

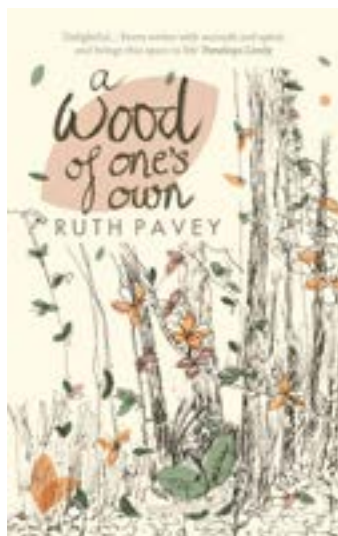
A Wood of One's Own

Ruth Pavey

Duckworth Overlook. 2017

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This book fits snugly into a recently created genre which records the trials and tribulations of the novice as they strive to learn the skills required to manage small woodlands. After many years living in the thrum of London, Ruth Pavey yearned to reconnect with the countryside as she set about realising her long-held dream of managing her newly acquired woodland.

Ruth's story begins with the purchase at auction in 1999 of four acres of scrubland in Somerset for £2,750. However, it was not the plot of land she had intended to buy at that auction. Its attraction lay in the fact that it was the last lot for sale on the day. Aside from remarking that it might be useful for conservation and/or amenity purposes, the auctioneer did not heap praise on the four acres. Undaunted, Ruth soon meets her new neighbours, which leads her to the realisation that when the neighbours are on your side, all manner of challenges can be overcome. Some of the early challenges encountered by Ruth included seeing off intruders, getting help with heavy work and learning the history of her newly acquired property. Her most supportive neighbours were Ted and Andrew who virtually adopt the new London-based owner and keep a supportive eye on both her and the land. She is by nature a curious person, so she seeks out the previous owners who now live in a

care home and from them she learns the history of the land and how part of it came to be called *Sugg's Meadow*.

The book is an enthralling story of how she grew to understand and later to mould this patch of derelict woodland into an enduring legacy – a verdant landscape rich with wildlife. Interwoven with Ruth's candid descriptions of the practical challenges she faced are forays into the local history of the Somerset Levels's, as well as sensitive portraits of its inhabitants, both past and present.

However, Ruth is not a sentimentalist and she cannot be accused of yearning for a return of the *good old days*. She comments,

Yes, the people sang as they worked in the fields and they rarely lacked for company. Yes, some of the decedents look vacant as they wander around the local Tesco, and the countryside has grown increasingly suburban. But still, the old ways, as well as being golden, were harsh and often exceedingly harsh.

Like most of the population, she fears for the future in the context of climate change and worries that, if the dystopians are right, then making plans is a waste of time. However, she holds the view that things may not be quite so bad. With that in mind she contacted a local conservation group to see if they would like to inherit her woodland. However, she found it a most disheartening experience which was bedevilled with bureaucracy. Nothing concrete came of it apart from a sharply critical report prepared by the conservation group. This annoyed her greatly. Dreaming of owning a bucolic haven is fine and grand but ownership brings hard work and responsibility in its wake. Attempting to orchestrate matters from beyond the grave can also be a tricky business since trusts can be broken and charities redirected. Later, as Ruth was making headway with the woodland project, people would sometimes ask her, “when will your wood be finished?” No doubt these were urbanites because, as with farming, gardening or tree planting, there is never an end or definable finish, in the sense that you reach a satisfactory conclusion.

Originally a teacher, Pavey now works as the gardening correspondent for the *Hampstead and Highgate Express* (affectionately known locally as the *Ham and High*). She attended the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art at Oxford and a selection of her illustrated works are included in this, her first book. Her non-bravura style makes this book a definite winner. *A Wood of One's Own* is a lyrical, beguiling and inspiring story, a portentous reminder of nature's delicate balance, and of its comforting and abiding presence.

As she departed the wood late one star-lit evening, leaving it to the trees and the woodland creatures, she realised that she can be its “owner” for a short while only, a mere twinkling in time – whereas the trees and their kind remain for ever. A profound and humbling thought!

For any forester, who would love to own a wood of their own and who yearns for the feel of the outdoors, this is an excellent and thought provoking read.

John Mc Loughlin