For an author whose fiction often ventures into dark terrain, Graham Swift has chosen a walk that seems somewhat incongruous. The Booker Prize-winning novelist, whose works have dealt with murder, incest, war and grief, has brought me to the South Downs – a place that represents an almost idealised view of England.

With miles of softly undulating hills before us, he stops to take in the view. “You know, I’ve done this so many times, stood here so many times, and every time it just gets me. I love it.”

Best known for the novels *Waterland* (1983) and *Last Orders*, which won him the Booker in 1996, Swift appears much younger than his 65 years. His manner is quiet, unassuming and gentle. “It’s impossible to be standing here and actually not to have a feeling about England. Look at the Sussex Downs and you’ve got the fields and the hedgerows. I’m struggling not to be sentimental – I don’t want to say anything sentimental – but you just feel England.”

We had started the morning with a short stroll through the town of Lewes, followed by a brisk walk up Chapel Hill. As we head down into the valley, sheep bleating past us as they gambol up the hill, I ask how often he makes the day trip here from his home in south London.

“Half a dozen times a year, at least – in all weathers. One of the great things about walking is that you can think while you walk or, of course, you can totally switch your mind off and just go along. I love being on my own two feet and steering myself.”

I suggest that perhaps there is a controlled predictability to walking that is the opposite of writing, which can be both capricious and magical. “Yes, you bet. And I totally approve of the word magic. I think when a good story...”