VINTAGE

THE VOICE THAT THUNDERS

ALAN GARNER

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About the Book

Alan Garner is an exceptional lecturer and essayist. This collection, taken form the work of more that twenty years, explores an enviable range of scholarly interests: archaeology, myth, language, education, philosophy, the spiritual quest, mental health, literature, music and film.

The book also serves as a poetic autobiography of one of England’s best-loved but least public writers. He hears himself declared dead at the age of six; he draws on the deep vein of a rural working-class childhood in a family of craftsmen who instilled the passion for excellence and for innovation and humour. The disciplines he learnt as a Classicist give a shape and clarity to that passion in this richly various book that would have fascinated his forebears, whose work and lives are also celebrated here. This most unusual, most candid, most vivid picture of an English family and its home, its country’s history, is also a devastating revelation of a writer’s own life. Alan Garner’s account of his mental illness will become a classic, and each strand of the book will be a source of fascination to anyone who has ever fallen under the spell of an Alan Garner story, as also to all who concern themselves with the craft of writing.

About the Author

ALAN GARNER was born in Congleton, Cheshire, in 1934, and grew up in Alderley Edge, where his father's family have lived for more than three hundred years. He was educated at Manchester Grammar School and at Magdalen College, Oxford, after which he began writing his first novel, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen,* at the age of twenty-two.

His books include Elidor, *The Owl Service* (winner of the *Guardian* Award and the Carnegie Medal), *Red Shift, The Stone Book Quartet* (winner of the Phoenix Award of America in 1996) and, most recently, *Strandloper*.

Also by Alan Garner and published by Harvill

STRANDLOPER

For Griselda

The Voice that Thunders

Essays and Lectures

Alan Garner

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“A person doesn’t need to go to college to learn facts.
He can get them from books”

Albert Einstein

“Doing’s a hard school, but a fool will learn at no other.”

Joseph Garner, 1875–1955,
whitesmith

INTRODUCTION

This book is made from various attempts to record the excitement that has attended life so far. Spread over some thirty years and now put together as one statement, they may show the progression, or otherwise, of a writer's thought, and the environment that engenders and shapes, but must never appear in, the work.

The texts are the full texts as they were written, though not always as they were presented. Lectures are constrained by time and the patience of an audience, and articles are subject to an imposed length.

I myself have edited occasionally here, but, I hope, honourably. When dealing, over time, with linked themes, it is natural if for once something has been said definitively to use it again. Therefore in this context I have avoided the inelegance that would engender. There are other kinds of repetition that may be instructive; and I have held my pen and kept them in.

So here, for me, are the building blocks of what matters. It is a map of a journey that has been made possible by the friends, influencing minds and helpers that have brought me to this point. To try to list them would be prodigal of paper beyond the reckless, and would face me with choices to defeat Solomon; for I have been most fortunate in the net of fellowship through life and around the world. Better that both fellowship and trees stand.

A.G.
Blackden
14 *January* 1997

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The Edge of the Ceiling

MY NAME IS Alan Garner, and I was born, with the cord wrapped twice round my throat, in the front bedroom of 47 Crescent Road, Congleton, Cheshire, at Latitude 53° 09'40" N, Longitude 02° 13'7" W, at 21.30 on Wednesday, 17 October 1934. My mother was a tailor, and my father a painter and decorator.[1]

My mother's family were talented cranks, on every side; lateral thinking was a part of their equipment, and those that got away with it were respectable as well. Even the names are odd. There was a great-aunt Sophia Pitchfork; and a great-great-grand-uncle, J. Sparkes Hall, an inventor, of 308 & 310 Regent Street, London, Bootmaker to Her Majesty The Queen and Their Royal Highnesses The Prince and Princess of Wales. He designed the elastic-sided boot, and demonstrated his English Cottage or Test House (which became the traditional nineteenth-century worker's kitchen fire-cum-oven-cum-boiler) at the Paris Exhibition of 1867. His brother, Edward, designed and built church organs in Birkenhead.

