

Research Space

Journal article

Opening spatial hinges with mindful writing practice: negotiating Philip Pullman's secret commonwealth

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Opening Spatial Hinges with Mindful Writing-as-Practice: Negotiating the secret commonwealth of Philip Pullman's Oxford.

Abstract

This article enquires how 'spatial hinges' between author Philip Pullman's series *The Book of Dust* and different sites are unexpected and elusive, but may be opened by mindfulness. Natalie Goldberg's mindful writing practice techniques are used as the interpretative instrument to measure the hinging of parallel worlds. The research data amalgamates interviews with Oxford fantasy tour guides conducted before COVID 19 restrictions with writing sprints about Lockdown walks in a local park and a guided tour of "Philip Pullman's Oxford". The data reveals how a secret commonwealth of elves and fairies infuse the parks with otherworldly, unexpected and exaggerated bucolic awakenings and intersubjectivity, exposing ancient mythical places, including a holloway. On a tour of Oxford, the imaginative storytelling techniques of the guide include impromptu flights of fancy and tilted perspectives that contribute to an atmosphere of unlikeliness, suggestive of Pullman's texts. In addition, an experience of getting lost or "de-touring", leads to unexpected encounters with the affective mystical presence of Pullman's texts. The findings conclude that while stories have agency and reveal themselves spontaneously, mindfulness may create a state of attunement to the reverberations of spatial hinges.

Keywords: Storytelling; literary tourism; media tourism; spatial hinge; Philip Pullman; creative writing; mindfulness; fantasy tourism.

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Introduction

This article enquires how 'spatial hinges' link author Philip Pullman's fiction and different, extra-textual locations.ⁱ The research foregrounds Pullman's two epic fantasy series: *His Dark Materials* and *The Book of Dust* which are set, among other places, both in Oxford and also in a parallel Oxford that is eerily familiar-but-strange. His multiverse is best summed up in a frontispiece of a companion-piece to the series, *Lyra's Oxford*. Quoting from a parallel version of Baedeker's iconic tourist guide he writes: 'Oxford, where the real and unreal jostle on the streets [...] Oxford, where windows open onto other worlds...'ⁱⁱ Interestingly, the comment mirrors Watson's similar description of literary tourism as 'cut[ting] windows through from this world to other worlds'.ⁱⁱⁱ

This paper takes the idea of the windows between parallel worlds still further. It achieves this by introducing research hypotheses developed in the field of literary geography, particularly the 'spatial event' theories of Hones, following Massey's work on the multiplicity of space.^{iv} Hones states that 'fiction can be usefully understood as a geographical event, a dynamic, unfolding collaboration, happening in space and time'.^v For example, Amey has described how living in Helsinki evoked a sense of spatial situatedness

and inbetweenness that connected her to the author Tove Jansson^{vi}. Inspired by Hones, James Thurgill and I conceptualised the notion of a ‘spatial hinge’. When places hinge themselves together, ‘actual-world places shift from shaping the reading of the text to being shaped by the reading of the text’.^{vii} As McLaughlin observes, texts are expansionary, they can travel off the page.^{viii} This means that it is not always necessary to visit places associated with authors or their works in order to experience a literary spatial event, because places that are *unrelated* to texts may ‘feel like they share the same affective environment.’^{ix} Developing an understanding of how we negotiate the hinges between places was important during the physical Lockdowns of COVID-19, when tourists couldn’t travel to mediated sites. Unpacking how texts and places converge will also inform a future in which media tourism may be reduced, as we consider more sustainable travel patterns and also limit the number of on-location film shoots.^x

Hinges are useful but slippery mechanisms, and this study seeks to unfold their more capricious and elusive aspects. Some literary places are wayward and badly behaved: they may either reveal themselves when and where they are least expected, or they don’t appear when and where we hope they should. So this paper paraphrases Pullman’s discussion of story plotting to ask: “how do we get from here, where we live, to there, where strange things happen?”^{xi}. In his novels, Pullman conveniently solves the problem by inventing a specifically-crafted knife to carve windows between parallel worlds. Without such a convenient solution to hand, this paper suggests that it may be possible to increase our receptivity to the opening of hinges between here, and there (where strange things happen).

Hidden multiverses

In order to understand how spatial hinges can operate between different places and Pullman’s locations, we first need to examine his terrain. Oxford possesses a storied history as a crucible of high fantasy fiction, having nurtured authors including JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis. In that sense it resembles Pullman’s Cittagázze, a fictional city which acts as a gateway to windows leading to multiple worlds. Pullman is highly aware of the inspirational suggestiveness of Oxford:

‘The commonest question writers get asked is where do you get your ideas from? I dunno. They just turn up. But when you are wandering about with your mind open and your eyes glazed waiting for them to do so, there are few better places to wander about in than Oxford, as many novelists have discovered. I put it down to the mists from the river which have a solvent effect on reality. In Oxford, likelihood evaporates’^{xii}.

