

# David Mitchell in the Labyrinth of Time:

Review of THE BONE CLOCKS and Preview of an Interview

By Paul A. Harris, Editor, *SubStance*

David Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks*, the latest iteration of his fractal imagination, follows a central character's life through six decades in six sections that simultaneously succeed as stand-alone stories. Protagonist Holly Sykes narrates the first and final chapters; in the middle ones, her life is seen prismatically through the lenses of others who cross her path: Cambridge student Hugo Lamb, war journalist Ed Brubeck, bad-boy author Crispin Hershey, and Horologist Marinus. Navigating this narrative proves to be a rollicking ride: the plot is a propulsive page-turner, picking up momentum as it goes; the narrative is kaleidoscopic-episodic, unfolding in a series of juxtapositions and sometimes sudden shifts; the style is protean, skipping skillfully among different rhetorical registers, allusive layers, and literary genres.

At the same time, *The Bone Clocks* is a tightly woven text that recursively loops through Mitchell's previous books and ultimately interlaces all his books into an intricate, sprawling intertext. Returning Mitchell readers will encounter familiar faces (Lamb, Marinus), and recognize allusions to his other books ("The Voorman Problem," a story attributed to Hershey, is from *Number9Dream*; the "symmetrical structure" of Hershey's novel *Dessicated Embryos* can be read as an allusion to *Cloud Atlas*, and there's even a comical reference to the movie). Back-stories in *The Bone Clocks* turn into/out of back-stories to episodes/elements from previous novels (Magistrate Shiroyama's killing Abbot Enomoto in *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*; the Prescients in *Cloud Atlas*).

More broadly, the form of *The Bone Clocks* is a synthesis of globe-trotting *Ghostwritten* and time-travelling *Cloud Atlas*. In tone and style, Holly Sykes's rebellious teen sojourn into the countryside is straight out of contemporaneously-set *Black Swan Green* (she's a slightly older avatar of Jason Taylor). While each chapter of that novel covered a calendar month over a year, each section of *The Bone Clocks* is set in a specific decade, beginning thirty years ago and ending thirty years into the future. Eventually, one surmises that the heterogeneous characters and events in *The Bone Clocks*, and its central plot conflicts, are all always already written into something called "The Script," a self-reflexive motif for the text itself, and perhaps for Mitchell's body of work as well.

For those encountering Mitchell's writing for the first time, reading the novel might well feel like listening intently to a complex, swinging jazz tune (and this may hold for anyone's first trip through *The Bone Clocks*). Like such compositions, the novel unfolds not in a simple linear, metric fashion, but instead features syncopated rhythms (present moments have distinct, different intensities; scenes pass at different speeds; prolepses and analepses bend loops in the narrative arc) and tonal variation achieved through improvisational stylistic riffing (e.g., a chaotic bar scene catalogued as a rhythmically rhyming list in a sort of prose rap; a writer's lecture folds into the text a pithy literary

critical accounting of itself; a cinematically rendered abduction/rescue scene culminating in a firefight inside a police van is reminiscent of the famous car ambush scene in *Children of Men*). Like an ensemble trading solos, the text invites different voices/viewpoints to enter and ‘stretch out’ (a war journalist’s view of 2004 Iraq, a girl’s youth in provincial 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia). Following the novel, like tracking the complexities of a jazz tune, can make your head hurt at times—you are not sure if and how something fits at first but afterwards or on repeated examination, it feels just right. And, true to the cyclic nature of jazz innovation and performance (each soloist improvises on a given structure; each version makes a familiar tune new again), *The Bone Clocks* ends on a note that looks to the next story: “for a voyage to begin, another one must end, sort of.”

In fractal texts, one might say, it’s synecdoche all the way down. The salient synecdoche in Mitchell’s latest book is the labyrinth, which appears as both recurrent motif and central plot element, and provides it with an apt conceptual model: *The Bone Clocks* is a time-labyrinth that explores the labyrinthine nature of time. (Terminological note: I will follow Mitchell in conflating labyrinth and maze, though technically they are not the same.) Viewed from the outside, labyrinths and time have a distinct structure through which one moves in two symmetrical directions (respectively, the path from entrance to center and back out; going back into the past or forward into the future). Experienced from the inside, labyrinths and time offer a dizzying series of disorienting choices made without complete information; learning is largely trial and error. Mitchell marks the dual nature of labyrinths from the outset: as Holly packs to leave home as the book begins, her “freaky little brother” Jacko gives her a labyrinth composed of “eight or nine circles inside each other” that looks “dead simple” but Jacko insists is “diabolical.” Hugo Lamb finds Holly’s pendant of the labyrinth and at first just looks at it before discovering that the route through it can be found only by painstaking manual tracing.

