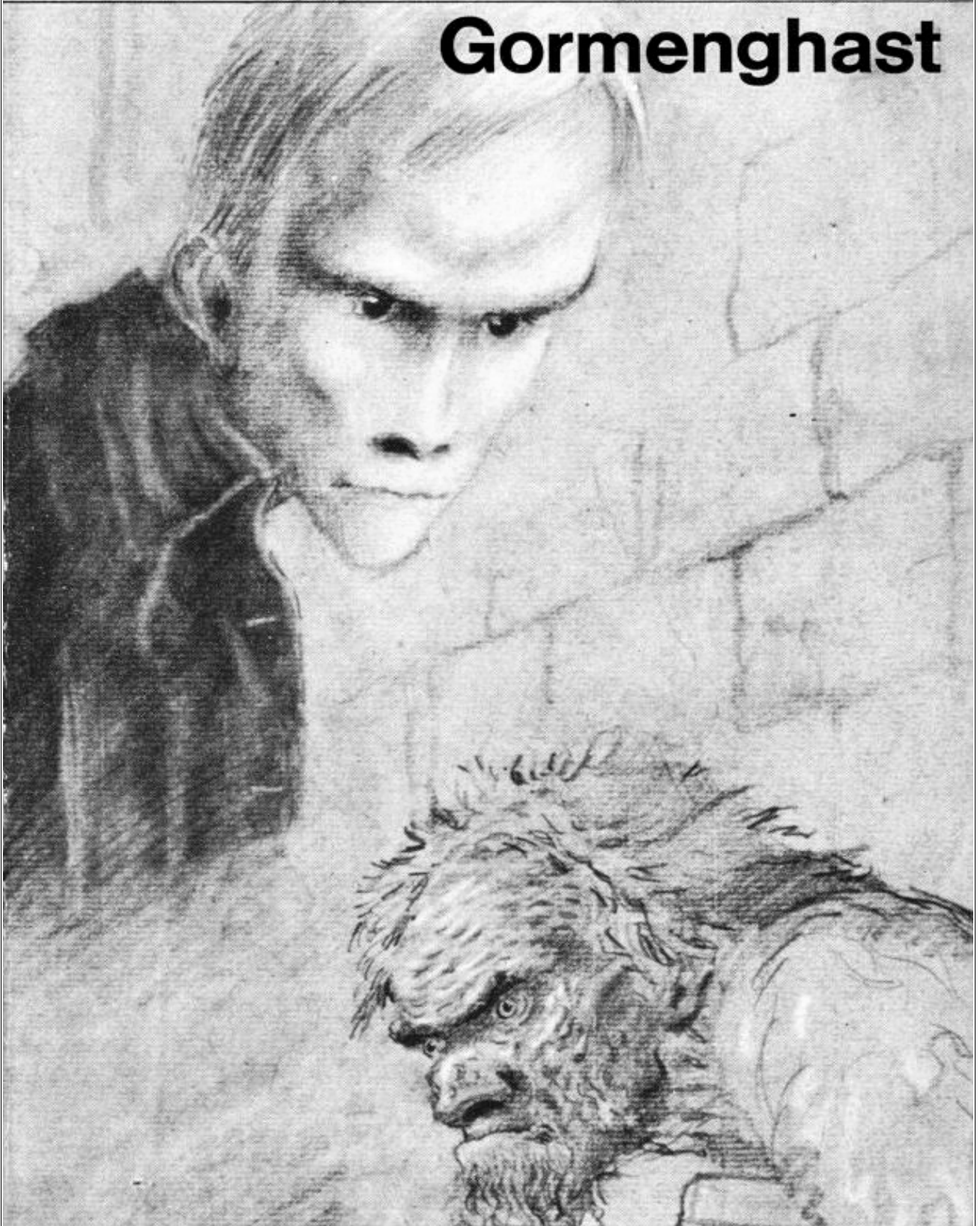




Penguin Modern Classics

Mervyn Peake Gormenghast



A fanzine for the October 2011 mailing of ANZAPA (Australian and New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association) and a few others
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Bruce Gillespie

Mervyn Peake: Mind out of time

I

For the last few weeks I have been living inside a dream. The dream springs from the mind of Mervyn Peake, as found in the vast territory described in the books called the 'Gormenghast trilogy' or the 'Titus books'. They are *Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast*, and *Titus Alone*. After re-reading the first two of these books in recent weeks, I have found myself waking in the early hours almost unable to remember where I am: the world of Gormenghast castle and that of my own.

