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Diplomová práce

Rivers of London: The Fantastic World of the
Novels of Ben Aaronovitch
Řeky Londýna: Fantastický Svět Románové
Série Bena Aaronovitche

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Abstract

The thesis deals with Rivers of London, a novel series by Ben Aaronovitch, with its primary focus being the literary image of the fantastic world in the series. The work offers a literary analysis of the first volumes of Aaronovitch's novels which are all centred around crime investigation (Rivers of London, The Moon over Soho, Whispers Underground) and explores the fantasy elements of urban fantasy in contemporary British literature. In the introduction, the thesis gives a description of the urban fantasy genre and presents other authors with similar approaches (Gaiman, Butcher).

The thesis further focuses on the representation of fantastic worlds in literature using elements of the Gothic novel, with the concept of the supernatural, and the mythological qualities of the characters in the Rivers of London series (the Rivers, Nightingale, Peter Grant). The work attempts to capture the significance of the space of a big city and its diversity within the frame of the fantasy genre.

Keywords: Ben Aaronovitch, urban fantasy, mythology, liminality, London.

Anotace

Předmětem zkoumání diplomové práce je románová série Řeky Londýna od Bena Aaronovitcha, přičemž se zaměřuje především na literární obraz fantastického světa v této sérii. Práce se soustředí na literární analýzu prvních dílů románové fantasy s detektivní zápletkou (Řeky Londýna, Měsíc nad Soho, Šepoty v podzemí), a zkoumá fantazijní prvky žánru urban fantasy v současné britské literatuře. V úvodu práce je podán popis žánru městské fantasy a představení další autoři s podobným přístupem (Gaiman, Butcher).

Práce se dále zaměřuje na ztvárnění fantastických světů v literatuře s využitím prvků gotického románu, s pojetím nadpřirozena a mytologickou rovinou postav Aaronovitchovy série (Řeky, Nightingale, Peter Grant). Práce se snaží zachytit význam prostoru a obrazovou rozmanitost velkoměsta v rámci žánru fantasy.

Klíčová slova: Ben Aaronovitch, urban fantasy, mytologie, liminalita, Londýn

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1. Introduction

This thesis offers a comprehensive literary analysis of Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* series, a contemporary work within the urban fantasy genre gaining widespread popularity in the recent years. The primary focus is on exploring the worlds Aaronovitch constructs with the use of urban fantasy, the concept of liminality, and mythological inspirations. The series, with its unique blend of fantasy and crime fiction, provides a fertile ground for examining how contemporary urban environments can be transformed into the fantastic. The secondary aim is to explore how Aaronovitch's distinctive use of words creates vivid, immersive settings and enhances character development and thematic depth.

The theoretical part of this thesis encompasses several key areas. Firstly, it provides an overview of relevant literary genres, following the roots of Aaronovitch's creative coverage. This section also highlights the unique role that urban settings play in urban fantasy narratives, often serving as active agents in the story. Then, the theoretical part utilizes Farah Mendlesohn's framework to categorize and understand the various fantasy elements present in the *Rivers of London*.

Mendlesohn's classification of fantasy (comprising Portal-Quest, Immersive, Intrusion, and Liminal fantasy) helps elucidate the mechanics of Aaronovitch's storytelling, demonstrating how these categories function through examples of books comparable with *genii locorum*. These books serve primarily to exemplify the elements of different fantasy categories and are not further analysed within the scope of this thesis, allowing a focused examination of Aaronovitch's work.

A significant portion of the theoretical exploration is then dedicated to the concept of liminality, a crucial theme in the *Rivers of London* series. This concept will be examined in light of its application to both the physical spaces within the novels and the character arcs, providing insight into how Aaronovitch navigates the boundaries between reality and fantasy.

Moreover, the thesis delves into the mythological and folkloric elements that Aaronovitch intricately employs in his narrative. Grounded in the investigation of mythological and legendary accounts, this part of the thesis aims to highlight the cultural resonance of the novels.

Following the theoretical groundwork, the practical part of the thesis presents a detailed analysis of the *Rivers of London* series. The analysis examines key aspects such as "The Folly," the headquarters of the supernatural police force, and the depiction of London, including its multiculturalism and urban life. It also delves into the underground world in "London Under – Whispers Underground." Furthermore, the thesis explores the cost of magic in the series, specific magical encounters, and the liminal aspects of the narrative. A significant focus is placed on crime investigation as a central theme and the development of characters, particularly the protagonist, Peter Grant. The mythology surrounding the rivers is also analysed.

In summary, this thesis aims to provide a thorough and nuanced understanding of Ben Aaronovitch's use of narrative in his novels. Through meticulous analysis and theoretical exploration, it seeks to uncover the ways in which Aaronovitch's storytelling techniques captivate readers and contribute to the appeal of his works.

For clarification, I have to state that when I read the Aaronovitch's novels for the first time, I had physical copies borrowed from a public library. But later, writing the thesis, I opted for the form of e-books. Electronic publications do not provide numbered pages and it would be very confusing to declare some bibliographic references with the page number and some without. That is the reason why I decided to omit the page numbers for my primary sources. I include links to the e-books in the bibliography at the end of the thesis.

2. Literary Context

The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize Aaronovitch's work among literary genres and approaches which influenced his creative endeavours. Regarding their impact on the series, the genres discussed in this part of the thesis are urban fantasy, crime novels, and science fiction. A separate paragraph is also dedicated to Gothic literature as it should not be overlooked in this thesis due to the genre's similarities to urban fantasy and proven contributions to its development.

2.1 Relevant Genres

2.1.1 Urban Fantasy

Although the name might imply categorization under the fantasy genre, Ekman argues for urban fantasy being a distinct genre of its own with identifiable roots in Gothic horror, mystery fiction, science fiction, and fantasy, of course.¹

H.R. Sinclair supports Ekman's logic by indicating that urban fantasy is a "melting pot" of other genres, including fantasy, horror, humour, suspense, mystery, action and adventure, and romance.² Additionally, Irvine notes that having started as a fantasy brought to the man-made environments, urban fantasy can now occupy a place somewhere between epic fantasy and science fiction, "*diffused in a fog of contradiction*".³

Another interesting aspect of urban fantasy is how the city can feature as a rightful character. As the name of the genre gives away, many urban fantasy stories are set in specific cities, and the city itself often plays a key role in the story. Could we view London as a central character in Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* or *Rivers of London*? Perhaps it could be just as intriguing and enjoyable in Chicago, Canberra, or Prague, but most readers and literary experts alike would agree that the books would not work the same. It is safe to say that the authors deliberately chose London as the setting, incorporated its specific features, and built on what it has to offer.

As some experts suggested, perhaps the city is much more than a setting and its distinct

¹ Ekman. (2016). Urban Fantasy: A Literature of the Unseen. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 27(3), p. 452.

² Sinclair, H. (11. June 2014). Understanding Urban Fantasy and Its Roots.

<https://iamhrsinclair.com/blog/2014/06/11/understanding-urban-fantasy-and-its-roots?rq=urbanfantasy>

³ Irvine, A. C. (2012). Urban Fantasy. In F. M. Edward James, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 200-213.

attributes should not be overlooked, especially in urban fantasy.⁴ At the same time, there are certainly cases when the location remains accessory even in terms of a literary direction which evolves around the city. For instance, the adventure would probably not be affected too severely had Laurell K. Hamilton's Anita Blake began to hunt the undead in St. Louis, Missouri

Therefore, if we consider "the identifiable recurrence of a common trait by which one recognises, or should recognise, a membership in a class"⁵, the undeniably delimiting trait of urban fantasy is the place where the story unfolds, but in some cases, the setting admittedly only provides an appealing background without much influence of its own. For that reason, when Ekman indicated that "urban fantasies are texts where fantasy and the mundane world intersect and interweave throughout the tale"⁶, he formed the most accurate definition of the genre.

London and major American cities seem to appear more frequently than other cities or towns, and countries from the developed world are undoubtedly represented more. What is it that makes London specifically so attractive? In an interview for Phoenix New Times, VE Schwab illustrates the popularity of the United Kingdom's capital in literature:

*"Any big city with bright streets and dark alleys is great for playing with liminal space, but when you deal with a city like London, there is something about the antiquity of it. It's been built and torn down and built again to where there are hundreds of years of architectural history layered. You can be walking down a modern street and turn a corner and find yourself in an alley that hasn't changed since Elizabethan times."*⁷

The author suggests that the strongest benefit cities like London offer are its layers: the old meets the new, people move in and out, and slight echoes of the times that have passed can still be heard from time to time - maybe only by the ones who pay attention. This remark insinuates a distinct, albeit dual, characteristic of the archetypal protagonist; something which appears to be a common trope: The lead is either "the chosen one", a human with exceptional qualities, or a perfectly ordinary person who finds themselves in a

⁴ Seed, D., Clute, J., & Grant, J. (1999, July). *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. *The Modern Language Review*, 94(3), 975. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3737025>

⁵ Derrida, J., & Ronell, A. (1980). *The Law of Genre*. *Critical Inquiry*, 7(1), p. 63 <https://doi.org/10.1086/448088>

⁶ Ekman, S. (2016). p. 457

⁷ Senft, M. (2016, February 25). *Author V.E. Schwab on Following Up the Success of A Darker Shade of Magic*. *Phoenix New Times*. <https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/arts/author-ve-schwab-on-following-up-the-success-of-a-darker-shade-of-magic-8079074>

strange situation where they cross the threshold⁸ and encounter the impossible.

Moreover, the dark alleys and corners of the city are where the gothic merges with the fantastic. The places where anything unfamiliar or even dangerous can hide is what Stefan Ekman denotes using the term “*Unseen*.”⁹ It also encompasses yet another important layer of the urban environment: the marginalized and associated issues such as homelessness or prostitution.¹⁰

According to Siranko, the supernatural appears to be embodying the frightening *Other* that most cultures have tried to contain through various methods, including literature. These efforts to control the irrational can either comfort us by suggesting a fundamentally orderly universe or confront us with our fears in unsettling ways, thereby cautioning us against ignoring morals.¹¹

2.1.2 Police Procedurals (Crime Fiction)

Crime novels and urban fantasy share a unique relationship with the setting, particularly the city, which is often used as a background for the story. The city’s architecture, history, and culture are used to create a rich and complex world that is both familiar and mysterious.

Crime novels often explore the abovementioned concept of the Unseen, which is a common trope in urban fantasy. The urban diversity is also used to create a unique atmosphere that remains realistic. The city’s liminal spaces, such as dark alleys and corners, are where the crime and mystery merge, and where anything unfamiliar or even dangerous can hide.

This is evident in the popularity of the urban in crime fiction, where specific urban characteristics are integrated into the very fibre of the story.¹² However, the relationship between crime fiction and urban spaces is not a recent development. The roots of the genre date back to the early nineteenth century, where the city became a prominent setting for identity exploration and the portrayal of menace, exemplified by Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and*

⁸ Aguirre, M., & Sutton, P. (2000). *Margins and Thresholds*. In *An Enquiry into the Concept of Liminality in Text Studies*: Vol. 1 . Gateway Press. p. 6

⁹ Ekman, p. 463

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 465

¹¹ Siranko, J. (2016). *The Supernatural in Detective Fiction*. [Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz]. Universitätsbibliothek Graz. p. 3

<https://unipub.uni-graz.at/obvugrhs/download/pdf/1378044>

¹² Phillips. (2017). Crime Fiction and the City: The Rise of a Global Urban Genre. *IAFOR Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2(2). <https://iafor.org/journal/iafor-journal-of-cultural-studies/volume-2-issue-2/article-7/>

Mr. Hyde. Authors like Arthur Conan Doyle and Robert Louis Stevenson masterfully depicted the dirty streets of London as essential elements that not only set the stage for gruesome crimes but also symbolize moral filth and societal decay.¹³

Through these iconic works, the urban environment in detective fiction proves to be a powerful narrative device adding authenticity to the stories.

Despite its long-standing presence in detective fiction, the urban environment continues to evolve as an integral component of the genre, evidenced by the wide range of urban fiction available.

2.1.3 Science Fiction

Fantasy and science fiction, while often grouped together under the umbrella of speculative fiction, have distinct characteristics that set them apart. Fantasy typically revolves around magical or supernatural elements, where the laws of nature can be bent or overridden. This genre often features mythical creatures and epic quests and might take place in worlds vastly different from our own, but at the same time, it is not unusual to bring the fantastic into the real world (as is common and almost necessary in urban fantasy). The focus is on imagination and the suspension of disbelief, as readers are transported to new worlds where anything is possible.

On the other hand, science fiction tends to explore the possibilities of technology, alternate realities, and the impact of scientific advancements on society. While fantasy relies on the magical, science fiction is rooted in scientific principles or speculative theories extrapolated from current knowledge. This genre often ventures into themes such as space exploration, time travel, artificial intelligence, and dystopian societies. Authors like Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Philip K. Dick are renowned for their contributions to science fiction, having invented stories that challenge readers to contemplate the potential consequences of scientific progress.

One key distinction between fantasy and science fiction lies in their respective approaches to the unknown. Fantasy embraces the mysterious and magical, inviting readers to embrace the wonder of the unknown without needing scientific explanations. In contrast, science fiction seeks to explore the unknown through the lens of science and rational inquiry, often

¹³ Curtis, H. (2020). *Dirty London: How Victorian Filth Formed the Urban Detective*. English Honors Theses. [Skidmore College]. https://creativematter.skidmore.edu/eng_stu_schol/41

presenting plausible explanations based on scientific principles. While both genres offer escapism and imaginative storytelling, fantasy tends to focus on the realm of the impossible, while science fiction delves into the realm of the possible, albeit improbable.

However, there are instances where the lines between fantasy and science fiction blur, as seen in works that attempt to rationalize the fantastical through scientific means. For example, Arthur Conan Doyle's "Sherlock Holmes" stories often present seemingly supernatural occurrences that are ultimately explained through logical deduction and scientific analysis, such as in "The Hound of the Baskervilles." Similarly, Robert Louis Stevenson's "Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" explores themes of duality and transformation through the lens of scientific experimentation, with consequences admittedly more typical of the fantasy genre. Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" is another notable example, where the creation of the monster is rooted in scientific ambition, yet the narrative delves into philosophical questions about the nature of life and humanity.

In these instances, while elements of fantasy are present, they are filtered through a rational, scientific framework, softening the boundaries between the two genres and showcasing the rich interplay between imagination and reason in literature.

Aaronovitch has revealed that the influences for him as an author were especially Andre Norton, Asimov, Clarke, Heinlein, Ed McBain, and then Anne McCaffrey, C. J. Cherryh, Ian Rankin, and Ursula K. LeGuin.¹⁴ Although these names include writers of the other two genres, many are also representatives of science fiction which likely helped shape Aaronovitch's writing style. Furthermore, Terry Pratchett's legacy and Aaronovitch's fondness for British media are apparent in his numerous mentions of Doctor Who and other TV programmes alongside the whimsical references to the infamously famous literature of magic (Harry Potter and the like). For these reasons, I believe science fiction should be included within the literary context for *Rivers of London* despite its marginal presence in the series.

The series revolves around Constable Peter Grant who tries to apply 'the scientific method' to the magic he encounters and understand it through the lens of physics. Such an approach

¹⁴ Dillon, B. (2018, November 20). *Fanbase Press Interviews Ben Aaronovitch on His Latest Novel, 'Lies Sleeping.'* Fanbase Press. <https://fanbasepress.com/index.php/press/interviews/books/item/9479-fanbase-press-interviews-ben-aaronovitch-on-his-latest-novel-lies-sleeping>

is not very common in similar novels where characters generally accept (sometimes rather reluctantly) the workings of the new world they are presented.

The narrative subtly weaves in Isaac Newton, attributing him a dual legacy as both the founder of magical practices and the pioneer of modern science. This nuanced portrayal underscores the interconnectedness of fantasy and science in the story:

*“He was our founder, and the first man to systemise the practice of magic.’
‘I was taught that he invented modern science,’ I said.
‘He did both,’ said Nightingale. ‘That’s the nature of genius.’”¹⁵*

Besides Newton, other real or fictional men of science move into the spotlight when Peter learns the craft of magic – for a policeman, he spends a significant amount of time immersed in the study, showcasing his commitment to grasping the intricacies of magic. Aaronovitch’s writing presents a captivating synthesis of science fiction and urban fantasy. He skilfully connects the subtle elements of science fiction with the supernatural occurrences emblematic of urban fantasy. This fusion of influences creates a unique world that feels both contemporary and deeply rooted in speculative fiction.

2.1.4 The Gothic

Characterized by its emphasis on mystery and horror, Gothic literature often explores themes of isolation, madness, and the darker aspects of human nature. The genre found early expression in classics such as Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, where crumbling castles, and haunted mansions set the stage for tales of suspense. Observations have been made about the settings often serving as symbolic representations of the characters’ internal struggles.¹⁶ The gothic tradition also encompasses elements of romance, with doomed love affairs and forbidden passions. Throughout the centuries, the Gothic has continued to evolve, influencing a diverse array of genres from horror to romance and even urban fantasy.

The Gothic extends beyond literature to other art forms such as architecture and visual arts. Gothic architecture, with its soaring spires and intricate ornamentation, reflects the

¹⁵ Aaronovitch, B. (2011). *Rivers of London*.

¹⁶ Hogle, J. E. (2002). *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Cambridge University Press. p. 100

grandeur characteristic of the genre, while gothic films often explore themes of psychological terror and the uncanny.¹⁷ From classic horror films like *Nosferatu* and *Dracula* to modern psychological thrillers like *Crimson Peak* and *Black Swan*, gothic aesthetics and motifs continue to captivate audiences with their mix of beauty and terror. In the visual arts, artists like Francisco Goya and Henry Fuseli evoke the gothic sensibility through their dark imagery, depicting scenes of madness, death, and the supernatural. Whether in literature, architecture, or film, the gothic continues to endure as an enduring aesthetic that taps into the darkest recesses of the human psyche, reminding us of the allure of the unknown.

