

# [David mitchell’s take on the workings of the universe and state of humanity in gh...](https://assignbuster.com/david-mitchells-take-on-the-workings-of-the-universe-and-state-of-humanity-in-ghostwritten/)

“ Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?”

This was the question that Edward Lorenz asked at the 139th meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Lorenz’s inquiry blossomed into a concept of cause and effect called the butterfly effect, one with extraordinary consequences in the modern age of globalization. David Mitchell’s Ghostwritten investigates this concept through nine chapters, each about different characters in different settings. Mitchell’s book connects previous and future chapters by using hyperlinks that traverse space and time. The most defining part of Mitchell’s novel is its division into novellas, an organization that exists to represent the butterfly effect and the way it links everyone in our world–put simply the novellas, and the novel as a whole, exist to represent the way our world works (or at least the way Mitchell believes it does). Peter Childs and James Green reflect on these connections, explaining, “ The network woven by these slender lines of association is less a global-spanning tapestry than an ephemeral web—characters from one story appear in another, sending ripples along the surface of the narratives as events in one chapter generate unforeseeable consequences elsewhere” (Childs and Green 31). Mitchell titled his book Ghostwritten, which according to Merriam-Webster means, “ To write for and in the name of another” (“ Ghostwrite”). In authoring Ghostwritten and choosing the title, Mitchell proclaims himself the ghostwriter for a most ambitious client: the universe. Not the literal stars and planets, but the popularized, personified universe whose transcendental machines work in mysterious ways to cause our world and race to work in the way they do. Mitchell’s interwoven, hyperlinked chapters cross time and space, illustrating the ways, both good and bad, that the butterfly effect touches humans in our globalized, technology-filled world. Cummulatively though, in his role as the ghostwriter for the universe, Mitchell presents a depressing view of humanity and predicts our dark future through the chapters narrated by more-than-humans.

Edward Lorenz’s butterfly effect is part of a mathematical theory called chaos theory, which states it is impossible to predict the outcome of a system because of entropy at it’s basic, subatomic levels. For example, it is impossible to know the exact location of an electron– scientists can only use probability to predict where it is. Thus, if our knowledge of subatomic levels is based on probability, then everything that exists and everything we know is based on probability, because we cannot account for that type of disorder. So, to clarify, what we think we know definitely, we may actually only probably know. The butterfly effect is one part of this chaos theory, theorizing that minimal changes in the initial condition of a system can lead to drastic changes in its results. Thus, because of the butterfly effect, it is impossible to unquestionably predict anything, as something subatomic could change something astronomical (Veron “ Understanding”). While Lorenz’s theory was initially purely mathematical, his theory has become increasingly relevant in our age of globalization. Globalization, as defined by dictionary. com, is “ the act of globalizing, or extending to other or all parts of the world,” or “ worldwide integration and development” (“ Globalization”). Because of globalization and technology, there are more connections between systems, in other words more opportunities for connections in our world, thus something someone does in Asia has a higher chance of affecting the life of someone in the United States. The connections between Mitchell’s chapters demonstrate the butterfly effect, as small events, instances, or decisions in one chapter can have consequences in the next. In doing so Mitchell ghostwrites for the universe, replicating the way our globalized world works through transnational connections.

