

Praise for

The LIGHT in
EVERYTHING

'This is Balen's best book yet: ambitious, funny, spirited, moving, heartfelt and bold all at once. She's a force to be reckoned with'

Ross Montgomery

'I loved this book. The deftness with which Katya creates such passionate, funny, broken, brave characters. What an achievement. Katya Balen can break your heart and make you snort with laughter in the same sentence'

Natasha Farrant

'This story literally took me by storm. A brave heart-dive into the deep emotions of Tom and Zofia, it's beautifully told with care and tenderness'

Jasbinder Bilan

'I loved this book!'

Hilary McKay

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‘A bold, bright story of blended families, and how two remarkable children cope when their lives change dramatically. Katya Balen’s writing fizzes with her trademark originality and voice. This is another stunningly good read from one of my favourite authors’

Emma Carroll

‘Katya Balen is rapidly becoming one of my favourite writers. This is a beautiful book that will capture you from the first page. An incredible book by an incredible writer. I loved it’

Lisa Thompson

‘A sensitive story about stitching a new family together from frayed pieces. So vividly imagined you can taste the salt in the air’

Aisha Bushby

‘Original, compulsive, uplifting: this is another triumph for Balen’

The Times

Books by Katya Balen

The Space We’re In

October, October

The Light in Everything

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The LIGHT in
EVERYTHING

KATYA BALEN

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*For Lucy Mackay-Sim,
who is always right*

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ZOFIA*

I was born in a storm. The sky cracked with lightning and thunder shook the sea. The rain lashed the cliffs and it was like the whole world had tipped upside down and the ocean was falling from the sky. The weather was furious and so was I. The midwife said she'd never seen such an angry baby and in all the photographs I am a red-faced ball of fury and my fists are clenched and my mouth is a shouting O. I sometimes feel like that storm blasted its way into me. That's what Dad says too when I'm being loud and rowdy and raucous and shouty. Which is a lot of the time apparently. But I feel a spark and rumble inside me and it's like the storm is stretching itself and waking up. Sometimes it goes back to sleep. And sometimes it really doesn't. And that's when Dad says things get *turbulent*.



Dad and I are a pair. Two peas in a pod. Two halves of a whole. Two guinea pigs in a hutch. I once read that you can't ever have one guinea pig because it'll be so lonely that it might die. In Switzerland it's actually illegal. I can't imagine being sent to prison and locked up day and night because you only had one guinea pig but I guess that's what happens. Anyway even though guinea pigs will die of loneliness, if you try to introduce a new guinea pig into the hutch then the other one will attack it and probably bite its head off or something. I'm happy with a dog and a cat.

Dad and I like most of the same stuff. Well, he doesn't like very loud music or wearing gold Doc Martens or eating twenty Oreos in a row but he loves the sea and jokes and watching really really bad TV and spicy food and graphic novels. And he might actually like Oreos but he's never quick enough to find out.

Dad and I live in a cottage with sloping stone walls and a bright yellow front door and a front garden full of every wild flower in existence ever. If you look out of the windows or stand in the garden or just look up



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then you can't just see the sea but you can hear it and smell it and sometimes you can taste it too.

Our cottage looks like something out of a picture book. It has roses around the door that I used to make spells and potions with when my best friend Dommo and I were little, and it has a winding path up to its yellow door. It's the kind of cottage from that kind of book where you see a mum and a dad and a little girl and maybe a dog that can fetch slippers and it's a perfect little life. And that's what it's like. Well, we have the dog but he's more likely to eat slippers than fetch them and Mum died when I was a baby but otherwise it's exactly what it's like.

I wouldn't change a thing about our lives right now.

TOM

The dark around me is filled with light. That's what I tell myself. There is the acid orange glow of a street lamp just beyond the curtains. There is the gentle spill of yellow melting on to the carpet from under my bedroom door. There is the slow red eyeblink of a charger plugged into the wall opposite.

But the space around me is stained with soot and ink and shadows. The shadows slink and twist and reach and grasp. They slither and slip into something new and their edges blur and stretch. My fingers twitch. I gulp lungfuls of dirty dark air. Try to slow my breath and push away the black. Be my own light. My heart is clawing in my chest. I count the shapes I can see.

One. Two. Three.

