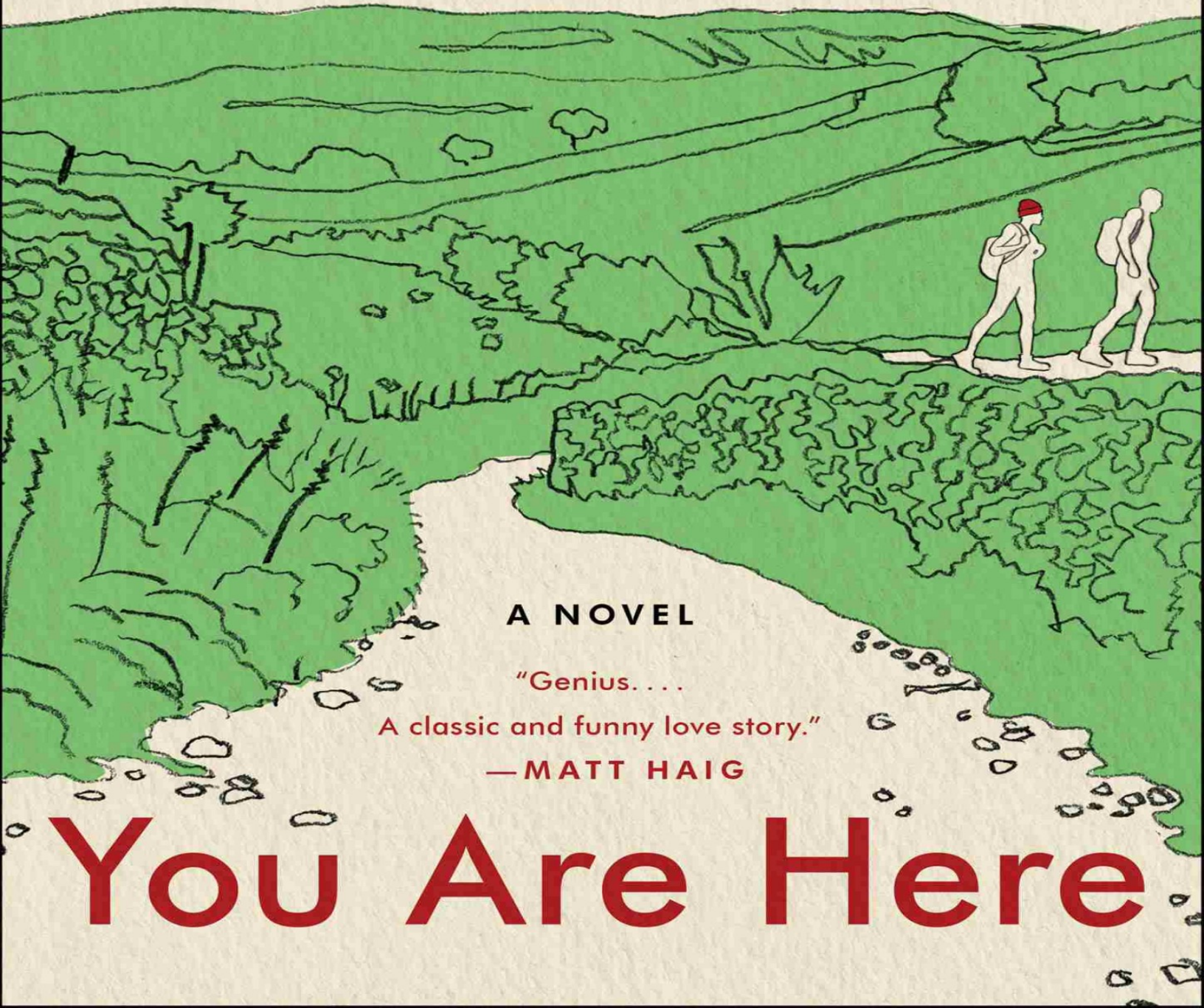


DAVID NICHOLLS

#1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF ONE DAY



A NOVEL

"Genius...."

A classic and funny love story."

—MATT HAIG

You Are Here

You Are Here

A NOVEL

David Nicholls



HARPER

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Dedication

To Hannah, Max and Romy,
for all the walks

Epigraph

She was sure of his having asked his partner whether Miss Elliot never danced? The answer was 'Oh, no, never; she has quite given up dancing. She had rather play. She is never tired of playing.'

