

Cole Moreton



# Leading light

The beauty, sadness and history of Beachy Head are all explored in *The Light Keeper*, the debut fiction novel from writer Cole Moreton. **Simone Hellyer** discovers what it is about the dramatic East Sussex coast that inspires him so much

**B**eachy Head is one of the most dramatic and breathtakingly beautiful spots in East Sussex, but it also has very dark connotations, being well known as a suicide site. The effect that this duality has on the people who live there is something that is explored in *The Light Keeper*, the debut fiction novel from writer and award-winning journalist Cole Moreton.

Attracted by the beauty of the cliffs, Cole moved to the outskirts of Eastbourne in 2003 and almost immediately felt the need to capture the landscape in writing, as he explains: “When I moved here my head was full of a book that I had written about the west coast of Ireland called *Hungry for Home* and I saw some similarities with the landscape here at Beachy Head. They’re both spectacularly beautiful, but also quite dangerous and there is this sense of history in the shape of the hills.

“It was inevitable once I had moved here that I would try to respond to it in writing in some way. Initially I tried to do that by writing about the history, but actually there is a poetry and a mystery about the place that suits fiction.”

As a journalist and broadcaster, Cole Moreton has reported on major events from around the world, including the Waco siege, the Olympics, 9/11, the London bombings and the death of Nelson Mandela. He is a man used to dealing with tough subject matter, so it should come as no surprise that his debut novel tackles the complex themes of death, suicide, grief and infertility.

The novel was largely inspired by Belle Tout, a decommissioned lighthouse turned B&B that stands mere feet from the edge of the cliffs

near Beachy Head. In the novel the lighthouse is inhabited by the enigmatic Keeper whose life is thrown into disarray by the appearance of a young man who is desperately searching for his missing wife.

There is no shying away from the reason that many desperate people come to Beachy Head in the novel and it is a subject that Cole deals with in a sensitive and knowledgeable manner.

“I live eight minutes’ drive from Belle Tout Lighthouse and we are used to seeing helicopters flying over or the RNLI sailing out to look for bodies. As a journalist I was writing about the assisted suicide debate, but actually it looks very different from down here because living next to Beachy Head is like living with a loaded shotgun on your kitchen table because you know what is possible if you’re that desperate,” he says.

Cole also spent a week on patrol with the Beachy Head Chaplaincy, a search and rescue and crisis intervention charity, in 2014 while working for *The Daily Telegraph*. During that time he saw lives being saved every day, with some people being spoken to by the chaplains right on the edge of the cliffs.

The book also explores the male perspective on fertility, with Cole drawing on much of his own experience of IVF treatment. “About 15 years ago I started to write some first person stuff about what it was like to go through IVF treatment and it was going to be a book,” he explains, adding: “Strangely, I feel like I was able to be more honest about what it’s really like by writing about it through fiction. I am not the character Jack, but there is some stuff that is in there from life, like the moment he realises that it’s his

problem as much as hers and being put in a paediatric waiting room at the hospital, with Winnie the Pooh on the walls.”

For all the tough subject matter, the book is by no means a depressing affair thanks to Cole’s desire to celebrate the beauty and history of the landscape he loves. There are lots of great historical tidbits in the book, like the story of how the wheatear bird helped save some secret royalists during the civil war. Cole is something of a fount of local knowledge, which he puts to good use with local radio presenter Emily Jeffery in their podcast, *Edge of England*.

“Part of the idea for this book was to put really engaging characters into a real landscape as well as tell some of the history,” Cole explains. “I really wanted to take the reader there, especially if they’ve never been. People who know the place have told me that reading the book is like taking a walk through the landscape and there is a reader in Russia who has become obsessed with the Seven Sisters and now wants to come,” he adds.

Cole wrote some of the novel in the light room at Belle Tout itself and he is continuing to immerse his work in the local landscape by performing readings from the book and playing songs with his acoustic band The Light Keepers at the lighthouse and Birling Gap. Ultimately, Cole hopes to take groups out on walks to explore the landscape that has inspired him so much. ♦

## Good to know:

Cole will be performing readings and music at Birling Gap on 9 November and at Towner in Eastbourne on 5 December.

**For more information visit**  
[thelightkeeper.org](http://thelightkeeper.org)

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