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## "This Hill is Still Dangerous": Alan Garner's Weirdestone Trilogy - A Hauntology

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In Alan Garner's 1973 young adult novel *Red Shift*, young couple Tom and Jan arrange to meet in the small town of Crewe. There, Tom observes that Crewe's centre, filled with shops, is "Ultimate reality. That's why we can't touch it. Each of these shops is full of every aspect of one part of existence. Woolworth's is a tool shed; Boots, a bathroom; the British Home Stores, a wardrobe. And we walk through it all, but we can't clean our teeth, or mend a fuse, or change our socks. You'd starve in this supermarket. It's all so real, we're shadows."<sup>1</sup> Tom is troubled by the apparent power of an ever-growing commodity culture to render he and Jan insubstantial, useless, hungry, as if they were ghosts. They might occupy the same space as the brand name shops in all their convenience and modernity, but their bodies apparently remain distant. Worse, the shops are understood as so insistently real that Tom and Jan are left questioning their own status; they are marginal, no more than shadows. Readers are encouraged to agree. The life espoused by the chain stores on the High Streets is inadequate.

Tom's complaint resonates with the growing gloom that characterised popular British discourses on society, culture and the imminent future in the early seventies,<sup>2</sup> but also illuminates problems that inform Garner's earlier work, including his 1960 debut *The Weirdestone of Brisingamen* and its 1963 sequel, *The Moon of Gomrath*. These books respond to Britain's growing modernity by ignoring it, turning their back on the life of the present, of cities and towns, in favour of a wistful anachronism. In Garner, ghosts emerge when the present is unsatisfactory, when the past must be called up. The books begin by transferring Colin and Susan, the young heroes of the sequence, to Alderley Edge in Cheshire and a farmhouse with no electricity. There, they live with Gowther and Bess Mossock, who run a horse and cart rather than a car. As they explore the landscape about the farmhouse, the children encounter a series of personae and creatures drawn from Anglo Saxon and Celtic legend. These are understood as creatures from a treasured, storybook past; the books insist on a division between the 'modern' present of its readers and the alternative, timeless life on the Edge. In *The Moon of Gomrath*, the wizard Cadellin notes that people have become separated from the creatures of legend because the 'Age of Reason' – post Enlightenment modernity – cannot safely treat the 'wild forces' that these legendary figures entail. The

creatures of this other world ‘withdrew from mankind and became a memory, and, with the years, a superstition, ghosts and terrors for a winter’s night, and later a mockery and a disbelief.’<sup>3</sup> These are the presences which populate the Edge. Despite his acute interest in the landscape and lore of this place, Garner’s writing is not exactly regionalism. He has little interest in describing the Edge as it has become, an affluent ‘Wag paradise’. Garner himself describes it as ‘fake’,<sup>4</sup> although one imagines this is the sort of fake that has the oppressive power of the ‘ultimate reality’ depicted in *Red Shift*.

Jacques Derrida, quoting *Hamlet*, suggested that ‘hauntology’ is a way of addressing the perception that ‘time is out of joint’.<sup>5</sup> ‘Hauntology’ describes a cluster of ideas, critical discourses and artistic practices that have grown around Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*. In Derrida’s native French, the word becomes a pun on ‘ontology’; thus it articulates haunted ways of being. Perhaps too foggy to truly cohere as a ‘theory’, hauntology has gathered a small but substantial interest amongst cultural theorists since the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> The term itself permits us to speak of hauntology as if it were a solidified set of ideas, and the growing body of writing which takes up the term seems to confirm this; yet this degree of certitude can hardly be the case. Hauntology is a pun, although rather wonderfully, it is a pun that does not quite function in translation, so that in English at least, it is a term already ‘out of joint’ with itself. Moreover, Derrida notes that scholars ‘are not always in the most competent position to do what is necessary: speak to the specter... A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts... There has never been a scholar who... does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being...’<sup>7</sup> Difficult as this prospect is, it is nevertheless the territory that Garner depicts. Colin, by the time of *Boneland* – the third book in the trilogy, published unexpectedly in 2012 – is an astrophysicist who has received degrees in theology, anthropology and other disciplines,<sup>8</sup> a figure who has inherited the legacy of the Enlightened west, and he eventually converses with the ghost of his sister.

