



# The Bone Clocks

*David Mitchell*

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## **The Bone Clocks** David Mitchell

One drowsy summer's day in 1984, teenage runaway Holly Sykes encounters a strange woman who offers a small kindness in exchange for 'asylum'. Decades will pass before Holly understands exactly what sort of asylum the woman was seeking...

The Bone Clocks follows the twists and turns of Holly's life from a scarred adolescence in Gravesend to old age on Ireland's Atlantic coast as Europe's oil supply dries up - a life not so far out of the ordinary, yet punctuated by flashes of precognition, visits from people who emerge from thin air and brief lapses in the laws of reality. For Holly Sykes - daughter, sister, mother, guardian - is also an unwitting player in a murderous feud played out in the shadows and margins of our world, and may prove to be its decisive weapon.

Metaphysical thriller, meditation on mortality and chronicle of our self-devouring times, this kaleidoscopic novel crackles with the invention and wit that have made David Mitchell one of the most celebrated writers of his generation. Here is fiction at its spellbinding and memorable best.

## **The Bone Clocks Details**

Date : Published September 2nd 2014 by Sceptre

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Author : David Mitchell

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# From Reader Review The Bone Clocks for online ebook

## Jenny (Reading Envy) says

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The book is writt

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## Tyler Goodson says

By the middle of the first sentence, I knew I was in for it. By the end of the first sentence I loved Holly Sykes, and would follow her anywhere. I got to follow her everywhere. With The Bone Clocks we'll remember why we already love David Mitchell, and be amazed that he could top himself again. I'm increasingly convinced that, like some of his characters, he too has lived many different lives. I don't know how one person could equally portray the variety of people, places, and times he does, but I think he might just be that good, and there are passages so beautiful you'll have to pause to read them again. He puts us there, from first sentence to last. This is the kind of book you will want to get lost in and never be found. All you have to do is open it up.

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## Bradley says

Some of these books of David Mitchell are odd and some of them feel almost epic, while still others are just shocking by how much strong voice coming through the page, and some have it all. This is one of those books, the closest novel to Cloud Atlas out of all the books of his that I've read.

It shares the same basic concept of loosely-tied novellas with strange immortal creatures either living their lives among the humans or actively engaging in a far-ranging and explosive war with others a bit like them, but one thing is certain, they're firmly ensconced in broad stretches of time, even if they're able to hop through history. I love the SF features of these books perhaps more than most who read Mitchell's books, because it's my primary fascination.

However, taken in context with everything else that's going on for the majority of the novel, it can appear rather strange. For one, we're constantly and deeply immersed in the lives of the main characters, and whether or not we're a young girl who hears things or a famous author having a wild time amongst his peers, breaking conventions and fourth-walls, we're often so deep in the setting and these minds that when the SF stuff comes around, it's rather a shock.

Well, to me, it's rather fun, but these are the things that tie all these wildly different novellas together even more than common themes such as counting time. We all live in bone clocks, after all, experiencing birth and growing old, and it's kind of a fun feeling to experience it outside the loop both as a reader and as another character, too.

I am undeniably impressed by the writing chops and the overall sense of structure, the crystal clear voices, and the huge array of techniques, but to be honest, it often feels either too-understated with the ideas it's

trying to push across the page or they're lost in the wide world of admittedly interesting scenes and events.

For example, before the slow but interesting fall of civilization in our near future, we had a what might have been a pretty cool and exciting end to the whole novel, but while the structure is undoubtedly done for some purpose that eludes me at the moment, I'm left with the feeling that I'd have liked the novel better with just a slight rearrangement. You know, a bang at the end instead of a long decline after the bang.

I'm often reading this novel while scratching my head, marvelling at the mastery and wondering if I'm missing something. Sure, I can bring my brain to the table and construct something appropriately deconstructionist to match the craziness in the earlier novella, but is that even appropriate outside of that novella? There's a lot of different writing styles in play, and I assume the author is attempting to lead us through dimensional doors with different cultures and outlooks, so why would he force us to a DFW dance while we're blowing up our enemies with psi-bombs? No Comprendo.

On the other hand, if I'm just meant to go along for the ride and piece together whatever I want out of it, then I guess the novel is doing its job admirably, but Mitchell writing somewhat schizophrenically and I kinda wonder if he ought to choose between the amorphous readings or the strict ones. There's such a tight voice in each, I kept looking carefully for the strict, from connection to connection, but it was really frustrating unless I just let my eyes un-focus. You know what I mean? Everything is there and clear if I just let go, but in the meantime, all that effort was kinda wasted.

So I got a little frustrated. No big deal. I enjoyed the novel as entertainment, and enjoyed it even more as it gave me more and more huge glimpses and even a grand outline of the entire connected worlds between the rest of his novels. That part was very satisfying, indeed. It's just the satisfaction of this novel by itself that suffered a bit, as if it needed either a grand and merciless editor or the freedom to be two or three times as long as it actually is. (And it's a pretty hefty book already.) :)

Very decent and well worth it to Mitchell fans. Not my favorite, but it is kind of necessary for global enjoyment. :)

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### **switterbug (Betsey) says**

"True metamorphosis doesn't come with flowcharts."

Another genre-bending novel by David Mitchell also channels Stephen King and Carlos Ruiz Zafón. Did you just hear that? Yes, but Mitchell does nothing by mistake. It was evidently deliberate, and he mixes various castes of writing styles, although much less so than in *CLOUD ATLAS* and even *THE THOUSAND AUTUMNS OF JACOB DE ZOET*. Mitchell lures in mainstream readers, as well as his steadfast fans. I think he does one better, though, than the latter giants of the macabre. He not only advances the plot, he advances the reader.

"Power is crack cocaine for the ego and battery acid for the soul."

Although *Cloud Atlas* remains my personal favorite of Mitchell's novels, I was no less astonished by the author's ability to chime all his previous books in *THE BONE CLOCKS*. Some authors, such as Coetzee, will name their protagonists after themselves in the later novels of their oeuvres. This is more and more common as novelists become established and preeminent. However, that has the effect, unfortunately, of

removing me from the novel-at-hand. Every time I see the author's name in print on the pages of the latest of his or her fiction, I am jettisoned out the story and into the basking novelist's quasi-biography.

Mitchell, rather than transmitting a duplicate self, creates an arterial pathway and an organic conduit from *Bone Clocks* to all his other novels--*Black Swan Green*, *Number 9 Dream*, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, *Ghostwritten*, and *Cloud Atlas* at different times in various ways. He bolsters the theme of connection literarily and in temporal and perpetual ways so that time is unleashed, not as a Western mindset, but rather in something like a boundless circle, mounted from an ancient ziggurat, and understood through the all-seeing eye. If that doesn't make a lot of sense, it will when you read it.

It would be egregious to spell out this plot, which is its own exciting discovery. But, fans of Mitchell will be familiar with how he can change course and slip into a linguistic detour. Less so in this novel, and *BONE CLOCKS* coheres more obviously so than *CA*. Holly Sykes is the clear protagonist, even when she isn't always steering the POV. The book doesn't read so much like separate novellas that run a course together, even though there are six delineated parts; it reads like an epic novel with several turnoffs that lead you back to a central story with fair transparency, but persuades you to visualize a maze of narrative junctures and coronas.

If you don't like the paranormal genre, there's a possibility that you might abandon the book at this turn of narrative style, which comprises about 400 pages. There's also a chunk of the dystopian. If you can stick with it, there is much reward that transcends the genre.

"We live on, as long as there are people to live on in."

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## **Ron Charles says**

Anticipation started pooling around David Mitchell's magical new novel as soon as the title was revealed last year. Like Thomas Pynchon and Haruki Murakami — to whom he's often compared — Mitchell excites his culty fan base into fits of rapture. One bookseller told me that a customer offered money to be allowed to sit in the store and read an advance copy of "The Bone Clocks." Named a finalist for the Booker Prize more than a month before publication, the novel has finally descended incarnate from the mind of this divinely inventive author.

Like "Cloud Atlas," one of Mitchell's earlier novels shortlisted for the Booker, "The Bone Clocks" presents a curio cabinet of apparently disparate stories, but readers should be onto his tricks by now. The presumption of an interconnected puzzle hangs over these narrators as though Mitchell's oeuvre were some massive literary sudoku. Devout Mitchellians are already cross-referencing the names and locales of "The Bone Clocks" in the ever-accreting concordance to his works. (Why, there's Jason Taylor's cousin from "Black Swan Green." And my, my — it seems like a thousand autumns since we last saw Dr. Marinus.)

But don't let the high walls of his fan club intimidate you. This new novel offers up a rich selection of domestic realism, gothic fantasy and apocalyptic speculation, stretching around the world from the Margaret Thatcher era of the 1980s to the Endarkenment of 2043. (Alas, it turns out that the climate-change deniers were wrong. You might want to put up some root vegetables before winter.)

At the center of this cunning arrangement of nested tales is a strong-willed 15-year-old named Holly Sykes. We meet her in the summer of 1984 when she runs away from home to move in with Vin, a 24-year-old car

salesman who wears a leather jacket embroidered with the words “Led Zep” in silver studs. He can play the intro to “Stairway to Heaven.” Quite the catch! “Vin and me could start a band,” Holly thinks. In a twist that will surprise young teens everywhere, that love match doesn’t pan out, but Holly continues running for a few days just to give her mum a good scare.

This jaunty, first-person picaresque is filled with the young woman’s pop culture and school-hall concerns — and so many discombobulating clues to future mysteries that it sometimes feels as if the ink from another novel were bleeding through the pages. Having grown up over her parents’ pub in Kent, Holly displays a tragicomic mix of confidence and naivete, which Mitchell balances endearingly to keep her from seeming like an object of mockery. As she confidentially chats away, we catch glimpses of what she calls her mind’s “nutso part,” the “Weird S---” — including muffled chatter from the Radio People in her head and visits from a golden-haired fairy godmother who once, conveniently, pushed a schoolyard tyrant in front of a van. But that’s just crazy talk — right? — easy to brush over as Holly wrestles with the real-life challenges of finding food and shelter on the lam.

Subsequent sections — in different places, at different times, with different characters — continue this pattern: intensely compelling confessions that seem wholly realistic, except for those incongruous moments of fantasy that poke through like carpet tacks. Some of these narrators are moving and sympathetic; others radiate the metastasizing creepiness of a Patricia Highsmith villain. Their stories evolve in subtly distinctive tones and forms that reflect their outlooks. An ambitious journalist, for instance, is bored at a family wedding, his mind ricocheting from marital festivities to Iraq bombings, until a crisis close to home scares him more than anything in Fallujah. How entirely different that tightly focused family drama feels from the glib sociopath who glides from one ingenious swindle to the next, assuring us that anyone “spared love is spared grief.”

The most irresistible section is narrated by a bitter novelist named Crispin Hershey, whom a TV interviewer describes as “a master stylist and a laser-sharp chronicler of our times.” In this tour de force satire of literary culture and its roiling jealousies, Mitchell has created “the Wild Child of British Letters,” a writer “so bent on avoiding cliché that each sentence is as tortured as an American whistleblower.” It’s a fantastically witty section, like tumbling into a Martin Amis novel (an early, good one). Crispin scorns his bestselling competitors, including an author working on a novel that sounds something like “The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet.” He lusts after others’ fame as he’s driven deeper into debt and the circuit of inane writing conferences. (In one particularly humiliating moment, he’s mistaken for Jeffrey Archer.) His public battle with a feminist scholar — a “bigoted blob of trans fat” — recalls the good old slugfests of Mailer and Vidal before authors grew so darn polite with each other. When Crispin’s new book is harpooned by a sharp review, the aggrieved novelist has no choice but to react to the “pube-bearded” critic with equal and opposite force: “Ethics are Newtonian,” he warns us.