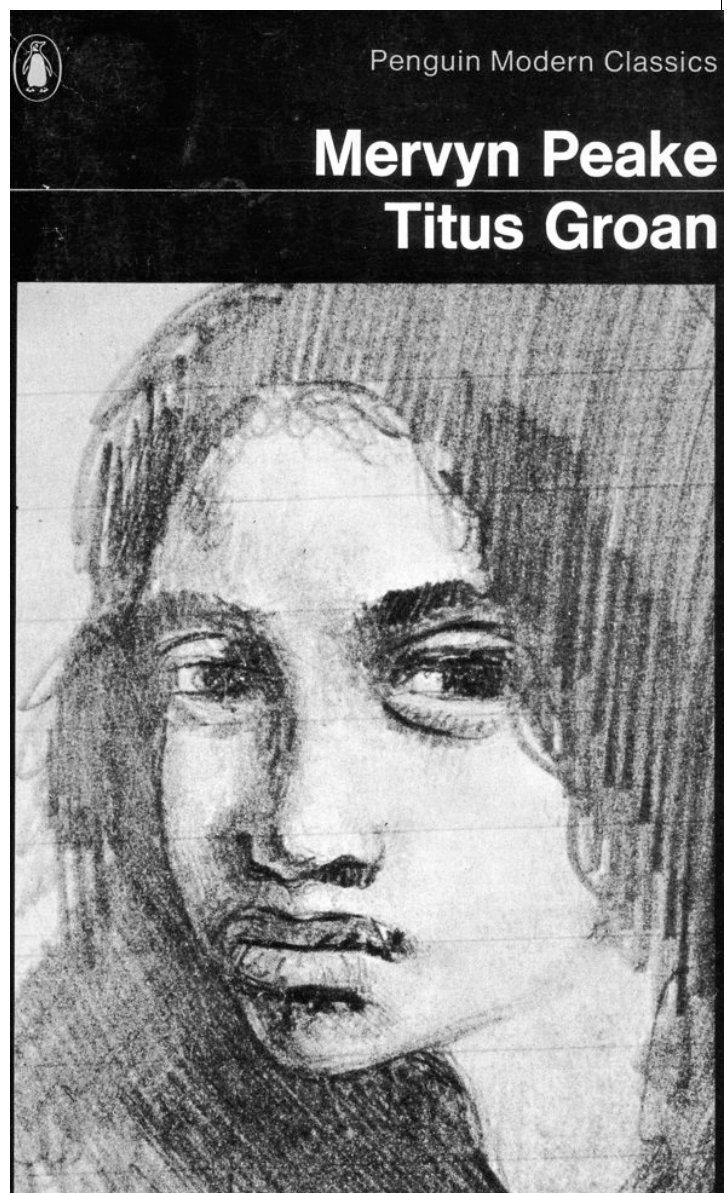
Why have I become mildly obsessed with the Gormenghast books, even to the extent of also reading two biographies of Mervyn Peake?

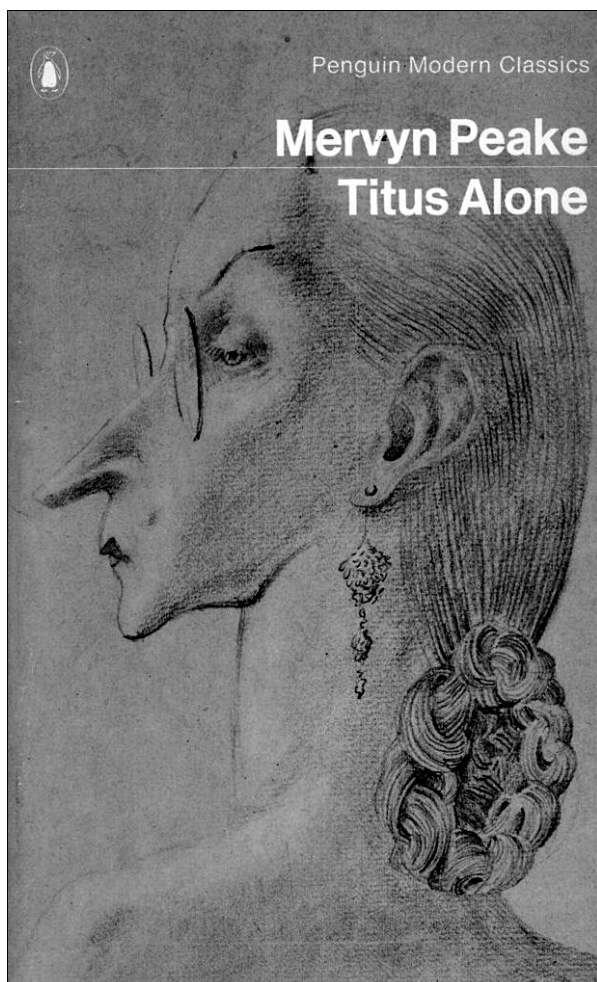
First, the long answer. The long answer is that the three novels always seems to have been a part of my consciousness, although I hadn't read them. I bought the Penguin edition when it appeared in 1968, found

The covers of the first two volumes in the Penguin Modern Classics edition:

(Left:) *Titus Groan*, first published 1946; Penguin edition 1968. Cover: Mervyn Peake's sketch of Fuchsia.

(Front cover:) *Gormenghast*, first published 1950; Penguin edition 1969. Cover: Mervyn Peake's sketches of Steerpik (above) and Barquentine (below).

