

# The Ogres and the Critics: Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant* and the battle line of fantasy

Richard J. HODSON

## Introduction: Ishiguro v. Le Guin

The release of Kazuo Ishiguro's seventh novel, *The Buried Giant*,<sup>1</sup> was both preceded and followed by considerable media interest. As well as the inevitable sense of anticipation generated by the first publication in a decade of a novel – and indeed the first book in six years – by a highly respected and decorated writer, both the novel itself, and Ishiguro's public comments on it, have located criticism of *The Buried Giant* within a wider debate on the merits and status of fantasy literature. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Ishiguro admitted to being uncertain about the reception of his novel: "Will readers follow me into this? Will they understand what I'm trying to do, or will they be prejudiced against the surface elements? Are they going to say this is fantasy?"<sup>2</sup> These questions prompted a swift response from Ursula K. Le Guin, who commented unfavourably both on *The Buried Giant* itself – criticising "the flat, dull quality" of its dialogue, and concluding that "I found reading the book painful" – and on what she saw as the "insulting ...

---

<sup>1</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Alter, "For Kazuo Ishiguro, 'The Buried Giant' Is a Departure", *The New York Times* (19 February 2015).

thoughtless prejudice” against fantasy that lay behind Ishiguro’s questions.<sup>3</sup> Ishiguro’s rebuttal was swift, retorting that Le Guin was “a little bit hasty in nominating me as the latest enemy for her own agenda” and declaring that “If there is some sort of battle line being drawn for and against ogres and pixies appearing in books, I am on the side of ogres and pixies”.<sup>4</sup> This rebuttal drew a response from Le Guin, who apologised that her “clumsiness led him to take [her] words so much amiss”<sup>5</sup> but who also went on to ask a number of questions that she wished that she and Ishiguro could discuss, including: “Would he be interested in talking about the various definitions of the word “fantasy” as inclusive of most imaginative literature (as I use the word), or as limited to a modern commercial development in fiction and the media (as I think he was using the word)?” and to reiterate her feeling that Ishiguro’s original comments “appeared to me to be drawing the kind of ‘battle line’ that he deplors”. This paper will examine eighteen positive and negative reviews of *The Buried Giant* published in British, Irish, and American newspapers and periodicals, both in print and online, as well as the novel itself and interview comments by its author, in search of this “battle line”. Are these eighteen professional readers following Ishiguro, or is there indeed a prejudicial line being drawn against fantasy literature, or against fantasy in literature?

---

<sup>3</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, ““Are They Going to Say This Is Fantasy?”, *Book View Café* (2 March 2015), online at <http://bookviewcafe.com/blog/2015/03/02/are-they-going-to-say-this-is-fantasy/>

<sup>4</sup> Sian Cain, “Writers’ Indignation: Kazuo Ishiguro Rejects Claims of Genre Snobbery”, *The Guardian* (8 March 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “Addendum to ‘Are They Going to Say This Is Fantasy?’”, *Book View Café* (10 March 2015), online at <http://bookviewcafe.com/blog/2015/03/10/addendum-to-are-they-going-to-say-this-is-fantasy/>

## Categorising *The Buried Giant*

Reviews of *The Buried Giant* have been divided on whether the novel qualifies as fantasy, although the term is clearly a relevant one: all but three of the eighteen reviews used the word fantasy at some point. The questions posed to Ishiguro by Le Guin highlight an important distinction between fantasy as a literary approach, and fantasy as a marketing category. It is not always entirely clear which definition is being applied in the reviews, but the majority seem to focus more on fantasy as a literary label than as a marketing one. Adam Mars-Jones is one of few to address the circumstances of the novel's publication explicitly. Closing his *London Review of Books* review with an analysis of an extended set-piece from the novel, he concludes that what Ishiguro is providing here is "classic big-screen derring-do ... and what it's doing in a novel on a literary list is anyone's guess".<sup>6</sup> The concept of a "literary list" is worth examining here. Faber & Faber, Ishiguro's UK publisher, included *The Buried Giant* in the "Original Fiction" section of their catalogue,<sup>7</sup> which distinguishes only "Crime" as a separate fiction category: it seems likely that Faber's reputation as a publisher of works by T. S. Eliot, Samuel Beckett, William Golding, Harold Pinter and other Nobel Laureate authors makes its fiction list appear particularly literary. In the USA, *The Buried Giant* is published by Penguin Random House, where it appears in two categories: "Literary Fiction" and "Fantasy".<sup>8</sup> At least as far as lists available to the reading public, rather than those specifically available to reviewers, are concerned, it seems that Ishiguro's novel has not been treated to a single, "literary" categorisation.

---

<sup>6</sup> Adam Mars-Jones, "Micro-Shock", *London Review of Books* 37, no. 5 (2015).

<sup>7</sup> "New Books January-June 2015" [catalogue], (London: Faber & Faber, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> "The Buried Giant by Kazuo Ishiguro" [catalogue], Penguin Random House, online at <http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/85613/the-buried-giant-by-kazuo-ishiguro/>

What, though, of post-publication labels: those applied by readers, reviewers, or critics based on their readings of, or about, the text itself? Mars-Jones further argues that “on the basis ... of its plot skeleton you might expect *The Buried Giant* to be billed as Kazuo Ishiguro’s first novel for young adults” before going on to argue that the young adult novel, which “is somewhere between a genre and a marketing sector” is “commercially and creatively lively, and it would be no insult to *The Buried Giant* to admit it into that category”. He also suggests that Ishiguro’s plot would be appealing to illustrators of “1950s adventure stories” and finally, moving away from marketing and into the realm of literary approach, that Ishiguro’s slow pace places him “among writers who want to enter genre territory without losing sight of literary priorities”. Other critics who use the term fantasy also accept that *The Buried Giant* lends itself to multiple generic labelling.

