

Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Mini-Episode 10: Black Swan Green

(Brief intro music)

Rachel: Hello, and welcome to Not Your Mother's Library, a readers' advisory podcast from the Oak Creek Public Library. I am Rachel, your host for this episode. To hear from Leah, check out the episodes immediately before and after this one. While being safer at home due to COVID-19, we are uploading mini-episodes of the podcast on a bi-weekly basis. Thanks for joining us as we talk about some of our favorite media. So far, I have been recommending television series, video games, graphic novels, movies, and music. To get back to the show's roots as readers' advisory, today I am going to talk about a book called "Black Swan Green" by David Mitchell. The author is best known for his fantastical writing rooted in realism. His stories tend to be told from many points of view through multiple narrators. Having so many spinning plates can be a difficult—if not impossible—feat for many authors. Mitchell's skill at weaving these strands together is exemplified in his most famous novel, "Cloud Atlas." It was made into a movie in 2012, one that stars some big names including Tom Hanks, Halle Berry, and Hugo Weaving. If you've been around long enough, you probably remember what a big deal it was when it first came out—a veritable water-cooler topic of discussion. Much like the book, the movie is very long, and the scope ambitious. Mitchell is a bestselling author for a good reason, and while his writing ability is commendable, so too is his creativity. Themes present in his novels tend to include reincarnation, personal journeys, and coming of age. You know, the big stuff. "Black Swan Green," for instance, is a Bildungsroman, which Wikipedia tells me includes any literary work that follows a main character's mental or moral growth from child onward. The story is broken down into chapters that each represent a month in the year of the life of Jason Taylor. It's 1982, and Jason is 13, living with his family in the West Midlands of England while the Falklands War starts to pick up speed. Jason suffers from stuttering, and that influences pretty much every part of his life. We are also introduced to his circle of peers at school, most of them cruel, and we learn that Jason publishes poetry in the parish magazine under a pseudonym so as to avoid anticipated ridicule. I won't say anything more for fear of spoiling the plot, but the entire time I was reading "Black Swan Green" I was struck by how realistic it felt. We've all been through—or will go through—those weird pre-teen years when we're still children but teetering on the edge of becoming our true selves. Mitchell captures that feeling of struggling into maturation as if he himself were experiencing it in real time. He based the character of Jason upon himself, too, because he used to stammer, so that makes sense. Another interesting thing that the author does is use certain characters across his books. They pop up from time to time at different points in their own lives, and I don't know of many other writers who do that so seamlessly. We see recurring characters in single series, sure, but less so in the multi-verse. So, if you are interested in reading "Black Swan Green," you can check out a physical copy from Oak Creek Public Library or digitally download it via OverDrive and the Libby app. Readalikes include Mitchell's other novels, and now I am going to read you some of the blurbs for these books by using another of the library's free-to-use databases called NovelList. First up is "Ghostwritten," which was published in 2000. "The lives of nine total strangers from nine different countries become intertwined in a strange series of circumstances." That sounds pretty intriguing, right? Next up, "number9dream" published a year later in 2001. "In the wake of his sister's death and his mother's breakdown, a young dreamer from remote rural Japan journeys to Tokyo to find his long-lost

father and comes face to face with the dark underworld of the great city.” That one sounds pretty interesting, too. Next up, the aforementioned “Cloud Atlas.” This one came out in 2004. “Many characters live out their lives from 1850 to a postapocalyptic Iron Age Hawaii, and eventually their disparate lives intertwine.” After “Cloud Atlas” came “Black Swan Green” in 2006, and then the next recommendation I have is actually from 2014. It’s called “The Bone Clocks.” “Beginning in 1984 and moving in linear fashion through the years before ending in the 2040s, this complex, layered novel interweaves several different narratives to tell the story of a secret war between those who would steal souls and those who try to stop them. But it’s also the story of Holly Sykes, who belongs to neither of these groups but whose life is nevertheless bound up in them. An expansive, globe-trotting book that takes on themes of aging, youth, and death, ‘The Bone Clocks’ also features characters who have appeared in author David Mitchell’s other books and incorporates genres from absolute realism to heady fantasy.” If you are interested in checking out the NoveList database, it is available on countycat.mcfls.org. Just visit the website’s databases page, choose your residence as ‘Oak Creek’, and you’ll be brought right to it. NoveList gives you access to thousands of fiction book reviews as well as publication information and recommendations. As a librarian, I use this site all the time to look up readalikes, so I really can’t recommend it enough. But that’s enough database promotion for one day. Back to David Mitchell: he actually has another novella, called “From Me Flows What You Call Time.” If you want to read it, though, you’re gonna have to wait a really long time. It is part of Future Library Project, a work of art by Katie Paterson that collects original written works every year from 2014 through 2114. Mitchell’s contribution will be published about 94 years from now. Let’s all hope we’re still around then. I’ll be a wily 121-year-old with a flying car, an indestructible robot body, and about two dozen cats. Lookin’ forward to it. That’s all for this short episode, folks. At time of recording, the library is closed until late April due to Wisconsin’s Stay at Home order. Just in case that order is extended and we need to remain closed for longer, Leah and I have a couple more mini-sodes lined up. We’ll release them no matter what, so if the building does reopen, consider the episodes an added bonus. Subscribe and rate us if you like what you hear, and feel free to reach us through the library’s website or Facebook page. Simply use the #notyourmotherslibrary. Oh, and check this episode’s shownotes for a list of everything I just talked about. Cheers for listening and, until next time, happy reading.

(Brief outro music)