

*Starve Acre***Andrew Michael Hurley**

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Andrew Michael Hurley's third novel, *Starve Acre*, was released on the highly appropriate date of 31st October, 2019. Hurley is the author of two prior novels – the critically acclaimed *The Loney* (2014) and *Devil's Day* (2017) – both of which fall loosely within the 'folk horror' subgenre. Fans of Hurley's first two novels, and of folk horror in general, will be happy to hear that *Starve Acre* is positioned still more firmly within the folk horror tradition; it is a brilliant interweaving of psychological realism, folklore, and the haunting presence of the supernatural. I would put it in the company of some of M. R. James's fiction, Daphne du Maurier's *Don't Look Now* (and Nicolas Roeg's 1973 film), Piers Haggard's *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), and Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) (as well as Roman Polanski's 1968 adaptation).

As the novel opens, Richard and Juliette Willoughby are struggling with the recent death of their five-year-old son, Ewan. The Willoughbys live at Starve Acre in the village of Stythewaite, having moved out of Leeds to take over Richard's family home after his mother died. Juliette, in particular, felt that living in the small village would be better, healthier, for the children they would have. Once Ewan starts school, however, he changes, and soon the

Willoughbys are being silently banished from any sense of community they may have started to develop. Indeed, the locals become positively hostile.

Ewan's change seems connected not only to his starting primary school but also to the field across the house from Starve Acre, a blasted place where things won't grow. The more time Ewan spends in the field, the more erratic he becomes, and before his first year at school is over, his parents have to pull him out for an act of brutal violence. Soon, he is dead.

The principal plot of *Starve Acre* takes up the diverging stories of Juliette and Richard as they try to survive the death of their son. Juliette reaches out (via a friend) to the Beacons, a group of occultists who seem to specialize in helping people with grief. There is a gathering at the Willoughbys' house with the Beacons that offers Juliette a transformative experience. Richard remains skeptical. This scene in particular, with its occult ritual that draws together living and dead, and with its focus on the mother, evokes recent folk horror films *A Dark Song* (Liam Gavin, 2016) and *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018). Hurley is tantalizingly ambiguous about what happens, though. Richard, who was there, does not know, and he is baffled when Juliette and their friend Gordon tell him that they can't explain what they saw. Richard saw nothing. But Juliette is profoundly changed in the wake of the ritual.

Richard's response to grief is to dig: he digs in the field opposite their house and he digs through the boxes of books his father left behind in his study. And what Richard finds is an interwoven history and folklore of Starve Acre, Stythewaite, and the massive Stythewaite Oak that used to stand in the field opposite Starve Acre. It is in Richard's story that the principal folk horror strands emerge in the novel. Richard finds the long-buried Stythewaite Oak, as well as the skeleton of a hare – and these objects start to exert a magical influence on his life. At the same time, he unearths the history of what the tree was used for – the hangings of village sons.

In this part of the novel, Richard's digging and discovery of the Styethewaite Oak, *Starve Acre* intriguingly evokes the trees of M. R. James' fiction (especially 'The Ash Tree' and 'The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral'), as well as the demonic influence of the buried object found in the fields of *The Blood on Satan's Claw*, and the importance of the hare in *The Wicker Man*, a hare that is, in that film, conflated for a while with the missing child, Rowan Morrison. By the end of the novel, Juliette's and Richard's stories converge in a shocking scene that evokes *Rosemary's Baby* as well as Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015). All of these connections, I must say, offer themselves to much more exploration.

Like his earlier *Devil's Day* in particular, Hurley adeptly braids together in *Starve Acre* different temporalities – the life of the Willoughbys both while Ewan was alive and after his death, as well as the long-buried history of Stythewaite and its famous oak tree. Richard's and Juliette's lives move inexorably forward while Richard digs into the past – and what he exhumes exerts ever more power over the present.

Hurley is also simply brilliant at walking that line between the rational and the supernatural. *Starve Acre* could be about demonic possession (of both humans and animals) and the resurrection of what is dead. But it could also be about a scared and perhaps overly-controlling mother and two utterly grief – and guilt-stricken – parents, and what their minds conjure from their dark and powerful emotions. I would say that, in his ability to render the liminal space between psychological and supernatural, Hurley most closely resembles Shirley Jackson, especially *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). The supernatural typically escapes our ability to comprehend it, but then so do human emotions. As Hurley writes in *Starve Acre*, 'There was nothing more remote than another person's mind'.

Starve Acre also exemplifies Hurley's wonderful way of introducing folklore into his novels. The field across from *Starve Acre* was not only home to a massive oak tree but also to the ambiguous figure of Jack Grey, who was, as Hurley writes, 'really just another Green Man or Robin Goodfellow or Hag o' the Hay'. Or is Jack Grey something more sinister than these 'friendly' but 'not entirely trustworthy' figures? In Hurley's earlier novel, *Devil's Day*, the mythology of the devil that stalks the farming community of the Endlands – and which they try to control through ritual – represents how people create folk tales to explain and contain things over which they actually have little control. As Hurley himself has said of *Devil's Day*, 'Life in the community is always precarious and unbalanced and ritual is a means of addressing that feeling'.ⁱ Rituals also emerge in *Starve Acre* precisely as a way of managing the precarity of life and the terrors of death.

Andrew Michael Hurley is writing the very best folk horror fiction out there. In that, he has no rival. Indeed, he's writing some of the best fiction, period. His novels cannot be easily categorized. They are always luminous representations of human nature, in all its frailty, spliced together with the disconcerting power of the natural world and the myths and rituals by which we attempt to reconcile ourselves to that power. In the interstices of these things – human emotion, nature, ritual – Hurley offers glimpses of what we could call the supernatural.

An earlier version of this review, based on an advance copy, was published on *Horror Homeroom* on 16th August, 2019, <http://www.horrorhomeroom.com/?s=starve+acre>.

ⁱ Personal communication with Andrew Michael Hurley, 16 August, 2019.