



On this poet's garden tour, Sarah Salway writes of the gardens' physical selves, of course, but also of the sensations they conjure, the memories they stir up and the glimpses of history that colour her perception. Each description is rich, layered, personal and moving. It is more like the way we all experience gardens than any garden writing I have come across.

Sarah has a unique combination of a garden lover's eye and a poet's imagination, and it is a delicious treat to watch her exercise them on this group of gardens. She makes a fascinating and unpredictable virtual garden companion, always drawing your attention to some unexpected detail, or taking some half-told story, exploring it and breaking your heart with it. At the end I desperately wanted to set her onto my own favourite gardens and see what happens.

I read this book sometimes with a silly smile on my face, sometimes gripped and anxious, often with a tingle running down my spine. Sarah's poetry has always moved me, and now she writes about my favourite subject, gardens. How lucky we gardeners are to have her in our midst. This could not be a lovelier book.

*Lia Leendertz, who writes about gardens for  
The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph and others*

In *Digging up Paradise* Sarah Salway has drawn thoughtful and imaginative pathways for the reader through the horticultural persons, places and histories of Kent. Through an arboretum of writing these spaces come alive on the page, providing a moment of instant verdant escape for the committed armchair traveller.

Part-travelogue, part-poetry collection, part-guide-book, *Digging up Paradise* moves from landscaped castle grounds to shell grottoes, from desolate public parks to topiaried views, gathering creative seeds and espaliering the stories so that a sense of each place can be quickly understood and enjoyed. Reading this book has inspired me to take my own notebook out into my local green patches, and left me with hopeful plans to visit the Garden of England that these 'cuttings' make sound so enticing.

*Vicky Adams, Writer and Literary Artist*



Sarah Salway's new collection is an original and engaging take on a perennial theme – pun intended! Gardens have occupied the imaginations of poets for generations, from Hafiz writing in ancient Persia to Rudyard Kipling declaring that 'All England is a garden'. In moving, engaging and often surprising reflections, Sarah Salway takes the reader on a tour of the Garden of England, introducing us to the stories of Kent's astonishing variety of well-known and tucked-away gardens. As we'd expect from this widely praised and published writer, her prose is expansive and generous and the poems distilled and precise. As a bonus, both are illustrated by Sarah Salway's own photographs. This is a book to treasure and to carry on summer picnics to these captivating and ever-changing oases – a worthy paean to gardens and the gardeners who created them.

*Victoria Field, author of *The Lost Boys**

This remarkable creation – part guided tour, part literary and history essay, part poetry – is rich testament to Salway's entirely passionate and insightful observations as a writer and self-confessed, lifelong biophile.

In *Digging Up Paradise*, Salway charts interior and exterior journeys as she travels through Kent's gardens. From Margate Shell Grotto to Sissinghurst Castle, we travel with her via an eclectic mixture of photos, journal entries, and exquisite poems, often to our own real and remembered gardens, and the people in them. This book surprises and delights us with what we never knew, or knew and had forgotten, reconnecting us with our own public and private spaces. With characteristic lightness of touch and lively enquiry, Salway explores our relationships with the natural world: how we live and create in it, and how it lives and breathes in us.

*Patricia Debney, author of *Littoral* and *How to Be a Dragonfly**



Sarah Salway is a novelist and poet living in Kent. She grew up surrounded by gardens as the daughter of garden historian and writer, Elizabeth Peplow, and is now a full member of the Garden Media Guild. Sarah is the recipient of Fellowships from Hawthornden in Scotland, the VCCA in the USA, and was the Royal Literature Fund Fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science. This book started during her term as Canterbury Laureate, and more gardens and photographs can be found on her website, [www.writerinthegarden.com](http://www.writerinthegarden.com).

### Acknowledgements

The author and publisher are grateful to the garden owners for permission to use the author's photographs of the gardens in this book.

Without the following people, this garden journey wouldn't have been so interesting or so much fun. I'm grateful to them all for their enthusiasm for the project, good advice and generous sharing of wisdom:

Alison Chambers and the Canterbury Festival; Beth Cuenco and the Wise Words team; Vicky Adams; Kim Addonizio; Will Sutton; S.J. Butler; Patricia Debney; Victoria Field; Lia Leendertz; Michelle Lovric; Gregory Warren Wilson; Danuta Kean; Anne Kelly; Alice Elliott Dark; Veryan Pendarves; Katie Campbell; Catherine Smith; Gaye Jee; Anna Lambert; Clare Law; Pamela Johnson; Rachael Hale; Gaynor Edwards; Ellen Montelius; Mark Holihan; Stephanie Decouvelaere; Maria C. McCarthy and Bob Carling of Cultured Llama, and of course to the gardeners, curators and owners of the beautiful gardens of Kent.

