



Barrington Stoke



# ARMISTICE RUNNER

TWO LIVES CONNECTED BY MEMORY

# TOM PALMER



SAMPLER

## A note from the author

"I wanted to write a book about fell-runners past and present. My daughter is a fell-runner and her races have become a big part of our life. The idea for *Armistice Runner* came to me standing with other parents and grandparents in muddy fields, watching our children enjoying taking part in sport. Every weekend I see active children being friendly, healthy and happy, completely contradicting the cliché that all children today are device-addicted and woefully unfit.

I have also heard older relatives inspiring children by sharing memories of sport from their childhoods. That made me want to write about sports handed down from generation to generation, drawing me initially to the history of fell-running and then to the fascinating stories of the war heroes of its past.

In the muddy fields, along with the parents and grandparents, stand the coaches. Volunteers who give up their time and use their passion to make it possible for millions of children to enjoy dozens of sports every week in the UK. *Armistice Runner* is dedicated to them."

TOM PALMER

## A note from the editor

"*Armistice Runner* is an incredibly moving story of the powerful love that bonds families together through generations and the devastating aftershocks when those bonds are severed through loss. Tom has managed to give equally powerful voice to a heroic runner on the Western Front and a modern-day teenager, linking them through their passion for fell-running and leaving the reader with an unforgettable story that moved me to tears at each reading." AILSA BATHGATE

## ONE

Lily accelerated, keeping her eyes on the three girls ahead of her. She was ten metres behind them and within striking distance as they climbed the muddy, water-logged path.

*Time to attack.*

She pushed past the first of the three leaders, a thin girl in a white vest. Now Lily was in third place. Ahead of her were Gemma and Keeley. Older than Lily. Slower than Lily on the uphill. Chest hurting, legs hurting, everything hurting, Lily pushed herself hard.

She could hear her own lungs forcing air in and out as she passed Gemma and Keeley. And – now she had taken the lead – she knew she had her breathing right.

The ground was firmer further up the hill. Not boggy like at the start of the path. But Lily placed her feet carefully, avoiding exposed roots and rocks that could mean a slip or a twist.

*Attack.*

Lily knew she had to keep at it, because now she could sense who was behind her. She couldn't see her, couldn't hear her, but she knew she was there all the same.

Abbie Granger. Arms pumping like an unhinged windmill, running on Lily's shoulder, waiting for her moment to overtake.

After pushing so hard up the hill, Lily was struggling to breathe evenly now. Beyond her comfort zone. And she heard a voice in her head as she stared across the high open moor to the other side of the valley.

*It's only a training run, the voice said. Save your best for the big race.*

It was true, Lily thought. This, after all, *was* only a training run. The last training run before the first big fell race of the season. One that Lily would be racing. And one that Abbie would race too. In the Lake District village where Lily's gran and granddad lived. *That* was the important run, not this one.

Lily felt a crosswind ripple over the surface of the moor. The ground beneath her feet changed again to soft wet wild grass, damp working its way into her fell shoes.

Lily hated wind like this. It interfered with her breathing, breaking the rhythm of her ins and outs. She gazed beyond the top of the moor towards the range of higher hills in the west. Clouds drifted eastwards. Greys and whites. Like giant sheep grazing on the hills. Eyes back on the track, Lily saw some of the parents standing on the side of the course, Abbie's dad among them.

That was the moment that Abbie chose to make her move. An explosion of pace where the track widened before it fell downhill. Overtaking Lily.

Lily felt a burst of sudden sullen fury. What had she been doing staring at the clouds, thinking they looked like giant sheep?

*Stupid.*

Now she could hear Abbie's dad yelling at his daughter.

"Take her," he yelled. "Get her! Put her out of the race."

His words came as a shock to Lily, although Abbie's dad was always like that, always shouting at his daughter. OK, Abbie was in the lead now, but it wasn't even a proper race!

