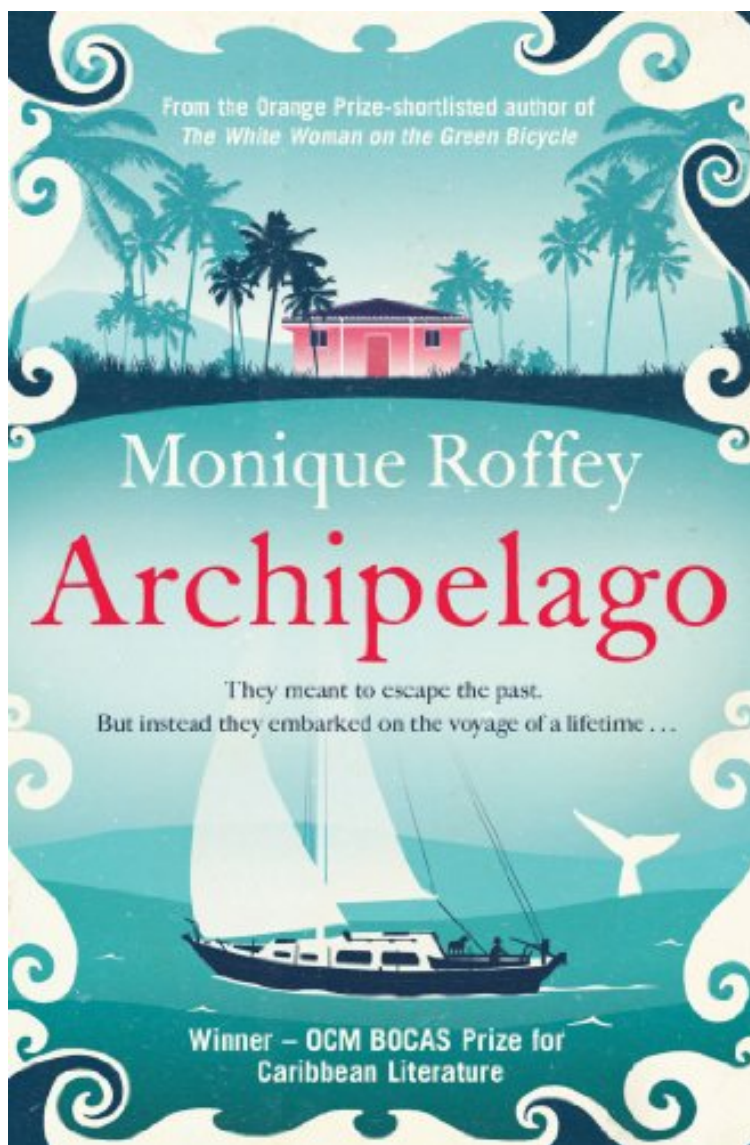


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## Archipelago (English Edition)



*Par Monique Roffey*  
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### Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe magical new novel from the Orange Prize shortlisted author of The White Woman on the Green Bicycle will take you on a journey like no other... Gavin Weald lives with his six-year old daughter Ocan and their dog Suzy in a newly rebuilt pink house. It is only a few months since a devastating flood swept through their home, with heartbreaking consequences. Gavin is trying desperately to carry on, but wakes each night to his daughter's cries and his own fears for the future. So one day he does the only thing he can think of: he takes his daughter and his dog down to the marina, to his old boat Romany which hasn't set sail in years, and embarks upon a voyage to make his peace with the waters. They set sail into deep open ocean, watch fish and dolphins leap from the waves, and head for the Caribbean archipelago that Gavin longed to explore as a younger man, before he fell in love with a woman and moored his boat for what he

thought was the last time. Now Gavin has a new reason for wanderlust and an unexpected crew, who are about to discover the full power and majesty of the sea. A miraculous journey awaits, new sights and wonders - but it will take more than an ocean to put the memory of the flood behind them.

Praise for Archipelago: 'There's a warmth to this book, an exuberance and a wisdom, that makes the experience of reading it feel not just pleasurable but somehow instructive. It's funny, sometimes bitingly poignant. A brilliant piece of storytelling' Andrew Miller, author of *Pure*, winner of the Costa Book of the Year 2011

