

“Life Is a Terminal Illness”: The War against Time and Aging in David Mitchell’s *The Bone Clocks*

Noémi Albert

HJEAS

ABSTRACT

David Mitchell’s *The Bone Clocks* (2014) centers on Holly Sykes, the main character whom the novel follows from her youth into old age, thus witnessing the major events of a lifetime through her. This recounting serves as the traditional plotline that is intertwined with a fantastic story of two warring organizations of quasi-immortals and a narrative of climate change that ultimately leads to “Endarkenment,” the environmental catastrophe that hits the globe in Holly’s lifetime. These three distinct stories converge on the novel’s protagonist, through whom the reader encounters questions about aging, time, and mortality. The war between two atemporal factions, the Horologists and the Anchorites in particular, sheds light on humankind’s aspirations for immortality and focuses on present society’s conceptualization of old age. The paper analyzes these three distinct but tightly connected issues for a complex view both on the aging process itself and on society’s reaction and relation to it, that is, ageism. Mitchell’s novel—fantastic and realistic at the same time—becomes an intricate statement about aging, one of the most pressing issues facing humankind. (NA)

KEYWORDS: aging, bone clock, atemporals, Apocalypse, fantasy, immortality

David Mitchell’s *The Bone Clocks* (2014) encompasses an extended web of interconnected, carefully balanced topics, all converging on the central theme of aging with a focus on the main character, Holly Sykes, who brings together the novel’s six separate chapters and their individual narrators. The chapters follow Holly from adolescence into old age in chronological order, revealing a fairly traditional life cycle invigorated with love, disappointment, betrayal, partnership, loss, children, and, finally, grandchildren. Two distinct plotlines, however, also become intertwined with the traditional one: namely, a fantastic story of two warring factions of quasi-immortals and the narrative of climate change that ultimately leads to “Endarkenment,” an Apocalypse that occurs during the life of Holly Sykes.

The novel begins with scenes introducing the adolescent Holly, who decides to move in with her much older lover. After her plans have fallen through (she catches her lover in bed with her best friend), Holly decides to run away. The very act of her escape will later prove to be essential for several

reasons: first, her schoolmate Ed Brubeck, who helps her through those few homeless days, later becomes a famous war correspondent and the father of Holly's daughter. Second, during her time away, her younger brother Jacko disappears mysteriously, which, she believes, happens because she abandoned him. Third, during her wanderings Holly meets a small old lady, Esther Little, who seeks asylum in exchange for some tea. All these events are enveloped in mystery, and at first no connection can be discerned among them. The connecting thread gradually develops through the introduction of the fantastic world of atemporal beings, who are almost immortal creatures forming two factions. The Horologists (like Esther Little and Jacko), through their centuries-long existence, save young lives by inhabiting them at death and thus preserve their identities. The Anchorites, by contrast, resort to murder in order to extract the souls of human beings, which help them keep their youth. One of the novel's main plotlines follows these two warring groups, with Holly Sykes assuming a central role, since she will be the one to win the war for the Horologists.

The constant war between the Horologists and the Anchorites and, most importantly, their very adverse relationship with humans—who are symbolically called “bone clocks”—present a complex picture about contemporary society's relation to old age. The central concept—namely eternal life—through either continuous rebirth or feasting on extraordinary souls, reflects on humanity's fight against aging. The issue Mitchell raises here pertains to the age-old question whether eternal life is attainable and, if it is, what it would be like. Furthermore, the name given to human beings has a rather pejorative connotation, underlining the superiority of the pseudo-immortal creatures. The joining of the images of bones and clocks emphasizes the mortality of humankind and its constant race against time.

