

The summoning: folk horror and the calendar custom in Molly Aitken's the island child (2020) and Zoe Gilbert's folk (2019)

PARKES-NIELD, Sophie

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/31005/>

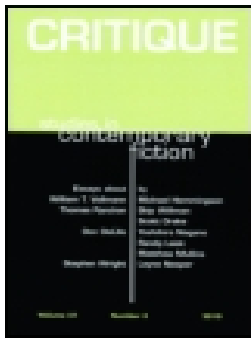
This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Published version

PARKES-NIELD, Sophie (2023). The summoning: folk horror and the calendar custom in Molly Aitken's the island child (2020) and Zoe Gilbert's folk (2019). Critique : Studies in Contemporary Fiction.

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>



The Summoning: Folk Horror and the Calendar Custom in Molly Aitken's *the Island Child* (2020) and Zoe Gilbert's *Folk* (2019)

Sophie Parkes-Nield

To cite this article: Sophie Parkes-Nield (2023): The Summoning: Folk Horror and the Calendar Custom in Molly Aitken's *the Island Child* (2020) and Zoe Gilbert's *Folk* (2019), *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, DOI: [10.1080/00111619.2022.2143256](https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2022.2143256)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2022.2143256>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Published online: 19 Jan 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 151



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The Summoning: Folk Horror and the Calendar Custom in Molly Aitken's *the Island Child* (2020) and Zoe Gilbert's *Folk* (2019)

Sophie Parkes-Nield 

Centre for Contemporary Legend (CCL), Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), UK

ABSTRACT

The UK has a rich calendar of folkloric traditional customs that continue to occur in our communities, even when their purpose is archaic or unknown. Folk Horror is most associated with cinema and television, and filmmakers consciously use calendar customs as a “summoning,” to epitomize the horror of the landscape, the isolation of the characters and their “skewed moral beliefs” (Scovell, “The Folk Horror Chain”). Though Folk Horror scholarship is new and emerging, this paper aims to interrogate whether two works of contemporary literary fiction, *The Island Child* by Molly Aitken (2020) and *Folk* by Zoe Gilbert (2019), could be considered Folk Horror, and how their respective employment of the calendar custom as a narrative device impacts the text.

Whether it is news footage of intrepid challengers chasing a cheese down a hill in Gloucestershire, or the broadcast of the Stonehenge sunrise on Summer Solstice, each year in the UK, calendar customs find their way into local and national media, shining a spotlight on the seasonal events that communities continue to perform despite their sometimes unlikely cultural relevance to contemporary society. Usually organized by the community for the community, these customs have been “around long enough to have been passed on to successive generations” (Roud xiii) and can be widespread and found in multiple locations, in the case of rushbearing and well dressing, for example, or unique to the place in question.

Though the very nature of these customs is that they recur, the day and date can seem arbitrary: for example, the Maypole raising at Barwick in Elmet, Yorkshire, occurs every three years (Roud 283), Corby Pole Fair every twenty years (Roud 194), and in Denby Dale, West Yorkshire, “Once every thirty or forty years, the people of the town get the urge to make a huge pie, usually even bigger than the one before” (Roud 585). The dissemination of information through social media and dedicated websites has made discovery of calendar customs much easier. The website CalendarCustoms.com, for instance, encourages users to share multimedia information to enable would-be visitors to visit the customs next time they occur. But their continued perpetuity by word of mouth and local communications, and the place and time at which they happen, contribute to the fact that, unlike a large commercial event which relies upon advertising to sell tickets, it is also possible to be unaware of calendar customs altogether. Artist, Ben Edge, described his “stumbling across” a Druid ceremony on Tower Hill in London on Spring Equinox as “life-changing”:

I immediately realised it was quite a serious thing, there was something quite deep going on here. The idea of coming together and performing something. So then I started looking into folklore more and there was this whole incredible world I had no idea existed around the country (Edge, Interview).

CONTACT Sophie Parkes-Nield  sophie.e.parkes-nield@student.shu.ac.uk  Centre for Contemporary Legend, Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), Cantor Building, 153 Arundel Street, Sheffield S1 2NU, UK

© 2022 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

This notion, that it is still possible in densely populated Britain, where news is available around the clock, to stumble across a gathering of people performing a custom about which the spectator knows nothing, inevitably shrouds the calendar custom in mystery. This is exacerbated when the performance appears, at first glance, peculiar. Why in Castleton, Derbyshire, on 29 May, for example, does a man parade about the village on horseback with a huge cage of wildflowers suspended over his head and body? Why, in the small village of Abbots Bromley in Staffordshire, do men dressed in curious costumes dance on Wakes Monday with centuries-old antlers? What kind of communities come out to celebrate these happenings when there is often no real, absolute evidence regarding why these practices began in the first place, and no obvious reason for their continuity?

