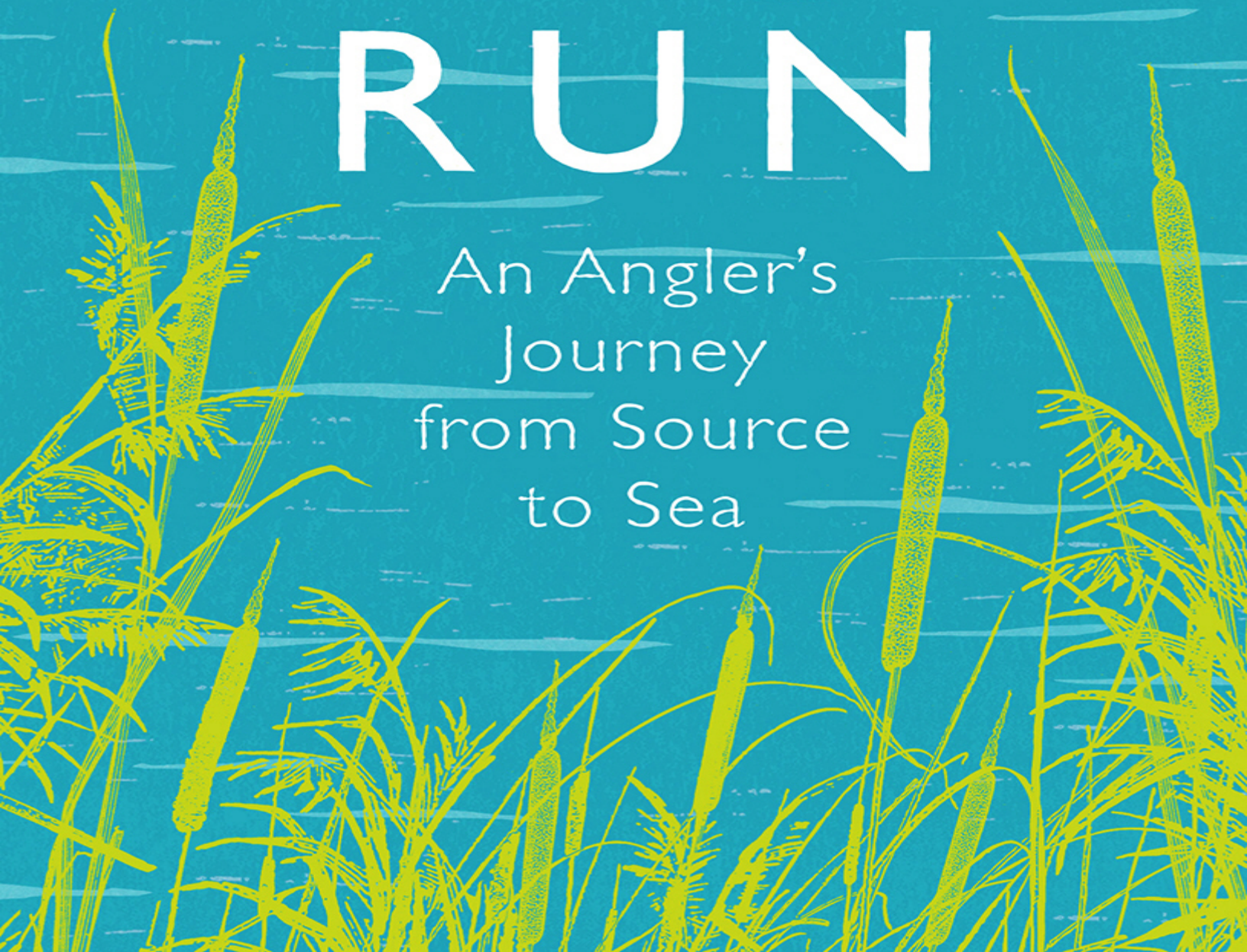
KEVIN PARR

'A book that flows like a river'
Chris Yates, author of *Out of the Blue*

RIVERS RUN

An Angler's Journey from Source to Sea



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About the Book

Rivers Run is a eulogy to Britain's rivers and waterways. From the Stour to the Avon, from weirs to chalk streams, and the secret pool named after him, Kevin Parr travels to some of our most fascinating watercourses.

Parr is on a quest to discover what it is that makes someone an angler, and how a passion for fishing and rivers can shape a life. Along the way, he shares fishing lore, stories and insights about the creatures and plants that can be found in watery habitats. Here are otters, kingfishers, imposing barbel and pike lurking in the depths.

