

# Books & Authors

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## About the Author

Full text biography:

### David Mitchell (British novelist)

Birth Date : 1969

Known As : Mitchell, David Stephen

Place of Birth : United Kingdom, Southport

Nationality: British

Occupation : Novelist

Table of Contents:

Awards  
Personal Information  
Career  
Writings  
Media Adaptions  
Sidelights  
Related Information



about this author

## Awards:

*Mail on Sunday* John Llewellyn Rhys prize, and London *Guardian* First Book Award shortlist, both 1999, both for *Ghostwritten*; Booker Prize shortlist, and James Tait Black Memorial Prize shortlist, 2001, for *Number9dream*; Man Booker Prize finalist; National Book Critics Circle Award nomination, 2004, Nebula Award nomination for best novel, Arthur C. Clarke shortlist, and British Book Awards "best read," all 2005, all for *Cloud Atlas*; Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the South Asia and Europe Region, 2011, for *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*; Nobel Prize, World Fantasy Awards, 2015, for *The Bone Clocks*.

## Personal Information:

Born January 12, 1969, in Southport, England; married. **Education:** University of Kent, B.A., 1990, also earned M.A.  
**Addresses:** Home: Ireland.

## Career Information:

Writer and teacher. Taught English at Hiroshima Kokusai University, Hiroshima, Japan, for four years.

## Writings:

### NOVELS

- *Ghostwritten*, Random House (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Number9dream*, Random House (New York, NY), 2001.
- *Cloud Atlas*, Random House (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Black Swan Green*, Random House (New York, NY), 2006.
- *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, Sceptre (London, England), 2010.
- *The Bone Clocks: A Novel*, Random House (New York, NY), 2014.

## Media Adaptions:

The film *Cloud Atlas*, adapted from David Mitchell's novel, was released by Warner Bros. Pictures in 2012.

**Sidelights:**

Having spent his childhood in England, writer David Mitchell moved to Hiroshima, Japan, where he lived and worked as an English teacher for eight years. In 2001, he returned to his homeland. During his stay in Japan, he wrote two novels. The first was *Ghostwritten*, a collection of nine separate but interrelated tales that take place all over the world. Each has its own distinct narrative voice, but each voice is somehow connected to and has influence on the other eight tales. Each chapter, or tale, is named after a different physical place, beginning in the East and traveling westward. As the reader becomes involved in the stories, an underlying thread emerges, one involving a man-made but uncontrollable superintelligence grappling with humanity's tendency toward self-destruction.

Reviewers have commented on the debut novel's episodic structure. In her review for *Salon.com*, Laura Miller observed that "some of the chapters in *Ghostwritten* do work on their own, for Mitchell has a genuine aptitude for storytelling. Too often, though, even the enjoyable segments of *Ghostwritten* bring to mind other writers who tend to be more accomplished with the sort of writing at hand." Miller went on to note: "The result is often readable, but never inspired, a peculiar effect considering the project is the kind of thing usually only attempted by eccentric geniuses following fiercely individual visions." Brian Kenney, in his review for *Booklist*, was effusive in his praise. "It is a thrill to read a piece of fiction this engrossing, challenging, urgent, and, ultimately, so very new." Kenney compared Mitchell's writing to that of American novelist Don DeLillo and Japanese novelist Haruki Murakami and noted its science fiction influences: "Especially in its continual probing of what is real and what is not, this book remains very much its own thing: a novel of the twenty-first century." A *Publishers Weekly* contributor remarked: "Mitchell's wildly variegated story can be abstruse and elusive in its larger themes, but the gorgeous prose and vibrant, original construction make this an accomplishment not to be missed."

Mitchell's second novel, *Number9dream*, is the story of twenty-year-old Eiji Miyake and his search for the father he never knew. It takes place in modern-day Tokyo, and Eiji's search takes him far from home, where he encounters nothing less than the god of thunder, John Lennon, and organ harvesters. The book is a surreal treatment of a very realistic event--the search for identity. It begins with multiple openings and ends with a missing dream.