As the two examples given here demonstrate, calendar customs can often be a visually arresting experience, and spectators may find the costumes and accouterments associated with the custom – these cages of wildflowers or ancient antlers – bizarre, even unsettling given their lack of documented explanation. Many customs exhibit local and handed-down knowledge, too; for example, the building of a rushcart in rushbearing festivals or the decoration of a clay-packed screen with organic materials in well dressing customs takes skill and precision, perfected through practice.

As such, the calendar custom, to an individual not involved in the performance or resident in the community, may appear eerie and peculiar, perhaps even threatening and intimidating. It is this reputation that has led artists working within the Folk Horror genre to use the calendar custom as a horrific climactic scene. This is best epitomized in the 1973 film *The Wicker Man*, where the protagonist comes to an untimely, unpleasant end at the zenith of this isolated community's custom to secure future food production.

In her review of what is considered to be the current seminal exploration of Folk Horror, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* by Adam Scovell, Dawn Keetley acknowledges that there is little scholarship on Folk Horror, with criticism largely perpetuated through popular journals, blogs and websites (Keetley, "Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange" 137). Indeed, the term itself is only believed to be in use from 2003, when director, Piers Haggard, described his 1971 film, *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, as "Folk Horror" (Keetley, "Review of *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*" 134). Film and television scholar, Diane A. Rodgers, defines folk horror as a:

subgenre in which the horror is not necessarily horrific, and folklore, contemporary legend or the paranormal are employed to unsettling ends. The finer details of folk horror's generic conventions, loosely modal though they may be, tend to lie in use of landscape, atmosphere or skewed beliefs and rituals of isolated communities (Rodgers, personal communications).

The last clause of this definition is particularly pertinent and is a nod to what Adam Scovell calls the "Folk Horror Chain," a tick-list of folk horror identifiers. The "links" in Scovell's Folk Horror Chain are:

- (1) the use of landscape, which "explicitly isolates the characters and communities within them."
- (2) "skewed morality and belief systems" to which the reader/viewer is exposed and finds abhorrent and outdated.
- (3) a "summoning" or "violent act such as possession, sacrifice or something else that leads to violence and eventually death", which epitomizes these objectionable belief systems. This is where the calendar custom comes in: the chance for the society to display their beliefs through an ultimately violent, memorable event.

Dawn Keetley augments the Chain with the "monstrous tribe" (Keetley, "Introduction: Defining Folk Horror" 9); that the isolation through landscape and skewed moral beliefs is not just manifested in a summoning or final climactic event, but "a community bound together by shared (folkloristic) beliefs, traditions, and practices – a community bound so tightly, in fact, that it constitutes a 'tribe'" (Keetley, "Introduction: Defining Folk Horror" 11). Taking *The Wicker Man* again as example, the inhabitants of Summerisle, and their figurehead, Lord Summerisle, do indeed form a "monstrous tribe": outwardly

they may appear benign, with an almost naïve reticence to embrace contemporary practices and technologies, but as the film nears its end, their collective lies, tricks, dissident behavior and community-wide immorality are revealed, through the eyes of both the viewer and the protagonist. The viewer, trembling at the denouement, would certainly not want to encounter this monstrous tribe.

Folk Horror is most commonly associated with film, as a result of *The Wicker Man*'s enduring legacy and complemented by other cinematic works. However, its popularity with artists and audiences has seen it flourish across form and medium, including literature. Perhaps best epitomized by Shirley Jackson's 1948 short story, "The Lottery," Keetley acknowledges Folk Horror fiction by UK authors such as Max Porter and Andrew Michael Hurley (Keetley, "Introduction: Defining Folk Horror" 11). Other examples might include *The Good People* by Hannah Kent, and Neil Gaiman's short story, "The Truth Is a Cave in the Black Mountains," neither of which employ calendar customs as the summoning, but their revelations are nevertheless ghoulish and horrific.

The appearance of a calendar custom in a work of fiction, however, does not automatically mean that the fiction is a work of Folk Horror. In Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012), Leah and Natalie reflect on the change in their experience of Notting Hill Carnival. Having grown older and left their working class origins behind, Carnival is now spent among accomplished, wealthy people in a lavish apartment, spectating proceedings from above. As such, Smith's Carnival demonstrates a rite of passage that reflects the growth, evolution and change of the characters, impacting on both character development and plot, as it is here they learn of Felix's murder.

