

Sally Nicholls' Tree Story

From the Welcome Session on Saturday 29 July 19:15 – 20:30

Who makes a forest?

Is it a giant or a wizard? A business conglomeration? An empire and all its armies?

No.

First, you have bare, stony ground. No earth. Nothing that will hold water. Nowhere to put down roots.

What comes first?

Not a mighty oak or an English rose, but little, clinging plants. Lichen. Algae. Moss. Tiny smears of green on the stone.

What comes next?

Insects. Beetles. Ants. Little, crawling, busy things, who eat the moss and fertilise the ground. They die, and the moss dies. And tiny microscopic creatures come, and break their bodies into soil.

So now there is soil, and in the soil and in the plants there is water. And little seeds blow in on the wind, and now there are ferns, and grass, and wild flowers in the stony places. Bees come, and butterflies. And the flowers may be small, but their roots bury down into cracks in the rock, and they wear the rocks into stones, and the stones into pebbles, and the pebbles into earth.

There's shade now. Thistles grow, and brambles, spiky, hardy plants. Birds stay, and eat the blackberries, and the worms, and the beetles. Mice come, and rats, and voles, and hedgehogs. They die, and the plants die, and their bodies sink into the leaf mould and thicken the soil.

Shrubs grow. Little sycamore keys whirl in, and saplings sprout in the cracks in the rocks, and the cracks widen, and the leaf mould settles, and now if you look, there's more earth there than stone.

Years pass. Decades. Centuries.

And what was once a bare and barren land is now a forest. Deer graze in the shade of the trees. Flowers grow by the side of the streams. More things live and grow here than you could count in a lifetime.

And who made the forest?

A giant, a wizard, an emperor?

No.

It was the seeds and the bees and the roots of the trees. It was a thousand, thousand tiny things.

And together they changed the face of the earth.