The Stone Book Quartet Short Guide

The Stone Book Quartet by Alan Garner

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Overview

Although each of these brief stories can be read separately, The Stone Book and its equally slender companion volumes, Granny Reardun, Tom Fobble's Day and The Aimer Gate, gain complexity and power when read in sequence. Taken together, the books read like sections of a single novel. The quartet traces the history of an unnamed working-class family (based on Garner's own) in Chorley, Cheshire, from the 1860s of The Stone Book to the dark days of World War II in Tom Fobble's Day. Each book is the story of one special day when a member of the rising generation faces decisions that will shape his or her life in a changing world.

The formula enables Garner to catch four generations of young people, not just at a dramatic moment in their own lives, but also at a crucial time in the larger story of their family and society.

At first glance the stories seem undemanding, but they are hardly simple.

To read the series is to sample some of the major social, economic, and political issues of the last hundred years. Each main character's personal search for a life's role illuminates universal problems, and the books produce a compelling sense of local and family tradition.

About the Author

Alan Garner was bom on October 17, 1934, at Alderley Edge, Cheshire, in the northwest of England. He spent much of his first ten years bedridden, suffering from spinal and cerebral meningitis, diphtheria, pleurisy, and pneumonia. As a child, Garner entertained himself with stories inspired by the irregular walls of his room, which he viewed as a fantasy landscape. This period created feelings of resentment between young characters and an ineffectual or exploitative older generation in Garner's early novels. At the same time, the author's constant references to magic spilling over into ordinary life may be an enactment of the wishful fantasies of his childhood.

Gamer put chronic illness behind him in his eleventh year, quickly distinguishing himself as a student and a fiercely competitive athlete at the local school in Alderley Edge and at Manchester Grammar School. Garner went on to Magdalen College, Oxford, where he studied classical Greek literature and archeology, and developed an interest in acting. He left Oxford without a degree when he became bored with academic life.

After leaving Oxford, Garner served as an officer in the Royal Artillery until, influenced by William Golding's recently published Lord of the Flies (1954), he decided to become a writer. Returning to Cheshire, Garner spent four years completing his first book and researching the folklore and archeology of the region. Today Gamer lives and works in the Cheshire village of Blackden-cumGoostrey in two houses built on an ancient burial mound, similar to the ones described in several of his stories.

Setting

The Stone Book series is set in rural Cheshire in a region of long ridges and "mosses," or boggy lowlands, within a mile of the village of Chorley. Garner accurately describes the local landscape and weather, but he emphasizes the time—which ranges from the 1860s to the 1940s—and culture of the setting, presenting his village family against the broad backdrop of history. For all their seeming isolation, Chorley and its people are touched by the same historical currents that wash through the outside world during the nine decades covered by the stories.

Social Sensitivity

The deftness of Garner's touch should not disguise the range of issues he engages. From the rise of mass production to the stupendous violence of modern warfare, many leading concerns of the past century and a half are reflected in the lives of the Stone Book family. For example, the concepts of class conflict, religious arrogance, and thoughtless destruction of the past come together when the rector demolishes the Allman's cottage in Granny Reardun. The rector carries out this destruction merely because he wants the stone from the cottage to wall his wife's garden.

The books deal less sensitively with women. Regrettably, Garner creates a strong character in Mary, the protagonist of The Stone Book, only to let her life fade into uncertainty. When she reappears in Granny Reardun she is merely a shadowy figure on the fringes of the relationship between Joseph and Old Robert. The reader never learns how she fared in her efforts to better herself or how she copes with her unconventional life as an adult. No woman besides Mary in Garner's four stories is given more than passing mention. While this imbalance might be excusable in some fiction, Garner so clearly wants to make points about the real lives of working villagers that his failure to include a proportionate number of women and to treat them fairly is a notable omission.

Literary Qualities

The Stone Book series confirms Alan Garner's mastery of plain language.

Each book is rich in dialect, starting with the first lines of The Stone Book: "A bottle of cold tea, bread and a half onion. That was Father's baggin."

Words such as "baggin" (for "lunch") establish the authenticity of Garner's style, yet their meanings are always clear and never slow the stories down.

Equally authentic are idioms borrowed from mining, masonry, metalwork, farming, and other trades. When the Allmans' house is demolished in Granny Reardun, for instance, the workmen do not simply stack different sized roof slates on the site; they stack "Princesses, Duchesses, Small Countesses, Ladies, Wide Doubles, and the neat Jennie-go-lightlies from under the ridge."

Gamer's descriptions are simple but brilliant. In The Stone Book Mary watches a half-eaten onion fall from the steeple: "The onion dropped off Father's knife and floated down to the lawns of the church. It had so far to fall that there was time for it to wander in the air." In these lines, Gamer verifies the giddy height of the steeple, atop which Mary will shortly ride the weathercock.

The passage turns on nothing more exotic than the words "floated" and "wander," two common verbs deployed here with scientific precision.