The calendar custom as a narrative device is not confined to the contemporary novel. Thomas Hardy's novels are peppered with calendar customs and other folkloric practices, and Peter Robson believes this is Hardy being aware of his metropolitan readership and their "ignorance of the details of country life in Dorset and their confidence in him as a reliable guide" (Robson 48). For Hardy, the inclusion of calendar customs in his works, such as mumming and May Day festivities, help better immerse the middle- and upper-class city dwelling reader in this alien, rural and lower class world. Hardy's calendar customs also develop a sense of character, demonstrating their vernacular beliefs – Mrs Penny's reluctance, during the house visiting custom, to dance on Christmas night lest it entices the devil, in *Under The Greenwood Tree* (Hardy 37), for example – and also drive forward the plot, enabling chance meetings between lovers: Eustacia Vye's participation in the mumming on Egdon Heath, for instance.

Ngaio Marsh's *Off With His Head* (1957) is closer in tone to what we might expect from a calendar custom in a work of Folk Horror. "The Dance of the Five Sons," an invention of the writer but clearly reminiscent of real-world customs as acknowledged in her introduction (Marsh 5), is a spectacle observed and participated in by Mardian residents and admired by outsiders with folkloric interests. The setting for the annual dance is dramatic: a small, snowy village already geographically isolated and further removed from the wider world due to inclement weather, and the custom itself is performed in a manner of reverence. It is the staging of the custom that enables a murder to occur, and it is the detail of the custom itself that amplifies the mystery.

Using Scovell's Folk Horror Chain with Keetley's addendum, however, it can be deduced that *Off With His Head* is not a work of Folk Horror, but crime fiction. Though the landscape poses danger to Mardian residents and newly arrived visitors, isolating them from wider society, and the dance becomes a violent act resulting in death, the cast of characters do not subscribe to collective skewed morality and, as the perpetrator is revealed as an individual with a personal motive, they do not constitute a monstrous tribe.

Molly Aitken and Zoe Gilbert's debut novels, *The Island Child* (2020) and *Folk* (2019) respectively, feature calendar customs as narrative devices and also, to take Diane A. Rodgers' Folk Horror definition, use "folklore, contemporary legend or the paranormal . . . to unsettling ends." This paper, then, seeks to interrogate whether these works can be considered Folk Horror, and how the calendar custom is presented in the text, and its impacts on setting, plot and character.

“Listen, for the Beat” (Gilbert 1): Presentation of the Calendar Custom

In *The Island Child*, a calendar custom occurs at the center point of the novel, in the chapter “The Fires” which acts as a key scene to make possible subsequent aspects of the plot. Throughout childhood, Oona has been forbidden to engage in Saint John’s Eve festivities on the smaller, nearby island of Éag, where the island’s dead are buried. However, at age sixteen, Oona is finally given the opportunity to go, permission granted reluctantly by her mother. Oona dons her dress, newly procured for the custom, is told to “be a good girl” (Aitken 175) and sets sail for Éag with her father and brothers.

Aitken’s choice of Saint John’s Eve, or Midsummer, is not by chance. The novel is set on a fictitious island, “loosely based on Inis Oírr, which is one of the Aran Islands, the littlest one” (Aitken, Interview), and Saint John’s Eve has been historically celebrated across Europe, including the UK and Ireland, by the burning of bonfires. In fact, in many places, this custom still persists (Hole 138). The writer, now living in England, recalls her Steiner school education in Ireland and its intentional celebration of a variety of different annual festivals. She says:

I remember going with my family and they’d have this huge fire at a field near the school. And yeah, I just remember that being kind of magical and also the older boys talking about jumping over it but never actually . . . And there’d be, you know, urban legends about one boy, years ago, who’d had his legs burned off. It’s my mum’s birthday as well, on St John’s Eve, so it was always an event in my family, I think. When I was writing the book, I didn’t think that much about choosing that day specifically, and I think that it’s probably something that’s quite common maybe, it wasn’t an active decision. It was just like ‘this seems like the obvious choice’ (Aitken, Interview).

Though this community is imagined, Aitken selected a likely real-world custom for her fictitious community, something which would ground them in the reader’s imagination but ensure that the magic and otherworldliness of the custom can pervade the novel.

The custom gives Oona experiences she has never encountered before. At first, this is positive: she excels at the races, discovering an athletic talent she didn’t know she possessed; she is able to engage in activity not usually permitted for girls: “girls weren’t meant to tend the fire” (Aitken 177). Away from her mother’s watchful, restrictive gaze, she enjoys agency for the first time.

