



The Pier Falls: And Other Stories (Vintage Contemporaries)

By Mark Haddon

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Nine dazzling stories from the beloved, bestselling author of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.

The stories that make up *The Pier Falls* take many forms—Victorian adventure, science fiction, morality tale, contemporary realism—but they are united by the talent and empathy that have made Mark Haddon a household name. Lyrical and uncompromising, these tales span from England to Mars, ancient Greece to the deepest Amazon. Drawing inventively from history, myth, folklore, and modern life, *The Pier Falls* reveals a previously unseen side of the celebrated author.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Truly spectacular. . . . While reading these terrific tales one wonders how a single mind can create such diverse fiction as Mark Haddon has done here.” —*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“[Haddon is] a virtuoso stylist. . . . One reads in a state of surrender.” —*Chicago Tribune*

“Gripping. . . . [Haddon is an] expert and innovative world-builder. . . . His voice can convey the authority of ancient fairy tales.” —*The New York Times*

“The nine stories in [*The Pier Falls*] are exuberant, lusty exercises in juxtaposition: intimacy and estrangement, exoticism and domesticity, innocuousness and malevolence, the cataloguing of minute detail and the expansiveness of the zoomed-out lens.” —*The Guardian*

“Haunting. . . . It is rare that an author can write with such depth and clarity.” —*Austin American Statesman*

"*The Pier Falls* is pure genius and I'm jealous of every word." —Douglas Coupland

About the Author

Mark Haddon is the author of the bestselling novels *The Red House* and *A Spot of Bother*. His novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for First Fiction and is the basis for the Tony Award-winning play. He is the author of a collection of poetry, *The Talking Horse and the Sad Girl and the Village Under the Sea*, has written and illustrated numerous children's books, and has won awards for both his radio dramas and his television screenplays. He teaches creative writing for the Arvon Foundation and lives in Oxford, England.

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THE PIER FALLS

23 July 1970, the end of the afternoon. A cool breeze off the Channel, a mackerel sky overhead and, far out, a column of sunlight falling onto a trawler as if God had picked it out for some kind of blessing. The upper storeys of the Regency buildings along the front sit above a gaudy rank of coffee houses and fish bars and knick-knack shops with striped awnings selling 99s and dried seahorses in cellophane envelopes. The names of the hotels are writ large in neon and weatherproof paint. The Excelsior, the Camden, the Royal. The word Royal is missing an o.

Gulls wheel and cry. Two thousand people saunter along the prom, some carrying towels and Tizer to the beach, others pausing to put a shilling in the telescope or to lean against a balustrade whose pistachio-green paint has blistered and popped in a hundred years of salt air. A gull picks up a wafer from a dropped ice cream and lifts into the wind.

On the beach a portly woman hammers a windbreak into the sand with the heel of a shoe while a pair of freckled twins build a fort from sand and lolly sticks. The deckchair man is collecting rentals, doling out change from a leather pouch at his hip. “No deeper than your waist,” shouts a father. “Susan? No deeper than your waist.”

The air on the pier is thick with the smell of engine grease and fried onions spooned onto hot dogs. The boys from the ticket booth ride shotgun on the rubber rims of the bumper cars, the contacts scraping and sparking on the live chicken wire nailed to the roof above their heads. A barrel organ plays Strauss waltzes on repeat.

Nine minutes to five. Ozone and sea-sparkle and carnival licence.

This is how it begins.

A rivet fails, one of eight which should clamp the joint between two weight-bearing girders on the western side of the pier. Five have sheared already in heavy January seas earlier this year. There is a faint tremor underfoot as if a suitcase or a step-ladder has been dropped somewhere nearby. No one takes any notice. There are now two rivets holding the tonnage previously supported by eight.

In the aquarium by the marina the dolphins turn in their blue prison.

