

BOOKS

Plants have evolved into some extraordinary forms to compensate for their immobility, and in the 18th and 19th centuries people were far more excited than we are now about the strangeness of, for example, the ancient, towering sequoias of California or the peculiar Venus flytrap.

Today, we tend to see plants as either utilitarian or ornamental rather than amazing and awe-inspiring. The garden has become the main source of pleasure for the plant-lover while flowers, crops and trees have been reduced to being no more than the 'furniture of the planet'.

But plants should not be treated as 'mute servants in the great Enlightenment project of mastering nature', argues Richard Mabey.

The challenge he has set himself is to reignite our excitement about plants. He wants us to rediscover 'our ancient sense of wonder'.

Plants in this book don't just 'vegetate'; they are far more dynamic. They combat climate change; they clean up smog; they protect against floods; they inspire engineers. They are, Mabey insists, 'autonomous organisms'.

Mabey is one of Britain's finest nature writers. Reading him, I always know that I will discover

ANDREA WULF NATURE

The Cabaret Of Plants

Richard Mabey
Profile £20 ★★★★★

something new – a connection I never made before or a description so evocative that I enjoy rereading it again and again. A landscape in mid-March is 'still in brown tweed'; evolution is 'trial and error in slow motion'; churchyard yews have an 'aura of antiquity, distilled from sombre foliage and dark wood'.

He refers to the chapters as 'meditations'. Some are about particular plants – maize, cotton, samphire – others are about the influence of plants on writers and artists, from Wordsworth's daffodils to Van Gogh's olive trees. Each 'meditation' is a meandering stroll through memory, history, ecology and nature.

He loops, twists and turns in his storytelling and most of the time it works beautifully, so long as one just follows and lets Mabey take the lead.

Take the chapter on oaks, for example, which is about the many species of oak across the world –

from spindly, shrubby dwarfs to 60ft specimens. Oaks adapt to their environment. They are 'capable of morphing into almost every imaginable arboreal form'. They aren't record-breakers, as in the 'highest', the 'thickest' or the 'oldest', but they have been around us for a very long time. The planks of a 6,000-year-old prehistoric pathway, the Sweet Track in the Somerset marshes, were made of oak.

In this one chapter, Mabey covers Westminster Hall, the oak as an environmental mimic, acorns as food (and the beginning of centralised agriculture), the perfectly symmetrical oak tree in his garden (as if 'designed by Pythagoras'), notable oaks of Norfolk, the mysterious meaning of the Green Man carvings of foliate heads found in so many churches and John Ruskin.

And across the whole book, he takes his readers into nature, up hills and down into valleys. He zooms from the sweepingly panoramic to the smallest detail – from a bog filled with thousands of sundews that sparkle with 'minute and ephemeral rainbows' created by the light refracted in the sticky drops at the tip of their tiny tentacles to 'a landscape condensed into a single boulder'.

It's a marvellous journey that cannot fail to reawaken the reader's sense of wonder.

IT'S A FACT

The 'General Sherman' giant sequoia tree in California is the largest known single stem tree in the world. At 275ft tall and 79ft in girth, it's thought to be 2,000 years old.

THEY ALL
GO HAND
IN HAND
THROUGH
THEIR...

plantlife!



SEBASTIAN FAULKS

A PASSION FOR BOOKS

My childhood crush

The Hundred And One Dalmatians by Dodie Smith and *The Voyages Of Doctor Dolittle* by Hugh Lofting. I just liked animal stories, but I also found out later that they are very well written. I also liked pretty much anything with a witch in it.

My first love

David Copperfield by Charles Dickens and *Sons And Lovers* by DH Lawrence. They made me see how literature could operate beyond simple narrative, that the seas it could sail were boundless.

The one I dumped

I found *The Da Vinci Code* so badly written that I couldn't understand what was meant to be happening. *Why Are We In Vietnam?* by Norman Mailer is a tough read because of the super-dramatic speech in which it's written. Some novels have a sort of Becher's Brook you just have to get over.

The one that made me cry

Mr Knightley's declaration of love to Emma in Jane Austen's *Emma* has made me cry on each of the five occasions that I've read it. People see the book as being about her sentimental education, which it is; but Knightley also has to change to be worthy of the prize. This is him acknowledging that.

My perfect holiday fling

I don't understand the concept of a holiday read being a trashy book. It's the one time when you have free hours to concentrate. I remember first reading Proust on holiday in France in 1984; I still haven't quite read all of it, so *A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu* would be my choice.

The one I'm taking to bed now

The War In The West by James Holland, a reassessment of, among other things, German armed forces in 1939-41. It challenges national stereotypes and it's especially good on the operational aspects of war. *Where My Heart Used To Beat* by Sebastian Faulks is published by Hutchinson, priced £20