Perhaps a more typical gene was represented by the third brother, who was Professor of Systematic Memory, or Polymnemonics, on which he delivered lectures, "copiously illustrated by Novel, Curious, Extraordinary and Interesting Experiments (Schools at halfprices)".

In the eighteenth century, the Halls cover their traces, but documentary fragments and early photographs suggest that a pawnbroker Hall, of Plymouth, had fashionable tastes; and so my great-great-great-great-grandmother may have been West African.

My father's family is quite different. They have been craftsmen for centuries. They have married locally, under strict cultural tabus, and have lived in the same house without a break of tenancy. My cousin lives there now. The house stands in a small area called The Hough, on the slopes of Alderley Edge, a wooded sandstone hill above the Cheshire Plain. The Edge is a Beauty Spot in summer and at weekends, but its long history and prehistory make it unsafe at all times. It is physically and emotionally dangerous. No one born to the Edge questions that, and we show it a proper respect.

So there are three main elements in me from the start. Families on the one side gifted, unstable, and, on the other, skilled, steady. And a hill that Garners have inhabited, and worked, for as long as anybody knows.

Born in Congleton, raised in Alderley, I have lived, since 1957, seven miles from both, near the Jodrell Bank radio telescope, in a mediaeval timber-framed house on a site that has almost certainly been occupied by the living for seven thousand years, since the Mesolithic period, and by the dead as well. The mound that the house stands on is one of a group of tumuli. If I have any real occupation, it is to be here.

Therefore, I have spent the whole of my life, so far, on the Pennine shelf of East Cheshire. It is an area that encompasses most of the landscapes to be found in Britain. Within twelve miles, I can move through fen, dairy and arable farms, to sheep runs and bleak mountain tors. And, in this particular place, I find a universality that enables me to write. Everywhere is special, in some way. It was not imperative that I should be born in Cheshire; but it was

imperative that I should know my place. That can be achieved only by inheriting one's childhood landscape, and by growing in it to maturity. It is a subtle matter of owning and of being owned.

The landscape of childhood is itself unremarkable, for the child. Lack of any concept of things being other than they are found to be brings to childhood an innocence that hindsight can abuse. When we comment on the resilience of children, we should remember that what may now appear to have been brave or terrible was possibly unquestioned at the time. It was certainly unquestioned by me as an individual and by the generation of village children to which I belonged.

"God bless Mummy, God bless Daddy, make me a good boy and don't let the war end. Amen." I gabbled that prayer every night from the age of six until God let me down in 1945, when I was nearly eleven. We were not a religious family. The first three pious requests were taught by my mother, who was enlisting the Holy Trinity as a child-minder, and the last bit was my own, because I had worked out that peace would axe my favourite wireless programmes.

The knowing innocence of childhood makes something peculiar of war. Lack of experience turns it into a bright game. There is no responsibility, no foresight, no sense of deprivation. The child is free to take what he wants from the mess; and the child is a callous animal, with little built-in morality.

For us, the past was something called Pre-war. It seemed to have been an age of plenty. Adults would thumb through old mail order catalogues and talk of the good days. If the past was Pre-war, the future had no name. We were living in a geological time span called the Duration.

The nearest I came to an understanding was that I was between two periods, of which adults were aware, but I could not be: the Eldorado of Pre-war, of which I remembered only the vivid yellow and the taste and shape

of a banana, and a return to an Elysium after the Duration: a “once and future peace”. I felt no sense of loss.

We lived a rural life on the edge of suburbia, far enough from Manchester for us to take their evacuees, but among the anti-aircraft batteries, and where the bombers would jettison for the dash home. I lay in bed, listening. Heinkel? Dornier? It was the wah-wah of German engines as the planes dragged their weight to Manchester. Then the guns. Out of bed and into the road to pick up hot shrapnel: metal with a texture like no other: steel sand.

Next morning we would swap our shrapnel and barter for sticky incendiary bombs that were more like bicycle pumps than fireworks. For some reason, shrapnel that had been “hot-found” was worth more than “cold-found”, though there was nothing by which to tell the difference now. It was a matter of unquestioned honour: the only instance that was never challenged, in my experience of childhood.

