

Book Review

The Garden Against Time: In Search of a Common Paradise

By Olivia Laing

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Olivia Laing writes with fervour and conviction about the importance of gardens and the practice of gardening in her richly woven new book *The Garden Against Time*. The 16th century East Suffolk house she shares with the Cambridge academic and poet Ian Patterson, and which they purchased just before the latest pandemic and ensuing lockdowns, adjoins a fine garden. Its sequence of rooms was created by the former owner Mark Rumary, who was a garden designer for Notcutts, a well known nursery. Rumary was gay “when it wasn’t good to be gay” and he is the first queer presence in a book full of queerness, from Derek Jarman and Cedric Morris to Laing’s own mother.

Her mother’s separation from her husband, subsequent lesbian relationship and a move to a commuter village after she was outed marked Laing’s youth: “We were out of place, definitively strange. Two adult women, two small girls did not constitute a family in those relentlessly homophobic years.” Queerness provides critical distance from society’s norms and forms, though, and having been pulled in the wake of her mother’s lesbianism clearly contributed to the clarity of vision and association everywhere evident in the text. It probably also underpins a crusading sense of rightness and justice which also presumably stems from her straitened circumstances and unstable housing through much of her adult life. There is a kinship here, too, with the other great writer of East Anglia, W.G. Sebald, whose work she references and whose paths she treads. While she doesn’t possess the oceanic sense of melancholy Sebald’s work imparts, she does exhibit the great range of literary and historic knowledge which is a large part of what makes his work so rich and compelling. She writes with more flourish than Sebald, and the ornamentation of her language intertwines in every paragraph like the vines and flowers in a William Morris pattern (more about Morris later), but it is never overwrought.

Using the development of her own garden as a frame to riff through history, she tells many stories familiar to landscape. She repeats narratives about the influence of the paintings of Claude Lorraine on English landscapes and the use of the Claude glass, the view through the lens of which would make any landscape painterly. These stories sound fresh in these pages and are invigorated by the context she gives them and by her fine prose: “Here and there,” she writes of a Claude landscape painting, “the last light

catches, beatifying a leaf, a branch, adding to the sense that the human drama is subordinate, almost inconsequential, compared to the majesty of the theatre in which it occurs." Laing's sense of wonder is tempered by her knowledge of hardship and burnished by her humility and sincere gratitude to the lights of literature and the makers of gardens celebrated in these pages. She also abundantly displays honesty, sincerity, care, and compassion—and it is tonic to be immersed in these qualities when they have so thoroughly been extracted from public life in recent years. Indeed, there is such a gulf between the commitment she displays and the enforcement of the toxic fantasies that underpin present day capitalism.

Along with Claude she turns to John Clare, John Milton, Horace Walpole, Derek Jarman at Prospect Cottage [<https://www.creativefolkestone.org.uk/prospect-cottage/>], and Cedric Morris at Benton End [<https://bentonend.co.uk/>] among many others. John Clare in particular is presented with such sympathy that he feels alive in the text. Laing displays incredible verve and pacing in describing his waning years. This comes all in a rush in a memorable paragraph which contains the line, "Clare, already high-strung, was sometimes unstrung altogether. Health failing, mood low, troubled by thoughts of death, pursued by blue devils, dreaming three nights of hell."

For Laing the garden is not purely a place of escape and romantic fantasy—it is shot through with the troubles of daily life and the injustices accrued through practices of bounding and accumulating. Her anger at the enclosure of common land and dispossession of the peasantry for the 'improvement' and emparkment of landed estates is paired with an unvarnished and often gruesome account of the way many of these estates were used to greenwash their genesis in the horrors of the transatlantic trade in slaves. There is a lesson here, too, that the everyday pleasure gardens provide is not diminished by the dark histories so many of them possess. In fact, the practice of gardening is seen here as a corrective, and she writes admiringly of Fergus Garrett's work in encouraging astonishing levels of biodiversity at Great Dixter [<https://www.greatdixter.co.uk/>] She shows that gardening need not be a selfish act, and that the hand of the gardener might have more to offer to ecologies than "austere models of rewilding" and that gardens might come to be seen as possessing a radical openness to the world rather than closure, each opening onto "a great network: a quilt made by many hands, spread out across cities and villages, encompassing private gardens, parks, allotments, balconies and verges, every square different, each one sustaining and supporting life." Here she frames the garden not as a paradise, but a utopia: Great Dixter was "the first utopia I'd encountered in all my searching, in which self-expression and the pursuit of beauty truly served the commons, instead of sabotaging it."

Here too the labour of gardening is visible, necessary, and part of what makes us simultaneously human and part of nature. It's an opportunity to pull back the curtain from what Raymond Williams calls "the magical extraction of the curse of labour" which, in a passage discussing the way in which the sunken fence called the ha-ha allows a seamless

and seemingly effortless connection from tended landscape to recruit the whole countryside into the garden. Here, she says, “there is no active agent, no individual carrying out the work of levelling, mowing, rolling. It just ... happens, passively, as if ordained.”

Her writing is passionately political, and she is able to deftly work between history and current injustices. She writes of events unfolding as she gardens, “One era does not replicate another, but I’m sure Trump’s border wall had sharpened my feelings about the improver’s park and what it stood for. When the language of exclusion is no longer coded but spoken unambiguously, one becomes increasingly alert to its disguised forms too.” She says she was slow to warm to the work of the great socialist designer William Morris—who so often spoke unambiguously for justice and beauty—but that warmth grows to hotness in her text in a passage that positively vibrates with enthusiasm, and which is really necessary to quote in full.

It’s this deep, infectious wistfulness for something better that animates his political and aesthetic visions. Both are saturated with longing for plenitude, for pleasure, for something that is glimpsed around the corner, that once existed and might come again. Is it love? Is it sex? Is it a new social order? What is the endlessly renewable Edenic cargo of which Morris dreams? I think what his gardens really stand for is fellowship: a humming, thrumming togetherness that transcends not only sexual desire but the human world itself. Call it a garden state: a cross-species ecology of astounding beauty and completeness, never static, always in motion, progressive and prolific. I want to live there, and the world won’t survive much longer if we don’t. It hasn’t come to pass, this fertile revolution, and yet every time you look into a garden, the invitation is still there.

What a gift such a paragraph provides, and what motivation to pitch in with shovels and rakes and make a better future. Laing flings open the garden gate and invites in the world with all its pains, filthy secrets, abundances, and pleasures. Amid the glut of romantic idylls in the canon of garden writing this is a bold and brave narrative that shows us how much more appreciation of everything is possible when the fantasies are all washed away and the spaces of our lives are presented with erudite frankness and utopian ambition.

An extract from *The Garden Against Time* has been published in *The Guardian* at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/apr/27/safe-haven-or-symbol-of-injustice-what-our-gardens-tell-us-about-the-world-we-live-in>

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