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Connected through Custom: Well Dressing in Jon McGregor's Novel, *Reservoir 13*

Sophie Parkes-Nield

Abstract

Placing a calendar custom in a fictional text opens a wealth of possibilities to the writer: enabling new plots or changes in trajectories; signposting critical information about place and pace, time and timing; conveying and communicating complex characters. In *Reservoir 13,* a novel by Jon McGregor, the custom of well dressing appears not as superfluous detail, but as an intentional device to control and manipulate the text—and the reader's response to it. Though the mentions of the custom are fleeting, this article demonstrates how its inclusion, and its frequency of use, enables the writer to develop a sophisticated sense of place and distinctive, memorable characters through a few well-chosen words. The custom also aids readers in their navigation through a structure which could otherwise prove difficult to fathom, while simultaneously grounding the characters in their calendar when collective trauma may provoke feelings of detachment and isolation.

Introduction

Reservoir 13, written by Jon McGregor and published by Fourth Estate in 2017, has been phenomenally well received, winning the 2017 Costa Book Award, and in the same year being shortlisted for the Goldsmiths Prize and longlisted for the Booker Prize. The novel charts the life of an unnamed Peak District village in the aftermath of the disappearance of a thirteen-year-old tourist, Rebecca Shaw. Though missing children stories are well-worn tropes in literature, television, and film, as well as folktales and contemporary legends, '*Reservoir 13* isn't simply an iteration of the usual story, however: it's a fascinating exploration of it' (Hadley 2017). McGregor's masterful storytelling manages to convey experiences both collective and personal, macro and micro, over thirteen years, demonstrating the lengthy impact of grief and trauma, and the desire—the need—for life to go on.

The reader of *Reservoir 13* soon becomes embedded firmly in village life, accustomed to village routine, recognizing that with routine comes familiarity and, in turn, therapy. A foible of this fictional village's routine is its annual participation in a well dressing custom which its residents undertake with a sense of duty borne out of habit. This article seeks to demonstrate how the writer's sensitive use of well dressing, and its nuanced deployment throughout the novel, manifests in the reader's better comprehension of time

and place, while simultaneously grounding the fictional characters in their own environment, in their time of personal and collective need. The well dressing custom helps grow and evolve these characters into village residents we believe in—with whom we identify and empathise, suspect, or are irritated by—better immersing ourselves in this fictitious village and increasing our enjoyment of the novel.

First, though, what is well dressing? Visitors to well dressing villages during the well dressing season, May to September (Simpson and Roud 2003), will encounter large decorative scenes—biblical, historical, commemorating a specific event such as an anniversary, or linked thematically in some other way—placed at wells, springs, or, as P. Hadfield describes the Youlgreave tradition in this journal in 1951, at more modern water sources: 'In this village, however, the ceremony might be more accurately described as "Tap-dressing". In 1829 water was carried by pipes from a spring to five public taps in Youlgreave. These taps, which are still in use, are decorated at Well Dressing time' (Hadfield 1951, 333). Sometimes, perversely, the dressings are placed at other civic spots not related to water sources at all. The scenes are created by an array of materials, both natural and artificial, pushed into clay, like an amalgam of mosaic and collage. Materials may have been specially collected from local gardens, parks, and common areas, gathered from kitchen cupboards, or bought in specifically for the custom. As Rosemary Shirley asserts in her article focused on the custom in Tissington, Derbyshire, the custom is executed variably from village to village, making it 'unproductive to write about the practice of well-dressing in general' (Shirley 2017, 651). This includes the scenes depicted, the materials used, the presence or absence of competition, the ways in which the final boards are displayed. Many villages have a festival or gala week in which the well dressings are celebrated at their peak, and other civic events and activities may also be programmed alongside the well dressings to augment the offer to residents and tourists. This is not a new phenomenon: in Charlotte Norman's paper on historical well dressing representation in local media, she presents the *Buxton Advertiser's* preference for the custom at Tissington, Derbyshire:

> It is pleasant to contrast what was seen at Tissington with what was experienced at Buxton. . . . At Tissington it is a work of love maintained by the affections of generations. At the other place it is a Saturnalia kept up for the most sordid of purposes and unredeemed by the slightest poetry'. (Norman 1993, 3)

Historians and folklorists have long documented gratitude for water. Peter Naylor and Lindsay Porter state that 'the essential part water plays in our everyday lives and its importance to the continuation of life' explains why water, over any other natural phenomena, 'has been ritualized by religions the world over' (Naylor and Porter 2002, 11). Earlier twentieth-century folklorists, such as Christina Hole, have been eager to make links between the modern well dressing custom and earlier thanksgiving, such as votive offerings at springs: 'Springs and wells have always been venerated, from exceedingly remote time onwards, because water is a basic necessity of life, and to our forefathers it seemed a

mysterious and spirit-haunted thing . . . Well-dressing in Derbyshire is a relic of this ancient form of worship' (Hole 1976, 213).

