

Derek Niemann

Author

Autobiographical life story.

Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk

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1. Childhood and Education

Generally speaking, any writer's working life is pretty dull. All the excitement goes on inside our heads and maybe some of it spills out in the words we put down. I think I knew that as a 10-year-old, when I first started writing fiction.

We were a kind of double-immigrant family. My dad had left Germany as a young man, and we had all left Hamilton, Lanarkshire, when my brother and I were boys. I don't think I ever felt truly at home in Hertfordshire, and a sense of displacement and disorientation has always fed into my writing.



At the age of 11, I produced a masterpiece called *Mystery at Animal Village*. A friend of my dad's declared he was greatly impressed and was struck by the resemblance to *Animal Farm*. I'd neither read it nor heard of Orwell, but I was aghast that someone should have had the talking animal idea before me.

We were solidly working class with middle class aspirations, so an airy-fairy degree was not for me. University was about going on a course with a fast-track to a job, so I started at Manchester University, doing Law. Somehow I broke loose and ended up switching to English fourteen months later.

2. Early Career



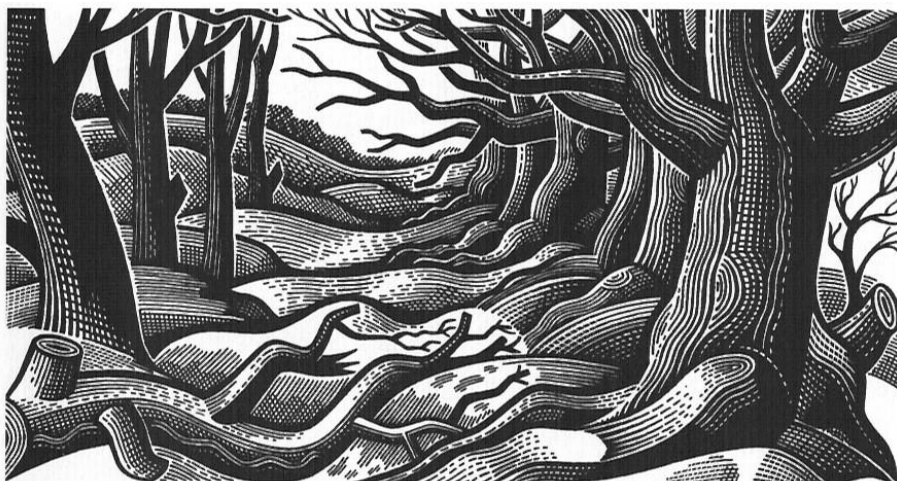
Though I adored Manchester, I gained nothing but a qualification, equipping me for not very much. And so for 18 happy, impoverished months, I built up experience as a full-time volunteer, writing about conservation, running a tree nursery and coping when money ran low by eating chickweed and nettles. I even developed my own photos in a mosquito-ridden cellar.

Paid employment came with the Beds & Hunts Wildlife Trust, where I was good at raising publicity (witness the bumblebee costume right), but rather less effective at raising funds.

When it was time to move on, I hopped nine miles to join the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) press office. I was editor of the RSPB youth magazines for 16 years. The endless enthusiasm of generation after generation of child readers kept me going.



3. Journalism and Books



A drawing by Clifford Harper for the Guardian Country Diary column, with acknowledgement and thanks to the Guardian.

A sideline started with a succession of chapters and books on wildlife for the US market. I got a big break with a small column, the Guardian Country Diary. It's a great privilege to write for what is (almost) the world's oldest newspaper column. The Guardian's first Country Diary appeared in 1904. And but for forgetfulness on the part of one contributor (he forgot to send his copy in one day), it would be the longest-running on the planet. I enjoy its eccentricities and range of styles (including mine, writing on the second and fourth Thursday of every month – confused? I am.). Each column is just 350 words, a vignette you can absorb in less time than it takes to boil up a cuppa.