However, the exhilaration turns to despair as the revelry descends into license for abuse. Sexual predators capitalize on the confusion. Oona is raped. Her family’s shame intensifies her own, and she is compelled to leave the island for good. Though the custom is not the climax of the novel, it epitomizes Oona’s poor quality of life, her family’s dysfunction and lack of emotional support, and it gives her the push she needs to take her life – and the novel – elsewhere. The danger with using a custom as an “enabler,” to change the novel’s trajectory, is that it could feel artificial to the reader, shoehorned in for that very purpose. However, Aitken’s decision to choose a custom that complements the fictional environment in which it takes place is wise. Saint John’s Eve, as shown here, typifies the island community’s parochial and gendered behaviors and attitudes, which Oona seeks to escape, and gives her a final chance to defy her didactic, authoritarian mother.

In contrast, the custom that appears in *Folk* by Zoe Gilbert appears at the beginning. Though referred to as a novel, *Folk* is a collection of linked short stories taking place on the fictional – and remote – island of Neverness, closely modeled on the writer’s familial experiences of the Isle of Man. Each story focuses on a neat cluster of characters whose appearances in other stories, often on the periphery, coagulate to form an overall impression of a populated island brimming with folkloric practices.

The novel opens with “Prick Song,” in the gorse with Crab, a first-time gorse runner. His head newly shorn for the custom, it is his duty, along with the other young men of Neverness, to chase after monogrammed ribbon-arrows which have been shot by the young women into the gorse. On finding a ribbon-arrow, the boy must return it to the girl whose name is monogrammed. On receipt, he is rewarded by a kiss – or sometimes more. As we read on, we learn the importance of this calendar custom: this is Neverness society’s way of bringing couples together and Crab’s own parents were paired off in this manner. This is no game; the custom is taken seriously, “she will not cheat and bite

her own mouth until it bleeds” (Gilbert 4), as it dictates the futures of the young people of Neverness. Crab Skerry is determined to win a kiss from the young woman he admires, and the stakes, for him, are high.

Beginning the novel in this way enables Gilbert to initiate the reader into the fantastical environment, a place or time unrecognized by contemporary readers and not defined by the writer. Our introduction to this weird, fairy tale world comes as we are dropped straight into a violent, bloody calendar custom. As Crab gropes his way round the gorse maze for the first time, the reader must navigate in much the same way, grappling to understand the action that is taking place on the page and its significance for the characters and the society in which they operate.

Gilbert uses the custom to introduce us to the wider community, too. The parents and grandparents, who remember their own participation in the custom, come out to spectate, oversee the results and ensure the custom is carried out correctly. We begin to learn how this society functions; the rules that us readers will need to observe as we progress through the linked stories.

But there is a darkness, a violence, in this society that the custom highlights, which intensifies throughout the fleeting duration of “Prick Song.” Despite the quirky, endearing names of the characters – Crab Skerry, Werrity Prowd, Madden Lightfoot – a lack of technology and a simple, agricultural lifestyle, we learn quickly that this is no rural idyll.

Firstly, there is the physical and sexual violence of the custom, where “the spikes impale and trap a boy” (Gilbert 4), and participants emerge bleeding from the gorse. Coupling takes place whether the individuals will it or not; the monogrammed arrow-ribbons are the deciding factor, and the other villagers, “lighting torches, passing them along the line” (Gilbert 3), will ensure that the outcomes are adhered to. For the girls, there is the impending fear of a lifetime trapped with the wrong person, while the boys are in thrall to the dizzying power of their own sexuality: it is “Not a kiss from a girlie in the heather. You want the Gorse Mother to get you . . . She puts it on you and it’s like ten mouths all at once. You go in the gorse and if she gets you, you come out a man” (Gilbert 8). Neverness, the reader learns from the outset, is a brutal society in which its young people are put through a rite of passage which determines the trajectory of their futures – or whether, in the case of Crab Skerry, they have a future at all.

The gorse running custom is an invention of the writer. It was Gilbert’s experience of the way in which gorse grows in the Isle of Man, tall and cavernous, coupled with a fashion image she encountered that gave her the inspiration:

It was a very beautiful image, very striking, of a black model who had been styled with this kind of dress that looked like it was made of twigs and feathers and flying petals, and it was a crazy image. And I loved it. I had it in my notebook for years. And so [the model] became the Gorse Mother (Gilbert, Interview).

Much to the writer’s delight, she recounts that some readers have claimed to know the story of the Gorse Mother. Though her intention was not to hoodwink readers into believing it to be real, authentic folklore, “it’s the fact that it feels like it possibly could be in that landscape which is what I was looking for” (Gilbert, Interview). The invention of the custom gives the writer artistic freedom to use it exactly as the text requires it, and, like Aitken’s Saint John’s Eve festivities, it fits neatly into this imagined world to complement its fictional society.