Hauntology is characterised by a knot of themes and interests; in mourning, in present absences, in inheritance. It understands the ghost both as an ‘actuality’ and as a metaphor.<sup>9</sup> Hauntology suggests a palimpsestic ‘now’ that is frequently oriented towards the past, an arrangement that is a ‘[s]taging for the end of history’;<sup>10</sup> in making this observation, Derrida was referring specifically to the condition of Europe after the collapse of communism, but the term is now used to discuss a much wider range of twentieth and twenty-first century phenomena. Certainly, the concerns of hauntology characterise the novels of the *Weirdstone*

trilogy. The Edge is a place where time is out of joint; where the adult Colin mourns his vanished sister; where inheritances – the weirdstone, the Mark of Fohla, the primitive axe – signal wider heritages. In Alderley, ‘...there are memories about the Old Magic that wake when it moves... they are fickle, and wrong for these times...’<sup>11</sup> Garner’s landscape is haunted by presences that do not quite belong in the present. ‘Now’ in Garner signifies a moment sometimes extended over thousands of years, a point underlined in *Boneland*, when Colin notes that the starlight we perceive twinkling in the sky ‘now’ is in fact millions of years old; Meg, ostensibly his psychologist, declares ‘now’ an ‘impossibility’.<sup>12</sup>

Mark Fisher suggests that hauntology describes a ‘confrontation with a cultural impasse: the failure of the future.’<sup>13</sup> This is the confrontation that *Red Shift*’s Tom perceives as having spectral consequence. Contrarily, as a way of avoiding the substance of contemporary Britain that *Red Shift* describes, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath* call upon ghosts to populate the Edge. Industrial modernity is inimical to these revenants, for the ‘dirt and ugliness and unclean air that men have worshipped these two hundred years’ creates a ‘smoke-sickness’ amongst some of them.<sup>14</sup> Yet as frightening as these ghosts can be, the earlier books are animated by the dangerous joy of the children’s adventures. *Boneland*’s adult Colin, conversely, occupies the failing future where he is a mentally fragile loner. His doctors suggest electroconvulsive therapy. Colin, who cannot remember the life he lived as a child, is nevertheless haunted by his earlier experience of haunting; he hears voices and sees ghosts. Genuine crisis rather than adventure is depicted.

Just as Colin is haunted by his own past, the publication of *Boneland* directs readers back to the first two books of the trilogy, placing them in a curious twilight, the hour between dog and wolf. It makes unexpected shapes visible in the earlier narratives, and unsettles any attempt to use them as objects that might allow the exercise of readerly nostalgia. *Boneland*’s late publication and its generic transformation – it is a novel for adults rather than for children – creates a space in which adult readers are directed towards and haunted by their earlier lives as readers.

Garner, alongside contemporaries like Susan Cooper and Diana Wynne Jones, is considered an author of ‘modern classics’ for children.<sup>15</sup> *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath* are hallmark works of the ‘second golden age’ of children’s literature, understood as the period from 1950 to 1979.<sup>16</sup> As such, they continue to influence the field, and define what children’s fantasy might be. Children’s fantasy often features a Gothic turn,

and Garner helped define the procedures of the children's Gothic – the narrative of a secret struggle with supernatural forces played out apart from the adult, daylight world; the resuscitation of frightening folkloric elements; an emphasis on action rather than the protracted depiction of psychic distress that often occupies the adult Gothic, and so forth. While Garner's Gothic is rooted in Cheshire legend, it is nevertheless informed by wider cultural currents, apparently drawing from the occult boom of the 1960s (the witch Selina), from Dennis Wheatley's popular black magic thrillers (dangerous magic and the black mass of the svartmoot), and contributing to the emergent notion of a British 'folk Gothic', which would occupy films such as *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1970) and *The Wicker Man* (1973).