The six distinct chapters focus on separate years, following a chronological order that encompasses the life of Holly Sykes. Thus the process of growing up and getting older is captured through small leaps throughout the decades subtly leading not only to Holly's aging self as a wrinkled old lady, but also to the Apocalypse. As time goes by in the various subplots gradually unfolding in the novel, not only is Holly getting old, but so is all of humankind, ultimately leading to “Endarkenment,” an age where all previous commodities become unattainable and humanity is on the brink of extinction. This subplot of the Apocalypse gives a new twist to the issue of aging, expanding the personal story into a universal one.

The novel's first and last chapters, “A Hot Spell” (1984) and “Sheep's Head” (2043), feature Holly Sykes as their narrator, with the first one

presenting her as a runaway teenager and the last one as a grandmother struggling to save her grandchildren in the era of “Endarkenment.” The second part, “Myrrh Is Mine, Its Bitter Perfume,” is narrated by a Cambridge undergraduate, Hugo Lamb, spending Christmas with his parents and New Year’s Eve with some friends at a Swiss ski resort (1991-92). Part three, titled “The Wedding Bash” (2004), is recounted from the perspective of war correspondent Ed Brubeck, Holly’s partner. The next part (“Crispin Hershey’s Lonely Planet, 2015”) features a novelist previously proclaimed the *enfant terrible* of British literature, who gradually gets immersed into the both mundane and fantastic life of Holly Sykes. Finally, part five, “An Horologist’s Labyrinth” relates in detail the war going on between the two immortal factions, drawing in both Holly and her brother, the latter believed to be missing throughout the novel. The six disparate chapters offer a complex view on the life of the protagonist and her mortality, which stands in contrast to the immortality of the atemporal creatures.

The novel introduces three distinct but tightly connected issues, the aging self, the plot of the quasi-immortal factions, and the process of Endarkenment (which marks the aging of civilization), to probe the aging process itself and society’s reaction and relation to it, that is ageism. Mitchell’s novel—blending realism with the fantastic—is an intricate statement about one of the most crucial questions concerning humankind, that of aging.

Time and mortality

The field of psychological aging may be characterized as “focusing on manifest changes or transformations that occur in human and animal behaviour related to length of life” (Birren and Schroots 3) and Mitchell’s novel builds upon a meticulous investigation of one life, through depicting its “changes, transformations, and transitions” (Dixon 7), pitted against other lives.

All the different threads converge on the human preoccupation with temporality and mortality. The novel balances both death and the prospect of eternal life, ultimately becoming, as Bill Ott remarks, “a meditation on mortality, of course, but also on the hazards of immortality and the perils of power” (25). Temporality itself gradually becomes a quasi-character, providing an insight into mortal lives, primarily into the life of Holly Sykes. The passing of time captures the duality of change (through Holly) and immutability (through the atemporals).

Patrick O’Donnell emphasizes Holly’s preoccupation with temporality: “A complex network of stories that circulate around Holly’s

involvement with larger historical, temporal, and cosmological forces, the novel alternates between fantasy and realism in projecting chronoscapes where the future of the planet is at stake” (3). Indeed, the subplot, centering on the aforementioned “invisible war” between two immortal factions, not only focuses on the prospects of immortality, but also sheds a new light on humanity and mortality as we know them.

The two distinct atemporal factions embody contrasting aspects of temporality. Horologists transmigrate, they die but after forty-nine days wake up in the body of a sick child whom they actually resurrect through entering. This act entails members of the group changing appearance every few decades. The abandonment of a body, however, does not result in erasure, since each Horologist preserves the personality, memories, and the soul of their former hosts. Consequently, as Mitchell remarks in an interview, “their viewpoint is time’s viewpoint” (Naimon 53); that is, they encompass the duality of change and immutability that characterizes the concept of time in the novel.