Eileen Battersby in *The Irish Times* writes that the novel’s narrative “appears to be intended to take the form of a fairy tale” but also that its use of a journey makes it “a picaresque”, its plentiful allusions make it “an extremely literary novel” and that, in the character of Sir Gawain, it “might become a parody of romance literature”. It also has “a theatrical tone”. Battersby expresses a certain scepticism about what kind of novel *The Buried Giant* is intended to be, and concludes that it is a “cautionary, half-hearted novel that is not quite a fairy tale, not quite a fantasy. Instead it dangles unconvincingly somewhere between the two”.<sup>9</sup> For Battersby, this generic multiplicity is clearly a weakness rather than a strength, but there are some critics who see it in a more positive light. For Tom Holland in *The Guardian*, *The Buried Giant* is “ostensibly a historical novel” that ends up, via a “promiscuous mixing of influences and periods within a fantasy novel” as

---

<sup>9</sup> Eileen Battersby, “*The Buried Giant* Review: Kazuo Ishiguro Could Use Some Ogres”, *The Irish Times* (28 February 2015).

both a “deconstruction” of its “manifold sources and inspirations” – among which Holland names *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* – and as a successor to them.<sup>10</sup> Alex Preston in *The Observer* presents something like Holland's argument in reverse: *The Buried Giant* “appropriates many of the conventions of ... fantasy” but then “seems to demand an allegorical reading” and ultimately resists a single interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

*The Buried Giant* seems, then, to be a novel that is simultaneously difficult to categorise, and that invites attempts at categorisation.<sup>12</sup> In other words, it is an Ishiguro novel *par excellence*. Marie Arana in *The Washington Post* argues that Ishiguro, unlike Jane Austen, for example, is one of a group of writers who do not write in “tidy, classifiable, immediately recognisable genres” and that:

It would be too easy to call what Ishiguro is undertaking “fantasy” or “magical realism.” Critics will summon such phrases to describe this book, but they would be wrong to do so. Such facile labels – suggesting that the author is relying on literary devices pulled from old bags of

---

<sup>10</sup> Tom Holland, “*The Buried Giant* Review – Kazuo Ishiguro Ventures into Tolkien Territory”, *The Guardian* (4 March 2015). Holland is typical in mentioning many other literary works during his review. A list of such references is given in the appendix.

<sup>11</sup> Alex Preston, “*The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro – Review: ‘*Game of Thrones* with a Conscience””, *The Observer* (1 March 2015).

<sup>12</sup> The eighteen reviews examined for this paper applied the following genre labels and categories to *The Buried Giant*: adventure; allegory; chivalric romance; fable; fairy tale; fantasy; historical fiction; magic realism; myth/legend; mock epic; parable; parody/pastiche, picaresque; quest narrative; play; road [movie]; young adult. In many cases, the label overlaps with another, is applied tentatively, or speculatively, and some critics mention a genre only to argue that it does not (wholly) apply to this book. Some deviation from standard definitions of “fable” and “picaresque” is evident in several reviews.

tricks – have no meaning here. Instead, what we are given in “The Buried Giant” has the clear ring of legend, as graceful, original and humane as anything Ishiguro has written.<sup>13</sup>

Arana’s endorsement of the novel is far from universally shared – in fact, of the eighteen reviews, nine were largely positive, and nine mainly negative – but her view of Ishiguro as a writer whose work crosses conventional generic boundaries is a widely held one. Reference not only to previous novels by Ishiguro, but also to their genres, is a common feature of almost all reviews of *The Buried Giant*. Mark O’Connell in the *Slate Book Review*, for example, claims that *The Buried Giant*:

is a fantasy novel in much the same sort of way that *Never Let Me Go* was a sci-fi yarn—or, for that matter, that *When We Were Orphans* was a detective novel, or *The Remains of the Day* was a historical romance: very much so, but also hardly at all. Ishiguro is in full genre-occupying mode here, settling an imaginative region, capturing its tropes and conditions, and establishing within it his own peculiar sovereignty.<sup>14</sup>

For Joyce Carol Oates in *The New York Review of Books*, “*The Buried Giant* is a novel of ideas in the awkward guise of a picaresque adventure tale, as *Never Let Me Go* is a boldly imagined novel of ideas in the guise of a science-fiction novel, and *When We Were Orphans* is a less satisfying novel of ideas in the guise of a detective novel”.<sup>15</sup> And for Toby Lichtig in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Buried Giant* is a “fashionably old-fashioned fable of ogres

---

<sup>13</sup> Marie Arana, “Review: Kazuo Ishiguro’s “The Buried Giant” Defies Easy Categorization”, *The Washington Post* (24 February 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Mark O’Connell, “The Abyss of Bones”, *Slate Book Review* (2 March 2015), online at [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2015/03/the\\_buried\\_giant\\_by\\_kazuo-ishiguro\\_reviewed.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2015/03/the_buried_giant_by_kazuo-ishiguro_reviewed.html)

<sup>15</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, “The Remains of the Britons”, *The New York Review of Books* (2 April 2015).

