



## The Writer and Nature

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Judith Allnatt

UNTIL I WAS ELEVEN, my family lived in the grounds of the agricultural college where my father taught. Unofficially, all the staff's children had the run of the place: from Pig Wood where an escaped boar was said to live, to the pasture where a docile heifer would let you ride upon her back. Given such an opportunity for exploration, my interest in the natural world grew and my father, a born countryman, taught me how to look closely and answered my many questions on our walks together. Because of this, I've always associated country walks with careful observation and with letting my mind range freely — two things that have been useful to me as a writer.

When writing scenes set outdoors, I like to visit a setting and take notes if I can. Gathering tiny details gives you a bank of material on which to draw, either to conjure an accurate scene for the reader or to develop characters by considering what *they* would notice and why. It's probably no coincidence that the passages picked out by readers, as scenes that have 'stayed with them', always seem to be those where I've actually walked the ground. The goose down caught in the grass by the lake, the rain hanging on barbed wire, like notes on a stave, the green mops of bluebell leaves: the small details provide authenticity and perhaps for other nature lovers, the pleasure of recognition.

I think that the natural world must be a crucial part of my inspiration as a writer. Like many others I often practise writing continuously, in a stream of consciousness style, to loosen up my thoughts. Looking back



over these jottings I notice that if I start with an indoor setting I very quickly move outside. One piece that started in a drawing room skipped immediately to the house as a ruin, with the roof blown off and a view of the sky through its weedy rafters.

It's perhaps no surprise that the natural world features in the themes of my novels. The first is set on a farm and deals with rural isolation and its impact on a dysfunctional family. The second touches on the effects of the enclosures on the sanity of the poet John Clare. In other novels, man-made forces are set against nature. *The Moon Field* shows the ravages of the Great War on the landscape and the natural order. In *The Silk Factory* the industrial and natural worlds are in conflict and the main character can only escape the cruelty of an exploitative system by becoming a traveller and returning to an almost savage state.

Taking all this together, it's clear that nature is embedded both in my creative practice, through walking, observing and thinking, and in the ideas underpinning the writing itself. But more than this, learning from my father as a child has given me a love of the natural world and a belief in its importance that has fuelled the very desire to write.