



the art of writing fiction

David Mitchell

When talking to David Mitchell, it soon becomes clear that he is devoted to his craft. In fact, he is faithful to the art of writing fiction to the point where he describes the idea of a clinch with scriptwriting or an embrace with poetry as akin to being adulterous. "I think I'm too much a devotee of the novel and its mystical arts, I'm too miserly, too obsessive a lover of it to wish to have an affair." It would be easy to imagine a writer of Mitchell's

dedication as sitting in a well-appointed sanctum, looking out over a spiritually nurturing vista, or as having a well-worn chair that has been a lifelong friend. The reality is, of course, much more pragmatic. The views from his office in Japan are a snapshot of a car park on one side and a wisteria-covered copse on the other. There is no companionable chair, not even a lucky charm. Instead he relies on his infatuation with writing, his prodigious creative talents

and a great deal of hard graft.

Before any story can be written, ideas need to emerge and be explored. As Mitchell points out, the creative resources are readily available, but it isn't a case of where to look, but *how* to look. "You can't begin without the raw material, [however] *inspiration* is what you do with it...Literary inspiration is the molecular structure of the world of ideas around us; it's cause and effect, it's what life already is. It's not a question of hunting for

it; it's more about sifting what you're in." Like panning for gold, once the dirt and dross have been discarded, the moment arrives when it's time to start moulding the nuggets into glittering monuments. So how does David Mitchell approach the task of writing his books?

"Writing is editing for me. I do a rubbishy, sketchy version first to get to work on, which is scaffolding. And then the writing is honing and refining, strengthening, trimming and leafing out — so like a tree it grows out and out. I was going to say it's 90% editing, but if it's possible, it's 100% editing... I would be un-publishable if I didn't go back. I would be un-publishable if I didn't go back fifteen times. It's fun as well. It's so satisfying to fix a broken sentence, to spot that it's broken and then work out how fix it; and then do the same with a number of things, for instance, a broken scene." During this editing process, Mitchell remains focussed on one key question, as he explains; "I would say that what I try to do is constantly ask myself with every page, 'Why would someone other than my mother actually want to read this?' You should be able to answer that question with a *good* answer. It's not just about keeping the pages turning, it might be that the writing is so beautiful that you can't take your eye off this page; [or the effect could

be] 'oh my god what's going to happen with this person I care about?' But with every sentence, never let that question leave at least the corner of your eye, and maybe the middle of your eye as well."

The enthusiasm that Mitchell feels for his craft is evident in his voice and it's infectious. However, he doesn't hesitate to bat back a suggestion that he should write a book on the practice of writing fiction, "I'll have to go back to the question about scriptwriting. It would be like having an affair. But if I can mention it in interviews occasionally and some of it should get out there, I would be delighted." In that case, what other advice can he offer?


"If you have a page of text with too many sentences beginning with the word 'I', then there are needles in your eyeballs. The prose becomes as tedious as conversation with the pub bore who also begins too many sentences with the word 'I'. What do you have to do? Switch a sentence around here and there so that it begins with the object, the subject in the middle, and suddenly this horrible, fraught prose is fluid, it's lubricated." What happens when the prose becomes jammed, or the oil can feels empty, and the cogs just won't turn? "All you have to do is define in words, in your notebook, why you are stuck. If you do that, then your definition

"Why would someone other than my mother want to read this?"

is your answer, it's there. It might be I'm stuck because this is crap, and I'm sorry but I've got to abandon it."

It's hard to imagine David Mitchell composing even a sentence that needed to be abandoned, but as is apparent from his candid comments on how he goes about writing his books, his method is one that involves taking the red pencil to his work as much as it comprises creative gymnastics. In the end though, it is his unadulterated love of writing fiction, which dwells in the mind. So how does he feel about being called a literary genius or virtuoso? "Once you begin to believe it, you've had it. It would be artistic death, I think. After all, the first purpose of writing is to learn how to write better." David Mitchell's books include *Cloud Atlas* and *Black Swan Green*.

Rachel Hazelwood



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