Pullman’s geographical inspirations are clearly delineated. His literary territory merges with the Oxford topography, removing some features and adding other buildings and sites, such as the fictional Jericho College. Some place names have been changed in the books, while others remain the same. Alternate Oxfords overlap as reflections of Pullman’s central theme of multiverses. Pullman’s second trilogy of novels begins with *La Belle Sauvage* and *The Secret Commonwealth*, both of which move away from the multiverse. These two works reference a magical-world-within-a-world in the form of a hidden republic of elves, fauns and fairies.^{xiii} Pullman Here, he pays close attention to the interweaving of his texts with mythological texts including *The Faerie Queen and Paradise Lost*. He also draws on Kirk’s 1691 original treatise on the secret commonwealth (in this quotation *f* = *s*, the original script conveys both age and atmosphere):

‘...diverfe of the SECRET COMMONWEALTH may, by Permiſſion, difcover themſelves as innocently to us, who are in another State, as ſome of us Men do to Fiſhes, which are in another Element, when we plunge and dive into the Bottom of the Seas, their native Region’.^{xiv}

The secret commonwealth resembles the *genii locorum* (spirits of place) identified by the Ancient Greeks, including Naiads associated with rivers, springs and lakes and Dryads who guarded forests and trees. These spirits were worshipped for their protection. Kirk’s contention is that the secret commonwealth has agency. Its default state is to hide, but it may choose to reveal itself to humans. In the novel *The Secret Commonwealth*, Pullman’s protagonist Lyra rejects her imagination as inferior to the rationality of adulthood. Omitting spoilers, the absence of her imaginary life is all-too-tangible and the author allows the secret commonwealth to disclose itself to her, as a new source of wonder and enchantment. Enchantment is not a central theoretical concern of this paper. But it is worth noting that, according to Bennett, entering a state of enchantment relies on unexpectedness. The shock of an encounter with unfamiliar (or strangely familiar) phenomena causes both physical stillness and mental exhilaration as the mind struggles to rationalise the irrational.^{xv} Similarly, it is the sheer unpredictability of encounters with the secret commonwealth of literary places which makes them peculiarly, sublimely enchanting.

Making windows

Imagination, rather than rationality, is also crucial to media and literary tourism. Reijnders emphasises its importance of place by extending Nora’s theory of *lieux de memoire* into ‘places of imagination’, which he defines as ‘material reference points, which for certain groups within society serve as material-symbolic references to a common imaginary world’.^{xvi} In our short position piece about spatial hinges, Thurgill and I make the point that place is an active participant in literary happenings.^{xvii} But we did not elaborate on the specifics of the ‘resonance’ of place that is critical to the presence of spatial hinges. The resonance to which we refer could be argued to be a sensation of intersubjectivity. To explain further, according to Barthes, the Eiffel Tower in Paris does not simply receive but also returns the gaze^{xviii}. Places and objects return the gaze in a diffuse fashion, ‘a sense that seeing happens, although without a specific source’.^{xix} This statement by Schwenger signals that intersubjectivity is not rational, yet it is not entirely imagined either. It is encountered through the body’s multi-sensory perception, as an affective atmosphere dispersed between subjects and objects.^{xx}

But as Hones’ reasons, texts are also ‘part of what happens.’^{xxi} For our purposes, the research that best encapsulates this idea is Daya’s analysis of potter Edmund de Waal’s book, *The Hare With Amber Eyes*. The book considers how the collection of objects inherited by de Waal are both irreducible and responsive, implying that ‘things touch back’^{xxii}. This theory follows Merleau-Ponty’s thesis that vision and touch are fused, and thus seeing an object allows us to feel its touch.^{xxiii} Daya however, goes further, concluding that the written words of stories (the text about the object) are not simply representational objects, but rather, ‘stories can be thought of as things themselves, with many of the same properties more conventionally understood as belonging to objects.’^{xxiv} So as objects, stories touch us.

My long interest in how stories and places touch us can be inferred from my work on tourist visits to English historic cities, including Canterbury, Oxford, Bath and Cambridge.^{xxv} This research found that the magical affordances of many heritage cities are neither deliberately sought by tourists nor induced by the tourist industry. Instead, the fantastical

aspects of their suggestive topographies - the winding streetscapes; gargoyles; spires; towers; gateways; sunken buildings and Gothic architecture – are familiar to tourists as setting motifs in the background of fairytale films, books and TV series. These tropes then spontaneously appear to tourists during their visits as ‘magi-heritage’. What this means is that tourists do not perceive a division between stories and places, they encounter hinged, storied places. The fairy story guides their steps, sending them down twisted paths, as ancient lanes appear and disappear, demonstrating the agency of the secret commonwealth of texts as spatial events.