What sets the Stone Book sequence apart, however, are the intricate crossreferences Garner develops among the stories, using echoes and recurring symbols to weave each volume into the series and build a network of associations. Thus, even commonplace items such as Faddock Allman's hammers or the handle of Joseph's bellows carry literary significance. In The Stone Book, for example, Mary's exultant moment on the weathercock as she looks out across the prosperous countryside is balanced by her descent into the Engine Vein and the subterranean room where footprints of centuries of her forebears draw her back into the distant past. These themes are then repeated with intriguing variations in The Aimer Gate, when the younger Robert climbs the tower of Chorley's other church, built by Old Robert at the opposite end of the village.

Just when he feels most alone at the top of the tower, Robert discovers his own name in the stone, carved there by his great-grandfather. Robert's ascent recalls his grandmother's climb two generations earlier, but because Robert climbs inside the tower, his experience is linked to her cave walk as well.

The Stone Book sequence is crisscrossed by such recurring elements, woven into structures of striking complexity. Tom Fobble's Day ends with a culmination of sorts: William sleds down Lizzie Leah's with the clay pipe Old Robert buried in The Stone Book in his pocket. William's sled is made from the handle of Joseph's bellows and the remains of Old William's loom. The bump he must negotiate between the upper and

lower fields was left there by Robert in The Aimer Gate. Beneath it are the remains of the Allmans' cottage, torn down in Granny Reardun. The family's lives and works are forged together in one shimmering moment of joy and motion as William glides down the hill.

Themes and Characters

The theme of constant, relentless change is a key element in the series, as Garner's villagers try to maintain local traditions in the face of upheaval.

Progress strands the elderly by making their skills obsolete. Like the rest of the world, Chorley is steadily moving away from the familiar values of the past toward the impersonal standards of modern mass society. But if change is one of Garner's themes, stability is another. Members of the family remain profoundly loyal to their surroundings and to their class, their fortunes perpetually tied to those of their neighbors, the Allmans and Leahs. Everyone grows up knowing the same stories, landmarks, hills, and fields. By the end of the series so much has happened at some of the key places—St. Philip's and the chapel at Chorley, Glaze Hill and the jackacre at Lizzie Leah's—that they have almost become characters themselves.

The characters in The Stone Book must confront the relentless industrialization of their crafts. Uncle William is a weaver, a holdover from the days when individuals worked alone using their own rudimentary machinery. Cottage industries like Uncle William's died away as the new railroads concentrated production in industrial centers such as Manchester (just visible from the steeple of St.

Philip's in Chorley). William's brother Robert, a stonemason, knows that trades rise and vanish—like species— through survival of the fittest. It is this struggle of the natural selection of industry that provides the backdrop for the book.

Joseph, Robert's grandson, decides in Granny Reardun to become a blacksmith because he has seen Robert bypassed just as William was. The railroad boom is over, and Joseph's search for a trade leads him to the smithy.

Workers will always need tools, he reasons, hoping that because ironworking is "aback" of other trades, it will outlast them all. But in The Aimer Gate, set during World War I, Joseph is forced to toil daily making horseshoes for the army. He forges fifteen tons of shoe iron into 33,600 shoes in the course of the war. Once an independent craftsman, Joseph is reduced to imitating modern factory methods of mass production.

This trend continues in Tom Fobble's Day, the last volume in the series. Great waves of industrial production and international conflict wash over Chorley in the form of German bombers, sweeping searchlights, and booming guns.

Joseph's handwork at the forge is entirely outmoded. The outlook for the younger generation is as uncertain as ever, represented by Joseph's grandson, William, who to some extent symbolizes Garner himself.

Garner's characters come alive with all their quirks and faults. Old Robert, "a bazzil-arsed old devil," is proud and irritable. A drinker, he spent more than one night in a ditch in his younger days.

While he is up-to-date on geology and evolution, he harbors a reactionary, anti-intellectual streak. Robert considers religion a plot to suppress workingmen and resists letting his daughter Mary learn to read. Mary is a bit of a mystery. A spunky, bright girl, she hopes to be a housemaid for the local aristocracy, a better life than stonepicking in the fields. Although Robert loves Mary's pluck, their wills seem destined to clash. In Granny Reardun Mary is apparently unmarried and looking after her son Charlie while her older son Joseph—the "granny reared one"—lives with Robert.

Joseph matures into a conservative and dour man, sharing Old Robert's powerful mind and difficult nature.

Joseph's intuitions about mechanical forces are almost visionary, but he is unable to open himself to others. By mid-life he is a miser, and in old age he sums up his life in numbers: the distance he has bicycled to and from work over the years ("equivalent to two and a half times round the world at the equator" or the 33,600 horseshoes he made during World War I). On a carefully hidden level of his personality, he remains passionately devoted to his dead wife.

