

Award-winning author of *How to Bee* and *The Dog Runner*



ACROSS

THE

RISEN SEA

BREN  
MACDIBBLE

# ACROSS THE RISEN SEA

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*To everyone trying to live more gently  
on this earth. Keep up the good work.*





## ***THIS OFF DAY***



It's one of them days when everything is off.

A hot sweaty night in Rusty Bus means we kids is all grouchy-tired. Littlies wake up whining and pushing, arguing over whose clothes is whose. Little Margy clings to my shirt tail so hard I can't work her fingers open and have to drag her all the way to the loo with me. Me and my best friend, Jaguar, head to the beach, trying to cool down by taking turns at dipping in the sea pool. Him standing on the sea wall on lookout for crocs, me swimming, then we swap places.

We always do things as a team, him and me.

We's gonna be the best fisherpeople and the best salvagers on the whole of the inland sea one day.

The dawn mist is sitting low, not a gust of wind to blow it or the mozzies away. They's buzzing at my ears whenever I come up for air. I'm slapping at one when Jag sets up whining like a newborn puppy and leaps off the sea wall into the water with me. Splashing and gasping, his eyes wide and wild, he yells, 'Neoma! Run!' He scrambles out onto the beach and takes off, jus' leaving me there! I know he's unnaturally afraid of crocs but this is silly! 'We's meant to be a team!' I yell after him.

His shorts must've been torn on the sea wall, coz all I get in answer is one hilarious pale buttcheek sliding up and down in a corner tear in his shorts as he gallops up the beach.

'Jag!' I shout and scramble out of the sea pool, all splashes and pumping legs up the beach. I turn back once I got a head start on that croc or whatever, coz I wanna know what's got Jag so messy. He's regularly afraid of stuff, but he never up and leaves me to face it alone!

A pale-pink head pokes up above the edge of the sea wall. It's a baby. A tiny baby head, pulling itself up out of the water and onto the sea wall made from old car frames

and rocks. I head back down the beach to help it. Who left a baby in the water? Lucky it didn't drown!

The baby keeps climbing, revealing more of itself over the rusty metal and rock. It ain't got no hair, and it's unnaturally pink like it got soaked in hot water not cool sea, and then a pair of bright blue eyes is looking at me. There's a tuft of green sea moss stuck on its ear. Its nose is tiny and there's pink flower-bud lips jus' below that. Then its chin shows, and jus' below something that makes me want to scream and run too! Scuttling crab legs! This baby's got crab legs instead of a body!

My heart shoots to thumping flat out, and my feet stagger back from this crawling nightmare, until my bad-sleep head tells me babies can't have crab legs for bodies, but crabs can take anything for shells. It ain't a real baby head, but a doll head. One of them dolls that looks like a real baby. The crab's found it in a drowned house somewhere in the risen sea. It's got its own bit of salvage.

I laugh, which comes out a bit squeaky, and then I whistle up to the littlies. 'Come and be witness to what's jerky-walking along our sea wall happy as can be. A baby-head crab-house!'

Jag comes creeping back down with the other kids, hanging on to his shorts at the back, hopefully coz he's

noticed the hole . . . not for any messier reason. All the littlies, even those still hot and sleepy with puffy eyes, laugh and try to be brave even though it's a terrible, terrible sight, that jerky-walking crab baby.

Little Margy wants to chuck rocks at it, but I tell her no. 'Bad enough that crab can't find a decent shellhouse to carry round, now you wanna go and smash the only one it could find?'

We's all there, down on the beach, laughing off our fear, when an aluminium-hulled boat with a bright yellow sun on the prow comes sliding out of the mist.

What a day. Maybe I'm having one of those sweaty sleep dreams that seems so real?

Three tall people, all wearing shiny headbands, is in the boat. They dock, and before the first long leg stretches for the jetty the littlies scatter like scared roos. Me and Jag run and hide too, behind a car-body cottage.

The three strangers hoist large black bags over their shoulders and stride through the village and straight up Cottage Hill like they's the most important thing around. More important than us. More important than our elders even, who come out of their huts and cottages, their silver hair shining in the early morning sun, shouting, 'You there! Whaddya think you're doing here?'

The rest of us, seeing them shiny bands of gold around their heads with a big gold sun on the front, seeing their smooth jet-black hair, seeing their fine clothes, the rest of us is too scared to say a word to them.

Round the back of our island is all cliffs and shores, so full of rocks and driving sea that people don't dare come that way, but our beach is open. With all the car bodies lying round after the risen sea dragged them up here, we took the bendable body-metal and wheels for building and set those solid chassis down as a sea wall, to make anyone come in the front of the bay where we can all see them. There was a time when we'd have people sitting on the sea wall, ready to sound the alarm or see them off, but all our neighbours now is peaceful and we look out for each other, so it's a big shock for us to see people we don't know sailing straight on in like they own the place.

