

**Timothy C. Baker, *Contemporary Scottish Gothic: Mourning, Authenticity, and Tradition***  
(Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014)

From *The Body Snatcher* (1945) to *Brave* (2012), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) to James Robertson's *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (2006), Scotland is continuously depicted in both literature and film as fundamentally linked to ideas of the supernatural, haunted pasts, and the Other. While these elements adhere to an undeniably gothic aesthetic, it is only recently that any sustained interest in establishing Scotland as a site for the gothic has emerged, with critics such as David Punter, Kirsty MacDonald, and Ian Duncan each tracing a national Scottish tradition.<sup>1</sup> Timothy C. Baker, in this monograph, seeks to further this discussion in a sustained study of contemporary examples of 'Scottish Gothic', a genre which, as Baker states, problematises such an analysis by having no clear point of origin, nor a 'cohesive body of work or a fully developed tradition' (p. 5).

Baker's introduction serves as a functional overview of the gothic in general, introduced as the progenitor of Scottish gothic, before moving specifically into what constitutes both the 'contemporary' and 'Scottish' sub-divisions. Previous academic opinions on the matter, from Cairns Craig, David Punter, and Ian Duncan amongst others, are offered up for consideration, and provide a significant critical basis, which the research employed throughout the book expands upon and develops. The introduction focuses specifically on certain conventions of the gothic (the prevalence of fear, and a problematic relationship with history, to name but two) and how these have shaped critical definitions of Scottish gothic, comparing and contrasting it to a classical gothic canon defined by Ann Radcliffe, Horace Walpole, and Matthew Lewis. This works well to situate Scottish gothic within the wider framework of the established tradition of eighteenth-century gothic texts, and helps assuage the genre's lack of a definitive origin by aligning it with that of the gothic itself.

A significant portion of the introduction is also devoted to introducing the 'widely neglected' theme of mourning in gothic literature, with Scotland being cited as an 'especially useful focus for such study' due to recent socio-political historical events that call into question ideas of national identity (pp. 16, 23). Such questions raise ideas of a collective or national mourning, which Baker focuses on in this text, pointing towards a Scottish gothic

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<sup>1</sup> David Punter, 'Heartlands; Contemporary Scottish Gothic', *Gothic Studies*, 1 (1999), 101-118; Kirsty MacDonald, 'Scottish Gothic: Towards a Definition', *The Bottle Imp*, 6 (November 2009), 1-2; and Ian Duncan, 'Walter Scott, James Hogg, and Scottish Gothic', in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 70-80.

tradition of collective mourning over issues of lost or mitigated nationhood and nationality (p. 19). In the rest of the book, the Scottish gothic is divided into five distinct themes, with a chapter devoted to each, containing a close analysis of three or more examples from contemporary Scottish literature that exhibit gothic motifs, often in direct comparison to classical examples of the same, specifically Walter Scott, James Hogg, or Robert Louis Stevenson. The textual analyses that follow the introduction offer an in-depth and much-needed exploration of a large number of texts by Scottish authors, though Baker states that this is not intended to represent an exhaustive list of Scottish gothic authors. The first chapter examines the relationship of contemporary authors to their predecessors — James Robertson to Scott for example — and the relationship between individual text and literary tradition, before subsequent chapters move on to highlight the relationships between the text under discussion and a variety of tropes and themes, including identity, the reader, history, animals, and community.

The first chapter, titled ‘A Scott-Haunted World’, works to outline the place of Sir Walter Scott’s works in contemporary literature, examining the ways in which works such as the *Waverley* novels (1814-31), particularly *Old Mortality* (1816) and *A Legend of the Wars of Montrose* (1819), continue to influence contemporary Scottish texts. Scott’s ‘Phantasmagoria’ (1818) and its relation to James Robertson’s *The Fanatic* (2000) form the main textual analysis of this chapter, along with an analysis of Robertson’s *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (2006). Baker reads Scott as a pseudo-Walpolean progenitor of Scottish gothic, and as a specific static point in Scotland’s literary past, one which is consistently textually alluded to, though often not in the most favourable terms. He writes,

