

# Tales of the Dead Narrating Highgate Cemetery between Nostalgia and Heterotopia

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Highgate Cemetery has become a literary (as well as a filmic) trope with a variety of semantic inscriptions. Since its first literary representations, for instance as a symbol of wealth and high social status in John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* (1907–1921) at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has grown to a multi-faceted place through the numerous references given to it in horror movies and mystery novels exploiting the decline of the cemetery, but also its criminal history.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it has become a setting for video games and cover-artworks of Gothic rock and Heavy metal-bands. Nonetheless, the most complex references to Highgate and its representations can be found in contemporary novels that concentrate on cemeteries, mostly with a retro-Victorian focus on the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The most popular of these novels Tracy Chevalier's *Falling Angels* (2001), Neil Gaiman's *Graveyard Book* (2008) and Audrey Niffenegger's *Her Fearful Symmetry* (2009) reached a broad audience. These texts as well as many other representations of Highgate have highlighted the cemetery as a kind of a Gothic «heterotope» with a different (social, political, ontological) order in opposition to the «normal» world outside, as the French philosopher Michel Foucault described the cemetery in his theory of «other spaces».<sup>2</sup> This interrelation of the cemetery and the city, of «special» and «normal» spaces, is linked to the categorical differentiation between life and death, which is mediated through the cemetery as a liminal place of both, the borderland of the living and the 170,000 dead in their 53,000 graves.<sup>3</sup> Literature as a medium of imagination – and therefore, of any transgression possible – stresses these borders, and may expand them beyond reality

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1 See Anna-Katharina Höpflinger's contribution to this book.

2 For English translations of the text see Foucault 1986, or Foucault 1998.

3 See Bulmer 2016, 8.

and realistic story-telling towards alternative narrated worlds in Horror, Fantasy, or the in-between genre of the Phantastic.

The decline of Highgate in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century fuelled the literary imagination and sharpened the image of the dark Victorian past of forbidden love and hidden pleasures, ghosts and vampires that inhabit the cultural imagination up to the present day. In this article – after a short review of literary traditions concerning graveyard poetry and the narration of cemeteries – I will provide close-readings of the three above mentioned novels, whilst also reflecting upon how literary adaptations of cemeteries have changed against the backdrop of post-modern writing, and social reading. Social reading has gained much popularity since the year 2000 and the global social networks of the internet. Social reading has become a striking set of inter-acting practices of readers that blog and chat about the literature they read (for example on huge platforms such as *Goodreads*), which has a strong influence on both the reception of literary texts and also the perception of real spaces and encounters that are antecedent to the literary adaptations.

## 2. *Literary Traditions: Epitaphs and Graveyard Poetry*

From the earliest stages of literature, graves and graveyards have been used as literary motifs that became *tropes*, metaphors with a fixed or conventional signification. In Greek and Latin literature, myriads of epitaphs and other forms of epigrammatic writings used in burial contexts are known.<sup>4</sup> They have been transmitted and translated continually throughout the centuries in their dual functions to remember the dead and to remind the living of their mortality (*memento mori*). It was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the cemetery became a principal aspect in literature. With the graveyard poetry cemeteries became popular through the so-called pre-romantic ‘Graveyard School’.<sup>5</sup> Thomas Parnell’s *A Night-Piece on Death* (1721) was the first poem to let a voice speak, that was situated in a graveyard. Parnell evokes a graveyard of «The Marble Tombs that rise on high» in order to memorialize the living: «They rise in visionary Clouds / And all with sober

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4 See Wolfe 2013 and Liddel/Low 2013.

5 There are some forebears in the 17<sup>th</sup> century such as Edward, Lord of Cherbury (*Elegy Over A Tomb*, 1617) or George Herbert (*Sepulchre*, 1633), but they did not attract the same attention as the 18<sup>th</sup> century graveyard poets did.

