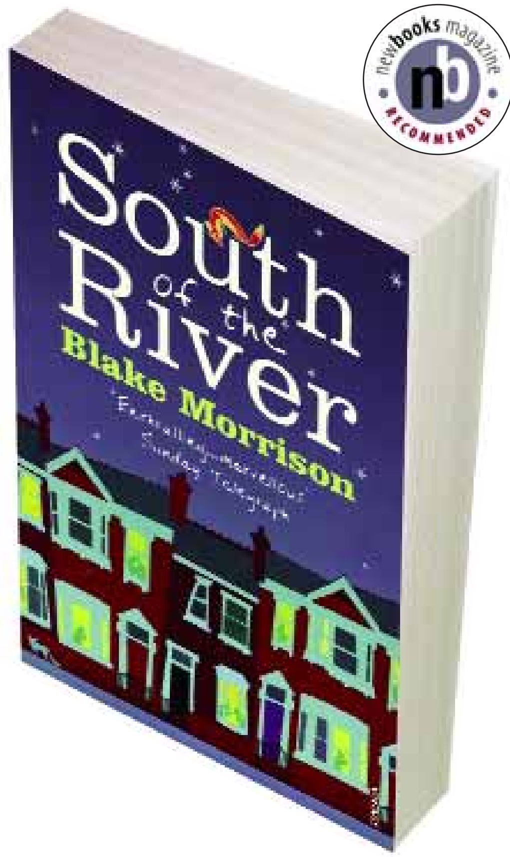
South of the River

Blake Morrison



South of the River, set on 5 particular days spanning a 5-year period, opens on the 'new dawn' of Labour's election victory in 1997.

But this is not so much 'state of the nation' as state of our souls, marriages, families, hopes and careers – a sharp and sexy portrait of a dysfunctional group of characters, all different yet connected. There's Nat, failed dramatist and reluctant lecturer, falling for a younger woman; Anthea, an eco-friendly lost soul obsessed with foxes; Libby, hardworking mother and advertising executive, the family breadwinner; Harry, Nat's friend and ex-pupil, a journalist on a local paper, with a guilty secret of his own; and Jack, Nat's blimpish but unexpectedly poignant uncle. Beneath the bright familiar world of Blair's Britain, there's a dark undertow of political and personal disillusion, of mythologies and urban myths that circle round our apparently comfortable lives.

LIBBY

Half a decade later, as she stood by a high window ready to throw herself out, what Libby would remember of that day wasn't the dinner-table conversation with her husband, or the footage of Tony Blair waving to the crowds, or even the interview with the man who would become her lover. It was the fox she saw at first light, leaving its tracks across the dew-white grass.

The fox was large, brassy and, despite a slight limp, horribly robust. She shivered as she watched from the bedroom window. A male, probably: too big for a vixen; too big, really, for a fox. There were more of them every year, more and larger. They already had the run of the garden – digging up plants, shitting on the patio, stealing any item (toys, gloves, trainers) accidentally left out. 'If they catch us, will we be eaten, Mummy?' Hannah and Rose sometimes asked. 'Don't be silly,' she told them, without conviction. It wasn't rational to be afraid of foxes. But what was rational about foxes living in a city? Not just living in but occupying, controlling, taking over. She shivered again, then banged on the window. The fox turned its head and stared back: Fuck you, lady, I'll do as I please. She banged again, to no effect. Then something next door caught its attention and off it went, up and over the garden fence with practised ease. A pigeon croo-crooed from the roof, soothing as cough medicine. But there were prints on Libby's small back lawn. Today was going to be difficult. And the fox seemed a bad omen.

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Behind her, under the duvet, Hannah and Rose lay sleeping either side of Nat. They had appeared an hour ago, complaining of sore throats; Nat, staying late at Deborah's election party, had crawled in not long before them. What if the girls were too ill to go to school? Once dosed with Calpol they had nodded off, but soon it would be time to wake them. Millie, the live-out nanny, was 'marvellous', everybody said. Any nanny who stuck the job for a month without committing infanticide was likely to earn the adjective, but in Millie's case it was true. Still, Millie ▸▸

had a hospital appointment and wouldn't be around till after three. And though Libby herself sometimes worked from home on Fridays, today was the SaxonAir meeting, which she couldn't afford to miss. There were no friends she could turn to, either, at such short notice. Which left only Nat – and the prospect of eight hours' mayhem.

If only I'd skipped Deborah's party, she thought, slipping into the shower, I wouldn't feel so tired. That American woman annoyed me, too, across the buffet table: 'Don't you feel conflicted,' she said, 'working full-time and having young kids?' It was an aside, unmalicious, a conversation-filler between the exit polls and the first results. Libby was used to worse. Cold, people called her. Hard as nails. A ball-breaker. Not to her face, naturally. But she knew – from sly jokes and overheard remarks. But when the American woman implied, between forkfuls of roast peppers, that because she worked long hours she couldn't love her children, Libby came close to losing her cool.