CHAPTER ONE  
RAIN

The dog mumbles something under her breath. What now, Gavin replies, as he goes about the kitchen in an aimless fashion. 7 p.m. Dinner should be on the table and she's trying to remind him. Animals have a keen sense of time. Okay, okay, he says. The dog sits in the middle of the kitchen, trying not to slump over. Her chest is robust, yet she sits in a manner which suggests her stiff front legs are propping her up. Her triangular eyes are narrowed to slits; her tongue hangs from her dark mouth. She's making sure everything is all right, that they'll get through for the time being. She mumbles long and loud, a sound not dissimilar to his stomach when he's hungry. Good girl, he says to her, not knowing if he needs or loves this dog any more. Maccy cheese and chicken Vienna sausages will be their meal tonight. This is what his daughter likes. They've eaten it the last three nights; very little else will tempt her. Maybe he'll add a tin of peas. She's lying in the huge double bed in the bedroom, like a mermaid on a raft, watching Casper the Friendly Ghost. November and it's still raining, popcorn rain, almost every day, short dense showers, ten minutes of a mauve downpour and then nothing. It falls from the mountains all around, unbidden, and makes him feel like he's done something wrong, like he's been in an argument and was the one to say all the stupid things. He opens the tin of chicken sausages and winces at the stink. Like the innards of a gym shoe, a stale acid smell. He spills the brine out into the sink. Here, have one of these, he says to the dog. He prongs a short brown pink sausage and holds it close to the dog's muzzle. She sniffs it but doesn't take a bite. Go on, try it, he cajoles. She sniffs again and puts her snout to the sausage. She nibbles it like a Japanese lady might nibble on a rose petal. Oh, for God's sakes. She takes the sausage carefully in her mouth and then slides to the floor and drops it on the lino. She looks up at him and mumbles. Jesus Christ. To be this close to collapse is a soft feeling. All his inner fibre, all his strength is ungluing and stretching and he can feel himself going stringy, like he could just come apart. It will be a tender experience, like falling in love. Yes, surely dying, losing, failing, giving up, are similar to all the great uplifting feelings; surely dying is like being born. He fills the saucepan with a jet of water, sits it on the hob and watches the ring turn candy red. The water is cloudy from the tap. As he watches it clear he puts his hand on his chest to check his heart. He scratches his beard. Black flies flit to the stove and he grabs the electric flyswatter, shaped like a small tennis racket. He swats one, smack, and the fly fries on the lines. It sizzles and forms a small black lump. Ha, ha, see, he says to the dog. I'm still dangerous. He swats another fly, smacking the racket down on the counter top. Another good shot, another sizzling sound. The racket smokes. Smack, smack. Two more flies get mashed and charred. He picks at his T-shirt, and fans it against his stomach; a small sweat has broken out. Maybe he, Gavin Weald, isn't dying, after all. Maybe he is Godzilla, the Great Ape; maybe he will destroy and conquer all. Daddy? The dog looks round at the little girl in the hallway. He looks at her too. Yes, dou dou. What's for dinner? It's a surprise, he says, hiding the racket behind his back. He towers over her, and yet he feels her strength; she can make louder sounds than he can. She can sob for a whole night, not eat for days, throw tantrums which spin themselves from nowhere. Or spin themselves from her new fear, the rain which bounds down from the hills. She is six and small and oh, so powerful. I don't want a surprise. You'll like this surprise, guaranteed. She shakes her head which makes her blonde hair sway around her face. What then? Pizza. Pizza? Since when did you prefer pizza? With anchovies please. You don't even know what an anchovy is. Yes I do. He drops to his knees. He holds the flyswatter like a real tennis racket, across his shoulder, affecting the style of a pro, forgetting the charred lumps. What is an anchovy, then? It's a fish. Oh, he nods. This is unexpected. When did she learn about anchovies? Captain Nemo, yes, but an anchovy? A fish? You mean like a whale? Nooooo, she shrieks at his stupidity. They're tiny, like a shrimp. A shrimp? She laughs and her face glows. The dog's tail thumps the ground. Ocan, I'm sorry, but we don't have anchovies. Nor whales, nor any kind of fish, and anyway, anchovies taste horrible. I love anchovies. You've never even tried one! Yes I have. Look, we're having your favourite tonight, maccy cheese and . . . He looks at the sausage on the lino still between the dog's paws . . . And then we are having ice cream with peas. That was the surprise; I wasn't supposed to tell you. It's a secret recipe. Now go away and leave me to cook. Ha. She's outfoxed. Her face is pensive, trying to work out what to do next. He's losing his marbles and the one good thing about it is that he can now defuse a pre-tantrum six-year-old. Go on now. She turns and he paddles her behind with the racket full of burnt flies. She