and knights” in which “the Ishiguro template has simply been transposed to high fantasy, just as it has previously been transposed to science/gothic fiction (*Never Let Me Go*), detective fiction (*When We Were Orphans*), Kafkaesque surrealism (*The Unconsoled*) and the novel of the English country house (*The Remains of the Day*)”.<sup>16</sup>

### Is *The Buried Giant* fantasy?

Even this limited survey provides no consensus on whether or not the label of “fantasy” can be appropriately, let alone usefully, applied to *The Buried Giant*. What, though, is “fantasy”? John Clute provides one simple but comprehensive definition of fantasy against which Ishiguro’s novel can be measured: “A fantasy text is a self-coherent narrative. When set in this world, it tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it; when set in an otherworld, that otherworld will be impossible, though stories set there may be possible in its terms”.<sup>17</sup> The opening pages of *The Buried Giant* are quite explicit regarding the novel’s setting in post-Roman Britain: “this world” but in the distant past. Elements that must surely qualify as “impossible in the world as we perceive it” are introduced immediately – “Icy fogs hung over rivers and marshes, serving all too well the ogres that were then still native to this land” – and just as immediately rendered ordinary within that world: “The people who lived nearby ... might well have feared these creatures ... But such monsters were not cause for astonishment” (p. 1). They are presumably the descendants of the “gygantes” of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae* and the “eotandes” of Layamon’s *Brut*. The novel’s most spectacular manifestation of the fantastic is introduced with a similar

---

<sup>16</sup> Toby Lichtig, “What on Earth”, *The Times Literary Supplement* (18 March 2015).

<sup>17</sup> John Clute, “Fantasy”, in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, ed. John Clute and John Grant (London: Orbit, 1997).

assumption of familiarity: “‘The path will climb steeply for much of your day. And when at last it levels you must take care not to lose your way, for you’ll be in Querig country.’ ‘Querig, the she-dragon? I’ve not heard talk of her for a long time. Is she still feared in this country?’” (pp. 62-63). This is a world in which, like our own, a dragon can appear amongst other more mundane elements in the lines of a children’s song – “Who knocked over the cup of ale? Who cut off the dragon’s tale? Who left the snake inside the pail? ’Twas your Cousin Adny” (p. 237) – but, unlike ours, one in which dragons are not held to be impossible. A similar approach can be seen to other fantastic elements: “Do you remember, Axl, there was talk last winter of a sprite seen near our village?” (p. 102): “But there’s one place we need to be cautious. Axl, are you listening to me? It’s when the path goes over where the giant is buried” (p. 31). This is not to say that all such phenomena are equally well known to the human characters of this world. The strange, dog-like creature that Axl, Beatrice, Edwin, and Sir Gawain encounter in the tunnel under the monastery is something new. Beatrice assumes that it is “a creature escaped from the Great Plain itself” (p. 174) – and the Great Plain is a place of “power and mystery” (p. 32) and home to “dark forces” (p. 27) that may even, to Beatrice’s mind at least, include a demon (p. 29) – and Sir Gawain’s boast that “if this be a beast of the earth, I’ll get the better of it” admits the possibility that unearthly beasts exist. He goes on to speculate that “It may be there’s dragon spawn within this monster”. However, like the pixies that attack Axl and Beatrice on the river, or the ogres whose attacks are accompanied by “panic” rather than incomprehension (p. 13), and which are threats of the dark of the same order as wolves (p. 11), it is a knowable enemy, in world in which supernatural explanations for unusual phenomena – the stranger who is “most likely a demon or else some elf disguised” (p. 13) – are a matter of course.

In its impossibilities, then, *The Buried Giant* seems to go some considerable way towards satisfying Clute’s definition of fantasy. However,



the extent to which the book is “self-coherent” is open to question. Ishiguro himself has claimed that the world of *The Buried Giant* is one that is comprehensible and consistent in its own terms:

My guiding principle when writing *The Buried Giant* was that I'd stay within the parameters of what somebody in a primitive, pre-scientific society could rationally believe. So if you don't have a scientific explanation for why somebody dear to you has got ill, it seems to me perfectly sensible to go for an explanation that went something like, “A pixie came in the night and gave my dear wife this illness, and I only wish I'd done something about it, because I heard something moving around that night and I was just a bit tired and I thought, well, it's a rat or something ...”

If it was within the imaginative world of the people of that time, I'd allow it literally, in my fictional world, but I wouldn't allow a flying saucer or a Tardis, because that was outside their realm.<sup>18</sup>

Ishiguro's fantasy, then, appears to be explicitly regulated. That which would be impossible in our world is allowed to be possible in the world of *The Buried Giant* by virtue of the fact that the inhabitants of that world believe in things that we think of as impossible. Axl, Beatrice and others belong to a society that believes in ogres and dragons, so Ishiguro allows ogres and dragons to exist in his fictional world. However, Ishiguro's position is slightly problematic, and not as clear-cut in its relation to *The Buried Giant* as it first appears. In the “pixie/rat” example, it seems as if there is a scientifically-expllicable reason for the wife's illness, but that the “primitive, pre-scientific” husband is not able to process it. It also seems that the rat (or something that makes a noise moving around in the night) exists; but it is not clear that the

---

<sup>18</sup> Neil Gaiman and Kazuo Ishiguro, “Let's Talk About Genre’: Neil Gaiman and Kazuo Ishiguro in Conversation”, *New Statesman* (4 June 2015).

pixie exists, other than as a “perfectly sensible” *post hoc* explanation in the mind of the husband that connects the illness with the noisy nocturnal visit of the “rat or something”. This is not the case in *The Buried Giant*, in which pixies do actually exist. Ishiguro allows himself to write about pixies because he has judged that his characters would believe in their existence, but pixies in the novel, unlike Peter Pan’s fairies, do not solely or simply exist because people in the novel believe in them. As a commitment to a self-coherent world – a commitment to fantasy – this is less than completely convincing.

