

PAUL JENNINGS

Unreal!



An exhibition celebrating Australia's
best-loved children's author





Foreward

— VANESSA GERRANS OCT 2018

Paul Jennings AM is one of Australia's best loved children's authors. His books have sold millions of copies, won countless awards, been translated into eighteen languages and turned into the top rating TV series, 'Round the Twist'. His work explores ideas and experiences that all children face – from embarrassment to being part of the gang, losing things, making mistakes, dealing with people and taking risks to discover new ways of being themselves.

Jennings' career began in Warrnambool, where he still lives and works. The Paul Jennings phenomenon began in 1985 with the publication of a collection of short stories, *Unreal!* With over one hundred books and short stories, he has been a part of the childhood of a generation of readers.


Reading his stories, children experience a range of emotions. The protagonist is often a child who feels alone or doesn't quite fit in; a child whose life has been turned upside-down, or a teenager struggling with inner demons. Behind thrilling and hilarious moments they find ways to cope.

Jennings' passion for literacy is ever present. Helping children to read, particularly those with learning difficulties, has been a life-long goal. From the pre-reader series, 'Rascal the Dragon' (2004), to comic-style books that engage older children and teens, each book is a motivator to become an enthusiastic reader.

Paul Jennings *Unreal!* is an exemplar of the possibilities for deepening city and community connections. WAG maintains a strong association with local creative practitioners. Through advocating their talents and achievements, we continue to forge a shared identity and understanding of the South West region.

Unreal! coincides with the Allen & Unwin book launch of *A Different Boy* with Paul Jennings and Geoff Kelly (illustrator), followed by book signings for kids. The event will be opened by with remarks by Erica Wagner, Executive Publisher, Books for Children and Young Adults, Allen & Unwin.

Exhibitions like this, accompanied by the comprehensive suite of events and education material, including the children's activity book which is presented as a complement to this scholarly catalogue, lend vitality to Warrnambool City's aspiration to be a sophisticated city. This is a symbol of a community and a culture of which we can all feel proud.



Paul Jennings: cabbage patch stories for rascals and deadly wicked kids

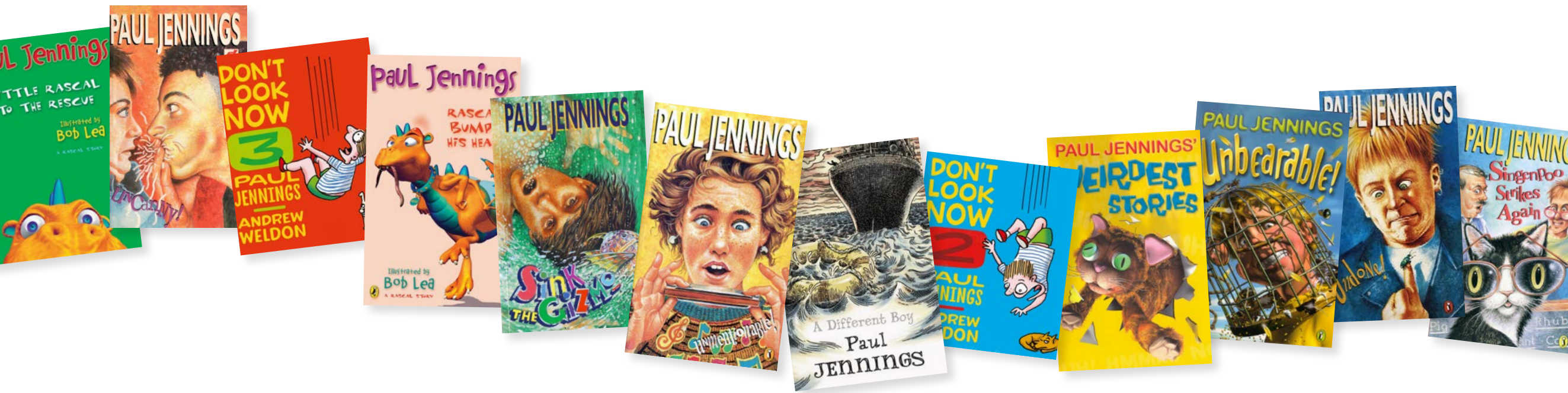
— PAUL VENZO

Examples of literature for young people stretch back across many centuries, and aid us in identifying how ideas about children and childhood have changed over time. For example, the Puritans sharpened their pens to reproduce stories of pious child martyrs, to ensure young readers were similarly fit for heaven (Lerer 2008, pp. 81-103), while Charles Perrault, writing in the 1700s, re-imagined popular fairy tales for a young adult audience, using humour to inculcate messages around moral propriety (Shavit 1999). Later, Rousseau's notion that play was both salutary and educational was developed throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, and popular writing for children and adolescents in the modern era embraced the idea that childhood is a time of development that includes, by default, the full gamut of emotions and behaviours.