However, later folklorists, such as Steve Roud, in his book *The English Year*, warn against these assumptions:

> Most present-day well-dressings have a relatively short history, either originating in the last few decades, or being revivals of traditions from the 19th or early 20th century. However, the earlier history of well-dressing is not at all easy to ascertain, and the picture is considerably distorted by extravagant claims that well-dressing has been carried out, in an unbroken tradition, for 600 or 700 years, or even that the custom stretches in an uninterrupted line back to pagan times. (Roud 2008, 312-13)

Thanks to the popularity of the traditions in Derbyshire villages such as Tissington, where Marc Alexander deems the village's custom to be 'the most famous' with an alleged tradition dating back to 1349 (Alexander 2002, 312), the custom has become associated with the county. While Alexander boldly claims that 'Only two villages outside Derbyshire are known to have practised the custom' (313), this is discredited by other sources, which acknowledge that the practice is found 'throughout the kingdom and beyond, but admittedly, it has achieved its greatest popularity in Derbyshire mostly because the tradition is especially strong here' (Naylor and Porter 2002, 8). S. Elizabeth Bird believes Derbyshire to be the main proponent of the custom due to the county's unreliable water supply, stating,

> The hydro-geological characteristic of the southern and central limestone plateau in the area presented problems of water supply, resulting in frequent droughts or shortages . . . It can be assumed that the original custom was a response to very specific environmental conditions. (Bird 1983, 67)

Locating Place and Setting

It is this issue of place, locating a fictitious world, which brings us first to Jon McGregor's novel. Though McGregor strives for verisimilitude in *Reservoir 13*, his fictitious village is not named. This could be for ethical reasons, to ensure that a real village is not linked to a serious crime, or readers do not make links between the characters of the page and the characters of the real world. It could be to make it easier for the writer, so that he is not restricted to real-world topography, or constrained by the amenities and landmarks found in the real location. It could also be to enhance the feeling of universality: that this could be anyone's experience, in anyone's village. After all, as David Almond acknowledges in his writing about using home as a fictional setting, 'The local can contain the universal. The part can stand for the whole' (Almond 2001, 175).

However, for someone who has encountered the well dressing custom in the real world, then this is a big clue to the setting of the novel. Then other 'clues' become apparent: we learn that the village is situated on the moors between Manchester and Sheffield; the

‘Stone Sisters’ are most likely to be the Nine Ladies on Stanton Moor; there are fictitious visitor centres and country estates which could easily be mapped onto Google Street View. This is satisfying for a reader; we like to be able to flesh out a setting and make it real in our minds, whether it is real or fantastical. We want to believe that the characters we are becoming acquainted with are not figments of the writer’s imagination, but living and breathing, buying bread from their own village shop or picking up their children from their own village school. And it is all the more helpful to our immersion if we can base it on a place of which we may have some understanding or experience, even if it is as simple a connection as ‘it is Northern England, it is hilly and rainy’.

But if the reader is not aware of the relationship between Peak District villages and well dressing, the custom still helps to illustrate that this is a special place that prides itself on a strong sense of community. McGregor’s character, Irene, tells us: ‘It boggled the mind how someone could live in a well dressing village and not know that’ (McGregor 2017, 221); that to be a successful, integrated member of this community is to engage, in some way, with the well dressing custom.