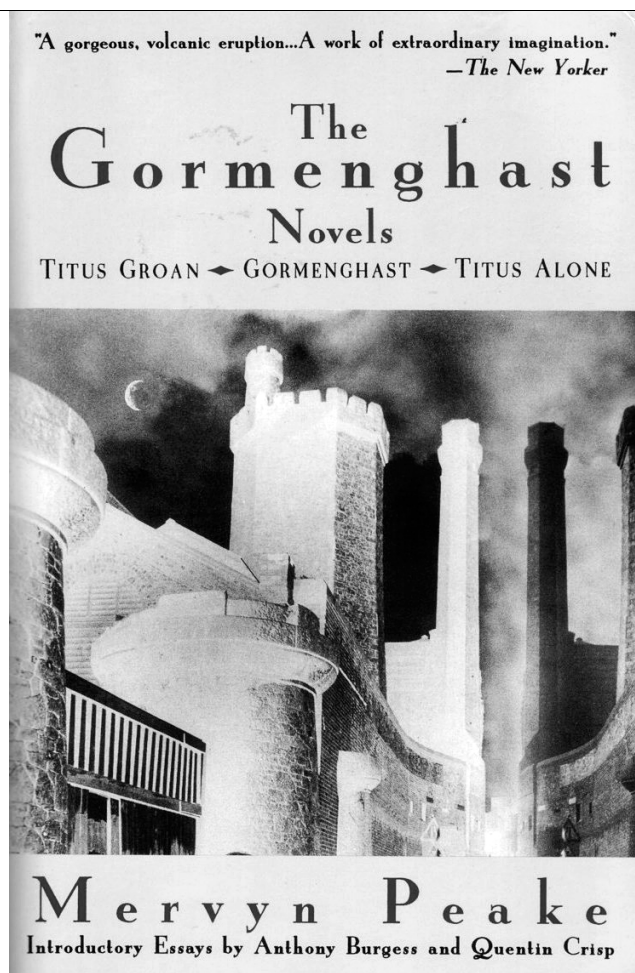




Titus Alone: first edition 1959; Penguin Modern Classics edition 1970. Cover: Mervyn Peake's sketch of Irma Prunesquallor, who does not appear in this novel.

the first pages of the first book difficult reading, and did not continue. However, I knew that the three books formed a classic that one day I would read. Why did I know that? Because I had seen them praised in a science fiction magazine, and not just any old SF magazine. Michael Moorcock, editor of *New Worlds* from 1965 onwards, is credited by Peter Winnington, in his biography of Peake, as being the person most responsible for bringing *Titus Groan* back into public view although it had been out of print since 1948. It was the young Michael Moorcock who met Peake in 1960, then championed Peake's work in the pages of *New Worlds* throughout the 1960s, and who persuaded Penguin to reissue the three novels in a Modern Classics edition in 1968. Langdon Jones, who was then assistant editor of *New Worlds*, put a huge amount of unpaid work into assembling a definitive edition of *Titus Alone*, the last novel, for the 1970 edition.

Second, the short answer. A few years ago Dick Jenssen gave me a copy of the most



The Gormenghast Novels, the Overlook Press/Tusk edition, 1995. Cover: photo collage by J. K. Potter

recent complete edition, the Overlook Press edition from New York. It contains not only the definitive versions of the three novels, *Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast*, and *Titus Alone*, but also introductions by Anthony Burgess and Quentin Crisp, plus 100 pages of essays about the life and work of Mervyn Peake, taken from the journals *The Mervyn Peake Review* and *Peake Studies*. We already owned a copy of the three-volume edition that most Australian readers know, the Penguin Modern Classics edition, but I had never read them. In 2008 I read the new edition, plus the two biographies, one by Malcolm Yorke, *My Eyes Mint Gold*, and one by G. Peter Winnington, *Vast Alchemies*.

Dick Jenssen's present of the new edition prompted me to start reading the 'Gormenghast trilogy', 40 years after I should have done so. However, I nearly put it back on the shelf. Although I was entranced by the early description of the castle itself, I found the sentences long, the characters overblown, and the narrative just a little vague. At the beginning of the first novel, called *Titus Groan*, Titus Groan has just been born, and



Photo: Maeve Gilmore and Mervyn Peake (1938)

he is still only two years old at the end of it. The main character is Steerpike, the boy from the kitchen who decides he is going to take power in Gormenghast. At the end of the first volume, he has already carried out some of his dirty deeds, but by no means succeeded in his aim of achieving total power. Only in the middle of the second volume, *Gormenghast*, do we discover the full extent of his dastardly plans, and how various people eventually defeat him. Titus Groan himself is only 18 by the end of that volume.

Should I recommend that you read these books? Not on the basis of what I have just told you. The fact that I have read two of the books twice shows that whatever is going on in these novels has little to do with the pleasures that one finds in conventional novels. A tale of breathtaking action this is not, although some scenes are highly dramatic. It is not a 'fantasy trilogy', although it is often called such. It contains almost no supernatural elements, such as magic, wizards, fairies, and elves. It does not fit the conventional pattern of fantasy trilogies that are modelled on *The Lord of the Rings*. It aims to be a realistic tale about a territory set on an alternative earth. Its tone is close to that of horror or dark fantasy. So how realistic is this world that has been built? If it is not

realistic, is the trilogy really a horror fantasy?

II

The main character of the first two books is Gormenghast the castle, rather than any of the humans who live there. The first paragraph deals with the castle itself. Peake describes:

the shadows of time-eaten buttresses, of broken and lofty turrets, and, most enormous of all, the shadow of the Tower of Flints. The tower, patched unevenly with black ivy, arose like a mutilated finger from among the fists of knuckled masonry and pointed blasphemously at heaven. ... At one point within the Outer Wall, a few feet from the earth, the great stones of which the wall itself was constructed, jutted forward in the form of a massive shelf stretching from east to west for about two hundred to three hundred feet.

The first day of the book takes place on the Day of Bright Carvings, when the tribe who live outside the castle present their year's carvings to be part of a ceremony presided over by the Earl of Groan, the ruler of the castle. The Earl, also called Lord Sepulchrave, and his wife, Gertrude, Countess of Groan, choose the finest object of the year, which is then stored in the Hall of Bright Carvings within the castle. After the ceremony, we explore the hall itself. The only illumination is from 'seven great candelabra', all of which are kept burning by Mr Rottcodd, the Guardian of the Bright Carvings. Here he lives alone, never seeing anybody from one end of the year to the other.

