

Autumn Reads Resource Pack

The Town Reads Modern Nature by Derek Jarman

Introduction

This November, Creative Folkestone are delighted to present a brand-new festival for these strange times. Autumn Reads will be a 4-day celebration of Derek Jarman's *Modern Nature*.

From Thursday 19 to Sunday 22 November join us as we come together for a series of events and activities that explore the themes of Jarman's diaries. Autumn Reads: Modern Nature will explore ideas of memoir, art, activism, gardening and more in creative ways.

In the build up to Autumn Reads we are encouraging everyone to read *Modern Nature*. Dive into Derek Jarman's diaries with us ready for the Festival in November. In this handy resource pack, we will give you some extra information so you can get to know Derek Jarman a bit better.

Who was Derek Jarman?

Derek Jarman, (born 31 January 1942—died 19 February 1994) was a filmmaker, stage designer, diarist, artist, gardener, activist, author, and one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century British culture. He was educated at the University of London and at the Slade School of Art in the early 1960s and was part of a group of young painters, including Patrick Procter and David Hockney.

Jarman is well known as a filmmaker and has a back catalogue that includes both experimental shorts and full-length features. Figures such as Tilda Swinton, Toyah Willcox, Julian Sands, Joanna Hogg, Sean Bean and John Maybury had their first opportunities under Jarman's direction. *Blue* (1993), which was made when Jarman was nearly blind, is one of his most iconic works and featured an unchanging plain blue screen and a spoken narrative of the director's own thoughts and feelings about his battle with AIDS.



After establishing an international reputation as a film director, Jarman continued painting. He was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 1986, primarily for his achievements as a filmmaker, and for *Caravaggio*. Caravaggio's life and art were a source of inspiration and his research led to the creation of volumes of sketchbooks, storyboards, and paintings.

Jarman was outspoken about homosexuality, his public fight for gay rights, and his personal struggle with AIDS. In 1986, he was diagnosed as HIV positive and discussed his condition in public. His move to Prospect Cottage came shortly after his HIV diagnosis and the garden he built and lived in became a refuge for calm and creation in the face of his uncertain future.

What is Prospect Cottage?

Derek Jarman bought Prospect Cottage while visiting Dungeness, Kent, in 1986. He was at the peak of his creative powers - and it was here where he was to film *The Garden*, write the book *Modern Nature* and create a celebrated garden - but was also suffering terribly



following his HIV diagnosis and subsequently AIDS-related illness. The cottage quickly became a source of inspiration, a sanctuary, a place for collaborations with fellow artists, and a creative hub where his artistic practices came together.

Prospect Cottage is filled with over 40 works of art by Derek Jarman (and also by friends such as Maggi Hambling, John Maybury, Richard Hamilton and Gus Van Sant) as well as props from films such as *Caravaggio* and *The Tempest*. It has been lovingly cared for and preserved since his death.

The garden Derek Jarman created from the shingle beach at Prospect Cottage is internationally renowned. It is a garden without boundaries, planted by him with the help of Howard Sooley and filled with objects and sculptural arrangements crafted from the rocks and driftwood found washed up on the shore.

In 2020, Art Fund, Tate and Creative Folkestone ran a successful campaign to save Prospect Cottage for the nation. Creative Folkestone will become the custodians of Prospect Cottage, with income drawn from a permanent endowment to cover maintenance of building and garden, as well as a residency programme for artists, academics, writers, gardeners, filmmakers, and others interested in Jarman and his work.

What is Modern Nature?

As well as being an artist and filmmaker, Derek Jarman is also well known as a diarist having published two memoirs.

In 1986 Derek Jarman discovered he was HIV positive and decided to make a garden at his cottage on the barren coast of Dungeness.

Facing an uncertain future, he nevertheless found solace in nature, growing all manner of plants. While some perished beneath wind and



sea-spray others flourished, creating brilliant, unexpected beauty in the wilderness.

Modern Nature is both a diary of the garden and a meditation by Jarman on his own life: his childhood, his time as a young gay man in the 1960s, his renowned career as an artist, writer and filmmaker. It is at once a lament for a lost generation, an unabashed celebration of gay sexuality, and a devotion to all that is living.

Book club Questions

To help you explore the themes of Modern Nature in more depth, we spoke to Stuart Sheach from the Quarterhouse Book Group who has offered a few starters for 10...

1. How important is gardening and growing plants and vegetables in our lives?
2. Derek Jarman's AIDS diagnosis was a death sentence in the early nineties. What role does Jarman's garden at Prospect Cottage play in relation to Jarman's illness and to the 1990's AIDS pandemic in general?
3. Have gardens become a new class defining criterion particularly in cities like London where many people had little escape from their 4 walls during the peak of this summer's lockdown. Should a garden now be considered a basic standard of living for all of us or, are gardens and gardening the insufferable preserve of an uptight middle class?
4. How influential to 'Modern Nature', and indeed Jarman's rebellious creativity, was his time at boarding school and at the various outposts of the British Empire?
5. 'Modern Nature' depicts the UK in 1990/1991 from a gay man's perspective. Has society improved its understanding of sexuality or are there now different 'categories' of 'outsiders' who can claim a similar sense of 'otherness' that Jarman felt in his time?
6. 'Brown shoes and florid waistcoats!' How far, in Mark Twain's words, do 'clothes make the man' both in 'Modern Nature' and society at large?
7. In the second half of 'Modern Nature', Jarman's illness is described with a great deal of stoicism. How far does Jarman's description of the weather and the elements mirror his own deteriorating health?
8. How does 'Modern Nature' speak to us in times of a pandemic, lock downs and social distancing?
9. Prospect Cottage was Jarman's idyll and fortification against the outside world. Can you name other literary idylls or indeed the ingredients necessary for your own dream home and garden?
10. The naughty crow upstages Jarman several times in the book. Discuss the importance of not taking yourself too seriously!

Find out more about the life and work of Derek Jarman

To help you dive deeper into the life and work of Derek Jarman, here are a few additional resources:

READ

New York Times article:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/movies/derek-jarman-garden-prospect-cottage.html>

New Yorker article:

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/reading-derek-jarman-is-strangely-consoling>

Olivia Laing on Jarman:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/27/olivia-laing-derek-jarman-modern-nature>

Where to begin with Derek Jarman

<https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/where-begin-derek-jarman>

Tony Peake: Derek Jarman: A Biography

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/195038.Derek_Jarman

WATCH

Mark Kermode on Jarman:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LL8RjxEDHuY>

Short film on Jarman and his garden:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbGbT5uVUHQ>

Tate Shots: Jarman and his short films:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ldHePjYqu-A>

Great Gardens:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orNvcliKlnY>

Documentary on Jarman

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAvyj-dZS0>