But most of all to Francis, Hugh and Rachael who have had to put up with a lot of 'garden-talk' over the years.





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# Digging Up Paradise:

## Potatoes, People and Poetry in the Garden of England

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Previous books by Sarah Salway

**Novels**

*Tell Me Everything* (2011)

*Getting the Picture* (2010)

*Something Beginning With* (2005)

**Short Stories**

*Leading the Dance* (2011)

**Poetry**

*You Do Not Need Another Self-Help Book* (2012)



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Sarah Salway



First published in 2014 by  
Cultured Llama Publishing  
11 London Road  
Teynham, Sittingbourne  
ME9 9QW  
[www.culturedllama.co.uk](http://www.culturedllama.co.uk)

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ISBN 978-0-9926485-6-5

Printed in Great Britain by Lightning Source UK Ltd

Jacket design by Mark Holihan  
Interior design by Bob Carling  
Map by Ellen Montelius  
Copy editing by Stephanie Decouvlaere  
All photos by Sarah Salway



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*'Now there,' said he, pointing his finger, 'I make a comma, and there,' pointing to another spot, 'where a more decided turn is proper, I make a colon; at another part, where an interruption is desirable to break the view, a parenthesis; now a full stop, and then I begin another subject.'*

Lancelot 'Capability' Brown describes how he designs a garden to Mrs Hannah Moore





*Letter to a Stranger, a Homegrown project in  
Greyfriars Garden, Canterbury, 2012*





Dear Stranger

What would *you* say if you were writing to a stranger? And where would you like to be writing – and reading – that letter?

What about a quiet garden only just yards away from Canterbury's busy High Street? One that you enter through wooden gates after following a path Chaucer's pilgrims may have taken over not just one simple bridge but two, because this garden sits in the fork of the river, fed on both sides by the Stour. Add a chapel that was consecrated in the 13th Century when St Francis of Assisi was still alive, and which sits in a field of wild flowers circled by a mown lawn path.

This is Greyfriars Garden in Canterbury and when, as Canterbury Laureate in 2012, I was invited to stage an 'intervention' here, I knew I wanted to work with the three qualities I had experienced in the garden. The first was how quiet it is. So peaceful in fact, that I always have to stand still to work out what it is I'm not hearing: traffic noise, other people, machinery. Second, a sense of safety helped by the old walls and river inlets that hold this garden as if welcoming deep thoughts of past, present and future. And lastly, the contrast in atmosphere between the frenzy of the nearby shopping street and this space where I don't have to do anything, be anything, buy anything. I can sit alone but not feel lonely. So, during the Wise Words Festival and working with the Reauthoring Project, I set up a little stall in the garden, picked postcards from my own collection and invited people into the garden to write a message to a stranger. These were then pinned up on makeshift

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‘washing lines’ hung around the garden for everybody to browse until they found the card they wanted to take home.

We had poetry, confessions, messages of love and encouragement, angry stories, sad stories, inspiring quotes, jokes and invitations to talk further. At least one friendship resulted from two strangers connecting through these postcards, and as one writer said: ‘They say all art is stealing but that doesn’t feel quite right because Canterbury today is giving me this feeling, this feeling I’m going to be thinking about today all night.’

And it’s right that these ‘feelings’ can and should happen in gardens – places of alchemy where we can make our own boundaries to turn a public space into our own private paradise. There’s even a word for it – biophilia – which means a connection, a love or an ease with one’s natural surroundings.

I know all about this because I’ve used public gardens as my own at different times in my life. When I first left home to live in a London flat, I missed the countryside so much that I’d take my shoes off in my local park so I could remind myself there was grass and earth under all that concrete. Lonely and a little bit frightened, I would often write in my journal about the other park users and what I imagined their lives to be. Then, in Edinburgh, when my children were small, we had a key to one of the city’s garden squares that my son called ‘the country’. We’d take picnics so he could run around enough to tire himself out, and he held his first birthday party there. And now, I live in the middle of higgledy-piggledy Tunbridge Wells, where our ‘patio’ is so open to the cobbled street that our predecessors once came back to some tourists enjoying their sandwiches at the garden table. Perhaps it’s not surprising that I escape to our local common as often as I can to breathe in the trees and reconnect with grass.

I’m sure it’s a hangover from my childhood when my garden historian mother, Elizabeth Peplow, opened the herb gardens she’d designed to the public. I got used to keeping corners of the garden for myself, watching in turn how visitors would often treat ‘my’ garden as their own.

