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LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

On Mirkwood, Vampires and Rhododendrons: Experiencing Familiar Places through Fiction

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During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many have faced and are currently facing different modes of confinement and isolation, in some cases self-imposed and in other enforced. Border closures, travel restrictions, curfews, limitations on social gatherings, self-quarantine rules and similar measures have affected and continue to affect the lives of millions in different parts of the world. As someone who has been studying literary tourism and other forms of fiction-inspired travel, I am aware of the constraints the current situation presents also for researchers working in this field: in addition to the profound impact the pandemic has already had on the tourism industry, the situation surrounding COVID-19 outbreak is expected to have long-term effects on travel worldwide. At the same time, I am also considering the possibilities and new perspectives it can offer when analyzing connections between literature and space. While in the field of tourism studies the focus is oftentimes on how our reading and encounters with fiction in various media shape our view of previously unknown or rarely visited locations, I would like to focus on the question of how the places where we read affect those readings.

In response to the suggestion to contemplate how researching literary geographies (Hones 2020) could be shaped by the ongoing crisis, and, in turn, what new points of view this field of study can offer when looking at the situation, I thought about the idea that 'all stories happen in multiple places' (Hones 2020: 13). Being confined to the home,

neighborhood, city and country where one currently resides, not being allowed to (or choosing not to) leave one's place of residence, being forced to or making a decision to be *here* and not anywhere else, one can turn to literature as means of escape, but one can also correlate own past and current spatial experiences to stories one reads. The text 'happens' (Hones 2008) where we read it, but it also happens in the places where we have previously lived or visited, our past experiences and memories coming together to allows us to envision fictional or fictionalized locations and project narratives unto them.

In the first season of the Netflix sci-fi/horror web TV series *Stranger Things* (2016 –), a group of pre-teens habitually refer to a certain road in their hometown as *Mirkwood,* due to its perceived similarities to the Mirkwood forest in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit.* The forest is a dark and eerie place, with dangers lurking behind the trees. The road, similarly, gives the youngsters a deep sense of unease, 'a sort of watching and waiting feeling' (Tolkien 1937/2008: 175), which, as it turns out, is completely justified. Tolkien's forest is fictional, as is the road nicknamed after it, as is the small town Hawkins, Indiana, where the young protagonists live, and the young people themselves are, of course, fictional. Just as fictional characters often combine the traits of 'real' individuals, fictional places are also a blend of actual 'worldly' locations and imaginary aspects. If we imagine (or remember), for a moment, living in a small town in the Midwest (or, maybe, in the West Midlands, or, perhaps, in southern Finland), being in our early teens and daily having to take a road through woods which give us the creeps, wouldn't it occur to us – having just read Tolkien's books – to make a connection between the foreboding fictional place and the no less chilling site we encounter every day?

Perhaps, nothing has ever been written about the place where we live, or about that particular road. No famous writer has ever lived in our small town or been inspired by its overwhelming ordinariness or after-dusk eeriness. No cinematic adaptation has ever been filmed here either. But the way it looks and *feels* at night, on that road – with the dim atmosphere, strange sounds, the smell of rotting leaves, and that unnerving feeling as if someone, or something, is watching you from behind the trees – gives you the feeling you get when reading the passages about Mirkwood, and you feel that it must be exactly this feeling that Bilbo and the dwarves felt when they set foot in the forest.

From my teenage years, a few pieces of anecdotal evidence:

> A few evenings alone in a hotel room with vampire novels, while parents played pool, and the surrounding area, with Crimean vineyards and mountain ranges, became associated with gloomy aristocrats, dressed in outdated finery and lusting for blood. I just couldn't quite figure out what rhododendrons were – they featured repeatedly in the novel. Having lived above the Arctic Circle for most of my life, I wasn't really very familiar with southern flora. I assumed they could possibly look like roses.

