

Following the rove: intangible cultural heritage and creative writing practice 1.

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Following the rove: intangible cultural heritage and creative writing practice

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Abstract

England has a rich, varied calendar of folkloric customs, traditions that take place in the community which are usually governed, stewarded, and performed by the community itself. I am a creative writing researcher and novelist and in 2024 completed practice-based doctoral research at the Centre for Contemporary Legend, Sheffield Hallam University, UK, that explored the effect of using a calendar custom in fiction, and how calendar customs might be accurately and sensitively portrayed. This chapter summarises this research project, defines intangible cultural heritage and the calendar custom in this context, and offers considerations for writers, and other creative practitioners, on how they might work with intangible cultural heritage such as the calendar custom. It reflects on *Thankstide*, the novel I have written for my PhD, and the decisions I have made in its writing, influenced by three case studies, the concepts of the carnivalesque and the folkloresque, folk horror, cultural appropriation, and the appraisal of fiction that represents calendar customs. (160 words).

Killing my darlings: an introduction

As a writer of long and short fiction, I am often invited to supply a biography to accompany my creative work. In it, I tend to state my influences as ‘history and heritage’, and this is derived from interests in uncovering and reworking the stories of the past, especially the stories of those who are often forgotten or sidelined by history.

But in more recent years, heritage has played a more significant – and contemporary – role in my creative writing practice. In a particularly reflective period, I noticed that much of my

fiction was linked by the continued reappearance of community-wide traditions, punctuating the text as key scenes for plot development, or to show a new side to a character, or an alternative perspective on a particular place. This was reinforced when I came to edit the manuscript of my debut novel, *Out of Human Sight* (Parkes, 2023): why was I drawn to writing such traditions, and did it serve this particular text to include two? (It didn't, and one was swiftly edited away.) I thought back to my childhood in North Oxfordshire where I had cultivated a love of traditional music; the people of the county's towns and villages had also perpetuated numerous customs in which I, as a teenager, had enjoyed the novelty of celebrating in the streets with friends and neighbours.

Then I noticed traditions in the work of other fiction writers, too. What were these writers' intentions in using these traditions in their novels and short stories? How possible would it be to illustrate, both accurately and sensitively, a tradition in fiction? And how could creative writing seek to illuminate, celebrate or even challenge heritage that might not be the author's own?

These early questions led me to pursue a practice-based doctorate at Sheffield Hallam University's Centre for Contemporary Legend, one of few UK research centres dedicated to folklore scholarship. Here, I would write a novel that sought to explore these questions, accompanied by a critical thesis that would aim to locate and critique its context. This chapter summarises this study, considering my responses to these research questions, both creatively and critically, and illustrates considerations creative writers might make to work creatively with intangible cultural heritage. As with a project of this size, this chapter offers only a snapshot, but I hope that readers will find these ideas resonant, useful, and applicable to other creative practices.

This chapter's first-person, reflexive mode reflects the nature of the research. Please also note that when italicised, *Thankstide* denotes a reference to the novel as a whole; stated without italics, Thankstide is a reference to the (fictional) calendar custom represented in the novel.

The importance of naming: arriving at and settling on a name

The introduction to this chapter uses numerous terms – tradition, custom, intangible cultural heritage – to describe the traditions that take place in communities with which my research, and this chapter, is concerned. Many folklorists lament the long-term lack of investment in folklore scholarship in the United Kingdom which has resulted in a fragmented discipline (Buckland, 1993; Hutton, 1996) and scholarship regarding the calendar custom is particularly ‘poorly served’ (Roud, 2008, p.xiii). I believe that this must be the result of this naming inconsistency.

Throughout my research, and this chapter, I refer to ‘intangible cultural heritage’, the umbrella term UNESCO employs to describe:

traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts (UNESCO, n.d.a).

Intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO tells us, is what makes communities across the world – rural or urban, indigenous or diasporic, developed or less so – unique, or at least different, in the face of increasing global homogeneity. Though intangible cultural heritage may nurture a link to the past, it is living and breathing, and very much part of contemporary cultural expression (UNESCO, n.d.a) In 2003, UNESCO founded the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage to ‘ensure respect for the intangible cultural

heritage of the communities, groups and individuals concerned’, raise the profile of the intangible cultural heritage in question and the communities that practice it, and advocate for international support (UNESCO, n.d.b). Excitingly, in late 2023, twenty years after its founding, the United Kingdom’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport announced its intention to ratify the Convention (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2023). At the time of writing, a consultation and a series of online roundtable events have recently taken place. For those with an interest in the intangible cultural heritage of the United Kingdom, the next few years will prove an interesting time, as we see the results of the consultation and understand what the Convention will mean for the country’s intangible cultural heritage.