S. Elizabeth Bird notes that well dressing in Derbyshire ‘involved almost everyone at some level or another’ (Bird 1983, 68) and, similarly here, all corners of McGregor’s village seem to participate. It is genuinely inter-generational, with the teenagers accompanying the older men in retrieving the boards from storage and soaking them in the river. The custom has even resulted in the creation of a new family: local journalist, Austin Cooper, meets his journalist wife Su, originally from Manchester, when she arrives in the village to learn more about well dressing. Though there may be ‘free and familiar contact’ among people when engaged in well dressing, including villagers with differing backgrounds who might not ordinarily cross paths, McGregor’s well dressing is not a representation of Bakhtinian ‘carnivalistic life’ (Bakhtin 1984, 122-23): this is a quiet, conservative custom, where hierarchies are enforced or reinforced, and piety and dedication are rewarded.

As Irene’s comment tells us, with local pride and identity comes local knowledge. McGregor’s village is an enchanted environment where girls go missing. Residents of this village are at the mercy of the elements: ‘Some of the people who come this way don’t know how sharply the weather can turn. How quickly darkness falls. Some of them don’t seem to know there are places a mobile phone won’t work’ (McGregor 2017, 2). The well dressing custom, comprising its garden-gathered natural components and its skills honed over time, is an example of this local knowledge. And, as we know from Rosemary Shirley’s examination of the custom, McGregor’s villagers will carry out well dressing in their own unique way.

The Turning of the Wheel of the Year

The custom also aids the writer in specifying how time operates and passes in this fictional world. In *Reservoir 13*, MacGregor has created a structure that controls and constrains the writing: each chapter constitutes a year; there are thirteen chapters (as there are reservoirs), and within each chapter, a paragraph constitutes a month in the life of the

village. This results in the linking and adjoining of unrelated information in lieu of traditional paragraphing, which can be a discombobulating experience for the reader:

> The swallows were busy in and out of the barns. The well dressing boards were brought out of storage and taken down to the river to be soaked. The girl's mother was still at the Hunter place and it was known that Jane Hughes visited sometimes. (McGregor 2017, 39)

To prevent stipulating exact dates and times, which would break up the purity of the prose, and to ensure his reader is aware of the time of year in which the action is taking place, McGregor uses activities that can silently signpost without diverting attention. These silent signposts may be natural activity, such as the swallows building their nest, as we see from the above example, but human behaviour is just as crucial. Well dressing is an example of this. To locate the reader within the wheel of the year, the custom appears in every year-chapter, barring chapter five, which seems to be an oversight, rather than anything intentional. During the course of the novel, the reader experiences the complete process of the custom—the collecting of the boards; the cutting and soaking of the clay; the design; the gathering of materials; population of the scenes; the display and accompanying festivities; the packing away of the boards—which avoids repetition of particular activities (tiresome for both writer and reader). It also enables the characters to make comparisons with previous incarnations of the custom—'the crowds up on previous years' (McGregor 2017, 271)—which is crucial for the plot and for the exploration of the theme of collective healing following trauma.

Interestingly, how the design of the boards is decided, the theme for each year, is not touched upon in the novel. The reader sees Winnie, as designer, making the designs for the boards, and some of the traditional elements she includes: 'She started with the framing and the arches, moved on to the lettering, lined out the sky and clouds and sun and hills, and finally detailed the figures and animals in the foreground' (McGregor 2017, 170), but what this scene depicts is not revealed. This could have proved an interesting addition to the plot: could the villagers have chosen a Bible story related to the loss of loved ones, for example? Given the scant reference to the custom in each chapter, the reader can only presume that McGregor did not want his well dressing custom to shoulder such responsibility. This, too, may be echoed by his characters. The custom is where they join together to enjoy their skills and the tradition of their village; perhaps this is not the place to be reminded of real-world concerns.

The custom is given no explanation or fanfare, to illustrate the village residents' habitual performance of it and their familiarity with all of its facets. Thus, the reader who has not encountered the custom must extrapolate the information and its jargon, working it out as the novel progresses: 'At the village hall the puddled clay was pressed into the dressing boards, resting on trestles in the centre of the room, while everyone stood by with the mosses and petals and bark they'd been gathering all week' (McGregor 2017, 143).