But in fact, the ethics of this novel are anything but Newtonian; they’re all spooky action. As these characters spin into the 21st century, their morality is reshaped and redirected by quirks and quarks they couldn’t possibly anticipate. Some will steal or kill for money or fame. And what wouldn’t one do for mind control, telekinetics, even immortality? That’s the weird strain running throughout these stories: As time is etched on the bodies of the mortals — mere “bone clocks” — they’re periodically enlisted by “Atemporals,” participants in a metaphysical battle waged over the centuries beneath the shade of the material world.

That fantastical mystery smolders away under hundreds of pages, but when it finally bursts into flames in the novel’s fifth and longest section, it throws off surprisingly little heat. While Mitchell explains the characters’ obscure connections to each other, he suspends the novel’s serious philosophical and moral tenor in favor of an adolescent moral code and some vague theological iconography. In fulfillment of the Script — something

like fate or prophecy — two ancient camps, the vampiric Anchorites and the body-snatching Horologists, try to psycho-demolish each other in a blind Cathar's castle. It is, as one character needlessly explains, "a fight to the death," but the whole enterprise feels as worn as the stone walls of Hogwarts. Too earnest to be a parody of old fantasies, it's laced with tinfoil 'n' Scotch-tape lines such as "I revoke my cloak and invoke a body-shield." The evil overlord is an elegant and sardonic fiend somewhere on the scary scale between Ernst Stavro Blofeld and the Penguin. His evil villainess actually shrieks, "Crush them like ants!"

We climb this steep mountain expecting that we will be rewarded with the wizardry of "The Night Circus," "The Magicians" or "Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell" — but somehow, as "The Bone Clocks" winds up for its long-anticipated climax, Mitchell abandons his exploration of character, sexuality, class and politics for an old warlock's sack of clichés. In the words of one of the book's courageous, jargon-laden soldiers, the "psychovoltage is low."

Fortunately, the author doesn't leave us in this knock-off version of "Harry Potter." Instead, for its finale, the novel jumps ahead to a surprising time and place, and we're back to the real world of rapacious men and women and the good souls who must confront them. It's another story entirely, another example of Mitchell's boundless dexterity. By this point, some of these characters are familiar and beloved, which makes their increasingly lawless era all the more terrifying.

And Mitchell makes a strong case that it's coming our way. Atemporals should be fine; the rest of us bone clocks might want to get busy and see if the Script can be changed after all.

This review was first published in *The Washington Post*:  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>

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## **s.penkevich says**

--Slightly improved version 10/31/2014--

With his newest effort, 2014's *Bone Clocks*, David Mitchell returns to form found in his earlier novels such as *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas* with a wide-ranging epic spanning across multiple narrators and continents with aims at a universal message about power and the battle of good versus evil. Like *Cloud Atlas*, his newest effort harnesses various genres of fiction into a larger mosaic work that highlights the interconnectivity of humanity and the versatility of fiction writing. *Bone Clocks* both builds upon and simultaneously suffers from its attempt at harnessing the popular fiction of the day, yet misses the mark in terms of both parody and creating a work of lasting value. The book is a enjoyable, wild ride, and it is no surprise it has a popular following and managed to poke about on bestseller lists for a brief period. However, in the cannon of David Mitchell, this book falls far short of its potential. Mitchell seems to be making a grab for a wider, younger reader base here with *Bone Clocks*, yet also appears to be self-conscious of this grab and satirizes the genres he parodies in order to wash his hands of the whole affair. Despite the length and sprawling settings, the book finishes feeling overly simplified and overly explained, nothing left for the reader to venture in their own minds, and, most unfortunately, feels as if the novel was cheated by being tied together by the tawdry fantasy elements. However, Mitchell does succeed in highlighting the elements of popular fiction and adapting his own prose to fit these elements. While *Bone Clocks* has a lot of positives going for it, it succumbs to the overpowering negatives amalgamated from lackluster—and totally unnecessary—fantasy sub-plots, weak dialogue, and an insistence at saturating the text with witty one-liners.

A fascinating and engaging aspect of *Cloud Atlas*, to which this novel is sure to be frequently compared, was Mitchell's ability to sashay between genres and voice, creating a wide-ranging assortment of characters reincarnated through time as a brilliant metaphor for the reoccurrence of motifs in various literary traditions as well as an exploration of the how language evolves through time. Whereas *Cloud Atlas* parodied a wide range of notable styles across a lengthy timeline, using voices reminiscent of Herman Melville, Aldous Huxley, and even dipped into mass market action adventure crime dramas, *Bone Clocks* keeps the voices very contemporary. While this is in keeping with the shorter timeline of the novel, the variations are less noticeable and though it would seem impressive from a different author, it leads the reader to wonder why he would pull the same trick but to a lesser extent and the diminishing returns take the headspace that would otherwise be occupied by awe (this same aspect thwarts his character Crispin Hershey, though more on that later). Another dilemma is that the voices aren't all that varied in cadence and each voice is oversaturated with jokey one-liners and insults that are all built on the same blueprints. Mitchell compensates for this as most of his narrators are writers themselves, but the technique quickly becomes threadbare. There is no attempt to step into a voice outside the actual author—Mitchell—and each new narrator brings further diminishing returns of enjoyment and awe. Also, the collection of parodies seems more an ugly hodgepodge than a fine-tuned machine of separate gears working together. '*think Solaris meets Noam Chomsky via The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo. Add a dash of Twin Peaks...*' Hershey's own future book sounds just as clumsy as the one at hand.

The contemporary voice of the work seem pivotal to Mitchell's intent for the novel. Literature is an ever-changing, fluid beast that reacts both to the society and times from which it is created, but also to itself. Literature spawns from a tradition that is forever reshaped, reexamined and refurbished, drawing on both past and present to create something new and, hopefully, something noteworthy, but it cannot do so without recognizing where it has come from in order to step in a bold new direction. '*Even if a poet sets out to invent a new poetics,*' lectures character-author Crispin Hershey, '*he or she can only react against what's already there. There's no Johnny Rotten without the Bee Gees.*' We live in an age of hyper-information, an age where anyone can voice an opinion and have it read across the globe, an age of 'entertainment and technology and every four year old with a computer, everybody his own artist' (William Gaddis, *Agap?* Agape). In this age, literature has fallen prey to a capitalist agenda, where the books that are easily accessible—in regards to both accessibility to a consumer and accessibility of understanding—are the ones that will be pushed and promoted on the market. These books are much like what social theorists spoke of about popular television a few decades ago, being something with the highest possible pleasure and leaving the recipient feeling as if they have not wasted their time though they have actually just been a passive viewer to what has transpired. With *Bone Clocks* Mitchell seems to be highlighting the characteristics of what is now considered popular fiction. *Cloud Atlas* had the merits of being a sort of 'literary pulp', being both pulpy stories but with a literary intent that would lead readers excited by the adventures towards the literary pillars Mitchell had parodied. *Bone Clocks* is similar, except he leads readers towards popular fiction, for better or for worse. Mitchell often mentions the authors and genres he satirizes by name, such as the name-drop of Lee Child in the action story narrated by Marinus. This story is particularly pockmarked with atrocious dialogue. Characters are overly jokey in high-stress situations—a common occurrence in bad action films or books to point out how 'hardened' they are, and, in one unforgivable moment, the villain (yes, this book falls victim to the juvenile usage of a pure-evil villain character) of the book shouts '*crush them like ants*' during a battle sequence. People do not talk like this. Why would she need to inform her pure-evil team in the middle of a fight to the death that they should be trying to kill their opponents? Why reiterate that for the reader, unless it is assumed we've missed the point that they should be killing each other. Once again, this is the characteristics of pulpy action stories.

While other chapters seem based on writings of a bit more merit, such as the Martin Amis inspired Crispin



Hershey or the war correspondent section, the characteristics of popular teen fiction seem to flicker in much of the novel. There are the tidy endings often found in that genre (in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, a current corner-stone of popular fiction, the focal characters reject novels that do not have tidy, redemptive endings), and the cliché villain characters like Hugo that are charismatic, selfish and essentially sociopathic (a bit of a Voldemort character). An aspect that registered most distasteful are the 'allusions' that are more a mere name-dropping than actual references. Instead of cloaking an allusion to be unearthed by those who either know the material or do their research, Mitchell simply states things to rile up the fans. Daleks and the Tardis are simply called out, a technique found in popular fiction to excite fans but more borders on pandering than anything, and even the more literary references like the Auden and Laxness discussions are laid bare instead of assessed intertextually. I must admit to feeling the 'fan-boy' glee at name-drops such as Bonnie Prince Billy, but the frequent name dropping feels careless and desperate for attention rather than used for any higher purpose beyond elevating the readers pulse.

The troublesome narration, flat dialogue, and pulpy, fantasy plots would be easily disposed as simply bad writing in any other author, but those familiar with Mitchell are sure to notice that the writing is uncharacteristically poor for an author who is known to take careful, self-conscious consideration and typically writes at a higher caliber than much of what is found within *Bone Clocks*. Perhaps the negative reception to the film version of *Cloud Atlas*, which is sure to have hurt sales (I personally used to recommend the book to customers at my bookstore, and was often met with a wrinkling of the face and comments on how they had heard or thought the movie was terrible). Perhaps Mitchell is attempting to expand his reader base and is dipping into popular fiction as bait. Many times while reading *Bone Clocks* I was upset knowing Mitchell is better than how he was carrying on. There is much evidence in the text to support he was aware of his attempt to parody popular fiction and his usually charming self-conscious anxiety assesses this frequently throughout the Crispin Hershey segment. Hershey's in-novel literary history reflects Mitchell's own in many ways. The five year gap between *Bone Clocks* and *Thousand Autumns* is represented in the five years before Hershey's *Echo Must Die* saw publication in the novel, and Hershey is always short-listed for, but never the recipient of, the most prestigious European literary prize, mirroring the Man Booker Prize for which Mitchell is always notable but never victor. The most charming aspects of a David Mitchell novel is always when he exposes the clockwork, and Crispin Hershey's segment is that moment in this novel. Mitchell pokes fun at himself, such as the review of Hershey's *Echo Must Die* by character Richard Cheeseman (fans of *Cloud Atlas* are sure to enjoy that Cheesman—Mitchell never missing an opportunity to ridicule reviewers by naming his reviewer Dick Cheese—was first employed by a certain Felix Finch) stating:

*Why is Echo Must Die such a decomposing hog? One: Hersey is so bent on avoiding cliché that each sentence is as tortured as an American whistleblower. Two: The fantasy sub-plot clashes so violently with the book's State of the World pretensions, I cannot bear to look. Three: What surer sign is there that the creative aquifers are dry than a writer creating a writer-character?*

Each of these points are clearly addressing *Bone Clocks* itself, or is it that *Echo Must Die* is in fact a in-novel version of *Bone Clocks*? There are plenty of strong points in this novel, particularly Mitchell's recurring theme of those in power holding an obdurate seat of authority over those without by any means possible most, notably emphasized in Brubeck's chapter 'Wedding Bash', yet every time the novel is flowing nicely along through societal or interpersonal commentary, the fantasy elements crop up, derail anything beneficial, and speed the plot along towards some unsatisfying and unnecessary fantastic climax (a climax achieved in an orgasm of action-packed psychic battle bloodshed). To humor the idea, what then are the 'echos' that must die? Through each section, right when things get dicey and plot-excitement take hold, there are the repeated questions: 'what do you know about Horology?' or 'Who is Esther Little?'. These questions echo on, conjuring up the jarring and, unfortunately for the book, juvenile and cheesy fantasy elements that plague

the novel. Mitchell is pointing out how these fantasy stories, the action plots of authors like Lee Child and Dan Brown (both of which are frequently mentioned) are bastardizing the literary tradition. This then leads the reader to question every element of the novel, noticing the glaring clichés and other popular fiction elements flagged by flagrantly poor writing.