Accent cry / *Think, Mortal, what it is to dye.*»<sup>6</sup> *Memento mori* is the striking intention of Parnell's poem, that is also present in his successors' writings.

Most notable among the graveyard poems are Robert Blair's *The Grave* (1743), Edward Young's *The Complaint: or Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (1742–1745) and Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1750) which all fuelled a literary trend that paved the way for the Gothic Novel and other genres closely related to the dark and the uncanny. But these literary tropes were mostly self-referential, in that they only connected to literary depictions. Thus, the graveyards in graveyard poetry didn't have any close connection to real places. Instead, they portrayed the gloomy graveyard in general as the ideal setting for meditation and melancholic reflections on death and loss,<sup>7</sup> immortality and afterlife, and any other kind of religious and philosophical speculation.<sup>8</sup> Their settings are gloomy, but they also convey to the reader impressions of cozy, almost homely places. Graveyard poets, as Eric Parisot put it, «collectively, [...] revived a literary tradition that viewed death as a friend and a blessing, one that extended well into modernity.»<sup>9</sup>

About a hundred years later, the Irish poet William Allingham (1824–1889), wrote a piece entitled *In Highgate Cemetery*, serving the tradition of Graveyard poetry with an explicit reference to a concrete place.

Far-spread below doth London wear  
Its cloud by day, its fire by night-  
Yet scarce with heavenly presence there  
Shrined in the smoke or pallid light.

Incessant troops from that vast throng  
Withdraw to silent colonies;  
Where houses, lo, are fair and strong,  
Though ruins, all that dwell in these.

6 Parnell 1989, 168–171.

7 For an analysis of how the reflection on death in graveyard poetry influenced literature and society see Smith 2016.

8 See Leeuwen 2009. For a comparative view see Akhavan 2015.

9 Parisot 2013, 159.

Yet, 'neath the universal sky,  
Bright children here too run and sing,  
Calm verdure waxes green and high,  
And grave-side roses smell of Spring.<sup>10</sup>

The voice is located within the cemetery, among the grave sites, looking down on the vivid city – Highgate is the «other» space, yet no trace of horrifying aspects can be found in Allingham's poem.

### 3. *Shaping Highgate: Horror and Glory*

Highgate did not become the mysterious place it now represents in literature without the mystifications of popular culture. When John Galsworthy wrote his three novels and two novellas which were compiled to produce *The Forsyte Saga* (1907–1921), Highgate was a continuous setting for the family member's burials, yet hardly any hint of a darkened place with ghosts and walking dead can be detected in his stories. Subsequent history has contributed to shape the darker aspects of Highgate as «Victorian Valhalla» (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: *Victorian Valhalla* (Image: Niels Penke 2017).

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10 Allingham 1850, 8.

Central to its change of image was the decline of Highgate Cemetery after its closure following the Second World War and rumours of occult rites occurring there. The presumed Highgate vampire in the late 1960s and early 1970s paved the way for new representations in media and popular culture. Most notably, Hammer production's *Taste the Blood of Dracula* (1970) starring Christopher Lee shaped the cultural notion of Highgate as a place of the uncanny, which was prolonged with other horror movies such as *Tales from the Crypt* (1972) and *From Beyond the Grave* (1974) marking the peak of darkening the cemetery.<sup>11</sup>

With this in mind, as a kind of cultural knowledge, one might better understand the close connection between Highgate and ghosts, vampires and other dark secrets, which are featured so often when it becomes the setting of stories and novels. In such a guise it appears as a suitable stage for some successful contemporary novels in the genre of Gothic fiction (or maybe retro-Gothic, as they revive older forms of the novel with an emphasis on reviving its gloomy aesthetics).