wanders back to the bedroom and the TV. The water in the pan bubbles furiously and he opens a packet and throws the pasta in to boil and waits, stirring and stabbing it with a wooden spoon. When its soft, he drains the tubes, throws them back in the pan. He takes the sachet of macaroni cheese mix and tears it open, sprinkling it in. The grey powder dissolves in a puff and the pasta coagulates into a stiff mess at the bottom. He pours in milk, adds a knob of butter. He prods and stirs, prising the pasta into separate pieces and the powder starts to become thinner and lighter in texture, like a miracle; it even starts to smell like cheese. They eat together at the table. He doesnt attempt conversation for fear of where it might lead. Anchovies, rain. Mummy. Cheesy steam lifts from the pot of macaroni, sedating them. Next to it, a bowl of grated cheddar, slices of bread and butter. He scoops some macaroni into her bowl and her eyes grow wide and dilated at the sight of the starchy goo. Yum, yum, he says and means it. He sprinkles the real cheese on top and puts the bowl down in front of her. She holds her fork like a trident and gazes into the bowl, inhaling deeply. One day shell fall asleep into her macaroni. Yum, yum, he says again to himself, as he scoops a triple helping and takes a fistful of cheddar. They both hum while eating their food. She sucks whole tubes down in one, blows them out onto the table. He doesnt care to correct her. He picks at his food and he strokes at his heart; he chews slowly, trying not to drift too far away. He especially tries not to think of the office, of what hell have to face tomorrow, Monday. Theyve been back in the house exactly twelve days. Twelve days within these pink walls. Tomorrow is day thirteen. When he thinks of the office nothing comes. He cant conjure up faces, to do lists, Mrs Cyrus his secretary of ten years, anything. Where is it all, that part of him? He was doing so well, the CEO of a good-sized company; it feels like years ago. His head is light and theres a churning in the pit of his stomach. Daddy, can I get down now? Yes, pumpkin. Will you watch TV with me? Of course. He dumps the dishes into the already dish-crammed sink and burps. The dog sits against the kitchen wall. He bends and strokes her behind the ears and she tilts her head for more. Scratch, scratch, good girl. Her bull terrier s nose is long and Roman, a pink patch at the end like a piece of a ballet shoe, worn satin; the tip of her nose is black and cold, reassuring to touch. He fights the urge to sit down on the floor and hug the dog close. Come on then, Suzy. Lets watch TV, he says. The dog gets up and he pats her side. She trots after him, tail up, and they both climb on to the kingsize bed with the little girl on it. The three of them form themselves into a kind of nest; the sheets around them are damp and smell of dog and feet. The Discovery Channel shows images of crocodiles in a place called Kakadu in Australia. Ocan is transfixed. She is lying across his barrel chest and the dog is slumped across her legs. Immediately, as he tries to focus on the TV, his eyes feel heavy. Crocodiles, a creek somewhere, yellow eyes bulging from the water. Sleep arrives quickly and he doesnt try to fight it off; its usual for him to end his days like this, with his daughter clinging to him, with the feeling, deep down, that its the other way around. \*In the office on Monday his staff float around him. How much longer can they trust him? How much longer would he trust him if he were them? When will the Board of Directors call him in, Steve or Mr Grant, the owner of the company; how much longer before they give him unrealistic targets, start to discuss his benefits? He is No. 3 in the company, the one hired to run everything; they can always replace a No. 3. At first there was time off. Curiosity, sympathy, cards, flowers. He didnt discuss any of it. It was a relief to finally get back to work. In his private office, he examines his hands. They are feathered with dead grey skin stained here and there with yellow where hes splashed antiseptic ointment on the slits. The skin is now paper-thin. He can type, but holding a steering wheel is difficult, tying his laces is painful. His feet are the same, skin peeling off in welts. Psoriasis. It set in a few months after the flood. Hes tried everything now, all the steroid creams, the pills, hard drugs packed full of chemicals which made his hair fall out, his pubes wither. Hes started seeing an alternative doctor who can read his vibrations on a little machine. He doesnt know or care exactly what this means. You register a four, the doctor says. Now hes been prescribed a glass of water every morning, with a squeeze of lime and a teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda to alkalise his body. At 11 a.m. he walks to the coffee machine for his fourth cup. Its the coffee. If he could give up coffee, his one vice, all his other problems would come good. He knows this is an underlying truth, that he cannot give up this black toxic liquid. If he could put this one little thing right, he could put everything right. He smiles at Petula at reception and her eyes fill with love when she sees him; shes like a nun, so openly concerned. Only she has understood. Hi Petula, he says and she beams. Petula, who is also so fertile five kids. So fertile she can make her glasses fog up just sitting there all day. Petula who, like the dog, has come to run his life. Doughnut today, Mr Weald? No thanks. Potato pie? Oh God, no. What I can get fer you? Nothing. Thank you. He is still full of last nights macaroni cheese. He waddles to the mens room and stands in the cubicle, counting to ten. When his eyes are open he can see tiny filmy black snakes in the air in front of him; floaters, the optician calls them. Its weird

