How to Fake a Nineteenth-Century Novel

Martin Paul Eve

Birkbeck, University of London

Novelists often write about the past, but how do particularly skilled novelists create a realistic and vivid impression of bygone eras? How do writers invent a vision of the past that rings true with how we think about historical times in the twenty-first century? Take a quirky recent book, *Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell – how does it manufacture its different pasts?

Some things that writers do are obvious. Various types of object – horse-drawn carriages, country mansions, workhouses – appear in nineteenth-century novels and novels set in these times. Appropriate settings and objects self-evidently contribute to the creation of historical scenes.

But the actual way to fake a nineteenth-century novel, if *Cloud Atlas* is any guide, is much darker. It turns out that if you really want to sound like a novelist from the nineteenth century, one of the best ways to do this is to use a lot of discriminatory language or to make your narrator sound like a racist.

This contributes to a type of imagined language that Mitchell has called ‘bygonese’. ‘To a degree’, writes Mitchell, ‘the historical novelist must create a sort of dialect – I call it “Bygonese” – which is inaccurate but plausible. Like a coat of antique effect varnish on a pine new dresser, it is both synthetic and the least worst solution’.[1]

I wanted to know what the features were of this imagined bygonese and Mitchell’s writing turns out to be an excellent test bed. *Cloud Atlas*, for those who don’t know or who are only familiar with the movie version, is a novel that is divided into six chapters. Halfway through each chapter, though, the text ‘breaks’ and cuts to the next in the sequence, leaving the reader hanging. In the second half of the novel, the reader is given the ‘missing’ finales of the chapters, cascading back down in reverse order. Importantly, as shown in Figure 1, the text moves forward in historical time in its first half, spiralling towards a dystopian future in ‘Sloosha’s Crossin’’ before spiralling back down towards the past again as it reaches its end, where it started, in ‘The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing’.

1 David Mitchell, ‘Past Imperfect’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 May 2010, pp. 20–21.

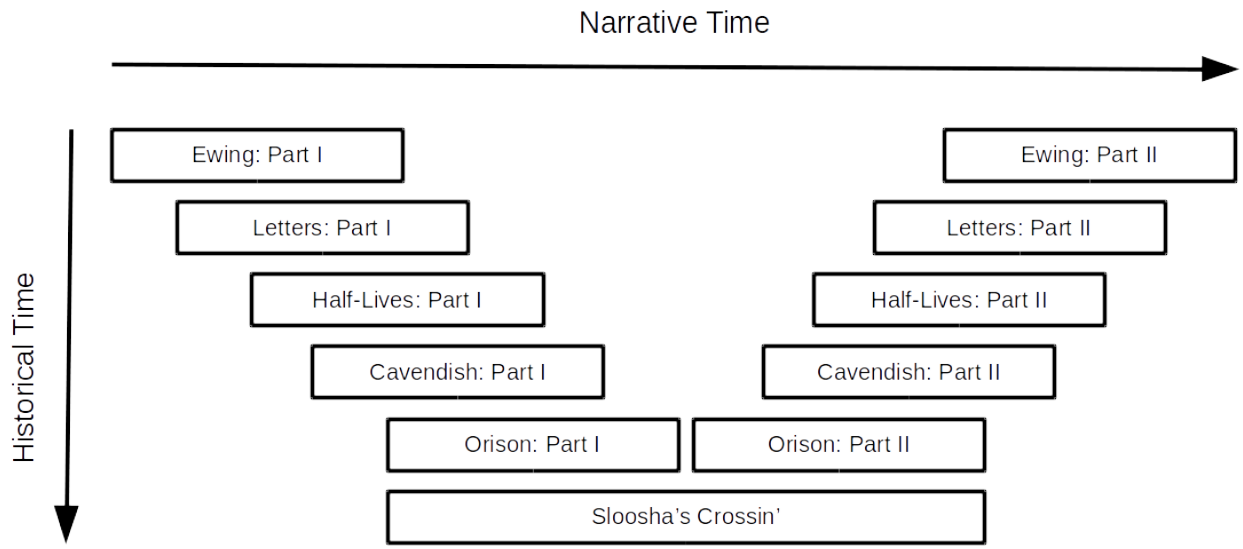

Figure 1: Narrative time, historical time, and chapter progression in Cloud Atlas. Reproduced from Martin Paul Eve, *Close Reading With Computers: Textual Scholarship, Computational Formalism, and David Mitchell's* Cloud Atlas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019) under a CC BY-SA license.

As if this weren't complicated enough, the *language* of *Cloud Atlas* – what we might call its 'register' – changes in each chapter to mirror the historical period when it was set. To give just a flavour, the first chapter, the 'Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing' is set in the style of a seafaring nineteenth-century narrative; 'Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery' takes the form of a 1960s crime thriller, written in a fast-paced present tense; 'An Orison of Sonmi~451' is a kind of future science fictional documentary that takes the form of an interview etc.