2.2 Prominent Authors of Urban Fantasy

2.2.1 Ben Aaronovitch

Ben Aaronovitch, born 22 February 1964 in Camden, London is a devout fan of the city he was raised in, and he imparts this appreciation to Peter Grant, the main character of Aaronovitch's successful book series. He used to work in Waterstones, prior to having his first novel published in 2011. Before that, his affection for science fiction proved useful when he contributed to *Jupiter Moon*, *Casualty*, and *Doctor Who* as a screenwriter.¹⁸

As a Londoner, he never really considered writing novels which would take place anywhere else. It was decidedly practical to set the story within walking distance from his workplace, and generally, to be able to walk all the paths his characters walk. Instead of just talking about London's landmarks, Aaronovitch makes the city come alive. He describes its streets, buildings, and neighbourhoods in a way that makes readers feel like they are walking through them alongside the characters. The city is not a mere setting, it actually influences what happens and how the characters act. And the way different neighbourhoods are described helps you understand the characters better and why they do what they do.

The author openly claims that the ultimate motivation for him to publish was earning more money rather than it being a creative outlet, but at the same time, as an ardent reader, he

¹⁷ Royle, N. (2003). *The Uncanny*. Manchester University Press. p. 108

¹⁸ BIO. (n.d.). Ben Aaronovitch. <https://www.benaaronovitch.com/bio/>

has always wanted to explore the possibilities of writing books. He mentions his beginnings with scriptwriting and transitioning to novels, driven by a love for writing and a desire to avoid physical labour. Now he is considered an influential voice in contemporary urban fantasy, and his Peter Grant series has been praised for its unique take on magic, detailed depiction of London, and well-developed characters.¹⁹

Aaronovitch has written novels, novellas, comics, short stories and he also contributed to a development of a Rivers of London role-playing game which was released in April 2023²⁰ To maintain the continuity across an extensive series, Aaronovitch found meticulous methods of tracking characters and storylines including spreadsheets, whiteboards, and a personal assistant. Despite pressures from the publishing industry, Aaronovitch remains committed to writing the books he wants to write, prioritizing reader enjoyment over acclaim.²¹

2.2.2 Neil Gaiman

Neil Gaiman, born on November 10, 1960, in Portchester, England, to David and Sheila Gaiman, was deeply influenced by his early love for books and libraries, describing himself as a "feral child raised in libraries".²² He found solace and inspiration within the pages of beloved authors such as C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Edgar Allan Poe. His voracious reading exposed him to new authors weekly, shaping his mind and influencing his writing style significantly.

Gaiman is known for transcending the boundaries of genre with his fondness of fantasy and horror. His novels garnered widespread acclaim, earning him a place among the literary elite. His penchant for storytelling extends to young adult fiction, with works such as *Coraline* and *The Graveyard Book* enchanting readers with their chilling yet enchanting tales. Beyond books, Gaiman's influence permeated the movie industry and television: he wrote a screenplay for two episodes of Doctor Who, and adaptations of his works, such as *Coraline* or *American Gods*, are popular with the global audience. Gaiman's storytelling

¹⁹ Londoners, 1. (8. April 2015). Ben Aaronovitch, the writer of the "Rivers of London" supernatural crime novels, Londoner #76. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7ZUe4BqNGk>

²⁰ Chaosium. (2023). *Rivers of London: The Roleplaying Game*. Chaosium Inc. <https://www.chaosium.com/rivers-of-london-the-roleplaying-game-pdf/>

²¹ W. R. C. (2022, April 16). BEN AARONOVITCH in conversation with Martin Latham | "Rivers of London" | Author Talks. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRfzUUx4VC4>

²² Gaiman, N. (2021). About Neil. *Biography*. https://neilgaiman.com/About_Neil/biography

prowess is leaving an indelible mark on popular culture.

Both in personal and professional affairs, Gaiman's advocacy reflects his commitment to social issues. As a Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR since 2017, Gaiman has been supporting their refugee advocacy and awareness efforts globally.²³ He has utilized his writing talents to highlight the refugee experience and support empathy. In 2023, Gaiman published a poem collection called *What You Need to Be Warm* with proceeds benefiting UNHCR's work.²⁴

Gaiman has also been an outspoken advocate for free speech and against censorship, particularly in the comics medium. He served on the board of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. Gaiman argues that comics' unique visual nature allows them to powerfully impact society and public discourse, which has also made the medium a target for incursions. However, he believes that *"as long as people are getting upset, a medium is not dead"*.²⁵ His stance during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, refusing to renew contracts with Russian publishers and advocating for Ukrainian refugees²⁶, also shows his activism on the global stage.

In analysing Gaiman's literary works, many note his affection for allusions and intertextuality, drawing from diverse sources.²⁷ His novels, such as *Stardust* and *The Graveyard Book*, are steeped in literary and religious references, offering unique insight into the story. Gaiman's approach to storytelling, while often aligned with the monomyth structure, reflects his reluctance to adhere strictly to established frameworks.

2.2.3 Peter Ackroyd

Peter Ackroyd, born on October 5, 1949, in London, England, is a prolific author known for his literary works spanning various genres, including novels, biographies, poetry, and historical non-fiction. Growing up in East Acton, Ackroyd developed a deep fascination with

²³ Neil Gaiman. UNHCR Africa. <https://www.unhcr.org/africa/prominent-supporters/neil-gaiman>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ McCabe, C. (2014, December 19). *Neil Gaiman on Censorship and the Perception of Comics as a "Gutter medium."* *National Coalition Against Censorship*. <https://ncac.org/news/blog/neil-gaiman-on-censorship-and-the-perception-of-comics-as-a-gutter-medium>

²⁶ Gaiman, N. (2022, March 5). X.com (formerly Twitter). <https://x.com/neilhimsself/status/1500158016494125056>

²⁷ Evans, T. H. (2016). *Folklore, Intertextuality, and the Folkloresque in the Works of Neil Gaiman*. In M. D. Foster & J. A. Tolbert (Eds.), *The Folkloresque: Reframing Folklore in a Popular Culture World*. University Press of Colorado. (pp. 64–80). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt17mvkfh.7>

the history and culture of London, which would later become a central theme in much of his writing. After graduating from Clare College, Cambridge, Ackroyd began his career as a literary critic, working for esteemed publications such as *The Spectator* and *The Times Literary Supplement*.²⁸ His insightful analyses of literature and his profound understanding of English history earned him recognition as a leading voice in literary criticism. In the early 1980s, Ackroyd transitioned to writing full-time, publishing his first novel, *The Great Fire of London*, in 1982.²⁹ This debut novel, which explored the aftermath of the devastating 1666 fire that swept through the city, marked the beginning of Ackroyd's exploration of London's rich history. His ability to evoke the spirit of London across different time periods has solidified his reputation as one of the foremost chroniclers of the city.

Over the years, Ackroyd has been awarded a CBE and other numerous honours for his contributions to literature, including the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for biography.³⁰ His legacy as a writer lies not only in the breadth and depth of his work but also in his profound influence on how we perceive and understand the city of London.

²⁸ British Council. *Peter Ackroyd*. Literature. <https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/peter-ackroyd>

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

3. Methodology

In urban fantasy, we can trace two primary approaches which can be broadly categorized as those where the urban characterizes the fantasy, and those where fantasy modifies the urban setting. In the former, stories often involve encounters with the realm of faerie or other magical beings. These narratives fuse elements of fairy tales and folklore with contemporary urban settings, resulting in collisions between the fantastical and the modern. Major cities, such as London, New York, or Istanbul are rooted in our collective memory, which warrants historical accuracy even when incorporating the fantastic. On the other hand, in the latter approach, the city itself becomes a central character, with its own unique rules and history independent of traditional folklore.³¹ Cities like China Miéville's New Crobuzon exemplify this, where the city's nature gives rise to the fantastical elements within the narrative.

While these two strains represent opposing ends of a literary spectrum, they share common ground in their exploration of the intersection between urban life and the fantastic. The folkloric type draws from literary traditions rooted in fairy tales and Victorian Gothic, while the other type, exemplified by works such as *Perdido Street Station* and *Shriek*, finds inspiration in explorations of urban living by authors like Dickens and Baudelaire, using the fantastical to deepen this exploration.

In my analysis of the *Rivers of London* series, I aim to showcase the prevalence of the folkloric approach in the novel series while highlighting instances where the city directly influences the narrative and fantastical elements.

To observe how fantastical worlds function within the *Rivers of London* series, I will directly employ Farah Mendlesohn's categories of fantasy. This approach will allow for a structured analysis of the narrative elements, enabling a deeper understanding of how folklore thrives in contemporary urban settings and influences the development of the supernatural within the novels.

Additionally, a portion of my thesis will be dedicated to examining the mythological elements, particularly those related to rivers, to discern the inspirations behind Ben Aaronovitch's creation. By delving into the mythological foundation, I aim to shed light on

³¹ Irvine, A. C. (2012). Urban Fantasy. In F. M. Edward James, *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 200-213.

the influences shaping the fantasy aspects of the series.

In the last chapter, I will revisit the urban space and analyse its significance within the narrative, observing how the city contributes to the overall thematic richness of the novels. The genius loci will reappear, but this time it will be solely referring to the England's capital. Through this multifaceted approach, I seek to provide a comprehensive understanding of how urban fantasy operates within the Rivers of London series, exploring its intersections with folklore, mythology, and urban life.

4. Rhetorics of Fantasy and Mythology

The focus of the forthcoming chapter shifts to the fantastic worlds in literature, utilizing a framework based on the classification introduced in Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Mendlesohn identifies four distinct categories of fantasy: **portal-quest, immersive, intrusion, and liminal**.³² The chapter will examine how each of these categories is represented in selected literature and provide examples of fantastic worlds aligning with each category.

Mendlesohn's taxonomy is useful for understanding the construction of the fantasy genre and provides critical tools for further analysis. The categories of fantasy are not mutually exclusive, and some texts may straddle the divide between them.

The categories Mendlesohn posits stem from the dynamic between the protagonist and the fantasy world:

Portal-quest fantasy: This category of fantasy is often set in a completely separate world from our own and adopts the structure and rhetorical strategies of the portal fantasy. The protagonist and reader are positioned as naive, and the story denies the taken for granted.

Immersive fantasy: This category of fantasy is set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world. A story's setting and events are presented through a guiding narrative voice that has significant control over how the reader perceives the fictional world. Whether it is narrated from the perspective of the main character(s) or directed towards them.

Intrusion fantasy: This category of fantasy features a fantastic intrusion into reality. The fantastic intrudes on reality, and the protagonists' engagement with that intrusion drives the story.

Liminal fantasy: To engage well with liminal elements, it is crucial to define what is meant by the term. The word "liminal" comes from the Latin word "limen", meaning literally, "threshold". *"A limen is a threshold between two spaces. If a border is viewed as the line, imaginary or real, which separates these two spaces, then the threshold is the opening which permits passages from one space to the other."*³³

A liminal element of a story, then, is one that marks a gateway or passage into the unknown, signifying the experience of the character undergoing the event. Such elements

³² Mendlesohn, F. (2008). *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Wesleyan University Press.

³³ Aguirre & Sutton, p. 6

can introduce a transformation, be it personal, physical, societal, or other. Liminal moments may involve a number of things that are regularly experienced in the world, but imply potential for considerable social or personal change. Events such as birth, death, rituals of initiation or degradation, a change of residence, coming of age, marriage, or divorce are common liminal moments.

Victor Turner further built upon the work of Gennep, defining liminality as *"the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of a passage when the attributes of the ritual subject fall into the gap between the ritual roles."*³⁴

Previously studied and observed solely in the context of ritual and rite, liminal elements are now utilized in the modern epic fantasy genre, the threshold being earth and the other world being a magical realm. The threshold, might be the first step into another world, an actual doorway or diverging paths in a forest. It is an intermediate state often characterized by confusion, dissolution of old structure, and the sense of being in between realities.

Furthermore, liminality plays a significant role in urban fantasy, by creating transitional spaces within the city. Liminal spaces are characterized by being on the boundary of different states, existing in an intermediary or transitional position. These spaces evoke uncertainty and dread, allowing exploration of the inherent urban fears.³⁵

Urban fantasy protagonists often possess the ability to cross these liminal spaces, granting them power and serving as a bridge between the real-world setting of the city and the fantastic liminal zones. Conversely, mythical characters typically occupy these liminal spaces, epitomizing the otherness of the supernatural.³⁶

Liminal spaces in urban fantasy serve several purposes, providing a distinct locale for supernatural elements to operate without causing incongruity with reality. Victor Turner provides another useful definition when he describes the ambiguous state during rites of passage as that which *"is neither this nor that, and yet is both."*³⁷ They can transform ordinary spaces into betwixt spaces, where the known becomes unknown due to the presence of the supernatural, rendering the ordinary fantastic and creating temporary in-

³⁴ Turner, V. (1967). *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. p. 94

³⁵ Mannolini-Winwood, S. *Urban Fantasy's Monstrous City*. (2018, December 2). *The Artifice*. <https://the-artifice.com/urban-fantasy-city/>

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Turner V. (1987) *Betwixt and Between*. In Mahdi, L. C. (ed.) *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation. La Salle, Ill. : Open Court. p. 9*

between spaces for supernatural actions to occur.

Overall, liminality contributes to creating a believable integration of the supernatural into city life, offering a unique setting where mythical characters and protagonists navigate transitional zones.

4.1. A Few Words on the Primary Sources

For the purpose of this subchapter, I have selected a few other urban fantasy works in addition to Aaronovitch's fantasy series.

There are two books by Neil Gaiman because each of them presents an outstanding yet different mirror to *Rivers of London*.

Neverwhere is a story of an unassuming young man getting involuntarily involved in a dangerous adventure in a world that exists beneath the streets of London, therefore it was chosen mainly because of the portrayal of "the other London" that *Neverwhere* provides.

American Gods is a book offering a fascinating repertoire of deities surviving or thriving in modern day setting. In contrast to the structured crime novel format of *Rivers of London*, *American Gods* employs a more episodic and meandering narrative structure

Dresden Files is a series selected because of the similarities in structure with its portrayal of a wizard detective navigating the complexities of a modern-day Chicago rife with magical creatures and occult mysteries which parallels Aaronovitch's work in its exploration of magic intersecting with everyday life.

4.2. Application of the Framework to Urban Fantasy Literature (to the selected works)

This subchapter will apply Farah Mendlesohn's theoretical framework to the chosen works of Urban Fantasy. The focus will be on demonstrating the operational dynamics of each mode within the genre, exploring how they manifest and influence the narrative structure.

John Clute stated that fantasy, "(w)hen set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible,

though stories set there may be possible in its terms,"³⁸ this definition accentuates the qualities of real and unreal worlds, but it is also proving useful for understanding Mendlesohn's categories of fantasy.

4.2.1. Immersive Fantasy

In each of the following works, immersive fantasy transports readers into fully realized worlds. A realist writing style, along with authoritarian narration, ensures that readers feel fully immersed in the urban setting while exploring the fantastical elements of the story. This immersive experience allows for a deeper exploration of themes and characters, making for a captivating journey through the realms of urban fantasy.

Rivers of London

This series stands as a prime example of immersive fantasy, intricately connecting the magical and earthly aspects of modern London. The protagonist's journey from a police officer to a wizard's apprentice allows readers to explore this immersive world through his eyes. Aaronovitch masterfully integrates a diverse array of supernatural beings, including ghosts, vampires, and powerful gods, seamlessly into the narrative. What distinguishes *Rivers of London* is its realist writing style, which offers readers a sense of familiarity within the urban setting while bathing them in the fantastical elements of the story. Unlike traditional fantasy that may guide readers delicately, the reader is not hand-held through every magical revelation but is rather invited to explore the magical underbelly of London alongside the characters, enhancing the immersive experience.

Dresden Files

Jim Butcher's series presents another immersive urban fantasy world, this time in the bustling city of Chicago. The series follows the adventures of Harry Dresden, a wizard and private investigator. Magic is an integral part of Dresden's everyday life. Butcher seamlessly integrates supernatural entities into the story, but his realist approach ensures that readers feel a sense of authenticity within the urban setting while exploring the fantastical elements of the story, be it vampires, werewolves, or faeries.

Neverwhere

³⁸ Clute, J. (2000). Grail, Groundhog, Godgame: Or, Doing Fantasy. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 10(4 (40)), 333. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43308400>

Through protagonist Richard Mayhew's eyes, readers are transported into the depths of London Below - a fully realized world that challenges their understanding of the city. Gaiman smoothly blends the mundane and the magical, creating a rich and immersive domain of fantastical characters and settings. As Richard navigates the treacherous streets of London Below, readers explore this hidden world alongside him, experiencing the wonders and dangers of the realm. Gaiman's writing style ensures that readers feel fully immersed in the urban setting, while the narration reveals the intricacies of the magical world in a captivating and immersive manner.

American Gods

In *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman's characters interact with a variety of gods and mythological beings who have migrated to the United States. The world of *American Gods* is immersive, as the reader is fully engrossed in the mosaic of diverse cultural influences, such as Norse, Egyptian, and African folklore. The immersive experience of *American Gods* invites the readers to register the complexities of belief systems and societal reflections within the modern western setting.