Similarly, the temporal structure of Mitchell’s novel appears simple enough: in relation to our historical present, its sections ripple outwards symmetrically into the past and future. But when one first reads the text, without an outside perspective on its structure, the path through the narrative takes unexpected twists and turns, following its own labyrinthine logic. The linear path along the narrative present is disrupted regularly and punctured with holes (events occur that characters are made to forget and that readers cannot make sense of initially); these holes seem like proleptic gaps inserted for later explanation; conversely, crucial events in the storyline (including marriages, childbirths, deaths, abortions) occur ‘between’ narrative sections and are analeptically back-filled. The text is peppered with images of two-way labyrinthine temporality: Ed Brubeck, because he wants his war reporting “to make a tiny dent in the world’s memory,” is seen as “an archivist for the future”; Holly is told that “the future looks a lot like the past.”

Self-similarly, the plot of *The Bone Clocks* unfolds two distinct storylines on two distinct temporal levels. One plot thread depicts a war being waged across generations among more-than-mortals who transcend or resist time’s passage; the other traces Holly Sykes through the seasons of her life. More-than-mortals move on a different plane; they can flit

into and out of human lives like Sphere moving through A Square's world in Edwin Abbott's *Flatland*; they can erase ("hiatus") things from people's memories or persuade ("suasion") people to think or do things. The more-than-mortals plotline drops in on the mortal one abruptly and enigmatically at first, and even as it becomes more fleshed out it retains a cryptic logic (in different senses): it plants puzzles; it allows characters and memories to be encrypted for later recovery; it is full of crypts, holding secrets and ghosts. By contrast, mere mortals move forward in time as a forking labyrinth. A character frantically searching for a lost child feels "a prodding certainty that I'm in a labyrinth not only of turnings and doors but decisions and priorities, that I've been in not just a minute or two but ages, years, and that I took some bad turns many years ago that I can't get back to." Only information from the other temporal level can reveal a route out of the labyrinth: the character is told he is of the Script, and then sees Jacko's labyrinth at the moment he hears a voice speaking a clue through Holly. As this episode demonstrates, while the book's two central plotlines unfold on different levels of time, the overarching plot of *The Bone Clocks* emerges from the intersections and interplay between them.

Labyrinths, since Daedalus, have embodied the ingenuity of their artificers. Mitchell has already authored a mind- and boundary-stretching time labyrinth in *Cloud Atlas*. Indeed, because its sections move forward in time until the middle, and then move backwards again to where it started, that novel's structuring most overtly resembles the route through a labyrinth. *Cloud Atlas*, in expanding the parameters of novelistic narrative time by stringing together stories from centuries in the past to centuries in the future, changed the fundamental grounding and scale of novelistic narrative time: rather than focusing on an individual life or single culture through historical epochs, it charts an evolutionary history of the human species on the earth. The implication or upshot of that text is that our lives are unfolding on and embedded in several temporal scales nested in one another; we act in a 'present' that can be situated within the scope of individual lives, cultural and political histories, and ecological planetary history alike. In short, *Cloud Atlas* is a novel of the Anthropocene, the geological epoch defined by humans becoming a force that changes global natural history.

Mitchell's innovation here is that the text aligns the different temporal scales; the plotlines of Holly's life and the more-than-mortals share the same timeline. Seminal events are happening in both her mortal existence and the existences of those whose lives span generations. In addition, the span of Holly's life encompasses a turning in the Anthropocene; by the time of her old age in the final section, she can deliver a mournful eulogy of how humanity destroyed planetary ecologies. *The Bone Clocks* makes us feel viscerally (in a more direct way than *Cloud Atlas*) that we live and act not only in human history but natural history. With its drama of time-defying creatures, it adds a further temporal scale within which to contemplate human life.

Much ink is sure to be spilled (and many pixels posted) over the more-than-mortals plotline. At times it feels like a geeky epic along the lines of Holly and the Horologist-Time Wizards against the Anchorite-Soul Decanter Time Vampires in a battle for control of time and death. (Hence the preemptive tongue-in-cheek line "Oh, the V-word. Here it

comes again.”) Personally, I found Mitchell’s unabashed foray into fantasy engaging and plain fun. But the supernatural register in *The Bone Clocks* also becomes an aperture that opens onto philosophical explorations. Just as Jacko functions as a Trojan Horse in the more-than-mortal war, this fantasy-thriller of a book is a Trojan Horse in which Mitchell has planted time-ponderings aplenty. Characters who resist or overcome death lead to the invention of over-the-top fantasy/sci-fi nomenclature and make for great action scenes worthy of Harry Potter or *Game of Thrones*. In Mitchell’s hands, they also provide the means to reframe questions about dying: a more-than-mortal character wonders “to what end” s/he lives (in both senses), and what it means to make choices in a single lifetime.