The shadows that creep and swirl on the walls are nothing but shapes. Just a collection of angles and

lines bound together by black. Shapes can't hurt you.
They're nothing. The dark can't hurt you.

Four. Five.

But what's hiding in it can.

Six.

My heart is on fire.

I reach out in the blacknothing that swoops around
my face like the flap of a bat and flip the emergency
switch next to me.

Light.

Light streams and pours and floods. Light swallows
the darkness whole and shrinks it backwards
into scraps that only flicker in the corners. Light
splinters through the glass prisms that sit on my desk
and the walls are a dance of rainbows. I stop counting
seconds and count the colours instead. I run through
them like the names of friends. I race through the
syllables.

Redyellowgreenblueindigoviolet.

Redandyellowandgreenandblueandindigoandviolet.

Red and yellow and green and blue and indigo and
violet.

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My heartbeat slows a little to something that isn't a dull howl against my ribs.

I tap the clock on my bedside table and it glows. So does the liquid light in my lava lamp. I have six different types of light in my room.

I made it one minute and thirteen seconds without it.

I get out a piece of square paper and I fold it. I follow the lines my fingers know and I don't even have to think about the shapes I'm making. My heartbeat starts to match the slow and careful turns and by the time I finish the paper star everything is in rhythm again.

I pull the duvet up to my chin and turn to face my lava lamp. When I close my eyes, there's no darkness but instead illuminations painted on my lids like fireworks.

In the morning before school the sun is hung in the sky and the darkness only scurries in corners.

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ZOFIA*

I stand where the waves first start to lick the shore. I'm barefoot and I wriggle my toes to make prints in the sand that the sea rushes hungrily to fill. In seconds it can be like I wasn't even there.

I run at the waves and slip beneath them like a fish. The water and the light turn me to silver. The sea roars in my ears and crashes against the sand and salts my skin. I tumble and turn and twist underneath a slick blanket that covers a whole new world. Puffs of silver fish dart through my toes and ribbons of seaweed dance around my ankles. When I burst through the surface and breathe in the sky again I feel like a whole fresh new Zofia. The salt and the spray scrubs away any aches or worries that were starting to drumbeat inside me.

My babcia in Poland always wanted me to have a

baptism and Mum and Dad said no when I was a tiny baby, but maybe she'd like me doing this even though it's probably not quite the same. But any time I feel like my anger or annoyance or even a stupid little mouse-peek of loneliness might be getting too big then I run down from the house to the beach and let the salt wash it all away. I can see the sea from my bedroom window. I can hear it and smell it too. I used to say it was my friend and even though I'm old enough now to know that the sea can't be your friend I still sort of think it somehow.

I tread water. In the distance blurred against the dark sky is my number-one nemesis. Dommo said it was a ridiculous name for a yawning mouth of rocks biting and chopping against the waves. Fiji. It's called Fiji because Fiji is beautiful and tropical and in the middle of a warm blue sea and this is not. I think this is meant to be funny but I'm not sure I get it. Anyway people call it Fiji and so it's called Fiji. And it's my nemesis. This is the year I'll defeat it. I'll swim far enough to stand on top of it and bellow into the sky. I'm going to swim every single day, and every single

day I'll get a bit faster and a bit stronger and a bit closer.

When I am scrambling out of the water I hear Dommo's voice. She's laughing her Dommo-laugh which is like a hyena crossed with an albatross. It always makes me laugh too. Then I hear Halima. I blink the sand and wind away from my eyes.

Dommo is carrying a large shape. I squint and she unfurls it and starts to run. The wind picks it up and throws it high in the air. A bird-shaped kite dances in the sky.

Dommo is flying a kite. With Halima. Without me. The wind roars in my ears and a hurricane starts to spin inside me.

Dommo spots me and waves. She's shouting something but the wind whips away her words. She staggers towards me and the kite bucks and dips like a furious horse. I want to do that too. I want to rage into the swirl and swoops of the wind. I want to twist myself in the air and howl. She didn't want me here and I am being left out. Dommo and I do everything together. Just like me and Dad.

Dommo finally makes it over to me and she's still grinning and she says *we knocked at yours but you weren't in obviously because you're in the sea do you want a go* and I feel a rush of relief that lifts me higher than the wind ever could.

