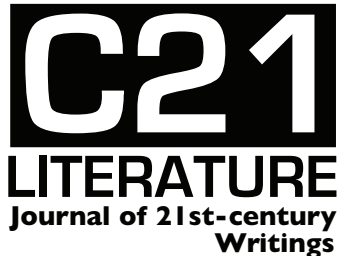




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ARTICLE

## Introducing the David Mitchell Special Edition of *C21 Literature*

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Rose Harris-Birtill introduces the David Mitchell special edition of *C21 Literature: Journal of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Writings*. Harris-Birtill provides a critical introduction to David Mitchell's complete works, before discussing her experiences as organiser of the international David Mitchell Conference 2017, held at the University of St Andrews on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2017, and its relationship to the special edition. Highlighting the dominance of David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* in both Mitchell's UK book sales and across current literary criticism to date, Harris-Birtill introduces the articles in the special edition, summarising the contributions of each essay. Drawing on the conference discussion, and the decision to include the author in the event, Harris-Birtill argues for the importance of openly discussing the scholarly issues and rewards of working with living authors in the field of contemporary literature.

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**Keywords:** David Mitchell; *Cloud Atlas*; *Ghostwritten*; *The Bone Clocks*; *Black Swan Green*; contemporary literature

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'Born in England in 1969, British novelist David Mitchell...' is how an introduction to a special edition on this writer's works might be expected to begin. Yet with seven novels, two libretti, some twenty-six short stories and thirty non-fiction essays to date, David Mitchell's literary contortionism situates this author far beyond the singular category of 'novelist'. With David Mitchell now living in West Cork, Ireland, and with his long-standing fictional preoccupation with global geographies, histories, and cultures, we might well also ask how his writing plays on, and pulls against, established notions of 'Britishness'. However, nearly two decades after the publication of his first novel, *Ghostwritten*, in 1999, David Mitchell is now widely acclaimed as one of the leading voices in contemporary British writing. His literary accolades include two Booker Prize shortlists and three longlists, the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, a World

Fantasy Award, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. He has also featured in *TIME* magazine's list of the 100 most influential people in the world. This is an author whose works are now taught and researched in universities across the globe – as they are simultaneously read in train carriages and book clubs. Yet to say that Mitchell's writing enjoys both literary acclaim and widespread popularity doesn't quite capture it.

The international David Mitchell Conference 2017, which I ran at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, UK, on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2017, sold out nearly three months in advance.<sup>1</sup> So many people contacted me to ask about extra places that I started a waiting list; the day was live-tweeted and the evening reading filmed to cater for those who had contacted me from overseas to express their regret at being unable to attend. The third conference on David Mitchell's works to date, the event brought together twenty speakers from ten countries, as well as the author himself, and attracted national media attention. Attendees travelled from across Europe, the US, Canada and New Zealand to take part. The day was a truly interdisciplinary one: as well as literary critics, the attendees included philosophers, psychologists, physicists, film experts, a cognitive neuroscientist, a biologist and a film maker. Several of the attendees from the first David Mitchell conference in 2009 also returned, while Dr Sarah Dillon, the organiser of the first conference and editor of *David Mitchell: Critical Essays* (2011), gave the keynote lecture, making the day a celebration of both diversity and continuity. I knew that David Mitchell's work was well-received both inside and outside academia, but until 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2017, I had no idea just how many people from different backgrounds and disciplines, from all around the world, were prepared to cross oceans – continents, even – to participate in the ongoing academic conversation on his works.

