

Olentangy Local School District Literature Selection Review

Teacher:	Martin Boden	School:	Olentangy Academy
Book Title:	Cloud Atlas	Genre:	Literature/ Science Fiction
Author:	David Mitchell	Pages:	528
Publisher:	Random House	Copyright:	2004

In a brief rationale, please provide the following information relative to the book you would like added to the school's book collection for classroom use. You may attach additional pages as needed.

Book Summary and summary citation: (suggested resources include book flap summaries, review summaries from publisher, book vendors, etc.)

Cloud Atlas begins in 1850 with Adam Ewing, an American notary voyaging from the Chatham Isles to his home in California. Along the way, Ewing is befriended by a physician, Dr. Goose, who begins to treat him for a rare species of brain parasite. . . . Abruptly, the action jumps to Belgium in 1931, where Robert Frobisher, a disinherited bisexual composer, contrives his way into the household of an infirm maestro who has a beguiling wife and a nubile daughter. . . . From there we jump to the West Coast in the 1970s and a troubled reporter named Luisa Rey, who stumbles upon a web of corporate greed and murder that threatens to claim her life. . . . And onward, with dazzling virtuosity, to an inglorious present-day England; to a Korean superstate of the near future where neocapitalism has run amok; and, finally, to a postapocalyptic Iron Age Hawaii in the last days of history.

But the story doesn't end even there. The narrative then boomerangs back through centuries and space, returning by the same route, in reverse, to its starting point. Along the way, Mitchell reveals how his disparate characters connect, how their fates intertwine, and how their souls drift across time like clouds across the sky.

As wild as a videogame, as mysterious as a Zen koan, Cloud Atlas is an unforgettable tour de force that, like its incomparable author, has transcended its cult classic status to become a worldwide phenomenon.

-Amazon Book Summary

Provide an instructional rationale for the use of this title, including specific reference to the OLSD curriculum map(s): (Curriculum maps may be referenced by grade/course and indicator number or curriculum maps with indicators highlighted may be attached to this form)

Cloud Atlas is many books in one, and each storyline contains its own distinct curricular rationale. Close reading at the senior level asks students to synthesize vastly different perspectives with limited life experience. Cloud Atlas offers six generational perspectives (two fictional), six ethnic perspectives, and allusions to almost every single major work in western literature. It brings many elements together in a way that allows seniors to remain engaged even though their life experience is limited. The story also adapts very different genres, allowing students to compare different approaches to a single subject.

Include two professional reviews of this title: (a suggested list of resources for identifying professional reviews is shown below. Reviews may be “cut and pasted” (with citation) into the form or printed reviews may be attached to the form)

Review #1

Cloud Atlas

by David Mitchell

544pp, Sceptre, £16.99

David Mitchell entices his readers on to a rollercoaster, and at first they wonder if they want to get off. Then - at least in my case - they can't bear the journey to end. Like Scheherazade, and like serialised Victorian novels and modern soaps, he ends his episodes on cliffhangers and missed heartbeats. But unlike these, he starts his next tale in another place, in another time, in another vocabulary, and expects us to go through it all again. Trust the tale. He reaches a cumulative ending of all of them, and then finishes them all individually, giving a complete narrative pleasure that is rare.

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The first tale is about a 19th-century American lawyer, Adam Ewing, crossing the Pacific in 1850, meeting Maoris and missionaries, a seedy English physician and some nasty sailors. The second is about a young British composer in 1931, who cons a dying genius into taking him on as an amanuensis, and then makes love to his wife and daughter. This narrator, Robert Frobisher, composes the Cloud Atlas Sextet "for overlapping soloists" on piano, clarinet, cello, flute, oboe and violin, "each in its own language of key, scale and colour". Frobisher's tale is told in a series of letters to his lover, Rufus Sixsmith, who later appears as a nuclear scientist in Reagan's California in the 1970s. This Californian thriller is the tale of Luisa Rey, a journalist who uncovers a corporate nuclear scandal and is at constant risk of assassination. The fourth voice is Timothy Cavendish, a 1980s London vanity publisher, trapped in an old people's home near Hull. The fifth is the pre-execution testimony of Sonmi-451, a cloned slave in some future state, who has acquired intelligence and vision. The sixth, and central one, is the storytelling voice of Zachry, a tribesman after the fall of the civilised world, who is back in the Pacific islands where the linear narrative began. The novel opens with one ship - the Prophetess - and ends with another ship that contains the survivors of Civ'lise, the Prescients.