But presupposing that texts have agency also implies that they can withhold themselves. Visiting literary sites for proximity to authors’ inspirational influences does not necessarily guarantee affective hinges to places of imagination. As McLaughlin observes, joining a Sherlock Holmes themed tour could be described as consciously seeking to *force* a connection to a literary place by deliberately walking within the story^{xxvi}. The act of forcing could actually obscure the connection. As a result, being there (in Oxford, on a tour) does not necessarily mean being *there* (affectively encountering the presence of Pullman’s Oxford multiverses). We may feel distracted. Or tired. Some visitors have been disappointed by fantasy spaces because they there are too many other tourists, or the site is too commercial, or contrived.^{xxvii} In the book *The Subtle Knife*, Pullman’s protagonist Lyra visits her home, Jordan College, in a parallel world, only to find that it does not exist. Her anguish echoes that of Gertrude Stein when revisiting her childhood home, which had been demolished. Stein wrote that there was no ‘*there there*’.^{xxviii} Consequently we may visit stories, but they don’t always visit us.

In addition to these geographies of unanticipated absence, there are also geographies of unexpected presence. Stories can hinge themselves to the unlikeliest of places. Building on our previous work, Thurgill states that the spatial hinge ‘extends a reading (and with it the text itself) into places previously not connected with the text, 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, even where the author has no connection to such a site in their writing’.^{xxix} For example, Mayberry suddenly found that the site of his local walks at Dry Creek in Kansas reminded him of the magical landscapes in CS Lewis’s Narnia novels.^{xxx} As McLaughlin points out, readers can walk into stories.^{xxxi} Mayberry’s analysis of his encounter with Narnia allows us to see *how* they do so. He inadvertently answers a central question of this work: if literary spatial hinges are essentially unpredictable, then how do we open them? Mayberry makes it clear that in his case, his connection to Narnia wasn’t a wardrobe door, a marker, or a tour, but his state of mind.

Mindfulness

The solitary, rhythmic flow of walking in rural Dry Creek causes Mayberry’s mind to meander and thus embrace the discontinuities of his imagination. Similarly, creative ideas came to Pullman as he ‘wandered around with his mind open’. This practice resembles Wunderlich’s definition of ‘discursive walking’, ‘during which we half consciously explore the landscape while sensorially experiencing it passing by’.^{xxxii} Wunderlich uses the term discursiveness to differentiate this mode of walking from more purposeful or critical excursions. It is walking for the sake of walking. It could be argued that the mindfulness of this practice allows the consciousness to escape the circular concerns and ruminations of everyday life which often absent it from its surroundings. Giving the mind space to roam allows it to attune itself to those minute changes in register or ‘oscillation of affect’, that

characterise spatial hinges.^{xxxiii} For Mayberry, discursive walking led to the touch of Narnian place.

The notion of discursive walking also applies to other actors in literary experiences, for example tour guides. Literary tour guides add to material destinations by immersing visitors in the intangible landscapes constructed both from scripted facts and unscripted, spontaneous storytelling. They create a sense of presence. Hansen and Mossberg's research assesses the affective labour of tour guides, emphasising their deep emotional investment in their stories.^{xxxiv} According to Mathisen, the autobiographical tales told by guides in adventure landscapes may be deeper, personal and heartfelt performances.^{xxxv} In addition to emotion and autobiography, Lee and also Lovell and Thurgill discern the immersive, *imaginative* universe-building efforts of the tour guides, shop keepers and magical exhibition curators who develop Harry Potter-themed tourism products.^{xxxvi xxxvii} A colleague, Howard Griffin and I took this idea further by concluding that the production of enchantment by the tourism industry originates in imaginative acts of lateral thinking and flights of fancy.^{xxxviii} So the improvised, discursive, imaginative comments of guides may further enhance the resonance of Pullman-themed tours.

To summarise this section, hidden literary places are more likely to hinge themselves to other sites if the consciousness is relaxed through the practice of discursive walking.

The right instrument

This research began conventionally. Early in 2020, speculative, online interviews were conducted with four Oxford tour guides who were chosen because they specialise in visits to mediated fantasy locations. Participants were all asked the same open-ended question, taken from a topic guide: "Describe your tour." Each guide also pondered, unprompted, about multiple realities and parallel worlds. The names of guides have been changed in the findings to characters from the Pullman texts.

The next development occurred in April 2020, when I took a two-month writing class led by Natalie Goldberg, the author (among many works) of *Writing down the Bones: Find your Voice, Tell your Story*. The book emerged from her creative writing teaching and six years of study with a Zen Master, Katagiri Roshi. The class was designed to establish an ongoing mindful habit of daily writing sprints. First we sat for five minutes (meditated) to calm our minds. Then Natalie spoke to us about her practice. Next we were given prompts, which we used to write ten-minute sprints. We then read them to each other in small groups of four with no reaction, no praise or judgement. Ground rules were established to prevent self-editing: 'Keep your hand moving; don't cross out; don't worry about punctuation, spelling, or grammar; lose control; don't think; don't get logical; go for the jugular'.^{xxxix} Goldberg recommends tactics like ignoring boundaries such as the margins of pages in order so that thoughts can spill over the lines naturally.