watching them; they look like bacteria breeding in a Petri dish. He closes his eyes and puts his fingers to his temples. He tries to steady himself but that rising panicking butterfly feeling threatens to get the better of him. He holds his head in his hands and counts. When he hears the bathroom door open he unzips his flies and lets a steady torrent of saffron yellow urine cascade from him. Pissing, ahhh, its like a strange dull orgasm. Maybe he could move in with Petula and her kids. Each one of them has a different father. All good-for-nothing layabouts. Maybe they could form a pod, a kind of double family. Or better still, maybe they could all live together in his pink house. Petula appears to him, through a haze, her glasses sparkling, her smile beatific. Potato pie? Maybe she could still work on reception here, but also be a kind of flatmate. Could that work? Mr Weald? Uh yes? Mr Weald, is that you? He panics, looking at his watch. Oh, God. A piercing realisation, no . . . no, please no. He has fallen asleep again, standing on his feet. His flies are still open, his dick hanging limp against his trousers. Petula. He was thinking of her and then . . . Mr Weald? Yes, Im here. It sounds like Elston from the warehouse, a good man. He wont mention this to a soul. You okay, Mr Weald? He zips himself back up and opens the cubicle door. Elston, Im fine. Was I snoring? Yes, Mr Weald. Well, Im fine. I just got a little lost in there; you know what its like. Elstons face is huge and incredulous. Never mind, Gavin says quickly and leaves the mens. He goes back to his office and tells Mrs Cyrus not to bother him. He has piles of paperwork; he tells her to put no one through unless its a dire emergency. In his office he sits very still at his desk until his sense of humiliation quells and his heart slows again. He says some kind of prayer and in that moment an image of his old boat shimmers before him. Romany. His 28-foot sloop, his old mistress, his great friend. He thinks of her sitting in the olive green water, her wooden deck, her upturned bow; he knows hes clutching at straws. Gavin hides in his office all day. Hours of hot itchy hands and a racing heart and a mind slipping all over the place: images of Romany, the boat from his bachelor days, appear and disappear like a ghost boat in a haze. His old boat has been sitting moored at the yacht club for over a year now; theyd decided to sell her, finally. No time for boats any more, for sailing down the islands, for racing, nights gazing at the stars. His wife had never enjoyed sailing much. Then the flood came. By now, she is probably covered in pelican shit, full of rainwater. He plays Solitaire online and then he plays Bridge. He checks Facebook seventeen times, checks for hurricanes, for sightings of UFOs, for information about Kakadu; then he finds all this checking makes his head spin even more. At 5 p.m., on the dot, he logs out and leaves the office without looking Mrs Cyrus in the eye. \*At home Gavin stands on the lawn and scrutinises the pink garden walls. Seven feet high now, with buttresses, steel-enforced. Nothing will knock over these pink walls. What colour were they before? He cant remember; mostly they were covered with orange trumpety flowers, a climbing plant of some sort, other shrubs. Now the walls are candy pink, princess-pink, to make his daughter happy. She chose these walls. He looks up and sniffs, he can smell the rain arriving anytime soon. The sky is heavy with thunderheads about to burst; the rainy season is a month from being over. Daddy? Ocan comes to him and holds onto his legs. Yes, dou dou. Can we have meatballs for dinner? Yes, we can have meatballs. Can Suzy have meatballs too? Of course. How was school? Okay. He sits down on the step of the porch and hoists her onto his lap. The dog appears from round the corner; she trots over to them, mumbles something, and then flumps over onto her side. We made butter today at school. Really? I have it in my school bag. Show me. She jumps off him, fetches her school bag and digs around in it, producing a small plastic yoghurt pot with, yes, a creamy pool at the bottom. It has to go in the fridge, she explains. Hes impressed. Butter? Anchovies? This is what a private education is buying. Go and put it in the fridge and we can have some tonight on toast, then come back here and tell me all about how you made it. She skips off. A peal of thunder from the sky. The dog replies with a low growl. He gets up and walks out onto the lawn again and shivers. Hes done something wrong, but he doesnt know what. The world is tetchy with him, but why? How did he end up like this; when, at what moment, did he make the wrong choice, end up here, gazing at these pink walls? A fat spot of rain hits him hard on the centre of his head. The clouds are low, troubled. Another rumble. Stop, he shouts. But the rain falls quickly down on him, as if unzipped from a valise. In seconds hes drenched, but he doesnt bother to get under cover. The rain falls down on him in a low consistent thrum; its only just begun. November rain in Trinidad. Then it picks up, falling louder from the clouds, long fluid ropes of tropical rain. He clenches his fists, seized by a rage for this rain, for its spite, its ridicule of him. How could rain make him feel so weak? From inside the house he can hear another sound, louder than the rain, the screaming of his little girl. \*In the morning he wakes with the dog and the child snoring lightly next to him. Each has found a space on the bed. Ocan is spread like a starfish, on her stomach; the dog is close to falling off the edge. His sheets have knotted up and wound themselves around his legs. The radio clock says 5.30 a.m. A ceiling fan whirs

overhead, stirring up the air. There's that sullen brooding feeling beyond the louvres, like the rain never went away. He needs help. He realises this, has been coming to the conclusion for months. He needs his own private team. Not just Josephine once a week to mop and dust and change the sheets, not just Petula. He needs a chef, a dietitian, a psychotherapist, a specialist dermatologist, a hypnotherapist to get him off the coffee, a masseur; and he needs to pay someone, a woman, for a hug every now and then, maybe even more.

He is a man and he isn't coping. His wife made him healthy, stable. Now he is half-himself, not himself. Pathetic. Only mornings can be innocent, just before light. This is the quiet time before it all happens, before anything starts, this half an hour before he has to rise and begin over again. These are his quiet moments, the only time he has to himself, and it's not enough for him to regroup, to think straight. He cannot figure out another plan in this tiny space of half an hour every morning before the merry-go-round starts again. All he can do is admire his little girl; how on earth did he produce such an exquisite creature? Him so dark and curly-haired, olive-skinned. When they stand together it looks like he stole her from another family; she's like a fairy girl, her hair like silver seaweed and her mother's grey-blue eyes, her mother's pale skin. It was his idea to name her Ocan, after the sea. The dog snuffles and rolls over and falls in slow motion off the bed, landing on her sturdy feet. She farts and stretches and yawns, then climbs back onto the bed and curls herself back into her dreams. Outside, he can hear the patter of light rain and he feels himself freeze: will it wake her up? Dear God, no, please, and with these thoughts he sees his daughter's eyelids flicker, as if she now has some internal radar for rain. Her eyes shoot open wide. Her mouth opens and she screams and screams for her mother, where is my mummy, she wails. And it's not fair, because he cannot be her mother, not that. She's screaming now, so bad, he sometimes fears what the neighbours might think, even though they know; they were there, too, in the flood. Dou dou, shhhh, he tries, but it's useless. She is screaming herself awake, into consciousness. The dog barks and jumps from the bed and trots outside to bark at the rain and it's then, in the chaos of her screams, that he knows what to do, how to save them.

