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Magic and Power: Ben Aaronovitch's Multi-Level Approach

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Magic and real-world power do not combine easily, but Ben Aaronovitch weaves them together by imagining both in terms of layers or dimensions. In his *Rivers of London* urban fantasy series, he theorises five magical dimensions: Deep Time, Faerie, the places on Earth from which *genii locorum* can draw power, a completely evil *allokosmos*, and a morally neutral *allokosmos* from which his Newtonian mages draw their power to keep the peace and prevent criminals from harming others. Aaronovitch seems fascinated by power in its many forms, so against these magic manifestations he scrutinises socio-economic forms of power exercised through colour, gender, education, accent, architecture, money, government position, shell-companies, and the police. He shows the drawbacks of complex societies but implies that too much rationalisation or simplification is dangerous. Rationalisation that does away with competing interests and sets of rules would put too much power in too few hands. Rather, he urges us to form springy, flexible social alliances to work toward goals, and he upholds 'muddling through' by means of 'arrangements' and 'agreements' as safer than a cleaned-up, regularised society. His magic entertains readers yet leads them, without preaching, to consider the nature and limits appropriate to power in the real world.

Introduction

Urban fantasy plays magic powers off against the social and cultural powers felt by everyone living in an urban context. Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* series revels in the generic pleasures offered by introducing magic into police procedurals.[1] The novels are saturated with examples of social, economic, and political power, and the chief figures in the series, both police and villains, wield magic power in several forms. Magic is tricky to deploy in realistic settings; however, the detailed London scenes provide grounds for looking at the nature of power and the problems that surround its use. Power is the realistic equivalent to magic for getting things done.

Aaronovitch places his sources of magic power in alternative cosmoi or levels of existence, and he views real-world power in terms of layers; wealth, race, class, and education create some of those many layers. Furthermore, he grafts onto these layers something real that functions like a magic extra-dimension or level of existence when portraying wealthy criminals protecting themselves through shell companies. These shells isolate them from our constraints as if they were in a different world because they are unreachable by laws or by the police. Because he imagines both his magic and everyday life in similarly layered ways, the two mesh and intermingle and allow him to focus on problems caused by power and suggest how to handle them rather than just escape or defeat misused power through fantasy.

His alternative cosmoi and social layers differ in their accessibility. Layers can exist within a single system, even as upper, middle, and working classes exist within a society. Many people manage to move from one to another in real life. The alternative cosmoi are different worlds or levels of reality. There will be cross-over points between two such cosmoi: the barriers between Faerie and our world grow permeable at full moon and Midsummer night, for instance. At most times, the two are separate though they may share a similar landscape, and they can only be reached by humans with magic training. Some of these alternative cosmoi, or '*allokosmoi*' as Aaronovitch calls them, seem to lack physicality but nonetheless contain power.

He shows magic power in two basic forms. One is the power to *make people do what you want.* This manifests itself both on the individual level and in the workings of empire. The spirit of Punch (the gleefully immoral puppet of the Punch and Judy Show but given a Romano-Briton origin by Aaronovitch) causes the entire audience at the Royal Opera House to riot in Covent Garden where they smash windows, loot, and set fires. The implications of empire turn up in Aaronovitch's use of Romans in Britain and

[1] For discussions of police procedurals and their variants, see Breen (1998) and Dove (1978). Urban fantasy is now much commented upon, but relevant articles include those by Benczik (2017), Irvine (2012), and several by Ekman (2016, 2017, 2018). Vanderbeke (2014) lists motifs found in other urban fantasies, many of which turn up in Aaronovitch.

his many characters in London whose parents came from territories once subsumed in the British Empire. The other kind of power *makes matter do what you want.* Beverley Brook, a goddess of the Beverley rivulet, can make water from the Thames gush through hydrants and other outlets to put out the riot fires. Matter can be one's own body; former police constable Lesley May suffers destruction of her face through Punch's malicious magic. Though she cannot regain what she lost, she learns magic means of making herself temporarily look like her old self or like anyone else, male or female, and uses this magic, learned from one of the major villains, to get her hands on things she is hired to steal. Making people do what you want is how we think of power in social terms, but making matter do what you want corresponds to our engineering and scientific power.