In a similar way, a northern city where I used to live, thousands of miles away from the Black Country, became associated with Birmingham as depicted in Joel Lane's novels, because, to me, it had the same desolated post-industrial feel. My personal evidence aside, the instances

when 'fiction leaks into the real, and vice versa' (Hones 2009: 1) might be facilitated by our experience of places and spatial attachments we form during our lives: while our geographical knowledge can help us imagine the spatiality of the fictional text, spatial associations can work also in reverse (Hones 2014; Anderson 2015; Thurgill 2018; Thurgill and Lovell 2019).

Literature is often considered a form of armchair tourism, a way to 'see' places without actually travelling there. Occasionally, stories may captivate readers to such an extent that they motivate them to visit the 'actual' locations which appear in or inspired fictional narratives, in order to 'authenticate the reading experience in a more "personal" way' (Watson 2006: 13). In the course of these visits, places which have become 'familiar' during the reading are often experienced through the prism of fiction and compared to their literary descriptions (Hendrix 2009). Additionally, places where authors were born, resided or were buried, as well as locations that served as sites for screen productions (e.g. Beeton 2016; Kim, Long and Robinson 2009) can all become associated with fictional narratives.

An extensive and growing body of research on literary travel and other forms of media-induced tourism examines the connections between fiction and space, looking at how stories affect individually and collectively constructed images of places and focusing on how spaces can be experienced through their connections to specific narratives. Although places with ties to fiction can attract visitors from different parts of the world, they do not necessarily need to be 'far away' locations: fiction-inspired travel does not always lead visitors to places far from home, as multiple examples of domestic literary tourism demonstrate (e.g. Pocock 1987; Squire 1994; Watson 2006; Wang and Zhang 2017; Yu and Xu 2018).

At the same time, the places we encounter in our daily lives can become fictionalized. Reading narratives set in familiar places can make the story feel more 'real', and it is easier to 'unfold' the narrative across the space we already know and have previously experienced (Hones 2014). The process, however, is not a one-way stream: readers' geographical experience affects the reading, but, in a similar manner, the reading can also affect the perception of places, both during and after the encounter with the text (Thurgill and Lovell 2019). Two notable studies of an autoethnographic nature have been published in *Literary Geographies*: Jon Anderson (2015) and James Thurgill (2018) have analyzed narratives set in Cardiff and Aldeburgh respectively. Both researchers reflect on their personal experiences of living in the area (Anderson 2015) or in its proximity (Thurgill 2018) and on their spatial experience of the surroundings in light of their engagement with particular fictional narratives. Anderson (2015) describes tracing the 'exact' sites featured in Tessa Hadley's *The London Train* – based on textual descriptions and his own assumptions. Although the places are not directly referred to in the novel, several specific locales in Cardiff – some of which are relatively easily identifiable, and others based on more of a guess – have become, for him as a reader, associated with the fictional narrative. Even after a conversation with the novel's author, when one actual site that served as an inspiration was revealed, Anderson's initial conjecture regarding the site still takes precedence for him when re-imagining the story.

Thurgill (2018), in his autoethnographic study, also locates the actual-world sites which served as a setting, in his case for M. R. James' supernatural short story *A Warning to the Curious*. Referring to recognizable landmarks from the text, Thurgill follows in the footsteps of the

fictional characters around Aldeburgh, a town in Suffolk which was a prototype for the fictional Seaburgh of the story. While many sites are still recognizable to the reader based on the description in the text, even after close to a century since publication, in the course of this 'spatial performance' (241), a notable sense of absence emerges repeatedly – that of the fictional characters, of the author himself (there is no indication that he lived there), of one notable landmark in the story and, suitable to the mood of the ghost story, the general absence of other visitors at the time. Thus, the pursuit turns out to be as haunting an experience as the supernatural source text itself.

These two studies are examples of research focusing on and conducted at the locations which feature – in a direct or semi-fictionalized form – in works of fiction, and in both cases researchers draw on their own experience of places when studying connections between space and literature. It is possible, however, for visitors to encounter the 'fictional' dimension at sites with no existing connections to fiction, as 'literary space spills over into the Real world' (Doel 2018: 47) and the other way around.