Most notable are Anne Perry's *Highgate Rise* (1991), Tracy Chevalier's *Falling Angels* (2001), Fred Vargas' *Une Lieu Incertain* (2008; *An Uncertain Place*), Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* (2008), Audrey Niffenegger's *Her Fearful Symmetry* (2009) and Victoria Álvarez' *Hojas de Dedalera* (2011, not translated into English yet).<sup>12</sup> All these novels focus on the darker aspects of Highgate and its history alongside their many references to elements of classical Gothic literature as a model-kit of motifs and scenes in order to create a particular atmosphere. Some, as historical novels, also go back in time to the Victorian age of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Perry; Chevalier; Álvarez) to intensify the gloomy atmospheres against the background of a period that was closely related to a mourning culture in society as a whole. Moreover, all the Highgate-novels contain some twists; they evoke the cemetery not only as the Gothic trope to raise a certain uncanny atmosphere, but also as a liminal space, where the veil between life and death is thin, and in some cases, even permeable. In the following section I will provide close readings of three novels whose appropriations of the stock of images of Highgate as well as of literary traditions appear to be the most interesting, and influential when it comes to literary tourism in the context of social reading.

11 See Höpflinger's contribution in this volume.

12 This is nothing but a brief selection. One may find many more crime, horror or mystery tales, especially from the last decades. Most recently: Vaughn Entwistle *The Angel of Highgate* (2012), Asa Bailey *The Vampire of Highgate* (2012) and Della Farrant *Haunted Highgate* (2014).

#### 4. Highgate in Literature between Nostalgia & Heterotopia

The first of these novels, Tracy Chevalier's (\*1962) *Falling Angels* dates back to the 1990s, when Chevalier encountered Highgate Cemetery through a guided tour. She remembers: «I fell in love with the decay, the gothic excess, the neglect. More than that: as the guide pointed out yet another symbol of death adorning a grave (it was an hourglass with wings – time flies, all is temporary), I thought, I have got to set a book here. What kind of society was this that celebrated death so explicitly?»<sup>13</sup> After she made the plan to write this novel, she started volunteering at the cemetery to professionalize this particular aspect of her writing, not only in order to achieve a professional expertise of Highgate's history and its conditions, but also to familiarize herself with its atmosphere.

The novel starts in January 1901, on the day after Queen Victoria's death as told in the second chapter of the multiperspectivic narration (which means every chapter is told by another character with a unique voice). On account of this event, two families visit the cemetery, where they own neighboring graves. Their communication starts with a quarrel over the gravesite decoration, where one family, the Waterhouses, chose an angel, while the other, the Colemans, an urn. Developing out of this constellation of images, Chevalier portrays two different attitudes towards society, contrasting Victorian traditionalism (as shown in the angel) (fig. 2) with a more progressive modernism (as the urn is a sign for cremation), although their argument is strictly connected to and conducted in the cemetery.

As the plot develops, the families are linked to each other when their little daughters Maude and Lavinia become friends while using the cemetery as their mutually favourite playground – they confess to be «desperate to get to the cemetery».<sup>14</sup> As a result of this they get to know the people working there and also make friends with the gravedigger's son, Simon, who already works with his father. He helps the girls to get a deeper access to and understanding of the cemetery. Highgate becomes a space of transgression, where some borders are, at least temporarily, permeable. The cemetery appears as a point of intersection; it is shown as a historical monument and representation of economic and social status, but furthermore as a place of social interaction, and labour. This plethora of meanings irradiates in different practices of handling the cemetery. While the gravediggers dig without further involvement, the protagonists visit their family's graves, and

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13 Chevalier, n.d.

14 Chevalier, 2001, 53.





Fig. 2: *Highgate Angel* (Image: Niels Penke 2017).

discuss aesthetics, finally, they also research burial and mourning practices. By doing so, they respond to the *Zeitgeist*, which is supported by the upper social classes. «But really if they want to go there, we have Queen Victoria to blame for it, elevating mourning to such ridiculous heights that girls with romantic notions grow drunk from it.»<sup>15</sup> When the girls experience the other's behaviour in the cemetery and whilst talking about it, we as readers experience a broad variety of practical and mental relations towards cemeteries, and negotiating death and loss. The children's playful attitude is, in accordance with their social status, quite opposite to the gravediggers' needs, and the manager's relation, who runs the cemetery like a warehouse or a factory «A cemetery is a business, like any other,»

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15 Chevalier 2001, 114.