*Faster. Harder.* Lily felt the rhythm of her breath falter even more as she tried to match Abbie's speed. She wanted to reach out and grab her rival, pull her back. But Abbie was leaving her for dead now.

Lily wanted to cry out in anger. And she would have, if she'd been alone or somewhere Abbie couldn't hear her. Instead she felt herself slow, her head drop, a scowl numbing her face.

Downhill. Downhill all the way. Gemma and Keeley eased past her. Lily generated post-run excuses in her head.

*My knee was aching.*

*I've got a cold coming on.*

*I didn't get to bed until late last night.*

But none of those things were true and she wouldn't say them. She'd run badly. And she'd run badly because she took her mind off running. Then – unforgivably – she'd given up and let herself be beaten.

Those were the real reasons.

Lily ran past her coaches, then she saw her dad and then her brother, Tim, who was holding his hand up to make an L shape, mouthing *loser*. And Lily's head filled with thoughts. Bad thoughts.

She thought about the long drive to her grandparents with her idiot brother next to her on the back seat. Abbie Granger and the race in a couple of days. Gran being ill. And it might be serious because she'd overheard Mum and Dad talking about it the night before. That worried her more than anything.

The next three days might be hard.

## TWO

As soon as she walked into her grandparents' house the next day, Lily understood.

It had changed.

There were two bin bags in the hall, full of rubbish and tied at the top. The house smelled funny, not like its usual comfortable smell of Gran's home-cooked dinners or furniture polished until it gleamed.

Granddad had his arms open wide in welcome, but his eyes looked weary to Lily. His skin was grey and crumpled. Lily felt pain rising from her stomach to her chest. She clutched the present of a wrapped red scarf that she'd bought for her gran tighter in front of her.

"What's that weird smell?" Tim asked.

"I've let the place go, Timmy." Granddad tried to smile. "Need to concentrate on your gran. I keep the front room, kitchen and bedroom nice. The rest will have to go to the dogs. Come on in," he said.

Gran was in the front room. There was a fire burning in the hearth, a neat stack of tinder and logs next to it, and a painting of hills on the wall above the fireplace. Lily smiled. Granddad was right. This room felt good. This room hadn't changed.

But Gran had. She looked smaller somehow. Lily hesitated for a half-

second before going to give her gran a big hug. Tim stayed by the door and put his hand into his mum's.

They sat down in a circle of chairs and sofas.

Dad tried to start a conversation with his mum. But she seemed to be half dreaming, miles away. After a few attempts, Dad stood up, rubbed his face and left the room.

Lily gave Gran her present. Gran smiled when she saw the red scarf but put it aside without a word.

Granddad asked Lily and her brother what they'd been up to since he last saw them.

"Lily's been running," Dad announced.

Lily smiled. She didn't mind that her dad answered for her. She liked that he sounded proud of her.

"Another runner?" Gran said, her first words of the day.

"She's a fell runner." Tim laughed. "It means she falls over a lot. Especially when Abbie is behind her."

"*Another* runner?" Dad asked, ignoring Tim. "What do you mean, Mum? I don't remember any runners."

Lily felt her gran's hands close around hers.

"My granddad." Gran smiled. "Your great-great granddad, Lily. His name was Ernest. *He* ran the fells. Tell me about your running, Lily."

Lily could see that Mum, Dad and Granddad were on the edge of their seats, watching. Gran talking was a big deal. They smiled at Lily to encourage her to ask more.

So Lily sat with her gran. She talked about her running club. How they trained. And the two fell races she'd done last year. The old woman nodded as Lily spoke, but Lily didn't really want to talk about herself – she wanted to know more about her great-great granddad.

"Will you tell me about your granddad now?" Lily asked, remembering how her mum had told her to encourage her gran to talk about her past. She looked at her dad and saw he was watching closely.

"He was a champion," Gran said, the pride clear in her voice.

Lily leaned forward. "Really?"

"Really," her gran said. "He won lots of races. It was before the war that he did his most famous run. He broke the record in the fell race

here." Lily felt her gran's hand grip tight again. "And that record still stands. One hundred years later."