The conference also led to the publication of this David Mitchell special edition of *C21 Literature*. Many of its essays have been developed from papers given

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<sup>1</sup> The full programme, photographs and information on the day can be found on the conference website at <https://davidmitchellconference.wordpress.com/> and using the Twitter hashtag #DMcon2017 at <https://twitter.com/hashtag/dmcon2017>, accessed 21 August 2018.

during the event. The essays that follow both continue and extend the diversity of critical perspectives shared throughout the day. Whether you are coming to this special edition primarily as a literary critic, educator, student or fan (or all of the above), it is my hope that these rigorous and accessible essays continue to stimulate further exciting new ways of reading David Mitchell's multi-genre, cross-temporal, British-Not-British, polyvocal, interconnected body of fiction – or as he puts it, his 'macronovel' – for years to come.<sup>2</sup> The papers included in this special edition variously engage with Mitchell's macronovel from digital, biblical, temporal, fantastic, apocalyptic, and pedagogical perspectives, investigating the spirits that haunt this fictional world as they chart the islands and languages that divide and unite its inhabitants. The range of scholarly perspectives is testament to the now sizable body of research into this author's works, and each contribution brings vital new angles that extend the growing international scholarship on Mitchell's macronovel. But before introducing the individual essays in the special edition, it's worth briefly commenting on the existing critical field.

To date, literary criticism on Mitchell's writing has been overwhelmingly dominated by papers on *Cloud Atlas* (2004). This novel is undoubtedly the most famous of the author's seven novels to date; it accounts for 46% of his total UK book sales to March 2018, according to Nielsen book data. Yet if *Cloud Atlas* remains enduringly popular with the public, it remains even more so with literary critics. Of the 124 published English-language journal articles, books and book chapters that I found on Mitchell's works, each published between 2002 and 2017, eighty-one (65%) feature *Cloud Atlas*, either discussing this text alone or alongside other works.<sup>3</sup> In an already crowded field, academic papers on this remarkable novel have to work particularly hard to contribute new and noteworthy directions to this sizable body of criticism. The articles included here on *Cloud Atlas* have been selected for their uniquely

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<sup>2</sup> In 'David Mitchell, the Experimentalist' (2010a), the author notes in an interview with Wyatt Mason that 'each of my books is one chapter in a sort of sprawling macronovel'.

<sup>3</sup> For a full statistical review of existing Mitchell criticism to date, see 'Introducing David Mitchell's Fictional World' in *David Mitchell's Post-Secular World: Buddhism, Belief and the Urgency of Compassion* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019) by Rose Harris-Birtill.

innovative approaches, proving that far more is still to be said on this stylistically and narratologically fascinating text.

Opening the special edition, Martin Paul Eve's 'The Historical Imaginary of Nineteenth-Century Style in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*' conducts a detailed computational investigation of the novel's Adam Ewing section, using narrative clues to date Ewing's diary from 1851–1910. Conducting detailed stylometric analysis to evaluate the historical accuracy of its language, Eve interrogates the limits of linguistic mimesis in the novel, exposing the lexical mechanics behind Mitchell's twenty-first century creation of a nineteenth-century 'historical imaginary'.<sup>4</sup> In 'The Iterable Messiah: Postmodernist Mythopoeia in *Cloud Atlas*', Gautama Polanki discusses the novel's postmodernist refiguration of the biblical myth of deliverance, reading each of its protagonists as figures of the eternally recurrent messiah. Noting the messianic conception of history in Judeo-Christian culture, Polanki argues that the figure of the comet is central to the novel's mythopoeia, identifying the novel's simultaneous reworking of biblical messianism and the Nietzschean trope of eternal recurrence as part of a wider metamodern aesthetic. In 'Spirits in the Material World: Spectral Worlding in David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*', Ryan Trimm approaches *Cloud Atlas* and *Ghostwritten* as novels which use the trope of spirit to move beyond familiar representations of globalisation. Discussing Mitchell's rewriting of Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of *mondialisation*, Trimm interrogates the linked concepts of world and spirit in each of these works, arguing that Mitchell's novels use their spectral interconnections to rework both the accepted conventions of globalization and the traditional associations of novel and nation. Revisiting *Cloud Atlas* through the disparate poles of computational analysis, religious myth-making, and spectral worlding respectively, the contributions by Martin Paul Eve, Gautama Polanki, and Ryan Trimm each bring ambitious new critical perspectives to Mitchell's most popular work.

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<sup>4</sup> Extending the computational approaches discussed in this article, Martin Paul Eve's forthcoming book *Close Reading with Computers: Textual Scholarship, Computational Formalism, and David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas* (Stanford UP, 2019) uses computational analysis to conduct a comprehensive digital close-reading of the novel.

