Red Shift Short Guide

Red Shift by Alan Garner

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Overview

Alan Garner's Red Shift deals honestly with many of the problems of modern youth: love and sex, parental conflicts, and alienation from other people and even from the world. It is also a highly creative, experimental book which uses history and myth to cast light on everyday life.

The novel is difficult and disturbing because it places scenes from different centuries next to each other without explanation, portrays violent emotions, and projects a bleak outlook on life.

Although some readers doubt that it is a book for children, it was written for a young audience, and adolescents who can handle the unusual approach and are willing to spend some time with the novel will enjoy the book's energy and originality.

Instead of reading Red Shift as a conventional novel, readers may be wise to compare it with film or poetry. Like a film, it presents a series of vivid scenes, with little explanation or narration; the dialogue moves quickly, sometimes in fragments or snatches. As in a poem, the language of Red Shift is honed to a few well-chosen words and filled with vivid images and allusions. Characters are not described; there are no chapter divisions to provide smooth, easy transitions. This short and fast-paced novel requires readers to be active, filling in gaps, using their imaginations, working out clues and puzzles.

About the Author

English author Alan Garner is rooted in the language, places, and myths of his birthplace. Born in Congleton, Cheshire, on October 17, 1934, to a family of country people and craftsmen, he grew up in the village of Alderley Edge, where his ancestors had lived for generations. His village, now a suburb of Manchester, took its name from a great, wooded escarpment, a landmark on the Cheshire plain. Garner spent many childhood days exploring the land around Alderley Edge and getting to know the people of the countryside. Several severe illnesses, including a yearlong bout with meningitis, forced him to spend months in bed, where he read extensively and developed his imagination.

Garner attended Manchester Grammar School, then one of the most demanding schools in the country.

There he found that home and school did not mix, that his dialect and even his way of thinking were not acceptable at school. Nevertheless, he rose to the challenge of the competitive environment and became a champion sprinter. After service in the Royal Artillery, he became the first in his family to attend a university. He studied classical languages at Magdalen College, Oxford. He left before taking his degree, but not before deciding to devote his life to writing. Returning to Cheshire, Garner moved into a medieval timbered house only a few miles from where he grew up. Here he has raised his own family.

The sense of dislocation and alienation that resulted from Gamer's background and educational experience became a predominant theme in his fiction. At the same time, his love of the Cheshire landscape, folklore, and dialects figures prominently in his works. As his career progressed, he also became an expert on the history, prehistory, geography, and geology of the area.

The Weirdstone of Brisingamen and The Moon of Gomrath, Garner's first two novels, are shaped by the environment of Alderley Edge. His third book, Elidor, is set in Manchester and its suburbs; the house where the main characters live is the house where Gamer grew up. Once, while exploring Alderley Edge, he found a stone axe, the centerpiece of Red Shift.

His own ancestors make up the family in The Stone Book. Garner's interest in mythology and folklore has brought the Mabinogian, Arthurian tales, Scottish ballads, and other folk material into his stories; and his ear for language has made the treatment of dialect particularly strong in the later novels.

Like the work of many novelists, Garner's is autobiographical. His subjects are sometimes so mature that, after The Owl Service, critics and reviewers began to discuss whether Garner was still a children's writer. An idiosyncratic, unpredictable author, he is constantly experimenting with new techniques.

The tension between Garner's background and education seems to have been resolved in the Stone Book quartet.

Many readers find this series to contain his finest writing, and, like his other works, it is enjoyed by adults and young people alike.

In 1967 The Owl Service won the Carnegie Medal for the year's outstanding children's book published in the United Kingdom and in 1968 the Guardian Award (given by the English newspaper The Guardian) for the year's outstanding work of fiction for children by a British author.

Setting

Red Shift weaves together three stories. Nearly all the events occur in a single area: the part of Cheshire comprising Crewe, Rudheath, the village of Barthomley, and the hill of Mow Cop.

However, the stories are set in three different periods—during the days of the Roman legions in Britain, at the time of the English Civil War, and in the present. The stories are not told in the customary chronological sequence, as if an earlier event influenced a later event, or as if one story is present and the other two are historical. Instead, they seem to be simultaneous, as if events and people in the present can have as much impact on the past as the past can have on the present. Each narrative sheds light upon the other two.

The book begins with the modern story of Tom and Jan, a pair of "star-crossed" young lovers contending with separation, alienation, and insensitive parents.

This strand of the story is the most developed of the three.

Parallel to this story is an account of four men and a boy named Macey, battered remnants of the Ninth Roman Legion. These soldiers, having decided to "go tribal" in order to survive among the warring Celts of Britain, slaughter the local people. Because the men also profane sacred places and rape and cripple a Celtic priestess, they too die violently; but the boy is spared.