By turns practical, thought-provoking and moving, *Rivers Run* mirrors the journey from source to sea on many levels. As Parr discovers, the stillness required to fish offers opportunity to reflect on how we interact with the natural world – and what this can tell us about ourselves.

About the Author

Kevin Parr is a writer, fisherman and amateur naturalist. He is the angling correspondent for *The Idler* magazine and a regular contributor to *Countryfile* magazine, *Fallon's Angler* and the *Caught by the River* website. He also writes a weekly fishing column for the *Dorset Echo* and has previously written for *The Independent*, *Birdwatching* magazine, *Anglers Mail* and a variety of other publications. His books include *The Idle Angler* and the black comedy *The Twitch*. Kevin lives in West Dorset with his wife and a colony of grass snakes a few strides from his garden gate.

Also by Kevin Parr

The Idle Angler
The Twitch

RIVERS RUN

An angler's journey from source to sea

KEVIN PARR

LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

To my wife, Sue

A Note about the Text

Over the following pages you may notice that I refer to anglers in the masculine. This is purely for ease of flow – ‘fisherman’ rolls more smoothly off the tongue than ‘fisherperson’; while for every ‘he’, I really mean ‘he or she’ – but the former is simpler to use in the text. Although angling is male-dominated, some of the very finest fisherfolk have been female. In fact, the British record salmon and the biggest ever fly-caught salmon were both famously caught by women. Therefore, before anyone thinks I might be mildly misogynistic, please be assured to the contrary!

Also, I often refer to rivers as feminine. However, this is less about narrative flow and more to do with a personal feeling. While I do not regard every river as female, some, such as the Kennet and Itchen, have an almost indiscernible quality that ‘feels’ far more female than male – certainly to me at least. Interestingly, in the German language, where nouns are defined as either masculine, feminine or neuter (der, die and das), the majority of rivers are prefaced by ‘die’: female. And while I could never get to grips with gender in my German classes at school, that distinction certainly makes sense to me now.

And if the river should ever run dry,
Somewhere the rain will still fall from the sky

Karine Polwart, ‘Rivers Run’

1

BEGINNINGS

Return to Stourhead

I AM THANKFUL for the breeze. This morning's haze dissolved as soon as I dropped down from the hills and here the sky is clear and the sun relentless above the shingle. I lay down my rod and kick off my flip-flops, giving the sea a quick toe-test before sitting back on the pebbles. The water is cool but not cold, the flooding tide warming over sun-baked stones.

There is an irresistible excitement when fishing a water for the first time. That first cast into the unknown, where absolutely anything could happen. In the past, I would have rushed to set up a rod, believing that the only way to catch a fish is to get a line in the water at the soonest opportunity. Experience, though, has taught me otherwise. Far more can be learned by not casting – by sitting, breathing and sharing the rhythm of the water. There are subtleties that can only be noted through observation and absorption, and we see little if we don't give our eyes a chance to focus.

So, for now, I will just sit back and let my chest rise and fall, because today there is even more reason to slow down. This beach is not simply a new spot for me to fish; the sea

itself represents a whole new world. I have dabbled in sea fishing in the past, from rocks and piers and the odd boat, but my first cast here symbolises a new life. Gone are the mortgage, the savings and the monthly pay packet. Circumstance and illness have led my wife, Sue, and me into a life of rural simplicity. We have little now, and gather our own wood for the fire and supplement our cupboards with free gifts from nature's larder. If I catch a fish or two this afternoon then they will be eaten for supper. Should I fail, we will not starve quite yet, but for the time being this is the only way we can afford to eat protein-rich food such as fish.

Considering my inexperience at this sort of fishing, I feel confident. There should be mackerel riding this flood, crashing into the flashing sparkle of whitebait shoals out there along the shore. I have visited other stretches of this coast and seen anglers lined up almost shoulder to shoulder from east to west. They thump out a team of feathers and winch them back with great sweeps of the rod, over and over, waiting for a shoal of mackerel to move through and dance on the end of their lines.

I have come away from the crowds for this, my first attempt. This beach might not be as well regarded as others but with no fellow anglers here, any fish that show will be mine alone to cast among. And it is for signs of fish that I am looking, shapes in the water or shadows in the surf – any nuance or anomaly that might lead me to mackerel. I will watch the gulls and terns and follow their gaze. This is a new language to me but one I am sure I can slowly decipher if I consider what I have already learned on my journey here. For the moment, however, it is a language that is but a whisper.

