



Authorgraph No.129: Paul Jennings

Article Author:

[George Hunt](#) [1]

[129](#) [2]

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Paul Jennings interviewed by **George Hunt**.

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Paul Jennings is a quiet and almost diffident man. He gives the impression of being quietly bemused by the fame and success that have been his reward for creating a distinctive fiction combining nightmarish surrealism, hilarity and emotional intensity. In the world he has created through his short, powerful stories, hapless humans face such ordeals as apparent gender changes, the growth of extra organs, or, more mundanely, being sent to a sewage farm to collect a pair of false teeth that have fallen down the toilet. Most of his fiction focuses on vulnerability, a preoccupation he traces back to his arrival at the age of six as a migrant to Australia.

?It was an incredibly brave thing for my parents to do. The culture was totally different, and the English didn?t tend to live in supportive enclaves like other nationalities, because they were supposed to be the same as the Australians. I was made fun of because of my accent, so it vanished just like that. But my mother missed England till the day she died, and it made her very depressed.?

Perhaps in response to these tribulations, Jennings took refuge in fiction, and in his own imagination.

?I lived in my head a lot. I didn?t like rough stuff like football, and I remember being caned for hiding in the library with books when I should have been at games. But I could tell jokes. They were always getting me to do that on school camps. My father was a Yorkshireman, and I think I inherited his gift for exaggeration and the good punchline.?

This passion for retelling funny stories led to Jennings? first, very traumatic encounter with the publishing business.

?Apart from telling jokes, the only other thing I was ever good at was composition, but I used to think that all writers were elderly and extremely brilliant, so I never thought I?d attain that. Then one night when I was about thirteen I was out camping with a friend, and in the middle of the night we realised we had a tiger snake outside the tent, deadly poisonous and very aggressive. We sat together in the middle for ages, shining a torch around the edges until the batteries ran out. Then I felt something cold and wet touching my hand. It was an enormous bullfrog. We ran for it, jumped on our bikes and ended up sleeping on the veranda of the post office in the nearest town. I wrote all this out in an old exercise book and sent it to the **Women?s Weekly** and they sent it back again. I was mortified. I thought I was no good. I didn?t even think about writing again until I was thirty-nine. I often tell the kids in the schools I visit that story to demonstrate two things: just because something funny has happened to you doesn?t mean other people are going to be interested in it; and the other thing is not to give up on your dreams too easily.?

As Jennings relates this story, the sense of hurt is tangible.

?When you write, you expose yourself, you make a gift of yourself. You?re saying, this is me, what do you think? In a way you are offering your love, and when that?s rejected it?s devastating. I didn?t want to face that again.?

Twenty-six years elapsed between his first rejection slip and the publication of his first book, and Jennings spent most of them in education. Driven by that sense of sympathy for the vulnerable that pervades all of his fiction, he taught primary school children whose lives had been blighted by various traumas: physical disabilities, learning difficulties, and involvement in crime.

‘In the Opportunity Classes, as they were called, they would bring the kids to school in handcuffs, shove them in the classroom and expect you to teach them maths. I tried to make it interesting for them. We might lift the engine block out of a car, take it to pieces, put it back together again, try to work some maths out of that, but it was all high stress.’

After several years of classroom and hospital school teaching, Jennings specialised in speech therapy, undergoing intensive training which included a rigorous course in linguistics. When he began to write fiction for children, this experience manifested itself in an analytic sensitivity to the features of written language that control the accessibility of a text to young readers. The immediate catalyst for this was the trouble that one of his sons was having in learning to read. He had been given a ‘high interest, low vocabulary’ remedial reader to take home. It did not work for him.

‘I remember us sitting there all cosy in front of the fire when suddenly he literally flung the book across the room, and there were real tears in his eyes. He said I’m sick of these piddling little readers, and when I looked at it I could see why. There was no plot. So I thought, I can do better than this.’

The outcome was **Unreal!**, a collection of eight enthrallingly bizarre stories that set the pattern for the series of similarly entitled books which have followed. All of them are characterised by a radiant clarity based on short, active rhythmic sentences, accessible but varied vocabulary, and tight control of the cohesive grammatical features that carry meaning from sentence to sentence. This produces a spare but powerful prose reminiscent of Raymond Carver, a writer he admires. Jennings’ technical control was originally based on research and painstaking construction, but it has now become what Jennings calls his natural voice. It is a voice completely free from condescension and over-simplification.

‘I refuse to write down to kids. It’s a mantra of mine that there is no such thing as a book for a reluctant reader. That’s like saying you can have a book that’s specially for redheads. If a story isn’t good enough to hold the attention of a good reader, you haven’t got a chance of interesting a struggling reader in it. If they don’t like something, you’ll never get them to read it. If you give them something they like, you can’t get them to stop reading it.’

