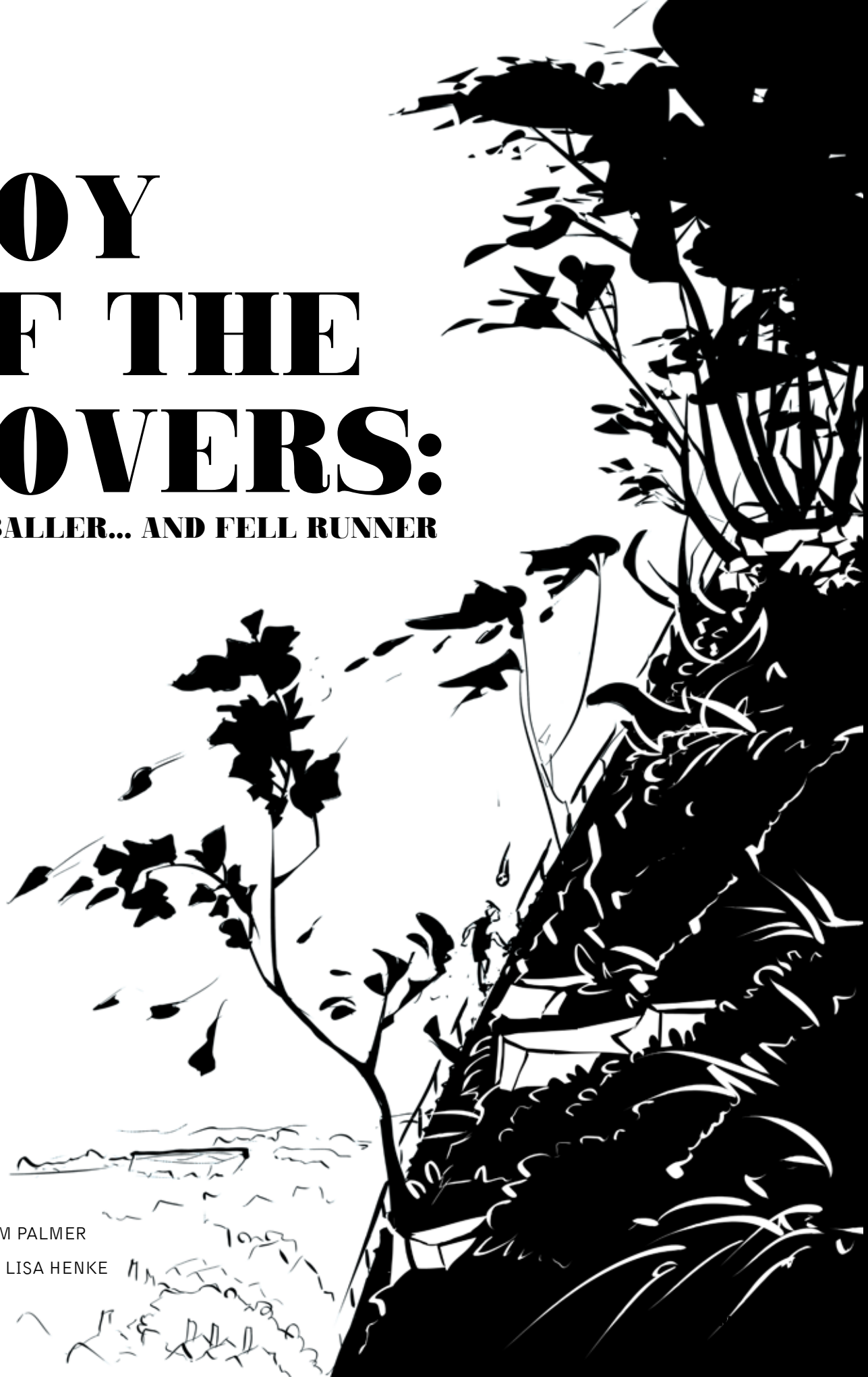


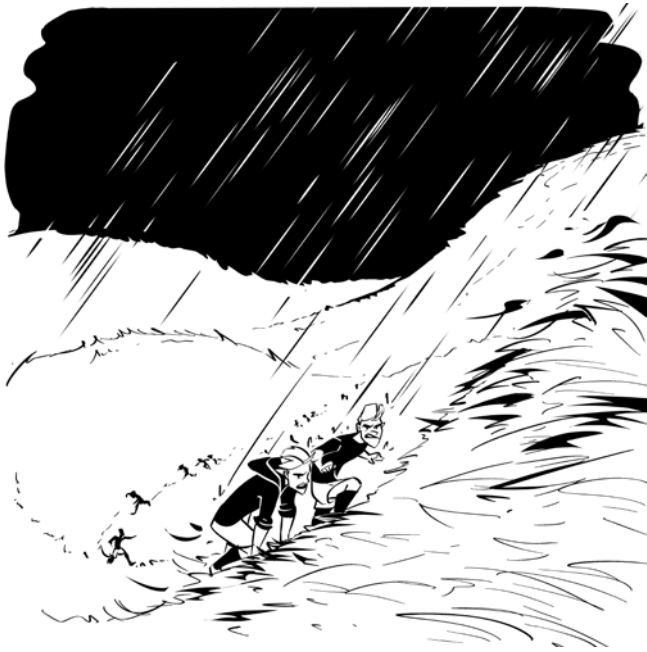
ROY OF THE ROVERS:

FOOTBALLER... AND FELL RUNNER

WORDS TOM PALMER

PICTURES LISA HENKE





In 2018 I was asked to take part in the rebooting of Roy of the Rovers, the 20th century footballing comic icon. New books for children about a genius footballer with his feet on the ground. The idea appealed to me because it meant I could write about one of my great passions in life: football.