Who are the Bright Carvers? Who is Rottcodd? Is he a major character? If not, why is he introduced before we meet anybody else? What are we to make of Mr Flay, the Earl's personal servant, who is the first person to visit Rottcodd in a year?

Mr Flay appeared to clutter up the doorway as he stood revealed, his arms folded ... It did not look as though such a bony face as his could give normal utterance, but rather that instead of sounds, something more brittle, more ancient, something dryer would emerge, something perhaps more in the nature of a splinter or a fragment of stone. Nevertheless, the harsh lips parted. 'It's me,' he said, and

took a step forward into the room, his knee joints cracking as he did so. His passage across a room — in fact his passage through life — was accompanied by these cracking sounds, one per step, which might be likened to the breaking of dry twigs.

Mr Flay tells Rottcodd that the Earl and the Countess of Groan have a new child and heir, Titus. After he has delivered his news, Flay descends to the Great Kitchen of the castle, presided over by the monstrous Abiatha Swelter, the chef of Gormenghast, and his drunken apprentices, the boys who form his kitchen staff. For reasons never explained, Swelter and Flay hate each other, and both are in turn hated by a member of the kitchen staff, a 'high-shouldered boy' who 'pulled out a small pipe of knotted wormwood and filled it deliberately. His mouth was quite expressionless, curving neither up nor down, but his eyes were dark and hot with a mature hatred'. This is our first introduction to Steerpike, the character who dominates the first two volumes of the trilogy.

What kind of place are we in? We are in a vast building of endless corridors and empty rooms. We are in an edifice, above all, of rich language, the kind of prose that had probably not featured in English fiction since the heyday of Charles Dickens. All the characters we meet in the first few pages are grotesques, more like expressions of the ancient stonework of the castle than characters in any modern sense. They all have Dickensian names, expressing properties rather than family characteristics: people such as Doctor Prunesquallor and his sister Irma; Mrs Slagg, who is Titus's nanny; the king's sisters Cora and Clarice; Fuchsia, the daughter of the family and Titus's brother; and the extraordinary teachers of the school, including Bellgrove, Dedyawn the headmaster, and the masters Perch-Prism, Flannelcat, Shred, Shrivell, Spiregrain, Splint, Throd, Cutflower, Crust, and Mulefire. What do we make of a narrative written about a castle of medieval technology and procedures, its inhabitants who would have seemed old-fashioned in the 1850s, but which was in fact written in pencil by a soldier as he was shunted around from one army camp to another during the first three years of the Second World War?

III

Initially I was repelled by the first few chapters on *Titus Groan*. I gave up the first time I tried reading it, and many others will as well. But I did return to it, discovering a narrative that built in irresistible force, rolling forward in a series of dramatic waves of ever-growing intensity. Peake takes many pages to reveal the pleasures and strengths of his narrative.

Flay rescues Steerpike from the kitchen. As they wander through the endless corridors of the castle, Flay shows the boy the cats' room, the room where live the hundreds of white cats that are the main companions of Gertrude, the Countess of Groan. He also shows Steerpike a spyhole, through which he sees a man being examined by his doctor. Steerpike realises that he is looking at the seventy-sixth Earl of Groan and 'the owner of, as Steerpike put it to himself, the whole caboodle, bricks, guns and glory'. Seen through this spyhole we also meet for the first time Doctor Prunesquallor, the earl's physician. Since Prunesquallor, after another 800 pages or so, eventually becomes one of the heroes of the drama, it is worth relating his first appearance in the book:

The laugh of Doctor Prunesquallor was part of his conversation and quite alarming when heard for the first time. It appeared to be out of control as though it were a part of his voice, a top-storey of his vocal range that only came into its own when the doctor laughed. There was something about it of wind whistling through high rafters and there was a good deal of horse's whinny, with a touch of the curlew ... Between the laughs he would speak very rapidly, which made the sudden stillness of his beautifully shaven jaws at the time of laughter all the more extraordinary.

Is Peake mocking his character? Trying to present some essential part of his character? Or, as with Dickens, whose descriptions this closely resembles, trying for humour? I'm never sure, because Peake's extended humorous sequences throughout the trilogy are heavy-handed and not convincing, compared with the dramatic and lyrical sequences. However, the tone is sardonic and ambiguous rather than jolly. Peake never tries to reassure his readers, as Dickens often did. Peake knows what he is doing.

No character in the novel inspires more

contradictory emotions in the reader than Gertrude, the Countess of Groan, the formidable lady in command of Gormenghast. When we first meet her she is a vast shape sitting up in bed, visited by few people, and surrounded by birds, or when she moves through the castle, by an army of white cats. She has little time for other people, and we wonder from the start how she and Lord Sepulchrave ever shared a room long enough to generate the new heir to the throne, Titus Groan. When Nannie Slagg brings little Titus to see his mother:

‘Slagg,’ said the Countess, ‘go away! I would like to see the boy when he is six. Find a wet nurse from the Outer Dwellings. Make him green dresses from the velvet curtains. Take this gold ring of mine. Fix a chain to it. Let him wear it around his wry little neck. Call him Titus. Go away and leave the door six inches open.’

