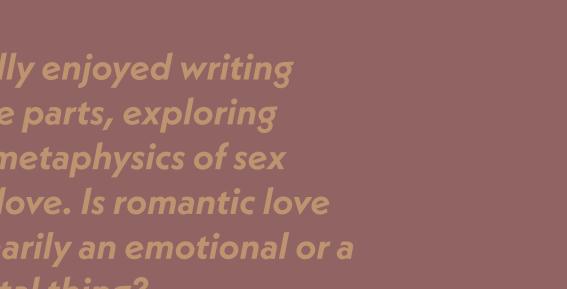
conversation with

Alexander: What was the first character or element that grew into the Garden of Earthly Bodies?

Sally Oliver: I'd actually watched the film, Annihilation, which I really admired, and I couldn't stop thinking about the visual effects afterwards. I loved this horrific merging of bodies with parts of the environment, the strange fusion of one life form with another. I also wanted to explore the idea of "forest bathing" because I think it's amazing how we have this transcorporeal relationship with trees, how they reduce our blood pressure and influence our moods in the subtlest of ways. So, the concept of eco-therapy was important to the story from the beginning — but I wanted to make this more frightening and subversive, where the boundary between mind and body is dissolved at the same time. I'm also really interested in hallucinogenic drugs and what they do to the psyche — how the ego is dismantled, and the default mode network (our neural baseline activity) is shut down, to a arge extent, when we take something like magic mushrooms. It can feel like you're merging with everything around you. I wanted parts of this novel to have that psychedelic feel, a trippy vibe! I had the ending of the novel in mind at the very beginning —

it was the first thing I could visualise.





they are serious or not. As you see in the novel, Marianne has secretly longed Alexander: Developmentally it's an important stage for us when we begin for someone to pathologise her, yet as soon as her doctor does actually to understand our separation from our parents and from others generally. say, "well you're clearly very sick and need to do something about it," she It's in this stage that we begin to learn to recognize the existence and recoils from this verdict. This is the kind of diagnosis she's subconsciously separateness of other minds. This idea of giving up that boundary and wanted, but it also feels like a trap, especially since she's been told that she merging with nature or the larger world is interesting; we must abandon has an option — she can go to Nede, where there is apparently a very high the hard-won limits we first have to create in childhood. It makes me success rate of recovery, or she can do nothing but continue and hope to think about Marianne's relationship with Richard. Early on in your novel, improve, without taking any drastic measures to speed up the process. The there's a separateness between the characters and the boundary between problem with Marianne is that she is a very passive person and has been them stays so rigid that connection seems all but impossible. At one point this way for a long time. It's weirdly comforting to give into her despair, to when Marianne is reflecting on their relationship we have this line, "She wallow in self-pity, thinking that nobody has the "right expertise" to help was effectively mourning the end of their life together while it was still in her or advise her. I am similar in that respect. I suffer from depression — and progress, had barely just begun." And I wonder, is Marianne paying the cost 💎 have done for most of my life — but I consistently surrender to this idea that of a mind awakened to the realities of loss and grief or is this about the nobody can possibly help me, that it's insoluble. My editor actually said that difficulty of lowering that boundary—this boundary that is, in the beginning Marianne's decision to go to Nede seemed so "out of character" for her, that I needed to add more dialogue between her and her doctor, to have

of life, so important for us?

ery quickly and need an escape route again.

Sally: That's a good question. I think it's both. Marianne is haunted by the character for her, but that's precisely why she does it. She realises, on some fact that her sister is no longer in her life anymore, and this takes up so much level, that her character has always been the problem; her stubbornness to of her headspace. This absence also takes up a lot of space in her body, and 🧪 change, her self-pity and apathy have always held her back. there is a particular passage where this is very evident in the book. Grief can completely dampen arousal, and it also feels like you're being smothered Alexander: So many reasons seem to stack up for Marianne to abandon by the slightest thing. It's definitely something that can go one of two ways her identity or at least do radical surgery to it in hopes of change. Is she — it makes you cling to other people who are close to you, or it creates — ultimately in love with the illusion of change, or has she just gone down the a barrier where you can't bring yourself to share the experience. Because wrong path? Marianne's relationship with Richard is still kind of in its infancy (they've only been going out around seven months at the present stage in the Sally: I think when Marianne visits the doctor to discuss her depression, novel), she's not really had a chance to develop real long-lasting intimacy she's sick of herself. She wants changes to be made, but it's almost like there. He also didn't know her sister, Marie, very well at all, so Marie she doesn't want to put the effort in. Marianne is certainly not a perfect remains Marianne's property, and she is very territorial with her memories. character, by any means. She dwells on herself far too much, and she has You're also right about the difficulty of lowering that boundary even in the a foul temper, a short fuse. You can sense that she's on high alert for bad absence of difficult experiences. Marianne is intensely introspective but she behaviour all the time, especially in the workplace, and lacks the capacity doesn't like to share her thoughts with anybody. She's very fearful of this 💎 to deal with it. When she loses Marie, this intensity drops off — she has no being taken for granted. She's perhaps a bit too serious, too paranoid, and 💛 energy left to invest in anything. Nede is a tempting possibility because it painstakingly aware of herself. And yet she also yearns for companionship. I sounds like a place that doesn't really require too much of her. When she think a lot of us have this push-pull relationship with others, in that we want decides to go there, she has reached a stage where she doesn't want to to avoid company and protect our space, but we also grow sick of ourselves have an identity at all. Instead of charging forward to claim her place in the

