

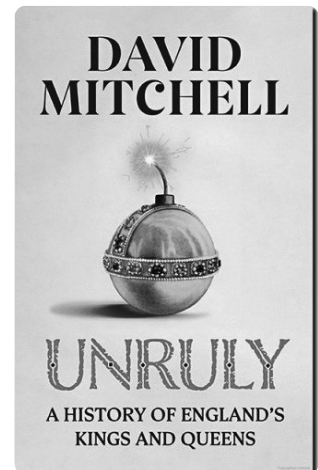
from

Unruly, A History of England's Kings and Queens

by David Mitchell

1. King Arthur

- (1) He didn't exist. That's the headline. It's a disappointing start, I know, but it's an early sign of how tricky history can be. England's (though more usually Britain's, but often Wales's and Cornwall's, sometimes Brittany's) most famous king turns out to be fictional. That's putting it politely. Gandalf is fictional. King Arthur is a lie.
- (2) Some people will still say he might have existed, but the sort of person they say he might have been is so far removed from King Arthur in any of the forms we understand him that it feels like they are saying, 'Oh yeah, there was a real Superman except he didn't have any actual superpowers and he dressed as a bat.'
- (3) For the avoidance of doubt, and of a catastrophic collapse in readers' confidence in the first chapter, let me make clear that I realize Batman also did not exist.
- (4) Who do people say 'the real' King Arthur might have been? Perhaps a Roman officer who served in Britain, or a Romano-British chieftain, or a Welsh king — some senior figure who lived at any point from the third to the sixth century (the 200s to the 500s). Someone like that, the idea goes, might have been the bit of real grit in the imagination oyster that turned into the Arthurian pearl.
- (5) Personally, I don't think imagination oysters need real grit any more than metaphorical bonnets need real bees. What caused the Arthur pearl was the persistent longing of humans, of almost all eras and cultures, to hark back to something better. It's a far more enduring psychological habit than a belief in progress. People found it much easier to believe in a rose-tinted view of the past than a utopian future. 35: hence 'Take Back Control' and 'Make America Great Again.'
- (6) For most of the period covered by this book, any claims or attempts by leaders to change or improve things are most persuasively labelled, to the people of the time, as restorations of some kind. Saying that something was totally new often played badly. The ultimate, most glorious restoration would be to the golden age of King Arthur.



- (7) We get most of our sense of King Arthur from Geoffrey of Monmouth, who completed his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain) in 1138, and from Sir Thomas Malory, whose fifteenth-century *Le Morte d'Arthur* (The Death of Arthur) was, in 1485, one of the first books to be printed in England. That gave the Arthur myth wider circulation. There's now been so much talk about King Arthur over the centuries that many people feel, like they do with ghosts, that 'there must be something in it.' There is: it just happens to be deep-seated psychological need rather than historical reality.
- (8) The story of Arthur reflects our longing, as a species, for the ancient, concealed and magical. Towards the end of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Malory suggests the title 38: 'Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had gone by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place; and...many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: Hic jacet Arthurus, Rex quondam, Rexque futurus' (Here lies Arthur, the once and future king).