

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Walking with Goats and Gruffalo

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I entered lockdown with a sense of disbelief, naivety and fear. This latter was not a fear of catching Covid 19, nor was it an abstract fear over how the pandemic would alter life as we knew it. My fear was more mundane than this, it was over how, in these unprecedented times, when playgrounds were closed, childcare minimal and playdates a no-no, I was to entertain a 3-year-old and a 6-week old baby. Being confined to house and garden, with one permitted outing for daily exercise, was not the maternity leave I had envisaged. How was I – how were we – to cope?

Routine is critical to our sense of wellbeing and stability, and for children this is perhaps even more crucial, for it not only imparts comfort and familiarity, but also nurtures a sense of time and duration. During lockdown, when every day had a very similar hue, being able to measure the day became important. And so, fashioning a new routine became central to our collective sense of coping. The central pillar became our daily walk. It happened after lunch, it took us out of the house for around 90 minutes and a variety of vehicles were involved – pushchairs, bikes and scooters – as were a number of furry friends – doggy, puppy, aardvark and, latterly snake, were all packed into my son's rucksack and off we went.

Our early walks were familiar ones, well-trodden paths, circuits of known length with suitable places for rests and wild wees. Slowly though, we ventured along new routes, or followed paths seen and sensed but which we'd never previously traversed, and so we began to discover our town anew. Our daily walk quickly transformed into a challenge for my 3 year old and me: we wanted to walk a new route every day. We printed off maps, we followed lines, and we embraced the byways, lanes and paths we'd previously ignored. If I was hoping that maps and route-making might develop a love of geography in my son, he surprised me

by coming at the subject from a more creative direction: he began to inscribe our daily walks with stories, and different walks demanded different stories. It all began not with a goat or a Gruffalo, but with a fox, for we stumbled upon a hole. Most probably a badger hole, but my son informed me it was fox's underground house and so began our Gruffalo re-tellings.

I have written elsewhere about the creative power of walking and route making (Saunders 2016) and during lockdown my son came to embrace our daily walk not just as an outing or an opportunity to cycle or scooter, but as a time to tell stories and play with language. By the time the first lockdown was easing we had a Gruffalo wood, a goat track and various routes associated with digger and tractor stories. The Gruffalo wood became one of our most popular routes and the rules surrounding this walk were laid out carefully by my son. Our telling of the story could only commence on entering the (very small) wood. At the fox's den we had to stop, prod the hole a little, shout for fox and ascertain if he'd left by the backdoor. We then proceeded to find owl's treetop house (quick story-telling here, as the wood was small), before moving on to snake's log pile house. The wood never allowed us to encounter the Gruffalo, it was too small and the route too short, but this did not bother my son, we'd met the main characters who lived in the wood. Another favoured route was the goat track, so called after the book *Oi Goat* by Kes Grey and Jim Field (there is also *Oi Cat*, *Oi Frog*, *Oi Dog*, *Oi Duck-Billed Platypus*), a rhyming series in which all animals have to have a seat (bears sit on pears, goats sit on coats etc). Our goat track was a long, thin path through a housing estate and as we moved along this path we had to shout out animals and people for the other to find them a seat. This was a more fluid story. It depended more on who or what came to mind as we walked, rather than having set points for different characters to emerge and direct where the story went next.

Was this a coping strategy, well yes, but it also became so much more than this. It became a way of coming to know place, of connecting it to other people and places, both real and imagined, and it gave me space, albeit limited, to ponder the relationship between children, place and storytelling. Geographers have long been interested in the nature of stories and story-telling. From small stories (Lorimer 2003), through stories as conceptual processes (Cameron 2012; Rose 2016) to the creative practice of story-making and telling (Saunders 2016; Mundell 2018), the story is recognised as a complex and powerful narrative and practice. Yet much of this focuses on adults, and on creative writers and established practitioners, but what of those yet to fall into these groups: those in the early stages of building their self and their world? Stories feed the imagination: they proffer children an insight into other worlds, they present them with difference, danger and challenge, and they nurture a sense of timing, gesture and rhythm. There is no denying the power of the story, but the way children engage with stories also tells us something about their process of creation and knowing.

