

## BOOK REVIEW

### Marc Hamer: A Triptych of Wisdom

Sue J. Wright

*Seed to Dust* is a cross between a gardening manual, full of lots of fascinating facts about different plants and how to propagate them, and about the life-cycles of insects like aphids and ants, a memoir, and a Zen-oriented poetry book. And it is a book to cherish and keep dipping into.

Hamer writes in prose, but it is poetry. His life is one of hard, basic, earthy work, but there is a spirituality in it. He is a brilliant observer, and has a way with words and the knack of finding unique and evocative metaphors (although at times he becomes repetitive). I felt drawn into the garden he tended for over 20 years – becoming familiar with its different ‘rooms’ and the cycles of its year. I also became very drawn to the garden’s enigmatic owner – liking her for her eccentricity and occasional small acts of kindness, curious about her story – which Hamer did not know. I was touched by the relationship between these two rather solitary beings – their ‘long-term and thin communication’ framed within short, polite transactions when ‘Miss Cashmere’ came out into the garden, dressed in a stylistic, old-fashioned way and armed with her newspaper, cigarettes and lighter on her way to sit in the summerhouse. It was her garden. She owned it. It was Marc’s garden, for he had lovingly created and tended it for so long. And it

belonged to neither of them, as he made clear. It was a part of nature.

Hamer knows that instinctively – ‘When I prune a tree I become the tree. When I water the dahlias I become the dahlia.’ He teaches us – if we take time to read between the words – about our embeddedness in nature, inconsequential but interconnected parts of it that, like the cherry tree blossom in Hamer’s own small garden, will flower and fall. He teaches us how to live a contented life, to stay simple, focused on the moment ahead, not fretting about past or future and not allowing our attention to stay with negative emotions like anger.

You could also describe *Seed to Dust* as a love story – Hamer’s love for his wife Peggy, with many descriptions of their comfortable rubbing-along-together daily routine; his love for his employer. The psychotherapist in me could suggest that in both spaces – his home and the garden – he found the safe haven he lacked as a child growing up in a deprived, violent, northern town, and that he found ‘family’ with these women and the plants and birds and insects around him. A psychotherapist might also say – ‘Would therapy have helped him?’. No. A book like this is a humble lesson on letting go of hubris. Hamer’s teachers are the seasons, plants,

creatures, mountains and rivers he has encountered in his wandering as a tramp and his years immersed in the soil, well laced with much reading of poetry, Greek philosophers and whisky! And I would rather put his books on a psychotherapy reading-list than many others.

*Seed to Dust* is the second of three works by Marc Hamer. But it was the one I began with and then, feeling hooked, I read his first memoir and ordered the third, which came out in early 2023. That sequence worked for me, although I am not sure why, and so I might recommend that for others. Having started in the middle I wanted to learn more about Hamer's early life, and was then curious to find out where life took him after the *Seed to Dust* years.

The three books all have their own distinctive style, as well as, like in a Triptych, having an element of coherence with earlier stories being embellished or images returned to in later books. For instance, *Seed to Dust* takes us through the year with detailed descriptions of the garden tasks Hamer did each month, the crops he would sow and tend, and the wildlife he observed. In *A Life in Nature – or How to Catch a Mole* we are guided steadily through the intricacies of catching moles in as humane a way as possible, with fascinating details about this tiny creature (I now look with a far more informed and respectful eye at the many molehills in the fields near where I live). We also learn how Hamer developed his love of nature.

The third book, *Spring Rain*, perhaps the most deeply autobiographical of the three, moves skilfully between chapters about Hamer's sometimes traumatic, sometimes exciting, ever-changing childhood in the north, and his life today with Peggy in a community on the edge of Cardiff. Growing and tending gardens is a unifying theme. The vivid and poignant description of a little boy's discovery of plants that he could grow is a counterpoint to the details of Hamer's current project, that of making a new garden at home. All three books are graced with simple black-and-white line drawings, and include short poems by the author.

A mark of a book that speaks to me is when lots of pages become dog-eared or have sections underlined in pencil. I could have selected many quotations to whet your appetite. But let me end with three:

This body is not yours, it is nature's. This mind that calls your body yours is not your mind, it belongs to nature. None of this is you or yours, it is all nature expressing itself; there is no 'you' that is anything more than nature – nature singing its wonderful song. It breathes you into the world then out again, and you are just a single breath. All the things in nature arise, then fall; this is you. (*Seed to Dust*, p. 293)

I have seen death a few times; it holds no fear. I have seen the life drift out of people and animals until it failed to return. I have killed animals, watched them be killed by other animals, and I have been close to my own death. Close enough to accept it as a friend that teaches me how to live well, joyously and connected to the world around me as we change and look into each other. (*Seed to Dust*, p. 199)

I am sitting on a bench waiting for Peggy.

On my lap is a bunch of bright-orange gerberas that I bought from the florist across the road. A special door opens when I buy flowers, which takes me, each time I look at them, into a place where I and they are not the owned and the owner, but a mirror to each other. This is because flowers change at a pace I can understand, they brown and fall and whisper at the thinnest edge of my awareness that I am good and beautiful, even though I fade and wilt. I look at them and see myself as a flower.

I like to have flowers, that is how it is, on my table while I eat, by my chair where I sit and read or in my hand while I wait for my love to arrive. Peggy often brings me flowers. I would wear one in my buttonhole, but I know that I look odd enough already, so I prefer just to hold them. When I do, ladies look at me and smile – I like that. (*Spring Rain*, p. 10)

Nick Totton, when arguing for an ecosystemic approach to psychotherapy, spoke of the need to recognise that 'humans don't stand alone in the universe, but are profoundly connected with and interdependent on other species and entities who

share this earth’; and that ‘skilful living flows from a capacity for spontaneity and yields to what is, rather than from a struggle to exert control over self and others’ (2012, p. 254). Hamer appreciates this in his bones, and I often find myself recommending his books to people I work with or sending them short quotations. I try to remind them – and myself – that we are all parts of nature expressing itself. And in my own garden I try, now and then, to be the plants that I am tending. It makes a difference.

## References

- Hamer, M. (2019). *A Life in Nature – or How to Catch a Mole*. London/Vintage: Penguin.
- Hamer, M. (2022). *From Seed to Dust: A Mindful, Seasonal Tale of a Year in the Garden*. London: Penguin/Vintage.
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## About the contributor



**Sue Wright** is an Integrative, Sensorimotor psychotherapist, writer and gardener who lives in a tiny village in Wales. Her publications include various articles, and *Dancing Between Hope and Despair: Trauma, Attachment and the Therapeutic Relationship* (Palgrave, 2016); *The Temporal Dimension in Psychotherapy and Counselling: A Journey in Time* (Routledge, 2020); and *The Change Process in Psychotherapy during Troubling Times* (Routledge, 2021). Sue specialises in working with the survivors of complex trauma.