My background in humanities and creative writing has been suppressed for the past two decades as I pursued an academic career in social science. As Goldberg describes it, we can become "frozen" in certain ways of being, but Dharma, or "what is" moves and changes, however much we try to hold it back.^{xl} As a result of this course and three others taught by Goldberg, my approach to cultural geography moved on, slowly becoming more flexible, mindful, and embodied, as suggested by Delyser and Hawkins and Dickens and Edensor in their more creative approaches to research.^{xli} This meant that although I was unable to travel

to Oxford for twenty months, I recognised Pullman’s landscape when it came to me through my discursive walking and writing practice.

In early November 2021 I finally set out on a themed tour of ‘Philip Pullman’s Oxford’. Only five of us had booked, two couples and myself. The guide, Hester, was softly-spoken and had grown up in Oxford. We were all Pullman fans. I occasionally chatted to Hester but mostly, we drifted, listening to her and radiating interest in our surroundings. It is important to note that I only participated on that single guided tour in Oxford. The city is now overlaid with memories: a poetic ivy-wreathed arched window in a college; or a spot where Hester pointed something out. Consequently, returning would surely diminish the spontaneity and singularity on which this work relies. I actively resisted my impulse to interview either Hester, or the other tour participants. Instead, the research data I gathered consisted of the following: my original interviews with the tour guides in Oxford; my park sprints; and the sprints I wrote after visiting Oxford. These words more accurately convey, as Lorimer and Parr have detailed, the ‘affective worlds of hope, anxiety, care, desperation, joy, wonder, enchantment, dread and desire’.^{xliii}

I also folded an interpretative approach into the data analysis. Empirical coding is divisive by nature, fragmenting stories and creating findings, but also *losings* by process of elimination. In this case, coding would be the ‘wrong instrument’ as Lyra remarks:

‘If rationality can’t see things like the secret commonwealth, it’s because rationality’s vision is limited. The secret commonwealth is there. We can’t see it with rationality any more than we can weigh something with a microscope: it’s the wrong sort of instrument. We need to imagine as well as measure...’^{xliiii}

The right sort of instrument would actually be Pullman’s ‘alethiometer’, a fictional invention physically resembling a compass and ringed with symbols. Characters in his novels use the alethiometer to truthfully answer questions. I needed a discursive methodology that was equally able to truly detect the affective register of literary spatial hinges. Periodically, throughout the tour, I had indulged in the exact behaviour that Goldberg advises against. My researcher was in charge, intervening in the mindfulness of my experience by pausing to record muttered field notes on my phone. But it was the writing practice sprints, not the recordings, that allowed me to *feel* Pullman’s worlds within the wider discursive comments. The sprints let us get to know our own minds (however mundane), and meet ourselves and our truths. Goldberg advises the technique of ‘composting’ to allow the sprints to change from their constituent parts into a more fertile, organic matter.^{xliiv} Composting provides a slower, open, mindful consideration of reading and rereading outside the margins, from which different themes emerged.

These findings are divided into recognisable sections, but each theme leaps between related but different topics, following a stream of consciousness spanning parallel worlds. As Lorimer and Parr suggest, we should pay attention to ‘matters of composition, expression, voice, language, tone, cadence, and mode of address’.^{xliv} Consequently, like Dickens and Edensor, I have held back on theoretical analysis during the telling of the findings, in order to smooth the narrative flow.^{xlvi}

Here, in the park

During the COVID 19 Lockdown restrictions in England, I expanded my habitual

walking routes into two previously unfamiliar parks near my home. I still walk these routes daily, when I am clear-headed in the early mornings. I approach the park through an alleyway located at the bottom of an old road. The alleyway is bordered by a high stone wall on one side, beyond which is a churchyard. Fenced-off woodland lies on the other. The alleyway leads to the first park formed of fields left to rewild in patches, bordered by trees and bisected by a broad, straight main cycle and pedestrian path. Off the beaten track, a second path runs beside the East Stour river. This route irresistibly winds out of sight. The path is cracked and covered in thyme. It is flanked by tall nettle banks and dog roses and overlooked by drooping trees (See Image 1). I always choose to walk this way. Every-so-often, a trampled-bare clearing in the undergrowth leading down to the riverbank suggests the presence of fishermen.

The park ends at the road by Pledges Mill, an abandoned Victorian flour mill built at the intersection of the Great Stour and the East Stour. There is a rumour that this is the ford from which Ashford drew its name. The mill is ruined, the windows broken or boarded up. The river winds past the silent waterwheel, which speaks of old industry (see Image 2). Behind the mill, a second, manicured civic park is accessed by small bridges over the river. I loop this second park by the riverbank and return the same way early each morning.