The countess then pulls a whistle from around her neck, and blew on it. From throughout the castle, ‘an undulation of whiteness’, all her white cats, pour through the door: ‘there was no shadow in all the room that was not blanched with cats’.

How does this world hang together, if its two rulers rarely see each other, and each is, in different ways, seemingly mad? The answer? Ritual and tradition. Mervyn Peake presents an isolated world in which all the tiniest details of everyday life are guided by ancient ritual, much of it meaningless, all of which is decided by voluminous tomes interpreted by Sourdust, and later his son, Barquentine. Lord Sepulchrave, in particular, spends most of his days taking part in the rituals, many hundreds of years old. By contrast, Steerpike is determined to cut through all obstacles to taking over the rituals so that he can gain power over the castle. By contrast, from a very young age, Titus is determined to escape ritual and tradition, and escape his destiny. The battle between these two impulses propels the action of the first two novels, *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast*.

Peake’s attitude to Steerpike is ambiguous. On the one hand the author shows his main character as a complete sociopath, unable to feel sympathy for any other human being. His only loyalty is to himself. However, the narrative springs to life when Steerpike leaps onto stage. Steerpike is the only character in the novel, perhaps the only person

for hundreds of years, who appreciates the true enormity of Gormenghast itself. When Mr Flay, ever loyal to Gormenghast, senses early in the novel that Steerpike will become a source of rebellion, he locks him in a small room. In an almost superhuman way, Steerpike crawls out of the small high window and climbs up onto the roof of the castle:

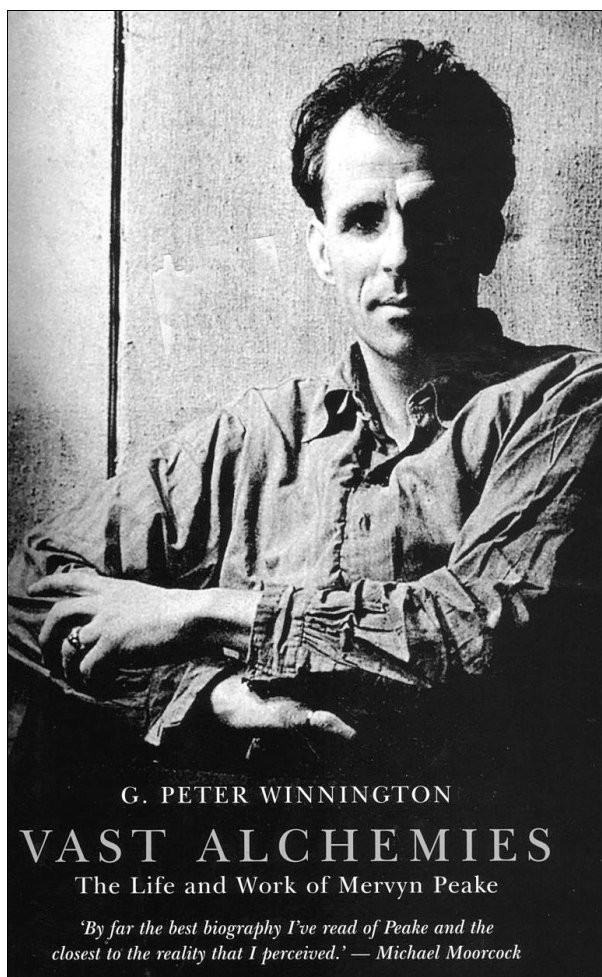
He could see how the ridge on which he sat led in a wide curve to where in the west it was broken by the first of four towers. Beyond them the sweep of roof continued to complete a half circle far to his right. This was ended by a high lateral wall. Stone steps led from the ridge to the top of the wall, from which might be approached, along a cat-walk, an area the size of a field, surrounding which, though at a lower level, were the heavy, rotting structures of adjacent roofs and towers, and between these could be seen other roofs far away, and other towers. ... He could ... from where he was guess at the stone sky-field itself, lying as it did a league away and well above his eye level, but as the main massing of Gormenghast arose to the west, he began to crawl in that direction along the sweep of the ridge.

One of Peake’s great conceptual inventions in these novels is the ‘sky-field’, a vast area of roof that covers the whole castle, and which has not been glimpsed by human eyes for hundreds of years. Steerpike realises just what is at stake here: Gormenghast is not just a castle, but it is a country, an island of stone, most of it empty, but seemingly set to be filled by Steerpike’s infinite ego.

Steerpike is the only character who has real perspective, yet his sense of perspective is wasted. He knows the beauty of what he is seeing, but does not feel it. The emotional impulse comes from the author, not any of the characters. Steerpike sees one thing, but the author feels quite something other:

The roofscape was neither more nor less than a conglomeration of stone structures spreading to right and left and away from him. It was a mist of masonry. As he peered, taking each structure individually, he found that he was a spectator of a stationary gathering of stone personalities.

