

## Philip Marsden

### Writer - Fiction and Non-fiction

**Philip Marsden** is the author of a number of books of travel, history and fiction. *The Crossing Place: A Journey among the Armenians* (re-issued 2015) won the Somerset Maugham Award while *The Spirit-Wrestlers: and Other Survivors of the Russian Century* (1999) won the Thomas Cook / Telegraph Travel Book of the Year Award. His work has been translated into more than a dozen languages.



## Agents

---

Anna Webber

awebber@unitedagents.co.uk

+44(0)203 214 0876

Associate

Seren Adams

sadams@unitedagents.co.uk

+44 (0)203 214 0956

## Publications

---

### Fiction

---

Publication Details	Notes
------------------------	-------

**THE MAIN  
CAGES**

2003

HarperCollins

Philip Marsden's brilliant first novel is set in the 1930s, in the small Cornish fishing village of Polmayne. A newcomer to the village, Jack Sweeney, buys a boat and establishes himself as a fisherman, gradually winning the respect even of the village elders.

But times are changing, and a new kind of visitor is beginning to appear in Polmayne. A bohemian colony of artists offends some sensibilities, while a hotel is opened to accommodate the summer tourists, and pleasure steamers mingle with the fishing boats in the harbour.

Yet, despite the superficial changes, the old ways and the old hazards of Cornish life endure. Offshore, just below the surface of the waves, lie the Main Cages, a treacherous outcrop of rock where many ships and many lives have been lost.

Firmly rooted in a particular place and time, yet recalling in its universality such books as Graham Swift's *Waterland* and E. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*, *The Main Cages* is a gripping story of love and death, and a remarkable fictional debut.

---

## Non-Fiction

---

### Publication Details Notes

---

**RISING GROUND**

2014

Granta

Why do we react so strongly to certain places? Why do layers of mythology build up around particular features in the landscape? When Philip Marsden moved to a remote creekside farmhouse in Cornwall, the intensity of his response took him aback. It led him to begin exploring these questions, prompting a journey westwards to Land's End through one of the most fascinating regions of Europe.

From the Neolithic ritual landscape of Bodmin Moor to the Arthurian traditions of Tintagel, from the mysterious china-clay country to the granite tors and tombs of the far south-west, Marsden assembles a chronology of our shifting attitudes to place. In archives, he uncovers the life and work of other 'topophiles' before him - medieval chroniclers and Tudor topographers, eighteenth-century antiquarians, post-industrial poets and abstract painters. Drawing also on his own travels overseas, Marsden reveals that the shape of the land lies not just at the heart of our history but of man's perennial struggle to belong on this earth.

---

---

**Publication Details Notes**

---

**THE LEVELLING  
SEA**

2012

HarperCollins

During the 1560s and 1570s, a maritime revolution took place in England that would contribute more than anything to the transformation of a small rebel state on the fringes of Europe into an imperial power. Until then, it was said that only one man in the country was capable of sailing a ship across the Equator. Within ten years an English ship with an English crew was circumnavigating the globe.

At the same time in Cornwall, in the Fal estuary, just a single building – a lime kiln – existed where the port of Falmouth would emerge. Yet by the end of the eighteenth century, Falmouth would be one of the busiest harbours in the world.

The Levelling Sea uses the story of Falmouth’s spectacular rise to explore wider questions about the sea, its place in history and the imagination, and its effect on the lives of individuals. Through a dazzling parade of Elizabethan privateers, merchant seamen, naval heroes, religious dissenters and outsiders, award-winning author Philip Marsden presents Falmouth and its harbour as a crucible for the modern world. Drawing on his own deep connection with Cornwall, he writes unforgettably about the power of the sea and its ability to push enterprise to extremes – with piratical greed, brilliant innovation, or courage and endeavour on a grand and tragic scale.

---

**THE SPIRIT-  
WRESTLERS: AND  
OTHER  
SURVIVORS OF  
THE RUSSIAN  
CENTURY**

2010

HarperCollins

In Moscow, a man is looking at a map of the Caucasus. He is a Doukhobor, a ‘spirit-wrestler’, member of a group of radical Russian sectarians. ‘Here,’ he says. ‘I was born here. On the edge of the world.’

So begins Philip Marsden’s journey into a strange and ambiguous world – a world where nothing is quite as solid as belief, where miracles are a part of everyday life, and where the Russian steppe gives way to the hostile Caucasian scarp.

---

---

**Publication Details Notes**

---

**THE BAREFOOT  
EMPEROR: AN  
ETHIOPIAN  
TRAGEDY**

2008

HarperCollins

Towards the end of 1867, Emperor Tewodros II of Ethiopia burnt his own capital, took his vast mortar - named 'Sevastopol' - and began a retreat to the mountain stronghold of Mekdala. For months thousands of his followers struggled to build a road for the great gun, levelling the soil of the high plains, hacking out a way down into mile-deep gorges. At the same time, a hostile British force, under General Napier, was advancing from the coast. It was the climax to the reign of one of the most colourful and extraordinary rulers in African history.

Discovering traces of the road in the highlands, and drawing on years of involvement with Ethiopia, Philip Marsden recounts the story of Tewodros. From his spectacular rise - camel-raider to King of Kings - Tewodros was a man who combined a sense of Biblical destiny with personal charisma and military genius. He restored the fortunes of the ancient Christian kingdom, introduced reforms to his army and to the church, and dreamed of an alliance with the great powers of Europe. But as his reforms stalled and the British Foreign Office lost his letter to Queen Victoria, Tewodros's behaviour became more and more violent and erratic. When he imprisoned the British consul, years of negotiation culminated in one of the most bizarre - and expensive - campaigns of the Victorian age.

The Barefoot Emperor is history at its most thrilling and dramatic. Using narrative skills proven in such acclaimed books as *The Bronski House* and *The Chains of Heaven*, Philip Marsden recreates scenes and characters of glittering intensity - and the intriguing paradoxes of a central figure grappling not only with his own people and his own demons, but with the seductive and unstoppable approach of the modern world.

---

**THE CHAINS OF  
HEAVEN: AN  
ETHIOPIAN  
ROMANCE**

2006

HarperCollins

Walking hundreds of miles through a landscape of cavernous gorges, tabletop mountains and semi-desert, Philip Marsden encounters monks and hermits, rebels and farmers, people whose spiritual passions reveal a reckless disregard for the material. In spare and glinting prose, *The Chains of Heaven* celebrates the ageless rewards of the open road and a people for whom the mythic and the everyday are inextricably joined.

---

**THE BRONSKI  
HOUSE**

2005

HarperCollins

A remarkable, multifaceted story made up of journal accounts, memories, conversations and personal experience, *The Bronski House* is a paean to Poland, a landmark in travel writing, and a family history - tied together by the unique experience of returning from exile.

In the summer of 1992, accompanied by Philip Marsden, the exiled poet Zofia Hinska stepped into the Belorussian village where she had spent her childhood. *The Bronski House* is in part the remarkable story of what she found. It is also the story of her mother, Helena Bronska - of her coming of age during the Russian revolution, her dramatic escapes from Bolsheviks, Germans and partisans, of her love and loss in a now vanished world. It brilliantly reconstructs a world which vanished in 1939 when Soviet tanks rolled into eastern Poland.

---