

A close-up portrait of David Mitchell, showing his eyes, nose, and a full beard and mustache. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

David Mitchell
Back Story

A Memoir

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For VC (M)

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Introduction

This is one of those misery memoirs. And it's one of those celebrity memoirs. It's also a very personal journey, a manual for urban ramblers and a weight-loss guide. Surely it'll sell?

I realise the whole 'Let me tell you about my pain' thing is a classic envy-avoidance technique. What it's saying is: if you envy me my interesting job, my relative affluence and moderate fame, then don't. Because I struggle daily with a dark and terrible problem. With some it's drugs, abuse, depression, the loss of loved ones, the terrible illness of a child – well, you can't have it all, I suppose, and so I've made do with a bad back.

What do you reckon to that then, envious!? Eh? You want to swap!? Ow, my back! You want to swap places!? Well go ahead, if you like terrible pain and misery, hardly assuaged at all by getting to be on TV! Eek, my poor spine! You want to take my place in the horror dome!? Ow, it's creaking and spasming! Well, make my day! By which I mean life!

I'm assuming here that my life is enviable enough to require this mitigating strategy. Well, I admit it – I think it is. Aside from being born into the free and affluent West and never having had to worry about food, shelter and warmth, I do basically think I'm a jammy sod. I'm not saying there aren't things that worry and upset me a lot, but I reckon everyone gets that. And I make a very good living doing something I love, a state of affairs that tends to be envied by those who don't share it. Of course there will be loads of people who don't envy me at all. I probably envy *them*. I expect they'll have all yachts and kids and stuff.

What this book isn't is one of those novels by David Mitchell. You know, David Mitchell the novelist. I'm sure he would never allow a sentence with 'isn't is' in it like that. Everyone says he's a very good novelist but I've never checked, partly because I resent him for sharing my name without asking and partly because I do a lot of my novel reading on the Tube and it would feel weird to be reading a book with my name on it in public. If one of the people who conflate me and the novelist saw that, they'd think I was sitting there *reading my own book*. 'He might as well spend the whole journey admiring his own reflection in a hand mirror,' such a person might think.

David Miliband is such a person (although he might take a less than averagely dim view of narcissism). I was once in a London park, on a crisp winter afternoon, feeding some bread to the ducks with a girl, when David Miliband wandered up with his kids. He stood there, a couple of yards behind us, for what felt like minutes. He was playing with his children in the park at the

weekend, like a perfectly normal husband and father, who is being portrayed by a power-crazed Martian.

The woman I was with urgently wanted us to say hello. She was all interested, I don't know why. I couldn't see the point in bothering him. I thought it would be embarrassing. I was right.

'Oh, you're David Mitchell,' said David Miliband, adding politely to my companion: 'I love his books.'

This was nice of him. But it was a complicated moment. He can't have known that there were a comedian and a novelist both called David Mitchell and mistaken me for the other one, because he recognised my face. He must have just assumed we were the same person.

Or he knew perfectly well I was only the comedian, and had particularly enjoyed *This Mitchell and Webb Book*, my most recent publication at the time. In fact, my only publication at the time. But he'd said 'books'. Perhaps he was looking ahead? Yes, that must be it. He was so confident he'd enjoy my future volumes, he was already able to say he loves them. Thinking about it, I'd have been quite justified in putting that quote on the cover.

But I'm not the novelist, I'm the one who's a bit known from TV. And of course there are millions of other David Mitchells who are neither. Was it the pain of my slightly problem back that gave me the need, the will and the focus to become one of the David Mitchells that potential Prime Ministers mistake for one of the others? Was it because I was maddened yet driven by a constant sciatic throb that I was able to conceive of sketches and characters that were marginally more amusing than those of people who didn't end up on TV? Is it the desire to get up and stretch that inspires my trademark panel show 'rants'? Would I happily exchange all the success for a less problematic spine? Or is my aching back so completely a part of me that, metaphorically bitter and literally twisted though it makes me, I wouldn't change it if I could? Do I, as Captain Kirk said in *Star Trek V*, 'need my pain'?

You will find the answers to all those questions in this book. Indeed in this section. On this very page. In this paragraph. In fact, in two words' time. It is 'No.' To all of them.

I know what you're thinking. Why didn't BBC Four snap this up? It would make a cracking documentary. Good point. It would be gold dust. Me moaning about my back, pottering around stiffly, interviewing other people about their niggles, talking to specialists, shaking my head with concern as I'm told about the annual man-hours lost nationally, before suddenly putting an anguished hand to a cricked neck. They could even have clips of *The Simpsons*, for God's sake. That episode where Homer goes to the chiropractor.

But no, when it comes to celebrities moaning about their problems, they only want to hear about depression and madness. The liberal media have a tremendous bias in favour of disorders of the nervous system's cerebral centre rather than its provincial offshoots. It's London-centricity made anatomical and there was no shifting any TV commissioner to the Salford that is my spine.

Yet, let me tell you, back pain is a fascinating topic – as long as it's your own. It may not be *fun* to think about, largely because it happens in the context of nagging back pain – it's like trying to solve an engrossing country house murder while gradually being murdered yourself – but it's never boring.