Reviewer in general gave a warmer welcome to Mitchell's second novel, which was shortlisted for Britain's prestigious Booker Prize. Calling *Number9dream* a "terrific book," *Booklist* contributor Keir Graff added: "Flexing his considerable stylistic muscle, [Mitchell] plays with form while hewing true to a tightly plotted tale that pulls you along." In *Time International*, Neil Gough observed: "Unlike Mitchell's first book, a loosely connected collection of stories, *Number9dream* is a more fully fleshed-out tale, and reaffirms what many had already suspected: the arrival of a vastly talented and imaginative novelist." *Newsweek* contributor Malcolm Jones likewise remarked: "Mitchell has produced a novel as accomplished as anything being written. Funny, tenderhearted and horrifying, often all at once, it refashions the rudiments of the coming-of-age novel into something completely original."

James Urquhart of the London *Independent* interviewed Mitchell just after *Number9dream* was published. When asked about the similar structures of his two novels, Mitchell admitted: "I didn't really plan the recurrent theme of power and control in *Ghostwritten*, but it does seem to be there. Throughout the novel, events happen because of different levels of power, rather like the inevitable effect of different levels of water in a lock." He explained how his writing process changed as the manuscript for *Ghostwritten* progressed: "The first two or three chapters began as discrete stories until I had the idea of linking them together," Mitchell told Urquhart, adding: "From then on there was more of a master plan. Each chapter addresses why things happen, and how different forces--from surrender, greed, and love to history and quantum physics--shape the course of events." Similarly, in *Number9dream*, "each chapter is about a different mode of the mind, and it is written as far as I could in that mode." Even if the reader does not notice the structure, Mitchell told Urquhart, "it provides a strong force that helps to stop the book from flying off in all directions."

In 2004, Mitchell published his third novel, *Cloud Atlas*, which was nominated for numerous awards and was a finalist for the prestigious Man Booker Prize. Writing in *Library Journal*, Jim Coan called that novel a "postmodern visionary ...

epic." A film adaptation of *Cloud Atlas* was released by Warner Bros. Pictures in 2012. Starring Tom Hanks and Halle Berry, the film was nominated for a Golden Globe Award.

In 2006, Mitchell published his fourth novel, *Black Swan Green*, the tale of a year in the difficult life of teenager Jason Taylor in a small English town during the early 1980s. Jason suffers from a stutter and must do his best to make his way at school and at home, where his parents' marriage appears to be falling apart. Written in episodic, diary form, the book's thirteen chapters take the reader into Jason's mind and world, as he "relates his story in a voice that is achingly true to life," according to *School Library Journal* contributor Kim Dare. This coming-of-age story is in fact not intended for adults at all, thought *Spectator* critic Sebastian Smee. Rather, it is "a brilliantly handled novel for young adults." Coan also had praise for *Black Swan Green*, commending the "virtuoso ventriloquism of multiple voices and settings."

Mitchell's fifth novel, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, is set in Japan in 1799. A Dutch Calvinist named Jacob de Zoet has found his way there along newly opened trade routes and attempts to acquire wealth and success enough to enable him to marry his fiancée, Anna.

Reviewing the work in the *New York Times Book Review*, contributor Dave Eggers noted: "There are no easy answers or facile connections in *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*. In fact, it's not an easy book, period. Its pacing can be challenging, and its idiosyncrasies are many. But it offers innumerable rewards for the patient reader and confirms Mitchell as one of the more fascinating and fearless ... writers alive." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor commented: "It's as difficult to put this novel down as it is to overestimate Mitchell's virtually unparalleled mastery of dramatic construction, illuminating characterizations and insight into historical conflict and change." *New Statesman* contributor Leo Robson opined: "In his previous work, Mitchell has proved himself a virtuoso of voice, but this novel is conducted in a third-person plod." Writing in *Spectator*, Philip Hensher reported: "Mitchell's fifth novel, an exotically situated romance of astounding vulgarity, has some things to be said for it. It will certainly entertain the simpler reader that lurks within all of us."

