David Mitchell, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (Sceptre, 2010)

Reading David Mitchell’s new novel, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, I was reminded of a review I read of a Meryl Streep movie. The reviewer said something like, ‘Now that she has exhausted all superlatives (in Mitchell’s case, “dazzling,” “brilliant,” “genius”), all one can say is, “She’s done it again!”’ In a completely different way from his innovative, genre-bending previous novels, Mitchell has shown again that he is a first-class story-teller with a keen sense of drama and style, and one of the most daring and talented writers at work today. I think it is safe to say, ‘He’s done it again!’

What Mitchell has masterly done is to take a finite world described almost street by street and building by building, and animate it with dozens of clearly drawn characters, all of which is set in an historical moment ripe with culture clashes. Layered over that are intersecting plots and subplots. Open to any page and you are walking into a scene from a complete world.

Speaking of Streep, Mitchell also does voices. Perhaps not as defined as the different time and space narrators in *Ghostwritten* or *Cloud Atlas*, but within the world he creates for *Jacob de Zoet*, there is plenty of opportunity for voice shifting – ship captain, educated doctor, wily provisioner, lofty abbot, ship hands, factory clerks, slaves, servants and interpreters. Depending on who is talking to whom in which setting, the dialogue bristles with hearty oaths, ribald jests, veiled warnings, fractured Dutch (given in English), philosophical musings.

A final allusion to Meryl Streep is the cinematographic quality of Mitchell’s writing. What makes the book a good read will also make it a good film. The setting is unique – the Dutch trading port was a temporary and voluntary jail with limited access in and out. On the Japanese side there are guards, spies, friskers, interpreters of several ranks, a Chamberlain, Magistrate and Abbot. On the Dutch side there are a motley crew of international opportunists and unfortunates, mostly the latter, all struggling for more than their allotted share. There is tension in every conversation as the inmates vie for even a slight advantage over each other or their absent employer, the Dutch East Asia Trading Company. Almost every sentence contains a casual reference to something that must have taken hours of research to put there, creating a tactile, olfactory, audible tangibility of the world of Dejima, Nagasaki, in 1799-1800.

Into this sordid world comes Jacob de Zoet, a pastor’s son denied the hand of his true love due to his meager prospects. His potential father-in-law is willing to give him a chance to make his fortune by arranging for his joining The Company in their lucrative trading business in Asia. His five-year absence will also be the test of their love.

Tall, gangly, with orange hair and green eyes, Jacob is an innocent abroad, an honest accountant in a nest of thieves. His patron, Chief van Vorstenbosch, sets him the task of reconciling the past few years’ accounts, bringing to light the various irregularities which enriched the former Chiefs and Assistants, and making Jacob the most hated person on the small island. ‘Zoet’ in Dutch means ‘sweet,’ and there is something too naïve and innocent in his character. He naturally gravitates toward Dr. Marinus, the educated company surgeon, who uses his time on the island for his own botanical research and teaching. Jacob also illegally falls in love with Orito

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Aibagawa, a young midwife with a half-burned face, permitted to study western medicine with Dr. Marinus along with others. He is also protected by an interpreter, Ogawa Uzaemon, who had earlier also fallen in love with Orito, and conveniently overlooks Jacob’s forbidden Psalter in return for access to his copy of Adam Smith.

But this is not a love story, despite the potential. In fact, in true Mitchell style, it is actually three interwoven stories. The first is the foundation story set in Dejima, where we meet the characters, witness their circumscribed lifestyle, hear their backstories and watch Jacob be buffeted between the various corrupting forces, as he struggles to maintain his religion, chastity, and integrity. Chapters are broken into scenes, each one containing a conflict to be reconciled. It ends with Orito being abducted by the Abbot’s men to be taken to his Temple in the mountains.

The second part takes place in this mountain temple and revolves around Orito’s confinement and gradual realization of what is happening around her: the resident sorority of deformed women is being used for ‘engifting’ children spawned by the residential monks, who are then taken down to the village for adoption. Except, unknown to them, the children are being used as sacrifices to enhance the Abbot’s spiritual power. As Orito plans her escape from inside, Jacob’s interpreter friend enlists the help of his kendo teacher and a band of masterless samurai to attempt a rescue from outside. This part ends suspensefully with two twists of allegiances.

The third part returns to Dejima and the enactment of the Phaeton Incident (recast here as the Phoebus), where a British warship tries to wrest control of Dejima from the Dutch in the wake of the Company’s folding and Holland itself being folded into the Napoleonic empire. Here Mitchell plays loose with historical detail, since the actual incident took place in 1808, several years after he sets it. But it is a useful dramatic device to hasten the resolution of Jacob’s plight, ridding him of his nemeses within the company, as well as the Magistrate and the Abbot. Two afterwords show that things end wistfully well for Jacob, if not as originally intended.

As in his other novels, Mitchell renders suspense and tension as his primary page-turning device, animating multiple subplots each with their own possible outcomes. At times the tale has the feel of Tolkien, sometimes Robert Louis Stevenson, but Mitchell is not content with just making a good story come to life with set-piece details. His prose is sometimes straightforward, but often pellucid, combining just the right adjective with noun to the enhancement of both. Many scenes are filled with dialogue in several dialects, which may put off some readers. Another device is the cinematographic split screen, where he alternates two scenes or points of view, sentence by staccato sentence, or outward conversation with inward thoughts (set in italics). Other times, he applies layers of description in one-sentence brushstrokes. And then, toward the end, he gives us a magnificent page and a half, one-paragraph poetic panoramic view, following gulls in flight over Nagasaki in the morning, to reprise the world he has created:

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; woodcutter’s sons sharpening axes; candle-makers, rolling waxes; flint-eyed officials milking taxes; etiolated lacquerers; mottled-skinned dyers; imprecise soothsayers; unblinking

liars; weavers of mats: cutters of rushes; ink-lipped calligraphers dipping brushes, booksellers ruined by unsold books...runny-nosed cooks; sunless attic nooks where seamstresses prick calloused fingers; limping malingerers; swineherds, swindlers; lip-chewed debtors rich in excuses; heard-it-all creditors tightening nooses; prisoners haunted by happier lives and ageing rakes by other men’s wives ... (441-442)

This is the world that Mitchell has drawn us into and this ‘land of the thousand autumns’ isn’t entirely pretty. Life in Japan at the turn of the 19th century was harsh and unforgiving for both Japanese and the unfortunates on Dejima. But within the danger, sordidness and treachery, Jacob de Zoet heroically clings to his faith against all odds and emerges mostly intact. In the final scene, 11 years later, from the rail of the ship that will take him home, Jacob waves good-bye to his son by his temporary wife (not Orito), required by law to stay in Japan. It is a fitting metaphor that part of him will always remain behind. It is David Mitchell’s talent that by the time the book ends, we, too, may feel that we are leaving behind a world we have come to know very well.

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