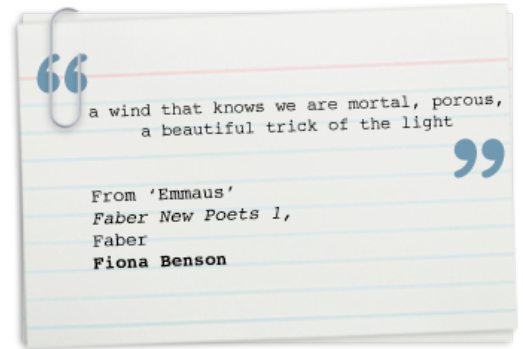




Good Morning! It's Tuesday on July 05, 2011.

Literature for everyone in the South West



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book of the month

The Levelling Sea
by Philip Marsden



The story of Britain's glorious maritime past seen through the changing fortunes of the Cornish port of Falmouth. Within the space of few years, during the 1560s and 1570s, a maritime revolution took place in England that would contribute more than anything to the transformation of the country from a small rebel state on the fringes of Europe into a world power. Until then, it was said, there was only one Englishman capable of sailing across the Atlantic. Yet within ten years an English ship with an English crew was circumnavigating the world. At the same time in Cornwall, in the Fal estuary, just a single building – a lime kiln – existed where the port of Falmouth would emerge. Yet by the end of the eighteenth century, Falmouth would be one of the busiest harbours in the world.

The Levelling Sea uses the story of Falmouth's spectacular rise and fall to explore wider questions about the sea and its place in history and imagination. Drawing on his own deep connection with Cornwall, award-winning author Philip Marsden writes unforgettably about the power of the sea and its ability to produce greed on a piratical scale, dizzying corruption, and grand and tragic aspirations.

Cyprus Well was delighted to catch up with Philip Marsden to ask him about the new book, and his writing in general ...

Can you tell us a bit about how you came to write 'The Levelling Sea' and the inspiration for it? It feels like a very personal journey?

I wanted to write a book about the sea, to explore my own connection with the sea and the curious yearning I always for it when I'm inland. Looking back on the books I've written, and the places I've spent long periods in, it's strange how landlocked they are - Armenia and Ethiopia, big subjects for me, and not a yard of coastline between them. After spending time in these places, coming back home was coming back to the sea, back to my house in Cornwall. There's a certain paradox about this pattern as it has also always been the sight of the flat horizon of the sea that gives me itchy feet again....

But unless you're going to write a long and tedious meditation on waves, a book about the

Calendar

South West
What's On

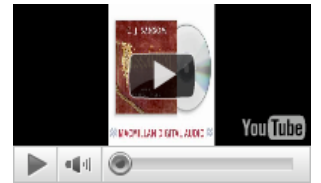


Book of the Month Clips

The Redeemed by M.R. Hall



Dissolution by C.J. Sansom
[Pan Macmillan](#)



Innocent by Scott Turow
[Hachette Book Group](#)



Dark Matter by Michelle Paver
[Pan Macmillan](#)

The Death of King Arthur by Peter Ackroyd
Penguin

sea has to be a book about the sea's effect on people. So that's how the shape of the book began to form. I assembled a cast of historical figures who displayed that often fatal attraction to the sea. I was interested in the way that the sea cast a spell over their lives; in a way the book is a series of biographies. I begin with my own initiation to the sea - through my grandfather who taught me to sail. At the same time, I became drawn to the instance of Falmouth, the port on my own doorstep, and realised that its story embodied the same notion of sea-attraction, and that its arc was exactly that of the 'age of sail'.



Some quite extraordinary characters appear in the telling! Can you tell us about a favourite figure from Falmouth's past that you discovered in your research?

Difficult to pick a favourite....The Killigrews in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were wonderfully colourful - very powerful both in the county and also at the Tudor and Stuart courts. But at the same time they were arch-brigands and pirates. Then there was Joseph Emidy, the freed slave who became Cornwall's greatest musician and composer in the early nineteenth century. And Edward Pellew, a towering navy hero, an extraordinary seaman, and Peter Mundy who travelled the world as early as the mid-seventeenth century. And many others that were very enjoyable to research and write about.