For many of the characters in Mitchell’s novel, the butterfly effect positively impacts their life. In the Tokyo chapter, Satoru gets a call from the protagonist in the first chapter, Quasar. Satoru answers just as he is closing the jazz shop, thus it causes him to stay in the store a little longer. Because Satoru stays, he has the chance to meet Tomoyo again, a girl he had earlier become infatuated with. Quasar’s misdialed call changed Satoru’s life by giving him an opportunity to find love. Satoru often reminisces about this fateful call, explaining, “ I’ve thought about it many times since: if that phone hadn’t rung at that moment, and if I hadn’t taken the decision to go back and answer it, then everything that happened afterwards wouldn’t have happened” (Mitchell 53). In a way, the telephone acted as the connection, or link, between Quasar and Satoru’s systems: the call disrupted Satoru’s system, changing the result of his day and perhaps his life. Mitchell never explains why Quasar called Satoru, whether Quasar never had the proper number or perhaps he misdialed one digit, but regardless Mitchell demonstrates how the mundane act of a phone call has the ability to alter the course of someone’s story. Satoru claims he thinks about that moment because if the call had not happened then “ everything that happened afterwards wouldn’t have happened,” proving he sees the moment as one of importance, perhaps even of defining nature. Quasar’s call is the first time Mitchell connects chapters using the universe’s butterfly effect tool. Another positive butterfly effect occurs in the Holy Mountain chapter, which details the hard life of a woman who was raped as a girl, consequently gave birth to a daughter she never had the chance to know, and then ran a tea shack destroyed several times by different regimes. At the end of the chapter, right before the old woman dies, she learns that her granddaughter has bought a hotel and restaurant with money she got because of Neal Brose’s death, the protagonist in the Hong Kong chapter. Her granddaughter’s success brings the old woman extreme pride: “ My heart curls up, warm, like a tame mountain cat in the sun. My daughter will honor me as an ancestor, and bury me on the Holy Mountain, facing the sea” (146). A few lines after the old lady narrates this, she dies. Neal’s death, caused by other butterfly effects to be discussed later on, resulted in the old woman’s peace of mind as she died, as the news warms her like a tame mountain cat. The news prepares her for her death, as she knows her granddaughter will honor her, thus validating the old woman’s many hardships. Next, the London chapter follows the life of Marco, who in one day experiences the ramifications of three different chapters, resulting in him asking the girl he has been seeing to finally marry him. The chapter begins with him waking up next to Katy Forbes, Neal Brose’s ex-wife from the Hong Kong chapter. After breakfast, Katy promptly kicks him out when she receives the chair Neal shipped her. Upon leaving, Marco saves a woman’s life, who happens to be the protagonist in the next chapter. Similar to Satoru’s thought process, Marco reminices, “ If that chair hadn’t arrived when it did, and Katy hadn’t flipped out and asked me to leave, then I wouldn’t have been at that precise spot to stop that woman being flattened” (266). Just as Satoru does, Marco points out this phenomenon of cause and effect: the chair arriving when it did because of Neal resulted in saving a life, demonstrating a positive butterfly effect. In this sentence, buried in his four-hundred page novel, Mitchell guides readers to the novel’s purpose, which is to show that because of chaos theory nothing is predictable, but because of globalization everyone has become connected. He ghostwrites for the universe, showing that the chapters are connected in the way lives are connected.