4.2.2. Intrusive Fantasy

Identifying the dominant category within literature of fantasy poses minimal challenge; however, we can still discern components of the other categories within the same literary works. *Rivers of London*, *Dresden Files*, *Neverwhere*, and *American Gods*, all contain intrusive elements of fantasy that disrupt the ordinary world. These elements are essential to the genre of urban fantasy, which combines elements of fantasy and horror with a contemporary metropolitan setting. The subsequent paragraphs present examples of how these works incorporate intrusive fantasy:

Rivers of London:

The protagonist undergoes a transformative journey from a police officer to a wizard's apprentice upon encountering a ghost as murder witness. Coming across a supernatural being for the first time and consequently discovering the world of magic disrupts his worldview and challenges the norms associated with his role as a police officer. This revelation and the transition into a wizard's apprentice fundamentally alter his understanding of reality, prompting a profound shift in perception and purpose.

What distinguishes *Rivers of London* in the degree of the intrusion is how the protagonist, a scientist at heart, tries and often succeeds in rationalising most of the incomprehensible. With him, we learn why the majority of spells are in Latin and why there is no visual evidence of magic (spell casting destroys all electronic devices that are not turned off).

Dresden Files:

As with *Rivers of London*, the magical elements in *The Dresden Files* remain hidden from the public, contributing to a sense of mystery and wonder in the contemporary urban setting. Here, the narrative introduces an assortment of supernatural entities, from vampires and werewolves to faeries, enriching the fantastic world.

Much like *Rivers of London* and quite frankly, an overwhelming portion of urban fantasy, the series starts off with an intrusion, however, the storyline gradually transitions towards what Mendlesohn terms immersive. The fantasy aspects of the world-building grow in intricacy, resulting in a notable shift in the narrative style. Instead of intruding upon reality, the fantastical elements get assimilated, effectively becoming the new reality.

In the initial entries of the series, fantastical elements disrupt the otherwise realistic urban setting. The disruptions compel the protagonist to confront and resolve challenges posed by these fantastical intrusions, such as Dresden's triumph over an evil wizard. Later, Dresden's adventures extend beyond the confines of Chicago where new challenges await, yet this marks the extent of intrusive fantasy within the narrative.

Neverwhere

Richard Mayhew becomes embroiled in the mysterious and dangerous world of London Below after helping a young woman named Door. Mendlesohn states that "*in intrusion fantasy the fantastic is the bringer of chaos*"³⁹ which is epitomised in the events that follow meeting Door. Everything is flipped on its head, leaving Richard disoriented as he is thrust into the unpredictable perils of London Below, where danger lurks around every corner, catching him entirely off guard. Gaiman's portrayal of London Below disrupts the ordinary world by introducing a parallel reality that challenges the reader's understanding of the city.

³⁹ Mendlesohn, p. 21

Another disturbance, perhaps solely perceptible to readers, is Gaiman's utilization of place names and wordplay to fuel the story.

American Gods:

The second Gaiman's novel chosen for this thesis takes a divergent yet equally intriguing path within the urban fantasy genre. Set in a contemporary America, the narrative introduces Shadow, an unwitting participant in a conflict between ancient gods and new deities born of technology. Shadow stepping into the lives of gods (or Mr. Wednesday – Odin entering Shadow's life) serves as a catalyst for redefining the ordinary within the urban setting.

4.2.3. Elements of Portal Quest Fantasy

Neverwhere

Neverwhere embodies elements of portal-quest fantasy through its exploration of a hidden world beneath London. Protagonist Richard Mayhew's journey begins when he inadvertently crosses into London Below. This serves as the portal through which Richard enters a parallel reality, distinct from the ordinary world above. Also the character which drives most of the narrative is named Door, a portal on its own.

Rivers of London

Although primarily characterized by its immersive and intrusive fantasy elements, Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* also contains elements of portal-quest fantasy. The series features instances where protagonist Peter Grant travels between the ordinary world and the supernatural realm, often through encounters with magical gateways. These portals serve as thresholds through which Peter gains access to different worlds, including time travel or visiting the Rivers and other supernatural entities. These quest-driven narratives imbue *Rivers of London* with elements of portal-quest fantasy.

4.2.4. Elements of Liminal Fantasy

The suggestion of a journey and passage into the unknown or "other" world is the most basic of liminal elements, and this theme is common to many fantasy novels. Liminal moments help to divide the structure of the story, usually marking the start of a transition from the familiar into the unknown, and thus setting the tempo and atmosphere of the proceeding event. An easy example from *Neverwhere* is the moment Door is found bleeding and hurt on the pavement by the protagonist, effectively marking the start of his passage from reality, as he knows it, into another world. Throughout the novels, characters are met with various liminal elements, each helping to define his or her role and the change they will undergo in that particular part of the story. This is a common functional tool for liminal elements, they frequently suggest a momentarily change in an individual, and or the present situation, that has potential consequences in future events.

Much of modern literature seeks to elicit specific responses from readers. Sometimes, as in the case of science fiction or romance novels, the nature of the response is fairly straightforward. Fantasy literature, especially that which is more focused on the creation of new worlds rather than the mimicking of our own, is often written with the intent of creating a sense of wonder. When said fantasy literature utilizes a great deal of liminal imagery, it creates the impression of an extra dimension to the world or the beings which that imagery concerns, and thus the world becomes immeasurably more wondrous. This very much tends to occur with the liminal entities themselves, particularly when they can be viewed in terms of the message their presence carries, usually by way of its effects on neighbouring more human or otherwise familiar elements. Since these entities are generally in a state of 'in-between-ness' themselves, the effect is to throw the in-between-ness of the entire world into sharp relief, thereby blurring the line between the fantastic and the mundane and greatly heightening the sense of wonder.

Richard Mayhew is a young businessman who encounters a young woman of apparent noble roots. His act of kindness, turning her apart from the bloodthirsty killers pursuing her, changes his life and events spiral out of control. Richard is displaced from his world above and all his familiar surroundings to a world below.

The protagonist of *American Gods* is also a truly liminal character, starting out as a prisoner he is immediately presented as an outcast, which is a feeling that does not go away during the story. The very start of the book sees Shadow re-entering society after being released from prison, i.e. in the state of transition. Subsequently, he undergoes a complicated personal journey coming to terms with his own roots.

5. Mythology and its Role in Urban Fantasy

There is a crucial distinction to be made: mythology stems from cultural beliefs - people once believed that the stories were true, and myths have been incorporated into religions and history of certain nations, whereas fantasy is a purely fictitious construct. The fascination with mythology can be observed in a substantial portion of literary fiction, but for the purpose of this thesis, I will only be focusing on the works of urban fantasy.

Urban fantasy is undoubtedly a genre that has been significantly influenced by mythology and folklore, as evidenced by several scholarly works. For instance, in his book *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*, Brian Attebery explores the use of mythology in storytelling, arguing that there is a plethora of symbols and motifs heavily utilized in fantasy, with roots traceable as far as the oral tradition of mystery and magical tales goes.⁴⁰

Additionally, Varughese discusses the emergence of post-millennial "Indian Fantasy" and its relationship with mythology, indicating a trend of reimagining and incorporating mythological elements into contemporary urban fantasy.⁴¹ Interestingly enough, Varughese also observes a tendency to go beyond the ancient Indian mythos and create worlds based on an integral sense of "Indianness".⁴² This directs attention to the culturally nuanced aspects of the fantastic novels Western-oriented motifs simultaneously noting the diverse influences and themes present in urban fantasy literature.

One might say that modern science fiction and fantasy settings provide a safe platform for authors to transcend cultural constraints and actively express their creativity, while honouring the historical legacy.

Many creators draw inspiration from folklore and mythology for their novels and TV media. Here are some notable examples:

⁴⁰ Attebery, B. (2014). *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*. New York: Oxford University Press USA. p.16

⁴¹ Varughese, D. E. (2017). *Genre Fiction of New India*. New York: Routledge Taylor.

⁴² Ibid.

Authors:

- J.R.R. Tolkien: The iconic author drew heavily from Norse mythology and other folklore in creating the rich world of Middle-earth.
- Neil Gaiman: Gaiman weaves elements of mythology into his storytelling, often putting less known folklore into the spotlight.
- Rick Riordan: Riordan is famous for his young adult fantasy series *Percy Jackson & the Olympians*, *The Kane Chronicles*, and *Magnus Chase and the Gods of Asgard*, which are based on various mythologies, including Greek, Egyptian, and Norse.
- Madeline Miller: *The Song of Achilles* and *Circe* are reimaginings of Greek mythology, bringing ancient stories to life with a fresh perspective and emotional depth.
- Susanna Clarke: Clarke's debut *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* incorporates elements of English folklore and magic in an alternative history of 19th-century England.

TV Media:

- Game of Thrones (based on George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*): While not directly based on mythology, "GoT" incorporates elements of folklore and draws inspiration from real historical events, creating a complex and immersive fantasy world.
- The Witcher (based on Andrzej Sapkowski's book series): Set in a world inspired by (not only) Slavic mythology, the story follows Geralt of Rivia, as he navigates a morally gray world filled with mythical creatures and political intrigue.
- Buffy the Vampire Slayer (by Joss Whedon): The drama series sees a high-school student struggle to juggle her real life responsibilities and hunting vampires and demons. It is possible to connect the success of Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the subsequent popularity of similar formats in TV.
- Outlander (based on Diana Gabaldon's book series): Mixing elements of historical romance, and time travel, Outlander incorporates Scottish folklore into its storytelling, adding a fresh twist to its portrayal of 18th-century Scotland.

Going deeper into the exploration of mythology and its significance in urban fantasy, it becomes evident that the genre is not only a reflection of our modern society but also a platform for the reimagining of traditional folklore and mythological elements. This reconfiguration allows for a stimulating perspective on the ageless legends and tales.

The Rhetorics of Fantasy framework by Farah Mendlesohn provides a comprehensive approach to analysing the incorporation of mythological elements into the urban fantasy genre. The framework allows for an exploration of how mythic elements are integrated into the narrative structure of urban fantasy literature, shaping the fantastical worlds depicted in these novels.

Examining it through a different lens, Meteling views urban fantasy in the context of London, analysing works by Neil Gaiman, China Miéville, and Peter Ackroyd, and portrays the England's capital as a liminal space and a gothic heterotopia. He illustrates how urban fantasy utilizes mythological elements to create a sense of otherness and to construct unique and fantastical settings within urban environments.⁴³

The most prominent and stable mythological phenomena appearing in the series are the *genii locorum* (spirits of natural elements), more specifically the gods and goddesses of the river Thames and its tributaries. Therefore, the following part of this chapter shall be dedicated to the world mythologies and their depiction of river-like deities.⁴⁴ This will be essential to the analysis of *Rivers of London*, as Aaronovitch has never specified which religion(s) inspired him to create the characters of Mama Thames and the like.

5.1. Spirits of Places

The concept of geographically bound spirits or deities associated with specific locations is a popular theme in global mythology. In Roman religion, the term "Genius loci" refers to the divine nature of a place and the meaning has been extended to encompass the

⁴³ Meteling, A. (2017) *Gothic London: On the Capital of Urban Fantasy in Neil Gaiman, China Miéville and Peter Ackroyd*. University of Cologne.

⁴⁴ Although it would be incredibly interesting to examine the influence of various mythologies on urban fantasy, it is sensible to only address the mythological aspects playing a role in Aaronovitch's novel series.

atmosphere of a place.⁴⁵ Each location is supposed to have its own protective spirit embodying the essence of the place they inhabit, whether it was a natural landscape like a grove, river, or a constructed site like a city or a home.⁴⁶ In the book series this thesis is dedicated to, the *genii locorum* mostly refer to river gods and goddesses.

In Norse mythology, *Landvættir* are spirits that inhabit particular places and landscapes, such as rocks, forests, and mountains.⁴⁷ These spirits can bring good fortune or misfortune depending on how they are treated by humans. Respecting the *Landvættir* was crucial, and many traditional practices involved ensuring their favour.

The *Leshy*, a forest spirit in Slavic mythology, is considered the guardian of the forest and all its creatures. The *Leshys*, rather malevolent creatures, can shape-shift and are known for leading travellers astray, but they can also protect those who respect the forest and its inhabitants.⁴⁸ The *Leshys* embody the wild nature of a forest.

Similarly, *Kodama* are spirits that inhabit trees according to Japanese folklore. Cutting down a tree without the proper rituals to appease the *Kodama* can result in misfortune. They are considered guardians of the forest and symbolize the spirit of the tree itself.⁴⁹ The concept of tree spirits has been preserved and popularized through various forms of media, including storybooks and anime. A notable example is the film *Princess Mononoke* by Hayao Miyazaki. While not always depicted as protective, they are considered integral parts of the landscape.

Greek mythology introduces *Naiads* are freshwater nymphs associated with rivers, streams, and fountains. Each body of fresh water had its own *Naiad*, who was believed to personify the spirit of that particular water source. *Naiads* were often depicted as beautiful maidens and were both protective and capricious. *Dryads*, tree nymphs specifically associated with oak trees, are considered the protective spirits of forests and trees, and harming a tree where a *Dryad* resides could bring misfortune.

Furthermore, in Celtic mythology, the *Sidhe* are fairy-like beings associated with natural

⁴⁵ Lewis, C. T., & Short, C. (2009). *Genius*. In *A Latin Dictionary*. Medford, MA: Perseus Digital Library, Tufts University.

⁴⁶ Beard, M., North, J., & Price, S. (1998). *Religions of Rome: Volume 1, A History*. Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁷ Turville-Petre, E.O.G. (1964). *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*. p. 234

⁴⁸ Warner, E. (2002). *Russian Myths: Legendary past* (Illustrated ed.). British Museum. pp. 38-40

⁴⁹ Moore, G. & Atherton, C. (2020). *Eternal forests: The Veneration of Old Trees in Japan*. Arnold Arboretum. <https://arboretum.harvard.edu/stories/eternal-forests-the-veneration-of-old-trees-in-japan/>

features such as hills and bodies of water. They are regarded as benevolent and protective beings, central to local loyalty as depicted in the early medieval Irish Metrical Dinnshenchas. This collection of lore suggests that the Sidhe played crucial role in guarding and blessing their communities. However, folklore also paints a darker picture of these beings. It is said they transform into terrifying female spectres associated with death and the supernatural. These beings, including the Irish ban-sidhe and lian-sidhe, or the Welsh cyhiraeth and gwrach y rhibyn, are often harbingers of death or predators on humans. These legends illustrate how deposed deities can effectively become demons in folklore, reflecting a dramatic shift from their original purpose. They are often depicted as ancient and powerful, and many Irish tales speak of interactions with these spirits. The Sidhe are believed to inhabit a parallel world, but they have a profound influence on the natural world. The Cailleach, a hag deity associated with winter and the creation of landscapes in Scottish and Irish mythology, is often connected to specific mountains and rock formations, believed to have been formed by her actions.

Among various Algonquian-speaking tribes, a Manitou is a spirit that represents the power and essence of a place, animal, or natural force. Each aspect of the natural world has its own Manitou, making them central to the spirituality of these cultures. In the mythology of the Hopi, there are spirits associated with specific natural features like mountains and springs. These spirits are honoured in ceremonies to ensure balance and harmony in nature.

Many cultures personify natural elements like rivers, mountains, and trees as deities or spirits, attributing a living essence to these features. These spirits often act as protectors of the places they inhabit, with humans showing them respect through rituals, offerings, and by maintaining the sanctity of these natural sites. They can be benevolent or malevolent, depending on how they are treated by humans, with disrespect or harm to their domain usually resulting in negative consequences. These spirits are deeply integrated into the daily lives and beliefs of people, influencing agriculture, weather, health, and overall well-being. Understanding the mythology of geographically bound spirits reveals a common human instinct to imbue the natural world with spiritual significance, showing deep respect to the environment.

5.1.1. The Mythology of Rivers

Water, the source of life, has probably been respected and even worshipped as long as the history of mankind goes. The universal respect for water and the deep-rooted religious connections to rivers highlight their importance as symbols of life, purification, and spiritual sustenance across different cultural contexts.

In Greek mythology, the underworld is surrounded by rivers, while in Indian religions, the Vaitaraṇī Nadī is recognized as a river that flows through the hell realm, capable of purifying the sins. Hindu religious texts also attribute sacredness to rivers, with the most notable embodiment of the goddess Ganga, the Ganges. The concept of river deities is prevalent across nations and ethnic groups, where certain rivers are named after or associated with sacred, spiritual beings.

Obviously, English folklore also does not lack its own river spirits. For instance, there is a mythic figure called Old Father Thames, very likely a direct source of inspiration for Aaronovitch. Peter Ackroyd offers a description of Old Father Thames as “a water divinity of unknown origin who bears a striking resemblance to the tutelary gods of the Nile and the Tiber. His flowing beard and hair call up the strange association between hair and water”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Ackroyd, P. (2008, November 4). *Thames: Sacred River*. National Geographic Books. p. 24

5.1.2. Rivers in Religions

Rivers, as natural phenomena, have been deeply intertwined with the spiritual and religious beliefs of various cultures throughout history. This section will summarize some mythological narratives and religious practices that have emerged around rivers:

Aztec: Chalchiuhtlicue and Tlaloc

In Aztec mythology, water held immense significance as well. The Aztecs worshipped several deities associated with water and, such as Tlaloc, the god of rain, fertility, and water, and Chalchiuhtlicue, the goddess of rivers, lakes, and streams.⁵¹ Chalchiuhtlicue, meaning "She of the Jade Skirt," is deeply associated with water's life-giving and destructive qualities. In the myth of the Five Suns, Chalchiuhtlicue governs the fourth era, which ended in a great flood. This portrayal points to the dual nature of water as both a source of life and a force of destruction. Chalchiuhtlicue's representation often includes jade ornaments and beaded headdresses, and she tends to be depicted with streams flowing from her⁵², symbolizing fertility and childbirth, emphasizing her function in birth ceremonies and the continuity of life. These deities were revered for their power to provide essential nourishment and sustenance to the land and its people.

