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Opening Extract from...

The Bookshop That Floated in Away

Written by Sarah Henshaw

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Please print off and read at your leisure.

For Stu. And for my parents.

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INTRODUCTION

Almost daily, customers ask why I have a bookshop on a boat. Sometimes their tone of voice suggests genuine interest. Usually it is to precede a pun they actually believe to be original – about it being a 'novel' idea. Or one 'hull' of an idea. Or, when the American tourists are in, a 'swell' idea. Once it was asked with an inflection tending towards hysteria as the woman, peering from a far window, shrieked: 'We're actually on water! Maggie, you didn't tell me this was a real boat! You, at the desk, WHY IS THIS SHOP AFLOAT?' She then paused, pulled a paperback to her chest as if to shield against some kind of half-understood canal alchemy, before reconsidering: 'But is it afloat? I just realised, this is all probably some 3D illusion.' More thought. 'On stilts.'

And so I launch into a well-rehearsed and quite truthful spiel about the relative cost-effectiveness of a floating premises as opposed to one on the high street, or how the quirkiness attracts greater footfall, the advantages of being able to move on when business is slack and, on Friday afternoons when a couple of glasses of cheap wine have unspooled an embarrassing romantic readiness, I say that books and boats just go together. 'Adventure!' I cry. 'Escape!' I trill. And then straight into a chronology of

craft-inspired literature, beginning with *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, Of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight-and-Twenty Years, all alone in an uninhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oronoque; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With an Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pyrates.* 'For that was Defoe's considerably longer original title,' I slur, winking knowledgeably. I am nothing if not didactic on £4.99 Co-op Sauvignon Blanc from a plastic cup.

The Book Barge took shape in 2009. My boyfriend and I petitioned several banks for loans to buy the boat. They all saw the same supporting document, which was, I can now clearly appreciate, a nonsense. It was presented as a book (my idea). It included a title page with the pun-heavy, poorly written tagline: 'The locks could not imprison her. The waterways could not drown her spirit. She defied canal convention to become… THE BOOK BARGE.' I am squirming. Weirdly, at the time, I thought this was a kooky approach to business financing that would win over even the most hardened, calculator-for-a-heart manager. I now realise I was being a tit. There were fictional endorsements: 'Gripping! A masterpiece of business prose' – *Finance Digest*. 'You can bank on this having a happy ending' – *The Investor Times*. Inside, the 'chapters' had dumb-ass names like 'An Interesting Proposal', 'A Fortuitous Partnership' (to describe Stu's and my faux business credentials) and 'A Great Number of Numbers', which presented highly optimistic sales forecasts as an Excel spreadsheet, sandwiched between pictures of

Cleopatra's barge and Ratty and Mole gesticulating on a blue wooden rowing boat. An interesting proposal? It was frankly indecent. Our loan application was turned down firmly – and frequently – and we were forced to borrow from family instead.

When we first opened, it seemed like the gamble would pay off; business was brisk and the events the shop hosted were well attended. But the industry was changing, and it was changing fast. A year later, consumer sales of ebooks and downloads already accounted for 11 per cent of the British book market (up from 2 per cent when The Book Barge launched). Meanwhile, national headlines were still dominated by statistics warning of Britain's worst double-dip recession in fifty years. Suddenly browsers were borrowing pencils to scribble down ISBNs to purchase later, for less, online. The question everyone asked was now slightly different: not, 'Why do you have a bookshop on a boat?' but 'Why do you have a bookshop at all?'

Frustrated and struggling financially, I set off in May 2011 on a six-month journey to raise awareness, not just of my plight, but of the uncertain future facing all high-street bookstores. It turned out to be transformative in a more wonderful way than I imagined. There's a line in Emma Smith's canalling memoir, *Maidens' Trip*, claiming the waterways offered her a life that, for once, lived up to all her expectations, and that's what happened here too. More than that, I felt complete confidence and satisfaction in what I was doing. It made me indescribably happy.

This was almost entirely down to the people who bought, swapped or donated books, the ones who emailed a complete stranger to say nice things about the venture, the ones who refrained from swearing when I collided into their houseboats, the ones who made cups of tea, the ones who made Victoria sponge cakes, the ones who enlisted as 'crew' to bypass archaic Bristol trading laws, the ones who hauled a boat from a lock in Yorkshire when I flooded it, the woman who suggested a book bus might be easier, and the three sheep who jumped over a dry-stone wall to see what all the fuss was about when I yelled hysterically back at her that she should mind her own business. Staying afloat, I discovered, was only half the story.

PART ONE

1. WATER *(part i)*

There are two types of skinny dippers in this world: those who do it because the idea of being naked in water is titillating and/or liberating. And those who misguidedly believe that no one can see them naked *because* they are in water. I suspect there are only a handful of people in the latter category. Growing up in South Africa, my sister and I were two of these.