The Horologists have a rather benevolent relation to mortals, while the Anchorites need to make actual sacrifices in order to keep their youth. They never change their bodies, their strength lies in keeping themselves eternally young and powerful with the help of special human souls that they “decant” into black wine, which they drink ritualistically. I agree with Joseph Metz, who contends that the two groups are “allegories of two modes or models of dealing with time, history, and memory” (123), or ultimately “two theories of the archive” (123). The Horologists function as archivists preserving the memory of and every human trait connected to the person they inhabit, thus fulfilling the work of a historian, whereas the Anchorites are “anti-historians” (Metz 123), since they incorporate the decanted souls just like a black hole that engulfs everything. Thus the war is fought between two views on history as well as on identity: one faction celebrates multiplicity, an amalgam of different genders, races, social classes, whereas the other fights for the preservation of a singular identity by and through the destruction of human beings. In an interview conducted by Paul A. Harris, Mitchell emphasizes that in the novel the two immortal factions and their confrontation symbolize the ambiguous nature of time itself. As he states, time is both “the great enabler of being” and “a slow-burning ‘decay bomb’” (8), or: “what stops everything happening all at once” as well as “what allows everything to happen” (9). Ultimately it is both our ally and enemy (Harris 9), enabling and hindering individuals at the same time. Conversely, the subject’s

relation to time in the novel is multifarious, emphasizing the inherently paradoxical nature of human life and mortality itself.

The novel's highly metaphoric title is a testament to the central view just outlined. "The Bone Clocks," on the first level of interpretation, comes from the atemporals' rather ironic and disdainful appellation for mortal beings. Nevertheless, the title also bears hints of melancholy and even a certain sense of futility, since the bones imply the fast approach of death, underlined by the image of the clocks. In the last chapter of the novel, the title's metaphoric field further expands with the image of an Apocalypse, with decaying bodies, the disappearance of civilization, the spread of diseases and death across the globe, human beings "ticking towards death from starvation, Ebola, widespread violence, ecological catastrophe or suicide pills" (Harris-Birtill 134).

Although Carol T. Christ claims that the novel's fantasy framework "sits uncomfortably with its human drama" (157), I would argue that there is a conscious and informed choice behind the dualism employed throughout the novel, which is to provide a more complex perspective on both aging and agelessness, on the one hand, and on the dying individual and the dying world, on the other. The three types of beings who inhabit the novel's complex world stand for three different temporalities: the first one is a rather short timespan that mortal beings are allowed to spend in the world; the second temporality is represented by the Anchorites, who follow the philosophy of "live indefinitely as long as you can find the prey"; and finally the Horologists, who, as Mitchell says, have a "Serial Repeater" timescale (Harris 14). Accordingly, the time structure of the novel is always tripartite, providing intermingling temporalities that continuously exert their power over each other.

For instance, a future Anchorite (at this point still a mortal) formulates his theory of aging while witnessing old age from close up. "You'd think old age was a criminal offense, not a destination we're all heading to" (119), claims a disappointed nurse who works in the nursing home where Hugo Lamb, the narrator of the second part, occasionally visits. Her disappointment stems from her witnessing the conscious abandonment of the elderly by their children. The seemingly amiable and good-natured young student, however, does not share the nurse's opinion. On the contrary, he divulges to readers that "our culture's coping strategy towards death is to bury it under consumerism and Samsara, that the Riverside Villas of the world are screens that enable this self-deception, and that the elderly *are* guilty: guilty of proving to us that our willful myopia about death is exactly that" (119). His

words succinctly capture twenty-first-century society's general relation to the elderly and to the process of aging itself, which, although it should be seen as natural, is met with restraint and contempt.