Lily loved the strength of her gran's memories of her granddad. She loved it that she had her fell running in common with a man, a part of her family, who'd lived a century ago.

"Which war?" Lily asked.

"The Great War, they called it," her gran said. "The first."

Lily remembered what she'd learned at school about the First World War. The trenches. The mud. The endless fighting that left millions of men dead.

"But Ernest never ran again after the war," Gran went on. "He came home safe, but my mum told me that he never ran again. He wasn't injured, but he put his running shoes in his box and closed it and that was it. Fit as fiddle he was, too."

Then Gran was on her feet, leaning on Lily to push herself up.

"Mum?" Dad asked. "Where are you going?"

"I have to go," Gran said, her voice wobbly with distress.

"No, Mum," Dad said. "We're staying here today."

"I have to go," Gran said. "Home."

Lily felt herself go cold all over.

Dad put his hand under Gran's arm. "*This* is your home."

"No." And she pushed his hand away.

"Mum. Please," Dad said.

Lily felt sick. What had she done to make her gran like this?

"I'm not upset," Gran insisted, as if she'd been reading Lily's mind.

"I need to get something for the girl." She screwed up her face. "For Lily. I need to find Ernest's box."

"Ernest's dead," Dad said.

"Oh, I know my grandfather's dead, silly boy," Gran snapped, as fierce as Lily had ever seen her. "He died on 31 July 1967 and we buried him a week later in the graveyard at Hawkshead. But I still have his box. If this is my house, then take me up to the loft. No one's looked at his things for years. Decades. Inside that box there's his running boots and log books. His vest, his race numbers. And his medals. I kept them all. I knew one day there'd be another runner in our family. I want to give the box to

Lily. Ernest would have liked that.”

Lily felt a burst of excitement as she understood she’d not upset her gran at all. It was the opposite, in fact. She’d made her happy. And now Lily was desperate to see what was in the box.

## THREE

Dad placed a wooden box on the coffee table in front of Gran.

She studied it, a smile lighting up her face. She ran her hands along the rough pale wood of the box, then touched the metal hinges and catch that held the lid in place. On one side THREE CARTRIDGES FOR MORTARS was stencilled in faded black letters.

“My granddad brought this box back from the war.” Gran broke the silence in the room. “My mother told me that once he was home, he put his running kit inside the box.”

“And never ran again?” Lily asked.

Gran shook her head. “Never. He gave it up for good. He would get the boots out and polish them with dubbin to keep them supple. He’d do it in spring when he saw the sun hitting the tracks he used to run. He lived here, you know. In this house. He’d polish them, then put them back in the box.”

“So, he wasn’t injured in the war?” Lily asked.

“No,” Gran replied. “He was the fittest man I knew. Right up until he died. He’d walk and garden and row his boat. He farmed on the fells for a while between the wars.”

Silence in the room. Lily didn’t know what to say.

Gran came to her rescue and answered the questions Lily didn’t know how to ask.

“He never explained why he stopped running,” she said. “We always thought it was to do with the war, but the men who came home never spoke about what happened to them. And no one ever asked them.”



Lily understood. She remembered how she'd cried when she'd done her homework on the First World War, when they'd held a Remembrance service at school. Maybe silence was the proper response.

"Open the box, Lily," Gran said. "See what's inside."

The catch was stiff, but after a few seconds she was able to unfasten it. As she opened the lid, Lily watched an explosion of tiny dust motes burst out of the box and sparkle in a shaft of sunlight coming in the window.

Lily blinked and looked inside. On the top there was a pair of light leather boots. They were like nothing she'd seen before, made of old cracked leather, brown. The laces were frayed, hanging limp. Lily lifted one of the shoes from the box and turned it over. Metal studs were driven into its sole.

She heard her gran breathe in, saw her smile. "Smell that," she said. "Dubbin. That's what he used to rub into them to keep them soft. He loved those boots. I always thought they looked like a weapon he'd use in the trenches more than they looked like shoes. Imagine getting hit with one of those."