The aspect of intangible cultural heritage with which I have a particular interest is the ‘calendar custom’, the community-wide, traditional practices and events that take place throughout the country often with little fanfare. Though the term ‘calendar custom’ is not used uniformly, in Folkloristics, more widely in the academy, or outside of an academic context, I feel its two component parts are helpful in referencing the practice’s adherence and significance to a particular point in the year, its recurrence on an annual basis, and indicating habitual human behaviour, encompassing games, ceremony, ritual, performance, the folk arts, and everything in between. I find ‘calendar custom’ is useful in distinguishing these practices from wider holidays and festivals, such as Christmas, though, of course, many calendar customs are associated with and take place during holidays and festivals. I use the term to refer to the ‘communal customs’ of which Hutton is also concerned in his book *The Stations of the Sun*, as distinct from ‘private seasonal rites, such as divination and magic’ (1996, p.ix). Steve Roud, in the introduction to *The English Year* (2008), describes the subject of his book as ““traditional” customs and festivals that take place within communities and are organized by members of that community, and have been around long enough to have been passed on to

successive generations' (2008, p.xiii). When I use the term 'calendar custom', in this chapter and elsewhere, it is Roud's definition that I refer to.

A glance at the map at CalendarCustoms.com demonstrates the volume and variety of England's calendar customs (Shepherd, 2023), though it is intriguing how much experience or contact with a calendar custom an individual may have: some readers may be aware of a community's rich recurring traditional custom and may even participate themselves, while others may have never experienced anything like it – except, perhaps, local or national media coverage of an event, such as the annual reporting of the Summer Solstice at Stonehenge (BBC, 2023).

Methodologies: augmenting my practice-based research

As stated in the introduction, my doctoral project was practice-based: through the writing of a novel, I intended to explore my research questions and arrive at a contribution to knowledge that would offer insights into how a writer might work creatively with the calendar custom.

But to make my research truly meaningful, I felt I needed to enhance this practice-based approach with additional methods. Through close reading of contemporary fiction, I would be able to analyse and appraise how other writers have used and treated the calendar custom in their works, and to what effect. I was also conscious that I do not organise a calendar custom and, prior to my doctorate getting underway, I had visited only a handful. To better understand how a custom occurs or is staged (for example, the resources it draws upon and the agencies with which it must interact) and to go some way to understand also why an individual might choose to participate in such an event, I decided to augment my study with qualitative research. I decided that this qualitative research must remain relatively limited, to

prevent domination of the overall project, so I established three case studies: three calendar customs that I could visit, and with whose organisers I could interview. Given the necessary limitations of the qualitative research, it was felt that the case studies should attempt to represent diverse types of custom and so the sample included one custom with a long performance history (the Castleton Garland Ceremony, in existence since at least 1749 and taking place each May in the village of Castleton, Derbyshire, England (Roud, 2008, p. 278)); one revival (the Saddleworth Rushcart which occurs each August in Saddleworth, Greater Manchester, England, was revived in 1974 by the Saddleworth Morris Men who continue to orchestrate the custom today (Ashworth, 1995)); and one more recently created custom (the Imbolc Fire Festival of Marsden, West Yorkshire, England, was designed by local people in the 1990s (Hannant, 2011, p. 24)). I deliberately established case studies that took place within one hour's drive time from my home to enable me to visit, but also to demonstrate my keen local interest to organisers. Additionally, my ethics application included interviews with other individuals involved in customs outside of the three case studies that might have a direct bearing on my work, and also the opportunity to secure interviews with writers and other artists who had worked creatively with calendar customs, to gain insight into their own approaches on the topic.

In April 2020 I was granted full ethical approval for this study to take place, and for interview material and personal communication to be used in all aspects of my creative and critical work (ER23290032).

In the game of fiction: creating a calendar custom

How to portray a custom *sensitively* became particularly pertinent when I considered what kind of custom would be represented in my novel. Initially, I had planned to translate a real-

world custom to the page: something culturally significant, colourful, and vibrant, that would prove a challenge to convey, and ripe for doctoral investigation. I imagined developing a plot to oscillate around this real-world custom, and through this act of writing-as-research, I envisaged getting to know this custom and its community inside-out; that I would be welcomed by the community to better understand the custom's impact. In my initial excitement, I considered the May Day celebrations in Padstow, Cornwall, England: a celebration which I had never visited but had been enthralled by from afar. On 1 May each year, huge parties of people connected in some way to Padstow, once a fishing town and now predominantly a tourist resort, gather, dressed in either red or blue depending on their allegiance to the 'Old 'Oss' or the 'Blue Ribbon 'Oss', two hobby horses which are 'teased and danced through the streets of Padstow all day long' (Rowe, 2006, p. 38). There is singing, music-making, and the town itself is decorated for the celebration. Collector and documentarian of calendar customs, Doc Rowe, who has made a pilgrimage to the Cornish coastal town for the custom every year since the mid-1960s, describes its pull and power thus:

Unquestionably the most important event of the year, emotion runs high on Mayday [sic]: with tears of joy and affection, of grief and loss and a true contemplation of the preceding year and beyond. It is not difficult to sense that the 'Oss and Mayday symbolises more... it's a united proclamation – almost a 'clenched fist' in the face of the ravages of time and outside influences (Rowe, 2006, pp. 38-40).