Which is not to say, exactly, that Mitchell is a poor writer, and I find it troublesome to actually label the writing in this book as 'poor'. Considering the idea that this is an intentional investigation into popular fiction, Mitchell brilliantly succeeds in parodying and highlighting the elements of the novelists and genres he has chosen to examine. Lee Child comes up a few times, an author working within the action-packed political spy genre. The Marinus segments work wonderfully within this genre, and while it seemed to me a bit overblown and pulpy, that is exactly what it is supposed to be. The dialogue of Sadaqat, the housekeeper of the Horologists home-base, does not feel realistic, being overtly passive and chummy and full of home-team pride, but it is exactly this disingenuous dialogue that leads the reader to realize that he is a traitor. When he betrays them, which doesn't come as much of a surprise, it is evident that the flat dialogue was the foreshadowing; Mitchell uses linguistic cues and intentionally 'bad' writing as a method of character development, which is honestly quite fascinating and is in keeping with the style of dialogue such a character would employ in, say, a Lee Child novel. Similarly with the nods to Dan Brown in the Crispin Hershey segment, utilizing the semiotic investigations of a Brown 'connect-the-dots to solve the mystery' plot such as the one-eyed man being used to bait the reader to a false climax (the first is not his killer, and the second is a surprise interpretation).

Mitchell is making a play for a wider audience by baiting them with popular fiction, yet simultaneously prodding at the book for employing this technique. However, would a self-respecting author really *intentionally* stoop to poor writing to make a point? I fully concede to be wrong on all accounts here, because would Mitchell jeopardize his novel and writing-caliber to make a point? I believe he may have taken this risk, as I have faith that Mitchell is wiser and more adept than much of what he presents here, yet even seeing through to the possible mechanics and impetus of the novel do not save it, though they do retain respect for Mitchell as a writer. Even alongside this theory of both utilizing bad fiction while chastising it for a higher purpose of literary conversation, *Bone Clocks* still fail. The supposed intent does not compensate for the inferior writing, meretricious fantasy elements, and aggravating characters—such as young Holly—that plague the novel and detract from the emotive and intellectual themes of power, corruption and literary prowess that could have shone on their own had their not been a need to tie them together with the Anchorite vs Horologist sub-plot. Each time this plot reared its ugly head it was met with an eye-roll.

All the negatives aside, this is a *fun* book. Mitchell enacts a fascinating and well-rounded theology with the Horologists, creating a within-the-novel jargon and fleshed-out history (impressive at least to me, a reader not well-versed, and even adverse, to the science-fiction realms Mitchell takes the reader throughout this book). The characters are engaging, especially Ed Brubeck, who leaves the reader wishing Mitchell had just written a full-length novel on him alone (though at least we are blessed by war correspondent stories such as 'Listening to the Shells' in William T. Vollmann's *Last Stories and Other Stories*—possibly the finest book published in Summer 2014—to satisfy where Mitchell cut short). Mitchell works well with three-dimensional characters like Brubeck who is not without his flaws, and especially Hugo, the book's most likeable character who also happens to be a morally bankrupt utter bastard. This is interesting seeing as most popular fiction tends towards relatable, likeable characters that are either irreproachable or flaws that are more charming than anything else. This book is also worth reading for any Mitchell fan simply to see how it fits into his universe. There are frequent allusions to his other works, particularly *Black Swan Green* in the earlier portions (Alan Ward and Hugo were exciting to revisit) and *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* which may possibly feature an early example of the Anchorites alongside the first mention of Marinus (if this was preordained by Mitchell or just a happy opportunity for expansion is up for debate and could only be

resolved by Mitchell himself). Despite my earlier comments on the bland dialogue and, to me, middling prose that comprises the Marinus section, that chapter blazed like wildfire with excitement and glee. While I did not enjoy *Bone Clocks*, it is admittedly a fun and engaging novel, especially for those who are coming to this from the styles which he parodies.

Mitchell returns with fascinating themes on power and the human condition that permeate his other novels. I respect his views on good and evil, and that the world is ruined by those who abuse power to shoehorn their own profit-gaining power over those below them. The section on the Iraq war is of particular interest, as Mitchell manages to summarize the conflict better in a more succinct and beneficial manner than months of news broadcasts explained it to me in my youth. I particularly enjoyed his jabs at American arrogance and his brief mention of war-profiteers such as Erik Prince's Blackwater group (who are local heroes here in hometown Holland, Michigan, much to my disdain). Mitchell has an agenda for the betterment of humanity that is honorable and uplifting, and these themes of his are what always keep me coming back for more.

Mitchell does well by gathering a wider readership and creating a fascinating fantasy world that is fun to read, yet the novel feels like he is constantly juggling more than he can carry and is thwarted by a striking mediocrity in variety of voices and satire, though intentional. What is most troubling is that Mitchell seems to be writing for the sake of an audience, a wide audience at that, and not for the sake of the story. Cheapen a book for an audience, and the story suffers. Keep true to a story, and an audience will find their way. That said, I will still read any following Mitchell novels and still hold faith in him as a writer. He is a necessary and wonderful benefactor for those hoping to move from pulpier fiction to a fiction of a more literary bent reminding readers how much fun reading can be. *Bone Clocks* is a fun adventure, but one soon forgotten upon completion.

**2.5/5**

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## **Darwin8u says**

*"Love's pure free joy when it works, but when it goes bad you pay for the good hours at loan-shark prices."*  
? David Mitchell, *The Bone Clocks*

It is hard to not *like* David Mitchell. He is literary, just not too literary. He is funky, just not too funky. He is hip, just not too hip. He is political, just not too political. He is spiritual, but also seems to leave room for a bit of humanist doubt. I can't think of another writer who captures the energy or direction of the slick, urban, cosmopolitan, educated, 21st century global zeitgeist.

David Mitchell is brilliant at ventriloquism and style-jumping. His books are filled with multiple narrative and style incarnations (the stacking-doll *Cloud Atlas*, or narrative leaping *number9dream*, or his most recent *The Bone Clocks*), but sometime I feel like he is starting to eat his own tail here. I want to see Mitchell do a Peter Carey and jump out of his slick, crowd-pleasing novels into something a bit different. Do I know what I want? No. I just see this author who I've liked enough to read everything he's ever published, and fear that we might just get two or three more of these books. I like them. Don't get me wrong. I liked the *Bone Clocks* enough to give it four stars and review and read it. I just don't want to see Mitchell begin to get so comfortable in his archipelago of interconnected narratives that he doesn't push his talent into dark, rough, and uncomfortable places.

Anyway, Mitchell hasn't written a novel YET that I'm very disappointed with and Bone Clocks is no exception. There might be a couple slower chapters and the ending might have been a bit predictable, but I had a hard time putting the novel down while reading and was sad to put it down when I finished. That isn't rare for me, but it is a pretty good indication that the novel is on solid ground. People keep claiming to see the death of the novel around the corner, but Mitchell's talent and slickness is at least one star that keeps consistently reappearing.

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## Debbie "DJ" says

For many, David Mitchell seems to be an untouchable. However, this was my first book written by this author. I read it based on the rave reviews I saw, but found it as close to unreadable as any I've come across.

The first chapter is by far the best of the book, after this, the author goes off on tangents using language, terms, and words that were completely foreign to me.

The story is all over the place and I was completely lost regarding character progression, relationships, and the overall storyline. The sections pertaining to the immortals was one of the worst pieces of writing I have ever experienced. I had waded my way through 500 something pages and was meandering about trying to connect the dots.

I kept reading hoping that the proceeding pages would somehow make sense. Soon, I found myself skimming as I was oh, so tired. My feelings became one of "who cares." After 600 pages I was still as confused as before. I may have missed a few parts, due to skimming, but in the end, nothing offered closure of any kind.

Since I've already been given a hard time without a review, why not give one, and let the battle begin.

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## Cecily says

This is a detailed summary of key features of the book. I've hidden big spoilers, but there may be minor ones, depending on your definition of "spoiler".

I have a **brief, spoiler-free, and very different, review here (different \* rating, too):**

**<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>**, which is more about my feelings for the book. It also includes a selection of favourite quotes and links to interviews. The difference in star rating is deliberate: I couldn't decide.

## LINKS AND THEMES

This book, perhaps more than any of his others, cannot be viewed in isolation. In particular, it is closely tied to The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

I've read all Mitchell's previous books (four of them twice): connectedness is the most overarching theme, within and between books.

All (except Black Swan Green?) muse on (im)mortality, specifically souls moving from one body to another, but not in a spooky paranormal way; it's more matter-of-fact than that. The sometimes uneasy host/guest/invaser relationship is mirrored in wider themes about power, exploitation and survival of the fittest. Music often features, as do islands, rescue vessels (literal and metaphorical), and survival despite societal collapse. Here, there is no sudden, total apocalypse and it happens without a glittering high-tech future in between.

Most famously, characters from one book make fleeting appearances in another. This is fun, ~~pretentious~~, sometimes gratuitous, distracting, but enriching.

I like the idea that just as his novels (including this) are often built up of connected stories in different styles, those novels have a similar relationship to each other: stories within stories within stories, creating a whole world of connections: immortality by transferring from one vessel to another.

**“Each of my novels are expanders or chapters in a kind of uber-book, a piece of a universe that all my novels are making”**. That makes it less surprising that his next five novels are “planned to some degree”. One will be the final volume of the Marinus trilogy.

The Thousand Autumns had seemed to be a fairly conventional historical novel with fewer connections than Ghostwritten and Cloud Atlas; The Bone Clocks changes that, exposing overlaps and hidden fantasy:

- Slade House (reviewed here: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>) is entirely in this world.
- Marinus, a significant character in The Thousand Autumns, is a major character in this.
- Marinus mentions Arie Grote from his life in Dejima in Thousand Autumns.
- The immortality-seeking baby-eating cult in Thousand Autumns is presumably an early grouping of Anchorites.
- We glimpse Prescience, precursors of the Prescients from Cloud Atlas.
- Hugo Lamb's cousin is Jason Taylor, the main character in Black Swan Green (who was in turn, heavily based on Mitchell).
- Ed Brubeck writes for Spyglass magazine, as did Luisa Rey in Cloud Atlas.
- Elijah D'Arnoq is a reincarnation or descendant of a D'Arnoq that Adam Ewing encounters in The Chatham Islands in Cloud Atlas.
- Dwight Silverwind from Ghostwritten makes a small but significant appearance.
- Mo Muntervary has small important roles here and in Ghostwritten.
- There is a mention of a battle in a sunken garden, the title of the opera Mitchell recently wrote the libretto for.
- Holly's family get takeaways from The Thousand Autumns Restaurant (though it's Chinese, not Japanese).

- Soleil Moore: she's an Asian-American poet who is really important, then drops out of the narrative completely. I'm guessing she'll feature prominently in a future book.

There are also characters apparently based on real characters: Lord Roger Brittan is a minor character, rather like Lord (Alan) Sugar; more obviously, Crispin Hershey is remarkably like Martin Amis (see below).

The book even references itself: Hershey bases one of his characters on Holly's husband, and Soleil Moore accuses him of having written about Anchorites.

## **CAST**

There is an enormous cast, and some characters live in multiple bodies and so go by different names. Those peripheral in one section are often significant in later one.

I don't need to like the protagonists of a book, which is just as well. Holly isn't **unlikeable**, but I found her voice annoying and trying too hard to sound teenage, yet not always believable. (In particular, endless abbreviations: "Ed Brubeck'll be", "Mam will've told Dad... 'bout why", and the apostrophe-esses that weren't possessive were easy to stumble over).

Other characters are highly unpleasant, yet somehow lacking the glamour of a really good baddie.

Many have accents in their names, which was a little distracting: Zoe, Anais, Eilish, Oshima, Immaculee – but not Aoife.

