

A Different Dog

Paul Jennings

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‘Short, spare in its telling
and yet with incredible breadth of subjects -
memory, loss, friendship, trauma and resilience -
it’s a book which, like a concertina, expands out
to occupy every corner of the mind, leaving
readers thinking, feeling and left feeling that
little bit more alive after reading. It’s a triumph!’

- Jake Hope, Youth Libraries Group and reading consultant

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Paul JENNINGS

with illustrations by
Geoff KELLY



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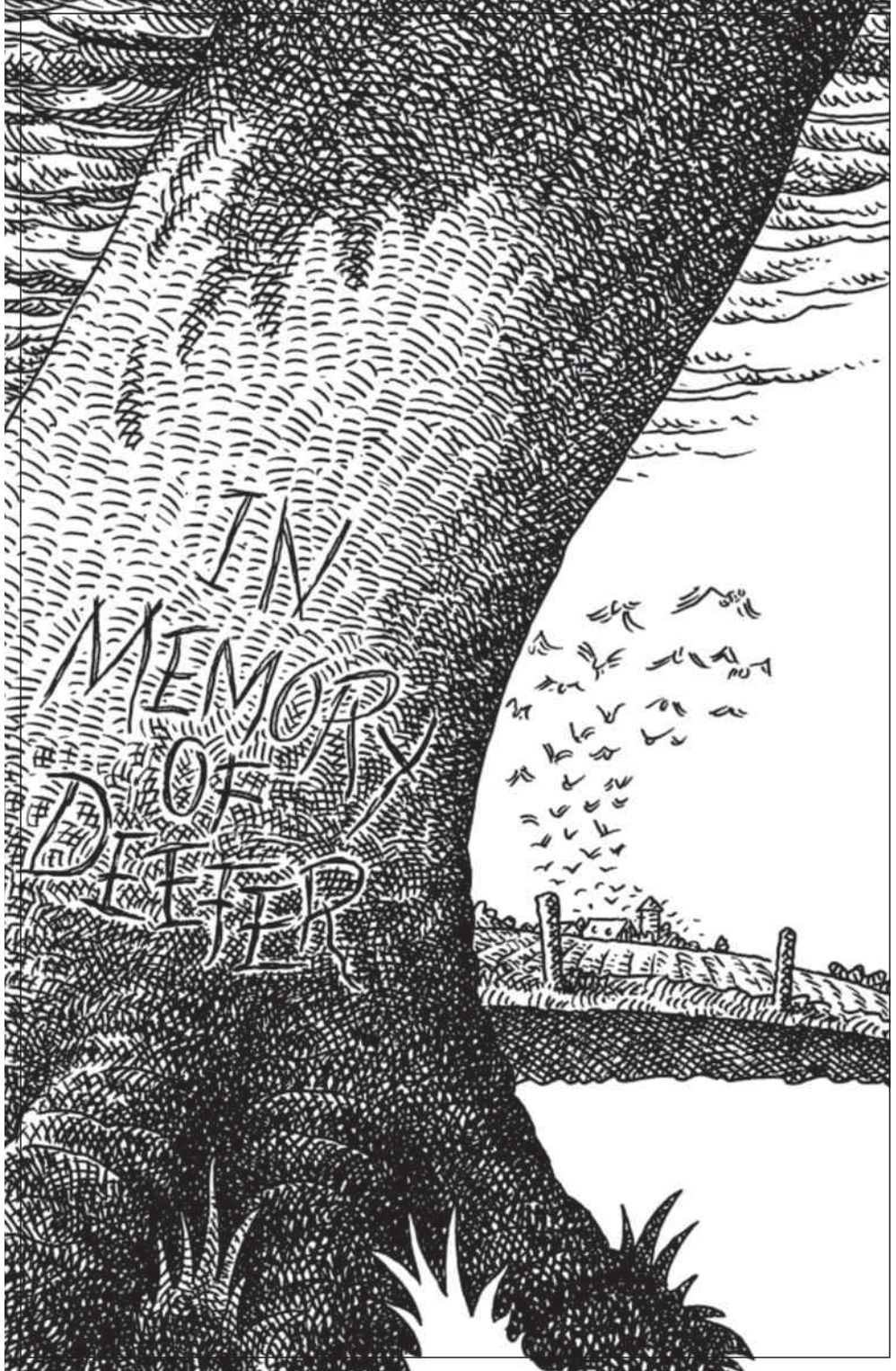
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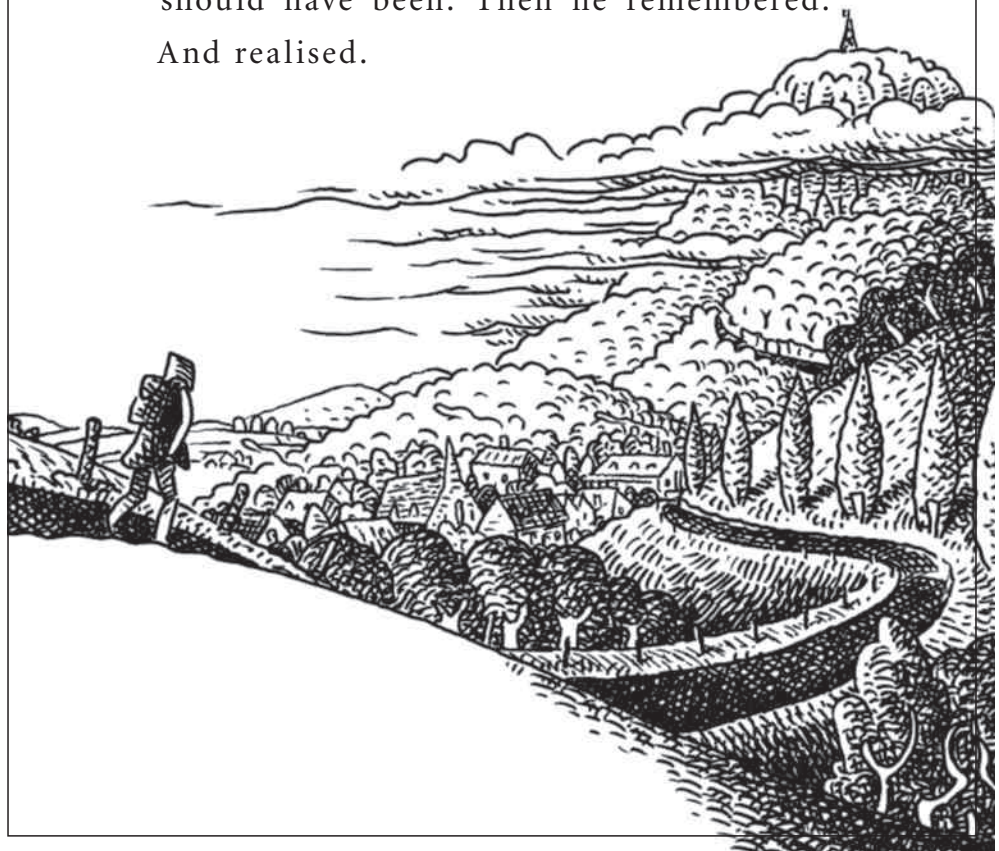
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To Ruth and Frank