The stories are all very intensely first person - apart from "Half-Lives - the First Luisa Rey Mystery". Each has a character with a birthmark like a comet, as though they might be different incarnations of the same soul or different forms of the same cloud of molecules, as we all are. They are linked by other artifices - Frobisher finds both parts of Adam Ewing's Pacific diary; Luisa Rey acquires both Frobisher's letters and a rare gramophone record of the Sextet; Cavendish is sent "The First Luisa Rey Mystery" by its author; Sonmi's dying request is to watch an old half-viewed film of "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish", to see what happened. Sonmi herself has become the goddess of the Valley Tribes of Zachry, although the Prescients - who have preserved a hologram of her "orison", or recorded testimony - say she was a "freakbirthed human who died hun'reds o years ago".

Cloud Atlas is powerful and elegant because of Mitchell's understanding of the way we respond to those fundamental and primitive stories we tell about good and evil, love and destruction, beginnings and ends. He isn't afraid to jerk tears or ratchet up suspense - he understands that's what we make stories for. Cavendish, considering "The First Luisa Rey Mystery", imagines a critic saying: "But it's been done a thousand times before", and snarls to himself, "as if there could be anything not done a hundred thousand times between Aristophanes and Andrew Void-Webber! As if Art is the What, not the How!" This is a half-truth - Cavendish has the limitations of his place in culture, history and this novel - but it does associate works of art, and novels, with the eternal recurrences of culture and human nature.

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Mitchell is indeed both doing what has been done a hundred thousand times before and doing it differently. He plays delicious games with other people's voices, ideas and characters. Adam Ewing has his secret sharer and his Billy Budd. Frobisher is an amoral aesthete out of Waugh and Powell, and Vyvyan Ayres, his elderly host and slave-driver, quotes Nietzsche with nasty, decadent charm. Cavendish is nasty (and insinuatingly sympathetic) in the way of the Amises and Burgess's Enderby, snarling with wit about disasters of transport and bodily malfunction. "Luisa Rey" is interesting because it uses the clichés of the Chandler world of good cop against bad power, exacts the simple response with which we would read such a tale - narrative greed, simplified fear and sympathy - and at the same time (because of the context it is in) is more moving than it would be on its own. Luisa describes an interview she did with Hitchcock (who, she says, described his own works as rollercoasters), in which she "put it to the great man, the key to fictitious terror is partition or containment: so long as the Bates Motel is sealed off from our world, we want to peer in, like at a scorpion enclosure. But a film that shows the world is a Bates Motel, well, that's ... the stuff of Buchloe, dystopia, depression."

This observation is something that Mitchell understands and exploits - using the word partition in both its musical and fencing sense, to make a distance between us and the tense dramas and horrors he describes, to make us see everything. *Sunt lacrimae rerum*, as Frobisher says at the end of his tale.

Another paradigm we are offered is the idea of another character, a scientist - shortly before he is blown to bits - that we exist for a brief moment inside a shell (like Russian dolls) of virtual pasts, one of which is also the real past, and another of virtual futures, one of which is the real future. "Half-Lives" is a knowing title, radiation and fiction combined. Fictive people are ghosts. The ghosts of the virtual future, paradoxically, have to be more concrete than those of the pasts, written and real, that we already know. Sonmi's Nea So Copros and Zachry's Sloosha's Crossin' are both recognisable dystopias, one technological and political (in the tradition of Orwell, Huxley, Alasdair Gray), the other post-technological primitivism (as in Riddley Walker, Golding, Ursula le Guin); and both work because of the joyful amplitude of Mitchell's inventiveness. He is good at imagining the details of these hypothetical lives - not only the food and the rituals, but the moral atmospheres and the automatic assumptions. But his great feat is the variation in rhythms, which sweeps away any readerly objection to yet another brave new world. Sonmi, the fabricant who learns nakedly and from scratch to think and feel, is oddly the most intelligent of all the characters. Zachry's rhythm of tribal anecdote is the most compelling. These two use old words and invented new ones which are a delight.

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Cloud Atlas asks the simple questions of our own time, which has a Darwinian vision. A missionary explains to Adam Ewing, son of the American revolution, his idea of a "ladder of civilisation" that will extinguish those races unable to join progress. Zachry's tribesmen believe Sonmi was "birthed by a god o' Smart named Darwin". Humans, someone says, have the intelligence of gods and the souls of jackals. Greed will destroy the world. Ewing, at the end of the book which is close to its beginning, as it has come full circle, sees the "natural" ideas of dominance and fitness as "the entropy written within our nature". He has saved the life of the last Moriori tribesman, whose peaceable family were destroyed by Maori warriors. The Moriori saves him, and individual acts of heroism and rescue stand against tooth and claw across the narrative web. Ewing goes back to become an abolitionist. Sonmi is a (briefly) freed slave whose presence has its half-life after defeat. Zachry becomes again the last of his peaceful tribe, and its storytelling memory. Ewing also says that "Belief is both prize and battlefield", and what Mitchell does is embody simple beliefs and make them vital and important.

