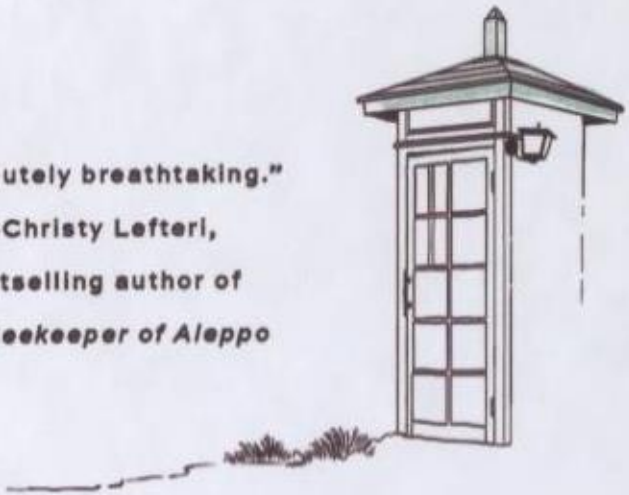
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TERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

the phone booth at the edge of the world

A NOVEL



"Absolutely breathtaking."
—Christy Lefteri,
bestselling author of
The Beekeeper of Aleppo

Laura Imai Messina

The PHONE BOX at the EDGE of the WORLD

Laura Imai Messina

Translated from the Italian by Lucy Rand



MANILLA
PRESS

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To Ryōsuke, Sōsuke and Emilio,
To the voices that will always be with you

A note on the language

The Hepburn Romanisation system was used for the transcription of Japanese terms, according to which vowels are read as short vowels in English (like the *a* in *cat*, *e* in *edge*, *i* in *igloo*, *o* in *octopus* and *u* in *umbrella*) unless they carry a macron (ō), which doubles the length of the vowel sound. The *g* sound is hard, like in *pig*, *f* is pronounced more like *h*, and *r* something more akin to *l*.

Following the Japanese convention, family names precede given names.

This story was inspired by a real place, in the north-east of Japan, in Iwate Prefecture.

One day, a man installed a telephone box in the garden of his house at the foot of Kujira-yama, the Mountain of the Whale, just next to the city of Ōtsuchi, one of the places worst hit by the tsunami of 11th March 2011.

Inside there is an old black telephone, disconnected, that carries voices into the wind.

Thousands of people make the pilgrimage there every year.

It is a passing of forms from one life
to another.
A concert in which
only the orchestra changes.
But the music remains, it's there.

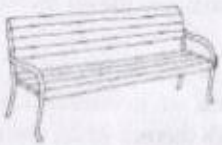
—Mariangela Gualtieri

Awake, O north wind; and
Come thou south,
blow upon my garden,
that the spices thereof may flow out.
Let my beloved come into his garden
and eat his pleasant fruits.
[…]
Come with me from Lebanon, my bride …

—Song of Songs 4: 16, 8

So speak not too lovingly.

—Kojiki



Prologue

In the vast, steep garden of Bell Gardia, great gusts of wind lashed the plants.

The woman instinctively raised an elbow to her face, rounding her back. Then, almost immediately, she straightened up again.

She had arrived before dawn, and watched as the light came up but the sun remained hidden. She had unloaded the big sacks from the car: fifty metres of maximum-thickness plastic rolled up in a tube, cylinders of electrical tape, ten boxes of ring-shank nails to attach to the ground and a hammer with a ladies' handle. At Conan, the enormous hardware store, a shop assistant had asked if she would mind showing him her hands. He just wanted to measure her grip, he said, but she had found herself frozen, unable to respond.

She hurried towards the phone box now. It looked fragile, as if it were made of candy canes and crumbling meringue. The wind was raging already; she didn't have much time.

They worked non-stop on the hill above Ōtsuchi for two hours: she – wrapping the phone box, the bench, the entrance sign and the little archway at the beginning of the path in tarpaulin – and the wind, which didn't let up for a moment. Every so often she would hug herself involuntarily, the way she had done for years whenever she felt her emotions rising up. But then she would get back on her feet, lengthen her spine and face the bank of clouds that now enshrouded the entire hill.

Only once she had finished, once she could taste the sea in her mouth, as if the world had been turned on its head, did she stop. Exhausted, she sat down on the bench, which she'd wrapped up like a silkworm in its cocoon, feeling the weight of her boots, their soles packed with earth.

If the world were to fall now, she told herself, she would fall with it, but if there was even the slightest chance of it staying upright, she would use every last ounce of energy she had to make that happen.

