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# Boneland: the continuing story

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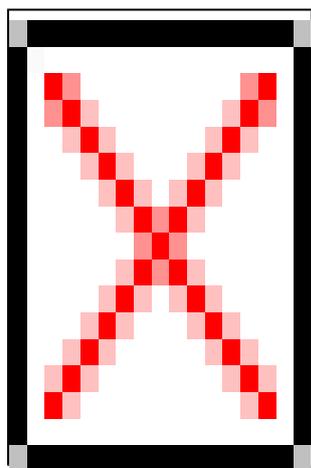
[Geoff Fox](#) [1]

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Byline:

**Boneland: the continuing story. Geoff Fox** reads and rereads Alan Garner's new novel.

Boneland: the continuing story



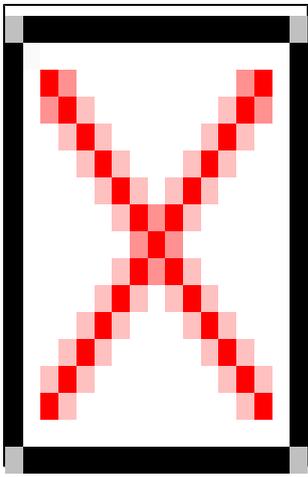
Had it been around at the time, **Books for Keeps** would probably have reviewed Alan Garner's **The Weirdstone of Brisingamen** (1960) and **The Moon of Gomrath** (1963) in its books for 10-14 year-olds section. The dust jacket of Garner's new novel **Boneland** (August, 2012) describes it as 'a novel for adults, concluding a trilogy that was begun for children'. Is there another trilogy written over 50+ years? **Geoff Fox** re-reads, reads, and reads again.

Alan Garner would not have known me when we were boys at Manchester Grammar School, but I knew him; he was the kind of 6<sup>th</sup> Former all of us in the Lower School knew - National 100 yards Champion, lean as a whippet, always an eager smile. A flamboyant Osric in **Hamlet** who, I think, doubled up as the Ghost. On the night I went, Claudius accidentally dropped a ring, which clattered slowly across the stage. As I see him now, Osric swooped, bowed and returned the ring with a flourish and a couple of instant iambic pentameters; or if he didn't, he fooled me and everyone else in the audience.

A few years later, after **The Weirdstone of Brisingamen** and **The Moon of Gomrath** and after I had returned to teach at the school, he came to talk with my 1D:

*Precocious 12 yr old (there were many):* Mr Garner, wouldn't you say that you are very much influenced by J.R.R. Tolkien?

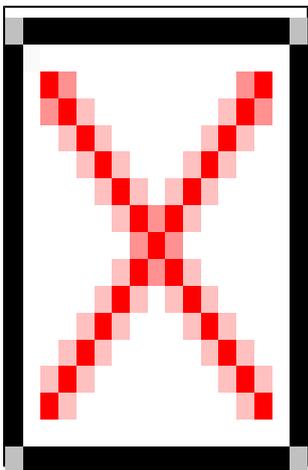
*Mr Garner:* Who?



Revisiting those early books after almost fifty years, prior to reading **Boneland**, I was disappointed. The adventures of Colin and Susan, around and under Alderley Edge (close to home for Alan in every sense, and a favourite bike ride for me) are exciting in their settings, especially the smothering underground journey in **The Weirdstone**. The land is charged with wild and timeless energy. But the present day reader might well feel that the children's enemies never seem to be seriously dangerous, the stakes no longer feel high enough. The twins are indistinguishable in the way in which they speak; and the sense of High Romance depends rather too easily upon resonant names summoned up from Celtic mythology. At the time though, **Weirdstone**, **Gomrath** and **Elidor** (1965) surely broke open a door for later writers, especially in their fusion of legend with landscapes and times which young readers could recognise as their own. Philip Pullman, Garth Nix and Neil Gaiman implicitly acknowledge such a debt in their appreciations included in a 50th anniversary hardback edition of **Weirdstone**.

A **Guardian Review** interview (18.08.12, p.11) reveals that before he had finished **Gomrath**, Garner had come to 'loathe' the characters, describing them as 'zeroes', the novels as 'drivel'. Move forward to **The Owl Service** (1967) and **Red Shift** (1973) and find an extraordinary development, especially in dialogue that has the brilliance of glittering rapier; perhaps he was more at ease with the voice rhythms and wit of his late teenage characters. I read an extract from **The Owl Service** to 4B one day, and that was that. They weren't going to do anything else until I'd read them the whole book. Alan generously came in to answer their questions. After an interrogation from the boys, I said I'd been surprised that it was Roger rather than Gwyn who could free Alison from the fatal hatred of the old legend. 'Ah then, you haven't read the book properly,' he said. Take the opening of **Red Shift**, echoed a couple of times in **Boneland**, including a repeated punning joke about the numbering of Motorways and the stars (you sense Garner enjoys a private smile within his own writing now and again). Jan and Tom, in their late teens, test their relationship - one brave and direct, the other anxious and oblique; far more lies between their lines than on the page. Garner would probably hate this, but I never found a better passage to help undergraduates on my creative writing courses explore how dialogue can be crafted.