Luisa is named after Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, another tale of lives brought together in time and significance by convergent fates. It is a tougher, sparser book than I had remembered, and I had forgotten the character of the priest, who tries to find God's providence in the accidental deaths and is burned for blasphemy. There are recurrent abbesses in *Cloud Atlas* who resemble the abbess in Wilder's book, who watches over the harmed and the hurt. Both books can be read both ways - there is a hidden order, mimicked by, or revealed by, art, which makes sense of

our brief lives. Or perhaps there is not any order, except at the molecular level. Perhaps there is only kindness and tears.

Byatt, AS. "Review: Cloud Atlas by David Mitchell." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 06 Mar. 2004. Web. 25 Oct. 2016.

Review #2

IT is not unheard of for a novelist of exceptional talent to write a deliberately difficult book. This urge does not necessarily result in novels with nameless characters, mutating typography or unpunctuated attempts to explore the aphotic realm of human consciousness. It is also not an urge unique to modernism or experimentalism. Some novelists just seem to say, What the hell. John Updike's odd (and wonderful) early novel "The Centaur" seems to have been written from this impulse, as do Philip Roth's equally bizarre novel "The Breast," Norman Mailer's "Why Are We in Vietnam?" and Kazuo Ishiguro's "Unconsoled." Among this crowd, the young British novelist David Mitchell stands out. Deliberately difficult novels are the only novels he seems to be interested in writing.

This is to the good; the tree of literature drops its best fruit after being shaken with conviction and intelligence. Mitchell is neither abstrusely arch nor a wizard of scenic dislocation. One does not sense that -- unlike, say, William Gaddis, Carole Maso or Walter Abish -- Mitchell is trying to chop down the tree of literature in order to replace it with something treelike. On the contrary, his prose is straightforward and, quite often, magnificent. Mitchell is as good at aphorism ("Faith, the least exclusive club on earth, has the craftiest doorman") as he is at description ("Now and then goldfish splish and gleam like new pennies dropped in water"). The difficulty comes in how Mitchell chooses to construct his novels -- or rather, how he does not choose to construct his novels.

"Ghostwritten," his first, involves nine characters (a musician, a terrorist, a host-seeking poltergeist and so on) and nine different locales that have no formal connection to one another. The book's meaning is the readerly equivalent of an inkblot test. "Number9Dream," his second, largely follows a single character through Tokyo and beyond, but the story fractures along so many stress lines of the possible and impossible -- confusion the book does almost nothing to repair -- that the novel becomes little more than a beautifully expressed fantasia. With "Cloud Atlas," Mitchell has returned to the rather nutty method of "Ghostwritten": the novel gives us six separate stories, spanning the planet, that cover roughly 1,000 years of time. On one hand, Mitchell's strategy is boldly antithetical to what most narrative-driven novels have been up to since Cervantes. On the other hand, what Mitchell is doing is basically James Michener's "Alaska" with an I.Q. transplant.

"Cloud Atlas" has already been published in England. The reviews have been messiah-worthy. (One critic wrote that the novel makes "almost everything in contemporary fiction look like a squalid straggle of Nissen huts.") In The Observer of London, Robert McCrum called "Cloud Atlas" "a remarkable new novel by a significant talent," and made its Booker Prize nomination ("Number9Dream" was a finalist) sound inevitable -- although The Sunday Telegraph caused a brief stir when it disclosed it would not review "Cloud Atlas" because its critic found the novel "unreadable."

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"Cloud Atlas" imposes a dizzying series of milieus, characters and conflicts upon us: a ship sailing amid some islands around New Zealand during the mid-19th century, wherein an American notary named Adam Ewing befriends, at risk to himself, a stowaway Moriori named Autua; a Belgian estate called Zedelghem in the 1930's, wherein a sexually indecisive aspiring composer named Robert Frobisher serves as amanuensis to an older, more accomplished composer; California during the 1970's, wherein a plucky journalist named Luisa Rey attempts to disclose an "Erin Brockovich"-style industrial conspiracy; London during the here and now, wherein a 60-ish book editor named Tim Cavendish finds himself accidentally imprisoned in a home for the elderly; Korea in the (just) foreseeable future, wherein a genetically engineered "fabricant" named Sonmi-451 is interrogated

for her crime of wanting to be fully human; and Hawaii in some distant and thoroughly annihilated future, wherein a young goatherd named Zachry bears unknowing witness to the final fall of humanity into superstition and violence and war.