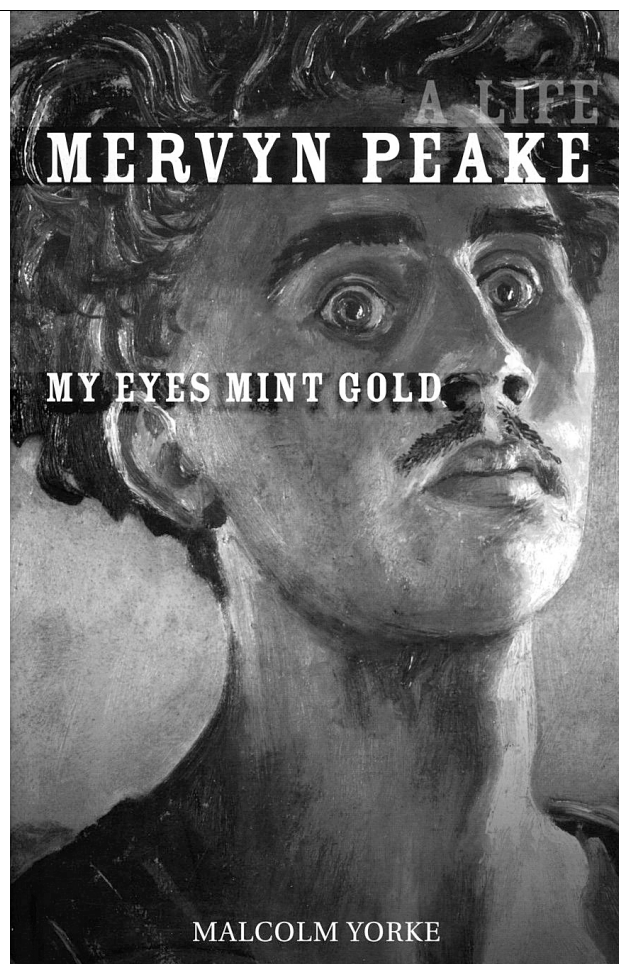
Steerpike also sees far in the distance a



G. Peter Winnington: *Vast Alchemies: The Life and Work of Mervyn Peake* (London & Chester Springs: Peter Owen; 2000; 263 pp.). Cover photo: Derek Sayer.

huge dead tree against growing up from the ground and covering an entire section of the wall. Two figures are walking along the horizontal stem that stretches out from the wall. These two women, dressed in purple, are the king's sisters, Cora and Clara, and in time they will become central characters in the story.

Titus Groan, the character you would think the author would most identifies with, never quite comes to life in the same way. This is despite the fact that little baby Titus, then the boy Titus, proves to be more dangerous to tradition-laden Gormenghast than the murderous Steerpike. During the elaborate ceremony of Titus's christening, the one-year-old baby takes the two symbols, the stone and the ivy branch, symbols of his status, and hurls them into the lake. During his tenth birthday, he rejects the whole ceremony and escapes from the castle, and at the end of the second volume he leaves Gormenghast forever, at last set free. Yet we often see the action through Titus's eyes,



Malcolm Yorke: *Mervyn Peake: My Eyes Mint Gold* (London: John Murray; 2000; 368 pp.). Cover: Self-portrait by Mervyn Peake.

sometimes very vividly, rather than empathising with him.

IV

You might well ask about the origins of this immense enterprise, which took over a decade to write? Peter Winnington, one of Peake's biographers, has been publishing magazines about Peake's work since 1975, but many mysteries remain. In neither his nor Malcolm Yorke's biography do we find out the origin of the central symbol, Gormenghast. Both biographers hazard a guess that it might have had its origins in Mervyn Peake's Chinese childhood. 2011 is the centenary of Mervyn Peake's birth. He was born on 9 July 1911, in Kuling, in the province of Jiangxi, China, where his parents were Anglican missionaries. Peake lived in China until he was 12. China was still ruled from a vast palace where Pu Yi, the boy king, was held isolated while other people controlled the crumbling dynasty. In the novel, Titus Groan becomes boy king before he is one year

old, after the mysterious disappearance of his father.

Another inspiration might be the years 1933 and 1934 that Peake first lived on Sark, in the Channel Islands. Not only is it an island surrounded by 100-metre-high cliffs, therefore resembling a castle surrounded by a moat, but it is ruled by a hereditary *seigneur* or lord, who retains complete rule over the island. No cars are allowed on Sark, and until recently all transport was by horse and cart.

From an early age Mervyn Peake saw himself as an artist first, and a writer second. He began to draw profusely before he went to school. At boarding school his talents for drawing and writing were recognised by his art teacher and English teacher, and he was encouraged to send both stories and drawings to English children's magazines. When he returned to England, he did not finish secondary school, but instead went to art college, and began to sell both illustrations and paintings. He might have expected to have a brilliant and lucrative career, but many of his projects came to nothing.

The central fact about Mervyn Peake is that he was himself a kind of Titus Groan, out of time and out of place, always placing freedom of expression before any other value. Publisher's editors and reviewers recognised that his book illustrations were brilliant, but his images were often judged too weird or grotesque for children's books, and not appropriate for nice English adult readers. During his exhibitions, Peake did sell quite a few paintings. Although his freelance artist's life was mainly poverty stricken, he had a few periods of success.

If you look at the accompanying drawings, you catch a glimpse of how brilliant Peake could be. His style connects straight back to the great black-and-white visual artists of the nineteenth century, especially Doré, Tenniel, and William Blake. His own favourite books were the classic nineteenth-century adventure books, especially Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, which he knew by heart. His most famous works of illustration were those he provided for an edition of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, and those for an edition of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. When you look at these illustrations, especially those for the latter, you think you have stepped into the foreboding world of Gormenghast. Peake's best work centres on

exaggerated human figures, with landscapes enclosing the figures and glowering at them. The deeply enclosed and stifling world of the corridors of Gormenghast castle can be found in any number of Peake illustrations long before he found the ideal symbol for his world of imagination.