The third story centers on a historical account of the Barthomley Massacre during the British Civil War. In 1643, the king's forces converged on Barthomley Church, where some twenty people (supporters of Parliament) had taken refuge. Violating the principle of religious sanctuary, the troops entered the church, set fires to drive the people out of the church tower, and captured them.

Most of the captives were killed, but Thomas and Margery Rowley survived.

These three tales are told piece by piece, with only a small break where one story leaves off and another begins. The first shift occurs without warning; on the last few pages, all three stories, all three centuries, run together, almost as if they are happening at the same time— or as if they are the same story in three versions. Relationships and events repeat themselves; words and ideas spoken by one character resurface in other centuries, like the fossils that Tom and Jan keep finding. Time is bent, pushed around, manipulated—leaving readers with the idea that only place matters.

Although the passage of time brings no real advances or meaningful changes, readers can pick out some differences between now and long ago and the changes that "progress" has brought to the area. For example, Rudheath, site for a shrine of the Mothers (one of the Celtic tribes), later becomes a medieval Christian sanctuary. But in

the twentieth century it is only a place near the M-6 (an English freeway) where Tom lives with his parents in a caravan (a trailer or mobile home).

The value of the sanctuaries and holy places diminishes when they are no longer used for worship. The Celts fear their sacred places and kill anyone who profanes them. The villagers in 1643 view Barthomley Church as the center of their community and a refuge from their enemies. For Tom and Jan , though, the same church is just a cozy place to have lunch.

Mow Cop, however, has not changed in any important way. The Celtic tribe of the Cats believe it holds the sacred netherstone of the world, on which the skymill turns to grind stars. It also pro vides a peaceful center for Thomas and Margery, who build a home there. Later, as a fantastic landscape of dead quarries, grotesque crags, and ruined cottages, it remains a spiritual refuge for Tom and Jan. It is the eye of their hurricane, and for a few hours they can feel above the sludge, filth, and problems of the everyday world.

Social Sensitivity

Red Shift has drawn strong positive and negative reactions. Some readers charge that the book is obscure and pretentious; that the atmosphere is hysterical, negative, even degenerate; and that the language is disturbing (at least for those who do not like to hear adolescents swearing). Even more distressing to many readers is the violence and sex—and the violent sex. Massacres are central to the two earlier stories, and the female characters in those stories are raped repeatedly by soldiers. However, most of the violence and all of the sex are implied, not graphically portrayed. The novel does not exploit sex and violence; rather, it expresses and perhaps helps exorcise the violent tensions and emotions which already exist.

In the twentieth century, Tom's violence is mainly self-directed, but he takes his frustration out in nasty verbal attacks on others, and he pushes Jan around.

Literary Qualities

The style of Red Shift is clipped, even abrupt; meaning is concentrated in a few words, and much is communicated without words. For example, Tom and Jan's sexual relationship is implied, not stated. Transitions between scenes are not leisurely; instead, a painful moment in one century's story often "cuts" to a time of crisis in another story. This method occurs frequently in films.

Another technique in the novel that is common in film is the repetition of scenes. Red Shift presents three separate versions of the same scene in Barthomley Church, once for each set of characters involved.

Instead of describing his characters, Gamer uses realistic dialogue to reveal their personalities. In some parts of the book, we seem to be overhearing scraps of dialogue, as if we had arrived in the middle of a conversation and had to listen awhile in order to catch the drift.

Tom and Jan sound like clever students.

Local dialects appear in the two other stories with words like "borsant" and "skriking." The language of the Roman soldiers echoes that of American soldiers in Vietnam: "Negative. We zapped them good," and, "We're fighting a different war."

Red Shift is full of codes, clues, and literary allusions. Tom's phenomenal memory and brittle wit make him a prime source of such games. Some readers may enjoy decoding Tom and Jan's messages and tracking down hidden references, but this is not necessary in order to understand the stories.

Garner has said that Red Shift is a version of the myth of Tamlain (or Tam Lin), Burd Janet, and the Queen of Elfland. In this legend, the Queen of Elfland kidnaps Tamlain, Janet's lover.

He is forced to become one of the fairy queen's knights, but he tells Janet that she can release him from the spell.

When he rides by with the queen's entourage, Janet is to stop and hold him, never letting go, no matter what shape he takes. He turns into all kinds of fierce and repulsive creatures, but Janet holds on, and finally the spell is broken. Janet is pregnant, and now her baby will know its father.

In Red Shift, Tom needs Jan to hold onto him no matter what monstrous shape he takes. Otherwise his domineering mother will keep him enslaved and tear the lovers apart. All three Thomases are under a certain spell— their tendency to seizures, which sometimes put them in contact with "other worlds." They all need women to hold them and understand them.

The novel also alludes to King Lear. By repeating "Tom's a-cold," Tom brings to the novel a comparison to Tom-o'-Bedlam and the mad scenes. References to Macbeth, Shakespeare's sonnets, Thomas a Becket, Child Rowland, the Olduvai Gorge, and others, show that Tom is clever, and connect different centuries.

