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David Mitchell's Fractal Imagination: *The Bone Clocks*

Paul A. Harris

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

David Mitchell's Fractal Imagination: *The Bone Clocks*¹

Paul A. Harris (bio)

David Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks*, the latest iteration of his fractal

imagination, follows a central character's life through six decades in six sections that simultaneously succeed as stand-alone stories.

Protagonist Holly Sykes narrates the first and final chapters; in the middle sections, her life is seen prismatically through the lenses of others who cross her path: Cambridge student Hugo Lamb, war journalist Ed Brubeck, badboy author Crispin Hershey, and Horologist Marinus. Navigating this narrative proves to be a rollicking ride: the propulsive plotting picks up momentum as the stories unfold; the narrative is kaleidoscopic-episodic, unfolding in a series of juxtapositions and sometimes sudden shifts; the style is protean, skipping skillfully among different rhetorical registers, allusive layers, and literary genres.

At the same time, *The Bone Clocks* is a tightly woven text that recursively loops through Mitchell's previous books and ultimately interlaces all his books into an intricate, sprawling intertext. Returning Mitchell readers will encounter familiar faces (Lamb, Marinus), and recognize allusions to his other books ("The Voorman Problem," a story attributed to Hershey, is from *Number9dream*; the "symmetrical structure" [340] of Hershey's novel *Dessicated Embryos* and a riff on Shelley's "The Cloud" [that concludes "I unbuild it again" (562)]) can be read as allusions to *Cloud Atlas*, and there's even a humorous reference to the movie). Back-stories in *The Bone Clocks* turn into/out to be back-stories to episodes/elements from previous novels (Magistrate Shiroyama's killing Abbot Entomoto in *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*; the Prescients in *Cloud Atlas*). Retroactively, certain characters and sentences in the earlier novels take on a whole new meaning: in *Thousand Autumns*, Marinus tells the protagonist, "'I'm indestructible, like a serial Wandering Jew. I'll wake up tomorrow—after a few months—and start all over again'" (440). Who would have guessed that, as it turns out, this was no idle boast?

More broadly, the form of *The Bone Clocks* is a synthesis of globetrotting *Ghostwritten* and time-traveling *Cloud Atlas*. In tone and style, Holly Sykes's rebellious teen sojourn into the countryside is straight out of contemporaneously-set *Black Swan Green* (she's a slightly older

avatar of Jason Taylor). While each chapter of that novel covers a calendar month over a year, each section of *The Bone Clocks* is set in a specific decade, beginning thirty years ago and ending thirty years into the future. Eventually, **[End Page 148]** one surmises that the heterogeneous characters and events in *The Bone Clocks*, and its central plot conflicts, are all always already written into something called “The Script,” a self-reflexive motif for the text itself. But Mitchell’s entire corpus could be seen the same way: all of the stories within all of his books, as they unfold, seem on completion to assume their place in an already-existing Script threading together all his texts.

For those encountering Mitchell’s work for the first time, reading the novel might well feel like listening intently to a complex, swinging jazz tune (and this may hold for anyone’s first trip through *The Bone Clocks*). Like such compositions, the novel unfolds not in a simple linear, metric fashion, but instead features syncopated rhythms (present moments have distinct, different intensities; scenes pass at different speeds; prolepses and analepses bend loops in the narrative arc) and tonal variation achieved through improvisational stylistic riffing (e.g., a chaotic bar scene catalogued as a rhythmically rhyming list in a sort of prose rap; a writer’s lecture on Icelandic sagas and the history of the novel folds into the text a pithy literary critical accounting of itself; a cinematically rendered abduction/rescue scene culminating in a fire fight inside a police van is reminiscent of the famous car ambush scene in *Children of Men*). Like an ensemble trading solos, the text invites different voices/viewpoints to enter and ‘stretch out’ (a war journalist’s view of 2004 Iraq, a girl’s youth in provincial 19th century Russia). Following the novel, like tracking the complexities of a jazz tune, can make your head...

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
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