“The Woven Dark and the Moaning Sky” (Aitken 177): Time and Place

The very nature of the calendar custom is to celebrate, commemorate or observe a particular point in the year. This might have a functional purpose, completing an agricultural task which must happen at a designated moment, for instance, or it might be symbolic, such as welcoming the lighter nights and warmer days, and “driving out” the hardship of winter.

According to Steve Roud, Saint John’s Eve was traditionally a time for love divinations to take place, when rituals would reveal a young woman’s future husband (Roud 305). It is during this chapter that Oona, her inhibitions disappearing due to the significance of the occasion and her consumption of

alcohol, confesses her love for Michael. Though he tells her she is too young for him, too different, too good, the fact that this exchange happens at a Saint John's Eve celebration indicates to the reader that Michael will remain significant to Oona throughout the remainder of the novel.

It is also not for convenience that the custom is held on Éag. Though it is an imagined and uninhabited place, the reader learns its significance to the residents of the larger island: it is the final resting place for the island's dead and this enables an eerie, foreboding atmosphere which is manifested in its topography, observed closely by the protagonist: "As we got closer, the dark stack of Éag sprang out of the green water. Waves danced through the stone arch where, Bridget had told me, once early islanders left coffins to be taken back by the sea" (Aitken 175). Oona is fearful, and so becomes the reader. We suspect that something of importance will happen here, and it does.

In *Folk* and "Prick Song," the setting is also an island. The physical boundaries of the space mean that inhabitants are not so easily influenced by a wider society on a mainland; the lore of the island, and the way in which it organizes and governs itself, prevails. Brigitte Le Juez and Olga Springer observe that:

fictional characters tend to end up on islands for different reasons, essentially variations on voluntary and involuntary isolation. Either they seek a retreat from civilization or they will do all in their power to regain their familiar social and cultural identities . . . Imaginary islands exist as temporary paradises where contemplation and self reinvention may happen, or as false havens where conventional laws and moral codes are put to the test (Juez and Springer 1).

Crab and Oona are certainly put to the test, and they can only escape if they are to physically leave the island which is unlikely, if not impossible: both characters are children, physically immature, and without the wherewithal to survive without their families. Even putting to one side the sociological aspects of leaving the communities to which they have been born, removing themselves from their islands would require access to a boat and the knowledge to sail in often treacherous conditions, plus familiarity with a safe destination. Without these, Crab and Oona are anchored to their respective places, however inhospitable.

Though both islands are fictional, the writers had in mind real-world islands as their foundations. This enables the writers to ensure their worlds feel real and acceptable to the reader of contemporary literary fiction, but also to enable freedom to create a place in which "magic and drudgery exists in this place together" (Gilbert, Interview). Gilbert acknowledges that this approach was not initially attractive to her first readers: the participants in her writing group encouraged her to label both the place and the era in which her stories were located. Eschewing this, she feels, has given her work another dimension compared to writers who are "injecting the magic into a contemporary feeling, real world" (Gilbert, Interview), tonally something which is much closer to the folktales she sought to emulate, with their "everyman, any time" universality.

Locating their works in fictional places also frees the writer from connections to real-world places and people which can hamper the reader's experience of the novel if there is knowledge of the real-world location. This is particularly important when writing about small, close-knit communities in which unsavory events take place. Jon McGregor set his novel, *Reservoir 13* (2017), in which a young girl goes missing, in an unnamed Peak District village based on an amalgam of several real-world locations. Though this was partly because he wanted artistic freedom to manipulate the landscape to fit the narrative, it was also because: "I knew that if I based it on an existing village, the people that lived in that village would be very conscious of . . . readers recognising that village and would start to identify characters with real people" (McGregor, Interview).

Though both *The Island Child* and *Folk* are set in the past, there is always the chance that present-day residents of the Aran islands and the Isle of Man may try to make connections to historical persons which may have repercussions for individuals living today. Removing this possibility enables Aitken and Gilbert to tell the stories they want to tell in the manner they choose to tell them.

Aside from the betrothal of the children, there is another purpose of the gorse running and its subsequent burning: to "cleanse the air for another season's turning" (Gilbert 5). Though *Folk* is not

assigned a definitive era, this custom demonstrates to the reader that this is a pre-industrial, agricultural society. Gorse is extremely useful for biodiversity of species and regular burning of old growth can help the germination of new growth (RSPB). Crab's father and his compatriots depend upon the land for their survival, and this calendar custom forms an aspect of practical land management, as well as poignant symbolism.

