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Britain's peculiar fascination with the weather

The Barbican's Rain Room exhibition is a reminder of how the weather defines our nation's character.

BY ROSALIND GOATES | PUBLISHED 02 MARCH 2013 15:36

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The Rain Room exhibition at the Barbican.

"When two Englishmen meet, their first talk is of the weather". Dr. Johnson noted this in the 18th century and yet it is still unassailably true. Despite Oscar Wilde's famous riposte, "conversation about the weather is the last refuge of the unimaginative", Britain remains a country peculiarly fascinated with the weather. This obsession seems quintessentially British, our literature is flooded with references and metaphors; one need only skim through a book of English poetry, or look at a Turner painting. However, there is something rather sentimental about it. As Richard Mabey aptly writes, despite the banality of discussions on the weather, the nice thing is that "we're all in the weather together", it offers each of us a common narrative. Perhaps we choose this narrative because of a lack of imagination or because of an ingrained 'stiff upper lip' and a need for a conversation 'safety net'. Whatever the reason, it is an ingrained part of our culture, BBC Radio 4 discovered this when they proposed cutting the late-night shipping forecast which provoked an outcry from listeners, most of whom did not actually live near the sea.

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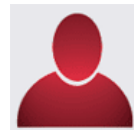
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Pondering these thoughts and with a mixture of intrigue and bafflement, I headed off to see the *Rain Room* at the Barbican. The installation has been one of the institution's most successful exhibitions and comes to a close this weekend having opened on 4 October. The installation, created by Random International, seeks to "push people outside their comfort zones" and has certainly created a storm with queues averaging six hours. Once inside the rain room, one is confronted with what appears to be a downpour. However, when you enter as if by magic, the rain does not touch you. The installation is designed to allow viewers to interact and experience is both exciting and contemporary, the space is calming and intriguing and allows individuals to make what they will of it.

The exhibition, for me, most aptly sums up our fascination with weather and suggests that we enjoy the weather, not just as a banal piece of information, for idle chit chat, but as something that defines part of our nation's rich character.

The Rain Room exhibition at the Barbican closes this weekend

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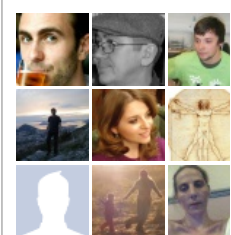
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