What I didn't expect was that it would give me an opportunity to write about *another* passion in my life: fell running.

When you're developing your main character in a novel, you need to make them stand out. They have to have something more. Obsessions. Flaws. Contradictions. A footballer can't just be a footballer: they need to have a convincing interior. A good way to do that is to put in something of yourself.

I was lucky that the rough idea for the reboot of Roy of the Rovers already had Roy living in the north of England. Called Melchester, it could be Halifax, Bradford, Leeds, Burnley.

I live in Halifax. I have Calderdale in mind when I'm writing Roy's books.

In addition to place, I wanted Roy to have a complicated family situation, something he was needed for, so that his necessary relationships challenged and changed him as the books went on. He wasn't a free agent. So I gave him a dad with a brain tumour. And a mum who needed him at home to help.

Both things I knew all about. Both things I could write about with heart.

But I wanted to introduce fell running too!

In the first book – *Scouted* – Roy's steps up from junior football to the men's game in what is known as the Moor Cup, played on high ground above the town. His first match lays bare his weaknesses.

'You need to work on your strength,' his coach tells him. 'You need more stamina. More power. Do some hill work.'

Roy takes the advice to heart. The next morning he's up at dawn jogging to a forbidding flight of steps known locally as the Terrible 200 that takes you from the bus station to the edge of the moor. He runs up and down it twice. He collapses at the top, retching. The next day he can barely walk.

I think it's good to experience what my characters experience so that I can think and feel what they go through and – therefore – I can describe it better. I live near Trooper Lane in Halifax, which many readers will know about. My own retching and week of sore legs after first attempting Trooper Lane helped me with describing Roy's early hill sessions.

But Roy wanted more. Or was it that I wanted more? I love getting Roy to run up hills. I needed the chance to send him on a proper fell run.

In my second *Roy of the Rovers* book, *Teamwork*, the team was struggling mid-season. Their attitude wasn't quite right. They were cocky. Not driven like they needed to be driven. Their old-school football coach had a plan. He took the squad of mostly under-eighteen League Two footballers – including Roy's big rival, Vic Guthrie – in the club's rickety minibus and parked up at the foot of a hill. A young woman was waiting for them.

'This,' Coach said, 'is Lily Halifax. Lily Halifax is a British fell running champion. This is Stoodley Pike. It is less than three miles away, two hundred and fifty metres up... First one to the top wins £20.'

Roy watched as a curtain of rain swept up the valley. He grinned. He wanted that prize. Then he noticed Vic looking at him. They locked eyes. And Roy knew Vic wanted the prize too.

Now Roy becomes obsessed with hills. From trains and cars he studies them, traces the paths, works out which line he'd take if he was to run up it.

He's obsessed.

Now in every book Roy runs up a hill. Usually somewhere new, somewhere on his travels with the team. This is where I couldn't resist putting a bit of me into Roy.

When I do school visits I often check out where the school is via a vis hills. I've taken bookings in schools at the foot of the Malverns, Arthur's Seat, Dartmoor, Pendle. In the same way I choose the places Melchester Rovers play their key games based on where Roy can run.

In *On Tour* I sent them to Tromso in Norway, a town surrounded by fjords and mountains. Perfect for the rebooted Roy.

He felt an urge to run up the mountains again. He had so much in his head... It was easier to think when you were on your own. So – after a dinner with players from all four teams taking part in the tournament – Roy drifted away from all the others and headed up the mountain...

It was steep and hard work, but, as soon as he was alone and away from buildings and roads, he could feel his mind relaxing amid the trees and grass, the sky pale but still light with drifting clouds above him.

Sometimes when I am writing a bit of me into a character I'm surprised. I get something back.

This was one of those times.

Here was Roy escaping a few of his problems and – though becoming increasingly physically fit – there was something more important. He was staying mentally fit. He needed to get away from the oppressive banter of groups of young men he spent his time with. He needed to think about his dad with his brain tumour and the unavoidable fact that he was slowly dying.

All things I had to deal with when I was about Roy's age.

What's it supposed to be like when you're a young man?

How much should you be like the other young men and how much should you be like yourself, or what you have been until now?

How do you cope when your dad is dying of a brain tumour?

This is the space in the story that Roy thinks things through. This is where I sometimes work out my own stuff when I am out running. And where I become relatively physically fit too.



Tom Palmer is the author of 40+ books for children, including *Armistice Runner*, which is about a fell running fourteen-year-old girl and was inspired partly by Ernest Dalzell, fell runner until the First World War, a book that recently won the UK Children's Book Prize for older readers.

www.tompalmer.co.uk

Illustrations by Lisa Henke