The Weirdstone of Brisingamen Short Guide

The Weirdstone of Brisingamen by Alan Garner

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Overview

The Weirdstone of Brisingamen is a thoroughly entertaining fantasy. Although Garner touches upon such values as friendship and faithfulness, his book is so rich in imagination and descriptive writing that few readers ever notice the rather unbelievable characters or the absence of convincing themes. Garner's emphasis is on action, not ideas. And, indeed, life is never dull for the young protagonists of the story, Susan and Colin. Almost immediately, they become embroiled in the desperate struggles of wizards, goblins, warlocks, reclusive fairies, and valiant dwarves, all blatantly enrolled under the banners of good or evil. Susan's accidental possession of "Frostfire," the Weirdstone lost centuries earlier by the wizard Cadellin, breaks down the usual barriers and thrusts the children among the magical creatures living just beneath the surface of things. The children and their allies wander Alderley Edge, the plain to the south, and Shuttlingslow, an outpost of the distant Pennine mountain range, in their effort to keep the Weirdstone from the evil enemy.

About the Author

Born October 17, 1934, into the working class at Alderley Edge, Cheshire, in northwestern England, Alan Garner was chronically ill for most of his first ten years, suffering from spinal and cerebral meningitis, diphtheria, pleurisy, and pneumonia. But these early bedridden years were formative for the future author. Forced to entertain himself, he invented stories, inspired by the irregular walls of his room, which he viewed as a fantasy landscape.

When he was eleven, Gamer's health greatly improved and he quickly demonstrated outstanding abilities at the local school in Alderley Edge and at grammar (high) school in Manchester as a student and an athlete. He was so fiercely competitive as a sprinter, he said that he would have quit the sport the moment someone beat him in a race, but no one did. Gamer 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 after deciding that the numbing routines of academic life were not for him. The turning point, he explained, came soon after he realized that his professor never smiled once in two months of lecturing on Aristophanes, one of the greatest comedians of all time.

After leaving Oxford, Garner served as an officer in the Royal Artillery and then turned to writing after reading William Golding's Lord of the Flies in 1954, a work that deeply affected him. Returning to Cheshire, Gamer lived for four years on National Assistance (British welfare) while completing his first book and researching the folklore and archeology of his beloved region. Today Garner lives and works in the Cheshire village of Blackden-cum-Goostrey in two houses built on a neolithic tumulus like the ones in several of his stories. One of the buildings is a medieval apothecary's shop from twenty miles away, which Garner disassembled and rebuilt on the spot.

Setting

Susan and Colin, temporarily separated from their parents, stumble onto magical doings on Alderley Edge, a wooded ridge six hundred feet high and three miles long that towers above the surrounding countryside in rural Cheshire, author Garner's home ground. Its weather, landmarks, woods, caves, tunnels, lakes, and moors are a major presence in the story, and Garner makes the landscape come alive.

In Garner's hands Alderley Edge becomes the ideal setting for fantastic deeds. The Edge is honeycombed with the abandoned shafts and tunnels of human miners. Beneath these are the forgotten shafts of dwarves that connect with the human mines and the surface in surprising ways. One ancient network of tunnels is overseen by Cadellin, a wizard guarding one hundred and forty silver-clad knights from the world's youth. Another is the home of the "svarts," a nasty tribe of goblins in uneasy alliance with the morthbrood, a coven of local witches.

At the western end of the Edge is St.

Mary's Clyffe, the house of Selina Place, the Morrigan, or chief witch. More frightening than Selina is Grimnir, a fen-monster like Beowulf's Grendel, who inhabits a nearby tarn. The plain fronting the Edge is dotted with barrows or tumuli. These man-made hills cover prehistoric burial sites and contain their own forms of enchantment, as do other landmarks dating back to the neolithic period in Cheshire.

In Gamer's cosmology, the worlds of magic and ordinary experience coexist but rarely mingle. The imaginary universe he describes seems to have progressed through three phases: the oldest, governed by the Old Magic of sun, moon, and blood; the age of High Magic, represented by the imposing wizard, Cadellin; and the present, apparently under the control of human beings. None of these ages interacts with the others comfortably. Only the children can bring them together, and then only briefly.

