



The Writer and Nature

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I DIDN'T REALISE the impact of my natural surroundings on my writing life until I was asked to write a nature almanac for children. The commission came after two years of intense sadness and paralysing writer's block following the death of my father, and by the time I sat down to draft the first pages, my mother had also died. I'd not been able to write any fiction for so long that I'd convinced myself I couldn't write anything at all. When asked how I was feeling, I would reply that I felt lost. That I wasn't myself. And deep down, I was worried I would never find or be myself ever again.

I remember that January, in the days after my mother's death, forcing myself to go out for a run along the towpath where I lived, looking in vain for signs of life and joy in the tired, drooping trees and the murky canal water which seemed determined to mirror my mood. What was I going to write about in the January section of this almanac? How was I going to enthuse twenty-first century, mostly urban child readers to get out to observe and enjoy their natural surroundings if *I* didn't want to get out and about myself? Everything was dark and grey and damp and depressing. I should run home straight away and ring my agent and tell her I couldn't do it. I wasn't a *nature writer* — I'd never even written a nonfiction book for goodness' sake! Why had they asked me?

I turned to run home. First it was the blackbird that caught my attention; his song surprised me after long winter months of no dawn chorus. I looked up and saw him sitting in the bare branches of a hazel tree, his



yellow-ringed eye matching the cheery gold of the catkins hanging like forgotten Christmas decorations, pollen-laden and brazen in the gloomy morning mist. He dropped down from the tree, on to the woodland floor which bracketed the canal and, following his flight, I was drawn to the first snowdrops, bright, pure and clean against the thick, brown leaf mould. I ran on, alert now, looking to left and right, and saw a heron, standing sculpture-still on the far bank, his anglepoise head tilted to keep his bead-bright eye on me as I ran, my breath puffing out chilly little clouds before me. And then – the prize – a kingfisher, bright as a jewel, fast as a dart, everything about him defying any description I tried then, and have tried since, to hone. The kingfisher has always been special to me. He is Dad's bird – the bird Dad always pointed out to me when we were kayaking together. The bird he shared a name with — Martin.

I went home and I started writing the first draft of the almanac. I wrote that it was true that January was a hard, unforgiving month, that it didn't offer us much daylight and that it was tempting to stay indoors and pull the duvet over our heads until it was all over. But that if you stopped, if you looked, if you listened, there was *so much* to get excited about. There were plants to spot, and animals and birds, there was fun to be had, running and playing along rivers and canals, through parks and gardens, even down to the sea if you were lucky. There were also festivals to enjoy in winter, I discovered – Lohri, Wassailing, Tu B'Shevat [Too Buh-Shvat], Chinese New Year – and many of these festivals centred on the hope of things to come, on renewal and rebirth and resolution.

As winter bloomed into spring, I began to sense a spark of renewal in me — in my life *and* in my writing. I started to look out for more and more things to add to my almanac whenever I was out walking and running — I made a point of stopping to smell the roses, both literally and figuratively. I got a puppy and she came out with me, and her joy at being alive, at exploring the natural world, was infectious. I began swimming in a local lake, in spite of the low temperatures — I even broke the ice one day and still have the photo of me doing this, a slightly mad grin on my frozen



features. I made new friends at a time of life when I erroneously thought I didn't need any more. And I found I was writing other things alongside the almanac. I wrote picture books for the first time in twenty years, and they were all about the natural world; about seals and sea swimming, about living and dying and kingfishers. Three of my books from that time are on their way to being published, and the nature almanac is in its fifth iteration. I also wrote a memoir during this time. It was as though a cork had been pulled from a bottle. The words kept coming. The writer's block was vanquished.

It's not only my writing that's been affected by my relationship with the natural world, but also the way I live my writing life — if I don't have a morning run, walk or swim before I sit down to write, I'm jittery and can't settle. I need to get out first thing, to lift my head to the sky, to smell the trees, the sea, the river, to follow the swoop of a buzzard taking off from a telegraph pole. I need to notice changes in the air, in the light. It grounds me, holds me and calms me when I'm struggling with my words.

Of course I still have days when grief jumps out and surprises me or when the words get stuck and refuse to let me order them on the page. But as long as I can keep getting out of the house and keep my eyes and ears open — as long as I can notice what's happening around me in the nonhuman world — there's a good chance that I will not get lost again, and that I will feel more myself than I have ever been.