She had moved away rather than reply. The love she felt for Hannah and Rose needed no defence. She would not have expected it. Might not even have chosen it. But couldn't help it. She had been intrigued, during her first pregnancy, when a brown line appeared down the middle of her stomach, like longitude, and could remember thinking: I'm a globe, a planet; in my keeping lies a vast population of one. Men didn't understand. They saw that line running from breasts to vagina and it confirmed what they thought already: that this was a woman's only roadmap, her A–Z or (since there was nothing between those two poles to interest them) her A–B. For women, the line marked the discovery of new hemispheres; the world took on a different shape. Whether you worked or not was irrelevant. Once you were a mother, nothing was the same.

One towel round her head, another knotted at her breast, she tiptoed from the fogged-up bathroom and stood in front of the bedroom mirror. Only a couple of stretch marks, no visible cellulite, crow's feet barely apparent in the curtained light. No grey hairs in the auburn, either. And she was slim, thanks to the exercise bike and her genes: Thin Libby. But she had lost the bloom that made men lust for her through her twenties. Nat, luster-in-chief, had aged, too, of course. But there was still something unlived-in about him. Whereas she, or so she feared, was wearing less well.

'Time to get up, everyone,' she said, to the three-headed monster in the bed. A groan from Nat was the only response. He had come back from Deborah's silly-drunk, blabbering stuff about history being made. Sod history – when your children are ill, your hair's wet, you're stressed about work and you've a headache, history doesn't amount to a bean. I've more important things to think about than a change of government, she thought. More important, that is, to me.

'Come on, up,' she said, and coaxed her two children – three children – down to breakfast. The day hung in the balance over Weetabix and scrambled egg: were Hannah and Rose really ill? Or merely disoriented by spending yesterday at home, the school having been requisitioned as a polling station? Nat, hungover, unshaven, in pyjamas, felt as desperate as she did – Fridays were his writing day, he had a lunch with Harry to go to, and if forced to play nanny for a few hours he would pay Libby back tonight with mournful sermons on the incompatibility of parenting and artistic creation, 'the damp dishcloths of household duty snuffing out the flame of inspiration', etc. Household duty? Nat? He might vaguely offer to help sometimes ('help', see: as if his role was purely voluntary), but tidying up mess didn't come naturally to him; creating it did. How someone who spent so much time at home could be so undomesticated was one of life's mysteries.

'No daughter of mine is going to school if she feels sick,' Libby said, pouring out more orange juice. The trick was to insist they stay at home while implying how brave and clever it would be if they didn't. At 8.20, Hannah announced she was feeling better and went off to get dressed; Rose, with a little prodding, followed. By 8.40, with cheese sandwiches, crisps and apple juice in their lunch boxes, Libby was heading out the door with them, leaving Nat to not get on with his writing.

Bankside Primary was less than half a mile away and unless the weather was freakishly bad Libby liked to go on foot, the last mother in London to walk her kids to school. Today the sky was clear, the heat unseasonal, the air unnervingly bright. Even the sun over the roofs looked freshly minted. Not a day to rush, but the meeting with SaxonAir was scheduled for ten and she wanted to brief her colleagues beforehand. The account was large and the client unhappy. No wonder she had slept so badly, even before the girls climbed into bed. If Nat had a proper job it wouldn't matter, but the family depended on her earnings.

'Will you spend a day with us soon?' Hannah asked.

'I'll be home all weekend.'

'I mean at school.'

'Of course, sweetie. When things have settled down a bit.'

Other mothers put in time as classroom volunteers. Hannah and Rose kept pressing her to do the same. And she would have liked to, if only to see how the school worked. Because it wasn't working, for Hannah and Rose, that was the thing. Oh, they weren't unhappy – consented to attend most days, had acquired friends who invited them to parties and sleepovers, knew more about the Chinese New Year and Indian deities than she did. Which was great. She just wished that they could read. They were seven and five now, and surely ought to be reading. She ▸▸

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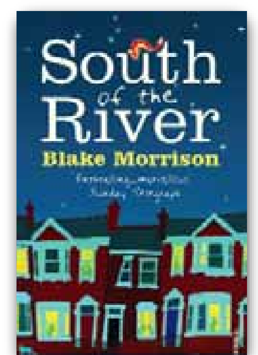
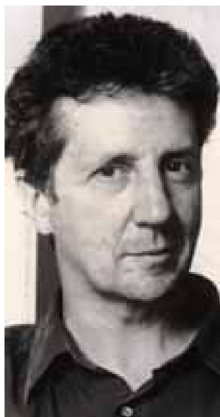




blamed herself: if only she had more time, if only when she did have time she wasn't so exhausted. But reading was part of the curriculum – surely the school had responsibilities too. When she raised the subject with Mrs Swayne, the head teacher, at the last parents' evening, she had been made to feel pushy. But was it pushy to think a child of seven should be reading? In her day, hadn't it been more or less expected? What Libby remembered from school in Ballymena was symmetry: desks in neat rows, hair tied in bunches, a rectangular blackboard dominating each classroom. Whereas the ethos at Bankside was chaos by any other name. 'Unconfining,' Mrs Swayne called it: in the informal, progressive, unconfining atmosphere of Bankside, children could thrive. To Libby, Ballymena was the better model. But to find it these days you had to go private, which she lacked the money for and, even if she had it, would have resisted. Look what private school had done to Nat.