## CHAPTER TWOTHE GREAT DANEO

Ocan sits in the front seat of the 4x4, mute. Baseball cap, tracksuit top zipped to the chin, pink ballet skirt, pink party sandals, frilly socks; that's all she wears at such short notice. The dog is in the back.

They are in Hi-Lo car park in Maraval. Daddy, where are we going? Shopping, were going shopping. Now? Yes. But what about school? School? He hasn't formed an answer to this. Not to anything, yet.

He needs to shop for a trip of two or three days, maybe longer. School is closed today, sweetie-pie. Closed? The teachers rang us all up. School is closed for a few days. Rained off. Come, quick. He stands outside the passenger door and motions for her to climb down. I thought we'd go on a trip. Where? To fairyland, that's where. He winds down the back window two inches for the dog and says: stay here. The dog nods through the glass and leans against the back seat. He takes Ocan by the hand and hurries across the warm concrete. Tinned food, and dried food, rice, pasta, lots of it, that's what they need. He wheels the trolley into the cool air-conditioned supermarket, across the lull of the vegetable aisle. He picks up a bag of onions, a bag of tomatoes, some potatoes and a lettuce, some apples and limes, some oranges. Then, like a swarm of locusts, he makes for the other aisles. He pulls armfuls of tins from the shelves: corned beef, spaghetti hoops, baked beans, chilli dogs, chicken Vienna sausages, tuna fish, Bachelors tomato soup, sweetcorn and peas and packets of Super Noodles and boxes of macaroni; Froot Loops, cornflakes, bags of bread rolls, Cheddar cheese, Crix crackers, mayonnaise and Matouks pepper jelly. And then several five-litre bottles of water, bottles of Pepsi and coconut water; also toilet paper and dog chow. Tins of meatballs too, for the kid and the dog. Soon the trolley is heaving. Ocan carries three large bags of Doritos and all of a sudden she seems to be enjoying herself. No school is always an easy bribe. At the checkout point two young men come forward to help bag things up. He dares not look up or around for fear of bumping into someone he knows. It is mid-morning. Anything could happen; his boss could walk in, or Mr Grant, the big man himself, or worse, Jackie, his mother-in-law. Anyone could stop this; what then? It's hard escaping from a small place. You can trip over yourself on your way out. Head down, head down. He doesn't even look at the checkout girl as he hands over his credit card. She slices it through the machine and a white slip putters out. With the heavy trolley, they head back into the squashed heat of the car park. He opens the car door for the dog. Sorry, he says. She yawns and scratches her ear. It wasn't so bad. After unloading the bags of food, he gets back into the driver's seat and looks at himself in the mirror, checking he's really there. He sees a bloated forty-six-year-old version of himself. Green-yellow skin, bags under his eyes, his past handsomeness now vague. He sees flecks of grey in his beard, a large and distended belly, like that of a blowfish yanked from the sea. Breasts like a carnival whore, all this way and that, and he feels ashamed of himself and how he got like this. He revs the engine, reverses and drives the Jeep out onto the bumpy tarmac road; he turns on the

