

PROFILE More mellow than melancholy these days, Paul Jennings is still drawn to the mysteries and so-called maladies of the mind, writes **Michael Lallo**.

Of light and shade

FOR the past two hours, Paul Jennings has been looking over my shoulder. Shy and softly spoken, he avoids eye contact, focusing instead on the mahogany-panelled wall of the hotel lobby. But now he has a favour to ask. Nervously lowering his gaze, he politely requests that I leave a few things out of the story. Such as his six children, of whom he is fiercely protective. And the well-worn anecdotes about his childhood. Oh, and everything in *Paul Jennings*, a biography by former *Age* journalist Matthew Ricketson.

"I still believed my own publicity in those days," says the 65-year-old best-selling children's author. "That book was premature. It wasn't a life worth writing about."

But Jennings was already 57 when it was released in 2000. He had sold 6 million books and won many literary awards. He'd also survived a tough childhood, lost his religion and found success. Surely that *was* worth writing about?

His reticence, however, does not stem from any perceived lack of achievement at that time. Rather, he does not want to be remembered as the anxious, soul-searching man whom Ricketson found. A lot has happened since then. He has sold another 2.5 million books, for one. His second marriage ended. He left his inner-city apartment and returned to Warrnambool. And he found himself at the centre of the so-called "reading wars", pilloried by conservatives and dismissed as another lefty do-gooder with pie-in-the-sky ideals.

Yet he is content. "My life used to be fairly chaotic," he says. "But it's not like that now. I like to think I'm more considered and reflective."

These days, he writes only if he has something important to say. And if that means no more children's books, then so be it. "There's no point in me doing another collection of funny short stories. If I did so, it

would only be for commercial reasons. I want to throw some light on the human condition."

Which explains his latest offering, *The Nest*, a dark, gripping tale of a 16-year-old boy named Robin searching for his mother. It contains none of the fantastical aspects or dunny humour of his other books. Instead, each chapter is separated by a medieval-style fable — and it opens with a suggestion that the protagonist killed his father with an ice pick.

