

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Journey to the Sea

Edited by Sarah Brown,  
Gil McNeil and Hugo Tagholm

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

Whether it is memories of childhood holidays or exotic fantasies of faraway places, a sea and its coast forms the most evocative of landscapes. Combining elements of romance, danger and mystery, it provides the perfect inspiration for this unique collection. The finest writers from our water-bound nation, including Alexander McCall Smith, Ruth Rendell, Joanne Harris, Joseph O'Connor and Libby Purvis, give us their accounts of adventures and chance encounters, short stories and non-fiction pieces representing the many facets of the sea's power that will haunt and inspire. The collection also includes gripping accounts of real-life adventures on the ocean from such experienced sailors as Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, First Sea Lord Admiral Sir Alan West and Tracy Edwards.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sarah Brown, wife of Gordon Brown, is President of the charity PiggyBankKids, which she founded in 2002. PiggyBankKids has launched the Jennifer Brown Research Fund to seek solutions to pregnancy difficulties and help save newborn lives, and supports a wide range of charitable projects which create opportunities for children and young people. Sarah and Gordon live in Fife and London with their sons.

Gil McNeil is Publishing Director for PiggyBankKids and has worked in advertising, the film business and publishing. She is the bestselling author of *The Only Boy for Me*, *Stand by your Man*, *In the Wee Small Hours* and *Divas Don't Knit*. She lives in Canterbury with her son.

Hugo Tagholm is Programme Director for PiggyBankKids. Hugo has worked in public relations and events management with a wide range of organisations, including the National Gallery, the Art Fund and the BBC. He lives in Camden Town and spends most of his spare time wakeboarding or chasing waves along the north Devon coast.

This anthology has been compiled and edited by Sarah Brown, Gil McNeil and Hugo Tagholm. PiggyBankKids will be supporting Special Olympics Great Britain with the publication of this book, and will receive £1 for every copy sold.

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# Journey to the Sea

Edited by Sarah Brown, Gil McNeil and  
Hugo Tagholm



EBURY PRESS

# INTRODUCTION

SARAH BROWN

Most of us have childhood memories of time spent by the sea, from holidays to day trips, in sunshine or stormy weather, and damp sandwiches and sandy blankets usually play their part in these memories. At various times in my childhood my brothers and I holidayed at North Berwick, Hunstanton and Walberswick, Brighton and Llandudno, burying each other in the sand or skimming stones across the water; and now when I take a break from 11 Downing Street to go to Scotland with my family, one of the things I look forward to most is the view over the Firth of Forth. The sight of water when you wake up in the morning is definitely good for the soul. The sea also has a wider role in our collective heritage than simple reminiscence and relaxation; from Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, alone on his 'wide wide sea', to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, from the history of heroic figures like Admiral Nelson and Grace Darling to the stories of Dunkirk and the folklore of fishermen and lifeboat crews, our history is full of the brave adventures of our island race. Stories of people who push themselves to the limit, facing great peril and encountering great beauty. People who conquer overwhelming odds but never give up, like the people I met when I attended the Special Olympics World Summer Games in Dublin last year. The Games were the culmination of the year-round training and competition undertaken by people with a learning disability, and I was struck by just how inspiring the opening ceremony was, seeing seven thousand athletes from over a hundred and

fifty countries proudly marching behind their country's flag. Not only for those taking part, but also for their families and carers, who got to see so many people who at first glance might not appear destined for glory being brave enough to give it a go, and bringing a real sense of achievement both to themselves and to everyone associated with their efforts. It was a real privilege to be there, and after meeting the team at Special Olympics Great Britain everyone at PiggyBankKids was determined to help them in their efforts to increase the number of athletes, coaches and volunteers and to improve the quality and range of sports on offer.

Since I launched PiggyBankKids in 2002 we have raised over a million pounds for our ongoing projects, including the Jennifer Brown Research Fund which supports a perinatal research laboratory based at the Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh. We have worked on partnership projects with other charities to support mentoring and volunteering, family services, and advice for one-parent families. Last year we launched our new fundraising initiative, The Big Night In, which will help us fund all our core projects and enable us to expand the range of charities we help. Our aims at PiggyBankKids are simple: to support and strengthen charities working to improve opportunities for children and young people across the UK. So we are especially proud to be working with Special Olympics Great Britain, which has such a positive approach to providing ever greater facilities for their young people and creating an environment that encourages previously unimaginable achievements.