## **Hershey, Amis, Mitchell?**

Critics have seen close parallels between Martin Amis and former "Wild Child of British Letters", Crispin Hershey: in terms of life events, writing style, personality, and book titles (Hershey's successful *Desiccated Embryos* and another called *Red Monkey* compared with Amis' *Dead Babies* and *Yellow Dog*). Martin's father, Kingsley, is even quoted, saying a bad review might spoil breakfast, but he wouldn't let it spoil lunch.

Mitchell has repeatedly denied any conscious link. Instead, he claims Hershey is "not just my worst aspect, he's my fears. He's what I might turn into if I'm not careful" and he "is all the worst parts of me, amplified and smooshed together" and in this section "I got to have a lot of fun spoofing people like me". Hershey's most successful novel has a symmetrical structure, like *Cloud Atlas*.

Most literary critics are sceptical. The Guardian wondered whether "buried deep within this scrupulously polite and unassuming writer, a revenge fantasist [is] just waiting to punish the reviewers who dismiss him" or if he'd "belatedly woken up to the fact that taking a pop at his literary elders is not necessarily the smartest career move".

I've only read one Amis novel, and nothing else by him; I wonder if he has Crispin's quirk of alternating between first and third person for himself – even in a single sentence!

## **META – MUSINGS ON WRITING**

Mitchell sees each collection of related novellas as part of a greater work: echoes and foreshadowing abound, Hershey's failed book has "Echo" in the title, and elsewhere, we're told the mysterious "Script" "loves to foreshadow".

In this, he explicitly muses on fiction, writing, and lit crit, and pre-empts some potential criticisms of this book. The bad review that kill Hershey's sales, includes, "Hershey is so bent on avoiding cliché that each sentence is as tortured as an American whistleblower... The fantasy sub-plot clashes so violently with the book's State of the World pretensions, I cannot bear to look... What surer sign is there that the creative aquifers are dry than a writer creating a writer-character?" Later, "A book can't be a half fantasy any more than a woman can be half pregnant."

After the second *deus ex machina* moment, Mitchell has one of the characters declare it as such, just so you know he knows.

In some ways, Hershey is very unlike Mitchell, observing that "in publishing, it's easier to change your body than it is to switch genre" – something Mitchell makes a speciality of. He also makes prescriptive judgements on writing that I doubt Mitchell subscribes to in blanket terms: "Double-negatives are truth smugglers" and "Adverbs are cholesterol in the veins of prose".

"A writer flirts with schizophrenia, nurtures synaesthesia and embraces obsessive-compulsive disorder. Your art feeds on you, your soul and, yes, to a degree, your sanity. Writing novels worth reading *will* bugger up your mind, jeopardise your relationships and distend your life."

At one point, Hugo observes, "such narrative arcs make great movies, but shitty lives"; he neglects to say what sort of books they make.

## **PLOT**

This is deceptively straightforward for Mitchell: a chronological story of one woman's life, told in six, first-person parts:

### **1984 "A Hot Spell"**

Illustrated with a disintegrating clock, narrated by Holly, a fifteen-year old who heard voices as a child, and now runs away after bust ups with parents and boyfriend. It is not Orwellian.

(view spoiler)

### **1991 "Myrrh is Mine, Its Bitter Perfume"**

Illustrated with Holly's labyrinth, told by Hugo Lamb, a conscience-free, money-loving Cambridge student, not quite as aristo as his equally obnoxious friends. Far more important than it first seems.

(view spoiler)

### **2004 "The Wedding Bash"**

Illustrated with a crystal ball showing the Middle East, told by Ed Brubeck. Two very contrasting aspects: the excitement of a family wedding and life (and constant risk of death) as a reporter in Iraq.

(view spoiler)

### **2015 "Crispin Hershey's Lonely Planet"**

Illustrated with a spider and web, told by Crispin, an amoral, formerly successful, novelist.

(view spoiler)

### **2025 "An Horologist's Labyrinth"**

Illustrated with an apple, narrated by Marinus. It becomes full-on YA fantasy here. It reminded me of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. If I'd read any Dan Brown, I might spot parallels there.

Plotwise, it could have ended at the end of this, but my rating would have been lower, as I found this section increasingly silly.

(view spoiler)

### **2048 “Sheep’s Head”**

Illustrated with a running fox silhouetted against an ominously large moon, told by Holly, who is old, and struggling to raise two children, as a slow-burn apocalypse approaches. There is irony the fact this increasingly desperate situation is utterly plausible and grounded in current and possible events. The fantasy battles of the previous chapter seems irrelevant – especially as connectedness is the most fundamental thing to collapse (“the commodity we’re most in need of is news”).

(view spoiler)

### **VOCAB**

The vocab list for anyone interested in horology became somewhat ludicrous. Here’s a sample:

Scansion, Incorporeals, Atemporals, Sojourners (go straight from one body to another, usually of the same sex), Returnee (“each resurrection is a lottery of longitudes, latitudes and demography”, usually alternating gender, with a 49 day gap), subtalk, the Script, Aperture, Shaded Way, psychovoltaic, “hiatus freezes [someone], suasion forces [them]”, oubliette, psychosoterica, carnivorous psycho-decanter, animacides, soul thieves, chakra-latent, dreamseed, metalife, transversing.

### **CLOSING THOUGHTS**

**“For one voyage to begin, another voyage must come to an end, sort of.”** I think that sums up Mitchell’s approach to his novels.

Mitchell quotes mostly from <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/p...>, and <http://www.theguardian.com/books/book....> Also interviews on BBC Radio 2’s Book Club, and Radio 4’s Front Row (that I can’t find online any more).

**All my Mitchell reviews are on this uber shelf:**

**<https://www.goodreads.com/review/list...>**

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### **Reading Corner says**

I couldn't finish this book, I struggled to even get to 300 pages, it's horribly boring. The opening chapter is fantastic and I thoroughly enjoyed Holly's perspective but things really go downhill after that. The book follows Holly Sykes' life through other people who meet her as she ages. Holly Sykes has a strange connection with an outside influence which is a mystery to her and the reader.

After Holly's opening chapter, the narrative switches to Hugo who was an absolute pain to read, it's depressingly boring and his chapter seems to be completely pointless. Perhaps at the end it ties together but Holly makes a small appearance and we learn nothing new about her, other than where she is working and the fact she's now older. The next chapter follows Holly's husband, Ed and his narrative is actually quite interesting and I did enjoy it. His chapter actually gave me insight into Holly's strange abilities and added to



my understanding. I gave up reading a bit into Crispin Hershey's narrative as I was falling asleep while reading it and I just couldn't read any further.

This novel definitely wasn't for me although I did enjoy two chapters but I couldn't force myself to go further. Some of my friends love this book but *Bone Clocks* is just not for me.

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## Cecily says

I read this, couldn't decide whether it was 2\* or 4\*, and knew it would take a while to digest it properly and write a full review. So I decided to do two: this is the short, spoiler-free, initial thoughts one. **The much longer, and very different, one is here:** <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...> (it has spoilers, but they're hidden).

Two reviews allows two ratings, but by the time I'd finished this, I realised even with its faults, it's not 2\*, so it will be 3\* and 4\* from me.

## Narrative Structure and Plot

It's a relatively straightforward narrative for Mitchell: a chronological story of one life. However, like *Cloud Atlas* and *Ghostwritten*, it is also a collection of related stories, in different styles and genres (like CA, it's in six parts). In this case, the first and last sections are narrated by the central character (Holly), and the other four, by those playing a key role during that episode of her life.

In Mitchell's own words (jotted down almost verbatim) in an interview on BBC Radio 2's Book Club:

*A murderous feud between two circles of pseudo immortals: one benign and one decidedly predatory. It erupts every ten years or so. Holly moves from pawn to decisive weapon, as she develops from being primarily a daughter, through lover, to mother, improbable and reluctant bestselling writer, (he missed out the fifth one, but I'd say confused combatant), and finally, battle-scarred grandmother. It's about mortality, and several characters are offered a Faustian pact: keep your youth in return for having your conscience amputated. (Mind you, there's at least one character who rather lacking in the conscience department, even without such a pact.)*

But although it's ostensibly about a woman, it's always in relation to the men she encounters, and most of them are pretty unpleasant. So really, it's about men. There's no reason why it shouldn't be, but I think it's only fair to point out a potential wrong expectation.

It could easily and satisfactorily have ended after the fifth section, but didn't, which I'm glad about, despite the sharp contrast.

I've described the key features of each section in my detailed review.

## Common Threads

As with all Mitchell's books, this one features characters from and references to his other works. Most have a peripheral role here (there's no need to be familiar with their other appearances), but one major character was

significant in *The Thousand Autumns* (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>), making that book seem much less of a straightforward historical novel than it appeared at the time.

In Mitchell's own words, **"Each of my novels are expanders or chapters in a kind of uber-book, a piece of a universe that all my novels are making"**. It started out as fun, but "I'm building a coherent, megalomaniac's, large-scale world of an uber-novel".

Very recently, he said:

**"I think I have recently discovered I am basically not a novelist, I am a novella writer. If you put novella A next to novella B then they – interact isn't right – smack off each other, they glint at each other.** They possibly echo or reflect each other, and make a third thing."

(From [http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-ent....](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-ent...))

Mitchell's favoured themes of power, predacity, exploitation, contrasted with sacrifice, mortality, islands, lifeboats (in a loose sense) and refuge are strong. Migrating souls are central, and there are other touchpoints, such as music, and life approaching or after societal collapse.

There's a comprehensive list my other review: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

### **Mixed Genres and Age Groups**

The early sections have a few incidents that might be paranormal or just psychological, but it's all broadly realistic. Only later does it turn overtly fantastical (at which point you begin to realise some of the foreshadowing in earlier sections) and it's more like something by Philip Pullman (or perhaps Dan Brown, who I haven't read).

Swapping genres is a trick Mitchell has pulled off well before, but this feels like switching age groups, which may be why it feels more jarring. The contrast between the very realistic (I assume) sections set in the Iraq war and the more YA fantastical war in the later parts is a powerful disconnect. Is that a strength or a weakness? I'm not sure.

### **What Price Immortality?**

This question is never explicitly asked, but it screams from the pages. Would I want to live forever, even if such an ability was benignly acquired? Probably not (what about friends and family?), and yet, there's always one more enticing experience. Mitchell himself says he chose the motivation for the evil protagonists based on what would tempt him: not money or sex, but "never having to stop... never having to end... not having to say "goodbye" to this world".

Even one who has lived through many lives fears "Will I die without ever reading *Ulysses* to the end?". I haven't even started that! Then again, as one mortal says, "We sort of live on, as long as there are people to live on in", meaning grandchildren, whether biological or just a younger generation one has influenced.

### **Memory Cleansing**

Wouldn't it be nice to erase bad memories, as could be done by some in this book? If you've seen "Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind", you may be less sure. But without the bad, the good would seem less good, and our lives would lack colour and contrast. Also, what if you knew something had been erased? "When you know your memory's been monkeyed around with once, how can you ever be sure of any memory

again?” And “If you can’t trust your mind any more, you’re mentally homeless.” I think for most of us, we’re probably better off keeping most of our memories.

## **Weaknesses**

Quite a few, I’m afraid:

Some of the narrators were annoying: teenage Holly didn’t ring true (and used odd abbreviations) and Crispin Hershey alternates between first and third person for himself.

One of the irritations is how *knowing* this book is: Mitchell pre-empts some of the more obvious criticisms by applying them to a book that (like this) jumps oddly into fantasy, and having a character acknowledging a *deus ex machina* by that label. There’s a lot more about these aspects in my lengthier review.

Conversely, lack of knowing is an issue: on at least two occasions a narrator has a memory wiped – and yet they’re able to describe before, during and after.

Spotting cross-overs with his other books can be fun, and it creates a broader canvas for an uber-book or universe, but occasionally it feels like gratuitous showing-off. However, one can never be certain there isn’t a good reason, yet to be revealed, so I end up forgiving him.

