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## “This Sense of Otherness”: The Horrors of the Countryside in Andrew Michael Hurley’s *Starve Acre*



Erin Mercer 

School of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand

### ABSTRACT

In novels *The Loney* (2014), *Devil’s Day* (2017) and *Starve Acre* (2019), contemporary British author Andrew Michael Hurley locates threat in the British countryside where primitive superstition continues to exist. Describing his writing as “folk horror,” Hurley tempers nostalgic desires for a traditional rural lifestyle by revealing its barbaric underpinnings. In his most recent novel, he also critiques contemporary values. In *Starve Acre*, the Willoughby family are tormented by superstitious beliefs, but they are ultimately undone by a privileging of material secular realities. *Starve Acre* thus represents the traditions of the rural past and those of the urban present as equally threatening. This bleak vision of British life suggests that solace is not to be found in idealized notions of an escape from contemporary living to the traditional lifestyles of the past. Rather, that the return to a life lived in harmony with the environment must be accompanied by a psychic return that acknowledges the power and fundamental otherness of nature. What Hurley’s fiction highlights is that the anti-Enlightenment project associated with Gothic’s varied manifestations, including folk horror, can be harnessed for contemporary concerns with how humanity might better exist in and relate with the natural environment.

The fiction of contemporary British author Andrew Michael Hurley can be broadly understood through a Gothic concern with haunting, a barbaric past and the return of the repressed. More specifically, Hurley’s Gothic imaginary in novels *The Loney* (2014), *Devil’s Day* (2017) and *Starve Acre* (2019) locates threat in the British countryside where primitive superstition continues to exist and where the “malignant history” of the nation is uncovered.<sup>1</sup> In Hurley’s most recent novel, *Starve Acre*, a young couple relocate from Leeds to a house on the edge of moorland outside a rural village where they expect to raise a family and enjoy the pleasures of country life. Instead, they take up residence beside a field haunted by a malevolent woodland deity that reifies the sins of a superstitious British past. Describing his writing as “folk horror,” Hurley tempers nostalgic desires for a traditional rural lifestyle by revealing its barbaric underpinnings. Unlike other folk horror narratives, such as Thomas Tryon’s *Harvest Home* (1973) and Bernard A. Taylor’s *The Moorstone Sickness* (1982), *Starve Acre* critiques contemporary values in addition to those of the past. Richard Willoughby and his family are tormented by historical violence and superstitious beliefs, but they are ultimately undone by Richard’s privileging of material secular realities. *Starve Acre* thus represents the traditions of the rural past and those of the urban present as equally threatening. This bleak vision of British life suggests that solace is

**CONTACT** Erin Mercer  [e.mercer@massey.ac.nz](mailto:e.mercer@massey.ac.nz)  School of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Massey University, Private Bag 102904, Auckland, North Shore 0745, New Zealand

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not to be found in idealized notions of an escape from contemporary living to the traditional lifestyles of the past. Rather, that the return to a life lived in harmony with the environment must be accompanied by a psychic return that acknowledges the power and fundamental otherness of nature. Hurley's suggestion that the landscape is "a living element" in narratives that explore humanity's relationship with the natural world reveals the centrality of an environment that it not simply lived on in physical terms but lived *with* in relational ones.<sup>2</sup> What Hurley's fiction highlights is that the anti-Enlightenment project associated with Gothic's varied manifestations can be harnessed for contemporary concerns with how humanity might better exist in and relate with the natural environment.

The term folk horror that Hurley uses to characterize his work can be traced to Mark Gatiss' three-part television series *A History of Horror* (2010). Gatiss uses the term to describe British horror films of the 1960s and 1970s that draw on the primitive folklore of rural environments. Adam Scovell's *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017) furthers understanding of the genre by arguing that it is perhaps more a mode than a genre defined by strict parameters. Andy Paciorek suggests something similar in *Folk Horror Revival: Field Studies* (2018) by describing folk horror as "atmospheric and sinuous. It can creep from and into different territories, yet leave no universally defining mark of its exact form."<sup>3</sup> In lieu of a definition, Scovell suggests that folk horror can best be understood as being concerned with isolated rural environments "where elements in the topography have adverse effects on the social and moral identity of the inhabitants."<sup>4</sup> This process is amply demonstrated in the film *The Wicker Man* (1973), which documents the pagan beliefs – including human sacrifice to guarantee a successful harvest – of the people of the remote island of Summerisle. Similarly, in *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), the inhabitants of a picturesque English village conduct black masses to the demon Behemoth.