These boundaries between private spaces and public grounds were the seeds that grew into what became first the *Writer In The Garden* website ([www.writerinthegarden.com](http://www.writerinthegarden.com)) and then this book. Canterbury being the heart of Kent, and Kent being the Garden of England, I made my Laureate project a creative



exploration of public gardens in Kent. I thought I'd be exploring typically English gardens, but what quickly transpired was that this book actually contains very little that is strictly English. Plants, trees, designs, planting styles have come from all over the world to flourish together in what could be chaos but ends up alive and vibrant. 'He who plants a garden plants happiness,' the saying goes, and just as people make the difference between a building and a home, so they turn a landscape into a garden.

So this is a book about gardens, but mostly it is about people. The strangers whose footsteps I've followed through the gardens and whom I have come to know – three asthmatic brothers who built a formal garden together as the world stood poised on the edge of war; a thirteen-year-old boy sentenced for stealing roses in the 19th Century; a man obsessed with building his own ruins; artists of perspective; hornpipe dancers; plant collectors; apple scrumpers.

There are twenty-six gardens here to make up a horticultural alphabet, and although there is a map which suggests a tour, this isn't only a guide book or even a book stuffed full of gardening advice or history. It is a book you might take into a garden to read and dream a little of who sat there before you. But I hope too that you will put it down to write your own letter to a stranger and leave it in the garden for someone to find. There are a few writing 'seeds' hidden in here to provide inspiration.

Sarah Salway



*A view to the Cathedral from  
Greyfriars Garden, Canterbury*







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### Letter to a Stranger

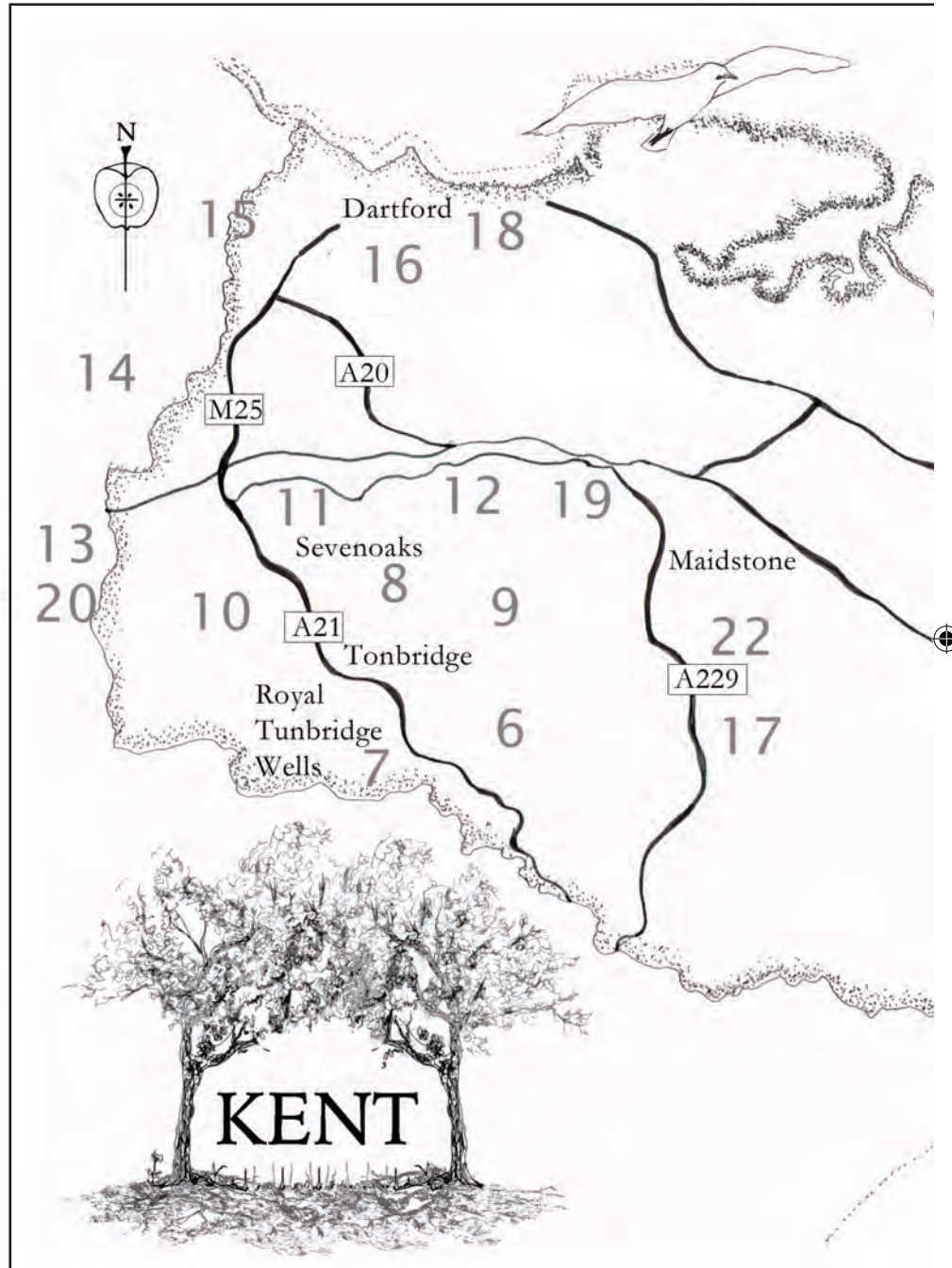
Last night I dreamt of a blue plate  
piled high with strawberry-shaped words.  
Trust. Kind. You. Flourish.  
This morning I followed the path  
round a green bowl filled with wildflowers.