Indeed, several of the novel’s less favourable reviews go so far as to accuse Ishiguro of inconsistency. James Wood in *The New Yorker*, for example, says that he is “always breaking his own rules, and fudging limited but conveniently lucid recollections”.<sup>19</sup> Many of these criticisms focus on the novel’s problematic central narrative conceit, in which the main characters, and the society in which they live, cannot remember their own past – except when the story demands that they do. However, critical disquiet with the extent to which the world of *The Buried Giant* is a coherent one seems to run deeper than this, and is not confined to those who take a negative view of the book as a whole. Arifa Akbar in *The Independent* is an admirer of the book who concedes that “it does not have the heart or soul of a fantasy novel”<sup>20</sup> (although it is not entirely clear what this means). Michiko Kakutani in *The New York Times* is more explicit: the novel is a “fairy tale” but an “eccentric, ham-handed” one with a “jumble of story lines” in which Ishiguro has “embraced a fablelike primitivism” that not only “hobbles [the author’s] instinctive talent” for qualities that served similar themes of memory and denial so well in his previous novels, but fails “to create a persuasive or fully

---

<sup>19</sup> James Wood, “The Uses of Oblivion”, *The New Yorker* (23 March 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Arifa Akbar, “*The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro, Book Review: This Isle Is Full of Monsters”, *The Independent* (26 February 2015).

imagined fictional world”.<sup>21</sup> Battersby, we have already seen, described the novel as “half-hearted”; for Oates, it is a “somewhat enervated and overfamiliar fantasy of the kind known in publishing circles as ‘sword-and-sorcery’”;<sup>22</sup> for David L. Ulin in *The Los Angeles Times* it is “too thin, too narrow in its vision ... not fully imagined”;<sup>23</sup> and Alan Massie in the *Literary Review* argues that it “has the weakness of all fantasies that are not in some way anchored to a coherent world-view” and that it is, therefore, “an exercise in fancy, dipping too often into mere fancifulness, rather than in imagination”.<sup>24</sup>

### **Embracing the fantastic, or failing to**

From these criticisms – and indeed from some of the more positive appraisals of the novel – it is beginning to look as if there is less of a clear “battle line” between approval and disapproval of fantasy literature than Ishiguro’s conversation with Le Guin suggests. In fact, the point at issue may not be whether a fantasy novel can also be a “literary novel” but whether Ishiguro’s book even succeeds as an example of the genre. As we have seen, there is some reason to doubt that *The Buried Giant* satisfies Clute’s definition of the genre. However, other definitions of fantasy are available. One such is provided by Laura Miller in *Salon*, who explicitly states that Ishiguro’s novel is not fantasy, arguing that fantasy is “a contemporary genre

---

<sup>21</sup> Michiko Kakutani, “Review: In ‘The Buried Giant,’ Ishiguro Revisits Memory and Denial”, *The New York Times* (23 February 2015).

<sup>22</sup> According to Oates, in contrast to the works of J. R. R. Tolkien and G. R. R. Martin, Ishiguro’s novel is “a more conventional generic work of fantasy fiction” but this categorization is a little difficult to reconcile with the observation earlier in the same review that ogres actually “have virtually no part in *The Buried Giant*, and the ‘buried giant’ turns out to be a metaphor”.

<sup>23</sup> David L. Ulin, “In Ishiguro’s ‘The Buried Giant,’ Memory Draws a Blank”, *Los Angeles Times* (27 February 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Allan Massie, “Here Be Dragons”, *Literary Review* (March 2015).

that uses the form of the novel to deal with the material of pre-novelistic storytelling” whereas Ishiguro’s novel “reverses that formula, using the structure of a medieval romance to explore the moral and psychological themes we’re used to seeing addressed by the realistic novel”.<sup>25</sup> Miller goes on to give the novel qualified praise: “It’s a weird and daring project ... This fusion [of modern psychology and medieval storytelling devices] doesn’t always work, but when it does the results are fascinating and moving”. A negative, mirror-image of this judgment can be seen in the verdict of another critic who stops short of labelling the novel as fantasy, Tim Martin in *The Telegraph*, who argues that Ishiguro has chosen “to stage his habitual drama of indirection within the tropes of fantasy literature” and that this choice is a bizarre one, resulting in an “affectless fantasia”.<sup>26</sup> James Walton in *The Spectator* is one of the few critics who do not use the fantasy label. He argues that its “impressively complete range of folkloric types” and “painstaking evocations of mythical fifth-century landscapes, politics, [and] customs” are actually “things the book isn’t really about”, concluding with qualified praise: *The Buried Giant* is “another of [Ishiguro’s] miraculous fusions of metaphor and narrative” but “even the most high-minded of readers might find their admiration tempered with more than a twinge of impatience”.<sup>27</sup> More enthusiastic is O’Connell (who, as we have seen, believed the book to be fantasy both “very much” and “hardly at all”) whose reasons for admiring this “sad and remarkable book” owe much to the potential afforded by its generic liminality: “for all that *The Buried Giant* clothes itself in the armor of

---

<sup>25</sup> Laura Miller, “Dragons Aside, Ishiguro’s ‘Buried Giant’ Is Not a Fantasy Novel”, *Salon* (2 March 2015), online at [http://www.salon.com/2015/03/02/dragons\\_aside\\_ishiguros\\_buried\\_giant\\_is\\_not\\_a\\_fantasy\\_novel/](http://www.salon.com/2015/03/02/dragons_aside_ishiguros_buried_giant_is_not_a_fantasy_novel/)

<sup>26</sup> Tim Martin, “*The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro, Review: ‘Affectless Fantasia’”, *The Telegraph* (5 March 2015).