The Polish pilot would have been our greatest prize, but we lost him. His fighter was in trouble, and he crash-landed. He was dead when we arrived. We could not get the cockpit fully open before the fire reached the ammunition, and we had to leave his goggles and make do with a yellow handkerchief that had been around his neck. But the blood was real.

Our war was with the evacuees. We had them from Liverpool, Manchester, London and the Channel Islands. The worst were the Islanders. They were silent, foreign, could speak a secret language, and would not go home. Manchester, Liverpool and London fought dirty, but were scared both of woods and of open spaces. For us, a field was certain refuge from pursuit even if it were empty. The possibility of a cow lurking in the cropped grass was something that no townie would risk.

The adult plans for what they called the Home Front (there appeared to be no Home Back; or, if there was, it did not concern them), were varied and improvised. My mother

concocted the following stratagem against invasion while my father was guarding us from the Hun in Rhyl.

I kept a bag of pepper by the door, next to Mum's poker. They were for the German paratrooper. When he knocked on the door, I was going to throw the pepper into his face, Mum would hit him with the poker, and then we would run upstairs and commit suicide by hurling ourselves head first from the bedroom window. That the window was only some nine feet above the ground, with stone mullions that would have made "hurling" a problem did not make either of us question the efficacy of the scheme.

As for political understanding, I relied on the propaganda of the *Beano* and the *Dandy*: Musso the Wop (He's a Bigga-da-Flop), and Adolf and Hermie (The Nasty Nazis) in their endless search for food. "I have der pain in der breadbasket."

Peace, I thought, came when a sailor gave me a banana. But it was green. He told me that it was not ripe. I put it on the mantelpiece and watched it every day. When it was the yellow I remembered, and the smell was as I remembered, I peeled and ate it in a Proustian orgy. At that instant of biting into the fruit, I knew that the Duration was over. By colour, taste, smell and geometry, a banana, for me, bracketed the Second World War. Then everything changed.

The Belsen films were shown at our cinema. Although children were forbidden entry, we had always known the free way in. I saw the films four times. The not-dead corpse in the black skull-cap, picking over his shirt and grinning at the camera that had come too late; the bulldozer ploughing its graceful, hideous choreography into the mass grave. It was right for us to see this, to remind us that what we children were playing was being played better by adults, because they were bigger and had more toys.

Everyone will have been affected. For me, I am not afraid of the dark, and the blackout gave me a childhood of stars. But I do wish that air-raid sirens were not still used to call

out the fire brigade. Also, to grow up in an improvised world, where others are trying to kill you, develops an ability to distinguish between necessity and luxury, to arrive quickly at priorities, to survive.

My children are secure in a way that we never were. They are in a saner world, though it is not sane yet. And there is a factor to consider. The Blitz, the bag of pepper, the dead pilot meant little. Belsen made sense. At the age of ten, I realised what all the fuss had been about. It was about the ovens and the people inside. Before seeing them, I knew a lot of facts, but could not give them a context. Then, within minutes, the facts came together in an image and I was violently wise. My children and their generation have not had that shock; yet they are better informed than I was, and they are better informed because they have watched television.

Rubbish, though it very often is, trite, though it nearly always is, there remains an argument for accepting the medium of television as the main cultural development of the century. It removes more barriers than it creates, and exposes liars more clearly than any previous news machine. As long as politicians and generals continue to fear the lens, and there are men and women willing to be killed serving it, future cameras may arrive in time for the not-dead corpse in the black skull-cap.

I find this hard to explain to many people, who say that the world is getting worse because what they see on the news is so terrible. I try to explain that what they see has always gone on, but they have not been able to see it as it is happening, edited, focused. If a camera had been around to record how Athens dealt with an Aegean island that objected to paying taxes, the Parthenon and our model of Western thought would have been put into a different perspective indeed. This century has moved the portrayal of war from static engravings, with no corpses, in the *Illustrated London News*, of events long gone and in another

country, to a young girl running naked in napalm into your house, in high-quality colour, and now.

