

April

Lazy days

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Reviews editors: Margaret Bartlett, Maria Hodson



Dixie Egerickx, aged 14, plays Mary Lennox in Marc Munden's adaptation of *The Secret Garden*

BEHIND THE GARDEN WALL

British gardens share the limelight in this verdant big-screen adaptation

FILM

THE SECRET GARDEN

RELEASE DATE: POSTPONED UNTIL AUGUST

DIRECTOR: MARC MUNDEN



Set in the early 1900s, *The Secret Garden* tell the story of 10-year-old Mary (Dixie Egerickx), who is sent to live on her uncle's remote Yorkshire estate after her parents die in a cholera epidemic in India. Our traumatised, spiky heroine roams the grounds of Misselthwaite by day and investigates the strange noises of the manor at night. In her explorations she

discovers both the secret garden and a hidden cousin, whose unspecified condition renders him bed-bound.

Marc Munden directs this adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett's children's classic, and is relatively faithful to the unabashedly melodramatic tale. Mary's troubled, hunchbacked uncle (Colin Firth) is incapable of engaging with his emotions, while the steely housekeeper (Julie Walters) has better things to do than look after motherless children. In the absence of parental love, the youngsters find solace in the natural world, which provides the escape and healing they desperately need.

The cinematography is attractive, with the enchanted garden cleverly incorporating a patchwork of beautiful British locations. The mossy nooks of Puzzlewood in Gloucestershire appear alongside the exotic planting of Cornwall's Trebah Gardens, the romantic ruins of Fountains Abbey in North Yorkshire and the yellow laburnum arch in North Wales' Bodnant Gardens, among others.

It is an appealing film in many ways but the approach is slightly heavy-handed, with overblown visual effects detracting from nature's genuine wonders.

Maria Hodson, production editor

Photo: Shutterstock

BOOK JUST ANOTHER MOUNTAIN

BY SARAH JANE DOUGLAS
ELLIOT & THOMPSON, £14.99 (HB)



How often have you heard someone announce they'll write a book about their turbulent life? That Sarah Douglas actually did is unsurprising, considering her tendency to jump into challenges. It's a trait that her mother – whose premature death was the catalyst that catapulted Sarah into a spell of addiction and failed relationships – recognised and exhorted. "Promise me you'll never give up," she'd said.

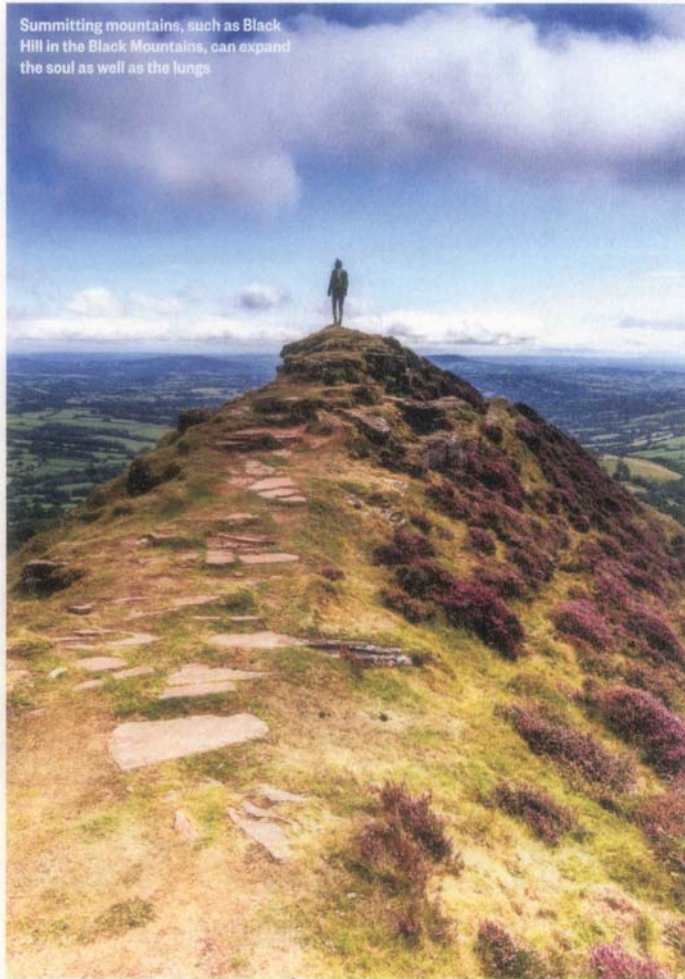
Sarah does not-giving-up well; she did not-giving-up drinking, shoplifting and a bad marriage well, for a while. Luckily, she was equally dogged when it came to caring for her family and walking, both of which became her salvation.

Having hiked with her mother, it was in the mountains that Sarah felt closest to her. The mountains lifted her spirits, no matter how traumatic her life otherwise was and no matter that they often threw danger her way. So it was for the mountains that she learned to keep her feet on the ground, navigate, respect and survive – transferable skills. Essentially, the mountains equipped her to orientate life and achieve its summits, too.

The book is neither literary-great, nor page-turner, but it's a real account of a strong, compassionate woman who just keeps going. It's a book about life and death and mountains, and you can't get more vital than that.

Julie Brominicks, nature writer

Summitting mountains, such as Black Hill in the Black Mountains, can expand the soul as well as the lungs



BOOK WANDERLAND

BY JINI REDDY, BLOOMSBURY, £16.99 (HB)



Jini Reddy is a city-dweller who wants to experience some of our wildest places. So far, so familiar. But *Wanderland* is extraordinary, unique even, standing apart from recent books about the British countryside.

