

## **Keynote Address: Paul Jennings**

“One of our favourite Australians” is how Pauline McCowan (National Library Adviser - Auckland) described Paul Jennings to the 180 attendees at the SLANZA mini-conference held in Cambridge on Friday 16 July. It proved a fitting tribute for the keynote speaker. In his address, “The Librarian, the Writer and the World of the Child” he proceeded to capture the imagination and enthrall and excite the audience in the same way his stories have won the hearts of children and got them reading over the last 30+ years. In fact any librarian will tell you that Paul Jennings got children reading ‘down under’ years before J. K. Rowling burst on the scene.

As a teacher Paul said he had always been interested in literature and before his first story “Skeleton on the Dunny” in 1962, he had undertaken a lot of research into “what it is to make a child want to read.” He recalled an anecdote also illustrated in his book “The Reading Bug and How to Help Your Child Catch It”. At his first book signing an elderly lady asked him to write something in the book which would make her grandson John want to read it. When he had finished the woman walked off looking less than pleased. When his agent asked him what he had written he said he had put “Dear John when you’ve finished reading this book Grandma will give you \$25.00.” However, he was quick to point out that children cannot be bribed if the material is no good. It must be a top story that interests the child.

Paul said that from stories people learn who they are, where they come from, and that they’re not alone through the trials, tribulations and personal struggles. They experience the magic of good story-telling. He emphasised what a wonderful thing it is “to create happiness and teach children to read at the same time.”

When Paul writes his stories he said he “becomes an eleven year old child.” When he was asked by his publisher to write some stories for emergent readers he was unsure if he could be five years old in the same way. However, for his newly published books for younger children he was able to draw on his relationship with his granddaughter and her dog Rascal. Rascal the dog became ‘Rascal the Dragon’ and one story ‘Rascal in trouble’ (which he read to the conference) relates to a specific incident when his granddaughter came to visit. Paul said that in the world today (..libraries and librarians) are still doing something wondrous (putting books into the hands of the child so that they can explore both the rational and the mystical). He said that of all the things libraries do, the great role is to provide books which tell stories.

Paul suggested that computers will never replace books, that the book is a wonderful technology in itself. He said books tell stories better than any other medium and no other medium brings the happiness desired for our children.

In writing stories for children Paul noted that you cannot shelter children from the truth, that there are problems in life, self doubts. "Happiness is not attained by denying a lot of life is unpleasant, death occurs.....fear is not alleviated by oppressing it..." He spoke of "Charlotte's Web" where death occurs but hope is given, the grave is not the end of the story. When writing he brings writer and reader close to the edge, the critical point of danger to make someone laugh. However, he stated it is a serious issue that you mustn't hurt children. Laughing at fears, he said is one way to overcome them. Some of his stories make children cry. It is a wonderful thing, he said, that a story can have such a humanising effect on us.

Reading stories Paul said, makes us human. "We become someone else...shy, fat, weak...heroes and heroines point us to the stars, make us honourable members of the human family and do all this by entertaining us. All good stories turn us into good people."

Paul said that children should be introduced from the very beginning to moving books. Little ones hear the story of the ugly duckling and experience what it feels like to be left out. Children can be transformed into caring adults by exposure to caring stories. "Bridge to Terabithia" by Katherine Paterson is another story Paul believed was a powerful influence for good.

Paul illustrated what he had been saying by telling his story of Lenny Lighthouse from "Tongue-Tied". He stopped part way through the story leaving the audience hanging to remark how television and newspapers usually give only part of the news....not the happy endings. Children can grow up believing the world is a dangerous and terrible place because they only hear bad news.

He said "we can't pretend that terrible things don't happen in the world but we can tell stories to help explain and give hope." He then concluded his story of Lenny Lighthouse ..... with its happy ending!

Paul finished his talk by reminding us to give honour to what we do....bringing books to children. He said that "somewhere a little girl is shedding a tear whilst reading a book (we) gave her, taking her into shadowy places but knowing that in the end it will take her to a sunlit valley where flowers grow."

Geraldine Parker