The Aztec civilization attributed divine qualities to water, viewing it as a source of life and fertility. This reverence for water is evident in their religious rituals, where offerings and ceremonies were dedicated to the deities associated with water, seeking their benevolence and abundance for the prosperity of their communities. The influence of rivers and water bodies in shaping the mythological and religious beliefs of the Aztecs exemplifies the universal reverence for water as a fundamental element essential for life and spiritual nourishment.⁵³

⁵¹ Miller, M.E. (1993). *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion*. Thames and Hudson. pp. 70, 166

⁵² Codex Borgia, c. 1500. p. 65

⁵³ Miller, p. 60

Celtic: Belisama, Boann, Danu

The Celts regarded water bodies not merely as natural phenomena but as living entities inhabited by divine beings. These bodies of water acted as both protectors and providers for the communities that depended on them. The Celts viewed rivers and lakes as sacred landscapes, where the presence of the divine was palpable and the veil between worlds was thin.

One prominent figure in Celtic mythology associated with a river is the River Goddess Boann, linked to the River Boyne.⁵⁴ Legend has it that the River Boyne was formed by the overflow of a magical well, a consequence of Boann's disobedience.

In addition to Boann, Celtic mythology is replete with other river deities, each carrying their own significance and mythology. Among them is Belisama, the Gaulish goddess associated with rivers, lakes, and fire. Belisama was probably the divine patroness of waterways, symbolizing the life-giving and purifying properties of rivers and the transformative power of fire.⁵⁵

Danu, often considered the mother goddess of the Tuatha Dé Danann in Irish mythology, is also closely linked to nature.⁵⁶ Though not exclusively a river deity, Danu is often depicted as a nurturing and maternal figure, regarded as the progenitor of the divine beings in Celtic mythology, symbolizing the primordial waters from which all life emerges.

The worship of river deities was integral to Celtic religious practices, with rituals and offerings made to honour and appease these divine beings. Pilgrimages to sacred rivers and lakes were common among the Celtic peoples, who sought blessings, healing, and spiritual guidance from these revered water sources.

Moreover, lakes held a special significance in Celtic belief, often considered as portals to the Otherworld.⁵⁷ These bodies of water were believed to be thresholds between the mortal realm and the realm of spirits, where one could glimpse into the mysteries of the beyond.

⁵⁴ Ó hÓgáin, D. (1991). *Myth, Legend & Romance: An Encyclopaedia of the Irish Folk Tradition*. Prentice Hall Press. p. 49

⁵⁵ Hutton, R. (1991). *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles*. Oxford: Blackwell. p. 218

⁵⁶ Hutton, pp. 150-153

⁵⁷ Koch, J. T. (2006). *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*. ABC-CLIO. p. 1671

The Celts conducted rituals and ceremonies at lakesides, seeking communion with the divine and guidance from the spirit world.

Greek: Achelous, Oceanus

Greek mythology is rich with water deities. Achelous, the river-god of the river bearing his name, is one of the prominent figures, embodying the river that flows into the Ionian Sea. As the son of Oceanus (Okeanos) and Tethys, Achelous is central to many myths, including his battle with the hero Herakles for the possession of Deianeira, during which he transforms into various forms. He also marries the muse Melpomene, and their daughters are the Sirens.⁵⁸

Naiades, the fresh water nymphs, represent the divine essence of streams, rivers, and springs, embodying the life-giving properties of fresh water.⁵⁹ They are a subgroup of nymphs, which also include the dryads (Greek drys = oak-tree), female spirits of nature who inhabit trees. The fate of these tree-nymphs is intimately tied to the trees they dwell in.⁶⁰

Oceanus, the Titan who fathered all fresh water, and the Potamoi, river gods and sons of Oceanus and Tethys, are also crucial figures in Greek mythology. Charon, the ferryman of the underworld is another significant figure. He transports the souls of the dead to Hades, receiving payment in the form of a coin placed in the mouth of the deceased. Initially depicted as a demon of death in the form of a dog, Charon evolved into a crucial part of Greek mythology's portrayal of the journey to the afterlife.⁶¹

The sacred Styx, in Greek mythology, is the river that forms the boundary between the living world and the underworld. It is one of the five rivers of the underworld, and its waters are considered sacred. The River Styx is also known for its power to grant invulnerability to those who drink from it or touch its waters. The river is also associated with the oaths of the gods, as they would swear by the River Styx to uphold their promises.⁶²

Hinduism and Buddhism

⁵⁸ Lurker, M. (2004). *The Routledge Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses, Devils and Demons*. Psychology Press. p. 10

⁵⁹ Burkert, W. (1985). *Greek Religion*. Harvard University Press. p. 174

⁶⁰ Lurker, p. 61

⁶¹ Lurker, p. 49

⁶² Burkert, p. 251

Hindus believe that bathing in the Ganges River can cleanse one of sins and bring spiritual enlightenment.⁶³ The Ganges River is also associated with the god Shiva, who is believed to have released the river from his matted hair. Similarly, a mythical river, the Vaitaraṇī Nadī is recognized as a river that flows through the hell realm, and it is believed that it recognizes the impurity of those who attempt to cross it.⁶⁴

The Ganges River, also known as Ganga, holds immense significance in Hindu mythology and religion. Revered as a goddess and a purifier, the Ganges is believed to have descended from the heavens to bestow spiritual and physical cleansing to humanity. Its waters are considered sacred, and the act of bathing in the Ganges is believed to cleanse one of sins and facilitate spiritual purification.

According to legend, the Ganges was brought to earth by Lord Shiva's descent and was caught in the locks of his hair, thus preventing its force from flooding the earth. This divine intervention elevated the Ganges to a place of unparalleled sanctity, making it an integral part of Hindu religious rituals and beliefs. The significance of the Ganges is manifested in the *Kumbh Mela*, a major Hindu pilgrimage where millions of devotees gather to bathe in the sacred waters, seeking spiritual rejuvenation and liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth.⁶⁵ The Ganges also plays a pivotal part in religious ceremonies, including the immersion of cremated remains, which is believed to facilitate the departed souls' journey to the afterlife.

The mythological and religious significance of the Ganges exemplifies the deep reverence for rivers in Hinduism and highlights the belief in the transformative power of water as a conduit for spiritual purification and divine blessings.

Norse

In Norse mythology, rivers hold significant symbolic and cosmological importance. They are often depicted as bridges between the mortal world and the realm of the dead, with the

⁶³ Lurker, p. 74

⁶⁴ Hopkins, E. W. (2008). *Epic Mythology*. Read Books. p. 110

⁶⁵ Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (2024, March 29). *Kumbh Mela*. Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kumbh-Mela>

river Gjöll⁶⁶ serving as the boundary between the living and the dead. Rivers are also associated with the creation of the world, with Hvergelmir, the wellspring of serpents, being the origin of many rivers, including Gjöll. This connection highlights the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth, as well as the flow of creation and regeneration. Additionally, rivers are linked to the Otherworld, with the Irish medieval 'Dindsenchas' texts and classical Greek and Irish beliefs suggesting that all rivers ultimately flow to the Otherworld before returning to the mortal realm.

A slightly different myth is connected to the The River Ván. After being deceived and chained, the monstrous wolf Fenrir howled in rage and a foamy river called Ván flowed from his drooling mouth. This river symbolized the turmoil and chaos that Fenrir's binding and subsequent imprisonment would bring. The river Ván became a constant reminder of Fenrir's power and the gods' deceit, foreshadowing the catastrophic events that would unfold during Ragnarök.⁶⁷⁶⁸

Yoruba: Oshun, river orisha

Yoruba mythology is steeped in a rich tradition of spirits known as Orishas. These divine beings are believed to embody the forces of nature and humanity, serving as intermediaries between the two.⁶⁹ Each Orisha has a specific domain in the natural world, with their own unique strengths and personalities.⁷⁰

There is Oshun, a major orisha in Yoruba mythology, associated with water, fertility, love, and sensuality. She is known as the river orisha and is one of the most powerful deities, embodying both nurturing and capricious traits. Oshun plays a central role in creation myths, where her intervention brought life to earth. One Yoruba myth describes how the orishas were sent by Olodumare, the Supreme God, to populate the Earth. Oshun, the only female among the original 17 deities, used her sweet and powerful waters to bring life to the planet when the male deities failed.⁷¹ Oshun's significance in Yoruba religion reflects the essential value of water in sustaining life and its transformative power in spiritual practices.

⁶⁶ Simek, R. (1996). *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*. D.S. Brewer. pp. 111, 144

⁶⁷ Simek, p. 80

⁶⁸ Gaiman, N. (2017). *Norse Mythology*. New York, W.W. Norton & Company.

⁶⁹ Murrell, N. S. (2009). *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions*. Temple University Press. p. 53

⁷⁰ Ibid. p.49

⁷¹ Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. Oshun. *Encyclopædia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Oshun>

There are numerous other orishas associated with nature, each with unique attributes and stories. These deities are not omnipresent or omnipotent; they must be invoked through specific rites and rituals. Originating from the celestial realm of orun, each orisha carries specific responsibilities upon entering the Earth.⁷²

Among the orishas associated with rivers and waters, Yemoja holds a prominent place. Revered as the metaphysical mother of all orishas, Yemoja is sometimes depicted as the co-creator of humans alongside Obatala⁷³ and during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, she became associated with the ocean's vastness. Yemoja's imagery reflects her dual nature as both nurturing and powerful. In rituals and representations, she appears as a matronly figure with prominent breasts, symbolizing maternal love and protection. Adorned in blue and white—colors representing the ocean's turbulence and serenity—she wears a silver crown adorned with beads that cascade from her forehead. Clasp a silver sword to her chest, she delicately holds a mirrored fan in her other hand, embodying both strength and grace.⁷⁴ Devotees of Yemoja pay homage through elaborate ceremonies involving her favorite foods such as duck and turtle. They perform special dances that mirror the ebb and flow of the ocean, reflecting her domain overseas and waters. Ritual specialists, within community or family shrines, invoke Yemoja's blessings through songs, dances, and the display of her sacred emblem, a fan shell.⁷⁵

In Yoruba cosmology, each orisha commands reverence and worship in specific regions, with their authority and influence varying across different communities. While Yemoja reigns over the seas and maternal love, other orishas such as Shango, Olokun, and Oya oversee domains ranging from thunder and storms to lagoons and rivers.⁷⁶ All these beings play integral roles in the spiritual and everyday lives of their followers.

⁷² Murrell, p. 31

⁷³ Probst, P. (2011). *Osogbo and the Art of Heritage*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. p. 17

⁷⁴ Murrell, p. 36

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Adeoye, C. L. (1989). *Ìgbàgbọ̀ àti èsìn Yorùba*. Ibadan: Evans Bros. Nigeria Publishers. p. 303 (transl. <https://www.deepl.com/en/translator>)

Christian Beliefs

The Jordan is remembered as the river where Jesus Christ was baptized, marking a significant rite of passage. It has been told that the waters of the river have healing properties. In Old Testament it is also mentioned that the Israelites crossed the Jordan River during their exodus from Egypt.

As the preceding paragraphs demonstrate, the nature of rivers gives them truly liminal characteristics and makes this form of water incredibly powerful, often a symbol of boundaries or bridges between worlds.

5.1.3. Rivers in Literature

Rivers have been a profound symbol in literature, often representing life and movement. As natural arteries that traverse diverse landscapes, rivers are often chosen as the central settings in works of literature, reflecting the cultural currents of the societies they flow through. Several texts use rivers as a symbol of transformation, such as *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* by Langston Hughes, which is a powerful exploration of the African diaspora and the journey of the soul, where the river serves as a metaphor for the passage of time and the transformation of the human experience.

“I’ve known rivers:

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen
its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I’ve known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.”⁷⁷

The powerful poem conveys how deep the “black history” reaches. Similarly, the *Heart of Darkness*⁷⁸ by Joseph Conrad, symbolises the darkness and moral corruption of European

⁷⁷ Hughes, L. (2002). *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* from The Collected Works of Langston Hughes. Reprinted by permission of Harold Ober Associates, Inc. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44428/the-negro-speaks-of-rivers>

⁷⁸ Interestingly enough, the novella starts with a group of people on a boat drifting along the River Thames.

colonialism, with the river's powerful current seemingly resisting European intrusion, making the upstream journey arduous and symbolising the challenges Marlow faces in understanding his surroundings and the exploitation occurring there. Conversely, the downstream journey is swift and effortless, mirroring a grim acceptance of the colonial reality. Norman Maclean's semi-autobiographical novella *A River Runs Through It* uses the river as a symbol of family and life, illustrating the transformative power of nature and the journey of self-discovery. Michael Jacobs' *The Robber of Memories: A River Journey Through Colombia* chronicles an author's journey along the Magdalena River, using it to explore Colombia's history, culture, and his personal memories, but also the memories of the river itself. In essence, from the meandering Mississippi in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to the tumultuous Congo in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, rivers serve not only as physical pathways but also as metaphors for the characters' journeys, both external and internal.

In children's literature, Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* depicts the Thames a place of adventure but also tranquillity for several animal friends. Grahame's portrayal of the river emphasizes its pastoral qualities, providing space for the whimsical and reflective moments in the childrens' classic. Correspondingly, Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog)* is a humorous account of a boating holiday on the River Thames. The narrative captures the scenic beauty of the river and the comical misadventures of the men and their canine companion.

As for non-fiction, and particularly useful for this thesis, Peter Ackroyd's *Thames: Sacred River* offers a comprehensive portrayal of the River Thames, delving into its historical significance and its impact on the life in London. Through this examination, we can realise how authors use rivers to mirror the human condition and highlight the interplay between nature and human experience.

6. Introductory Overview of the Rivers of London Series

6.1. Overview of the Series

In her review, Vipula Gupta claims that *Rivers of London* “tries to be a fantasy-fiction novel, a police procedural, a London guide, and a commentary on race all at the same time but never quite succeeds.”⁷⁹ Gupta’s critique is reasonable, but I feel that the author does manage to compose a light-hearted yet thought-provoking story that is, in fact, all those things. Allow me to extend this statement to the whole series since the following numbers advance what the first novel established.

In the *Rivers of London* series, the integration of gothic elements, supernatural phenomena, and the mythological qualities of characters within the urban space of London result in an immersive world that explores themes such as diversity and identity. This demonstrates the capacity of urban fantasy to effectively use a recognizable setting like a city to craft an extraordinary and enigmatic storyline.

6.1. Plot Summaries

Rivers of London (USA: Midnight Riot)

Guarding a crime scene, Peter Grant, the protagonist, obtains an unlikely witness statement from a ghost, shares this information with a colleague, and doubts his own sanity. Much to Peter’s disbelief, he is abruptly recruited to a special police department designed to deal with the supernatural (The Folly). The case which got Peter involved is particularly sinister and gruesome - starting with a decapitated body and growing into a string of unduly violent crimes that each ended with the perpetrator’s face disintegrating. In parallel with the investigation, Peter becomes acquainted with Mama Thames, Father Thames, and their “children”, attempts to mediate a territorial dispute between the two parties, and as the drama progresses, he slowly learns more about the laws of magic, the deities, fae⁸⁰, and about himself.

⁷⁹ Vipula Gupta (Shades of Words). (2020). *The Riveting Review* [Review of Rivers of London, by B. Aaronovitch]. <https://medium.com/the-riveting-review/rivers-of-london-by-ben-aaronovitch-3a1c8e6ae602>

⁸⁰ not entirely human creatures, more information in Glossary

Moon over Soho

As if the first case was not gruesome enough, here we come across men whose penises get bitten off by a vagina dentata. The attacker kills two men and wounds a few others. She is initially instructed to do so by a nefarious wizard who seeks retribution but one of the attacks is only self defence against rape. Apart from that, seemingly healthy musicians die without a clear cause, and when Peter detects vestigia⁸¹ around their bodies, he knows that this is a case for the Folly. Each novel appears to have a central theme which reflects an aspect of life in a given part of London. Here, the prominent theme is jazz, and as the title reveals, the readers are invited to take in the bustling life of Soho. In search of the culprit, Constable Grant contemplates his father's mistakes and growth, becomes involved with a jazz-vampire, and at the very end, he fights the vengeful magician who will not stop generating chaos in the novels to come. This adversary keeps his identity hidden so Peter nicknames him the Faceless One.

Whispers Under Ground

Nightingale has taken in a second apprentice, Peter's colleague Lesley May and they both struggle studying the magic. An American art student is found dead at Baker Street Underground station. He was stabbed with a pot shard but not an ordinary shard – the "unbreakable" pottery reeks of vestigia again. When the investigation takes the team into the railway tunnels, they discover the Quiet People, a community living under ground who also turn out to be exceptional pottery makers. A new character is introduced: Zach – half human, half fae. He lived with the victim and is directly involved with the Quiet People. Aaronovitch's third novel is a little anti-climactic, but it is surely an exciting read.

Broken Homes

The unifying theme is harder to ascertain this time, but various events lead Detective Grant closer to his merciless enemy: the Faceless Man, and the ties between each case eventually turn out well laid out. There has been adequate foreshadowing, however, a shocking revelation occurs at the very end with not much time to process the event nonetheless. Making the situation a lot more complicated, this book might alter the course of the storyline.