Mr. Jackson [the manager] says. «People tend to forget that.»<sup>16</sup> But with the grave-digging boy, Simon, they get to know places, such as the «heathenish» columbarium and the Circle of Lebanon, where Chevalier offers close descriptions.

The columbarium is housed in one of the vaults in the Circle of Lebanon, where a sort of channel has been dug round a big Lebanon cedar and lined with a double row of family vaults. To get to it one walks up the Egyptian Avenue, a gloomy row of vaults overhung with rhododendrons, the entrance done in the Egyptian style, with elaborate columns decorated with lotus flowers. The whole thing is rather theatrical – I am sure it was very stylish back in the 1840s, and now it makes me want to laugh. The tree is lovely, at least, its branches crooked and almost horizontally spread, like an umbrella of blue-green needles. With the blue sky behind it like today it can make the heart soar.<sup>17</sup>

Not only is the cemetery the cardinal point of all the protagonists' important interactions, it is also crucial for the condition of their inner life. By this, it becomes clear that it is primarily the living that rule this place. «I've often thought this place is really for the living, not the dead. We design the grave to remind us of the dead, and of what we remember of them.»<sup>18</sup> Thus, Highgate is very present in precise descriptions that allow the reader to follow the character's tours around the cemetery, «our lives seem to revolve around it»<sup>19</sup>, as Lavinia sums up all their relations.

When Simon one day gets trapped in a grave, they experience the gloomy atmosphere of Highgate. Even though sinister moments are rare in Chevalier's novel, they appear. Another day, the angel on the Waterhouses' grave falls down.<sup>20</sup> This is, on the level of diegesis, to be understood as a supernatural sign of fate, pointing to the impending doom of the family. But, as the novel definitely tends toward realism without any undecidable tension whether there might be some supernatural forces in the shadows, these suspicious moments come to a resolution in the end without any super-human powers entangled here. In fact, the *Falling Angel* is, on the symbolic level, a clear mark of the crack of ages and the farewell to the old Victorian age, whose haunting shade of mourning is to be cleared away by his-

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16 Chevalier 2001, 102.

17 Chevalier 2001, 84.

18 Chevalier 2001, 335.

19 Chevalier 2001, 395.

20 Chevalier 2001, 129.



torical progress.<sup>21</sup> As the girls grow up, the Victorian century gets detached by new inventions, as electricity replaces gas lighting and the Edwardian age, the «new age»<sup>22</sup> breaks through, even when Halley's Comet appears in 1910 – the cemetery stays as it was. When the protagonists change and some of them vanish, Highgate Cemetery remains forever as a playground, a garden and the memorial site for those that live nearby.

Without a concrete link to Chevalier's novel, Audrey Niffenegger's (\*1963) *Her Fearful Symmetry* (2009) seems to shift the plot about a hundred years later. The twins Julia and Valentina move to London, when their presumed aunt Elspeth dies and bequeaths them her apartment (under the fictitious address Vautravers Mews, Highgate, N6), if they meet the precondition to stay for at least a year. The house is directly bordering the cemetery: «Beyond the wall, Highgate Cemetery spread before them, vast and chaotic. Because they were on a hill, they might have seen quite far down into the cemetery, but the density of the trees prevented this.»<sup>23</sup> Elspeth's former companion Robert, sunk in depression and grief, works as a guide at the cemetery. He also, as a historian, writes his doctoral thesis on the history of Highgate. Therefore, he owns a key to the cemetery enabling visits whenever that is required. The third chapter initiates the cemetery with Elspeth's burial and a precise location of her grave site:

The hearse glided up the Cuttings Path and disappeared from sight. The Noblin mausoleum was just past Comforts Corners, near the middle of the cemetery; the mourners would walk up the narrow, tree-root-riddled Colonnade Path and meet the hearse there. People parked their cars in front of the semicircular Colonnade, which divided the courtyard from the cemetery, extricated themselves and stood looking about, taking in the chapels (once famously described as Undertakers Gothic), the iron gates, the War Memorial, the statue of Fortune staring blank-eyed under the pewter sky. Marijke [one of their neighbors] thought of all the funerals that had passed through the gates of Highgate. The Victorians black carriages pulled by ostrich-plumed horses, with professional mourners and inexpressive mutes, had given way to this motley collection of autos, umbrellas and subdued friends. Mari-

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21 On angel statues at Highgate Cemetery see also the contribution of Natalie Fritz in this volume.

22 Chevalier 2001, 98.

23 Niffenegger 2009a, 79.

like suddenly saw the cemetery as an old theatre: the same play was still running, but the costumes and hairstyles had been updated.<sup>24</sup>

Niffenegger's novel opens up the perspective of a historical connection back to the Victorian age with Highgate as the stage of «an old theatre» giving the same play throughout the centuries while changes only occur on the surface.<sup>25</sup> How history is still entangled with the present is shown in several of the tours that Robert and Jessica, Robert's boss, lead. From Strathcona to Mount Royal memorial, down Swains Lane memorializing people and their lives. The highlight of these tours is told in a whole chapter of more than 15 pages, *A Tour of Highgate Cemetery*. In there, the twins experience an in-depth introduction to the cemetery, its emergence and its most prominent figures and stories, and become attracted to it. Niffenegger does as Chevalier did when she also connects every character with a peculiar relation to the cemetery. Highgate is mainly seen through the eyes of the few main characters – thus, it appears as a closed world apart from other people with hardly any interaction outside. «For Jessica, Highgate was not about the tours, or the monuments, not about the supernatural or the atmosphere or the morbid peculiarities of the Victorians; for her the cemetery was about the dead and their grave-owners.»<sup>26</sup> Thus, she protects the cemetery, as it had «suffered from the attentions of paranormalists and Satanists in the past», she «spent a great deal of time discouraging Japanese television programmes and enthusiasts of the supernatural from promoting Highgate as a sort of haunted cemetery Disneyland.»<sup>27</sup> Robert's relation is more diverse, besides his scholarly interest in the cemetery, he is also emotionally involved. «He found that he liked the cemetery itself much better than anything he wrote about it.»<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, in the chapter *Night in Highgate Cemetery*: «He liked Highgate Cemetery best at night. At night there were no visitors, no weeds to pull, no enquiries from journalists there was only the cemetery itself, spread out in the moonlight like a soft grey hallucination, a stony wilderness of Victorian melancholy.»<sup>29</sup> Robert also pretends to patrol in order to protect the cemetery against

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24 Niffenegger 2009a, 10.

25 Niffenegger 2009a, 10.

26 Niffenegger 2009a, 27.

27 Niffenegger 2009a, 60.

28 Niffenegger 2009a, 27.

29 Niffenegger 2009a, 51–52.

«vandals and the self-described vampire hunters.»<sup>30</sup> Robert is the key-figure for Niffenegger's staging of the cemetery, as his:

PhD thesis had begun as a work of history: he imagined the cemetery as a prism through which he could view Victorian society at its most sensationally, splendidly, irrationally excessive; in their conflation of hygienic reform and status-conscious innovation, the Victorians had created Highgate Cemetery as a theatre of mourning, a stage set of eternal repose. But as he did the research Robert was seduced by the personalities of the people buried in the cemetery, and his thesis began to veer into biography; he got sidetracked by anecdote, fell in love with the futility of elaborate preparations for an afterlife that seemed, at best, unlikely. He began to take the cemetery personally and lost all perspective. He often sat with Michael Faraday, the famous scientist; Eliza Barrow, who had been a victim of the notorious serial murderer Frederick Seddon [...].<sup>31</sup>