The character of Hugo Lamb illustrates why *The Bone Clocks* might be identified as a sort of "midlife crisis book" (Morgan). His ideas about old age go beyond society's general fear of aging and point towards (and at the same time explain) his subsequent choice to join the Anchorites of the Dusk Chapel of the Blind Cathar of the Thomasite Monastery of Sidelhorn Pass. Mitchell describes what the Anchorites can offer as a "Faustian pact," which ultimately serves to bring to our notice the "need to come to a working accommodation with aging" (Morgan), since Hugo purports to deal with aging differently than through fear and loathing. In an interview Mitchell claims that the reason for focusing on this issue was not philosophical, but rather connected to his becoming middle-aged: "My relationship to mortality needs a reboot. . . . Mortality is no longer an abstract thing over the horizon anymore. It's in your kneecaps, it's in your back, it's in your lungs" (Naimon 54). Hugo Lamb is approached by Imaculée Constantin, an Anchorite, while contemplating Rubens's *Adoration of the Magi*, a scene that has fascinated numerous great artists throughout time, since it evokes the birth of Jesus, who is surrounded by the old kings coming to worship him. The clash between generations is visible in all renderings; Rubens captured it through a grey-bearded king leaning towards the newborn, while baby Jesus is above him, holding out his hands towards the old man. The painting not only represents Jesus's role as mankind's Prince, but it also pinpoints the natural cycle of life, children taking the place of their elders.

Imaculée Constantin's tentative efforts to persuade Hugo Lamb to join the Anchorites are all the more suggestive and powerful as they are standing in front of this masterpiece. Facing mortality captured in paint, Ms. Constantin offers the young student "a form of power that allows one to defer death in perpetuity" (99). She also indicates that those possessing this power can keep their youth intact. She further intensifies his human fears of mortality, claiming that death "is inscribed in your cellular structure" (99), and it needs to be fought like an illness. The power Constantin describes lies in the preservation of "the singularity of the individual," to use O'Donnell's words (164), with the act of preservation countervailing the passing of time. This moment serves as a reminder of humankind's inherent fears and conceptions about aging, to dismantle them gradually. The novel utilizes numerous methods to approach humankind's relation to mortality, and religion seems to be one of them. There is a rich composite of religious

symbols and fantasy interwoven into the narrative. With allusions such as Cross, Lamb, and Bishop for names, Allhallows-on-Sea, St. Mary Hoo, and Eastchurch for place names, as Pico Iyer argues, “we’re in the realm of hyper-realism and half-religious allegory all at once.” These two distinct modes are constantly juxtaposed, sometimes through disturbing images, such as the following: “I find my lover’s crucifix among her boingy curls. I hold the Son of God in my mouth, and imagine him dissolving on my tongue” (123). Lamb’s train of thought immediately leads him to contemplate sex and immortality, reaching the conclusion that “[s]ex may be the antidote to death but it offers life everlasting only to the species, not the individual” (123). Consequently, sex is not satisfactory for the egotistical young man; his sole dream is the preservation of his own youth and personality, no matter the cost.

The relationship between religion and the Anchorites’ way of preserving themselves, also evident in this example, is explained by Mitchell in the interview given to Paul Harris where he presents religion as one of four distinct methods usually employed by human beings to somehow deal with the approach of death. Mitchell responds: “Most sects of most of the world’s religions issue passports to an afterlife in return for an unwavering faith in that sect’s precepts” (“Laboratory” 12). This view provides solace for believers who then do not have to fear the demise of their selves, or souls.

O’Donnell recognizes in “the scandalous address to Mariangela’s crucifix . . . the corporeal basis of Christianity to which Mitchell draws our attention throughout his novels” (8)—pointing to the corporeality that underlies each aspect of *The Bone Clocks*, most accentuated in the duality of the atemporal factions. The maddening struggle to maintain one’s perfect looks and youth stands in contrast to the quasi-immortal beings that every couple of decades die just to come back in the body of different persons, thus enriching the row of faces, but at the same time that of selves, too.

“Life is a terminal illness” (167), Hugo concludes upon witnessing the elderly in the nursing home. Throughout his narrative the reader encounters explicit and rather disturbing descriptions of deaths happening around Hugo as a child and later as a young boy, such as the death of his dog, Twix, when he was seven, all brought side by side in his mind by the death of his grandfather, about which all he says is: “Who is spared love is spared grief” (152). Thus it seems that Hugo is like a sociopath incapable of feeling grief. Death and mortality interest him in a different way: “Wouldn’t it be freaky if we saw the dead in the chairs opposite?” (155), he asks Holly Sykes while

sitting in ski chairs. He is fascinated with death and convinced that old age is something one should fight against.