<sup>27</sup> James Walton, “Here Be Dragons”, *The Spectator* (28 February 2015).

chivalric romance and fantasy, it is also subtly using these formal structures to subvert from within the kinds of national mythologies that are so often built around them”.

A slightly different perspective is provided by Neil Gaiman in *The New York Times*: “Fantasy is a tool of the storyteller. It is a way of talking about things that are not, and cannot be, literally true. It is a way of making our metaphors concrete, and it shades into myth in one direction, allegory in another”.<sup>28</sup> Gaiman’s verdict is that Ishiguro’s novel is pulled in both directions, and that it is, as a result, not entirely successful:

Fantasy and historical fiction and myth here run together with the Matter of Britain, in a novel that’s easy to admire, to respect and to enjoy, but difficult to love ... Ishiguro is not afraid to tackle huge, personal themes, nor to use myths, history and the fantastic as the tools to do it. “The Buried Giant” is an exceptional novel, and I suspect my inability to fall in love with it, much as I wanted to, came from my conviction that there was an allegory waiting like an ogre in the mist.

Gaiman is not the only reviewer to focus on the allegorical aspect of the novel. Wood argues that Ishiguro has written “not a novel about historical amnesia but an allegory of historical amnesia, set in a sixth- or seventh-century Britain, amok with dragons, ogres, and Arthurian knights. The problem is not fantasy but allegory, which exists to literalize and simplify”. For Wood, this is a huge failing – the novel’s “fictional setting is feeble, mythically remote, generic, and pressureless; and ... its allegory manages somehow to be at once too literal and too vague” – and this view is clearly in line with that of Kakutani (“ungainly fable”) and Lichtig (“overbearing metaphors”).

---

<sup>28</sup> Neil Gaiman, “Kazuo Ishiguro’s ‘The Buried Giant’”, *The New York Times* (25 February 2015).

### The allegory in the mist

John Sutherland in *The Times* reminds us of Tolkien's view that "we should simply enjoy dragons as dragons in our fables, as children enjoy them, not lumber the beasts with deep symbolisms" and argues that "One can certainly enjoy the sheer quest-and-adventure surface of Ishiguro's fable". Nonetheless, he continues, "it is impossible to escape the sense that his fable is indeed about something weighty".<sup>29</sup> He concludes that *The Buried Giant* is "a beautiful fable with a hard message at its core". For fable, read allegory. For Sutherland at least – and indeed also for Preston, quoted earlier – this is not a failing. However, this seems to be a minority view, and Tolkien himself famously rejected the term:

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history – true or feigned– with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse applicability with allegory, but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.<sup>30</sup>

Tolkien's allegory/applicability distinction may prove to be a useful one in explaining the divergence of critical reactions to *The Buried Giant*. Preston, as we have seen, argues that the best way to approach Ishiguro's novel is to adopt "an anti-allegorical reading, where no meaning is allowed to settle firmly on the highly suggestive events, but the ethical import of the text left

---

<sup>29</sup> John Sutherland, "The Buried Giant by Kazuo Ishiguro", *The Times* (21 February 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*, 2nd ed. (1966). Despite this wariness, Tolkien was clearly aware of the potential for an allegorical reading of his work. In a letter to Peter Hastings written in September 1954, for example, he refers to desire of the Eregion elves for the knowledge of Sauron in the Second Age of his legendarium as "an 'allegory' if you like of a love of machinery" (Humphrey Carpenter, ed. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 190).

to work upon the reader on its own terms” and goes on to offer one such potential reading: “We can view the ‘buried giant’ as the way history has been swept over any number of genocides, from Armenia to Rwanda”. This seems very like Tolkien’s standard of applicability; and Kakutani, Lichtig, Wood and, to some extent, Gaiman seem to feel that *The Buried Giant* does not meet it. Other critics, though, are more amenable to this approach. They include Akbar, who actually uses the word “applicable” and points to “postwar Europe, or today’s war-ravaged regions” and the BBC’s Lucy Scholes, for whom “the issues Ishiguro examines have their origins in the aftermath of more recent conflicts: from post-World War Two Japan, Vichy France and post-apartheid South Africa, to the genocides of Rwanda and Yugoslavia”.<sup>31</sup> Ishiguro himself would no doubt approve of such readings. In an interview with Martha Kearney subsequent to the publication of *The Buried Giant*, he said that he saw “the treatment of racial minorities in America as an example of collective forgetfulness” – an American “buried giant” – and went on to address the potential applicability of his book: “though he could have set his novel in Rwanda or in Kosovo, he had picked a semi-mythical setting of historical Britain to avoid any implication that he was writing about any particular country or war.”<sup>32</sup> Other interviews tell a similar story. According to Alter:

For the past 15 years, he had been toying with the idea for a novel exploring collective memory, and how societies and cultures recover from past atrocities by forgetting. He considered setting it in post-World War II France, or in contemporary Bosnia, America or Japan. But he worried