Durban, 1990. We swim most afternoons after school at the hospital where our father works. It's invariably empty, but at 4 p.m. a man called Mr Priggy comes through the gate with a bucket of chlorine powder and empties this around us. At weekends our whole family comes, and the neighbouring family too, and so there are eleven of us in or around the water. The parents usually recline on loungers in the shade. Us children dive or belly flop or swim lengths underwater or play a game called Marco Polo, which is an aquatic version of blind man's bluff. I don't know why it is called Marco Polo because, as far as I'm aware, Marco Polo wasn't blind. From pictures I've seen, nor does he look like the kind of guy given to the frivolity of *pretending* to be blind, especially in pools. When I'm playing it, I don't much think about the origins of Marco Polo. I'm shouting loud refrains of

'Polo!' whenever the unseeing 'It' tries to gauge our whereabouts with a questioning 'Marco?'. I'm swallowing lots of water too. This game is my favourite. I don't even mind being 'It'. All I know of Marco Polo is that he was an explorer, and blindly voyaging into the unknown, like him, seems not such a bad way to spend an afternoon.

My sister and I love being in the water. We stay in after everyone else has towelled off and turned into each other to chat and eat thick cheese sandwiches. This is when my sister suggests we take off our swimming costumes. 'No one will know because no one can see under water.' We have an identical style of swimming costume. Our mother made them for us. They have a scooped back, tanning matching parabolas on us. Above the crack of our bums is a bow. Hers is pink. Mine is blue. We take them off and put them on the hot, tiled side of the pool where they look like the rain-ruined petals of an exotic flower. We are naked and giggling. Following her logic, I put my whole head under water so no one can see me at all. It's a shame that no one can see us, I think, because when we pull the water with our arms and legs we must look like little birds against a blue sky.

Years pass. We grow up, school, study, get jobs, move away. I open a bookshop on a canal boat near the brewing town and Marmite metropolis of Burton-on-Trent, England. It doesn't sell many books. The water around it is not like the water we grew up with in the pool. It is dark and brown. I could take off my clothes in it and no one would know I was naked, but I would not look like a bird. Across the marina is a dual carriageway and an

Argos warehouse. I look out of the window at them and at the water. It is not like any water I know. It doesn't run towards me like a dog, pawing my shoulders, as the waves do on a beach. It doesn't cry in my hair like rain. Mostly it just lies there, unsharing except for a dead trout it squeezes between the hull of the boat and the promenade one week in the summer.

If this was a mean trick, it goes one better that winter. For two weeks after Christmas it freezes over. When I look out of the window now there are fissures that look like small, bare trees lightly foresting the lake. Mostly they're around the sides of the boats – my boat too – hedging us neatly in. I can't see the water through the ice and stop worrying about it. I have lots of bills unpaid in the red filing cabinet by my desk to divert my attention instead. It's been a long time since I took any money from the business.

As it gets warmer and the ice starts to waste away there's a surprise on the boat. When I open up at 10 a.m. I can hear things are different because the boat is gurgling like a bad lung. The inside is flooded and I'm puzzled to see how clear the water is. For a moment it looks like a long pool in there. Bookshelves are toothed unevenly along its length and those on the bottom are swollen now and my heart aches at all the money gone into them. I turn off the water pressure and find where the pipe has burst, which is in a cupboard full of more wet books. Their pages are limp and thin. All the words on them are confused by the words you can see behind. The water has crowded them like frightened herd animals. I phone my

boyfriend, Stu, and we try to empty some water with buckets and a wet vac. If the ice was thinner maybe we'd be able to steer the boat across to the pump at the boatyard and have it all out in minutes. But we're still there in the evening and my father goes Victor Frankenstein in his garage to produce something that hoses it out a little faster, powered by his orange electric drill.

When we're finished it's not so bad and I can open up a few days later. I feel like the boat has had enough of this marina though – and I have too. I press my nose against the condensation on the window to form dot-to-dot pictures while I wait for customers. It's a rush to complete them with my index finger before drips ruin the fragile images and I'm glad no one can see me.

2.WATER (part ii)

At around this time, I start searching for wooden rowing boats on eBay. Stu keeps telling me we can't afford one, but I've seen a young couple turn up at the marina pub on one and I want that for ourselves. They had laughed so hard trying to get off their boat and onto the promenade. The boat had rocked and their legs shook as if they were scurvy-weakened from a long, long journey in it together. When they were inside the pub I hurried out to look at their boat with the oars crossed in a kiss.