Garner tends to resist the labelling of his work as 'children's literature'.<sup>17</sup> However, Garner was an important figure in the 'second golden age', which saw an expansion of the scope of children's writing, and new forms of popular and critical prestige were attached to the genre.<sup>18</sup> This enthusiasm allowed Garner to 'cross over' from being read as a 'children's author' to a position of wider critical respect and popular esteem, especially following the publication of *The Owl Service* in 1967.<sup>19</sup> His writing was important in the development of this 'crossover' market for children's fiction, so that adults as well as children might legitimately read it. *Boneland* perversely replies to this reputation, in that it is an adult book which few children would be capable of negotiating. Any golden age – especially a second one – notes a distinction between itself and less celebrated periods, and must necessarily pass. The era where Garner made his name exists in contrast to the 1980s and 1990s, where there was a shift to the production of a literature for children as consumers, in both America and the United Kingdom.<sup>20</sup> As early as 1983, Garner was calling the generation of children's writers who followed in the wake of the second golden age 'effete and trivial.'<sup>21</sup> Present conversations about children's writing tend to look back to the period with a degree of nostalgia, a vague sense that something might have been lost since. As readers, we live within this history. Regardless of the actual quality of contemporary children's writing, there apparently remains an anxiety that contemporary productions do not live up to the earlier reading experiences of the adults who pass judgement upon them. The children's Gothic is not what it once was; but how could it be? Even if we are reading 'crossover' fiction, we have learned to read differently as we have aged.

While uneasy with the frame of 'children's literature', Garner seems more comfortable with other generic titles. He has suggested that the 'Biblical, the Epic, the Romantic, the Gothic are all merestones, boundary markers of their day and the pointers of

ours.’<sup>22</sup> Garner’s claim places his own work in this tradition of boundary marking and navigation, calling the first two novels of the *Weirdstone* trilogy his “‘boundary” books’.<sup>23</sup> In *Boneland*, Colin, remarks on a merestone marking a boundary on the Edge, and explains that boundaries are not safe for they “...occupy neither space nor time. Boundaries can change apparent realities. They let things through...”<sup>24</sup> For Garner, the Gothic is one of the genres that marks a limit, and opens it; that ‘things’ could come through suggests the attendant difficulty we might have naming those things. Yet despite this danger, the genre holds a particular appeal. Once the children encounter the legendary personae of the Edge a second time in *The Moon of Gomrath*, they recall that ‘this was a world of deep shadows as well as of enchantment.’<sup>25</sup> The Gothic and its shadows are part of the desired magical escape.

If the function of the Gothic, for Garner, is to open boundaries, *Boneland* does so in a very different way to the first two books in the trilogy. The novel is written in a very different style, brusque and adult. Colin, once the child hero who courageously encountered unambiguously legendary figures and magical occurrences, is much older, unhappy, and may or may not be in communication with supernatural forces. The narrative shifts, somewhat disorientingly, between two distinct times – Colin’s present and a prehistoric period on the Edge, inhabited by a single lonely remnant of a tribe of early men – but the connection between the two is, unsurprisingly, oblique. *Boneland* further frustrates readerly desires for continuity in narrative; it teasingly withholds ‘what happened’ in the wake of the dramatic final pages of *The Moon of Gomrath* for most of its length, and it does not carry on the narrative of the first two books on in any conventional way. The notion of reading in serial has become crucial to children’s literature and fantasy. By offering a disjunctive, basically adult end to the trilogy, Garner thumbs his nose at the practices of the field his work helped foster.

Neil Gaiman – one of Garner’s inheritors – noted in his review of the novel that ‘*Boneland* feels like the book you write when you can no longer muster the belief in magic to write about elves and wizards in caves, but you can write about the older magics.’<sup>26</sup> Gaiman is noting the disappearance of legendary figures like Cadellin and the lios-alfar in *Boneland* and their replacement with an early shamanic figure, but this is also a claim that implies that childhood – and by extension children’s reading practice, and children’s literature – are spaces inhabited by a particular kind of childish magic, while adulthood, amongst other things, means that it is harder to enter into this space. Gaiman’s turn of phrase suggests this is a kind of weakening of a particular visionary strength; he also echoes Jacqueline Rose’s

argument that Garner's work functions as expects the generality of children's fiction to, offering 'the idea... of a primitive or lost state to which the child has special access.'<sup>27</sup>

At first, *Boneland* seems to confirm these ideas. It is impossible to make sense of the book without recalling the earlier books; many readers will be encouraged to take up *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath* once more. (How else to make sense of Colin's outburst in the last novel, warning a child in a psychiatrist's office of the power of witches? We must recall his captivity in *The Moon of Gomrath*. How to see that *Boneland*'s ending features Colin retracing the path the farmer takes in the Legend of Alderley, which opens *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, or that he ends standing on Saddlebole, where the sleeping knights are located in the earlier novels?) In turning back to the earlier novels, readers – at least readers who read *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath* when they were children or younger adults, which I presume to be the majority of the *Boneland*'s readership – are directed not just to prior narratives, but to their prior readings of those books, to their now-passed experiences and habits of reading, to ways of engaging with text that have become part of the wider 'once upon a time' of their earlier lives as readers. *Boneland*, in its difficulty and detail, calls attention to what it is to read as an adult, and how this differs to how we once read as children.