The sections describing reporting from a war zone are very well done, but there was just too much of it for my taste –and most of it wasn’t very relevant for this book (but who knows about future ones?).

A trivial but (for me) distracting feature was the excessive use of names with all manner of accents, even for English characters. Just because computer typesetting makes it easy, doesn’t make it desirable.

He even throws in the most famous line from Game of Thrones (it must be famous, as I’ve neither read nor watched it) - or maybe that was just co-incidence.

## **Strength – So Much**

And yet... and yet... even though I didn’t care enough about any of the characters until the very end (which is not the same as liking them, which is not something I need to enjoy a book) I was keen to keep reading at every opportunity, and am glad I did. And now that I’ve finished, I find I have SO much to mull over, I realise what a powerful book it is.

## **Closing Thoughts**

“For one voyage to begin, another voyage must come to an end, sort of.” I think that sums up Mitchell’s approach to his novels.

## **QUOTES**

- A bone clock “whose face betrays how very, very little time they have left.”
- “There’s the thirsty sky and the wide river full of ships and boats and stuff.”
- “What if heaven *is* real, but only in moments? Like a glass of water on a hot day when you’re *dying* of

thirst, or when someone's nice to you for no reason... Like the best song anyone ever wrote, but a song you only catch in snatches."

- "Whatever's slowing down isn't inside me... it's time slowing up or gravity pulling harder, or air changing to water."
- "a low-tide sort of face" (of a man in his sixties).
- "When you know your memory's been monkeyed around with once, how can you ever be sure of any memory again?"
- "King's College choir's sixteen bat-eared choristers, bereft of hair styles."
- Music "chasing its echoey tail around the sumptuous ceiling before dive-bombing the scattering of winter tourists... [it] binds your quivery soul to the mast and lashes it with fiery sublimity."
- "I let Piccadilly Circus tube station suck me down into its vortex of body odour and bad breath... commuters sway like sides of beef, and slump like corpses."
- "Persuasion is not about force: it's about showing a person a door, and making him or her desperate to open it."
- "A wealthy upbringing compounds stupidity while a hard-scrabble childhood dilutes it... This is why the elite *need* a prophylactic barrier of shitty state schools."
- "Love is a blurring of pronouns. Love is subject and object."
- "The morning cold is a plunging cold; but the blue sky's blue as Earth from space, and the warmth from the sun's a lover's breath; and icicles drip drops of bright in steep-sloped streets from story books whose passers-by have mountain souls."
- "The impossible is negotiable. What is possible is malleable."
- "Like all belongers, the Sykeses and Webbers don't notice how easily they slip into groups."
- "Clouds curdled pink in the narrow sky above the blast barriers lining the highway into Baghdad."
- "The stranger absorbs Hershey's withering stare like a man in his prime with nothing to fear, notwithstanding the damage that Time the Vandal has done to his face."
- The US president has "orthodontically majestic sons".
- "Modesty is vanity's craftier step-brother."
- The soul is "a spiritual memory-stick in search of a corporeal hard-drive; and as a placebo we generate to cure our dread of mortality."
- "Esther enfolded my soul in hers so I could spirit walk much further and faster than I was otherwise able. When she scansioned me I felt like a third-rate poet showing his doggerel to Shakespeare. When I

scansioned her I felt like a minnow tipped from a jar into a deep inland sea”.

- “The sun’s sunk behind the [mountain], so the greens are stewing to greys and browns. Leaves and twigs are losing their three-dimensionality... The glass of dusk is filling.”
- “She walks as if distrustful of floors, and sits down as if she’s had some bad experiences with chairs too.”
- “‘What lives one day must die’ can, in rare circumstances, be renegotiated... Atemporality, with terms and conditions applied.”
- “There are days when New York strikes me as a conjuring trick. All great cities do and must revert to jungle... Today, however, New York’s here-ness is incontestible, as if time is subject to it, not it subject to time.... Welded girders, inhabited sidewalks and more bricks than there are stars. Who could ever have predicted these vertical upthrusts and squally canyons?”
- Paraphrasing Arthur C Clarke, “Some magic is normality you’re not yet used to.”
- “If you could reason with religious people, there wouldn’t be any religious people.” (It’s rather missing the point of faith, but is true nevertheless.)
- “The sound of waves dies and gives birth to the sound of waves, for ever and ever.”

### **Links**

\* A presentation to librarians, in which Mitchell talks initially in general terms and then, from 11:45, The Bone Clocks specifically: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxq-F...>

\* Q&A with HuffPo: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09...>

\* Interview that includes a chart of cross-over characters: <http://www.vulture.com/2014/08/david-...>

\* Barnes and Noble interview, including much about Marinus in both this and Thousand Autumns, as well as the importance of music: <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/review/...>

\* LA Review of Books, general lit crit of Mitchell’s uber-novel, but mainly in relation to The Bone Clocks: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/review/ad...>

\* November 2015: This won the World Fantasy award. Thanks Apatt for this: <http://goo.gl/ExyV7K>

**All my Mitchell reviews on this uber shelf:**

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/list...>

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## Greg says

Fans of David Mitchell who can remember simple things like characters' names will enjoy the callbacks to his earlier novels. Those who can't remember shit might find themselves like me doing a lot of Wikipedia plot summary searches to see if they are missing any little surprises for each character that passes through *The Bone Clocks*.

I don't think that it's important to have read all of Mitchell's earlier books to enjoy this one. And I don't think I'm saying that just to make myself feel better about having spent the past week reading this book and waiting online to get a signed ARC of the book for about two hours (even though physically it is probably the nicest looking ARC given away at this years BEA).

The book roughly follows the life of Holly Sykes who, is first seen in 1984 as a fifteen year old getting into a fight with her mom after mom discovers Holly hadn't spent the previous night at a friends house but was off shagging her twenty something year old cool guy boyfriend. Mum slaps Holly. Holly packs her bags, gives her parents two fingers in the air and because fifteen year olds always make the best decision, she heads off to live with 'the love of her life'.

The first section of the book covers fifteen year old (I'll be sixteen in just a couple of months) Holly's adventure.

The next five sections are each told from a different characters perspective and move linearly through time. In varying degrees each section features Holly and the reader learns more about her and is caught up with what has been happening to her, but in most of these sections it is the other characters who are the real focus of the stories.

The way that Mitchell tells the stories in the first four sections is quite good. I wanted to say fun but that might not be the best word to use (although the 'Martin Amis' section is quite fun (it is supposed to be him, right?)), these sections are sort of their own self-contained worlds like the sections of *Cloud Atlas*, which stand well on their own. He doesn't do the whole genre switching thing here though, or not as blatantly (I've been on the fence about this question for the past few minutes—all the time that I spent thinking about what I should write before sitting down to write).

Through the end of the fourth section I was fairly sure that I'd give this five stars. It was just so good up until then.

If the book ended on page 400 it would have gotten five stars. It's possible if the book ended with the penultimate section it would have gotten five stars, too. But instead it went on a bit too long for me and I ended up knocking off a star (later decided to be only a half star deduction) because the work as a whole I felt suffered from the last section.

If you haven't read the book and ever plan to read it do not click the spoiler button. I mean it—don't click spoiler and thank you for reading my review of *The Bone Clocks*!

(view spoiler)

Phew, I rambled a bunch there. I might have been a little harsh but it's only because I loved the first parts of the book so much. What I didn't like so much didn't ruin it for me, but maybe made it a 4.5 instead of a 5 star book.

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## **Forrest says**

I once wrote a novel like this.

My agent wisely advised me to split it up into two novellas.

I did.

I wish Mitchell's agent had given the same advice.

He or she didn't.

Too bad.

It's a tempting trap, this splicing together of novellas. I know, I've been caught in it myself. It makes the writer's job much easier. And it's clever, to boot. In the case of *The Bone Clocks*, however, this strategy backfired, creating a novel divided against itself.

I'll spare you the plot overview for three reasons: 1) others have already given fantastic overviews (see, particularly, reviews by AmberBug, Jenny (Reading Envy), and Greg). 2) Any plot outline is bound to contain inadvertent spoilers. 3) I'm feeling rather tired from other, writerly projects.

So let's focus on structure and characterization.

The internal schism in the book isn't about plot, anyway. It's about pacing, emphasis, and characterization, more than anything else. The first 2/3rds of the book were, frankly, overwrought. And by that, I don't mean that the language was overly purple or the syntactical structure too complex. In fact, I found quite the opposite. Mitchell was careful to portray salt-of-the-earth characters and jaded characters as if they were almost Jungian archetypes of naive teenagers and hedonistic twenty-somethings, respectively. Mitchell tried really, really hard to get these characterizations across.

Too hard.

You could tell that he was trying.

Time and again, I felt that Mitchell was trying so hard to make his characters - "trendy" or "hip" are the words that come to mind - that they ended up being pastiches of the very ideal for which the author was aiming. They became, in a word, distracting, like that guy who so wants to be the center of attention at a party that he wears a rainbow afro wig. Everyone sees him there, making everyone laugh. But guess who's not going home with the girl?

Now, I've read (and written) my share of annoying and despicable characters. But these characters, by and

large, threw me out of the story. Later, when said characters returned (in later sections), I found it extremely difficult to accept them. My brain wanted to reject them, and I found myself becoming angry at the author for having screwed these characters up in an attempt to be "literary".

And there is the biggest structural problem with the book.

In the first 2/3rds, Mitchell seems to be making a conscious effort to appear "literary". I'm not sure why - it's obvious from his previous work that he has writing "chops". I don't know what he was trying to prove, but he tried so hard that he failed. He over-thought the first part of the book. Only in section 3, "The Wedding Bash" does Mitchell's auctorial \*voice\* sound genuine and natural.

This third section is exceptional, and would have made a brilliant novella by itself. As it stands in relation to the rest of the plot, however, it feels as if it has been awkwardly welded-on to the rest of the novel, weakening the overall product. Really, this section is some of the best writing I've read in a while. Mitchell's got chops . . . in doses.

The next section, "Crispin Hershey's Lonely Planet" is indulgent, and not in a good way. Perhaps I'm missing some hidden humor about Mitchell's experience as a well-known writer. If so, the inside jokes are, well, a little \*too\* inside. And, like the third section, this bit seems tacked on, hardly relevant, except in a few small points which could have been distilled down to a few pages. In fact, I believe that the first 350 pages of this novel could have been brought down to about 100, and Mitchell would have not only a heck of a novella (in "The Wedding Bash," which I like to call the "Baghdad section"), but a great novel, as well.

Because, you see, it gets better. Much, much better. Had Mitchell not stretched out the first half of the book to three-times the length it should have been(to be fair, the blame might lay with the editor), you'd be reading a five star review. No kidding: The last half-ish of the book is THAT good.

It's in the tale of the Horologists, and beyond, that the author really hits his stride. Here things get weird and exciting, two things which I like very much in a novel. Gone is the pretense of trying to please *The New Yorker* crowd. The catering to angry teenagers has thankfully died away. And Mitchell reveals that he is a heck of a writer when he lets his hair down, takes off his tie, and gets down to really letting himself fly as a writer.

But, wait. "What", you ask, "is a Horologist"?

I'm not telling. I'll leave it as a surprise. But suffice it to say that once we understand a little bit about them, all hell breaks loose. Really, everything goes crazy. Not just for the characters directly in the path of the immediate action, the ones in a psychic conflict between superhuman beings, but for the whole planet. Now, before you go blaming the Horologists (after all, their organization sounds so . . . prostitutional - which isn't even a word, but you get my point), know that while they are powerful, they are far from all-powerful. They are at the mercy of mankind's collective bad decisions, just like the rest of the world. And while reading the last section of the book might make the reader feel that he is taking a beating from a pedantic stick wielded by Greenpeace, it does set things up for what I must admit is a very emotional ending. I found myself staying up late because I had to finish the book. Mitchell compelled me, by making me viscerally-involved and emotionally-invested in the characters at the end of the book. Finally, finally, I could forget the forced too-cool-to-be-true feeling of the first part of the book and enjoy myself, really let myself get steeped in the characters' thoughts and emotions, and feel their fear, love, and longing in my bones.