It is odd, though, that the biographies do not mention a visual influence that leaps out at me from almost every paragraph of the dramatic sequences of the Gormenghast books, that is, the black-and-white cinema of the 1930s, especially German expressionism and the Walt Disney animated features. Of course, if I went back to Peake's biographers and they told me that Peake did not go to the movies during the 1930s, my theory would be knocked over. However, I take as my evidence a remarkable action sequence in *Gormenghast*; that is, the battle between the chef Swelter and the king's servant Flay in the corridors of the castle.

In the chapter called 'Blood at midnight', Swelter stalks Flay, then Flay stalks Swelter in a series of scenes that read like setups from an action movie. Every movement of both men is illuminated by individual claps of thunder and lightning strokes. Then Flay sees the glow of Swelter's lantern as he waits in the dark:

If Mr Flay stalked, Mr Swelter *insinuated*. He insinuated himself through space. His body encroached, sleuth-like, from air-volume to air-volume, filling and edging out of each in turn, the slow and vile belly preceding the horribly deliberate and potentially nimble progress of his fallen arches. Flay could not see Swelter's feet, only the silhouetted dome, but by the way it ascended he could tell that the chef was moving one step at a time, his right foot always preceding his left, which he brought to the side of its dace-like companion. He went up in slow, silent jerks ... Flay waited until he had rounded the curve of the stairs and was on the first landing before he followed, taking five stone steps at a time.

These snapshot-like scenes continue for some pages, building to a tense battle between two people who cannot quite see each other in the castle's dark corridors, but who are both determined to kill each other. The power of the sequence is heightened when both realise that the earl himself is wandering the corridors, and following both of them.

Because of events I haven't gone into, the earl has gone quite mad, and now thinks he has turned into an owl. The three meet in the Hall of Spiders, where the battle of swords lit by lightning and spider webs is one of the greatest pieces of horror writing in the English language. In cinema it reminds me most of the final battle between the dwarves and the Witch Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, the Walt Disney feature that came out in 1937. That was certainly the most disturbing cinema sequence that I saw when I was a child, apart from the scenes of the approaching tornado in *The Wizard of Oz*.

V

Not that Peake himself was a glowering, melancholic soul. Anything but. The biographies tell of an energetic, engaging person, very good-looking, who attracted many girlfriends during the early 1930s. He spent all his spare time drawing and painting. When at last he met Maeve Gilmore, a painter and sculptor, in 1935, his friends were astonished that he was willing to settle down with one woman. They married in 1936, and Maeve and their three children became the central plank of his existence.

Life was never easy for Mervyn Peake and his family, because he would never compromise his art, and many people among his intended public found his art very perplexing. He tried writing in the 1930s, hoping a successful book would provide a steady income. None of his writing provided him much income in his lifetime, although interest in the Gormenghast books was starting to build just before he died. During the Second World War he became England's least successful soldier. He was so incompetent at so many menial and/or dangerous army jobs that he was eventually shoved aside, on full pay, which is when he found the time to complete *Titus Groan*. He put in many applications to become an official war artist, but he was turned down. As the war was ending, an English magazine sent him in 1946 to Germany to survey the post-war landscape. In Belsen-Belsen, at the newly opened concentration camp, he discovered images of horror far beyond any he had ever dreamt of. Peter Winnington speculates that this experience colours many aspects of *Gormenghast*, the second novel, which is even darker and more bloodsoaked than *Titus Groan*.

Gormenghast, written in the three years after the war, was made possible because

Titus Groan was accepted by Eyre & Spottiswoode, after it had been carefully edited by Graham Greene, one of the partners of the firm. After *Titus Groan* was published in 1946, it received a favourable response from the British press, sold 2000 copies, but was not then reprinted. It became unavailable in Britain until 1968. The second volume appeared in 1950, and again was well reviewed, but also went out of print.

In 1957, Mervyn Peake first showed serious signs of a disease that was eventually diagnosed as Parkinson's disease. By the early 1960s could barely speak, and he retained few short-term memories. However, with much help from Maeve, he had finished *Titus Alone*, which appeared in 1959. Only his drawing facility remained with him until shortly before he died in 1968. Meanwhile, as I've already related, the Peake revival was on. Penguin Modern Classics in Britain reprinted the trilogy in 1968, and Ballantine Books issued the first American paperback edition. It was marketed in such a way as to lead readers to expect it to provide a companion trilogy to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, which it in no way resembles. This year, 2011, the hundredth anniversary of Peake's birth, the British Library staged an exhibition of his works, 'The Worlds of Mervyn Peake', from 5 July to 18 September. In Australia, neither the anniversary nor the exhibition was noted, except by Jane Sullivan in her weekly column for Fairfax newspapers.

For most of his life, Peake was a cheery soul, an enthusiastic sportsman and lover, and a delightful father, although I suspect often a wearying husband. What is the connection, then, between the characters in the Gormenghast trilogy and their creator? It is not easy to tell. The essential quality of Gormenghast's characters seems to be their exaggerated oddity and their sexlessness. Who were Gertrude's parents? Where did characters like Mr Flay come from? Where did Steerpike come from? They all seem to have sprung up from nothing. The teachers in Titus's school have not seen a woman in 40 years. Sterility rules in this castle. Most of its people have disappeared, leaving endless corridors of locked doors behind which can be found only dusty remains of centuries-old habitation. Only at the end of *Gormenghast*, the second novel, do we meet any of the other inhabitants of the castle, the servants who save the castle during the great flood, but we have no sense of who they are or where they

usually live. There seems to be no contact with the outside world; indeed, the first two books give no hint that there *is* an outside world apart from Mount Gormenghast and the dense forest that surrounds the castle.

