

FOREWORD

Julian Mitchell is a writer of many talents and much wit. He began his literary career by publishing poetry and editing a poetry magazine while still at Oxford, produced several successful novels during the 1960s, and then abandoned fiction for the theatre, screen-writing, film and television. He suffers from an embarrassment of riches, and those of us who enjoyed and admired his fiction were sorry when he gave it up. He has given various reasons for this decision, and it may be that in his last novel, *The Undiscovered Country*, which appeared in 1968, he felt that he had explored the limits of the genre to his own satisfaction. He has always had a restless and enquiring mind, and has been more eager to move on than to look back and rest on his laurels.

The Undiscovered Country is a startling and innovative work, quite unlike anything he had written before, and unlike the experimental fiction that was being written at that time. It is original both in form and in content. The first half of the book appears to be a first-person memoir which opens with a description of the author's days at prep school, where he forms a close, admiring and entangled friendship with his hero and 'alter-ego', a boy called Charles Humphries, a child unusually blessed, we are told, with 'four living parents' – a characteristically intriguing phrase. The story moves on through public school to Mitchell's National Service as a submariner, studies at Oxford, an Aldermaston CND march, travels in America, work at the BBC, and the beginnings of a successful literary career, punctuated by occasional sightings of Charles, who has taken a somewhat different path. The narrator, 'Julian Mitchell', speaks in his own voice, mentions real people (some famous, some tangential), and describes experiences recognisable, historically, as his own, yet we sense that his friend

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and creation Charles inhabits a different realm of reality. The resultant mix of levels and identities is challenging, entertaining and disconcerting. The documentary aspects of the memoir go far beyond the playful postmodern tricks of writers who more recently have introduced themselves as characters or commentators in their own work: this is a wholesale, thorough deception, done with all the conviction of a faithful keeper of a diary. This is a circumstantial account of the 1960s as they were, and as we remember them. (It also manifests Mitchell's exceptional gift for puns, both good and bad.)

But the events of the 1960s are not the subject of the book. The second half of it, written in a completely different tone and key, is allegedly the transcription of an unfinished and fragmentary novel left by Charles to Julian after his death by suicide. This is based on the *Satyricon*, an extravagantly homoerotic classical text by Petronius dating from the decadent reign of Nero, which is also fragmentary in the form in which we know it. In this section, Mitchell ventures into another world of the surreal, the pornographic, the carnivalesque, as Charles describes his picaresque wanderings through a mysterious Kafkaesque hotel in a mysterious country (is it America?) in search of an ideal, beautiful, ever evasive and sex-changing lover. Events in Petronius are mirrored, and so is his wildly various style, which ranged from plebeian prose to mock heroic to verse, and was larded with *doubles entendres* and puns: Mitchell uses, as did his model, pastiche, parody, encapsulated short stories (including a sad one about extinct ducks) and comic-satiric onslaughts on contemporary art and literature. It is a bravura and inventive text. But it is more than that.

The theme of identity and gender came to prominence in the 1960s, both in literature and legislature, as women's groups and the Campaign for Homosexual Equality fought to redefine who we were and who we thought we were and who we had a right to be. Charles's sexual encounters in the underworld, and his

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fantastic confrontations with both mother and father figures, take us on an exotic journey in search of the self, as Mitchell travels through a succession of styles of living and writing. We recognise the Beatniks, the political activists of the barricades, the dramaturges of Peter Brook's *Theatre of Cruelty*, and, in a parody of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, the pioneers of what came to be called Pink Power. Abraham and Isaac and Oedipus also play their part in the cavalcade.

Homosexuality had been partly legalised in 1967 by the Sexual Offences Act, following the Wolfenden Report and a long public campaign, and this material was topical, although still highly controversial – we were a long way from the freedoms of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming Pool Library* (1988), towards which some of Mitchell's subterranean sequences seem to point. It is relevant to note that in 2007 Mitchell wrote a highly-praised documentary TV drama called *Consenting Adults*, which dramatised the relationship between Wolfenden and his gay son Jeremy. Mitchell's own father thought homosexuality a crime, and did not speak to him for two years after he got wind, at his club, of the contents of *The Undiscovered Country*. Times have changed.

But this is not a campaigning work, nor even a reflection of the zeitgeist, although it serves as both. (Fellini's great film, the *Satyricon*, appeared a year after Mitchell's version, in 1969, and I cherish the probably erroneous view that he was prompted to it not wholly by Petronius, but also by being alerted to Mitchell's novel, which would then have been doing the rounds of the screen agencies. Both are very much of their time, as well as lasting works of art.) It is also an attempt, through multiple refractions, to arrive at an inner truth of the divided self. Mitchell has often said that irony is a danger to writers as well-read and as aware of the ridiculous as he is, but here, through excess of parody, he reached a mysterious equilibrium and a poignant sense of the human quest.

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There is one image in this book that haunted me when I first read it, and does still. In a trout stream in Gloucestershire at the end of his parents' garden, he tells us, lived a solitary goldfish. No one knew how it got there, and the young Julian hoped it was happy there. Perhaps it thought it was a trout. 'Nature', says Mitchell the novelist, 'provides me with a thousand metaphors each day. And there was a goldfish in the pool below the bridge.' I could not resist asking him, when I met him, whether there really was a goldfish swimming amidst the trout. 'Of course', he said. But of course, to this day, I do not know whether to believe him or not. I do not know whether the goldfish and Charles were real. And that, to me, is a sign of the book's ongoing life.

Margaret Drabble
London, May 2010