

Murder in Arcadia: Towards a Pastoral of Responsibility in Phil Rickman's *Merrily Watkins* Murder Mystery Series

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ABSTRACT Phil Rickman's *Merrily Watkins* murder mystery series look to the 'golden age' of detective fiction to create then undo the pastoral upon which that form heavily relied. This paper examines how such a strategy might be termed post-pastoral in Terry Gifford's understanding of that term, and promotes the idea that popular fiction has a role to play in reshaping pastoral so that it speaks to and for a future, rather than an idyllic and fictional past.

The phantasy, then, in which the detective story addict indulges, is the phantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence where he may know love as love and not as the law.

– W. H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage"

It is timely to ask what deployments and representations of nature tell us about humankind's attitudes towards it. The appeal of the pastoral and/or 'nature' endures undeterred in popular fiction, suggesting that the cultural imagination is reluctant to relinquish the solace or drama that these conventions and categories traditionally offer. This is especially the case in the crime genre. It is true that there is currently a trend in British television drama that insists on the darker underbelly of small town, semi-rural communities, which foster in their midst a longstanding corruption, and which the very nature of their rural isolation has at best allowed unchallenged. Such dramas as *Broadchurch*, *Southcliffe* and *The Guilty* (UK), or *The Top of the Lake* (New Zealand) do not necessarily depart from the formula by leaving the crime unsolved. In fact, in *Southcliffe* we are in no doubt from the start. But they leave the viewer with a strong sense of the idyll permanently ruptured, of being, in fact, party to the corruption by believing in the idyll in the first place. Dramas like these further suggest that the solved crime is merely a symptom of an innate

rotteness that cannot be comfortably contained or eradicated, that *et in arcadia ego* is always the case. The power of that idea, however, is dependent on the enduring desire for a return to an originary and imagined state of grace and harmony. In post-Romantic terms, this presumes a particular relationship and dialogue between the human and non-human, in which the non-human might function as a marker of the moral and spiritual state of the human.

Phil Rickman's *Merrily Watkins* murder mystery novels sit somewhere between the darker tendencies of the dramas cited above, and the more 'cosy' examples of the murder detection genre. It is easy enough to think of such examples, which show societies and settings to be integral to the consolatory intention of the form: Agatha Christie's Miss Marple and the small village of St Mary Mead; or Ruth Rendell's Inspector Wexford, in Kingsmarkham—a small market-town in Sussex. In these and their like, the restoration of the idyll, of the *world* of St Mary Mead or Kingsmarkham by the end of each novel, is paramount. It is, as Stephen Knight and Martin Priestman observe, more useful to think in terms of Christie's 'world' rather than her characters or their adventures, for it is that world that is put into disarray by the crime (Priestman qtd. in Knight 153–4). Rickman agrees that something of St Mary Mead haunts the *Merrily Watkins* novels as they constantly tease out the flaws of Arcadia. But while Rickman retains a fondness for Miss Marple, "Merrily is not any kind of homage" and the series maintains "all the stage-settings of a cosy village mystery while turning out to be not all cosy" (2013). Thus, Rickman knowingly paints pastoral or bucolic only to undo it. To take two examples from the novels which shall be my focus here: in *The Wine of Angels* (WOA) "[t]he pink moon shone surrealistically down on a pastoral dreamscape" simultaneously invokes Samuel Palmer and Salvador Dali, familiar pastoral slipping into alien nightmare (580). In *To Dream of the Dead* (DOD) Ledwardine village square is quiet, but with the quiet of a village hostage to economic change as milk deliveries, postal deliveries and baking bread at dawn, the signs that a community is alive and working, are now dead: "the morning post wouldn't be here for hours, and the milk came in plastic bottles in the supermarkets, and soon nobody would be seen on the streets of Ledwardine until about ten when the dinky delicatessen opened for croissants" (DOD 51–2). Rickman's 'world' is St Mary Mead undone.

