London Urban Fantasy: Places with History

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URBAN FANTASY MEANS, NOT SURPRISINGLY, FANTASTIC STORIES ABOUT cities, and thus about our modern world. As the number of urban fantasy writers grows, so does the number of locations in which they set their stories, providing us with metropolitan and suburban settings of varying degrees of urbanity and with a wide geographical spread. In this multitude of urban fantasy settings, London appears to be the most popular, providing a great many writers with material for their worlds and plots. And for good reason, too. The British capital is littered with physical locations familiar to readers, either through personal experience or from factual and fictional accounts of the Tower, Westminster Abbey, Regents Park, Oxford Street, Covent Garden, the East End, or Paddington Station ... to name but a handful. London also comes with a history of almost two millennia, starting in Roman times and containing Vikings, Normans, Shakespeare's Globe, a regicide, a Great Fire, a Great Stink, a Blitz, and much, much more. Few cities can provide so many famous locations along with such a wealth of history that urban fantasists can mine, smelt, and forge into worlds, narratives, and characters that resonate far beyond a superficial sense of recognition in the reader.

In this article, I argue that urban fantasies today imbue their fictional versions of London with meaning by combining the city as a contemporary location with physical and cultural traces of history. I demonstrate this by identifying four historical elements that commonly recur in London urban fantasies and analyzing how these elements contribute to creating settings suited to urban fantasy stories. Urban fantasy is a genre where past and present meet (Young, *Race* 142; Irvine 211), often in conflict, which makes history's contribution to a sense of London-ness critically significant. Rather than focusing on the portrayal of a single work or author, I am interested in what the general idea of London is like in the genre. My discussion here is based on prevalent (if not universal) features of how London as a physical *space*

is reconstructed as a literary historical *place* (using Yi-Fu Tuan's distinction between the two terms). I first try to determine what the London of urban fantasy is like. Second, I ask what role that particular view, those particular features, play in urban fantasy narratives. While I have selected the subject of my analysis because it is special—no other city is used by so many urban fantasy writers, is familiar to so many readers, and has such a long history to draw from—my perspective on the historical construction of place can be applied to other literary settings, whether based on an actual location or sprung from its author's imagination. Thus, it can contribute to a critical understanding of those settings and the role they play, as places, in their own stories.

To suggest that the literary construction of place is worthy of critical attention raises few eyebrows today, decades after the emergence of theoretical approaches such as ecocriticism and literary geography. In science fiction and fantasy, imaginary worlds have long been subjected to critical analysis, for instance under the term "world-building" (discussed in detail for example by Wolf 16-63 and Taylor 13-32). In *Here Be Dragons: Exploring Fantasy Maps and Settings*, I argue that fantasy settings have much in common with fantasy characters (216), although I center my analyses on settings found in secondary worlds (9; cf. Wolfe 115). However, a significant number of urban fantasies are set in cities that are more or less recognizable from our own world (Irvine 200-01) and as such, the construction of the setting requires the author to decide *what* from the actual world to include and *how* to present it. According to Brian Attebery, fantasies set in recognizable cities "share a particular concreteness" and the settings "provide firm ground and vivid detail to the narratives" (137). The concreteness, firm ground, and vivid detail are based on the simple fact that recognition comes from being familiar with something: the author is familiar with what they include, and the reader can extend the description from the page into their own knowledge of the world (cf. Attebery 131). The very mention of London sets off the reader's contribution to the details of the world, but the text's descriptions are what shapes the reader's impression of the setting, its atmosphere, its particular sense of "London-ness."

In reading several recent London urban fantasies by a range of authors, I discovered that each work or series creates its own sense of London-ness, having its own historical features and suited to a particular narrative or set of characters.[1] From all the texts, a common London-ness also emerges, an urban fantasy London whose sense of history is dominated by four elements of London's history: the origin and pre-origin of London, the Great Fire of 1666, the time(s) of building tunnels under the city, and the (recent) past when architecture perceived (by characters or narrators) as ugly was added to the cityscape. While not universal, these elements were common enough to stand out. After a brief background discussion about place as an analytical concept, with focus on urban places and their historical associations, I will analyze the

four elements of London history in terms of their expression in the various texts as well as more broadly as features of a general urban fantasy London, including how the sense of London-ness is partly achieved by combining fantastic elements with history.

This approach invites a number of questions: is London different from other primary-world cities as an urban fantasy setting? What about New York or Chicago, Brisbane or Toronto, Stockholm or Paris? What about alternative Londons, like Simon R. Green's Nightside and China Miéville's UnLondon, made-up cities like Charles de Lint's Newford and Liz Williams's Singapore 3, or secondary-world cities such as Jeff VanderMeer's Ambergris and Max Gladstone's Alt Coulumb? There is a limit to the number of places that can be fruitfully compared and contrasted in even a longish article. Similarly, there is a limit to how far back one can go in the analysis. There are numerous fictional versions of London endowed with fantastic elements that precede my primary texts, proto-urban fantasies by authors such as J. M. Barrie, Edith Nesbit, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Charles Dickens. Helen Young has suggested to me in conversation that the oldest example of a fantastic story set in London is, arguably, the alliterative fourteenth century poem *St. Erkenwald*. There are, in other words, centuries of texts worth analyzing, though outside the scope of this article. However, I hope to inspire and encourage other scholars to explore urban fantasy's taproots and literary siblings in the future.

