

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

A Manual of Hinges and a Musing on Gruffalo

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A hinge is a hinge, so I thought, until I began to open and close a few. There are, it turns out, many different types of hinge. The most common is a butt hinge. Look at most doors and this is what you will see: two matching leaves, one on the door and one on the door jamb. This though, is only the start. For there are corner hinges, lift-off hinges, continuous hinges, off-set hinges, strap hinges, concealed hinges (to name but a few) and then there are those designed for the interior, the exterior, for fine furniture, for heavy-duty work and those for everyday use. Irrespective of design, in essence all hinges work in the same way and have the same purpose. They are moveable joints, connecting two objects, and are intended to allow limited rotation between these two objects. In so doing, they connect and they separate; they hold something close and something at a distance. We have to push (or pull) on the door, to work the hinge and reveal the world hidden behind it.

Hopefully, this last line reassures you that this is not a technical manual of the hinge, but rather a way of pondering the work of the hinge in literary geography. James Thurgill and Jane Lovell, together and separately, have developed the concept of the *spatial hinge* as a way of exploring how ‘actual-world places shift from shaping the reading of the text to being shaped *by* the reading of the text.’ (Thurgill and Lovell 2019: 18, original emphasis). It draws the process of reading into places unconnected with the text, it begins to make these places part of the text and, even where writers have made no mention of these places in their work, readers begin to experience these places as integral parts of a text’s literary landscape (Thurgill 2021; Lovell 2022). The ‘manual’ of hinges, with which this piece started, then, is a way of asking if the spatial hinge can take different forms? In a sense, the multiplicity of the hinge is

implicit in Thurgill and Lovell's work, for in following Sheila Hones' (2008) idea of the text-as-a-spatial-event, they recognise that there must be as many hinges as there are readers and textual encounters. What though of the different kinds of hinge? Can the type of hinge offer new insight into how actual places are shaped by the reading of texts which are not directly connected to them?

To explore this, I want to return to the walks my small charges and I made with the Gruffalo (Saunders 2020). This time though, I want to begin some distance away at the Queenswood Arboretum in the beautifully named village of Hope-under-Dinmore. Nestled in the Herefordshire countryside, we know the Queenswood Arboretum as the Gruffalo Wood. Those who have meandered with me on my earlier Gruffalo walk will know my small charges have another wood, also named the Gruffalo Wood. This wood is closer to home and we will revisit it in a moment, but back to the Queens(Gruffalo)wood. If you go down to these woods today you will find a Gruffalo Trail replete with sculptures of characters from the books by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler. The trail is about 1.5km and wends its way around the south-eastern corner of the arboretum. This is so obviously a Gruffalo Wood: there is a trail leaflet you can pick-up with the locations of the characters, there are the Gruffalo sculptures to find, climb on (not allowed, but invariably some small child is determined to conquer the Gruffalo or ride the fox) and, of course, you hear many-a-child chanting parts of the story as they navigate the trail. If I had to liken this to a hinge, I would say it was of the butt variety: there are two leaves – the wood and the story – clearly interwoven and each clearly visible. Butt hinges are common and so it seems are Gruffalo Woods like this one, for there are many dotted around the country: Alice Holt Forest (Hampshire), Delamere Forest (Cheshire), Sherwood Pines (Nottinghamshire), Westonbirt Arboretum (Gloucestershire) and Dalby Forest (Yorkshire) are just a clawful of places where you can encounter the Gruffalo up-close. All of these places are, after McLaughlin (2016), conscious extensions of the literary space of the Gruffalo. The walker-reader is invited to hunt *for*, not just look *at*, the Gruffalo, but they are invited to hunt in particular places, along particular trails and for particular characters. The nature of this invitation moulds our experience: it tell us how to work the hinge, how to open the door and it hints at what awaits on the other side. There are, of course, opportunities to open other doors and slip through into other worlds, but the pull of the hunt is strong and eventually reasserts itself, even over the most wilful charge.