In his next novel, *The Bone Clocks: A Novel*, Mitchell presents a complex tale featuring a teenage runaway whose adventure starts with hearing voices in her head. Writing that the novel is "a series of six interlinking novellas," Yvonne Zipp, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, goes on to note: The novel "racks up some serious frequent-flier miles, starting in England and visiting Switzerland, Iceland, Iraq, Argentina, and Western Australia before touching down in New York for the big epic fantasy showdown ... and winding up in Ireland."

*The Bone Clocks* is broken up into six sections, with Holly narrating the first and last sections. The other four sections are narrated by various characters who have impacted Holly's life. The story begins in 1984 with the young Holly running away from home to be with her older boyfriend. Readers learn that Holly has heard voices in her head and calls them "The Radio People," initially believing that the voices came from a nearby radio. It turns out that Holly's ability to hear voices has drawn the attention of two immortal groups. The first group, the Horologists, are guardians of the earth who reincarnate after their deaths. The second group, known as the Anchorites, attain their immortality by drinking the souls of youths who have psychic abilities. When Holly's soul is targeted by an Anchorite, a Horologist intervenes, removing her ability to hear voices and, thus, making her unappetizing to the Anchorites. Then Holly's little brother, Jacko, disappears.

The next section of *The Bone Clocks* takes place in Switzerland in the 1990s and is narrated by Hugo Lamb, from one of Mitchell's earlier novels, *Black Swan Green*. Hugo has no use for morals as he tries to climb the social ladder. As a result, he ends up making a Faustian bargain to remain young, handsome, and healthy forever. In an interview with *Chicago Tribune Online* contributor Kevin Nance, Mitchell noted that Hugo makes the agreement "in return for the amputation of his conscience. And I think that's a bargain that a lot of us would at least stop and think about."

Ed Brubeck, who was a classmate of Holly's in high school, narrates the third section, which takes place in 2004. A foreign correspondent who has seen the devastation caused by war, Ed is now Holly's partner and the two have a six-year-old daughter named Aoife. Eventually, Ed is killed while on assignment in Syria, leading to the novel's fourth section, which takes place in 2014. This section is narrated by Crispin Hershey, a British man of letters whose career is on the wane. Crispin and Holly meet following Holly's book, *The Radio People*, which she wrote in an attempt to

reach out to her brother, who she thinks may still be alive and, in a sense, is alive, although not as the brother she knew. Zipp, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*, noted: "It's highly entertaining listening to the acidic Hershey's take on everything from literary festivals pullulating with punters, 'securely pensioned metropolitans stuffed with artisanal fudge and organic cider' to adverbs: 'Adverbs are cholesterol in the veins of prose. Halve your adverbs and your prose pumps twice as well.'"

Marinus, a character from a previous novel by Mitchell, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, narrates the novel's next section. Although it is now the twenty-first century, Marinus is still alive three centuries after the time that he appeared in the earlier book. Marinus, it turns out, is involved in the battle between the two mystical groups in *The Bone Clocks*. As a child psychiatrist in London, he is the one who rid Holly of the voice in her head. He now goes on to enlist Holly for her help as he explains to her the battle between the forces of good and evil that are going on around her.

Holly returns as the narrator in the novel's final section. The year is 2043, and Holly is now an old woman. The world is in turmoil as mass extinctions have begun to occur, fossil fuels are almost depleted, and people have regressed to a near barbaric level of existence. Living on the west coast of Ireland, Holly seems to be waiting for the end to come while caring for her two granddaughters. "Mr. Mitchell is able to scamper nimbly across decades of Holly's life, using his prodigious gifts as a writer to illuminate the very different chapters of her story," wrote *New York Times* contributor Michiko Kakutani, who went on to note: "Like a wizard tapping his wand here and there, he turns on the lights in a succession of revealing little dioramas."

