

Under the Apple Tree



Nationality: Forester!

I have been trying to write an 'author bio'- a brief paragraph about me as a writer- and it's probably the most difficult paragraph I have ever written! But it set me thinking about why I write in the way I do. Often in the first person, my characters have an emotional inner life as they struggle to find their courage to overcome their fears and above all, to discover their true selves.

Now why is that? Why the focus on the inner life and overcoming fear? And why that tinge of magic that colours all of it? I think it has a lot to do with childhood. I was born and brought up in the Forest of Dean, an extraordinary place of deeply forested hills and steep valleys rising between the Wye and the Severn like the peaks of a magical kingdom in a storybook.

The Forest is culturally very different to the rest of Gloucestershire. I think of myself as a Forester before I think of being from Gloucestershire or indeed being British. When I left to go to university I realised just how different it was, and just how different I was. Other people have distances in their landscapes, in the forest you are enclosed by the trees. It makes for a fiercely self-sufficient, tight community, often suspicious and sometimes scornful of strangers. I had to leave the Forest to become my true self, open to the possibilities of life, the joy of personal growth, but it was the Forest that shaped my imagination.

It was a major personality in my childhood, with limitless possibilities, teeming with wildlife and history. I felt an affinity for the Celts and Romans who had lived there. The Roman Road near Blackpool Brook, the mysterious St Anthony's Well, the Scowl Holes and Roman workings were as much a part of our map as the towns and villages. I absorbed a sense of the landscape being ancient, secretive and powerful.

As a child (and still as a writer) I lived a great deal in my imagination. I could see faces in the trees and hear the voice of the Forest in the whispering of the branches shifting in the wind. My writing reflects that childhood in the Forest, I think. I write about the inner life of my characters, always they have fears to overcome, and are a journey of discovery about themselves. And the books hint at an underlying magic, something unseen but there, just beyond our reach. It was a writer's childhood.