

## A SECRET GARDEN

The story of a little girl's visit to Monet's garden was an instant hit with a modern-day child called Isabel. But her father Roy Richard Grinker had no idea just what the tale would mean for his autistic daughter

**ON WINTER** mornings, as I took our daughter Isabel to her pre-school at the Smithsonian Institution, we could see the glow of sunrise above the Capitol, sometimes turning the Washington Monument pale orange, yellow or even purple. Around the nearby museums there are lindens, hollies, weeping birches and 7-metre-tall saucer magnolias, trees whose shapes and textures made Isabel stop and stare. I recall most vividly the *Corylus avellana* "Contorta". In winter, its branches twist and curl as if afflicted by a mysterious disease. It doesn't grow the way a tree is supposed to.

In 1996, Isabel's pre-school teachers showed her a book, *Linnea in Monet's Garden*, the story of a Swedish girl who travels to France with her elderly neighbour to Monet's house and garden in the village of Giverny. Isabel carried it with her everywhere.

She couldn't read or write and, like many autistic children, didn't like talking to anyone but herself. At 5, she could speak only 200 words, all nouns, mostly Disney characters or Thomas the



NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, DC

Tank Engine trains. She had just learned to say "Mommy" and "Daddy". For three years, my wife Joyce and I had battled Isabel's inability to relate to people, and she had made steady progress. But Linnea had a power we didn't.

As we read the book to her, maybe a hundred times, Isabel started to sound out the words and read. It cast a spell on her. Three years later, Joyce bought an animated video version and Isabel became hooked on that, too.

We took her to the National Gallery of Art to see one of Monet's paintings of the famous lily pond and Japanese bridge. Isabel stared at it from around a corner, peered briefly then darted away, seeming to take in the entire image in a split second.

Sometimes she stood on our shiny marble coffee table dressed in a black

What was it about seeing Monet's garden that opened the world up for Isabel?

T-shirt, sun dress, black shoes and hat, looking just like Linnea, and said "Japanese bridge". As she focused on the table's surface, I imagined she saw in it Monet's double garden – the pool with its water lilies and the reflection of the sky and landscape. At those moments she was uncharacteristically calm, a calm that would not return until the following August, when we took her to Monet's garden in Giverny.

The place was a marvel. In the late morning, after a shower, the garden was overwhelmingly green. Just like the painting, the garden and the water blurred where they met. Isabel raced to the Japanese bridge, stood at its apex for an hour, mesmerised and more serene than I had ever seen her.

Did Isabel notice the pond changing with every new breeze? There were carpets of flowers, streaks of colour she probably never saw. For her Giverny was the repetition of a script. Dressed like Linnea, she sat on the same steps where Linnea sat, lifted her right foot and stretched her arms above her head in joy just as Linnea had. She had her own impressions, but I think they were of completeness: the book, the video, and now reality.

Call the trip extravagant, but that single day in Giverny transformed her in a way we never anticipated. She started saying words in French so often that we enrolled her in a French class. It was like speech therapy – simple conversation in pretend social settings – and she blossomed. She absorbed the vocabulary and pronunciation with such speed that her teacher asked if her mother was French.

One day, she approached a stranger walking his dog and asked: "Le chien est gentil?" I translated: "Is your dog nice?" He nodded yes, and Isabel, who had been terrified of dogs for years, touched the top of its head.

Few experts would suggest that a child with autism study a foreign language, but it worked for her. She applied the French lessons to new situations, at home and in public. The people she spoke to didn't speak French, but it didn't matter to us. She was interacting with the world.

Today, Isabel is more social than we ever expected. She also has her own dog, a French bulldog, registered with the American Kennel Club as Linnea of Monet's Garden. ●

This article is based on *Unstrange Minds: Remapping the world of autism* by Roy Richard Grinker (Basic Books). Grinker is professor of anthropology at George Washington University, Washington DC

## Enigma

### Two squared

No. 1437 Richard England

HARRY and Tom each replaced each asterisk with a digit in such a way that the three numbers that could be read across and the two

\*\*\* numbers that could be read down were five different perfect squares each of which consisted of three different digits (with no leading zero). Tom did not use any of the 3-digit squares that Harry used. Which three 3-digit

squares consisting of three different digits (with no leading zero) did neither of them use?

£15 will go to the sender of the first correct answer opened on Wednesday 9 May. The Editor's decision is final. Send entries to Enigma 1437, New Scientist, 84 Theobald's

Road, London WC1X 8NS, or to [enigma@newscientist.com](mailto:enigma@newscientist.com) (please include your postal address). The winner of Enigma 1431 is Eric Norton of Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, UK.

**Answer to 1431** Patience  
The directions that appear are R U R R U D.