Right away when they reach the top of the hill they pull giant axes from their bags and set to clearing trees and use the wood to mark out big circles, though we tell them not to. The elders tell them we don't cut down the trees, we only take the lower branches, we only take the dead and fallen wood. But they's the biggest people we ever seen. And they go about their strange business



like our elders is jus' children, to be yelled at if they get in the way.

Their language is strange and only old Marta understands it, a little. That's how we learn they's siblings from the Valley of the Sun, two sisters and a brother, but we dunno what they's doing on our hill. We don't have anyone who knows their language good enough for that.

Nothing feels right about this day. This day of hot, tired kids, and walking baby heads, this day the siblings from the Valley of the Sun choose to come sliding out of the mist and take down our trees.





# **EVERYTHING IS CHANGED**

Day by day the siblings from the Valley of the Sun clear the top of the hill, chopping our trees down to huge logs and pushing them into post holes. And we stand by and watch.

‘Not so close,’ the olds yell at us Rusty Bus kids, when we’s daring each other to run in and touch one of them tall siblings. We ain’t s’posed to go too close to strangers, all of us kids born and raised here on the Ockery Islands of the inland sea, on account of how strangers can jus’ sneeze and spit diseases into the air all around us and we’ll come out in festering spots and cough our lungs right out of our chests. The old people say they been to see doctors when they was babies and now they’re

nokulated and diseases can't get to them. They do the doctoring if anyone's sick, and all us kids who ain't babies and ain't teenagers, we sleep cosy safe in Rusty Bus so no diseases can get to us.

The siblings don't have spots, so we keep at our game of dares. Jaguar says he touched one of the sisters, but I was watching and I think he jus' swiped at her clothes and ran, so I don't believe him. Now when he says he touched one, I poke him hard in the belly to make him jump and stop his exaggerating.

The olds bring the siblings from the Valley of the Sun food each night, coz ain't they queens and stuff? Instead of sitting down to eat and take tea like Ockery Islands people do and let old Marta find out more about what they's doing here, they nod for a thankyou and take the food down to eat, then sleep in their boat.

Each morning, we hope they'll be gone but they're back up and building circles from upright logs. Two small circles and one large one, right on top of our hill. Then they stand a huge pole right in the middle of the largest circle and bring something up in a wooden box from the boat. The whole village follow them to watch.

They take from the box this shiny metal square thing and hoist it onto the top of the tall centre pole. One of the

sisters scrambles up after it and nails it there. She casts down wires. Then they dig deep pits in the centre of the two smaller circles and drop metal buckets in there and connect them to those wires from the box.

All of us stand and stare. Marta who can speak their language asks them what it is, but they jus' tell her not to touch any of it or we will die.

Then the siblings from the Valley of the Sun return to their boat and sail away across the inland sea. They've been here four days and three nights and everything is changed.

We all stand and stare at the thing on top of the pole. 'Teknology,' old Marta calls it. 'It must do something,' she says. 'Spy on us, or make it easy for people to find us, or claim us as part of these islands, or help them talk to people way across the risen sea.'

And none of us think this is good. So we wanna take it down and pull down the wood circles, and try to put everything right by moving young trees to this hilltop. But no one moves, and as the earth turns away from the sun and the dark creeps in on us, the Teknology starts up whirring and flashing a red light and we all run screaming back down the hill to our huts and Rusty Bus.





## **TECH BURNS**



Nobody dies that night but all of us are worried. The next day we all push and shove and roll Rusty Bus out of the view of that Teknology, so the little kids won't be up half the night sitting at the windows and crying about the red flashing eye watching them.

Marta says that technology used to do a lot of stuff, but none of it to do with the act of living. She says it was good for spying and talking to people far away and finding your way around, but it wasn't any good for growing food or fishing or building boats or taking care of your own community. She says she's glad we don't have it no more, and can me and Jaguar go and draw the shiny metal box

coz she's going to take a boat to the other Ockery Islands and ask them if they know what's going on.

So that's what we do. We got our bit of clean cardboard from Marta's stash and we got a pencil and we sneak back up the hill, brave as anything. Well, I am. Jaguar's pretending he's dropping the pencil so he's got an excuse to fall back. It ain't that he's not brave. It's jus' if that red flashing light is gonna zap anyone, he'd be happier if we found out about it on me first.

Sometimes when we're out salvaging from buildings, Jaguar says, 'Hey, Neoma, can you get across this rusty metal beam?' And that's coz he wants to see how strong it is. You see, Jaguar's real smart, and even if I know for sure he's jus' getting me to test something, he makes me do it anyway by saying stuff like, 'I bet you can't.' I can never turn down a dare. Smart people are more careful. Me, maybe I ain't so smart, coz I like to test things out myself. I'm a doer. I do things.