Before I discuss Rickman's work more specifically, it is useful to establish properly the kinship between the detective story and the pastoral mode. We can then ask how Rickman's novels might, also in Terry Gifford's words, deploy the "pastoral mode, in its post-pastoral incarnation"

to comment on humankind's exploitation of environment and nature ("Post-Pastoral" 24).

I began this essay with a quotation from "The Guilty Vicarage" by W. H. Auden. In that piece, he famously confesses to being unable to enjoy a crime novel unless it is set in "rural England" (Auden 406). More importantly, he further notes that in the worlds of the detective story, "nature should reflect its human inhabitants, i.e. it should be the Great Good Place; for the more Eden-like it is, the greater the contradiction of murder" (408). Auden recognises the Edenic aspect of rural England as it continues to be imagined and desired by readers like him, even now, of such novels. Significantly, as Stephen Knight notes, Auden is talking about the structure of what is labelled 'the golden age' detective novel, a period of crime writing that approximately covers the years 1918–1930 (Knight 77). The term 'golden age' itself harks back to an idea of innocence and certainty, the 'Eden' of antiquity, and this in turn brings us to the origins of pastoral. For Auden, says Knight, the "conflict of 'innocence and guilt' [is] central", not social but spiritual or religious: "the reader's sense of personal guilt [can be] consolingly displaced on to the criminal by the "exceptional individual [that is, the detective] who is himself in a state of grace" (89). Knight continues that, for Auden, G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown is exemplary in this respect (Knight 89). But Father Brown's significance as priest, or pastor, is matched by the significance of his ability to 'detect,' or 'see' and 'read' correctly, which quality is enabled by his spiritual 'purity,' and, importantly, his facility for compassion. As Auden puts it, Brown "cares for souls" and his "prime motive is compassion, of which the guilty are in greater need than the innocent" (411).

The links between pastoral and the detective novel or murder mystery are examined further by Martin Priestman, who, with a nod to William Empson, discusses the 'golden age' detective novel in just such terms. Priestman acknowledges that the term 'golden age' here "evok[es] a separate realm of *literary* innocence" specifically: while the 1930s saw a "particular mixture of pastoralising nostalgia for the social innocence lost in that turbulent decade," it is also true that "literary intellectuals of this period were engaged *en masse* in a love-affair with the form" of the detective novel as, in the words of Marjorie Nicolson, an "escape not from life, but from literature" (Priestman 151). Priestman continues: "an escape, that is, into order and objectivity" and back to the narrative certainties that Modernism was busy undoing (151). This reduces, or perhaps expands, pastoral to mean simply, in Renato Poggioli's words, "a double longing after innocence and happiness" (qtd. in Alpers 437). Priestman's point is salutary, however: the

'golden age' detective novel, which Rickman invokes and partly resists, is pastoral in its formal certainties as much as in its depictions of rural idylls.

This brings me to pastoral and environment. In the mid-1990s, Lawrence Buell established the following criteria concerning how we should define an environmental text:

- 1) The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history;
- 2) The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest;
- 3) Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation; and
- 4) Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (qtd. in Borlick 6–7)

Buell's criteria are still pertinent, but ecological concerns and anxieties have undergone a transformation in terms of their political and cultural status. Terry Gifford offers a useful update of cultural responses to, and perceptions of, environment, particularly in the UK. During the first years of the twenty-first century, "a shift [took] place in British culture that has given us a slightly revised sense of the word *environment* with implications for the way we now read the diverse forms of literature that perform the cultural function we have come to know as pastoral" ("New Senses" 245). In that time, the "term *carbon footprint* penetrated the language [...] and the culture for businesses, cities, villages and families" while the polar bear replaced the whale as the potent symbol of all things environmental. As Gifford points out, however, this shift is about much more than merely swapping one mammal for another: the whale remained 'other,' in need of our conservationist intervention to save the species; the polar bear's situation "represent[s] our *own* plight on the planet" as the ice caps are disappearing in precisely the manner our own civilisations are forecast to disappear ("New Senses" 245; emphasis added). The polar bear's dilemma is not merely a matter of its extinction through being over-hunted; rather, it is now the canary of impending ecological disaster for humankind, of our own possible extinction. Understandably, this creates a different urgency, and Gifford calls for "pastorals of responsibility" ("New Senses" 248). We can understand such pastoral to stress the future over the past and to be suspicious of nostalgia. Such a pastoral would also recognise that states of grace, harmony and innocence are impossible, at best transitory, but

