ metalife is just a larger-scale model of a mortal life – mine, purely for example – stretched over about fifteen centuries (and counting.) Horologists, then, are metaphors of mortals. They have repeated lives to slouch towards enlightenment, we have just the one to scramble there as best we may, but the methods and the destination are the same.

What’s all this got to do with time? Not sure, to be honest, but maybe it’s worthwhile to note that a novel is a zone of near-infinite possibilities, where contradictory elements can co-exist, including temporal ones. *The Bone Clocks* is about mortals like us who operate on a ‘three score years and ten and a few more if your pension’s okay’ time scale; as well as pseudo-immortals like the Anchorites who operate on a ‘live indefinitely as long as you can find the prey’ time scale; as well as the Horologists, who have a ‘Serial Repeater’ time-scale; and this triumvirate of time-scales stays upright (assuming you think the novel works.) If *The Bone Clocks* were an astrophysics dissertation, I’d have my academic ID revoked and be escorted to the campus gate by security, and quite right too. Because it’s a novel, I get away with it. Novels are free to probe and say ‘What if?’, but have no obligation to conclude. The use – and enjoyment, and maybe even enriching effect – of the novel is in all its 600 pages, not page 600 alone. Novelists don’t have to be ‘right’: we only have to be ‘good’ in the sense of ‘capable.’ To relate (belatedly) all this to the ques-

tion in your last email, I feel it would be too grandiose to claim that I had “a working model of time” when I wrote *The Bone Clocks* – rather, I had three working models of time, one for three responses to the inevitability of mortality. My tendency for plurality (which hostile critics might call my intellectual messiness) may be one reason why I write these chunky, compartmentalized novels. Specifically, *The Bone Clocks* both comingles and houses different time-scales without – quite, I hope – exploding in a big bang of incoherence.

**PH:** For me, the coherence in your fiction emerges from the ways in which the plots and structures of your novels move around in history and bridge time-scales with seeming ease and fluidity. This temporal dynamism depends, of course, on your stylistic agility, your ability to shift genres and create compelling characters and stories in a remarkable range of settings. The new structural twist in *The Bone Clocks* is that the three working models of time are all plotted on a single timeline, Holly’s life. Put differently, events in the novel are unfolding on several time-scales simultaneously. I have two follow-up questions:

1) Did you find that your “thought-experiments” in *The Bone Clocks* “laboratory” yielded philosophical views on mortality or helped you find death any more acceptable? I found two lines particularly suggestive: when Crispin Hershey thinks he is going to be shot, he recalls his “favorite line from Roth’s *The Human Stain*: ‘Nothing lasts, and yet nothing passes, either, and nothing passes just because nothing lasts’” (393). The second: when Holly’s granddaughter says a phrase that was passed down to Holly by her father, she thinks, “We live on, as long as there are people to live on in” (548).

2) Much of your work examines humans as a planetary species—I think that *Ghostwritten*, *Cloud Atlas*, and *The Bone Clocks* could be called novels of the Anthropocene. You create a feeling for the deep past of the species in *The Bone Clocks* in the memorable passage describing Esther Little’s “long name” that spans 207 lives in a “metalife stretching back approximately seven millennia”; her “soul predated Rome, Egypt, Peking, Nineveh and Ur” (432). This reads to me like an attempt to use fiction to create something akin to Anthropocene memory. Conversely, the novel ends in the “Endarkment,” a future time from which Holly looks back and delivers a mournful eulogy of how humanity destroyed planetary ecologies. Do you consciously attempt to write fiction that intertwines human

cultural history and geological / evolutionary timescales? Do you see this as a significant mission for writers today (should they choose to accept it)?