This might bring about a kind of mourning for a vivid, romantic mode of reading. Might we enter into and inhabit the world of Garner's earlier texts – indeed all the favourite texts of our childhoods – in quite the same way we once did? It seems apposite that *The Moon of Gomrath* closes with both Colin and Susan longing for the presence of the magical forces that retreat from them. Susan is told that it is not yet her time to join Celemon and the starry women that enter the sky – although she ultimately will. She is 'left as dross upon the hill' as the 'fire dies' in her and she is 'alone on the moor... joy and anguish in her heart.'<sup>28</sup> Susan is left pining for a continuation of the fantastic, Gothic narrative she has been participating in. Likewise, Colin hears Susan's call to the starry women as 'another sound, so beautiful that he never found rest again; the sound of a horn, like the moon on snow, and another answered it from the sky...'<sup>29</sup> Colin is left haunted by the sound of Susan's desiring call to the sisters and the narrative plane they occupy. *Boneland* leaves us with Colin, the boy left behind, rather than the girl who has perhaps joined the stars, and the novel is driven by Colin's unnameable grief and his attempts to recall the sister – and the worlds – he has lost. Adult readers might feel the same way about the stories they once participated in. To what extent is our rereading of a text from our own past unsettled by the critical distance that

marks the educated, adult reader? When we re-read at the distance of a lifetime, are we haunted by the way we once participated in or occupied a text? Has something been lost?

While *Boneland* prompts an encounter with earlier reading experiences and seems to mourn past narrative, it also effects the transformation of those narratives. This troubles readerly attempts to use the earlier books as objects of nostalgia and upsets the view put forward by Rose and others where children's literature in general, and Garner in particular, habitually present childhood as a privileged, Wordsworthian space. *Boneland* causes deeper patterns to emerge from the earlier books, as if they were partly written in invisible ink, now visible.

Sometimes this effect is created by *Boneland*'s provision of further detail about actions in the earlier novels. For instance, in *The Moon of Gomrath*, Colin is represented as having remarkable fortitude while he is being held within Errwood. On being rescued, he says he is 'all right... I've not had anything to eat or drink... I was a bit dizzy to start with, but that's passed off.'<sup>30</sup> Colin is apparently troubled by the absence of lunch more than the frightening, bespelled house in which he is confined; in line with so much children's writing, Colin's robust psyche and capability is emphasised. In *Boneland* Colin is more honest; when he was in Errwood, he wet himself.<sup>31</sup> Colin's claim in the earlier book, it emerges, was boyish bravado trying to cover his fear and humiliation. *Boneland* appeals to our adult sense of the hidden feelings and limited agency of children; of course the child was frightened. How could we have taken Colin's claim at face value? This, in turn, complicates the apparently untroubled heroism of the children in the battle in front of the house that follows. Colin must be terrified as he and Susan fight the gathered bodachs and baddies, and he does so with wet pants. This relationship between *Boneland* and the earlier texts encourages us to bring our sensibilities as adult readers to *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath*, reducing their ability to generate an easy nostalgia.

More than the transformation of particular scenes, *Boneland* remakes the organising patterns of the earlier books. Garner has called *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath* a 'Manichean over-simplicity.'<sup>32</sup> It is true that in *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, it is easy to locate notions of good and evil; Cadellin, the dwarves and the children are simply good, whereas the Morrigan and her various conjurations are simply evil. This is at least partly true of *The Moon of Gomrath* too, where good and evil must fight, although there are occasional notes that upset this simplicity. Susan refuses to obey the

authority of the good wizard Cadellin, and is attracted to the lawless power and violence of the Hunt; she is left ‘in wonder, appalled by the bloodshed that the riders showed’.<sup>33</sup> Susan is initially troubled because the killers of the Hunt are ‘*enjoying* what they’re doing.’<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, this concern passes, and Susan ultimately favours this ancient wildness, although the Hunt and its leader are from ‘a cruel day of the world’ and ‘Men have changed since they honoured him.’<sup>35</sup> Her values shift to so that they are out of joint with her present. If the children’s literature of the period was given to moral didacticism as an aid to ‘personal and moral growth’, or, in the later 1960s, as a ‘socialising’ tool,<sup>36</sup> *The Moon of Gomrath* begins to reject these functions. The Colin and Susan of *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* were curious but obedient; Susan, later, is quietly, impressively ungovernable, although the pair still work to contain the evil of the Morrigan and the Brollachan. This suggests a small, linear progression between the first two books.