Peake falls into that category of rare birds, the author who is also a great visual artist. His work resembles that of few other authors, except for that of Charles Dickens in the nineteenth century, but I see links between the intense imagery of his books and those of Australia's own Patrick White, who also would have liked to have been an artist. The secret of Gormenghast seems to be that it has been grown from its images, rather than any science-fiction-style world plan or even a desire to mirror the wartime Britain in which Peake lived. The Gormenghast books embody a great visual design in Peake's head, which probably accounts for the way they took over my dreams for several weeks. It is very easy to imagine yourself wandering the endless corridors of Gormenghast or travelling through the dense forest that surrounds it. The castle and the surrounding landscape

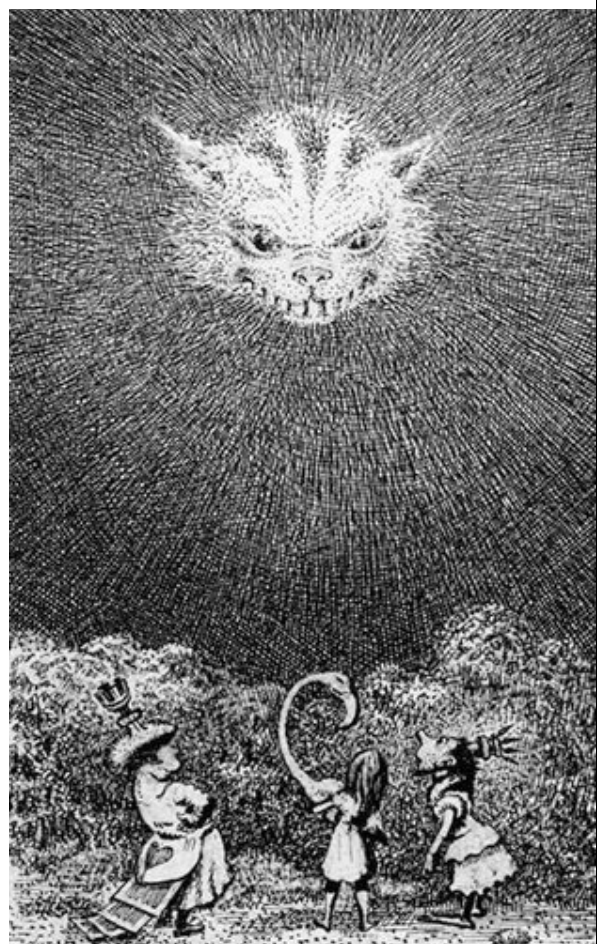
are fully alive, whereas the people are only outgrowths of that life.

VI

Should you seek out the Gormenghast books for your reading pleasure? Yes, if you love long, luscious sentences, language that never lets you down. Yes, if you want to investigate an author whose works, I suspect, have had a much stronger influence on British horror, fantasy, and science fiction than is usually acknowledged. Elements of his vision can be found in the works of many of the writers we value, such as Angela Carter, Brian Aldiss, Keith Roberts, Michael Moorcock himself, almost certainly J. G. Ballard, and probably more recent writers such as China Mieville.

But even now I'm not sure what kind of a creature *is* the Gormenghast trilogy. We could describe the two main Gormenghast books as realistic books set in an unrealistic world. They are not fantasy. They fit the mood and methods of horror or dark fantasy;

Two Mervyn Peake illustrations from the 1945 edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*: (left) The Walrus and the Carpenter; (right) the Cheshire Cat.



but they contain few fantastic elements. They are not science fiction, for they offer no explanation of how the members of the castle's population sustain themselves, or how its government works. How can a society that insists on the absolute rule of ritual and tradition operate without an oppressive police force? Yet we meet no police or soldiers. They are not novels that caricature contemporary British society, because we gain very little idea of a working society that powers life in the castle. We don't even gain much idea of what people do in this society when they are off stage. Perhaps Gormenghast castle provides an analogy for everything that Peake hated about British society in the 1930s and 1940s — but he describes this world so lovingly that it's obvious he also has nostalgia for the ancient and odd. The Gormenghast books provide a continuity with the great British fiction of the nineteenth century, but they are sufficiently startling that Michael Moorcock kept recommending his works to his *New Worlds* readers through the 1960s. They are unique books, creating and sustaining their own audience.

Epilogue

Titus Alone is so different from the others that I have not even discussed it, and yet Peake's fundamental power of language do not fail him. It tells of a territory that Titus Groan finds when he travels as far away as possible from Gormenghast, but it is a science-fictional world, more Peake's *Brave New World* than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. *Titus Alone* can only be talked about separately from the other two books. There is a very strange Titus novella called 'Boy in Darkness', and a few pages of Peake fragments, which Maeve Gilmore developed into a book called *Titus Awakes*, which has just been published for the first time.

— Bruce Gillespie, 3 October 2011



Three Mervyn Peake illustrations from the 1949 edition of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: (back cover) The albatross; (above) The ancient mariner; (below) The dead sailors.



