

Finding Magic in Nature

By Susan Camp

Christmas this year was a quiet one at our house—no far-flung family members returning home for an annual visit; no days of menu planning and cookie baking; no December trips to Washington, D.C. or Boston to see the “Christmas Revels”. Just the two of us at home with the cats, our Christmas tree, and the quiet of short midwinter days and long, cold nights.

A few moments of relief from the monotony of solitude brightened the season for us. The days of unseasonably warm weather allowed us to join other Daffodil Club members to plant bulbs at various locations in the county. Jim and I can’t wait to see the the bursts of yellow, white, and pink when spring arrives.

Our son, Joe, and granddaughter, Emma, drove down from Alexandria to deliver Christmas presents in person. We hadn’t seen them since before the COVID-19 shutdown. We spoke to our daughter-in-law, Liz in Hollywood, Florida and our son, Mike, aboard a ship anchored off the coast of Hawaii since October.

We spent a quiet Christmas, not a melancholy one. Jim and I always have several projects in progress at any given time: gardening, home improvements, crafts, and personal interests and activities.

My favorite pastime is reading. I usually have three or four books going at one time, fiction and nonfiction. I received four books this Christmas, two of which are of particular interest to me as a gardener and a steward of the natural world. Both of these books have changed the way I look at nature. From now on, every walk in the woods or hour spent working in the garden will be an adventure, an opportunity to examine closely the relationships between the plant and animal inhabitants of a specific place.

“The Hidden Life of Trees” burst onto the scientific and literary worlds in 2016. The author, Peter Wohlleben, spent more than twenty years as a professional forester with the German forestry commission. His responsibilities included examining trees for injury or disease and assessing their market value.

After some years, his interest in trees changed from their marketability to a growing wonder at the ability of trees to communicate with and nourish one another through their roots and to repel insect pests and animals by releasing noxious chemicals to drive away the invaders. Wohlleben explains how fungi provide a kind of mycelial internet that allows trees of a species to communicate with each other. In other chapters, he examines tree reproduction, aging, and demise. Health problems faced by city trees and adaptation to a changing environment are covered, too. In the final chapter, he looks at the contributions of trees to the health of the planet and well-being of humans and all other species.

The second book is equally fascinating, but in a different dimension. It is a small book of poems called “The Lost Spells” (2020), written by Robert Macfarlane and beautifully illustrated by Jackie Morris. Each poem is an ode to an animal, tree, or a flower, accompanied by striking watercolor paintings that reflect the content and meaning of each poem.

Macfarlane is an acclaimed British nature writer and poet. He has written several award-winning books about the lost wild places of Britain. His other books include “The Old Ways” (2012), “Landmarks” (2015), and “The Lost Words” (2017).

Jackie Morris is a prolific, British writer and illustrator. She also collaborated with Macfarlane on “The Lost Words”.

Carry this little book with you when you visit your garden or walk in the woods. Speak the words aloud. Look for signs of fox and jay and woodpecker. Make a daisy crown. Listen to the wind blowing through the treetops. Let nature speak to you.

Some of the flora and fauna are native to Britain, but simply substitute the name of a tree or bird or animal that lives on your land. The magic is the same.

May you find magic in nature in 2021. Happy New Year!

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