



Black Swan Green

A Novel

Written by David Mitchell

WINNER 2006 - ALA Notable Book

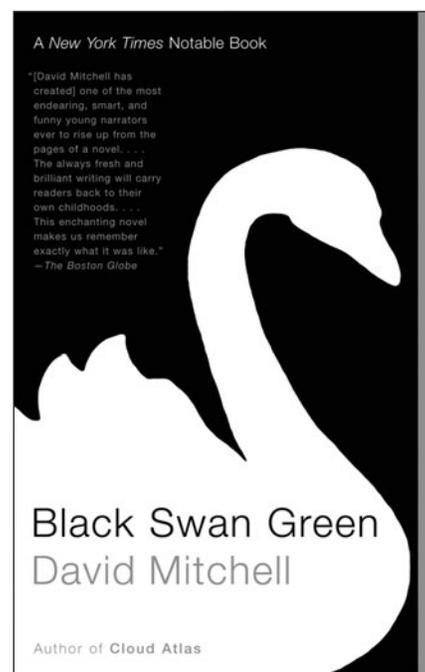
WINNER 2006 - ALA Alex Award

WINNER 2006 - ALA Best Books for Young Adults

WINNER 2006 - School Library Journal Best Adult Books for High School Students

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READING LEVEL: 9



• note to teachers •

Countless novels address the dynamic time between childhood and adulthood. Whether readers encounter the young heroes of classic mythology, the quirky protagonists in the work of Judy Blume or J. D. Salinger's unforgettable Holden Caulfield, the experiences of adolescence are always distinctly familiar and, therefore, thoroughly relatable. Adolescence is a universal subject: a time bursting with "firsts", an age of sexual and political awakening, and therefore, it is the beginning of the realization of our complete selves. Subsequently, it is a subject brimming with possibilities for writers—a seedbed for tales that reflect the full range of human experience and emotion, yielding stories that are painful, joyful, awkward, and almost always humorous.

But what is it that makes a story structured around this subject successful? We should enjoy being taken along for the ride, witnessing the challenges a character is faced with. If the author has done his or her job, we root for the young character's ultimate, yet uncertain—and sometimes unrealized—triumph. Undoubtedly, a sense of *authenticity* is necessary. This authenticity can be evidenced in characters who we swear we have met before (or wish we would); in carefully laid-out language that situates us firmly with regard to place and time; and perhaps most importantly, in the revelation of character flaws so familiar and particular that they erase any evidence of the line between reality and fiction. More precisely, the creation of an authentic voice is required—not only for each character, but for the novel as a whole.

This kind of authentic voice is one of the highlights of David Mitchell's award-winning novel *Black Swan Green*. Jason Taylor, the protagonist of the novel, is a stuttering young poet, trapped somewhere between boyhood and manhood. Around him, Mitchell creates a careful architecture of pop-culture references, political dialogue, and slang which is indicative not only of Jason's origins, but also of his age. Accordingly, much of this guide focuses on the utility of language and on demonstrating how voice may function as the foundation for a novel.

But beyond Mitchell's narrative voice, one of the most interesting characteristics of *Black Swan Green* is its versatility—it provides many teachable vantage points that can serve as catalysts to the study of literary genre. The novel straddles the line between young adult literature and literary fiction. It can be studied on its own, examined within the tradition of young adult literature, discussed from the perspective of the British novel, or viewed as a counterpoint to post-modern literature. Examined within the context of Mitchell's previous works, which exhibit post-modern tendencies such as non-linear plots, global settings, and multiple narrators of diverse backgrounds in a single work, *Black Swan Green* provides students with an opportunity to examine where the novel has been and where it may be going.

• about this book

In a rather short period of time, David Mitchell has established himself as a young author to watch. His first three books incorporate layers of stories, a variety of styles, diverse narrators, an assortment of settings that span the globe, coverage of a plethora of time-periods, non-linear story-telling, and a wide representation of genres—all within a singular form. While the novels have been highly-acclaimed and well-received by a broad readership, the unprecedented breadth and scale of Mitchell's works have made them the subject of a critical eye. In response to the question of whether the author was also capable of creating a dynamic and intimate story of a more traditional style, Mitchell wrote *Black Swan Green*, a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age story set in Margaret Thatcher-era England. The book, which tells the story of one year in the life of thirteen-year-old Jason Taylor, shows no traces of Mitchell's post-modernist techniques. Broken down into thirteen chapters, which are also able to function independently as short stories, each one reflects a month in the life of the young protagonist.

With all post-modern literary devices stripped away, Mitchell's major success with *Black Swan Green* is in his exquisite use of language. He utilizes slang and references pop culture to create both a distinct sense of place and authentic characters. Because the protagonist is thirteen, and because he is not without his flaws (a debilitating stammer and a tendency towards youthful exaggeration) he is instantly relatable and likable.

• teaching ideas

Black Swan Green is a versatile work of fiction that can be used in the classroom in a variety of ways. It might be used in literature classes, examined in history classes for its depiction of Cold War England, or utilized in psychology classes and in courses that examine human behavior and development. Examine the novel within the tradition of young adult literature. Consider why adolescent protagonists are so popular and so relatable. How does Mitchell's novel function as a young adult novel? How does it break out of this classification? *Black Swan Green* can also be studied profitably from the standpoint of British literature and a tradition of careful depiction of place. Perhaps most interestingly, the book can be used as a counterpoint in the examination of post-modern literature—providing an opportunity to examine the work of one author who has produced novels in contrasting styles. Finally, while the novel can be analyzed according to its use of typical literary components—characterization, structure, narrator/voice, themes etc.—emphasis might be placed on the author's use of language to create authenticity.