In *The Moon of Gomrath*, the mythical Angharad explains to Susan that, through the bracelet she has accepted – the Mark of Fohla – she has become involved in ‘moon magic’. Angharad draws on Robert Graves’ work of speculative anthropology, *The White Goddess*,<sup>37</sup> itself an attempt to recover a cherished although imaginary past. Angharad speaks of a triple lunar goddess– shifting between maiden, mother and crone – explaining that the Morrigan is ‘part of’ the dark of the moon, Angharad herself is of the full moon, and that Susan is connected to the young moon.<sup>38</sup> *Boneland* seems to take this exchange as the structuring principle of the trilogy. *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* remains informed by the imaginary sureties of childhood (‘good’, ‘evil’), *The Moon of Gomrath*, especially once altered through the release of new information in *Boneland* signals coming into maturity, while *Boneland* itself insists on the slipperiness of embracing age and the dark. As we age, the simplicities we once depended on cannot help us any longer.

Meg, Colin’s last chance with therapy before he will have to submit to electroconvulsive treatment, is endlessly patient and kind as she guides him into his mental underworld. She is also, apparently, the Morrigan.<sup>39</sup> This is a detail that is difficult to catch in the narrative; Colin is speaking with Meg’s disembodied voice at the time, Meg’s voice does not name the ‘we’ she is speaking of, and to make this hermeneutic leap, readers will need a good recall of the exchange with Angharad in *The Moon of Gomrath* discussed above. These are the skills of critical, reflective adult reading. Nevertheless, it makes sense of the weird disappearances and transformations at the end of *Boneland*. Bert, the cheerful taxi driver who ferries Colin to his appointments, is one of the Morrigan’s bewitched creatures. Her office,

suddenly gone, is an enchanted ruin just as Errwood Hall is in *The Moon of Gomrath*. Colin's attempted destroyer has become his redeemer.

The buried memories that Meg helps Colin unearth further upend the 'over-simplicity' of the first two books. It emerges that Colin's memory loss stems from an incident that occurred soon after Susan's death. Obviously desperate to recover his sister, he approached the Fundindelve and attempted to awaken the knights who magically sleep there, awaiting the time when 'England shall be in direst peril'.<sup>40</sup> Colin, alone and frantic on a stormy afternoon, is of course, mistaken: despite his personal distress, the nation is not imperilled by Susan's disappearance, and no help or comfort is forthcoming. Where the first two books feature narratives that largely fulfil the wishes of the children – terrible evil may be undone through the children's agency, the thrill of the Wild Hunt might be called up by Susan's desires – in *Boneland* the desires of the child hero no longer align with the substance of the narrative; the world it describes refuses to offer wish fulfilment. Troublingly, it emerges that Colin's hopeless search is resisted by Cadellin, formerly the just Gandalfian patriarch of the earlier books, now nameless and angry. The wizard appears through the storm and Colin is struck by his lightning. Cadellin then curses the nearly dead boy.<sup>41</sup> The trusted figure of wisdom and authority assaults a distressed and helpless child.

These are transformations that haunt the earlier books if we return to them; trustworthy Cadellin is not to be trusted, fearsome Selina should not always be feared. A witch might heal as well as harm. *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* suggests the freshness and optimism of the young moon, while *Boneland* emphasises the wisdom of its waning. This would place *The Moon of Gomrath* in a position which articulates a nascent maturity; perhaps it does. Susan's attraction to the Hunt suggests her growing maturity, perceiving a series of limits and agencies created through the 'natural' world, time and the body. She looks at Garanhir, the Hunt's leader, and 'was not afraid. Her mind could not accept him, but something deeper could. She knew what made the horses kneel. Here was the heart of all wild things. Here were thunder, lightning, storm; the slow beat of tides and seasons, birth and death, the need to kill and the need to make.'<sup>42</sup> Understanding the power and necessity of this wildness is framed as a mark of maturity. *Boneland* adds the suggestion that Susan, at the time of her disappearance, had experienced the onset of her period, which Meg understands as making her an 'adult'.<sup>43</sup> A romantic, menstrual logic of the Gravesian folk Gothic is being invoked.