IN
MEMORY
OF
DEFER

One

The boy opened his eyes and saw that the light bulb was too high. It seemed to hover like a low-flying eagle about to drop on a mouse. He blinked his eyes to bring the morning into focus and noticed that the ceiling was also higher than it should have been. Then he remembered. And realised.



It was not the ceiling that had moved. It was him. He was sleeping on a mattress on the floor.

His wooden bed had collapsed and his mother had chopped it up for firewood. He didn't really mind. It was cold inside and the flames had kept the place warm until morning.

But that was yesterday and there was no firewood left. He knew from the frost on the window that it would be another damp, chilly day.

He stood up quietly and pulled on his underpants and T-shirt. He shivered and quickly added a ratty pair of jeans and a holey jumper. Then he wriggled into his mother's pink parka. The one with the furry border around the hood. White stuffing poked out through a couple of holes in the sleeves.

'Everyone will laugh,' he said.

He pulled up the zip.

'But I don't give a rat's.'

He pulled out the black bin bag that he had shoved under the mattress and pushed his head

through the hole in the bottom. He pulled the rest of it down over his body and thrust his arms through the slits in the side.

He examined himself in the cracked mirror on the wall. They had found it on the side of the road. It had a sailing ship etched into the glass.

'Now I'll be okay if it snows,' he said. 'But I'll look like a fool.' He shook his head and gave a rueful smile.

'The Bin Bag Kid rides again,' he said. 'But at least it will keep me dry.'

The door of his mother's room was ajar and he could hear her gentle breathing.

'Today I will win some money,' he said to himself. 'And then Mum can buy two beds. And electric blankets. And we will fix the broken window. And she won't have to work in the orchard in the winter.'

More than anything he wanted her to get a job which didn't leave her with red raw hands

and cold feet. A job inside. In the warm. That paid well.

'But what if you don't win?' he said. 'What then?'

He could see the fog of his own breath in the damp air.

'I *will* win,' he said. 'I have to. Because…'

He didn't finish the sentence. He knew that good jobs were hard to find in country towns. Especially for a single woman with a boy to look after.

He put on his worn boots and picked up the backpack that he had prepared the night before. Then he walked over to the outside door, quietly twisted the handle and stepped into the frosty morning. In the far distance the higher mountains were covered in snow. He could just make out the twisting road to the top of the nearest peak.

'Here I come,' he said. 'Ready or not.'

He walked across the bare paddock and

paused at the wire gate. He read the words scratched into the bark of the only tree on the property.

In Memory of Deefer

A distant sound like the breaking of a dry stick cracked across the valley.

The boy winced. It was that damned man again. Firing at the birds. Scaring them off his newly sown field. Sending the flock into the air like a frightened white cloud.

Every morning in spring the man fired his gun into the air. The boy's mother called the gunshot 'The Morning Rooster' because it often woke her up.

Blinking back a tear the boy began his journey. He made his way along the deserted and lonely track to the main road, which led to the foot of the mountain. He passed the secondary school and then began his ascent. There was no one else to be seen.

He planned his strategy. The competitors would start at the lookout at the top of the mountain and jog to the bottom and then back up again. The final leg down would end at the school where there would be food and entertainment.

'I have to save my energy,' he said. 'It's going to take all day. Start off slow and just keep going.'

He sighed and looked up the steeply winding road …

'Who are you kidding?' he said. 'You'll be tired before you even start.'

For the first hour he had the road to himself. The left side fell away dangerously into the forest below. Bent trees struggled to gain a hold on the rocky banks.

He moved to the side at the sound of an approaching car. It was coming up from behind, headlights still on. He stepped nervously closer to the edge as the car slowed and then stopped.

The boy groaned as he recognised the late model SUV.

A window dropped and a grinning face appeared. It was Skinny Luke. The kid from Year 8C who was always trying to get him to talk.

'You have to ask,' said Skinny Luke.

The boy said nothing.

'Otherwise it's no ride,' said Skinny Luke.

The boy shook his head.

'It's talk or walk,' said Skinny Luke. He smirked, pleased with himself. He said it again. To make sure that they all got the joke.

'Talk or walk.'

'Love the parka,' said a voice from the back seat. 'Where did you get it?'

The boy saw that it was Skinny Luke's sister. She was wearing the latest snow gear.

The boy pressed his lips together and said nothing.

Skinny Luke's father leaned across to the open window.

'Hop in,' he said. 'We'll give you a lift.' The rear door swung open.

The boy shook his head.

'He can't get the words out,' said Skinny Luke.

'He only talks to one person,' said Skinny Luke's sister.

'Himself,' said Skinny Luke.

'Are you sure you don't want a ride, son?' said Skinny Luke's father. 'It's a long way to the top and you might miss the start.'

The boy shook his head again.

'He's stubborn,' said Skinny Luke. 'He can talk but he won't even try.'

'Leave him alone,' said Skinny Luke's father. He opened the glove box and fiddled around. He produced a pencil and a small notebook and held it out to the boy.

'Write it down,' he said. 'What you want to say.'

The boy shook his head again.

