

The Power of Memory and Place

The Weirdstone of Brisingamen, The Moon of Gomrath, Elidor, The Owl Service, Red Shift, Collected Folk Tales, Alan Garner (HarperCollins)

A Year in the Country: Lost Transmissions, Stephen Price (A Year in the Country)

Time Lords and Star Cops: British Science Fiction in the 1970s-80s, Philip Braithwaite (Manchester University Press)

Alan Garner finally got some kind of belated recognition in 2022 by being shortlisted for the Booker Prize. It seemed unlikely that he would win on the back of the strange novella *Treacle Walker* (and he didn't), but it did act as a reminder to readers that he was still out there, actively engaging with myth, place and time through writing fiction.

HarperCollins have just reissued six of Garner's books, in beautiful moody new covers: his first five novels and a more recent anthology of retold folk tales. Garner tends to be dismissive of both *The Weirdstone* and *The Moon of Gomrath*, his first two books, perhaps rightly so as their sometimes rather Tolkienesque adventures and encounters are not his best. Fairly soon after their initial success the author allowed himself the luxury of deleting adjectives, which certainly helped, but their narrative arcs are somewhat straightforward and most problems seem to produce fairly immediate answers.

However, both books contain wonderful evocations of Alderley Edge and other Cheshire locations, and Chapter 14 of *The Weirdstone*, 'The Earldelving', contains the most horrific and frightening journey through a small tunnel I know of. Claustrophobic, dark and dangerous, the weight of the earth above the waterlogged escape route presses down on the reader, their imagination and dreams for years after. It is the stuff of nightmares.

Elidor is partly set in the demolition sites of Manchester, as traditional housing is levelled, the other part in the land of Elidor. Four children find what is junk in the 20th century and treasure in Elidor, and fight to return it. Some critics regard it as a nihilistic text, others a downbeat epiphany; either way, it is evocative and well written, although this edition contains an unnecessary and condescending foreword which tells the reader 'Why You'll Love This Book', and a mostly unnecessary set of additional material at the back which apart from a 'Note from the author' is the usual irrelevant mix of obvious notes and advertising publishers feel they need to put in children's books.

Garner's next book, *The Owl Service*, is – again – unnecessarily bigged up by Philip Pullman, and is a very different kind of work. Channelling a story from *The Mabinigion*, a collection of 12th and 13th century Welsh folk tales, the novel (as well as the brilliant accompanying TV series) explores how past events can reoccur, because of the power of memory and place, the tensions and destructive energies of class, sexuality and colonization. (In this instance, Wales by the English.) There is misunderstanding and magic too, but this is a very different magic from the wizardry of *The Weirdstone*, this is myth reincarnate, possession

and re-enactment. Garner says it is 'a kind of ghost story'; the closing paragraph, one of healing and release, is one of Garner's finest pieces of writing.

The Owl Service was praised at the time, although some critics felt the story lacked clarity and would confuse young readers. In response, Garner noted that he had never said his writing was for children, and his next book proved it. Although I read *Red Shift* when it came out in the early 1970s, so that its (then) contemporary love story resonated with and moved the teenage me, its entwining of three different stories continues to confuse many readers, especially those who cling to traditional narrative techniques and expectations.

Each of the stories are linked in various ways: by a stone axe which passes through all the time zones of the book, by astronomy and cosmology, by desire, violence, and madness. In the Roman period the axe is a sacred object which causes Macey to go berserk (although he regrets blooding it) and it is he who takes care of the corn goddess his fellow soldiers have raped and mutilated in their encampment, having gone missing from the Ninth Legion before 'going tribal'. In the Civil War the rediscovered axe is a lucky charm, a thunderstone, and Thomas has fits and sees visions rather than going berserk; both he and his counterpart, another Thomas, on the opposing side, are or have been in love with Margery. In 1970s England, Tom and Jan try to maintain a relationship that has to deal with separation, class boundaries, and Tom's inability to express himself (we might regard him as autistic or having ADHD now) and also see that the re-found axe is more than just a museum specimen for Jan. Themes including sanctuary, love, possession, violence, home and relationships are played out mostly against re-occurring landscapes and places in Cheshire: Barthomley, Mow Cop, Crewe and Rudheath.

Areas of Cheshire are what have fuelled most of Garner's fiction since. They are all actual places, all have 'true' stories or folk tales attached to them. You can see civil war bullet holes at Barthomley church, you can visit the folly on Mow Cop and see where mill stones used to be cut, Rudheath is historically documented as a 'secular sanctuary'. Garner's house in Cheshire is opposite Jodrell Bank's radio telescopes, built from two ancient buildings combined and now partly houses The Blackden Trust. His family history is intricately bound up with the surrounding area, and he wrote about them in *The Stone Quartet*, a beautiful quiet collection about craftsmanship, place and belonging.