Thank you so much for buying this book and helping us to raise funds to promote the important work of Special Olympics Great Britain. I would like to thank my coeditors, Hugo Tagholm, our Programme Director at PiggyBankKids, who's a keen surfer, and Gil McNeil, our Publishing Director, who is still trying to get the sand out of the back of her car after her son discovered the joys of surfing last summer.

Most of all I would like to thank our brilliant writers, who all so generously agreed to donate their work for free. I am sure you will enjoy reading their fantastic stories as much as I have.

Sarah Brown  
PiggyBankKids  
February 2005

**'LET ME WIN, BUT IF I CANNOT WIN, LET  
ME BE BRAVE IN THE ATTEMPT'**

**CHRIS HOOPER  
Executive Director,  
Special Olympics Great Britain**

TO COMPETE WELL in any sport, or indeed in life itself, requires inspiration, determination, confidence and self-belief. For the average person the road often seems tough, but the attainment of success is even more of a challenge when you have a learning disability. For those with a learning disability the true ideals of sportsmanship still exist and it remains an honour to compete, irrespective of the final result. The skills of winning and losing are taught to us all at a young age, but it is rare to find the qualities needed to accept defeat in the able-bodied population.

To witness seven thousand athletes from all over the world competing at the Special Olympics World Summer Games in Dublin in the summer of 2003 was incredible. This was the biggest sports event in the world in 2003, and with teams from Afghanistan to Australia it was truly global. The games were officially opened by Nelson Mandela in Croke Park stadium in Dublin, which was filled to capacity. Twenty-six different sports were contested. It was the pinnacle of years of preparation, and the realisation of a lifetime's dream for the athletes and their families.

This was so much more than a sports event - this was an opportunity for people with learning disabilities to make new friends, to gain confidence and to experience new cultures. Many of the athletes had never been away from their home villages and towns, let alone travelled to the other side of the globe. The Irish people embraced the games, and as a result many more learning-disabled people have been given the opportunity to get involved, as well as significant numbers of new volunteers eager to assist.

For many, of course, the World Games will always be a dream - the 400-metre race at the local park will be the

height of their athletic achievement, but for them this will be just as special and just as defining.

The key to the success of Special Olympics is the extent of its reach beyond the sports field and the opportunities it can open up for people who have previously led sheltered lives and who have no belief in their own abilities. Many athletes are trained in leadership and are given the platform to become self-advocates and spokesmen and women for the organisation. Sport is a vehicle to achieve so much more in life – and it is not only the athletes who benefit. I have seen parents, siblings and teachers touched through their involvement and the success of others.

As Georgina Hulme, Special Olympics ambassador and athlete, says, ‘As well as swimming, for the last twelve months I have also started coaching the young beginners at the end of every session, and it is very exciting to see their progress. Some of them, if not all, will be good enough to take part in galas this year. It is fair to say that my training through sport and the Special Olympics has allowed me to become more able to deal with other important matters in my life, particularly college work. Special Olympics has helped me to achieve many of my dreams and ambitions.’

In Great Britain, Special Olympics is still relatively small, with only five thousand athletes taking part in regular training and sports competition. Potentially, however, there are over a million learning-disabled people in Great Britain, and over the next couple of years it is our goal to recruit another five thousand into the programme. The focus of the growth will be among the school-age population in order to get young parents and volunteers involved whose energy can drive Special Olympics forward.

Sailing and kayaking are both very popular sports within Special Olympics, and I know that the anecdotes and memories recalled in this book, from some of our greatest mariners, will provide great inspiration to our athletes. We

are a nation surrounded by the sea, a treasure that has protected us and provided pleasure over many generations.

The next National Summer Games for Special Olympics GB will take place in Glasgow, 1-9 July 2005. The games are expected to attract three thousand athletes with learning disabilities, together with a thousand coaches and at least three thousand parents, carers, supporters and friends, from nineteen regions throughout Great Britain. Over the eight days, the athletes will compete in twenty-three sports at eleven venues in and around the city of Glasgow.

The opportunity to be the beneficiary charity from the sales of this wonderful book is fantastic, and I would like to sincerely thank Sarah Brown and PiggyBankKids for supporting Special Olympics.

# MOMENTO

ANDREW MOTION

I have forgotten the beach  
Where I knelt in the blinding wind,  
And this perfectly round white stone  
Rose glittering into my reach.

Here it is now on our shelf  
Like an egg, or an eye, or a clue  
Dropped from the lips of the sea  
To something besides itself.

Yes I have forgotten the day,  
The sun, the wind, the waves,  
And even your loving look -  
But I still took something away.

