

# Japan and My Writing

David Mitchell

I knew I wanted to be a writer since I was a kid, but until I came to Japan to live in 1994 I was too easily distracted to do much about it. I would probably have become a writer wherever I lived, but would I have become the same writer if I'd spent the last 6 years in London, or Cape Town, or Moosejaw, on an oil rig or in the circus? This is my answer to myself. In Japan, I am, in writer/critic Donald Richie's phrase, an alien amongst natives. The Lonely Planet guide quotes the idea that some countries have a 'mission' attitude towards foreigners, and some have a 'club' attitude. 'Mission' countries define foreignness by behavior—act like a native, and as far as other natives are concerned, you eventually have as much right to be there as they do. 'Club' countries define foreignness by your lineage or passport—it will never matter what you do, how well you learn the language, how many soccer teams or famous department stores you buy—you are foreign and always will be. Japan is a classic club society. Living here, I kiss my sense of social belonging goodbye.

When I was a kid, my main talent was sulking—spectacular, multi-day sulks. I don't think I sulked to manipulate: the point was to isolate myself. I sometimes believe that my real motive behind living abroad is to enjoy the same fruit. This lack of belonging encourages me to write: I lack a sense of citizenship in the real world, and in some ways, commitment to it. To compensate, I stake out a life in the country called writing. I don't mean the publishing world: I mean a mental state (mental is the word!), where characters and plots in the head achieve the solidity of people and lives outside the head. Of course, other writers not living in Japan, and many non-writers, not to mention psychotics, do the same. But for me, my ability to compound inner-skull reality is a direct result of my life away from where I 'belong.' To date, many of my characters show the same trait. My life in Japan is stripped down. Two reasons: firstly, my ability to read the Chinese characters used here is roughly on par with a 10 year-old. I get by in everyday spoken Japanese OK, but even

here, with more formal adult registers of speech I lose track quickly. Secondly, apart from drunk businessmen, my foreignness repels the residue depositors of daily life: pamphleteers, TV license people, salespeople, bores in bars. Both my lingusitic inability and my repulsion field allow me to zone out at will. Japan is a famously built-up place, but I can walk through the adverts, announcements, signs, notices, warnings, screens, and in terms of its demands of me, I may as well be in a forest. Japan teems, but what it teems with is, for me, largely devoid of meaning. TV, faculty meetings, cell phone conversations—I can zone out of these, too, like King Louis (I forget which number) who could manipulate his ocular blindspot to erase irritating courtiers from existence. I'm not advocating blinkerdom—if it weren't for my girlfriend I wouldn't know a typhoon was coming until a pylon flew past my window—but as a writer, I find it pays (and keeps away gentlemen from Porlock—they don't even bother calling.) Another example: in the apartment building where I live, a couple starts most mornings with a row. I don't know what they argue about—his affairs, leaving the toilet seat up, disagreements on how to dispose of the bodies of neighboring eavesdroppers. All I hear is how they argue—the spite and anger in the man's voice, the life-sentenced quality of the woman's voice. In a sense, I would understand less if I understood more. For foreigners, the casing of the human condition sometimes turns transparent, like a see-through Swatch.

I need to write a paragraph about how Japanese arts have influenced me. This is a ruthlessly edited list. Haiku, I feel, is the optimum of 'less is more.' I would love to make such complex compounds in such simple crucibles. The ending of *Ghostwritten* is influenced directly by the ending of Mishima's problematic masterpiece, *The Sea of Fertility*, which



Tissue distribution at street intersection in Tokyo

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in turn comes from Buddhist reality-is-illusion art. Haruki Murakami's novels show how literature can marry popular culture to cook up humour and metaphor. Junichiro Tanizaki's *The Makioka Sisters* exemplify how compulsive the mundane can become if you look at it in the right way. Zen art uses space as matter pregnant with possible meaning, and Toru Takemitsu's otherworldly compositions demonstrate how loud silence can be. Japanese film is adept at dialogue-through-gesture—perhaps this tradition has its roots in Noh theatre. Don't make a character say it—move the character's head, in just the right way, and it is said. I could have and would have learned the same things from non-Japanese sources (Bill Evans the jazz pianist is a master of the silent note, and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is an ordinary life in an extraordinary book) but it so happens I learned them through the media of Japanese art, and I think they affect the way I write.

Fiction is stuffed with what life is stuffed with. I guess most writers draw from what is lying around them. Obviously, what I draw from happens to be Japanese—this is especially true for the novel I'm working on now. Japanese buses, faces, disaster movies, red-light districts, open windows, cinema queues, schoolkid herds, mountains, petty gangsters, music, beauty, grot. Other countries' grot is always exotic grot. What I draw from this local reservoir may be major—the Fellowship cult in the first part of *Ghostwritten* is based on Aum, which let off sarin bombs in the Tokyo metro in 1994, and which, gobsmackingly, is still active. Or it may be minor—on my walk to the station today I saw a woman sobbing into her mobile phone, her make-up running, kneeling by a bonfire of scorched cans—and thought—like the true parasite writers are 'hey, bet I can use that!'

My life in Japan has coincided with the start of my education as a writer. Although



Queue for theatre tickets

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my ideal future as a novelist is one of reinvention, and although I won't be in this place for good, I think this place will be in me for good. ■



### David Mitchell

Mr Mitchell is a novelist based in Ireland. He graduated in English and American Literature followed by an MA in Comparative Literature, from the University of Kent. He lived for a year in Sicily before moving to Hiroshima, Japan, where he taught English to technical students for eight years, before returning to England. His novels include *Ghostwritten* (1999), *number9dream* (2001), and *Cloud Atlas* (2004).