A little closer to home we have our own Gruffalo Wood, and this is the one that provided so much succour for us during lockdown. There are no sculptures here, no pre-given trail to follow and, in comparison to Queens(Gruffalo)wood, it is tiny. It is more a route through than a wending trail. If this is a hinge to another world, it seems more of a concealed hinge than a butt hinge. The Gruffalo world we make here is of our own creation (so to speak), there are no props to inspire us, or direct us (or limit us), and here we are not hunting *for* characters so much as for traces of them: a provocative paw print, a promising hole or a possible log pile. As the seasons change, the things we find and which we employ as placeholders for our story alter. What was fox's hole in winter is much overgrown by summer, and so we have to find new holes, or hints of a hole, or perhaps we might pass over fox completely,

as we search instead for traces of owl's treetop house. There is an expansionary literary geography at play here, but it is visible only to ourselves. We craft it in the space between us, in the narrative possibilities we ponder as we wander, in the holes we prod with feet and sticks and through the wood's ceaseless happening. We leave no trace of this world for others to find, there is no doorway for others to follow us through, the hinge, and the door by implication, is well concealed.

We love both Gruffalo Woods, but we love them for different reasons. In the Queenswood we are on a mission, for we are in pursuit of all the characters and there is always a little bit of a competitive edge to our walk – how quickly can we find all the beasts and which small charge will spot them first? We do get a little side-tracked, for there are things to climb on, holes to prod and competitive stick-finding to be undertaken, but we always pick-up the route where we left off, as we have a trail to complete, characters to tick-off and a book to finish. We are also part of something bigger, for in front of us and behind us come equally keen Gruffalo hunters; there is no hiding the doorway into this expanded space of the Gruffalo. The invitation to enter is clear and public. Closer to home, our Gruffalo Wood is more fluid. Sometimes, it's not a Gruffalo Wood at all, but just a way through to somewhere else, for our invitation to this wood is intermittent, depending on weather, season and mood: we can't always find, nor do we always want to find, the doorway through. When we do go through, we are not always certain of what awaits on the other side – we are always on the cusp of '*something*'. It is a '*something*' that may take form through, or inspiration from, whatever has wound up in the place since our last visit or which presses in upon our path in a new or inviting manner, or it may be a '*something*' inspired by recent readings: there have been Gruffalo and Percy the Park Keeper mashups.

If 'the 'spatial hinge' names a process which extends a reading (and with it the text itself) into places previously unassociated with the text' and 'which start to feel as if they belong to the text and, as a result, come to be experienced by readers as fundamental parts of its literary landscape' (Thurgill 2021: 153), this little manual of hinges hopefully illuminates the variety of spatial hinges at work in the world (and the mind). What this manual reveals is that some hinges are ready-made, visible and are intended to be opened by all, these are the butt hinges of this world. These hinges are made by others, as is the association between text and place, and we are invited to push on this hinge, open the door and explore the world that is presented to us. The strength of this hinge varies. Some who push on it may embrace the world they encounter and convey elements from it on their return through the door, others may slip in and hover on the edges, and others may bypass the door completely. Whether, and with what eagerness, one pushes on the door may come down to age or literary interest. Others hinges, meanwhile, are more hidden. These are the concealed hinges, which reveal worlds only to those who possess the right key or are in the right frame of mind. These hinges are quite fluid, they may gather in one place, for a while, but we are not always certain of the texture of the world on the other side. At times, the world we craft on the other side may be rich and lustrous, animated by a host of characters and giving rise to all sorts of stories and literary roamings, at others we may not choose to open the door, or we may give it the most cursory of pushes, dip a claw in and then retreat, animated by other things. The same doorway may

also give rise to very different worlds. Those who meandered with me on my first foray into the Gruffalo wood may recall that one of my small charges was a baby, and I walked in the hope that this baby – who should have been sleeping but wasn't – was at least honing his storytelling skills. This baby is now a toddler and interestingly has little interest in our little Gruffalo Wood. He walks through the door with us, engages with our stories of holes and trees for a while, and then chugs off, transforming the path into a track, with a different story to tell.

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