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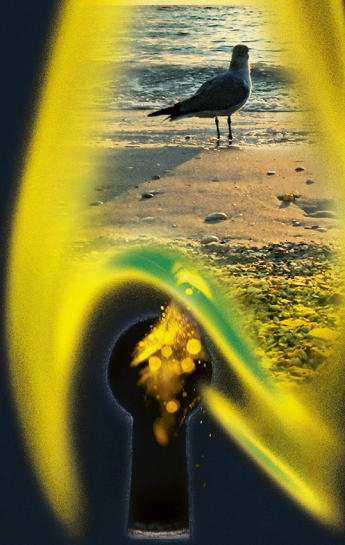
MICHAEL MORPURGO

Nicola Garrard



'An important and powerful story of family, community and love'

MATT GOODFELLOW

ON THE EDGE

Praise for *On the Edge*

'Tender and angry, salty and sweet… a heartfelt novel shaped by powerful undercurrents'
Michael Morpurgo

'The prose, rich with salty metaphor, often sings an alluring siren song… a beautiful book'
Anthony McGowan, winner of the CILIP Carnegie Medal for *Lark*

'An important and powerful story of family, community and love'
Matt Goodfellow, author of *The Final Year*

'This book is magnificent'
Katriona O'Sullivan, author of *Poor*

'A beautiful, immersive read which crackles with tension, heartbreakingly provocative… weaves powerful themes of family and belonging. A brilliant read'
J.P. Rose, author of *Birdie*

'This book stole my heart, I loved the boys so much'
Independent Book Reviews

'It just gripped me and held me in its grasp… Just buy it!'
Book Monitor

'Atmospheric and thought-provoking, packs an emotional punch'
Jake Hope, literacy consultant

'I was captivated from the very first page… a timely and nuanced exploration of financial hardship, masculinity and adolescence.'
Just Imagine

'Nicola Garrard evokes fiercely and with skill young male lives unfolding in coastal shadows, battling outside forces with scant regard for their existence.'
John McCullough, author of *Reckless Paper Birds*

'Raw and lyrical… dives into brotherhood, belonging, and a boy's fight to hold on.'
Matthew Tobin, lecturer in Children's Literature

'This stunning novel is a modern tragedy, a love story and a warning, both political and deeply personal'
Astra Bloom, *Common People: An Anthology of Working Class Writers*

'Angry, poetic, funny, and empathetic, and it demands that we see, and that we care'
Sarah Brooks, author of *The Cautious Traveller's Guide to the Wastelands*

'A novel of rare power, dazzlingly original and full of heart. Prepare to be swept away!'
Juliet West, author of *Before the Fall*

'Immersive, haunting, atmospheric'
Sarah Harman, author of *All the Other Mothers Hate Me*

'Has the reader surfing atop a wave of hope and familial love. Just beautiful!'
Cauvery Madhavan, author of *The Inheritance*

'A raw, tender story… with heart, humour and defiance.'
Prof. Sheelah Argawal, Centre for Coastal Communities, U. of Plymouth

ON THE EDGE

Nicola Garrard

Old Barn Books Ltd
Warren Barn, Fittleworth, West Sussex, RH20 1JW
Email: info@oldbarnbooks.com
Web: www.oldbarnbooks.com
Follow us on Facebook, Twitter/X or Instagram:
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Old Barn Books' authorised representative in the EU for product safety:
Easy Access System Europe Oü, 16879218
Mustamäe tee 50, Tallinn, Estonia
Contact: gspr.requests@easproject.com
tel: +372 56 968 939

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To Miriam

GLOSSARY

Devonian words used in the novel

backalong – in the past
dimpsey – the light at dawn and dusk
grockle – tourist
grommet – very young surfer
gurt – big
proper job – expression of agreement or approval
tidy – great, brilliant
tor – a granite outcrop
yarn – a tall tale

Note to Reader

Please be aware that *On the Edge* contains content that may be upsetting, including depictions of grief, suicidal feelings and substance abuse. If you are affected by these issues, please turn to the back of the book, where there are helplines and other sources of support.

'A man is nobody underneath a big wave'

Alice Oswald, *Nobody*

PART ONE

The Pride of Lythcombe Bay

ONE

Former local hero, Rhys Fisher, had featured on the cover of the *South Devon Express & Echo* when he was seventeen. His wetsuit was peeled down to his hips and he held a gold surfing medal between his teeth. Hard to believe that was only last August. On either side of him were his little brothers Dav and Owen, and there, half-cropped out, was their dad, Phil Fisher, holding the prize-winning surfboard deck-side to the camera, so that the brands of potential sponsors might be seen. The paper's digital edition had six likes and one comment:

> *Go on Rhys lad! Up their arses with a weever fish mate. You can go all the way.*

Who were the Fisher brothers?

Salt boys. Rock boys. Motherless boys.

Reckless boys.

People think it was being untended by a woman's hand that had made Rhys reckless. Even as a squirt, he had little fear of height or consequence. He would do backflips off the harbour wall at low tide into a metre

of watery silt, not caring for the rusted can or scallop shell's cut. High places drew him; he could not go near Lythcombe's cliffs without lying on his belly and letting a gob of spit fall over the drop. And last year, when Owen let go of his new kite by the lighthouse cliffs – the Fishers always had their birthday picnics there – Rhys did not shrink from climbing down to rescue it.