Through historic and biographical insights like this, Niffenegger's Highgate gets a far more precise description than in Chevalier's novel, especially the focus on famous buried persons and their gravesites, such as Karl Marx, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal, who was exhumed for the poems Rossetti consigned with her at her burial. By doing so, *Her Fearful Symmetry* starts as a realistic novel, but after a while supernatural elements begin to creep in. It starts with telekinesis and ghostly apparitions, that get enlightened in the process of the novel. It turns out that the deceased Elspeth refuses to leave the world. She, strong-willed even in death, finds she is stuck in the world of the living and therefore haunting her own flat, unable to escape. By this exposure of the supernatural, Highgate is highlighted as a place of intercourse of the living and the dead – and Elspeth's house fulfills the trope of the house at the cemetery from horror film tradition (as initially depicted in Lucio Fulci's infamous *The House by the Cemetery* from 1981). She seeks to come back in the flesh, which is successful in the end when she's able to take the body of one of the twins who is suicidal. The ghost story is transferred back to normal while all the protagonists except Elspeth flee the eerie house at Highgate. «On Roberts desk was a neat pile of paper. A History of Highgate Cemetery. All the files and notes had been cleared away. There was a look of finality about the scene.»<sup>32</sup>

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30 Niffenegger 2009a, 52.

31 Niffenegger 2009a, 58.

32 Niffenegger 2009a, 401.

Despite its supernatural and fantastic elements, the depictions of Highgate in Niffenegger's novel are nonetheless close to its real model for Niffenegger (\*1963) also volunteered at the cemetery after two years of research for the novel. She has been guiding tours since 2004, and still does so from time to time.<sup>33</sup>

One of these tours was visited by Neil Gaiman (\*1960), a popular comic, horror and fantasy writer from England who had just moved to the US. In an interview Gaiman admitted that Highgate inspired him especially because of Niffenegger as his guide.<sup>34</sup> He had already made a plan to write a graveyard novel back in 1985, but decided it wasn't the right time to get it done until he encountered Highgate through Niffenegger. The Western part of Highgate (supplemented with Abney Park cemetery, a Sussex graveyard and Glasgow Necropolis) helped him to shape the main setting for his *Graveyard Book* (2008). His novel is a rather rare attempt to pen a graveyard story mainly written for children. The novel does, nonetheless, remain partially dark and scary. When his parents are murdered, the baby-boy Bod flees his home, and finds shelter in the cemetery close by. A look at the first chapter *When Bod entered the graveyard* shows a typical place of horror:

The fog was thinner as you approached the top of the hill. The half-moon shone, not as bright as day, not by any means, but enough to see the graveyard, enough for that. Look. You could see the abandoned funeral chapel, iron doors padlocked, ivy on the sides of the spire, a small tree growing out of the guttering at roof level. You could see stones and tombs and vaults and memorial plaques. You could see the occasional dash or scuttle of a rabbit or a vole or a weasel as it slipped out of the undergrowth and across the path. You would have seen these things, in the moonlight, if you had been there that night. [...] The gates were locked. They were always locked at four in the afternoon in winter, at eight at night in summer. Spike-topped iron railings ran around part of the cemetery, a high brick wall around the rest of it. The bars of the gates were closely spaced: they would have stopped a grown man from getting through.<sup>35</sup>

Gaiman's cemetery is vaguely described, even if it contains some topological and topographical details, it could be anywhere. In contrast to his pop-

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33 Niffenegger, 2009b.