radio. Its playing Madonnas Holiday. Were going on a holiday, he says to his daughter. But he can tell she isnt entirely happy. Shes doing the quiet thing, watching out of the front window, trying to decide how to be. In the back, the dog pants heavily. He half-turns in his seat to run his hand down her long bony nose. Good girl, he says. Soon they are slipping through the outskirts of Port of Spain, west, towards the sea and the marinas. The road tracks the coast and he gazes out across the smooth metal-grey Gulf of Paria; many large vessels are out there, abandoned workboats, tankers, container ships, harbour-ing from the global recession. The sea is settled for now after the early-morning rain. Besides, he knows these waters, and he knows his boat; theyll be hugging the coast of Venezuela for half the trip, this wont be a stupid thing to do. For now, the clouds are high and white, the sun burning itself up behind them. They are saying, quickly, go now. At a petrol station, on the way, he stops and fills three large jerry cans with diesel. Further along, when they reach the marinas, he stops at Peakes, the chandlery. This is more serious shopping, mostly done over the counter. Ocan stands quietly while he speaks to the assistant. He buys a spare engine impeller, fan belts, flares, life vests, harnesses with lifelines, two jack lines for the deck, a good torch, two foul-weather jackets, a new fishing rod, two sleeping bags, a pair of deck shoes and a pair of gloves, spare batteries for the GPS. He also buys fins and a snorkel, a first-aid kit, a new pump for the dinghy, and a logbook, also charts for Margarita and the Dutch islands, a cruising guide. Back at the house hed packed clothes for them both: two canvas duffel bags, plus their passports, papers, a lead for the dog, the hand-held GPS, the hand-held VHF. It took him thirty-five minutes to vacate the pink house. He left a message for Josephine on the kitchen counter, plus a small bundle of blue notes in the usual place to tide her over until she finds another job. She will clean the place, then lock up. He switched off his mobile phone; it was that easy. As hes leaving Peakes, it happens. He runs straight into the friendliest man he knows, Alphonse, from the bakery. Ayyyy, Gavin, how yuh goin? says Alphonse. He remembers Alphonse also owns a boat, Jouvay, a 37-foot beauty, automatic pilot, auto-furling sails, water desalinator, a fridge, GPS, AVS, solar panels, a wind generator, everything. Its the kind of deluxe boat that would sail itself while Alphonse sleeps for hours on his way to Grenada or entertains lady friends in a comfy berth below. Gavin has seen him on it many times. Alphonse owns the bakery; hes a No. 1 of his own company. He can be anywhere he likes on a Tuesday morning. Im good, man. Gavin tries to fake his cheer. Taking a small trip, across to Margarita. Plenty rain comin, Alphonse says. Venezuela rainin all now. Floods over der. You sure you leaving today? Yeah. Rather you than me. Ayyy. He looks down at the little girl. She get real pretty. Ocan goes shy around big men. She hides behind Gavins legs. Ocan, say hello. She says nothing, just hides. Lookin just like she mudder. I know. Then Alphonse checks himself and a careful smile spreads across his face, as if suddenly he understands. The whole frigging island knows what happened to him. You takin a break, den? Yeah. You take care of yourself, you hear? I will. What boat you goin on? Romany. Dat ol ting? Alphonse smiles, teasing. My boat solid as a rock, man. Solid and stable and, Gavin laughs . . . slow. Slow as a pig. Where you goin after Margarita? West. Gavin jerks his thumbs behind him. North much easier, man. Its a bitch to come back if you go west. I been north plenty times, never west. Allah dem Dutch islands, nah. You speak Dutch? Nah, Gavin laughs. They speak other languages there, man. Papiamento, Dutch, English, American. Pappy-what? What kind fancy language is dat? Some ol slave language, nuh. Something creole. Alphonse raises his eyebrows and steupses. Nah, I doh like dem Dutch Pappy . . . whatever fellers, dey too Dutchy you know what ah mean? Dutch-like. Yeah. Dutch arses. Pardon my French, Miss Ocan. Were going to see the reefs, and the fish. Well say hello to them for me. You take care, eh? Yeah. I will. Alphonse walks away. Gavins throat dries shit. Almost sprung. He looks down at his daughter. Venezuela rainin all now. Floods over der. The word alone makes his bowels start to squirm. Floods everywhere these days. Never mind about that. Hes a proper sailor, a wrango-tango, hardass, learnt-from-experience man of the sea at least he was. And besides, Caracas is miles away. For now, the clouds in Chaguaramas, Trinidad, are high and white and saying go now. Come on, dou dou, he says to his little mermaid girl, lets get going. \*Paco, the tender man, helps load up the taxi craft, a tall upright feller, black-brown and bald and sculpted from hardwood. His eyes are speculative, as always. You going fer days, he says. Alphonse, Paco, others on their boats have spotted him. So, it wont be a clean getaway. Yeah, man. A short break. Goin Venezuela? Nah. Bonaire. Across so. Margarita too? Figure so, one night maybe. Not long. Pirates there, man. Paco juts his chin, like hes heard the same. My wife shops in Margarita, he says. So does mine. Does, that small word. He cant bring himself to use the past tense. Bonaire meant to be a nice place. Nice reefs. Yeah, man, I learnt to dive there years ago. The taxi boat sits low in the water with all their loot. Paco takes them slowly out, threading through the moored yachts. Suzy rides the bow, patient and quietly expectant; shes been aboard Romany many times. She has a nose for salt air and