Writing a custom such as May Day in Padstow, I thought – something so rich and visible in support by its people – would surely reveal the true draw of custom.

In May 2020, however, when the event was cancelled due to UK lockdown restrictions, I arranged to speak with a Padstonian heavily involved in its orchestration. Our conversation proved pivotal in my thinking. My interviewee told me that May Day is, to Padstonians, the most important day of the year, far exceeding the expectations and revelry that come with

any other holiday, notably Christmas. More significantly, however, was the emphasis he placed on who May Day is ‘for’: for the town and its people (personal communications, 5 May 2020).

This was a stark warning that I had previously underrated. Customs belong to their communities. Who was I to dare to create something, *recreate* something, so precious? I could conduct as many interviews as I liked, but May Day was not mine and, as a result, I would likely fail in my attempt to illustrate its intricacies, let alone its significance, on the page. In harnessing the power and excitement of May Day for my novel, I risked cultural appropriation, what the Oxford English Dictionary defines as ‘the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the practices, customs, or aesthetics of one social or ethnic group by members of another (typically dominant) community or society’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023).

Novelist Lionel Shriver has been especially vocal in the debate about cultural appropriation and fiction, and states an unequivocal opposition to what she believes is a society-wide shift towards an effective ban on writing from other perspectives, particularly those from marginalised groups, something she feels curtails the artistic freedom of the fiction writer (Shriver, 2016). She, along with Ian McEwan (Knight, 2023), for example, has expressed disdain for the publishing industry’s use of ‘sensitivity readers’, a practice where a manuscript is checked by an external reader for cultural inaccuracies and stereotypes which prove hurtful or harmful, which Shriver dubs the ‘sensitivity police’ (Shriver, 2017). Shriver states that the experiences and identities that she chooses to write about should be portrayed accurately for the sake of good literature; she rejects that she should tread sensitively for the

sake of her reader, stating, facetiously, that the novelist cannot obtain permission (Shriver, 2016).

I feel strongly, however, that the novelist has a responsibility to her readers as well as to the fictional world she creates. A novel is a communication of ideas. If those ideas are not well researched, if they fall flat, or worse, they cause offence, then, in my opinion, the novelist has not done her job as effectively as she could. (And, I believe, this is very different to *pleasing* a reader.) As I am not a Padstonian, it would be unlikely that the significance, let alone the accuracy, of my fictional representation of May Day would come close. And this is before the issue of cultural representation is considered; I would be choosing Padstow May Day purely for my impression of it, for inclusion in a novel – essentially entertainment – for readers who, too, would likely be outsiders. The sentiment expressed by my Padstonian interviewee was enough to encourage me to reconsider.

Instead, through close reading, I looked to see how other fiction writers had represented the calendar custom. The pace egg play in *The Loney* by Andrew Michael Hurley (2016) is both universal and unique. Pace egging, a form of mumming, is found in many locations across England's northern counties of Yorkshire, Cumbria, and Lancashire where *The Loney* is set (Roud, 2008, p. 162). By choosing a relatively widespread custom to feature as a key scene, Hurley avoids the direct appropriation of a unique slice of intangible cultural heritage.

Instead, he retains the recognisable aspects of the play and augments the players' ghoulish, unexplained nature, perfect for maintaining both the child's eye view and the atmosphere:

'The pace eggers had always frightened me as a child, looking as they did like things that had crawled out of a nightmare' (Hurley, 2016, p. 230). Hurley also customises it by inserting his villains into key roles and having them perform the play in an inebriated, menacing manner.

The play is brought into the private sphere of the narrator and his family, enabling the villains access to the young narrator, and this year's performance is notably different, and influences the trajectory of the plot. The inclusion of the play is effective as it develops plot and characters in parallel with the setting, in terms of place and time of year (Easter), while amplifying suspense and tension. Anchored to the component parts of the novel in this way, the custom does not feel plucked from its cultural context and relocated purely for entertainment, but a natural expression borne out of the machinations of this unusual, off-kilter place.

Similarly, in 'Prick Song' by Zoe Gilbert, the opening short story to her highly acclaimed collection, *Folk* (2019), we are introduced to the brutality of a society that values its traditions with a violent custom that takes place in the gorse of her fictional setting, Neverness. Here, the management of the gorse through annual burning has been transformed into a festive rite of passage, as the island's young people compete against each other and the gorse itself to emerge as young adults, ready for marriage. The young people are in awe of The Gorse Mother, a pseudo deity whose legend motivates the young people to participate in the custom and keeps the flame of tradition – quite literally – alive. Gilbert has been transparent in naming Neverness' inspiration as the Isle of Man (Gilbert, 2019, p. 238), and in an interview with the author, she told me that readers familiar with the folklore of the Isle of Man reported an awareness of the Gorse Mother and the gorse running custom, which is actually entirely of Gilbert's creation (Parkes-Nield, 2023a). Gilbert's intention was not to mislead readers but create a folklore that felt meaningful and credible for her fictional world and its residents; her readers' subsequent belief in this folklore as derived from the real world is indicative, to my mind, of an effective execution.