The city below was still asleep. There was the odd window lit by the glow of a lamp, but most people had left their roller shutters down and secured their rain screens with wooden rods, in preparation for the approaching typhoon. Some had leaned sandbags against doors to prevent them from being ripped off their hinges by the fury of the wind and to stop the rain from flooding the rooms inside.

Yet Yui seemed oblivious to the rain and the dense blackness of the sky. She observed her work: the plastic and tape dressings she had used to protect the phone box, the wooden bench, the pathway of slabs in single file, the archway, and the signpost that read 'THE WIND PHONE'.

Everything was caked in mud and thoroughly waterlogged. If the typhoon threatened any sort of damage, she would be there, ready to hold it all in place.

Yui was untouched by the most basic truth: that fragility does not reside in things so much as in flesh. An object can be repaired or replaced, but the body cannot. Perhaps it is stronger than the soul, which once broken can remain so forever, but it is weaker than wood, lead or iron. Her refusal to acknowledge this meant that she didn't, for a single moment, perceive the danger she was in.

'It's September already,' she sighed, contemplating the darkness of the sky that was approaching from the east. *Nagatsuki* 長月, 'the month of long nights', as it used to be called. Yet she had repeated that same phrase every month: it's October already, November, December. It's April already, she had said, and then it was May, and so on; in the never-ending list of days that began on 11th March 2011.

Every week had been a struggle; every month simply hours stacked up in the attic, for a future that might never arrive.

Yui had long dark hair that was blonde at the tips, as if it were growing from the bottom up. She had stopped dying it when her mother and daughter were swallowed by the sea. Instead she got it cut a little shorter each time, until, eventually, it looked like this, a fallen halo. The colour of

her hair, the contrast between the yellow and its natural black, had ended up being a sort of log of her grief. Like an advent calendar.

If she was still alive, she owed it all to that garden, to the white telephone box with the sky-blue roof and the black telephone sitting by the notebook on the ledge. Her fingers would dial a number at random, her hand would lift the receiver to her ear and her words would tumble into it. Sometimes she cried, sometimes she laughed, because life could still be funny, even after a tragedy.

Now the typhoon was almost upon her, and Yui finally noticed it.

Strong winds were common in that area, especially in the summer. They tore up the landscape, overturned roofs and scattered tiles across the earth like seeds, and every time it happened Suzuki-san, the custodian of Bell Gardia, would protect the garden with tender loving care.

This time, however, the typhoon was supposed to be unusually destructive and Suzuki-san wouldn't be there. The rumour of his illness had spread quickly. The extent of it was unclear, but people knew he had been admitted to hospital.

If he wasn't there to defend the place, who would be?

In Yui's mind, the typhoon was a boy with a nasty glint in his eye, plotting to pour a bucket of water over another child's carefully constructed sandcastle, a child who was less experienced, more naive. The boy observed his victim from behind a rock, poised to strike.

The position of the clouds was constantly shifting, the sky moving fast and the light sliding rapidly westwards. The sun appeared momentarily, bathing her in warmth before slipping away again.

Then, all at once, the garden was entirely submerged in darkness and the wind's deafening roar, and everything around Yui was pressed flat under its fury.

Her hair inflated like Medusa's, torn into ribbons that swirled in a vortex around her head. It felt like a warning for the plants that would soon be uprooted, pulled to shreds. The scarlet *higan-bana*, the flower of Nirvana, the flower of the dead; the hydrangea that had bloomed and gone to seed again; the white inflorescence of the *fūsen-kazura*, with its green fruits that children loved to ring like bells.

Although it had become difficult to stand up, Yui had to check one last time that everything was well protected. Dragging herself along the ground and leaning into the bank of air in turns, she somehow made it to the end of the path. She double-checked the hooks she had used to secure the tarpaulin to the cabin, then pulled herself through the wind with her arms, as if swimming.

One of the paving slabs made a crunching sound under her foot, and a memory flooded Yui's mind – her daughter's voice calling the blocks of stone that covered the ditch near their house 'biscuits'.

She smiled, happy to have salvaged another one.

As children we see happiness in things. A toy train sticking out of a basket or the plastic film around a slice of cake. Or a photograph of a scene in which we are at the centre, all eyes on us.

As adults it gets more complicated. Happiness is success, work, a man or a woman. All vague, laborious things. Whether it's a word we use in relation to our lives or not, it's mostly just that, a word.

Childhood taught us something different about happiness, Yui thought, that all you needed to do was reach out your hand in the right direction and it was there to be taken.