I find one eventually for £200 and buy it. Its outer shell is painted a bruised red but inside is just plain yacht-varnished wood. Because the narrow boat's name is Joseph, I call the little one Josephine and it stays upside down on the roof of the shop. Stu is furious. He's working two jobs at the time to pay our bills and when he comes home from his second shift – late, often at midnight – I'm miserable with guilt and twice as angry back at him. I'm working seven days a week in the bookshop but it counts for nothing financially. I remember how my sister and I used to predict each other's romantic future when we were little. I always told her exactly what she wanted to hear – that she would marry a farmer or a dog handler or a horse whisperer and he'd buy her new pets every birthday and have strong forearms. But she never returned the fantasy for me. I wanted to live in sin and fingerless gloves in a cold garret. She pointed out that I have bad circulation in my fingers and insisted my wedded fate was with a rich businessman in a large, double-glazed house. As a concession to my vehement complaints, she granted I could have an affair with the gardener. Only fifteen years on and completely broke does her forecast seem suddenly more reasonable.

In between my arguments with Stu there's this thing called boredom. I suppose it's always been around, haunting wet summer holidays and long car journeys. When it turns up on the boat one morning I choose not to acknowledge it. I'm finding this a useful tool to deal with most things that come down those steps. But it stays longer each time, leafing through the mounting piles of

unsold books, making beautiful origami swans from the invoices stuffed in drawers. It doesn't do any of the things that annoy me in other customers, but I find its lurking presence uncomfortable. I won't speak. I turn the radio volume up and angle the computer screen out of its puzzled sightline.

One day a man walks into the bookshop to order I-Spy books for his son. He doesn't live around here but he likes boats and was curious about the shop. He returns a few weeks later to pick the books up and stays longer this time to talk. I like hearing him speak, especially when he's talking about sailing. He brings me some books about boats and shows me photos online of the Scandinavian sloop he's just bought in America. 'I'd like to cross the Atlantic in that,' I say. 'Why not?' he replies, 'September's a good time.' So I spend even more money on sailing gear and a life jacket and buying a big Imray chart mapping a September Atlantic crossing. I dream of big waves pounding out all the mistakes I've made with the bookshop and with Stu. I imagine coming back a different person, someone we will both like more.

A month before I'm due to leave, I move out of the flat I share with Stu and back in with my parents. I want Stu to tell me to stay, but we're both out of confidence. I get some clothes and he helps me put them in a big black bin liner and takes it to the car. The summer, which I hadn't noticed happen, is also hastily packing her things. There's a mess of trampled petal by the bottom step of the front door. How did a season escape us that year? I don't know it's over until I'm driving away. I see Stu

standing, smile set, setting with the heavy sun in the rear-view mirror.

The man with the boat gives me sailing lessons on Windermere. Even though I don't know exactly what I'm doing, he lets me take the wheel and guess with the sails while he goes downstairs and makes calls on his mobile phone. I like these moments and the lake. The sky greys us both and gets me thinking of a book I'm reading about boredom. It explains that boredom is a force, that it moves us and compels us to do things. Out there on the lake, boredom feels like the wind, and I jibe with it. I jump in the water with no clothes and feel happy that I don't need to battle boredom any longer. I pull it close to me with the cold water. When I look up and see the man with the boat watching me, I am conscious of how wrong my sister was about water. It doesn't cloak me. With my head under and my hair in its fingers it bares everything.

In the car on the way back, the man tells me about his job. He's a businessman. As always, I like hearing him speak. I look straight out of the front window at the grey motorway and suddenly know that I won't cross the Atlantic on his boat and that it doesn't matter. I start planning another journey – just me and my books and my canal boat. I feel like I have to do something because otherwise I'm just wondering about Stu and getting angry that people aren't buying books. Chekhov says of inspiration that if you look at anything long enough, say just that wall in front of you, it will come out of that wall.

I have no reason to distrust him. I like his short stories more than any others.

3. GARDEN

My plans for the trip are vague. I figure you can't be too sure when the gardener's going to turn up in your life story so I'm taking no chances. I concentrate mainly on furnishing the roof of the boat with a fifty-foot length of fake turf. There are a few potted plants up there too, which my mother buys, and an orange flower from my friend Ali. These all die in the first few weeks, mainly because I forget to water them. I leave them up there anyway – neglected vegetation is just as likely to get a green-fingered lover's blood pounding as blooming, pruned stuff, I reckon.

Stu gives me a golden pot to grow sunflowers in. When we started dating ten years earlier he wrote out the lyrics to Paul Weller's *Sunflower* on an old cassette tape. He had replaced the tape ribbon with white ribbon and winding it on with a little finger revealed the whole song biro'd across. I used to sit on my bedroom floor rolling through it a lot. I liked the line about a wheat field for hair. Now, when he gives me the pot for the sunflowers, I start crying.