Yeah, I had to reach for the tissue. There were tears.



Still, there was a time when I wanted to stop reading the book. And I am not one to stop reading books, no matter how bad. But I was tempted to close this one up and take it to the used book store. Oh, I was sorely tempted. Thankfully, I pushed through and it was just a tiny bit after I peeked over that wall (and it was a big wall), that it got better. Ultimately, it was a victory. But a Pyrrhic victory. I may be recovering from this novel, both the good and the bad parts, for some time to come.

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## Julie Christine says

“My hero is a Cambridge student called Richard Cheeseman, working on a novel about a Cambridge student called Richard Cheeseman, working on a novel about a Cambridge student called Richard Cheeseman. No one’s ever tried anything like it.”

“Cool,” says Johnny Penhaligon. “That’s sounds like—“

“A frothy pint of piss,” I announce, and Cheeseman looks at me with death in his eyes until I add, “is what’s in my bladder right now. The book sounds incredible, Richard.”

How can a novel so replete with cynicism and sadness, where beloved characters are vanished and the world spins heedlessly toward doom, be so much dang fun?

David Mitchell, that’s why (by the way, this novel is not about Richard Cheeseman).

If you’ve not read David Mitchell before, I wouldn’t recommend you start here, because I don’t think *The Bone Clocks* is his best, but it does overflow with all the features that make his writing such a joy to read: the nested Russian Doll plotting; the marvel of authorial ventriloquism—where he can inhabit any character and produce any voice with astonishing believability; the soaring heights of detail and imagination; the sheer precipices of suspense and drama. *The Bone Clocks* is a delight of storytelling, even if some of its parts weaken the strength of the whole.

The novel is series of interlocking narratives, with the character of Holly Sykes at its core. I adore Holly, from her naïve teenage defiance in Thatcher and Talking Heads England of 1984 to her world-weary rebellion as an old woman in dystopian 2043, scrapping away on a remote peninsula in southwest Ireland. Young Holly stumbles into paranormal mishaps after running away from home in the book’s opening section, but she’s being used as a vessel and her memory is wiped clean.

The reader remains fully aware, however, and we next encounter Holly in Switzerland in 1991. She is incidental to the story here, which is narrated by the pretentious Oxbridge brat, Hugo Lamb. The drug and trust fund-induced capers of his posh friends find Hugo sliding down a pitched roof and into Holly’s thin, pale arms.

Yet, this is a tale of star-crossed lovers, for Hugo is borne away by a supernatural force and the story speeds off on a new track, right into 2004, where Ed Brubeck is waiting. Ed’s been waiting a long time, really, for he helped his schoolmate Holly out of a jam in 1984. Twenty years later, he is Holly’s partner and the father of their beloved Aoife. Now Ed himself is in quite a jam. He’s a war correspondent who has led his family to believe he’s leaving the front lines in Iraq (“Bad Dad,” little Aoife calls Baghdad), but he’s just accepted a six-month extension and doesn’t know how to tell Holly he’s addicted to war.

At this point, we're halfway through the novel and I'm eating it up. I love the occasional teases that something Huge Is About To Happen, the intersecting storylines, the reluctant heroine of Holly Sykes, the hurtling of the past and present toward a murky future.

Then we enter "Crispin Hershey's Lonely Planet," the fourth installment of *The Bone Clocks* and the last set in the known world. It is narrated by the largely despicable and wholly caustic writer, Crispin Hershey, whose authorial star is plummeting to earth. Crispin's tale is a meta-fiction romp through the world of literati, circa Now. It's ripe black comedy, for Crispin is such a pathetic sot, and although it takes a good long while for the character's place in the story maze to define itself, we see Holly shimmering at the edges. She has recently published a blockbuster memoir, *The Radio People*, and her success embitters the already vinegared Hershey, yet they become friends.

I'm still entertained but the bizarre and pathetic Hershey, but beginning to drift during this overlong section, longing to return to Holly's inner circle.

Should be careful what I wish for.

Section Five. Ah yes, much has been written about Section Five, its graphic novel cinematic scope the cause of debate amongst serious critics, so I won't belabor the point. You may love this part, you may wrestle your way through it (likely a bit of both). But you must pay attention, for here all is revealed—the paranormal mystery explained, the battle between good and evil carried out in a stone chapel—and it's very easy to get discombobulated. The characters move between bodies and minds and I myself got a little lost, finding the explanations and the action rather tedious at times. But I was helpless to resist. And the reward is . . .

Sheep's Head Peninsula, West Cork, Ireland, the year 2043. Maybe I love this finale so much because I've hiked those craggy hills and been stung by the cold sea spray and it was there I fell so helplessly in love with Ireland, but really, I could spend a whole novel inside this beautiful and desperate end. I won't tell you any more.

I wish . . . I'm not sure what I wish. That the central themes had been more profound? That the metaphysical element had been less the stuff of comic-book heroes and more carefully threaded through the narrative? That David Mitchell had spent less time with the boorish Crispin Hershey and given us more of Holly Syke's delicately fierce intellect? Yes, I wish all that.

Yet, it took me a few days to regain my reading balance after finishing *The Bone Clocks*. The world, and all the other words in it, seemed pale and diminished after being absorbed by Mitchell's.

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## Melanie says

Dear James Wood,

We read and love writers for very different reasons. I read Albert Camus and I read Jorge Luis Borges. I read Milan Kundera and I read Malcolm Lowry. I read Richard Ford and I read Doris Lessing. I read Lawrence Durrell and I read Saul Bellow. I read Samuel Beckett and I read Jim Harrison. I read Emily Bronte and I read Michel Tournier.

David Mitchell's dazzling gifts are not those of Karl Ove Knausgaard, yet I need them equally in the fabric of my life. They bring different qualities to the literary landscape, they light up different areas of the brain. You cannot posit that one is superior to the other without falling into the trap of a certain form of elitism that we can surely do without today.

"The Bone Clocks" is not only superb and entrancing storytelling but it does have plenty to say about the human condition. Suspension of disbelief does not annihilate meaning. I found this novel to be quite profound in parts, a love letter to family, an ode to imagination, a dire warning to humanity about the next fifty years.

I was transported, engrossed and moved. Since when were these emotions second-rate?

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**Ian "Marvin" Graye says**

**Meanwhile...at the Frankfurt Book Fair 8 to 12 October, 2014**

David Mitchell caught trying to sneak into the Frankfurt Book Fair for free. Why would he even try?

**David:**

*[On the red carpet outside the auditorium]*

Haruki, would you mind autographing my book for me?

**Haruki:**

*[Looks only briefly at the book, before opening it to the title page]*

Hey, this isn't my book! What's going on?

**David:**

It's my book. I told you it was my book.

**Haruki:**

*[Recognising David Mitchell]*

But you keep plagiarising my novels.

**David:**

Come on. They're homages.

**Haruki:**

It's a breach of copyright. I should sue you. You've stolen my identity. Even the covers look the same!

**David:**

Would you settle for a pastiche?

**Haruki:**

Stop it. I've had enough. I can't put up with it anymore.

**David:**

Listen to me. This is your last chance. Just sign my book!

**Haruki:**

I'm going to get the police. Why do you keep following me around?

**David:**

Life is an eternally recurring cycle.

**Haruki:**

Look, enough of this Western crypto-Nietzschean-Buddhist shit you carry on with.

**David:**

But, Haruki, it's my way of saying I love and admire you...we're connected...

**Haruki:**

There's only one way I'd ever want to connect with you.

*[Murakami punches Mitchell on the side of his jaw.]*

**David:**

*[Lying semi-conscious on his back, looking at the sky. There are tears in his eyes.]*

Wow, I can see two moons!

David Mitchell waiting outside the 2010 Book Fair, wondering if this cover looks like the cover of a

Murakami novel

## Another View

My more frank and earnest review is here:

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

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## Stephen M says

[UPDATE 10.16]

Here is the review that this book deserves: please read this and not mine. My review is not worth reading.

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I'm such a drama queen.

This is all planned out: I imagined a ceremonious return to goodreads, where I shock the masses with a derisive and scathing critique of one of my favorite authors, and the goodreads community would all be astir. "What happened to him?" "Didn't he just *love* David Mitchell?" "He wouldn't shut up about him!" And then the marauding hordes would rise out of the woodworks, tear me from my home, and tie me to the stake, set those sticks ablaze, crying, "Traitor! Traitor! What hath the apostate said about the lord our Mitchell? Blasphemy!" And I'd look fierce and proud, dying a martyr for the cause.

What vanity! Who was it, David Foster Wallace, that said people don't think about you nearly as much as you think other people think about you?

The interesting thing is that David Mitchell, in many ways, has already reviewed his own book. Turn your hymnals to page 291:

*"In my salad days at Cambridge, I got into a fistfight defending the honor of Hershey's early masterpiece Desiccated Embryos and to this day I wear the scar on my ear as a badge of honor . . . To dub Echo Must Die 'Infantile, flatulent, ghastly driveling; would be an insult to infants, to flatulence, and to ghosts alike. . . So why is Echo Must Die such a decomposing hog? One: Hershey is so bent on avoiding cliché that each sentence is as tortured as an American whistleblower. Two: The fantasy subplot clashes so violently with the book's State of the World pretensions, I cannot bear to look. Three: What Surer sign is there that the creative aquifers are dry that a writer creating a writer-character?"*

I wouldn't go as far as *that*, but Mitchell's fictionalized critic has a point. Self-referential self-deprecation is so passé, so 2004. What is this *Cloud Atlas*?

It's true, the fantasy plot in *Bone Clocks* is crammed into the other stories, and it is such a jarring shift in tone that it derails the novel; it threw me out of reality that Mitchell tries so hard to create. And it's mostly due to

the fact that fantasy novels insist upon its own language, invented words, self-serious monologuing, and exposition-dumping, all of which is difficult enough to stomach in a strict fantasy novel, let alone a novel that wants to be every genre. (And that's not a bad thing in my book. It's what has made Mitchell the writer he is, but it seems too difficult to throw fantasy into the genre juggling circle.)

Furthermore, the fantasy "sub-plot" is actually the main plot in *Bone Clocks*. However, this plot is dropped for almost 50 pages at a time. The writing, while certainly lovely, feels aimless through most of the novel. We meander through large passages of beautiful prose that detail the lives of sad, sexually-frustrated males, only to find our way back to a strange and ham-fisted fantasy plot.

And several times, Mitchell touches on the plot through some serendipitous event that demands explanation, which the characters (ignorant of the grander scheme behind it all) can not make sense of. It's all awash in semi-mystical, new age metaphysics, Murakami at his worst. When the plot lands and Mitchell does explain the mechanism behind the mysteries, we're a good 450 pages into the novel. There were such large stretches of text that persisted without explanation that I failed to find it interesting, important, or significant.

Don't get me wrong, this is still D. Mitch, and the dude can turn a phrase like it's no one's business, but the structure does more to inhibit the novel's enjoyment than it does to enhance the writing. The book's far too uneven or inconsistent to have taken off, and maybe this is what it was like to not enjoy *Cloud Atlas* and that seems fair to me now.

I'll just go reread *Number9Dream* and wax nostalgic about the good ole' days when I could worship unquestionably at the feet of my idols. Maybe *then* those damn kids will get off my lawn.

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## Nataliya says

*"For one voyage to begin, another voyage must come to an end, sort of."*

**Your déjà-vu is real** (or maybe you're a Prescient). Yes, you've seen something of this sort before. Six interconnected stories told in the first person, combined to create a novel, radiating like raindrop rings on water - or maybe the walls of a concentric maze leading to the elusive center - from a central overarching theme. You've seen it from David Mitchell not that long ago, in the hit-smash-success *Cloud Atlas*. You'll see it again in *The Bone Clocks* - but less gimmicky, more streamlined, a bit more cohesive, and a bit more playful.