Paul Jennings' writing for young people extends this tradition. Across three decades of authorship he has explored childhood as a space where literacy and learning come to the child reader through the representation of a wide range of childhood experiences and desires, setbacks and triumphs. His characters are not static or stilted, and absurdity is embraced as a kind of boundary-stretching of what is possible rather than simply probable. It is perhaps little wonder that his first book was titled: *Unreal!* (1985).

In Matthew Ricketson's biography of Paul Jennings, the author is quoted as saying 'I don't believe childhood is as good as people think it is... When children grow up, they want to have some power, some control over their lives, and they want to forget how it felt to be powerless' (2000, p. xv). Jennings' stories follow this idea, in so far as they rarely glorify or guilt-edge childhood and yet, interestingly, his young protagonists often have laudable qualities, powers even, that the adults around them fail to recognize at first glance, or do not themselves possess.

The stories documented in this retrospective exhibition are never didactic or preachy, and yet they develop out of Jennings' knowledge of children's writing and his desire to promote literacy and learning through the experience of reading. His previous work in speech pathology, teaching and academic research, as well as his desire to introduce his own children to the pleasures of reading, were a driving force behind his first forays into writing kids' books. Jennings has said that his 'definition of a reluctant reader is a child for whom adults have not been able to find a good enough book' (Ricketson 2000, p. xiii), and in a sense, his use of interesting wordplay and humour, and the development of "everyday" characters who are heroes in their own particular universe, are all mechanisms through which his books engage their target audience, and develop their relationship with reading.



At the heart of children’s writing is a paradox: the overwhelming majority of texts produced for young people are not written by young people themselves, but rather by adults. This is perhaps why so many children’s stories involve first-person narration by an implied child author; a kind of narrative strategy geared to make such texts seem more authentic and believable. However, this sense of an authentic voice can also be achieved, as it in the work of Paul Jennings, by the exploration of narratives that, even when embracing the bizarre, resonate with the concerns and experiences of young readers. For example, while few of us were tasked with taking care of a mewling bundle of green life found in the family cabbage patch, as young people many of us faced challenging and important lessons about responsibility, caring and tenderness.

Over the past decade or two, increasing academic and commercial attention has been given to children’s literature produced outside of the English-language marketplaces of the United Kingdom and North America. This has been instrumental in the recognition of writing for young people that is peripheral to these hitherto dominant cultural centres. Australian children’s literature, and in particular Australian Indigenous children’s literature, is finally getting the critical attention it deserves: not simply because this kind of literature reflects the lives, histories and hopes of young Australian readers, but because there are many great stories produced here that are worthy of our attention and patronage.

The use of Australian-English vernacular and idiomatic expressions, local settings that jog our collective memories, the importance of life outdoors and the connection with nature, are all aspects of Jennings’ writing that make his work seem particularly familiar to those of us living in this vast, southern continent. It is as if the fact he was born in England has lent Jennings a “tuneful” ear to the language of his adopted

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homeland: he reports it back to his readers with a kind of unvarnished honesty, and a good deal of affection. With these connections in mind, it seems particularly appropriate that a major retrospective of Jennings’ work, in the form of the exhibition to which this catalogue essay belongs, should be held in Warrnambool: the location where so many of his stories have been written.

An exhibition of writing that is housed in an art gallery may seem counter-intuitive, but of course, so many of the great works of children’s literature contain visual forms of narration, and some books might even be thought of as art-objects in their own right. Moreover, certain forms of writing conjure word-images that are easily transferable from one medium (writing) to another (illustration, television, sculpture...just to name a few). The adaptation of Jennings’ *Round the Twist* series to television, and the interactive, content-rich website that showcases his writing are cases in point: they provide many different layers of textual material to draw audiences into the fictional world he has created. Visitors to this exhibition will find it immersive, in the sense that this collection is not confined to a series of static artefacts on display, but instead invites the entrant to participate in storytelling, to listen and to touch: it is a multi-modal experience of literature that replicates well the various ways in which stories are consumed in contemporary culture.