Lily glanced at her dad. He was nodding at her. Lily took it to mean that she should empty the box. Everyone understood that to see and smell its contents was helping Gran to remember.

Next Lily took out a white T-shirt, its thin cotton stained and worn. Lily held it up so that everyone else could see it.

"Mud." Mum grinned. "He must have come home covered in mud, just like you, Lily."

Then some clippings from old newspapers. Smudged black-and-white photos of crowds standing at the foot of hills. All in hats and long coats. Race numbers printed on squares of crumpled paper.

"People would come from miles around," Gran said. "A day out to watch the fell runners. They'd bet hundreds of pounds on who would win."

Underneath the newspaper clippings was a pile of notebooks bound together by two long shoelaces.

The string round the log books fell away and Lily lifted the top notebook, turning it over in her hands. It was narrower than her school

exercise books but with many more pages, printed with fine blue and red lines. She opened it and was hit by the warm, musty smell of old paper.

She saw some little drawings of routes across hillsides, in and out of valleys, then some numbers laid out in a chart. There were times and distances, neat notes about the weather. Even lists of what he'd eaten and how long he'd slept for. Lots of it was just like what Lily did in her own notebooks, but the level of detail was fantastic.

After flicking to a random page, Lily read:

*I ran like the blazes back to my company. I abandoned all my usual care and – for the first time out there in France – it felt like a real run, a fell race even. I gave it everything, full-lunged, feeling the pain pouring into my legs, because I was desperate to tell Captain Whitaker the news. I knew he was teetering on the brink, which meant that another week of this damn war and his nerves would be shredded, but this news would set him on the road to recovery.*

*Out there, in the abandoned fields and trenches, I could tell that most men knew the war was over. The Armistice had been signed. There was no relentless barrage now and the skies, which had thronged with planes all autumn, were empty and quiet.*

What was this? Lily wondered. It seemed to be some kind of diary rather than a running log.





## About the author

TOM PALMER was a reluctant reader as a child and credits articles about football with getting him into reading. He went on to become a bookseller and then worked in reader development. He is well known for his hugely successful football fiction for Puffin, and is one of Barrington Stoke's top-selling authors, writing about both sport and history with great appeal. He travels all over the UK visiting schools and working with charities, and is well loved across the book trade.

For more information about Tom, his books and school events, visit:  
[www.tompalmer.co.uk](http://www.tompalmer.co.uk)

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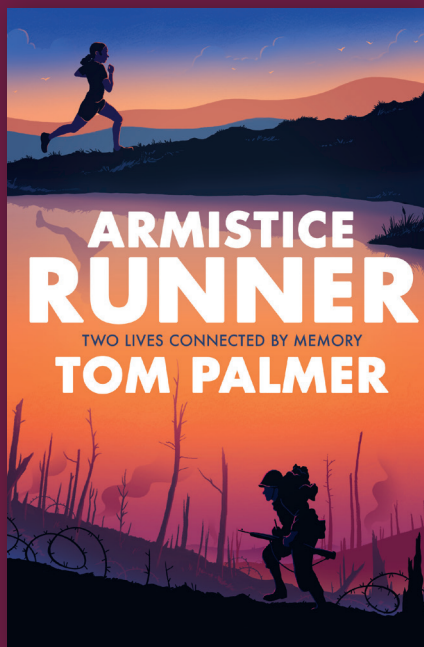
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**A powerful intergenerational novel that honours the forgotten fell-running heroes of the First World War and examines the devastating impact of dementia on family relationships in the twenty-first century.**



Running is what Lily is good at, and fell-running is what she loves. But what Lily doesn't realise is that this talent was inherited from someone very important – her great-great-grandfather Ernest, an unsung hero of the First World War. When Lily's ailing gran passes on to her Ernest's diaries, Lily learns of his experiences in the trenches, and their stories intertwine into a tale of past, present and the little known heroes of November 11th, 1918.

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