likes to watch the waves and snap at the sea birds, likes to swim too. In fact, Suzy enjoys being on Romany almost as much as he does. Its been a while since they were aboard the old boat, how long? Years? At least two, maybe longer. Suzy is a deck dog, a hardass too. She will be his crew. As they approach, he is amazed to see that the pelicans have left Romany alone. No pelican colony has taken ownership; in fact, the boat doesnt look so bad at all. She was on the hard for a year, in the water the last fifteen months; the sails and cockpit are well tarped up, the teak, from a distance, not so bleached. He wonders who came out to wrap up the boat so well. Paco, you seen anyone out on this boat in the last few months? Yeah. Really? Who? Mr Holder. When? Now and den. Well, he never told me. Clive Holder, his best friend and ex co-owner of Romany, never said anything about this. They havent talked about Romany in recent months. In fact, he and Clive havent talked much about anything, not since the flood. Did he stop speaking to Clive or was it the other way around? Either way, Clive, the wonderful bastard, has been taking care of his boat. Clive owns a bigger boat now; hes here, at TTSA, a lot. Romany sits in the back of the bay, quiet and self-assured. Shes small and slim and old-fashioned with her teak wash-boards, hatches and locker tops, like one of those Nordic Folkboats with her nose and tail lifted up from the sea. A Danish boat, she was sailed by the last owner to Trinidad across the Atlantic. A Great Dane is what shes called, a GD28, only two hundred and fifty ever made. Her long leaden keel gives her a low centre of gravity. She is a stable boat, designed by a sailor, an Olympic medallist. Romanys hull is navy blue and her sails are white. The word ROMANY is stencilled on her in pale blue curly capitals. She looks shy on the water, but ready: easy to underestimate this small sailboat. His heart thrills just gazing at her. Daddy, when can we go home? He ignores this. Paco, dat is boat, he says to the old man. Daddy, Im bored. Ocan is sitting beside him, her hands tucked under her armpits. You wont be bored in a moment, Starbuck. Starbuck? My chief mate, thats you. Ill tell you all about him later. Can we have meatballs again, tonight? Yes. Look at that beautiful boat, eh, Paco? Gavin gazes in rapture. The old man nods, a cigarette crushed to the side of the mouth. I remember you plenty times with Mr Holder in dating. Yeah, man. Pack up on a Friday afternoon, take a bottle of rum and a telescope, watch the stars. Spend the week- end cruising, fishing, girls on board. Plenty racing too in that slow ting. Sailing up the Grenadines. Yes, man. Das a good boat. How old is she? Oh God . . . he calculates . . . thirty, maybe thirty-five years old. Still lookin good, man. Boy, dat is boat. They pull up alongside Romany. The dog is now more alive, her tail stiff as a mast. He can tell she wants to be first on board. He stands up in the tender and this is enough to make it rock. He steadies it back and they throw fenders out. He makes a pass at the steel lifelines with one leg, but he cannot throw it so high, his big fat leg wont reach any more. Ah get fat, he says, making light of it. But it isnt funny, just one small thing he overlooked. His fatness. Fat men dont sail. Fat men dont go near the sea because fat men dont float too well, contrary to popular thought; they dont surf either, or windsurf, kite surf, boogie board, scuba dive or snorkel much. When did he get fat? He has some other image of himself, a long-ago younger man image, the one that had a gift for the sea. He heaves and tugs and makes a giant effort and then, one and two and when Paco helps, hes up and on the boat, face flushed. Pass me the dog, he says to Paco. Lookin like she gonna jump. Paco passes the dog up. Next, Ocan in her pink ballet skirt. Her face is blank, like she is trying to be patient, but just for now. Sweetie, I want you to sit in the cockpit over there for about five minutes, he says. Dont touch anything or move. Okay, Starbuck? Okay, she says quietly. Then Paco passes up the rest, armfuls of booty: equipment, food, fuel. Yuh forget de rum, Paco quips. Boy, plenty rum where ah goin. But this isnt true. The Dutch dont make rum; they make a vile liqueur called Blue Curaao. He has left rum out of the equation. A little girl, the sea and rum. Not a wise combination. When all the bags are on board he reaches down to Paco and stuffs twenty bucks into his hand. Listen, nuh, he says to Paco. If you see Mr Holder tell him ah gone. Yes, man. Tell him ah headin west. Tell him Im going west and then west again, he will understand. We talk about it plenty times when we were young. Yes, man, and then the ancient skipper turns his boat and revs the engine. He roars off, without looking back, making a small wake in the placid green sea, abandoning Gavin to his small boat with his child and his dog and plenty of things to do. \*Like many boats, Romany has a legend. Gavin runs it through his head, or what he can remember. She was found adrift; that is a fact. It was twenty-odd years ago. Some fishermen from Mayaro spotted her, empty, her sails flapping, the VHF radio babbling in Spanish, a mile out in the choppy Atlantic sea, east of Trinidad. The fishermen were a canny lot; they had the idea to sail her north, halfway round the island, to the marinas in Chaguaramas, or that was the story he got from Clive. They were hoping to collect a reward. But no one knew of the boat, or the owner, and she wasnt registered in local waters; nobody in Trinidad had offered money to bring her in. By law, the fishermen werent allowed to keep her; they went back home by bus. The coastguard merely thanked them for doing their job. Romany