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- *Observer* (London, England), March 11, 2001, Robert MacFarlane, "When Blade Runner Meets Jack Kerouac."
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**The New York Times** | <http://nyti.ms/1OLbltD>

BOOKS

## Review: David Mitchell's 'Slade House' Plunges Into a Battle of Immortals

By DWIGHT GARNER OCT. 22, 2015

David Mitchell's novels are flecked with meaningful coincidences, to borrow Carl Jung's description of synchronicity. Characters recur from one of his books to the next. So do images and ideas.

Mr. Mitchell's best-known and most ambitious novel is "Cloud Atlas" (2004), a suite of interfolded novellas that skip purposefully between eras and temperaments. It seemed, in that novel, that there was nothing this writer could not do. Intellect, feeling, narrative brawn — his kit bag opened and both the Johnstown flood and a rescue skiff poured out.

His most recent novel, "The Bone Clocks" (2014), was nearly as ambitious but felt like a misfire. His gifts were put in service of a plot — there were psychic powers, creepy villains, an epic showdown between good and evil — that felt soft and formulaic.

This was a pastiche of second-rate fantasy fiction that actually read, quite often, like second-rate fantasy fiction. Mr. Mitchell's intertextual gamesmanship — the recurring characters and so on — began to seem, as a friend said to me, "less like Yoknapatawpha and more like Marvel."

Mr. Mitchell's slim new novel, "Slade House," is a sequel of sorts to "The Bone Clocks," although it's closer to being a sly footnote. It first came to life as a short story, "The Right Sort," which the author published in 140-character snippets on Twitter. It's grown into something more.

On a macro level, "Slade House" plunges us again into a battle between two blocs of immortals. One group consists of soul vampires; humans must die for them to live. The other is vastly more pleasant.

On a micro level, this can make for malevolent fun. A pair of immortal twins, Jonah and Norah, occupy — or appear to occupy — a grand old pile in downtown London, accessible only through a small metal door in an alleyway. It opens very rarely, and when it does, it admits a victim.

Once they've found an acceptable soul to suck, the twins share it as if it were a milkshake into which two straws have been sunk. We're given tasting notes. "A sprinkle of last-minute despair," Jonah comments, "gives a soul an agreeably earthy aftertaste."

After killing and inhaling the soul of a loutish cop, "The twins gasp and let out soft groans like junkies shooting up when the drug hits the bloodstream." By the time the officer saw something, it was too late to say anything.

"Slade House" is told in five chapters, spaced nine years apart. The first takes place in 1979, the last in 2015. In each chapter, a victim enters the compound. Muggles will not do. The twins need "engifted" humans with potent "psychovoltage."

Mr. Mitchell tips this book into some dark corners. One character is made to viscerally understand how suffering is much worse if someone you love disappears rather than simply dies.

"Grief is an amputation," this woman says, "but hope is incurable hemophilia: You bleed and bleed and bleed. Like Schrödinger's cat inside a box you can never ever open."

Mr. Mitchell remains a fluent and, when he wishes to be, witty writer. It is hard to disapprove of a novel in which one of the most likable characters is a young



woman named Sally Timms, clearly in homage to a lead singer in the venerable British punk band the Mekons.

As this book moves deeper into the fripperies of its ghost story, Mr. Mitchell is savvy enough to have his characters, every so often, blow raspberries at the expense of all the solemnity. "This is all sounding a bit 'Da Vinci Code' for me," one says. And: "What I see is the wackometer needle climbing."

Alas, the wackometer needle does climb. Characters deliver big chunks of artless exposition so readers can keep up with metaphysical nuances. The dialogue often has a Lovecraft-meets-Hardy Boys flavor: "Something bad's happening in this house, Sal. We need to get out."