But there is more at stake for Neverness residents. Gorse running takes place when "The door of the day is nearly shut, but this is the hinge of the year itself. Days are shrinking, nights spreading" (Gilbert 11). The reader understands that this is how residents of Neverness mark winter, the closure of the old year and preparation for the new year, a period of time with a whole host of folkloric meaning. Gilbert states:

I've always loved the idea that around Hallowe'en, or the similar festivals at that time of year, the idea is very much that for a period of time, the boundaries between our worlds and the spirit world becomes very thin or it's gone altogether. And depending on how you behave, you might invite spirits through. This is the time when magic is at its strongest (Gilbert, Interview).

By opening the novel at the waning of the year, this is another way in which Gilbert sets the tone for the remainder of the novel: readers are invited to suspend disbelief and regard characters and events as not merely fantastical or magical, but real within the context of their setting, both sociological – the beliefs and practices of the society at large – and topographical. The gorse running custom illustrates the danger of the natural world. Though the human inhabitants burn the gorse as part of their land management practices, we are reminded that this is an island and inhabitants are dependent on the land for survival – and at its mercy. The gorse tears at the clothes and the skin of the participants, leaving them bloody and wounded. Crab, bearing in mind the entreaties of his competitors to remain in the gorse for as long as possible, is entrapped by the gorse. When the ritual burning of the gorse begins, at the behest of his own father, Crab is engulfed. As reader, we have spectated this horrifying custom and have duly learnt the unsettling rules of this community and its natural world overlords, personified by the Gorse Mother herself.

"Every Year They Gather" (Gilbert 3): Custom and Character

Both Aitken and Gilbert use a young newcomer through which the reader can view the custom. This is important as it enables the reader to understand the machinations of the custom – we see it for the first time, too – but also the emotional resonance of the occasion. As customs recur, usually annually, it would be difficult for the reader to gain a sense of significance and potential through the eyes of a habitual attendee: the minutiae would go unnoticed unless there was something peculiar or unexpected, and emotional responses may be dulled through habit and expectation.

Oona's excitement at attending Saint John's Eve on Éag is palpable, and the reader is able to share in the experience: "Excitement rippled from boat to boat. There would be races through the day and evening would have tales of the dead and ever-young, and the fire" (Aitken 175). Her coming of age on the day of the festivities is also important to the reader as, at sixteen, she is "no longer a girl" (Aitken 175). She is chastised for the dress she is wearing – presumably rather revealing, as her mother hands her a cardigan – and she goes to the event, knowing full well Michael, the man she has fallen for, will be present. She is already thinking to her – their – future, acknowledging she "thought of America" (Aitken 174). Oona hopes this event will change the course of her life, yet she barely knows Michael, her senior by more than a decade, and her lack of experience with the custom, with alcohol, with men, signals extreme vulnerability to the reader, exacerbated by her own confidence and belief in her own maturity. Saint John's Eve exposes Oona's vulnerability and the reader is primed: we know that something momentous will happen, and we hope that she will be protected. When the worst is confirmed and she is raped, the subsequent treatment by her family typifies Oona's life on the island. We hope she will leave to find a better life elsewhere.

Zoe Gilbert opens her novel with an unusual proposition: a protagonist with whom we greatly empathize but we do not meet again. This could be considered a risky strategy as there may be readers too horrified, too invested in Crab's short life, to continue with the novel. The reader's empathy is driven by the way in which Crab is presented, a "skinny stick of a thing" (Gilbert 1) that is teased by his father for his effeminate curls. Crab asks questions of the other boys, older and more self-assured, and is determined to succeed in the game to win Madden Lightfoot's affection. His youth, inexperience and slight stature deem him the underdog; his admirable qualities, especially when contrasted to Werrity's pride and Pie and Dally Oxley's coarseness, encourage the reader to desire him to triumph.

By showing us Crab's strengths, the reader learns of the weaknesses and flaws of his peers and the other inhabitants of Neverness, including his own father. It is Gill Skerry's decision to light the fire that kills his son: is this a terrible mistake or, given what we have already learned about this society, a public act of filicide, concealed by custom? Nevertheless, Crab is sacrificed, quite literally, for the world-building, the writer's assertion of place, time and wider Neverness society, to determine the shape of the remainder of the novel.

Both customs appear as rites of passage through which characters must progress, developing plot as well as the characters themselves. As both rituals take place on islands, the characters are physically and psychologically isolated from wider society, from help and protection, and cannot escape their fates. Saint John's Eve on Éag and the gorse running on Neverness are stark coming of age rituals, warning both protagonists of the dangers of adult life in their respective communities. Oona may finally be deemed old enough to experience Saint John's Eve, but her subsequent suffering affects her for life, whilst Crab's apprehension toward the gorse running only heightens the power – and horror – of the ending. Crab, of course, does not have chance to come of age, as The Gorse Mother claims his life.