Still, at least Nat could read.

At the school gates she secured her escape through counter-suggestion.

'You look a bit pale, Hannah. Shall I take you home to Daddy?'

'I'm fine,' Hannah said.

'And I'm even finer,' Rose said.

'Well, OK, then. But you must go to Mrs Swayne if you're unwell.'

She kissed them both, then turned guiltily away and headed down the hill towards the station, wondering, as she always did at this point of the day, why she chose to live south of the river when from Islington or Hackney she could be at her desk in twenty minutes. In a year or two, the Docklands Light Railway would be extended to Lewisham but till then she had to go overground to London Bridge then on the tube via Bank, a cumbersome journey at the best of times and there were few of those.

On the train she took out her mobile and called Angie. According to the rules of middle-class commuting, mothers used mobiles to fix piano lessons or remind Ingrid to take the puréed carrot out of the freezer, not to call their PA. But Libby's life ran counter to the rules. This morning, like most mornings, was a crisis. She couldn't not work on the way to work.

'I'm running late,' she said.

'You stayed up, then?' Angie said.

'Why, do I sound tired?'

'For the election.'

'Oh, that.'

Libby knew she ought to take more interest, but elections were a boy thing, like football.

'No messages?' Libby said.

'Nothing that won't keep.'

In advertising, nothing kept. If you had a thought you had to act on it, before your rival thought it. Even instantaneity was too slow.

'Tell me.'

'Annie Cleeve called. I said you'd phone her once you were in.'

Angie was protecting her. She didn't want to be protected.

'Because?'

'The ChildPlanet ad came out smudged.'

'Just that?'

'It was in the Arts Section and they asked for News. She was a bit upset.'

'She didn't shout, did she?'

'Just put the phone down on me.'

'Bitch. I'd better call her.'

Saying sorry always strengthened the client relationship. The pie principle, Libby called it: eat humble and they would be nice as.

'Oh, and if the SaxonAir people get there before me,' she told Angie, 'give them coffee in the conference room. With croissants and stuff. Make a fuss.'

She hung up, suddenly conscious of other passengers listening in while pretending to read their newspapers.

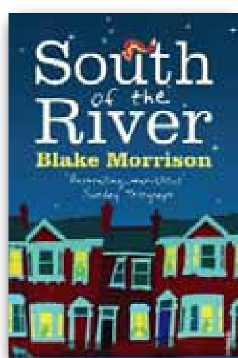
Disembarking at London Bridge, she noticed, with a pang, that the outbound train at the next platform would be calling at the station she had just come from. For a moment she considered catching it and journeying back to a life she'd never known, as a stay-at-home, unconflicted mother. Then she headed for the Underground as fast as she could.

JACK

The family of Raven had been long settled in East Anglia. For centuries they raised cattle in the meadows by the Waveney, the sluggish river which divides the counties of Suffolk and Norfolk. But then great-great grandfather set up a sideline in agricultural machinery, and as it grew so the cattle, the land and finally the farmhouse were sold off. For the past eighty years the family business had been light engineering. The works stood where one of the outlying bams used to be, next to the B-road between Harchope and Frixley. Parking his Jaguar in the usual space, Jack snuffed the air as if he owned it. On a morning like this – blue skies, wide horizons, the barometer settled on Sunny – he liked to forget he was the MD of a small company, and to imagine himself ploughing and tilling his loamy acres: a gentleman farmer of the old breed.

The fax was waiting for him on his desk. One skim was enough: '. . . enjoyed our recent meeting and hope your flight back...highly competitive market...more attractive rival bids...regret to say...no reflection on the quality of your...feel sure that as the economic climate changes...hope that it won't jeopardise our personal friendship...trust that if you and Nancy are passing through Toulouse this summer you will...yours ever, Luc.'

