



"Where you tend a rose, my lad,
A thistle cannot grow."

The Secret Garden, written by Frances Hodgson Burnett a hundred years ago, has delighted generations of children. It is a timeless novel that has not lost its appeal. Since the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the garden has been a recurrent theme in many a book. It is often a symbol of paradise, or a fairy-tale place where magic is at work.

When Mary Lennox, a ten-year-old sullen sickly child, arrives at Misselthwaite Manor in Yorkshire to live with her uncle after her parents' death in India, she is bad-tempered and selfish. So is her cousin, Colin Craven, whom everybody believes to be an invalid.

The two cousins, Mary and Colin, have been raised without their parents' love. Their life is like an untended garden, full of weeds and thorns. They are spoilt, bossy and self-centred and do not like or love anyone. How could they, since they have been deprived of their parents' love since birth?

Thanks to Martha, a housemaid, and her brother Dickon, Mary will gradually become more human and sociable. Martha and Dickon are simple country people. They often use the Yorkshire dialect - not always easy for foreign readers - but it is pleasing to see them use such a poetical term as 'daffydowndilly' for 'daffodil'. They live in a tiny cottage with ten brothers and sisters and are often hungry. Nevertheless their parents' love has made them gentle and thoughtful. They have a caring mother both Mary and Colin envy them for.

As Mary starts working in the secret garden, she regenerates herself and learns how to share and care about people. *The Secret Garden* thus depicts a fascinating journey into the characters' inner lives. As the garden comes to life, so do Mary and Colin. The curative power of love and nature is amazing. Both Mary and Colin believe 'magic' is responsible for their metamorphosis. We might also call it a 'miracle', or an 'epiphany' to use the term coined by James Joyce. But isn't it simply the will to live and be happy that may radically transform a person's life?

The garden truly has a healing power. As Colin starts gardening, he begins to evolve and become more human. With the help of Dickon, such an endearing character, 'an animal charmer' who walks around with a squirrel in one pocket, a bottle of milk to feed an orphaned baby lamb in the other, followed by a crow and a fox, the children manage to coax the garden back to life. And when Mr Craven - disconsolate since his wife died ten years before - returns home, he is touched and realises he is alive too. The children's joy and transformation are contagious. I highly recommend this book. You might also enjoy other children's books dealing with gardens such as *Tom's Midnight Garden* by Philippa Pearce or *The Forgotten Garden* written more recently by Australian Kate Morton.