Social Sensitivity

There is little in The Weirdstone of Brisingamen to cause offense. Religion is never mentioned. No one drinks. No animals are abused. Sexuality does not exist. And except for one memorable instant when the Einheriar attack the Morrigan's troops and Susan notices Garanhir, their leader, bloody to the waist, with strips of severed flesh hanging from his antlers, the violence in the books is clearly make-believe. None of the characters has heard of racism or class warfare. Susan is a brave girl and often takes the lead over her brother Colin. Both children are obedient within reason. There is enough suspense to keep the stories moving forward but not enough to seriously frighten the smallest child.

On the other hand, there is little here to improve anyone's behavior or morals.

Readers are reminded in a general way that it is better to be good than bad, better to be brave than cowardly, and better to be faithful than dishonest, but Garner makes no special effort to drive these rudimentary lessons home. Imaginative readers will treasure this book; others will never understand why.

Literary Qualities

The Weirdstone of Brisingamen is the work of a gifted writer still learning his craft. In retrospect, after producing a series of more polished novels, Garner called The Weirdstone of Brisingamen "a fairly bad book," but this judgment is too harsh. While this early fantasy is unevenly written, it is filled with creative force and lit with flashes of genuine brilliance, usually in passages of description. This makes a compelling mix. Many readers prefer the vigor and uncomplicated morality of Garner's early works to the elegant but troubling "problem" novels that he produced in the next stage of his career.

Much of this early vigor stems from the free use Garner makes of ancient tales and myths. The epilogue to The Moon of Gomrath points out that most of Garner's creatures, plot developments, and names are solidly traditional. Thus, Fenrir of Ragnarok, Nastrond's wolf, is borrowed whole from Scandinavian mythology, while the Wild Hunt thunders through a quantity of British folk tales. "The more I learn," Garner said, "the more I am convinced that there are no original stories." Recognizing this fact, he borrows from centuries of traditional lore from several cultures.

Description, especially of nature, is another Garner strength. His word-pictures of the Edge with its rustling beechwoods and lurking caves stick in the memory, giving a degree of authenticity to even the most unlikely of the children's adventures.

Garner's talent for manipulating point of view makes his action writing unusually effective. For instance, when it seems inevitable that Susan will be killed by a dreadful troll-woman, Garner describes the scene from the anguished point of view of Durathror, her would-be protector. Not only does Durathror see what is taking place more clearly than Susan, but his anxiety at being unable to help adds an overlay of emotion to an already dramatic scene.

Garner, however, can never seem to resist giving the wheel an extra turn.

Toward the end of The Weirdstone of Brisingamen, when the wandering character Gaberlunzie appears out of nowhere to carry the children to safety, his intrusion makes an irrational shambles of the final flight. If Gaberlunzie and his magic horse could transport the children and their friends to Macclesfield Forest, why couldn't he simply take them all the way to Shuttlingslow, where they would be safe? This, and other unfortunate elaborations, mar the structure of the plot.

Themes and Characters

In his early fantasies Garner seems determined to keep the pot boiling at any cost, and The Weirdstone of Brisingamen is no exception. Thematically, the stories dip into Norse mythology, which points toward a world-shattering final battle between the forces of good and evil. Although Garner had not read Tolkien before writing this novel, his use of children as an unexpected force on the side of good will be familiar to admirers of Tolkien's hobbits. He suggests that the innocence of weak creatures may be as potent against evil as more sophisticated and powerful defenses.

Susan and Colin, Garner's young heroes, are highly idealized. Both are resourceful, loyal, good-hearted, eager, brave, and determined in equal measure. In later books like Elidor and The Owl Service, Garner shows himself capable of imagining young people with realistic flaws, but in this one and its sequel, The Moon of Gomrath, he clearly did not try. Instead, as several critics have remarked, Susan and Colin function as blank spaces in the stories into which the reader can project himself or herself. Assuming that Gamer's purpose was to construct appealing tales fully enjoyable without hard thinking, Susan and Colin do their job perfectly.

As usual, Garner's older people are less simple, especially those who should be the children's protectors and friends.