---

<sup>31</sup> Lucy Scholes, “Book Review: Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*”, *BBC Worldwide* (3 March 2015), online at <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150303-enter-the-dragons>

<sup>32</sup> Jessica Elgot, “Kazuo Ishiguro: Treatment of African Americans Is a ‘Buried Giant’ for the US”, *The Guardian* (24 May 2015).

that a realistic historical setting would blunt the impact of the idea, making it seem too narrow and political.<sup>33</sup>

Alex Clark in *The Guardian* provides further details of these examples of a “collective reaction to trauma”<sup>34</sup> and her interview with Ishiguro sums up the genesis of the novel and its purposed applicability:

Ishiguro had been looking for a vehicle in which to explore a specific set of ideas about societies and historical events, but didn’t want it to be easily and obviously relatable to any particular place or time. “It seemed to me wherever I put this story down, there was a danger that it would be seen as about that,” he says, but he was adamant that he didn’t want to look “peculiarly interested in a particular crisis in history. And so I was trying to find something that would be obviously fictional.” Ogres, elves, knights and a quest-style narrative would at least partially solve the problem. “A landscape like that would clearly signal that this was fantasy and you’re supposed to apply it to many situations.”

Clark’s use of the word “vehicle” is an instructive one: it suggests that the novel’s form – the “surface elements” that Ishiguro was concerned would mark out the novel as fantasy and prejudice readers against it – is subordinate to its content. The chosen form is instrumental (Gaiman’s view of fantasy as “a tool of the storyteller”) rather than organic. Moreover, these surface elements “would at least partially solve the problem” of unwanted topicality. Alter tells us that Ishiguro “arrived at the fantasy setting partly out of desperation”. The qualification in both of these statements is telling, and Ishiguro’s own conversation with Gaiman, in which Ishiguro says that “being able to resort to fantasy opens things up enormously” (my emphasis) shows that he is not being misrepresented. This is not a whole-hearted embrace of

---

<sup>33</sup> Alter, *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> Alex Clark, “Kazuo Ishiguro’s Turn to Fantasy”, *The Guardian* (19 February 2015).



the potential of fantasy: an enjoyment of “dragons as dragons”.

### Conclusion: the “battle line” of fantasy

In his conversation with Neil Gaiman, Ishiguro talks on several occasions about there being a “stigma” against fantasy. He questions the very boundaries that are commonly used to separate books into genres – Are they “things that have been invented fairly recently by the publishing industry?” – and confesses that he gets

worried when readers and writers take these boundaries too seriously, and think that something strange happens when you cross them, and that you should think very carefully before doing so.

Is there an explanation here for the mixed critical fortunes of *The Buried Giant*? Is there, as he posited in his response to Ursula Le Guin, “some sort of battle line being drawn for and against ogres and pixies appearing in books”? If the eighteen reviews examined in this paper are representative of critical opinion as a whole, the evidence for such a battle line is not convincing. Certainly, a number do use spatial or topographical terms to suggest that genres are separable. The identical titles of Massie’s and Walton’s reviews (“Here be dragons”) borrow an image from medieval map-making, and Holland’s title is “Kazuo Ishiguro Ventures into Tolkien Territory”. Titles, of course, may well be the responsibility of sub-editors rather than authors, but the texts of some reviews also refer to Ishiguro’s “foray into fantasy” (Scholes), and call the novel a “daring venture into a medieval wilderness” (Arana). Most explicitly, Mars-Jones suggests that Ishiguro’s techniques in *The Buried Giant* show him to be “among writers who want to enter genre territory without losing sight of literary priorities”. Are these genre lines, though, lines of battle? Of the negative views, Massie’s probably comes closest to Le Guin’s image of “prejudice” against fantasy: “Readers who like this sort of whimsy and escapism will lap it up eagerly and quite possibly declare it a

masterpiece. Others who prefer that fiction should cling more closely to that human experience we recognise as reality will find it barren”.<sup>35</sup> But Massie’s criticism is not based solely on the fact that Ishiguro has written a fantasy; instead, as we have seen, he attacks *The Buried Giant* as sharing the “weakness of all fantasies that are not in some way anchored to a coherent world-view”. In other words, *The Buried Giant* is to be evaluated poorly not because it is a fantasy (although the tone of Massie’s review suggests that he does not have a high opinion of the genre), but because it is a weak one.

This distinction is to be found in many other reviews of *The Buried Giant*, both positive and negative. Mars-Jones describes fantasy as a “hard discipline that rewards attention to detail”, with the implication that Ishiguro’s novel is not up to the task. For Kakutani it is “ungainly” and “ham-handed”; for Battersby, “half-hearted”; for Ulin, it is “constrained” and “misbegotten”; and for Martin, “at times it has the feeling of an author throwing up his hands”. Even for admirers like Sutherland, the book is “odd”. Of the three main strands of criticism of the book (the other two being its perceived tendency to allegorize, and its prose – especially its dialogue – which is frequently described as listless, clumsy, and even occasionally laughable<sup>36</sup>)

---

<sup>35</sup> Gaiman addresses the issue of escapism in his genre conversation with Ishiguro: “literature is looked down on when it’s being used as escapism ... I’ve never had anything against escapist literature, because I figure that escape is a good thing: going to a different place, learning things, and coming back with tools you might not have known”. Tom Shippey (in *J. R. R. Tolkien : Author of the Century* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), p. viii) argues that critical reaction to fantasy, especially when it is perceived as escapist, often casts it as “a kind of literary disease, whose sufferers ... should be scorned, pitied, or rehabilitated back to correct and proper taste”.