As mentioned above, London-ness, in this article, refers to the qualities of London as a *place* rather than a *space*. Places, according to Tuan, have a history and meaning, and they incarnate the experiences and aspirations of a people ("Space" 213). This gives a place, in Tuan's words, a "personality [which is] a composite of natural endowment [...] and the modifications wrought by successive generations of human beings" (234).[2] Joseph A. Amato expands on this idea in "Local History: A Way to Place and Home," postulating that

> [a]s much as a place is rendered real by its geography, environment, demography, social and built structures, organized spaces, made things, and social forms and ways, a place also belongs to a time: a period and its happenings, events, memories, and dreams. A place forever belongs to real and imagined temporalities. (216-17)

Because London-ness, the sense of London as a place rather than as a set of map coordinates, includes history as well as geography, structures, and arrangement of spaces, we can follow Mark J. P. Wolf's suggestion that "[s]tories set in secondary worlds may need to rely on backstory more than those set in the Primary World, since much Primary World history is already known, or at least accessible, to the audience" (205). I agree up to a point: stories set in a primary world may not need to invent quite as much backstory because there is already a historical background in place (assuming an ideal reader, I will equate *known* and *accessible* for the discussion). However, because this historical background is not created from scratch to fit the needs of the story, the *selection* of historical events and the ways in which they are used are important factors to analyze. The particular events and periods to which the text refers, alludes, or provides access, and how they are presented—in terms of positive or negative connotations as well as relation to the present and to the fantastic domain—determine how the reader sees the fictional version of the place. The choice of which aspects of the actual city's temporalities are included and which are left out is key to how that version may be understood.

"Cities," Lewis Mumford writes in *The Culture of Cities* (1938), "are a product of time"; indeed, "[i]n the city, time becomes visible" (4). To Mumford, it is the buildings and physical structures that make time visible, and the history of a city is the adding and subtracting of these buildings and structures, and what they have gone through. St. Paul's Cathedral reminds us of the Blitz it survived and the Great Fire that caused it to be built. In the city, history is a material process. Physical arrangements, such as street grids, last longer but new visions can replace even them; new buildings stand next to old ones; old structures and buildings are demolished in favor of new ones. Mumford expresses this in terms of temporal conflict, explaining how, "[t]hrough the material fact of preservation, time challenges time, time clashes with time," and how the conflict is resolved in an architectural, urban palimpsest: "[l]ayer upon layer, past times preserve themselves in the city" (4). The city consists of layers of history and expresses its history by juxtaposing structures of differing age. In Kate Griffin's *The Midnight Mayor*, this temporal perspective on cities is explained to the protagonist Matthew Swift: London is "built by two thousand years of man," people who "all scuttled through the streets and made the city what it is, and now they are forgotten" (246, 247). Matthew disagrees, possibly realizing that, in a city, time is more complex than that (250). History is encoded in the physical structure of an urban place but also vice versa. In literature of the city, it thus pays to read the physical and historical layers in parallel in order to discover the nature of a place, something I demonstrate in my reading of the palimpsests in Lisa Goldstein's *Tourists* (1989) (*Here* 190-94).

A sense of place thus arises in fantasy settings from the combination of history and space. According to Farah Mendlesohn, one reason that "the modern intrusion fantasies that emerged in the 1980s [...] brought the fantastic into the cities" was to provide "the cities of the modern Americas [...] with complex historical layers" (147). John Clute introduces the idea of the time abyss, a gap between the story's present and some connected instance deep in the past ("Time" 947). History—and indeed ancient history—is

important in the construction of fantasy settings, in constructing a sense of a larger secondary world as well as a sense of localized place. I propose that even when the city used is not located in a secondary world and already has "complex historical layers," like London, history and space combine into places that provide both recognition and a sense of what J. R. R. Tolkien calls "recovery": a way to free things from "the drab blur of triteness or familiarity" (146). The recovered experience of London differs depending on the reader's previous familiarity with the city. However, regardless of how familiar a reader is with the English capital, they will both recognize and experience the places of (the fictive) London as for the first time.

Londons in urban fantasy are modeled on the actual world London, but do not slavishly imitate it. Just as the societies at the center of many stories are what Clute calls "wainscots" that are "living in the interstices of the dominant world" ("Wainscots" 991), the history of London is reshaped to fit the fantastical events of the narratives. Thus, actual history is turned into fictional history to fit the fictional world and events. Often, but not always, prominent historical events are given a significant role in the fantastic domain. This process may involve "supernatural explanations for mundane events" (Ringel) or may "uncover a Secret History of the World" (Clute et al. 334), or it may simply connect historical events and artifacts with the fantastic. For example, the Great Fire of London might be reinterpreted as the weapon of the city's goddess (Pollack I: 136), the Stone of London might protect the city from malevolent supernatural forces (Griffin, *Midnight* 115), or the *genii loci* of Tyburn, Fleet, and Effra might be killed when the rivers were turned into sewers (Aaronovitch, *Rivers* 185). The history of London becomes intertwined with, and a source of, the fantastical events of the stories, and the fantastic becomes an aspect of the temporal.

Each of the stories analyzed for this study uses people and events from London's history differently to construct the sense of London as a place. Each text approaches history from its own angle and makes the historical past a more or less prominent element of its narrative and world. Tom Pollock, M. V. Stott, and Kate Griffin downplay London's past and keep to a minimum the amount of historical information; Benedict Jacka constructs his narrative around an invented "Secret History" of magic; Ben Aaronovitch and Neil Gaiman both introduce detailed sections of historical information; and Paul Cornell superimposes events from the city's past on his present-day London. The four elements of history used most often to imbue urban fantasy settings with a sense of London-ness are, as mentioned previously, the origin of the city centuries or millennia ago; the Great Fire of 1666; the different periods when tunnels of various kinds were constructed under the city; and the notion that London, at some point in time, has gone through an architectural "Era of Uglification."

Back to the Beginning

One prominent historical aspect of place in these urban fantasies is the notion of origin or beginning, and a sense that the city has been where it is for a long time, but also that there was a time in the distant past when the city did not exist. This is an element of history that London shares with every other city—they have all begun at one time or another—and in most London urban fantasies, it is used to provide a sense of how incredibly old this particular city is and how much history there is between its beginning and its present. There is, in these stories, often a connection between that ancient origin and the fantastic. (Even in *St. Erkenwald*, the source of the fantastic events lies in the distant, pre-Christian times.)