Skinny Luke's father put his notebook back in

the glove box. He gave the boy a smile and then said, 'Good luck in the race. I hope you win.'

The boy heard a snort from the back seat.

'Thanks heaps, Dad,' said Skinny Luke's sister.

The man turned around and spoke to his daughter. 'I'm putting up the prize money,' he said. 'And you don't need …'

His voice trailed off. He didn't want to go on. But the girl wasn't finished yet.

'I need the money,' she said. 'Just because he's poor doesn't mean that I …'

He frowned and barked out one word.

'Desist.'

There was silence in the car.

Their father leaned across and spoke to the boy.

'We're helping organise the race,' he said. 'The money is going to set up an op shop in town. To support the SES.'

The boy already knew this. It cost one hundred dollars to enter. Anyone could win but

kids didn't have to pay. Most of the money went to the State Emergency Service.

The boy nodded and the man started the car

'Love the bin bag,' said Skinny Luke.

The back door slammed and the car began to move off.

The boy heard muffled laughter and Skinny Luke's voice shouting.

'Talk or walk, talk or walk.'

He began to jog on but was forced to move to the side again as another car came up from behind. A red van with writing on the side. The driver showed no sign of stopping or even noticing the boy on the side of the road. Next to the driver was a dog, which, like its owner, was wearing earmuffs.

Instinctively the boy touched his own ears. He gave them a rub to ease the biting cold that was creeping through the thin hood of his mother's parka.

The dog sat in the passenger seat taking in

the scenery. It reminded the boy of the way his mother used to sit in the car, looking around. In the days when they had a car. Before she lost her job when the post office closed.

The boy smiled at the dog. It had sad eyes but it seemed to smile back.

And then the car was gone.

The boy jogged on for half an hour or so. Then he dropped his pace back to a walk, trying to ignore the stitch in his side and the pain that had developed in his left leg. The clouds were building slowly above him and he knew that he should turn around and head back home.

'It's a waste of time,' he said to himself. Then he spoke as if someone was listening.

'I'll never win. I'll never even get there. I should have gone in the car. But Skinny Luke is a pain.'

He bent over and panted like an athlete at the end of their run.

He straightened up.

'But I have to give it a go. For you, Mum. I'm going to win the thousand dollars. And get you all the firewood you need. And good shoes. And the best parka in the world. And you won't have to work in the orchard in the winter. And get sore hands. And walk all the way there.'

He wished he could tell her all this. All he wanted for her.

The road sloped steeply in front of him.

'Downhill is harder, he said. 'It will be worse coming back. But not as tiring.'

Without warning, the clouds released their load. Hailstones bounced on the bitumen as if thrown by some hostile giant in the sky. He imagined the sound on the tin roof of the shed.

'It will wake Mum up,' he said. 'If the Morning Rooster hasn't done it already.'

He stood under a large gum tree and watched every exposed space turn white. The hail lasted for about five minutes and then stopped, leaving a river of icy beads twisting down the mountain.

'I'd better watch my step,' he said.

He picked up a handful of the stuff from the road and rolled it between his gloved fingers.

'Or I will go a sixer.'

He started to pick his way up the mountain. Treading carefully. Judging every step. Not wanting to feel his legs slide from under him.

Then he heard a sound from above. The unmistakable crunch of wheels. Moving fast.

He jumped to the side of the road. It was the red van coming back down the mountain.

'Don't hit the brakes, mate,' he said to himself.

The van rushed towards him, gaining speed with every second.

'Or you are a goner.'

The van flashed past with the rear wheels locked. It fishtailed a couple of times through the white hailstones and disappeared around the bend.




IN
MEMORY
OF
DEEFER

From the author

I have had a number of different occupations over the last fifty years: a special school teacher, a speech pathologist, a lecturer in reading education and an author. *A Different Dog* draws on many experiences in these fields. And of course, it also draws on my own childhood.

If you ask me, 'Where did the story come from?' that's another thing altogether. I will have to say that I don't know. It was a matter of putting my hand into the lucky dip of my own mind. There are many presents in that barrel and they are all wrapped so you don't know what you are going to get.

