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 **Palter & Prescience – On David Mitchell and *Ghostwritten***

Sean Hooks

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

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The works of David Mitchell have inspired a consistent utilization of the

lexicon of accolade, at times even of hyperbole. Reviews and critical assessments are littered with terminology such as: visionary, protean, prolific, genre-bending jack-of-all-trades. He is, for some, the ultimate conceptual writer, a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Man. His work, until recently, was called unfilmable, and depending on your opinion of the Tykwer-Wachowski adaptation of *Cloud Atlas*, maybe you think it ought to have stayed that way. Maybe you're a Mitchell fan who likes to tout the British maestro's mash-ups of genre fiction and formalist literary mischief as redefining the novel, as mind-blowing, intuitive, challenging, pyrotechnic, ambitious, and clever.

But one man's clever is another woman's gimmick, phrased as such because Mitchell's books are populated by androgynes and floating consciousnesses, by liminal pubescent and dislodged expatriates, even by non-gendered (ungendered? genderless?) characters, phantasms and poltergeists, child ghosts and tribal gods and other undefinable sorts of immortal sentience. One who tends to write in the category of High Gamesmanship, David Mitchell is a cineaste audiophile lit-hound blender. Widely praised and well reviewed but also bestseller material, he is not a fringe member of some experimental fiction cabal, nor cognoscenti fodder, nor a soi-disant enfant terrible. As much as his supporters might want to argue for his indie cred, he's been blurbed by Dave Eggers and the movie version of his big novel starred Tom Hanks. Mitchell is inarguably intelligent, seemingly sincere, even humble, despite aiming so high, aspiring to gargantuan meritorious blocks of impressiveness, an individual whose writing is highbrow and referential but who also possesses an affable accessibility. If Mitchell's books are difficult they're recognizably so, 'fun difficult' as opposed to 'avant-garde difficult' (for the latter, think Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, published the same year as Mitchell's debut), and reading his first novel, *Ghostwritten*, fifteen years after its publication, what abides is its prescience.

By presenting a Huxleyan dystopo-present freckled with brand names and macular with rampant consumerism – Mitchell would later dub the dystopo-future a 'corpocracy' in *Cloud Atlas* (in which Prescients become

a race) – the globetrotting Englishman’s first book has been proven **[End Page 39]** right about so many of its most pressing concerns. This is a novel with plenty of maximalist complexities and ‘big ideas’ – from a thread about transmigration to grappings with the body-soul separation to allusions regaling you with erudition and aplomb on everything from *Star Wars* to *The Master and Margarita*, from Salman Rushdie to the history of jazz, from science fiction to cosmological and genetic facts – but his opening salvo is actually a much more straightforward one: he was a young novelist disappointed by the confounding inauthenticity of the modern world.

Mitchell’s quasi-autobiographical *Black Swan Green* was nominated by *Slate*’s Jessica Roake to replace *The Catcher in the Rye* as the coming-of-age novel of choice for the millennial generation and beyond (Roake). This is mostly because Salinger’s mid-20th century classic is viewed by some as didactic and privileged and other things that grad students and hipsters like to decry, but a Caulfieldian disdain for phonies is absolutely at the forefront of Mitchell’s debut as he weaves his *Bridge of San Luis Rey*-style causality brocade, a litany of disport rhetorically railing against the fake, the unreal, anything that’s less than capital ‘T’ True. Thornton Wilder’s novel is the source of this one’s epigraph and there’s also a central character in *Ghostwritten* known only as “the zookeeper,” called Zooey for short, Mitchell quite aware of J.D. Salinger’s oeuvre and legacy as well. Like the youngest and most put-upon member of the Glass family and his author, Mitchell yearns for integrity. He also aches to believe in an upside to the vexations of interconnectedness and privacy depredation that exist in a globalized real world and a post-DeLilloan fictive one (one of the few negative-leaning reviews of *Ghostwritten* upon initial publication came from Laura...

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A syntesis of depositional trends in intertidal and upper subtidal sediments across the

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