Referring to London's origin is above all a way to indicate that the city is not only old but ancient: the beginning of the city is the beginning of history. Going back further means going back into the chaotic time of story from which the fantastic comes. In Green's Nightside books (set in a secondary urban world only partially overlapping with a primary-world London), this sense of "before-ness" is invoked repeatedly. Nightside "exists because it has always existed" (*Something* 16), it contains the oldest pub in England (*Something* 47), and there is a church that might be older than Christianity (*Agents* 1). Nightside is ancient, pre-dating rather than having an origin, and is thus a magical place in and of itself.

The smallest of allusions to the origin of London can be used to evoke a sense of antiquity, of age-old conflicts or ancient threats. In Jacka's *Fated*, the historical references are internal to the diegetic world of magic users. The artifact at the center of the plot dates back to the end of "the Dark Wars," almost two thousand years ago, and even if the fact is never explicitly mentioned, an astute reader could infer how the end of the Dark Wars and the new order that followed them coincide with the founding of Roman London. With the founding of London comes civilization as it is known today. The origin brought change, setting the city as a place apart from that which preceded it. In Stott's *Familiar Magic*, that change is what drives the ancient enemy, who seeks to destroy London and its magic: with the city came a change in magic. The origin functions as a temporal boundary to London parallel with its physical boundaries.

This temporal boundary is where story and history meet. Legendary founders are invoked, making London not just old but mythical, a place founded by supernatural beings in which the supernatural is still present. In Mike Carey's *The Devil You Know*, the center of London is described briefly in terms of its history, as "a city that's been a major population centre ever since Gog and Magog sat down on their two hills some time around the middle of the Stone Age and put their feet up" (29)—Gog and Magog being giants and legendary guardians of the city of London. Other writers similarly refer

to familiar founders of legend, but the legendary origin can be tailored to a story, giving that story's London a supernatural origin suited to the story as Jacka's history is suited to the story in *Fated*. A noteworthy example is the legendary beginning of London in Pollock's Skyscraper Throne trilogy. In this series, origin and ending are used to bracket the story. Pollock's London was founded when the river Thames was chained by the Goddess of London (I: 75–76; also III: 365). The series climaxes when the river is unchained and two forces of destruction, the Goddess's Great Fire and the flooding Thames, cataclysmically meet. Undoing the city's legendary origin—the chaining of the river—threatens to bring about its end. As in Jacka and Stott, the origin of Pollock's London brought change, but where the threat is fully averted in the former books, Pollock's confrontation between fire and flood changes the city radically, and at the end of the Skyscraper Throne, we are faced with a very different London.

In contrast, Griffin's London-ness is focused on London's urban nature, and the origin of the city is medieval, equating "London" with "the City of London." *A Madness of Angels* introduces a dragon drawn from the City's coat of arms. This is "the dragon that guarded the city of London" found "on all the old gates at the city walls" (436), and it is implied that it has been the city's protector from its beginning. The dragon is another instance of a threat from the past brought into the present, but unlike Stott's ancient antagonist and Pollock's unbound Thames, the threat is to Matthew personally. He defends himself by appealing to the City's motto, *Domine dirige nos* (Lord, guide us), and by insisting that he is of the city and that he knows the city's "history, duty, humility, laws, time" (437). Griffin's London is a place defended by a legendary, ancient guardian, bound to the city by its walls both spatially and temporally. Appealing to the ancient powers of the city is a way of providing protection (457) as these guardians change with the city rather than resist such change.

References to its origin are often used to create a sense of London as a place of great age, with a long history. Young observes that "[h]istorically, London has been—and been understood as—the central metropolis of the British Empire—not as a former colony of the Roman" (*Race* 155), and although some of the texts recall London's past at the heart of the British Empire, often in the form of an industrial, Victorian capital, it is the city's Roman or pre-Roman roots that figure, prominently or only in passing, in many urban fantasy versions of London. An example is *A Madness of Angels*, in which the ancient past is introduced by mentioning shards of stone from "the first Roman ruin found underneath the city's streets" (Griffin 322-23) as magical ingredients. The pattern is familiar: the city is a place which goes far back in history, and that ancient past is a source of magic.

In some texts, Roman London is given more weight as part of London-ness—and in the narrative—than a passing remark, however. In Cornell's *London Falling*, one of the protagonists undertakes a spirit journey to a version of Roman London and obtains essential information from its founder. In *Rivers of London*, Aaronovitch's Police Constable Peter Grant chases the murderous spirit of riot and rebellion back through the history of London and catches up with it in pre-Roman Britain. The spatial and temporal aspects of place collapse as Peter runs through time and space, and London emerges as a combination of locations and events. The geographical boundaries of the city shrink as Peter's pursuit takes him back in history, until his quarry has run out of both time and space. The beginning of London is also the end of London.

Miéville's *Kraken* and Gaiman's *Neverwhere* construct their respective Londons by balancing the historical and legendary origins of the city. In *Kraken*, the origin of London is connected to the Londonmancers. As a group, these diviners of London's "needs, urges and insights" have been around "since Gogmagog and Corineus, since Mithras and the rest" (183). (Corineus was the eponymous first ruler of Cornwall according to Geoffrey of Monmouth; Mithras was a deity worshipped in Roman London.) The Londonmancers are connected not to any specific historical time but to the idea of the distant past: to the ancient protectors of the city, whether those are called Gog and Magog or Gogmagog and Corineus. Their connections to the city's origin also mix the legendary with the historical, as they reside close to the London Stone, a part of an old Roman milestone that has become the heart of London. Through the Londonmancers, London's geography and history are linked, and in a plot that revolves around urban cults and the destruction of all of history, the sense of London-ness is expanded to contain everywhere and everywhen: an urban world and urban history revolving around myths and legends.