There's little 'classic' nature writing about species and places, and Reddy modestly admits she can neither read a map nor identify wildflowers, birds or trees.

She is, she declares, lovesick: at times her prose has a dreamy, almost erotic charge. "I yearned with my whole being to hear nature's voice," she writes. "I wanted to be led by nature's invisible bond, the wildness you could not see."

When Reddy embarks on a quest that takes her from a Cornish pilgrim trail to Glastonbury, Holy Island and Iona, she is seeking the divine in the landscape. Attracted by mysticism, she meets shamans, herbalists, a landscape-zodiac enthusiast, a priestess of the Goddess, followers of the 'Old Ways', a tree whisperer.

This still-flourishing subculture has been overlooked by most nature writers of late.

Reddy's voice is also refreshing because she identifies as an outsider, a woman of colour brought up in Canada by Indian parents who had suffered under apartheid in South Africa. She is a brown person in a white landscape. "People I meet in the countryside often look at me a second longer than they need to," she says. We need more writers like Reddy to challenge the outdated, mono-ethnic view of rural Britain, where racism, sadly, is alive and well.

Ben Hoare, naturalist

BOOK THE ACCIDENTAL COUNTRYSIDE

BY MATT GAW, ELLIOTT & THOMPSON, £12.99 (HB)



The renowned environmentalist Chris Baines, Stephen Moss reports in *The Accidental Countryside*, once noted that "one way to improve the biodiversity of an arable field is to build a housing estate on it".

It's a funny line that has more than a grain of truth: farming in the UK has largely destroyed our wildlife, which increasingly finds refuge in the gardens of our urban areas, where flowers, shrubs, nestboxes and ponds provide food and shelter.

Human impacts can provide habitat in other ways, as Moss discovers. For peregrine falcons (pictured), tower blocks act as artificial cliff faces, while the proliferation of feral pigeons offers an inexhaustible food resource.

Lodge Hill, on Kent's Hoo Peninsula, became a no-go zone after unexploded military ordnance was buried there and it subsequently became covered in thick woodland. Now, it's the single most important site for breeding nightingales in the whole of the UK.

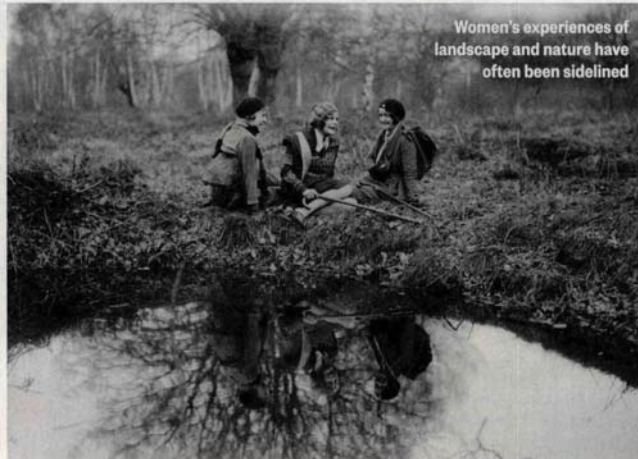
These sites and many more – Salisbury Plain, Carvey Island and the Iron Age broch on the island of Mousa to name just three – are all explored in great depth and are what Moss terms "the accidental countryside".

All of which raises an interesting problem, for as Moss says: "By definition, much of it is temporary, fleeting and uniquely vulnerable. No one cares for it; no one will report any damage; no one will fight to protect it". We certainly should if we want to retain all our natural heritage – and, perhaps now, more of us will.

James Fair,
naturalist



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Women's experiences of landscape and nature have often been sidelined

BOOK WRITING WILD

BY KATHRYN AALTO, TIMBER PRESS, £18.99 (PB)



When American-born landscape historian Kathryn Aalto moved to Britain, she delved passionately into nature writing, but found women's contributions were often sidelined from the canon. *Writing Wild* is her intervention: an urgent celebration of 25 British and American women who shape "the way we see landscape".

Readers hoping to broaden their nature collections will find much to enjoy. Aalto offers brief profiles of poets, natural historians, academics and gardeners, from Dorothy Wordsworth and Susan Fenimore Cooper – the first American nature writer – to Gretel Ehrlich's realist depictions of the American West and UK contemporaries such as Amy Liptrot. With each chapter, readers are offered a unique lens for seeing the natural world. Handy further-reading

lists dotted throughout broaden the scope even further.

Tracing or visiting many of the women's journeys and homes, Aalto compellingly links their biographies to her own: describing her childhood near the "long spine of the Sierra Nevada", in placid suburbs named for women, beneath mountains named for men. Ultimately, she argues that "perspective colours experience" and tackles both discomfort and delight: Leslie Marmon Silko writes of genocide and displacement, while Robin Wall Kimmerer finds wonder in nature's tenacity. Indigenous and African American writers such as Kimmerer, Lauret Savoy and Carolyn Finney offer some welcome diversity to this revised canon, although noticeably it comes solely from the American side.

Aalto is a generous reader, and this is a heartening book, granting attention to women who dared to write and ramble wild.

Jessica J Lee, author and environmental historian

RADIO REFORESTING BRITAIN

COSTING THE EARTH, 3.30PM ON 28 APRIL
BBC RADIO 4; ALSO ON BBC SOUNDS

The last general election saw all the main political parties make competing pledges on tree planting. Would it be 30 million trees from the Conservatives,

60 million from the Liberal Democrats or one billion from Labour?

But is planting on this scale really a good idea? Does it risk the loss of much-loved British landscapes; could foreign saplings bring in new diseases, and is there enough water to keep all those trees alive? Tom Heap explores the politics of planting.