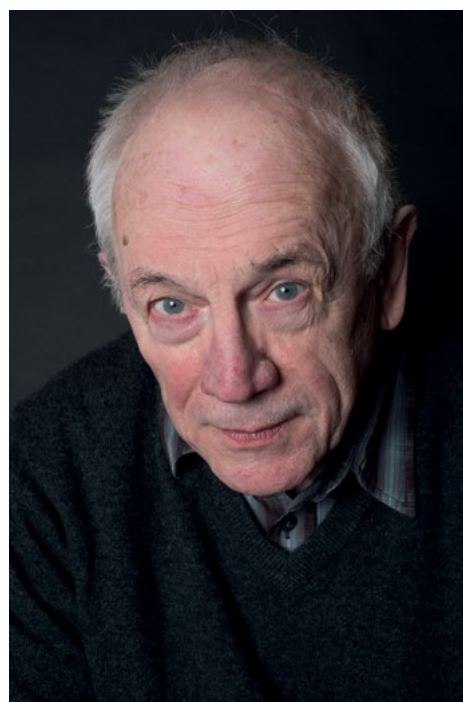
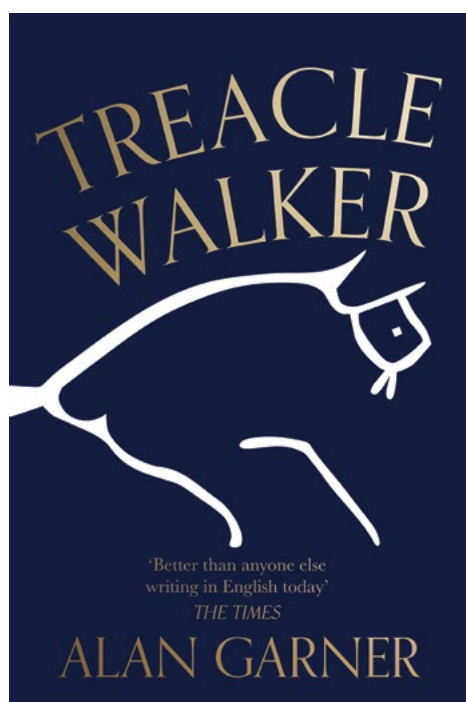




Reading guide



Treacle Walker Alan Garner

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Synopsis

Joe Coppock squints at the world with his lazy eye. He reads his comics, collects birds' eggs and treasures his marbles, particularly his prized dobbers. When Treacle Walker appears off the moor one day - a wanderer, a healer - an unlikely friendship is forged and the young boy is introduced to a world he could never have imagined.

In this playful, moving and evocative fable, set once again in his beloved Cheshire, the masterly Alan Garner delivers both a stunning fusion of myth and folklore and a profound exploration of the fluidity of time.

It is the latest fiction from a remarkable and enduring talent which brilliantly illuminates an introspective young mind trying to make sense of the world around him.

About the author

Alan Garner was born in Cheshire in 1934 and grew up in Alderley Edge. In 2001, he was awarded an OBE for his services to literature.

The achievements of Garner's long and distinguished career have been recognised with numerous awards and honours. In 1968, he won the Guardian Award and the Carnegie Medal for *The Owl Service* (1967) - the first author to win both awards for the same book. He garnered the Phoenix Award in 1996 for *The Stone Book Quartet* (1976-1978), and his *Elidor* was a 1965 runner-up for the Carnegie medal.

Garner was also awarded the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award in 1970 for *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, First Prize at the Chicago International Film Festival for his film *Images*, which he wrote and presented, and the Karl Edward Wagner Award (for lifetime achievement) at the 2003 British Fantasy Awards.

Alan Garner's novel *Treacle Walker* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize 2022.

What the Booker judges said

In a nutshell

It's a mysterious, beautifully written and affecting glimpse into the deep work of being human. Alan Garner's stories always draw you relentlessly into their echoing metaphysical and emotional space: this one made some of us cry.

On the book

Joe Coppock, a boy with poor vision, lives alone. His inner world is built out of a comic book and the sound of the noon train in the valley below his cottage. Then one day a rag-and-bone man called Treacle Walker knocks at his door. In the medieval period, the word 'treacle' meant 'medicine', and it soon becomes clear that the medicine man's purpose is to cure Joe's sight in more than one sense. Seeing the world is not the same as seeing what the world is.

Quantum physics and the imagination entangle themselves around Joe's subsequent adventures and learning experiences. Tautly-written, but with a visionary poetry in every line, *Treacle Walker* is the story of an apprenticeship, a struggle during which Joe must gain a new kind of sight. But Treacle Walker has his own problems and together they take us on a heartbreaking tour of Garner's concerns: age, repetition, change, the perception of time, the entanglement of human history and personal history.

On the characters

Joe seems so vulnerable and inturned, perhaps even a little sulky. At the same time, he possesses an innate energy and determination that immediately captures our hearts. He has, perhaps, exactly the characteristics the Treacle Walker set out with when he began his own strange, long, tiring life. For the apprentice to become the master, these qualities only need bringing out, and that process is one of the central stories of the book.

What the critics said

The Guardian:

'Garner's work has always been hard to classify, here more than ever: this tiny fable, hewn from elements of children's story, myth, alchemical texts, old rhymes and cartoons, has an implacable directness, as though still channelling the childlike viewpoint of his memoir.'

The riotous energy of seemingly throwaway comics is shown to be in communion with the power of myth and both express truths found in the most cutting-edge science. This is a book about quantum physics as well as ancient lore.'