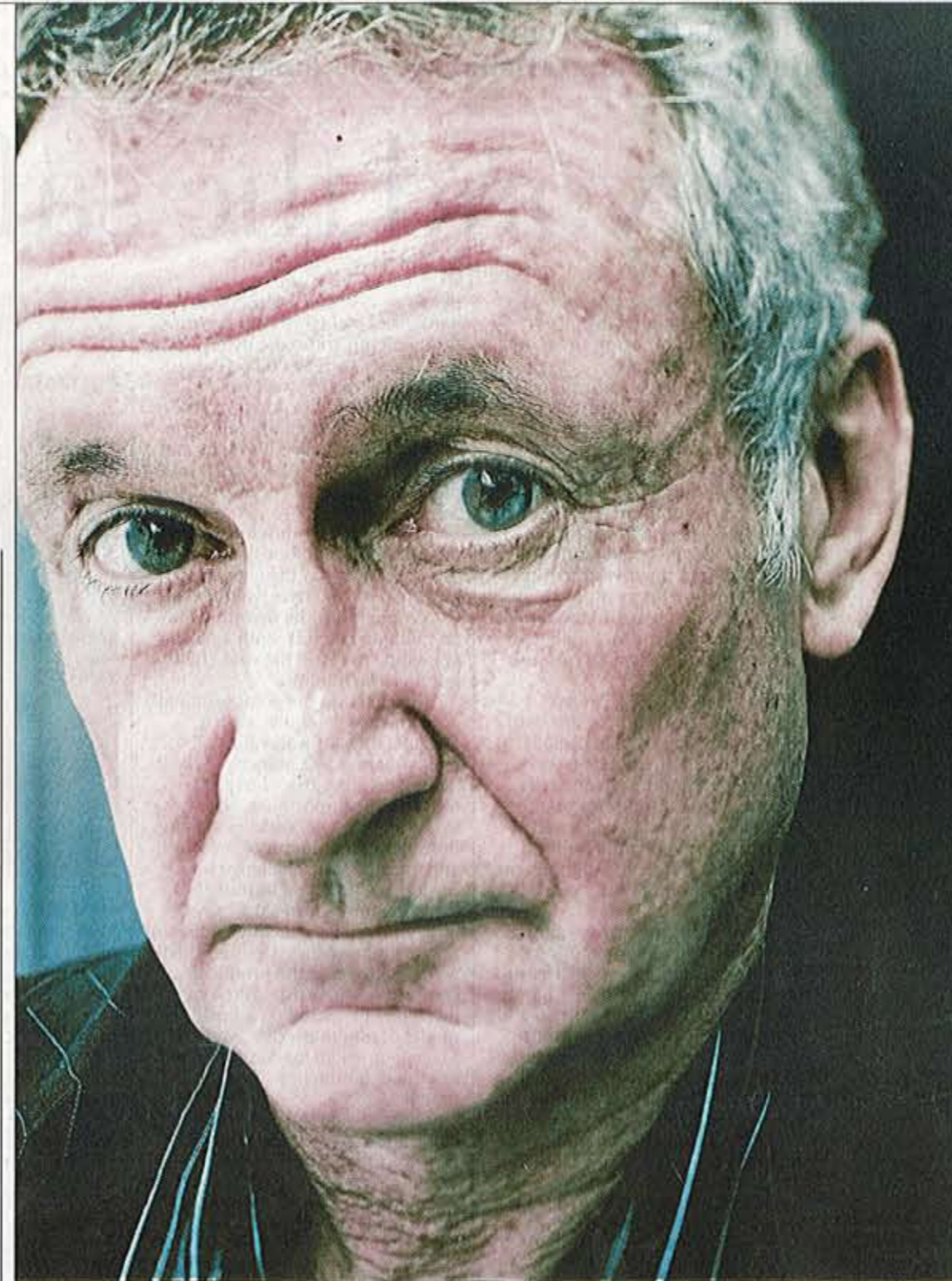
"It's not suitable for primary-school children," Jennings says. "In this story, the boy's father doesn't love him. I'd never write something like that for a young child. I don't want children to think the world is a dark, evil or dangerous place."

What he does want, though, is to acknowledge the confusion, anger and sexual frustration of adolescence. There is no happy ending — at least not in the traditional sense.

"I want readers to know that whatever is happening to them, they're not alone. If they have a severe problem, it doesn't mean that a nice girl won't love them. Robin is not 'cured' in the end. If it's raining, you can't stop the rain. You'll still get wet and you might catch a cold. But rain also makes the plants grow."

All of which is an allusion to the character's mental illness — a term that Jennings dislikes. (He prefers the phrase "mental distress".) Labels such as syndrome and disorder, he believes, create false distinctions, which is why he recants his earlier claim that he suffered depression.

"Look, I certainly think there is such a thing as depression," he says, choosing his words carefully. "There are people who are so badly affected, they can't get out of bed. But I think at the time I said I had it, it was also a bit of a fashionable thing. Where does sadness end and depression begin? What I had would be better described as melancholy or sadness. And these days, I don't get sad as much. I had five years of



Paul Jennings turns his attention to teen readers in *The Nest*, tackling themes of "mental distress".

PICTURE: ROB BANKS



psychotherapy and I'm sure that helped."

Jennings' current state is not one of ebullience, but a mellow kind of satisfaction. Over the years, he's figured a few things out. He's learned to embrace his sensitive disposition, for example; to harness its power instead of letting it control him. But as a child, he was yet to discover this. Even today, when he recalls experiences from his youth, he doesn't just recount them — he *relives* them. His face reddens and his features contort. The memories of 50 years ago still sting.

This is a man who know how kids feel. It doesn't matter that he grew up

without iPods and computers, he insists. The universal experiences of childhood transcend all that.

