



PAUL MAUNDER

# THE WIND AT MY BACK

## A Cycling Life

*'he writes wonderfully'*  
Jim Crace

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something you'd known all along but had only forgotten for a moment.  
Emotions can still be very present for the cyclist but because the conscious mind has shrunk, emotions are not deconstructed and endlessly examined, they are transmuted into the physical world. Anger is pushed through the pedals into the tarmac, sadness reflected by the dark hills and the gathering clouds; joy is the sensory cacophony that makes you glad to be alive.  
On the bike, do not consciously try to solve a problem, trust the breaking down process. Riding is like dreaming: the conscious mind shuts down, allowing something deeper to happen.  
On a warm midsummer day, at a trendy cycling café in Spitalfields Market, East London, I meet up with landscape artist Matthew Webber. A resident of north-east London, Webber has been a racing cyclist as long as he's been a painter, with a healthy measure of success in both disciplines. We talk about the links between place and creative work and he describes how, for him, there is a direct connection between his favourite riding landscape and his work. The place he loves to ride is Epping Forest, the dense woodland wedged into the outer edges of London. From the busy roads that border it, the forest looks rather tame, rather managed, yet if one takes a bike onto its myriad of tiny paths, one is quickly submerged in a wonderful dark labyrinth.

### SKY, SOLITUDE

working at frame-by-frame images of the trees overhead. While his eyes were focusing on the path, the camera had fixated on the canopy. Individual frames show random, abstract configurations of branches. When one catches his eye Webber will use it as the basis for a sketch that may then become a painting. With layers and layers of paint applied, then sanded back down, the original spidery branch shapes are usually impossible to discern in the finished work. But they are there, buried in the painting's history. Cyclists always desire movement, speed, and through this Webber has enabled 21st-century technology to capture a fleeting, ethereal picture of an ancient place, and all without any conscious intervention from the artist.

Fascinated by this process, I asked Webber if he ever went to other landscapes to paint. 'Occasionally,' he said. 'I can get away on my own for a few days to somewhere wilder.' Recently he loaded up his campervan with canvases, paint and bike and spent three days in Wales. Despite a lot of rain, he immersed himself for those three days in cycling and painting. My first reaction was that this sounded like bliss. Three days alone with only a bike and one's work. No children, no emails, no neighbours with whom to make polite conversation. Solitude, with all its space.

And yet solitude can grow oppressive. It didn't occur to me to ask at the time, but later I wondered whether

Even if one spends time getting to know the layout, trying to memorise the paths, the forest is constantly changing, always throwing in little surprises. This may not be wilderness in its truest sense, but the careless traveller could easily end up going round in circles like those hapless actors in *The Blair Witch Project*. It is the opposite of my favoured landscape, the Downs. In the forest nothing is explained, nothing can be read at a single glance.

By connecting up local parks and paths, and the brutalist concrete underpasses beloved of sixties town planners, Webber can ride from his front door into the heart of the forest without touching a road. He rides for the same sort of reasons we all ride - for fitness, for fun, to escape. Riding off-road, he tells me, on sinewy paths littered with tree roots and fallen branches, demands total concentration. No dreaming, no philosophical analysis, there's no time for that. Concentration brings its own relief; it's a connection to the physical world. Body and mind working together to solve the problem of how to move fast through the environment. Everything else is purged, just for an hour or so.

On Webber's handlebars is a video camera, pointing upwards. It records as he rides, not the path as most off-road riders would, but the trees. When he gets home he downloads the recording and slows it down until he is

he'd got lonely towards the end of the three-day stint. Surely solitude can turn sour, and we'll never know when that turning point comes until we try it. And when loneliness does begin to creep in, does that stifle the creation of art?

An extract from a memoir by the writer Paul Maunder, in which my work features.

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