

David Mitchell Talks About Moscow, Literature and the Future

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David Mitchell is one of the most promising British writers today with five bestselling novels, including two that were shortlisted for the Booker Prize: *Cloud Atlas* and *number9dream*. The former was later made into a blockbuster movie by the Wachovski brothers and Tom Tykwer.

David flew to Moscow last week to take part in series of literary events presenting *Granta* magazine's "Best of Young British Novelists" in collaboration with Ahmad Tea and the Russian State Library. While he was here, he met with a journalist from *The Moscow Times* and discussed his views on Russia and his future work. (With contribution from Evgeniya Kisileva).

Q: Is this your first visit to Moscow? What do you think of the city?

A: This is my second visit. I first came here in 1997 as a smelly backpacker. That was before my

first book was published. Moscow is in better condition now than it was in 1997. Obviously, the economy is stronger, and the traffic is worse, but that's usually a good sign for the economy. My first visit was during Yeltsin's reign. Of course, there is a different president now, but let's try to avoid politics.

I'll tell you what the difference is. In 1997, I was staying at a hotel out in the suburbs, and on every floor of the hotel there was an old woman with sort of an angry face who would never even say hello. At the hotel where I stay now, people say good morning and seem to mean it. Maybe they don't mean it, but they've convinced me that they mean it. So yeah, people smile a lot more now than in 1997. There are social problems, but they are the social problems of a more prosperous society than in 1997.

Q: You've been meeting with your readers for several days now. How do Russian readers differ from those of other countries?

A: Russians are surprisingly philosophical, they are more Germanic and less American in the sense that their questions are quite deep and theoretical. There was one girl who asked me, "Do you agree that writing is the dialogue with the unwritten." You don't get that in Milwaukee.

Q: In your first book you have a chapter taking place in St. Petersburg about a curator at the Hermitage who steals and sells paintings, how was this character inspired?

A: When I was at the Hermitage Museum, I saw this woman, and I started thinking about her life. Whatever her face was, it was erased by the face of my character, and my character's face is being erased by time — I wrote it 16 years ago. But I am a little embarrassed now that I come back to Russia as a writer and that story has been published in Russian. I know I've made many mistakes. I hope the mistakes I made don't totally spoil it for a Russian reader. It's a little piece of crime fantasy.

Q: Cloud Atlas, the movie, is very different from Cloud Atlas, the book. What do you think about that?

A: I feel that the film is as good a film as a book is a book. Compared to most pieces of Hollywood crap, it's still a really good movie. They brought the background to the foreground with the whole soul reincarnation concept and changed some of the plot lines, but film is a different vehicle of narrative so it is to be expected. If they hadn't changed the book it would've been a worse film, so fine by me.

Q: Faith plays an important role in your books, what's your own attitude towards religion?

A: I am a kind of secular Buddhist. I meditate and find it very helpful, and Buddhism doesn't ask me to sacrifice my rationality or my common sense, it doesn't ask me to believe the impossible. I find it helpful to keep my mind under control, sane and calm. What happens after we die — I don't know, and I'm happy not to know. I feel I have no choice but to not know. Buddhism doesn't care if I don't accept its cosmology, I don't have to believe it all.

Q: What's your new book about?

A: It's about an immortal being that gets reincarnated as different men and women. There will

be a section on a serf girl, Clara, who lives in a village near Perm in the 19th century. I'm considering a research trip to Perm, but it's such a short flashback that perhaps it would be easier to be specifically vague — I try to avoid specificity.

Q: You write about the future a lot. What would you predict for our country?

A: My knowledge of society is very superficial. It's better now than it was before this trip, but it's still not deep enough to give prophecies — there's a lot to learn. I hope there won't be many changes, and I hope future politicians are wise and honest men and women. I hope that there will be a healthy, functioning democracy and that Russian people determine the fate of their country. I hope there will be a future that will profit from human potential because it's enormous, and I feel like in the past it wasn't really allowed to bloom.

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