essential perhaps, as an aspiration. Rickman would agree: “I don’t want to stamp on the possibility of a return to Eden, and we should occasionally get inspiring glimpses of it [...] in a spiritual sense” (Rickman 2013). While there is an argument for calling Gifford’s concept a tautology, given the etymology and genealogy of ‘pastoral,’ perhaps it is necessary for the phrase to recall us to that oft-overlooked dimension of pastoral in which care and guardianship are the essence.¹ For what Rickman’s novels debate and stress repeatedly is responsibility for community and environment: a modern rural community is the ideal tool for such a debate, peopled as it is by figures—landowners, gentry, priest—whose traditional roles, status, authority and attendant responsibilities have always been challenged by economic and political change, class and cultural mobility.

The two Rickman novels that I discuss here, *The Wine of Angels* and *To Dream of the Dead*, are positioned roughly at the end of the twentieth century and the end of the first decade of the twenty-first respectively. As such, they demonstrate the kind of shift that Gifford describes regarding the term environment as it moves from meaning conservation of the ‘other,’ to a chilling realisation that we ourselves are in danger. From a close reading of salient passages in these two novels, we might further ask if the series has adapted to what Gifford terms “post-pastoral.” Gifford notes, after Alpers, that pastoral is “self-aware of its potential idyllicism;” thus he has found it necessary to coin the term ‘post-pastoral’ to describe a “body of literature that transcends ‘naïve idyllicism’ with a more positive agenda than simply being an ‘anti-pastoral’ corrective to idyllicism in its intent” (“Post-Pastoral” 14–15). For Gifford, post-pastoral texts might imply certain questions intentionally or not, including whether awe in the face of natural phenomena might lead to humility in our species; what the implications might be of recognising that we are part of a creative-destructive process; and, “how can our distinctively human consciousness, which gives us a conscience, be used as a tool to heal our troubled relationship with our natural home?” (“Post-Pastoral” 18). Buell’s criteria and Gifford’s questions are all ones for which Jane Watkins, Merrily’s daughter, and her mentor, Lucy Devenish, would recognise the need. The presence of nature and environment in these two novels often, though not inevitably, seems to protest both their constancy and vulnerability to process.

It would be stretching the point to ascribe to the novels an agenda in this respect; Rickman is understandably chiefly concerned with telling a

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1. Pastoral relates originally to the care of sheep and pasture, in which harmony is partly ensured by the shepherd/pastor figure fulfilling his/her duty.

good story, and as a former journalist, he maintains that balance of view is also one of his aims: even if that means the murderer is a member of the Green Party (2013). Nevertheless, the novels work to a set of values which accords environment status. These values also suggest that that environment is not ours except by force and neither are we alone in it.

Merrily makes her debut appearance in *The Wine of Angels* (1998), a novel which, explains Rickman, was never intended to become a series (this possibly explains the death of one of the most striking characters, whose absence from the subsequent novels is a great shame). Merrily is a young widow, with a teenage daughter Jane; she is also a vicar, and in the second novel, *Midwinter of the Spirit* (1999), has begun training as a deliverance consultant—which is what the Anglican Church now calls exorcists. By the tenth novel, *To Dream of the Dead*, Merrily is firmly established in this role, one that enables her character plausible access to acts of crime and detection.