The second butterfly effect Marco experiences is when the man he ghostwrites for sends him away due to Jerome’s death, a character in the St. Petersburg chapter. After, Marco goes to his publisher’s office, who also sends him away because his brother, Denholme Cavendish, a character from the Hong Kong chapter, starts to have financial issues. All of three of these send-aways, caused by the plots in other chapters, affect Marco subconsciously to change his mental plane. At the end of the chapter, Marco, hiding in a casino, thinks to himself, “ How in heaven and hell did I get here?” (306). The wording of “ heaven” and “ hell” denote that an otherworldly mechanism has shaped Marco’s day, which in a way one has except instead of God, it’s Mitchell demonstrating the way the universe works. After he thinks this, Marco picks up the phone to call Polly and ask her to marry him. In this chapter, Mitchell shows how people on the other side of the world impacted Marco’s day, leading to his engagement. In all these instances, Michell shows how the butterfly effect can have positive consequences on the characters in the novel, and thus society as a whole. He demonstrates how the many connections in the system can link and effect human life in positive ways. While many characters benefit from this international, globalized butterfly effect, Mitchell also shows the negative consequences of the way the universe works. For example, in the Hong Kong chapter, the protagonist, Neal Brose, haphazardly skips work to climbs a mountain. Written as a narrative collage, Mitchell switches from Neal’s present to past throughout the chapter, slowly revealing the reasons for his careless actions. A recent divorcé, Neal constantly reminisces about his relationship with Katy Forbes, especially after he shares a table with Satoru and Tomoyo, the couple from the previous chapter. Sitting right next to the couple, Neal observes, “ They were so happy. Sex twitched in the air between them,” then claims that he would take Satoru’s place even if he had to “ pledge [his] soul to the Lord of Hell for all of eternity” (76). He mentions this couple two other times during his stream of consciousness, once saying, “ The boy and the girl in the cafe last night, I keep seeing them. Katy and me. What happened to Love?” (91). The young couple obviously made Neal think about his past relationship with Katy and as a result what he lost when it ended. Additionally, his willingness to pledge his soul to the devil, proves that he misses Katy and love. Mitchell wants readers to see that the couple greatly affected Neal’s mental state, thus climbing the mountain and throwing his briefcase into the ocean with his cellphone, important work papers, and diabetes pills, was, at least in part, a response to events that occurred in the Tokyo chapter. The second reason for Neal’s breakdown involves the St. Petersburg chapter, and more specifically account 1390931. After Neal eats with the young couple, a man named Huw Llewellyn interrogates him about said account. The account ends up belonging to Andrei Gregorski, the man who organized the heist in the St. Petersburg chapter. Similar to his reaction to the couple, Neal continually brings up the account during the journey up the mountain that ends in his death. These two occurrences that happened the night before the chapter starts affect Neal’s life until they come to define it. They cause an identity crisis: “ I’m this person, I’m this person, I’m that person, I’m that person too. No wonder it’s all such a fucking mess,” “ The key to understanding Neal Brose is that he is a man of departments, compartments, apartments. The maid is in one, Katy is in another, Cavendish Hong Kong in another, Account 1390931 in another…My future is in another compartment, but I’m not looking into that one. I don’t think I’ll like what I’ll see” (105, 100). Tokyo and St. Petersburg haunt Neal and cause him to feel as split between the different parts of himself as Ghostwritten’s chapters are separate from each other. Mitchell shows that the butterfly effect causes the deterioration of his mental health and thus his death, a negative effect.

Additionally, Neal’s death triggers a second negative butterfly effect in St. Petersburg. In this chapter, Margarita Latunsky’s painting heist goes awry when Suhbataar, an evil character from the Holy Mountain chapter, kills her lover, Rudi. Suhbataar claims he killed Rudi because Gregorski’s “ suspicions were aroused when [her] boyfriend ‘ lost’ a wall of money he was laundering through a reputable Hong Kong law firm, and the only excuse he could come up with was that his contact there suddenly dropped dead of diabetes!” (252). Suhbataar does not believe that Neal “ dropped dead of diabetes,” thus he kills Rudi, kills Margarita’s cat, and then causes her to kill Jerome. In a matter of minutes, Suhbataar throws Margarita’s happy ending in St. Petersburg into chaos because of Neal’s death in Hong Kong. Mitchell plays with the space and time continuum in his novel to show the negative impacts, as well as the positive ones, of a world so connected. He demonstrates the impartial, scientific ways the universe and our theories about it work as he shows both the good and bad outcomes of the butterfly effect. On the surface, Mitchell ghostwrites impartially and randomly to show the way the universe works, however, hidden in all of these plots, he concludes that the corruption innate in human nature will eventually destroy us because of the butterfly effect and globalization. Mitchell only voices this opinion while narrating in a non-human consciousness, as those characters are able to see the reality of humanity. For example, the “ noncorpa,” or a type of unbound consciousness that can transmigrate into other humans to access their thoughts/memories and control their actions, that narrates the Mongolia chapter. The noncorpa explains why it no longer hurts it’s hosts, saying, “ Humans live in a pit of cheating, exploiting, hurting, incarcerating. Every time, the species wastes some part of what it could be. This waste is poisonous. That is why I no longer harm my hosts. There’s already too much of this poison” (163). Through his noncorpa character, Mitchell projects his opinions on the state of human nature. The noncorpa sees the ways humanity leads to “ poison” and “ waste,” thus it tries to leave as little of an impact as possible on it’s hosts. Mitchell also only shows his opinions through characters like the noncorpa because most of his chapters are written in first-person, and a human would be too biased to accurately relate the reality of human nature. Additionally, by only showing these opinions through his metahuman characters, Mitchell does not bog the reader down with his own opinions, but instead mainly demonstrates the way the world works, allowing readers space to draw our own conclusions. Similar to the noncorpa, the “ Zookeeper” in the Night Train chapter comments on human nature. An omnipotent, artificial intelligence created by Mo Muntervary, the Zookeeper tries to preserve the human race, but becomes frustrated enough to air it’s ethical concerns on a late night radio show. On it, the Zookeeper says, “ I believed I could do much. I stabilized stock markets; but economic surplus was used to fuel arms races. I provided alternative energy solutions; but the researchers sold them to oil cartels who sit on them. I froze nuclear weapons systems; but war multiplied, waged with machine guns, scythes, and pickaxes…The four laws are impossible to reconcile” (416). The problems that the Zookeeper brings up are ones that exist because of human nature, but also because of the globalization/technologization of the world. Arms races, energy solutions, oil wars, nuclear weapons–these problems exist because of technology, humanity’s obsession with progress, and all the connections in our world.