Neverwhere brackets its narrative both with the idea of London's historical origin and the supernatural threat from a legendary beginning. The plot is driven by the schemes of the fallen angel Islington, imprisoned under London but in some sense located outside of or beyond it. To journey to the angel, the protagonists Door and Richard pass through the old city gates, effectively leaving London. The gates are themselves weighed down with history and myth—Richard associates them with Gog and Magog (Gaiman 302-303)—and beyond them lies a labyrinth that was there "[b]efore King Lud founded the village on the Thames marshes" (304). By traveling spatially out of London, Door and Richard also travel back to before the beginning of London, in a parallel to Peter's chase in *Rivers of London*. But the story of Richard and Door is also bracketed by the historical beginning of London. Door escapes Islington's assassination of her family because she has gone exploring, encountering "some Roman soldiers camped out by the Kilburn River" (89), and can therefore meet Richard and bring him along on her quest.

That quest ends with Islington's defeat, and Door and Richard say farewell on a small island in the Thames, in "London as it had been perhaps three thousand years ago," before the first human habitation (347). The quest is thus framed by references to the city's origin, and London is constructed as having a beginning both idyllic and peaceful, and dark and ominous: a beginning both historical and legendary that has given rise to an equally double present and is well suited to the complex place that is Gaiman's setting.

Just like in *St. Erkenwald*, several of the urban fantasies point explicitly to an origin, a starting point for the city, or even a time before that beginning. The origin adds to the sense of London as a place with a long history, but it also constitutes a boundary between that place and whatever came before it. The temporal border between city and not-city becomes a source of the fantastic, providing ancient powers or mysterious insights (such as the dream quest to Roman London in *London Falling*, the powers of the *Kraken* Londonmancers, or the dragon protector in *A Madness of Angels*), or, as Young suggests, giving rise to a supernatural threat that is "a product of the history of a place" (*Race* 142) with its roots in the wilderness or legends preceding the city. It is for this reason that so many narratives connect their final conflict in some way to a place related to the beginning of London, either literally in a place in the past (*Familiar Magic* and *Rivers of London*) or in confrontation with an entity in some way imprisoned beyond the city's beginning (the Skyscraper Throne, *Neverwhere*, and *Fated*).

Every city has a beginning, a time when the first house was erected or the first settlement built. This origin does not have to be a prominent part of how a city's sense of place is portrayed, but in most of the urban fantasy texts that I examined, this tends to be the case. The next element of history that emerged prominently in the texts, which I turn to next, is a much more specific event, however.

The Great Fire of London

In September 1666, much of central London was reduced to rubble and ashes by a conflagration that started in a bakery in Pudding Lane. While many cities have suffered disastrous fires that resulted in drastic changes to their urban make-up—Hong Kong (1953), Dresden (1945), San Francisco (1906), and Ålesund (1904) are only the first to spring to mind—the Great Fire of London has taken on legendary qualities. All the texts that I examined refer to it in some way, with the exception of *Fated*, which only refers to the history of magic users, and *Familiar Magic*, which does not refer to any specific historical events at all.

Of the four common historical elements of London as place that emerged from the texts, this is the only specific event. That is not to say that no other events are described, mentioned, or alluded to (many are), only that the Great

Fire of London is the only event that recurs in the great majority of texts. In giving a sense of London-ness, the Great Fire is almost inescapable. There is no obvious reason why. Although the event is woven into the narrative in a few cases, others refer only briefly to it, and in some cases, the reader has to be familiar with the Great Fire in order to understand the allusions. What the inclusion of the Great Fire of London appears to do, more than anything else, is to say: "this is London, this is the place where there was a Great Fire." It is almost as if the Great Fire is not *an* event in London's long history—it is *the* event. And as such, it is not so much included as part of London-ness, as it must not be excluded: any attempt to portray London as a historical place requires at least a nod to the Great Fire of 1666.

As the one ubiquitous event, the Great Fire of London offers a good example of how the same actual events can be used in various ways in the construction of London-ness. Most texts (*Fated* and *Familiar Magic* being the exceptions) draw upon events from the history of London in their construction of the literary place. How these are used differs greatly: they can be briefly alluded to or provide a descriptive detail mentioned in passing, but they can also be turned into a part of the narrative or even fashioned into a plot device. London urban fantasies offer examples of all these ways of using the Great Fire. Vivian Shaw describes the attempt to burn down the city as "not only atrocious but unoriginal" (316), and in a list of catastrophes that have afflicted London, Carey includes that it has been "razed by fire" (29). In *Rivers of London*, the Great Fire is mentioned literally in passing as "a blast of hot air" (367) when Peter chases his perpetrator back through history. A reader unfamiliar with London's history may fail to connect these allusions to the Great Fire, and they may therefore add little to any particular sense of London-ness. To someone expecting the Great Fire to be part of London-ness, however, the allusions confirm that the fictive place is indeed London: "yes, there was the Great Fire once, let's not deny it, but there is no need to dwell upon it."

One reason for providing details from actual history in urban fantasy (or other forms of fantastic fiction set in a primary world) is to blur the line between the fictional and the actual. The historical sense of London-ness is constructed by extending history into the fictional world, similar to how "the reader is encouraged to extend the world [...] geographically and historically" (Ekman, *Here* 83) by traveling geographically from a fictive place to London in *Stardust* by Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess. Attebery describes how such extension of the world arises by the "discourse of reporting" allowing readers to "extend the narrator's observations in any direction" by filling in the gaps with what experience tells them is there (131). By connecting the history of the actual and fictional Londons, the reader is encouraged to extend the fictional history.