Jennings’ stories, and his short novels such as **The Gizmo**, **The Paw Thing** and **Sucked In**, evidently offer what children like. The extravagance of his content, providing a rhapsodic celebration of the absurd and the taboo, is dynamically antithetical to the austerity of his style. Some of the story titles from **Unreal!** might give you a flavour of this: ‘Skeleton on the Dunny’; ‘Wunderpants’; ‘Cow Dung Custard’. His characters shapeshift and change species; they learn to fly, time travel and to adjust their own ages; they are forced to eat flies or titanic quantities of spaghetti; they are invaded by other people’s tattoos or by metabolic catastrophes that change skin to scales or cause sudden eruptions of body hair. Embarrassing bodily functions are exposed and ridiculed. Dreamlike episodes of public nudity turn out to be for real. In **Sucked In**, his most recent novella, an excised appendix develops a life, and a voracious appetite, of its own. This is all hilariously done, but the stories also have a serious aspect, describing and providing reassurance for the emotional fragility of childhood and adolescent experience.

‘It’s all to do with childhood culture, but the main thing about childhood culture is that although there’s a lot of kids about, they are powerless. I can remember what it was like to be small and frightened, not knowing what was going to happen next, frightened of getting things wrong.’

Jennings’ own experience of being forced to strip for the school showers inspired the story ‘Pubic Hare’ in **Uncovered!**, a collection which deals more searchingly with adolescent insecurity, the dread of a loss of control as the body runs amok, or the family inflicts brutal embarrassments on the frail sensitivities of youth. But the resolutions of the stories do provide reassurance or at least resolution. Bullies and pompous authorities are worsted, victims and outcasts achieve their moments of glory. In ‘Ringing Wet’ from the same collection, for instance, a bedwetter nets the neighbourhood burglar by deliberately peeing on the mattress and setting off her enuresis alarm.

In recent years Jennings has been writing in collaboration with Morris Gleitzman. The first fruit of this partnership between Australia's most eminent children's writers was **Wicked!**, a six-part serial centered on the enforced alliance between two step-siblings whose recently married parents appear to have been eaten by a horde of flesh devouring mutants hatched from the boy's pet worms. The publishers adopted a high risk strategy for this venture. Jennings and Gleitzman wrote alternative chapters, faxing them to each other and leaving the fantastic complications which end each episode for the other to sort out. The first books appeared well before they had any idea of how the final one would end.

It was fun getting the characters into terrible fixes knowing you didn't have to worry about getting them out of it, but imagine what would have happened if we'd had a fight; it would have been a catastrophe.

Accordingly, the latest collaboration (**Deadly!** another six-parter) has been planned in advance. Jennings wrote the first chapter, in which a youth inexplicably finds himself naked in a forest, being pursued by armed, malevolent and dung obsessed toddlers. Later, when he has found a woman's dress to wear, he discovers that he is pregnant.

So Jennings continues to play on archetypal anxieties that are the stuff of nightmare. His ability to generate fantasies that are disturbing yet comical appears to be effortless, but he has his own anxieties about creativity, and the process of writing is a laborious one for him.

You start off with a gem of an idea – maybe just a funny image, and that becomes the germ that grows into the story. For example, a novella I've been working on started with an idea about a boy who loses his milk teeth, and when the second set grow they turn out to be luminous. He's an orphan boy who's lost his mother, but every day on his birthday he comes looking for her at the underground railway station where she told him to wait for her. The punchline involves an electricity blackout at the station, and the boy's teeth acting as a warning light to the trains. But to get from the first image to the whole story you've got to stick with it, hour after hour and day after day, and Jeez, it's hard work.

But the rewards are great. Apart from his worldwide fame as a storyteller, novelist and scriptwriter, Jennings receives copious mail testifying to the paradoxically reassuring qualities of his disquieting fiction. A grandfather now, he is particularly proud of the fact that his grandchildren delight in the tales he began to tell to inspire his son. When asked if his fiction continues to be an expression of the altruistic instinct that caused him to work for years providing therapy for troubled children, his reply is cautious but revealing.

I suppose it is. It's certainly therapeutic to me; you get an enormous sense of wellbeing from completing a good story. But there's also the point I made about offering your love when you write for people. I was reading something that the Dalai Lama said, that human beings are programmed to give and receive love. The world only works properly if we're kind to each other and supportive of each other, and I think writing can help with that.

Photograph courtesy of Puffin Books.

The Books

(published by Puffin at £3.99 each unless indicated otherwise)

Quirky Tails, 0 14 037101 X

Unbearable!, 0 14 037103 6

Unbelievable!, 0 14 037100 1

Uncanny!, 0 14 037102 8, £4.99

Uncovered!, 0 14 036900 7

Undone!, 0 14 036823 X, £4.99

Unmentionable!, 0 14 037104 4

Unreal!, 0 14 037099 4

Unseen!, 0 14 130515 0, £4.99

The Cabbage Patch Fib, 0 14 037769 7

The Cabbage Patch War, 0 14 038243 7

The Paw Thing, 0 14 037770 0

Singenpoo Strikes Again, 0 14 130099 X

Singenpoo Shoots Through, 0 14 130609 2

The Gizmo, 0 14 037090 0

The Gizmo Again, 0 14 037807 3

Come Back Gizmo, 0 14 037845 6

Sink the Gizmo, 0 14 038148 1

Sucked In, 0 14 131199 1

Deadly!, with Morris Gleitzman, 0 14 130912 1, £4.99

Totally Wicked!, with Morris Gleitzman, 0 14 130556 8, £4.99

Thirteen! Unpredictable Tales, chosen by Wendy Cooling, 0 14 037790 5, £4.99

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[Paul Jennings.JPG](#) [3]

Page Number:

10

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