A flotilla of gulls, black-headed and herring, bob gently a hundred yards offshore, while a pair of crows sit silently on the shingle to my left. They are waiting as I am, and their presence reassures me that something will happen. I reach

for a rod and slowly put it up, pausing as I thread each ring, scanning and listening. The mass of water before me has softened slightly, the surface appears less sharp, less impenetrable, perhaps responding to the warmth of the air and the gentle flood of the tide. My mind no longer swims as I consider the enormity of the expanse, and instead, as I become less daunted, I find small pockets of familiarity. The sea might be vast – and salty – but ultimately I am just a little bit further down the river than I've been before. It is feasible that I have encountered this water before – odd particles of it at least. Perhaps flowing through the Dorset Stour at the end of last season. Maybe in the Hampshire Avon the summer before, or in the Kennet two winters ago. The drop that is still glistening on my toenail might have flowed in the Thames once, or along a tiny Highland stream where I've caught brown trout. And now it is evaporating, heading skyward with a billion other droplets, massing together only to drop once more.

I wonder where it will fall. Somewhere far out over the sea, or perhaps inland – deep inland. It might sink through the surface strata and bubble up back at the beginning, at the very start of the stream. I feel an urge to return upstream myself and retread the path that has led me here, to revisit those places that helped shape me as an angler and a person. But how would it feel to go back?

I've threaded the rod but not yet tied on a lure. For some minutes I have been holding the tag end of the line between the fingers of my left hand and flicking it with the thumb of my other. I could start my journey right now – chuck the rod back in the boot and point the car north. There is time today, though it would mean missing out on our fish supper.

As I ponder, a gull's chatter catches my attention. Wings are spread and in seconds the bobbing flotilla has become an airborne squadron. The crows hop up and glide with purpose past my nose. Something is happening. I reach for

my binoculars and look to where the birds are flying. A few hundred yards to the west, on the very edge of the shore, is a shower of glass. Thousands of tiny fish desperately leaping from hungry mouths. The surface boils like a puddle in a hailstorm, followed by bigger splashes as the mackerel throw themselves into the shoal. I reach for a lure; I will venture back upstream, but not just yet.

In the south-west corner of Wiltshire, just a short hop from Somerset and Dorset, sits a tiny pool. It is no bigger than a puddle and, but for the boot-clinging squelch surrounding it, I could probably jump both its length and breadth. It is shallow and clear yet teeming with life. Dozens of midge larvae hang from the surface film, while between them flit water boatmen no bigger than grains of rice. The margins beside my feet are blanketed by ivy-leaved crowfoot whose watercress-green leaves contrast with the mauve stems of water purslane. A tiny water beetle breaks surface, conspicuous as he sinks from the ball-bearing bubble of air he carries on his tail.

There is always water here and I don't need to see the steady streams of bubbles rising from the bottom of the pool to know this. This seemingly insignificant splash of water is the source of the Dorset Stour, a river as rich in life as it is in form, and with whose banks I have become familiar in recent years. I first fished her when I was ten or eleven years old. At the time, I was visiting my best friend in the world, Ian Murray, whose family had moved him to the other end of the earth – although we would still see one another during school holidays. Fishing was more my thing than his, but Ian had a rod and reel, and the Stour flowed through Sturminster Newton where he went to school, so we had to fish it. His mother dropped us off at Fiddleford Mill a mile or two downstream from Sturminster, a small

market town and ancient fording point on the Stour, where Thomas Hardy lived when he wrote of the sorrows of Clym Yeobright in *The Return of the Native*.

Within minutes of our arrival, the rain began to fall, and after an hour of tangled lines and motionless floats, a man in a green wax jacket and matching hat wandered down the bank and asked to see our permits. Ian and I looked at one another in panic. We hadn't even thought of the need for permission. Ian mumbled something about his mother forgetting to pick them up and the grown-up nodded and half smiled. He might have confiscated our tackle, but instead he pointed us to the other side of the weir pool where some chub might be lying under the trailing branches of a willow. We didn't catch any, but my first-ever minnow saved a blank, and we were so sodden that we were packed up and ready to go long before Ian's mother arrived to rescue us.

More than a decade was to pass before I returned to the Stour, although I soon became well aware of her pedigree. Not long after my trip with Ian, one of the angling newspapers led with the tale of a 'Giant Dorset Stour Roach'. The story had quite an impact on me. Despite not knowing exactly where the roach was caught, I felt that I had had a brush with something extraordinary.

Today, as a recently adopted Dorsetphile myself, I fish the Stour's middle reaches throughout the winter and on occasion she is generous with her rewards. While she can be fickle, and bursts her banks angrily after prolonged rain, few rivers share her intrigue and subtle changes of character. I would never profess to know her well – certainly there are other rivers with whom I am far better acquainted – but I know enough of her to be struck curious by her beginnings.