Published a decade after *Cloud Atlas*, David Mitchell's multi-genre novel *The Bone Clocks* (2014) has attracted both literary acclaim and derisive reviews for its ambitious use of realist and fantasy modes within a single fictional project. This special edition's essays on *The Bone Clocks* each provide original perspectives on the novel's incorporation of the fantastic, from its depictions of the relationships between human and supernatural entities to its temporal fluidities and manipulation of narrative gaps. Kristian Shaw's essay, "Some magic is normality': Fantastical Cosmopolitanism in David Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks*' argues that the novel employs the fantasy genre to offer alternative perspectives on cosmopolitical power struggles, opening up subversive spaces through which to confront the global threats facing the twenty-first century. Situating *The Bone Clocks* as part of a wider contemporary resurgence of works that cross the imagined divide between fantasy and literary fiction, Shaw argues that the novel's cosmopolitan strategies of atemporal collaboration respond directly to the socio-political and environmental concerns of an increasingly volatile globalized world. Jo Alyson Parker's essay 'Mind the Gap(s): Holly Sykes's Life, the 'Invisible' War, and the History of the Future in *The Bone Clocks*' argues that the fantastic is integral to Mitchell's macronovel, analysing the breaks in temporal continuity in *The Bone Clocks* in light of current debates on the Anthropocene and climate change. Discussing Mitchell's wider use of a vast timescale across his works, Parker argues that the narrative ellipses in the novel allow the author to write a history of the future that enables readers to connect past causes and distant future effects, effectively warning the reader to 'mind the gaps'.

Taking a broader approach to David Mitchell's fictions, several of the essays in this special edition cast a wider net across his now sizeable body of publications, offering new insights on the shared preoccupations that resurface across the author's narrative terrain. In "'No Man Is an Island": Tracing Functions of Insular Landscapes in David Mitchell's Fiction', Eva-Maria Schmitz reads Mitchell's recurring motif of islands as platforms for literary experimentation in *Ghostwritten*, *Cloud Atlas*, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010b) and *The Bone Clocks*. Drawing on Tuan's and de Certeau's frameworks of place and space, Schmitz argues that Mitchell's islands serve as relational entities that connect his protagonists with the

world around them, serving both as sites of refuge and corruption. In 'Schrödinger's Cat Metalepsis and the Political Unwriting of the Postmodern Apocalypse in David Mitchell's Recent Works', Scott Dimovitz discusses the deferred representation of the apocalyptic in Mitchell's first three novels alongside *The Bone Clocks*, *Sunken Garden* and *From Me Flows What You Call Time* (2016/2114). Dimovitz argues that Mitchell's later works extend, transform and undermine the significance of the apocalyptic in his first three novels, establishing a 'retroactive Mitchellverse' that offers an increasingly didactic political critique of apoliticism in the face of apocalyptic climate change. In 'Oblique Translations in David Mitchell's Works', Claire Larsonneur approaches the author's use of translation as both fictional theme and personal practice, discussing *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* and *Black Swan Green* (2006) alongside David Mitchell and Keiko Yoshida's joint translations of Naoki Higashida's *The Reason I Jump* (2013) and *Fall Down Seven Times, Get Up Eight* (2017). Drawing on the Japanese tradition of translation, Larsonneur explores the relationship between autobiography and translation, using the concept of 'oblique writing' – defined as the practice of rewriting or writing over a lost voice from a lateral perspective – to understand Mitchell's approaches to translation across his works.