Despite the sense of a cycle that *Boneland* establishes, it offers a further striking transformation. If *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath* had seemed to be discrete stories, one following the other and introducing new villains who must be defeated, new kinds of magic to encounter, the publication of *Boneland* disrupts that notion of progression. Instead, each book seems to offer the more-or-less the same story: the children access the hidden geography and personae of the Edge through various supernatural intermediaries; there is always an inherited talisman of crucial import – the Weirdstone, the Mark of Fohla, the axe cut from stone by the early man, which finds its way to Colin. There is an urge for communion with those who sleep beneath the Edge – the knights, the riders of the Hunt, the early man who once lived there, Susan’s ghost. There is unexpected life underground, and there is always a quest. Colin keeps entering the witch’s house. Indeed, elements of the stories seem to repeat and chime. In *The Moon of Gomrath*, Susan rides the sinister Brollachan into the flooded quarry; in *Boneland* she apparently rode the Mossock’s horse into a mere when she vanished. Colin mourns his vanished sister; the early man mourns a vanished woman. The early man, Cadellin and finally Colin all have a duty to watch over the Edge. “Someone has to look after the Edge. There always is someone: always has been....” says Colin.

These are haunted actions: as Derrida notes, ghostliness is a ‘question of repetition: a spectre is always a *revenant*... it begins by coming back.’<sup>44</sup> The action described in *Boneland* has already apparently occurred in *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath*; yet weirdly, these actions have already been performed by the early man who occupies the Edge, long before the narratives of the first two books. Most readers will encounter this earliest element of the narrative in the final book they read, so that they become cognizant of this earlier narrative action only after perceiving the actions that repeat it. Which is the ‘original’ action? Impossible to tell. *Boneland* creates another transformation in the earlier works, so that the action they describe has become reiterative, is ‘coming back’. This further extends whatever ‘now’ – already a moment composed of several times – means in the books.

Just as time takes on a multiple or haunted aspect in the trilogy, so too do Garner’s characters, especially in the gloomy light of *Boneland*. The flatness of Colin and Susan in the first two books has often been noted. Ursula Le Guin has called them ‘semi-characterless actors in a fantasy tale.’<sup>45</sup> Garner, while struggling to complete *The Moon of Gomrath* felt the pair were ‘zeroes’.<sup>46</sup> Pearson has described how the children’s literature of the early 1960s

emphasises children as ‘imaginative, autonomous and complex beings’.<sup>47</sup> Colin and Susan’s flatness is usually understood as a problem in the texts.

*Boneland* makes suggestions about the nature of subjectivity that potentially address this issue, while further distancing the earlier books from the usual practices of the genre they helped define. Meg diagnoses Colin as missing an ‘autozoetic awareness of [him]self as a continuous entity across time.’<sup>48</sup> Troubling as this lack of an unbroken sense of oneself might be, it seems to characterise both Colin’s sense of himself, and the ontological dimensions of the figures who surround him. Colin’s own actions repeat or echo the actions of the early man who occupies the Edge – and thus are to some extent determined by a figure he is largely unaware of. He is haunted by the spectre of Susan, yet when he finally embraces the ghost, it seems to tell him that he is figure that has haunted himself.<sup>49</sup> The boundaries of Colin as an individual are unclear, as are those of many of those around him. Bert the taxi driver is apparently a magical invention, although he might be Bert the maintenance man. Meg is reduced to a disembodied voice before completely disappearing. *Boneland*’s characters are not as certainly present in the narrative as we expect ‘characters’ to be.

This perhaps provides a context for the slightness of the characters in the first two books. If Colin and Susan are not as vividly drawn as we might expect, this perhaps signals a porousness of self. Indeed, Susan is possessed by the Brollachan in *The Moon of Gomerath*, a possession which divorces some part of Susan from her body, as if she were a split piece of kindling.<sup>50</sup> Later in the book, Susan speaks aloud words she ‘had never known or heard.’<sup>51</sup> Either some other voice is speaking through Susan, or Susan’s self extends beyond the limits of its language. Where then are the boundaries of self? This is a question which begins to highlight the curious doublings and triplings of identity that occur throughout the books. Grimnir, the fell wizard, is Cadellin’s brother. Cadellin and the shamanic early man, watching over the Edge from beneath it seem to be paired – and Colin, dressed in his academic robes and unable to leave the Edge, seems a further double of the wizard. The Wild Hunt sleep within the earth, as do the sleeping knights, as do the prehistoric dead. Susan, Angharad and the Morrigan are all aspects of the moon; and the Morrigan takes on discrete identities as Selina and as Meg. The books understand ‘character’ as a series of names between which perceptions, identities and actions resonate rather than as discrete, sovereign individuals. These ‘characters’ function as Garner’s view of the Gothic as a genre does; they are merestones, boundaries, portals.

