



# Journey into a mind obsessed



**M**ORE than one generation of readers has been influenced by Paul Jennings. It is fair to say that Jennings' often quirky and very funny stories have hooked kids into books.

The facts speak for themselves.

In 2007, Jennings had amassed sales of more than eight million copies. In 1995, he was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to literature. In 2001, he was awarded the coveted Dromkeen medal for his role in developing children's literature.

It would not be a surprise to anyone if he was named as the inaugural Australian literature children's laureate.

While Jennings is often categorised as a children's author and, more specifically, one for the upper primary years, his new book, *The Nest*, is something of a departure for him.

This is a book which is anything but one for his usual audience.

*The Nest* is a young adult novel dealing with the dark theme of obsessive compulsive behaviour.

Set in the Victorian Alps, it is centred on Robin Gordon — a 16 year old who comes from a troubled background.

Robin's mother abandoned him as a baby and his father is a cruel and demanding man.

When I meet Jennings, he has come to Melbourne from his country home in coastal Victoria.

Sipping a glass of water, Jennings, characteristically modest and self-effacing, says *The Nest* was not an easy book to write.

"I've never taken as long over a book. *The Nest* took me four years. The story was quite a struggle," he says.

"I start most books with my reader in mind.

"With this book, I began with the idea that I would write about a boy who had unwanted

thoughts and images that were disturbing.

"I knew straight away that it couldn't be for primary school children with that topic.

"I don't believe that you should present the world to be a dark and scary place to this age group.

"At one stage, I even thought it might be an adult book. Then I came to the conclusion that the person I wanted to speak to was aged about 15."

Jennings is an enviable stylist. While this new book deals with challenging and unsettling themes, it is written in a limpid style that immediately engages the reader in the narrative drive of the story.

It is one of the finest teenage novels written in some years.

Jennings has created a story that thrusts Robin Gordon into the rarefied adolescent company of J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye* or Barry Hines's Billy Casper in *A Kestrel for a Knave*. Robin stays with us.

But where other writers have explored teenage angst and even violence, Jennings does this but also leavens it with both an exploration of teenage tenderness and deep poignancy. Nevertheless, there is a message.

"It was hard to do this. I started off being quite explicit as to what was happening in Robin's mind," he says.

"What I realised was that the reader wouldn't like him very much and they would be a bit scared of him. I don't think anyone has written about this problem in the manifestation I have here.

"Obsessive compulsive disorder which involves compulsive behaviours has been done in movies and in some ways that is a relatively easy thing to describe.

"But in *The Nest*, this is something going on in a person's mind. So it's much harder to write about that.

"I first wrote the book as a novel, then a series of short stories.

"I then wrote it in the first person, third person, past tense then present tense before I decided to use metaphors in the early part of the book.



**Sunday Tasmanian**  
**08/03/2009**  
 Page: 9  
 Section: Supplements  
 Region: Hobart Circulation: 59526  
 Type: Capital City Daily  
 Size: 280.00 sq.cms  
 Frequency: -----S



“I did this so that you got to like the boy and you realised that he was a sensitive person before you are confronted with the violent images he has.”

As a marker of Jennings’ skill, we do not judge Robin. Quite what he does and what form it takes is for the reader to discover.

It is enough to say that there needs to be a certain preparedness in the reader’s imagination to see Robin as a troubled boy who searches for understanding.

Jennings says in some ways, this book crystallises what his work has always been.

“I am interested in the unconscious mind. One of the things that I realised in my own writing was that I often didn’t know what the agenda was,” he says.

“There are various ways the unconscious mind makes itself self known. Stories are one of them.

“The writer is tapping into himself or herself. I felt that was a terrific way of dealing with the whole thing that Robin is facing. He writes stories.

“Someone once said that we read to know that we are not alone.

“I felt that Robin shows that there are a lot of people who keep their fears, phobias and mental illness to themselves and don’t share it.

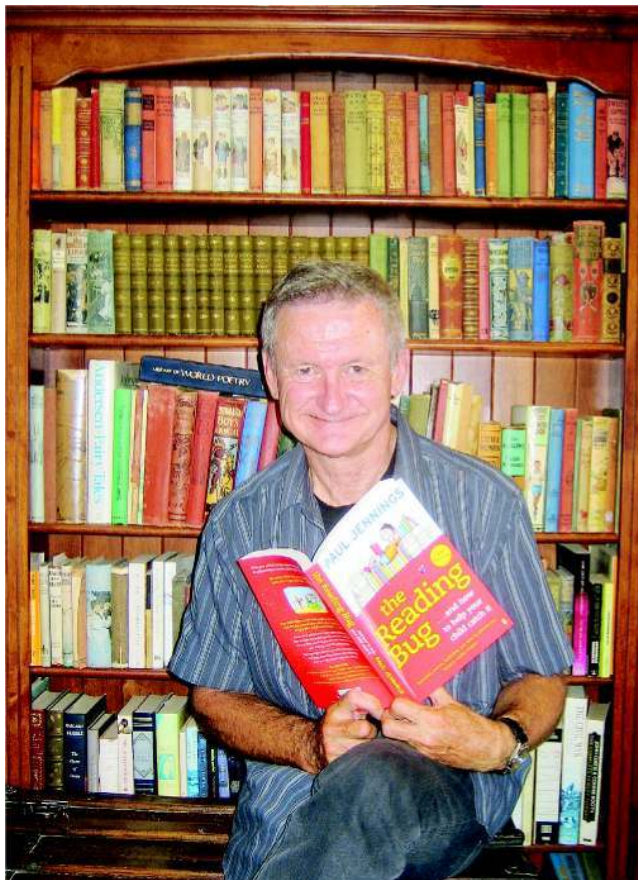
“I wanted the teenage reader to feel that they are not alone and that anything that has happened to you has happened to someone else.”



The *Sunday Tasmanian*, thanks to Penguin, has give copies of *The Nest*, by Paul Jennings, to give away. For your chance to win, simply put your name, address and phone number on the back of an envelope and send to: **Sunday Tasmanian Paul Jennings competition, GPO Box 334, Hobart, 7001. Entries close on Wednesday and the winners will be announced in next week’s Bookchat column.**

By providing your details you are giving News Limited permission to use these details to keep you informed of future services and products by various media channels for an indefinite period of time.

“I began with the idea that I would write about a boy who had unwanted thoughts and images that were disturbing. I knew straight away that it couldn’t be for primary school children with that topic”



LAUDED: Author Paul Jennings with one of his many titles



*The Nest*  
 by Paul Jennings  
 Penguin. \$19.95