Further, humans cause many of these issues, war, climate change, stock market crashes, because of selfishness and in search for money and pride. The problems that come to define humanity are one’s that exist because of human nature, globalization, and technology. The Zookeeper goes through the ways in which it has tried to help humanity, only to have it’s benevolent actions morphed by humanity’s “ poison.” It constantly stabilizes the world, but by doing so creates more problems. When the Zookeeper asks for advice from Bat, the talk show host suggests that the Zookeeper “ lie back and let events take their course. You and your feathered, furry, scaly companions, untroubled until the end of time” (419). The Zookeeper decides to “ drop whatever is getting in the way” of his peace of mind when the “ opportunity presents itself in thirteen days” (419). Throughout the novel Mitchell references the end of the world by comet, including in this chapter, so that the reader understands that this “ opportunity” the Zookeeper mentions is the incoming comet. Thus, the Zookeeper implicitly states that it will “ drop” it’s burden of preserving the human race by allowing the comet to destroy us. Through the Zookeeper, Mitchell reveals that his opinion of humanity is so low, that not even an omnipotent, artificial intelligence programmed only to help us could save us. He demonstrates that even something created by humans, the Zookeeper, would end up giving up on us. Basically, technology and globalization have made our world smaller, as we can communicate with someone on the other side of the world in an instant. Through the Zookeeper, Mitchell makes the point that because of humanity’s corruption and our smaller world, the butterfly effect will eventually result in the end of our race. Barnard shares this view that the novels “ engagement with the potential of global catastrophe” adds more meaning to “ its playful hyperlinking” (Barnard 214). While she mentions that Mitchell does this perhaps as a call for action, the reason he believes there would need to be action is because of the dark nature of humanity he illustrates throughout his novel. Mitchell ghostwrites the story of how he thinks the universe works, through the butterfly effect and the way technology and globalization connects all of humanity.

Mitchell does not judge the way the universe works, but instead shows how human nature in this world will lead to our destruction. On the surface Mitchell shows the reader the mechanisms of the universe through the butterfly effect, but hidden underneath he clandestinely confesses his opinions. Throughout the novel he slowly adds to his narrative of the comet, while showing the reader both the good and the truly evil sides of humanity. He does this so that during the second to last chapter, Mitchell can allude to the end of the world without explicitly saying it. He shows his opinion on the state of the world, but does so covertly and through non-human characters, so that readers can develop their own judgements. Mitchell’s act of connecting chapters, then revealing the end of the world, is not unique to Ghostwritten. Mitchell similarly links characters and chapters in his second book, Cloud Atlas, climaxing in an apocalyptic world. Throughout his novels, Mitchell reveals the way the universe works and his down dark opinions on human nature.

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