<sup>36</sup> Ishiguro himself has admitted that the published novel differs significantly in this respect from its earlier draft, the language of which, according to his wife, “wouldn’t do” and led to the whole novel being rewritten from scratch in much plainer prose. (Hannah Furness, “Kazuo Ishiguro: My Wife Thought First Draft of *The Buried Giant* Was Rubbish,” *The Telegraph*, 4 October 2014).

these comments come closest to drawing a battle line between fantasy and literature – but not that close. *The Buried Giant* has its admirers as well as its detractors; and the great majority of criticism of Ishiguro's novel focuses not on its choice of genre, but on its execution of that choice.

## References

- Akbar, Arifa. "The Buried Giant by Kazuo Ishiguro, Book Review: This Isle Is Full of Monsters". *The Independent*, 26 February 2015.
- Alter, Alexandra. "For Kazuo Ishiguro, 'The Buried Giant' Is a Departure". *The New York Times*, 19 February 2015.
- Arana, Marie. "Review: Kazuo Ishiguro's 'The Buried Giant' Defies Easy Categorization". *The Washington Post*, 24 February 2015.
- Battersby, Eileen. "The Buried Giant Review: Kazuo Ishiguro Could Use Some Ogres". *The Irish Times*, 28 February 2015.
- "*The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro" [catalogue]. Penguin Random House, 2015. Online at <http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/85613/the-buried-giant-by-kazuo-ishiguro/>
- Cain, Sian. "Writers' Indignation: Kazuo Ishiguro Rejects Claims of Genre Snobbery". *The Guardian*, 8 March 2015.
- Carpenter, Humphrey, ed. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981.
- Clark, Alex. "Kazuo Ishiguro's Turn to Fantasy". *The Guardian*, 19 February 2015.
- Clute, John. "Fantasy". In *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, edited by John Clute and John Grant. London: Orbit, 1997.
- Elgot, Jessica. "Kazuo Ishiguro: Treatment of African Americans Is a 'Buried Giant' for the US". *The Guardian*, 24 May 2015.
- Furness, Hannah. "Kazuo Ishiguro: My Wife Thought First Draft of *The Buried Giant* Was Rubbish". *The Telegraph*, 4 October 2014.
- Gaiman, Neil. "Kazuo Ishiguro's 'The Buried Giant'". *The New York Times*, 25 February 2015.
- Gaiman, Neil, and Kazuo Ishiguro. "'Let's Talk About Genre': Neil Gaiman and Kazuo Ishiguro in Conversation". *New Statesman*, 4 June 2015.
- Holland, Tom. "*The Buried Giant* Review – Kazuo Ishiguro Ventures into Tolkien Territory". *The Guardian*, 4 March 2015.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Buried Giant*. London: Faber and Faber, 2015.
- Kakutani, Michiko. "Review: In 'The Buried Giant,' Ishiguro Revisits Memory and Denial". *The New York Times*, 23 February 2015.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. "Addendum to 'Are They Going to Say This Is Fantasy?'". *Book*

- View Café*, 10 March 2015. Online at <http://bookviewcafe.com/blog/2015/03/10/addendum-to-are-they-going-to-say-this-is-fantasy/>
- . “Are They Going to Say This Is Fantasy?”. *Book View Café*, 2 March 2015. Online at <http://bookviewcafe.com/blog/2015/03/02/are-they-going-to-say-this-is-fantasy/>
- Lichtig, Toby. “What on Earth”. *The Times Literary Supplement*, 18 March 2015.
- Mars-Jones, Adam. “Micro-Shock”. *London Review of Books*, 37, no. 5, 5 March 2015.
- Martin, Tim. “*The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro, Review: ‘Affectless Fantasia’”. *The Telegraph*, 5 March 2015.
- Massie, Allan. “Here Be Dragons”. *Literary Review*, March 2015.
- Miller, Laura. “Dragons Aside, Ishiguro’s ‘Buried Giant’ Is Not a Fantasy Novel”. *Salon*, 3 March 2015. Online at [http://www.salon.com/2015/03/02/dragons\\_aside\\_ishiguros\\_buried\\_giant\\_is\\_not\\_a\\_fantasy\\_novel/](http://www.salon.com/2015/03/02/dragons_aside_ishiguros_buried_giant_is_not_a_fantasy_novel/)
- “New Books January-June 2015” [catalogue]. London: Faber & Faber, 2015.
- O’Connell, Mark. “The Abyss of Bones”. *Slate Book Review*, 2 March 2015. Online at [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2015/03/the\\_buried\\_giant\\_by\\_kazuo\\_ishiguro\\_reviewed.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2015/03/the_buried_giant_by_kazuo_ishiguro_reviewed.html)
- Oates, Joyce Carol. “The Remains of the Britons”. *The New York Review of Books*, 2 April 2015.
- Preston, Alex. “*The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro – Review: ‘Game of Thrones with a Conscience’”. *The Observer*, 1 March 2015.
- Scholes, Lucy. “Book Review: Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*”. *BBC Worldwide*, 3 March 2015. Online at <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150303-enter-the-dragons>
- Shippey, Tom. *J. R. R. Tolkien : Author of the Century*. London: HarperCollins, 2000.
- Sutherland, John. “*The Buried Giant* by Kazuo Ishiguro”. *The Times*, 21 February 2015.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings*. 2nd ed. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966.
- Ulin, David L. “In Ishiguro’s ‘The Buried Giant,’ Memory Draws a Blank”. *Los Angeles Times*, 27 February 2015.
- Walton, James. “Here Be Dragons”. *The Spectator*, 28 February 2015.
- Wood, James. “The Uses of Oblivion”. *The New Yorker*, 23 March 2015.