The series charts the progress of Peter Grant, a British police detective. His mother is West African and his father Scottish. He failed to get into a university to study architecture, so became a policeman, but he brings a scientific curiosity while keeping an open mind to the possibility of ghosts existing. He stumbles onto and then starts to theorise various magical *allokosmoi* that somehow exist adjacent to, or superimposed on, or parallel to, our own world. He is also trained by the last police mage, Thomas Nightingale, in some of the magic techniques that let him control people and matter. I would like to show how Aaronovitch's multiplex vision relates to his fascination with problems of power in the contemporary world. He looks at personal power, police power, power used for individual aggrandisement, and the residual effects of imperial power on the London of today.

Aaronovitch's multiplex conception of magic power

Aaronovitch conceptualises roughly five cosmoi (so far): Deep Time; the realm of Faerie; locations in this world that serve as conduits for earth-derived power; a purely evil cosmos; and one or more cosmoi that are simply 'other' than our everyday world but may be the source for the power that fuels Newtonian magic as exercised by his police and other law-abiding practitioners and possibly also provides some power for his villains. How separate all of these are to each other is not clear, but humans can only access them by magic.

Deep Time is the dimension introduced in the first volume, called *Rivers of London* (2011) in Britain and *Midnight Riot* (2011) in the United States. In his desperation to catch the murderous spirit of Punch, Peter Grant submits to a dangerous form of haemomancy or blood magic and pursues Punch through London. As they run, he finds himself travelling back through time. London has a long history, and Peter notes the changes in architecture and landmarks as he goes back through renaissance and medieval scenes until he finds himself in Roman London (*Rivers of London,* 367–8).

There he meets a Romanised British priest, Tiberius Claudius Verica, who will later appear as Father Thames, deity of the Thames above the tidal point.

Although today we mostly see these former buildings as archaeological sites or in museums, maps, and models, Aaronovitch implies that spiritually or in some alternative cosmos they are still there, and events back then still influence our present. Peter returns to this deep time level at least twice more, once when buried alive (in *Whispers Underground* [2012], 307–12) and when trying to question Sir Tyburn, Lady Tyburn's riverine predecessor (*Lies Sleeping* [2018], 190–200). Although this deep time influence on the present is not developed in the first book, it becomes more significant in *Lies Sleeping* when Aaronovitch suggests that the Roman Empire failed to protect its British converts to Roman life in the Boudiccan rebellion, and the vengeful spirit of Punch wreaks havoc on modern London because of that failure of imperial power to take responsibility for those it subdued. At least by implication, British imperial power is similarly guilty, and it needs to remember this when dealing with immigrants from former empire countries.

Aaronovitch's second alternative cosmos is the realm of Faerie. All the hills and rocky outcroppings near Leominster, the setting for *Foxglove Summer* (2014), are the same in our world and Faerie, but a ruined castle in ours is a vibrantly colourful, occupied castle in Faerie. The two realms are sufficiently close that Roman roads visible in our world are also visible in theirs. As Peter remarks, 'Those imperial fuckers had put their mark on the landscape, all right. Even to the point where it impinged onto fairyland. Had that been their intention, to break up the native fae and ease their conquest of the material world? Or had they just liked straight lines and not cared about the effect?' (*Foxglove Summer*, 368–9). Evidently at certain times (full moon or midsummer night) the Fae are able to cross from their dimension to ours. The man who begot two daughters, one on a Faerie woman, presumably met her out in the countryside at such a time, and a unicorn from Faerie can come to our world at a crossover time and be seen by the half-Fae girl though not by anyone else. Thanks to his own magic powers, Peter is able to enter Faerie at a crossover time but ends trapped there and is only rescued by his girlfriend, the river deity and *genius loci* Beverley Brook.[2] Most people in Aaronovitch's England have no reason to become aware of this parallel world, but a number of beings in the London demi-monde are called half fae, and they occasionally intrude something magical into the everyday world.

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[2] Rudyard Kipling made known to his English readers the Roman concept of *genii locorum* in *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) and *Rewards and Fairies* (1910), and Kipling's and Gaiman's use of such *genii locorum* is discussed by Hume (2019). Kipling's Puck haunts the vicinity of his home, Bateman's, about thirty miles from East Grinstead, Gaiman's boyhood home. Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013) creates such spirits of place in the Hempstocks; Aaronovitch's spirits seem appropriately influenced by African òrishàs.