Park Life

During the first Lockdown, I was immersed in reading and listening to Philip Pullman's *The Book of Dust* series. In the second novel, *The Secret Commonwealth*, Lyra and her daemon Panteleimon (daemons are outer expressions of the soul/conscience in animal form) argue about her cool, rational stance and rejection of her imagination. As a result of their disagreement, she embarks on an epic journey. At one point she travels through the marshes on a barge, where "will o' the wykes" or 'jacky lanterns' (green marsh gas) unite to bring down a zeppelin that is hunting her. She starts to accept that there is a secret commonwealth, 'quite invisible to everyday vision. If it existed at all, it was seen by the imagination, whatever that was, and not by logic.'^{xlvii} As a mythical world-within-a-world, the secret commonwealth may infuse any landscape with non-rational, magical elements. However, parks are likely places in which to encounter the guardians spirits of rivers and trees and the Ashford parks are decorated by many benches and poles, carved with the animal motifs of English folklore: horse; duck; squirrel; wolf; hare; swan. They recall Pullman's daemons, also drawing attention to the park's busy commonwealth of rabbits, squirrels, crows and magpies. Mayberry renamed Dry Creek *The Land of Allium*, referring to the wild garlic growing near the water. Like Mayberry's free associations between Narnia, and wild garlic, nature became conflated for me with the otherworldliness of Pullman's fantasy space.

On one spring morning, the trees simultaneously sprang to life, displaying new shrimpy catkins and mysterious, outsized artichoke-like buds which I had not noticed the day before (see Image 3). My eyes were no longer fixed on the path, or the middle distance, but up, and down. I heard the calls of unseen creatures. Yellow waterlilies bloomed in the East Stour, seeming to trail parachutes underwater. The autumn produced bulbous, fluorescent berries and unreal large seed-pods but now, more alert, I had watched them green and ripen. I found a strawberry tree. An impossible thread of spiderweb spanned two trees a road's breadth across. Other webs were picked out in dew drops and, only days later, blew past on the wind like strands of hair. Rabbits chewed grass along the path, melting into the verges as I approached. Nature returned my gaze. A squadron of dragonflies whirred by, one pausing to hover enquiringly, in front of one of my green eyes, then the other (see Image 4). A pink-bright jay alighted and strutted on the path ahead, cocking its head.

I was mindfully walking when the text of *The Secret Commonwealth* ‘discovered itself to me’, as Kirk described, in bucolic form. As de Certeau contends in his discussion of the reading of places as texts, objects do not remain passively inert under the gaze, but have secret lives.^{xlviii} The parks had previously been picturesque, but when the hinge opened, I felt their reciprocal touch. Texts had happened.

Water

Yet the secret commonwealth is not always benign. Landscape and weather can act as a dominant, malevolent character, behaving with brutal agency in children’s novels like Susan Cooper’s *Dark is Rising* series.^{xlix} *La Belle Sauvage* centres on the scenario of a great flood in Oxford and the southeast. Water is a significant element for Pullman, who has considered how the river in Oxford rises into the atmosphere, leaving the city altered.

‘I sometimes feel that the mists from the river come out at night and seep through the stonework and alter the contours of things and all these gargoyles face another way. So when you look at it next morning, things are slightly different. Something changes. You can’t put your finger on exactly what. And I think there is this mistiness, this vapour in the air’.¹

Albion, an age-old version of the world, emerges from the flood in *La Belle Sauvage*, restoring the original *genii locorum* as the lands between Oxford, London and further afield are reclaimed by water. This is made clear in a chapter, *Ancientry*, where the protagonists, Malcolm and Alice, encounter a river God clutching a trident:

‘It was the head of a man but huge, emerging from the water among the reeds. He must have been a giant. His hair was tangled with weeds and seemed to be growing through a rusty crown; his skin was greenish, and his long beard trailed over his throat and down into the water.’^{li}

Similarly, from early September 2020 onwards throughout the winter, ceaseless, heavy rain changed the character of my park walks. Each weekend brought a new ‘named storm’. As the foliage died back in Autumn, I shifted my focus from the land to the river. In January it overflowed, inundating the park by defamiliarising the space with waterways that had to be forded (see Image 5). The drowned lands of Ashford reminded me of the violent unpredictability of nature as water reshaped the land. On dry days, mist rose in a spectral line from the park fields, as Pullman stated, leaving everything somehow changed. Malcolm, the protagonist of *La Belle Sauvage*, described the flood in as a ‘kind of a between-time. Like a dream or something’.^{liii} Things were, indeed, made liminal, uncertain and betwixt by rain and river. Pledges Mill, built at the place where the rivers run together, loomed ever-larger like a marker at a crossroads, a shrine to the unappeased, angry river Gods. The East Stour doubled, then trebled in width. *La Belle Sauvage* had hinged itself to my world, which was now in its watery grasp.

The water and its resultant dampness seeped into other spaces on my daily walks. Moss and algae altered the colour and texture of the stone churchyard wall, turning the alleyway into a holloway (see Image 6). Macfarlane describes the holloway as an ‘ancient sunken path, harrowed down into landscape by centuries of rainfall, wheel-run, hoof-hit & foot-fret. Where trees reach & clasp over a holloway, it feels more ghostly green time-slip tunnel than open path’.^{liiii} The parks are part of a designated ‘Green corridor’ in Ashford and I walked from them into a truly green corridor, an eerie, holloway, a Pullmanesque hinge that I

incongruously exited into a Victorian suburban street.

