



## Inspiration

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POETS OFTEN SPEAK OF inspiration as if it is a spirit, drifting past, or sneaking up on them, and they have to catch its nebulous form, cup it carefully in their palms and gently mould it into a new shape before it melts away.

In the first half of my writing career, I felt as if inspiration was all around me, buzzing like a hive of bees. As well as being a novelist, I worked as a TV producer and director, a features writer for newspapers and magazines, and as a nonfiction author. I travelled extensively, read widely. My multiple worlds cross-pollinated each other. My novels are, of course, stories, but they are also interwoven with ideas and infused by themes — free will, God, evolution, freedom, slavery. I took big ideas and condensed them, nurtured tiny ones until they grew: the discovery of a rare, white lily; a myth about magpies, empathy in chimpanzees.

Then, I had a child and my other forms of income dried up and with them, my sources of inspiration. Now I barely had time to look at the pictures in the newspapers I once wrote for; I journeyed as far as the local park. Inspiration was still there, although now it felt less like a swarm, and more like witnessing solitary bees, emerging slowly on a cool morning, waiting for the sun to warm their wings. I overheard fragments of conversation at the school gate and I'd turn these nuggets over in my mind, and ask, *What if?* My writing became focused on the family, on the domestic, on the suburban: the landscape smaller, the timescale narrower. And yet the *ideas* within them – about secrets, trauma, abuse, relationships – are universal.



In many ways, the ‘pram in the hallway’ has not been, for me, ‘a sombre enemy of good art’. Having a child has given me access to different types of people, places and concerns, as well as reconnecting me with my own childhood, and reminding me how children and young adults might view the world. Now that my daughter is older and my role is becoming more of a facilitator than a caregiver, I hope that what inspires me will change once more.

Like any creative person, I’m happy to see if a sprite will whisper in my ear, if I’ll have a dream, or if an idea, like a wild animal, will visit and allow itself to be tamed. But I believe I’ll need to be more proactive than that, actively seeking out sources of inspiration, allowing them space to breathe, before asking whether this little creature could grow to the size of a 90,000-word beast. As Bob Dylan said, ‘inspiration is hard to come by...you have to take it where you find it’.

And then you have to learn to live with it.