Merrily's parish is on the border between Wales and England, near the English cathedral city of Hereford. The setting of the novels is bucolic but in a manner that, as earlier noted, disturbs and mocks even as it appeals to Agatha Christie's 'Miss Marple' model, in which order is always restored. Rickman is vehement that Merrily is not a clerical sleuth in the fashion of Father Brown, and insists on her flaws as a vicar: she swears, smokes, and makes mistakes (Rickman 2013). But ultimately, she never lacks compassion, and she serves the guilty as she serves the innocent. Superficially, she is a world away from Chesterton's protagonist, but in important respects, she is at least a kindred spirit, and immediately invokes Father Brown by both countering and echoing him. Most importantly, she is burdened with an overdeveloped sense of responsibility, as we are told on our very first encounter with her: "This was Merrily's problem. Always felt responsible" (WOA 3). Where Merrily properly diverges from Father Brown and Miss Marple is that she does not, in fact, solve crimes or puzzles; rather she gets caught up out of her highly developed sense of duty in the messiness of 'evil' and essentially brings another way of seeing to bear on that 'mess'.

Returning briefly to Auden, Knight understands Auden to extend the notion of priest to the detective in much the same way as later critics have seen an analogy between the detective and the psychoanalyst (89). Both analogies continue a critical tradition of situating the detective novel in the context of meeting a need, whatever its sub-genre or primary model of detection; both also concern themselves with restoration and to some extent, absolution. Auden's choice of title for his essay further strengthens

its relevance to the *Merrily Watkins* series, and creates a link to the first Miss Marple novel, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930). This novel is narrated by the vicar, and begins in the vicarage itself, with the narrator “brandish[ing] the carving knife in a vindictive manner” and remarking that “anyone who murdered Colonel Protheroe would be doing the world at large a service” (Christie 1). Of course, as the reader knows, the vicar is protected from being the culprit twice over through his position as narrator (although Christie flouts that expectation in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*), and parish priest. He is, after all, the pastor, albeit an endearingly flawed one, of the community under threat.

In *The Wine of Angels*, Merrily has just arrived in Ledwardine, the apparently idyllic village referred to above. That it is in the border county of Herefordshire, a county with nearly 400 years of cider-making to its name, is important. The Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) UK lists over 30 Herefordshire-based cider-makers still in operation. Cider is an historical fact in Herefordshire, but of all the alcoholic beverages, cider is perhaps the most readily and fortuitously associated with the bucolic and pastoral. The apple is perceived as the fruit instrumental in the Fall of Man (though it is not identified in Genesis as anything other than ‘fruit’) and thus stands for consequence, expulsion, and neglect of duty in favour of satisfying one’s desires. Orchards are generally imagined as places of tranquillity, abundance, even shelter, while cider itself has an artisan aspect. This makes Ledwardine, a fictional village but one constructed from various real Herefordshire/border villages, typical in that its history is entrenched in the county’s cider-making traditions: the “wine of angels” is, in one interpretation, cider. It is also a quotation attributed to the seventeenth-century poet, Thomas Traherne, which heads the novel: “Tears are the Wine of Angels... /the best... to quench the devil’s fires.” The spirit of Traherne, who in real life was from Hereford and held a parish at nearby Credenhill, hovers over the Watkins family and the series to function as a spiritual anchor, crossing all creeds. There is not the space to address Traherne’s poetry and meditations here, but they insist on felicity as both duty and expression of faith, a felicity which is to be found by being in God’s natural world. As such, he is a further reminder of the possibility of grace and individual responsibility.