• vocabulary

Mitchell uses slang which is not only particular to England, but is revealing of Jason's age. Examine some examples of slang, such as the ones that follow, and discuss how readers can infer what the words mean. Ask students to use each word in a sentence which demonstrates their understanding of its meaning.

- Sarky
- Scrap
- Trainers
- Epic
- Snogging
- Ace

• about the author

DAVID MITCHELL was born in Southport, England in January of 1969. He studied at the University of Kent, where he received a Bachelor's degree in English & American literature and a Master's degree in comparative literature. In recognition of his first novel, *Ghostwritten*, he was awarded the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for best work of British literature by an author under the age of 35 years. His debut work was also short-listed for the Guardian First Book Award. Mitchell's next two novels, *number9dream* and *Cloud Atlas*, were short-listed for numerous awards, including the prestigious Man Booker Prize; his fourth novel, *Black Swan Green*, was long-listed for the 2006 prize and won a number of awards for young adult literature, like the American Library Association's Alex Award. Mitchell has been listed among *Granta's* picks for Best Young British Novelists. In 2007, he was chosen for *Time Magazine's* list of the 100 Most Influential People in the World.

• discussion and writing

1. Why do you think that the author chose the title *Black Swan Green* for this novel? How is a sense of place significant within the context of the story? How are Jason Taylor's experiences linked to a sense of place?
2. How are Jason's experiences allegorical? How do his experiences compare to the experiences of other adolescent characters in the tradition of literature? How do we relate to Jason and his experiences?
3. Examine the structure of the novel. Why do you think that the author chose to break the novel down into chapters which seem also to function independently as short stories? Why might he have chosen to include 13 chapters? Why not 12 chapters?
4. Why do you think that the author chose to name both the first and last chapter of the novel "January Man"? What does it indicate about the passage of time in the novel? How has Jason Taylor changed from the first to last chapter?
5. How does the author use language to convey a sense of place and create authentic characters? Give examples.
6. Is Jason Taylor a trustworthy narrator? Are his descriptions and stories always accurate? Explain.
7. Who is Hangman and how did he acquire his name? Does he have a positive or negative influence on Jason? Does Hangman, or Jason's perception of Hangman, change as the story progresses?
8. Who is Unborn Twin? Maggot? How does the dialogue of Unborn Twin and Maggot differ from Jason's dialogue? What purpose does the appearance of Unborn Twin and Maggot serve?
9. How does the author end each chapter? Are there decisive conclusions to each section? Why do you think the author chose to end the chapters this way?
10. How does the author employ references to popular culture in the novel? How does this help to create a sense of time and place? Does it have an impact on the authenticity of the novel and its characters for readers?
11. Why do you think that the author chose to open the novel with the story of the wrong number? How does it make Jason feel? What kind of feeling or atmosphere does it create for readers?
12. In the first chapter we meet Dean "Moron" Moran. Jason says "Names aren't just names." What does he mean by this? How does the author address issues of "rank" in Jason's experiences and in the world at large?

• discussion and writing (continued)

13. Who is Elliott Bolivar? How does his presence in the novel relate to the other representations of identity within the novel?
14. How do the events of the first chapter help to set up the novel for readers and create the mood? What themes begin to emerge in this first chapter? How does the author create foreshadowing?
15. How does Julia and Jason's relationship change as the story progresses? What do you think draws them closer together?
16. What is the significance of the Ralph Bredon scene in the first chapter? What do we learn about our narrator as a result of this section?
17. What political events are taking place throughout the novel? How do they affect Jason? How do depictions of the political events correspond to the depiction of Jason's own life at home?
18. Readers ultimately learn that Jason's parents are going through a divorce. How does the author reveal the breakdown of their relationship?
19. Protagonists typically have to overcome flaws and challenges. What does Jason have to overcome? Would you say he is successful? Why or why not?
20. Various ethnic groups are represented or discussed throughout the novel. Are they accurately described? Whose points of view are represented?
21. We learn that Jason writes poetry. Rather than just tell us this, how does the author convince us of this throughout the novel?

• beyond the book: suggested activities

1. Ask your students to compose a short story about an event from their childhood. Ask them to first write the story using the voice of themselves as a child. Then have them write about the same event retrospectively. Discuss how the stories differ. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each method of narration and the different points of view?
2. Have your students compose a short story using language as a primary tool. Instruct them to use slang, dialect, etc. to convey a sense of place and authentic characters. Have students read some of their passages and discuss how each author "convinced" their audience.
3. Examine the Cold War and political events that Jason witnesses in *Black Swan Green*. What impact did they have on Jason and the people around him? Then allow students to discuss political events that they have witnessed. How were/are they affected? Ask students to create a piece of fiction which characterizes their feelings on these points.

• about this guide's writer

This guide was produced by JENNIFER BANACH PALLADINO, a writer from Connecticut. Jennifer was the main contributor to *Bloom's Guides: The Glass Menagerie*, edited by Harold Bloom for Facts on File, Inc. She also recently completed a guide to Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* for DemiDec, Inc., a producer of guides and study materials for the U.S. Academic Decathlon and the World Scholar's Cup.