



2019 Longlist

Undertow

by

Roisin Maguire

About the Author page 7

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UNDERTOW

When I was six months old I fell into the sea. We were on a battered old tub of a row-boat, the kind of thing Popeye would use to skim over the waves, and it was stuffed full of my cousins and sisters and my uncle the Skipper, and me. Uncle Sean laughed at my mother who stood twisting her hands on the beach and said that he knew what he was doing, and sure it would be no bother, they would hold the Ba tight, and she'd be grand, we were only going for a wee skite round the bay. Mum looked at me, snug as a bug on my sister's stout knee, and let me go.

We hadn't gone far from shore, my uncle hauling on the thick oars to move us along, when a great big fish was spotted by my cousins, just under the surface of the water. Huge excitement rose like a wave and tipped the laden boat quite sharply, and my sister shrieked and clutched the sides and let me go. In I fell with a plop, and *Oh sweet Jesus!* said my uncle. He almost scuppered the battered craft altogether, so great was his leap to the side to save me.

Imagine his astonishment when he looked down and saw me just under the prow of the boat, swimming along, paddling my podgy little arms and kicking my sturdy little legs on the surface quite happily. I was wearing my bright red coat, which had a hood that he hooked to haul me up and into the rocking boat again like some glorious catch, to be cried over and hugged and rubbed and kissed while I beamed and gurgled at all around me, delighted with my first swim and dripping everywhere. I was a water baby from the start.

There is a growing interest in the hypothesis that at some time in pre-history our ancestors evolved to be semi-aquatic animals, and that remnants of these marine adaptations persist in our biology and psychology today. Remarkable physiological changes that take place when humans enter the water; instinctive reactions of very young children to immersion; even

the shape of our face and our features indicate that at some point in our development we were creatures living between land and sea, much as the seal does today. To some this may sound like arrant nonsense, but to others like myself the truth of it is clear every time we enter the water. In Northern Ireland, where I live, we are never more than a few miles from the sea, and so the affinity with wave and tide is even stronger in the people here, and the drive to be on it, or in it, or under it, a constant undertow.

There was a morning recently when everything was in chaos. Like many modern parents I had children to deliver to soccer and swimming and drama classes before the first cup of coffee. Everyone had slept in, so we rushed around in the dark fog, leaving a Hansel-and-Gretel trail of belongings all the way out to the car, and as always, a string of something, bootlace or scarf, flying in the hectic wind behind us, caught in the car door. As soon as the last child had slammed the car closed and trotted off through the magic doors of Cathy's Dance Den I swung it around, engine heaving and jammed it into gear. I was going scuba-diving, and I was late.

Under cloudy skies, the sea at Ringhaddy Bay looked purple and bruised as I squeezed into a non-existent parking space, and a fair amount of coffee slopped out of my flask and down my front as I braked. I found a single dance shoe wedged between the handbrake and the seat. I turned off my phone and hid it in the glove compartment.

A stiff wind was perking the water like meringue as I slipped and slid over the shingle to where three black-clad figures huddled over a tangle of hoses and metal on the ground like witches round a cauldron. They looked up as I approached, and their faces looked like mine—tired, sleep-creased and cold.

'Bloody gas-leak somewhere— pishing out, it is...' someone muttered at me, and they went back to their dials and gauges and valves, trying to find the problem.

This is an extreme sport in a dangerous environment, and it is practiced by the most careful people in the world, or else they're dead. Our ancestors did not stay long enough by the water to develop a breathing system like the whale's, so while we developed bipedalism to wade, and a fatty subcutaneous layer to keep us warm on the surface, the difficulty begins when we try to put our heads below the water and keep them there for a while. Like the seal, our heart-beat and metabolic rate slow on submersion, but to explore this alternate universe for any length of time we must bring our own breathing air with us in a great big tank strapped to our backs. A leak of air, '*pishing*' out from one's Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus is not therefore a good thing, first thing in the morning.

I almost turned around and went home again, to a dry shirt and a warm house and a fresh cup of coffee and the morning TV. But something kept me on the beach —that drive which persists in me and so many others, to be in, or on, or under the water. I heard the scree of seabirds calling out what they saw below the surface. I saw a family of seals a little way out from shore, sticking their snouts in the sky to wait for sunshine. I zipped up my jacket and bent to see if I could help with the kit.

The thickest of the cloud slid away as we tightened this and loosened that, until the scuba gear was operational again and the morning had warmed a little. We kitted up, carefully, methodically. Each diving pair then faced each other and went through their pre-dive checks, one at a time, piece by piece. The systematic listing of kit and function rose and swelled in the salted air like a rosary. I let the sound wash over me and breathed a little easier after the scramble of the morning. I stopped worrying about the dance shoe. The tiny wind-waves on the sea relaxed until it was smooth and slick beside me, and the sun came out.

'Air in. Air out. Shoulder dump operational. Kidney-dump operational. I've got 230 bar on a 15-litre tank. Air breathes well, tastes good, no smell. There's no fluctuation in the dials...'

The quiet incantations continued until all were satisfied and ready, and then in a penguin-huddle of black we headed for the sea. There is always a moment when I stand at the edge of the water hooded in rubber, weighed down by lead and tank and fins and all the rest, and I feel absolutely ridiculous to be heading into the deep like some amateur space-explorer—as unwieldy and cluttered as a Christmas tree—but the call persists. I levered on my fins that morning and in I went.