I'm already circling the pole that holds the shiny metal box by the time Jaguar catches up. I shove the cardboard at him.

'I think we need to draw it like we's looking down on it so we can show how the poles is spaced out in a circle,' I tell him.

Jag nods, so I wrap my arms and legs around a wooden pole on the circle and haul myself up it, using the insides of my bare feet around where the siblings cut branches off to push myself up.

‘What you doing?’ he asks.

‘Getting higher, so I can draw it,’ I say.

‘They said if you touch anything you’ll die!’ he says.

‘They meant the stuff inside the circle, not our tree poles round the outside,’ I say.

‘How do you know what they meant?’ Jag asks. ‘You can’t understand their funny speak.’

‘Run away if you’re so scared. Jus’ gimme the cardboard and pencil first.’

Jaguar don’t run away, coz he’s my friend and he can’t jus’ leave me here, but what he does do after he passes me up the cardboard and the pencil is stand behind the pole, him maybe thinking it’s the square box that might kill him dead.

I sketch out the shape of the square box and circles best I can, hanging on to the top of the pole with one hand and both my feet, then drop the cardboard and pencil down to Jag.

‘There,’ I say. ‘Make that look good with your fancy drawing skills.’

I scramble and jump to the ground and, while Jag is doing some pencil-sucking and thoughtful staring at the square box, I squeeze between the poles of the smaller circle, and use my hands to dig out the loose earth over one of the metal bucket things the siblings buried.

I scrape it out, dirt getting caught under my fingernails, and soil getting warmer the further I dig down. Then hot in a weird way it shouldn't be.

'Stop it!' Jag shouts when he figures out what I'm doing.

I turn my head to look at him. A waft of sharp burning air smacks my head and I fall back.

'Neo!' Jag screams.

Whatever's down in that hole is sending out burning heat! I kick at the pile of dirt I've made and cover it back over before any more escapes. A stinging burn sets in up the side of my head and gets worse and worse.

'Ow!' I say and turn to Jaguar to ask can he see anything. But he's gone. Jus' a wafting bit of cardboard and a bouncing pencil and a pair of raggy shorts disappearing down the hill, legs pumping like mad.





AN OLD BARN BOOK

First published in Australia by Allen & Unwin 2020

This edition published in the UK by Old Barn Books Ltd 2020

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Distributed in the UK by Bounce Sales & Marketing Ltd

[Sales@bouncemarketing.co.uk](mailto:Sales@bouncemarketing.co.uk)

ISBN: 9781910646670

eBook ISBN: 9781910646687

Cover & text design by Joanna Hunt

Printed in the U.K.

First UK edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2



FSC® helps take care of forests  
and the people and wildlife  
that call them home.

## Publisher's Note

As I write this, the UK is tentatively emerging from a three month-long 'lockdown', which saw schools and businesses closed and many lives put on hold while others were forced into urgent activity, in an attempt to stem the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus. This has been a time of enormous anxiety and grief. Millions of people around the world have lost loved ones and had their lives changed irrevocably by this pernicious disease. It has also been a time for reflection, as everything we had taken for granted suddenly stopped. No traffic on the roads and no planes in the sky meant an extraordinary reduction in pollution, leading to clear skies, the regrowth of wildflowers on verges and the re-emergence of birdsong as the soundtrack to our lives in a way it has not been since the Industrial Revolution. Panic-buying and empty supermarket shelves revealed the fragility of our food supply chain and led us to question whether, as a nation, importing something like 50% of our foodstuffs on a 'just in time' basis is a sustainable model for the future.

Confined to their homes, British schoolchildren showed the rest of us how to master communication technology, rather than being mastered by it. Their creativity and kindness led the way in supporting and celebrating key workers, in planting insect-friendly gardens, learning to cook from whatever ingredients were available and re-discovering our bonds with the natural world on permitted outdoor exercise.

This is the third in a sequence of novels from Bren MacDibble based in a climate-changed future world. She has imagined a life with no pollinating insects, in *How to Bee*, and one with no grass-based foodstuffs, in *The Dog Runner*. *Across the Risen Sea* imagines how we might all live should the oceans rise. Once again, her young lead characters demonstrate the creativity and resilience we are all going to need. In wild adventures, Bren's books bravely explore potential future scenarios and offer hope for us all. Just as the UK is now talking about a new 'green' normal, building on what we have rediscovered in lockdown, Bren believes that the next generation 'do not deserve to feel stressed or helpless about the future.'

It has been a privilege and a joy to bring Bren's novels to a UK audience. I hope that her storytelling power and thoughtful optimism will resonate with you and that you enjoy the ride!

June 2020