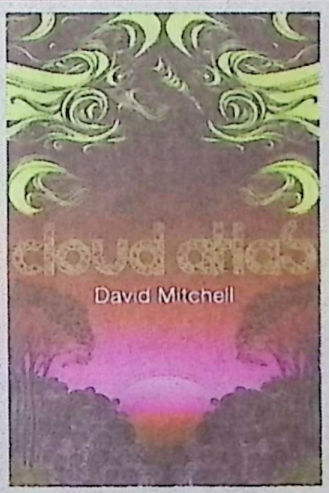
Time and Emotion Study

HEPHZIBAH ANDERSON



DAVID Mitchell is a master of fragmentary fictions. When his first book, Ghostwritten, was published, critics were undecided whether it was a novel or a collection of short stories. This latest is similarly episodic, but it is a novel in the biggest, most exhilarating sense.

Cloud Atlas is made up of half-a-dozen disparate but artfully interwoven narratives that propel the reader forwards through time and genre, from the distant nineteenth to the not-so-far-off twenty-second century, from giddy picaresque to cool thriller to chilling sci-fi.

It begins in 1850 with the journal of a Yankee notary whose piety and longing for home never quite eclipse his curiosity. Adrift in the Pacific, he sojourns on the island of Chatham, where he surveys the impact of colonialism (accurate time is "one valued import") and learns about the Maoris' brutal subjugation of its peaceable natives, the Moriori, thereby introducing two themes that lie at the novel's moral and intellectual core.

Back at sea on a schooner, the Prophetess, Ewing's journal ends in mid-sentence, and the novel lurches forward to 1931, when one Robert Frobisher, turfed out of Cambridge, cut off penniless by his pa and forced to flee London after a bad run at the pinochle table, sails for Belgium. As his "Letters from Zedelgem" reveal, Frobisher plans to trace a reclusive, ailing composer and insinuate himself as the great man's amanuensis. He also finds a book, irritatingly torn in half. Its title? The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing.

Although he is a cad, Frobisher may be a musical genius, too, and is toiling over his Cloud Atlas Sextet, whose composition mirrors Mitchell's own: "Overlapping soloists: piano, clarinet, cello, flute, oboe and violin, each in its own language of key, scale and colour. In the first set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the second, each interruption is recontinued, in order."

Differing wildly in pitch, pacing and content, each of this novel's sections seems as eerily self-contained as a snow globe, but all are intricately, even supernaturally, interlaced. Jump-cut to yet another continent, decades later, and a young woman will become entranced by music in the Lost Chord Music Store that is "intimately familiar", that makes her feel as if she is "living in a stream of time" and turns out to be Cloud Atlas Sextet by Robert Frobisher.

A myriad of similar remembrances and foreshadowings, serendipities and coincidences ghost Mitchell's sextet, along with more tangible, equally thrilling connections. In the pages that follow, the novel reels from a splendidly snarky send-up of literary London to a dystopic, minutely imagined twenty-second-century "corpocracy", where a "fabricant" "genomed" to serve fast food with a smile and an exclamation-marked, text-friendly chirrup "ascends" to become a sentient human being.

Cloud Atlas meditates on belief and religion, on the curses of rampant science, big business and human insatiability; it questions how capable we are of changing the course of our own lives, let alone history or humankind's nature, and hints tantalisingly at notions of reincarnation. But it is time's progression - linear or otherwise - that truly captivates Mitchell and, in a gesture at once terrifying and comforting, he sets his most futuristic tranche in a world that is the most ancient.

While each of the preceding tales is written, filmed or recorded as a hologram, at Cloud Atlas's epicentre we meet Zachry, a goatherd who spins his yarn around a campfire, drawing deep on the "damnit weed" to conjure up an island littered with eerie remnants of life before "the Fall" - a runway, observatories, grammar. Throughout, Mitchell morphs language: our own label-studded tongue becomes one in which brand names replace nouns and letters go permanently astray, but Zachry speaks in a post-apocalyptic patois whose quaint, sugary innocence confirms the worst.

It becomes clear the disaster that ended "the Civ'lise Days" and shaped Zachry's present was foreseen from the beginning, and yet storytelling survives science and if anything can save us, Mitchell suggests, it is narrative. His characters make reference to the likes of Alice, Huck Finn and Emerson like old acquaintances, and draw from Greek myths, 1,001 Nights and Hans Christian Andersen.

The literature that fills Cloud Atlas's pages can be incendiary, too - people swim deep into dark waters and go up in flames. His own epic is hewn from timeless, mythic ingredients - strong, nurturing goddess figures, quests for freedom, for truth, for enlightenment - and at the zenith of its narrative arc, it eulogises the power of storytelling, having Zachry's sons listen to his story even though they know he was "a wyrd buggah" and suspect that most of his "yarnin's was jus' musey duck-fartin".

As Ewing concludes at the novel's close, if by believing the wrong story we can bring about the worst, who knows what we can achieve by believing a good story?

"Revolutionary or gimmicky?" Frobisher demands of his Cloud Atlas Sextet. Mitchell is far too able for gimmickry - his is a Rubik's cube structure that repays closer attention with still more puzzlement, until no detail seems accidental, no turn of phrase incidental, and the novel's texts thrum with distant echoes of one another.

As with the most perplexing dreams and riddling rides, Cloud Chamber courteously sets us down where we began, but I surely won't be the only reader turning straight back to the first page and starting all over again.

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