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

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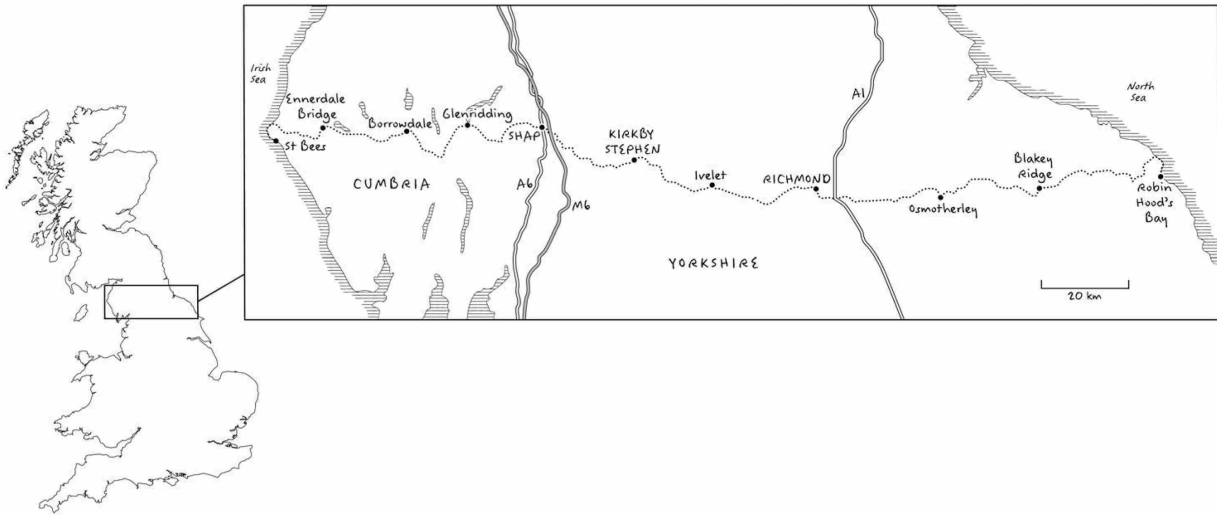
Praise for You Are Here

Also by David Nicholls

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About the Publisher

The Coast to Coast Walk



Part One

Home

*To what purpose, April, do you return again?
Beauty is not enough.
You can no longer quiet me with the redness
Of little leaves opening stickily.
I know what I know . . .*

Edna St Vincent Millay, 'Spring'

Imaginary Photographs

In all her youthful visions of the future, of the job she might have, the city and home she might live in, the friends and family around her, Marnie had never thought that she'd be lonely.

In her adolescence, she'd pictured the future as a series of imaginary photographs, densely populated, her friends' arms draped around each other, eyes red from the flash of the camera in the taverna or lit by the flames of a driftwood fire on the beach and there, right in the centre, her own smiling face. The later photos were harder to pin down, the faces less defined, but perhaps there'd be a partner, even children among the friends she would surely know and love all her life.

But she hadn't taken a photograph of another person for six years. The last time she'd had her picture taken was at Passport Control, where she'd been instructed not to smile. Where had everyone gone? Now thirty-eight, she had grown up in the golden age of friendship, when having a supportive, loving community around you was a far greater priority than the vexed business of family, the strained performance of romance or the sulky obligations of work. The late-night phone-calls, the texts, the outings and board games, it had all been so much more exciting and fulfilling than her erratic love life, and hadn't she once been good at it? A nice addition to the group if not the core, well liked if never adored or idolised. She was not one of those girls who hired a nightclub for her birthday but she'd easily filled a room above a pub for her twenty-first, a long table in an Italian restaurant for her thirtieth. For her fortieth she thought she might go for a walk in the park with a friend or two, a once popular band obliged to play ever smaller venues.

Year by year, friends were lost to marriage and parenthood with partners she didn't care for or who didn't care for her, retreating to new, spacious, ordered lives in Hastings or Stevenage, Cardiff or York while she fought on in London. Others were lost to apathy or carelessness, friendship like a thank-you letter she kept meaning to write until too much time had passed

and it became an embarrassment. And perhaps it was natural, this falling away. Real life was rarely a driftwood fire or a drunken game of Twister, and it was part of growing up to let go of those fantasies of perpetual skinny-dipping and deep talks.