With the exception of Zachry's tale, the book's thematic centerpiece, we visit each of these stories twice, in the following order: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Each story is written quite differently -- so much so that "Cloud Atlas" feels like a doggedly expert gloss on various writers and modes. The archaic Ewing section, rendered in journal form, becomes Defoe, possibly Melville. The epistolary Frobisher story is, perhaps, Isherwood or some other sturdy English master. The Luisa Rey section, written in breathlessly lousy prose, is some species of sub-Grisham. The urban comedy of Tim Cavendish's antics is well within Martin Amis's city limits. The plight of Sonmi-451 is Huxley (or "Blade Runner"). And the daymare of Zachry's postapocalyptic world is something out of William S. Burroughs in a "Cities of the Red Night" mood. Taken as a whole, "Cloud Atlas" seeks to give the novel a steely new rigging of the possible. It is an impressive achievement. Unfortunately, impressive is usually all that it is.

It is a devious writer indeed who writes in such a way that the critic who finds himself unresponsive to the writer's vision feels like a philistine. So let it be said that Mitchell is, clearly, a genius. He writes as though at the helm of some perpetual dream machine, can evidently do anything, and his ambition is written in magma across this novel's every page. But "Cloud Atlas" is the sort of book that makes ambition seem slightly suspect.

The novel is frustrating not because it is too smart but because it is not nearly as smart as its author. Running across its muscularly told tales are two obvious connectors. The first is that every story is in some way "read" by a character in another (Ewing's journal is found by Frobisher, Frobisher's letters are read by Rey, Rey's story is submitted to the editor Cavendish, Cavendish's story becomes an old film watched by Sonmi-451, one of the gods worshiped in Zachry's world is Sonmi-451 herself). The second is the strongly implied notion that every central character is a reincarnation of a previous character, a philosophical conceit that in its basic elegance could have flapped from the pages of "Jonathan Livingston Seagull." Cavendish himself addresses this as he mulls over the novel about Luisa Rey that was submitted to him: "One or two things will have to go: the insinuation that Luisa Rey is this Robert Frobisher chap reincarnated, for example. Far too hippy-druggy -- new age." Self-mockery as self-protection is a very old gambit, certainly, but it is beneath a writer as brilliant as Mitchell.

To write a novel that resembles no other is a task that few writers ever feel prepared to essay. David Mitchell has written such a novel -- or almost has. In its need to render every kind of human experience, "Cloud Atlas" finds itself staring into the reflective waters of Joyce's "Ulysses." Just as Joyce, in the scene that takes place in the cabman's shelter, found the hidden beauty of cliché-filled prose, so Mitchell does with his Luisa Rey story. Just as Joyce, in the late scene in which Bloom and Dedalus finally sit down together, explored the possibilities of a narrative driven by interrogation, so Mitchell does with his ruthlessly grilled "fabricant," Sonmi-451. "Cloud Atlas" is friendlier than "Ulysses" but far less fallibly human. If Mitchell's virtuosity too often seems android, one suspects this says less about his achievement and more about the literature of formal innovation. This is a book that might very well move things forward. It is also a book that makes one wonder to what end things are being moved.

Bissel, Tom. "History Is a Nightmare." The New York Times. The New York Times, 29 Aug. 2004. Web. 25 Oct. 2016.

What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?

Title: **Dubliners, James Joyce**

Author:

Title:

Author:

Title:

Author:

Title:

Title:

Title:

Author:

Author:

Author:

Document any potentially controversial content:

There is controversial language used in the book including sexual references and racial slurs. These occur in the context of a book that critiques male patriarchy, sexual assault, and ultimately slavery as an institution. Foul language is placed in the mouths of problematic characters in an effort to show their flaws.

David Mitchell uses language that makes it extremely difficult to classify because much of the book is written in a fictional futuristic language. There is a sex scene some would describe as graphic, but no graphic terms are used to describe the encounter (250). The same process is used to describe a rape scene. The perpetrator is punished, and the context is in that of a war. To compare, there is a similar scene in *Catch-22*, a commonly assigned 12th grade classic.

Violence and drug use are also referenced. The most egregious versions of this occur in a chapter that involves clones. The clones are recycled in a way that completely disregards their humanity to show the kinds of moral hazards that will come with new genetic technologies.

All of the violence in the text is designed to show that even modern humans who critique the habits of previous civilizations allow exceptions for savagery, slavery and cruelty. This text would be at home on any freshman college syllabus. There is no tasteless violence, sex or drug use.

Keeping in mind the age, academic level, and maturity of the intended reader, what is the suggested classroom use: (check all that apply)

Gifted/Accelerated Regular At Risk

GRADE LEVEL(S): 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

Reading level of this title (if applicable): College Prep

Date Submitted to Department Chair: 10/25/16

Suggested Professional Literary Review Sources:

School Library Journal

Horn Book

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

Library Journal

Book Links

Publisher's Weekly

Booklist

Kirkus Review

Wilson Library Catalog

English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)

The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)

Literature for Today's Young Adults