

The writer Graham Swift takes his favourite walk ‘half a dozen times a year, at least – in all weathers’. *Hannah Beckerman* joins him to discuss England, war and the stuff of life

For an author whose fiction often ventures into dark terrain, Graham Swift has chosen a walk that seems somewhat incongruous. The Booker Prize-winning novelist, whose works have dealt with murder, incest, war and grief, has brought me to the South Downs – a place that represents an almost idealised view of England.

With miles of softly undulating hills before us, he stops to take in the view. “You know, I’ve done this so many times, stood here so many times, and every time it just gets me. I love it.”

Best known for the novels *Waterland* (1983) and *Last Orders*, which won him the Booker in 1996, Swift appears much younger than his 65 years. His manner is quiet, unassuming and gentle. “It’s impossible to be standing here and actually not to have a feeling about England. Look at the Sussex Downs and you’ve got the fields and the hedgerows. I’m struggling not to be sentimental – I don’t want to say anything sentimental – but you just feel England.”

We had started the morning with a short stroll through the town of Lewes, followed by a brisk walk up Chapel Hill. As we head down into the valley, sheep bleating past us as they gambol up the hill, I ask how often he makes the day trip here from his home in south London.

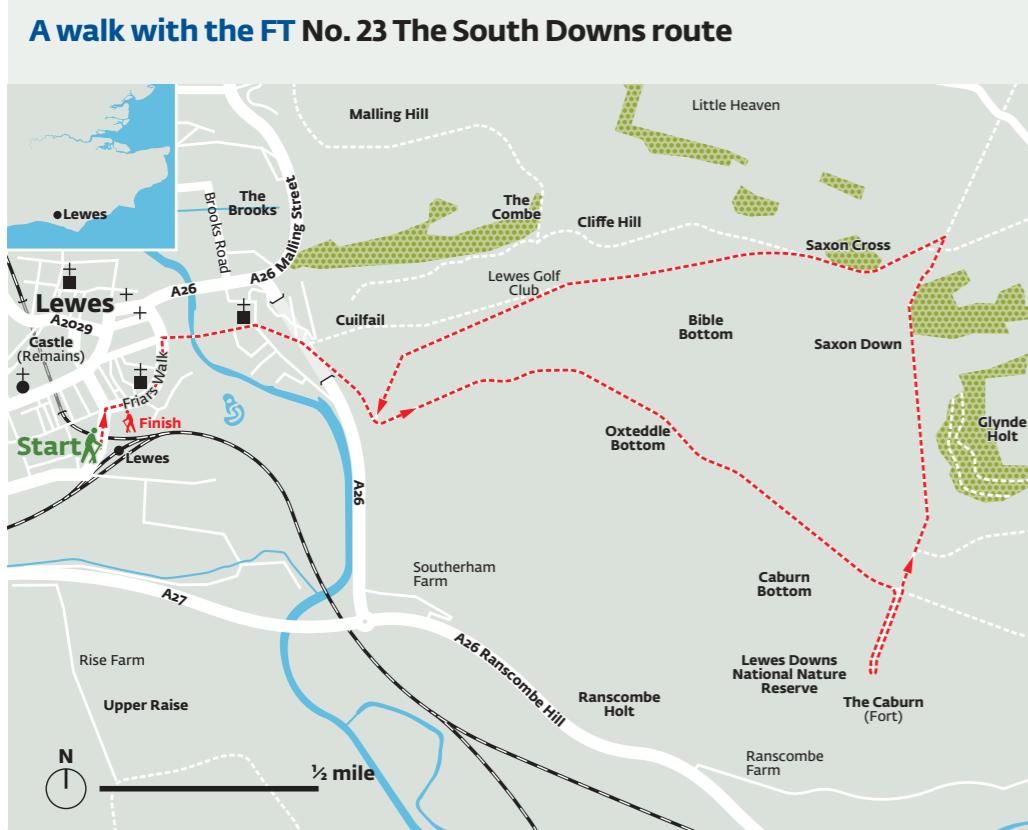
“Half a dozen times a year, at least – in all weathers. One of the great things about walking is that you can think while you walk or, of course, you can totally switch your mind off and just go along. I love being on my own two feet and steering myself.”