Ngaio Marsh's 1957 murder mystery, *Off With His Head*, also proved stimulating. Marsh's preface sets out the 'Dance of the Five Sons', which takes centre stage in the novel, as a fictional creation. The writer acknowledges her sources, folklorists Douglas Kennedy and Violet Alford, so that the reader understands that her creation is grounded in folklore scholarship. Furthermore, one of her central characters is Mrs Bunz, a German admirer of British folklore, "saturated, I hope I may say, in the very sap of Old England" (Marsh, 1957/2009, p. 10). The reverence Mrs Bunz has for British folklore demonstrates a recognition of the difficulty in the representation of intangible cultural heritage: to use an identifiable custom for entertainment, the vehicle for a murder mystery, reduces its impact and its meaning to those that perform it. Creating her own calendar custom, that operates like a real-world custom and carries as much significance for her fictional community, bypasses this. Nevertheless, Marsh is keen to locate the Dance of the Five Sons in the recognisable world, and there are numerous references to real-world British folklore and calendar customs, such as the Grenoside sword dances from Yorkshire, near Sheffield, England, which are still performed each December (Roud, 2008, p.553) and the aforementioned Padstow Hobby Horse, from Cornwall, England. This reinforces that Marsh has done her research: she understands the nuance of custom and the potency of community stewardship.

Inspired by these fictional adaptations and creations, I decided that creating my own custom would be the most comfortable way forward for me. I settled on 'Thankstide', a May custom, possibly borne out of historic May festivities, in which villagers pay homage to an allegedly benevolent pair of fifteenth-century landowners and founders of my fictional village of Cornley, inspired by Oxfordshire villages. On reading the first draft of the novel, my Director of Studies, Dr David Clarke, felt that this origin story did not make sound enough rationale for why present-day villagers would perpetuate such a custom, so in draft two, I added a

legend: a boy, orphaned by bubonic plague and taken in by the landowners to be raised as heir, had gone on to establish Thankside in their honour.

The Thankside legend makes it possible for villagers to explain aspects of the custom, which historical documents cannot always corroborate, such is the length of time between the alleged founding of the custom and the present day. An example of this is the ‘Cornley Cake’, the hot-cross bun-style cake which is baked and distributed throughout Thankside festivities and held to be lucky on consumption. Many present-day, real-world customs have evolved out of a ‘dole’, the offering of alms to poor residents of the community, usually historically established through the wills of the deceased (Roud, 2008, p.115), and a dole seemed a likely evolutionary aspect of the Thankside legend, to better explain the saving of the orphan boy’s life and to demonstrate the compassion of the landowners. Giving out ‘bread or buns, without gimmicks’ is the feature of numerous English calendar customs (Roud, 2008, p.116), and the Cornley Cake became a symbol of how welcoming (or not) the villagers are to those from elsewhere, and the hard work it takes to stage a traditional custom.

Other aspects of Thankside grew out of research into other calendar customs, particularly those from Oxfordshire; elements that the legend could explain or make possible; and necessary functions to enable characters to engage with it, meet and interact. As explored later in this chapter in the discussion about the carnivalesque, it was clear Thankside was required to bring villagers out of their houses to facilitate the plot. This would have the added advantage of enabling reader acclimatisation to Cornley and its inhabitants, gaining insight into what it means to live in a place with such a strong, historic tradition. Thankside, then, needed an element of procession, and I developed the ‘rove’, a day-long, Cornley-wide procession, led by morris dancers but participated in and spectated by villagers and tourists.

The strengthening of the legend also fuelled the opportunity for a new subplot to emerge: the affair between puppeteers, Orla and David.

On reflection, and as *Thankstide* took shape, I realised I had a greater sense of artistic freedom by creating a custom, rather than fictionalising a recognisable real-world custom: both the weekend's activities and the fictional village itself could bend and flex in accordance with the thrust of the plot, and the characters' engagements with it, and I did not risk exploiting a custom that was not my own. This, however, is not to condemn those writers (and other artists) who decide to work with calendar customs outside of their own experience; I would instead ask the writer to consider why they are drawn to that particular custom, why they are best placed to write that story, and appraise what their own set of skills, insights and experiences could bring to the writing of that custom.

After *Thankstide* began to operate like a custom a reader might recognise, I began to reflect on what I had created. 'Folkloresque' is a term coined by Michael Dylan Foster to describe a work of popular culture in which folklore from the real world is represented to form something new, 'cobbled together from a range of folkloric elements, often mixed with newly created elements, to appear as if it emerged organically from a specific source' (2016, p.5), to give weight or credence to a narrative. As folklore is often believed to have a historical legacy, a universality and a cultural understanding that, in turn, offers 'a sense of "authenticity"' (Foster, 2016, p.5), Foster proposes that popular culture seeks to harness this authenticity by mimicking or passing off folklore, whether taken from contexts different from its own, multiple contexts, or inventing entirely new folklore for that very purpose. I suspect that Foster would deem *Thankstide*, and the *Thankstide* custom more specifically, a work of the folkloresque, as it has been created 'as a process of *bricolage*...that retains a *connection*