34 See Jones, 2017.

35 Gaiman 2008.

ular novel *American Gods*, *The Graveyard Book* is not about to reproduce real places and their conditions. Hence, Gaiman's focus lies somewhere else, exactly in the creation of a cemetery in strict opposition to the real world and its social inscriptions: as a heterotopian place of colour and diversity in the sense of Michel Foucault that is a refuge for the boy in distress, where the magical assemblage of otherwise contradictory forces is possible.<sup>36</sup> Gaiman's novel is directed to a children's literature audience, though he draws many motifs from Gothic horror traditions. But many twists arise as most of the grim and scary creatures that inhabit his graveyard are more friendly and adjuvant to the boy than any of the living ever were. According to this, his cemetery is a lovely place of calmness, safety and beauty that are derived from models such as Abney Park and Highgate – as a model that moreover had its own vampire.<sup>37</sup>

If the novels are compared to each other, what do they have in common? First of all, they tend toward nostalgic approaches to their subject concerning the times when cemeteries were more central places of society, and culture. The three authors produce stories that express a longing for the sublime, and at least two of them also for magic and the supernatural. By doing this, they confirm Max Weber's hypothesis that even in the epoch of disenchantment, the «world remains a great enchanted garden».<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, this «magic» is no longer linked to any transcendental religious truth, it only refers to the individual experience in the act of reading (as well as in the attendance of Highgate), and the imaginations inspired thereof. In supernatural fiction like this, Highgate works as a place that «guarantees» more than other places – in the sense of Foucault as a heterotopia – a different order. The cemetery seems to make it more conceivable, that the marvelous intrudes reality, or at least, that there might be a place of in-between-ness, of transgressions between life and death. Indeed, their main common quality is – besides the «good story» and gloomy atmospheres – the evocation of bygone times and its representatives. In that regard, the cemetery is a medium; it connects the particular time of the conscious visitor, writer or reader with former times: with pre-Christian antiquity and the Middle-Ages as Gaiman's story does, with Victorian and Edwardian times in Chevalier's case, with the general history of Highgate and some of its inhabitants in Niffenegger's novel. Wherever you want to look back to, the cemetery is most likely to offer a suitable connection, especial-

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36 See Penke 2012a; and Penke 2012b.

37 See Rasmussen 2014.

38 Weber 1971 (1920), 270.

ly if its gravesites don't get removed as it is the case with the eternal places of the «Victorian Valhalla». The different historical layers of the past are still present – side by side in the same «broad present»,<sup>39</sup> they offer passages to different pasts, as a source for extensive narrations, for tales of the dead, and their residence.

All three novels are under the influence of the real place Highgate Cemetery, so it might be an appropriate question to ask in the other direction: what does literature add to reality, or at least, how does it fuel the imagination of the readers that later on experience Highgate as visitors?

### 5. (Literary) Tourism and Social Reading

Social reading is not a new phenomenon in literature or literary studies, but it has gained much attention as it has been fueled through digitalization and many recent opportunities in blogs and social-media platforms.<sup>40</sup> Social reading features a set of practices, such as sharing one's experiences, feelings and thoughts while or after reading a book, discussing with others, writing reviews, giving hints and further suggestions. In the latter part, the real world overlaps with fiction, for example when advice relating to touristic outings are given. Highgate at least is worth a real visit, as we can read in some reviews written for *Goodreads*.<sup>41</sup> Some readers experience the cemetery first, but as far as my observation goes, most of the reviewers at *Goodreads* and other platforms are convinced to visit it *while* or *after* reading. They are persuaded by the authors and their novels. «I was as enchanted with this book as I was with the cemetery. Both gave me chills.»<sup>42</sup> writes a reviewer D. on 03.03.2008 on Chevalier's *Falling Angels*. C. adds on 26.05.2013 «I toured it 2 years ago and it was one of the most richly rewarding places I've ever been. Perhaps that made the book even more spectacular.» This conserving tendency of Chevalier's depiction of Highgate is a quality that many readers seem to attach to the novel, while others that live(d) «nearby» show a greater awareness of the author's creativity «I say

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39 See Gumbrecht, 2014.

40 See Córdón-García/Alonso-Arévalo/Gómez-Díaz/Linder 2013, esp. 141–191. Further: Peplow 2016.

41 The full range of reviews of the books in focus can be found via: <https://www.goodreads.com/search?q=Highgate> (accessed May 20, 2018).

