



## The Writer and Nature

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**I**DEAS OFTEN START OFF as unpromising seeds before they soar, like a sunflower, into a wide new sky. But, like seeds, you have to believe in them at their most tiny and unpromising, and this isn't always easy.

I found it particularly hard to plant any ideas during the first lockdown of the 2020 pandemic, with my family all at home. At this point, I had nowhere else to write, so after some soul-searching, I furloughed myself. I abandoned any attempt at writing and spent three weeks in my garden, yanking out thuggish plants and weeds. I planned, planted — and, to my amazement, saw a huge border of bright flowers appear. The physical transformation was overwhelming, but so was the internal effect: it was like I'd re-booted my mind.

As Sue Stuart-Smith writes in *The Well-Gardened Mind*, nature works on our senses in a number of ways. It provides a safe, reflective space — the opposite of an insistent smartphone. Trees and plants allow you to be happy or sad, with no demands or reactions. Gardening gives you physical tasks which steady the mind and bring it to a relaxed state.

Nature also offers a continual cycle of death and rebirth. My picture book *The Wonder Tree* is about a little owl who can't sleep, but it's also about the death of my dad. He was a keen gardener, and I'd found myself remembering him when I pruned roses or planted pots as he taught me to do. I expressed this in having Little Owl's mummy talk about her parents who used to live in the same, ancient tree as she and Little Owl do now:



‘Look’, she says — ‘Their stories are here...  
in the rings of a tree  
and the clasp of its roots  
and the kiss of its leaves.  
My parents felt the leaves fall, just like you.’

In strange pandemic times, I found this continual cycle comforting. As Stuart-Smith observes: ‘When things are precarious...it is with the promise of spring that nature vouchsafes us an answer.’ No matter what happens, the bulbs you plant in autumn will come up in spring. The rhythm of renewal provided a calm narrative to my spiralling thoughts.

Then I was offered a place to work, in the middle of our beautiful local park, and as I started to write again, I realised that nature is something to which I’ve continually turned. I’ve written outside with nothing other to look at than a field. I regularly write in my head on a run by the river. Outside, in nature, Knotted ideas unravel, phrases tumble through my mind; images become clear. I can say *yes* to floating seeds of thought: follow an idea and let it blossom.

And this time, I’d found I’d also planted some sweet, hidden seeds as well. Many of my new stories were rooted in the natural world. It was as if I’d been steeped in roses, trees and leaves, and they all began to appear in my writing. Nature had seeped into my mind. I’ll be careful now to never let it go.