In the later novel, *To Dream of the Dead* (2008), a fictional website describes Ledwardine as being “once known as ‘the Village in the Orchard’” and that “the old centre of the village is still partly enclosed by the remains of an apple orchard dating back at least to medieval times” (*DOD* 6). Ledwardine figures as a kind of Eden then, but always with the

seed of 'evil' at its heart. The website, www.getalife/welshborder.co.uk, is exquisite in its cynical observation of what those searching for the idyll seek:

Today, Ledwardine (Jewel of the New Cotswolds—Daily Telegraph) is serene and inviting. The cobbled village square, with its small, open market-hall supported by oak pillars is enlivened by a variety of retail outlets, including bookshop, gallery and delicatessen as well as the 15th-century Black Swan Inn, noted for its fine food. (DOD 6)

In sum, Ledwardine promises material plenty: 'the open market-hall,' 'fine food,' a 'delicatessen,' combined with an assurance of culture and further consumption in the bookshop, gallery and 'variety of retail outlets'. The market-hall's "oak pillars" are a further invocation of sylvan origins and thus continuity, as well as resonating with the symbolism that the oak offers regarding empire, strength and surety. The purveyors of this 'life' (and ultimately Rickman) are keenly aware of pastoral as commodity here. Later in the same novel, this is further mocked, as Merrily wryly observes: "And it was raining again, which wouldn't help. They didn't have rain on GetaLife/welshborder, the relocation website all about convincing city-based would-be migrants that they could have a greener, saner way of life out here in the west" (DOD 28).

In its elision of "green" with "sane," the website peddles a travesty of the Rousseauesque ideal, the irony of which is not lost on Merrily or Rickman. The later novel confirms the ambiguity of Ledwardine's orchard as unproblematically pastoral in *The Wine of Angels*, where it is already embroiled in a discourse of responsibility and consumption, a point to which I will return.

The Wine of Angels establishes the setting of Merrily's new parish in terms of mood, principles and an ethic that come to characterise subsequent novels. It particularly makes clear to the reader the importance of reading, of interpreting signs, customs, people, and events according to context and history/ies; in other words, it deals with accountability. It begins by demonstrating the awkwardly multiple symbolisms of Ledwardine as "the village in the orchard" (DOD 6).

The novel opens with an attempt to 'revive' a tradition of wassailing, in which the locals gather to awake the spirit of the cider apple trees on Twelfth Night, thus ensuring a good crop later in the year. It is dark, bitterly cold, the trees so covered in ice that they "glitter [...] grimly" in the "bilious lamplight" (WOA 3). The more popular image of orchards as dappled and

fruitful is instantly dismissed. This is a sinister place and its denizens less than content: “Twisty old devil,” Rickman says of the apple tree that has been designated Apple Tree Man for the ritual, and continues, through Merrily’s eyes:

Looked as if it held a grudge in every scabby branch, and if you touched it there’d be sharp, pointy bits, like thorns. And it wouldn’t give you any fruit on principle, wassail or no wassail, because, left to rot, apple trees...

...they grows[sic] resentful.

Merrily’s grandad had told her that once, when she was a little girl. Frightening her, because you always thought of apples as cheerful and wholesome. Oaks could be gnarled and forbidding, pines scraggy and cruel. But apple trees were essentially good-natured, weren’t they? (WOA 3)

Thus, young Merrily would trot down to her grandfather’s orchard and “wish the trees a wary good night, assuring them they could always count on being looked after as long as she was around” (WOA 3). Apart from establishing an atmosphere of portent and suspense, this opening clearly signals negligence amounting to abuse by those who own the orchard. The ill-will and meanness of spirit that results, it is implied, is due to a wilful, even evil, failure of duty by the owners. The restitution of the orchard into more caring and responsible hands by the close of the novel is suggestive of Gifford’s point concerning conscience and the need to heal the ruined relationship between human and nonhuman. As it is purchased by the Diocese of Herefordshire, through the orchestration of Lucy Devenish, the orchard returns to the fold of Merrily, the community’s official pastor who is now able to make good her girlhood promise. That these hands are specifically Christian is not problematic for ecocriticism: as Todd Borlick argues, Christianity might advocate “dominion” but it also “promotes a sacred regard for the material world,” “proves [...] accommodating to pagan philosophy and credits Nature as God’s deputy” (Borlick 207). In a wider sense however, the orchard is metonymic of the facade of cosiness that is Ledwardine itself for those “would-be migrants,” a facade which the reader cannot ignore.