Television removes barriers. My attitudes in childhood were partly the innate callousness of an infant, and the war ended when I was on the threshold of adolescence, ready to become more aware of other people. I maintain that children now are more aware, more humane, because they have learned more through television than we did by living in an isolation that happened to be punctuated by random, and occasional, violence close at hand.

I would say that television presents facts and offers interpretation in a way that involves every area of our lives. Of course it can be, and is, abused; but I had to grub among old cigarette cards to extend my knowledge. Set that against what is available now. Rubbish there was, is and ever shall be. What has to be educated is choice. That is the difference. My children are richer in mind and spirit than I was, and from that richness grows compassion.

Let me stress that I see no miracle, no sudden generation of angels. But, where I tried to snatch the pilot’s goggles, the next children may not let him put them on.

So, while Leningrad starved for nine hundred days and Belsen conducted its roaring trade, my childhood was happy, along with the other village children; and, in addition, unaware that all children did not commonly live as I lived, I spent ten years in two worlds.

The daily landscape for me was a bedroom ceiling in a brick cottage, with a porch. It became the house of *Elidor*, and the porch the entrance to the Mound of Vandwy, “night’s dungeon”, because it was out of that porch my father stepped one January in the pre-dawn blackness and disappeared to join the army while my mother and I cried, certain we should not see him again.

The bedroom was whitewashed, irregular plaster, steeply pitched, with rafters and purlins and ridge exposed. And I

lay on my back beneath it through three long illnesses: diphtheria, meningitis and pneumonia.

I had no brothers or sisters. The Second World War came and went. The family survived. There were no tragedies. But the isolation caused by physical weakness and paralysis must have been increased by the more general isolation of a house threatened, bombed, blacked out. When I was bedfast, the rhythms of day and night were not imposed on me. Rather than sleep, I catnapped, or was in coma. Reality was the room.

The view from my window was, for five years, glued over with cheesecloth against bomb blast; but, even unrestricted, it was no more than a length of road where little happened, and which was closed by the spire and weathercock of a Victorian church, on which my great-great-grandfather had worked, and later became a running stitch through *The Stone Book Quartet*. Sideways rolling of my head made the spire wobble, the houses insecure, and people on the road change shape. I knew that the uneven window pane was the cause, but it still gave the room the greater reality. The ceiling did not wobble when I rolled my head.

There was a forest in the ceiling, with hills and clouds, and a road to the horizon. The way into the ceiling for me was harder at some times than at others. To enter the ceiling, I had to stare at the road and remove detail from the sides of vision by unfocusing my eyes. I had to block sound. I had to switch myself off.

“Switching off” is not a good description, because there was a profound engagement in the activity of making the bed-bound “me” let go of me. The changes in sound and vision were felt by the “me” on the bed. I had to remove myself from that. I would concentrate on the concentration of the “me” concentrating. I thought of the thought of myself thinking. I observed the observer observing; until the observer was not the observed.

Whatever actually took place, the sensation was that of sliding out of phase with the boy in the bed. And the automatic result was to find that I had crossed the neutralised zone from the bed into the ceiling. I did not sleep. There was no relaxing of consciousness. It was the opposite. I had to think harder, relatively, than at any previous time of my life. The thoughts may have been unusual, but the thinking was not.

I could tell the difference between waking and sleeping because of something else that developed. It was the ability to programme myself for dreaming before I slept, rather like choosing from a menu. Generally, the dreams would come in their programmed order, though nightmares were frequent and unsought.

If I found myself in a nightmare, I would first check that I was dreaming, then watch for the approach of the nightmare's particular horror, and jump headfirst into it to wake myself up. I always knew when I was dreaming, because I could control the dream. The ceiling, however, I could not predict. Once I was on the road in the ceiling, there was no effort needed to keep me there. I entered, and did not look back. I did not see the boy on the bed. I felt that I was awake.

The world of the ceiling was three-dimensional, objects were solid, visual perspectives true. I never ate or drank in the ceiling (as I later found was the rule for the Other World). There was no wind, no climate, no heat, no cold, no time. The light came from no source and was shadowless, as neon; but before I knew neon. And everywhere, everybody, everything was white. It was the genesis of the dead land of Elidor.