Memory as an archive

Hugo Lamb finally manages to reconcile his fears of his own aging, with the help of the Anchorites.

They cured me of a terrible wasting disease called mortality. There's a lot of it about. The young hold out for a time, but eventually even the hardest patient gets reduced to a desiccated embryo, a Strudlebug . . . a veined, scrawny, dribbling . . . bone clock, whose face betrays how very, very little time they have left. (516)

This statement joins the two central and recurring metaphors in the novel of the desiccated embryo and the bone clock that have the effect of associatively connecting disparate moments and, at the same time, highlighting the exaggeration and fear seeping through his words.

An Anchorite as described by one character “was a girl who lived like a hermit in a cell, but in the wall of a church. A living human sacrifice, in a way” (431). In the novel the Anchorites, as one of them claims, exist selfishly “to ensure the indefinite survival of the group by inducting its members into the Psychosoterica of the Shaded Way” (194). In contrast, the Horologists whose name denotes the study and measurement of time, or the making of clocks and watches are tightly connected to time, its measurement, and different temporalities. They function as living archives by incorporating several disparate identities. As Joseph Metz contends, the Horologists “preserve the histories, memories, and identities of the various bodies they become or inhabit” (123).

Although memory and the archive are traditionally conceived of as quasi-opposites (see, for instance, Boulter), Mitchell's novel presents them as facilitating and complementing each other. Pierre Nora's definition of the archive sheds light on the interplay between the two, since he considers the archive to be the “storehouse of a material stock of what it would be impossible for us to remember” (13). However, the archives appearing in the novel go beyond the imagery of a storehouse, which would imply an outside, distant collection: they themselves function both as preservers and living entities taking part in the events, in the world that they inhabit. For the subject as archive Jonathan Boulter's consideration of Freud's and Derrida's theories provides a possible approach. The central notion of their theory is loss: a

phenomenon inherent in the concept of the archive. Derrida recognizes, in Boulter's words, that the subject is "always already inhabited by its own loss" and thus it "becomes an archive, a site, where loss is maintained and nourished" (1). His recognition is crucial because it identifies the subject, the self, as the center bringing past, present, and future together as the subject becomes the archive that preserves the event.

The notion of loss that Freud and Derrida recognize to be the central element of the archive points towards the inherent duality, possibly even the paradox of preservation and loss. A similar dynamic has been recognized between memory and forgetting by Paul Ricoeur: "forgetting is lamented in the same way as aging and death: it is one of the figures of the inevitable, the irremediable. And yet forgetting is bound up with memory" and it "can be so closely tied to memory that it can be considered one of the conditions for it" (426). I agree with Boulter's conclusion that the archive becomes the subject (5) and claim that this recognition provides a key to understanding how memory works in the novel. Boulter defines the subject "As crypt, as archive ventrilocated by history, the subject begins to offer itself as a site to be heard, to be read, to be interpreted" (7). Holly Sykes is a representative of the dynamic relationship between remembrance and forgetting through her humanity, whereas the Horologists reconcile preservation and loss.

As opposed to the Anchorites, who are all for destruction and concerned with their own survival, the Horologists carry on numerous lives in themselves through time. Esther Little proves to be the richest identity-possessor of them all, having already lived through several millennia and having a name that brings together all her previous identities: "a sort of Bayeux Tapestry that bound myth with loves, births, deaths; hunts, battles, journeys; . . . and the names of every host within whose body Moombaki [her other name] had sojourned" (Mitchell 436). Harris remarks that "this passage has an epic quality; it links human lifetimes to cultural histories to geological eons" ("Fractal" 152). Esther embodies "collective memory" (Mitchell 433), which encompasses all previous selves. This may be interpreted as a direct reference to Halbwachs's theory of collective memory: "The collective memory, for its part, encompasses the individual memories while remaining distinct from them. It evolves according to its own laws, and any individual remembrances that may penetrate are transformed within a totality having no personal consciousness" (51). Esther, this age-old woman chooses the novel's protagonist, Holly Sykes, to ask for asylum, to shelter her for decades from the warring faction. Thus, by sheltering Esther inside herself, Holly also becomes an archivist of sorts.