Unlikelihood

Leaping from a wet winter in Ashford to a windy late November in Oxford is the perfect point to mention that the discursive juxtaposition of styles in Oxford's built environment is referred to by Pullman as a 'lack of likelihood'. He explains it as follows:

'On a day such as this, when the sun's low in the sky you can see all kinds of curious combinations of things: a Victorian terrace, right next to a medieval church, right next to a modern launderette. That sort of thing'.^{liv}

Our 'Philip Pullman's Oxford' tour guide 'Hester' unwittingly embraced Pullman's lack of likelihood. She aimed to take us from here (where we were a polite tour group trying not to get run over by bicycles), to *there* where, as Pullman stated, strange things happen. As a result, her tour narrative often resembled a writing sprint as it moved outside the margins of her script. Between evidently practised sections, she also randomly drifted between a multiverse Oxford that included: the filming locations for *His Dark Materials*, the *Inspector Morse* TV series and different *Harry Potter* film locations; Tolkien and Pullman's biographical spaces; Hester's encounters with actors from *His Dark Materials* during filming; the arcane, closed world of the Universities and Hester's Oxford. During the course of the tour, she referred to "Lyra's Oxford," "Will's world," and "our world." The intersections between worlds were described as "crossed over, overlapped, passed through, met." Phrases and words that are suggestive of hinges.

The unlikelihood of Hester's narrative flow also included an unlikely tilting of our perspectives. Another Oxford tour guide, Mary, carefully situates her tour. She tells tour participants this is where: "Lyra is sitting with her alethiometer in 20th century Oxford". But Hester did not always align the exact spaces of the texts with her recreations of Lyra's actions. Instead, she frequently caught us unawares by abruptly pausing in her historical descriptions of colleges to remark that this is where "Lyra would have been". In Brasenose Lane, she suddenly remarked: "Look! Lyra would have run past us here". Or "there's loads of weapons in the Pitt Rivers Museum and I can imagine Lyra spending hours in there. Hester also, repeatedly and surprisingly tilted my perspective upward. On several occasions she stopped us to observe how Lyra climbed from rooftop to rooftop in Exeter College. When we visited the covered indoor market, she asked how it would be if bird daemons darted about, up in the ceiling. Her interjections did not help me to visualise the daemons, or Lyra, who remained elusive. But I was startled out of my researcher mode, my tour passivity and my general complacent, pedestrian ruminations. Hester's comments washed over me as a diffuse sense of *her* awareness of the text that encompassed us. Attending a Pullman tour involves inserting ourselves into fictive place, forcing the hinge by grasping at the story and these discursive touches and tiltings improve our chances of unexpected spatial events occurring.

Doorways

We were surrounded by the material, architectural reminders of the text, including : the grotesques and gargoyles; the classical, Italianate architecture; the statuary; the arcane colleges and the doors. Part of the magi-heritage affordances of historic cities is that their doors were made on a different scale. They are shrunken or colossal and made of sturdy, studded wood hinged to thick stone gateways. We passed through some of them, but that

didn't necessarily mean that we arrived where we expected to be.

For example, Pullman tours often visit the passageway in *La Belle Sauvage* where Lord Asriel claims 'academic sanctuary' for his daughter during the floods. We could not enter New College on our short tour, but we could stand in the gatehouse, picturing the flood beyond. "These are the doors, but of course, they are not flooded now," Hester pointed out. She explained that the scene was filmed in New College, but set in Jordan College in the texts, which is based on Oxford University's Exeter College, which Pullman attended. This multiplicity was accepted as lore on our fantasy tour. There, but not. As we were. We were actually positioned beside a porter shouting at an intrusive tourist. He turned to us, shaking his head in mock-disapproval: "They'll be sticking their heads in the windows next!" Porters are, of course, the genii locorum of colleges. But New College is not a name on a page about Oxford University, to be politely studied, then turned. New College is a living place, peopled and disrupted by us. We were intruders, as the porter's guardian presence reminded us. As our group listened to Hester in other locations, students clanged in and out of barred gates, briefly eyeing and dismissing us. However, these sensations of outsidership do not entirely block the imagination. Alternatively, they invite it to cross the thresholds of fantasy locked doors and high, ivy-wreathed windows.

Detouring

We could not enter the Botanic Gardens either, because, as Hester explained, they require tickets. But I sought a specific bench, so she kindly pressed her membership card into my hand and agreed that I could catch up with the party later. I left the group and trotted through gardens where I would have liked to dawdle. To my surprise, I was accompanied partway by a very attentive, large, loud duck.

