



The Writer and Nature

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THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT the way the sea breathes that helps me think and write. As the waves inhale, then let go, exhaling over the shore, I find myself matching them. My own breathing slows, and I feel part of the natural rhythm of drawing in and releasing. My thoughts slow too. This helps my hyperactive ADHD brain. Instead of a thousand thoughts flitting across my mind like small bright fish, each fish followed for mere seconds before being distracted by another shiny fin or an iridescent scale, I'm watching the whole shoal of fish. I can see patterns in its movements, the calm in the chaos. I can also zero in on one fish, one thought, to see where it goes. And that's how it helps me write. I have an overcrowded aquarium of stories in my head, thousands of them clamouring for attention, flapping their fins against the murky glass walls of my mind to be fished out. And not like those poor live crabs and lobsters in restaurants that diners choose to die, these fish, these stories, want a tank to themselves in order to live, they want to come to the surface for air and be given the space to grow.

It's been that way for as long as I can remember. One of my very first memories is sitting on a sun-cuddled blanket on a sandy beach, watching the waves exhale and finding my mind calm. By luck and by choice, I've lived most of my life by the sea, in Poole, Brighton, Hastings and Eastbourne. And when living inland, in Cambridge, London and Rochester, there's always been a river nearby that has helped distil my thoughts to a single stream. If I am able to go on holiday, I try and find somewhere I can see, and preferably hear, the sea. A few days of staring at the sea and my mind feels as refreshed as a dip in the sea on a too-hot day.



More and more studies are being undertaken on how being by water, and nature in general, help thinking and mental health. It even has a name — ‘blue mind’, named by Wallace J. Nichols in 2014. ‘Blue mind’ refers to a state of feeling calm, unified and satisfied with life in that moment, and when around water. BlueHealth2020 is a fascinating project reviewing thirty-five studies that look into blue mind, concluding that there is a positive association between proximity to water and improved mental health.

One of my heroes, the writer, director and actor David Lynch, uses the metaphor of the mind as water to talk about diving for ideas. His experience is that meditation helps you to dive for the big fish, deep down in the water. My experience is that being by water helps get into that meditative state. Here, in Eastbourne, I am a short walk from the seafront. Hills surround the town — Beachy Head holds its arms out to one side, Hastings to the other. It’s comforting, walking by the breathing sea, but there’s also a strangeness to seaside towns that I love. The fellow ADHD brains of the seafront arcades of run-down towns in winter, a fishing beach with discarded bones; a fairground where a carousel turns but there’s no one on the horses.

Stories are everywhere in seaside towns; they are full of fish. One day I’ll have a writing shed that looks out to sea. Till then I’ll meet the sea every day, we’ll breathe together, and there I’ll catch my stories.