

## David Mitchell in Morgenbladet by Rob Young

'It's like *Sleeping Beauty*,' said Margaret Atwood in Oslo a year ago, at the opening of Deichmanske biblioteks Future Library project. 'The texts are going to slumber for 100 years and then they'll wake up, come to life again.' Future Library is a fantasy made real: 100 pieces of writing stored, one year at a time, in a time capsule in a specially designed room at the heart of Oslo's newest library building, currently under construction at Bjørvika.

On 28 May, British author David Mitchell will be arriving in Oslo to deliver the second sealed manuscript. Mitchell, born in 1969, is one of the most unpredictable and inventive novelists of our time. Best known for *Cloud Atlas* (2004), which was made into a feature film by the Wachowski partnership who made *The Matrix*, Mitchell's storylines leap across multiple time zones, geographical locations and literary genres, from costume drama and coming-of-age novels to satire and sci-fi. *Cloud Atlas* begins on an 18<sup>th</sup> century exploration ship and ends in a post-apocalyptic distant future. Along the way we meet an English composer and his devious young assistant, a stressed literary agent in London, an investigative journalist uncovering the shady side of a nuclear power company in the US, and a cyborg labourer who revolts against her corporate masters to become a new messiah. Mitchell's genius is to embed each story inside the other, in a fictional equivalent of the Russian doll, so that you never quite know where the homeground of this narrative lies. If the pile-up of banal details and adolescent philosophical questions in Knausgaard become too much, Mitchell's nomadic, global and multi-temporal imagination is the perfect antidote.

Mitchell has lived in the Irish countryside since 2002, and I meet him in an organic café in Cork, his nearest city. He still hasn't quite finished writing his gift to the Future Library, but he reveals it's 'not short', and he's 'pleased with it. Which is somewhat frustrating, as I'd like to publish it now, and get the plaudits!' He has treated the assignment as an opportunity to develop new ideas which, he claims, will feed forthcoming writings. 'It's building up a world that I can use again in the future – a world and a time and a place. So it's a freestanding, fairly substantial piece of fiction in its own right, but it's also the preparation for something bigger I'll use one day as well. It will also be a jigsaw piece in my literary universe. Characters from this will be appearing in future books, I think. But because of the nature of the plot it's somewhere I haven't really gone to before, so it's a sort of foundation stone.'

Does it have any relation to the ideas behind the Future Library?

'Yes. To answer that fully I'd probably have to step over the line. But yeah, it's concerned with the future.'

*Ghostwritten*, his stunning 1999 debut, came with many of his literary signatures fully developed, in particular an imaginative concept involving immortal beings, known as Atemporals, who have re-emerged across several of his novels, and are the focal point of the last two, *The Bone Clocks* (2013) and *Slade House* (2015). Atemporals are emanations of pure consciousness which leap between human bodies, and continue to be reborn over and over again. Some, the 'Horologists', use this for the good of humankind, others, the 'Carnivores', feed their immortality by consuming the souls of gifted humans. *Slade House* takes place entirely in a haunted building conjured up by a pair of Carnivore twins as a trap for unwitting victims.

Fiction is another form of atemporality. As a writer whose work is deeply concerned with time, and finding hope in uncertain futures, Mitchell is a highly appropriate participant in Future Library. In *The Bone Clocks*, a retired teacher in Trondheim is the innocent transmitter of a vital message between the Horologists, after storing an important package for several decades in exchange for funding for his deaf school. Culture requires safe havens in order to be preserved and transmitted into the future, and this incident recognises that areas like Scandinavia are among the most stable and secure in the world. 'Of the world's life rafts,' he says, 'Norway as a state, and Scandinavia as a region, appear to be some of the more unsinkable ones. Of course, they said that about the Titanic...'