On the far side of the Botanic Gardens near the river is a bench. In *The Amber Spyglass*, the second novel of Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, the protagonists Will and Lyra have to part permanently. However, this bench exists in both of their parallel worlds and once a year, at noon on Midsummer's Day, they agree to sit on it to remember each other. Lyra's and Will's initials have been inscribed on the bench by visitors, as an act of extra-textual placemaking. In 2019, a statue was erected behind the bench, portraying Will's daemon, a cat called Kinjava, Lyra's, Pantalymon, Lyra's pine marten daemon and Philip Pullman's raven daemon, Nevermore. A guide, Serafina, mused about the metaphysical significance of the bench: "It's interesting because a lot of people don't realise what it is, or the importance of that bench. Unless you've read Philip Pullman, it's just a bench." The bench was not just a bench to me. It was the object of my quest and quest-like had led me off the beaten tour track into a "de-tour." Now I wanted to sit on it and commune with Will and Lyra in their parallel worlds. But I was overpowered by my anxiety to catch up with the tour group, who were already on their way to New College. In other words, however significant markers are, unless the mind is receptive, they may also be empty vessels. Forcing hinges keeps them closed. So I photographed the bench and left.

The wind was up. Strong gusts blew me forward. Later, looking back on this moment, I was reminded of the words of another Oxford author, Tolkien, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*: "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to."^{lv} The alleyway I should have turned down had hidden itself. My Google Maps app swept me off in an unfathomable, obstructively wide arc of the colleges and lost me. Abruptly, I found myself

in front of a row of giant, carved stone heads upon pillars, like the river God described by Pullman, ‘the head of a man but huge’ (see Image 7). I had passed them by twice earlier, when my attention was focused beyond them on photographing the scenic Bridge of Sighs. Now I took them in. Or, rather, they took me in. The heads were classical revival in style and also 70’s Prog Rock. They were abruptly, utterly Pullmanesque, certainly not of this world. Beyond them, a procession of Mages shrouded in red, with mask-like painted white faces paced funereally slowly down the middle of the street (I found out later that this was an Extinction Rebellion protest) (see Image 8). They were impassive. Silent. Worlds hinged (or I unhinged?), I inhabited space made extraordinary, my steps guided by Pullman’s work.

Much later, while searching for the correct reference for the book *Lyra’s Oxford* in my endnotes, I happened upon this passage in the introduction which addresses lost material ephemera:

‘They might have come from anywhere. They might have come from other worlds. That scribbled on map, that publisher’s catalogue – they might have been put down absent-mindedly in another universe, and been blown by a chance wind through an open window, to find themselves after many adventures on a market-stall in another world’.^{lvi}

Getting lost had jolted me out of the passivity of the tour into a more mindful state of focus on my environment, springing a hinge to a window through which, on a chance wind, I had been blown.

Going through

Hester phoned me with instructions about how to find the group and my de-tour was over. So I surrendered my imagination once more to the tour. Hester had arranged entry to Exeter College where Pullman studied. So at last we stepped *through* a small wooden door in a larger stone gateway. The place also doubled as Jordan College, where Lyra grew up, in the Pullman novels. We entered a quadrangle to impressions of arts and crafts architecture and beds of tasteful planting and ivy-smothered windows (see Image 9). She took us first to see a bust of Tolkien in the chapel, pointing to it in silence, as performers in a Mozart recital rehearsed. This, finally, was the place I had anticipated. Lyra was not here, but I was in her stead. We passed the library and entered a serene, large, walled garden, autumn-leaved trees framing a lawn marked with a “keep off the grass” sign. Climbing a narrow stairway we arrived at a path on a very high wall overlooking Radcliffe Square and the Radcliffe Camera, just as the sun began to set. Hester commented that people looking up at us would ask: “Who are they?” We were sentinels against the sky. Just for a moment, the hinge opened and *we* were the strange things happening *there*.

We climbed back down into the garden, where we paused. Hester pored over the laminated map of Lyra’s Oxford document with us, tracing the inter-lappings of places to illustrate our tour through fictive space. She pointed out a window between worlds in the Oxford of *The Subtle Knife*. “It’s not a particularly great place to visit. You wouldn’t see much. It’s part of the A42 that runs from London to Cheltenham. It definitely wasn’t filmed in the location of the book.” It is all the more poignant that the window between worlds is fittingly, truly unmappable.

Conclusion

This paper makes an original contribution to cultural geographies by addressing the inherent unpredictability of spatial hinges. The article builds on the writing of story-articles by Delyser and Hawkins and also Edensor and Lorimer. It adds Goldberg's writing-as-practice as a mindful data collection technique to the mix, using composting to rootle out the truths. Examining Pullman's multiverse involves hinging separate parallel academic and creative writing worlds together. Parallel worlds, by definition, do not meet, but sometimes they bend the laws of physics to hinge themselves together spontaneously. These unlikely intersections remind the author of the lyrics to a song *Everything that Rises Must Converge* written by a friend in a band called The Handsome Family:

'When so-called experts try to tell you that
Parallel lines will never intersect
Don't listen to the man
Don't you believe a word
I'm speaking from experience
Everything that floats is gonna run into something 'cause
Everything that rises must converge'.^{lvii}

The juncture of parallel worlds expands literary, media and transmedia tourism's site-specific focus further into places that are unconnected to texts.