As the well dressing displays deteriorate, petals withering and leaves discolouring, the characters in the novel and the reader are reminded of the decay of the year, that summer will soon transition to autumn. Although this is another example of a silent signpost for the reader regarding time of year, it also has other impacts on the narrative. Crichton Porteous, in his 1949 exploration of Derbyshire well dressings, noted:

> The great pity of this work is that despite all the care taken these pictures and decorations must all fade within a few days, and when petals have lost their glow, and mosses and leaves have died, the pictures look sad, and even have a depressing effect. (Porteous 1949, 21)

This depressing effect is felt keenly by the villagers who are still, many years after the disappearance of Becky Shaw, learning to cope with the fact that her body may never be found and her disappearance may remain unexplained. The well dressing's annual trajectory, which can only ever end in decay, helps perpetuate the melancholy atmosphere McGregor intends to maintain, demonstrating how written landscapes 'act as catalytic converters for human experience and memory, their concrete realities melting to release the ghosts of time' (Mort 2001, 178). This natural, environmental decay also has the dual purpose of reminding the reader of this community's proximity to nature. Agriculture is still a key industry in McGregor's village, and weather, especially the hardship of winter, will always be a dominant force in the success of village life. We understand that life here is not for the faint of heart.

Bringing Characters to Life

How characters respond to or interact with their surroundings demonstrates to the reader their type and personality—their individual strengths and weaknesses rendering them memorable and distinct; their reactions making plotlines possible. In *Reservoir 13*, McGregor employs a distant omniscient narrator who floats over his imagined village like a drone, touching down with specific individuals and families to build up a cohesive picture that also—somehow—manages to grow his individual characters, while the well dressing custom helps silently signpost character, too.

The roles McGregor chooses to assign to his characters corroborate Bird's well dressing observations: chiefly, that activity is gendered, with men responsible for the screens themselves and women for the population of the designs, and particular families taking on certain tasks (Bird 1983, 61 and 68). More important to the novel and the development of character is that these roles confirm what we already know about those who perform them. For example, the Jackson family are sheep farmers, renowned for their hard graft and manual labour in the village. It is their role to bring out, store, and soak the boards: 'They were much heavier after a fortnight's soaking, and there was some grunting as they lifted them on to the back of the trailer, the cold water streaming down their arms' (McGregor 2017, 70). The wealthy Hunter family, in contrast, are not shown to interact with

the custom directly, although the clay is cut from their land and the boards are stored in their outbuildings.

Winnie, we learn, is an elderly woman who has lived her entire life in the village and, as such, she has won the coveted role of lead designer: she is 'part of it. And she'd grown up here' (McGregor 2017, 47). There is an unspoken tension between Winnie and her friend, Irene, which McGregor uses the custom to exacerbate. Although Irene has lived her adult life in the village, she 'had always kept a touch of the town about her' (McGregor 2017, 47) and, therefore, she is not permitted to become a designer. Known for her fastidiousness (she is employed as a cleaner in the village) Irene's status means she is designated the role of quality assessor and trainer of the well dressers: 'Irene watched to see that it was done well, then gave the nod for the paper to be peeled away' (McGregor 2017, 315).

The reader is not told which villagers constitute the well dressing committee, beyond Winnie and Irene. In its facelessness and namelessness, the committee is shown to wield considerable power. Despite Winnie's status within the custom, even she seeks the committee's approval and respect: 'As always, she doubted it was sufficient for the committee's purposes; as always they assured her effusively that it was' (McGregor 2017, 170). The committee may, in reality, only consist of a handful of benign villagers, keen to volunteer their time and skills for their community tradition, but referred to as the 'well dressing committee', it begins to grow in size and stature and accentuates the importance of the custom to the village and its inhabitants.

Irene is the victim of trauma, both collective (she is part of the community where a teenager has gone missing) and personal (she is physically and mentally abused by her son, as she was by her late husband). She is the sole carer for her son whose unspecified learning difficulties become increasingly difficult to manage. The well dressing custom, however, gives her a purpose, especially once her son moves to residential care, and a sense of satisfaction: 'Some of the newer dressers were lacking for technique, and Irene had to be clear when sections weren't up to scratch' (McGregor 2017, 221). Despite her difficult circumstances, the reader sees her smiling and whistling, engaging with her fellow villagers and exercising the little power she has. In short, well dressing provides Irene respite and therapy.

Recovery from trauma is a key theme of the novel and McGregor also explores this on a community-wide level using his drone-style perspective. As such, the community becomes a character, too. The custom is continued even after the disappearance takes place:

> The well dressing committee had a difference of opinion about whether to dress the boards at all this year. Under the circumstances. There'd never been a year without a well dressing that anyone could remember. But there'd never been a year like this. In the end it was agreed to make the dressing but to keep the event low-key. (McGregor 2017, 14)

Much like the benefits Irene experiences, the custom brings relief, satisfaction, and even celebration to the community-as-character: occupying minds and hands, fostering cohesion

and togetherness, and demonstrating that the good times will return. The seasons, represented by the natural materials gathered by the dressers, and the wheel of the year will continue to turn, time will heal.