# SMILES

ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH

SHE ARRIVED IN bangkok not knowing what to expect. Her husband knew the place, as he had made a number of business trips there over the years.

'You'll be happy there,' he said. 'I promise you. People are. And the Thais are very friendly. You'll see.'

'But the traffic,' she said. 'And all that noise. The children . . .'

He touched her arm in reassurance. 'There's traffic in Sydney too, remember. And the children will be fine. The firm will provide us with a maid - two, if you want. You'll have all the help you need with the children.'

He had been right. She liked living in Bangkok, and soon stopped missing Sydney, where they came from. It was easy to keep in touch with Australian friends, too, as they were often able to break their overseas journeys with a stop in Bangkok.

'They stay the perfect length of time for guests,' she wrote in a letter. 'Three days to catch up on things and then they move on. Guests are like fish, aren't they? After three days they begin to go off.'

Her husband enjoyed his job. He was now in the highest echelons of an international firm of accountants, and he had been put in charge of the Bangkok office. They mixed in elevated financial circles, with parties and receptions at the houses of Thai plutocrats. They were popular in the society of the capital, and being photogenic her picture often appeared in the pages of the *Bangkok Tatler*. She went to charity auctions and fashion launches at the silk houses. And he liked this. 'It's good for business for you to be seen,' he said. 'Consider it work. Enjoy yourself.'

By the end of their fourth year there, when the boy was fifteen and the girl thirteen, they had become so established

that the prospect of returning to Australia seemed something remote. Yes, they would go back, but not in the immediate future. The children had learned Thai and had their friends in Bangkok. They were doing well at their international school. They had better manners than their Australian contemporaries, and they had picked up that subtle physical grace which the Thais have. Australian teenagers seemed so ill at ease in the space they occupied, and were so gauche.

Then, on a Friday afternoon in the monsoon season, just as a heavy purple cloud was building up over the northern fringes of Bangkok and the air was heavy and humid, a woman from the office knocked at the door. She let her in and could tell immediately that something had happened. The Thais smiled in a particular way when they were distressed, and this was such a smile. It was always misread by foreigners - *farangs* as they called them - but she understood it very well and did not misinterpret it now. Something very serious had happened. He's had an accident, she thought immediately. It's happened.

Every eight hours, somebody is killed in a traffic accident in Bangkok, so dense is the volume of cars, trucks, motorcycles. He had been in the car with his driver, apparently, and they had turned a corner into a narrow street. A small elephant and its keeper, a man from a hill tribe in the north, had been crossing the smaller road and the car had hit the elephant. The driver had been relatively unharmed, but her husband had been badly cut about the neck by flying glass. He had been dragged out, bleeding, and because there was no ambulance service to speak of had been put into a motorbike taxi, a *túk túk*, and driven to a nearby clinic, his driver trying to staunch the bleeding from his neck. He died in the brightly painted *túk túk* as it bumped its way along the pot-holed road.

There was an outcry from the firm and from those who had been campaigning to rid the city of elephants. 'They

have no business in the city,' said a prominent member of the city administration. 'This is another example of what happens when you allow elephants to roam around in the city. These people who bring them in must be punished severely.' She did not want anybody to be punished. She saw a photograph in the *Bangkok Post* of the elephant that had caused the accident, and of his keeper, who looked so small beside his charge, and so intimidated by the presence of the two policemen in the background. The elephant's left foreleg, facing the camera, had a large gash in it, a laceration caused by the impact with the car. She stared at the photograph, and then turned the page quickly. But she turned back to the photograph and looked at it again, noticing the details, the shirt worn by the keeper, and the Buddhist amulet around his neck. He might have thought that this amulet had saved him, and made a victim of her husband instead, an anonymous *farang* whose car was going too fast anyway.

She could not go home. Her parents, who were retired and living in Melbourne, came over to stay with her, and helped. They urged her to return to Australia.

'You have to do it for the sake of the children,' they said. 'Think of them. What are they going to do here?'

'But it's for their sake that I'm staying,' she said. 'Look at them. They have all their friends. They're happy here. I don't want to uproot them.'

She stayed in Bangkok for a year, a year of pain and loneliness, which she tried to disguise for the children's sake. Her weepy moments, alone in the apartment overlooking the Chao Phraya river, were never witnessed by the children, although the boy sensed the depths of her distress, she felt, and put his arm about her at odd moments and hugged her to him. 'You have me,' he whispered. 'You're not alone. Remember that.'

