



Things brought into the light

In her latest book, Sarah Sands explores grief, and humanity's relationship with creation. She talks to **Sarah Meyrick**

SARAH SANDS is a distinguished journalist. As the former editor of *The Sunday Telegraph*, the London *Evening Standard*, and Radio 4's *Today* programme, her bread and butter in recent years has been the cut and thrust of politics.

Her topic of choice for her new book? The plight of the humble hedgehog. The book opens with the moment Ms Sands's grandson discovered a hedgehog trapped in a piece of netting by the pond in her garden. She felt — indeed, she was — responsible for the creature's fate. Curiosity about hedgehogs led to the discovery that the species is under serious threat of extinction. One estimate — the only census for hedgehog numbers is roadkill — is that the UK population has halved since 2000.

Not that *The Hedgehog Diaries: A story of faith, hope and bristle* is twee: she goes to some lengths to avoid the elephant trap of anthropomorphism. Nor is it just about hedgehogs. While Ms Sands was delving into their world, her elderly father, Noel, was reaching the end of his life. The book weaves together her reflections about humanity and nature, life and death, grief and faith.

I wonder where *The Hedgehog Diaries* will sit in bookshops. Is it a book of nature writing, or a book about bereavement?

"It started with just a simple story about a hedgehog. And then, uncovering this hedgehog volunteer network, which I wasn't aware of, I thought that there were some wider implications to society," she says. "Then it became a bit more of an elegy about nature."

She was particularly struck by a Philip Larkin poem, "The Mower", which describes the accidental killing of a hedgehog and ends with

the lines: "We should be careful Of each other, we should be kind While there is still time."

The conflation with her father's dying was instinctive, because he found great comfort in the natural world, and, as he died, she couldn't help but ponder the relationship between humanity and creation. "He was a religious man, but his faith was tested during this final period, and he also found great solace in nature."

There is a moment in the book when she releases her recovered hedgehog back into her garden — newly hedgehog-friendly — and she worries about its future. "One of the volunteers said to me, 'Just because you can't see them doesn't mean they aren't there,' and there's a wider meaning there," she says.

"Then there's that description [by the philosopher Roger Scruton] about love being a relationship between dying things. It was all of that. Part of it is probably about mystery and the unknown, and the idea of not knowing where the hedgehog went, but somehow still having a responsibility towards it."

With its concern for the environment, and its focus on finding solace in the natural world, *The Hedgehog Diaries* feels very much of its time, written as the world emerged from Covid. Is this fair?

Yes, she says. Covid brought a greater sense of neighbourliness, demonstrated by some of the remarkable community efforts to make adaptations to the environment, so that hedgehogs thrive. "During Covid, people became much more aware of nature. It was all those

things: people were experiencing loss and also hearing birdsong for the first time."

Besides speaking to volunteers with hands-on experience — Emma, who runs Emma's Hedgehog Hotel in Norfolk; Lizzie, a young hedgehog champion in Surrey — Ms Sands made use of an impressive address book. Among others, she spoke to the former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Williams, one of whose choices on Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* was "The Hedgehog's Song" by the Incredible String Band (not to be confused with another song by Terry Pratchett, "The hedgehog can never be buggered at all").

"I feel like the hedgehog's job is the next thing to be done," Lord Williams told her. He describes the First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, as "a rather hedgehog-like politician", particularly in contrast with Boris Johnson, who, at the time of their conversation, was under investigation into the infamous Downing Street parties.

Ms Sands mentioned that some environmentalists believe that we will know that nature is back in balance once the hedgehogs return in numbers. Lord Williams responded with delight: "That's a wonderful image, very counter-intuitive. You can say that the lion is coming to Narnia, but the hedgehog coming back to Narnia is much better."

Lord Williams also spoke to her about the equilibrium of "welcoming" what life brings you, for good or ill. Acceptance was a form of faith, he said; and she realised that this was what her father was doing.

"After a lifetime of reading, he has put aside his books. He is quietly awaiting," she writes.

The book describes, with great tenderness, the comfort that her father — the son of a Methodist chaplain — found in his faith, in music, and the liturgy.

"In the drawer by his bed is my father's notebook with his scribbled thoughts, jotted down some months ago when he was still up to writing," she writes. "His fears at 'the end'; his doubts about the 'afterlife'. The writing was hurried and full of question marks. But the last sentence was one word. Compline. Perhaps an answer. As Rowan Williams said: acceptance is a form of faith."

Ms Sands's father died in January 2022, poignantly, on the very night that she lay in bed worrying about how her newly released hedgehog was faring.

The notebook was a great comfort. Her father had left instructions for his funeral. The family were able to put together an order of service that included the hymn "He who would valiant be . . . To be a pilgrim", and the ballad "Follow the Heron", to be played as the coffin was carried out. She herself read a passage that her father had written, describing the departure of the pink-footed geese back to Iceland in February, to a background of music by Sibelius.

The Anglican order of service helped enormously. It helped that her brother — the lyricist, screenwriter, opera director, and entertainer Kit Hesketh-Harvey — had been a chorister at Canterbury Cathedral, and a choral scholar at Cambridge, and could advise on music. She writes in the book: "Liturgy and music wrap death in ceremonial balm. Funerals deserve the same attention as weddings, yet the preparation is done in weeks and in muffled misery, so we can be too hasty. Royals and Romanies know the value of a proper send-off."

The Hedgehog Diaries was written last year. But, since then, loss has piled upon loss. Mr Hesketh-Harvey died very unexpectedly on 1 February this year, barely a fortnight after Ms Sands's ex-husband, and the father of her son, Henry, the actor Julian Sands, went missing in Cali-

fornia. His body was not discovered until late June.

Of her brother's death, she says: "It was a much more shocking death [than my father's]. But I still found that the liturgy at the funeral so answered all that shock and grief, and it just spoke straight to you about consolation . . . about grace, mercy, and peace."

Mr Hesketh-Harvey had recently divorced, and was living in the vestry of a church opposite the family home, which he had bought as a place to work and play the piano ("a kind of sanctuary"). He was "exhausted", she says; his death was "a slightly bleak ending", but the words of comfort were still profound. "Somehow, what you wanted was peace more than anything. Even that term, 'Rest in peace', which people just say, was absolutely what I wanted to hear."

Church is the place "where you can deal with the mystery and the unknown", she says. "With my dad, when I was sitting there, worried, thinking he's lost his faith, because he was having these doubts. . . It was the vicar who said: 'You know, that's where perseverance comes in.' And I think he had, in the end, accepted it."

People have asked her if she had some kind of foreknowledge of tragedy when she was writing the book. "Obviously, I didn't. It was written before my brother died and Julian died. But some of the themes apply . . . such as the part played by nature in death, and the mystery of it all."

Her brother's funeral at St Paul's, Covent Garden, the Actors' Church, offered "a great catharsis". While they were expecting 300 mourners, 500 attended — including a dazzling list of celebrities. (Dame Penelope Keith attended on behalf of the King and Queen.)

The service included music that Mr Hesketh-Harvey had written, including a requiem that was the last piece he wrote. The force of the first hymn — "Guide me, O thou great Jehovah" — nearly blew her away. "I guess one thing I didn't address in the book is the sort of communal public nature of death and grief," she says now.

Faith was "a huge consolation"

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