Themes and Characters

The main characters are three Thomases from three different centuries: Tom of the twentieth century, Thomas Rowley of the seventeenth, and Macey (an old diminutive of Thomas) from ancient Roman Britain. Other Toms include Thomas Venables (Rowley's former rival) and the "Tom's a-cold" lines from Shakespeare's King Lear. "Thomas" means "twin."

The modern Tom is a brilliant eighteen-year-old about to enter Oxford.

At first he seems thoroughly unpleasant. He feels sorry for himself, tries to foist his guilt on others, and uses his wit to take cheap shots at his parents.

In short, he has a chip on his shoulder.

But as his story unfolds, he emerges as someone who is only responding to problems that threaten to overwhelm him. He is serious about his work and his love for Jan, but he lives in a trailer with prying parents who treat him without respect. His oversensitive, highstrung personality leads him into many unpleasant "scenes" with them and with Jan , which sometimes bring on seizures.

Thomas Rowley, the Epileptic, is somewhat berated for his weakness and sometimes held in awe for his visions.

He feels inferior to John Fowler and Thomas Venables. Fowler has had a formal education, and Venables was once the lover of Margery, Rowley's wife.

Macey is still a boy, but he becomes a killing machine when he goes berserk and sees "bluesilver." His fellow soldiers use him as a secret weapon when they want to clear out a village, but Macey himself becomes ill when his fit is over.

The three Toms, despite their special sensitivities and talents, are all weak and dangerous. All three of them direct anger against themselves—Macey because he feels helpless and young, Thomas because he feels inferior, and Tom because he feels personally and sexually inadequate. They are linked not only by their problems, but also by their location, by their seizures, and by a sacred Stone Age axe head.

Macey and the girl, after using the special protection of the axe, bury it in the mound, where it is found by Thomas. Margery keeps him from smashing this "thunderstone" in order to place a piece of it into each chimney for good luck. After surviving the massacre, they build the lucky axe into their hearth as a symbol of their love and their new home. When Jan and Tom discover the axe in the ruins of the Rowleys' cottage, Jan, like the two women before her, recognizes it as a sacred object; she calls it a "Bunty," her "real and special thing" from her "real house." It is the couple's good luck charm until Tom, feeling betrayed by Jan, sells the axe to the British Museum. He hurts Jan deeply, profanes the sacred object, and destroys their love.

Although the axe provides protection and luck to the three couples, it is not a totally benign object. It is, after all, a weapon; it has been used to slaughter the Celtic villagers and probably many Celts before that. For Macey and Thomas, the axe absorbs the violence, allowing some space for peace. But for Tom and Jan, the charm fails.

All three Toms suffer from "blackouts," "fits," or "seizures," usually because of some severe conflict or mental anguish.

Their seizures involve some terror and violence, but they also bring visions. The visions are unclear, and none of the three understands them well. The Cat tribe is sure that a god enters Macey and that he "sees real." (The priestess understands because she refers to herself as both girl and goddess.) Margery is convinced that Thomas's fits are a useless affliction, and Jan believes that Tom may improve with understanding and counseling.

During the seizures, the young men break into one another's time periods, perhaps even into each other's consciousness, but they are only vaguely aware of what they are doing. When Macey has visions of a tower and a stone forest with different colors, he is seeing Barthomley Church, built more than a thousand years after his time. When Tom breaks the window with his hands, Macey is aware of hands pressing against his eyes. When Thomas hallucinates and "sees God"' he probably sees Tom instead. The "bluesilver" that brings on Macey's berserk rages is the train which carries Jan. Tom says, "I see everything at once," and, "We're bits of other futures."

The differences between Tom, Macey, and Thomas lie in what finally happens to them; their three stories might be one plot with different endings. The outcome is influenced by each young man's relationship with a woman who cares for him and helps him keep his sanity. The young priestess is a quiet, enduring, and formidable figure. The soldiers think she is only their slave, but she is a corn goddess who grinds the ceremonial flour. She sees to the destruction of the soldiers but protects Macey. Margery (Madge), Thomas's wife, is aggressive and practical; she mothers him. Jan, a student nurse, is better balanced than Tom. She helps keep him on his feet but sometimes treats him as a "case."

The older two relationships last. The men can forgive and forget the hurts of the past, and they see that some good can come out of their affliction; the women know how to cope with it because they have a sense of tradition and place. But Tom and Jan have no tradition or community to draw on. They receive no support from Tom's vicious, possessive mother and weak-willed, alcoholic father, or from Jan's absentee parents. Although they are intelligent, they lack maturity, and their education offers no help with their problems. Unable to forgive Jan for an affair with her German employer, Tom does all he can to hurt her, until she finally gives up, seeing that he is determined to sabotage their love.