Many writers on Scott view him primarily as a constraint. Robert Louis Stevenson, for instance, while figuring Scott as ‘the ever delightful man, sane, courageous, [and] admirable’, nevertheless cautions a friend not to make a comparison between them, as Scott’s novels are ‘full of sawdust’. [...] As much as he admires Scott, Stevenson protests that Scott’s work is already relegated to history. [...] Scott is both resigned to the past and yet persistently invasive [...]. (p. 51)

Baker posits Scott as a ‘haunting figure’ within contemporary Scottish gothic, serving as that past which returns intertextually, invasively, to haunt the present, and a ‘central, defining figure’ of the genre, whose works ‘are marks against which to measure your own value’ (p. 51), ultimately arguing that in the depiction of ‘phantasmatic narrators’, and via his own continuing intertextual hauntings, Scott sets forth a paradigm of the importance and instability of texts within the Scottish gothic.

Chapter Two continues with the theme of instability attributed to Scott in the previous chapter, but moves on to examine it via a focus on the ubiquitous, though often critically neglected, trope of the found manuscript. Baker first introduces a particular Scottish issue of anxiety over authenticity, tracing it back to the fraudulent claims over James Macpherson's publication of the first *Ossian* poems in 1761, before linking this to the rise of prose forgeries in the nineteenth century and to the production of James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), thus creating a strong connection between forgeries, impostures, and a Scottish literary tradition. The trope of the found manuscript, Baker writes, may no longer be intended to 'fool the reader', but 'nevertheless suggest[s] a sustained interest in questions of textual authenticity' (p. 55). After this, the chapter analyses Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992), and Andre Crumey's *Mr Mee* (2002), exploring how both texts use the frame manuscript to destabilise the idea of authorial authenticity, foregrounding intertextual play to allow room for personal interpretation, while simultaneously denying the resolution of identity. As Baker asserts,

Intertextuality does not clarify situations or identities, but rather suggests that any apparent reality can only be known through the relations between texts. Literature teaches us not how to be ourselves, but rather that no self is possible within literature: literature makes space only for itself [...]. (p. 69)

As Baker contends earlier, the found manuscript is a trope that often only references itself, literature making space only for itself, and this idea forms the crux of the chapter. Here, he links the found manuscript and the effects of its use in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* to those that he has previously established in both *Poor Things* and *Mr Mee*, before analysing three texts that subvert the trope: Denise Mina's *Sanctum* (2002), Morag Joss's *The Night Following* (2008), and A. L. Kennedy's *So I am Glad* (1996). From this, Baker argues that, despite the differing uses to which they put the found manuscript, within each text there is an 'implicit claim that identity is textually formulated', an idea he links not only to postmodern or metafictional practices, but intrinsically to the gothic, and Scottish gothic by association (p. 88).

Following on from the previous discussion of Scottish gothic frame manuscripts foregrounding ideas of authenticity, Chapter Three, 'Fantastic Islands', examines its use within the genre to 'address the much broader issues of history and communal memory', specifically to question the stability of any historic narrative (p. 89). Baker's focus in this chapter is on the relationship between the liminal and the central, focusing on island

narratives within contemporary Scottish gothic and their revelation of hidden histories. Louise Welsh's *Naming the Bones* (2011) and Sarah Moss's *Night Walking* (2012) are both shown to question the ways in which we produce histories and the layers of meaning imposed upon our own histories. Baker outlines how both the novels' protagonists 'resolve' their found manuscripts, discovering not a manuscript specifically, but rather a dead child whose story must be discovered. In doing so, they are both move from the peripherals of society to the centre through the renewal or gain of some form of familial relationship as reward for their discoveries. The chapter then moves into an analysis of Alice Thompson's *Pharos* (2002), Jess Richards' *Snake Ropes* (2012), and Alan Warner's *These Demented Lands* (1998). These texts extend the exploration of the creation of identity through found manuscripts and layers of identity, as explored in Chapter Two, but also illustrate 'the complex relationship between writing as the establishment of identity and the repression of the same' (p. 104). These specific Scottish island-gothic texts suggest that a liminal perspective on society is an ideal means through which to scrutinise the history of the cultural centre, and that 'textual authority is most meaningful when it is used to illustrate gaps in experience and narrative' (p. 110), gaps which are made all the more visible via this liminal view. The found manuscript is shown here to destabilise the relationship between text and world, calling into question the ways in which we construct histories and selves from the remains of other narratives.