That was my situation in 2007. It was really worrying me. I tried everything. By which I mean, I tried some things. You can't try everything. The world is full of evangelists – people who are convinced the answer lies in acupuncture, chiropractic, osteopathy, physiotherapy, cod liver oil or changing the pocket you keep your wallet in. I tried some remedies, and felt guilty that I wasn't trying more, but also tired because the condition stopped me sleeping properly. Even Poirot's little grey cells might have misfired if he was being occasionally bonked on the head by an invisible candlestick as he tried to address the suspects.

I took note of the things that I wanted to hear (such as 'you can fix it by sitting on a ball') and not the things I didn't (such as 'you might need a major operation') – like you do when you're infatuated with someone and can't yet bring yourself to draw the dispiriting conclusion that they don't fancy you. That would mean you'd have to start the incredibly unpleasant process of getting over them. In those circumstances – and I feel this gives an insight into the mentality of the stalker – you treasure any sign of affection or kindness and build great castles of reason around them in your mind: how could they possibly have said that, smiled then, noticed this, if they didn't on some level return your feelings? Meanwhile you ignore the overwhelming body of evidence of their indifference and the fact that they're often really quite pleasant to a wide range of people without that meaning they'd ever be willing to have sex with them. (More of this later.)

It's a sign of how deep my despair became, and yet how stubbornly I avoided dealing with the subject via official medical channels because of my weird fear of doctors and hospitals, that I started sitting on a ball – and indeed that I still sit on a ball, that I'm sitting on a ball as I write this. A giant inflatable yoga ball. Apologies if that's shattered your image of me lounging in a Jacuzzi smoking a cigar while dictating these words to an impatient and topless Hungarian supermodel. But, no, I'm perched alone on a preposterous piece of back-strengthening furniture in my bedroom in Kilburn surrounded by dusty

piles of books and old souvenirs from the Cambridge Footlights.

You have no idea how greatly sitting on a ball offends me aesthetically and challenges my sense of who I am. Or maybe you do. After all, you have bought a book written by me – you're probably aware of my tweedy image. You've probably guessed that all things 'new age' tend to make me raise a sceptical eyebrow. And a sceptical fist, which I bang sceptically on the table while wryly starting a sceptical chant of 'Fuck off! Fuck off! Fuck off!' before starting sceptically to throw stuff and scream: 'You can shove your trendy scientifically unsubstantiated bullshit up your uncynical anuses!'

To me, sitting on a ball feels a bit wind chimes. It's got a touch of the homeopathic about it. In homeopathic terms: a massive overdose. It smacks of wheat intolerance. Which, to me, smacks of intolerance. And I'm very intolerant of it.

The other major lifestyle change I adopted was walking. That was the only thing about which there appeared to be any consensus among the people offering me advice: that walking, even if it hurt, always helped. Resting, oddly, did not. Resting oddly certainly didn't. (Take that, Lynne Truss!) Walking was something I could do. This was so much more approachable as a solution than either the conventional medicine route (doctors, painkillers, scans, scalpels, unconsciousness) or any of the trendier alternatives, a lot of which – yoga and pilates, for example – seemed to involve going to classes.

I don't think men can really go to yoga classes, can they? I mean, it would be weird. All the women would just think you were there in the hope of a covert ogle or to hit on them afterwards. This is what I had always suspected until I was talking to a female friend about yoga. It was a group conversation in the pub. She was extolling the virtues of her yoga classes and saying how everyone should go until one of the men present asked: 'But wouldn't it be weird for a man?'

She seemed surprised. She thought for a moment. Then she said: 'Yes, you're right. It would be really weird. I was just recommending it because I go and I like it. But, no, of course if a man turned up, we'd all assume he was a pervert.'

But you seldom get called a pervert just for walking, unless you're naked and circling a primary school. So I started to walk, first for half an hour and then for an hour every day, and let me tell you it has cured my back. I get the occasional niggle, but then, who doesn't? But it doesn't feel fragile any more and I can bend down without having to take a few minutes to plan.

That's the main advantage. There's a secret other one, which is that I've lost about two stone in weight. But that's incidental. I refuse to let myself be

pleased about it. Or rather I'm in total denial of how pleased I am about it. I don't want to think of myself as that vain – or to admit that I'd even noticed the lamentable chubbiness that encroached over successive *Peep Show* series. If it made me a bit trimmer, that's a happy accident. Not even that, an irrelevant accident. I'm not the sort of person to care about that sort of thing: I don't go to gyms or diet. I fear that calorie counting, if I ever tried it, would be a short hop from powdering my wig, dousing myself in scent and speaking French to passers-by. I just take a daily constitutional. In a British sort of way.

And it turns out that I like walking. I find it relaxing – differently from, if not necessarily more than, watching television. It gives me some time to think, without the self-consciousness of having set aside some time to think. I find I'm more aware of the weather and the seasons and I have a much greater knowledge of the city I live in. If ignorance of one-way systems and not having a driving licence weren't a handicap, I'd be able to qualify as a taxi driver.

In this book, I'll take you on one of my walks – and I promise I won't go on about my back. It's a walk through my life, really, but I'll try to point out some of the notable London landmarks along the way so you can use it as a travel guide if you prefer. But it's basically a weight-loss manual.