Faerie and Deep Time both have a material component. The ruined castle here as occupied castle there testifies to its lying somehow parallel to our own dimension. However, Faerie may be limited in scope; we learn nothing of a Faerie equivalent to London. Individual Fae can operate in our London, as do Molly and Foxglove and the two more sinister members of the race, but they are here as exiles, sold by their queen to some human mage back before automobiles had replaced horse-drawn wagons. Evidently, they can never return to their own dimension but must live here and (in the cases of the two who harm humans) die here, conquered by human magic. The whole idea of Faeries who can interact with humans belongs to country beliefs and practices, not urban. Hence, this alternative realm corresponds only to rural parts of England and offers no urban counterpart. Inventing a Faerie city with suitable Faerie working class, sewers, and trade would destroy traditional ideas of Faerie and make that alternative world too powerful to stay hidden from most people.

The *genii locorum* use magic in ways unavailable to humans, but they look human, can marry humans, and have no trouble operating in our realm. This third cosmos consists of pockets within our world that let them tap into the power of earth-magic. The Hogsmill river's deity lives as an elderly lawyer and uses his mental pressure or 'glamour' on the authorities to help a troubled teen in *False Value* (2020). Father Thames drives an old-fashioned truck and runs a mechanical fair carousel but derives his power from the inland Thames. Some river goddesses have degrees and even doctorates from Oxford or Cambridge. Beverley Brook, the example most frequently and vocally present, keeps saying to Peter that what she and other river deities do is 'different,' meaning that their power over water is not anything a human could study and learn. Being a water goddess or òrishà, she gets her power from water and manipulates it with nothing but the mental effort of making it do what she wants. She seems to feel that her ability with water is like our ability to see or smell, just another sense, though hers can have physical effects in the world as ours cannot. If she gets really angry, a lot of Thames-side gardens will be flooded. For her and her sibling rivers, this link between themselves and water is natural and not something that they learned through training.

Their powers seem twofold: one is over water, but one is mental. Their power over water can cause or diminish floods and create water bubbles in the air or turn such bubbles into mist. In vengeance, it can fill a man's lungs with water and drown him on dry land. These deities' 'glamour' means that they can invisibly pressure humans to do things they want done, and the humans comply and believe that they too wanted that result. Lady Tyburn, goddess of the rivulet-turned-underground sewer, is a very successful political power in London. We do not actually see her using her glamour on committees, but her trying it on Peter when they first meet suggests that she might

well use it to get the votes she wants. Beverley Brook is always treated to free ales at pubs near the river. She claims she is not making the barmen do it; it just naturally happens because it makes the barkeepers happy. Magic as power over matter and over people can take many forms, but this is how Aaronovitch envisions such spirits of place operating in the modern world.

The power of Beverley and her kin comes somehow from locations on our Earth that connect to a reservoir of power and make it available. Most of the *genii locorum* we see are rivers, but a house gains such power in *What Abigail Did That Summer* (2021), so other entities may draw on such locational powers. The rivers acquire their deities in at least two ways. Beverley and Peter generate a new river spirit for the River Lugg when they have sex while floating in it, and several books show child river-deities who may have been generated in a similar fashion. The other way seems to be to die as a human and be transformed into a river. Mother Thames started as a twentieth-century African nursing student who committed suicide in the Thames but somehow out of all the suicides into that river, she was the one to inherit the power of its tidal reaches. Similarly, Walbrook was once a daughter of the Romano-Briton Punch. She was tortured to death by Boudicca's followers, but when her body was thrown into the Walbrook, she became its deity. River deities can die. Most of those in the tidal region died from the overload of sewage in the nineteenth century. The earlier River Lugg was killed off by the Methodists. Aaronovitch clearly enjoyed giving his deities different sorts of beginnings, deaths, and reincarnations.

Insofar as they are reborn, the current river deities also draw some emergency power from Deep Time. Their predecessors exist in those previous eras and so, in a sense, still exist in that other cosmos. In a crisis, they may help their successors. When Lady Tyburn is shot at by a sniper, the assassin's body is found with a stab wound, as if he had been transfixed by a sword; Peter sees Lady Tyburn's previous incarnation, Sir Tyburn, with such a sword when Peter finds himself in the distant past. Beverley's predecessor was also male and a warrior (*Lies Sleeping*, 380). Ordinarily, though, the river deities draw their power from rivers. When the river deity Ash is stabbed with cold iron by a hostile Fae in London, only being thrown into the Thames saves him from death. In its waters, though, he starts to heal immediately. When Peter's partner Beverley is about to bear their twin girls, she decides on a water birth and has an immense swimming pool dug in her garden down to her river, so that all her female riverine relatives can participate in and celebrate the event (*Amongst our Weapons* [2022]). We rarely think of our rivers as magical, but Aaronovitch suggests that if they were cleaned up and ecologically tended, they would supply spiritual power to us as well as the material power they give to London as an international trade port.