Another peculiarity was that I could see in the dark. If I lay in bed, in the black room, the ceiling became fluorescent, or a negative film. And, when I went into the ceiling, the ceiling-world was lit by the same reversed light, and so were the people and so was I. Otherwise, the ceiling was, for me,

“natural”. I met people I knew, including my parents, and some who were only of the ceiling. None of the “ceiling people” has turned up in later life, yet, and they had no names. The people I knew in both states of waking had no knowledge of the ceiling when I asked them. I soon stopped asking.

Of course, this is interpretation now. I should not have been able to describe the ceiling in these words at the age when I lived there. I “lived” in the ceiling. But there was a difference between the ceiling and the bed that made the bed, with all its pain and debility, the permanent choice.

Although the way to the ceiling was along the same road in the ceiling, the land beyond the road, from visit to visit, was inconsistent; and this inconsistency made the ceiling not more interesting but less. Each venture was separate rather than a learning, and such variety leads nowhere; it builds nothing; it has nothing to teach. And I wanted to learn. That was the difference. I would enter the ceiling by an act of will, but I left it through tedium. Sooner or later, I would stop whatever I was doing in the ceiling, turn around, and always be facing the same road-forest-cloud-hill picture that I saw from my bed. Then I would pull back as a camera does to the bed and lie looking at the lime-washed plaster.

There was one terror in the ceiling: one motionless dread.

Sometimes I would look up, and see no road, no forest, clouds or hills, but a plump little old woman with a circular face, hair parted down the middle and drawn to a tight bun, lips pursed, and small, pebbled eyes. She sat wrapped in a shawl in a cane wheelchair and watched me. She was a waning moon: her head turned to the side, as if she had broken her neck. When I saw her, I knew that I could die. She must not enter the room, and I must not enter the ceiling. If I let her eyes blink, I should die. There was no night, day, dawn, dusk. The little old woman and I were locked.

The little old woman came only when my life really was threatened. She was a part of the plaster in the ceiling, not of my room but of my parents' room, and I was taken there when I was too ill to be left alone. She was my death, and I knew it.

One hundred and fifty yards from bed, and behind the house, was my other world. Later knowledge told me that it was an eroded fault-scarp, 600 feet high, of the Keuper and Bunter Triassic sandstones. To me, it was the Edge, that cliff covered with trees, mined for copper and quarried for stone through centuries and then abandoned. When I was not confined to the house, I would spend my days and my nights on the Edge.

Woodland on a crag of coloured stone was just the beginning of that world for me. In the best sense, as a family, we have always known our place. We handled it as miners and stone-cutters. We culled its timber for houses and fuel, and grew food on its soil. At a deeper level, we accepted that there was a Hero King asleep in the ground, behind a rock named the Iron Gates. Our water supply derived from the Holy Well, which granted wishes to tourists at weekends, and an income for the child of our family who, on a Monday morning, cleaned out the small change.

Yet for no money would that child have climbed the yew that stood beside the well. "If I ever so much as see you touch that," my grandfather said, "I'll have the hide off you." And there was a memory that could hardly be restored to words: of how the well was not for wishing, but for the curing of barren women; and the offerings were of bent pins, not of pence. And Grandad spoke of rags tied to trees there. That had been a long time ago, he said.

So it is for a child born to the Edge. We knew our place, and knowledge passed beyond the material, such as where a band of white clay was under the fallen leaves which could be used as soap to clean up with before going home. It passed to the spiritual, too. I was brought up to respect

both. They were there. Even the ghosts were those of relatives.

Yet my relationship with that hill was different from that of the rest of my family. As a result of gained knowledge, for me the Edge both stopped, and melted, time.

I knew enough geology to become amazed. I could trace the tidal vortex in the strata: the print of water swirling for a second under the pull of wind and moon and held for two hundred million years. I felt the white pebbles in the rock, and wondered from what mountains they had come, by what river, to what sea.