Twelve and a half minutes later another rivet snaps and a section of the pier drops by half an inch with a soft thump. People turn to look at one another. The same momentary reduction in weight you feel when a lift starts descending. But the pier is always moving in the wind and the tide, so everyone returns to eating their pineapple fritters and rolling coins into the fruit machines.

The noise, when it comes, is like the noise of a redwood being felled, wood and metal bending and splitting under pressure. Everyone looks at their feet, feeling the hum and judder of the struts. The noise stops and there is a moment of silence, as if the sea itself were holding its breath. Then, with a peal of biblical thunder, a wide semicircle of walkway is hauled seaward by the weight of the broken girders underneath. A woman and three children standing at the rail drop instantly. Six more people are poured, scrabbling, down the half-crater of shattered wood into the sea. If you look through the black haystack of planks and beams you can see three figures thrashing in the dark water, a fourth floating face-down and a fifth folded over a weed-covered beam. The rest are trapped underwater somewhere. Up on the pier a man hurls five lifebelts one after the other into the sea. Other holidaymakers drop their possessions as they flee so that the walkway is littered with bottles and sunglasses and cardboard cones of chips. A cocker spaniel runs in circles trailing a blue lead.

Two men are helping an elderly lady to her feet when yet more decking gives way beneath them. The shorter, bearded man grabs the claw foot of an iron bench and hangs onto the woman till a teenage boy is able to lean down and help them both up, but the taller man with the braces and the rolled-up shirtsleeves slides down the buckled planking till he is brought to a halt by a spike of broken rail which enters the small of his back. He wriggles like a fish. No one will go down to help him. The slope is too steep, the structure too untrustworthy. A father turns his daughter's face away.

The men running the big wheel are trying to empty each gondola in turn, but those stuck at the top of the ride are screaming and those lower down are unwilling to wait their turn and jump out, some twisting ankles, one breaking a wrist.

On the beach everyone stands and stares at the hole punched into the familiar view. The coloured lights still flash. Faintly they can hear the "Emperor Waltz." Five men tear off shoes and shirts and trousers and run into the surf.

A line of seven ornamental belvederes runs down the centre of the pier. The western side of this spine is now impassable, so everyone seaward of the fall is squeezing through the bottleneck on the eastern side to reach

the turnstiles, the promenade and safety. At the narrowest point people are starting to lose their footing and tumble so that those still upright must either walk on top of them or fall and be trampled in their turn.

Sixty seconds gone, seven people dead, three survivors in the water. The man with the braces and the rolled-up sleeves is still alive but will not be for long. Eight people, three of them children, are being crushed by the crowd pouring over them.

One of the belvederes is listing now, the metal structure being twisted so hard that the twenty-two glass windows explode one after the other.

The pier manager has opened the service gate beside the turnstiles and escapees are fanning onto the pavement, dishevelled, bloody, wide-eyed. A small boy is being carried in the arms of his father. A teenage girl with a shattered femur sticking through the skin of her right leg is suspended between the shoulders of two men.

The traffic along the promenade comes to a halt and a crowd lines the rails. The whole front is so quiet that everyone hears the noise this time.

Two minutes and twenty seconds. The belvedere falls first, dragging the metal framework and the decking after it. Forty-seven people drop into a threshing machine of spars and beams.

Only six of these people will survive, one of them a boy of six whose parents wrap themselves around him as they fall.

The rubberised wires carrying power along the pier spark like fireworks as they are torn apart. All the lights go out on the end of the pier. The barrel organ wheezes to a halt.

The men swimming out to help are lifted on the small tsunami generated by the mass of broken pier entering the water. It passes under them and heads towards the beach where it sends everyone scurrying above the high-water mark as if it were infected by the event which caused it.

The arcade manager sits in his tiny office at the end of the pier, the dead receiver pressed to his ear. He is twenty-five. He has never even been to London. He has no idea what to do.

The pilot of a twin-engined Cessna 76-D looks down. He can't believe what he is seeing. He banks and circles the pier to double-check before radioing Shoreham tower.