**DM:** In answer to your first question, yes, Paul, I think so. Though it was less that I built my own bridge to an ingenious philosophical or theological position which de-stings death, and more that *The Bone Clocks* was a sort of monologue with and for myself about (a) the existential tackiness of wanting to stay alive forever, like a nightmare dinner-party guest who'll swat away the ever-blunter hints from his hosts that it's time to sod off now with yet another sparkling anecdote about himself (the Anchorites); and (b) the existential rightness of recognizing that if you've had 60 or 70 fairly well-functioning years in a fairly well-functioning society, you have already been blessed with vast good luck, so don't feel shortchanged when your body starts packing up (like Holly). (That line of Roth's, by the way, is the best in my book *and* his :-).) Given that (b) is the position that brings me solace, and that literal reincarnation or resurrection aren't doctrines I'm able to synthesize the faith to believe in, then what remains after I die are my 'consequences' or the effects I cause. If you're Stephen Hawking or Martin Luther King, Jr. or JS Bach or Kim Jong-Un or an Islamic State leader or a Fox News demagogue, these consequences will be 'impactful,' but for the rest of us it's not the scale that matters so much as the goodness of the consequence. 'Goodness' is a subjective term, but ask an average unclouded conscience "What is goodness?" and I believe there'll be more general "Do Unto Others" agreement across the Homo sapiens fold than our more vituperative media – or our nastier selves, which the former stokes and feeds – would admit. (Even in the week of the Charlie Hebdo murders.) As a teacher, as a friend, as a relative, as a stranger; a kind word, an act of generosity, a moment's forbearance, an attentive response – the effect of these commonplace things can and do outlive us, just as what Holly's selfless acts for Lorelei and Rafiq will outlive her. The children are her monuments, and children are much better monuments than statues. Children grow and pass messages on, instead of being obscured by pigeon droppings. We are all beneficiaries of countless individuals who have gone before: some who died to defend the country we're from during existential crises; some who put building blocks of civilization or science into place; and some, on a personal level, who taught us and lessened our ignorance or our callousness, either in a classroom or in life. To pass on compassionate knowledge is nourishing, as any gifted, underpaid high school teacher will attest. This act makes our lives count for more, whoever and whatever and wherever we are. It's

obtainable immortality. (Your name may vanish, but isn't the engraving of one's name onto the edifices and signboards of hospitals and foundations a rather hollow brag? Give it fifty years, and the name's just another word.) This all smacks of sunny idealism, I know, but without the sunny idealism of dead strangers who went before us, we'd still be working like medieval serfs, enslaved by priesthoods and dying in our early thirties.

Regarding your second question about the Anthropocene dimensions of my work: I love that phrase: "Anthropocene memory." (Mind if I nick it?) One day I'll do the third book in the Marinus Trilogy, when I'll do the reveal about the origins of the transmigrating Atemporals, which will indeed involve the concept of an Anthropocene memory. For my sins, I've always been a maximalist world-builder ('macrography' is the word of the week) and always loved the *big* space operas, the wide open spaces of the maps of Middle Earth, the infinitudes of scale. Esther Little's going for the record, declared by her diminutive surname. As I age and do the arithmetic of planned books versus years left, finiteness is muscling in on my life and thinking, but the maximalist is still hoping to go down in a blaze of big scale glory before settling down to a semi-retirement of 180 page books (-) . . .

The Crispin Hershey in me is tempted to quibble over your "Do you *consciously* [my italics] attempt to write fiction that intertwines human cultural history and geological/evolutionary timescales?" question. Where I do mix cultural history with superhistoric (my spell-checker insists that's not a word) timescales, of course I do it *consciously* – it isn't unconscious. But in a book like *Black Swan Green* or *Jacob de Zoet*, there's no place and no need for mixing timescales, so of course here, I consciously *don't*.

Lastly, I've known too many writers to dare to prescribe missions for fiction writers, beyond 'Write what you want to or need to write.' Doing what you can to help Amnesty International get writers out of jail for doing what we're free to do in the (relatively) free world strikes me as a worthy professional mission, but even in this area I wouldn't criticize non-joiners. You never know what's going in peoples' lives, so best not to judge.

I think that's a wrap. What I'll take to heart from this dialogue is the notion that time is a plural concept, even in the same novel. I can see that I have written fiction that overlays one timescale onto another – not unconsciously, exactly, but just doing it because the book required me to do it, and without really giving it much thought. From now on, I will be giving novelistic time more thought. So thanks for that Paul, and thanks for the brain-wattage you've spent on my work, and have a mighty 2015, or Year of the Sheep, to use a different time-scale.

**PH:** And thank you, David, for agreeing to do this interview, and for the psychoteric voltage you put into writing your novels. I look forward to reading more of them, and wish you a happy 2015 as well.

#### Works Cited

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