

FICTION IN
REVIEW



C A L E B S M I T H

The difficult birth of a concubine’s baby, the drumhead trial of a corrupt officer, the smuggling of a psalter into the Cloistered Empire – with these three scenes, David Mitchell begins *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, an elaborately, sometimes splendidly envisioned historical novel. Set in Japan at the turn of the nineteenth century, a distant but recognizable phase of globalization, the book is preoccupied with the opening up of closed spheres. “Land naturally divides itself into nations,” a ship’s captain says to himself in a moment of reflection, but “the seas dissolve human boundaries.” When a midwife trained in European medicine resorts to a pair of forceps, a Japanese servant is scandalized by the “foreign contraption,” but the operation saves the lives of the mother and the child. When the chief of a Dutch East India Company factory is found guilty of corruption, he lashes out at his judges, drawing blood; the trial looks more and more like an arbitrary exercise of power, and the line between legitimate business and enterprising fraud becomes unstable. When a pious clerk

The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet, by David Mitchell (Random House, 496 pp., \$26)

brings the Psalms of David into a nation that has outlawed Christian books, he is anxious that the authorities will detect his crime – but the interpreter who inspects his luggage is more interested, it turns out, in a copy of *The Wealth of Nations*. Every attempt to draw a border, to enforce a discipline, seems to be doomed. Knowledge is going to circulate. Bodies are bound to transgress. Wealth will flow.

The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet is composed of three interlocking stories. In the first, Jacob arrives in Dejima, a tiny artificial island off the coast of Japan, and does his best to get the Dutch East India Company's books in order. It is a delicate, thankless job. The corruption in the company runs deep. The clerk's stiff sobriety makes him an oddity on Dejima; he finds himself surrounded by swindlers and hustlers, struggling to decipher the codes of their down-and-out cosmopolitanism. Even his superior officers may be more concerned with their own fortunes than with the affairs of the company. To make matters worse, foreigners in Dejima work under the suspicious eye of the shogun's regime. Japan wants the profits of international trade, but it also aims to keep Western culture from contaminating "the most reclusive empire in the modern world." The practice of Christianity is a serious crime. The Dutch are not permitted to study the Japanese language, and contact with local civilians is discouraged. Any servant or interpreter may be a spy. Dejima is a trading post, but it is also a quarantine.

Jacob is no romantic hero. A humble pastor's nephew and a scrupulous bureaucrat, he tries hard to keep his conscience clean. He lives by a clerk's morality. "The world would be happier without slavery" is one of his platitudes. Soon he finds himself becoming enchanted with Aibagawa Orito, the midwife who saved a magistrate's infant son and who, in return, has been granted permission to study under a Dutch scholar-surgeon on Dejima. Smart and elegant, made even more intriguing by a severe burn on one side of her face, Orito begins to appear in Jacob's dreams. His middle-class ethics, cultivated in the pews of his uncle's Dutch Reformed Church, don't exactly interfere with his desire; they give it meaning, a sense of responsibility. He imagines himself as the protector of an exotic, damaged creature. He is willing to

hazard his career to keep himself untainted by corruption, and he will risk the harsh justice of the empire in his awkward courtship of Orito. He sends her a secret love letter, hidden between the pages of a translator's dictionary.

The second story is a kind of captivity narrative. To settle her dying father's debts, Orito is sold to a mysterious convent in the rural mountains. Locked away in the compound, a closed world within a closed world, she begins to discover its secrets – the ceremonial rape of the variously disfigured “sisters”; the murder of their children; the promise of immortality held out by the powerful, sinister Lord Abbott. As Orito considers the prospect of escape, a Dejima interpreter called Ogawa hires a little band of samurai to attempt a rescue. Along the way, the dark codes of the cult are revealed and entrusted to the heartsick Jacob de Zoet. In this episode, the novel is in danger of losing itself in a Hollywood-style fantasy. Mitchell develops the suspense with care. The evocative setting and the sensational plot are handled skillfully. The author is not too proud to be an entertainer. But the drama, meanwhile, seems to lose the analytic dimension, the capacity to be both telling a story and reflecting on the manner of its telling, that makes Mitchell's best fiction at once seductive with mystery and radiant with intelligence. The tale of Orito's abduction has its ghoulish delights, but the passage is more like a carnival funhouse than an architect's labyrinth.

In the novel's final episode, a British warship sails into Nagasaki Bay. The barracks on the island, the convent in the mountain, the frigate in the sea: each section of *Jacob de Zoet* plays out, for the most part, in a self-contained space. The aging English captain still has his ambitions. He wants to capture Dutch treasure and to establish trade with Japan – or, as he puts it, to “prize open the treasure box of Nagasaki.” When he turns his cannons on Dejima, he provokes a diplomatic and military crisis that will determine the fates of Jacob and Orito along with his own. The cannon shot rains down on Nagasaki, a terrible prophecy.

Like all of Mitchell's novels, *Jacob de Zoet* is written in a dazzling style. Every sentence seems to have its own peculiar shape. Some are long and intricate, taking surprising turns in their middles. Some are small fragments, broken off to be examined in

isolation. In one gorgeously indulgent pair of pages, Mitchell literally turns his prose into poetry, with old-fashioned schemes of meter and rhyme: “Gulls fly through clouds of steam from laundries’ vats; over kites unthreading corpses of cats; over scholars glimpsing truth in fragile patterns; over bathhouse adulterers; heartbroken slatterns; fishwives dismembering lobsters and crabs; their husbands gutting mackerel on slabs . . .” Each glimpsed act is a unit, like a line of verse or a bordered territory. The birds move through the invisible medium that connects them all, discovering their unity; the air, like the sea, is a fluid element that dissolves boundaries. The prose sentence gives that connection, that unity, a literary form.

