Encounters with the "hidden" world: Occult materialism in Gothic children’s fiction

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The recent "speculative" turn in philosophy – taken by writers such as Quentin Meillassoux (After Finitude, 2008), Graham Harman (Weird Realism, 2012), and Eugene Thacker (Horror of Philosophy, 2015) – attempts to account for objects, matter and other aspects of reality outside their relations with the human. This is not a return to naïve realism, but an endeavour to move beyond the limitations of deconstructive turns of Western thought, theorise encounters with materiality and develop new theories of ontology. Speculative materialism frequently turns to the Gothic for analogies or correlates. Graham Harman uses, for example, the stories of H.P. Lovecraft, whilst Eugene Thacker reads supernatural fiction to reveal "the horror of philosophy".

It is my contention that children’s literature engages in similar metaphysical speculations. Children’s Gothic fantasy often explores an occult ("hidden") knowledge of the world beyond perception, opening into borderlands that represent the limits of thought. Alan Garner’s "Weird Stone of Brisingamen" (1960) inducts children into a world of magic embedded in the physical geography of Alderley Edge, Cheshire. Similarly, Susan Cooper’s The Dark is Rising (1965) disintegrates the border between a world perceived by humans (what Thacker calls "the world-for-us") and a shadowy, chaotic reality (the "world-without-us"). Through magical talismans and ancient ritual, Cooper paradoxically reveals the hiddenness of the material realm. As a recent Twitter reading group (#TheDarkisReading) attests, there has been a renewed critical and popular interest in these darkly fantastic modern classics, particularly in their use of landscape and folklore.

My paper will trace the speculative impulse of Garner and Cooper into contemporary Gothic fiction by Anthony Horowitz ("The Power of Five", 2005-2012) and Celia Rees ("The Stone Testament", 2007). The latter overtly draw on the Weird to explore new ontologies, refusing traditional comforting narratives of maturation. I analyse the texts’ concern with materiality – with magic circles, ritual objects and talismans (metals, stones, markers), and with the importance of physical geography and archaeology in opening into, and so troubling, the border between the world-for-us and the world-in-itself. Thus, I argue that children’s literature offers one important site in which to theorise new materialist ontologies.

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