Conclusion

Representing intangible cultural heritage, such as calendar customs, in fiction can be fraught with problems. First, the writer must ensure that the custom serves the story: is it placed *purely* to take a plotline elsewhere, potentially to a previously inconceivable place? If so, once the applause has died and the crowds have receded, the reader will likely feel cheated that this unusual, colourful, even fantastical occurrence proves subterfuge for plot alone. Then there is the setting and the characters who perform the custom: is it in keeping with the environment and its residents? Can it illuminate and help develop the sense of place and character?

Representing a real-world custom in a community to which the writer does not belong can also be problematic. As we have seen with McGregor's well dressing, calendar customs are local knowledge, on which individual and collective identities are built. Using a custom for fictional entertainment, then, where it is not sensitively treated, can be viewed as appropriation and exploitation. This makes McGregor's portrayal of well dressing all the more skilful. His omniscient narrator, flying high above the heads of his villagers, risks illustrating a universal experience for the custom: that to participate in well dressing in this village is equivocally like this, and there is no room for individual response. However, we learn that Irene's motivation for involvement, for example, is likely to be different to that of the Jackson family, and different again from the Hunter family. In McGregor's 'village chorus', the term James Wood (2009, 20) uses to describe a style of narration in which collective perceptions are brought to the fore, there is also room for personal experience. This gives the reader a sense of scale, of participation in the custom, and in experience of the custom.

McGregor also wears his research on his sleeve. If he is not part of a well dressing community himself, or if he has not even seen well dressers at work in the flesh, then he has certainly researched not only the process—his 'puddled clay' (McGregor 2017, 143)—but what it means to take part. This is not some hokey, trivial, parochial pastime; this is an art, a skill, an endurance event, a happening. The writer understands that what may look like petals poked into clay to an observer is hard graft but also fulfilling, gratifying: 'and when they finally stood back and smiled in approval there was a general dropping of shoulders and a cheer and the order was sent out to the Gladstone for sausage and mash' (McGregor 2017, 248-49).

Setting the custom in all its sensory glory in words on a page can also be tricky. A custom is not static, a one-off occasion, but happens regularly, carrying with it memory, habit, nostalgia, and reminiscence, as well as the present emotional reactions of the participant: fun, frivolity, reverence, and so on. *Reservoir 13*, with its recurring months and developing years, captures this perfectly, illustrating how a custom grows and becomes

embedded in village life. Similarly, in offering us the capability to compare years, and in illustrating granular evolution over the years, McGregor is able to convey the magnitude of emotional experience combined with habitual behaviour, which would otherwise be challenging for a writer who intends to depict one custom in one scene in an otherwise linear, rather than cyclical, chronology.

Zoe Gilbert, the writer of *Folk*, a collection of closely linked short stories set on the fictional island of Neverness, tells of the difficulty she faced in translating an immensely personal, high octane experience, such as a calendar custom, across a crowd of characters. She describes an aborted short story in which she attempted to describe a calendar custom comprising a race through a forest. It fell down, she concludes, because 'it's hard to write about big groups of people. It's much easier to focus on one person in the midst of the crowd than it is to try to describe everyone doing something' (pers. comm., March 2020). Her subsequent gorse-running custom, which features in the opening of *Folk*, therefore trains its eye on Crab Skerry, a first-time competitor. Though we understand the villagers are lining the cliffs to spectate, it is Crab's experiences the reader feels, and it is his triumph for which we are rooting (Gilbert 2019). 'It's finding your focal points', Gilbert says, and, in Irene and Winnie, the Jackson and Hunter families, McGregor has found his.

Of course, it is possible to read *Reservoir 13* without really noticing the well dressing custom. Though it features in almost every chapter, its mentions are relatively slight, taking up two or three lines at most each time. No plotlines hang on its presence. But its inclusion, in the hands of this skilful writer, offers up a wealth of narrative opportunities, each strengthening McGregor's imagined village and the terrible, mysterious disappearance of Rebecca Shaw.

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