Susan and Colin have been abandoned by their real parents, who have been called abroad for six months, leaving the children in the keeping of Gowther and Bess Mossock. Gowther, a Cheshire farmer, has a noticeably suspicious nature and occasionally sulks. Bess vacillates between simple motherliness—"it'll do this old farm-house a world of good to have a couple of children brighten it up"—and an aggrieved sense that the children are an unnecessary complication in her life, as when Frostfire is lost or when Susan falls under the spell of the Brollachan. Gowther is the more important character, although neither he nor his wife ever comes sharply into focus. His dealings with the children are somewhat strained. He dislikes magic and joins the final odyssey to Shuttlingslow only under protest. Once the journey is underway, he never quite rises to the occasion the way veteran fantasy readers expect. In an epilogue to The Moon of Gomrath Garner says Gowther is a "straight and undiluted" likeness of an actual farmer, Joshua Rowbotham Birtles of Over Alderley. In view of the grimmer elements in Gowther's character, Farmer Birtles may have been less flattered to learn this than Garner meant him to be.

Cadellin Silverbrow is not a typical kindly wizard. Although supportive at times, he tends to retreat into his lair, leaving the children to roam the woods vainly pleading for his return. Although Cadellin is careful to explain that he behaves this way for the children's own good, they often feel he has betrayed them. Additional characters on the side of good include some extremely effective dwarves, whom Garner evidently prefers to elves. Few characters in literature are so infectiously gallant as Durathror, the joyous warrior dwarf who helps rescue the children from the svart caverns.

Garner's evildoers are not individually memorable, probably because there are so many of them. Wearing her everyday identity as a local eccentric, Selina Place is vaguely comic. Even as the Morrigan, or arch-witch, she often seems befuddled. Grimnir, who first appears as a terrifying fog, is better, but his fog-identity is so strong that it is difficult to imagine his other guises. Behind these major villains is Nastrond, the Great Spirit of Darkness, who never appears in his own person. He supports the villains with an astonishing array of wicked footsoldiers: svarts, lesser witches, twenty-five foot high green troll women, devil cats, animated scarecrows, and the Brollachan—an empty black presence with red eyes who inhabits living creatures until they burst with the strain of hosting him. At the end of The Weirdstone of Brisingamen the loathsome Grimnir is revealed to be the brother and evil double of Cadellin, a surprising twist, but one that does little to further the plot.

Topics for Discussion

1. What differences are there between the characters of Susan and Colin? How are these differences shown? Are they more or less clear than the character differences between Gowther and Bess Mossock?

2. What is left out of Garner's account of Susan and Colin? For instance, why do they make no friends their own age?

Why do they never fight? What else that is important in the lives of real children does Garner simplify or omit?

3. Consider this description of Grimnir: "He is, or was, a man. Once he studied under the wisest of the wise, and became a great lore-master; but in his lust for knowledge he practiced the forbidden arts, and the black magic ravaged his heart, and made a monster of him." Would it be better or worse if Gamer had written: "He was a man and a great lore-master. But he practiced forbidden arts, and black magic made a monster of him."

4. What happens on the island of Angharad Goldenhand, Lady of the Lake?

Could Garner have saved his characters from the mara and the cold in some less elaborate way? Why did he not?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Read Garner's sequel, The Moon of Gomrath. In the epilogue, he explains that the Einheriar, the Herlathing, and Garanhir are all drawn from authentic folk traditions. Read an encyclopedia account of British, Celtic, or Scandinavian folklore and identify other elements in the stories.

2. Gowther complains that his world is being overrun with "witches, boggarts, and green freetlings." List and describe the supernatural creatures Garner includes in The Weirdstone of Brisingamen. Don't forget minor ones like the stromkaris or Gaberlunzie's foxes.

3. Using Garner's maps, rough out the cavern systems of the Edge. Where are Fundindelve, the West Mine, and Earldelving with respect to each other?

Where are they with respect to the surface features of the Edge? Write a report of your findings and illustrate it with your own maps.

4. Pick a paragraph from one of Gamer's later novels and compare it to a paragraph of equal length from The Weirdstone of Brisingamen in terms of 1) sentence length, 2) number of adjectives and other modifiers, and 3) proportion of monosyllabic and polysyllabic words.

What do these comparisons imply about Garner's development as a stylist?

5. In The Moon of Gomrath, Cadellin reluctantly yields to the Old Magic, which he scorns and distrusts. Garner, on the other hand, has mixed feelings of his own about Cadellin and exults, "the Old Magic was free for ever." What in Garner's background might account for these feelings? What forces in his own life might he have identified with the High Magic and Old Magic?

For Further Reference

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New York: Atheneum, 1978. Garner's own reflections on his craft and career up to 1968.

