Reading My Arse!

Searching for the Rock Island Line

A Novel

Ricky Tomlinson

Published by Sphere

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

SPHERE

Published in Great Britain as a paperback original in 2007 by Sphere

Copyright © Ricky Tomlinson, Norman Giller 2007

Quick Reads™ used under licence

'Rock Island Line' (new words and music by Lonnie Donegan)
© 1956 TRO Essex Music Ltd., London SW10 0SZ
International Copyright Secured.
All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

The main characters and events in this story are from the imaginations of Ricky Tomlinson and Norman Giller and any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7515-3953-0

Typeset by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Brettenham House
Lancaster Place
London WC2E 7EN

A Member of the Hachette Livre Group of Companies

www.littlebrown.co.uk

PREFACE

I owe so much to reading. In fact, I can say that reading changed me for the better and gave me the confidence to improve myself at what was a time of crisis in my life.

It's no secret that I lost a couple of years of my life to a prison sentence that, I swear, was a miscarriage of justice.* It was the biggest stitch-up since the Bayeux Tapestry.

While banged up, I found the best way to make time pass was to lose myself in my imagination. I fantasised about what I would do when I got my freedom back.

One idea that kept floating round in my head was to write a story about a young man from Liverpool who becomes obsessed by the lyrics of

*Ricky Tomlinson was sentenced to two years' imprisonment in 1973 for allegedly conspiring to cause an affray while organising union pickets on the building site where he worked as a plasterer. Ricky, now established as a best-selling author and one of our best-loved comedy actors, has always fiercely maintained his innocence.

a song and gets led on an adventure by them. Little did I think I had the slightest chance of getting the story published. But now, thanks to Quick Reads, I can share it with you, and if you enjoy it and it gives you the hunger to read another book, I will be dead chuffed.

Reading is a free gift for everybody. It broadens the mind even more than travel, and it can set you off on a never-ending journey of discovery. Please, please, keep reading, and I promise it will make you a more complete, more confident, more satisfied and better-informed person.

Don't let so-called pals sneer at you for picking up books and reading them from cover to cover. You will find the books become your best friends, and give you a whole new outlook on the world. Books kept me sane in prison. I was able to escape – not literally, of course – to places far beyond the four walls of my cell.

There is a lot of me in the hero of this book, and I hope the story captures what it was like to be part of the music revolution that swept through Liverpool in the late 1950s and into the 1960s with the arrival of the Beatles. If I'd had my way, I'd have jumped on the Beatles' bandwagon and followed them to Hamburg

to help spread the Mersey Sound.

Hope you won't think I'm blowing my own trumpet (and I'm not referring to my big conk), but I have always been a storyteller. Even as a kid at school I could make an essay come alive with my imagination, which used to run riot. The actor in me was also let loose. I could hold my classmates spellbound with tales that came off the top of my head. And it was all inspired by the written word.

Yes, Reading My Arse!

It's not only books you should read. I used to devour the *Liverpool Echo* when I was a kid, starting at the back with all the football news about my heroes at Anfield (and I spared a glance for the Everton news, too!).

I was also heavily into reading comics. In those days there was a huge choice, ranging from *Topper*, *Film Fun* and, of course, the *Beano* and *Dandy,* to comics aimed at older kids like the *Hotspur*, the *Eagle* and the *Wizard*. But my personal favourite was the *Champion,* which didn't sell as much as the rest, and it concentrated more on the written word than illustrated stories. It was packed with adventure yarns, and the one I looked forward to reading

each week featured a boxer called Rockfist Rogan. It started a life-long love affair for me with the fight game.

That was the result of reading about the sport.

And it was reading that made me want to be a writer. I used to read books like *Black Beauty* and *Treasure Island*, and almost ached to be able to write those sorts of adventure tales.

But at that time, where I came from, if I had let on that I wanted to be something as 'arty farty' as a writer, they would have ridiculed me. The phrase used in those days was 'getting an idea above your station'. So I stupidly kept my mouth shut, and failed to ask the teachers to help me realise my ambition.

You don't have to be rich to become a regular reader, but you will be richer for the experience. All you have to do is join your local library, and there will be shelves upon shelves of books just waiting for you. Yes, a feast awaits you once you decide that reading can be not only informative but also fun. And it will cost you nothing.

I picked up reading again when I was sent to prison, the worst time of my life yet strangely the one in which I grabbed the opportunity to better myself.

I read anything and everything while I was banged up. The book that made the greatest impression on me was *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* by Robert Tressell. If you get half a chance to read it, I beg you to take it. It tells the story of a group of builders and tradesmen in the fictional English town of Mugsborough in the early 1900s, and captures the class struggle of that period in a way that will hold you magnetised to the page.