But nobody took the lost friends' places, and now she had revised her vision of the future to one of self-containment and independence, tea from a nice cup, word puzzles on her phone, control of the TV, her books, her bed. To eat, drink, read and ignore the clock, to live without the intrusion or judgement of another soul; the fantasy of being the last woman on earth. She couldn't say whether a falling tree in a forest made a noise, but no vibration that she made would strike another eardrum and so she'd taken to speaking to objects. Not *you* again, she joked with the damp patch in the bathroom. Nice and fresh, she complimented the eggs. *There* you are, she bantered with the corkscrew, waving its arms in the air. In a film on TV, Marnie watched a solitary character give a long pep-talk to her reflection. Nobody does that, she told the TV.

But solitary conversation was like playing yourself at Scrabble, it was hard to be surprised or challenged. Sometimes she didn't even bother with words, instead developing a vocabulary of small noises, fwa and petah, fluah and cha-ha, their meaning ever shifting. The radio helped, her days marked by the schedules, though the news was increasingly an hourly jolt of pure anxiety or rage that left her scrambling for the switch. She played music, listening to playlists called things like Coffeeshop Essentials or Rainy Day Piano, but no one had yet compiled a playlist for those sluggish Sunday afternoons in her one-bedroom flat, listlessly foraging on social media, incontinently liking posts, present but as anonymous as someone clapping in a stadium crowd. Time is a sensation that alters depending on where you are, and the cursed hours between three and five on a February afternoon lasted forever, as did the same hours in the morning, times when she had nothing to contemplate but the same circling anxieties and regrets, times when she was forced to acknowledge the truth.

I, Marnie Walsh, aged thirty-eight, of Herne Hill, London, am lonely.

This was not seclusion or solitude or aloneness, this was the real thing, and the realisation came with shame, because if popularity was the reward for being smart, cool, attractive, successful, then what did loneliness signify? She had never been cool, but she wasn't clueless either. People had told her she was funny, and while she recognised that this could be a trap,

she was never intentionally sarcastic or spiteful and far more likely to mock herself than others. Perhaps that was the problem – her ex-husband had certainly put it high on the list – but she was kind too, thoughtful, always generous within her means. She wasn't shy. If anything she tried too hard, a people-pleaser, though no one ever seemed that pleased.

There is who we want to be, she thought, and there is who we are. As we get older the former gives way to the latter, and maybe this is who I am now, someone better off by themselves. Not happier, but better off. Not an introvert, just an extrovert who had lost the knack.

But it was not romantic loneliness, or only occasionally. She had married and divorced in her late twenties, in that alone a prodigy, and this great central calamity of her life had gone some way to cauterising those emotions, even if the scar still itched now and then. Since the divorce there'd been no one, not really, though she thought about it sometimes, that it would be nice to feel the warmth of another body in bed or to get a text that was not an authentication code or scam. It would be nice to be desired but let's not get carried away. The risks involved in romantic love, the potential for hurt and betrayal and indignity, far outweighed the consolations. For the most part, she just missed other people, specifically and generally, and if the prospect of social contact sometimes felt daunting, exhausting, intimidating, then it was still preferable to this small and shrinking life inside her fifty-four square metres on the top floor.

Sometimes, she thought, it's easier to remain lonely than present the lonely person to the world, but she knew that this, too, was a trap, that unless she did something, the state might become permanent, like a stain soaking into wood.

It was no good. She would have to go outside.

Mighty Forces Beneath Your Feet

‘The trick is to change the way you think about time. It’s no use thinking in minutes or hours or days, or even generations. You’ve got to adjust the scale, think in terms of *millennia*. Then everything you see here is temporary, the lakes, rivers, mountains, all in motion, the changes taking place over millions of years. This valley wasn’t always here: it was *created*, gouged out by a great glacier, because ice is a moving thing, just a couple of feet a day but scouring and chewing away with these great teeth made of stone, snapping off boulders, gnawing into rock in a process we call . . . a process we call?’

‘Anyone? That’s right, glacial erosion, consisting of . . . ? Wake up, you lot, you know this. Yes, abrasion and plucking! Why’s that funny, Noah? Any reason why the word “plucking” is funny? Tell the class. No, I thought not.

‘So ice is unimaginably violent, much more violent than fire. It destroys but it creates too, like those hollows called . . . That’s right, corries or cwms here in Wales, those mountain pools where people like me and Mrs Fraser go swimming, unlike you cowards. Phones away, please, unless you’re taking photos for your project. No selfies. Have you been eroded by a glacier, Chrissy? Then no selfies.

‘Go back even further, about 480 million years, and this mountain, highest in Wales, wasn’t even here. It was formed in what’s called the Ordovician period. No, that won’t be in the exam but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t know it. O-r-d-o-v-i-c-i-a-n. Long before dinosaurs . . . No, long before. But, yes, at some point there were dinosaurs here . . . No, not any more, don’t be daft. Dinosaurs *are* cool, Ryan, but this is cooler, these forces, these immense forces . . .

