

“Brief Reviews”

The Voice of the Heart: The Workings of Mervyn Peake’s Imagination

G. Peter Winnington

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by Jeff Bursey

There are books one thinks of as fit primarily for children, novels which are simple, simplistic, or, in the cases of *Anne of Green Gables* and the *John Carter of Mars* books, aimed at particular genders. Mervyn Peake’s best-known works—*Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast*, and *Titus Alone*—have been consigned, mistakenly, to the category of fantasy meant for teenage readers, and thus have been largely ignored by critics and reviewers. When viewed as a fantasist, Peake can’t compete for popularity with J.R.R. Tolkien, and his novels won’t ever receive the adulation given the Harry Potter series. Anyone who reads Peake—and his novels are always in print—is aware that the television adaptations of the Titus books, and his other novel, *Mr. Pye*, while appreciated, failed to capture the literary qualities of the books, the complexity and nuances created through words.

The status of Peake’s books in the eyes of critics was demonstrated in March when a brief review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, by David Malcolm, of the latest book by G. Peter Winnington ended with this remark: “Though the book’s value is enhanced by the many illustrations from Peake’s drawings, these may be a little winsome for some tastes (just as the *Gormenghast* novels are a shade adolescent).” It’s impossible to decide whether or not Malcolm likes the drawings but wanted fewer of them, even though they add a necessary dimension to the book. Yet the throwaway adjective at the close indicates a kind of snootiness. It would have helped his case if he had paid attention to the opening pages of *The Voice of the Heart*, where the trilogy is titled, correctly, the Titus books. This phrase occurs almost half a dozen times in the first five pages alone, so it takes persistence to miss it. The drawings are evidence Winnington brings forward from his extensive familiarity with Peake’s short stories, poems, illustrations of classic tales (including *Alice in Wonderland* and *Treasure Island*), novels, and plays. Here, their significant function is to help prove the existence of themes that wind their way through all of Peake’s works.

As counterpoint to the appraisal of the Titus books as “adolescent”, one can turn to Robertson Davies, who wrote, in “Gleams and Glooms”, from *One Half of Robertson Davies* (1978):

“...I content myself with asking you to compare [Edgar Allan Poe’s] work with that of Mervyn Peake, a writer born in 1911 and not long dead, whose trilogy of *Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast*, and *Titus Alone* possesses qualities of sustained macabre fantasy, of poetic expression, and of sheer creative power which I do not think Poe can rival. Peake achieves the real poet’s feat of creating a world with its own laws, its own nature, and even its own weather—a world in

which the reader lives as he reads, and which he never forgets, and this is achievement indeed.”

Throughout Peake’s works, a reader will find light balanced against darkness, good against evil (most noticeably in the figure of Steerpike from the Titus books), and, in the case of *Mr. Pye*, hubris that leads not to tragedy for Mr. Pye, but to greater humanity, tinged with farce. In *Titus Groan*, it seems that the mood turns from the comic to the disturbing at a very particular spot on a very particular page. In another instance, Flay, Lord Groan’s right-hand man, uses Countess Groan’s favourite animals as weapons against Steerpike, cutting him. Despite the hostility, Steerpike admires Flay’s quickness of mind, and thinks, “Something to remember, that: cats for missiles.” It’s humorous, visual, bizarre, but it’s also reminiscent of Homer’s warriors who pick up from the ground whatever they can find to attack their enemy. Throughout, the atmosphere is macabre, the language poetic, as Davies said, and the literary qualities of the work reach from antiquity to Milton and to Peake’s peers. Meanwhile the brooding mood behind the works takes in his childhood in China (raised by missionary parents), “the newly liberated concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen,” and the impenetrable nature of those who could create such a thing. This combination is far removed from being adolescent.

With rewarding concentration, Winnington plumbs the depths in Peake’s writing, and it would be fair to say that some of these depths once looked like fairly shallow pools. They can’t be regarded as such any more. Those who read or write on Peake or his works—or, more generally, on voice, evil, technology, or art versus religion in 20th century literature—must take into account what has finally been exposed. By cross-stitching commentary, weaving drawings and writing together, Winnington, using plain, unencumbered prose, shows how Peake explored certain themes with the hunger and ache, of an obsessive. *The Voice of the Heart* turns inside out Peake’s use of symbols and motifs, among them solitude, islands, identity, and perspective. Until now, no one has written such an explication; it is bound to open up rewarding avenues for further scholarly work.

Previously, Winnington has served Peake well as a biographer, in *Vast Alchemies* (2000), and here the editor of Peake Studies has pulled off a bravura critical performance, and indeed “rekindled interest and fresh understanding” in Peake’s works. A critical book that is both respectful of its subject and audience, as well as enthusiastic about the author under discussion, is a rare thing. It’s well past time that Peake received such treatment.

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