The novel's third part ("The Wedding Bash") is narrated by Holly Sykes's partner, Ed Brubeck, a journalist documenting the Iraq war, who proves an archivist in his own right. His greatest goal in life is "to make a tiny dent in the world's memory" (208), an image that captures the traumatic nature of the *visible* war Brubeck has experienced and shown to the world. His narrative constantly changes between two contrastive stories of familial bliss and the war zone, or civilization and its collapse. He believes that "the survival of a narrative, a report, or an accounting of the past, no matter how minor, is essential to any chance for change in the future" (O'Donnell 168).

On the other side of the archivists are the writers, with Crispin Hershey as the narrator of "Crispin Hershey's Lonely Planet." His *Desiccated Embryos* gradually turns into an allegory that runs through the entire work, like a ghost which is constantly mentioned and hinted at but never explicitly represented. The title also serves as another metaphor for the "bone clocks," or the aging body in general.

Human lives, human fates follow each other through the decades witnessed and lived through by Holly Sykes, surrounded by atemporals for whom human life takes barely a second. Great emphasis is laid on these transient lives, and ultimately the novel evolves mainly around them rather than the fantasy subplot. Harris remarks that one function of the atemporals is to "provide a form of Anthropocene memory" ("Fractal" 152), preserving the lives of individuals over centuries and, in some cases, even millennia. Through this vast time, however, the seemingly minor events and moments are the ones that really shine through. The individuals themselves are those through whom the memories live on, and this is most pronounced when Holly reappears in the novel as an aging grandmother. When her granddaughter wishes her good-night saying "Sleep tight, Gran, don't let the bedbugs bite" (542), Holly realizes that these words have gone full circle throughout the generations, since she used to wish her daughter goodnight in the same way. Her conclusion is: "We live on, as long as there are people to live on in" (542).

Apocalypse and remembrance

Holly Sykes as a teenager tries to come to terms with life itself, with its transitoriness:

"What if . . . what if heaven *is* real, but only in moments? Like a glass of water on a hot day when you're *dying* of thirst, or when someone's nice to you for no reason, or . . ." Mam's pancakes with Mars Bar sauce; Dad

dashing up from the bar just to tell me, “Sleep tight don’t let the bedbugs bite” “S’pose heaven’s not like a painting that’s just hanging there forever, but more like . . . like the best song anyone ever wrote, but a song you only catch in snatches, while you’re alive, from passing cars, or . . . upstairs windows when you’re lost” (34, compare 542)

These words coming from a very young person will guide her through her entire life until finally much later she learns what is really valuable and thus finds heaven not in an unattainable, distant utopia, but in moments. This image of heaven contrasts that of the Anchorites and most prominently of Hugo Lamb himself. Both characters, Hugo and Holly, have been approached by Imaculée Constantin, preying on human vanity and fears. However, only Hugo, whose alter ego is named Anyder (“the principal river on the island of Utopia” [194]), joins the group. The heaven they project is utopian indeed: they promise eternal beauty and youth, a life without aging, without withering away.

These two contrastive images of heaven, represented by Hugo and Holly, stand at the core of the two distinct fates of the characters. In the war that is played out between the two atemporal factions, with Holly in the center, a powerful Biblical symbol, a golden apple, as the fruit from the Tree of Life, will become the savior of Horology. This symbol reverses the Biblical story of eternal damnation, since, contrary to the consequences of eating the apple from the Garden of Eden, this fruit brings victory to humans and further deepens the view that the bliss all the characters are looking for is ultimately to be found on earth, in their own selves.

