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The Landscape of The Shadow Year

The Shadow Year began as a single image: a simple stone cottage standing abandoned on the shores of a lake. I don't know where this image came from, but it dropped into my mind like a pebble and created such a ripples of ideas that it wasn't long before a story had formed in my head. It was all there but for one missing detail: where was this place?

I'd never spent more than a weekend in the Peak District – two beautiful but hazy days at a friend's wedding – but as soon as I thought of the area, I felt a tingle of excitement. Looking at maps and books, and studying blogs and tourism websites, I could see the area possessed the exact qualities required for my story: barren moorland, high escarpments, rural farmland, sweeping valleys and misty woodland. It didn't seem like too much of a stretch to imagine a group of naïve students stumbling upon an abandoned cottage hidden within a fictional Peak District valley. It didn't seem impossible that they would fall in love with such a place and convince themselves that they could live in isolation for a year, farming and foraging for their provisions. It didn't seem so far-fetched to imagine them convinced that here was their paradise lost. Although, as they quickly discover, it's far easier to talk about lofty ideals than it is to live by them.

I wrote the novel in a fury, with the Peak District setting proving to be a gift. It formed a real and solid scaffold upon which to pin the action of the book and (being a great believer in that we are all, in some way, products of our environment) it even began to dictate the characters' behaviour and actions, and shift the story in a new and intriguing direction. Some of the book's most dramatic plot twists came from the opportunities the landscape offered. Very quickly, I found the cottage morphing from a place of refuge and healing into something more far more unsettling and eerie. As Tom, one of my characters ruminates: there are just some places that feel as though something has happened there.

I was thousands of miles away at my desk in Sydney as I wrote the novel, and for twelve long months I hankered for the Peaks and an opportunity to immerse myself physically in the landscape I was writing about. Frustratingly, when I was at last able to return to the UK, it was too late. *The Shadow Year* was at the printers; I couldn't change or edit another word. But still, I couldn't resist. So in April of this year I arrived in Mappleton (a small village a mile or so outside Ashbourne) with my family, the day after a huge and unexpected snowfall. It was freezing. We drove through snowdrifts towering higher than the car and heard startled spring lambs bleating protest at their mothers, their young wool coats matted with snow and icicles. We couldn't get wood onto the fire quick enough to warm ourselves and wore every item of clothing we'd packed, wobbling round the place like Weebles. We read books, played scrabble, took the kids sledging, ate cake,

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drank tea. It was lovely, but beneath the cosy atmosphere I could feel worry brewing. Had I got the details of *The Shadow Year* right? Had I connected with the spirit of the place? Had I made the winter chapters convincingly cold enough? And worst of all, could an abandoned cottage like the one I had written about even exist in a location like this? Wandering the aisles of Waitrose in Ashbourne, my story began to feel a little far-fetched ... preposterous even.

It was our fourth morning in the Peaks when I spotted the watercolour on the wall of our accommodation: a depiction of a simple stone cottage standing amidst a copse of trees. The painting was entitled, 'The Magic Cottage'. I couldn't stop staring at it. It looked so like the place I had first imagined all those months ago. I leafed through the visitor's book and found a page of recommended walks, one handily entitled, 'Magic Cottage Walk' and I can only think my excitement was infectious because soon enough we were all bundled up and striking out into the snow to see if we could find the scene in the painting.

We crunched our way up a steep hill, our breath ballooning before us as snowflakes drifted silently from the sky. Any hint of a walking track was hidden beneath the snow, so we went purely on instinct, weaving our way up between trees, following the loping tracks of a hare for a little while. It was hard to believe we'd find anything at the top of the hill, but sure enough, as we came to rest at an old stile, there it was: a ramshackle grey stone building, cut off from the rest of the world, nestled within a copse of bare-branched trees, its windows and doors nothing but ominous dark squares. It was derelict ... totally abandoned. As we drew closer, a flock of crows took off from one of the trees, wheeling around the rooftop. It was breathtakingly eerie and so close to the fictional cottage that had occupied my mind all these months, that for a moment it was as if I was Lila ... or Kat. Something happened here. There it was, my book, made real, and it felt like the most startling kind of synchronicity to see something pulled from my imagination standing there, as solid as stone.

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