"This Was the Dead Land" (Aitken 175): In Conclusion

As Folk Horror scholarship is only beginning to emerge, the bulk engaged with film and television, identifying literary works of Folk Horror and analyzing their impact is not altogether straightforward. Paul Cowdell states that Scovell's Folk Horror Chain illustrates a process through which an artist – a filmmaker, or, in this case, a novelist – passes through in order to create their works, rather than definitive criteria (Cowdell 296). With the absence of other robust measures, however, it is Scovell's Folk Horror Chain that proves the current benchmark. Appraising *The Island Child* and *Folk* against it, can we consider these novels works of Folk Horror?

To take each point of the Chain in turn, the landscape in both novels is foreboding, forbidding and treacherous. Oona and Crab are confined to their islands: Oona must avoid the water "where most men are taken" (Aitken 175); Crab must overcome the Gorse Mother or be overcome.

Through the eyes of our young protagonists, we experience a resident society with beliefs that are "skewed" from a contemporary perspective: gendered roles, a lack of psychological understanding, and vernacular and folkloric practices. These beliefs are abhorrent or incomprehensible in the twenty-first century, but, the reader understands, correlates to our understanding of life in societies past. Are the beliefs demonstrated in the novels indicative of Keetley's "monstrous tribe"? This is more difficult to answer. The perpetrator of Oona's rape is, of course, monstrous, but his identity is not revealed, implying that any of the men on Éag for Saint John's Eve are capable of sexual violence. Oona is also blamed for the incident by her mother. Similarly, it is left unsaid whether Crab's father set alight to the gorse with knowledge that his son was trapped inside. These behaviors are, indeed, monstrous, but sexual violence, victim shaming, and filicide are found in our own, present-day society. Are we, too, monstrous?

And, of course, both novels feature summonings, calendar customs that manifest as violent acts, culminating in the death of one protagonist, and the rape and subsequent departure of another. After these customs occur, our protagonists cannot return.

If we abide by the criteria set out in the Folk Horror Chain, then both *The Island Child* and *Folk* are certainly representative of the subgenre, with clear, apparent motifs on show. But for writer Ben Myers, “Folk horror is a feeling. Those who know know” (Myers 46). What if we apply Myers’ murkier “feeling” test? The horror of *The Island Child* is different to the horror of “Prick Song”: it is subtle, domestic, dreamlike, recognizable and therefore easier to explain. Though the folkloric and the supernatural are present, the reader attributes this to an isolated culture, a way of life fiercely protected by a resilient people, and instead, we blame poverty and the unflinching presence of the Catholic church for the difficulties faced by Oona and her peers.

In “Prick Song,” however, the horror is brutal, inescapable, and the magic and supernatural ever-present; if an individual is not ensnared by an unsuitable life partner, then he may lose his life in the gorse, potentially at the hands of his own father. Our own folk are less recognizable in these folks; Crab, himself, needs reminding that his schoolmate, Verlyn, is unable to participate in the gorse running because of his wings (Gilbert 9). Is it this lack of recognition of ourselves in this society that enables us to point and claim Folk Horror?

Paul Cowdell, elaborating on Mikel Koven’s close reading of *The Wicker Man* in relation to its primary source, Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, states that it is the “intellectual history of British folkloristics and its trajectory, rather than just the materials of tradition, that explain the characteristics of Folk horror as a subgenre” (Cowdell 296); that the proponents of Folk Horror – and here he is referring only to filmmakers – are heavily in debt to the thinking of much earlier British antiquarians (as they were known before the terms “folklore” and “folklorist” came to be used) and their preoccupation with the notion of “survival and residual paganism, being especially attributed to rural isolation” (Cowdell 298). The deeper into the countryside we venture, according to survivalist folklorists, the more likely we are to encounter surviving pagan practices. This notion is roundly discredited by contemporary folklorists, but, Paul Cowdell believes, it has caught the imagination of Folk Horror creators. If we are to appraise *The Island Child* and *Folk* in this light, then the association with the subgenre begins to crumble, as both novels come from a fascination with storytelling and the oral tradition, the kinds of stories we tell and have long told: *The Island Child* is inspired by the Persephone myth (Aitken, Interview); *Folk* by an experiment into the tonal quality of folktales (Gilbert, Interview). In summary, Aitken’s use of a real-world custom is for verisimilitude and to highlight her protagonist’s extreme vulnerability, while Gilbert’s invention of a custom is to introduce her reader to the ruthlessness of this unpredictable world, and neither novel claim to show us clandestine, real-world folklore, survived from another time.

The apparent popularity of Folk Horror, however, has encouraged commentators to consider why our current times are ripe for this kind of work. Scovell believes that western society’s determination to remain connected, especially through digital means, has instilled a fear of isolation (Scovell, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* 167–168), while Myers puts this more simply: with the majority of British population living in urban centers, we have simply become fearful of the ways of the countryside and thus our “own past” (Myers 46).