The locals at the wassail have been coerced into it by incomers, the Cassidys, owners of the new restaurant and deli, the Country Kitchen, and include: three generations of the Powells, local farmers and landowners, including the orchard; Merrily, going incognito as new parish priest; Lucy

Devenish, local shop owner and folklore expert; and James Bull-Davies, lord of the local manor, his pedigree reaching back several hundred years—amongst others. Each of them continues the theme of responsibility, while also standing for aspects of rural life and community in which ancient and modern are in uneasy transition: the Cassidys are earnest incomers who seek to impose their version of Arcadia on the village, relentless in their celebration of customs and rituals which are in fact misappropriated irresponsibly from other regions, while James Bull-Davies, burdened with the upkeep of his ancestral pile and its attendant obligations recalls the reality of the country house today, as outlined by Christine Berberich. The last century “saw the rapid decline of many country estates” as “many country-house owners realized that their estates were no longer financially viable and sold out.” She continues that the country house now symbolises that very loss and decline in a wider sense, as well as standing for imperial and class avarice (Berberich 44).

Thus, Bull-Davies’s presence in Ledwardine and at this pseudo-wassail is a significant reminder of a pastoral tradition that begins with Ben Jonson’s “To Penshurst” but whose demise is mourned in *Brideshead Revisited* (1943). As a traditional figure of authority and duty, he contrasts with Lucy Devenish who is the self-appointed guardian of Ledwardine’s authentic folk history: she owns and runs a local shop, Ledwardine Lore, and as something of a warrior for Ledwardine, shows the need for all individuals to be accountable. In her “big, wide-brimmed hat” and poncho, she recalls both American Indian and witch, but talks like a graduate of St Trinian’s (WOA 4). Like Bull-Davies, she straddles old and new: pagan in her leanings, fiercely protective of Ledwardine, and yet cognisant of its commercial potential and need. Ledwardine Lore is full of tourist tat to do with apples.

It is Lucy Devenish who challenges the Cassidys’ wassail, pointing out that they are importing not only themselves but, carelessly, customs from elsewhere: “It isn’t traditional to the area [...] And so it *can’t* be right. Do you see my point?” (WOA 4). But it is Bull-Davies who allows the Cassidys and their ritual to proceed. In a comically grim showdown, the Cassidys and Miss Devenish wave their favoured folklore encyclopaedias like weapons, Miss Devenish’s being specific to the locale. She is condescendingly sidelined by Bull-Davies, with devastating results, as she herself foretells: as the locals raise their guns to shoot into the branches of the chosen tree, she mutters, “Going to cause offence [...] Deep offence” (WOA 11). Seconds later, the head of the eldest of the Powells is blown apart and plastered in the branches of the tree. Merrily has her first mysterious

death, but importantly, Bull-Davies is revealed momentarily as inattentive to, and ignorant of his own community, while the ritual, so wrong for the village, has facilitated the decapitation of the head of the Powell family. This particular incident is freighted with symbolism regarding the impotency of landowners in their failure to protect, against their power to abuse. Edgar, the oldest Powell, is marked as mentally and therefore metaphorically absent: “eyes wide open” but seeing nothing, “[h]e wasn’t here tonight, old Edgar, wasn’t here at all” (WOA 10); already emasculated by age, his decapitation is merely a literal rendition of his state. In death, he is further reduced to “what looked like a milk churn in an overcoat [...] pumping out dark fluid, black milk” (WOA 13). Edgar becomes an inversion of everything he stood for in life, senile child rather than patriarch, implement and product of the farm rather than farmer, female rather than male, “pumping out [...] black milk” (WOA 13). As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that both the Powells and Bull-Davies’s ancestors have a long history of sexual predations regarding those who supposedly, according to Burkean codes of landownership, are deserving of their protection: women, children, and tenants on their land.