to folklore, or *seems* folkloric, or has the *style* of folklore' (Foster, 2016, p.16, original emphasis). However, the component parts of Thankstide were selected and created on the basis that they worked together to manifest a whole that seemed appropriate both to the fictional world I had created and located, and to the reader's understanding of how intangible cultural heritage operates, however broad, nuanced or limited that understanding. In so doing, I feel that my Thankstide custom operates beyond the folkloresque and becomes *real* folklore for Cornley and its inhabitants; it is not a 'vener of folklore' (Foster, 2016, p.5) but an actual, living tradition and form of cultural expression for my characters and their world, albeit a fictional one.

In acknowledging the cyclical nature of the custom and, therefore, Thankstide's recurrence, it has also been necessary to consider its evolution and future. A custom must evolve to remain relevant to contemporary society, else it dwindles and dies. At the Castleton Garland Ceremony, for example, whereas historically two men dressed as the King and his Consort, both in gender-typical costume, now it is a man and a woman that feature at the head of the procession (Hole, 1976, p.79). The Cornley Cake showcases how Thankstide has similarly evolved. Andy reveals to the reader that the 'Cake Scramble', a series of games and contests much like a traditional sports day and held on the Sunday of Thankstide, is a recent development, designed to keep visitors and visiting morris sides entertained following the completion of the rove and the revelry of the Saturday night. The Scramble is inspired by 'scrambling customs' found elsewhere in the country, where coins or food are thrown to crowds for fun or to ensure the fairness of distribution (Roud, 2008, pp.172-173), and although it has historic precedence (though not in Cornley), it is not appreciated in all quarters: one of Thankstide's key organisers, Andy, has come to tolerate it, understanding the

purpose it serves, while younger members of the community feel it is incongruous in comparison to the rest of the tradition and problematic in terms of food waste.

The reader learns that Thankstide has, like all customs, a history of change and instability, and its necessary evolution remains a concern for the characters. Andy does not have an apparent successor to take up Thankstide's mantle, though his son's hesitancy to commit to university and a life beyond the village leaves this open. Many real-world customs operate creatively, drawing on the skills and experiences of individuals within the community, as my interviewees reported, but Andy recognises that these assets are not finite. Peppered throughout the novel are Andy's thoughts about the organisation and the life of the custom: how it can be improved upon and streamlined, but also how it must be taken on by a new generation. Even a custom with a long, rich history, ostensibly like Thankstide, can find itself redundant overnight without backing, resources, and understanding.

A question of experience: under the skin of custom

In my review of calendar custom scholarship, I observed that literature falls broadly into three camps, acknowledged by Theresa Buckland (1993): the 'catalogue' of calendar customs, where the writer attempts to give a broad overview of customs that occur across the UK (or one of its administrative regions, such as England) and the reader is encouraged to browse via a structure that is often geographical, calendrical or thematic; the monograph, a close study of a sole custom, often searching for its origins and charting its evolution; and the photographic survey, where a photographer documents a swathe of customs and publishes the results, sometimes with accompanying exhibitions.

My review, however, revealed scant academic literature that addresses the *experience* of custom, and why individuals might participate (or abstain) from participation in calendar customs. Folklorist John Widdowson corroborates this, stating that scholars ‘concentrate attention almost exclusively on the performance [of the custom] itself, which they usually describe without reference to the reasons that underlie it or to its function for performer and audience alike’ (Widdowson, 1993, p.24). Could creative writing go some way to tackling this, synthesising a range of individual and collective engagements with custom, both collected through research and imagined, and presenting them for interpretation and interrogation in a novel?

I found inspiration in the approach of artist, Anna FC Smith, who researches the phenomenon of Boxing Day fancy dress in her hometown of Wigan, in the North West of England (Smith, 2021). Beginning like many monographs on individual customs, tracing its origins in the archives via theories put forward by informants, the chapter later switches gear, intertwining this knowledge with her own experience and offering personal insights of participation. She documents her participation: the costumes she creates; how she and her friends prepare for the evening; the interactions between her group of friends and others they meet during the night. This approach has two consequences: it illustrates the nuances of the custom over time, giving an accurate picture of performance and evolution (the recurring jokes offered by taxi drivers, for example, or the superiority of homemade over shop-bought costumes, (Smith, 2021, pp. 163-164)); and it serves to demonstrate the meaningfulness of the custom to the individual and her community, and therefore the pride she takes in her hometown. Boxing Day fancy dress may seem, on the surface, innocuous and silly, but Smith’s research and personal account, derived from her own (and her interest in) creative practice, showcases an event which is culturally significant, and intrinsically connected to identity and civic pride.