Joseph's son, also named Robert, is sweet natured and simple. When pressed in The Aimer Gate to name his life's work, he says only that he likes looking after the crippled Faddock Allman, whom he serves with heroic patience. Drawn to his cheerful Uncle Charlie, who is home on leave from France, Robert thinks of being a soldier, but no one could be less suited for the army than this gentle, almost saintly boy.

William, Joseph's grandson, is more self-seeking. He is physically timid and not overly blessed with imagination. But it is William, inspired by a triumphant vision of family, nature, and time, who ends the series by gloriously descending a dangerous hill on a sled built by his grandfather.

Topics for Discussion

1. In The Stone Book Mary is frightened at first when she must climb St. Philip's steeple, but her fear gradually changes to a boldness that astounds her father, who is used to high places. How does Garner trace the steps of this transformation in Mary's feelings?

2. Each book in the series describes an important day for someone in the family.

For instance, Granny Reardun takes place on Joseph's last day of school.

What family turning points occur in the other stories? Why does Garner choose to base his stories on these particular events?

3. Garner's villagers are generally unsinkable: Uncle William makes light of his deafness; Faddock Allman lives cheerfully without legs; after each bombing run, the village children collect shrapnel as if the pieces were baseball cards. What other characters triumph over hardships? What gives them their strength?

4. Giving Mary a stone facsimile of a book, Old Robert says, "It's better than a book you can open....A book has only one story." Is this deep folk wisdom, or is Robert trying only to appease Mary, whom he does not want to go to school?

Look especially at the last sentence in the book. Would Robert feel differently if Mary were a boy? Do you think Garner would have treated her character differently?

5. Young people around Chorley are taken seriously but never coddled. They have work to do, and adults are often brusque with them. Even breezy Uncle Charlie in The Aimer Gate coldly berates William for using his oil: " 'I don't care what you need,' said Uncle Charlie. 'And you don't touch, think on.'" What other passages and episodes in the stories help define young people's roles?

6. When William asks Joseph what to do when someone calls Tom Fobble's Day" unfairly, Joseph wants to know if the caller is bigger than William. "Bigger," William says. "Then run like beggary," says Joseph. Find and discuss other examples of humor in the stories.

Is there a particular style to the humor around Chorley?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Inspect the handiwork in an old building in your area. What features would be difficult to duplicate today?

What sort of craftsmen probably worked on this job? Where did they leam their trades? If they were starting over now, how would their work be different? Write a report in which you carefully describe the building and speculate about its builders.

2. Look closely at what young Joseph says and thinks about his grandfather, Old Robert, in Granny Reardun. Write a detailed comparison between Joseph's reactions in that book and the feelings of William in Tom Fobble's Day as he thinks about his grandfather—the same Joseph, now grown old.

3. Joseph pushes his baby brother Charlie down Long Croft in his bassinet.

Years later the bassinet has been recycled as Wicked Winnie, Robert's wagon, and follows the same route on Robert's record run to Chorley. Later still, Joseph rides on Long Croft on his bicycle, with his grandson William on the back. List and discuss other examples of variations on the same theme that migrate from story to story.

4. Some critics accuse Garner of sugar-coating the Stone Book stories, nostalgically idealizing the past while ignoring the advantages of modern times. Do you think Garner's picture of the past is realistic or idealized? Base your answers on specific examples from the books.

5. When he learns that Joseph has not told Old Robert he intends to become a smith, Jump James comments: "You're a previous sort of youth, aren't you?"

Have you ever heard the word "previous" used this way? Is its meaning related to the Latin etymology of the word listed in dictionaries? What other words do Garner or his characters use in ways that differ from their common meanings?

For Further Reference

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Related Titles

Garner's early fantasies, The Weirdstone of Brisingamen and The Moon of Gomrath are generally cheerful adventure stories crowded with country scenery, wonderful characters, and thrilling events. They form an interesting point of comparison for his more mature works, such as The Owl Service with its plain style and somber vision.

Elidor, a fantasy about a family of children from industrial Manchester, is a transitional work that arrives at a tragic conclusion.

Red Shift is a less successful experimental novel that intertwines three stories from different periods in the history of Cheshire. The modern protagonist, Tom compulsively ruins everything he believes in. Tom's story has flashes of humor, but the two other narratives woven into the text are grim.

Garner's account of a brutal seventeenth-century massacre during the English Civil War and his violent depiction of the end of the Roman occupation of Cheshire are not clearly related to the affair between Tom and his girlfriend, Jan. Instead of adding tragic stature to Garner's present-day plot, the interwoven stories only make Tom and Jan's problems seem commonplace and unimportant. It is difficult not to be baffled by the book and repelled by its bleak outlook.

Garner has published rewarding collections of traditional stories and fairy tales, such as The Hamish Hamilton Book of Goblins (1969), Alan Garner's Book of British Fairy Tales (1984), and The Lad of Gad (1980). The last two books may shock readers familiar only with sanitized fairy tales, for Gamer catches not only the spoken music but also the nightmarish violence of traditional stories.

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Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

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