Some readers – especially those who remember the polyvocal, Nabokovian *Cloud Atlas* – may think of Mitchell as a pastiche artist of period styles. He has been both celebrated for his virtuosic range and doubted as a talented mimic who never seems to speak in his own true voice. Both of these appraisals, which are more or less the same one, miss the inventiveness of Mitchell’s writing and the lucid intelligence of his approach to genre. In *Cloud Atlas*, he links together six discreet texts. Each calls attention to its own status as a document: the journal of a nineteenth-century American traveler in the Pacific islands, a series of letters from an English composer living near Bruges in 1931, a pulp mystery novel set in California in the cocaine era, and so on. Mitchell plays with the conventions of these different kinds of writing, with the idioms of their various historical moments. At the same time, though, he makes them his own. Readers are invited into distant times and places but never quite allowed to forget that these scenarios are being dreamed up by an artist in the present. Here and there, the reminders are explicit. There is “something shifty about the journal’s authenticity,” says the composer who finds it tucked away in a library. “Its language doesn’t quite ring true.” The history contained in such archives is, at least in part, a history of fabrications – these narratives disclose their worlds most tellingly in the ways they work to conceal. Every confession is also a riddle.

The literary games being played in *Jacob de Zoet* are much more subtle. The three central episodes are narrated in a uniform

style, in third-person perspective and in present tense. Certain documents – Jacob’s letter to Orito, the scroll enumerating the creeds of the mountain cult – are written and read by the characters, with serious consequences, but they do not become part of the novel’s text. Mitchell’s research into the details of life around the Pacific in the 1790s, too, seems to anchor the fiction in history. If *Cloud Atlas* courts its readers’ suspicion, *Jacob de Zoet* prefers to invite their trust. Here, the historical novel has something in common with another favorite genre of the contemporary literary marketplace, the memoir. In each, the author’s fidelity to facts is part of the implicit contract that allows readers to enjoy a sympathetic identification with the characters. Jacob de Zoet is no hero; he is just like someone we might know, and we can like him for his small acts of decency and moral courage. The availability of such pleasures may help explain why this cumbersome, occasionally arcane novel about an obscure colonial outpost has become Mitchell’s best-selling book, far outpacing the critically acclaimed *Cloud Atlas*. Halfway around the world, two centuries ago, readers discover a familiar face, a middle manager with a heart of gold.

Still, Mitchell’s new novel might appear richer and more intriguing in light of some lessons from his earlier work. First, there is no unobstructed vista of history. Mitchell looks at the past through the many layers of its representation. He does not reconstruct the lost island of Dejima; he reimagines it, drawing from other imaginations. His sources include not only archives of maps and travel narratives from the period in question but also novels, films, and popular media. The Hollywood touches in *Jacob de Zoet* are not confined to the captivity episode. The novel is, at least in part, a costume drama, with types taken right out of Central Casting. The menacing Lord Abbott is a master of a game of strategy played with shells on an ornate board. The ship’s captain, like a lesser Ahab, walks the decks on a wounded leg. The enlightened doctor plays the harpsichord. As Mitchell summons these types onto his pages, he pays his respects to culture, high and low, and its ways of informing what the present makes of the past.

Second, the historical novel itself, in Mitchell’s hands, becomes an object of some scrutiny. In a classic study of the genre, the Hungarian critic Georg Lukács described how the historical novel

came into being, around the turn of the nineteenth century, as the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, and new kinds of international encounter changed the way the European public thought about the past. In an epoch of revolutions in politics and trade, history could no longer be treated as the incidental background of human drama. History was violence and contingency imposing themselves on life. The historical novel was designed to show how these forces shaped characters' lives. In placing "decent and average" figures at the center, Lukács observed, the new genre was able "to give living human embodiment to historical-social types." Its ideal protagonist was not a warrior or a prince, as in the older forms of epic and tragedy; he was a middling, ordinary character. He was the object, not the agent, of historical change. Jacob de Zoet sketches portraits of his beloved while their fates are being determined by global markets and distant wars. He puts his faith in his psalter, but his destiny is written in *The Wealth of Nations*. He is just the kind of character that Lukács had in mind, the sort of human embodiment through which the early nineteenth century had learned to think about history, by tracing its effects on a "decent and average" heart.

Telling this clerk's story, Mitchell may be performing, subtly, his own experiment in criticism. In one excruciating scene, the scholar-surgeon, Dr. Marinus, calls Jacob to the front of the classroom and demonstrates a delicate medical procedure that involves inserting a contraption called a "smoke glister" into his anus and forcing smoke through his entrails until, finally, it escapes from his mouth. The sympathetic protagonist becomes the subject of a mortifying method of research. "Doctor," he whimpers, "I never consented to *this*." As Jacob drops his trousers, his most private crevices are exposed to the cold eye of scientific reason for the benefit of a curious audience. Mitchell is wickedly, comically cruel to his title character, but the cruelty can be understood as part of a literary dissection. Returning the historical novel to the era of its birth, Mitchell leads the genre to reflect, in a sense, on the circumstances of its own development; he recalls that the historical novel is, itself, a historical artifact. Through this genre, writers and readers make their efforts to comprehend the past that gave rise to their own present. Like any other genre, though, this one may

conceal as much as it reveals – or, in other words, it may be most revealing when it is read with a critical suspicion, with an eye for its half-truths and deceptions.

Mitchell doesn't insist on the point. It is possible to spend long hours indulging in the exotic delights and sentimental pleasures of *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*. But it is also possible to admire something else – a cold, analytic beauty.