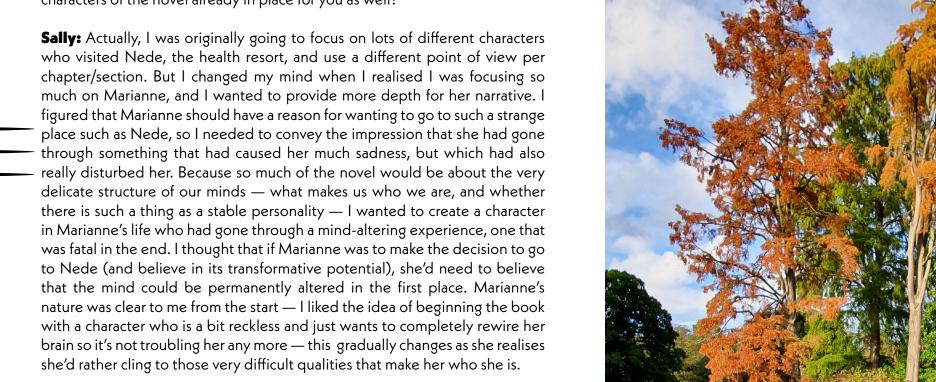
her seriously question the integrity of this solution. I agree that it's out of

world, she now wishes to retreat from it and spare herself the aggravation

and disappointment. This is change, but in the sense that she's bowing o **Alexander:** I wonder how this relates to her ambivalence toward authority of the race. figures. I'm thinking, again, of her first encounter with the doctor. As she's very consciously considering how to present herself, we learn she is "willing" But how much of this is true — does she really want to abandon her life and be studied yet loath to cooperate." Would it be right then to say that she 💎 all her memories of it? Marianne recognises this trait in herself, to indulge the has an anxiety about being seen and yet also wants to be seen as she would worst parts and believe herself to be helpless, hopeless, heartless. Nothing matters, etc. In reality, she is "unconsciously glad of being alive" as we find

later on, and she also finds other qualities that had been previously lying **Sally:** Yes, the thing with Marianne is that she's hostile to authority but she dormant — compassion, desire, courage. The tone of the novel changes also wants to be examined. I wouldn't say it's a lowering of boundaries, rather rapidly in the second half. I deliberately introduced a crazed, manic energy that she's allowing someone privileged access across the boundary. It's one towards the end of the book, where you see Marianne sort of wake back of those paradoxes, I think, in that talking about your problems is helpful up a bit. As soon as she senses that something's not right about Nede, she to some extent, but it also solidifies them. You can become quite obsessed feels that survival instinct kick in. There is suddenly so much adrenaline, with your own deficiencies and ailments, and this is what has happened to remorse and a sudden frustration with herself for her formerly passive and Marianne. A doctor has the necessary authority to examine these issues — pessimistic behaviour. whether somatic or psychological, or both — and then pronounce whether

Alexander: I appreciate your openness about your process. I'd like to explore that more. You mentioned you had started with the ending in mind. Without going into detail, it's a thought-provoking image/set of events. Were the haracters of the novel already in place for you as well?