‘Listen to me, please, if you want to get back! When continents collide, these plates of rock buckle and rise above the water and you get volcanoes, here, volcanoes, can you believe it? Close your eyes and look. You know what I mean. Close your eyes and *imagine* . . . Yes, imagine dinosaurs if

you want, it's not accurate but pop 'em in. The point is to remember this process doesn't stop just because humans are here. It's happening now and it'll happen when the last human is long gone. Mighty forces beneath your feet. Nothing permanent, everything changing. Sarah Sanders, don't yawn right in my face, please. Let's keep walking. Yes, open your eyes first, see if that helps.'

They began their descent. Like rivers, all jokes had to begin somewhere and he sometimes wondered who had started the notion that geography teachers were dull. Was it a book, a disgruntled kid, an embittered physics teacher? He would never dream of criticising a colleague's discipline, but were the historians really so interesting, bouncing back and forth between the Tudors and the Weimar Republic? No one in the English department was jumping on the desks, and the mathematicians could preach all they wanted about the beauty of numbers: it was all so much Sudoku. And yet somehow, somewhere, the geography joke had come to be and now it was up to Mr Bradshaw, Michael, to defy those expectations and inspire. He led the way, Mrs Fraser – Cleo – herding the stragglers, and down in the valley he spoke of alluvial fans.

'Just eighteen thousand years ago, which is nothing, the day before yesterday in deep-time terms, the glaciers receded and left this great gift behind.' He stomped on the ground and they looked dutifully down and saw the gift of mud. 'This soil, this beautiful dark soil, came from beneath the glacier, like grain ground into flour, washing out over the valley floor in a rich, fertile . . . Alluvial. Fan. Alluvial, what a great word. And these minerals spread out and made their way into the trees and plants and crops, into the apples you ate, should have eaten, in your packed lunch. Isn't that amazing? Debris from an ancient glacier inside you now, calcium in your bones, iron in your blood . . .' Here Michael paused and wondered if he should take things further, segue into the origins of these elements, of the universe itself, tell them they were all made of stars. The teenage mind was so easily blown but that was chemistry and physics and, besides, the apples were from South Africa.

'So – any questions?' he asked, looking out at thirty oily, unfinished faces, some glaring sullenly inside their hoods, others whispering or giggling at private jokes. He was a passionate and committed teacher who tried his best to punch through adolescent indifference, but the questions that preoccupied these kids were not his to answer. Who can identify

stratocumulus when your mind is on the hipflask and the vape and whether she likes you? How can a mountain compete with the boil on your chin? Tonight at the youth hostel there would be another game of cat-and-mouse, torch-lit patrols at three a.m., *I'll pretend I didn't see that. Put it out. Back to your room. Big day tomorrow*, and at the end of the residency he would return home, stooped and pale with exhaustion. Still, he would rather not go home.

He was a teacher but not a parent. They'd tried but there had been complications and obstacles, and he struggled to imagine the circumstances now. There was no comparison between the roles and only the most superficial overlap: a parent might teach a child but it's a mistake for a teacher to parent a pupil. Still, it sometimes seemed as if all the turmoil and angst of adolescence were crammed into the five days of the field trip, not just the mischief and squalor but the emotional stuff too. The popular, self-assured kids could be left to their plots and schemes. Instead, Mr Bradshaw chose to focus his attention on the nervy, awkward kids left to dangle from the end of abseil ropes. Looking at their fizzing, anxious faces it seemed unlikely they were made of stars but, still, he felt a certain professional tenderness.

'Landscape is life,' he told them, 'and when you take in a view like this rather than your phone, Sarah Sanders – I've told you before, I will throw it into the next ribbon lake – then you can see its beauty and read it too. Why are farms here? Why's the soil this colour? Why are clouds over the mountain but not the valley? Why does the rock glint in the sun like that? Look, how magnificent it is! Look!'

He noted the boys at the back, hoods pulled into snorkels, shoulders vibrating with suppressed laughter. He was well liked as a teacher, more than he knew, though he could no longer pull off the larky irreverence required to be adored. He was sincere in his passion for the subject but sincerity invites ridicule and the more passionate he sounded, the more they'd laugh, just as they'd laughed when Mrs Bradshaw moved out and some boys had seen him crying in his car. Really, there was nothing some kids wouldn't laugh at, nothing at all.