Deep Time, Faerie, and locations in this world are three of the separate-but-accessible sources through which power flows. The fourth, which turns up in Aaronovitch's later volumes, is described as pure evil, and it may or may not have a material component. Aaronovitch alludes mysteriously to this realm as understood by Rosemarie Moreno, an eighteenth-century magic practitioner from New Orleans. She studied at the French equivalent to the British Society of the Wise (Sir Isaac Newton's official school of British magic) and passed on magical techniques to Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace for their computer experiments that led to the construction of the Mary Engine, a magical computer-adjunct. She invented the Rose jars for containing ghosts of humans. When, however, Peter Grant deals with the two such ghosts whose connection to a computer allows it to pass the Turing test, he senses this other dimension for the first time: an alien cosmos pushing into his own: 'And there was something in that darkness—I could feel it. A sort of gleeful madness, a wild and vicious enthusiasm' (*False Value,* 391). Later he senses something 'huge and cool and unsympathetic' (392) looming in that darkness.

That is all the detail we get about this fourth cosmos, but it feels somewhat familiar. The gleeful madness and vicious enthusiasm match the attitudes of Punch very well as he murders and causes riots and fires in modern London. It may be his source of power. It may also fuel the mind of the fanatic who killed the programmer working on artificial intelligence and who was himself then shot by security guards. Fanatic and programmer are the two Rose-jar ghosts hooked up to the computer who give the impression that it has achieved true intelligence. Perhaps too the huge and cool and unsympathetic element reminds us of Martin Chorley, the villain-mage for several volumes. It may also resemble Terrence Skinner, the founder of Serious Cybernetics, who thinks he has achieved Artificial General Intelligence. While he occasionally shows emotions, his taking refuge behind his shell companies after murdering an employee with a drone makes him seem cool and unsympathetic. Such shell companies protecting powerful men create a non-magic, human equivalent to an alternative cosmos and take us from magic to power more generally.

The fifth source of power is non-specific. Late in the series, Peter Grant hypothesises that humans, trained by years of practice and study of Newtonian magic, somehow draw power to produce effects on our material world from some unknown cosmos. The Newtonian mages are not, as far as they can tell, drawing power from anything that is hurt by it. They are not vampires, unlike the three women who draw power from the musical creativity of jazz musicians, whose deaths they cause soon after (*Moon Over Soho*). They are not trying to draw power from people's lives or from dogs fighting to death (*Broken Homes* [2013]) or from killing river deities (*Lies Sleeping*) or even killing

people in hopes of absorbing their power at the moment of death. Peter Grant and his mentor, Thomas Nightingale, fight mages who draw their power from the harm of others, but clearly feel that their own power comes from somewhere so vast that it is unhurt by what they syphon off. Given that all living things are said to release a bit of power when they die, the reservoir might even just be the residue of human and animal history on this planet. If this is the source, it can be drawn on by anyone who learns how to channel it, whether for good purposes or for selfish ends. By implication, Peter's father and other musicians draw on some such power when their playing becomes inspired. Since real-world power almost always comes at the expense of some other beings or resources, this is an imaginative way of supplying power cleansed of negative effects.

Other schools of magic exist. A school of blacksmiths retained some magic practices handed down from Weyland. Peter stumbles on The Society of the Rose in later volumes, a tradition of British female magical practice. Women were denied the Newtonian training by eighteenth-century British sexism. Hence, they preserved and developed their own lines of interest in secret. Those we see do not use power to compel but to heal, and one tries to harness power to make her body fly. The separation of the sexes was not as extreme in France or Russia. A few female mages were recognised by the French academy, and Russia used women in World War II as 'night witches,' training them in aggressive killing magic only. We do not know where their power comes from, but possibly from the same general Earth-power as the Newtonian. Soldiers dying in the World Wars created an immense flow of power that may have fuelled the night witches initially. For all that the Russian night witch character is dangerous in England, that is because she is breaking the Queen's Peace under orders from her employer and so must be pursued and prevented from operating by the police. Clearly Nightingale wishes she would swear to recognise British law; he admires her skill and does not like having to inhibit her abilities. He would like to learn more from her. We also learn of various traditions of magic in the United States (*False Value* [2020]). Part of Peter's plans for the future includes bringing the various legitimate schools of practice to the table to encourage sharing information and working together. Legitimate, from his and Aaronovitch's perspective, means magic that tries to maintain the peace, magic that helps people but does not simply serve to enrich or empower the mage or mage group, and magic that does not prey on or harm others.