Chapter Four, 'Metamorphosis: Humans and Animals', moves away from analyses of frame narratives, instead focusing on the typical gothic convention of metamorphosis. To begin, the chapter introduces Ali Smith's story 'The Beholder' (2013) as illustrative of the emerging idea of symbiosis, rather than full metamorphosis, in relation to characters in Scottish gothic; Baker introduces and explores the theme of how the invasion of the natural, in this case a rose bush growing from within the protagonist's chest, 'invites a reconsideration of the very categories of the self and other', as the character does not metamorphose as a result of this invasion, but instead develops as an individual (p. 117). The chapter then moves to an examination of Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory* (1984), Elspeth Barker's *O Caledonia* (2010), and Alice Thompson's *The Falconer* (2008), commenting on the way that their protagonists navigate animal deaths. These are shown to take a variety of forms, from oracular to heraldic interpretations of bodies, though always linked to the central motif of mourning. Mourning once again becomes the central focus of the analysis that follows, as Baker suggests that death opens up space for a 'consideration of suffering, the

nature of the relationships between humans and animals, and the possibility of transcendence or liberation' (p. 136). Both *The Locust Room* (2001) and *Glister* (2008) by John Burnside are used to exemplify this point, by examining the post-human aspects of the rapist character of *The Locust* as 'neither wholly human nor animal', and arguing that, in *Glister*, the reconciliation of human and animal is always 'framed in terms of their mortality' (pp. 137, 146). Here, Baker suggests that death is a prevalent, and indeed necessary, force in the analysis of humanity's relations to those of the frequently Othered animal kingdom.

The final chapter, 'Northern Communities', moves the analysis away from Scotland specifically and makes an argument for the trope of the gothicised North, which is explored in Sarah Moss's *Cold Earth* (2010) and John Burnside's *A Summer Drowning* (2011). While neither text uses a Scottish setting, nor is 'Gothic in a simple sense', Baker still justifies their analysis as part of his argument as a whole due to their questioning of 'the relationship[s] between haunting, mourning, and storytelling' (p. 148). The chapter begins by focusing on key themes of 'far north' narratives (those set in Greenland and Antarctica, for example), highlighting these spaces as those which repel community, reconcile a myriad of opposing tendencies, and function as sites where 'questions of politics and society, of utopian communities, and metaphysical notions of grace and care, cease to matter' (p. 151). Both *Cold Earth* and *A Summer Drowning* are used to exemplify these themes, though Baker eventually circles around to the key themes of authenticity and reader response that have been threaded through each preceding chapter. In this case, the chapter focuses on the way in which both texts present communal acts of reading, acts which are ultimately insufficient to help people come to terms with grief and death. In both novels, Baker argues, 'there is a persistent sense that no story, and no haunting, will ever be enough; death remains a mystery, and grief is continually isolating' (p. 160). While somewhat disconcerting, as arguments go, it does tie into the overall theme of this monograph, as expressed in the previous chapter: 'Rethinking the human fundamentally necessitates rethinking stories themselves' (p. 147). In keeping with this, in the short conclusion that ends this chapter, and by extension the book, Baker details the importance of his study, making an impassioned and concrete argument about not only the validity of the genre, but the wider implications that research into such would raise about literature as a whole.

*Contemporary Scottish Gothic* is a well-researched and written work that comments on emerging trends in an ever-growing field. While, critically, the text utilises the work of Jacques Derrida and Martin Heidegger to great success, the idea of post-postmodernity is

entirely ignored. The majority of texts analysed by Baker date well into the period critically accepted as after the death of post-modernism, and certain themes — the desire to escape Scott while being continually drawn back to his work; the wish to move beyond postmodern conventions of traditional frame narratives; the return of history as observed by the liminal, to outline a few — certainly tie into ideas of the metamodern, if not many of the other possible -isms currently being postulated, and any addition in this regard would only have added to the points argued throughout. This does not detract in any way from the quality of the critical analysis, however, which is exceptional throughout and brings new light to texts that deserve more attention. With the recent surge in eco-gothic criticism, Chapter Four's examination of an optimistic human-natural hybridity is sure to be germane to any scholar researching the subject. Scholars whose work focuses on experimental or metafictional works may also find the text useful, alongside those with an interest in contemporary trends in the gothic genre.

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