Each of the strands of Red Shift is a love story, and all three couples try for honesty and permanence in love. Jan says, "I love you" over and over; Macey wants to protect his "mates," his buddies. Among the "Big Words" that come to Macey in his fit are, "Let

there be no strife, for we are brothers." This is the text carved into the choir screen of Barthomley Church, and it is read by both Thomas and Tom. The novel's theme has to do with establishing personal contact despite barriers, outside pressures, and violence. Communication is vital; singly, the characters are lost, but together they form a whole.

"Not really now not any more" is the sad little message scrawled underneath "Pip loves Brian" in the cottage where Tom and Jan find the axe. (It was also the original title of the novel.) The phrase marks the end of love, and it appears again at the end of the novel when Tom and Jan have broken up: "It doesn't matter. Not really now not any more." By backing away from Jan and saying it doesn't matter, Tom tries to protect himself. But it does matter, and as the novel shows, it has mattered for centuries.

The novel's present title also reflects the distance between people, distances that they must struggle to overcome.

The color pattern of the light which reaches us from the more distant galaxies demonstrates a shift toward the longer wave lengths—that is, toward the red end of the spectrum. To astrophysicists, this "red shift" means that the universe is expanding, that the galaxies are moving away from one another. In this novel, the red shift is a reminder that, like galaxies, people are moving farther and farther apart, making communication and understanding more and more difficult.

"Red shift" has more than one meaning in this novel. Tom says, "I see and can't understand. I need to adjust my spectrum, pull myself away from the blue end. I could do with a red shift. Galaxies and Rectors have them. Why not me?"

Tom is tired of having "the blues," so he cleverly suggests a shift to the red. Rectors have red shifts or gowns, but the role of religion has been decreasing through the centuries, until now it cannot help Tom and Jan. Galaxies are expanding, and perhaps Tom, too, needs a little "space," to help ease the pressure and provide some perspective. But he goes too far and cuts himself off from others.

Astronomy, then, provides a symbol of isolation. As each group of characters ponders the constellations, they consider the limitations of the world. Tom jokes about people speeding along the M-6 motorway at the same time that they are speeding away through space along the M-33 galaxy. But astronomy also unifies. The constellation of Orion links the people of the three stories.

Macey uses it to cause his frenzy. The rector quotes the Book of Job to his son, John Fowler: "Can you . . . loose the cords of Orion?" Tom and Jan, separated by miles, agree to look at Orion at ten each evening, using it as "a communications satellite" to make them feel closer.

Adaptations

A film of Red Shift was made for the BBC's Play for Today series (1977).

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Tom and Jan's love not survive? If you could, what advice would you have given Tom before it was too late? To Jan?

2. What happens to Macey, Thomas, and Tom when they have seizures? What visions do they have? Is the. Celtic com goddess right when she says that Macey "sees real"? Are the visions helpful or hurtful?

3. What does the axe mean to each of the main characters? Does it mean different things to the women and to the men? Why do they consider the axe so special? What powers, if any, does it have?

4. Describe Tom and Jan's parents.

What are their shortcomings? Do they have any strengths, or are they as bad as Tom says they are?

5. Which of the three young men has the most difficulty dealing with his problems? Why? Who gives the best help when one of the young men is in trouble?

6. As you compare the three worlds of the three stories, which seems most attractive? Which would be most difficult to live in, and why?

7. Reread the last few pages. What is happening to each couple? What clues do you have to go on? What do you know for sure and what do you have to guess?

What other scenes in the novel were difficult for you to understand and why?

Why do you suppose Garner wrote them as he did?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In Red Shift the worlds of Macey, Thomas, and Tom overlap. On your own, or with a group, read about the Roman Legions in Britain, about the Civil War and the Barthomley Massacre, and about the lives of high-school and posthigh-school-age young people in England. Then make a poster or book cover with a round or triangular design. On the outer edges, show Macey, Thomas, and Tom, and drawings or words which show their time periods. Toward the center of the circle, show the characteristics they have in common, or the events that overlap in their stories. You may wish to put the axe head or some other unifying symbol at the center of your poster.

2. Using an atlas, make a map of the area in which the stories take place.

(Look first for Crewe. If you have a very detailed map, you can find Goosetrey, where Garner lives—not far from the places mentioned in the novel.) If you wish, make a legend or draw pictures in places where important events occur.

Read about the area of Cheshire in which Garner places his novel. What is it like now?

3. If you were writing a Red Shift story, American style, what three historical periods would you think about overlapping? Choose three and sketch out one or two of the characters that would appear in each. You might consider making a three-column or three circle chart so that you could look at the similarities and differences of the characters and events.

4. Consult Book Review Digest for excerpts of reviews of Red Shift. Discuss the critic's views with other students who have read the novel, or write a letter to one of the critics you have read.

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