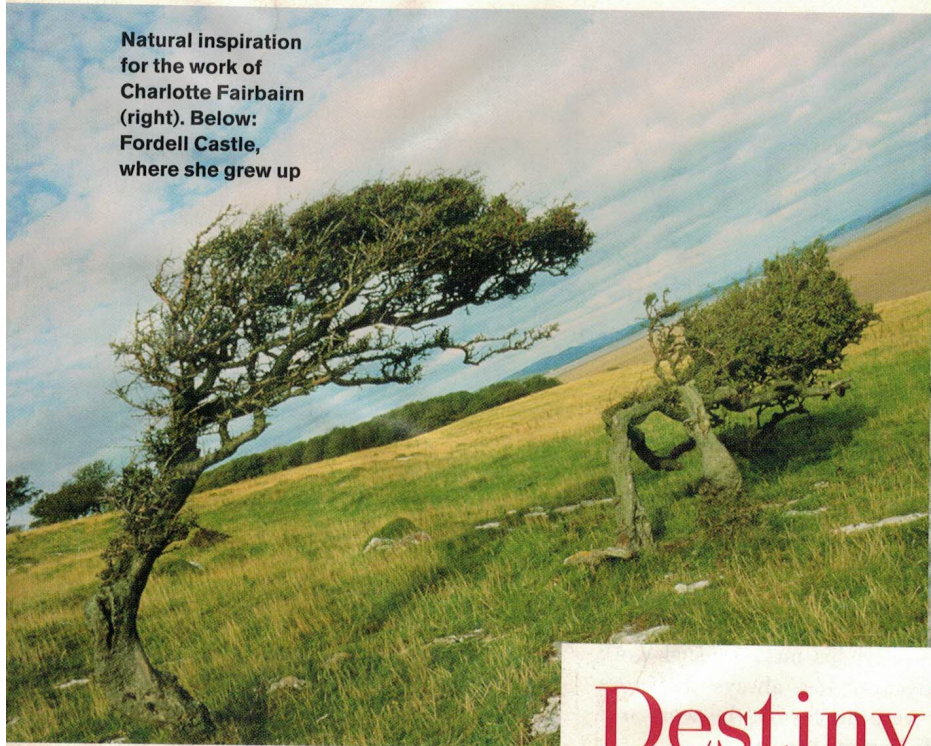


Natural inspiration for the work of Charlotte Fairbairn (right). Below: Fordell Castle, where she grew up



books

Destiny's child

She was brought up in a haunted castle by a flamboyant father and a stern governess – so, was Charlotte Fairbairn fated to write magical fables, asks Marianne Brace

It is not surprising that Charlotte Fairbairn became a writer. Her upbringing is the stuff of romantic novels: home was the 16th-century Fordell Castle in Fife; her education up to the age of 11 was in the hands of a Victorian-style governess. Her father was Sir Nicholas Fairbairn, one-time Solicitor-General for Scotland and tartan-clad devotee of Margaret Thatcher. When he died in 1995, Charlotte wrote her debut novel *A Bear With an Egg in Her Paws*, in an attempt to understand why things went wrong in her family. The book's womanising, alcoholic artistic Freddie is a thinly disguised portrait of her father. 'All the demons are there,' she says.

Charlotte has turned away from autobiography with her new novel, *God Breathes His Dreams Through Nathaniel Cadwallader*. A poetic allegory with hints of Thomas Hardy and a dash of magic realism, the book is about the divine nature of art, and is set in an entirely imaginary countryside, described in vivid beauty and harshness.

Dressed in a white shirt, jeans, and boots that have clearly negotiated a muddy field that morning, Charlotte has come down to London from Cumbria, where she now lives. Despite travelling for hours by train with her two young children, she seems remarkably unfrazzled. Frazzle is not Charlotte's style. Here is someone who juggles the demands of motherhood and writing with dressage ('the most athletic, gymnastic, balletic thing you can do') and running a livery stable. Up at six, mucking out and feeding the horses, she's often in bed by nine in the evening. Her husband, Ross Pople, director of the London Festival Orchestra, is only home at weekends.

During her own childhood, there was lots of playing in rhododendron woods, and down on the 200-acre farm that belonged to her mother, Elizabeth Mackay, just beyond Fordell's crenellated walls. Fordell was a gift to Charlotte's newly wedded parents from her maternal grandmother, Charlotte, Lady Reay. It was all very Sir Walter Scott. A chain and collar hung from all the entrance doors – 'to chain up unwanted guests', laughs Charlotte. There was a private chapel, a fireplace massive enough to stand in, turrets with arrow-slits, a tower with two winding stone staircases and even a Green Lady ghost. Mary, Queen of Scots supposedly slept the night in Charlotte's bedroom while fleeing to Loch Leven.

When Charlotte's parents divorced

acrimoniously, Sir Nicholas held on to Fordell Castle, claiming he had paid for it. According to Charlotte, her father was 'rumbustious, volatile and fascinating'. She also adds: 'I'd like to dig him out of his grave so I could murder him for being so maddening.'

After reading languages at Oxford, Charlotte worked for Pople, a New Zealander 18 years her senior. 'He's dynamic like my pa,' she says of him. Ten years ago, they bought an Elizabethan farmhouse in the Lake District, which they have restored, converting one of the barns into a venue for private concerts. 'I love the country, and would hate to live in London,' says Charlotte. Twelve horses, two dogs, four cats and numerous chickens would also make it quite difficult.

Anyway, Charlotte has settled. 'After 10 years, we've finally made inroads into the local community.' Finding a place within a community can be precarious. In *God Breathes His Dreams Through Nathaniel Cadwallader*, a stranger arrives in a village. He has an extraordinary gift, and the locals adopt him as their saviour. But when things start to go wrong, they turn on him. Charlotte wanted to show how destructive people can be. But she adds: 'I also wanted to write about a horse.' Dungarry is the stranger's conker-brown stallion – a noble beast in a world of weak, mean-spirited men. You can't help feeling that, given half a chance, he'd be awfully good at dressage. □ *'God Breathes His Dreams Through Nathaniel Cadwallader'; Review, £10.*