'Stay here with Dav,' he had told the snivelling Owen because Dav was a teenager and sensible-like. 'I'll get it for you, mate.'

Sad to say, Rhys never did find the kite, even after scratching through gorse, slithering down a wet gully, and scaling rocks at the foot, only to arrive perpendicularly below where the three brothers had been, far up at the top.

Where had the kite gone? Taken in the teeth of an albatross, was seven-year-old Owen's theory.

Reckless he might be, but inside Rhys was soft. When he was ten, he used to worry about the sheep grazing the cliffs – how they sometimes spook and run the wrong way.

It comes with the territory: soggy turf, sharp edges, no room for error. After a storm, the first anglers of the day find them lying on the rocks. Tides come and go, sloshing the bodies till they are eaten by gulls or otherwise moved.

A few years ago, a young man fell off the old cliff path. According to the coroner, ketamine was both cause and small mercy, since, like a sedated pony,

the victim would not have felt much. If he'd had a wingsuit, like the ones Rhys has seen on the internet, that man would have swooped in the air like a bird or a kite. And when the time was right, he could have deployed his parachute.

If I threw myself off, Rhys sometimes thinks when he is at the lowest ebb of his tide, *there'd be a moment when I, too, would fly*.

But Rhys does not own a suit, and without one of the winged variety, a man falls at fifty-three metres per second. The tallest of Lythcombe's cliffs being eighty metres, it would take two seconds to meet the rocks below.

He would be well and truly shattered.

Like an egg. Like glass. Like a wave.

*

Despite hankering after surf winnings and sponsorship deals, Rhys never planned to be famous. Now, at seventeen, all he wants is to be happy and to have a proper home, and maybe marry a nice girl one day and have kids who are happy at home with their mum. And he wants to work hard and do no harm and for the men in town to see him and say, 'There's Rhys, he's a good man who takes care of his kids. He doesn't take jobs on the continent when he should be at home.'

And when you need a man to turn up ready with the tools to do a job, Rhys will be that man. And when you want someone to talk to and tell your fears, he will be there for you. And if you are short of money, or need

a place to stay, as long as there is a few quid to spare and room on the sofa, he will help you out. And if you are thirsty, he will be at the bar ordering two pints, one that has your name on it. And when you need someone brave, Rhys Fisher will be your man.

A good man in bad times will do the right thing. Like when someone's little girl is stolen by a rip current from the beach and swept fast into the distance, he will be the first there, reckless of his own endangerment, swimming out to drag her back and haul her gasping onto the sand, and pump the water out of her lungs till she comes to life again. He will do all the right things at the right times in the right order. No mistakes made or opportunities missed or future lessons to be recorded by the coroner.

'Missus,' says this kind of man (who is Rhys) to the mum as he carries her baby girl, light as air in his arms, 'your kid's going to be okay.'

But there is no more space between bravery and recklessness than there is between a shearwater and the sea. That same summer of his great win, later that August, when clouds were darkening, Rhys waded into the surf, thinking, *Seeing a lightning storm from shore is all well and good, granted, but in the waves, it will be another thing altogether.*

So he waded in, waited for the snap, crackle and fork-flash, and counted the seconds till the thunder came. Then he said a small prayer for ships in international waters.

The first flash smote offshore but Rhys could feel

it tickle his insides like a jellyfish sting. The water lit, then followed a smell like burning bladderwrack. The air turned electric, like being in a junction box, all soldered parts, hot metal and salt. The rain thickened and the beach huts on the prom disappeared. He was alone in the Atlantic, though his feet touched the sand.

The next flash was hot. His hair stood on end and Rhys thought, *I don't like this any more,* and then he told himself, *Don't be soft*.

He turned seaward. Soon, there was no counting between flash and bang; they came both together. And he would have stayed, were it not for his dad, Phil Fisher, come running in the water yelling, 'Son, get out of there right now!' over the crash of wave and thunder.

'Don't stop my fun,' said Rhys.

'I'd sooner stop your fun than lightning stop your heart,' said Phil Fisher, who locked his fist round Rhys's wrist like the monstrous-muscled hand of a giant squid and dragged him to the number 7 bus stop.

'What were you thinking?' said Phil Fisher, perched on the thin sloping bench, a measure against junkies sleeping in the bus shelter. 'Have you so soon forgotten your lifeguard training? You could've been killed. I'm going to Santander tomorrow. How can I bloody earn a living if I can't leave you safe?'

Now that the storm was safe behind the plastic glass of the bus shelter, Phil Fisher switched to his soft voice for all the whys of it: the recklessness, the danger to fish and boat, the burns and scorches and hearts stopping at once like a flicked switch. Then he

put his arm round his son and said no more, for there was nothing more to say, only that, sometimes, you can get caught up in things like lightning storms that seem like a good idea at the time.

Rhys did not speak, but, later, he wanted to ask his dad, 'How can you tell if you're being brave or just being a dick?'