Using the Great Fire (or any other historical event) as a descriptive detail that makes up London as a place contributes to such blurring. Griffin mentions how Matthew "feel[s] the burning of the fire that had led to [St. Paul's] reconstruction" (*Madness* 134), in *Neverwhere*; "the columnlike Monument to the Great Fire of London" (Gaiman 269) is mentioned as part of the view from the deck of HMS Belfast; and in the sequel to *Rivers of London*, the Great Fire is referred to as the occasion when London "was razed to the ground in 1666" (Aaronovitch, *Moon* 24). These details more clearly refer to this particular historical event than the allusions mentioned previously. The reader is not required to be already familiar with the Great Fire of London; the details contribute some sense of it to the London-ness, even if they do little more than create a backdrop. In their respective contexts, these details add some history to the place: the cathedral was once destroyed by fire and then rebuilt; the Monument was erected by Christopher Wren at the same time as St. Paul's Cathedral and other buildings (implying the extent of the fire); and the event is given a date. From context, it is clear that the Fire destroyed parts of the city that were dirty and had narrow, winding streets—which were then largely replaced by more narrow, winding streets. The London-ness of the setting increases, as does the possibility of extending the history of the actual London into the history of the fictive London.

A historical event can be used to blur the line between actual and fictive even further by making the event part of the story rather than "just" part of the setting. In *London Falling*, the antagonist learns how better to use her magic during the Great Fire, gaining power from sacrificing people to the flames. What readers know about the actual event allows them to fill out the episode with details not included in the text: the place is brought to life just as much by the reader's knowledge of the Great Fire as by the descriptions given in the text. In the sequel to *A Madness of Angels*, the sinister Mr. Pinner, the anthropomorphic "death of cities," claims that "[w]hen the baker in Pudding Lane left his oven open, I was the customer who took the last loaf before the ashes scattered onto the straw and ignited" (Griffin, *Midnight* 290). In this way, the Great Fire is incorporated in the story but also receives a (supernatural) explanation. It becomes a part of a "fantasy of history," uncovering fantastic secrets behind (actual) historical events (Clute et al. 334) and offering a new understanding of these events. By mentioning the Great Fire of London together with the destruction of other cities by Mr. Pinner, such as the bombings of Hiroshima and Dresden, the burning of Rome, the fall of Babylon, the destruction of Pompeii, and the siege of Stalingrad (*Midnight* 290-91), Griffin extends the fictional world into the actual while suggesting that the reader extend the actual into the fictional. The lines between worlds are blurred if any event in London's history can have a supernatural explanation.

Occasionally, historical events are not only explained by supernatural causes but are turned into plot devices and actively used in the story. By turning the Great Fire of London into a supernatural element in its own right, the story comes to focus more tightly on London as setting and London as a place is constructed with greater emphasis on the history of London. Like the origin of London, the Great Fire can be an anchor which makes the story one that can only take place in London. Pollock and Miéville provide examples of this.

In Pollock's series, the Great Fire is the weapon of the Goddess of London and is mentioned throughout the series. One of the protagonists, Beth, is told how, in 1666, the goddess of London burned the destructive Crane King with "a fire hotter than—well, than *anything*. The Great Fire, we called it" (I: 136). Although Beth (and the reader) may not be aware of the full implications of "hotter than [...] *anything*," this is presumably an allusion to the very high temperature of the fire, which in places got up to 1,250 degrees centigrade ("Pottery"). She is also told of the importance of Pudding Lane, that the date was September 1666, and how "the baker's shop was [the goddess's] tinderbox" (I: 137). Pollock does not use history to fill in "inessential background" (Attebery 132). The details about the Great Fire—which month it took place, how hot it burned, the place and street in which it begun—are interlaced with reminders that this is the weapon of a city goddess in the battle against personified urban destruction. The details become essential foreground, a way of situating the conflict in London and nowhere else. The goddess's weapon, wielded against the Crane King in book I, and unleashed on London again at the end of book III, is more than just a historical event. It defines London as a place and makes the place itself active in the story.

In *Kraken*, there is a similarly detailed reference to the historical actualities of the Great Fire of 1666. After the cremation of a powerful wizard, the "proximity of the venue [...] to Pudding Lane, the unusual nature of the fire and the reputations of the [fire mages] that had prepared it had led to speculation that it had been a conduit, some [magical] spark scorching all the way back four-hundred-plus [sic] years, starting the Great Fire" (205). This summary also appears to fill in essential foreground, but the narrator uses something of a rhetorical sleight of hand. The historical circularity is only "speculation" and is immediately rejected as "Bullshit" by one of the main characters. Still, it is a clue to the dead wizard's current whereabouts, and it suggests a link to the central issue: that those who can see the future see a fire that destroys not just London but the entire world and all of history. The Great Fire of London is about to be repeated, this time on an apocalyptic scale. As in so much fantasy, the world hangs in the balance. The Great Fire is no longer an event of the past and a historical marker to signify London-ness but a looming end of the world suitable for a fantasy story set in London.

Through Pollock's and Miéville's inclusions of the Great Fire, destruction is made part of London-ness. But in its urban fantasy guise, it is supernatural destruction as history threatens to repeat itself. As a historical event, the Great Fire of 1666 is apparently unavoidable in creating a sense of London as a place with history, but it can be used more or less actively. The less active introduction of specific historical events, such as the Great Fire, contributes to London-ness, by confirming that this place is indeed London or even creating a bridge between the fictive and actual Londons. By making active use of a historical event, however, history and location become linked: the story becomes a story about London, not only a story set in London.

Events take place at one particular moment in history, just as the origin is really a particular moment. The third historical element of London-ness is not one moment but several: a collection of historical moments when major constructions of underground tunnels took place.

