



AN INTERVIEW WITH PAUL JENNINGS

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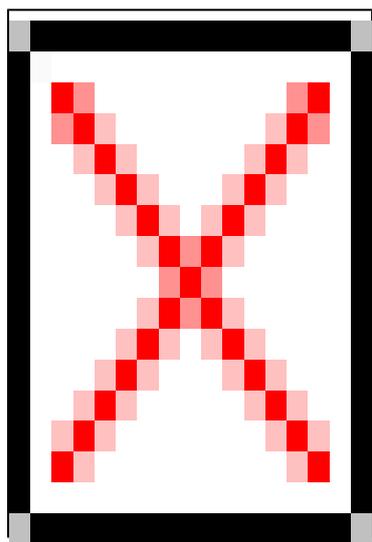
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The much-loved Australian author interviewed

Paul Jennings is one of Australia's most loved and best-selling authors, with over 100 books to his credit. He is probably best known in the UK for his story collections including **Unbelievable!** and **Unreal!**. Over the past 50 years Paul has worked as a special school teacher, a speech pathologist, a lecturer in reading education and an author. We are indebted to his publisher and editor **Julie Watts** for this interview



Paul, over your long career you have shown a great capacity for making us care for your characters and their feelings. Whether a story is making us laugh or cry or hold our breath in suspense (often all at once!) we are always there with the under-dog, the loner, the outsider.

Feelings are invaluable to the writer. Especially in children's books. They are a point of connection. I remember the embarrassments, failures and fears of the little boy I once was and they still haunt me to this day.

Feelings are also great resources. When you write fiction, children relate to expressed feelings but these have to be authentic and match their own experiences. I know that many good books are written from the head rather than the heart but many readers, particularly children, will appreciate it when your inner world speaks to theirs.

I remember you once received a letter from a fan who asked you: 'Dear Paul Jennings, how come you know what it is like to be me?' How do you know that?

That was perhaps one of the nicest letters I've received. I don't know what it is like to be him but I do know that the worries and fears of my childhood were no different to those experienced by today's generation. We didn't have iPads and computers but we did have first days at school, and loneliness and longings and rejections and vulnerabilities. And joys. These memories and feelings which still make me wince in pain, are part of my raw material. When I write I put

myself through it all over again.

You've often said: 'The boy in the story is always me.' That's largely true, isn't it?

The boy in the story *is* me. I can remember vividly my first day at school in Heston, England. The teacher gave all the new children a slate and a piece of chalk and told us to draw a circle. She then walked around inspecting the result.

'That is not a circle,' she said to me. 'A circle is round. You have drawn an oval.'

I didn't know what she was talking about. I just knew that she was annoyed. Next, we were lined up and told to hold out our hands for fingernail inspection. I passed the examination but one small boy received a whack on the back of his hands with a ruler.

'Filthy,' was all the teacher said.

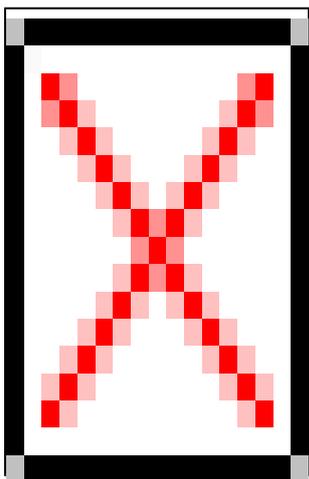
Later, at play time I found myself in a yard full of yelling, laughing children. But I didn't like it. I knew no one. I remember thinking, 'I don't like this.' I walked out of the gate and went home.

Forty years later, talented English author, Allan Ahlberg, took me to visit the Black Country History Museum in Birmingham. It was the re-creation of an industrial town from the previous century. There were many exhibits - a blacksmith's barn, a sweet shop, a coconut shy and a replica of a traditional school from the past. About twenty tourists including Allan and me were led into the schoolroom and told to sit down in the desks and play the roles of students. We were given a slate each and a piece of chalk. Before writing anything, we were told to line up for fingernail inspection. My whole body began to shake.

'I can't do it,' I said to Allan.

'Neither can I,' he replied.

We fled from the classroom. Outside we just shook our heads. We were both children's authors. Grown men. We had become infants again. You can't write for kids unless you are sometimes seized in this awful, beautiful way.



*The characters in your stories are often on the run from something, Paul - a school bully or a gang of bikies, an embarrassing situation or an impoverished home, for example. **A Different Land** is no exception and in some ways, it goes much further. Do you agree?*

I drew on my experiences as a child emigrating to Australia in 1949. We were running, not just from bombed out London but also a family tragedy. For me it was an exciting but frightening experience. In those days returning or visiting the UK was an impossibility. My mother was incredibly lonely and I knew it. She pined for her mother, sister and friends. My child's heart wept for her. Australia might have shared a king and a language with England but it might as well have been on the moon as far as she was concerned. Her anxieties and loneliness also became mine. I felt

vulnerable and different in this strange, new land. Looking back now of course, I realise how lucky I was.

I have been told that the first thing many therapists ask themselves when they first meet a troubled client is, 'What age is this person stuck at?' I heard one prominent family therapist suggest that Donald Trump is firmly fixed at age three.

Children's authors often discuss a similar question. And it is this: 'Do we write for a particular age group that represents a time when we were psychologically damaged ourselves?'

Naturally I have thought about this many times. I have written books for children aged from five to fifteen but if pressed I would have to say that my most successful stories appeal to readers around eleven years of age - a time in my life when my mother was at her most distraught. I think her suffering made me sensitised to the sufferings of others. I chose to work as a teacher and then a speech therapist in special schools, a children's hospital, a youth training centre (prison) and a speech pathology clinic. I was called upon to help these children grow and heal. I heard their stories and those of their parents. Their experiences, joys and feelings mix with my own and provide the material for my tales. I am me when I write but I am also them.

At some time all children feel vulnerable, lonely and different. What a privilege children's authors have in being able to help.

Just by writing a story.

You're a wonder, Paul, and millions of children agree. Thank you.

A Different Land by Paul Jennings, illustrated by Geoff Kelly, is published by Old Barn Books. 9781910646496, £6.99 pbk

Julie Watts emigrated from England to Australia in 1974 and has been involved with book publishing ever since, most notably as publisher and editor with Puffin/Penguin. Her working relationship with Paul Jennings began in 1987 and continues to this day in her freelance capacity. She has received both the **Dromkeen Medal** and the **Pixie O'Harris Award** for her services to children's literature.

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