



Weatherland: Writers & Artists Under English Skies

By Alexandra Harris

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A lively look at the English literary and artistic responses to the weather from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Keats and Ian McEwan

In a sweeping panorama, *Weatherland* allows us to witness England's cultural climates across the centuries. Before the Norman Conquest, Anglo-Saxons living in a wintry world wrote about the coldness of exile or the shelters they had to defend against enemies outside. The Middle Ages brought the warmth of spring; the new lyrics were sung in praise of blossoms and cuckoos. Descriptions of a rainy night are rare before 1700, but by the end of the eighteenth century the Romantics had adopted the squall as a fit subject for their most probing thoughts.

The weather is vast and yet we experience it intimately, and Alexandra Harris builds her remarkable story from small evocative details. There is the drawing of a twelfth-century man in February, warming bare toes by the fire. There is the tiny glass left behind from the Frost Fair of 1684, and the Sunspan house in Angmering that embodies the bright ambitions of the 1930s. Harris catches the distinct voices of compelling individuals. "Bloody cold," says Jonathan Swift in the "slobbery" January of 1713. Percy Shelley wants to become a cloud and John Ruskin wants to bottle one. *Weatherland* is a celebration of English air and a life story of those who have lived in it. 60+ illustrations

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Editorial Review

Review

“[An] edifying and rigorous tour of English literature and painting in terms of its depiction of weather. [Harris] is a brilliant guide and makes a persuasive case for examining how art looks at the skies. With her keen eye for detail and astonishing ability to trace connections, Harris will change how readers view their relationships to art and the world around them. The sumptuous reproductions of artworks are worth the price of admission all by themselves.” (Publishers Weekly)

“Fascinating... An ambitious, sweeping survey of British art and literature as seen through the lens of clouds, skies, sunshine and drizzle. Carrying her immense knowledge lightly, never emerging as didactic or pedantic, [Alexandra Harris] takes us across sodden fields and frosty meadows, through thick mist and into the English mind. Harris collects examples everywhere—from plays and architecture, from poems and elegies and paintings, but also from diaries and letters. She’s a nonpareil guide and *Weatherland* is a great achievement, wide-ranging but not confusing, packed with details yet clearly focused [and] with more than 60 well-integrated illustrations the book is also beautifully produced.” (The New York Times Book Review)

“My thinking about people and weather has been inspired from the first by Virginia Woolf,” writes Harris, whose *Romantic Moderns* won the Guardian First Book Award in 2010. In *Weatherland*, Harris captures the moods and influence of weather from Roman Britain to today’s climate change in lyrical prose that slides easily from historic moments to 21st Century insights. She gives us Tacitus, writing “the climate is foul, with frequent rains and mists,” and Beowulf’s “wild weather”. She traces the influence and revelations of weather through the work of artists and writers like Daniel Defoe, “cataloguer of the storm-strewn world”, who wrote his first book about a devastating 1703 hurricane, and Charlotte Brontë, who “breathed the lightning of *Wuthering Heights* with a sense of awe”. *Weatherland* is swift moving and brilliantly written.” (BBC.com)

“Fascinating... Harris traces the way we describe the weather because those descriptions become our metaphors: sunny gloomy, cloudy, cold, bitter—a lexicon that is as much about ourselves as it is the weather we inhabit” (Art Desk)

“[The book] is beautifully produced, with scores of crisp, evocative illustrations... her commentary... is unfailingly brilliant and revealing...an utterly superb, enchanting work” (Choice)

About the Author

Alexandra Harris is a cultural historian and writer. She is the recipient of the Guardian First Book Award and a Somerset Maugham Award for *Romantic Moderns*. She is a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Liverpool and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. She lives in Oxford and Liverpool.

Users Review

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Rebecca Goza:

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