## Appendix: Review references

The table below lists texts (including films) and authors cited in the eighteen reviews of *The Buried Giant*. An asterisk by the name of a reviewer indicates that the reference was to the work of an author as a whole, or to an author’s style, rather than to a specific text. In the majority of cases, the text or author was compared to, or contrasted with, *The Buried Giant* or another book by Ishiguro, but in some instances – such as, for example, Gaiman’s reference to his own novel *Stardust* – the reference serves to establish a context for the review, or to make a more general observation without drawing a specific connection to Ishiguro’s book.

author	text	reviewer
unknown	<i>Beowulf</i>	Gaiman, Kakutani, Scholes, Sutherland
unknown	<i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i>	Holland, Miller, O'Connell, Sutherland
unknown	<i>Wulf and Eadwacer</i>	Battersby
Adamson, Andrew & Jenson, Vicky (dirs.)	<i>Shrek</i> (animated film)	Akbar
Atwood, Margaret		*Oates
Baum, Frank L.	<i>The Wizard of Oz</i>	Akbar, Kakutani
Barth, John		*Oates
Beckett, Samuel		*Martin, *Sutherland
The Brothers Grimm		*Battersby
Bunyan, John	<i>The Pilgrim's Progress</i>	Gaiman, Wood
Camus, Albert	<i>The Plague</i>	Preston
Carroll, Lewis	<i>Alice's Adventures in Wonderland</i>	Mars-Jones, Oates
Carter, Angela		*Preston
Cather, Willa		*Wood
Cervantes	<i>Don Quixote</i>	Battersby, Holland, Sutherland, Wood
Chekhov, Anton	<i>Rothschild's Fiddle</i>	Wood
Coetzee, J. M.	<i>The Childhood of Jesus</i>	Oates, Preston
Crace, Jim	<i>Harvest</i>	Battersby
	<i>The Pesthouse</i>	Oates
Dante	<i>The Divine Comedy</i>	Battersby
Doyle, Arthur Conan	<i>The Hound of the Baskervilles</i>	Mars-Jones
Forna, Aminatta	<i>The Hired Man</i>	Akbar
	<i>The Memory of Love</i>	Akbar
Gaiman, Neil	<i>Stardust</i>	Gaiman
Gardner, Sally	<i>Maggot Moon</i>	Mars-Jones
Gawande, Atul	<i>Being Mortal</i>	Preston
Golding, William	<i>The Inheritors</i>	Mars-Jones, Wood
	<i>The Spire</i>	Wood
Gondry, Michel (dir.)	<i>Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind</i> (film)	Lichtig
Housman, A. E.		*Massie
Johnson, Samuel	Rasselas	Oates

Kafka, Franz	<i>In the Penal Colony</i>	*Battersby, *Martin, *Oates, Preston, *Wood
Keats, John	<i>La Belle Dame Sans Merci</i>	Holland
Lessing, Doris	<i>Canopus in Argos</i>	Oates
Levi, Primo	<i>If This Is a Man</i>	Preston
Malory	<i>The Morte D'Arthur</i>	Mars-Jones
Martin, G. R. R.	<i>A Song of Fire and Ice</i> <i>Game of Thrones</i> (TV series)	Akbar, Holland, Kakutani, Miller, Oates, Preston, *Ulin
McCarthy, Cormac	<i>The Road</i>	Battersby, Oates
Mantel, Hilary	<i>Beyond Black</i>	Mars-Jones
	<i>Wolf Hall</i>	Martin
Marvell, Andrew		*Massie
McEwan, Ian	<i>The Daydreamer</i>	Mars-Jones
Monty Python	<i>Monty Python and the Holy Grail</i> (film)	Mars-Jones, *Martin, Oates, *Wood
Murakami, Haruki	<i>The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle</i>	Miller
Reynolds, Kevin (dir.)	<i>Robin Hood : Prince of Thieves</i> (film)	Mars-Jones
Rowling, J. K.	the Harry Potter novels	Mars-Jones
Saramago, José	<i>Blindness</i>	O'Connell, Preston
Shakespeare, William	<i>Hamlet</i>	Miller
	<i>King Lear</i>	Akbar, Holland
Swift, Graham	<i>The Light of Day</i>	Mars-Jones
Tennyson, Arthur	<i>Idylls of the King</i>	Holland
Thorpe, Adam	<i>Hodd</i>	Martin
	<i>Ulverton</i>	Martin
Tolkien, J. R. R.	<i>The Hobbit</i>	Mars-Jones, Sutherland
	<i>The Lord of the Rings</i>	Akbar, Holland, Kakutani, Miller, Oates,
	Critical writing on <i>Beowulf, Sir Gawain</i>	Holland, Sutherland
Updike, John	<i>The Witches of Eastwick</i>	Mars-Jones
White, T. H.	<i>The Once and Future King</i>	Miller, Preston, *Ulin
	<i>The Sword in the Stone</i>	
Wodehouse, P. G.		*Holland, Sutherland
Yourcenar, Marguerite		*Wood