What I wanted to know, though, was this: given that Mitchell has written about how he constructs his historical language, *what does he actually do on the ground*? How does David Mitchell build a nineteenth-century prose style?

One of the first questions that I asked was about the accuracy of the language. Clearly, anachronisms such as satellite communication in fiction supposedly from a previous era would subvert the historical realism of a novel.[2] But Mitchell's novel does not feature such clear, attention-

2 Thomas Pynchon's 1997 epic, *Mason & Dixon*, features precisely this jokey Jesuit telegraph system.

seeking anachronism. What I did wonder, though, was whether *Cloud Atlas*'s 1850 section featured words that would not be accessible to an author actually writing at this time. In other words: was there a *linguistic* anachronism at work in Mitchell's writing – and how good are we, as readers, at recognising such features?

As it turns out: we are pretty terrible at spotting words that are out of time. But Mitchell also does an extraordinarily good job of restricting his vocabulary. In order to show this I wrote a computer program that would lookup each word in the text in various etymological dictionaries, in order to ascertain their first usage date. The results were surprising (Figure 2).

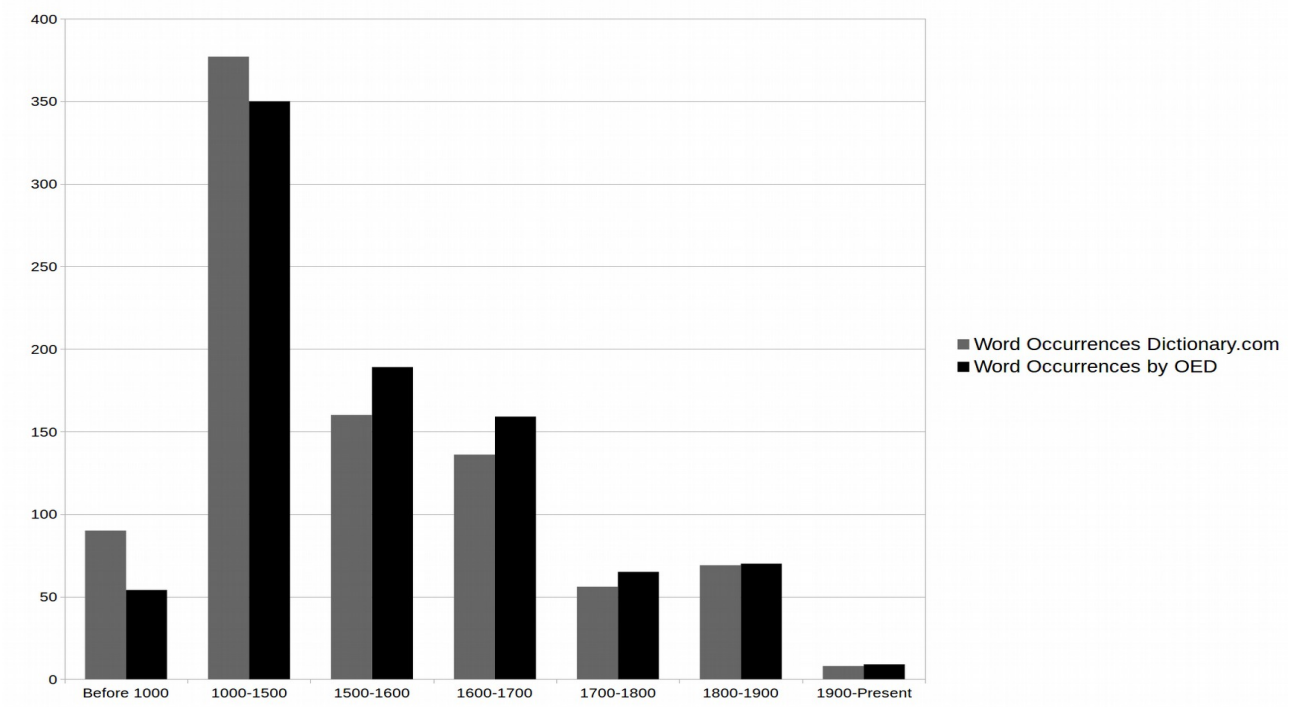

Figure 2: Word distributions in Part I of "The Pacific Diary of Adam Ewing" in *Cloud Atlas* by first-usage according to *Dictionary.com* and the *OED*. Reproduced from Martin Paul Eve, *Close Reading With Computers: Textual Scholarship, Computational Formalism, and David Mitchell's* Cloud Atlas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019) under a CC BY-SA license.

