

Inspired by gardens

ANNETTE SHAW asks three Devon writers how they feel about their gardens and how being in nature helps them access imagination and clear thinking

When it comes to writers and gardens as an aid to creativity, Agatha Christie set the bar very high. There must have been a muse at every turn. In the book *Agatha Christie at Home*, author Hilary Macaskill describes Greenway as: “A gracious creamy-coloured mansion, and partially screened by its mature trees and wild woodland gardens which rumble down to the river’s edge, it is, though very visible, a remote and private place.” Whilst few people would have such extensive grounds, Devon’s writers still find that their outdoor space is central to the plot.

Jonathan Walker, military history author and documentary advisor

“The garden reminds me that when it comes to the seasons of life or repairing a ravaged landscape, the natural world is ever resourceful and resilient. In my line of work, apart from the sheer peacefulness of this place, the restorative aspect is very reassuring,” says Jonathan.

Just out of Sidmouth town centre and with the backdrop of a thatched Devon longhouse it’s the archetypal English garden. With a chilled Sauvignon Blanc in hand, it’s pretty perfect. There are several seating areas and we’re on a higher level by the summer house kitted out as a writing studio. “In the warmer months I’ll come out here at 5am, look at the scenery, and start work. As the garden wakes up I see extraordinary things from wildlife to the changing light.”

War history was always a great



Jonathan Walker finds peace in his East Devon garden

interest in my family. So, in a corner of “forever England,” it was a stimulating and slightly surreal contrast to be discussing conflict and the complex emotions felt by those keeping the home fires burning.

With the anniversary of my father’s passing on my mind. I mentioned a poignant moment when I’d stood with him on Pegasus Bridge in Normandy. In a bizarre twist of synchronicity, as if to confirm the interconnectedness of people and places, an elderly gentleman arrived in the garden. It was Jonathan’s uncle Roy Maxwell, a day early - by mistake! Now age 96, he was with 4 Commando in World War II. On D-Day, as the allied troops landed on Sword Beach, he’d actually been on the bridge with Piper Bill Millin as he played his bagpipes whilst the forces advanced.

Jonathan is a member of the British Commission for Military History and Honorary Research Fellow in War Studies at the University of Birmingham. He

has written and contributed to ten books and lectures on 20th Century conflict. Jonathan has recently featured in BBC’s *Portillo’s State Secrets*, *Heroes of War* and *The Last Battle of the British Empire*. He was historical advisor for the six-part major drama, *The Last Post* aired on BBC1 in 2017. He was also recently one of the judges for the British Television Documentary Awards.

ADEN INSURGENCY - The Savage War in Yemen 1962-1967. Published by Pen and Sword Books. Paperback £14.99

Jill Treseder, novelist

When Churchill bought Chartwell he is reported as saying that he bought a view and a house came with it. “Oh, that’s what we did!” exclaims Jill Treseder.

We were in her courtyard garden overlooking a heavenly view towards the River Dart with the village of Galmpton beyond. Agatha Christie’s former home Greenway is just out of sight but as Jill says: “I feel her spirit is in the air. No wonder this is a



Jill Treseder’s garden looks across to the River Dart



Jill at work in her garden

creative corner of Devon.” To date, Jill has under her belt four novels, one novella and one non-fiction.

It’s 22 years since Jill and her husband moved to Dittisham. “We rejected the property initially but once we’d walked through the gate we were smitten. It’s such a lovely place to come back to, wiping out a busy world.” Even on a cloudy day it’s a captivating panorama as Jill explains. “For me, the water is a vehicle for the imagination. It’s head space and curiously this is where I come to write longhand. As if everything slows down. It’s what I like to do if I get stuck or if I have to get into the mind of a character at a life changing moment. Then, of course, the first edit happens in transferring it to my laptop.”

Jill often starts the day by writing a haiku – a short contemplative verse based on

the Japanese style that invariably reflects nature. “It concentrates the mind and we’re very aware of the seasons here, be it the wind or the changing colours as woodland meets the river. A copy editor once remarked that to truly succeed, an idea must be given wings Where better than watching butterflies in my garden?”

The Hatmaker’s Secret
Published by SilverWood Books.
Paperback £9.99

Bijan Omrani,
classicist and author

Bijan’s garden is in Shute, East Devon. At first glance, it’s best described as Capability Brown meets combat zone.

Author of many books including *Caesar’s Footprints: Journeys to Roman Gaul and Asia Overland: Tales of Travel on the Trans-Siberian and Silk Road*, Bijan strides to his purpose-built

ABOVE:
Colourful roses in
Jill’s garden

writing cave through acres of parkland rich with history. With views over Iron Age forts, sites of conflict between Celts and Saxons, all traversed by Roman roads, he must have one of the most atmospheric work spaces in Devon. Centuries later, during the Wars of the Roses, Lord Bonville and Thomas de Courtenay, 5th Earl of Devon, fought at the Battle of Clyst Heath. Shute was then pillaged by the Earl. And that’s before you consider the house. Bijan is working on the theory that the interior theatre, complete with murals, could have links to Dickens.

“Yes, the grounds are rich with history,” says Bijan. “Living here gives me a sense of connection and fuels a passion to tell those stories.” In 2019 the garden has a beautiful calmness with occasional reminders that this is now a family home. I asked Bijan what it meant to him to live here. Totally in tune with his surroundings, he points out the numerous shades of green rising to the skyline and the curve of an oak. “It’s such a deep bond. Silent but not silent. I hear the sound of the crickets and at dusk, the owls. I watch progress in the vegetable patch and the gentle movement of time. All this helps me to think, to create a more poetic side to my work, whilst maintaining reader accessibility, clarity and integrity of subject.” ♦
Caesar’s Footprints: Journeys to Roman Gaul Published by Head of Zeus. Hardback £25

BELOW:
Bijan’s writing
cave looks out
onto parkland