Cultural Forms of Power

Alternative cosmoi seem appropriate for describing Faerie and Deep Time, and the term works, if less well, for the other possible sources of magic power that I have mentioned. When we get to Aaronovitch's vision of society, I mostly prefer the term layers. Crossing

from one cosmos to another is difficult or possible only by magic; moving from one layer of society to another, whether up or down, is done all the time. Aaronovitch floods us with various kinds of layers in society. Peter Grant is particularly alert to these, thanks to his mixed-race background. As I have noted, he wanted to study architecture at a university, but his A-levels and drawing skills were not good enough, so he became a policeman. He is aware of everyone's educational qualifications, and he remarks on the architecture of just about every building he sees. Implicit in his analyses is his sense of what economic status is needed to live in any kind of building. Accents are another indicator of social level. As a policeman, he is also sensitive to sexual and gendered forms of power. As a mage, he recognises a variety of mage practices and their legality or illegality.[3]

This vision of society as an intermeshed set of layers of different powers looks as if it should be a hopeless tangle. In a way it is, but Aaronovitch sees virtues in that. Lady Tyburn wants to regularise and simplify the lines of control; however, Aaronovitch views that as dangerous because it would put too much power in too few hands. Martin Chorley similarly wishes to regularise Britain and wants control in his own hands. What Aaronovitch offers instead are 'arrangements' and 'agreements,' temporary teamwork by disparate elements to achieve what they want. The British sense of 'muddling through' becomes an ideal. It is far from perfect, but it means that you may get at least part of what you need or want.

Our reader-response at first might be hostile: the British 'old-boy network' is famous for its classism and sexism and Aaronovitch shows how both affected the founding of the Folly, the gentlemen's club in Russell Square that housed the Newtonian Society of the Wise. However, Aaronovitch seems to feel that that network has lost most of its power now, and other networks challenge and replace it in temporary ways that do not grant new dominance. Thomas Nightingale, the only police mage at the outset of the series, is the perfect example of the old boy type. He is well born, educated at a boys' school that included magical training along with Latin and Greek and the right sports, and he is well dressed. He wears tailored clothes and handmade shoes. He drives a classic Jaguar. He served the empire in bureaucratic and diplomatic capacities and fought in World War II. When we first meet him, though, he is relatively withdrawn and melancholic; losing all his mage-friends in World War II left him feeling that magic was dying out and he was the last of his tribe, even though he seems mysteriously to be growing younger and appears to be in his forties though he is actually 100. His taking Peter as an apprentice had to be officially 'arranged' (*Rivers of London*, 75–6) since the police agreed that magic was dying out and they favoured its extinction. Teaching Peter

[3] For an overview of the cultural variety in Aaronovitch's London, see Sylwia Borowska-Szerszun (2019) and Stefanie Lethbridge (2017). Lethbridge richly details the connections between styles of architecture and the social views they embody.

galvanises Nightingale. Peter is lower class, dark-skinned, and not highly educated, but he is smart and science-minded, and he views magic in ways that are new and intriguing to Nightingale.[4] The two of them also benefit from collaborating with a Scottish Muslim doctor who supplies high-tech clinical and forensic analyses of what magic does to the body, either of the practitioner or of someone magically attacked.

We see many other examples of networking arrangements as the way of surviving and thriving in society. The musicians' union has no concept of magic so does not know why several jazz players die in quick succession, but we see the informal way that musicians meet and form groups, drop names, and get gigs. At one such meeting, Peter's mother recognises as a 'witch' one of the jazz vampires, and this leads to the vampires' eventual suicide and the protection of future musicians (*Moon Over Soho*). A group of upper Thames River deities move about as a travelling fair; their grouping offers protection and fairground income. The demi-monde consists of several minor river deities and half-bloods of Fae-human extraction. They have secret meetings in different empty buildings and abandoned tube stations in London; only people with the password can get in. Again, this group protects its members and exchanges goods and information and entertainment. The most formal and obvious such subgroup 'arrangement' is the Quiet People, the subject of *Whispers Underground*. They descend from the Irish work gangs who excavated the tunnels for tube and rail systems. They live entirely and secretly underground but maintain contacts with other descendants of those gangs above ground. The upper group supply vegetables in bulk and are paid with magically unbreakable dishes. The vegetables feed pigs who supply meat, manure for growing foods, and methane for running machinery. Theirs is a very elaborate version of such arrangements, and illustrates how much can be done without formal, legal recognition.

