

we find them in the morgue.' In the aching space behind her eyelids, Alida could feel the memories escalating into grief and rage as they had done before.

Her bedroom was steeped in expectant silence. 'I'm not going to cry,' she muttered. 'It can't be too late.'

The curtains were momentarily parted as a waft of air tumbled in from the night and rolled across the wooden floor. Its coolness enveloped Alida like a shroud as she sat on the bed, so that she curled her toes up and shivered.

I'm going to India, she thought, and in one smooth motion she gathered her limbs and leaped from the bed.

Still trembling, blinking away the stars floating in her vision, Alida stood barefoot on the floor and tried to think rationally. She switched on the main light and flung open her wardrobe. A life-sized baby doll slid onto the polished wooden floorboards. She picked

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it up by its soft belly and crammed it back into her workbag, leaving ten plastic toes and a bald head visible above the leather rim. Pushed against the back of the wardrobe was the old-fashioned brown suitcase which had once belonged to her father.

When the case was lying open on the bed, Alida realised she didn't know where to begin. What would she need in India? On the duvet, she made a comforting pile of makeup and shampoo. She picked out a pair of low-heeled sandals. Then she saw the framed head-and-shoulders photograph of Mia which she kept on her bedside table. As she picked up the delicate silver frame, she had a disconcerting image of herself traipsing through the streets of India, showing people the picture and explaining that this was her lost daughter.

In the photograph, Mia was standing under a tree in Hyde Park on a blue January morning. The wind had loosened her corkscrew curls of dark hair so that individual strands snaked around her face, which was rosy with cold. Mia had a theory that on windy days she and her mother both ended up looking like Medusas, their hair whipped into a halo of snakes. Her eyes, caught in the wintry sunshine, were dark gold beneath strong, curved eyebrows and her wide mouth rocked with laughter as she breathed out a big white cloud of cold air. That day, the tensions which spiked the two of them apart had momentarily subsided, and they had fallen into step like experienced dance partners. 'Take a picture of my cloudy white breath flying away from me on the wind,' Mia had said. Alida had taken several, with Mia laughing as she tried to make different

shaped clouds. The picture had been taken eighteen months ago, when she had just turned seventeen. Alida tipped it gently into her handbag.

She had to tell Mia's father. His most recent address wouldn't be written inside Mia's passport, which was where the police must have found her own contact details.

Would it be acceptable, she wondered, if she just emailed him from India with the news? Sighing, she retrieved the telephone from the edge of her bedside table.

'What?' complained a husky female voice after three rings.

'Maggie, it's Alida. I need to speak to Ian.' She could hear the wobble in her voice, and frowned.

'At half five in the morning?' But she was already handing the telephone over. Alida pictured Ian's crumpled, unshaved face, his dirty-blond hair flopping over his eyebrows and the bright blue of his eyes blinking

awake.

'Lida. Something wrong?'

'It's Mia.' Alida bit her lip, her feet freezing on the floor. 'I got a call. She's in India.' To her dismay, her voice tripped up on the word India and tears started to slide from her eyes.

'I know she is,' said Ian impatiently. 'It's been three months now, hasn't it?' His voice was ragged around the edges, as if he'd had too much to drink the previous night.

'What did she say?'

'Nothing, I didn't speak to her.' Alida coughed to get the lump out of her throat. 'It was a policeman.' Teardrops were rolling off her cheeks and landing in hot splashes on her vest top.

'What?' Now Ian's voice was sharp with concern. 'What the hell did he say?'

'He... Mia's lost.'

End of book extract

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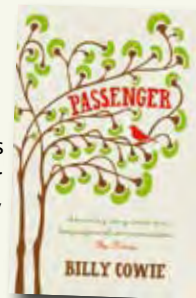
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New Releases

Passenger

Billy Cowie

Old Street Publishing



Billy Cowie has added another string to his already accomplished bow.

Milan's unexceptional life is changed beyond recognition when he hears a musical tapping, Beethoven's fifth to be precise, seemingly originating from within his own body. Fearing for his mental health, Milan undergoes varied medical tests which reveal his condition as "foetus in fetu." Whilst in the womb, Milan subsumed his foetal twin sister who has astoundingly survived undetected for 42 years.

Belying the sci-fi plot, *Passenger* is a simple, touching exploration of the human condition. Cowie's understated style cleverly allows the nuances of relationship dynamics to take centre-stage over the bizarre back-drop. Christening his "little sister" Roma, Milan's symbiotic twin becomes a rounded, humorous character whose fate becomes a real concern.

Disbelief is soon suspended, as the reader is swept away in the complexities of this tale, which gently challenges grand notions of identity, perception, love and enlightenment.

Samantha Cracknell

Up a Tree in the Park at Night with a Hedgehog

P. Robert Smith

Vintage Originals



Combining a tragic death and an exploitative affair with a categorically unsympathetic anti-hero

might not sound like the recipe to become the pretender to Mark Haddon's crown, but somehow with *Up a Tree*, Smith manages to pull it off. The protagonist, Benton Kirby disastrously lurches from one farce of his own creation to another, leaving a dead fiancée, a suicidal pet and heartbroken students in his wake to ultimately end where the novel's title begins, up a tree in the park at night with a hedgehog. Smith's saving grace in enabling the reader to continue their alliance to the pathetic Benton is his adept transformation from the realistic to the phantasmagoric to a point where the reader becomes truly involved in a grotesque parody of mundane existence.

Up a Tree does nothing to elicit any heart-wrenching emotion, but does provide a comical interlude into the bizarre and the macabre. A truly entertaining read for a light-hearted slant on usually heavy fare.

Pauline Bache