

## **Flowers (Book review)**

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*Flowers*


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**Fiona Stafford**

THE BRIEF LIFE OF FLOWERS

323pp. John Murray. £20.

978 1 4736 863 5 9

Created by natural selection to attract bees, butterflies, beetles, birds and bats, flowers speak to us in many ways: as ornaments, symbols, metaphors, or simply as themselves. Fiona Stafford has taken fifteen flowers and written an essay on each, exploring all of these aspects and linking them all. How many of us knew that the ruffs of Elizabethan gentlemen were stiffened with the juice of bluebell bulbs, that Hildegard of Bingen relied on lavender to deter lice or that there is a recipe for lamb and thistle stew?

Folklore claimed that Judas hanged himself from an elder tree, a belief expressing a pre-Christian fear and reverence for its spirit, Hylde Moer, and that to cut or burn the wood without her permission was to bring down her vengeance. The flowers, however, are more benign. Lotions and ointments made from them have been folk remedies for rashes and skin complaints. During the First World War, wounded horses were treated with an ointment made by simmering elderflowers in lard. More recently, elderflower cordial has become a fashionable non-alcoholic drink.

There is something in sunflowers that appealed to Baroque despots. Natives of Central America, they were brought back to Madrid, where they graced the Royal Botanic Garden. They so impressed Louis XIV that he used them as a decorative motif on his palace at Versailles – sunflowers for the Sun King – and the two enigmatic self-portraits with sunflowers by Van Dyck may be an allusion to his position as court painter to Charles I. Sunflowers inspired a fellow Dutchman, Van Gogh, in a series of paintings that are now among the most popular and expensive in the world. Peter the Great, more practical, introduced them as a crop to provide cheap cooking oil and they now have a potential future as a source of biofuel.

No flower is more resonant than the poppy, a symbol of fallen warriors from Homer on the plains of Troy to John McCrae on the fields of Flanders. To Ruskin, the flower was “a burning coal fallen from Heaven’s altars”. One species, *Papaver somniferum*, has been cultivated for the pain-relieving properties of its sap, opium, for 5,000 years. Literature documents the joys and pains of addiction: from Coleridge through De Quincey to Irvin Welsh. It has sent the British to war: against China to sell it and in Afghanistan to eradicate it, while, helpfully, the Royal Horticultural Society tells us that it is “easy to grow in any well-drained soil in full sun or light shade”.

Fiona Stafford has given to anthophiles the perfect companion for the long winter evenings before the snowdrops burst forth.

ANDREW HARVEY