That was my peak reading experience. Once again my desire to write was ignited by reading, and out of it has come the story you are now holding in your hands and, I hope, are about to enjoy.

So please come with me back to a past that remains rich in my memory. The time: the late 1950s. The place: Liverpool. This was when the Beatles were just about to strum their first chords, when rock 'n' roll was in its infancy and competing for popularity with a raw music called skiffle.

The cell door bangs closed, and I am alone with my imagination.

Ricky Tomlinson

CHAPTER 1

Eric's winkle-pickers were a size too small and pinched his toes as he walked along Scotland Road, his hands deep in his pockets, deep in debt, deep in thought and with a deep depression fogging his brain like a Mersey mist.

He was on a losing streak. Carole, his latest girlfriend, had chucked him. He had just got the chop from his trainee sales manager's job, and – worst of all – the Reds had just been beaten by Everton. True, it was only a reserves match. But any defeat of Liverpool by their detested neighbours was like a slash on the wrist.

The only way things could get worse was if somebody stole his pride and joy, a 125cc Vespa scooter that he had bought second-hand from Carole's brother for fifty quid. That was five weeks' wages, borrowed in advance, but it was worth every penny to know the freedom of the

road. He had chained the scooter to the Stanley Park railings while he went to the footie match.

The Vespa was still there. It was only when he leaned over to unchain it that he realised somebody had stolen the front wheel. Eric was now in deep despair.

As he started to push the one-wheeled scooter home, little did he know that this was going to be the day that changed his life.

A ragged-arsed kid laughed as he watched Eric pushing the scooter along the pavement. 'Hey, mister,' he shouted in thick Scouse, 'you're supposed to ride dem tings. It's not a pram, y'know.'

'Sod off, you little scally,' Eric spat back, 'or you'll go home wearing your testicles as a bow tie.' Only he didn't say testicles.

As the scallywag scurried off laughing, Eric pushed the scooter past a second-hand and part-exchange shop, where the shopkeeper was preparing to put up the shutters.

Eric did a double-take as he looked in the window. Hanging from a hook was a highly polished, six-stringed Spanish guitar. It had a sheet of paper stuck to it, on which was written:

'Identical to the guitar played by Lonnie Donegan. Yours for £15.'

Lonnie Donegan, the King of Skiffle, was Eric's current idol.

Purely on impulse, Eric said to the shopkeeper: 'What would you give me for this scooter?'

The shopkeeper, who had a heavily lined, saggy bag-of-spanners face, puffed out his cheeks, then sucked on his teeth as he studied the wounded scooter like a judge at a dog show.

'You're asking me to quote you a price for a one-legged chicken,' he said. 'I'd want you to pay me to get rid of it.'

'Be fair, pal,' Eric said, setting himself up for a little bargaining. 'I paid seventy-five quid for this just four months ago.'

'Seventy-five quid!' the shopkeeper exclaimed. 'Who sold it to you? Dick Turpin? You know *vespa* is Italian for "wasp" . . . well, you were stung.'

'It had two wheels until today,' Eric said, defensively. 'Some toerag stole the front wheel while I was at Goodison watching the match.'

'You Blue or Red?' the shopkeeper asked, suddenly eyeing Eric with suspicion.

'Red through and through,' said Eric.

The shopkeeper warmed a little. 'Just as well,' he said. 'If you'd been a Blue, I'd have told you to bugger off.'

He made a closer study of the scooter. 'Tell you what I'll do,' he said, 'I'll give you a tenner to take it off your hands.'

Eric looked again at the guitar, his eyes drawn to it. The instrument seemed almost to be calling to him.

'How about,' he said, 'doing a swap – that guitar for this scooter.'

'D'you play?' asked the shopkeeper.

'Not yet,' said Eric, 'but my granddad's a magician on a banjo. He'll show me how.'

The shopkeeper one-wheeled the Vespa into a storeroom and returned with a black guitar case. 'This case is worth as much as that bloody scooter,' he said, as he took the guitar out of the window and placed it inside.

As Eric took the case he felt as made up as if he was being given the crown jewels.

'Oh yes,' said the shopkeeper, 'one more thing. The fella I bought the guitar off left this in the case. You might as well have it.'

He handed Eric the sheet music for Lonnie Donegan's hit skiffle song, 'Rock Island Line'.

As he walked out of the shop, the elated Eric had the strange feeling he was somehow holding his destiny in his hands.