This “own past” resonates profoundly here. Oona, in *The Island Child*, cannot come to terms with her own past and, as a result, fears for her daughter’s desire to return to the island; the reader, too, hopes that her experiences are consigned to the past. Similarly, we do not hope to recognize ourselves in the “fishers and farmers, shepherds and huntsmen, fowlmonger, fiddler, brewer and beekeeper, seamstress, midwife, miller and bard” (Gilbert 3); though the era of “Prick Song” is not defined, we appreciate it is in the dim, distant past, and we hope that its violence does not resurface. This, Scovell claims, is one of Folk Horror’s clear strengths: that it “blasts apart the romantic visions of an England gone by” (Scovell, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* 184), and we are reminded that patriotic nostalgia can be a dangerous, distorted pastime.

Acknowledgments

For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

Disclosure Statement

There are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

Notes on contributor

Sophie Parkes-Nield is a writer, PhD candidate and Associate Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University, researching English calendar customs and their usage in contemporary fiction. For more information about Sophie, her writing and her research, please visit sophieparkes.co.uk

ORCID

Sophie Parkes-Nield  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7630-2334>

Works Cited

- Aitken, Molly. "Interview." Conducted by Sophie Parkes-Nield, 17 February 2021.
- Aitken, Molly. *The Island Child*. Canongate, 2020.
- Cowdell, Paul. "'Practicing Witchcraft Myself during the Filming': Folk Horror, Folklore, and the Folkloresque." *Western Folklore*, vol. 78, no. 4, 2019, pp. 295–326. JSTOR. www.jstor.org/stable/26864166.
- Edge, Ben. "Interview." Conducted by Sophie Parkes-Nield, 4 September 2020.
- Gilbert, Zoe. *Folk*. Bloomsbury, 2019.
- Gilbert, Zoe. "Interview." Conducted by Sophie Parkes-Nield, 23 April 2020.
- Hardy, Thomas. *Under the Greenwood Tree*. Tinsley Brothers, 1872. This edition using the text from 1912. Macmillan and Company Limited, copyright The Folio Society, 1989.
- Hole, Christina. *British Folk Customs*. Book Club Associates, 1976.
- Juez, Brigitte Le, and Olga Springer. *Shipwreck and Island Motifs in Literature and the Arts*. Koninklijke Brill, 2015.
- Keetley, Dawn. "Introduction: Defining Folk Horror." *Revenant*, no. 5, 2020. www.revenantjournal.com/issues/folk-horror-guest-editor-dawn-keetley.
- Keetley, Dawn. "Review of *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*." *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, vol. 16, Autumn 2017.
- Koven, Mikel. "The Folklore Fallacy. A Folkloristic/Filmic Perspective on the Wicker Man." *Fabula*, vol. 48, no. 3–4, 2007, pp. 270–80. doi:10.1515/FABL.2007.021.
- Marsh, Ngaio. *Off with His Head/Singing in the Shrouds/False Scent*. Harper, 2021. Originally published 1957.
- McGregor, Jon. "Interview." Conducted by Sophie Parkes-Nield, 24 February 2021.
- McGregor, Jon. *Reservoir 13*. Fourth Estate, 2017.
- Myers, Ben. "Review of *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*." *New Statesman*, vol. 146, no. 5375, 2017, pp. 46.
- Robson, Peter. *Thomas Hardy and His Writings as a Source for the Study of Traditional Culture in Dorset*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, U of Sheffield, 2004.
- Rodgers, Diane A. "Interview." Conducted by Sophie Parkes-Nield, 4 November 2020.
- Roud, Steve. *The English Year: A Month-by-Month Guide to the Nation's Customs and Festivals, from May Day to Mischief Night*. Penguin, 2006.
- RSPB. "Managing Gorse for Wildlife." RSPB. rspb.org.uk/our-work/conservation/conservation-and-sustainability/advice/conservation-land-management-advice/managing-gorse-for-wildlife.
- Scovell, Adam. "The Folk Horror Chain." *Celluloid Wickerman*, 25 Sept. 2014, celluloidwickerman.com/2014/09/25/the-folk-horror-chain.
- Scovell, Adam. *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*. Auteur, 2017.
- Shepherd, Avril. *Calendar Customs: A Guide to British Calendar Customs and Local Traditions*. 2020. calendarcustoms.com.
- Smith, Zadie. NW. Penguin, 2012.
- The Wicker Man*. Directed by Robin Hardy. Performances by Edward Woodward, Ingrid Pitt, Christopher Lee, British Lion Films, 1973.