

Walking the walk

The landscape of the South Downs was the inspiration for Arundel author Gina Challen's brooding collection of short stories, finds Simone Hellyer

With two lively border collies to care for, Arundel-based writer Gina Challen spends a great deal of time walking the South Downs. It's no wonder, then, that her debut collection of short stories was inspired by the landscape that surrounds her.

Chalk Tracks is a collection of 13 short stories that are rooted in and inspired by the South Downs, from Bignor across to Halnaker and then on to Chichester, Arundel and the sea.

"For me, my collection has the shape of the Downs, so we go up and over and then out across to the sea. That's how I see my part of the South Downs, so when I'm at the top of the hills I look out and see the strip of water in the distance. When you write a collection of short stories or poems how they lie together is very important as there needs to be cohesion," Gina explains.

Despite their shared location, each of the stories is very different: from Lillian who helps people to die; Ruth who encounters an unsettling stranger on the towpath; Kathy obsessing over a painting; Robyn putting her trust in a fox; and Mags, a forager who takes the things he wants. All of the stories, however, were dreamed up by Gina while on one of her daily walks on the Downs.

"I might have an idea about a person or an occupation and nothing happens, it just sits there. And then one day I'll be walking and I'll see something, like a dead fox for instance, and suddenly things join together and they become the story. I just see an image and then create the world around it," she says.

Some of the stories in the collection also shine a light on traditional local trades such as broom-making, horsemanship and beekeeping. For these Gina drew on personal knowledge and experience as well as conducting some local research. When writing *The Beekeeper's Daughter*, a poignant tale of an elderly woman struggling with independent living, Gina had a go at beekeeping herself. She says: "I went to a local beekeeper and I felt the weight of the supers to see how hard it would be for an old lady to lift those. There's a Sussex expression as well that says if you're a beekeeper you have to tell the bees that you won't be returning. So if somebody dies and nobody tells the bees that their owner has died they will swarm."

The undercurrent of loneliness that is evident in *The Beekeeper's Daughter* is a running theme in the collection of stories as is the complexity of family relationships. But as Gina did not initially write the stories as a collection, she did not spot some of the themes until she read them all together. One theme that was very evident, however, was that of people moving away and returning to the area, often from London.

"It is London that you go to from down here, always, as it is our first big city. My publishers were a little bit confused about that because they're based in Scarborough and they couldn't understand my obsession with London. And then when they really looked at the map they understood that it would be London that people go to," says Gina, who originally hails from London herself. "But mainly I think the stories are about people

on the margins, which I think is how short stories work best; somebody that's slightly different and walking on an edge," she adds.

Gina took up writing quite late in life, completing a BA in creative writing at Chichester University in 2004 and later giving up her job as an insurance broker to do an MA in 2012.

"I nearly went to do a BA three times, but life came along and said that it wasn't the right time. But then I went to an open evening at the university and spoke to one of the lecturers and I just thought to myself that I have to do this now. So yes, I was a very late starter," she says.

Although she is now working on her first novel, it is short stories that Gina still loves best, with another collection on the way. Speaking about what she enjoys about the genre, Gina says: "It's very, very hard to write a good short story, but even when it's at it's worst and I can't grasp it, I still love it. They are really engaging to write and if you do get bored, you haven't just wasted 40,000 words. Plus, you can keep them for later and go back in two years' time and fix what was wrong with it. I know that because it happened to me a couple of months ago."

It is possible to recreate some of the walks in Gina's stories, who had just returned from the route she walked while writing *The Broom Maker* when she spoke to *Sussex Life*. But for her next collection Gina plans to venture further afield – or at least as far as East Sussex. ♦

Good to know

Chalk Tracks RRP £9.99
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