The final contribution to the collection, 'In the Labyrinth of Slow Time: "A Perturbation in the Deep Stream" and "A Perambulation in the Deep Stream"' by Paul Harris, offers both creative and critical responses to David Mitchell's writing. Harris presents two original creative pieces written in dialogue with *The Bone Clocks*, one co-authored by David Mitchell with a letter under the enigmatic pseudonym 'Lachim DiVeldt'.<sup>5</sup> Harris' 'truthful fictions' take the reader into the Petriverse of Pierre Jardin, a rock garden in California whose mysterious temporal effects become drawn into the horological world of *The Bone Clocks*. With so many literature courses now offering students the opportunity to study David Mitchell's writing, innovative approaches

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<sup>5</sup> The full video of David Mitchell and Paul Harris' evening reading, including David Mitchell's reading of Lachim DiVeldt's letter and a Q&A session with the author, can be found on *YouTube*. See 'David Mitchell Conference 2017: David Mitchell & Prof. Paul Harris evening reading' at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5L2BMBVhEos>, uploaded by David Mitchell Conference 2017, accessed 21 August 2018.

to teaching the macronovel are becoming increasingly relevant. In his afterword, Paul Harris includes a critical essay that discusses teaching David Mitchell's work in connection with contemplative pedagogies, providing insights into his inventive university classes on *The Bone Clocks* within a wider framework of 'slow time'. Together, these essays form a special edition whose perspectives suggest new avenues for the scholarship, teaching and creative responses to the author's fictional world.

There is an undeniable strangeness to working with living authors in the wake of theorist Roland Barthes' 1967 essay 'The Death of the Author', and its insistence on the separation of author and text; as one conference participant put it, it's an 'uncanny and enriching experience'. Much important work has extended this discussion in recent years (see S. Burke 2008, K. Mitchell 2008, and J. Farrell 2017 for examples) but widespread anxiety about the contemporary writer's proximity to the critical space remains. Living authors unsettle literary critics: they can talk back, contradict, and unnerve. But they can also listen and respond with their own unique perspectives – as did David Mitchell during the conference – in an interaction that itself prompts new avenues for the wider study of the contemporary. Working with living authors also has its own metafictional implications for the texts themselves; as David Mitchell quipped during the conference, 'this will feed into my future work, so be careful what you tell me!'

As the organiser, I had to make a choice when planning the conference: invite the author to take part in the event, as in the first David Mitchell conference, or not, as in the second. There are arguments for both sides: to have the writer in attendance is to visibly acknowledge their contemporaneity, their authorship, and their literary contribution in an event which quite literally wouldn't have been possible without them. Their inclusion, it is hoped, should be mutually beneficial to the author and participants alike. Yet involving a living author brings a 'wildcard' element to the expected formality of an academic conference. It introduces an unavoidable aspect of celebrity to a primarily scholarly event, and deliberately subjects a living, feeling human being to a day-long critique of their life's work. However, having worked with David previously, the choice was not a difficult one. I knew that his patience, good



humour, and generosity, as well as his previous experience as an attendee of the first conference on his works, would make him an incredibly valuable part of the day – and a pleasure to have along. Rather than minimise the scholarly issues generated by his presence, however, the event sought to bring these into the open. Presenters, attendees and the author came together in a dedicated group discussion to contribute their perspectives, including the potential impact of the author's presence on the research presented, authorial fears about when and how to contribute at such an event, and how fan communities might productively interact and overlap with scholarly ones. We didn't definitively 'solve' these issues for future scholars. But we shared, listened, and acknowledged that the study of contemporary literature shouldn't shy away from these difficult questions: it should confront them head on.

I have one final comment before you embark on the critical essays that follow. In his evening reading with David Mitchell, Paul Harris spoke of his involvement in creating a time capsule at Loyola Marymount University in California, whose contents include a signed copy of *Cloud Atlas* and a sealed message from its author. After a day of seeing so many scholars come together from different backgrounds, disciplines, and countries, one phrase in Paul's reading particularly stood out. Discussing the shared act of burying the time capsule, Paul noted, 'we tried to be good ancestors to future faculty and students'. The concept of trying to be 'good ancestors' – of actively taking an ethical approach to the interconnected futures that our present actions create – is, I believe, particularly relevant to David Mitchell's fictions, and also to wider scholarship in the field. It is my hope that this collection of essays, developed from this spirit of collective discussion, open questioning, and the shared desire to 'be good ancestors', helps to inspire new directions for the study of this author's works – and the field of contemporary literature more broadly – for years to come.

Rose Harris-Birtill, September 2018

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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