In a previous interview, Mitchell has said he does not believe in reincarnation. So why, then, does he depict characters who span many lives? One function they fulfill is to incarnate a form of what might be termed Anthropocene memory. The oldest character’s “meta-age” is expressed in its “long name”: “she recited the names of all her previous hosts, and I lined up one pebble per name. There were 207 pebbles,” giving her a “metallife stretching back approximately seven millennia,” and a “soul [that] predated Rome, Egypt, Peking, Nineveh and Ur.” This passage has an epic quality; it links human lifetimes to cultural histories to geological eons. The translation between cultural and evolutionary histories is a resonant frontier in contemporary explorations of time and human identity (both individual and species). The “long name” image calls to mind *Finding Your Roots*, the television series in which Henry Louis Gates, Jr. supplements genealogy with genetics to trace ancestry back thousands of years and across the globe.

Ultimately, *The Bone Clocks* becomes a kind of thought experiment about time, identity and mortality when seen through the lens of the Anthropocene’s deep duration. Rather than positing a coherent metaphysics, the novel proffers provocative ways of posing the perennial questions regarding our persistence in time. One can, for instance, dwell quite fruitfully in the paradoxical tension generated by two particular passages whose meanings appear to be mutually occlusive. The first: 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.’” 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.”

Reviewing David Mitchell’s novels puts one in a perverse position, because describing them deprives readers of the pleasure of discovering what form his latest articulation of the novel will take. Given the fractal nature of Mitchell’s work, it might be fitting for his next novel to be issued in serial form. This would prevent reviews of his work from automatically serving as ‘spoilers.’ It would also prolong the suspense one feels on completing a section of a Mitchell novel—what will I find when I turn the page?—while shortening the interim between publications.

Serial fiction enjoyed its heyday in the Victorian era, and Mitchell combines high literature with popular appeal in a manner not unlike Charles Dickens, Alexandre Dumas or Wilkie Collins. The obvious contemporary comparison is the television series: reading

*The Bone Clocks* in a weekend felt like binge-watching a season (or seasons) of a show. (In fact, *The Bone Clocks* screams for screen adaptation, but as the *Cloud Atlas* example showed, a series or mini-series would be a better fit for Mitchell's works than a feature film.) Serial publication would also arguably be more organic to Mitchell's plotting, which doesn't always parse cleanly with the novel form. Like *Cloud Atlas*, *The Bone Clocks* feels like it ends twice; while the former ends the first time at midpoint, giving it a symmetrical elegance, here the penultimate section concludes one strand of the text, making the final one seem at times like a kind of dangling denouement detour into themes and places from previous books (though these places and themes receive fresh treatment and the section fittingly rounds out the story of Holly Sykes).

Fractals don't have beginnings and endings; it's just screen after screen, each its own scene, unique yet familiar. In the wake of a work that so explicitly brings his books together, it seems as if from now on Mitchell's texts won't really have to start or finish in the usual way: "for a voyage to begin, another one must end, sort of." If *The Bone Clocks* concludes season six in the iteration of David Mitchell's imagination, when does season seven start?

### **The Bone Clocks**

A novel

David Mitchell

Random House: 640 pp., \$30

### **Preview of an Interview with the Author Forthcoming in Spring 2015 in a Special Issue of *SubStance* on David Mitchell's Fiction.**

Dear David,

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview for the special issue of *SubStance* on your work. 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?

Best,  
Paul

Dear Paul,

Thanks for your question. Yes, I find time to be 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 do I 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 how we perceive time, yet science can offer only a vague understanding of what consciousness is. 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 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 much more so. Yet I also think that time is a slow-burning “decay bomb” not outside us but within us, that turns our newborn selves into our senescent selves. Time, famously, is what stops everything happening all at once (a quote often misattributed to Wheeler, apparently), 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, yet metaphorically time can seem mighty circular 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 mind insists that it 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 sometimes beautiful mercuriality.

Fiction requires fictional time, otherwise all the story ‘happens at once’ and you have an inchoate mess. 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 probably 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 be obediently tied to the POV character? Tense is an obvious one: is the narrative purporting to describe events already happened, or is the narrative is surfing along on the never-quite-breaking wave of the present moment? Perhaps a fourth variable could be mimesis: to what degree will narrative time obey the same laws that time appears to obey in our shared universe, and to what degree will it diverge from what we’re used to, allowing 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 humourless essays about humour, Paul: I guess the point here 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?

David