But perhaps the favourite would be James Silk Buckingham whose yearning for the sea was a powerful influence in his early life and set him off on an extraordinary decades-long odyssey across the Atlantic, through the Middle East to India and China. In later life he became an MP and a campaigner for the greater good, lecturing in hundreds of towns and publishing great tomes on utopian themes. His sheer range, and the richness of his life, was extraordinary - fighting off robbers in Persia, being banned twice from India, campaigning for his ideals in parliament. I like to feel his vigour and sense of adventure owed something to a childhood spent messing around in boats in the Fal estuary.

There is an elegiac quality to the book, but it is at the same time a celebration of Cornwall, Falmouth, the sea. Times have certainly changed, but do you see constants?

I think the human attraction to the sea remains constant. Each age expresses it a little differently, and uses it in a different way - but the sea's challenges, its beauty, its hostility and otherness will always bring out something in us, some restless spirit, a need to engage with it.

Could you say a bit about your approach to the research for the book?

One of the enjoyable surprises of working on this book, *The Levelling Sea*, was the uncovering of half-buried stories. A place that was familiar to me - Falmouth - revealed, with a little burrowing, a wealth of material and characters. Stories like that of the Jewish community, or the Quakers or a slip of paper I found in the Record Office describing the whereabouts of a pirate's buried treasure - all these were surprise discoveries. I have tried to convey a sense of this and the pleasure and thrill I feel in using primary sources. I did a lot of work in the Cornwall Record Office, in the RIC Courtney Library in Truro and in the British Library. The research became part of the story.

Can you describe your writing environment and practice – do you have a particular place where you write, or time of day, number of words, for example?

I have moved recently to a remote farmhouse and have built a shed in the field to shut myself away in. It looks out on ancient oakwoods and the tidal reaches of the Upper Fal. I'm a morning man - I love the hours of the early morning and find that's the best time for writing. Talking about word counts is a bit like talking about money - it creates jealousy, inadequacy or smugness. Best avoided.

At Cyprus Well, we are keeping an eye on developments in the digitising of books, Ipads, Kindles, etc. As an author, how do you view these developments?

From the side - of course these developments are making a huge difference in the way we consume our literature. But writers should concern themselves with content - it's up to others to work out how to convey that content and I do not envy them right now, publishers and booksellers, trying to keep up with technological change. I have a belief in the perennial appetite for good writing, good stories. Peoples' curiosity about the world will always be there, and writers will always write and readers will always read. On what machines they both do it in fifty, a hundred years' time is anyone's guess.

Thank you, Philip.

About the author

Philip Marsden is the author of *A Far Country: Travels in Ethiopia*, *The Crossing Place*:

Among the Armenians (which won the Somerset Maugham Award), *The Bronski House*, *The Spirit-Wrestlers: And Other Survivors of the Russian Century* (winner of the Thomas Cook Travel Book of the Year Award) and the novel *The Main Cages*. He is the editor of *The Spectator Book of Travel Writing* and is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. His work has been translated into ten languages.



Book of the Month Archive

June 2010 Derek Landy: *Skulduggery Pleasant Dark Days*
 July 2010 Scott Turow: *Innocent*
 August 2010: Julia Green: *Drawing With Light*
 September 2010: C J Sansom: *Heartstone*
 October 2010: Of Love and Hope
 November 2010: Michelle Paver *Dark Matter*
 December 2010 Peter Ackroyd *The Death of King Arthur*
 January 2011 Andrew Taylor *The Anatomy Of Ghosts*
 February 2011 Jill Mansell *To The Moon And Back*
 March 2011 Aminatta Forna *The Memory of Love*
 April 2011 M.R. Hall *The Redeemed*
 May 2011 Jussi Adler-Olsen *Mercy*

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