The pier is now in two separate sections, the ragged end of one facing the ragged end of the other, forty-five tons of wood and metal knotted in the water between them. Some of those stranded on the seaward section stand at the edge desperate to be seen and heard by anyone who might rescue them. Others hang back, trying to gauge the most dependable part of the structure. Three couples are trapped in the ghost train listening to the noises outside, fearful that if they manage to get out they will find themselves watching the end of the world.

On the landward section two people lie motionless on the decking and three others are too badly injured to move. A woman is shaking the body of her unconscious husband as if he has overslept and is late for work, while a man with tattooed forearms

chases the petrified cocker spaniel in a large figure of eight. An elderly lady has had a fatal heart attack and remains seated on a bench, head tilted to one side as if she has dozed off and missed all the excitement.

Faint sirens can be heard from the maze of the town.

Two of the swimming men turn back, frightened that they will be struck by yet more of the pier collapsing, but the other three swim on into the archipelago of bodies and broken wood. The pier looms overhead, so much bigger than it has ever seemed from the beach or up there on the walkway, so much darker, more malign. The men can hear the groan and crunch of girders still settling beneath them in the water.

They find a terrified woman, two girls who turn out to be sisters and a man still wearing his spectacles who floats upright in the swell like a seal, only vaguely aware of his surroundings. The woman is hyperventilating and lashing out so wildly that the men wonder initially if she is caught on something under the surface. Only the sisters seem wholly compos mentis, so one of the rescuers escorts them back to the shore. The man wearing the spectacles asks what has happened then asks for the explanation to be repeated. The panicking woman won't let anyone come near her, so they have to tread water and let her expend all her energy and come perilously close to drowning before she is tractable.

Just beyond the end of the pier five empty lifebelts are making their way out to sea.

A young man on the promenade lifts his Leica and takes three photographs. Only when he reads the paper the following morning will he realise what is happening in these pictures. Immediately he will open the camera and yank the film out of its drum so that the images are burned away by the light.

The air-sea rescue helicopter rises from its painted yellow circle on the runway at Shoreham, tilts into the prevailing wind and swings off the airfield.

Five minutes. Fifty-eight dead.

On the promenade a number of those who ran to safety have failed to find wives or husbands or children or parents. The manager has closed the gate but these people are weeping and shouting, trying to get back onto the pier. There are no police in attendance yet and he can see that keeping them here against their will may be as dangerous as letting them through and he doesn't want this responsibility, so he reopens the gate and twelve of them pour past as if he has opened the doors to a January sale. The last of these is a girl of no more than eight years old. He grabs her collar. She fights and weeps at the end of his arm.

The lifeboat is scrambled.

On the eastern side of the pier a farmer from Bicester is trying to prise the six-year-old boy from between his parents. The boy can surely see that they are dead. Half his father's head is missing. Or perhaps he can't see this. He won't let go of them and his grip is so tight that the man is afraid he will break the boy's arm if he pulls any harder. He asks the boy what his name is but the boy won't answer. The boy is in some private hell which he will never entirely leave. The farmer has no choice but to turn and swim, towing the three of them ashore. Only when he tries to stand will he realise that his ankle is broken.

The tattooed man comes running down the pier clasping the cocker spaniel to his chest and when he runs through the gate onto the promenade the two of them are greeted by cheers and whoops from a crowd eager to celebrate some small good thing.

Eight minutes. Fifty-nine dead.

The helicopter appears in the sun-glare from the west. Everyone on the promenade hears the growing pulse

of the rotors and turns to watch.

None of the eleven people running onto the pier find their missing relatives among the injured and unconscious so they stand near the ragged chasm and shout to the people on the other side. Have they seen an old lady in a green windcheater? A little girl with long red hair? But the people on the far side are not interested in the lady in the windcheater and the girl with red hair because they are missing relatives of their own and they are terrified that the rest of the pier will collapse and the only thing they want to know is when they are going to be rescued.