The environments in folk horror are both animistic and uncanny since they actively shape the skewed beliefs and practices of their inhabitants, as well as represent what Sigmund Freud describes as the anxiety provoked "when primitive beliefs that have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed."<sup>5</sup> Of course, this is what the Gothic has always done through its reliance on folkloric figures, such as vampires, werewolves and zombies that challenge Enlightenment privileging of the scientific and the rational. As Carina Hart points out, the Gothic's use of folkloric elements constitutes a "negative nostalgia" in which aspects of a familiar past are resurrected to "threaten the aspirations of modernity."<sup>6</sup> In folk horror, nostalgic perceptions of rural life are subverted by nightmarish aspects of primitive belief that pose danger to contemporary modes of thought. It is thus unsurprising that the emergence of a folk horror canon in British film and television during the 1970s coincides with the popular sitcom *The Good Life* (1975), which sees a middleclass couple decide to abandon their suburban lifestyle in favor of a traditional self-sufficient one. *The Good Life* expresses a nostalgic desire for a rural existence that folk horror seems to have emerged to radically temper. It is perhaps no accident that a revival of folk horror fiction has recurred in recent years as the increasingly visible effects of anthropogenic climate change encourage practices associated with the rural, such as rewilding suburban lawns and establishing vegetable gardens. Contemporary novels such as Sarah Moss' *The Ghost Wall* (2018) and Max Porter's *Lanny* (2019) acknowledge the desire to reestablish a life lived in harmony with the environment and insist on the darker aspects of such a nostalgic return. As Hurley points out, folk horror fiction "demands we look at the British countryside in an unsentimental way and see it not as something picturesque but the stage on which our (sometimes violent) pre-industrial past was played out."<sup>7</sup> Hurley's fiction insists that "darkness lingers in the rural:" rolling hills dotted with sheep were once places of execution; expansive fields were once bloody battlegrounds; and dappled woods were once rife with terrifying tales of the supernatural.<sup>8</sup>

The revelation of a dark history that resides within the rural environment in *Starve Acre* involves Richard and Juliette Willoughby abandoning their urban life for a more idyllic one in the country. When Richard inherits his parents' remote house, known as Starve Acre for the barren field beside it, Juliette is adamant that the couple should abandon their lives in Leeds to live there. Juliette has come to detest the urban environment, which she characterizes as constituted by concrete, dense traffic, vandalism, and violent crime. Working as a nurse in the local hospital,

Juliette sees the effects of the urban environment firsthand, and she is convinced “that sooner or later the city would touch them in some awful way.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the young couple plan on having a large family and Juliette insists that the country is a better place to raise children. Richard recognizes that his wife’s desire to live in the country is based on “romantic fallacies” (36), including the village school that “affirmed the goodness of country living, along with the ribbons at the spring fair, the sound of faint Sunday church bells, white sheep on green hillsides,” (128), but he ultimately yields to Juliette’s nostalgic desires for a simpler and safer life in the country. The Willoughbys’ choice to abandon the urban in favor of the rural involves privileging a lifestyle associated with the past over that of the present. According to Paul Newland, the way that the rural environments of folk horror are often pitted against modernity suggests an attempt “to re-engage with aspects of British culture that are not governed and controlled by an increasingly global, glossy, homogenous, superficial culture industry.”<sup>10</sup> The Willoughbys thus reject metropolitan sophistication in favor of a traditional British life focused on nature, agriculture and local village culture. Furthermore, the novel’s setting in the 1970s involves the reader reengaging with a British society not governed by the technologies and ideologies associated with twenty-first-century life. Both the Willoughbys and the reader “seek a route back to the old ways” and “a more simple way of living in a community where it feels more coherent,”<sup>11</sup> only to be violently disabused of their nostalgic and conservative perspectives. As is the case with many forms of popular fiction, folk horror can be simultaneously conservative and subversive, as it shows what bad ends come to those who violate taboo, while also suggesting the inherent fragility of the status quo.