1. *Borrowers and embellishers*: I want to suggest that when we consider adults and literary creativity we tend to talk about their engagement with place as one of 'borrowing'. Charlotte Doyle (1998) talks about seed incidents: events and happenings that inspire creation. We are in the world and we borrow from it. In contrast, I want to suggest that children tend to embellish: they are in the world and they add to it. My son wanted to

‘place’ the Gruffalo tale. He wanted to tell it in the world and allow the quiriness of the world to dictate the nature of its telling. For him, fox holes, bird nests and underground dens were a way to root/route a story in place and enhance its telling. The telling was never true to the original, we forgot words, got muddled and got distracted, but our place of telling was always the same location and we wove our story into the world around us, leaving threads that we would pick up on our next foray through the wood.

2. *Novelty versus repetition*: In her memoir of childhood reading, Lucy Mangan (2018), observes the importance of rereading and repetition to a child’s engagement with stories. Early readings are when they decode meaning, learn new words, and only after this do they enjoy plot and then everything that follows after. What is lost in suspense and excitement is gained by a deeper sense of knowledge and mastery of the story world. As a result, we have an intimate knowledge of *The Gruffalo*. Its characters all have distinct personalities and voices, and there are particular parts of the rhyming story we repeat joyfully. Alongside repetition of the story world though, my son’s walk of choice is always *The Gruffalo* route. It is a route we have repeated many times and while we tell the story each time, the telling (for the above reasons) is never quite the same. We also get distracted by the route. The seasons change, vegetation comes and goes, the weather alters and our path becomes boggy or drier. These changes are not problems though, but new doorways into the story. On a particularly wet day we were distracted by fox’s hole and had to ponder, at length, whether he/she would be awash in the underground den. On one occasion we approached the path through the Gruffalo wood from the other direction; all was well ‘in the deep, dark wood’ (Donaldson and Scheffler 1999) until my son realised the story did not fit the spatial order he had established previously. Where was fox’s den? Well, it was at end not the beginning on this occasion. The wood was wrong, and so we had to get to the other end (the start) and do it properly. So much for novelty, my son wanted the familiar. It was this that provided a launch-pad for his imagination. The stability it offered enabled him to burrow into character and place, animating his Gruffalo wood.
  
3. *Fourthspace*: walking and talking, Kate Moles (2008) argues, create thirdspaces: spaces of novelty, creativity and transitoriness. In this instance though, we were not just walking and talking, but ‘telling’ too and, if we follow Gérard Genette (1980), telling produces a doubled sense of time: the time of the telling and the time of the narrative. It also generates a doubled sense of place: the place of the telling and the place of the narrative. Thirdspace accommodates the generative nature of our creation of The Gruffalo Wood. This place did not exist before and it exists only for us: a coming together of the imagined and the real. Yet, we were falling into foxes dens and wriggling into log pile houses, and on our arrival we could just as quickly exit again, by front door or back, to ponder the effects of flood or fire. Our story might then recommence, but it might as easily remain with the log pile house as we discussed the likelihood of fire in the wood.

What this suggests is that the times and places encompassed within and generated by walking, talking and telling are multiple, and multi-layered. The grey of Thirdspace while adequate, is perhaps too thin and too vague to accommodate the real and imagined traipsings back and forth that happened in our Gruffalo wood – there were so many doors we could enter and exit from, and they never returned us to where we started. While to call it a *Fourthspace* is a little derivative, it encourages us to ponder the many worlds, doors and dens that hover somewhere at the nexus of the real and the imagined.

At this point, you may be wondering where the baby was? Well I'd like to say he was asleep, but on so many of these walks the opposite was true, and all I can hope was that he was honing his own storytelling skills.

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