We shuffled and stumbled in our heavy kit through the shallows in a grunting silence, all voices stoppered by our mouthpieces. At chest-deep we paused, as unlike Jacques Cousteau as you can imagine, and hot now as crabs in a pot. The sleek heads around me gleamed like seals, silent signals were exchanged and then we sank under the water, the only trace left for an observer the regular *pop-pop-pop* of our spent breath bubbling to the surface in long and winding trails.

When you submerge in Irish waters everything goes green. Yes, green. Not light blue as you might expect. Not gin-clear as in the nature programmes, swarming with myriad fish, but green. The stuff of life contained in our temperate waters—the soup of nutrients that stock the world’s oceans. Green and hazy. Often dark and murky, too. There was a *thock* as the water closed over my head that morning, and we sank gently to the bottom, landing on our knees as if in prayer. A poof of silt rose round each of us to our hips, and we looked like some weird bug-eyed gods sitting on our own clouds in a green world. A check of our gauges, and a squeeze of the inflator button on our jackets and we rose gently in the water. We were flying.

Suddenly I was in three dimensions as if I were a spaceman, gravity-free, and as always, I was entranced. I kicked my fins gently and moved forwards, the water running over the exposed skin of my face in ripples. I stopped again, floated, looked down. There was an above and a below, and a place where I was, in between. I was weightless. I could feel the pressure of water tight on my belly and on my back. Air came to my lungs as readily as on the dry land

and left me in a stream of glossy bubbles. I could twist around, hovering, and watch them flurry to the lightening green of the surface and disappear. I could see the belly of the sea curling and tightening like a muscle above me, its skin sleek and shining, restless, colourless and mesmerising.

This is the point in every dive at which I know my ancestors were creatures at home in the sea. The heart audibly slows, and I can count its slackening beats in my ears. My circulation pools its resources in my core which feels warm and buzzy, and my fingers fizz. As I swim to greater depths the increasing water pressure massages my soft insides, which compress without fuss, squeezing impurities from every cell. At twenty metres down, the brain enters a heavily meditative state. Fatty tissue is released into my bloodstream to absorb extra nitrogen taken on at depth, and it gives an energy buzz as a bonus. It feels absolutely marvellous, and on that day, after my manic morning, it felt as if I was in the right place at last. I looked over at my buddy, Brendan, whose eyes crinkled behind his thick mask. He was smiling too.

Finning gently over the rippling sand that unfurled below me like the ribs of the sea, I could hear the rasp of my breath as if I had just been born and the clucking, ticking noisiness of the underwater world. My legs moved slowly and lazily and nothing was difficult. It was a thick green world of bubble and constant fresh sensation. Things moved languidly, flashed past, drifted overhead, and I swam along, taking everything in.

There was a quick shadow to my left. The peripheral vision suffers in a dive mask, so I caught just a sense of it, a slick slide past me—close. Brendan, however, was banging his hands together, back to back— ‘*Seal! Seal!*’ I swung around with a quick thrill, but *it* moved as *I* moved, hiding just behind me no matter how I turned. It was playing. When I looked back at Brendan, he was shaking his head and smiling, pointing downwards.

About five or six metres below me a kelp forest breathed in the current. Snuggled in a space between stems the huge limpid eyes and thick snout of the young seal could be seen,

brushed back and forth by shining brown ribbons as the water moved. She hung there motionless, seemingly convinced that she was cunningly concealed until I upended and goggled my eyes at her from above. With a sudden invisible thrust she was up and past me, a sleek torpedo, drawing a graceful 'C' in the water and hanging there, motionless, to see if those long yellow fins of mine would twinkle again for her. Her skin was mottled grey and black, a beautiful thing.

Brendan had fumbled his camera out and was filming as the seal tilted her head like a thinking dog, and then came closer, regarding me with cautious eyes. I dabbled my fins alluringly in front of me like a ballerina in midwater. Closer she swam, and closer, until her snout reached my right fin, and she mouthed it gently. I saw her long sharp teeth and held still. Clearly, I wasn't to her taste, as she let go and swam off a little distance to hang straight like a mermaid, watching us. We watched her. The water burbled. My computer beeped on my wrist and broke the spell.

Gas Low.

Time to Ascend.

When I looked up again, she was gone, swimming her animal magic away through the murky green and Brendan was packing his camera back into his pocket. As we swam ashore and slogged our way out of the water and up the beach, I knew that there would be a stream of messages on my phone when I turned it on, and groceries to pick up on the way home, and washing to be done when I got there, and all the rest. I could feel my body readjusting to gravity and reduced pressure and settling, heavy, back to earth. But the sea could be heard behind me, a hushed whisper in my ear, and I knew that it would call me back again and again and again.

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About the Author

Roisin Maguire is a business manager and keen recreational scuba diver and scuba instructor. She has always enjoyed writing and has decided that now her four children have grown up a bit, that she is going to put more time and effort into it! She enjoys life writing especially, as it gives her an excuse to try new things and go to new places to ensure she has always got something interesting to write about.