A standard textbook on the study of texts for young people has the title: *The Pleasures of Children’s Literature* (Nodelman and Reimer 2003). Its authors point out that children’s literature is tightly bound to assumptions we make about children and childhood. As noted above, Paul Jennings work does not succumb to idealized, sugar-coated representations of children and childhood, but the popularity of his work, and its capacity to engage young readers with stories that intersect with their own experiences – good, bad, ugly, beautiful and even *Unreal!* – promises pleasures of many kinds.



Cover illustration by Keith McEwan from ‘Singin’poo Strikes Again’, Paul Jennings, 1998

Acknowledgements

Paul Jennings Unreal!
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Warrnambool Art Gallery

We extend our warm thanks to Paul Jennings who, along with his partner Mary-Anne Fahey and secretary Fiona Parker, has been both generous and enthusiastic in presenting this exhibition; thanks also go to the exhibiting illustrators Terry Denton, Geoff Kelly, Bob Lea, Keith McEwan, Craig Smith, Jane Tanner.

The WAG Team, particularly Curator and Education Officer Agostina Hawkins, has worked tirelessly to bring Paul's lifelong ethos for learning and education to life, through the exhibition and dedicated free activity book for children. In conjunction with the exhibition, local artist Francis van der Mark has expertly sculpted Jennings' characters from their illustrations: Bob Lea's Rascal the Dragon and Jane Tanner's Theefyspray, along with a life-size recreation of The Skeleton on the Dunny. Sinéad Murphy from Lovelock has been integral to the production of the exhibition graphics including merchandise and printed material. Georgie Jones and Clare Ryan, have focussed their WAG internship on Paul Jennings Unreal! - assisting with exhibition preparation and the delivery of education programs, through the Work Integrated Learning program (WIL), Deakin University.

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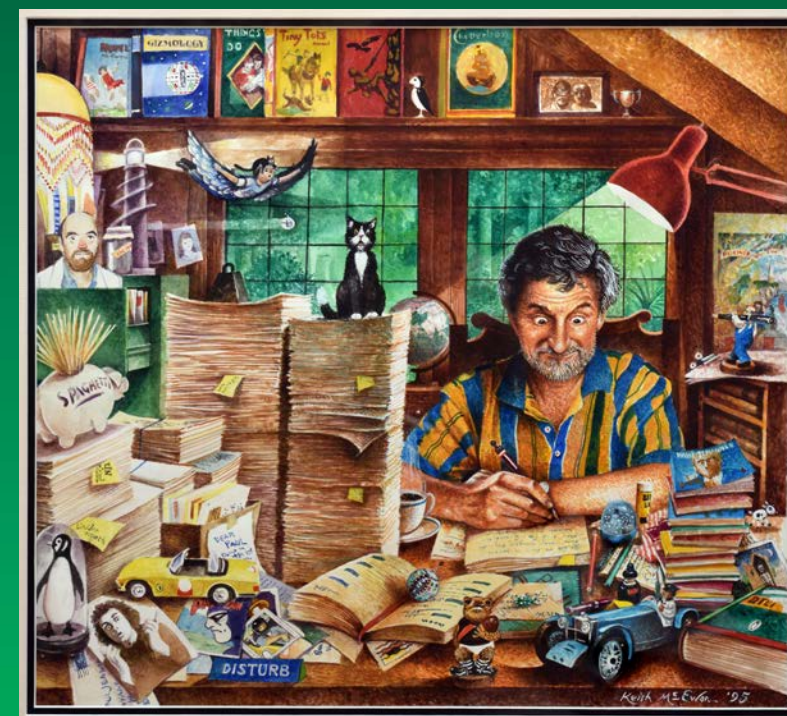


Image: Keith McEwan, 1995

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PAUL JENNINGS UNREAL!

curated by Vanessa Gerrans and
Agostina Hawkins with Ren Gregoric

PHOTOGRAPHY

Courtesy of the illustrators

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