



David Mitchell, *Slade House* (Sceptre, 2015, 233pp, £7.99)

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After the globe-spanning settings of David Mitchell's earlier novels, the action in *Slade House* is surprisingly localized: a single mansion and its grounds, and a nearby pub. But don't be fooled. The novel's location is anything but static as the house becomes a deadly playground of shape-shiftings, time distortions and bodily possessions. This is a novel in which 'souls are as real as gall bladders', a dead

moon-grey cat comes back to life thirty-six years later, and the natural becomes supernatural: 'thousands of fallen leaves fall upwards from the grey lawn, all at once, and attach themselves to the tree'. Visit and you'll be compelled to stay; eat or drink and you'll enter into a fairy-tale contract whose terms are fatal. One character's observation of her night in Slade House could equally apply to the novel as a whole: 'Tonight feels like a board game co-designed by M.C. Escher on a bender and Stephen King in a fever'. Hold on to your horror story: you're in for a ride.

Behind the paranormal mischief lies an interlinked plot which extends the mythology from the fifth chapter of Mitchell's previous novel, *The Bone Clocks* (2014), continuing its war between the soul-stealing Anchorites, who take others' lives to prolong their own, and the ethical Horologists who try to stop them. In *Slade House*, the 116-year-old Norah and her brother, Jonah, are the latest predators, luring a fresh victim into their lair every nine years, and consuming their soul to artificially extend their own life spans. Keen-eyed Mitchellians will notice plenty of shared characters and motifs from his earlier fictions, firmly situating *Slade House* in the author's ongoing macronovel, in which his works form a continuous narrative world with its own recurring cast. These include Fern Penhaligon, sister to Jonny Penhaligon from *The Bone Clocks* and distant ancestor of Captain Penhaligon from *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010), the aristocratic Chetwynd-Pitts from *The Bone Clocks*, and the mysteriously reincarnated Dr Marinus, who arrives to investigate the supernatural events in the final section of *Slade House*. Arguably Mitchell's most enigmatic character to date, Marinus first appeared in his works in *The Thousand Autumns* – set at the end of the eighteenth century – and has been returning in different bodies ever since. However, no previous knowledge of the writer's oeuvre is needed to venture into *Slade House*: a chillingly enjoyable, intricately woven spider's web of a tale whose narrative threads will keep you entangled until the final page.

Slade House begins in 1979 as thirteen-year-old Nathan Bishop and his mother Rita struggle to find their way into the mansion of the book's title, having accepted an invite to a 'musical gathering' at the home of Lady Norah Grayer.

When he meets Jonah in its grounds, their game of fox and hounds becomes a terrifying hunt as the garden begins to disappear; as Nathan escapes into the mansion, reality itself becomes disrupted, and he soon becomes the human prey for a deadly pair of predators. The novel's second section jumps forward to 1988, in which Detective Inspector Gordon Edmonds is searching for the mansion in order to investigate a lead following the disappearances of Nathan and Rita. Arriving at Slade House, he meets its latest resident, the newly-widowed Chloe Chetwynd. She knows nothing about the disappearances, but welcomes the sleazy detective, who can't resist her invite to dinner. It is only after he sleeps with Chloe that he realizes he's lost track of time – is this his second visit to Slade House, or his fifth? – and her 'beautiful' country mansion begins to transform into something far more sinister.

The third section, set in 1997, begins with its narrator Sally Timms at her university's Paranormal Society meeting, discussing the disappearances at Slade House. They set out to investigate, convinced of a supernatural connection. They venture into Slade House, now converted to student housing, in the middle of its Halloween party, its blaring '90s anthems, tacky costumes and 'shit wine' a ghostly façade for the real supernatural and time-distorting events that unfold as the night passes. In the novel's fourth section, Freya arrives to investigate the disappearance of her little sister Sally at Slade House. Nine years have passed, and she has used her journalist's credentials to arrange an interview with Fred Pink, uncle to one of the members of Sally's Paranormal Society, and conspiracy theory hobbyist. But when he tells her what's really been going on at the house, Fred's story is more than she's able to stomach. The final section's narrator is Norah Grayer herself, who has hijacked the body of an unsuspecting 'conspiracy theorist' called Bombadil in order to lure another victim to the house. But Norah's victim turns out to be Toronto psychiatrist Dr Iris Marinus-Fenby. A telepathic entity with formidable powers, Marinus becomes part of a metaphysical war in which the house, and all of its inhabitants, must be prepared for a fight to the death.

Slade House is the most overtly fantastical of Mitchell's novels to date. However, this is a haunted house whose characters' concerns are rooted in the same universe as our own, including Sally's experiences of bullying and bulimia, and Freya's struggles to reconcile her 'complex sexuality' with her family life. Its soul-consumption perhaps offers a metaphor for the neoliberal addiction to the pursuit of wealth and the victimhood that it creates; Jonah describes his 'nightmares' about 'Food that makes you hungrier, the more of it you eat'. Its supernatural narrative is driven by a speculative confrontation of human mortality and the fear of dying, and a desire to ask *what if*: what if immortality became available to the rich and powerful ('they'd kick off World War Three'); what if it became universal ('we'd all stop dying, but we wouldn't stop breeding. Would we?'); and what if it remained secret ('ensure your own supply and keep very very very shtum').

The questions raised by the novel interrogate humanity's relentless consumption as part of its compulsive self-destruction, narrating the paradox of a society whose individual survival instincts threaten to destroy it. Each layer of the tale approaches a recurring problem through a different era; it is only in its most recent layer – our own time – that change becomes possible, with the help of all the ghosts who have gone before. With immortality as the ultimate prize, today's all-too-real motives for global warfare – 'Oil; the drug trade; control over occupied territories and the word 'occupied'. Water. God's true name' – become merely the 'squalid, shitty reasons that people murder each other in large numbers now', as the novel uses the topic of 'Life Everlasting' to critique our murderous instincts, and the disappearing boundaries between survival and self-slaughter. With *Slade House*, Mitchell uses the techniques of science fantasy to create an effortlessly immersive, thought-provoking and warm-hearted world-puzzle, whose subject isn't its own mythology, but the natures of those who have built it: 'People are masks, with masks under those masks, and masks under those, and down you go'. If *Slade House* is haunted, it is haunted by human nature itself.