I also wondered how I might draw on and represent multiple experiences of custom in the novel, to demonstrate how individuals might engage with these traditional practices and therefore better understand their significance. Mikhail Bakhtin posited that polyphony enables characters to conduct themselves independently of an authorial agenda, as autonomous (fictional) agents with their own rights (1963/1984, p.5), and so I decided that employing a polyphonic narrative model might be helpful in illustrating variety than a novel narrated through a single perspective (Krasniqi & Tahiri 2022, p.133). I developed five narrators who would each pass the baton between them to tell their story of how they interact with Thankside over the course of its weekend and beyond: Andy, morris dancer, musician and key organiser of the custom; Melodie, a London resident who travels to Thankside to reveal herself as Andy's biological daughter; Darren, Andy's teenage son, shortly due to sit his A Levels and uncertain what the future may bring; Nicolette, Darren's peer, eager to leave the village for a new life at university; and Orla, secretly participating in the custom through disguise, and embarking on an affair with another character integral to the custom's performance. By thinking and speaking on their own terms and pursuing their own daily lives without the parameters of a stiff, stifling plot forcing them to conform to a preordained narrative arc, I hoped that characters represented polyphonically would allow me to gain a greater, deeper understanding of the relationship between individual and custom. I also hoped that polyphony would aid me in striking a balance between the accounts of those to whom a custom may mean little, or may not register at all, with the accounts of those to whom a custom shapes their identity and guides their personal calendar.

To return to Shriver's condemnation of the 'sensitivity police' and her concerns about the curtailment of artistic freedom regarding cultural appropriation (Shriver, 2016; 2017), I hoped

that this approach would allow me to explore lesser heard voices, rather than shy away from their representation. In this case, I wanted to bring the experience of the morris dancer to the fore and to capture how the morris dancer might perform as the custodian of the calendar custom, while gaining an insight into the role of morris dance in communities in England and, most significantly, its ostensible importance to individuals, namely older men.

In his recent comprehensive history of morris dance, Michael Heaney notes that the first written record of morris dancing in England is from 1448 (Heaney, 2023, p. 3). But, Heaney warns, we should tread carefully in dating the dance and its origins: ‘This does not mean that the dance itself is either ancient (certainly not in the 16th century) or English, but it has served as a beacon of such ever since these first indications’. Heaney also stipulates that what might be considered morris dancing in the present, may have looked very different in the past, or that individuals (both in contemporary and historical societies) may have a very different view of what constitutes morris dancing (Heaney, 2023, pp.ix-xi).

Today, the archetypal morris dancer as represented in popular culture and the media – male, ageing, wearing whites and performing a folk dance outside an English pub on a summer’s evening, either with sticks or handkerchiefs, bells strapped to the knee (Perez, 2008) – is only a small part of a broad tradition, comprising pronounced regional variations practised by men and women. Heaney notes that recent and consecutive surveys of morris dance teams, or ‘sides’, affiliated to the Morris Ring, the Morris Federation and Open Morris, and including a small number of groups that practise traditions often associated with morris, including mumming, sword dance, clog and step dancing, denote an ageing population of dancers, while the majority of new dancers joining sides are female (63%) (Heaney, 2023, p.413). Alongside male- and female-only sides, it is reported that, at present, there are also mixed

sides and LGBTQ+ sides, practising in both rural and urban centres, thwarting morris dance stereotypes (Adams, 2023).

While there has been much recent media attention about an apparent visibility of younger, ‘cooler’ morris sides (for instance, Goto, 2023), such as Boss Morris who, in 2023, performed at The Brit Awards (Wet Leg, 2023), morris dance still suffers from a poor reputation. Photographer, Rachel Adams, in a photo essay for *The Guardian*, notes that ‘morris is often seen as an English oddity that belongs outside the mainstream’, partly, she believes, due to a lack of state funding which has resulted in a dance that is perpetuated by amateurs (Adams, 2023). Matthew Simons, in his thesis which charts the lives and legacies of key individuals in morris dance in the twentieth century, cites a ‘long-established tradition in popular culture, which confined morris dancers to the peripheral’ and continues today (Simons, 2019, p.234).

Heaney acknowledges there are myriad reasons why an individual might join a morris side:

Among the practitioners and spectators of morris dancing it can evoke a sense of ancientness, of Englishness, and more broadly of connecting with the past and with the community. People also do it to keep fit, to socialize with friends, to find a partner, and to entertain and impress by artistry and skill in performance (Heaney, 2023, p. x).

The interviews I carried out with the Saddleworth Morris Men revealed a genuine, intergenerational camaraderie and support network. They warmly referred to ‘the lads’, the other members of the side, and illustrated a year-round calendar of dancing events, both at home and at the invitation of other sides across the country. The pinnacle, of course, is their very own Rushcart, which requires considerable effort synchronised across many people, skills, and agencies. I wanted to represent this little known (or understood) side of morris dance in my novel by immersing the reader in Andy’s thought processes through free indirect

discourse and spotlighting his enthusiasm for the dance and for the Thankstide custom. Though Andy might also be considered the archetypal morris dancer, I hoped that presenting a rounded character, by understanding his history, mining his desires, conflicts and personality traits, the intricacies of his marriage, alongside his interactions with other members of the side, would offer an alternative representation of morris that popular culture is seemingly lacking.