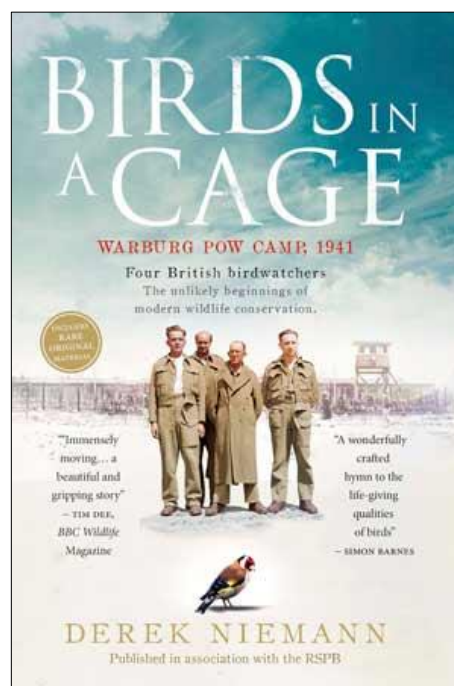
That led to slots in BBC Wildlife magazine, then *Birds in a Cage*, my first non-fiction book for adults, followed by a second book, *A Nazi in the Family*.

Just before book number two came out, I knew it was time to go freelance, turning a moonlighting role into a full-time job. That's just what happened at the end of 2014. And my third book, *A Tale of Trees*, the battle to save Britain's ancient woodland was published in October 2016.

4. Birds in a Cage

This is the story of an obsessive quest behind barbed wire. Through their shared love of birds, a group of British POWs overcome hunger, hardship, fear and stultifying boredom. Their experiences leave them scarred, but set them on a path to becoming greats of the conservation movement.

A raft of favourable reviews buoyed *Birds in a Cage* so much that the hardback edition all but sold out within six months of publication. The paperback came out in May 2013 and has now been reprinted. I'm gratified by the universally positive letters, e-mails and phone calls from so many people. Perhaps the best of all came from (the now late) conservation giant Norman Moore, an ex-POW himself, who told me "you've captured it just as it was."



I've lost count of the number of talks I've given about this book, but have lost no enthusiasm for giving them. It's marvellous to find so many inspired by this story and wonderful that more people want to hear about it. A number of people have contacted me with more information after having read *Birds in a Cage*, which is wonderful. If one of your relations was a POW and a naturalist, I would love to hear from you. You can email me your stories from our contact page.

Special thanks for help in writing the book are due to:

Rob Hume for artwork of goldfinches. *Birds in a Cage* uses original illustrations as well as a number specially commissioned from Rob Hume.

My grateful thanks to all the families and friends of the POWs, who gave so generously of their time and their memories. This book would have been so much less without them.

Special thanks to Sarah Rhodes (daughter of Peter Conder), who first had the idea for the book, and who did so much to help me with my research. Sarah knows many of the POW family members, and she unlocked many doors for me. Without her help and support I could not have written the book that I did. Thanks also to Sarah Rhodes, and to Jan Pickup (daughter of Barney Thompson) and her husband Tony for invaluable help at various book events.

Nature writer Mark Cocker provided both title and topic for my first non-fiction book. Because he already had another major project ongoing, he declined the offer to take the letters, diaries and reports of the ornithologist prisoners of war and shape them into *Birds in a Cage*. His generosity gave me the chance instead.

5. A Nazi in the Family

A visit we made to Berlin in 2012 had a profound effect on me. Not only did I go into my father's childhood home in the Berlin suburbs but also, to my dismay, I found my grandfather's name in books about the SS.

One of the things that writing and giving talks about this book has really made me think about is how an ordinary man can go hideously wrong. And I'm keen to contribute to wider understanding of the issues my family story raises.

Front cover of paperback edition of *A Nazi in the Family* by Derek Niemann

Writing the book My dad had always thought his father was no more than a simple pen-pusher. In a way he was, it was just that his pen shaped the lives of thousands of concentration camp inmates.

This book does more than tell the story of a man directly involved in the Holocaust. It describes what it was like to belong to the family of an SS officer.

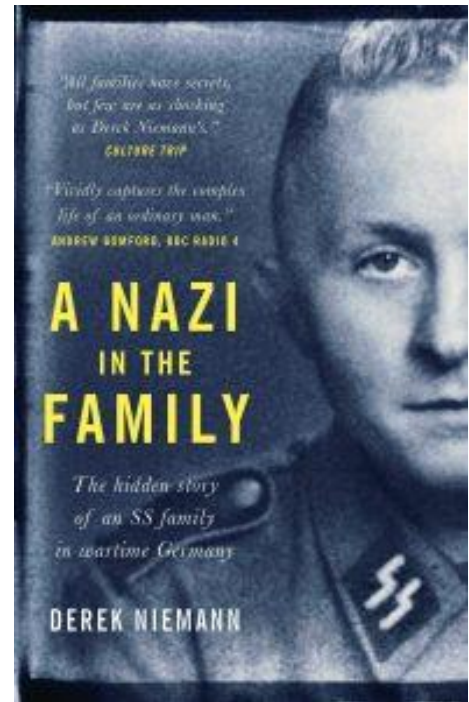
And it provides uplifting evidence that revealing the truth from the past brings hope and reconciliation in the present.