The move to Starve Acre is initially a happy one. The Willoughbys enjoy renovating the old house and the processes involved in making it their own. Juliette becomes active in village life and falls pregnant with what the couple intend to be the first of four children. The family’s seemingly idyllic country life nonetheless harbors darker undercurrents. The villagers are civil rather than friendly, since “unless one had family pedigrees that stretched back so far as to be forgotten, they didn’t really care for anyone much” (60), and the Willoughbys fail to add to their family following the birth of their son Ewan. The narrative’s focus on the insularity of the small family in their imposing house utilizes the Gothic’s tendency to cast cozy domesticity in terms of something hidden and potentially menacing from the eyes of strangers. What lies – quite literally – beneath the surface of the Willoughbys’ home is a terrifying history of violence. The barren field beside Starve Acre was once part of the town commons and legend tells that a giant tree called the Stythwaite Oak grew there and was used for hangings. According to local stories, God was so incensed by the violent usage of nature that he struck the tree with lightning. Furthermore, “Local lore had it that the divine reprisal had not ended with the tree but had spread out across the common in a poisonous ripple, turning the grass black, seeping down into the earth like oil, suffocating the life out of the place” (43). Richard scoffs at these legends, but family friend Gordon, who was also close to Richard’s parents, insists that there is something malevolent about the field. Gordon insists that he has seen things “left over” (58) in the field and refused to accompany Richard’s father on his digs to unearth old coins. Furthermore, Gordon believes that Richard’s father’s descent into madness and subsequent institutionalization was caused by “grubbing about in the mud at Starve Acre” (11).

The trope of excavation sees various members of the Willoughby family unearth dark secrets from the past that are associated with violence, madness and death. For Richard’s father, digging in the field for old coins coincides with a psychic decline that sees him terrified of the dangerous secrets he fears he has cataloged in his extensive library. Described as a room in which “the whole of history” has been arranged into “something as watertight as a policy document” (32), the library represents a knowledge of the past that Richard’s father fears will facilitate the world’s destruction by someone who would make nefarious use of its secrets. In a desperate attempt to thwart such plans, Richard’s father dismantles the library, either burning books in the back garden or packing them away in boxes for safekeeping, before he is taken away to Brackenburn hospital where he will eventually die. Like his father, Richard is engaged with uncovering the secrets of the past. He is a History professor whose

research involves archeological digs that unearth relics that reveal something of the past. This family inheritance even extends to young Ewan who is wont, despite Gordon's attempts to distract him from the field, to mimic his father by digging in the soil of Starve Acre. What each generation of Willoughby discover through their scientific attempts to document the past is a violent history that defies the rational forms of understanding that they rely on.

Just as Richard's father is irrevocably changed by digging in the field beside Starve Acre, so too is young Ewan. A gentle boy of simple pleasures, Ewan spends the summer before starting at the village school content to watch birds in the back garden, fly his kite on the moor, or explore the field, "digging like Daddy did, trying to find treasure (51). After a summer spent mimicking his father and grandfather in Starve Acre, Ewan starts school as quite a different child. His teachers report him to be sullen and uncooperative, and he lashes out in violence by purposefully slamming classmate Susan Drewitt's fingers in a door. Understandably shocked by Ewan's cruelty, the Willoughbys insist that their son had never been violent before and that "There'd been no sign that he would turn in such a sudden way" (51). Ewan's "turn" from a gentle child into a violent one involves increasingly concerning manifestations of deviance, as Ewan steals a lighter from his father's study and attempts to start a fire in his bedroom. The boy is prone to crawling into bed with his parents, where "he'd pinch their skin or pull Juliette's hair, simply because it hurt" (91). The change in Ewan is such that Juliette asks Richard whether he likes their son. After he replies in the affirmative and asks his wife the same question, she replies, "I don't know [...] Genuinely, I can't say" (91).