Literaryreview.co.uk:

'In *Treacle Walker*, Garner, now 87, continues to give expression to a lifelong obsession with myth and its curative effects. Here, his vision is slimmed down to a sparse yet masterful 150 pages: this is a mesmerising folktale where every word counts.'

The Telegraph:

'It's a glimpse of a world suffused with magic, of which our own day-to-day experience seems to be a flickering instantiation. Garner knots together a whole range of mythological and fairy-story motifs, and tropes from children's stories - double-vision, looking-glass worlds, wise fools, monsters that can't cross a threshold unless invited in, obscurely understood magical objects - to create a small universe absolutely charged with meaning.'

The Times:

'Treacle Walker and Thin Amren seem to have wandered out of a medieval morality tale, with their riddling speeches and courtly manners. If you're up for a bit of wordplay, Treacle's your guy.'

Questions and discussion points

Treacle Walker's prose is littered with wordplay. Garner uses idioms, slang, riddles and nonsensical speech liberally: 'I have been through Hickety, Pickety, France and High Spain, by crinkum, crankims, crooks and straights.' (p. 60) **What's the impact of this within the novel and what sense does it evoke for you as the reader?**

Many of Garner's other works are aimed at children, though the author has said of his books, 'Who reads it is beyond my control'. **Could *Treacle Walker* be considered a children's book?**

The character of Treacle Walker is a rag-and-bone man, which Garner loosely based on a real-life tramp who claimed to heal 'all things but jealousy'. **To what extent is Garner drawing on the real world and where does he begin to exercise creative license with *Treacle Walker*?**

One of few other characters in the book is Thin Amren, a naked figure in a leather hood who Joe meets in the bog. 'I must have me bog and me trees, else I'll be drying out, and that won't do. The sweet smiling of a step will hold you safe. But we can sit here on the bank till you're fit to go; and you can tell me why you were clanjandering in me bog at all.' (p.48). Thin Amren is reminiscent of a 'bog body'. **Why do you think has Garner used this iconography within the story? What is the character's purpose and relationship with Joe?**

At one point in the book, Treacle Walker is described as a 'psychopomp' - a word meaning 'a spirit guide who escorts souls to the afterlife'. At another point, Joe asks 'Am I dead?'. **Do you think Joe could indeed be dead?**

The original meaning of the word 'treacle' was 'an antidote for venom or poison', or a form of medicine. **Rather than just a rag-and-bone man, could Treacle Walker be seen as a sort of healer or shaman?**

Joe's parents are not seen or mentioned in the book? **Do they exist, where might they be, and what does their absence tell us about Joe?**

What is the significance of Joe's eyesight, or vision?

Garner has imbued *Treacle Walker* with folklore and mythology, from the mark on the donkey stone (which closely resembles the White Horse of Uffington) to Joe's home, which he calls 'this Middle-Yard' (reminiscence of Middle-Earth in Norse myths). **Where do you see Garner drawing on other external or literary influences?**

Throughout the text, Garner has fused the unfamiliar with the familiar and seems to take joy in peppering elements of 'yesteryear' within the book, for example, marbles, comics and the British landscape, which adds a playful element to the story. **Discuss to what extent you think this is autobiographical.**

Treacle Walker has been described as a fable. **Do you agree with this and, if so, what do you think the author is attempting to convey to the reader?**

In the *Guardian*, Alex Preston wrote that 'this is a book about quantum physics as well as ancient lore'. **What do you think he means by that?** (Quantum physics is the study of matter and energy at the most fundamental level, and aims to uncover the properties and behaviour of the building blocks of nature.)

While being a small book, *Treacle Walker* is also light on words. Garner has previously said 'language is the medium of my expression but I must remove the words as far as possible, so that they don't obscure the purity of what I'm looking at.' In an interview with the *Sunday Times*, he said 'The ways of storytelling are getting shorter'. What do you think he is looking at, and is Garner successful in his 'less-is-more' approach to storytelling?

Treacle Walker's epigraph is a quote from Carlo Rovelli's *The Order of Time*, 2017: 'Il tempo è ignoranza/Time is ignorance.' **Discuss the significance of this idea coupled with Garner's exploration of the relevance and boundaries of time within the text.**

Philip Pullman has called Alan Garner 'the most important British writer of fantasy since Tolkien'. **Do you agree with this?**

What the author said

'The process that led to *Treacle Walker* lasted from 22 July 2012 to 25 July 2020. It began with an anecdote a friend told me, which I instantly "knew" would produce a novel, though what kind of a novel it would be I had no idea.

'*Treacle Walker*, real name Walter Helliwell, was a tramp who claimed to heal "all things but jealousy". He was born at the beginning of the twentieth century, near Huddersfield. Not much else is known about him.'

Read more of Alan Garner's interview on the Booker Prize website.



Resources and further reading

Alan Garner interview in the *Guardian*:
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/oct/25/alan-garner-brilliant-idea-novel-treacle-walker>

Interview in the *Telegraph*:
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/alan-garner-interview-never-knew-just-who-alan-turing-nobody>

The unofficial Alan Garner website:
<http://alanger.atSPACE.org/>

A blog on the connections between *Treacle Walker* and British folklore:
<https://britishfairies.wordpress.com/tag/alan-garner/>

A guide to the local dialect in Cheshire:
<https://ia800907.us.archive.org/28/items/glossaryofwordsu00leigrich/glossaryofwordsu00leigrich.pdf>

A history of Knock-Out comics:
<http://lewstringer.blogspot.com/2012/12/knockout-no1-1939-and-1971.html>

If you enjoyed this book, why not try...

Alan Garner, *The Owl Service*

Alan Garner, *Thursbitch*

Alan Garner, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*

C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

M. John Harrison, *The Sunken Land Begins to Rise Again*