Two ambulances reach the seafront but the traffic is jammed so tight that the crews have to run carrying stretchers and emergency bags. Five stay with the injured on the front, three continue onto the pier itself.

Three policemen are trying to push the spectators back, some of whom resent being evicted from ringside seats. Nobody realises how many people have died. Everyone is thinking how they will tell the story to friends and family and workmates.

On the pier a woman is slid sideways onto a spinal board. An elderly man with a broken collarbone is given morphine.

Fourteen minutes. Sixty dead.

On the promenade people are wondering if it was an IRA bomb. No one wants to believe that time and weather can be this dangerous, and it is exciting to think of oneself as a potential target.

As the helicopter hovers over the end of the pier the people below fight to be the first to grab the winchman as he descends, but the downdraught batters them away from its epicentre and he alights in a circle of empty decking. He scoops a little girl from her mother's arms and the sight of her being clipped into a harness shames them. As she is hoisted aloft they start gathering the other children, lining them up in order of age ready for the next lift.

The swimmers come ashore—the sisters, the confused man, the struggling woman, their three rescuers. People rush forward with towels. It looks like a competition to see whose will be chosen. The struggling woman drops to her knees and digs her hands into the sand as if nothing and no one is going to separate her from solid ground ever again.

The body of the old woman who had a heart attack is carried through the service gate under a white sheet into a sudden hush. There are still people on the front who think she is the only person who has died.

The farmer towing the little boy and his dead parents hauls them into the shallows and feels one end of his broken fibula grinding against the other. It should hurt but he can feel no pain. He needs very badly to lie down. He rolls over into the water and looks at the clouds. People rush into the surf, then see his cargo and come to a halt. A young woman steps between them, a nurse from Southampton where she works in the accident and emergency department. She has seen much worse. She is the only black person on the entire beach. She puts her hands flat on the boy's shoulders and some of those watching wonder if she is using voodoo, but it is the steadiness of her voice which enables him to let go of his parents' bodies and turn and be held by someone who is not frightened. The colour of her skin helps too, the fact that she is so different from all these other people among whom he no longer belongs. Her name is Renée. They will stay in touch with one another for the next thirty years.

The fourth child is lifted into the helicopter, then the fifth. The arcade manager emerges from his tiny office. He realises that if he is the last person winched to safety he will be able to say, “I stayed at my post.”

The last couple escape from the ghost train, the husband kicking his way through Frankenstein’s Monster painted on the plywood sheeting of the façade.

Twenty-five minutes. Sixty-one dead.

The lifeboat arrives and the crew begin hauling people from the water. Some cannot stop talking. Some slither into the bottom of the boat like netted fish, sodden, glassy-eyed, oblivious. A boy of thirteen floats in a dark recess between two fallen girders. He refuses to come out and will not respond to their calls. A crew member jumps into the water but the boy retreats into the flooded forest of wreckage and they are forced to abandon him.

The winch is stowed and the helicopter swings away with all the children on board. Many of them have left parents on the pier. Several don’t know if their parents are alive. For all of them the hammering roar is a comfort, filling their heads so completely that they are unable to entertain the terrifying thoughts that will return only when they are helped down onto the tarmac and run through the wind from the rotors towards the women from the St. John’s Ambulance waiting for them outside the little terminal building.

On the promenade a man in a dirty white apron squeezes through the crowd bearing hot dogs and sweet tea from the stand he runs beside the crazy golf. He returns with a second tray.

Other boats are being drawn towards the pier, a Bristol motor cruiser, an aluminium launch with a Mercury outboard, two fibreglass Hornets. They idle just beyond the moraine of bodies and debris, unable either to help or to turn away.