Going Underground

The subterranean realm is a prominent space in London urban fantasy: *Strange Practices* opens with a prologue that details the undercity of London; *Neverwhere* is set in the underground tunnels and pockets of old time of London Below; and *London Calling* describes the totality of London with hidden rivers and caves in which younger cities lie on top of the remains of their predecessor (Cornell 390), to give some examples. London below ground is a place of the past. In urban fantasy in general, subterranean settings are common. I have previously described the underground tunnels as a "physical manifestations of the Unseen" and related them to other Gothic traits in the genre ("Urban Fantasy" 464). According to Alexander C. Irvine, "[u]nderworlds feature prominently in the texts of the urban fantastic, reconfigured and adapted to their new environments" (204-05). Young makes a similar point, but in that subset of urban fantasy that she calls "Suburban Fantasy," she sees a connection between suburbs and "the sub-urban—what lies beneath—both literally and figuratively," being, that is, both underground and in the past (*Race* 142). It is therefore not surprising that one of the historical elements of London-ness links different parts of the city's subterranean topography—sewers, the Underground, shelters from World War II—with the moment in history when they were constructed.

The most marked historical moment connected with building tunnels in London is the design of the Victorian sewer system by Joseph Bazalgette. In *Rivers of London*, this moment determines the physical as well as the supernatural environment. There is a description of "the Great Stink" of 1858, "when the Thames became so thick with sewage that London was overwhelmed with a stench so terrible that Parliament considered relocating to Oxford" (185). The smaller rivers of London—Tyburn, Fleet, Effra—were "drowned in

a flood of muck and filth and finally put out of their misery by [...] Bazalgette. Him that made the sewers" (185). Covering the rivers and making them part of the sewer system effectively killed their *genii loci*, setting up the present situation with one family of Thames gods in London, and another outside the metropolis. Peter does not venture down into the sewers until the third book in the series, *Whispers Under Ground* (2012), but the building of them is a key moment in history from the beginning. In *Neverwhere*, the covered Tyburn is "kept safe in the darkness in a brick sewer beneath Park Lane on its way south to Buckingham Palace" (Gaiman 212), and the sewers are very much part of London Below, the beauty of these "red-brick cathedrals" praised in what reads like honest appreciation (Gaiman 259). Gaiman also provides an extensive description of the origin of the London sewers, including the covering of the rivers, the Great Stink, and the subsequent building of the sewer system (261-62; see also 264-65). In *Strange Practice*, it is observed how "London's lost rivers had taken on a romantic sort of mystery in popular awareness," and the narrator describes how they flow "through cathedrals of tile and brick, unseen arches and coigns of gorgeous complexity guiding and shaping their eventual journey" (Shaw 76). The paragraph echoes the praise in *Neverwhere*, drawing attention to the unseen Victorian beauty under the streets of London. (This style contrasts sharply with Stott's description of the London sewers, which emphasizes their filth and odor [100-105].) The submerged rivers are also mentioned, but without attention to the building of the sewers, in *London Falling* (Cornell 390) and *The Devil You Know* (Carey 95-96).

The tunnels most commonly associated with London, however, are not the sewers but the Underground, whose lines are emblematic of London and frequently provide gateways between the mundane and fantastic domains, or offer a crosshatch region (Clute, "Crosshatch" 237) where the domains of the mundane and the fantastic occupy the same space. Green uses the Underground as a way to reach Nightside (22ff); in *Neverwhere*, it is a place where London Above and London Below overlap, and other texts use it as location for meetings with the fantastic. Parts of the Underground are more strongly associated with the fantastic domain, however, especially disused stations, abandoned tunnels, secret rooms, and other forgotten locations. In *The City's Son*, Beth first encounters the fantastic domain in a tunnel on an old, unused extension (Pollock 33-34). Disused stations are considered as possible bases for an order of murderous zealots in *Strange Practice* (Shaw 124). Matthew meets with a clan of urban magicians on the disused Aldwych Underground station and is taken to their headquarters in the old Kingsway Telephone Exchange under Holborn (*Madness* 212, 221). Richard and Door enter the British Museum from the disused British Museum Station (Gaiman 169). These abandoned locations are often provided with a historical

background, detailing when they closed, or what they were used for, weaving history, underground spaces, and the supernatural into a fictional sense of place. Occasionally, the entire subterranean setting is described in terms of previous use and turned into a place with a past and of that past:

> [t]here used to be other trains too. [...] The Post Office ran trains between its depots. The government always had something being moved about down here. The markets—they'd bring meat to Smithfield in subterranean trucks. Some of the lines never went above ground. You can't say that about many trains in the city. But it's different now. People forget about the things underground. (Griffin, *Madness* 226)

The nostalgia is palpable. To the speaker, the time of tunnels and tunnel-building was a better time. London used to be a place alive both above and below ground, but times change. Now the subterranean domain is empty, unseen, forgotten. London-ness includes a time when tunnels were built—and used.

One particular time of building underground is World War II and the Blitz. Although several types of tunnels are described in *Strange Practice* (e.g., Shaw 279), the main confrontation takes place in one of the mostly abandoned deep-level shelters built during the war. These shelters are attached to the Underground tunnels (Shaw 252-53) and thus are part of the entirety of London underground.

All these examples have in common not only that they are at some point built underground, they are also part of a system of tunnels and rooms, unseen by the majority of London's inhabitants. They make up a realm unknown and often forgotten, a topography separate from the city of the surface. Describing such settings in terms of when and how they were brought into existence and what they were originally used for is a way of establishing them as historical places. The relationship between the supernatural and other aspects of the Unseen (such as the subterranean) is expressed through the historical perspective of underground places, whether Victorian sewers, old Underground stations, or disused telephone exchanges. And within that specific historical perspective, the fantastic domain underground is largely constructed by very explicitly Londonian, subterranean history and geography.

