



Life can be stranger than fiction on Dartmoor

Laurence Shelley's first novel was inspired by a series of unusual experiences...

When my wife dreamt that I walked across Devon, I just had to do it. But uncanny encounters on Dartmoor made me think I was dreaming. At Mary Tavy I chanced upon a touring theatre production and was picked out of the audience to act as a dying funeral director. But life went on. When the play ended, I landed the last prize in a raffle. 'Back from the dead,' I said, as I collected a splendid desk tidy with pen and notebook. The die was cast. I was reborn - as a first-time novelist. It took many years to bring the novel to fruition, much assisted during an MA in Fine Art at the Arts University Plymouth which I embarked on at the tender age of 80!

The story told in 'Visions of Wilderness' is of a man revisiting childhood haunts on Dartmoor to help rebuild his life, after brain damage from a head-on car crash led to marriage break-up, homelessness and profound loss. It is

based on the real-life experiences of someone I knew. My challenge was to bring the real world of a shattered outcast alive. I never imagined that I'd also relive past heartaches. I decided that one source of solace would be a role model - his grandfather, Bardy. But where might he have lived? An overgrown cottage near Manaton caught my eye, just as the owner drove up. When I explained why I was there, he told me he once lived near Bristol, as I did. Incredibly, we had a dearly-loved mutual friend, an artist whose inspiration critically supported my recovery after my mother's early death. We both had his paintings! He'd been my role model.

That coincidence was extraordinary enough, but future discoveries became ever more intertwined with

my character. A colourful scarf I found abandoned on a tor, was picked up by both of us, and Scarf became my protagonist's nickname. Fact and fiction were virtually inseparable. My researches on Dartmoor had us tramping tors steeped in untold myths, wild camping, gatecrashing

a baptism, shacking up at a farm adventure centre, and sampling the exotic nightlife at Goosey Fair.

All these encounters helped Scarf rethink who he was and forge a new direction.

But my most telling experience was coming across a deserted squat at Tavistock. The previous squatter had slept in a shed, with 'Escape' scrawled on one wall, and a derelict house nearby decorated with mystical images. Strong clues convinced me that this vivid imagination was that



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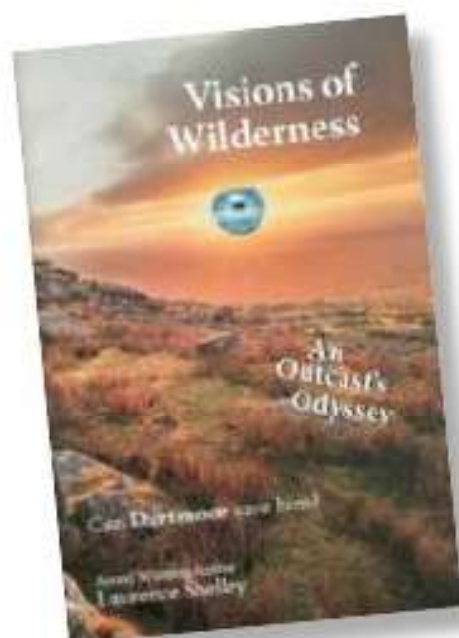
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of a creative young woman. After the book was published, I had to find out how she fared. For privacy reasons, I can only say that I was privileged to hear the poignant news from a family member that she had left home as a teenager and, now about 30, still received mental healthcare, though far from home. I was pleased to return some of her belongings and gift a copy of my book. Especially gratifying was that my imagined account of Scarf's meeting with the teenager and interpretation of the paintings and aura, had brought them much joy and comfort.

My fiction led me to research today's reality where young people can be overwhelmed by mental and emotional pressures. The long-term impact of verbal or social media abuse can be as devastating as violence. Happily, the Tavistock area is now well placed to provide the early support my female

squatter and Scarf needed. The Make A Difference charity runs a drop-in centre underneath the arches near Taylor Square for anyone 18 or over with mental health concerns. From 12noon to 4pm on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays you can talk freely with those who've often had similar experiences, and specialist advice is available on Mondays, 10am to 1pm. The venue benefits from a kitchen, board game facilities, art and craft activities, T-shirt and mug printing, with a woodworking room planned. Young men often find it difficult to air problems, so the Man Down talking sessions for the 18+ at Tavistock Library every other Tuesday at 7pm are a great safety valve. Just one drop-in chat can make all the difference.

If you'd like to know where my outcast's new life took him, copies of 'Visions of Wilderness' are available from Bookstop, Market Street, Tavistock

or postage-free from my website at thetispublishations.co.uk. There you can read about my factual journeys into the unknown. Stranger than fiction, of course!

Laurence Shelley

Laurence will be talking at Plymouth Literary Festival on 15 February 2026.

Visions of Wilderness By Laurence Shelley

A car crash has a devastating effect, with the loss of home and family turning the protagonist into an outcast. Reliving childhood memories in the all too real wilderness of Dartmoor, chance meetings give him glimpses of a new life. Will he meet with redemption ... or retribution?

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