Future Library works in the same way. Initiated by British artist Katie Paterson, it will act as a seed bank preserving writers' voices into an unknown future, confident that the printed word will still be a valid and actively utilised medium in two generations' time. Each author plants a tree in the Nordmarka, and in 100 years the works, revealed for the first time, will be printed on paper manufactured from this forest. 'He is an outstanding author of our era,' says Paterson. 'His voice can speak to the past and to the future concurrently; it has a force that will propel it through time. His work is transporting and polyphonic, blending time, dreams and reality.'

Mitchell's books now have many intriguing threads linking them together, so that they form part of a continuum, a map of a universe that is gradually revealing itself in blotches. Characters reappear, or are referred to in passing, or their relatives emerge in other stories. Now he needs to find an explanation for how the Atemporals came into being. 'I will sketch why Atemporals exist. Yeah, you'll find out. It's to do with libraries. The library of humanity.'

Over the years he has developed strategies for making the supernatural elements of his writing more convincing.

'It's like being a burglar. You have to disconnect the reader's 'that's ridiculous!' burglar alarms. You have to know where they are and how to switch them off.'

And how do you do that?

'You shoot your fantasy through with bolts of realism. You know: we're talking about Iraq, we're talking about a Talking Heads album – they're completely real, so why can't this be totally real as well?'

'There's always apocalypse in the air,' he says. 'But it's usually religious-backed apocalypse or possibly geopolitical. We haven't had scientifically-proven apocalypse in the air before, and this is this generation's equivalent of what for us kids was the nuclear war.' Mitchell grew up in the west of England, a 1980s childhood in the shadow of the bomb which he drew heavily upon in his 'straightest' novel to date, *Black Swan Green* (2006). Now, he believes, climate change is a bigger, although less spectacular threat. 'It's more slow motion,' he continues. 'Unfortunately it's also really real. As Cold War chill filtered through and unfurled its tendrils in our developing consciousness, I fear climate change is doing the same now. And the Future Library project is something of an antidote to that. It's a firm avowal that no, civilisation won't collapse, the Book won't vanish, there will still be readers and there will still be a place for thought, and the world won't look like *Mad Max 3* or *The Road*.'

It's the novelist's duty, he insists, to remain ever curious about their surroundings. Even when he is the subject of an interview, he asks plenty of questions constantly, of me, the photographer, the people at the next table – always on the lookout for another story.

His depiction of Atemporals is really a way to explore one of the most primal subjects of human curiosity. 'Conditional immortality, that's what we're talking about. It's

fascinating – I'm interested in ways that give us a small advantage in the fight against death. Ways of cheating death, outfoxing death – ever so slightly, or completely if you're lucky. This goes back to the Greek myths, and whatever there were before Greek myths. I'm sure this has always been with us. Earlier societies would have been insane not to have evolved myths about death.'

To write about 'souls' in a sceptical age is a brave tactic.

'I'm fairly secular myself, and once you start to throw evidence and proof out of the window, then you're merely into the realm of what do you want to happen? How do you want it to be? And people are not at their best or most humanistic once they start thinking in that way.'

The work's name will be officially unveiled next week, but Mitchell reveals it's titled after a piece of contemporary music by Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu. For now, though, he wants to 'be a non-fantasy writer for a while.'

Thinking about Future Library's time capsule inevitably draws questions about the nature and purpose of fiction itself, what role it now plays in the age of the highly evolved grand narratives of the television series, or the autobiographical shorthand of Twitter and Facebook. For Mitchell the story is a fundamental human need that will never disappear. As an artist who's collaborating with the Wachowskis on the Netflix series *Sense8*, and has written two opera libretti, he allows his fiction to be enriched by multimedia and televisual culture.

'Jonathan Franzen's latest book and *Breaking Bad*, they're both doing the same thing, satisfying this primal human urge for story. That goes back to the beginnings of the species, I think, and it will be there at the end. However, the dominant narrative form has changed throughout history, and what's relevant is how the dominant narrative forms impact on novelists. Novelists are now thinking more cinematically, and we compose scenes more like screenwriters. It doesn't feel like we're in competition, I just view it as a resource. But there are parts only the novel can reach.'