



The Writer & Nature: A Natural Fix

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LEAVING INNER CITY Birmingham in the mid-nineteen-nineties was a huge wrench for me. I liked the busy grittiness of Birmingham life, and loved being part of the city's vast diversity. Even being unfashionable had a kind of joy (post-war Birmingham has never been fashionable); I liked and relied on public transport; I liked that I knew where everything was in my adopted urban sprawl, or where to get it, at any time of day or night. I had entirely adjusted to the absence of hills and lack of access to countryside I'd taken for granted, growing up in Derbyshire. Birmingham has its parks of course, and these have their own rough and very social charm, but nature – unlike human nature – is pushed right to the margins in a big city; it clings on, as it must.

Arriving in semi-rural Cambridgeshire – our new home – one of the first things I noticed (apart from how bland the place felt, after Brum), was a cockchafer. Actually, what I noticed was a large brown bug like a super-sized half-hazelnut shell skulking by the back door. To determine it was a cockchafer I had to look it up in my *Reader's Digest* book of insects and butterflies — an heirloom from my father-in-law. Fred had grown up the son of an estate worker in Sussex, and had never lost the, er, bug for nature.

It wasn't long after that I noticed for the first time, for many years, how different the seasons are. The wind has little to break it in East Anglia, the roads – at that time – had too little on them to quickly turn snow to slush. In summer, wide open spaces, all just a few minutes walk or a five-



minute drive from home, plonked you down, helpless below huge gaping skies. For the next few years, I would be at home, juggling childcare and writing. Driving out to the Fens in those first few months, trying to orientate myself in this weird new environment, I was confronted with the deep, dark, dizzyingly brown folds of Fenland soil — and the flat, flat, really flat earth of this part of the globe.

This re-sensitizing to nature has had a profound effect on me. On a recent trip to China I realized, after a week or so, something was terribly wrong. I had not seen a single insect in days. Not an ant, not a cockroach, not a spider (ok I know they're not insects), hardly any birds. We started to look for them. No insects, very few birds.

Maybe I wasn't looking in the right direction.

Maybe I was there at the wrong time of year.

Maybe I was just distracted by all the other fascinating aspects of this fascinating land and people.

But the fact that I noticed the absence of a fly, and this unsettled me, demonstrates that twenty years on, my reconnection with the natural world is complete. My writing is, naturally, richer.