42 All the quotes from reviews can be accessed in the Goodreads review-section, see: [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2872.Falling\\_Angels?ac=1&from\\_search=true#other\\_reviews](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2872.Falling_Angels?ac=1&from_search=true#other_reviews) (accessed May 26, 2018).



loosely because having been to Highgate. I recognize where some of the landmarks have had author's licence done with them» (M.D. on 24.09.2016). Nonetheless, the novel draws attention to the real cemetery and attracts visitors as can even be detected in reviews for the travel portal *Trip Advisor* «I've wanted to visit Highgate Cemetery since reading *Falling Angels*»,<sup>43</sup> a visitor starts her five star-report, that confesses overwhelming experiences.

Whereas Chevalier's novel (1,307 reviews in total) didn't attract that many visitors, the readers seem to prefer Audrey Niffenegger's *Her fearful symmetry* (11,936 reviews in total), not only at *Goodreads* but in other self-descriptions as a whole book-club wrote in a report.<sup>44</sup> The visitors' reactions range from reinforcing the reading-impressions («I think having been to the Cemetery and knowing London made a big difference. I could really visualise the places and atmosphere as I read it»; N. on 27.09.2009) to fueling a desire to visit («and you will want to, too, after reading this»; G.W. 28.05.2012) culminating in the fulfilment of that desire «[b]est part of book was it caused me to visit Highgate» (D. on 26.11.2014). Several reviewers confess they liked the cemetery better than the novel: «The only thing I really liked about this book was its description of Highgate and its surroundings, especially Highgate Cemetery. Skip this book. Go to a Highgate Cemetery tour next time you're in London» (R.B. 29.05.2016). As far as the likes and comments to these reviews show, Niffenegger's novel is a medium that raises attraction for Highgate even though not all readers enjoy it. Their experiences focus on the condensed history in the western part, and the peculiar atmosphere in general, in which the supernatural elements of *Her fearful symmetry* seem to spoil the gravity of the original place. When visiting the cemetery, visitors seem to search for peculiar atmospheres that literature (or movies) have promised. Retracing these paths reveals an aim to reproduce meaning, whether it be by immersion into the fictitious inscriptions of the novels, or by the longing for a glimpse of the «supernatural» itself.

43 See [https://www.tripadvisor.de/ShowUserReviews-g186338-d194290-r386232703-Highgate\\_Cemetery-London\\_England.html](https://www.tripadvisor.de/ShowUserReviews-g186338-d194290-r386232703-Highgate_Cemetery-London_England.html) (accessed May 26, 2018).

44 See <http://wiflyers.org/2017/06/highgate-cemetery-book-club-visit/> (accessed May 27, 2018).

## 6. Conclusion

According to a general broadening of the cultural semantics of the cemetery from graveyard poetry to horror, more open, partially heterotopian, partially nostalgic as well as supernatural notions can be ascertained. As the motif of the cemetery as a ‹threshold› is widely-used in horror and fantasy literature, and also film, it influences even realistic novels and their readers. What all the explored novels (and also those of Anne Perry, Barbara Hambly and others) share, is a fundamental shift in the common ground of the religious implications: whereas the graveyard poets pondered about the soul, its afterlife and resurrection, these questions only appear in the mode of secularistic realism (with an implied neglect), or the mode of the supernatural (as ostentatious inauthenticity). On the contrary, all novels emphasize the maintenance of bygone times and the deceased. This pluralism of different kinds of post-mortem existence (as images and literary figures) goes without salvation for the dead, but for the living. Their contributions to the communicative memory help to keep the past alive: as long as there is talking, writing and reading, the dead won't be forgotten completely. However, this preservation needs the real model, the authentic Highgate Cemetery – as long as the place and its components exist, the past stays alive – by visiting, and narrating, and vice versa.

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