A year after it happened she was invited by friends for a long weekend in their house on Samui, an island in the

southern provinces. These friends, Americans who worked for one of the banks, were childless and her children, sensing a weekend without teenage company on Samui, opted to stay with friends in Bangkok.

The American couple lived on the west coast of the island, near a small village called Baan Thaling Ngam. They had spent a great deal on the house, which perched on the top of a hillside and was surrounded by palm trees. It had been built in the Thai style, but to the specifications of a Bangkok architect. The top storey had a large living room with a balcony overlooking an emerald-green sea; down below there were several bedrooms, with polished hardwood floors and windows with shutters against the heat. When the doors of the living room were opened, a warm breeze entered the house and kept it cool. This breeze carried the scent of the frangipani trees that had been planted in front of the house, a scent that made her think of expensive unguents and soaps.

'It's lovely here,' she said. 'So peaceful.'

'Yes,' they said. 'We're going to miss this place. We've put so much into it.'

'Miss it?'

'Paul's going back to New York. We've decided to sell.'

She said nothing, but that night, on the verandah, when they watched the sun burn down over the mainland, she decided that she would buy this house and live there. She would come down with the children during their school holidays and stay in the apartment in Bangkok during term.

'I'll buy this house from you,' she said suddenly.

And they had laughed. 'We hoped that you'd say that. We wanted somebody we knew to look after this place and its spirit house. Thank you.'

Many Thai houses had a small wooden spirit house in the garden: a tiny building on a pole, resembling a bird-house, but decorated with ribbons and flowers and with offerings for the spirits. A well-kept spirit house would have happy

spirits, who would be willing to stay. One that did not have regular offerings of fruit would be deserted by the spirits, spurned.

She returned to Bangkok with pictures of the house to show to the children. They approved of the idea. The boy, in particular, liked the sea. They had taken him on a number of occasions to Hua Hin and Phuket, and it had been difficult to get him out of the water.

‘Aquatic,’ said her husband. ‘Look at him. He’s like some beautiful sea creature. An otter maybe.’

## II

She was proved right about the children. They took to the house immediately and while they were on the island they largely forgot about their Bangkok friends. The boy took to fishing, and he struck up a friendship with a young man from a fishing community on one of the tiny islands off the shore of Samui. They could see this island from the house: it was a tiny lump of rock that rose sheer out of the sea and was topped by dense green jungle vegetation. At the base of this rock, the fishermen had built a few houses on stilts: houses made of palm straw and thick bamboo poles. On the edge of the cliff they had tied fishing poles with lines dangling down into the water, to catch lobsters and crabs, which they would take into the fish market on the large island. The boy sometimes went out with the young man, who was about his age, and fished from the side of the young man’s father’s longtail boat. She watched them set off from the beach, her son almost as browned by the sun as the other boy, and she thought of how her husband would have liked this. He found it more difficult to get over his natural reserve, and he spoke hesitantly to the locals. ‘I feel so out of place with these people,’ he said ‘So . . . so large. It’s as if I just don’t get it.’ She knew, though, that her son got it, whatever *it* was.

There were other foreigners in the area, and there was some social life amongst them. She got to know a couple, German artists, who had a villa further along the coast, and who entertained on a large scale. They held several parties each New Year, and it was at one of these that she met one of their friends, another Australian. He had been working in Bangkok and was between jobs. He was renting a house on Koh Samui for a couple of months before returning to Australia. She spoke to him for several hours at the party and invited him to the house the next day. He came, and met the children. She saw her son look at him, with attention, and then look away again.

This new friend returned her invitation.

'My house is not nearly as nice as this,' he said. 'But there's a pool, if the children want to come.'

The boy did not want to go. 'I'm going fishing,' he said. 'Samsook said he would collect me at the beach. We want to get some red snapper.'

She left them behind and went to his house. He showed her the pool and the living room. He had a spirit house, too, but he had left it untended. A few flowers, now dried, placed there by a previous tenant, were lying at the spirits' doorway.

'The spirits will have moved out in disgust,' she said, half chiding him.

'I'll try to get them back,' he said, laughing. 'I'll make it up to them.'

She found herself comfortable in his company. He had an easy charm, and was a good conversationalist. She realised that since her husband's death there had been so much she had not been able to say, because there was nobody to say it to. She had forgotten, she realised, what it was like to sit down with a man, at the table, and talk to him about anything, small things that had happened during the day, things that people had said. And he sat there listening, and

smiling; not the Thai smile with its numerous meanings, but a flickering smile that signalled intimacy and understanding.