Aaronovitch's belief in informal arrangements shows in his way of portraying police power. Nightingale's branch of magic police work floats along on such arrangements. It exists without many law officers knowing what it is or does. An example is seen when the mages help the non-magical police. The mages produce a rationalised (if untruthful) report that does not make higher authorities or the public uncomfortable with references to magic, but everyone who needs to know understands what is going on.[5] However, those who do know also have the authority to give Nightingale and his

[4] Borowska-Szerszun (2019) sees Nightingale initially as the embodiment of the British Empire; those who are othered by race or culture or magic ability can be tolerated only if they accept the white-imposed British system of laws and values. His experiences with Peter draw him toward a much more post-colonial sense of what should be.

[5] For one of many examples, see Aaronovitch's *Broken Homes* (2014), 50. 'There would be two reports, one for the Folly files and a sanitised version for the wider Met … "I'm going to blame it on his attempt to do the lighter fluid trick but with brandy," she said. "That way his official statement—that he was doing a magic trick that went wrong—will match the evidence."' Interestingly, Aaronovitch's novella set in Germany (*The October Man* [2019]) shows the German police

apprentice access to all the police computer systems so they can enter information and track events that might bear on their investigations. Aaronovitch grants the imperfections and inefficiencies of such a system but upholds it as less likely to misuse power on a grand scale than more organised systems.

In the context of Aaronovitch's distrust of organised power, his portrayal of the London police shows how a social system can minimise the dangers of possessing such power. Peter Grant and Nightingale being police, they wield a different sort of power from individuals since they can arrest people. In extreme circumstances, they can even kill people without being punished. Aaronovitch's picture of this power seems unduly positive. He makes many references to previous decades of police corruption (which he attributes to low pay), but the police system he describes in loving detail is, he suggests, a force governed by extensive training. Its members cooperate despite disagreements about crimes and jurisdictions. They may be underfunded and hampered by restrictions and grotesquely overburdened with paperwork, but as shown, they devote themselves to stopping those who disturb the Queen's Peace. Given very recent investigations into London police corruption and accusations of their racist, misogynistic, and homophobic behaviours, Aaronovitch is definitely glossing over continuing problems, but does not deny their existence.[6] Within his books, the police-as-system is valued for its work by much of the population. After all, even his criminals want the protection of the law when other criminals threaten them.

Insofar as non-magical power can be given a clean bill of health, Aaronovitch gives it to his fictional British police. What sets their power apart from less desirable forms? The constables on the street are not acting for personal gain, and they sometimes run risk of serious harm to protect the public. They are upholding laws passed by a representative government. They do not get much personal recognition for solving a crime or capturing a major criminal, partly because any such operation is a cooperative event, but also because policing exerts power as a system, not through an individual. Individuals may hope for eventual promotion, but Aaronovitch's higher officers are not shown to have extravagant wealth or power beyond those legal to their rank. In medieval literature, a hero had personally to kill the monster; when Tony Williams' modern version of saga-hero Grettir kills a paedophile, the modern replacement for a vicious

much more accepting of magic as a factor that they must consider. They also distrust the British to stick to the 'agreement,' and feel their distrust justified when they learn that Nightingale has taken an apprentice.

[6] See *The Economist*, 17 June 2021 (https://www.economist.com/britain/2021/06/17/a-panel-finds-that-londons-police-are-institutionally-corrupt) and Reuters 22 March 2022 (https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/london-police-chided-again-corruption-crime-links-2022-03-22/). For other accusations, see https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/21/metropolitan-police-institutionally-racist-misogynistic-homophobic-louise-casey-report.

grave-mound haunt, he goes to prison for the deed rather than receiving grateful thanks from those preyed upon.[7] The police relieve ordinary citizens of such responsibility and danger, but recognition of police heroism remains collective and not personal. While they will be investigated if they are responsible for the death of a criminal (as Peter Grant has been at the beginning of *False Value*), they will not be punished unless they have acted improperly. Officers represent a system rather than acting as individuals. In the real world, petty and grand corruption and violent misbehaviour going unpunished have made the contemporary police much less attractive than Aaronovitch's portrayal of them. In his study of power, though, he seems to be showing what the police system is in theory and should be if its rules were faithfully followed.