was flying a Danish ensign, and, in due course, a missing persons file was opened, a lost boat file too. Romany was eventually hauled into the yard at TTSA, Trinidads yacht club, and kept dry in the hope that shed be claimed by family, or someone close to the owner. Months passed, but no one came forward. Only Clive had noticed this small, neat, orphaned boat. Only Clive Holder, then aged twenty- five, was keeping an eye on her. Gavin knows only too well these things happen at sea. Lone sailors can trip, get knocked off balance by the boom, swept overboard by a wave. In a few cases, they jump off into the sea, dazzled with all the blue, hallucinating, leaving cryptic notes behind, things like it is the mercy. Thousands of men take to the sea every year, just like hes about to, alone. Some to escape, others to race, accomplish goals, others are making deliveries. Every year, a handful is lost: drowned, swamped by freak waves, capsized in storms, mown down by bigger boats. They snare upon fish pots, or forgotten nets. Nothing is fair or easy about sailing the high seas; even experienced sailors can make mistakes. Even Joshua Slocum disappeared on his boat Spray, run down by a steamer or struck by a whale on his way to the Caribbean. Other fine sailors have been mowed down anything could have happened to the owner of Romany. A year passed. Romany began to disintegrate. But Clive was smart. Being a distant relative of the yacht clubs president, he made a modest offer of thirty thousand TT dollars. My friend Gavin Weald will go halves with me, he said. Clive had already told him about Romany, had wooed him with tales of the adventures theyd have with her. Clive was the one whod sweet-talked Gavin into his affair with Romany. Of course hed go halves. Deal done. In Trinidad, no one was going to organise an auction; the boat would rot first. They kept her name, Romany, because its bad luck to change the name of a boat. But all those years of fun, of racing in that slow stable yacht, of down the islands and up the islands, the fishing and stargazing and all they saw on Romany, they never once discussed how she was found. They never saw a ghost skipper on board and knew little about the boat. And so she went forward into the hands of her new owners, two young men, keen and brash and in love with her and the sea. All they ever talked about was how this boat liked to roam, and that must be the reason for her name. \*Its two in the afternoon when Romany is ready to sail. In the course of unpacking, he has found many useful things stowed in the boat, including his old straw hat, a good omen. Hed wondered where itd vanished. A cross between a stetson and a sombrero, it is the hat of his entire adult life, made of some kind of indestructible straw. He looks like a Mexican peasant in it, and it has been the object of much ridicule in the past, but its huge and shady and sticks to his head like a claw. Suzy has been in the saloon for most of this time, minding the little girl. Ocan has organised all the tins for him, stowing them on the tiny shelves and in cupboards by label colour, then all the bottles, then her clothes, mostly tutus and pink dresses; she unpacked them all into lockers. They will be sleeping in the V-berth, the only proper sleeping space, in the bow, all three of them, or so she has decided. It will be their raft, and she has deposited her one toy, Grover, amongst the sleeping bags. They eat a small lunch of tuna sandwiches, and he tells her all about Captain Ahab and Starbuck, and the big white whale. So, Mr Ahab only had one leg? Yes, the white whale . . . He was hungry and well he . . . er . . . ate the other one off. Owww. She makes a dramatic face. That must have hurt. I think it upset him a lot. Thats why hes vexed with the whale? Yeah. I would be vexed with a whale that bit my leg off. He chased after it? For a long time. Will we see whales, Dad? Not in the Caribbean Sea. But well see dolphins, flying fish, wait and see. I hope we see a whale. Hes got things as ready as he could, set up the wind vane on the self-steering, laid down the jack lines on the deck. The mainsail is good for hauling, the jib partially unfurled. Long time since he did anything like this alone. Long time, man. Suzy is on deck; he meshed the rails years ago so she wouldnt ever slip through. Even so, she is sitting there, steady as a bag of sweet potatoes. Right, both of you, into the cockpit, he orders. The dog jumps down but Ocan looks at him blankly, like does he now think shes going to be bossed around with him in that stupid hat? Suzy barks. She is stuck, outnumbered; it has been too long now fidgeting around, they need to get going while the afternoon is still young. The child is tired and will throw an almighty hissy fit if he doesnt get the boat off her mooring. Okay, stay there then, he calls into the saloon. He starts the engine and puts it in neutral. In moments, he casts off the stern line and then slips off the bow line, walks back to the cockpit and casts off the lazy line port side. He sits to the tiller and revs the engine. The loud chugging noise it makes sends Ocan quickly up and out. She sits next to the dog. Where are we going? she cries, half-excited. Out to sea. He smiles. They putter through the other boats moored in the marina and he is caught by a gust of dj vu, a feeling from his long youth and something he once read about a time when youth must finally be left behind. He knows hes crossing that shadowline now and a dull notion of heroism surges in his veins; some whisper has come, go now. The salt in the air gets his blood up. He can hardly wait to do this. Slowly, they pass the other boats until they are all behind them and when its all clear, he puts the engine in neutral and

turns the boat windward. He puts on his gloves and makes his way to the foredeck and hoists the mainsail up. As he hoists, he feels a stinging in his palms; but as the sail rises so too do his spirits soar upwards. In the cockpit, he steadies the tiller and looks out to sea. Romanys sail catches the easterly wind and the boat tilts to starboard. She bristles, also eager to be out, no longer waiting around. Come on then, she is saying. They pass Five Islands, then Carrera, the prison island, then Gaspare with its banks of colourful island homes.

They have the wind up and behind them and the boat sinks into the sea. In front of them is a wide-open ocean, more green than blue, more Orinoco than seawater for now. Boats everywhere, tankers and liners and a huge oil rig far out. The dog barks with joy. He sits down and smiles at the child. See that? He points far out to a broken-off piece of rock which looks just like a tooth. It juts out from the sea. Were going out there, and then round the corner. Ocan nods. She is somehow fooled, that or she is getting it now. No more school.

She puts her blue Snoopy mirrored sunglasses down onto her nose and acts as though she knows what is happening, like she knew of this plan all along. She hasnt sailed much, his mermaid child. She has been on one or two day cruises, they took her down the islands a few times; she will be fine, he reassures himself. Fine as this day. Must get some sun block on her nose, he thinks, and with that he takes his mobile phone out

from his back pocket and tosses it over his shoulder, into the sea. Revue de presse Praise for

Archipelago: 'There's a warmth to this book, an exuberance and a wisdom, that makes the experience of reading it feel not just pleasurable but somehow instructive. It's funny, sometimes bitingly poignant. A

brilliant piece of storytelling' Andrew Miller, author of Pure, winner of the Costa Book of the Year 2011 PRAISE FOR The White Woman on the Green Bicycle: 'Roffey's evocation of Trinidad is extraordinary vivid, the central relationship beautifully observed... deservedly short-listed for the Orange Prize' The Times 'A rich and highly engaging novel' Guardian 'Roffey's Orange Prize nominated book is a brilliant, brutal study of a marriage overcast by too much mutual compromise' Independent