Eyre, Frank. British Children's Books in the Twentieth Century. New York: Dutton, 1971. Discusses Garner's work in the context of British children's literature.

Inglis, Fred. The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children's Fiction. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. A distinguished critical account of children's literature. Inglis finds Gamer's fantasies "substanceless," part of an escapist trend that "heightens and intensifies emotional life without giving either these emotions or the images that provoke them a way back into experience."

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London: Collins, 1981. A general appreciation, focusing in particular on influences on Garner and on the urge to excel that has driven him far beyond the easy appeal of his earliest work.

Townsend, John Rowe. A Sounding of Storytellers: New and Revised Essays on Contemporary Writers for Children.

New York: Lippincott, 1979. Contains a generally sympathetic account of Garner's development through The Stone Book and its sequels.

Written for Children: An Outline of English Language Children's Literature. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1974.

Discusses Gamer among other fantasists.

Wintle, Justin, and Emma Fisher. The Pied Pipers: Interviews with the Influential Creatorsof English Literature. New York: Paddington Press, 1974. Contains a revealing interview with Garner, focused chiefly on his biography and early life.

Related Titles

Garner's sequel to The Weirdstone of Brisingamen, The Moon of Gomrath, features the children, Susan and Colin, and most of the same cast of characters in a further fantasy adventure that pits good against evil. In this novel, however, the action centers on the prehistoric barrows, and "the old, straight tracks"— magical paths, visible only when the full moon is rising that connect centers of forgotten power. In this story, farmer Gowther's mistrust is stronger. He bristles when he learns the children are involved in yet another magical adventure and takes no part in it himself. The dwarf Durathror's place is taken by another dwarf, Uthecar, who is paired off against Pelis the False, an elegant and dashing criminal dwarf who is a fine creation in his own right. Garner develops an interesting contrast between Old and High magic by introducing a new set of characters that are in a class by themselves. These are the Einheriar of the Herlathing or Lords of the Wild Hunt, who are representatives of the Old Magic. These primitive, uncontrollable riders bear a spiritual force rare in Garner's early work. From the moment they rise from their barrows to harry the countryside behind the antlered leader Garanhir, The Moon of Gomrath assumes a mythic seriousness that looks forward to Garner's later novels.

Garner's novels grow increasingly somber as his style matures, and conflicts only hinted at in The Weirdstone of Brisingamen and The Moon of Gomrath assume a larger significance. Elidor, a fantasy of parallel worlds about a family of children from industrial Manchester, ends tragically. If the story had continued for one more page, Garner said, its chief character would have gone mad with despair. The Owl Service, which many consider Garner's best book, stretches a minimum of surface action over powerful undercurrents of myth and emotion. While these books show a growing seriousness, neither is as easy to like as the early novels.

Red Shift is an experimental novel that intertwines three stories from different periods in the history of Cheshire. The modern protagonist, Tom, compulsively ruins everything he believes in. Although Tom's story has flashes of humor, the two narratives interwoven with his are relentlessly grim. One strand is an account of a brutal massacre during the seventeenth-century English Civil War; the other, a violent episode at the end of the Roman occupation of Cheshire. Neither is clearly related to the affair between Tom and his girl Jan. Instead of adding tragic stature to the present, Garner's interwoven stories only make Tom and Jan's problems seem commonplace and unimportant. It is difficult not to be baffled by this book and repelled by its bleak outlook.

Far more satisfying are The Stone Book and its sequels, written in the late 1970s. In these short books, Garner explores life in rural Cheshire by tracing a single working-class family (based on his own) from the 1860s to World War II. While all four books taken together would not make even a short novel, Garner considers The Stone Book quartet his best work. Each story captures a moment in the life of the family, usually the emergence of a new generation. By the time of Tom Fobble's Day, set during World War II, many of the earlier characters have disappeared into the past, but none is forgotten. Although the stories are independent, they should be read in sequence to fully

appreciate the rich family tradition, based on love and respect that develops around Garner's characters. In a sense, The Stone Book and its sequels mark Garner's maturation as a writer.

Garner has also published rewarding collections of traditional stories and fairytales, such as The Hamish Hamilton Book of Goblins (1969) with reissues under various titles; The Lad of Gad (1980) and Alan Garner's Book of British Fairytales (1984). The last two books may shock readers familiar only with sanitized fairy tales. Garner catches the spoken music but also the nightmarish violence of traditional stories.

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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996