In her research on tourism in English medieval historical cities, Jane Lovell (2019), for instance, found that visitors projected medieval and fantasy narratives unto spaces which did not actually have any verifiable ties to these stories, based solely on the perceived similarities of architecture and the atmospherics. Similarly, in David McLaughlin's (2016) case study of American Sherlockians, the absence of actual connections to the famous fictional detective does not deter Holmes' devotees from intentionally 'spilling' their favorite narrative onto a hill half the world away from the places where Arthur Conan Doyle set his stories.

While some of the studies I referred to (as well as majority of tourism studies, naturally) centered on encountering fictionalized spaces during touristic and visitor activities – that is, in places which are not one's place of residence – other researchers (e.g. Hones 2014; Anderson 2015; Thurgill 2018) have looked at how familiar places are perceived in connection to stories set in those locations. Thinking back to Joel Lane's books and the way they resonated with my spatial experience of my hometown not far from the Norwegian-Russian border, I suggest that spaces not related to fictional narratives can nevertheless be perceived as related – through similar atmospherics, climate or specific architectural features, through their *mood* and *feel*.

Indeed, in their *Thinking Space* article (2019), Jane Lovell and James Thurgill address the possibilities of studying how places with no actual connection to fiction – either via the text, biographical ties with authors or through adaptations – can nevertheless be perceived through the lens of fictional narratives.

Places we visit, or those we inhabit, can be perceived in light of known fictional texts and become 'augmented' (Sandvik and Waade 2008) by fiction, connected in our minds to stories and places – be they imaginary locations like Mirkwood, Lothlórien, or the Forbidden Forest, or fictionalized actual-world places like Birmingham. As seen in two autoethnographic accounts I cite above, the places – one visited during a summer holiday and another, where I used to live – had no ties whatsoever to the fictional narratives set in the Mediterranean or the Black country respectively, yet the stories I read became tied to the spaces I occupied,

seeping into the physical reality and adding a fictional layer to these places, based on perceived aesthetic and atmospheric similarities, and the *feeling* they created for me.

Readers like Anderson, reading a novel set in *their* city, might get the feeling that a certain café just '*had* to be' (2015: 130, emphasis in the original) the setting for a specific scene in the novel and, through this 'knowledge', would envision and interpret that part of the narrative. At the same time, a reader like myself, on occasion, seeing an abandoned factory building in a desolate industrial area, or a snow-covered bench in an empty park in a city on the northernmost shore of Europe, might think, '*this* is exactly like in the story, this is what it must have looked like', even though the story is set in a city on the other side of Europe. Yet, this is what I will be imagining from then on, reading the text: that bench, that building. With my geographical experience affecting the reading, I bring the 'real world' into the text, co-constructing the story in my mind. However, during and after the reading, the tables might turn (Hones 2014; Thurgill and Lovell 2019): the bench might become associated with the narrative, and every time I pass by it, I might think of the book; Birmingham noir 'spills' out of the broken windows and cracks in the walls of the industrial building whenever I go to that area again.

Drawing on the previous research published in the field, and reflecting on my own reading and geographical experiences, this short piece attempted to consider the insights offered by studying literary geographies in isolation (Hones 2020) and possibly discover new directions for further inquiries. My suggestion with regards to future research on the topic of fiction and space would be to see how looking at how familiar places – those we currently reside in, or those where we used to live – can acquire a fictional 'layer' though literary texts and fiction encountered in other media. In light of the tradition of exploring how familiar place can be 'fictionalized' by narratives, an alternative path would be to analyze also how familiar places with no known connections to fiction can be – intentionally or not – experienced through fictional narratives.

During the lockdown, even if rules are relaxed and places begin to reopen, people find themselves confined to spaces where they live or temporary reside. Looking at readers' – as well as researchers' own – experiences of fictionalized familiar geographies, including current and former places of residence, may provide new perspectives for studying literary geographies. The presence – or absence – of other individuals around the reader, in public and private spaces, and the changing format (e.g. ebooks, Kindle) of literature consumption resulting from the situation surrounding the pandemic are also likely to affect the way the text happens (Hones 2008) and therefore that also might be worth investigating further.

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