Nevertheless, for Garner, a landscape of haunted actions and spectral selves is not the same as a place devoid of stable truths. The author's note at the end of *The Moon of Gomrath* insists that everything in the book –with the single exception of the Fundindelve – does exist; the 'ingredients of the story are... as true as I can make them' says Garner.<sup>52</sup> After the fantasies of the narrative, it is a curious claim: how can these things be 'true'? The claim that something is a 'true story' becomes a refrain in *Boneland*, offered as affirmation of the mythic stories told by the early man; of the collapse of a people, of his failure to ritually maintain the world which he understands as his responsibility. What is meant by truth in these contexts? Garner has written that 'A true story is religious, as drama is religious. Any other fiction is didactic, instruction rather than revelation... For me, "religion" describes... human concern for, and involvement with, the question of our being within the cosmos. The concern and involvement are often stated through the imagery of a god, or gods, or ghosts, or ancestors...' <sup>53</sup> These are the figures that are called forth in the trilogy, figures that might come 'through' or cross boundaries, which is what Garner understands the Gothic as facilitating. At the same time, the trilogy aims to present a 'true' account of being in vaguely religious terms. The trilogy is perhaps easier to understand as a structured meditation rather than as an argument; we encounter the Edge as a realm of ecstasy and sacrifice; of Susan's self-immolating desire to join the women in the stars, of Durathror's hopeless battle at the end of *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, of the early shaman's desperate ritualism, of Colin's sorrows; seasons and tides beat, people age there, children are hurt there. It might be a tragic place, but as Colin observes in *Boneland*, 'Once place is lost, you fall into history',<sup>54</sup> which suggests a view of history which leads in one direction only, to the oppressive flatness of the unstoried now.

In that book, Colin complains that his bicycle is run off the road by cars with tinted windows; Meg shares his concern that these drivers are 'the bimbos of Lower Slobovia', the new, prosperous population of Alderley, as they ferry their 'Cotton-woolled kids' about.<sup>55</sup> This is a class of person produced by a later strain of the culture of crass affluence that so horrifies Tom in *Red Shift*. Colin's complaint is a cliché, the grizzling of an old man, perhaps in conspiracy with his readers; but, if we do not dismiss it, we can see that Garner has no less a figure than the lunar goddess in her dark, deathly aspect lament the untoward safeness that surrounds the children of this generation. This complaint might speak to a wider issue in the children's Gothic as a genre.

It is difficult to imagine Garner 'keeping up' with present trends in writing for children, although the field continues to enjoy popularity and critical acclaim, and, as evidenced by the present volume, frequently offers Gothic tropes and narratives. Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* insists that monsters might be defeated through a child's indefatigable agency, while his *The Graveyard Book* depicts a cemetery and the ghosts that haunt it as comforting, creatures of the nursery more than the night. *Twilight*'s twinkling and decorous young adult vampires offer a falsely safe sense of sexuality. Garner's vision is franker. *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath* might have sponsored a literature of Gothic safety and wish fulfilment, to which readers could return in a nostalgic spirit. *Boneland* resists this, insisting on the ghostly and tragic potentials of the earlier works, on the importance of 'true' danger. In the final pages of the book, Colin is rushing towards Meg's now vanished rooms, and passes a sign that is familiar to him; 'THIS HILL IS STILL DANGEROUS', it reads.<sup>56</sup> *Boneland* makes the same claim for Alderley Edge, where place enables an encounter with Garner's 'truth'. We might find ourselves distanced from the way in which we once involved ourselves in the children's Gothic, but Garner insists that, at least in the case of the trilogy, its power and danger remains.