The Willoughby's seek medical advice to account for the changes in their once gentle and loving son and discount Ewan's repeated suggestions that it has something to do with Starve Acre. When asked why he would do such a dangerous thing as light a fire in his bedroom, Ewan's response is to reveal that he was attempting to banish the darkness since it was talking to him. Richard interprets this voice in rational terms by assuming that his son has heard the noise of trees thrashing in high winds and, when he notices Ewan looking warily at the field, suggests that he go play there "if only so that he knew there was nothing there to be afraid of" (80). Nonetheless, as Richard watches Ewan from the house, he sees the boy stop and gaze up into the sky, before dropping the branches he was playing a game with, backing away, and then fleeing the field toward the house. There *is* something to be afraid of in the field and Ewan reveals that he sees the Stythwaite Oak, noting that "It's there sometimes [...] Sometimes it's not" (89). In another episode, the family enjoy a rare happy moment together building a snowman in the field, which encourages Richard to put aside his anxieties about Ewan and the future since "That afternoon in the field had proved that he could still be happy. He could still seem like their little boy" (129–130). Later, Richard hears his son sneak out of the house in the early hours of the following morning. Under his father's gaze from the bedroom window, Ewan returns to the field and the snowman where "he seemed compelled to look behind him towards the middle of the field as if he were half seeing the oak tree again, as if it loomed over him" (131). In a stark repudiation of his father's hopes, Ewan takes up some fallen branches, which he uses to stab and decapitate the snowman.

The violence associated with the hanging tree of the past returns in the present as Ewan is compelled to increasing violence by the mythical figure associated with Starve Acre known as Jack Grey. Richard is familiar with this folkloric figure from his own childhood when his peers taunted him about its supposed residence in the wood beside his home's field. For Richard, Jack Grey is a vague figure who "persisted from one generation to the next, becoming ever more obscure until only the name survived, attended by a vague sense of malevolence" (95). He likens Jack Grey to other deities of English lore, suggesting that "He was really just another Green Man or Robin Goodfellow or Hag o' the Hay. The fickle entity that either spoiled or swelled the crop. The whistler in the woods. The stranger on the lane at dusk" (95). Richard dismisses this old folkloric entity by suggesting that "It was hard to imagine that anyone had honestly thought him real" (95), but Ewan nonetheless reports that Jack Grey speaks to him and invites him to the Stythwaite Oak. Furthermore, Ewan reveals that it was Jack Grey who instructed him to hurt his classmate and to destroy the snowman. Richard blames Gordon for putting tales of woodland sprites into Ewan's head, but the changes wrought on the boy's personality are such that Juliette flinches when he refers to her as "Mummy."

The malign influence of Jack Grey continues when the boy disappears from his bed on New Year's Eve only to be discovered catatonic outside the house. Ewan's eyes are so dilated that they appear to be black, and he is hot and red, as if sunburnt. In his tightly clenched hands is the body of a small animal rendered to pulp by the boy's grip. In a "garbled and frenetic" narrative, the unconscious child reveals that Jack Grey instructed him to go to the woods where "he'd show him how to see in the dark and sit very still and catch mice with his bare hands" (174). Richard's interpretation of this episode is that the boy was suffering from a fever and had simply found the body of a dead animal in the woods while sleepwalking. Gordon is not convinced and insists instead that, following this event, "the boy changed" (156). The culmination of Ewan's transformation from gentle boy to violent menace is when he stabs a pony in the eye at the village fair, apparently at Jack Grey's bidding. Richard's response is disbelief: "For him to have hurt the pony as brutally as he had, to have been so exacting with the stick, hardly seemed possible" (185). Juliette's response is the stark admission, "I'm frightened of him" (186).

The fear potentially inspired by children stems from their essential strangeness. At once representatives of innocence, children are intimately known by their caregivers but also fundamentally unknowable to an adult mind. Chris Jenks highlights the paradoxical nature of the child by observing that it is "familiar to us and yet strange; he or she inhabits our world and yet seems to answer to another; he or she is essentially of ourselves and yet appears to display a systematically different order of being."<sup>12</sup> Known and unknown, "us" and "not us," the child answers to a world of magic, or what Marina Warner terms "supernatural irrationality," with the result being that childhood "placed at a tangent to adulthood, perceived as special and magical, precious and dangerous at once, has turned into some volatile stuff – hydrogen, or mercury, which has to be contained."<sup>13</sup> The paradoxical nature of the child renders it a potent site of uncanniness that many practitioners of the Gothic exploit. Henry James utilizes the uncanniness of children in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), in which a governess is tormented by the possibility that her two young charges are consorting with malign ghosts. The uncanny child became a particularly visible mainstay of mid-twentieth-century film, such as *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Omen* (1976), both of which feature children as the Anti-Christ, and *The Exorcist* (1973), which relies for its gruesome effects on the sight of a child's body inhabited by a demon. Such narratives subvert assumptions of childhood innocence and insist on the essentially alien nature of beings that we once were that nevertheless define – even control – the ones that we are.