Humanity is saved from the war of the atemporals. But what happens when the Earth seems to be on the brink of collapse? The last chapter, set in the year 2043, when Holly is 74 years old, presents a dystopian vision of our world—that of an imminent and unavoidable Apocalypse: a “present dwelling inside, rather than fearful anticipation of a potent new intimacy between people and their worlds” (Buell 265). As Elizabeth Callaway explains, the signs of the approaching “Endarkenment” (Mitchell 533) pervade the entire novel, starting from the first chapter, “A Hot Spell,” whose title implies climate change and approaching disaster. As Holly’s comments on humankind’s responsibility for such climate change emphasize,

It’s grief for the regions we deadlanded, the ice caps we melted, the Gulf Stream we redirected, the rivers we drained, the coasts we flooded, the lakes we choked with crap, the seas we killed, the species we drove to extinction, the pollinators we wiped out, the oil we squandered, the drugs we rendered

impotent, the comforting liars we voted into office—all so we didn't have to change our cozy lifestyles. (649–50)

These words, like the last chapter, bring a new focus in the novel. The book could have ended with “An Horologist’s Labyrinth,” with the story of the war fought between Horologists and Anchorites, but instead it suddenly shifts emphasis. The last part introduces a pastoral setting in Sheep’s Head, Ireland, featuring some elderly women and children fighting for survival, struggling from one day to the next. To a certain extent this image eradicates the one of the supernatural war, which humanity never noticed and from which they had been saved by Holly Sykes.

An entirely human-made Apocalypse offers a third distinct approach to the issue of aging. Holly, now an old woman, faces a world that is also old, rapidly degrading, and dying. The Apocalypse presented through her is “quotidian and prosaic,” existing “in the everyday” (Callaway 9). Contrary to the grandiosity of the atemporals’ war, Endarkenment is never shown in large proportions, but always through day-to-day struggles of one elderly woman, her family, and friends. Ultimately everything boils down to memory being the greatest element of one’s identity, one’s life itself, and, furthermore, the possibility of life itself. As Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt observe, “memory is not only susceptible to changes, it is itself *a powerful agent of change*” (4, emphasis in the original). Indeed, memory brings together the individual and the entire society, and, adversely, its lack, its disappearance signifies the end of civilization.

Forgetting has become one of the greatest diseases of the entire world and attendant to aging. When Holly fails to remember more and more details, she remarks: “at my age, it’s like the beginning of a slow-motion death sentence. If you can’t trust your mind anymore, you’re mentally homeless” (572). Although one can sense resignation in these words, they express a certain degree of willingness to forget as well. As Holly explains it to her grandson, “Change is sort of hardwired into the world” (578), and, she realizes, even photographs, the objects meant to capture separate moments and to keep them fixed, change and fade (578). Photography theorist Damian Sutton claims that “life exists as absolute change, a duration defined only by the interaction of objects and perceptions,” and the subject is meant to continuously strive for “making sense of experiences of the present, our memories of the past, and our awareness of the oncoming future. This situation is full of tumult and paradox, and perhaps this is why the photograph—with its own paradoxes—always seems to reflect it” (34). Thus,

according to Sutton, the photograph is capable of mirroring this “absolute change”; its very existence is as a testament to the inherent paradox of duration and change.

The photograph has symbolic significance in the course of remembrance across Mitchell’s novel. The photo of Holly’s daughter, Aoife, and her husband functions as a remnant of their selves; however, it is shown as already in the process of fading, of withering away. Holly, upon realizing that it has become impossible for her to reprint it, since the computers barely function, concludes that “my feckless generation trusted our memories to the Net, so the ’39 Crash was like a collective stroke” (548). This ’39 Crash points towards a certain cyclicity in the novel’s time conception, since it rhymes with the actual Wall Street Crash of 1929 that shook the entire world. Hence, there is a sense that decline is a returning motif, capturing at once the ephemerality of human fate and the eternity of humankind’s struggles. Conversely, the literal fading of Aoife and Örvar’s photograph is a palpable manifestation of the complexity of the mode in which the photograph captures time and the individual’s relation to it.