There have been plenty of books about the Nazis, plenty about Hitler, and a fair number told by concentration camp survivors. But what was it like being in the family of an SS officer? And how did they cope with shame and guilt after the war?

The man in the picture of the Niemann family on the right is Rudolf Adolf August Martin Wilhelm Niemann. My dad. I'm the blotchy wee bairn with a bear and measles. My father Rudi and his brother Ekart were only boys when hostilities ceased, but they both provided jaw-dropping testimony to events that no child should have had to experience.

A Nazi in the Family was published in 2015. It tells the family story from the outbreak of the First World War right through to the new life my dad and his sister carved for themselves in Scotland after WW2.

The striking image on the jacket belongs to a large and extraordinary family archive. Sarah has digitally restored them all.



6. A Tale of Trees

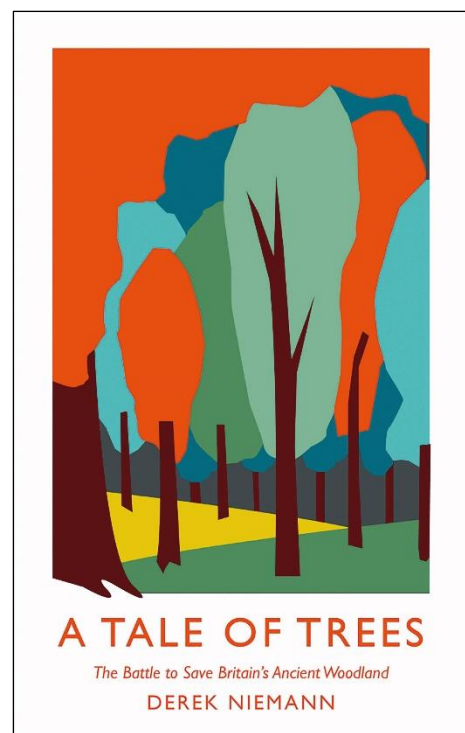


At the heart of *A Tale of Trees* – a book that ranges widely over ancient woodland throughout Britain, is the story of Derek’s local wood, one that was all but cut down. One third of Waresley Wood in Cambridgeshire survives, rescued by determined individuals from the Wildlife Trust. Derek’s explorations through Waresley over the course of a year draw out just what makes an ancient wood special. Photo by Sarah Niemann.

Britain loves its woods. When the Government proposed selling off public forests, more than half a million people signed a petition in a matter of weeks to declare their opposition. We go dewy-eyed at the thought of bluebells. We adore our mighty oaks, wild cherries and limes. There is mystique and reverence for woods that have existed since Domesday and before.

So how was it possible that, only a generation ago, we managed to destroy half of our ancient woodland? It’s said we cut down more woods in 40 years than during the previous 400. This is the subject of Derek’s third book – published by Short Books in October 2016. It asks these telling questions, but this is not an academic volume. It’s mostly about people and personalities. It tackles the issues, politics and economics from a human perspective, looking at motivations and the drivers of what we now know to be misguided decisions. People were of their time and we should not ridicule them with hindsight.

At the heart of *A Tale of Trees* – a book that ranges widely over ancient woodland throughout Britain, is the story of Derek’s local wood, one that was all but cut down. One third of Waresley Wood in Cambridgeshire survives,



rescued by determined individuals from the Wildlife Trust. Derek's explorations through Waresley over the course of a year draw out just what makes an ancient wood special.

And we end by trying to see the woods from the trees. What is the future for Britain's woodlands? Can we save them from diseases such as ash dieback? Can we revitalise them as economic assets, without trashing what made them unique in the first place?

In case you need reminding just how wonderful woods are, here is another of Sarah's photos taken in Waresley Wood, illustrating its irresistible beauty.



7. Reflection

An archaeologist friend had agreed to meet for a lunchtime walk and was fifteen minutes late. “Oh, I wasn’t worried”, he said, “I knew you’d find something to do.” I was bored one day in July 1976. But never since.

My partner in all senses is my wife Sarah, who also has what Rudyard Kipling called “an insatiable curiosity.” We work together, and sometimes I don’t know if my ideas are mine or hers. Or both. Maybe that’s the nature of partnership. It seems to work for us.