Despite my interest in morris dance and my desire to offer an alternative presentation of the dance and its culture in *Thankstide*, I believe that the novel would not be credible to the general reader if it did not signal, in some way, the sustained negative perception of morris dance. As such, I offer equilibrium through Melodie, who derides Andy's commitment to the dance, questions his evident knowledge about, to her mind, a niche and parochial practice, and, with her best friend, scoffs at the nuances of the Thankstide custom.

By interrogating, synthesising, and imagining the experiences of a wider cast of characters through polyphony, including the morris dancer who is rarely represented outside of caricature, I hope that *Thankstide* might explore the nuances of engagement with calendar custom in the present day.

Celebrating the everyday: the mundanity of carnival

I also hoped that my novel, and my research, could foreground the 'everydayness' of the calendar custom: that though it carries meaning and cultural significance, the custom's recurrence, usually on an annual basis, means that it is an anticipated, expected part of a community's calendar, a little like an individual might consider a birthday.

A common response to my research, by friends and family, as well as those in the academy, is that a calendar custom is somehow weird, eerie, and macabre. Many have made direct links between calendar custom and the cult film, *The Wicker Man* (Hardy, 1973), as a result of the film's dénouement which features a calendar custom recognisable in its procession and play, its dance and song and costume, and culminates in the torture and murder of a mainlander. As a cornerstone of the folk horror genre (Scovell, 2016), *The Wicker Man*'s influence is far-reaching and, as such, the calendar custom has begun to play a sizeable part in 'the skewed morality' (Scovell, 2014) of folk horror film and literature. (The Hurley and Gilbert examples I offer earlier are paradigms of this phenomenon.) I write elsewhere (Parkes-Nield, 2023b) about '*The Wicker Man* effect': the phrase I have given to this ostensibly common perception, coloured by the legacy of *The Wicker Man*, that the calendar custom is the pursuit of parochial, insular and, therefore, dangerous communities, who are ostracised from mainstream society and its morals, laws and conventions. 'As folk horror has continued to flower' (Keetley, 2017), I fear that in popular culture the calendar custom is in danger of being typecast in this way, thus further detaching and distancing us from our intangible cultural heritage: if calendar customs are only practised by the weird and the kooky, the dangerous and regressive, then they maintain little cultural value and relevance. I believe an alternative understanding and presentation of calendar custom is required, and this is where creative writing and literature can play a significant role: by exploring the multitudes of experience and engagement with custom, and emphasising how, for many communities, calendar custom is the everyday.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque has helped me reflect on the possibilities and potential of custom, and how everydayness and the festive, or what Bakhtin calls 'carnivalistic life' (Bakhtin, 1963/1984, p.122), can meet, mingle, and co-exist during the

performance of custom. In summary, Bakhtin proposed that carnivalesque literature is influenced by carnivalistic folklore; that is, the historic periods of carnival where society, in all its recognisable forms and structures, codes and conventions, is turned on its head. During carnival, individuals from differing and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds meet in ‘the carnival square’ (Bakhtin, 1963/1984, p.123), form new relationships and present behaviour that would be deemed eccentric, taboo or inappropriate in conventional society. Carnival-centric focus influences thoughts and values, and profanation is actively encouraged. Crucially, everyone present is a participant, and carnival becomes ‘a brief moment in which life escapes its official furrows and enacts utopian freedom’ (Robinson, 2011).

David Danow states the significance of the ‘marketplace or central square’ (Danow, 2004, p.20) to the carnivalesque as a place where anything can happen: where interactions between people who, outside of carnival time, would otherwise have little opportunity or reason to meet; and a physical space for play, performance, and profanation. This marketplace or central square is crucial to *Thankstide*, too, and enables the plot to unfold. Bringing characters out of their private homes and into the public realm, they are suddenly visible, and on show. Outsider character, Melodie, who lives 70 miles away in Camberwell, south London, takes advantage of this. The volume of people gathering for Thankstide gives her cover to observe her biological father from afar and, if she should find the courage, to introduce herself. It is within Cornley’s streets, the village’s marketplace or central square, that anything, for Melodie and Andy, could happen. With this new knowledge, their lives are turned upside down: the truths about their respective pasts become unfamiliar and they assume new roles – even new identities.

Thankstide shows other signs of Bakhtin's carnivalistic life, and an 'alternative vision' (Robinson, 2011) of life for Cornley villagers is glimpsed. Through other narrative threads we learn that Thankstide offers opportunity for desire to be considered if not realised: Andy's enthusiasm for the custom is related, in latter years at least, to his desire for Lena, a musician involved in the wider festivities, as his marriage to Jan stumbles into the stale; Thankstide for Andy's son, Darren, means valuable time he can spend with Nicolette, the young woman he desires; and Thankstide's potency even extends to strangers, as Melodie attracts the attention of a man she dubs the 'raver'. It has become tradition that teenagers Tomas and Laurel get together at Thankstide; their differing world views, trajectories and the age gap between them makes this an impossibility outside of carnival time. Orla escapes the banality of her house and marriage through the opportunity that Thankstide presents and indulges in an affair we presume will not live much beyond the threshold of the custom itself.