Collected Folk Tales gathers up previously published work from *The Hamish Hamilton Book of Goblins* and more recent writing. It is a collection of archetypal stories, that is examples of re-occurring types, the same elements re-arranged and retold to suit the location or teller. It is clear these and other stories inform and underpin Garner's fictions. (He has spoken, for instance, about how *The Guizer*, a collection of trickster tales, informed *Red Shift*.) But they are not any kind of key or explanation to his writing, for Garner himself cannot explain the triggers and obsessions which occur when a novel is precipitated and he goes into research mode, sometimes for months or years on end, in an attempt to put off the actual writing.

Although this sometimes feels like an author not willing to accept responsibility for what they have written, or a romanticised explanation of 'inspiration', it may also explain why Garner's books remain so intriguing, however many times they are re-read. I am still finding out things about *Red Shift*, having been reading it for 40 years and teaching it as a set text at university for 15 years. How does one write about cosmological time (the term red shift is to do with colour shifts in relation to objects moving away in time & space) or evoke the way that places seem haunted by the past? How *are* we affected by where we live or visit, or from what we remember of our past, be that individual, familial or communal?

These are the kind of questions which Stephen Prince continues to try and answer in his ongoing project A Year in the Country, which is a blog, a music label and a series of books. *Lost Transmissions*, the most recent, is subtitled and blurbed as 'Dystopic Visions, Alternate Realities, Paranormal Quests and Exploratory Electronica', a delicious, heady mix. It also happens to consider Alan Garner's work.

It has to be said that Prince seems to think that 'Hauntology' can be defined by what evidences and examples it, rather than in a more theoretical terminology or useful way. His Introduction does *not* define the term, despite claiming to, but it does usefully flag up the way he works, seeing his job 'to highlight and connect often quite disparate seeming areas of culture.' When he writes and considers his subjects at length these connections are fascinating, but the briefer chapters are often somewhat simplistic and regurgitate somewhat obvious ideas or summaries. This is annoying, as is his inability to differentiate half-em dashes from hyphens.

But never mind. We get often illuminating and original insights into clusters of sometimes disparate material, which Prince quite rightly feels able to digress and tangent from when he wants to. So the opening chapter, one of the longer and best, uses a discussion of individual TV programmes from the several series of *Leap in the Dark*, to discuss 'The Rise of the Paranormal'. Since the writers of the remaining online programmes are by Alan Garner, Russell Hoban, Davis Rudkin and Fay Weldon, the discussion is able to include *The Owl Service*, Hoban's *Riddley Walker* and Rudkin's *Panda's Fen* as well as the texts under discussion. We also get a much wider consideration of the context for such subject matter: encyclopedias of the occult and Colin Wilson's books, along with the fact that the online versions are themselves degraded, something that hauntologists love.

However, it's hard to see why the likes of The Ghost Box label, whose music releases relish the use of crackle and old samples, or Polish film posters of a certain era, are valued alongside far more seminal work by the likes of Nigel Kneale. Sometimes the *patina* of something – the (often added) hiss and analogue decay of a recording – seems to be confused with the product or content. I like the music of both Burial and Boards of Canada, who are each the subject of brief chapters, but I find it hard to know why they are included here. Both are popular artists but neither have little do with, say, 1960s TV or the Cold War, two other re-occurring frames of reference.

More original is the grouping of the films *Rollerball*, *The Anderson Tapes* and *Three Days of the Condor* to discuss dystopias and paranoia, as well as ways of telling or constructing narratives. For me, *Rollerball* remains one of the most convincing depictions of the natural conclusion of what we now call neoliberal capitalism: governments replaced by businesses, the suppression of the individual, with women regarded as 'furniture', and the return of gladiatorial sport for emotional and violent release. I seem to remember it was used for Sociology lessons at one point. The contrast of this with the surveillance documentation that is used to tell *The Anderson Tapes* is inspired.

It is because Prince can be so original and interesting that I wish his books were more than gathering-ups of his blog material. Some more thinking and further research, along with a more established overview and argument, would make for even better publications.

This overview is something that Philip Braithwaite definitely has. Unfortunately, however, his idea of science fiction is incredibly traditional and narrow. I'm really not interested in *Blakes 7* or *Doctor Who*, and I have always found *Sapphire & Steel*, a programme also written about by Stephen Prince, unwatchable. Fortunately for me, the first chapter spends some time discussing Gerry Anderson's under-rated *UFO* and *Space: 1999* series, as well as *Quatermass*; and the chapters on *Blake's 7* and *Dr Who* are at least discussed through political context: 'and Thatcherism' and 'in the late Thatcher era' respectively.

Whilst I longed for a wider definition of science fiction and the inclusion of more obscure TV films, series and experiments, the discussions of Americanisation, social and financial crisis, and the rise of neoliberalism, are carefully used here to underpin the discussion, albeit in a rather dry manner. What the book doesn't do, which Prince's does, is persuade me to watch and reconsider the programmes.

Rupert Loydell

(1935 words)