In my search of Dictionary.com, I found just six anachronistic words that would definitively not have been available to the narrator of the first chapter of *Cloud Atlas* and that are not 'realistic' in this sense:

- home-town [1910-1915]
- spillage [1920-1925]
- lazy-eye [1935-1940]
- returnees [1940-1945]
- latinos [1945-1950]

- A-frame” [1960-1965]

Yet, the Oxford English Dictionary disagrees. For “hometown”, it tells us, was coined in 1851; “returnee” in 1870; and “A-frame” as far back as 1827. The OED also yields a number of terms from the novel as being after our cut-off date that Dictionary.com does not. In the OED, through my automatic approach, we are given:

- bizarreness [1920]
- spillage [1934]
- slumped [1937]
- pulsed [1942]
- colour [1944]
- scuttlebutt [1945]

There are many complexities to this (why ‘colour’ in 1944? It’s because it refers to ‘colour’ in the sense of musical timbre.) We are left, though, with just three terms that, I feel, can be said with certainty to have been absolutely inaccessible either to Mitchell’s historic author or the intra-diegetic editor: spillage, from ~1934; latino, from ~1946; and lazy-eye, from ~1960.

Lazy-eye, in particular, is a startling find. This term sounds like a pejorative slur for people with amblyopia that would have been coined well before 1960. It’s something we would expect to find in literature from 1850, not in contemporary parlance – so this term works quite well for *Cloud Atlas*! However, this is not actually the case – it could not have been used in 1850 in this way.

The fact that we cannot recognise which words are appropriate to a time period brings to the fore a problem that has vexed historical fiction and its study for many years: to what extent is accuracy to the historical record actually important? And if the language is not totally historically accurate, what other markers might signify to a contemporary reader that the work is from the past?

First and foremost, to achieve his historical style, Mitchell does use archaic language, as we might predict. Within the first few lines of the text we are given ‘Indian’ to refer to any non-European, a ‘hamlet’ to refer to a settlement, a spelling of ‘trousers’ as ‘trowzers’, a jacket of 18th-century origin (the ‘Pea-jacket’), an ampersand (‘&’) repeated for conjunction instead of the more common ‘and’, and the term ‘eyrie’ to refer to a homeland.

Second, though, I wondered whether Mitchell might simply be using *uncommon* language to create the perception of a stylistic affinity with Victorian-era prose. For when readers do not know when words were actually first used, it might make sense to present readers with a range of words that they are *less likely* to have encountered. This unfamiliarity might be construed, then, as being words

are older than those used in day-to-day speech. Or more simply put: the less familiar the language, the more archaic it might sound.

In order to test this, I took a set of magazine articles from 2004 and pulled out words that occur in *Cloud Atlas*'s Ewing chapter that are not in the magazine. The result is, indeed, a set of terms that are unusual to the modern ear.

In particular, though, *Cloud Atlas*'s Ewing chapter falls back on offensive racial addresses in order to achieve its historical style and its critical focus on the legacies of colonialism. For instance, Mitchell's text gives us: Blackamoor, blackfella, darkies, harridan, womenfolk, bedlamite, mulatto, quadroon, and mixedblood. Specifically, colonial terms of racist abuse occur in the Ewing section of *Cloud Atlas* at a far-higher frequency than in a broader contemporary corpus. These are used, in the text, I should stress, for purposes of critique – not to condone such language and its imperial origins.

There's a great deal of debate about whether specific terms in texts are good markers of their genre. For instance, Ted Underwood has recently pointed out that science fiction novels are more clearly defined by their use of the adjectives of scale, rather than spaceships and so forth (although they do often have the latter).[3] In *Cloud Atlas*, though, racial epithets serve to build an imperial, Empire-based racist charge in the language that contributes to our belief that this writing could really have come from 1850. This is strengthened through the affiliation with outmoded colonial-era notions of 'tropical medicine' in this novel, in which the white man may fall prey to the diseases of the warmer climes.

All of which is to say that *Cloud Atlas* makes for an excellent case study of how contemporary writers build an aesthetic of how we wrote in the past. We like to imagine that language choice is all important and that every word counts, but as I found out, we aren't very good at recognising which words could have been used in 1850 and which words could not.

It is often how such writing sets itself apart from other contemporary works – through, say, racist and colonial markers – that best denote how we think we wrote, back then. In many ways this also rests upon a belief that we are better now and that things always tend to improve. In some ways, there are telling points to consider for our times here: it looks, to me, as though at least one of the ways that we evaluate the writing of the past lies in how authors write about others. The question then becomes: how will future writers pretend that they are writing in the twenty-first century? What will be the signature marker of our own style, for novelists in times to come?

3 Ted Underwood, *Distant Horizons: Digital Evidence and Literary Change* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), pp. 58–59.