Alexander: Where do you come down on the existence of a stable personality?

emotionally, but I was thinking more in terms of consistency here, whether your sense of self remains the same throughout your life. It's so difficult to determine where personality comes from as well — is it shaped by our mood, our thoughts, our emotions, our genes, our upbringing and history, or ou ocial space and environment? Biology also has a huge impact, and it's scary to think how easily the brain can be altered or damaged. Our sense of who v re stems from all these things, so it's also something that is bound to chan onstantly. I have been with my boyfriend for over fourteen years, and we'v ved together for half of that time. I'm not one of these romantic people w say that someone has always been the same, that they could never change. W have both changed massively over those years, and we're not really the sam eople we were when we met. That's why I think it's very rare for relationship to last the distance, because you have to be happy with all those changes in your partner, they with yours, and remain miraculously just as compatible as before, just as in synch with one another. But I also think you absorb one another's thoughts, emotions, even all the daft quirks so you become a kind of unit, an entity with a shared history. That shared history is the one constant

Sally: Ah, that's a hard question! I guess "stable" can mean mentally or

Alexander: There is a kind of romantic quality to that notion of growing together or of absorbing parts of the other and having parts of yourself

years she had been trying to achieve this with Marie, but there was always omething lacking in their relationship where Marianne believed she was ying much harder to close the gap. And then she finally pulls away at the vorst possible moment. There is also something not quite right about her relationship with Richard. There is a distance there that chills her when she thinks about it, and she is disturbed by the desperation in him, particularly nen they're making love. This is why I love writing about sex — it's such a elicate balancing act, a really intense and compact demonstration of desire, here two people are either completely in synch with one another or they're not. Because you're in such close proximity with the other person, it's quite easy to detect whether they're flagging or just going through the motions with you. I really enjoyed writing these parts, exploring the metaphysics of sex and love. Is romantic love primarily an emotional or a mental thing? With Richard, it's an intensely emotional display. With Marianne, it's both, but her brain spoil the balance as she overthinks everything and can't quite give herself fully to the act. And she also doesn't feel mentally in-tune with her boyfriend. There is also the fact that neither Richard nor Marianne know how to talk to one |||another, confide really painful truths, and this causes further estrangement.

Sally: Definitely! She's always been striving to have this connection with

someone, and not necessarily a romantic connection, just real intimacy. For

bsorbed. Is this the missed opportunity for Marianne?



exander: I loved *Annihilati*on. I read once that the human eye is particularly good at distinguishing the color green. The reason for this being our evolutionary past in the forests of the world. This was a somewhat depressing thought to me given that I was living, at the time, in a city so devoid of green spaces and so completely concreted over that a mild instorm resulted in ankle-high street flooding. I romanticized forests during those years. You're definitely exploring ne trans corporeal relationship with trees through a lens that's different and disturbing. Do you see this an outgrowth

completely romanticise forests too. And I totally agree that a lack of green space in your life can make you eel very stagnated, and creatively blocked as well. There is a massive interest in the wellness side of this, but it's also cinating to learn how ecosystems defend themselves without our input or interference, the interconnectedness of it all. There is a such a wealth of literature about the environment now, particularly all these microhistories on trees, fungi, nd other intelligent life such as Entangled Life and This is Your Mind on Plants — books which explore the "language" of plants. I particularly love that the roots of mushrooms form a sort of neural network beneath the earth, and these oots can extend for miles, becoming entangled with the roots of multiple trees so they can pass on their nutrients to e another. What I wanted to explore in my book is this vastness, the idea that the natural world is humming with its n consciousness and intelligence, something that is — depending on the way you look at it — really compelling but o quite eerie. I wanted to make the prospect of forest bathing or ecotherapy quite sinister, because it is a threat to our e of boundaries. That's where the body horror comes into it. D. H. Lawrence wrote effectively about this terrifying ecundity, the beauty and erotic tension of the natural world, where characters lose their minds when worshipping the n or canoodling in the woods. To be honest, I realise that my book has its grim moments, but I also find that there's some humour there (well, I like to think so!) even if it's a little ugly. It's an exaggerated take on ecophobia, the fear of d ungoverned spaces, regressing to a very primal state then not being able to come out of it.

Alexander: Do you think stories (books, films, all the forms) about nature have become more homogenous in light of the political discourse around animals and the environment?

Sally: To some extent perhaps you're right, and yet it's a genre that has so many sub-categories and different strands of discourse. I would say that books and documentaries on "nature as therapy/cure" are so prevalent and it's difficult to doriginal ways of discussing this. Though Everybody Needs Beauty by Samantha Walton is very good at addressing e darker side of the wellness industry, as well as how we exploit the environment for our own needs and which ltures are better at preserving it. In terms of fictional stories, it's kind of rare to find a narrative that hints at a wider l discourse — i.e. climate change and our moral responsibility towards the planet — without seeming t polemical. I tend to enjoy books that touch upon our concerns with the environment in a very oblique way and I'm always interested in macabre depictions of nature — I'm thinking particularly of Fever Dream by Samanta Schweblin, rhich plays with our anxiety about environmental pollution but in such a clever and creepy manner.