### The continuing story



So, **Boneland**. What might BfK readers want to know? What it's about, maybe? Impossible - it would lose too much in the retelling. What follows is provisional, since although I've read the book twice (it's only 160 pages), I am still adrift in some sections. Colin is now (I assumed) late middle-aged, a brilliant astrophysicist

working at the Jodrell Bank Telescope, not far from Alderley Edge. When we meet him, he is consumed by a search to find someone he has lost – so consumed that he is currently on sick leave. Old **Weirdstone** and **Gomrath** hands will know this must be Susan, though she is never directly named in **Boneland**. Colin does not even remember his twin, since he has no memory of the years before he was 13 (he and Susan were 12 at the end of **Gomrath**). In time, we learn why Colin's memory of those years has gone, just as we learn something of what happened to Susan. Colin does however have total recall of everything from 13 onwards. When his therapist asks him, 'What did you do in the afternoon after your sixteenth birthday?' he can reply, 'Double Latin. Double. I ask you! It's a set text. *The Aeneid*, Book Six, lines 703 to 751'. Ask him who was the President of the United States a decade ago and he has no idea. His recall is strictly autobiographical.

His hold on what passes for most of us as reality ranges from the tenuous to the desperate; which takes him to meetings with Meg, a psychotherapist. The sustained exchanges between the two are pure Garner. Nobody does it better. Witty, electric with intelligence and humour, an edge of sexuality. Two people locked in excited discovery. One of Meg's repeated prompts is 'Go to the pain, go to where it hurts the most and say whatever it tells you.' The **Guardian** piece notes that these were words Garner himself heard from his therapist after years of acute agony prior to a diagnosis of manic depression in 1989.

Readers of the earlier books will find no Fundindelve, no sleeping knights or warrior dwarves with flashing swords, no Cadellin and no Morrigan. And no Susan? She is there on every page, driving Colin's thought and action, and even those other characters may still haunt the Edge and **Boneland**'s pages. At one level, he believes she has found sanctuary among the Pleiades and tries to use the great telescope to find her; at another, she whispers in his mind. His therapist turns up newspaper cuttings which show that a girl – Colin will not let Meg speak her name – disappeared all those years ago from the Mossocks' farm (Old Gowther and Bess are long dead) and seems to have ridden through the waters of Redesmere to an island. The horse comes back but she doesn't; and no body is found. We know, though no-one in **Boneland** seems to know, that it was on this floating island that Susan met Angarad Goldenhand in **Gomrath**.

Though perhaps some of the characters *do* know. For who exactly is Meg? Or, for that matter, the always-on-hand taxi driver from High Forrest Taxis, Bert – of course, his surname would be *Forster*? Even the telephonist at the taxi firm is called 'Fay'. Once Colin nears some kind of personal resolution, Meg, Bert, the taxi firm – all disappear. The house where Colin and Meg have talked many times is closed up, and has been for years, though a handyman (another Bert) is busy with a spot of light maintenance when Colin calls. All that is left of Meg is a voice, urging Colin to forgive and accept himself. Somehow Meg, Susan and Colin need each other to form a 'Trinity' ('we are always with you, Colin. Always have been. Always shall be. All three?') So, just a minute, perhaps that early suspicion was 'correct'? Meg/Morrigan? If so, I'll have to rethink the Morrigan. I need another reading. Or as many as it takes.

### **Closer to poetry than prose**

The Meg/Colin interaction was the more accessible, compelling strand of the plot for me. Alongside it, or rather weaving in and out, is a beyond-time strand which does pick up the **Gomrath** theme of the Hunter – in that book, a Herne figure who leads the Wild Hunt. Here the Hunter (or, I think, the same being, The Watcher who may or may not even be Colin at times) must dance and sing on and under the Edge, for if he does not, then the Sleeper will awake, the Dream dies and 'all things must end'. I'm sorry, but I cannot capture this fully for **BfK** readers. The text needs to be read, and reread, word for word as it stands on the page, closer to poetry than prose. Meanings are multiple and not specific, overwhelming in their sprung intensity. Garner himself has said that writing **Boneland** at times terrified him, and there is also a sense that some passages are painfully crafted, as if he has used a stone hammer rather than a pen, searching out the shapes of language and ideas which lie deeply embedded, refusing to yield themselves up easily.

It's one of those layered texts which test your ways of reading. Colin's encounters with Meg, or with colleagues at Jodrell Bank, invite a headlong ride; you can hardly keep up with the pace. The 'Watcher' strand is so tightly interwoven, so surprising in its choice of individual words, so allusive to previous passages, that it needs a kind of reflective, circular reading and rereading demanded by the images and echoes of a poem or a novel such as **Heart of Darkness**.

Some readers will probably become impatient or frustrated, just as some were with **Red Shift**. Others may say, okay, if that's your game, I'm in. For his part, Garner writes what he knows only he can and must write, and he doesn't compromise. And if some of that seems to be for himself, then that's the deal, take it or leave it. Forty years ago, Garner could infuriate earnest conference audiences by his abrupt refusal to explain 'meaning'. The Weirdestone Trilogy is probably already exciting eager researchers. I wouldn't advise knocking on the author's door.

## The Books

**The Weirdestone of Brisngamen**, HarperCollins, 288pp, 978 0 0073 5521 1, £5.99 pbk

**The Moon of Gomrath**, HarperCollins, 224pp, 978 0 0071 2787 0, £5.99 pbk

**Boneland**, Fourth Estate, 160pp, 978 0 0074 6324 4, £16.99 hbk

**Geoff Fox** is now retired as Co-Editor (UK) of **Children's Literature in Education**, but continues to work on the board and as an occasional teller of traditional tales.

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