⁸¹ a magical residue, more information in Glossary

6.2. Glossary

The city of London has a lively and complex network of rivers, both above and below ground. And according to the series, the rivers contain magical energy embodied in human-like gods and goddesses. The energy can be harnessed and manipulated by those who possess the knowledge and ability to do so. The following text summarizes the main concepts and characteristics of Aaronovitch's hidden world.

6.2.1. Magical Entities

There's born different. Which is like me and the Thames girls and what you call fae but only because you don't know what you're talking about. And there's choosing to be different, which is like you and the Nightingale.' 'Sorry, there's three basic types, okay? There's born, those that choose and those that are made different.' 'Like through an accident or something.'⁸²

Genius Loci (pl. Genii Locorum)

Genius Loci is the spirit associated with natural elements, a human-like deity personifying the essence of the place. Aaronovitch's novel series focuses on the rivers but any ecosystem such as the forests or possibly mountains have their own Genii. It is also implied that buildings have their spirits too.⁸³ Genii are extremely powerful and could be malevolent if it was on their agenda. The Rivers take their human form from the people who drowned in their respective streams.⁸⁴

Fae

An inclusive term for all the beings with innate supernatural abilities. Not as powerful as genii locorum, they are principally described as capricious, free, and mischievous.⁸⁵

6.2.2. Magic

The "practitioners" are able to call forth the power of genii and ghosts, which can then be used to obtain information or to protect themselves and others. However, there are also dangers associated with using magic, as spells can have dire consequences (ranging from brain lesions or strokes to aneurysms and possible fatalities) which gives Dr. Walid a good

⁸² Aaronovitch, B. (2012). *Whispers Under Ground*. Gollancz.

⁸³ Aaronovitch, B. (2011). *Rivers of London*. Gollancz.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Aaronovitch, B. *Whispers Under Ground*.

reason to be so adamant about regular MRI examinations.^{86,87}

Gupta also highlighted the fact that the magic perhaps should not be contained in the rules of physics and that Aaronovitch often neglects to provide a comprehensive explanation although Peter requests it.⁸⁸

Vestigia

Vestigium refers to the imprint of magic left behind by an event or a person. This magical residue can be sensed by magic users and can provide information about past events. The vestigia can manifest in various ways, but most people experience it as uncanny feelings or smells. As a matter of fact, Peter senses the presence of a dog around the decapitated body they had found, and when the team finds Toby, the dog, they realize he might be useful.⁸⁹ Silly as it may sound, Peter then started to measure the intensity and longevity of vestigia using this “ghost-hunting dog” and established the Yap scale.⁹⁰

6.3. Main Characters

The novels are written in the first-person narrative which does not necessarily mean that the reader is solely provided the main character’s point of view. I felt that each character had their unique voice and their dialogues with Peter provided other layers to the experience.

Peter Grant: A probationary constable trying to avoid the impending doom of his career - paperwork. Frivolous as it might be, he starts an apprenticeship under Chief Inspector Nightingale without obtaining much information, but he would never give up the opportunity to know about magic and everything his new job entails. Peter’s personality beams out from the pages, he comes across as a witty, intelligent, and caring person who also certainly holds architecture and design in great affection.

Lesley May: Peter’s ambitious friend and fellow constable. They both appear to have feelings for each other but agree not to pursue a relationship. Lesley is a bright promising

⁸⁶ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

⁸⁷ Aaronovitch, B. *Whispers Under Ground*.

⁸⁸ Vipula Gupta (Shades of Words). (2020). *The Riveting Review* [Review of Rivers of London, by B. Aaronovitch]. <https://medium.com/the-riveting-review/rivers-of-london-by-ben-aaronovitch-3a1c8e6ae602>

⁸⁹ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

⁹⁰ Aaronovitch, B. (2013). *Broken Homes*. Gollancz.

police officer with a talent of being beautifully sarcastic. Putting a stop to the wrongdoings in the first novel unfortunately has lasting effects on Leslie and her relationship with other characters.

Nightingale: DCI Thomas Nightingale is apparently England's last officially sanctioned wizardly force. It was Nightingale who drew Peter into the supernatural branch of the Metropolitan police. Strictly old-fashioned, well-mannered, and thoughtful, he embodies the trope of a wise wizard master. There is a time when he almost dies which would have been a breaking point: the mentor passing away would allow for Peter's growth but it would also leave him absolutely lost.

Molly: An ever-present maid at the Folly. She cleans and cooks with passion, yet Nightingale sometimes sneaks out to enjoy other-than-English flavours. She does not speak and only little is revealed about her. Molly is an unknown species of fae, capable of performing haemomancy⁹¹, and she might be well over 100 years old.

Mama Thames and Father Thames: The genii locorum of river Thames who both exude immense power and knowledge, as well as determination to pursue their goals. Mama Thames is illustrated as a stern but fair woman, with a strong connection to the river and all its creatures, thus she is fiercely protective of her domain, prepared to use her powers to enforce her will. However, violence is not something Father or Mama Thames want which is why there are agreements in place to ensure peace. Unlike Mama, Old Father Thames is depicted as an astute patriarchal figure, with a benevolent personality. Despite his amiable nature, Father Thames is not to be trifled with and he did yearn for the expansion of his territory.

Beverley: Beverley Brook is one of Mama Thames' "daughters". Despite her brusque exterior, she is unshakably loyal to her colleagues and is willing to put herself in harm's way to protect them. Beverley will become increasingly intimate with Peter in the later novels.

Dr Walid: A Scottish Muslim well informed in the matters of the supernatural. He is a renowned gastroenterologist but when it comes to the "other means" he operates as a pathologist for the Folly and he also carefully monitors Peter's and Nightingale's health because practicing magic notably affects the human body.

Zachary Palmer: Impertinent and reckless demi-fae. Having been misled multiple times, Peter is not very fond of him. Zach and Lesley became romantically involved before or

⁹¹ Aaronovitch, B. (2011). *Rivers of London*. Gollancz.

during the events of the fourth novel, which creates even more tension.

Aaronovitch is very good at making the characters believable and compelling, and even the supernatural beings act truly human. Although a few reviews suggest that the characters are shallow and some of the minor characters only support stereotypical views,⁹² I found most of the interactions and backstories intriguing and delightful.

6.4. Reception

The portrayal of women in Aaronovitch's books, while at times focusing excessively on their physical features, does not necessarily warrant labelling the author as sexist. I did feel uncomfortable reading a few possibly bothersome passages. However, I disagree with painting the author a sexist. Female characters make their own decisions for themselves, they do not serve as a mere accessory to the men's adventures, they have their own plans, strong voices, and real power. Peter is objectively immature, but it progressively improves in the successive books.

⁹² Aaronovitch, B. (2012, January 23). *A Year of Reviews*. Temporarily Significant. <http://temporarilysignificant.blogspot.com/2012/01/year-of-reviews.html>

7. Literary Analysis of the Rivers of London Series

7.1. The Worlds of Rivers of London

Considering Aaronovitch's story worlds, there are two spaces that deserve a thorough exploration. The first, quite obviously, is the UK's capital. But there is a microcosm within London, which should be assessed on its own, and that is "*the official home of English magic since 1775*" - The Folly⁹³. Peter Grant moves into the Folly, which is a police station according to protocol, where he becomes Nightingale's apprentice.

7.1.1. The Folly

The term "Folly" in the *Rivers of London* book series refers to the headquarters of the Special Assessment Unit (SAU) and the living quarters of its members but also to the organization itself. Situated on the southern side of London's Russell Square, amidst a line of Georgian terraces, the Folly holds a significant position approximately one kilometre north of Covent Garden, neighbouring the British Museum.

The description of Peter first coming to the Folly attests to the importance of the location within the story and its alignment with the broader setting of London. The portraiture of the entrance conveys a sense of grandeur and distinction compared to its surroundings. The "grander flight of stairs," "double mahogany doors with brass fittings," and the motto "SCIENTIA POTESTAS EST"^{94,95} carved above the lintel all contribute to an atmosphere of authority. This suggests that the Folly is not just a regular building but a place of power and knowledge.

Moreover, the location in the vicinity of Russell Square and the British Museum, holds symbolic importance. By situating the Folly near Russell Square, which also boasts quite a few literary connections, such as Virginia Woolf's *Night and day* or Stanislas-André Steeman's *The Murderer Lives at Number 21*, as well as a literally book-related association – Black Books, Aaronovitch leverages the setting to incorporate historical and scholarly

⁹³ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Also, Peter struggles with deciphering the motto, which adds even more personality to his character, and „geeky“ humour to the series.

elements with the liminal aspects of the urban landscape. Additionally, this alignment might point out the idea that magic and the supernatural are not separate from London's reality but are indispensable for its identity.

In the same fashion, the proximity of the Folly to Covent Garden, a bustling area known for its entertainment and commerce, suggests that while the world goes about its daily activities, unaware of the supernatural forces at play, the Folly stands as a bastion against the darkness, protecting the city and its inhabitants, safeguarding the Queen's peace.⁹⁶ Inspector Nightingale, the protagonist's mentor, embodies an intriguing contrast. Though he maintains a facade of vitality, there's an indication of his unusual aging process. Moreover, Nightingale struggles to adapt to the advancements of technology, reluctant to embrace modernity.

With its inception dating back to 1775, The Folly has been recognized as the official epicentre of English magic for centuries.⁹⁷ The moniker originates from the historical context wherein its original members, initially known as the Society of the Wise, convened within a simulated medieval tower. Sir Isaac Newton, credited as the organization's founder, established the first structured approach to magic, signifying its motto "Scientia Potestas Est" ("knowledge is power"). The Folly's architecture, a grand Regency house erected by James Burton circa 1796, reflects an amalgamation of architectural styles, potentially mistaken as Victorian to the untrained eye due to its proximity to the era.

Transitioning from the exterior portrayal of the Folly, Peter invites us to inspect the interior in his own movie-esque experience:

"I pressed the brass doorbell but I couldn't hear it ring through the thick doors. After a moment, they opened on their own. It might have been the traffic noise, but I swear I didn't hear a motor or any kind of mechanism at all. Toby whined and hid behind my legs."⁹⁸

Peter's profession requires him to be analytical and cautious, qualities that are on full display as he approaches the mysterious house. His attention to detail allows him to pick up on subtle cues that others might overlook, such as the absence of a motor or mechanism when the doors open. At the same time, Peter's arrival at the house seems straight out of a suspenseful thriller. The brass doorbell, a classic feature of old mansions, adds to the

⁹⁶ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

intrigue. The fact that he could not hear it ring through the thick doors suggests a sense of isolation as if the house is deliberately shutting out the outside world. The doors opening on their own evoke a sense of the supernatural or the uncanny, hinting at hidden forces at play within the house, leaving Peter (and the reader) unsettled and questioning what might happen next.

The colligation of the mundane (traffic noise) with the inexplicable (doors opening on their own) creates a dissonance and sets stage for the strange events that are sure to unfold. Toby's reaction, whining and hiding behind Peter's legs, albeit not so prominent, serves as a mirror for Peter's own anxiety, reinforcing the sense that something is not quite right about this place. The dog's instincts, often attuned to danger, suggest that Peter may be walking into a situation far more perilous than he realizes. Although there is no harm waiting for him at the Folly, the trouble he gets himself into working for the SAU cannot be left unnoticed.

Later, as Peter navigates the corridors of the Folly, the readers gain more sense of its history. The description of the wooden doors and dust sheets⁹⁹ suggests a building in transition, with mysteries waiting to be uncovered. Nightingale's presentation of the Folly provides insight into its layout and purpose as he shows Peter the various rooms and facilities in the building, including the dining room, lounge, smoking room, library, lecture hall, kitchens, sculleries and wine cellar. The mention of unused rooms and spaces, such as the dining room and lounge, hints at the Folly's past grandeur and the changes it has undergone over time.

"Beyond the booth, flanked by two neoclassical pillars, was a marble statue of a man dressed in an academic gown and breeches. He cradled a mighty tome in one arm and a sextant in the other. His square face held an expression of implacable curiosity, and I knew his name even before I saw the plinth, which read:

Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night;

God said 'Let Newton be' and all was light¹⁰⁰

The expression "implacable curiosity" reflects the ethos of the Folly itself, a place dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the study of magic. The inclusion of the statue and a tribute to Sir Isaac Newton deepens the sense of history and tradition within the Folly.

⁹⁹ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*.

The building's internal structure boasts several notable features, including a central atrium, libraries dedicated to classical or magical texts, and a series of specialized rooms such as laboratories and a firing range. Despite its historical roots and evolution, the Folly presently operates as a department within the Metropolitan Police, tasked with handling "special" affairs across the British Empire and maintaining alliances with governmental organisations like MI6. Moving to the Folly, Peter Grant cements his role as Nightingale's wizard apprentice, studying the arcane arts under his mentor's guidance. Following unforeseeable events of the first novel, Lesley, Grant's colleague turned foe turned friend again, moves to the Folly a bit later, slightly changing the dynamic of the house. As she grapples with her own personal journey, Lesley's fate contributes significantly to the evolving narrative of magical practice within the series.

Ensuring that the Folly operates smoothly, there is Molly, an enigmatic housekeeper, whose mysterious origins point at a supernatural lineage.

She was slender and dressed like an Edwardian maid, complete with a starched white bib apron over a full black skirt and white cotton blouse. Her face didn't fit her outfit, being too long and sharp-boned with black, almond-shaped eyes. Despite her mob cap she wore her hair loose, a black curtain that fell to her waist. She instantly gave me the creeps, and not just because I've seen too many Japanese horror films.¹⁰¹

Described as "indispensable," Molly's presence at the Folly provides an aura of intrigue. Peter's immediate reaction to Molly, noting that she gives him "the creeps," underscores the mysterious atmosphere surrounding her character. This visceral response suggests that there is something uncanny about her demeanour or presence. The reference to Japanese horror films adds a contemporary intertextuality to Peter's unease, implying that Molly's unsettling aura taps into a universal fear of the unknown.

Together, the inhabitants of the Folly navigate the intricacies of magical practice and the challenges that arise from their involvement in the world of supernatural. The Folly transcends its physical manifestation as a mere building and emerges as a symbol of intricate complexity, akin to a labyrinth. Drawing upon the tradition of fantasy and gothic fiction, where labyrinths often symbolize enigma or danger, the Folly becomes a metaphorical maze. Within its walls lie not only physical corridors and hidden chambers but also the complexities of magical practice and the human condition itself. Just as

¹⁰¹ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

protagonists in such narratives navigate labyrinthine landscapes to uncover hidden truths and confront inner demons, characters within the *Rivers of London* series traverse the complexities of the Folly to confront adversaries, and deal with their own inner turmoil. Thus, the Folly emerges not solely as a static setting but as a dynamic symbol, evoking themes of mystery resonating with motifs commonly found in fantasy and gothic fiction.

As Peter settles into the Folly, he takes on the task of cleaning and refurbishing the neglected coach house, which embodies a profound transition, both physical and metaphorical. His meticulous examination of the coach house reveals not only his keen eye for detail but also his desire to understand the history of his new home. Peter observes, "*I couldn't tell whether the coach house had originally been built with a first floor... which had then been knocked through in the 1920s...*"¹⁰² This quote shows his analytical nature and his determination to unravel the mysteries surrounding the Folly. The discovery of the abandoned art studio within the coach house speaks to the layers of mystery that permeate the house, hinting at the secrets hidden within its walls. Peter's decision to clean and refurbish the space reflects his determination to make it his own, a symbol of his journey towards integration into the magical world he now inhabits. He remarks, "*This, I thought, will do nicely.*"¹⁰³, which illustrates his satisfaction with the potential of the space and his willingness to invest time and effort into its renovation. Moreover, his consideration for inviting Lesley over and his efforts to modernize the coach house highlight his commitment to forging connections and creating a sense of belonging within his new environment. He states, "*To inaugurate my re-entry into the twenty-first century I ordered some pizza and invited Lesley round to see my etchings.*"¹⁰⁴ His transformation from an outsider to a part of this enigmatic establishment mirrors his own evolution as a character, as he embraces the challenges and opportunities that come with his newfound position of an apprentice.

¹⁰² Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

7.1.2. London

London, much like the Folly within the *Rivers of London* series, can be perceived as a labyrinth due to its intricate layout and cultural depth. With its winding streets and myriad neighbourhoods, London presents itself as a complex network of paths and passages. Aaronovitch created his own version of 21st-century London enriched with a slightly concealed magical world. The UK's capital plays a crucial role in the story, as the author has decided to take the readers on a magnificent tour through a native's eyes, showcasing the city's unique charm. Along with the protagonist getting acquainted with all the creatures and the new rules of magic, the readers are allowed to digest all of that gradually. The London in the series is inhabited by characters who fall into the categories posed by Doležal¹⁰⁵: "physically impossible beings: gods, ghosts, monsters", the so-called "hybrid persons" (heroes of myths, fables and legends) and "inanimate objects personified in the supernatural world". All achieve their (unnatural) markings due to deviations which are discovered by the reader during the process of naturalization during activation of a certain reference level.