"Slade House" is Mr. Mitchell's shortest and most accessible novel to date, and you don't have to have read "The Bone Clocks" to comprehend it. Readers who come to this book first, however, will get only a slivery glimpse of this writer's talent. Our seats are the intellectual version of "obstructed view," as cheap theater tickets sometimes say.

The biggest drawback of "Slade House" might that it simply isn't very scary. These characters aren't alive enough for us to fear for them when they're in peril. With the possible exception of Sally Timms, we're not invested in them.

As it happens, I read this novel alone and mostly at night in a fairly remote cabin in upstate New York. There's no cellphone reception here.

I'm as susceptible to scary stories as the next person. After seeing "The Blair Witch Project," I wouldn't go on my back porch alone at night, even to smoke, for two months. But "Slade House" slid right off me, even as the wind howled outside.

In "Cloud Atlas," Mr. Mitchell wrote: "Power, time, gravity, love. The forces that really kick ass are all invisible." Fear belongs on that list, too.

Slade House

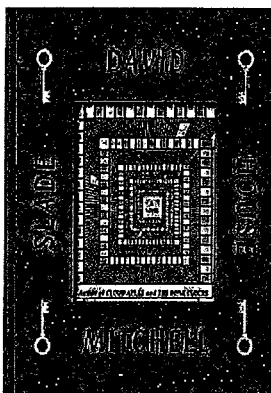
By David Mitchell

238 pages. Random House. \$26.

## Slade House Book Discussion Guide

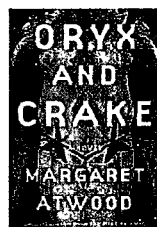
### 2015 Penguin Random House Selection

#### Biography:



**David Mitchell** was born in England and attended the University of Kent where he received a degree in English and American Literature followed by an MA in Comparative Literature. He lived for a year in Sicily, then moved to Japan where he taught English to technical students for eight years before returning to England. He is the award-winning and bestselling author of Bone Clocks, Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet, Black Swan Green, Cloud Atlas, Number9Dream, and Ghostwritten. Five of his novels have been nominated for the Man Booker Prize and in 2007 *Time* magazine named him one of the 100 most influential people in the world. With his wife, KA Yoshida, Mitchell translated from the Japanese the internationally bestselling memoir The Reason I Jump. He lives in Ireland with his wife and two children. (from the publisher)

#### Similar Resources:



#### Discussion Questions:

1. How believable are the characters in Slade House? Which character do you identify with or is it possible to identify with any of these characters?
2. What themes recur throughout the book? How does the author use these themes? Do they work?
3. Is the setting of the book important to the theme? Why? How realistic is the setting?
4. How does the arrangement of the book help or detract from the ideas in the novel? How is the book structured? Why do you think the author chose to write the book this way?
5. Does the book fit into or fight against a literary genre? How does this book relate to other books you have read? Would this book make a good movie?
6. What did the author attempt to do in this book? Was it successful?
7. Were the plot and subplots believable? Were they interesting? What loose ends, if any, did the author leave? Where could the story go from here? What is the future of these characters?
8. What is the great strength -- or the most noticeable weakness -- of the book?

### Discussion Questions for *Slade House* by David Mitchell

1. Slade House is told as a series of short stories set nine years apart. Did you find this an effective narrative technique?
2. How believable are the characters in Slade House? Which character do you identify with, or is it possible to identify with any of these characters?
3. Did anything that happened surprise you, or did you find the plot predictable?
4. What is the greatest strength or the most noticeable weakness of the book?
5. Did any lines or passages strike you as noteworthy, or parts you especially enjoyed?
6. Does the book fit into or fight against a literary genre?
7. Would this book make a good movie?
8. Has anyone read *The Bone Clocks* or *Cloud Atlas*? How does *Slade House* relate?
9. Would you recommend this novel to a friend? Do you want to read *The Bone Clocks* or *Cloud Atlas* or any sequel to *Slade House*?
10. Are there any questions you would like to ask, or other issues or elements you would like to discuss?