“Civilisation’s like the economy, or Tinkerbell: if people stop believing it’s real, it dies,” remarks Holly (572). In the final part of the novel, civilization collapses and death is everywhere. As Rose Harris-Birtill contends, “the mortals left behind are reduced to the ‘bone clocks’ of the book’s title” (133), and the possibility of any sort of future seems scarce, with only Iceland as an exception. At the end Holly’s two grandchildren are taken there, while she accepts her own doomed fate: “Incoming waves erase all traces of the vanishing boat, and I’m feeling erased myself, fading away into an invisible woman. For a voyage to begin, another one must end, sort of” (Mitchell 624).

Conclusion

Holly Sykes’s concluding thought encompasses the philosophy underlying not only David Mitchell’s *The Bone Clocks*, but possibly all of his oeuvre, since he is preoccupied with the constant war against aging, death, and oblivion. In his most famous novel to date, *Cloud Atlas*, souls wander, they live on, and they can easily travel through numerous generations, bodies, even ages. Whereas the thread is subtle in *Cloud Atlas*, the novel of six separate stories, six separate timelines and people, linked together through history and a birthmark, *The Bone Clocks* largely revolves around the intensifying complexity of the idea of living on. The characters capture different possibilities and aspects of this issue: the Horologists utilize the art of

“psychosoterica,” Ed Brubeck accomplishes it in war journalism and Crispin Hershey does so through his novels. Beyond these archiving methods, however, Mitchell’s novel concludes that one’s life, one’s soul is preserved in the memories of one’s children and grandchildren.

Like Callaway, I contend, contrary to other interpretations, that the novel’s final section remains the key to understanding the entire novel. As the thematic core of the novel, all the storylines circle around the issue of time: “How could you not be interested in time?” asks Mitchell. “It’s like being a fish and not being interested in the sea. It’s where we live. . . . We live in it. We live through it. It ages us. It changes us.” Consequently, the novel becomes a work that “not only spans time but contemplates it” (Naimon 48) and centers on both the individual and humanity facing Time. The last chapter reveals that the fantasy plot offers a distinct perspective upon one life, Holly Sykes’s, coupled with envisioning the fate of a rapidly dissolving world. In contrast, Hugo Lamb’s vision of life and aging is a nightmare from which he manages to awaken:

Wrinkles spread like mildew over our peachy sheen; beat-by-beat-by-beat-by-beat-by-beat-by-beat, varicose veins worm through plucked calves; torsos and breasts fatten and sag; . . . DNA frays like wool, and down we tumble; a fall on the stairs, a heart attack, a stroke; not dancing but twitching. This is Club Walpurgis. They knew it in the Middle Ages. Life is a terminal illness. (167)

Through the novel, however, this image of the aging body is reversed as the reader traverses the intricate layers, timelines, and the characters’ stories. Hugo and his quasi-immortal faction are defeated, and in the end it is Holly, a representative of the “bone clock,” the mortal human being, who lives on in her grandchildren. Despite the apocalyptic vision of Endarkenment, there is still a remnant of hope materialized in the young generation that is taken to Iceland.

The separate levels and sub-worlds of *The Bone Clocks* alternately bring to the fore and conceal the novel’s different emphases. It is ultimately a contemplation of time achieved not through the fantastic world of immortal beings, not through wars fought in Iraq or on a mountain in the Dusk Chapel of the Blind Cathar of the Thomasite Monastery of Sidelhorn Pass, but through one human life, that of Holly Sykes. This one particular life captured in all its intensity, with all its changes and transformations, points towards a possible new understanding of the process of aging and Time.

University of Pécs, Hungary

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