Look, I want to say,  
so much has gone before us,  
so much will happen next,  
not every day needs a destination  
or to make sense.



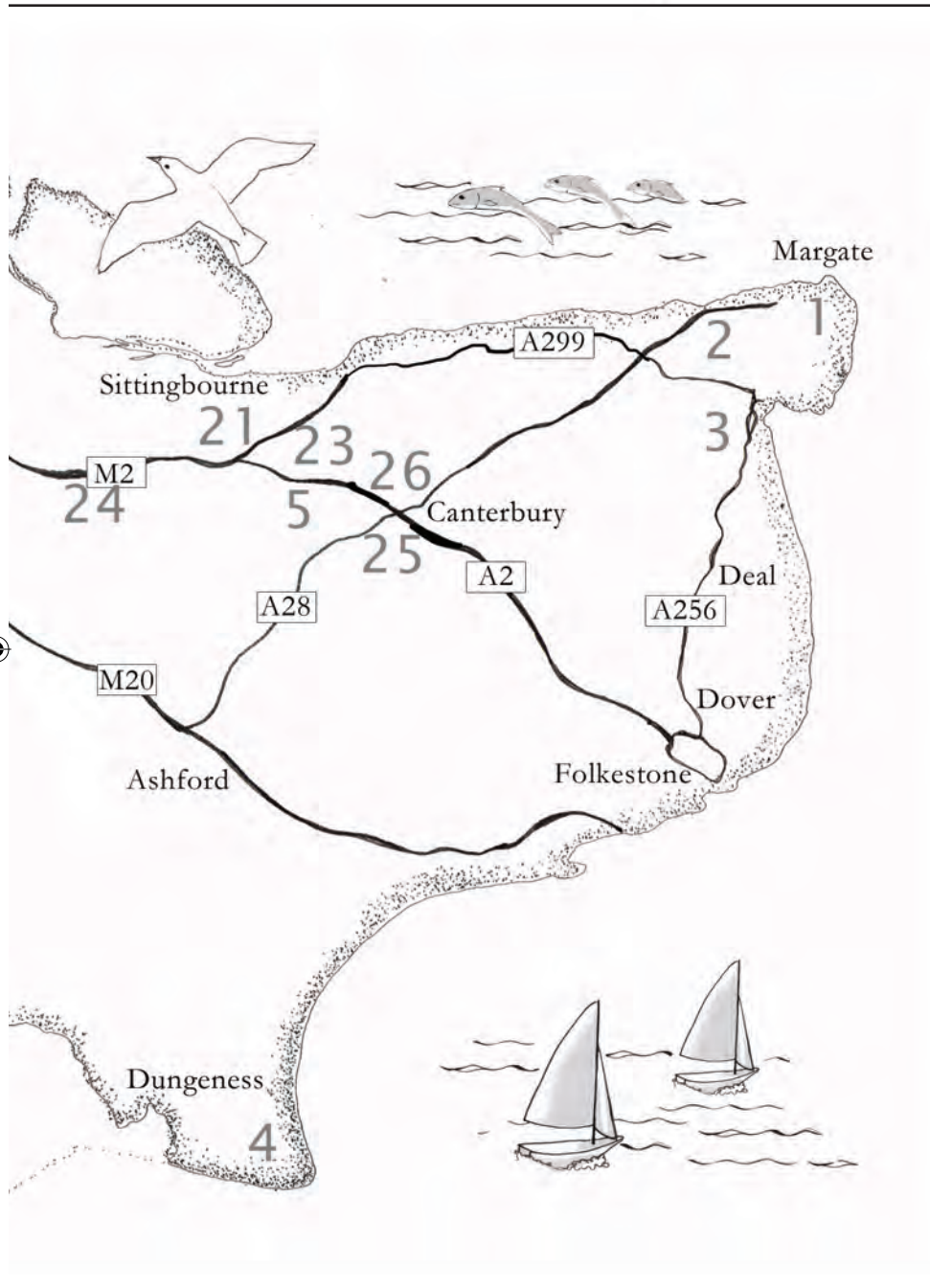
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Map by Ellen Montelius