7.1.2.1 Multiculturalism

The presence of a mixed-race protagonist and culturally diverse characters in Ben Aaronovitch's work has sparked discourse regarding authorial perspective and representation within literature. In examining Aaronovitch's portrayal of a multicultural London, particularly the treatment of African women within the narrative, it becomes evident that his personal background significantly impacts his writing. Raised in a London neighbourhood characterized by a substantial African immigrant population, Aaronovitch's experiences offer insight into the cultural dynamics he portrays. While acknowledging the increasing diversity in speculative, questions arise regarding the authors with no comparable experience depicting such perspectives. Despite potential concerns of cultural appropriation, Aaronovitch's personal connections to multiculturalism, including his marriage to a woman of African descent and their mixed-race child, promise a nuanced understanding that contributes to the authenticity of his portrayal. This prompts broader discussion about the role of authors in accurately and respectfully depicting characters and

¹⁰⁵ Doležal, Lubomír (1998). *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. p. 116

scenarios beyond their own backgrounds. While some argue for the necessity of diverse representation, others advocate for the importance of empathy and the ability to depict diverse experiences regardless of the author's identity. Ultimately, the debate accentuates the ongoing dialogue surrounding representation and authenticity within literature.¹⁰⁶

A contributor on the Goodreads online forum highlights the rarity of encountering well-executed portrayals of POC characters, citing Christopher Paolini's *Nasuada* as a notable exception.¹⁰⁷ Their observation stresses the disparity between the overwhelming white representation among authors and the limited inclusion of diverse perspectives in speculative fiction narratives. Furthermore, the commenter challenges the reluctance among some white authors to incorporate POC characters, emphasizing the feasibility of creating nuanced portrayals without resorting to racist stereotypes while acknowledging the importance of conducting thorough research to avoid perpetuating harmful tropes. Then again, Aaronovitch is more than aware of the "whiteness" of speculative fiction, and he is actively trying to support marginalized voices, for example by funding an Award exclusively for unpublished writers of colour now called *The Future Worlds Prize*.

This is what Aaronovitch said upon launching the new award.:

*"There's a problem with British speculative fiction – it lacks diversity. It is, in fact, whiter than a polar bear in a snowstorm who's decided to redecorate their cave with Dulux's brand new white, with a touch of white collection."*¹⁰⁸

The diversity of the characters' ethnic backgrounds is evident in many of the novel's key characters: The protagonist's mother is of Sierra Leonean origin; her customs being often brought into the spotlight. Abigail Kamara, Peter's cousin and later the Folly's junior apprentice, is also of mixed race with her father being from Sierra Leone. Constable Sahra Guleed comes from Somalia and most of Mother Thames's family are all of African descent. A pathologist well-versed in the more obscure parts of murder investigation, having cooperated with inspector Nightingale for a long time, Abdul Haqq Walid is of Scottish origin, and the only Muslim in his family, possibly having changed his name after converting. Varvara Sidorovna is a female practitioner from the former USSR. Besides, there are characters whose ethnicity has not been directly addressed but could be guessed based on

¹⁰⁶ The Sword and Laser - RoL: *White authors writing BIPOC protagonists?* Showing 1-27 of 27. (n.d.). <https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/22278787-rol-white-authors-writing-bipoc-protagonists>

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, contributor's username: Nico

¹⁰⁸ Sankey, B. (2019, September 27). *The Gollancz and Rivers of London BAME Award*. Gollancz. <https://www.gollancz.co.uk/news/2019/09/27/the-gollancz-and-rivers-of-london-bame-award/>

their surnames (Detective Inspector Miriam Stephanopoulos, Sergeant Jaget Kumar.) The series reflects the diversity of London itself, featuring a richly diverse cast of characters including people of colour, disabled individuals, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. This diversity is portrayed in a natural and organic manner, without actively excluding certain groups. Moreover, the series explores themes of identity and belonging through the character of Peter Grant.

7.1.2.2 Life in London

In the *Rivers of London* series, Aaronovitch vividly captures London's unique essence through various dimensions. The narrative discusses the cautious demeanour of Londoners towards strangers, likening acts of kindness to extreme sports - one of the first lines of the first novel is what really caught my interest and got me excited for what I was about to read. As a matter of fact, the sardonic introduction neatly illustrates the character of London:

"Being a seasoned Londoner, Martin gave the body the 'London once - over' – a quick glance to determine whether this was a drunk, a crazy or a human being in distress. The fact that it was entirely possible for someone to be all three simultaneously is why good-Samaritanism in London is considered an extreme sport – like base-jumping or crocodile-wrestling. Martin, noting the good-quality coat and shoes, had just pegged the body as a drunk when he noticed that it was in fact missing its head."¹⁰⁹

Having represented the Londoners exquisitely, Aaronovitch also pokes fun into their intrinsic habit of judging every house, from its architecture to interior design and estimated price. Quite frankly, I have imagined what Peter would have thought about my own home on multiple occasions. The following excerpt shows him making accurate assumptions about a person he is investigating:

The bathroom was professionally sparkling but I was hoping that whoever the cleaner was she'd drawn the line at going into the bedrooms. Judging by the combination old sock and ganja smell in the smaller of the two bedrooms she had indeed. Zach's bedroom, I guessed."¹¹⁰

Detailed descriptions of iconic landmarks and traffic, together with the ever-changing local weather truly paints a tangible picture of the city's character. Aaronovitch also explores British cuisine, from traditional greasy spoon fare to the renowned curry.

"(T)he catering staff were a mixture of compact Polish women and skinny Somali men, a strange kind of institutional inertia meant that the food was classic English greasy spoon, the

¹⁰⁹ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

¹¹⁰ Aaronovitch, B. *Whispers Underground*

coffee was bad and the tea was hot, sweet and came in mugs."¹¹¹

Through Peter's bookish nature, he even focuses on the evolution of London slang (blowers, one-unders...), tracing its roots from historical terms to modern expressions used in the city. Additionally, historical anecdotes such as those about Camden Market shed light on London's organic growth, including the contribution of Irish navvies in shaping its infrastructure through features like the Regents Canal, anchoring the narrative in the richness of London's cultural heritage. London landmarks are an integral part of the city as well as Peter Grant's adventures. A nice touch is how all the chapters in *Whispers Underground* refer to the Place Names. Aaronovitch's portrayal encapsulates the vibrant mosaic of London, evoking a sense of constantly evolving urban environment.

Furthermore, Aaronovitch's descriptions of London's spirit are vividly accurate. Although I've only visited London couple times, the capital is well and alive in my memory and in my imagination, probably even more in the latter than the first, given how many stories I devoured take place there. When Aaronovitch decides to portray London with anthropomorphism, it makes the bustling London come out even more:

*"It was a cold miserable day in October when I headed out of London. (...) However, London remained indifferent. She never cares when you leave her because she knows that for every one that leaves, two more arrive. Besides, she was too preoccupied applying her neon lipstick and dressing up in red and gold."*¹¹²

In this passage, Aaronovitch personifies London as a woman, a "she" who embodies the city's indifference and perpetual allure. This characterization reflects London's timeless and resilient nature. The city, like a grand lady, is too occupied with her own beauty and vibrancy to be concerned with individual departures. The metaphor of applying neon lipstick and dressing up in red and gold affirms London's dynamic development and flamboyant character. It portrays the city as ever-changing, constantly reinventing itself, yet always confident in its ability to attract new people and experiences.

Aaronovitch's depiction resonates with anyone who has ever experienced the city's magnetic charm, reinforcing the idea that London, in all its complexity, is very much alive. The personification of London as a woman parallels his depiction of other entities within the series, such as Mama Thames and the other *genii locorum*. These characters, like London,

¹¹¹ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

¹¹² Aaronovitch, B. *Moon over Soho*.

are similarly anthropomorphized, each representing the unique character of their domains. This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of the urban environment and its natural features.

7.1.3. London Under – Whispers Underground

The third book from Ben Aaronovitch's series *Whispers Underground* delves into the subterranean territories. Peter's cousin Abigail thinks she discovered a ghost living on the railway tracks in an old tunnel beneath her school, so she seeks out "the witchfinder"¹¹³. When Peter inspects the tracks, he only manages to disturb a strange young man who was spraying something on the wall.

Soon after, Peter is called to investigate a murder at the Baker Street Underground station. The evidence found is beaming with the magical imprint (vestigium), prompting Peter and Nightingale to take the case. By the end of the book, Peter's arch-enemy, The Faceless Man, remains at large, but clues are coming together, hinting at a grand, explosive match-up in the next instalment.

Throughout the series, readers are treated to an educational experience on London's neighbourhoods and police procedures. In *Whispers Underground*, this includes a peek into the British Transport Police (BTP) and the vast underground system, which might include secret tunnels and even a community living in the sewers. The idea is revisited and refuted on multiple occasions, until Peter meets the Quiet people and understands who they are.

The Quiet People, or Whisperers, are a group who have lived beneath London for generations, not in the sewers, but in their own comfortable tunnels.¹¹⁴ They are harmless potters who use a form of magic through singing when working with clay. Individual Quiet People have attempted to acclimatize to life above ground, but they primarily remain a hidden society beneath the city. This underground society could reference various historical and literary underground groups, such as the Morlocks in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, who live below the surface and represent a darker, hidden aspect of society. Additionally, the Quiet People might symbolise the hidden Jewish communities in medieval European cities or the early Christian communities who met in catacombs to escape persecution.

Similarly, Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* presents a fantastical vision of London, where a hidden world exists beneath the city's streets. The London Below parallels the themes of *Whispers Underground*, highlighting the idea of a dual city – the visible London and its hidden, mystical counterpart. Both narratives emphasize the symbolic significance of these hidden

¹¹³ Aaronovitch, B. *Whispers Underground*.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

layers of the city as places of danger. In *Neverwhere*, Neil Gaiman even describes a menacing Minotaur-like creature, the Beast of London. However, in reality, no historical references support the existence of such a creature lurking in the London underground. Gaiman's Beast seems to be a creative liberty taken to enhance the novel's fantastical elements.

This is not to say that wild animals beneath London are entirely fictional. In *London: The Biography*, Peter Ackroyd provides a fascinating account of the various animal remains found beneath the city's streets. Ackroyd writes about the discovery of skeletons of sharks and elephants embedded in London's clay and about mammoth remains found near King's Cross or lions at Charing Cross. He recounts how, in 1682, the poet John Dryden acknowledged the forgotten and invisible landscape of London, filled with remnants of primeval creatures.¹¹⁵ The underground of London has yielded fossils which are all evidence of the wild animals that once roamed the prehistoric landscape of the Thames Valley.

7.2. The Magic in the Series

In the first book of the series, the story revolves around the investigation led by Peter and his team into a series of crimes orchestrated by the malevolent ghost of Mr. Punch, a character from the *Punch and Judy* puppet play. This “spirit of riot and rebellion”¹¹⁶, forces other ghosts to invade people’s minds and use them as human puppets to reenact scenes from *Punch and Judy*, resulting in harm or death to the victims. The team’s plan to stop Pyke’s ghost involves following the script of *Punch and Judy*, with Peter and Nightingale obtaining a warrant for Pyke’s arrest signed by a ghost Magistrate. However, their plan backfires when Nightingale is shot, and Peter realizes that Lesley has been possessed by Pyke and playing a double role.¹¹⁷

In an effort to save Lesley and prevent further harm, Peter enlists the help of Molly, to travel to the spirit realm. Through Molly’s blood magic, Peter enters the spiritual realm of London, where he confronts Pyke, who is revealed to be the malevolent spirit Punch. Peter chases Punch through London’s history, eventually calling upon Father Thames for

¹¹⁵ Ackroyd, P. (2020) *London: The Biography*. Chatto & Windus. pp. 9-10

¹¹⁶ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

¹¹⁷ Siranko, J. *The supernatural in detective fiction*. p. 57

assistance. With Father Thames' guidance, Peter defeats Punch by stabbing him with a pilum, making a sacrifice to the gods. Following Punch's defeat, Peter returns to the present and saves Lesley by persuading Pyke to willingly leave her body. The murder mystery is resolved, and Peter facilitates a ceremonial exchange between Father and Mother Thames to cement ties between the two halves of the river.¹¹⁸

This sequence of events showcases the blend of supernatural and historical elements within the novel, as well as the themes of sacrifice, redemption, and the consequences of unchecked power.

7.2.1. The Cost of Magic

In many fictional works, including the *Rivers of London* series, magic often comes with a cost. This thematic element explores the idea that the use of magical abilities or the invocation of supernatural forces is not without consequences, and characters who wield such powers must often grapple with the price they pay for doing so.

One aspect of the cost of magic is a personal sacrifice: the practitioners often have to dedicate themselves to rigorous training and apprenticeship to master their magical abilities. This commitment requires them to make sacrifices in terms of time and effort, but often also personal pursuits. Moreover, the use of powerful spells or rituals may take a toll on their well-being, leading to exhaustion, injury, or other adverse effects. For example, during his normal practice, Peter muses, "*If the magic was still being sucked out of my head, how many could I put up simultaneously before my brain shrivelled?*"¹¹⁹ indicating the physical strain that magic places on the practitioners, while also highlighting the physiological cost of magic that is at work in Aaronovitch's world.

On the part of the pathological consequences of magical practice, there is a progressive and potentially fatal damage to the human brain, the "*thaumaturgical necrosis*"¹²⁰, which can be caused by a prolonged or intense exposure to magic. For example, Dr. Walid's examination of Michael 'the Bone' Adjayi's brain section showed "*the tell-tale neurological damage that was indicative of hyperthaumaturgical degradation – which is what kills you if you do too*

¹¹⁸ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

¹¹⁹ Aaronovitch, B. *Moon over Soho*.

¹²⁰ Aaronovitch, B. *Whispers Underground*.

much magic". This medical examination emphasizes the physical dangers that come along with excessive use of magic.

The clinical manifestations of HTD, as described by Dr. Jennifer Vaughan¹²¹, provide insight into the nature of the damage inflicted on the brain. The comparison to physical needlesticks highlights the severity of the injury and the potential for long-term neurological impairment.

The inclusion of characters who have succumbed to HTD-related fatalities, such as Albert Woodville-Gentle, Christina Chorley, and Tony Harden, and emphasizes the various complications that can arise from magical use, including weakening of blood vessels and susceptibility to cerebrovascular events.

References to HTD-related fatalities during Night Witch training in the USSR provide historical context and suggest that the risks associated with magical practice have been recognized and studied across different nations and time periods, adding depth to the world-building and mythology of the series.

Another dimension of the cost of magic involves ethical dilemmas and moral compromises. Characters may be tempted to use magic for selfish or unethical purposes, leading to moral conflicts and inner turmoil. Nightingale's adherence to a code of conduct and his commitment to serving the greater good highlight the ethical considerations inherent in the practice of magic. The use of magic can also impose a psychological burden on characters, causing emotional distress or trauma. Characters may grapple with feelings of guilt, inadequacy, or existential angst as they confront the vastness and unpredictability of the magical realm.

Moreover, magic often has unintended consequences that result in harm to innocent bystanders. The collateral damage might exacerbate the challenges faced by law enforcement and it does no good to Peter's reputation. This uncontrollable aspect of magic underscores the unpredictable and potentially destructive nature of supernatural forces, stressing the need for caution in their use. Finally, the cost of magic may involve loss and grief, as characters experience the consequences of their actions in the form of destruction or irrevocable change.

¹²¹ Aaronovitch, B. (2016). *The Hanging Tree*. Gollancz.

In my examination of the cost of magic, the character of Lesley May serves as a compelling example. This section of my thesis reveals important plot details, and many of the events and connections are uncovered in subsequent volumes of the series, which are not within the scope of my thesis. However, I find it crucial to look at Lesley's story more closely.

Her journey from a dedicated police officer to a conflicted and tormented antagonist in Ben Aaronovitch's series is a poignant exploration of the high cost of magic. Following the events of the first book, where she is possessed (sequestered)¹²² by a malevolent spirit, Lesley deals with severe facial injuries and a temporary loss of voice. Her face is grotesquely disfigured, and she wears a mask to cover her wounds. The physical trauma, compounded by the emotional and psychological scars, leaves her vulnerable, which is probably what made her an easy target for the Faceless Man who starts to subtly influence her and basically capitalizes on her desperation and pain.

The turning point in Lesley's journey occurs during a private conversation with Varvara Sidorovna and Albert Woodvill-Gentle (the first Faceless Man). This meeting, where Lesley reveals her disfigured face, marks the moment when the Faceless Man sees an opportunity to manipulate her. Albert Woodvill-Gentle also conveys Lesley's potential to his successor, Faceless Man 2. Her betrayal of the Folly stemmed from Nightingale's inability to fix her face, a stark contrast to the Faceless Man's promise of a magical solution, and an indicator of Lesley's selfish attitude.

Lesley's double-dealing becomes evident during the events of "Broken Homes," but the full realization of what she has become involved with likely comes later. Deeply pragmatic and brutally realistic, Lesley analyses her situation and chooses to continue her path with the villain. Her transformation is driven by a combination of desperation and her own unyielding willpower. Her story is one of profound loss – the loss of her physical attributes, her moral compass, and ultimately, her loyalty. The power she gains through magic comes at the expense of her integrity, it demonstrates how the pursuit of magical power and/or healing can lead to devastating consequences, corrupting even the most steadfast individuals.

Post *Broken Homes*, Lesley remains a morally ambiguous figure, driven primarily by personal vendettas. Her fixation on revenge against Punch and maintaining her newly altered

¹²² Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

appearance illustrate her singular focus and determination, often at the expense of ethical considerations or her established alliances with others. Throughout time, Lesley grapples with the consequences of her choices, including the toll on her mental and physical health from the intense use of magic. Maintaining her appearance through magic further complicates her psychological stability and hints at the potential complications like the hyperthaumaturgical degradation.

7.2.2. Magical Encounters

While the genii locorum, such as Mama Thames, Father Thames, Lady Tyburn, Beverley, Oxley, and other deities, are integral to the story of *Rivers of London*, there is a plethora of other supernatural entities and lesser-known beings who the readers can attempt to understand along with Peter, the protagonist.

Ghosts in *Rivers of London* represent a unique category of magical beings. Their existence is tied to vestigia, which are imprints of significant events or strong emotions that linger in the physical world. The encounter with Nicholas Wallpenny, a ghost who was the only witness of the first murder in the books, marked the pivotal moment that turned Peter Grant's life upside down, introducing him abruptly to the world of magic and the supernatural.