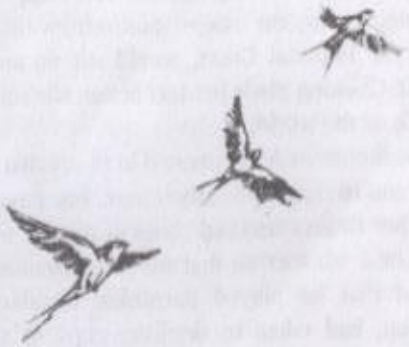
Under the grey sludge of sky, this thirty-year-old woman stood up straight, in spite of everything. She considered how material happiness could be, and got lost in that thought like she would once get lost in books, in the stories of others that, ever since she was a young girl, had all, without exception, sounded so much nicer than her own. She wondered whether that was why she had chosen to work in radio. She was fascinated by other people's lives, getting caught up in their worlds.

For several years, Yui's image of happiness had resided in the telephone box and the heavy black object with the numbers 1 to 0 arranged in a circle on the front. With her ear pressed to the receiver, she would become absorbed in the view of the garden on that remote hillside in north-east Japan. From there she could see the glittering sea, smell the salt rising up in ripples. From there Yui would dream of talking to her daughter, whose life had ended after only three years, and her mother, who had held the little girl in her arms until the very end.

And when happiness is a thing, anything that threatens its safety is the enemy. Even if it's something impalpable like the wind, or the rain pouring down from above.

Yui would risk her hollow existence to ensure nothing bad happened to that *thing*, or to the place that had made it real.

I



chapter one

THE FIRST TIME SHE HEARD about it was on the radio.

A listener called in at the end of Yui's programme to share what had helped him recover after losing his wife.

They had discussed the episode's main topic at length in the editorial room before settling on it. They all knew about her, about the deep abyss she carried inside. But Yui had insisted that whatever came up on the programme, she could handle it. After all, it was precisely because she had suffered so much that she couldn't be hurt anymore.

'What has made it easier for you, following a bereavement, to get up in the morning and go to bed at night? What lifts you up when you're down?'

But the episode was much less dark than they had anticipated.

A woman from Aomori said she would cook whenever she felt sad: she made sweet and savoury tarts, macaroons, jams, small dishes like croquettes or fish grilled in soy sauce and sugar, boiled vegetables for her *bentō*; she had even bought a separate freezer so that she could preserve her creations whenever the mood struck her. She would always make sure the freezer was thoroughly defrosted in time for *Hina-matsuri*, Girls' Day, on 3rd March,

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the day she used to celebrate her daughter. She knew that seeing the display of dolls in the living room, the staged platform with the collection of figurines depicting the Imperial Court, would stir up an urgent desire to peel, cut and parboil. Cooking made her feel better, she said; it helped her to place her hands back on the world.

A young office worker from Aichi phoned in to say that she went to cafes to stroke dogs, cats and ferrets, especially ferrets. Just having them rub their little noses against her fingers restored some of the joy of being alive. An old man, speaking in a whisper so that his wife wouldn't hear from the bedroom, confessed that he played pachinko; a salaryman, who was mourning a break-up, had taken to drinking cups of strong cocoa and crunching on *senbei*.

Everybody smiled when a housewife from Tōkyō, a woman of around fifty who had lost her best friend in a car accident, said she had started studying French and how just changing the sound of her voice, using the husky *rrrr* sound and the complex accents on letters, made her feel like a new woman. 'I'll never learn the language, I'm truly hopeless, but you can't imagine how good it feels to say *bonjouuurrrrr*.'

The episode's final call came in from Iwate, one of the areas affected by the 2011 disaster. The producer glanced at the sound technician, who observed Yui for a long moment and then lowered his gaze to the control panel, where it remained until the end of the call.

Like Yui's mother and daughter, it was the tsunami that had taken the listener's wife; their house was uprooted by the water, her body dragged through the debris, catalogued among the *yukue fumei*, 'whereabouts unknown', the missing. Now he was living at his son's house, far inland, where the sea was something you only saw in pictures.

'So,' the voice began, between regular inhalations on a cigarette, 'there's this phone box in a garden, on a hill in the middle of nowhere. The phone isn't connected to anything, but your voice is carried away with the wind. I'll say, *Hi, Yoko, how are you?* And I feel myself becoming the person I was before, my wife listening to me from the kitchen, busy preparing breakfast or dinner, me grumbling that the coffee's burned my tongue.

'Yesterday evening I was reading my grandson the story of *Peter Pan*, the little flying boy who loses his shadow and the girl who sews it back

onto the soles of his feet. And, you know, I think that's what we're doing when we go up that hill to Suzuki-san's garden: we're trying to get our shadows back.'