One of the influences on a writer would have to be the books that he or she has read themselves. An author cannot copy another's work and each writer must find their own voice. But somewhere in the back of our minds are tucked the stories we have enjoyed in the past.

Of the books that I loved when I was aged between thirteen and fifteen I can think of three which I turn back to and read again and again. They are still readily available more than fifty years later. Teenagers and adults love these stories. I still have my old copies and like to look at their torn and worn covers which beckon me from years gone by. Here they are:

Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain. A boy and a runaway slave on the Mississippi River. How I wished I was on that raft. And little did I know that I would still be amazed by their wonderful adventures all these years later.

The Snow Goose by Paul Gallico. A girl, a bird and disabled man feature in this moving story. When you finish it you just know that there is an untold truth hinted at within the main story and it makes you think for weeks after you have read it.

The Old Man And The Sea by Ernest Hemingway. This is a lovely story about a boy, an old man and a fish. Exciting, sometimes sad but always making you ask yourself, 'Could I ever do that?'

I don't know if these authors influenced me when I wrote, *A Different Dog* but if you read any of them you might like to give it some thought.

I can tell you how I think *A Different Dog* came into being. When I was eight years old, I had to bury a dead

dog. This unpleasant memory was the starting point for my new book. I began writing about how I felt while I was digging the grave for the poor animal. But as the story developed I dropped this bit out altogether and came up with a dog named Chase that was alive but very strange indeed.

As the wrapping paper came off, something else revealed itself and the story changed completely. It was not about death any more but had ended up being about …

Well, what do you think?

Paul Jennings, 2017

Paul Jennings has written over one hundred stories and has won every Australian children's choice book award. Since the publication of *Unreal!* in 1985, readers all around the world have loved his books. The top-rating TV series *Round the Twist* was based on a selection of his enormously popular short-story collections such as *Unseen!* In 1995 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to children's literature and he was awarded the prestigious Dromkeen Medal in 2001.

www.pauljennings.com.au

Other fiction titles by Australian authors available from Old Barn Books:

The Stars at Oktober Bend, by Glenda Millard
(shortlisted for the CILIP Carnegie Medal 2017)

Alice Nightingale if fifteen, with hair as red as fire and skin as pale as bone, but something inside her is broken.

Manny James runs at night, trying to escape his memories. He sees Alice on the roof of her river-house, looking like a figurehead on a ship sailing through the stars. He has a poem in his pocket and he knows the words by heart. He is sure that girl has written them.

'*Surprising, lyrical and beautiful, this book speaks of hope in the darkest of times, and of love in its many forms. The voices of Alice and Manny are distinctive and memorable, and their resilience will stay with me…*' Liz Flanagan, author of Eden Summer

A Small Free Kiss in the Dark, by Glenda Millard

Skip's an outsider, a quiet observer. He draws pictures to make sense of the world. He's never fitted in. So he takes to the streets. Life there may be hard, but it's better than the one he's left behind, especially when he teams up with old Billy. Then come the bombs which leave little Max in his care, and also Tia, the sad dancer, with her sweet baby, Sixpence. Scavenging for food, sheltering in an empty funfair, living on love and imagination… how long can Skip's fragile new family hold out as war grips the city?

How to Bee, by Bren MacDibble
(to be published in the UK in May 2018)

Peony lives with her sister and grandfather on a farm outside the city. In a world where real bees are extinct, the quickest, bravest kids climb the fruit trees and pollinate the flowers by hand.

All Peony really wants to be is a bee – dancing along the high branches and earning more for her family. Life on the farm is a scrabble, but there is enough to eat and a place to sleep, and there is love. Then Peony's mother arrives to take her away from everything she has ever known, and all Peony's grit and quick thinking might not be enough to keep her safe.

You might also like:

One Silver Summer, by Rachel Hickman

'*A sweeping romance shot through with mystery*' - Kiran Millwood-Hargrave
After losing her mother, Sass is sent to live with her uncle in England. Far from her native New York, the rocky shores and crumbling castles of Cornwall seem like the perfect place to hide her grief. And when she stumbles across a silver horse in a sunlit meadow, Sass feels a surprising sense of peace – only to have it broken by a boy with a secret.