The alien and unknowable qualities of Ewan Willoughby are recognized by his father who admits that "There was nothing more remote than another person's mind. Even down the bloodline communiqués were lost. A father had no more chance of truly knowing his son than he had of knowing a stranger. That had been proved to Richard on the day of the spring fair" (178) when Ewan turned the eye of a pony into a gluey mess. Richard's sense of not knowing his son sees him acknowledge the fact that Ewan "had a thousand different expressions [...] And yet he never once thought that he could read the boy" (31). The inability to read his child suggests a failure of interpretation that plagues Richard in other ways, particularly through his insistence on scientific rationalism when other modes of understanding might better serve him. Thus, despite Ewan's repeated and frantic suggestions that he can see the Stythwaite Oak and hear the voice of Jack Grey, Richard dismisses superstitious notions about Starve Acre by suggesting that the tree simply died from a fungal infection, and that any behavioral difficulties in Ewan might be solved by a child psychologist. Richard's reliance on scientific rationalism stems from an upbringing which instilled in him the belief that,

a church was merely a meeting place for the mentally ill, and that all who gathered there – priests and parishioners – were as fearful and asinine as schizophrenics. There was no God, no devil, no heaven or hell, no posthumous judgement for wickedness or reward for piety; there was no resurrection, no transfiguration, no illimitable bliss, no life everlasting. The sum of human existence was collagen and calcium phosphate. And then nothing." (69–70)

Richard's privileging of the material world serves him well in his profession, as he uncovers the physical relics that reveal something of a past civilization but fails him utterly when a folkloric past returns in ways that defy the rational.

The novel's critique of scientific rationalism is both expressed and elided in the epigraph from Thomas Hardy's poem "The House of Silence" (1917). Hurley includes lines from the poem's first stanza that describe a quiet house that is, in fact, filled with spectral life, but it is the omitted second stanza that speaks to the novel's central concern with interpretation:

"But I see nobody there, -  
Nobody moves about the green,  
Or wanders the heavy trees between."  
"- Ah, that's because you do not bear  
The visioning powers of souls who dare  
To pierce the material screen" (lines 7–12)<sup>14</sup>

On one level, these lines represent an adult speaker's attempts to inspire wonder in a child; on another, they highlight a failure to see beyond material realities. The house seems silent to the child, while the adult insists that "to a mind with sight" (line 16) it is filled with figures dancing, music and laughter. Hurley's protagonist does not have a mind with visioning powers and so cannot pierce the screen of the material world. For this blindness, Richard pays the ultimate price of the loss of his son, who is tormented by the voice he attributes to Jack Grey, and then mysteriously dies in his sleep.

What Hurley describes as "Ewan's strange premature death"<sup>15</sup> is recast by his protagonist into a medically explicable event. Rather than see the formerly healthy child's psychological decline and physical demise at five-years-old as odd, Richard seizes the coroner's revelation that Ewan had a heart defect because this "could be demonstrated with diagrams. There were books that explained a defective heart in great detail" (237). Richard's insistence on scientific rationalism works to repress what exceeds it, with the predictable result of its return. Mired in grief for the loss of their son, Richard and Juliette drift apart. Richard's response to his bereavement is to avoid it by plunging into his work and, when he is forced to take a leave of absence by his concerned manager, he turns to excavating the field beside his house in the hopes of discovering some evidence of the existence of the Stythwaite Oak. Juliette also takes leave from her work and becomes obsessed with what she believes to be signs of Ewan's continued existence. As Juliette seeks proof of the supernatural by recording Ewan's room and lining it with mirrors, Richard painstakingly sifts the dirt for signs that might confirm a historical truth. Significantly, Juliette's turn to spiritualism is represented as benign by the novel, while Richard's reliance on materialism is what renders the return of the repressed monstrous.