Jack's instinct was to tear it up, but Hook would



have to see it, and then it would need to be filed. He left it on his desk and walked to the window. In the yard below, two men in oily blue overalls were wheeling welding equipment into one of the sheds. Horace Sanders and the young Kinder boy, it looked like. Good lads, anyway. They were all good lads. But spirits were hard to keep up when the orders weren't coming in, and when word got round of the non-emergence of the SGS contract morale would suffer. Four hundred thousand quid down the pan. With the loss of that Belgian contract last week, and two smaller ones in Germany, that made Raven & Son nearly one million under-budget. What a start to the financial year. Four long-standing customers gone in a month. Last year's turnover had sunk from £2.1 million to £1.4, which was bad enough. But at least they were in profit, just. Whereas 1997–8, at this rate...it didn't bear thinking of. Eight rows of green machines sat in the far corner of the yard, alarmed and chained to discourage the local hoodlums. Eight rows of fifty. Four hundred machines at a RRP of £749.99–£300,000 worth, of which Raven & Son might see a third and, after wages and overheads, make a profit of £20,000. That was supposing someone bought them. Those four hundred had been meant for Belgium, but the bastards had pulled out a week before delivery. Luc had been less insultingly last-minute, which was to be expected when they had known each other for fifteen years. 'Personal friendship' came a bit rich all the same. A personal friend would have had the guts to telephone. A personal friend would have stood firm during difficulties which weren't the fault of the supplier. A personal friend wouldn't go running off to one's rivals. But it was true SGS had been muttering about the 'expense' of Jack's machines for at least two years. The problem wasn't Luc but his board. Business moved fast these days, and even the French were in a hurry. The rivals undercutting Raven & Son were almost certainly those Dutch arseholes, Luffnest or whatever they were called, the ones who used plastic covers rather than metal. Duff workmanship, anyone could see. When their machines fell apart six months from now and the customers began screaming at local agents and SGS lost its reputation for quality, then Luc would come crawling back, beret in hand. But in the meantime Jack was in the shit.

He peered miserably at the rest of the post – flyers and invoices, not a single new order, let alone a cheque. Was his mistake to have narrowed the business to mowers? And not just any old mowers, but traditional petrol-driven cylinder mowers with two- or four-stroke engines? Hapgood, Proctor & Raven (later Raven & Son) had originally made all manner of products – steam engines, threshing machines, circular saws, road rollers, power pumps, and corn-grinding mills – but then John-Joseph Junior, aka grandfather, an amateur driving enthusiast who competed at Thruxton and Brooklands, began to specialise in car engines, and launched the Viking Warrior in 1920. The only buyers were family friends and fellow enthusiasts – barely half a dozen cars came out of the factory in a year. Yet Raven & Son retained its good name as a maker of quality engines. And a government contract to develop 'a motorised cycle sturdy enough to flourish in adverse conditions' kept it going through the war. Convinced the future lay in motorbikes – that it would be decades before British working men were able to afford family cars – Jack's father launched the Viking Arrow (Mark I) in 1949, on Jack's twelfth birthday, with the slogan 'Quality Bikes for Family Types'. Hopes were high that the Arrow would catch on. But the only buyers were 500cc enthusiasts. A wife, two children and dog couldn't be accommodated in a sidecar. And by the end of the 1950s, the small family car became affordable after all.

'Here's your tea,' Karen said, scurrying out almost before she'd put the mug down. To have a secretary so finely attuned to one's mood was consoling. In thirty years, there'd been only three of them: Irene, whom he'd inherited from the old man; Michelle, who'd succeeded her in 1980; and for the past decade and more Karen. It was Michelle who'd seen the best years. Newly appointed, she'd gone with him on a recce to the Paris Show, when he first saw the potential of selling to Europe. By then mowers, originally a sideline, were Raven & Son's sole product. From cars to motorbikes to mowers: the bathos of it broke the old man's heart. But Jack could read a balance sheet and knew he had no option. The Paris Show was his breakthrough. No other British mower company bothered to attend. You were lucky to see a lawn in France or Germany, so what was the point? Cheap plastic Flymos or lumbering sit-ons were all they used. That was the common wisdom. Defying it, Jack took a stand in 1982 and brought his new model – the Greensleeves Three – and sat it on a bed of real turf. There was a long wrangle with French customs about importing the turf, but thanks to Michelle's persistence they eventually gave him the go-ahead, 'for trade exhibition purposes only'. The turf, rather than the mower, was what did it: its stripes were manicured, watered and spotlit, to emphasise the symmetry and sheen. The classic English mower for the classic English lawn: that was the pitch. The French and Germans loved it; the Dutch, Spanish, Italians and Scandinavians, too. A word-of-mouth thing happens at every trade fair, and the word in Paris in 1982 was Greensleeves. Michelle – mid-thirties, strawberry blonde, freckles, cornflower eyes, snub nose – was the perfect accompaniment; chaps from Malmé to Milan queued up to inhale her Englishness. They had appointments back to back from breakfast till close of play. Three major new contracts followed, Jack's first in Europe, one of them with Luc. ■

South of the River by **Blake Morrison** is published by Vintage, price £7.99 and is available from April 3 in all good bookshops.