If law-abiding police power as exercised within its society is acceptable to Aaronovitch, what of the larger policing powers wielded by empires? Aaronovitch does not portray British behaviour in imperial colonies but shows many West Africans and South Asians in London, a consequence of empire. Clearly, he shows subcultures of immigrants that are not fully assimilated and equal, but he shows members of the second generation succeeding within the British system, and a few rise to very high social levels. Though he may underplay continued prejudice against those of immigrant background, Aaronovitch suggests that in longer terms, a society of mixed races and cultures is possible and leads to a prosperous outcome.

When an imperial power invades a foreign land, the conquered culture is forced into a very weak and unprotected relationship to the ruling power. We see this in two forms: directly, in Roman Britain and by implication in the British Empire. The Roman influence remains and is seen from the fact that the god of the upper Thames was at one stage of his long life a Romanised Briton who took the Roman name Claudius Tiberius Verica. Like the spirit who became the rioting and murderous Punch in *Rivers of London* (Gaius Cata Pulcinella), Father Thames was a Briton who in the course of time accepted Roman ways and became a priest. When natives resent the empire enough to revolt, then any excesses of empire violence or injustice tend to be matched by the fanatic savagery of the desperate rebels. In *Lies Sleeping* (194–9), Punch's wife and children are tortured and slaughtered before his eyes, and he goes mad as a result. This Roman figure is a fiction dreamed up by Aaronovitch, evidently to make a point about empire, power, and the aftermath. As a Briton, Punch had adapted happily to Roman life, but Boudicca's rebellion showed him that the Roman military was not prepared to defend native civilians like his family. Given the violently destructive effect that Punch has in *Rivers of London*, we see that imperial failure to protect those whose power it usurped is

[7] Tony Williams' *Nutcase* (2017) showcases the very different social rules and pressures brought to bear on similar personalities.

to blame for things going wrong in later centuries. The forces behind empire-building value territory, taxes, cheap labour, military supplies, trade goods, mines, harbours, and other physical and financial benefits above the conquered peoples. Aaronovitch, however, implies that the benefits accruing to the conqueror constitute a debt to the indigenous people that is often unpaid—with consequences. More generally, he suggests that too great an imbalance of power leads to a fanaticism that can draw on the evil *allokosmos* for power.

We see little directly of the British Empire. What we are exposed to is the implicit argument that if Britain benefitted economically from imposing its rule on much of Africa, India, and other parts of Asia, then Britain has an obligation to those formerly colonised people, particularly if they come to Britain. Here Nightingale increasingly embodies what Aaronovitch treats as the proper attitude that the British should take. Nightingale happily deals with (and respects) Dr. Walid, who can approach magic with the latest scientific technology. Nightingale not only accepts brown-skinned Peter Grant and hijab-wearing Sahra Guleed and other police descended from Empire-colonised people. He also seems comfortable visiting Peter's parents or Abigail's in their council housing and getting their agreement to their children's education in magic policing. The remnants of empire are not fully absorbed yet by many Britons; Peter details some insensitive remarks that show whites being uneasy talking to anyone with dark skin, particularly one with police power.[8] Aaronovitch, though, shows some of the potential and power of these descendants of the colonised. Almost all the rivers of London below the highest tidal point are children of an African mother. Father Thames, the power above the tidal point, may be a pre-Roman Briton, and he is white and male and relies on archaic mechanical technologies such as the travelling carousel. He fled the lower river during the Great Stink of 1858, so it became open to a different kind of tutelary spirit. Aaronovitch's lower Thames as port for trade with the world, is distinctly post-colonial in flavour, as well as richly female and technologically advanced. Inland may be parochial and white and sometimes nostalgic for various lost pasts such as the Arthurian and the imperial, but his London is heavily influenced by descendants of former colonial populations and is much more oriented to the future.[9]

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[8] In Aaronovitch's *Whispers Under Ground* (2012, 44), Police Officer Carey sees Guleed in a furry hat and remarks 'I hear it gets cold in the desert.' Peter comments wryly 'Guleed and I exchanged looks, but what can you do?' In Aaronovitch and Cartmel's graphic novel *Detective Stories* (2020), 'Tales from the Riverbank,' (np) a story a single page long shows a wealthy yacht owner saying to Guleed 'No offence, but…would it be possible to talk to someone from the police who is *English*?' and two cels later, Nightingale has appeared in her place and has caused the yacht to be placed high in a tree by magical means.

