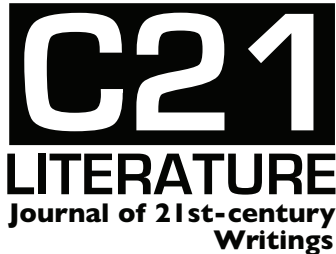




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Review

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REVIEW

Rose Harris-Birtill, *David Mitchell's Post-Secular World: Buddhism, Belief and the Urgency of Compassion*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press 2019), ISBN 9781350078598, £85.00

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This engaging and lucidly written study serves as a new benchmark for criticism on one of the most productive and critically interesting contemporary writers, David Mitchell. Anchored by what seems to be an encyclopaedic knowledge of not just Mitchell's novels, but his short fiction, non-fiction, libretti and interviews, and a unique methodology, this book makes a bold contribution to the critical work on post-secularity. After introducing the various spatial metaphors which run through Mitchell's work and with some close attention paid to how Mitchell himself argues that his work is essentially a 'macro-novel' of which the individual novels are chapters, Harris-Birtill then turns to the idea of the mandala. Whilst 'an intricately designed geometrical religious symbol' (10) it also possesses a 'secular duality that can be used to map the macro-novel's key trait.' (11) Furthermore, the mandala does not just function as a cartographic tool, but an ethical one as well. Here then, Harris-Birtill has found a critical methodology which responds in a more nuanced way to the spatial topography of Mitchell's work whilst also tying into the moral aspects of the macro-novel and Mitchell's long-standing fascination with Buddhist belief and practice. Importantly, this also allows for a shift in thinking about the concept of the post-secular, which as Harris-Birtill points out is usually associated with Christianity but 'must not neglect the impact of other global belief systems ... within contempo-

rary fiction.' (17–8) Thus, the book aims to make an ambitious contribution to wider debate beyond the scope of the broad interest in Mitchell as an author.

The opening chapter builds upon this introduction by offering a reading of the 'world machine' that is Mitchell's short fiction. The chapter argues that short stories can be understood as 'archipelagically linked narratives [that] reveal the essential contributions of the works to the author's continuous narrative world view.' (63–4) What is immediately notable is the way in which the mandala technique offers not simply a realist mapping of a literary space but a moral and imaginative one, which explores the ways in which small actions can have vast consequences. The micro-narratives are a part of the overall macro-novel, which through their focus on small, interconnected acts of resistance can 'amplify other marginalized perspectives.' (64) After a chapter on the much under-studied libretti and one on the role of time in the Anthropocene, the subsequent chapter turns to the spatial, 'using the mandala's distinctive structural design to suggest new critical approaches to the structures which underpin the macronovel.' (109) The chapter offers a fascinating Derridean analysis of the spatial and political implications of mandala criticism. Through a reading of *number9dream* the mandala as a spatial tool is contrasted with the hierarchical panoptic paradigms from which the novel's protagonist must escape. Following this the book pauses its investigation of Mitchell's work to consider the journey thus far and assess how the notion of mandalic literature might prove to be sustainable. One of the key markers of a mandalic literature is what Harris-Birtill refers to as 'compassionate cartography' (143) which is explored through reference to works by Margaret Atwood, Yann Martel and Will Self. In all these authors, Harris-Birtill finds a shared interest in interrogating the ethics of belief, the importance of individual compassion and the vital role of hope within contemporary dystopia. Whilst the argument is compelling, given the contemporary political situation these writers work within, there is an absence within this mandalic criticism of collective action. Whilst the moral significance of individual compassion is well worth emphasising, the idea that the political conditions of contemporary capitalism can be endured without reference to any kind of collectivity might initially seem tenuous at best. However, Harris-Birtill notes that mandalic literature features both an emphasis on 'small communities' (148) and an

understanding that individual actions have 'consequences far beyond their authors' intentions' (149). Whilst theorists such as Simon Critchely have written extensively about the nature of ontological entanglement and indebtedness, there seems to be much scope for a mandalic approach to criticism that retains the possibility of not just individual resistance but a systemic alteration of material conditions. The argument here goes some of that way, but also seems to find that change can come best in the context of small communities rather than the revolutionary mass movement. Thus, the reader gets to see both the political reality of contemporary society and the potential, however limited, for hope and political change. The final section of the book consists of a number of appendixes, highlighting key information about Mitchell's sales as well as offering some intriguing examples of mandala art – the perfect post-secular symbol for Harris-Birtill's argument. Perhaps the most striking of the appendixes is the long and incredibly detailed interview with Mitchell, which allows the author to respond to Harris-Birtill's insights and areas of interest. This is followed by an exhaustive list of further critical reading, which will be an invaluable resource for Mitchell scholars and students.

With its bold combination of Buddhist philosophy, post-secular theory and close attention to the text, this book should prove valuable to an audience far beyond scholars and students of David Mitchell's fiction. Drawing on both Eastern philosophy and the work of psychologist Carl Jung, the book offers a strikingly different way of responding to the conditions of contemporary writing. Moving beyond simple binaries and a limited focus on Eurocentric Christian post-secularism, the book is a challenging and provocative way of understanding literature in the post-secular age. Whilst there are perhaps moments where the critical analysis here lacks the mass politics that would be truly revolutionary, the book is an excellent starting point for reconsidering how theological and literary forms can combine. Through the fascinating critical methodology of the mandala, Mitchell's macronovel is shown to be as an expansive worldview which aims to induce ethical and compassionate action in its readers. Given the ecological and political challenges of contemporary capitalism, this is perhaps the most vital function of literature, and here with Harris-Birtill's book is a guide to understanding it in action.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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