The overarching theme this time appears to be **mortality** (*the titular 'bone clocks' are just us, people, mercilessly showing signs of passage of time on our faces and bodies*) **and power** and the lengths we'll go to for this elusive goal.

But the cornerstone holding the novel together is not as much this theme, really, but the life of one character whose viewpoint starts and ends the book.

All the other elements aside, *The Bone Clocks* is really the story of **Holly Sykes**, glimpsed through the eyes of different characters over 60 or so years. Holly is the glue holding the six interconnected novellas and the expansive meandering narrative together, conducting six novellas into a quite chronological story of one

person, albeit seen from a few different viewpoints and angles. Holly at 15, hurt by the first love; in her 20s in Switzerland, grazing a life of someone else like a bright meteor; in her 30s, with a child and a partner who seems to be married to his job; in her 40s, touching the life of a less-than-admirable pathetic creature of a writer; in her 50s in the middle of supposedly the most epic battle of all; and in her 70s, living in the post-technology post-apocalyptic Ireland.

*“Being born's a hell of a lottery.”*

Running through Holly's life is a mystical thread of strange events, precognition and brushing from time to time with the Horologists and Anchorites - the two kinds of immortals engaged in their own perpetual tug of war.

It seems to me that **this unexpected genre blending with fantasy** - or as our lit'rary colleagues will call it, 'speculative fiction' (yes, Margaret Atwood, I'm side-eying you) to avoid the label of the genre with which they remain uncomfortable - is **what both puzzled and frazzled a few critics out there.**

Yours truly, however, being a proud old hand at all this genre/fantasy/sci-fi stuff, will scoff snobbishly and say - 'Puh-lease.'

**And yet, as much as it hurts this fantasy fan to admit it, the overt inclusion of fantastical elements is what weakened the story.** In comparison with the other parts where just a slight teasing suggestion of 'magical realism' was perfect for infusing the atmosphere of the novel with just a right amount of uneasy suspenseful beauty, the overt trip to the realm of supernatural was not Mitchell's forte, leading to an almost young-adult level of sudden grating simplicity of rather non-ambiguous good-vs-evil psychic battle leading to an anvil-like foreshadowed magical maze. **How fervently did I wish during the entire Marinus section that the merciless editorial scissors had chopped that chapter right out<sup>1</sup>, leaving us with a subtle undercurrent of mysterious 'other' instead.**

<sup>1</sup> While we're on the editorial chopping block theme, I wish the merciless scissors or metaphorical red pen went through the overindulgent Crispin Hershey section a bit as well. One can only take so much 'meta' screaming, *'Look how clever I am! Lookie here! I'm a writer character so meta-ish-ly preempting all your reactions and all your reviews and how fracking wittily smart is it of me, huh?'* Puh-lease. I get it. Enough. Cut it out. Move on.

As far as Mitchell's strengths go, the powerful punch-in-the-gut impact is in the bits of Iraq war rather than in the supposedly decisive and overwrought Good-vs-Evil fantasy-overdone battle.

What saves this novel from a nosedive, however, is Mitchell's good sense in stepping away from the supposed fantasy climax you've been expecting the book to end with, making the phantasmagorical brouhaha the less memorable, less important part. Because then, after the fireworks should all be over and the quiet wrap-down should have begun, Mitchell moves on instead to the sixth and final section of the book, the one that puts quite a bit of things we've seen so far into perspective and - of course - **reminds us that the worst threat to us comes not from the warring Immortals but from our usual regular selves doing our regular usual things without stopping to think that once our short mortal lives are over someone else will be left to live the mess we made of it all.**

A random aside: I see much has been written about the interconnectedness of this work with

other Mitchell's books as a number of characters have had cameos in his other novels. Clever, but hey - those of us Constant Readers who have followed Stephen King (the non-lit'rary genre guy, yeah?) are no strangers to the concept of the fictional universe interconnected by numerous characters traipsing in and out of seemingly separate novels.

The language of the novel - well yes, I did enjoy it quite a bit. I like Mitchell's style, with his easy organic humor, unexpected apt metaphors, and quotable passages. It flows, 'nuff said.

*"We live on, as long as there are people to live on in."*

And so, *The Bone Clocks*. What do I actually think of this book, after all these words and thoughts that "meander like a restless wind inside a letterbox"? It's still hard to say. I loved the first three parts (Holly, Hugo, Ed), slogged through the overwrought meta-pathetic Crispin story, stumbled through Marinus' bit in exasperation at the nosedive the quality of the novel was taking, and despite all the dystopian clichés was grateful at the direction the story took in the final Holly chapter. The inevitable highs and lows - cannot escape them. After all, despite my most fervent wishes, writers do not create all of their stories to appeal specifically to me.

But the highs outweigh the lows, as I realize while finishing this review, **and so 4 stars it will be**. Even more - I'll finally crack open my copies of other Mitchell books, even if just to see what he does with the stories that don't come in six interconnected bits (there are some, right?)

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## **Ian "Marvin" Graye says**

### **The Confused and the Bewitched [Apologies to Dean Wareham]**

The bone clocks  
Sit clutching  
Champagne and  
Barbecue,  
Divided  
Betwixt the  
Confused and  
The bewitched.

### **"Being For The Benefit Of Holly Sykes!" [Apologies to the Beatles]**

For the benefit  
Of Holly Sykes,  
There will be  
A show tonight  
With clowns  
On bikes  
And acrobats  
On trampolines.



If you don't like  
The daring scenes,  
Call for  
The author  
To be sacked.  
You'll get your  
Money back.  
It's just a circus act!

*"Jacob's Ladder"* by William Blake

### **Dwelling on a Reservation**

David Mitchell seems to have become a literary target, because he walks a fine line between Post-Modernism and commercial success.

For the Post-Modernists, he's too popular to be holy. For the populists, he dabbles with genres without wholly embracing them.

The dual attack makes you feel as if you must approach him with some reservation, with your guard up, that if you enjoy his fiction, if you derive pleasure from it, then you must do so uncritically or you might have missed some glaring stylistic flaws.

Still, when I started reading *"The Bone Clocks"*, I got swept away again. For the duration, I..yes...I suspended disbelief.

So, teacher, does Mitchell deserve disbelief? Or suspension?

### **The Book He Wrote**

Over the time I've been reading Mitchell, I've had some (mis-)apprehensions that I've had to work my way through each book.

Recently, his style has been described as bad or atrocious. Is it really that bad? Is this exaggeration? Does he really deserve the forensic dissection and dismissal he gets at the hands of some critics?

No writer is beyond critical judgement. However, not every author sets out to write *"War and Peace"*.

Mitchell is living proof that we tend to read the book we want to, not necessarily the book the author wrote. What is the point of criticising what a novel is not, or doesn't purport to be?

Surely, most half-way competent authors wrote the novel they wanted to write? Maybe we should cut them some slack? Should we just ask, how successful were they in writing the novel they set out to write?

This doesn't mean that we can't criticise what they did or didn't try to do. However, this can really only occur

within the realm of overt subjectivity on the part of both author and reader. OK, maybe I didn't like what the author wrote. On the other hand, I have to appreciate that the author didn't write it so that I in particular might like it. They wrote it mainly so that they, the author, would like it.

## **Genre Wreak**

I don't think Mitchell set out to write a self-consciously literary novel on this occasion. He just wrote the kind of novel he felt his subject matter demanded.

In order to do so, he embraced genre. Again, I don't think he set out to become the next genre master, a Stephen King or Neil Gaiman.

Mitchell plays around both with and within the boundaries of genre, not always by way of parody.

But equally he doesn't take on strict accountability to the rules of genre (such as John Banville when he writes in the guise of Benjamin Black).

He co-opts genre for his own purposes, for the purposes of his play and our entertainment. Genre is no more than a coathanger or skeleton upon which he drapes the threads or body of his narrative.

## **My Wild Irish Prose Style**

Is Mitchell's prose particularly pretentious or purple? Not really. Like the character Crispin Hershey, he says he isn't "*a fan of flowery prose.*"

It's neither overwrought nor underwrought. If anything, it's deliciously wrought-ironical. It's relaxed, casual, conversational, fluid, breezy, exuberant, charming, almost flirtatious. The sort of prose you'd hope to meet at a party, in fact, the very reason we used to go to parties.

## **The Importance of Not Being Earnest**

I fear more that Mitchell might become too humorless, too serious, too self-consciously Post-Modernist, too precious, too everything I write is IMPORTANT, in other words, too Bill Vollmann, of all people.

I fear that one day a Mitchell book will be just too, too nice, too complacent, too middle class, too metrosexual, or if it were a little more earnest, maybe too Jonathan Franzen.

Luckily, this book isn't the one I fear. I hope he never writes it, or I never get to read it.

## **Improvisational Techniquity**

I had another apprehension about style.

Like Murakami, Mitchell goes where his characters' stories take him. He embraces improvisation. I kept looking for evidence that the result was sloppy or undisciplined.

If his writing was ever rough-edged during the early drafts, then he or someone else has smoothed it over by the time I got to read it.

## **Juxtaposition I'm Taking for Granted**

Well, maybe one last apprehension: that Mitchell's juxtaposition of disparate elements would be too arbitrary, too artificial, too unbelievable.

Unlike *"Cloud Atlas"*, the writing style is consistent throughout the entire novel. The style doesn't change with the subject matter or the period. This allows the reader to focus on the characters and the narrative without obstruction.

*"The Bone Clocks"* follows the life of Holly Sykes over sixty years, often through the eyes of her peers.

Here, the six chapters are more obviously interrelated than those in *"Cloud Atlas"*. They're very tightly intertwined, like strands of rope.

The chapters segue far more smoothly. It's worth re-reading just to see how quickly and efficiently he achieves each segue. Suddenly you're on the other side of the looking glass. They're like snakes and ladders, or slippery slides. The transition is as easy as falling down a rabbit hole (Lewis Carroll) or an echoey stairwell (Murakami).

## **Is This Just Fantasy?**

The main concern of many other readers seems to be the juxtaposition of fantasy elements (common to at least three of Mitchell's previous novels) with the apparent realism of some of his writing (in particular the first chapter in which we meet Holly Sykes).

Some readers can't get their head around the *"fantasy-peddalling."*

Mitchell anticipates the objection, when a character pitches his next novel:

*"A jetlagged businessman has the mother of all breakdowns in a labyrinthine hotel in Shanghai, encounters a minister, a CEO, a cleaner, a psychic woman who hears voices...think Solaris meets Noam Chomsky via Girl with the Dragon Tattoo. Add a dash of Twin Peaks..."*

*"Are you trying to tell me that you're writing a fantasy novel?"*

*"Me? Never! Or it's only one-third fantasy. Half, at most."*

*"A book can't be half-fantasy any more than a woman can be half pregnant."*

Still, what is wrong with fantasy that Mitchell is criticised for embracing it? What's wrong with fantasy-peddalling or genre-hopping? China Miéville often cops the same criticism. Does the criticism say more about the reader than the author?

Deliberately or not, Mitchell's works seem to divide readers between the confused and the bewitched.

## **Caught in a Landslide, No Escape from Reality**

While Mitchell has demonstrated that he can write in the style of realism if he chooses to (particularly in some chapters of *"Cloud Atlas"* and *"Black Swan Green"*), I don't think it's his preferred or most natural

style. This doesn't mean that fantasy is either. His concerns are always too metaphysical or metafictional (i.e., Post-Modernist). He writes in whatever style he feels he needs. His style is as fluid as his requirements.

The first-time reader shouldn't be surprised if the trappings of another genre suddenly appear in the narrative. They are almost inevitable. Here, though, it is strategically plotted, planned and foreshadowed (*"the Script loves foreshadow"*).