The novel's "interrogation of the damage grief can inflict on the mind"<sup>16</sup> sees Juliette insist on the ongoing presence of Ewan while Richard attempts to banish him. In an effort to establish more contact with her dead child, Juliette seeks the services of a spiritualist group called the Beacons that Gordon is part of. To banish Ewan, Richard retreats into his study, a place devoid of family photographs that he terms "his oubliette" (5), a word that stems from the French *oublier*, to forget. When thoughts of Ewan persist, Richard puts on headphones and listens to music loudly, "trying to lose himself in the noise and banish Ewan to the dark hole from he had emerged" (6). As both parents wrestle with the specter of their departed son, they become representative of the two perspectives expressed in Hardy's "The House of Silence." Juliette submits to a blood test required by the Beacons' leader Mrs Forde, which deems her to have the appropriate sensitivity for spiritualist activities. Richard too provides a blood sample, which passes Mrs Forde's test, but only because Gordon has secretly tampered with it so that Richard can be present to support his fragile wife. During the ceremony with the Beacons that Juliette hopes will restore her son, all present witness numinous phenomena, except Richard whose scientific rationalism leaves him not only blind but fatally misguided. Shortly before the ritual, Richard discovers the perfectly preserved skeleton of a hare as he digs in the field beside Starve

Acre. Although Richard finds it strange that the skeleton is in such good condition, as if it was “interred here deliberately” (16), he decides to dig up the pieces and take it home.

The novel’s tropes of burial, disinterment and resurrection represent a pagan inversion of the biblical verse from Corinthians 15 that Gordon recites at Ewan’s funeral, and the priest’s reading from the Gospel of John, “*I will raise them up on the last day*” (69). Mrs Forde is at pains to correct Juliette’s belief that the ceremony will bring Ewan back, suggesting instead that the physical form is merely a shell for the light that inhabits it. As Mrs Forde observes, “A body can’t come back once it’s been put in the ground” (101), but she posits that there are some people, like herself, Gordon and Juliette, “who can draw the light back to where it once flourished, where it gave life to something precious and loved. You can invite it into a new form” (102). The lifeforce that the Beacons believe in “has a tendency to wander when it’s released from the body” (101) since it is not conscious: “It doesn’t choose what it illuminates next. It can get lost, so to speak. It can drift” (102). Although Gordon has reassured the reluctant and skeptical Richard that what Mrs Forde does is not a séance and that it will not allow anything wicked into the house, the ability of the Beacons to draw the light into Starve Acre has an unexpected result when it takes up a new form in the hare skeleton. The subsequent resurrection of the bones into a living hare is not a miraculous restoration of a creature associated with fertility and the season of spring, but a demonic perversion presided over by a force diametrically opposite to the light as represented by the Beacons. Mrs Gordon’s spiritualism may not have invited anything wicked into Starve Acre – in fact, as she leaves the Willoughby’s home, she is repulsed by the sense of something “Fetid” (154) – but Richard’s scientific rationalism has when he transplants a relic associated with the Stythwaite Oak and Jack Grey into his home.

As creatures associated with pagan rites of fertility, hares represent life and rebirth as the season of winter gives way to spring. Hares are also associated with darker forces, particularly through folklore that associates them with occult practice. Hurley highlights the more menacing aspects of hares when he discusses a church near his home where a witch called Meg Shelton is buried. Local folklore has it that Meg Shelton could change shape into various animals, such as a goose or a cat, but also into a rabbit or a hare. Hurley reveals:

I think that’s partly where the idea of the hare being a symbol of something malevolent came from. Apparently she was killed in an accident in her home. When she was buried in this churchyard she tried to claw her way out, so they buried her again face-down to stop her crawling back up and put this enormous boulder on top of her grave which is still there. Lancashire is full of all these ghost stories. We have the Pendle witches as well, so the devil looms large in that county.<sup>17</sup>

There are numerous folk tales about the ability of witches to shapeshift into hares, which the novel gestures toward through its second epigraph, an ostensible folk song called “The Hare.” This song includes a multitude of terms used to refer to hares, including “Witch-Puppet,” by those whose superstitious fears were such that they refused to refer to them by name.