Elsewhere eating and drinking to excess is fiercely encouraged, as villagers recall past years of alcohol-fuelled mishaps. Costume enables taboo behaviours, with Graeme, as the fool, teasing members of the crowd, and Orla and David as puppeteers, performers, and adulterers. Thankstide also proves a rite of passage for the village's young people: the previously rigid boundaries denoting social groups are discarded and they are thrown together in revelry, carrying out shared traditional behaviours, such as counting the currants in their Cornley Cakes.

Thankstide, however, also reinforces many everyday, non-carnival structures, which calls into question whether it is a true representation of carnivalistic life – and, according to Bakhtin's many critics, whether carnivalistic life is, in fact, even feasible (Dentith, 1995, p. 71). Thankstide pays homage to the fifteenth-century landowners viewed by the residents as

the village founders, quite literally through the replication of their image in the giant puppets that head the 'rove', and so the custom could be seen as bolstering convention: the historic feudal system of landowner and tenant, but also contemporary establishment, as demonstrated by the Church's active involvement. This is further reinforced by the fact that Andy and his co-organiser, Mark – privileged, middle-class men – lead the organising committee; women are demoted to baker, florist, musical accompanist, if they choose to participate at all. Thankstide for Jan, Andy's wife, is not meaningful and significant; she views it as a repetitive irritant that preoccupies her husband and prevents him from full involvement in family life.

Thankstide does indeed dominate Andy's life; his precision and meticulousness mean much of the organisation falls to him and he both revels in and curses his responsibilities. The custom operates to a timetable, published in advance; his participants are briefed and rules are established. For the custom to go ahead, he must comply with the systems and policies enacted by other civic agents, such as police and insurance providers. Though there is room for genuine revelry and excess, it occurs at set points and in designated spaces (during the evening, in the public houses and, for the young people, the surrounding green spaces). A recurring criticism of Bakhtin's carnivalesque is 'whether or not carnival did have or could have the liberating energies which he attributes to it' (Dentith, 1995, p.71). In its fleeting, temporary state, is carnival simply a 'safety-valve' (Dentith, 1995, p.71) to prevent apathy with or rebellion from the systems of the day-to-day? Melodie observes this, too, wondering whether living in a semi-rural community means limited opportunities to party, and permission required from the elders (and history) for it to take place.

Thankstide is too prescribed, too starched in its performance, too bound up in twenty-first century bureaucracy, to be a true Bakhtinian carnival. But Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque invited me to consider whether the novel is representative of 'carnivalised literature' (Bakhtin, 1963/1984). Danow states that the carnivalesque:

supports the unsupportable, assails the unassailable, at times regards the supernatural as natural, takes fiction as truth, and makes the extraordinary or 'magical' as viable a possibility as the ordinary or 'real', so that no true distinction is perceived or acknowledged between the two (2004, p. 3).

The novel opens as the custom gets underway and closes with its Sunday evening debrief; carnival is the engine that drives it. Life in Cornley – as a fictional location – is carnival. Without the 'spirit of carnival' (Danow, 2004), *Thankstide* would be a very different novel, and Cornley a very different place. A preoccupation with truth (parentage, historical origins, fidelity), however, enforces a conformity which cannot be shaken, even in the throes of carnival.

Creative writing, and specifically the opportunity to investigate my characters' experiences, thoughts, and projections for the future, allows for broad explorations of the nuance of custom, carnival, and intangible cultural heritage more widely, while the carnivalesque invites the writer and reader to consider the potential of carnival. Whether or not Cornley and its people change as a result of Thankstide, the custom provides villagers with everyday access to the magical – for just one weekend.

In conclusion: 'Folklore is our cultural DNA' (American Folklore Society, 2022)

Folk musician Martin Carthy has long preached that folk music 'is not an archive. If you see it as that, it becomes like a butterfly in a glass case. Folk music has to live and breathe...this stuff is alive, we must claim it, use it' (Vulliamy, 2011). I take a similar, yet more cautious, approach with working with calendar customs in creative writing: this is our culture, and it is

a gift. Yet unlike the mostly traditional (and therefore anonymous) folk song, there are many individuals and communities to whom a custom is deeply entwined with notions of identity and attachment to place. Folklorist and creative writer, Matthew Cheeseman, implores us to ‘Remember, folklore is “real”’: it has been performed and recorded from real people in the actual world’ (2023, p. 407). As a creative writer looking to represent the magic of intangible cultural heritage, I must remain considerate while striving to harness the power of folklore and intangible cultural heritage. This approach has helped me develop exponentially as a writer, teaching me, for example, what subjects I am comfortable to tackle and identifying new methods and techniques to use in my writing. It also proves, at least to my mind, that the creative representation of intangible cultural heritage is a rich field for exploration and I look forward to future contributions.

7818 words, excluding abstract and reference list.

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