

The words 'glamour' and 'moss' usually only appear in the same sentence in the columns of celebrity magazines when supermodel Kate has hit the headlines. But as **Jenny Rowntree** explains, the life cycle of a moss has not only taken the literary world by storm, but has also made an impression at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival.

Moss arrives at Cannes!

Sometime early last year, a random email dropped into my inbox asking if I wanted to be involved in a project linking fiction writers with research scientists. Geoff Ryman, himself a science fiction author, and senior lecturer at the Centre for New Writing at the University of Manchester, was putting together and editing an anthology of short stories. The idea was that scientists would advise the authors, enabling the resulting fiction to be underpinned by good scientific facts and theory. While most of the authors involved were science fiction writers, one author, Sara Maitland, had expressed a wish to write something about bryophytes. Sara's idea was a fairy story about forests, mosses and wise women, but she wanted to find out more about the basic biology of moss before she began. This was where I came into the picture.

Initially, Sara sent me a couple of emails and we spoke on the phone. We talked about bryo-

phyte biology and I recommended a few books for her to read and websites to visit. The BBS website was an obvious place to start, and *Mosses & Liverworts* by Ron Porley and Nick Hodgetts is an excellent book for both beginners and experts. Sara came back to me with a few more specific questions: 'Do you know what the word *'generation'* means when referring to the bryophyte life cycle?' 'How is it that mosses can regenerate from the fragments remaining after they have been blended in a food processor?' I'm pleased to say I was able to answer Sara's questions and explain the 'totipotent' ability of bryophytes. I still love that word! Later in the project, Sara came down to Manchester and we met for a coffee and a mossy chat. It was great fun talking about bryophytes and finding ways to explain science to a non-scientist.

Finally, a draft of the story '*The Moss Witch*' arrived in my inbox. Sara had written a wonderful tale of the beauty and magic of mosses

and the Ent-like (sorry – geeky *Lord of the Rings* reference) moss witches who guard them. There was also a scientist, who loved his moss, although he didn't come out of the story so well in the end – a salutary lesson perhaps. Included was a reference to one particular moss that I have worked with extensively in the past: *Orthodontium gracile*. This was one of the main species I worked with for the *ex situ* project at Kew Gardens, and Sara had included it in the story as a thank you to me.

Every story in the anthology was accompanied by an afterword from each of the scientists involved. This included our impressions of the story and how the experience had been for us. I thoroughly enjoyed the whole process. I loved the story that Sara produced, and how she had bent science into fiction. I liked the different

way I was made to think as I tried to explain some complicated ideas to someone without a scientific background. I hope that this will stand me in good stead when I teach in the future, and I believe all scientists would benefit from a similar experience.

The book was published in time for me to give it to all my family as a Christmas present. It is called '*When it Changed – Science Into Fiction*' and is edited by Geoff Ryman. The book is published by Comma Press and is available from their website (www.commapress.co.uk).

Since its publication, Sara's story has taken on a life of its own. It was nominated for a BBC short story award and won the runner-up prize. As a result, the story was read on Radio 4, reviewed by the Radio 4 programme *Front Row* and is available as a BBC podcast, read by Hannah Gordon, at www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/nssa

Comma books, has a subsidiary called Comma Film, and earlier this year a short animated film was made of *The Moss Witch*, which was then taken to the 2010 Cannes film festival! I recently spent one Friday evening sitting in a little café in Manchester, watching the UK film premier of *The Moss Witch*. It was a great little film, but quite surreal to hear what sounded like a conversation I had had over coffee with Sara a year previously coming back at me from the big screen. The room (although small) was packed, and I did wonder how many people really understood what they were watching. Whatever they thought, around 50 people, who would probably not have known much about moss or bryophytes beforehand, sat and watched a film about their biology, albeit told as a beautiful fairytale.

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