He was divorced, and had been for some years. He had not wanted the divorce, and had tried to persuade his wife to stay. 'It was like a death,' he said, and then stopped, realising that this was tactless.

'It's all right,' she said. 'I'm sure it's just like that. I'm sure of it.'

They saw more and more of one another. He came to the house early in the mornings and stayed until late at night. They went out for dinner together at the nearby restaurant. The girl came with them sometimes, but the boy declined each invitation.

'I'm not sure if he approves of me,' he said to her.

She looked down. 'He's jealous. That's how it can be sometimes. I'm sorry. He'll get over it.'

He nodded. 'I've tried,' he said. 'I've tried to get through to him, but he doesn't seem to want it.'

'I'll have a word with him,' she said. 'It's difficult being a teenage boy, you know. They're all a bit like that.'

She went into her son's room that night. He was lying in bed, covered with a sheet, reading a book. He looked at her and smiled.

'I want to talk to you about Joe,' she said.

The boy's smile faded. He looked pointedly at the open pages of the book. 'What about Joe? What about him?'

'You should try to get to know him,' she said. 'You really should.'

The boy said nothing for a moment. 'He's going back to Australia, isn't he?'

'Yes, that's the general idea.'

'And he's going to ask you to go with him, isn't he?'

She caught her breath. They had talked about that, but she had no idea that her son would have worked that out. It was so recent, just the previous day, when he had asked her whether she would consider coming to live with him, and

she had replied that she would. And then he had said: *What about leaving this country? Will that be all right?* And she had said, *Yes, there would be no difficulty in that.* She did not know Melbourne, but they could all be happy there, just as they had been happy in Sydney.

She reached out and put a hand on his shoulder, over the sheet. 'Sooner or later you're going to have to go back. This isn't really your country, you know. Australia's our country. If we go back with Joe, I'm sure you'd be happy. I'd be happy, you know. You do want me to be happy, too, don't you?'

'You could be happy here with me,' he said. 'Here in Thailand. What's wrong with that?'

She bent down and placed a kiss on his brow. 'Darling, sleep on it. Think about it. But give Joe a chance. Please. Just get to know him a little. Take him fishing. You and Samsook, take him fishing in that longtail boat.'

The boy said nothing, and so she stepped back and left the room.

### III

The boy asked Joe to go fishing several days later. She saw them off at the beach. Joe stepped into the longtail boat, which was painted bright blue, with red lines round the rim and a garland of yellow flowers draped around the prow, for luck, for fish; for safety. Samsook was wearing a red sarong and smiled in welcome at Joe, bowing his head and performing the ritual Thai greeting with hands held together, as if in prayer. The boy said nothing, or very little, but looked at her in a strange way when the boat pushed off from the beach and into the light green water. She thought that she might call out to her son, to ask him what he wanted to say; but she did not wish to embarrass him. He looked at her again as Samsook lowered the long drive-shaft into the water and engaged the engine; a look that was half regret, half reproach.

They were gone the whole day. At three in the afternoon she felt uneasy, and went outside, into the heat. She paused at the spirit house, which was positioned in a small clearing, surrounded by a clump of banana trees. There were fresh flowers on the small platform and a bowl of ripening plantains, as an offering. She had not put these there, so she concluded that it was her son. He was attentive to the spirit house, like a conscientious Thai.

At five in the afternoon, with a storm brewing off towards the mainland, she went down to the beach. There was a stiff breeze from the sea, and the fronds of the palms moved in sympathy with the wind. She looked out over the water, which was still calm but which was beginning to ruffle slightly with the effect of the wind. She saw the longtail boat in the distance, a low black shape like a tree trunk in the water, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

The boat nosed into the sand and Samsook jumped out, his bare feet in the sand and powdered shells. Joe followed him. He seemed to have lost his hat, and had tied a red bandanna around his head to protect him from the sun. Her son was at the back of the boat, attending to the engine. He looked up and glanced at her, then looked back at the engine.

'You look like a pirate with that thing on your head,' she said to Joe, pointing at the bandanna.

He caught her eye. He was not smiling. 'Could you come with me back to my place,' he said. 'I want to talk.'

There was something in his tone that alarmed her, and she followed him back along the path to where he had parked his rented truck. They climbed in, and he drove quickly down the track that led to the main road. She noticed that his lips were pursed and that there was a scratch along the side of his cheek.

'Has something happened?' she asked.

'I don't want to talk just yet,' he said. 'We'll talk when we get to my place.'