Worlds within worlds are secretive and improbable so apprehending them with logic and rationality won't work, as Pullman instructs. Therefore this work follows Goldberg's advice that 1+1 can equal 48, a Mercedes Benz, an apple pie, a blue horse.^{lviii} . The resultant openly interpretative, irrational approach of this article could also be considered its chief limitation, because it gives equal weight to stream-of-consciousness, supposition and fantasy. Behaving illogically did not come easily to this academic, whose creativity had been retrained during the last seventeen years into a qualitative, but still conformist social-science mode. Any creativity seeping out around my edges was promptly stuffed out of sight. So, here are three interrelated thoughts for others, who also find stories not doing what they are supposed to do.

Firstly, unexpectedness. In order to truly enchant us, literary spatial events are best unforeseen, so that we are "struck" by them. Worlds-within-worlds are inchoate, hidden until they reveal themselves. It could be argued that they may be more likely to do so when the circumstances are conducive, perhaps in a quiet park in the early morning. Yet, conversely, getting lost in a busy street to an urgent soundscape of Extinction Rebellion protest megaphone speeches disorientated me. I was jolted out of the circuit of complacency, continuity and rumination on which my mind revolved. A hinge sprang open on a window through which, echoing the porter's words, giant heads stuck themselves. This meant that I was able to detect the Easter Eggs (the in-joke, intra-textual cultural references planted by multi-media makers for fans to discover), those gifts provided by my guide, the Pullman universe. The less I grasped for the place I wanted, the more firmly it grasped me, although never in the ways that I expected.

Secondly, unlikeliness. This research also celebrates the unexpected discursiveness and improvisational skills of tour guides. Flights of fancy can tilt the perspectives of tour participants up to a bird daemon circling a market roof, or down to the forbidden lawn of Lyra's College. A guide, Mary, stated that "walking the fictive universe is a means of

probing the human spirit. A means of drawing the character of my inner being into the open.” Never was this more true than during Hester’s random, autobiographical touches of her Oxford life, embodying aspects of Pullman’s and Lyra’s worlds. At the tour’s end, she indicated three symbols from the alethiometer on the front of her black T-shirt. Movingly, they included the anchor, “for always coming home, to my city.” In the right frame of mind, the merest impromptu remark of a guide, or the sight of an improbably-large catkin can spring open years-rusted-shut hinges on the stoutest wooden door, in the thickest stone wall, revealing improbable spaces shaped by Pullman’s texts.

Thirdly and lastly, mindfulness. Goldberg is clear that “writing does writing.” We simply have to “get out of the way.”^{lix} The barriers to opening spatial hinges are not closed doors, keep off the grass signs, or requests to stay silent in Exeter College chapel. The true barriers are your inner editor, researcher, tour guide and the other critical, absencing roles preventing your mindful presence. Quieting these voices allows you to hear your discursive thoughts and select the most creative. Booking a ticket on a guided tour of Pullman’s Oxford *is* forcing the hinge. You are purposefully exposing yourself to the affectively conducive affordances of place and presupposing that you will be in the mood to experience them. But you also need to be mindful in order to recognise the feather-light touch (or sometimes the loud voice, or watery flood) of the genii locorum of literary places. I had passed through an astoundingly bright-green holloway many times before I was sufficiently present to notice it, or, more accurately, before it appeared to notice me. So the opening of the spatial hinge ultimately refers to the opening of the mind.

Lastly, following on from this point, I had finally arrived in Oxford. Yet the tour and the Oxfordian architecture were entirely arbitrary, because I was in research mode. Rushing to see a bench meant that I missed the most important point of all, that the spatial hinge in the Botanic Gardens wasn’t a bench at all, it was a large duck, doing all it could to attract my attention. My inner being, my daemon, has feathers (see Image 10).

Notes

ⁱ J.C. Thurgill and J. Lovell, ‘Expanding worlds: place and collaboration in (and after) the ‘text-as-spatial-event’.’ *Literary Geographies* 5, no. 1 (2019): 16-20.

ⁱⁱ P. Pullman, *Lyra’s Oxford*. (St Ives: Doubleday, [2003] this hardback edition 2017). The frontispiece is quotation from a (parallel version of the) Baedeker guides presenting Oxford in the parallel location of The Coasts of Bohemia.

ⁱⁱⁱ N. Watson, *The Literary Tourist: Readers and Places in Romantic and Victorian Britain*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) p.210.

^{iv} S. Hones, *Literary Geographies: Narrative Space in Let The Great World Spin*, (Springer, 2014) p.32.

^v Hones, ‘Let the Great World Spin’ p.32.

^{vi} E. Amey, ‘An In-between Reader: Situatedness and Belonging in Tove Jansson’s Helsinki.’ *Literary Geographies*, 7(2), 235-250 (2020).

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