Not surprisingly, Hurley’s protagonist gives such superstitious beliefs little credence, but what is surprising, is that his scientific rationalism is so strong that he fails to adequately acknowledge the taboo resurrection of the hare. Over the course of several days, the skeleton develops tendons, organs, flesh and fat, and Richard observes the process in a clinical fashion, even using a magnifying glass to better witness the transformation. For Richard, the hare’s resurrection is a physical process that is quantifiable rather than a deviation from natural law that requires other modes of understanding. He thus contemplates sharing the process of the hare’s reconstitution with Juliette since “If she wished to put her faith in something, then this was it” (114). Ultimately, Richard keeps the resurrection occurring in his study secret and concludes:

Seeking an explanation for it all seemed ungrateful. A great kindness was at work here and he felt that by questioning the restoration he might jeopardise its fulfilment. He didn’t feel confused. He had witnessed what had happened and there it was. He wasn’t being asked to wonder, only observe and be awake to what he was being shown. (117)

Richard's insistence on the observable and the material sees him believe that the hare's transformation "had been unnatural but it had required no intellectual sacrifice, no faith, no imagination. It had occurred in this world of forms. For whatever reason it had happened, whatever it meant, it was real" (226). Thus, although Richard gives the fully reanimated hare "a reverential berth" (120) and acknowledges it to be "a parable" (125), Richard's materialism renders the hare's teaching benign and entirely physical, and he returns it to the field because ultimately "It just wanted to eat" (121).

Richard's excavations in *Starve Acre* unearths what Scovell describes as folk horror's "potential pasts under the surface top-layer of the landscape."<sup>18</sup> This disinterment is quite literal, as is also the case in folk horror narratives such as M. R. James's "A Warning to the Curious" (1925), which sees an archeologist unearth one of the three legendary crowns of Anglia, simultaneously summoning its guardian spirit. Similarly, in *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, a plow turns up a Satanic skull that propels the youths of a village into violent pagan rituals. In Hurley's narrative, Richard first unearths the skeleton of a hare and then the roots of the Stythwaite Oak. In another form of excavation, Richard digs through his father's library and gradually discovers a series of woodblock prints that have been separated from each other and hidden. First, Richard discovers a print called *Springe*, which depicts a courting couple beneath the branches of the Stythwaite Oak. In *Merrie Maye*, a group of children dance in a ring around the trunk of the oak, and in *Autumn* the children collect acorns and firewood. Richard then discovers a print representing the tree in winter, which includes a man climbing a ladder with a noose in his hand to the bough labeled *Olde Jultice*. What Richard eventually uncovers is a local history that involved three village boys being hanged for crimes – burning the hay, defiling a corpse, and throwing a child from the church tower – that they attribute to being corrupted by Jack Grey who appears to them in the form of a hare. The final image that Richard discovers depicts the hanging of the hare, which is then buried with the corpses of the boys, along with the felled Stythwaite Oak. What is revealed in *Starve Acre* is a secret British history of superstition, brutality and violence that subverts the idyllic assumptions that the Willoughbys have made about country living and undercuts their secular modernity.

In a narrative constructed by recurring motifs of burial and disinterment, concealment and revelation, what is denied or banished is bound to return. When Juliette decides that it is time to clear out Ewan's bedroom, Richard is relieved to finally be able to relegate his son to "the edge of his thoughts, which was the proper place for the dead" (138). Yet, once the room is cleaned out and the colorful murals painted over so that it might once again serve as a nursery, the hare returns to the house. Juliette cradles the hare on her lap, places it in the cot, and then takes it out for a walk in the pram. When Richard attempts to reason with his wife, Juliette insists that "We invited him to the house [. . .] He's here because we wanted him to be" (213). Richard realizes that Juliette is correct: "The hare wanted to be here. It had always wanted to be here. When he'd taken it out to the field, it had tried to get back to *Starve Acre* and find Juliette" (240–241). The return of the hare, first from the soil in which it was buried, and then from death to life, until finally returning to the home into which it was invited, reifies folklore beliefs and historical violence, including that committed by Ewan. Gordon, who attempts to warn Richard of danger, reveals a dark secret that he has been keeping: Juliette was with Ewan when he died and did nothing because she had previously discovered her son poised to slide wet stones into Richard's open mouth as he slept. The novel's final tableau sees Juliette cradling the reanimated hare associated with Jack Grey:

Sitting in the rocking chair, Juliette set it going with her foot and stroked the animal's ears. When it was settled, she undid the belt of her dressing gown, working her shoulder free and cupping her breast, which had grown engorged and milky white. She offered the nipple to the hare and, with a paw resting on her sternum, it latched tight and drank. (241)

The novel thus concludes with a scene that only confirms what has been denied all along: the Willoughbys are the parents of a monster.