Everybody in the radio suite was silent, as if, out of nowhere, an enormous foreign object had appeared in their midst.

Even Yui, usually exceptionally good at cutting off the most loquacious callers with a few carefully chosen words, didn't make a sound. She was only roused from her trance when the man coughed and the sound operator made his voice fade out. She quickly introduced the next track, and was taken aback by the title, a pure coincidence: Max Richter's 'Mrs Dalloway: In the Garden'.

Many more messages came in that night, and they kept arriving even as Yui was on the penultimate train for Shibuya and the last one for Kichijōji.

She closed her eyes, even though sleep was still far away. She went back and forth over that listener's words again and again, as if retracing her steps up and down the same street and each time discovering new details. A road sign, the name of a shop, a house. She wouldn't fall asleep until she knew the route by heart.

The next day, for the first time since her mother and daughter had died, Yui asked for two days off.

She started the car's engine after a long period of idleness, filled up with petrol and, following the instructions in the satnav, headed towards Suzuki-san's garden.

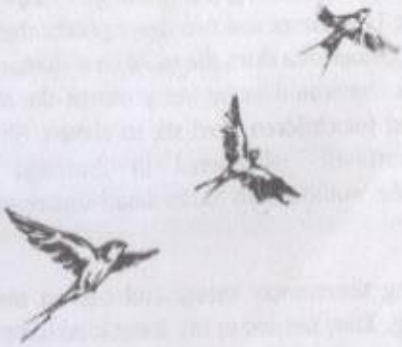
If not yet happiness, at the very least relief, was about to become a thing.



chapter two

Playlist for that Night During Yui's Radio Programme

Fakear, 'Jonnhae Pt. 2'.
Hans Zimmer, 'Time'.
Plaid, 'Melifer'.
Agnes Obel, 'Stone'.
Sakamoto Kyū, 'Ue wo muite arukōō' [I look up as I walk].
The Cinematic Orchestra, 'Arrival of the Birds & Transformation'.
Max Richter, 'Mrs Dalloway: In the Garden'.
Vance Joy, 'Call If You Need Me'.



chapter three

As she played around with the satnav, Yui tried desperately not to be sick.

The view of the sea had that effect on her for the first few minutes every time she saw it. As though, just by looking at it, the water would rush into her mouth, choking her. So she would quickly stuff something else in her mouth, a square of chocolate or a sweet, and within moments she would be used to the sight and the spasms would ease.

In the month following the tsunami, she had lived on a two by three metre sheet of canvas in an elementary-school gymnasium, with 120 other people. And yet she would never again feel as lonely as she had in that place.

Despite the heavy snowfall, almost unheard of in March, she would go outside as often as she could. She would squeeze through a crack in the wall of the school playground and cling to a tree that seemed firmly rooted to the earth. From there she would contemplate the ocean, now back in its correct position, and the crater of rubble it had left in its wake.

She scrutinised the water intensely; she hadn't looked at anything else for weeks. She was convinced that in there she would find the answer.

Every morning and every evening she would go to the information centre with the same query. Two names and two descriptions: the pigtails, the mid-length grey hair, the colour of a skirt, the mole on a stomach.

On her way back she would make hasty use of the school bathrooms, which were designed for children aged six to eleven. She would walk up and down the corridors wallpapered in drawings and homework assignments. Then she would return to her small square of life, silenced by all the absurdity.

Some people, among the canvas sheets laid out on the linoleum floor, wouldn't stop talking. They needed to say it out loud to be sure it had really happened. Others, however, said nothing, as if they were terrified to read the next page, where they knew the tragedy would take place. They convinced themselves that if that page wasn't turned, the inevitable wouldn't happen. Others still, the ones who already knew everything, had nothing left to say. The majority were waiting, and Yui was one of them.

Depending on what you were told at the information centre, you belonged to one of two groups: those who knew and those who were waiting. Sometimes people would go on to another shelter, where they'd find the people they had been waiting for waiting for them.

There were hundreds of astonishing stories to tell. Everything, when you looked back on it, seemed like part of a plan ('If I hadn't been in bed sick …', 'If I'd turned right instead of left …', 'If I hadn't got out of the car …', 'If we hadn't gone home for lunch …').

Everybody had heard the voice of the young woman working at the city hall, one hundred metres from the sea, who hadn't taken a moment's break from broadcasting the tsunami warning through the loudspeaker, the repeated command to run up hills, climb to the highest floors of reinforced concrete buildings. Everybody knew that even she hadn't been saved.