"I ain't worried about anything any more, squire," Nicholas had remarked, his spectral presence defying Peter's understanding of life and death. *"On account of having been dead these last hundred and twenty years."*

Another point the ghost proposes hints at Peter's unique abilities and perceptiveness and at the same time it almost naively showcases the convergence of past and present:

"You must have a touch of the sight," said Nicholas. *"Some of the old Palladino."* He looked at me closely. *"Touch of that from your father, maybe? Dockman, was he, sailor, some such thing, he gave you that good curly hair and them lips?"*¹²³

According to John Polidori, a ghost is the spirit of a deceased person that attaches itself to a specific area and feeds on residual magical energy. When the energy source diminishes, the ghost gradually fades away.¹²⁴

Vampires, on the other hand, are portrayed as predators of a different kind, feeding not on blood alone but on magical potential. Their chilling aura of 'anti-life' drains magical

¹²³ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

energies, setting them apart from the symbiotic relationship seen with the *genii locorum*. The encounter where Peter and Nightingale confront these vampires vividly portrays their predatory nature, emphasizing their role as hunters of magical essence at the moment of death. This exploration adds layers to their existence, revealing a deeper connection to the magical ecosystem and the dangers they pose to its delicate balance.

Vampires in the series are depicted not just as bloodsuckers but as entities that drain magical potential from their surroundings. This parasitic behaviour contrasts sharply with the symbiotic relationship of the *genii locorum*. In one encounter, Peter and Nightingale confront vampires that exude an aura of 'anti-life'.

"I shivered as we went down the narrow stairs. It was cold, like descending into a freezer... This wasn't physical cold, this had to be a type of vestigium. Nightingale paused, shifted his weight and flexed his shoulders like a boxer preparing to fight."

...

'What are you going to be doing?'

*'I'm going to cover you,' he said. 'In case they wake up.'*¹²⁵

This scene vividly portrays the chilling presence of vampires and their life-draining nature. The explanation that vampires hunt for magical potential, particularly at the moment of death, augments the uncanny flavour of their connection to the supernatural ecosystem.

Molly, the fae housekeeper of the Folly, introduces another fascinating supernatural element. Despite her human-like appearance, her abilities and behaviours distinctly mark her as fae. Her silent presence and sharp teeth hint at her non-human nature, and her history suggests a transformation or lineage deeply affected by magic.

Nightingale describes her kind of fae as those who 'were changed by magic, or they were born into lineages that have been changed. And as far as I know, this leaves them incomplete.

Molly's character embodies the vulnerability and mystery of the fae in the series. Her reluctance to leave the Folly and her fear of exploitation underscore the precarious position of fae beings in a world where magic can both empower and endanger them.

From ghosts and vampires to fae and trolls, each entity contributes uniquely to the story,

¹²⁵ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

reflecting various aspects of magic and its interaction with the physical world. These encounters not only advance the plot but also deepen the reader's understanding of the complex and often perilous magical ecosystem that Peter Grant navigates.

7.3. The Liminal Aspects of the Series

In the *Rivers of London* series, the concept of liminality is explored through various characters and settings, each exemplifying the transitional and boundary-crossing themes. The Folly, for instance, is a conceptually classic liminal place. Located on Russell Square, this building houses a magical institution that, while having no official standing, cooperates with the Metropolitan Police on supernatural cases. It occupies a boundary between the ordinary world and the magical. This dual existence is reinforced by its operations, which involve both modern policing and ancient magic, making it a metaphorical threshold that Peter must cross, signifying his initiation into the unknown.

The Rivers (Mama and Father Thames and their children) themselves are quintessentially liminal, presenting an intriguing combination of human-like appearances and their true nature as ancient *genii locorum*. This duality highlights the transformative themes that are central to the narrative. These river deities operate within the city of London, a modern urban environment, yet their powers are deeply connected to the natural world and its ancient origins. The presence of these liminal beings in the city creates spaces where the boundaries between the natural and the urban, the ancient and the modern, are constantly negotiated.

The rivers interact with the human characters on a relatable level, harbouring relationships and frequently being part of conflicts that drive the plot forward. However, they possess distinct personalities and exhibit behaviours that are intrinsically linked to their identities as river spirits. For instance, Mama Thames, who appears as a formidable matriarchal figure, governs her domain with maternal care and authoritative control, embodying the nurturing and destructive aspects of a river. Her interactions with Peter and other characters are marked by both human warmth and divine detachment, illustrating her liminal position.

Peter's first encounter with Mama Thames speaks for the concept through the vivid and intricate portrayal of her character. This meeting is a masterful demonstration of how a mundane setting can transform into a space brimming with supernatural significance. Upon

entering the room, the protagonist observes a striking scene: a collection of middle-aged African women reminiscent of a Pentecostal church gathering, all scrutinizing him.¹²⁶ This setting immediately introduces a sense of the familiar yet unusual, signalling a space where different worlds converge, as she governs the threshold between them. From an alternative standpoint, the true embodiment of liminality is Mama Thames herself, whose presence dominates the room with an otherworldly aura. She is depicted as a figure of immense power and beauty, seated on an armchair that resembles a throne. Her physical appearance, with hair braided and tipped with gold, a face smooth and perfect as a child's, signals her divine nature. Her attire, made of the finest gold Austrian lace, further enhances her regal image. The description of her surroundings - emitting the scents of salt water, coffee, diesel, bananas, chocolate, and fish guts¹²⁷, evokes the bustling and diverse nature of the Thames itself, encapsulating the myriad elements that the river supports. The sensory details used to describe Mama Thames' presence create a powerful glamour which reinforces the liminal nature of the encounter, likening the experience to being swept away by a tide. Furthermore, Mother Thames' dialogue with the protagonist discloses her ongoing work as a mediator between different worlds. Her authoritative tone and the reference to an "agreement" or "arrangement" suggest her involvement in maintaining the balance.

Similarly, her children, who represent different tributaries and aspects of the Thames, exhibit characteristics that reflect their watery origins. The concept of *genii locorum* itself reinforces the theme of liminality. These deities are intrinsically tied to specific places in nature, their existence highlighting the connection between the physical and metaphysical realms, as they personify the histories of their respective geographies.

Thomas Nightingale, the enigmatic master of the Folly, epitomizes liminality through his person. As a magician inspector, he straddles the line between the normal and the "weird", often finding himself in conflict with some of his colleagues, mainly Detective Chief Inspector Seawoll who says things like: "*I don't want any of your X-Files shit getting in the way of proper police work.*"¹²⁸ To which Nightingale reacts in a following manner:

¹²⁶ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

'I can assure you, Inspector,' said Nightingale, 'I have no intention of getting in your way.'"¹²⁹

His physical description—appearing in his early forties but born in 1900—adds to his liminal nature, as does his unusual aging process. Nightingale began to age backward, allegedly after the events of 1966. Nightingale's very being and function in the narrative, his gentlemanly behaviour and occasional annoyance with the modern times but appreciation for the global cuisine of London, make him a solid sample of liminality.

Peter, Nightingale's apprentice, possesses inherently liminal characteristics due to his ethnicity and his role as a mediator. His mixed heritage highlights ongoing issues within the police force, and his (although sparse) experiences with micro-aggressions reflect the additional societal boundaries he transgresses. Professionally, Peter stands at the threshold between ordinary police work and the supernatural cases handled by the Folly. This duality allows him to bridge gaps between characters and worlds, particularly evident in his interactions with Father Thames and Mama Thames.

Additionally, Toby the ghost-hunting dog embodies liminality in a unique way. Originally a regular dog, Toby's sensitivity to vestigia—supernatural residues—places him in a unique position. Toby's reactions to vestigia, quantified by the Yap Scale, highlight his transitional post of both a companion and a supernatural detector.

In another but similar vein, Molly, the maid, occupies a fragile threshold of domesticity and the eerie. She performs homely tasks, such as preparing food and doing laundry which could be associated with a human housekeeper. However, her behaviours and characteristics such as eating raw meat, inhuman laughter, and her startling physical features clearly mark her as something other. Her actions tend to be normal: keeping the household running, playing with the dog and teasing him with pieces of meat. Nevertheless, when she eats the raw meat herself and reveals her sharp teeth and prehensile tongue, the atmosphere abruptly shifts. This moment of transition not only shocks Peter but also emphasizes the fluidity of Molly's identity, as she smoothly moves between roles that are both comforting and disturbing.

"Molly didn't see me watching as she dipped her hand into the mixing bowl and lifted out a cube of chopped meat – raw enough to be dripping.

Toby barked with excitement as Molly teased him with the meat for a moment before sending it flying towards him with an expert flick of her wrist. Toby did an impressive jump

¹²⁹ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

from a sitting position and caught the meat in mid-air. At the sight of Toby chewing industriously while turning tight little circles, Molly began to laugh – the rhythmic hissing sound I'd heard earlier.

Molly picked up another cube of meat and waved it at Toby, who did a little dance of doggy anticipation. This time Molly faked him out, hissing at his confused twirling and then, when she was sure he was watching, popping the bloody piece of meat in her own mouth. Toby barked crossly but Molly stuck out an unnaturally long and prehensile tongue at him.

I must have gasped or shifted my weight because Molly leaped off the table and spun to face me. Eyes wide, mouth open to reveal sharp pointed teeth and blood, bright red against her pale skin, dribbling down her chin. Then she clamped her hand over her mouth and with a look of startled shame ran silently from the kitchen. Toby gave me an irritated growl.¹³⁰

The series also features other characters who illustrate liminality through their unique positions and attributes. For example, Mr. Punch and Henry Pyke are theatrical and gothic villains whose identities and actions blur boundaries. Mr. Punch compels others to commit crimes, transforming them into his clones, which merges their identities with his. Henry Pyke's changing identities and performative wickedness highlight the fluidity and instability of his character. Their connection with acting and audience participation underscores the liminal space between reality and performance.

Moreover, the Quiet People, or Whisperers, live beneath London in their own tunnels, representing a hidden society that parallels the surface world. Their subterranean existence and use of magic through singing position them at the boundary between the known city and an unseen, magical underworld. This hidden society reflects historical underground groups, symbolizing the tension between visibility and invisibility.

Furthermore, Zachary Palmer, a half-fae character, navigates the threshold between human and fae worlds. His heritage and the role of an odd-job man in the London Demi-monde place him in a transitional state, constantly shifting between different realms and identities. His nickname "Goblin-boy" and his loose relationship with the truth further emphasize his fluid and liminal nature.

Peter, naturally, collaborates with police force beyond Nightingale and Lesley. While some of these colleagues are aware of the supernatural elements in their world, they remain hesitant to fully accept them. Although it may not be accurate to describe them as liminal, they often find themselves in a state of wonder and dissonance when confronted with the inexplicable, which their rational minds struggle to reconcile.

This sentiment is succinctly captured in Seawoll's remark:

¹³⁰ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

"So far this year I've made a personal friend in Mr. Punch and helped burn down Covent Garden while Miriam here had to deal with women with carnivorous minges and real cat people, and now I've got to face the possibility that there might be a whole fucking village of mole people armed with fucking Sten guns living under Notting Hill. Given that I have been repeatedly instructed to defer to your expertise in all areas involving irregular and special circumstances, I am well within my rights to express a certain level of dissatisfaction with the way you exercise your responsibilities in this area."¹³¹

This passage accentuates the absurdity and chaos that the supernatural can inject into the real world, reflecting the frustration and incredulity felt by many police officers when magic disrupts their investigations.

In short, these characters and settings exemplify the series' exploration of liminality, communicating the intersections of different worlds and states of being. Through their boundary-crossing, they embody the core themes of transformation, ambiguity, and the merging of the ordinary with the extraordinary. This intricate interplay of liminal elements enriches the narrative, providing a nuanced and multi-layered understanding of the characters and their environments.

7.4. Crime Investigation as the Central Theme

The Policing in *Rivers of London* is treated with obsessive attention to detail, and meticulously researched, as Aaronovitch admits in one of his interviews. Not only does he have to understand the procedure and know the jargon, he also regularly needs to make sure he is using the correct terminology as the Metropolitan Police reorganizes every six months.¹³²

The portrayal of policing is not just a background for the fantasy elements and neither is it the other way round; it is an active and integral part of the narrative, treated with an intense focus on detail. One of the most striking aspects of Aaronovitch's approach to policing is the integrity with which he depicts the protagonist, Peter Grant. Throughout the series, Peter's character remains steadfast in his commitment to upholding the law and serving justice. Despite the fantastical situations he encounters, Peter's moral compass remains unwavering, and any dark tones in the narrative stem more from the situations he finds himself in rather than any moral compromise on his part. This unwavering integrity

¹³¹ Aaronovitch, B. *Whispers Underground*.

¹³² Hampshire Libraries (24. January 2024). 2024). *An Interview with Fantasy Writer Ben Aaronovitch*. (L. Y. Podcast). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWSzAKagQP4>

not only adds depth to Peter's character but also reinforces the sense of realism in the storytelling.

Central to Aaronovitch's exploration of policing is the intriguing intersection of crime investigation and the supernatural in an urban setting. While the central theme of investigation serves as a gateway to a deeper exploration of power dynamics, Aaronovitch also uses it as a lens through which to examine the complexities of law enforcement in a society where legendary beings and old gods coexist alongside the "normal." This thematic inquiry intricately navigates the challenges faced by law enforcement when dealing with crimes that defy conventional explanation.

The introduction of Inspector Nightingale and the Folly, the magical branch of the London Metropolitan Police provides a glimpse into the inner workings of a police force that deals with supernatural phenomena on a regular basis. The fact that such a branch exists, and that the police are aware of and actively engage with the supernatural, signifies a level of acceptance of the magical, albeit with certain reservations and protocols in place.

Aaronovitch's attention to detail extends to the procedural aspects of police work, both conventional and supernatural. From the initial response to a crime scene to the intricate process of investigation and interrogation, the author demonstrates a thorough understanding of police protocols and procedures. Scenes describing the arrival of the Murder Investigation Team to the crime scene, with forensic teams and senior detectives, reflect the hierarchical structure and coordination typical of major police operations.

Moreover, Aaronovitch's incorporation of magical elements into police work adds a unique and compelling dimension to the narrative. As Peter Grant navigates the intersection of crime investigation and the supernatural, readers are treated to a fascinating exploration of how law enforcement grapples with the presence of legendary beings and old gods in modern society. This juxtaposition of the ordinary and the extraordinary not only adds depth to the storytelling but also serves as a vehicle for exploring the nature of reality itself.

The conflict between magic and traditional crime investigation further enriches the complexity of the policing portrayed in the series. Peter Grant's journey from a probationary constable to an apprentice wizard under Nightingale's tutelage highlights the tension between conventional police work and the supernatural forces at play.

Aaronovitch's portrayal of policing in the *Rivers of London* is characterized by authentic

depiction of police procedures and a creative integration of magical elements. The author's ability to balance humour, sarcasm, and supernatural elements makes for a compelling and immersive reading experience, offering readers a fresh perspective on the genre of crime novels. Through Peter Grant's eyes, readers are given a front-row seat to a world where the pursuit of justice takes on new and unexpected forms.

The novel also explores the idea of violence as a form of entertainment through its use of humour. The comic streak serves to debase the traditional Gothic, reducing its terror-inducing power. This humour not only reminds people of their humanity but also strengthens the morale of the oppressed. The ability to laugh at evil and error means that one has surmounted them, providing a sense of satisfaction and pleasure. The theatricality of crime in *Rivers of London* is further enhanced by the use of theatrical spaces as crime scenes. The Covent Garden area, the novel's heart of criminal activities, is home to the Old Royal Opera House, a thespian landmark that serves as a backdrop for some of the series' most memorable scenes. The use of the Opera House as a crime scene highlights the performative nature of violence.

As the series progresses, the exploration of the supernatural in the modern urban environment becomes increasingly nuanced, posing thought-provoking questions about the balance between the seen and the unseen, the known and the unfathomable.

7.5. The Characters

7.5.1. The Role of Peter Grant

Peter Grant is the protagonist of the series. Born in London to Richard 'Lord' Grant and his wife Rose, of Sierra Leonean descent, around 1987, Peter spent his formative years in Kentish Town's Peckwater Estate.¹³³ While his childhood remains somewhat enigmatic, Peter hinted at familial struggles, including his father's heroin addiction and financial hardships. His educational journey diverged from architectural aspirations due to his drawing skills not being entirely up to par, leading him to pursue a career in law enforcement after various odd jobs, including stints in retail and the service industry.

Peter's upbringing is evident in his practical skills and work ethic, shaped by his African

¹³³ Aaronovitch, B. *Moon over Soho*.

immigrant family's traditions of hard work and resourcefulness. He reflects on his family's background, stating, *"At one time or other most of my mum's relatives had cleaned offices for a living."* Additionally, he describes how accompanying his mother to work taught him responsibility and the importance of contributing to the household, saying, *"When an African mum takes her son to work, she expects her son to work..."* This quote highlights the expectations placed on him and the values instilled in him from a young age. His practical approach to cleaning the coach house, including using Marigold gloves¹³⁴ and a vacuum cleaner, demonstrates his familiarity with cleaning techniques learned through the assistance to his mother.

Peter's journey from being a policeman to discovering a magical world and eventually training to become a wizard places him in a fascinating position where he must navigate the clash of different viewpoints and realities. A newly appointed police constable within a specialized division of the Metropolitan Police Service who, following unexpected events, finds himself tasked with investigating incidents of a supernatural nature. Once exposed to it, he quickly accepts the existence of magic. I believe that one must possess distinct qualities to explore this new world as extensively as he did, particularly evident in his reactions contrasted with the scepticism displayed by his colleagues towards anything supernatural.