The boy of thirteen will not come out from the flooded forest because he knows that his sister is in there somewhere. He cannot find her. After thirty minutes he is hypothermic and feels desperately cold. Then, quite suddenly, he doesn’t feel cold at all. This doesn’t seem strange. Nothing seems strange anymore. He wants to take his clothes off but hardly has the energy to stay afloat. Out there, only yards away, the world continues—sunshine, boats, a helicopter. But he feels safe in here. He is not thinking about his sister anymore. He cannot remember having a sister. Only this deep need to be in the dark, to be contained, unseen, some primal circuit still alight on the dimming circuit board of the brainstem. He sinks into the water five times, coughs and forces himself back to the surface, but with less effort each time and with a less distinct sense of what he has just avoided. The sixth time there is so little left of his mind that he lets it go as easily as if it were a book falling from his sleeping hand.

A journalist from the *Argus* stands in a phone box reading the shorthand he has scribbled onto four pages of a ring-bound notebook. “Shortly before five in the afternoon . . .”

One of the men trapped on the far end of the pier is terrified of flying. He is wearing a Leeds United T-shirt. The prospect of being lifted into the helicopter is many times worse than that of the structure collapsing beneath him. He knows that his only other choice is to jump from the pier. He is a strong swimmer but the drop to the water is sixty feet. The two possibilities toggle at increasing speeds in his mind—fly, jump, fly, jump. He feels sick. His wife is airlifted in the second batch and in her absence his thoughts race at increasing speeds until he realises that he will lose his mind and that this possibility is worse than flying or jumping. At which point he sees himself turn away from the crowd and run towards the railing. The

sensation of watching himself from a distance is so strong that he wants to cry out to this foolish man to remove his shoes and trousers first. He remembers nothing of the leap itself, only the terrible surprise of waking underwater with no memory of where he is or why. He fights his way to the surface, refills his lungs several times and forces off his double-knotted shoes. He can see now that he is at the seaside and that he is floating in the shadow of some vast object. He turns and the wrecked pier looms over him. He remembers what has happened and turns again and swims hard. After a hundred yards he stops and turns for a third time and finds that the distance has turned the pier into a part of the view. He looks towards the town, the crowds, the blue flashing lights, the Camden, the Royal. He is unaware that people saw him jump and that he is now starring in his own brief episode in the afternoon's greater drama. He feels victorious, unburdened. He swims steadily towards the beach where he is cheered ashore, wrapped in a red blanket and led to an ambulance. His wife will spend three hours thinking he is dead and will not forgive him for a long time.

There is now no one left on the far end of the pier.

The final person dies, deep inside the tangle of planks and girders. He is fifteen years old. He helped his father on the helter-skelter, collecting the mats and going up the ladder at the back when kids got scared or started a fight inside. He has been unconscious since he fell.

The lifeboat returns and the crew retrieve fifteen bodies from the water.

An hour and a half. Sixty-four dead.

A Baptist minister offers the use of his church hall. Survivors are escorted by policemen and firemen over the road, up Hope Street, through a door beside Whelan's Marine Stores and into a large warm room with fluorescent lighting and a parquet floor. The lid of a tea urn is rattling and two ladies are making sandwiches in the kitchenette. People slump onto chairs and onto the floor. They are no longer being observed. They are among people who understand. Some weep openly, some sit and stare. Three children are unaccompanied, two boys and a girl. The parents of the younger boy have been airlifted to Shoreham. The other two children are now orphans. The girl saw her parents die and is inconsolable. The boy has concocted a story in which his parents fell into the sea and were picked up by a fishing boat, a story so detailed and told with such earnestness that the elderly woman to whom he is telling it doesn't realise anything is wrong until he explains that they are now living in France.

A policewoman moves quietly round the room, squatting beside each group in turn. "Are you missing anyone?"

Outside, the lifeboat returns for a third time with a cargo of rope and orange buoys to keep away the curious and the ghoulish.

Three hours and twenty minutes.

Six men from the council works department erect shuttering around the pier entrance, big frames of two-by-four covered with sheets of chipboard.