And, in the fleeting, I found the vision. In knowing the moment of the vortex, and of the pebble, which, if I could have watched for long enough, was not rock but liquid, I lost all sense of “me” upon the hill. As with the ceiling, a barrier was down. But, perhaps because I was not weakened, fevered, paralysed, the result was different. I felt not that I entered a world, but that a world entered me. There were no exploits such as the ceiling gave; no journeys; no people. Of the two landscapes, the ceiling was the more mundane. But the ceiling had showed me that time was not simply a clock; and so I was open to the hill and to the metaphors of time that the hill gave. And the years of bed had developed another freedom.

For most children, I know now, time drags. That is because inertia is uncommon, and days are filled with events. But where a child has only inertia, time must not rule. And I played with time as if it were chewing-gum, making a minute last an hour, and a day compress to a minute. I had to. If I had not kept time pliant, it would have set me as the pebble in the rock.

So I brought to the coloured cliff and my strength the craft of the white ceiling and my weakness. I switched myself off. And the universe opened. I was shown a totality of space and time, a kaleidoscope of images expanding so quickly that they fragmented. There were too many, too fast for

individual detail or recall. They dropped below the subliminal boundary, but I felt the rip-tide of their surge, and the rip-tide has remained.

Yet despite the hurly-burly beyond words, when I partook of the hill and the hill partook of me, there was a calm, which childhood could not give. For if the child had been left with only a vision, if the “me” had not been replaced by a truer sense of self, I do not know what would have happened. I do not know that I could have grown. With only a blind vision, I do not know that I could have survived.

I said at the beginning that, as children, we accept “normality” to be whatever is around us; and I have tried to describe three experiences to demonstrate what I mean. Man, though, at every age is also an animal with instincts that need no teaching; and the strongest instinct is for life. Yet in childhood, at three separate times I died.

It was not medical death in the way that it can now be defined. It was the opinion of doctors, humane men, around the bed of an organism under the rough ceiling of a cottage below Alderley Edge. The child was technically alive, but all his systems were collapsing, and there was nothing more to be done for him. In one instance, meningitis, I heard my mother being helped to accept the imminent death by being told that for me to recover would be a cruelty, because the damage to brain and spine would be massive, and I should be a bedridden thing for the rest of my life: not a person, not a son.

What those humane men did not take into account was that I was not yet dead. I could not signal, I was unable to communicate with the outside world, but I was not yet dead. I could hear. And I heard. I heard myself dismissed, written off. It was, to the animal in me, an attempt to kill my life.

I screamed, using no words, making no sound. The body was nearly dead. But fury then was greater than death, and, though nothing showed on the surface of the creature under the sheet, inside was war. I raged against the cosmos. Inside

me was a zoo gone mad. Outside was calm, immobile, good-as-dead. And that is why I lived. I was too angry to die.

Mine was a glorious childhood. I would not wish it on anyone, nor on me again. But it happened. And my good fortune was that I was able, as a child, to know my death, to face the ultimate, before experience scrambled my brains.

I am not arguing for life-at-all-costs. I hope I am not so arrogant that I would even begin to tell other people in other circumstances what to do. Indeed, I am at a disadvantage. I have known my death and known its ways, but I have never felt so desperate that I have wanted to die. I have felt so desperate that I have wanted to live. I have pursued life through the Edge and the ceiling and am simply relating a number of connected events that, though personal to me, may by their simplicity be of interest to others.

I speak as a survivor, and have described some techniques of survival, the pursuit of life, through the Edge and the ceiling, through inner and outer space and time, which I used as a child at an historic period when strangers were trying to kill me. The instincts were those of an animal, but they went on to teach me something more. They taught me that we transcend technique and that all experience can be made positive and turned to good. But we can never afford to stop.

If I had stopped, having survived, the technique of the Edge and the ceiling might have dwindled into a sloppy mysticism; but instead I endured the rigours of an education that matched vision with thought, each to feed the other, so that dream and logic both had their place, both made sense, and legend and history could both be true.

In such a way, one mere survival was transcended, and is to this day. Each connection seen brings greater awe. My privileged childhood forced me to choose whether to live or to die; and I saw that inner and outer worlds did not collide. I saw a unity at work outside myself.