The images on mobile phones, which people were now queuing for hours to recharge, played back the absurd spectacle of men, women and children clinging to rooftops, capsized cars, houses that – after putting up a good fight – followed their inhabitants into the water's deadly flow, whirling like the rinse cycle of a washing machine.

And then there was the fire, which nobody ever imagined could overcome the water. We were taught as children that scissors beats paper,

paper beats rock, and water always beats fire, extinguishing it and saving our lives. Nobody could recall, from those childhood lessons, that time is everything, and smoke fills the lungs faster than anything else. That you can also die from flames in a tsunami, without the water ever touching you.

From the high ground that skirted the town, where she had run to that day after the first quake, Yui watched the ocean advance. It was slow, silent and bold, as if its destination was inevitable. What did the sea do, if not wash in and out again?

She was far from home, and her mother's message saying that she and Yui's daughter were nearly at their local shelter had been so reassuring that Yui had simply followed the people around her. She helped an old woman who was struggling to walk, she made herself as useful as possible, convinced as she was, deep down, that she was a survivor. For a moment she had even felt guilty for her good fortune.

Arriving at the open space on the mountainside they all looked out, as though on a balcony at the theatre. They held their phones in their hands, enlivened by an excessive faith in technology. They had looked like children again, back at the age when there was no difference between fear and excitement. But when the sea struck the land, and didn't stop until it reached the base of the mountain, there was only silence.

The scene was so surreal that, for a long time, Yui couldn't be certain of what she had witnessed.

The tsunami rose much higher than predicted, so much so that, in some cases, the term 'shelter' became a broken formula, a misspelled word; an imprecise definition that creates an equivalence between two things that are, in reality, nothing alike. That's what happened to her daughter and her mother, who, when they got to the shelter, found only death awaiting them.

Yui would wait on that sheet of two metres by three metres for a month, forgetting, at a certain point, what she was waiting for. The few objects she'd had with her at the time of the earthquake lay around her like a garland. Added to them were bottles of water, towels, cups of freeze-dried ramen, *onigiri*, cereal bars, sanitary towels and energy drinks. Surrounded by these things that were getting older and older, she waited for it all to be over.

Eventually, the bodies were found and Yui stopped looking at the sea.



chapter four

The Tōhoku Disaster According to the Figures Released by the Website Hinansyameibo.katata.info, Updated on 10th January 2019

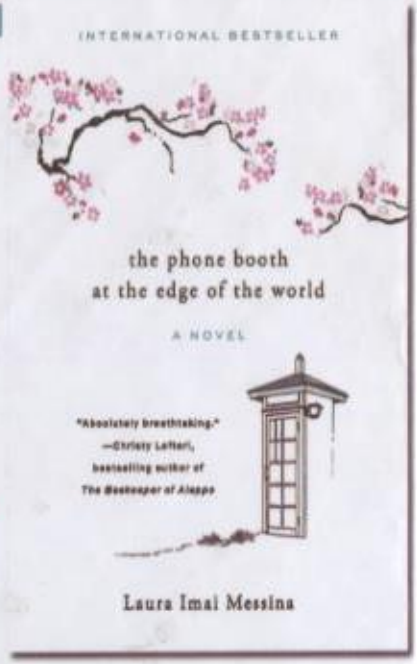
Confirmed deaths: 15,897.
Missing: 2,534.
Displaced: 53,709.
Disaster-related deaths: 3,701.

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OVERLOOK PRESS • READERS DISCUSSION GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

Inspired by a real phone booth in Japan with a disconnected "wind" phone where people go to talk to their lost loved ones, ***The Phone Booth at the Edge of the World*** tells the story of Yui's pilgrimage to the phone booth after losing her mother and daughter to the 2011 tsunami. The book explores Yui's grief and healing, as well as the loss shared by the people she encounters and connects with along the way. Simultaneously heartbreaking and heartwarming, this beautiful novel is the signpost pointing to the hope that can come after.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the different ways the book portrays the relationship between parent and child? What does that relationship mean to Yui throughout the novel?

2. Throughout the book, almost everything is permeated by a kind of duality, that happiness can come with fear, grief can come with beauty, etc. What are some dualities in the book that spoke to you and how do they dictate they ways in which the characters approach the world?

3. How does wind define or enhance the most important moments in this story?

4. Did you want to know more about Susuki-san? About his background, education, or experience that led him to install the phone?

5. What does the man with the picture frame symbolize in the story?

6. A professional writer who plans to title his upcoming book The Age of Immortality suggests that his son drowned because of "bad luck." How does luck enter or affect any character's life in this novel?

7. How did you feel about the short chapters with lists and other details of daily life?

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