In the hospital most of the broken bones have been set and the girl with the shattered femur is having it pinned in surgery. A woman has had a splinter the size of a carving knife pulled from her chest.

Evening comes. The front is unnaturally empty. No one wants to look at the pier anymore. They are

elsewhere eating scampi and baked Alaska, watching *The Railway Children* at the Coronet, or driving to neighbouring resorts for evening walks against a view that can be comfortably ignored. In spite of which the conversation keeps circling back, because at sometime this week everyone has stood in a spot which is now empty air. Everyone can feel the thrilling shiver of the Reaper passing close, dampened rapidly by the thought of those poor people. But was it a bomb? Was there a man on the front with a radio control and a trip switch? Had they perhaps sat next to him?

Nine people remain buried under wreckage. The authorities know about eight of these. The ninth is a girl of fifteen who ran away from her home in Stockport six months ago. Her parents will never connect her to the event in the newspaper and will spend the rest of their lives waiting for her to come home.

The orphaned boy and girl are driven to the house of a couple who foster for the local social services until their grandparents arrive tomorrow. The boy still believes his parents are living in France.

The reunited families have gone. The hall is almost empty now. The only people who remain are those waiting for family members who will never come.

None of the survivors sleep well. They wake from dreams in which the floor beneath them vanishes. They wake from dreams of being trapped inside a cat's cradle of iron and wood as the tide rises.

2 a.m. Clear skies. The whole town so precise and blue that you could lean down and pick up that moored yacht between your thumb and forefinger. Only the surf moving and a single drunk shouting at the sea. The gaudy lights along the front have been turned off as a mark of respect, leaving a scattering of yellow windows and the hotel names in green and red neon. Excelsior, Camden, Royal.

3 a.m. Mars just visible above the Downs and a choppy stripe of moon across the sea. There is a dull boom as the far end of the pier's landward half drops and twists like a monster shifting in its sleep.

The TV crews arrive at 5 a.m. They set up camp on the prom and outside the police station, smoking and telling jokes and drinking sugary coffee from Thermos flasks.

Dawn comes and for a brief period the wrecked pier is beautiful, but the epicentre of the town is already moving eastwards, down the prom towards the dolphinarium and the saltwater swimming pool. The pier is already becoming something you walk past.

People get their holiday snaps back from the chemist's. Some of the pictures contain the final images of family members who are now dead. They smile, they shade their eyes, they eat chips and hold outsize teddy bears. They have only minutes to live. In one freakish photograph a teenage boy is already falling downwards, his mouth wide open as if he were singing.

Funerals are held and the legal wrangle begins.

Paint peels, metal rusts. Gulls gather on the roundabouts and the belvederes. Bulbs shatter, colours fade. Cormorants nest on the rotten decking. In high winds the gondolas on the big wheel sway and creak. The ghost train becomes a roost for pipistrelles and greater horseshoe bats; the tangled beams and girders underwater become a home for conger eels and octopus.

Three years later a man walking his dog along the beach will find a sea-bleached skull washed up by a winter storm. It will be laid to rest with full funeral rites in a corner of the graveyard of St. Bartholomew's Church under a stone inscribed with the words, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea,

and gathered of every kind.”

Ten years after the disaster the pier is brought down in a series of controlled explosions, and over many months the remnants are lifted laboriously by a floating crane and towed to a marine break- ers in Southampton. No other human remains are found.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Connie Simpson:

Inside other case, little people like to read book *The Pier Falls: And Other Stories* (Vintage Contemporaries). You can choose the best book if you'd prefer reading a book. Providing we know about how is important a book *The Pier Falls: And Other Stories* (Vintage Contemporaries). You can add know-how and of course you can around the world by just a book. Absolutely right, due to the fact from book you can realize everything! From your country until foreign or abroad you may be known. About simple thing until wonderful thing you can know that. In this era, you can open a book or perhaps searching by internet unit. It is called e-book. You need to use it when you feel weary to go to the library. Let's study.

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