*

Rhys's so-called challenging behaviour as an older teenager came as a surprise to everyone. His primary school teachers called him quiet, not speaking except when spoken to, not moving unless told, doing his work to the best of his ability; that is, not too well but with a hope of improvement. But when secondary school bored into his soul like the mighty pile-drivers he would later learn about in NVQ Level 1 Construction, something inside him was let loose. He was like a net-snagged cormorant set free and ready to fly.

The signs had been there. Ask anyone in Lythcombe and they will tell you of Rhys's great leap, back when he was in Year Ten. Holding your eyes with an honest look, they will swear a bare-faced guarantee that Rhys did drop, via an open classroom window, three storeys down to the flat roof of the PE changing rooms below – an allegation containing one part falsehood to two parts truth.

Rhys had been first at the classroom door, home-time on the day of his brother Owen's seventh birthday, when the teacher stopped him before he could leave.

'You will stay,' she said, 'for non-completion of tasks and your generally stinking attitude.'

'Will I?' said Rhys, polite as you like. 'I don't think so.'

The teacher stood guard, body against the doorframe, ballet pumps flat for maximum grip, jammed between carpet and door, knees bent in the brace position, white knuckles on the handle. The other boys watched, not daring to say a word.

'You will.'

'Can't make me,' said Rhys, smiling. He made one last try for the handle – one short, ugly tug during which he learned that if he was to cross that threshold, he would also be overleaping a line crossed by few and those among them banished by permanent exclusion. Though he was stronger than his teacher by several orders of magnitude, he did not want to add assault to his list of misdemeanours nor lay his gentlemanly hands on a female member of staff. He turned his back.

'You will stay,' said the teacher again, through gritted teeth, 'until your detention is done.'

'I don't think so,' said Rhys, again.

He went to the window, appearing calm for all the pounding on his ribs by heart and blood, spreading adrenaline into the parts that give surfers courage. Outside, there was no view of sea or beach, school being at the arse-end of town in a dip below the horizon made by the Jubilee housing estate where he lived.

But he could smell the waves, and that was enough.

The safety catch was set too narrow for a body to

pass, so when Rhys opened the window, there was only enough room for the salt-tang air to stream through. Once upon a time, these classroom windows had opened wide, before risk assessments judged them too dangerous for kids prone to bouts of rage, self-injury and despair. Now, they only opened a fraction, not just for the protection of those inside the building, but also in case some idiot might want to break back in.

There was the drop: a full three floors, dizzying to all, though a mere hop and skip for wagtails and corvids.

And there: the changing rooms roof where a great white gull, the biggest of its kind, hunched on the edge. It stretched out its wings as if to jump, then changed its mind.

And here: the iron downpipe to freedom.

The catch was hard to break, but Rhys was not deterred by safety mechanisms cack-handedly attached as an afterthought by the caretaker and bent with age and misuse.

*If I cannot walk through the doo*r, *I will fly through the window*, Rhys decided in his head, where he was more dangerous and daring than in real life. He gave the window a sharp push in a direction wrong for the catch but right for his dark purpose.

'What the hell are you doing?' asked the teacher, who had scant understanding of the tensile qualities of aluminium and of stainless steel screws ill-suited to high-load applications – something Rhys knew a bit about from studying construction.

As soon as the catch pinged off, Rhys threw his leg over the ledge, as he had done on the harbour wall many a time. Reaching round, he grasped the drainpipe, rust-scabs of ceramic paint not lending themselves to confidence, then abseiled, monkey-hand over monkey-fist, before settling like a nesting tern onto the flat roof of the changing rooms.

Startled, the fat gull scrambled to the air and swooped down. Rhys followed, leaping, to his mates' cheers, to freedom. He looked up and grinned at his class, Jakey, Adam and Declan crowded at the window.

'You will stay!' said a shrimp-pink face above. Teachers do not know what to do with a boy like Rhys.

'Will I?' Rhys said back. 'I don't think so.'

Witnesses who saw all this cannot tell the next part of this story.

Rhys proceeded at pace over the perimeter fence and across the Jubilee estate, along the main road through Lythcombe, past the shops and harbour, the fish market, processing plant and promenade, and past the Shepherd's Nook cabin, where retreating writers write and painters paint the same thing time and again – you would think they would weary of it. He was as light as any boy not weighed down by his school bag and he did not stop till he reached the dunes at the far end of the bay. There, the tide out, he got to cover and laughed at what he had done, and not long after, he cried, sand sticking to the tears rolling down his face.

He was crying for his mum, gone that same day seven years before. Owen's birthday.

Unbeknown to his teachers, Rhys – half-man, half-boy, half-hero, half-villain, half-good, half-bad, half-this, half-that and half-of-the-other – added up to more than any measly whole. The classroom ceiling bounded not the sum of him, for he was greater, even if school tests measured him short. The answers were always there in Rhys's head, tucked down somewhere with the words, like sleeping crabs packed in an ice box. They just never showed themselves when required. Rhys was not nil, nor was he the square root of nothing. He was underestimated, is all, more than anyone could have calculated.

More than Lythcombe could ever know.