I suggest that perhaps there is a controlled predictability to walking that is the opposite of writing, which can be both capricious and magical. “Yes, you bet. And I totally approve of the word magic. I think when a good story ►



A walk with the FT
The South Downs
Lewes, East Sussex

Photography Simon Roberts



Circular walk 6.5 miles
Grade Easy
Turn right out of Lewes train station on to Station Road. Pass Pinwell Road on your right and take the next right on to Lansdown Place, leading straight into Friar's Walk. Turn right on to the pedestrianised street, taking you straight into Cliffe High Street, crossing over the River Ouse.

Follow Cliffe High Street to the end, then take a right and an immediate left to walk up Chapel Hill. At the top of Chapel Hill, walking through a small car park, you'll enter the South Downs. Take the right-hand path down to the bottom of the valley and then up the hill again. You'll see Mount Caburn on your right-hand side – follow

the path up to the top for views towards the south coast. Retrace your steps down Mount Caburn, passing where you began your ascent, and continue along the east ridge of the valley, with the village of Glynde visible on your right. Go down the valley and back up again, until you reach the path that runs along the top ridge, back towards your starting point.

Download the map at ft.com/walkwiththef

works, there is a magic – and storytelling goes very deep: it's very primitive, it's right in the depths of us as human beings."

Swift is of a generation of writers who have stood the test of time. He was included in Granta's inaugural *Best of Young British Novelists* list in 1983, alongside Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie and Julian Barnes. It is hard to imagine any subsequent collection of authors achieving the same kind of longevity.

Climbing the chalky grassland towards Mount Caburn, an Iron Age fort and one of the highest points in East Sussex, we are greeted by an abundance of wild flowers, a pair of paragliders and another breathtaking view that includes the hazy sea on the horizon.

We sit on a bench and Swift points out where Virginia Woolf had a cottage in the valley below. He then shows me the direction of Charleston, the country retreat of the Bloomsbury set. It's a fitting location to be discussing his latest book, *England and Other Stories* – despite the sharp contrast between the idyllic England before us and the emotionally painful version Swift portrays in much of his writing. The collection of short stories, published this summer, tackles everything from sex and death to illness and war with pathos, sensitivity and often humour. But it is a collection that also contains a lot of sadness.

"Yes, well there's a lot of sadness about. I just recognise that stuff is out there and needs, deserves, expression. Momentous things go on in people's lives that they deal with somehow, or sometimes fail to deal with."

Failure to deal with life's sadness is one of the abiding characteristics of the protagonists in *England and Other Stories*. In beautifully crafted, understated prose, Swift packs powerful emotional punches which, I tell him, on occasion left me feeling almost physically winded.

"Well, you see, there's this stuff that's called fiction, and fiction, of course, means something artificial, something not true, unreal. But when a story or a novel works, it becomes real. It becomes truthful. It becomes the stuff of life."

The "stuff of life", which makes this collection of stories deserving of its bold and – by Swift's own admission – provocative title, is its sense of history. Not only are there two works of historical fiction in the book but, Swift tells me, the stories also deal with the aftermath and inheritance of two world wars, the sense that "when you're in England, you're never far from war".

As we leave our view of the sea – and Mount Caburn – behind, and head along the ridge of a hill with the pretty village of Glynde to our



Swift wants to provoke his readers



A narrow street leads into the town of Lewes – the River Ouse can be seen in the distance

east, I ask Swift what made him write another collection of short stories after three decades of focusing almost exclusively on novels.

"Very occasionally I've written a story but they've never, until very recently, come to me in a real flood almost as they did for this book. It's just as though this creature inside me, who is a short-story writer, had been lying low for most of the middle of my life and it just popped up again. It's terrific."

Despite the length of his career and a highly acclaimed body of work, Swift clearly remains in awe of the process. "Oh, if you lost that, something would be wrong. It really is one of the genuine thrills of writing. You are somebody dealing on one day with something which absolutely wasn't there yesterday, in no way did it exist, you didn't have any hint of it."

'When a story or a novel works, it becomes real. It becomes truthful. It becomes the stuff of life'

Swift says he wants his readers to think: "I want to provoke them but, above all, I want the emotion. This sense that it touched my life... Writing is about getting words to register things beyond words."

Heading back down the hill to our starting point, past rows of period cottages on our right and overlooking the River Ouse on our left, I remark that after such a peaceful morning – in which we saw only four other walkers in three hours – it seems surprising to see people milling around the town centre. Swift laughs.

"It's strange, isn't it? I'm glad you said that. I nearly always feel that coming back down this street. You get away. You really get away." **FT**

Graham Swift's "*England and Other Stories*" is published by Simon & Schuster, £16.99