Whatever your reaction on first reading, in retrospect it makes much more sense. Sometimes this only becomes apparent on a second reading. It won't be apparent if you grow impatient after the first 50 or 100 pages and skim the rest, oblivious to the detail or pleasures of the text.

## **STOP MAKING SENSE!**

OK, that's enough serious talking head stuff.

This book is loads of FUN! It's an adventure story. Lots of goofy, crazy, trippy, weird shit goes down. *"It's mad! Infeckinsane!"* It's *"totes amazeball."* Mitchell must have been doolally when he wrote it.

One of the characters wears a T-shirt with the slogan, *"Reality is an illusion caused by a lack of alcohol."* (So is realism.) It's that kind of book.

Don't, whatever you do, take it too seriously. Take it seriously, but only as much as you would a playful entertainment like the film *"Pirates of the Caribbean."*

It's like Indiana Jones meets *"Alice in Wonderland"* meets Umberto Eco (*"Foucault's Pendulum"*) meets *"IQ84"* meets *"The Da Vinci Code"* meets Gabriel Garcia Marquez meets the Three Stooges meets *"The Wizard of Oz"* meets Voldemort meets Darth Vader meets Merlin meets Jules Verne meets *"Jack in the Beanstalk"* meets Biggles meets *"Little Red Riding Hood"* meets Enid Blyton meets *"The Matrix"* meets the Wachowski Siblings (just in time for the filmisation).

It's like looking into Mitchell's mind and seeing everything he's ever watched or read, and enjoyed. It's like inspecting the last century through a kaleidoscope. This is the full David Mitchell Experience! The uncut Regurgitator! The complete acme David Mitchell Ruse Explosion!

It's like...yes...Doctor Who!

## **"A Satirical, Postmodern, Science Fiction-influenced Adventure Story"**

It's also like *"The Illminatus! Trilogy"*, which wiki describes as *"a satirical, postmodern, science fiction-influenced adventure story."* (Yes, it's been done before! Although this time it's more fantasy than science fiction.)

I first encountered the term *"Post-Modern"* when friends who were architects introduced me to Charles Jencks' book, *The language of post-modern architecture*. I didn't see Post-Modernism as a threat to

Modernism, so much as an embrace of playful eclecticism.

There are ample architectural comments throughout the novel. One of my favourites goes like this:

*"The BritFone Pavilion was designed by an eminent architect I've never heard of and 'quotes' Hadrian's Wall, the Tower of London, a Tudor manor, post-war public housing, Wembley Stadium and a Docklands skyscraper. What a sicked-up fry-up it is."*

Yes, that'll do, this novel is a sicked-up fry-up. It's a potpourri, a strange brew, an Irish stew, cooked up in le croc pot. One of my favourite characters would have wanted it named after him, *"Marinus Stew"*, in honour of Gilbert Sorrentino's *"Mulligan Stew"*, described in one of my favourite GR reviews as *"wonderful, and entertaining, and it might be the funniest book I've ever read, and it is totally weird, and a masterpiece."* Yes!

The novel is also chock-full of allusions to other writers: Martin Amis, Kingsley Amis, Christopher Hitchens, Gilbert Adair, Lucretius, Ovid, W. H. Auden, Halldór Laxness (who dat, I ask?), Michael Moorcock, Philip Roth, Tanizaki, E.M. Forster, Ursula Le Guin, Murakami, Samuel Beckett, Angela Carter, H. G. Wells, Dante, Wordsworth.

There's a lot about writers and writing. Some good, some bad. How can you tell the difference between a master stylist and a wild child? Who cares!

Post-Modernism can be FUN! It's a divine comedy. Have faith! Abandon doubt all ye who enter here! Believe it!

### **The Great Illuminati Brawl**

What can you say about the plot? Somebody else can précis it. Or you could read the book!

OK, here's a bit of a snapshot. Good fights it out with Evil. This is one unholy sick crew. Or two. It's a battle between supernatural action heroes called the Horologists and the Anchorites. What? A trope? How dare Mitchell! It's the 21st century. Can't he come up with something new?

What are they fighting about? I don't know. What do supernatural heroes normally fight about? Eternal life? Jacob's Ladder? A stairway to Heaven? The right to get to Heaven first? The exclusive right to get to Heaven?

Whatever, they're pretty evenly matched, mirror images of each other, reversals, looking at each other through the looking glass.

### **This is Your Last Chance (to be by, of and in the Script)**

Of course, the brawl is tightly scripted. In fact, it's all in the Script. And just to introduce some narrative tension, there's a Counterscript. And a metafictional or metafictional guidebook that attempts to throw more (sun-) light on the Script (written by [Cirque du] Soleil Moore, aka the allusive Esmiss Esmoore). (view spoiler)

You could be forgiven for thinking that David Mitchell had written all three works of metafiction. Some conjuring trick! No need to split the royalties.

It's a black comedy, perhaps even a black magic comedy. It's a prank, a funfair, a carnival, a circus. There's even a maze and a labyrinth. It's fun, it's playful. It's Rabelaisian. As has been said on GR before:

*"A work of art needs no other justification to exist than the sheer joy of the human imagination at play."*

### **There's a Feeling I Get When I Look to the West**

There's some serious stuff, of course.

It involves the Eastern perspective on the West. Some of it is spiritual (mainly Buddhist), some economic, some political, some cultural.

Traditionally, Mitchell has been very pro-East. However, as the world globalises, he seems to have become more equivocal (at least in relation to economic and political power). It doesn't matter what complexion power has:

*"Shanghai's aura is the colour of money and power. Its emails can shut down factories in Detroit, denude Australia of its iron ore, strip Zimbabwe of its rhino horn, pump the Dow Jones full of either steroids or financial sewage."*

### **In a Tree by the Brook, There's a Songbird Who Sings**

And there's some stuff about love. There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold...Holly Sykes. Like us, she's a mortal human temporal, a bone clock. She falls in love several times. She has a daughter and a granddaughter. But for a moment, she is a Woman in the Dunes, looking out to the Dusk as it approaches.

Mitchell's story surrounds and cocoons her. It transports her through life and this adventure and this tale. At the end, she can't quite bring herself to say goodbye, nor can the author, nor can I:

*"I'm feeling erased myself, fading away into an invisible woman. For one voyage to begin, another voyage must come to an end, sort of."*

After all the high jinks, there is an acceptance of mortality, not with resignation, but with grace. Life is what we do on Earth. If it exists, Heaven can wait. Memories can't wait, nor can fiction. Still, whether or not this voyage has ended, I'm certain another one will soon begin. Sort of.

### **ADDED EXTRAS:**

**"The Bone Clocks" (disambiguation)(From Winkipaedia, the free encyclopaedia)**

The Bone Clocks may refer to:

\* The Bone Clocks (novel), a 2014 novel by David Mitchell; or

\* The Bone Clocks (film), a 2017 film based on the 2014 novel, produced by the Wachowski Siblings and directed by Tom Tykwer after the Siblings' epic space opera, Jupiter Rising.

This page was last modified on 13 October 2016 at 11:43.

## **Arty Facts**

This is a still photo of the inside of a kinetic sculpture ("*Artifact*" by Gregory Barsamian) at MONA, Hobart, January, 2014 (It shows the inside of a mind through a window in the skull. An internal strobe light flashed on and off rapidly, so I was very lucky to get such a clear picture.)

<http://vimeo.com/44454385>

<http://www.bookofjoe.com/2010/08/arti...>

<http://gregorybarsamian.com/>

## **David Mitchell on his 5 favorite Japanese novels**

<http://www.avclub.com/article/david-m...>

## **Invitation to a Burial**

Beloved  
Reader,  
Don't labor  
For ages.  
Why wait  
To see  
If it  
Engages?  
Let a  
Review  
Of the first  
Fifty pages  
Deter you  
From a  
Book that  
Enrages!

## **For the Want of An Editor**

Is this work  
Pretentious,  
Contrived or  
Overwrought?  
What if I  
Don't follow  
The author's  
Train of thought?  
Well, I hope  
This Mitchell  
Novel won't  
Come to nought.  
Let's see if  
Bill Vollmann's  
Editor  
Can be bought!

### **Hugo Queues and Pees**

[Short Shriftfest for Gilbert Adair]

Meanwhile, in the queue  
At the Buried Bishop, Hugo  
Rhymes Sartre, Bart and Barthes.

### **Afterwards in Bed**

Shall I compare thee  
To a sordid, low-budget  
French feature fillum?

### **A Moment in Love**

If just one moment  
Could last an eternity,  
I would choose this hug.

### **Upon Coming to the End of the Novel, Sort Of**

Through my tears,  
I see a pair of blurry  
Overlapping moons.

### **SOUNDTRACK:**



**The Beatles - "Being for the Benefit of Mr.Kite"**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCiG7...>

*"In this way, David Mitchell will challenge the WORLD!"*

**Keith Jarrett - "My Wild Irish Rose"**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PxCea...>

**Led Zeppelin - "Stairway to Heaven"**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9TGj...>

**Talking Heads - "I Zimbra"**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-RDJ...>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tyVn...>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYFqd...>

'kin amazeballs:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RI3os...>

**George Harrison - "Devil's Radio"**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1X3z9...>

**Robyn Hitchcock - "Devil's Radio"**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gJSx...>

**Luna - "We're Both Confused"**

**[For Readers with Disappointed Expectations]**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tOmL...>

*"I thought I knew [his] game*

*I miss [him] just the same."*

**Luna - "Bewitched"**

**[Dedicated to Holly Sykes]**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QuiN7...>

*"Her sleep is troubled*

*Her face will twitch*

*She wakes up angry  
And I'm bewitched."*

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## Chad says

I adore David Mitchell. To pieces. No novel has simultaneously so moved and impressed and entertained me as has *Cloud Atlas*, and I will always be an enthusiastic Mitchell devotee / groupie / fan-girl.

But did I adore *The Bone Clocks*?

With great disappointment, I must confess that I did not (notwithstanding the fact that I devoured the novel over the course of just three of four days).

*The Bone Clocks* is fantastical dreck camouflaged as literature. Don't get me wrong: I have nothing against fantasy novels *per se*. (See, e.g., *The Magicians*, one of my all-time favorite novels, which pulls a far weightier punch than its jacket blurb could possibly convey.) And Mitchell's previous works have not infrequently delved into the fantastical, often with considerable success (e.g., the strange but riveting middle section of *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*).

But here, the fantastical is grotesquely overdone (see also: contrived, artificial, unconvincing, inane, over-determinative) – particularly after Mitchell gives it center stage in the novel's fifth section – and it overwhelms and **cheapens** everything that comes beforehand and afterward.

This shortcoming of *The Bone Clocks* is compounded by the fact that the novel's fantastical backbone does not serve any more substantive thematic purpose – i.e., does not undergird a meditation on metaphysics, or ethics, or the meaning of life, or love, or fate – but is instead seemingly presented as pure storytelling, as pure plot. (Cf. *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*, which is, as far as speculative fiction goes, the far superior book.)

There were intimations of an outstanding novel here: the character of Holly Sykes, her family's coping with the mysterious disappearance of Holly's younger brother, and the two loves of Holly's life, particularly the caddish sociopath Hugo Lamb, first introduced in Mitchell's *Black Swan Green*, who is perhaps the most compelling yet sadly under-utilized anti-hero I have ever encountered in literature.

But all of that is overshadowed by "psychosoterics," and chakras, and a centuries-long battle between the supernatural forces of good and evil, none of which is convincingly developed.

To be clear, *The Bone Clocks* is not a largely compelling yet imperfect work of literary or even speculative fiction; it is instead a fundamentally flawed patchwork that collectively crumbles under its own overwrought weight. If it had been written by any other author, I would likely award it three reluctant stars. But I will not condescend to David Mitchell with artificially inflated ratings that his novels do not deserve.

See also Stephen M's review [here](#).