The nightmarish descent into grief and insanity that is experienced by the Willoughbys is precipitated by their proximity to a site associated with pagan belief and historical violence thus exposing

the unpleasant realities beneath romanticized notions of the countryside. Hurley's novel insists that rural Britain is not a chocolate box vision of thatched cottages and rolling green fields, but a land constituted by complex stratified layers of a dark history that is bound to return. Significantly, the return of the repressed in *Starve Acre* is a return of a pagan folkloric past that can only be met and understood in similar terms. As a mode, the Gothic frequently undercuts scientific rationalism by insisting on the power of what lies outside of its understanding. Thus, reality cannot be solely understood through Richard's privileging of observation, materialism, secularism and physical relics. What is also required is the more numinous perspective expressed through Gordon and his fellow Beacons who repeatedly warn Richard to banish the malign influences he unwittingly invites into the life of his family. When Gordon learns that Richard has discovered the roots of the Stythwaite Oak, his advice is to "shovel the soil back into the hole and leave them to the dark" (153). Similarly, in response to the revulsion that Mrs Forde experiences in the Willoughby home once the hare skeleton takes up residence, Gordon suggests, "Whatever it is you've brought into your home [...] get rid of it" (155). Richard's failure to heed warning is a failure of perception alluded to in the novel's epigraph from Hardy's poem and clearly identified by Gordon when he challenges his rationalist friend with a fundamental question: "Do you still think that this is it? [...] What you see or what you can feel under your hands is everything?" (226). Richard's response – "Of course it is. You're deluded if you think otherwise" (226) – is undercut by the narrative, which suggests that existence in the rural landscape requires acknowledging forces and powers that exceed the terms of secular modernity. In order to co-exist with dark moorlands, ancient woods and isolated landscapes, *Starve Acre* suggests a psychic return to older modes of understanding, such as animism and the sublime, that grant agency and personhood to the natural environment. In Hurley's writing, the landscape is never passive or inert, but active and resonant with what he describes as "this sense of otherness which I can't quite quantify."<sup>19</sup> This "otherness" is the essentially unknowable quality of a natural world whose laws and behaviors we only partially understand. Richard's attempts to understand the hare in anatomical terms fall woefully short of comprehending its private experience, which he recognizes upon letting it loose in the field where it returns "to patterns of living that were impossible to understand" (126). Likewise, Richard's search to understand the history of the Stythwaite Oak through centuries-old woodblock prints cannot explain its ongoing ability to poison and corrupt the present. What the terrifying return of the folkloric figure Jack Gray ultimately insists on is the power of a natural world that defies rational understanding. *Starve Acre's* conclusion is that if we wish to return to traditional modes of living in harmony with the natural environment, as urban lifestyles become increasingly unsustainable and untenable, then we will need to return to a mode of thinking that acknowledges and respects the fundamental otherness of nature, as well as its ability to shape our thinking, beliefs and behaviors. Hurley's text might appear to be conservative through its representation of country life as insular, primitive and barbaric, but its insistence on the power of the natural environment and the need to respect it is a radical call for psychic change in the face of environmental crisis.

## Notes

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## Notes on contributor

*Erin Mercer* is Senior Lecturer in the English Programme at Massey University. She is the author of *Repression and Realism in Post-War American Literature* (Palgrave, 2011), *Telling the Real Story: Genre and New Zealand Literature* (Victoria University Press, 2017), and *Stephen King and the Uncanny Imaginary* (Routledge, 2023). Erin is co-editor of the *Journal of New Zealand Literature/Te Hautaka Mātātuhī o Aotearoa* and Deputy Executive Officer of the Gothic Association of New Zealand and Australia.

## ORCID

Erin Mercer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9825-0793>

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