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TOM

Mum can't always pick me up from school. She works shifts as a hospital doctor. Everyone else in my class just walks home. It would be a lot easier if I could do that too and I know that. But I can't. Walking home isn't as bad as sitting in the dark but coming back to an empty flat in the fading winter light might be worse. So I sit in afterschool club and I don't talk to anyone and they don't talk to me.

The worst shifts are the ones when she's gone for the night. When that happens Mrs Adams from the flat below us comes to stay. She is gentle and kind but she turns my light off at 8 p.m. When I turn it back on she doesn't like it and tells me I'll never get enough sleep to grow up big and strong. I try to tell her that I'll never get any sleep at all if I'm stuck in the pitch dark and shadows are creeping

all around me and wrapping themselves around my skin. But she doesn't listen and she clicks the light off every time and plunges me back in time. Back to before.

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ZOFIA*

The sea is cold today. I don't go in. The waves are frosted and the sky is furious and rain-filled. Even in a wetsuit I would turn blue. I need a plan, because it's only going to get colder.

I turn the taps on cold and fill the bath until water spills over the sides and rushes away through the cracks in the floorboards. I plunge my hand in and swirl so that the water starts to wave and whisper like the sea.

I put on my wetsuit, get Dad's old plastic stopwatch and get in. It's so cold that my teeth chatter and my legs tremble even though I'm not asking them to do anything. I am burning with the fire of the ice-cold water. I take deep breaths that slow my wild heart and I clench my jaw and I go under.

One. Two. Three.

My eyes are open and the world above is soft
through the ripples.

Four. Five. Six.

My lungs are full and empty and my skin is
electric.

Seven. Eight. Nine.

The cold is shooting arrows in my blood.

Ten. Eleven. Twelve.

I need air I need air I need air. Thirteen.

I burst through the surface of the water and
swallow great mouthfuls of air and I feel it racing
through my blood.

Thirteen seconds is pathetic. I dry off and write
the number down in an old notebook. I'll do better
tomorrow.

TOM

Last night I made thirteen paper owls in the bright lights of my room before I could fall asleep. I put them in the cardboard box that's a spill of bright folded paper.

I have to fold paper and focus to stop my hands trembling. Every night is the same. The nights are the worst because I am so afraid of the creeping darkness and it's when my thoughts are loudest. The ones that tell me I'm not safe. The ones that curl like smoke and whisper that we might be happy now but it won't last. That it never lasts. That he won't stay away.

In the morning light it's easier to breathe those thoughts away. I can tell myself that Dad can't come back to get us now. I can tell myself everything is OK. I can tell myself that I wouldn't change a thing about our lives right now.



ZOFIA*

I have apologised a thousand times for the state of the bathroom and listened to about a million *wet floorboards will rot and the cat will fall throughs*. I have also managed sixteen seconds in the strange submerged bathtub world. I write it down and then go to the cold beach to let the floorboards dry a bit.

The beach is wild. The wind is tearing the water like paper and there is white confetti scattered on the waves. The sea is wild too and it's mine. I can feel the salt spray curling my hair and speckling my skin. I look at Fiji and I can see its raggedy flags whipping in the wind. Some of them are bright even in the dim light. Some of them are so faded they flicker and then blend into the sky around them. Some of them have been there since before I was born. Since before Dad was born. Since before Babcia, which is Polish for

Grandma, was born. Since before Pra Babcia, which is Great-grandma in Polish, was born.

Most of the really old flags have been whipped away by storms or dissolved by salt spray or stolen by birds for their nests. But there are still hundreds of ripples of fabric like rainbow waves rising from the sea. And not one of them is mine. Three of them are Dad's and he told me once that it was the biggest and bravest thing he'd ever done. He'd just moved here from Poland and everything was strange and new but the sea was the same and he swam in it every single day and every single day he felt a little more like he was home here. He said he knew when he reached that rock he would be truly part of the sea and the sky and the cliffs and the sand and this new land. And when he got there it was the best feeling in the world except for when I was born. I want that feeling. I want him to see me standing on the rocks of Fiji and I want him to be proud.

I've got a deadline. Every year the oldest class at my little school spends a day before big school on the beach learning how to surf and sail and life-save and swim against the tide. It's like a beach party before we

have to get the bus into town for lessons and before we're all split up into a million different classes. Our families get to come too. That's the day I show Dad how far I can swim and that's the day I'll put my flag on Fiji.

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