"In a couple of minutes we're going to take you down Hampstead nick, where a very nice lady from Scotland Yard is going to take your statements – separately. And while I'm a believer in veracity in all things, I want to make it clear that there isn't going to be any fucking mumbo-jumbo voodoo X-Files shit in any fucking statement. Is that understood?"¹³⁵

DCI Seawoll epitomizes this scepticism, often overlooking magical phenomena as irrelevant to proper police work. Although he learns to recognize Nightingale's supernatural investigation as useful, he still grapples with the whole concept. His frustration is clear when he tells Peter, *"If you get so much as a sniff of a suspect I want to know right away – and I want everything in the statements. Except of course the stuff you can't put in the statements, in which case you inform Stephanopoulos or me as soon as possible."¹³⁶* Seawoll's insistence on traditional investigative methods accentuates his discomfort with the supernatural elements Peter is involved in. The dismissal of magic as "X-Files shit" highlights the tension between Peter's dual duties as

¹³⁴ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Aaronovitch, B. *Whispers Underground*.

a police officer and an apprentice wizard, and the challenge he faces in bridging the gap between conventional law enforcement and the mystical world he is drawn into.

Despite being one of the most junior-ranking members in the police force, he occupies a unique and paradoxically powerful position within the Folly. As the only other active member besides Nightingale, Peter performs a wide range of duties typically beyond his official rank of Police Constable (later Detective Constable). Besides, as a policeman, Peter is trained to rely on evidence and rational explanations to uphold the law. His analytical mind is honed to seek out the truth in a world governed by rules and regulations. However, the discovery of a magical world challenges everything he knows and believes about reality. Suddenly, he finds himself confronted with phenomena that defy logic and cannot be explained by conventional means.

This clash of viewpoints and realities puts Peter in a state of cognitive dissonance. On one hand, his training and instincts compel him to seek rational explanations for the magical occurrences he witnesses. He may initially struggle to reconcile his rational worldview with the fantastical elements of the magical world he is entering.

Peter's journey into the world of magic not only expands his understanding of reality but also catalyses his personal growth. As he begins his training as a wizard, he is met with challenges that force him to confront his preconceptions. This perspective extends to his interactions with others, particularly women. While Peter may initially notice and appreciate their attractiveness, his journey teaches him to see beyond surface and recognize the value of individuals for their abilities and character. For example, his admiration for Leslie's competence as a policeman outweighs any superficial attraction he may feel towards her. He learns to respect her as a colleague and equal, recognizing her talents without objectifying her.

Peter Grant also embodies the archetype of the apprentice to a wise wizard, which is only highlighted by the intertextual nods to the pop culture wizardry appearing throughout the series. One such dialogue appears after a night out with Lesley and allows us to observe more of their unique dynamic.:

'You're so boring,' she said. 'You'd think a copper who was a wizard would be more interesting. Harry Potter wasn't this boring. I bet Gandalf could drink you under the table.'

Probably true, but I don't remember the bit where Hermione gets so wicked drunk that Harry has to pull the broomstick over on Buckingham Palace Road just so she can be sick in the gutter. Once she wiped her mouth with the napkins I'd so boringly kept in the glove compartment against such an eventuality, she resumed by pointing out that Merlin had probably had something to teach me about the raising of the wrist.

I would have been subjected to a longer list except Lesley had grown up reading Sophie Kinsella and Helen Fielding and so she ran out of fictional wizards at Severus Snape and our journey home continued in relative quiet.¹³⁷

In this excerpt, we see a clever blend of intertextuality and humour, which show Aaronovitch's unique tone and style. The intertextuality is evident through the playful comparison between the protagonist, a wizard copper, and well-known fictional mages like Harry Potter and Gandalf. Mentioning these iconic characters creates a connection with popular culture, but at the same time points out Lesley's supposed ignorance when it comes to the literature of magic.

Furthermore, Lesley's teasing remarks about Peter's lack of excitement highlight the contrast between his police duties and the fantastical world he's now a part of. Her comparison to popular fictional wizards serves as a reminder of the expectations associated with magic.

Peter's sarcastic response reflects his wit and ability to banter. While Lesley's comments may poke fun at his perceived dullness, Peter counters with dry humour, recalling an incident involving Lesley and a bout of drunkenness that deflates the romanticized image of the wizardry that has been talked about. His sense of humour provides charming comic relief throughout the series helping balance the darker and more intense elements of the stories. This human touch not only endears him to readers but makes his struggles and triumphs more poignant.

Likewise, Peter's learning process marked by both impatience and creativity makes him truly relatable; he often seeks new stimuli and devises experiments, which, although slowing his mastery of standard lessons, leads to innovative uses of magic. He is also a proper wannabe scientist, as demonstrated by my favourite passage in *Moon Over Soho*:

"I had jokingly developed my own scale for vestigia based on the amount of noise Toby made when he interacted with any residual magic, and called it a yap, one yap being enough vestigia to be apparent

¹³⁷ Aaronovitch, B. *Whispers Underground*.

even when I wasn't looking for it.

The yap would be an SI unit, of course, and thus the standard background ambiance of a central London pub was 0.2 of a yap (0.2Y) or 200 milliyaps (200mY)."

Peter's approach reflects his need to quantify and understand the world around him, even when that world includes the supernatural. Among his other traits is the propensity to be easily distracted, evident from his first interaction with Nightingale, where he explains his inability to complete a science degree due to being easily sidetracked. This characteristic persists in his magical training, where he shows impatience with repetitive lessons and a tendency to hyperfocus on topics that intrigue him.¹³⁸ Lesley May, his colleague, highlights this trait by recounting an incident where Peter, engrossed in reading an information panel, failed to notice a brawl occurring nearby. Notwithstanding these challenges, Peter's hyperfocus on certain details enables him to notice things others might miss, making his perceived flaw a subtle strength in his investigative work.

Despite his unassuming demeanour and the occasional underestimation by peers, Peter consistently proves his competence and resourcefulness. His achievements, often accomplished under challenging circumstances, illustrate his growth and adaptability. Nightingale's acknowledgment of Peter's exceptional skills, noting his limited experience, highlights the protagonist's evolution from a novice to a highly capable and innovative officer.¹³⁹

7.6. The Mythology of Rivers

Peter soon learns that the Rivers exist as sentient higher entities with the ability to choose their guardian spirits. Based on this, we can infer that in this universe, the *genii locorum*, are real people who had died and were given a second chance at life as guardian spirits.¹⁴⁰

Human civilizations have always admired and worshipped the natural world. The nuances observed in the adoration of water realms show a concern for environmental preservation. In *Rivers of London*, the *genii locorum* engage in a subtle power struggle reflective of human impact on their domain, with pollution serving as a central motif across British history. Similarly, within the mythology of the orishas, these divine entities act as intermediaries between humanity and the formidable forces of nature. They govern the tameable aspects

¹³⁸ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

¹³⁹ Aaronovitch, B. *The Hanging Tree*.

¹⁴⁰ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

of the natural world, offering a semblance of control, while simultaneously standing guard against that which remains beyond human manipulation. In both cases, mythology serves as a vessel for encapsulating human fears and attempts to comprehend the complexities of nature. Whether through the personification of rivers or the deification of natural forces, these myths highlight a timeless concern for environmental stewardship and the enduring struggle to coexist harmoniously with the natural world.

While connections can be drawn with almost all religions and mythologies, the parallels of the Rivers in *Rivers of London* series with the Orisha of Yoruba religion are particularly noteworthy due to visible similarities and etymological links. They even refer to themselves as the Orisa:

'If you're so supposed to be a goddess ...'

*'Orisa,' said Beverley. 'We're Orisa. Not spirits, not local geniuses – Orisa.'*¹⁴¹

Just as the Orishas are personifications of natural forces, the Rivers in Aaronovitch's universe exist as sentient entities with personalities and powers that reflect the rivers they inhabit. Like the Orishas, they are not passive beings but rather active participants in the world, with their own lives and agendas. And just as the Orishas are often called upon to protect humanity from the destructive forces of nature, the River deities in Aaronovitch's books are tasked with safeguarding their rivers from harm. Also, the power dynamics and struggles between the various genii in *Rivers of London* can be seen as a reflection of the power struggles between the Orishas in Yoruba mythology.

Exploring the concept of *genii locorum*, or spirits of place, it's illuminating to delve into other cultural and mythological representations beyond Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* series and the possible connections with Yoruba religion.

Apart from the symbolism of creation and sustaining life, there are intriguing parallels with the water and death, akin to the themes found in Aaronovitch's portrayal of river deities. This concept bears resemblance to the tragic symbolism of suicide present in Aaronovitch's narrative, particularly in the depiction of individuals who died in the rivers and subsequently become part of the genii.

The parallels between the genii and the Orishas highlight the universal themes of mortality, spirituality, and the transience of life. Both mythologies reflect human fascination with the

¹⁴¹ Aaronovitch, B. *Rivers of London*.

natural world, as well as the enduring belief in the existence of supernatural beings that inhabit and influence our surroundings. Furthermore, the symbolism of water as a symbol of transformation resonates across cultures and religions. In many folklores, water is often associated with renewal and rebirth, as well as the cycle of life and death. In Aaronovitch's portrayal of river deities, there's a poignant exploration of the relationship between water and death, particularly through the tragic symbolism of suicide. The rivers themselves become repositories of memories and echoes of those who have died within them, transforming into *genii locorum*. This resonates with broader mythological themes where water symbolizes not only life and purification but also acts as a gateway to the afterlife. The parallels between *genii locorum* and river deities from various mythologies accent the transient nature of life. Whether in Greek, Hindu, Norse, or other mythologies, rivers are consistently portrayed as more than geographical features.

8. The Significance of Urban Space

Urban spaces have evolved significantly throughout history, reflecting the changing needs and values of human societies. In ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Rome, cities served as the cradles of political power, designed to facilitate commerce and cultural innovation. During the Middle Ages, European towns like Florence and Venice, where narrow streets and canals fostered a sense of community and commerce, fostered a burgeoning middle class and contributed to many social and educational transformations.

The Industrial Revolution marked a major turning point, with rapid urban expansion driven by industrialization, leading to densely populated cities that became the epicentres of economic production and technological progress. This era also highlighted stark socioeconomic divides, with urban environments characterized by poor hygiene and horrifying working conditions for many. In the 20th and 21st centuries, urbanization continued to accelerate, with metropolitan areas expanding and suburbs rising, creating complex, interconnected urban environments. The advent of globalization further transformed cities into multicultural hubs, where diverse populations interact and thrive, reflecting the dynamic nature of modern urban life.

In literature, urban spaces have been depicted in multifaceted ways, evolving from gothic to modern urban fantasy settings. Gothic literature of the 18th and 19th centuries often portrayed urban environments as places of mystery, decay, and danger. This genre used the cities to evoke fear and highlight the sinister aspects of human nature, with crumbling buildings and shadowy streets symbolizing psychological and moral decay. For example, the eerie streets of London in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* mirror the protagonist's internal conflict and transformation. As literature progressed, urban fantasy emerged, blending fantastical elements with contemporary urban settings. Modern urban fantasy depicts cities as places where magic and the mundane coexist, often hidden beneath the surface of everyday life. This genre explores themes of cultural diversity and supernatural coexistence, reflecting the multicultural reality of modern urban centres. Symbolic urban spaces in urban fantasy serve as battlegrounds for supernatural conflicts and quests for identity and belonging, as seen in Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*, where London's underground transforms into a magical realm. Additionally, crime and mystery fiction, particularly in the noir tradition, uses urban settings to depict corruption, moral

ambiguity, and existential despair, with the city's shadowy streets and hidden corners providing a perfect setting for tales of crime and moral conflict.

Additionally, the concept of *genius loci* in *Rivers of London* is vividly illustrated through the depiction of river gods and goddesses, embodying the spiritual essence of London's waterways. However, beyond these mythological beings, London itself possesses undeniable *genius loci* that transcends the supernatural. The city's *genius loci* lies in its historical depth, its hidden secrets, and its vibrant, diverse population. London's charm is not only found in its iconic landmarks and scenic vistas but also in the everyday moments and stories that unfold within its streets. Thus, London's *genius loci* is not just a guardian spirit but a living, breathing expression of its historical significance, cultural richness, and the indefinable allure that bewitches all who experience it. This multifaceted *genius loci* of London is a key element in Aaronovitch's narrative, grounding the fantastical elements of his novels in a palpable and resonant sense of place.

The urban experience is a crucial aspect, with literary works often exploring the experiences of individuals navigating urban environments, highlighting the tensions between the individual and the city. The urban is often used to reflect the identities and experiences of characters, with authors using suburban spaces and landmarks to explore themes of identity and belonging. Urban representation and power are also significant, with literary works often reflecting the power dynamics at play in the city. For example, in works like Paul Auster's novels, urban spaces are used to explore themes of alienation and existentialism. Literary works often blur the lines between urban space and reality, using urban landscapes to reflect the complexities of human experience. Urban spaces are also used symbolically to convey themes and emotions, with authors like Charles Dickens using urban spaces to symbolize social change and the struggles of the working class.

Ultimately, literary works use urban spaces to explore the human condition, highlighting the tensions between the individual and the city. Through these representations, literature provides a nuanced understanding of the urban experience, reflecting the complexities and multifaceted nature of urban life.

9. Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated how the *Rivers of London* series contributes to the urban fantasy genre. It has provided a deeper understanding of the elements that define the novels. By situating the series within its literary and cultural context, this research has added to the academic discourse on urban fantasy and highlighted Aaronovitch's unique contributions.

Brief plot descriptions of the first few books were included, acknowledging that some disclosure of "spoilers" was necessary to provide a thorough analysis. A glossary was also created to clarify the most unusual terms, aiding the reader's understanding of Aaronovitch's unique world-building.

A pivotal aspect of this thesis was the exploration of liminality and the magic in the series, examining how Aaronovitch navigates the boundaries between reality and fantasy within his narratives. By applying the concept of liminality to both physical and metaphysical spaces in the novels, this study elucidated how these ambiguous zones contribute to the complexity of character development and narrative tension. This thematic analysis not only deepens our understanding of storytelling techniques but also stimulates appreciation for the genre's capacity to engage with transformation and uncertainty.

Additionally, the thesis undertook a thorough examination of the myths and legends, seeking references in Aaronovitch's work. This investigation proved how his incorporation of diverse mythological traditions enriches the novels' cultural resonance. Exploring these mythological underpinnings not only provided insights into Aaronovitch's creative process but also highlighted the enduring relevance of ancient narratives in the modern world.

The novels discussed might be fantasy, but they capture the essence of real-life experiences, such as the challenges of being a newcomer in a demanding job, family struggles, and the pain of betrayal. We recognize ourselves in these stories, and they teach us to understand and empathize with others.

Future research could expand on this foundation by exploring fantasy in different cultural contexts, examining how are mythological elements adapted in contemporary urban settings. Additionally, investigating the impact of the *Rivers of London* series on subsequent works would offer valuable insights into the genre's development. It would also be

intriguing to observe potential developments such as TV adaptations and the reception of the existing game, considering how these could further shape the genre's popularity and reach. As urban fantasy continues to grow and evolve, studies like this will remain helpful in understanding its cultural significance.

10. Resumé

Tato diplomová práce ukázala, jakým způsobem přispívá série Řeky Londýna k žánru urban fantasy, a umožňuje hlubší porozumění stavebním jednotkám, které tyto příběhy definují. Zasazením série do literárního a kulturního kontextu tato práce snad přispěje k akademickému diskurzu o fantasy a zdůrazní Aaronovitchův jedinečný přínos.

Stěžejním aspektem této práce bylo zkoumání liminality a magie v prvních dílech knižní série Řeky Londýna, přičemž bylo vystiženo, jakým způsobem Aaronovitch ve svých vyprávěních balancuje neostré hranice mezi realitou a fantasy. Aplikací konceptu liminality tato práce objasnila, jak tyto nejednoznačné zóny přispívají ke komplexní charakterizaci postav a budování napětí při vyprávění. Nejenže tato tematická analýza umožňuje porozumět spisovatelovým postupům, ale také oceňuje schopnost tohoto žánru zabývat se složitými koncepty, jako je transformace a nejistota.

Kromě toho se práce věnovala důkladnému průzkumu legend spojených s přírodou, zvláště pak s řekami, a hledala možnou inspiraci pro Aaronovitchovo dílo. Toto bádání prokázalo, jak začlenění rozmanitých tradic obohacuje kulturní význam literatury. Zkoumání těchto mytologických podkladů poskytlo nejen vhled do Aaronovitchova tvůrčího procesu, ale také poukázalo na trvalou relevanci antických příběhů v moderním světě.

Analyzované knihy sice patří do žánru fantasy, ale vystihují podstatu reálných životních zkušeností, jako je vstup do nového zaměstnání, rodinné problémy, a i bolest pramenící ze zrady. V těchto příbězích poznáváme sami sebe, učí nás porozumět druhým a vcítit se do nich.

Budoucí výzkum by mohl dále analyzovat, jak jsou mytologické prvky adaptovány v současném městském prostředí. Kromě toho by zkoumání vlivu série Řeky Londýna na vývoj městské fantasy a jejího vlivu na další díla nabídlo cenné poznatky o směřování žánru. Bylo by také zajímavé sledovat další vývoj série Řeky Londýna, diskutované televizní adaptace, a ohlasy u již vzniklé hry. Vzhledem k tomu, že městská fantasy se nadále rozvíjí, budou podobné studie i nadále přínosné pro pochopení jejího významu.

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