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- <sup>1</sup> Alan Garner, *Red Shift* (1973. New York: New York Review Books, 2011), p. 80.
- <sup>2</sup> Nick Tiratsoo, “‘You’ve Never Had It So Bad’?: Britain in the 1970s’ in Nick Tiratsoo (ed.) *From Blitz to Blair: A New History of Britain since 1939* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), pp. 163-90, p. 163.
- <sup>3</sup> Alan Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath* (1963. London: Fontana, 1972), p. 28.
- <sup>4</sup> Alan Garner, ‘Reading Group: Alan Garner answers your questions’ *The Guardian* 31 August 2012. Web.
- <sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (1994. New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 20.
- <sup>6</sup> María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Preen, ‘Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities’ in María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Preen (eds.) *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 1-27.
- <sup>7</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pp. 11-12.
- <sup>8</sup> Alan Garner, *Boneland* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), p. 36.
- <sup>9</sup> del Pilar Blanco and Preen, ‘Introduction’, pp. 2-10.
- <sup>10</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 10.
- <sup>11</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, p. 66.
- <sup>12</sup> Garner, *Boneland*, p. 53.
- <sup>13</sup> Mark Fisher, ‘What is Hauntology?’, *Film Quarterly*, 66/1 (2012), 16-24, p. 16.
- <sup>14</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, p. 22.
- <sup>15</sup> Lucy Pearson, *The Making of Modern Children’s Literature in Britain: Publishing and Criticism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 5.
- <sup>16</sup> Pearson, *The Making of Modern Children’s Literature*, p. 1.
- <sup>17</sup> Alan Garner, *The Voice That Thunders: Essays and Lectures* (London: The Harvill Press, 1997), p. 82.
- <sup>18</sup> Pearson, *The Making of Modern Children’s Literature*, p.. 6.
- <sup>19</sup> Charles Butler, *Four British Fantasists: Place and Culture in the Children’s fantasies of Penelope Lively, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones and Susan Cooper* (Lanham, Maryland: Children’s Literature Association and The Scarecrow Press, 200), p 2.
- <sup>20</sup> Pearson, *The Making of Modern Children’s Literature*, p. 7-8.
- <sup>21</sup> Garner, *The Voice that Thunders*, p. 17.
- <sup>22</sup> Garner, *The Voice that Thunders*, p. 109.

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- <sup>23</sup> Garner, *The Voice that Thunders*, p. 110.
- <sup>24</sup> Garner, *Boneland*, p. 131
- <sup>25</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, p. 19.
- <sup>26</sup> Neil Gaiman, 'Postcards from the Edge', *Times*, 8 September 2012, p. 11.
- <sup>27</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan: or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, revised ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), p. 9.
- <sup>28</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, p. 152.
- <sup>29</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, p. 152.
- <sup>30</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, p. 136.
- <sup>31</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, p. 119.
- <sup>32</sup> Garner, *The Voice that Thunders*, p. 110.
- <sup>33</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, p. 114.
- <sup>34</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, p. 114.
- <sup>35</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, p. 87.
- <sup>36</sup> Pearson, *The Making of Modern Children's Literature*, p. pp. 41-2, 47.
- <sup>37</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of a Poetic Myth*, amended and enlarged ed. (1946. London: Faber and Faber, 1961). Garner cites the book in his author's note to *The Moon of Gomrath*.
- <sup>38</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, pp. 99-100.
- <sup>39</sup> Garner, *Boneland*, pp. 147-8.
- <sup>40</sup> Alan Garner, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1960. London: Fontana, 1971), p. 11.
- <sup>41</sup> Garner, *Boneland*, pp. 126, 134-5.
- <sup>42</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, pp. 78-9.
- <sup>43</sup> Garner, *Boneland*, p. 104.
- <sup>44</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 11.
- <sup>45</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, rev. of *Boneland*, *The Guardian*, 29 August 2012. Web.
- <sup>46</sup> Alison Flood, 'Alan Garner: A Life in Books', *The Guardian*, 17 August 2012.
- <sup>47</sup> Pearson, *The Making of Modern Children's Literature*, p. 34.
- <sup>48</sup> Alan Garner, *Boneland*. London: Fourth Estate, 2012. p. 38.
- <sup>49</sup> Garner, *Boneland*, p. 147.
- <sup>50</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, p. 50.
- <sup>51</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, p. 150.
- <sup>52</sup> Garner, *The Moon of Gomrath*, p. 154-6.

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<sup>53</sup> Garner, *The Voice that Thunders*, p. 55.

<sup>54</sup> Garner, *Boneland*, p. 86.

<sup>55</sup> Garner, *Boneland*, p. 116.

<sup>56</sup> Garner, *Boneland*, p. 139.