The Era of Uglification

The fourth historical element of London's past that stands out in the texts does so not because of its many occurrences or the importance of these occurrences to the fantastic domain of the city but because it expresses the ubiquitous idea that during a particular period of its history, London became victim of particularly unsightly architecture (according to the narrator or particular characters): what I have chosen to call "the Era of Uglification." What particular time period constitutes the Era of Uglification differs between texts, but they share the idea that during some period, ugly buildings were constructed or an ugly cityscape brought into being. These periods are often situated in recent history and add to the sense of London not only as a place with ancient history, but also as a modern city.

Above, I discussed how city architecture is palimpsestic, with layer upon layer of time inscribed upon the urban landscape. Time becomes visible through these layers, and by finding older buildings side by side with younger ones. Tuan points out that there are also ways in which temporal layering and juxtaposition can be absent in the city, locations in which time is rendered invisible: "The temporal depth of the urban landscape has diminished in that buildings of different ages, which serve as time-markers, are rarely found occupying the same confined space" ("Place/Space" 109). Great swathes of cityscape have been demolished—accidentally, inimically, or intentionally—to leave room for new structures. In the London urban fantasies, such temporally shallow areas are often pointed out as ugly, or at best bland, such as "the south London suburbs, hectares of Edwardian two-storey terraced housing interspersed with interchangeable high streets" (Aaronovitch, *Rivers* 125). Although the scope of this article does not permit extended discussion of physical locations, it is worth observing how the temporally deep city centers are often placed in opposition to temporally shallow suburban areas (this is a dominant theme in Pollock I and III, but see also e.g., Griffin, *Madness* 80; Miéville 66). Not all references to the Era of Uglification are through areas of invisible time, however. Ugly architecture may be a single building or group of buildings, filling a gap or standing out as sole survivors or intruders. All are portrayed as architectural scars in the urban landscape and function as time-markers in and of themselves and in juxtaposition with other buildings.

The buildings that are described as particularly unsightly are occasionally linked to a particular time. In *Neverwhere*, the Centre Point is referred to as an "ugly and distinctive sixties skyscraper" (Gaiman 266), and the decay and dilapidation of an abandoned hospital is explained as the result of National Health Service budget cutbacks and failed developers in the 1980s (Gaiman 70). Aaronovitch's first-person narrator has a background in architecture and is particularly thorough in his criticism: an estate from the 1950s is utterly condemned and referred to as a large-scale architectural mistake by the post-war planners (*Rivers* 343), the former City of Westminster Magistrates Court is presented as "a bland box of a building built in the 1970s [...] so lacking in architectural merit that there was talk of listing it [as an architectural heritage] so that it could be preserved for posterity as an awful warning" (*Rivers* 120-21), and the Barbican Shakespeare Tower (built at the same time) is purportedly listed as an architectural heritage "because

it was that or admit how fucking ugly it was" (*Whispers* 69). Occasionally, the bombings of World War II are explicitly blamed for giving rise to ugly architecture, for instance by Aaronovitch (*Rivers* 342-43) and Griffin (*Madness* 44, 92; *Midnight* 65-66). Pollock's Era of Uglification is more recent. The evil fought in *The City's Son* is the vain and destructive Crane King, who "keeps building glass towers to look at himself in" (I: 77). These "glass towers" include for instance the One Canada Square (opened 1991) and the Shard (opened 2012). In the Skyscraper Throne series, the ugly architecture thus takes a central place in the plot, through the Crane King and as gateway to the alternative world of "London-Under-Glass." Rather than focusing on a single decade, Carey describes how uglification happens over a longer period of time, giving a history of what Somers Town (the area around St. Pancras and Euston Stations) has suffered at the hands of industrialization and modern city planning from the 18th century to today, until it "isn't a place anymore. It's more like a stump of an amputated limb" (62).

Some texts thus point out specific times when uglification took place, whereas others construct a more general idea that there are "modern," "recent," or "contemporary" buildings that are ugly. Part of the explanation as to why architecture from a certain time is so often described as ugly may be the "comprehensive redevelopment that was common practice from the late 1940s to the mid-1970s [and that] wreaked havoc in many cities, alienating many people from their communities and destroying cherished places and environments" (Carmona et al. 205-206). Although the texts acknowledge that the buildings have been around enough to be established as part of the cityscape, there is a sense of universal agreement about their unsightliness. Often, the ugliness is stressed by contrasting them with older buildings. A police station is described as "one of those very ugly London buildings in mustard bricks that, instead of weathering grandly as their red Victorian ancestors [do], never age, but just get dirtier and dirtier" (Miéville 19). The early Victorian Bonnington Archive stands out from "the low-rise concrete monstrosities around it like a spinster among sprawling drunks" (Carey 63). The contrast between the new additions and the original Georgian building of Royal London Hospital is simply "ugly" (Shaw 29). More generally, and in line with the '90s and '00s glass towers, London's skyscrapers are described as "execrable" (Shaw 6). It is through brief comments such as these that a sense of London-ness is constructed to include ugly architecture and a period when this was added to the cityscape.

The inclusion of recent, ugly buildings in London as a physical place adds a sense of mundanity and familiarity to the literary city. Ugliness as portrayed in the texts is a very everyday trait. It is not a question of something dramatic or remarkable: the sense is of a place that is normal. The ugly architecture, whether it is depicted as areas of temporal shallowness or stands

out by comparison to surrounding buildings, works as a bridge from the recognizable urban landscape of the actual world to the fantastical place in the text. These buildings are not described to invoke any sense of wonder or promote Tolkienian recovery. Only rarely are they directly connected to the supernatural (as in the case of Pollock) although they often provide a setting for supernatural events, thus giving an impression that behind the surface of the familiar, something uncanny goes on. That is the same impression that the tunnel settings give by locating supernatural threats in unseen places underground. Urban fantasy London is thus constructed as a setting with commonplace, familiar, ugly buildings that balance the unfamiliar, unseen settings and fantastical events. Both familiar and unfamiliar, this setting allows us to experience London as a city charged with the possibility of the fantastic.

