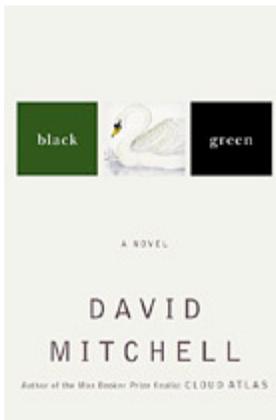


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Review



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Books by David Mitchell

[BLACK SWAN GREEN](#)

BLACK SWAN GREEN

David Mitchell

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Fiction

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Man Booker Prize finalist David Mitchell's books have been praised for their complex themes and their out-of-the-box approach to storytelling. To read and understand one of his books is to feel as though you're taking apart and putting back together pieces of a puzzle in order to grasp a larger whole. Unlike his previous, more experimental novels (GHOSTWRITTEN, NUMBER9DREAM, CLOUD ATLAS), Mitchell's latest offering is more conventional and probably his most plot-driven to date --- except for the fact that nothing really happens. Nothing, that is, until after you've turned the last page. Months later, the novel's protagonist is still nestled comfortably in your brain and in your heart like a close friend who has moved away or a bittersweet memory leftover from childhood, still resonant with meaning.

BLACK SWAN GREEN chronicles thirteen months in the life of thirteen-year-old Jason Taylor --- each one of the thirteen chapters mirrors each of the thirteen months during the time in which the novel takes place --- told from his perspective and at his own meandering pace. Jason, his older sister Julie, and his parents inhabit the posh countryside of Black Swan Green, a slumbering village in South Worcestershire, England. The year is 1982 and England is entrenched in both the Cold War and the short-lived war over the Falklands. Life is fairly ordinary in the small town, aside from the occasional news reel intrusion, and so are the events that transpire throughout the course of the book.

What makes this book so captivating to read is precisely the simplicity of what's being described --- mainly, Jason's transition from adolescence into semi-adulthood. Over the course of thirteen months, he goes from being an awkward, prepubescent young boy with a pesky stammering problem to a soon-to-be young man

with a backbone and a bit of experience under his belt. In the beginning, he is seen as an outcast, a weakling, a scab, and is relentlessly made fun of by his stronger, tougher peers. By the end, he has learned how to stand up for himself and has earned the respect not only of some of his tormentors, but of a certain young lady as well.

Although many will find the pleasure in witnessing Jason's ongoing mental and physical maturation process as familiar as watching that of any young person, what stands out as unique is the progression of his own particular self-awareness and the purity of his heart.

He is almost too creative and genuine for his own good (hence why he is constantly being picked on), yet completely unaware of his talents --- a rare occurrence in a boy that age. As a contrast to his gawky exterior, the way he expresses himself internally is downright poetic ("Listening to houses breathe makes you weightless"), and the steadfast earnestness with which he approaches life, albeit at an adolescent level, is incredibly humbling.

Over the course of thirteen chapters, Mitchell mixes just the right combination of insecurity, indignation and yearning to produce a series of vignettes, some of which are too precious to forget. His description in "Bridle Path" of Jason's day on his own while his family is away, first as the master of his house (putting his mother's mousse in his hair and drawing an Adam Ant stripe across his face; eating McVitie's Jamaican Ginger Cake and drinking a milk, coke, Ovaltine milkshake for breakfast; and listening to his sister's records at full volume), then as the brave explorer of the woods surrounding his home, is delightfully endearing and perfectly captures the spirit of what it's like to be young and carefree. In "Spooks," the description of Jason's initiation into a revered and secret club could have been lifted straight out of a young boy's journal, for all its excited eagerness, and the story of his first kiss in "Disco" is so full of nervous energy and longing that some readers might feel the urge to look away so as not to disturb the beauty of the moment.

The only event that may come as a shock is the very real nature of Jason's parents' failing marriage towards the end of the novel and the events that transpire following its collapse. But, in the wise words of now fourteen-year-old-Jason, "The world's a headmaster who works on your faults...you'll keep tripping over a hidden step, over and over, till you *finally* understand: Watch out for that step! Everything that's wrong with us...that's a hidden step. Either you suffer the consequences of not noticing your fault forever or, one day, you *do* notice it, and fix it. Joke is...There are always more."

BLACK SWAN GREEN is a true gem that seeps in at a snail's pace --- to be read and cherished for its wit, quiet and empathetic insights, and far-reaching appeal.

--- Reviewed by Alexis Burling

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