Now, a short distance behind me – forty-seven paces to be precise – stands a monument placed to mark the river's rising. It is a curious structure. Beneath a short, tapered

spire sit six figures, each within a curved recess that make up the sides of a hexagon. Beneath each corner is a pillar, the six of which sit upon a large square plinth. The base of the structure is far less defined – a misshapen hedgehog mound of rock which is tangled with the spines of bramble. At its base is the clue to the structure's original purpose: a small bowl into which would once have bubbled freshwater from a spring below. The monument is well weathered, having stood here for nearly 250 years, before which it served as a functional water source in the city of Bristol.

In 1768, when Henry Hoare had St Peter's Pump relocated from the city and rebuilt upon this rural site, he was unlikely to have known that its intended role might lack permanence. He had planned to place the monument upon the very spot, or at least the closest spot with suitable foundations, where the river that formed the centrepiece to his estate first appeared. To this day, Stourhead is known as the source of the River Stour – and yet St Peter's Pump is in the wrong place. Not simply because the water table has shifted and there is only ever flowing water here in the wettest of winters, but because the river has never truly begun here.

Although most visitors to the Stourhead estate, and there are many, will be aware of the symbolic significance of this place, a stranger walking through this valley would most likely look at the monument and see a simple folly – which in some respects is exactly what it is. While a spring still pushes a tiny pool above the ground here, there is no flow from it. A short run of club rushes alludes to the water's initial movement, but these quickly fizzle into nothing and for some distance there is only grass. The steadily sinking water table has forced the watercourse back beneath the ground and while the rushes do eventually find sufficient water to take root once more, these are hundreds of yards distant.

Far more prominent is the needle-straight path worn by a thousand soles into the side of the eastern slope, which caught my eye earlier when I first stepped out upon the head of the valley. From that vantage point, the rush-lined river course is slightly more obvious as it is gently concertinaed by the foreshortened aspect. I stood there for some minutes, silently taking in the scene before me and soothed by the warm southerly breeze that brushed my face and whispered in waves through the beech trees behind me. The valley was deeper than I had expected and almost glacial in appearance. Carved out, perhaps, by a giant with an enormous ice-cream scoop. A solitary oak with bark like a crocodile's back was the only tree that appeared not to have been deliberately planted, and although I am no great fan of manicured landscape, there was enough scrub and general untidiness to hold my interest. I ignored the well-trodden path and walked straight down towards the monument itself, putting up meadow pipits as I strode, and snaffling blackberries as I gently zigzagged between brambles to the place where I find myself now.

It is early October, yet summer lingers over the landscape. After an arid, record-breaking warm September, the ground is hard and dusty, and the only signs of moisture are the squelchy patch of bog in which I now stand and the microcosm of freshwater in front of my toes. I opt not to follow the course of club rush south into the trees. Most likely I will find no flowing water before reaching the chain of ornamental lakes that this spring feeds, and, having spent so many hours fishing beside the Stour, I prefer to look upon its uppermost reaches as a small bubble of possibility rather than a man-made curio. Instead, I cross to sit in the shade of an enormous birch tree to the west of the monument, where I eat my packed lunch as the seeps and pipes of goldcrests fill the pine trees behind me. I am grateful to be out of the sun and content to

keep my own company. A young couple has decided to take their own lunch beside the monument and I happily let them enjoy the space. The man sets down a toddler from a harness on his back and the child is off like a rocket, running excitedly round the blackberry-stained stones, a clockwork toy finally allowed to spin.

I should have come here in spring – when the world was waking up. It would have been a more appropriate season in which to gauge a sense of the river's beginning. The swallows would be hawking up the valley, picking off flies before arrowing over the beech trees and on to who knows where. The beeches themselves would be bare, save those stubborn few brown leaves that seem to forget they are supposed to fall. Today, the beeches are still dressed in a green almost as deep as they would have worn in late May, but when they do turn it will be sudden and potentially stunning.

With a satisfied sigh, I turn my face towards the autumn sun. Still the toddler runs, oblivious to the season or the significance of the spot where his feet pad. He is suitably enthusiastic, full of the hope and possibility to be found within the water bubbling up beneath him. I wonder if the toddler might one day fish – if he will find himself as captivated by water as I am. Today might be significant in the toddler's life, yet he will most likely not recall it. The smells and warmth and space will filter into his subconscious and maybe rise in a future bolt of pleasure. Alternatively, he might nosedive into the squelchy pool and get a mouthful of Stour that will put him off water for life.

I was little older than that toddler and had barely got to grips with the fact that fleas jump and birds fly, when I first became aware of the world that exists beneath water. I suddenly had to comprehend a place that didn't have a