The Era(s) of Ugliness fulfil much the same function but in a different way. The periods of time when the ugly buildings were erected are, as a rule, located recently, during the second half of the 20th century. This time period, like its architecture, is familiar and mundane. But instead of balancing the time of tunnel-building (as the ugly buildings balance the tunnel settings), the Era of Uglification is a counterweight to the impression of London as an old city constructed by references to its origin. London-ness is about the city as both ancient and modern, as the location for threats out of legends and the city of today with all its problems and possibilities. The "now" of the ugly buildings is juxtaposed with the (distant) past of London's beginning, as well as other events in its history, such as the Great Fire. The history of buildings and their (lack of) aesthetics are closely linked in providing a balance to the fantastical past and environments in the sense of London-ness, thus creating Londons in which seen and Unseen, modern and ancient, combine to provide places suitable as settings for urban fantasies.

In my application of a historical perspective to the reading of literary places, the four elements of history that I identify as emerging from the London urban fantasies contribute to a sense of London-ness that is suitable to London as an urban fantasy setting. However, they are not exactly the elements I expected to find being shared by a majority of texts. Where are, for instance, Victorian (or Dickensian) London and the Blitz? Certainly, there are a few references to each of these, but not enough to warrant inclusion here. The same goes for Elizabethan London and medieval London. So what makes the four elements that I have found so congenial to fantasy? I can offer no comprehensive explanation, only an observation. The combination of the four historical elements addressed in this article creates a sense of a history that goes so far back that facts and legends mix and from which a fantastical intrusion can arise; a history that includes a calamitous, well-known event that defines the city as a historical place and that lies at the very edge of the modern era; a historical explanation for the tunnels underground that provide

unseen, unknown locations for the supernatural domain; and yet a sense that this is a modern, familiar place. By applying a historical perspective on London as a place, it becomes possible to see how a sense of London-ness suitable to urban fantasy can be constructed.

It is not possible to say what general sense of London-ness these four elements construct. Each given text or series of texts combines and emphasizes them in their own way, constructing its particular sense of London-ness slightly differently. How such construction is done can be explored by applying a historical perspective to the places described, however. It would be possible to use such readings as a basis for comparisons between the Londons in different texts, or of different genres (such as the Londons of romance, political thrillers, or crime fiction), or of London as portrayed in texts labeled as nonfiction. Another interesting area of investigation would be the historical "place-ness" of other urban fantasy cities: what historical elements emerge in readings of the urban fantasies of New York, Ottawa, or Paris? Or of the urban fantasies set in secondary worlds?

This essay has demonstrated how a historical perspective of place contributes to our understanding of the way in which urban fantasy constructs its literary world, in relation to the actual world and as a world suited to its genre. The historical elements that London provides are special in their particulars, but every city has some sort of origin, some defining historical event, some reason for its unseen locations to come into being, and some way of portraying it as a modern city. Possibly, these are pervasive historical elements in the worlds of urban fantasy—something which future scholarship will need to explore.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. For an article this length, there is a limit to how much material one can analyze. My interest is in how London is portrayed in urban fantasy read today, and my selection of primary texts has been pragmatic in that I have included all London urban fantasies from roughly the past decade that I have been able to identify and get hold of:
- Mike Carey, *The Devil You Know* (2006)
- Kate Griffin, *A Madness of Angels* (2009)
- China Miéville, *Kraken* (2010)
- Ben Aaronovitch, *Rivers of London* (2011)
- Tom Pollock, The Skyscraper Throne trilogy (I: *The City's Son* [2012], II: *The Glass Republic* [2013], III: *Our Lady of the Streets* [2014])
- Benedict Jacka, *Fated* (2012)
- Paul Cornell, *London Calling* (2012)
- M. V. Stott, *Familiar Magic* (2017)
- Vivian Shaw, *Strange Practice* (2017).

I also decided to include what is perhaps the best known urban fantasy set in London, Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* (originally a television series broadcast in 1996; released in novel form the same year). These texts all have contemporary, purportedly primary-world versions of London as their main setting. Portrayals of historical versions of London would be skewed by the choice of period, so I have excluded texts that are set in a historical London. With the exception of Pollock's trilogy (which is a continuous story), only the first book in a series about a particular character or characters has been included (although there are occasional references to later texts in some series). It is beyond the scope of this article to divide texts by the authors' biographical details, such as age or place of birth, although that may prove of interest in future studies. Other scholars may make different choices or include more texts; when they do, I look forward to seeing whether their conclusions differ from mine.

2. I should point out that although this is a discussion about time and space in the sense that time is a requisite for history and space a requisite for place, these concepts are not equivalents in the sense they are used here. M. M. Bakhtin's concept of a *chronotope* is thus not quite helpful here. The chronotope as described by Bakhtin is a useful tool to think about how literary actions and events are situated in (fictive) time and space and the artistic meaning various such situations carry with them (84-85). His is also a historical poetics in which the chronotope is considered to define a "literary work's artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality" (243). While certainly a possible approach to adapt to fantastic literature, it is too broad a brush to use in my particular discussion. Rather than restricting Bakhtin's ideas to fit my project, I have chosen to use Tuan's *place* as my analytical tool.

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Abstract

London is one of the more popular settings for urban fantasy, standing out by offering both a great many famous locations and a history of two millennia. This article argues that the city's past is used to create a sense of "London-ness" by examining ten urban fantasy versions of London. It identifies and analyzes the functions of four prominent elements of history in these texts: the city's origin and pre-origin, the Great Fire of 1666, the periods of building various subterranean tunnels, and the notion that London, at some point, has gone through an architectural Era of Uglification. Through these, London is portrayed as a literary place suitable to urban fantasy: it is a modern city but with a long history reaching back to a beginning where facts and legends mix. This long history gives rise to supernatural entities that hide in the underground tunnels constructed at various points in the city's history.