[9] Imme Bageritz (2019) makes this point among others about the tidal versus the inland Thames, especially p. 165. Borowska-Szerszun (2019) emphasises the healthily multicultural aspects of the tidal Thames region. Lethbridge (2017) links the antagonism between Father and Mama Thames as representing current anxieties over immigrants from non-white regions.

What Aaronovitch most fears in a society is the individual who amasses power for personal use and who uses that power to build layers of legal protection such that the police and other systems meant to equalise power cannot touch that individual. Self-aggrandising power is the foremost totally negative image Aaronovitch presents, and magic helps place such individuals above the usual layers of society. Martin Chorley is its prime representative through several volumes, although we also see numerous low-level criminals doing what they can to gain power and we glimpse two of Chorley's predecessors in self-serving and socially harmful uses of magic. Chorley is already very wealthy, but that does not satisfy him. Although his goals are never fully stated, he seems to want to reshape Britain and British culture to be 'better,' where better is defined solely by himself. We deduce that one element in his definition is racist. He defines a 'proper Brit' as 'That wonderful blend of Romano-Celt and Anglo-Saxon with a flavouring of Dane and a pinch of Norman French' (*The Hanging Tree* [2016], 358–9). Chorley, of course, claims that Britain is degenerate and needs to be cleaned up. Like Lady Tyburn, he wants to rationalise and do away with the network of arrangements and agreements. Like any dictator, he will determine what must be changed. He invokes the Arthurian realm as his ideal. Since the historical Arthurian era of post-Roman Britons fighting Anglo-Saxon invaders was never anything like the romance realm of fair damsels and honourable knights, roundtable feasts, and combats governed by rules of fair play, we sense that his notion of the Arthurian realm is a Britain with himself as Merlin. He fancies himself the powerful mage who will give orders but need not bother himself with the trivia of governing. Given the layers of shell companies that he establishes to protect himself, the police never do capture him or prove his guilt; he is shot by his collaborator, Lesley May. While she partly did this to protect Peter, her killing her master illustrates the inevitable result of that self-aggrandising way of using magic. Similarly, Terrence Skinner is so protected by shell companies that he cannot be indicted although the evidence for his killing an employee with a drone is highly suggestive and might be provable if the police could access the relevant records.

Of Aaronovitch's *allokosmoi*, that of the Fae is the most traditional. We see a very similar realm in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* and many other stories through the ages of Faeries and their interactions with humans. Aaronovitch gives his version a bit of originality in making his Fae stronger and more bullying, and in making unicorns fierce and as large as raging draft horses. His other alternative realms are more original. Whereas other fantasies occasionally involve trips to past time, Aaronovitch makes his Deep Time seem still extant, in part through both ancestral figures and actual figures being alive in both times and aware of both. Those in the past do not seem ignorant of the present;

Beverley Brook's male predecessor kisses Peter as intimately as Beverley does as a signal that he is in some sense Beverley as well as an ancient warrior. In Aaronovitch's world, the past is not dead, just invisible and inaccessible to most of us most of the time, but it is still here and even having some effect on our day-to-day actions. The belief in *genii locorum* is found in many cultures and suits his sense of London as a confluence of many peoples and types of power. The *allokosmos* of pure evil at first seems more a Lovecraftian exaggeration than psychologically compelling, but it embodies and defines evil as taking power by damaging others and by being indifferent to the suffering it causes others, problems to which our non-magical world is all too susceptible. What Aaronovitch has done in his *allokosmos* of general power—possibly just power released at the death of all beings—is to invent a source of power that is not intrinsically harmful and can be used for general good. This, of course, is a dilemma bedevilling societies that lack magic. How do you get power that does not deprive or damage others and how do you ensure that it is used toward a common good?

Aaronovitch's answer reflects a realistic acceptance of compromise and imperfection. We cannot all get what we want, and we will not get all that we want. Our best tactic is to muddle along through the various layers of society and join springy temporary networks of those working for similar ends in hopes of getting some of what we want or need. His other answer is to exalt a body of publicly agreed-upon laws and establish a police force sworn to uphold the laws and protect all people from lawbreakers. The laws may not be perfect, and neither are the police, particularly when underpaid, but the pattern they represent seems worth striving for. We cannot solve our problems with magic, alas, and cannot draw power from different cosmoi, but he offers some hope for working within the social layers that do exist and for learning how to negotiate them by forming alliances.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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