We now see the idyll so carefully constructed by the Cassidys for the theatre it is: “it was artificial, it had been put on mainly for the Press who hadn’t bothered to turn up [...] this facsimile of rural life as it was thought to have been lived, this ‘traditional gathering involving for the most part, incomers” (WOA 6).

Nevertheless, the Cassidys and Miss Devenish broadly share a desire to intervene in order to conserve a species or way of life that is in danger of being lost. Ledwardine in this novel is like Gifford’s whale, especially for the Cassidys for whom it is exotic, other, and in dire need of saving. Both Cassidys see the locals as detached from their traditions, a trend they intend to reverse: “Are we all here? Good, good.” Mr Cassidy positioned himself [...] “But do we all know *why* we’re here?” (WOA 5).

Miss Devenish on the other hand, understands Ledwardine to be in need of rescue from the likes of the Cassidys themselves. Like latter-day missionaries, the Cassidys blunder into a community with a diagnosis and remedy that is wrong for that community. As Caroline chillingly but foolishly observes: “The past is over. It can’t harm us. But we can use it. [...] We’re lucky enough to have these wonderful old buildings, set in such beautiful countryside, and an absolute wealth of traditions. But, Lord, we mustn’t let them hold us back” (WOA 209). The Cassidys, Powells, and briefly, James Bull-Davies ignore Buell’s criterium concerning “human accountability to the environment” (Borlik 6–7). They further fail Gifford’s

post-pastoral test, lacking proper humility towards their environment, heedless of the implications of their more destructive than creative roles as they seek personal gain. They suppose their relationship with their “natural home” to be beyond conscience (Gifford “Post-Pastoral” 18).

In *To Dream of the Dead* this relationship is brought sharply into question. It is raining, and has been for some time. Early in the novel, Jane visits the swelling river “to get some sense out of” it:

On the bridge, she looked over [...] watching him licking his lips [...] Tonight [...] for the first time Jane could remember, he was roaring and spitting and slavering at this banks. All those centuries of low-level brooding, and then ... hey, climate change, *now* who's a loser? (DOD 14–5)

Like the orchard, the river seems vengeful, rising with relish to isolate then engulf Ledwardine; Ledwardine is no longer the whale, but increasingly, like the polar bear, adrift; it is now the populace that is in danger, not just customs and apple trees. Nature here is far from ‘great’ or unproblematically ‘good’; nor is it suffering from climate change: grown fat and dangerous on the incessant rain caused apparently by global warming, the river is not unlike the corrupt developers and councillors threatening to build over Coleman’s Meadow. Indeed, Rickman imputes distinctly human predatory qualities to the river: “You could smell him now. Smelled foul. It was almost sexual, Jane thought. Swollen, invasive, obscene, the river engorged [...] Jane [...] skip[pe]d back in disgust as he licked at her wellies” (DOD 15). The river has, in fact, like us, become the greedy, consuming entity.

This image echoes Gifford’s sense that:

[Once] we could retreat to Arcadia; now Arcadia has its revenge on us. It has come home to haunt us because the boundaries have shifted as a result of our retreats and our ignorance [...] The borderland [...] now surrounds us with new kinds of borders. (“New Senses” 246)

To conclude, Gifford continues that now we need new codes and relationships with both our potential and our pollution: we have a “freshly nuanced sense of environment that extends the original meanings of the very materials that pastoral literature explores” (246). Rickman’s series, while spinning excellent yarns, has moved the ‘golden age’ murder mystery into a post-pastoral mode by placing at its heart, an ethos of responsibility for environment that includes human, nonhuman, past and present.

The rapacious river is an especially sinister metaphor: not only are we destroying the environment, we are corrupting it. However, the image is more striking for being in a murder mystery novel: as I have argued, this genre is largely expected to console and reassure. That it repeatedly does not quite do so in Rickman's hands, is all the more alarming. The time for consolation and retreat is over.

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