



David Mitchell, *The Bone Clocks* (Sceptre, 2014, 595pp, £9.99)

Reviewed by Rose Harris-Birtill (University of St Andrews)

Like David Mitchell's phenomenally popular *Cloud Atlas* (2004), *The Bone Clocks* is divided into six narratives that take place in different locations across the globe. However, rather than travelling to the future and back, as in *Cloud Atlas*, each section of *The Bone Clocks* jumps forward in time, taking the reader on a journey from Gravesend in 1984 to Ireland in 2043, via the Alps, Iraq, Iceland, New York and Australia. As one character puts it,

'Rootlessness [...] is the twenty-first century norm' (297). *The Bone Clocks* explores and inhabits this rootlessness, both on the macrocosmic level of place and setting, but also in the microcosmic, with its depiction of a bodily rootlessness in which soul and corpus can become detached. In Mitchell's latest science fiction world, individuals are able to shed their bodies and live on in others, allowing a select few to extend their lifespans indefinitely. While *Cloud Atlas* merely hinted at the presence of a transmigrated soul through six contrasting personalities, *The Bone Clocks* follows the life of a single character, Holly, through this hidden network of body-jumping souls. Mitchell names the phenomenon 'psychosoterica': a hybrid term whose

Greek roots suggest the otherworldly mental discipline of the few specialist individuals who practise it.

The theme of predacity, another Mitchellian mainstay, resurfaces here in a war between the two different types of psychosoterics introduced in the novel – the Carnivores, who artificially halt their aging process by killing children and drinking their souls, and the Horologists who fight to stop them, a group of ethically-minded individuals born with the ability to travel between bodies. While the theme of hunter and hunted runs throughout Mitchell's fantasy sub-plot, it also appears in the novel's engagement with contemporary British politics as seen through the eyes of a self-confessed 'war-junkie' (199), journalist Ed Brubeck. Set in 2004, Ed's flashbacks to war-torn Baghdad interweave with scenes of an English wedding in the novel's third section, exploring the reasons behind failed attempts at political union in post-Saddam Iraq. The plot's depiction of carnivorous child-grooming is perhaps reminiscent of the high-profile child abuse cases documented in recent years, with fewer than ten remaining Horologists struggling against hundreds of Carnivorous 'serial killers' (467). Unusually for Mitchell's writing, there's also an affectionate dig at the established literati, with wry caricatures of Martin Amis and Germaine Greer in the characters of the aging writer Crispin Hershey and feminist academic Aphra Booth.

As a counterpoint to this engagement with the real, followers of Mitchell's earlier fictional universe are also richly rewarded. While the six sections of *The Bone Clocks* contain hidden textual echoes to each other, creating an uncanny sense of readerly déjà vu, there are also direct interconnections with all five of Mitchell's previous novels, his libretti, and even a handful of his short stories. For example, although his previous novel *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet* (2010) reads as tightly-woven historical realism set in the last days of the eighteenth century, in *The Bone Clocks*, psychiatrist Dr Iris Marinus-Fenby reveals she previously inhabited the body of one of *The Thousand Autumns'* characters, Dr Lucas Marinus, revealing he was actually on his thirty-sixth lifetime in the earlier novel – and thereby implicating *The Thousand Autumns* in *The Bone Clocks'* supernatural plot. Marinus has also appeared in Mitchell's libretti for the operas *Wake* (2010) and *Sunken Garden* (2013), while the soul-stealing Hugo Lamb is the protagonist's cousin from Mitchell's earlier – otherwise realist – coming-of-age novel *Black Swan Green* (2006). Again, these unexpected reappearances change how we receive the author's earlier works, adding a further narrative dimension.

Mitchell is renowned for embedding structural mini-metaphors into each of his works. *The Bone Clocks* offers the circular labyrinth, concentric circles and the spiral, reflecting a narrative fascination with uncanny revisitings, rebirths and textual echoes. This apt motif runs throughout, beginning with the circular labyrinth given to Holly, and continued in textual echoes as the

book progresses. As Crispin becomes drawn into the supernatural plot, he hears a bird 'luring me in, ever deeper ever tighter circles' (350) and in his final moments remarks, '*Spirals. All these weeks. Treading on spirals*' (382), while his last words funnel down to a visual spiral embedded in the text. In a plot that shares the gravity-defying and even cinematic qualities of the science fiction films *Inception* (2010) and *The Matrix* (1999), this image of the spiral or circular labyrinth reflects a tale in which the past haunts the future, and veiled messages return to become clear only in later sections of the book, on a second reading, or even more broadly, in context of Mitchell's previous works.

In the author's most heavily interconnected novel since *Ghostwritten* (1999), these embedded ties to his other works create a huge textual shift in Mitchell's narrative universe, encouraging fresh re-readings of his previous works in light of *The Bone Clocks*' larger fantasy world. *The Bone Clocks* stitches together these discrete fragments into a labyrinthine whole as Mitchell's entire body of work becomes a metadiegetic banquet, with seemingly disconnected tales from different times, settings, genres and even artforms picking up the larger science fiction trope of a single shared universe.

Perhaps the most vertiginous resurfacing is that of *The Voorman Problem*, a fictional film from the protagonist's daydream in Mitchell's second novel, *number9dream* (2001). In it, a prisoner who believes he is God is visited by a doctor to assess his sanity – only to prove his case, swapping bodies with the doctor. Made into a real-life short film in 2012, *The Voorman Problem* is also woven into *The Bone Clocks*' fictional universe as a novella by Crispin, before being mirrored in the novel's own plot when a psychiatric patient develops bizarrely God-like intuition. These Borgesian layers of metafiction provide a complex tale whose ending merely hints at the beginning of another era, in which the Horologists are revealed to have a crucial role in safeguarding civilization in the far-future science fiction world of *Cloud Atlas*.

With such a varied mix of literary genres running throughout his previous works, Mitchell to date has not been renowned for being primarily a science fiction writer, but *The Bone Clocks*' fusion of the everyday and the supernatural may well mark a new direction for an author fascinated by the boundaries between the real, the fantastic, and the rich vein of speculative fiction that runs between them. The final section, set in 2043, imagines a dystopian near-future within the reader's lifetime as we revisit Holly aged 74 – the same age Mitchell will be in 2043. The race for survival is reminiscent of Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy; fuel is scarce and the internet all but wiped out, leading to an 'Endarkenment' (533). After the previous chapter's psychosoteric pyrotechnics, magical solutions are painfully absent in the starkly dystopic final section as the mortals left behind are reduced to

the 'bone clocks' of the book's title, ticking towards death from starvation, Ebola, widespread violence, ecological catastrophe or suicide pills. As Holly warns, 'Civilisation's like the economy, or Tinkerbell: if people stop believing it's real, it dies' (572).

Though Holly describes the decade leading up to the novel's final section as 'a plotless never-ending disaster movie', as in *Cloud Atlas*, the author's apocalyptic vision ultimately avoids the bleakness of Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980) by providing the seeds of hope. In a novel where time is malleable and memory re-writable, this sense of hope lies not in the ability to freeze time or change history, but the ability to adapt and survive. Holly may not have the powers of the psychosoterics, but her characteristic strength and resilience ultimately make her the book's most remarkable creation. Part fantasy, part speculative fiction, part realist critique and part thriller, Holly's tale provides the human warmth that binds this ambitious tale into an intricately satisfying maze of a novel.