Which explains why his 45 books, including *Unreal!*, *Uncanny!* and *Round the Twist*, have been devoured by generations of readers. At first glance, the appeal is obvious: tightly written stories full of adventure and the occasional reference to poo. But there is more to them than that. Each tale features a character, usually a boy, riddled with self-doubt or fear. Yet through his intellect or imagination, he triumphs. It's no coincidence that Roald Dahl and J. K. Rowling found success with the same formula.

Not surprisingly, Jennings is incensed by the notion that childhood is merely training for adulthood.

"A friend of mine once said that childhood is not preparation for life — it *is* life," he says. "If a child dies at 12, it doesn't mean they didn't have a life. We need to value childhood for what it is. As well as teaching kids to work hard, we just need to let them have a good time."

And woe betide the grown-up who laughs at the monsters under the bed.

"Children are actually human beings with feelings and fears. Lying in your bed with the light off and being afraid of the dark is terrifying. It's no different to what an adult feels when they walk through some violent ghetto in the middle of the night."

Nor is it much different from the acute pain of rejection most teenagers experience. When Jennings was young, he used religion to stave off such feelings, throwing himself into an Anglican youth group.

"I was a fairly lonely and introverted child," he says, "and suddenly, I had this immediate group of friends. I went on camps with them and had fellowship meetings and did all sorts of things. If you're a nice person and you obey all the rules, they accept you. And this idea that there is a benign presence in the world who is going to make everything all right is very comforting."

But then he started asking questions. Why did Jesus have to die? Why can't God just forgive us? Eventually, his faith fell away.

"I just came to the conclusion that it wasn't true," he says. "I realised that if you question someone's beliefs and they respond by threatening to kick you out, it's not a good thing. And I can't make any sense of the fact that millions of children die each year from preventable illnesses; yet someone can shoot up a prayer to help them pass their exam. As if God is going to say, 'Oh well, all those children can die needlessly but you can pass your test.'"

This tendency to press for answers — to challenge "facts" that don't make sense — is one of Jennings' defining characteristics. Even in high school, he knew there was something wrong with a system that punished him for his love of reading.

"A lot of schools make you play football," he scoffs. "It's like, 'Get out there and be a man. Learn to take a few knocks.' But I just couldn't see the point in running around and

pushing and shoving each other, so I'd nick off to the library. And for that, I got the cane from the headmaster."

His anger at the system, however, propelled him to become a teacher, then a speech therapist and university lecturer. Jennings was in his early 40s when his first collection of short stories, *Unreal!*, was published in 1985. Needless to say, helping kids read is his passion.

Yet not everyone is thrilled with his efforts. In 2003, he published *The Reading Bug*, a getting-your-kids-to-love-books guide for parents. Based on the controversial "whole language" approach — in which children are "immersed in print-rich environments" instead of being made to sound out letters via the old phonics system — it sparked a heated debate. And Jennings' claims that "it's unpleasant to be corrected" and "it doesn't matter if they get a few words wrong" served only to intensify it.

"The trouble with the whole language approach is that it's difficult to understand but easy to do," he says. "Just keep it fun, fun, fun! People who say this approach doesn't involve phonics . . . well, they lie, really. We do teach phonics. We just teach it properly."

Jennings' next book, still in the conceptual stage, could well be the adult novel he has long threatened to write. In it, he wants to explore various forms of non-sexual love: the friendship between a gardener and a business executive, say, or an old man and an Aboriginal girl.

That could be years away, though. After all, *The Nest* required 30 drafts and took nearly four years to complete. The challenges of writing for a teenage audience — and in novel form rather than short stories — partly explains this lengthy process. But above all, Jennings used that time to craft what he feels is an important message.

"What I was getting at is that everybody has an unconscious mind," he says. "That's why I use the metaphor of an enchanted forest. In the traditional fairy stories, these forests are dangerous; they're full of witches and devils and other scary things. But they are also the settings for adventure, passion and courage. Each of us has a choice about whether we explore the forest — the forest that's inside of us. Yes, there could be lions in there and they might kill you. But if you don't go in, you'll also miss out on the ecstasy and the adventure."

The Nest is published by Penguin at \$19.95.