
The Lorikeet Tree
PAUL JENNINGS
First love, sibling trouble and the healing power of nature



The Lorikeet Tree

PAUL JENNINGS

I still visit the treehouse at least once a week and sit there, remembering those days and what they led to…

Emily loves the wildlife on her family's reforested property, particularly the beautiful rainbow lorikeets. But when her father is diagnosed with a terminal illness, Emily's world enters a tailspin.

Her twin brother, Alex, copes by building elaborate additions to his treehouse in the superstitious belief that it will avert disaster – leaving Emily to deal with harsh reality on her own.

When Alex secretly adopts a feral kitten, going against everything that's important to Emily, the siblings' emotions reach boiling point – with potentially dangerous consequences for them all.

A moving story of family, loss and love, from one of Australia's most beloved storytellers.

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Old Barn Books

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What they say about *The Lorikeet Tree*:

This is a beautiful story told in a very unique way. I want to tell you its secrets, but I won't, because discovering them is part of this literary journey and I don't want to spoil it for you. But I will say this isn't a typical start to end book. It won't be exactly what you expect.

With rich characters who reveal ALL their flaws, it's the kind of book kids will read and remember forever.
Through Emily's internal struggles, you're forced to look inside yourself and consider so many different topics. It asks readers to think about family struggles, having to be an adult when you're still a kid, environmental issues and right verses wrong. Big stuff, and yet the way Jennings delivers this book... it's like he's holding your hand through it all.

This will be a more challenging read than some on the middle grade shelf, but it shouldn't be missed. I am forever changed after reading it, and you will be too. And isn't that what we hope for when we open a book?

KidsBookReview blog

Paul Jennings truly is a masterful storyteller and I will be recommending this book for years to come.

Sammysreads on Goodreads

Arguably Australia's greatest living children's author.

Australian Book Review

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Warren Barn
West Sussex
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web: www.oldbarnbooks.com

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To Linda Moulds and all the wonderful staff
at Warrnambool Veterinary Clinic.
Thank you for caring for Ditto so lovingly.

WHAT'S GOING ON

Or

AS IT HAPPENS

by

Emily Mortimer



part one

Summer

I

OUR PROBLEMS STARTED on the day we learned that Dad was dying. My brother, Alex, was peering intently under our house at a family of cats that had taken up residence there – a black mother with white patches and her five kittens.

'Don't get your hopes up, Alex,' I said. 'I know that you want one of those ferals but we can't keep them. We just can't.'

The four ginger kittens were jumping on each other and having fun. The grey one with the little white socks kept taking a dab at its mother. Each time it received a whack in return, which sent it tumbling head over heels.

Alex spoke to the mother cat as if she could understand him.

'What are you hitting your own baby for? It's not fair.'

'Life isn't fair,' I said. 'Bad things happen to everyone. I know it's hard to understand, Alex, but that's the way it is.'

The drama with the grey kitten continued. *Dab, whack. Dab, whack. Dab, whack.*

'That one is not too smart,' said Alex. 'It just keeps coming back for more.'

'It's a survivor,' I said. I wanted to add, *Like me,* but didn't. Alex was clever in many ways but he was vulnerable to life's knocks. And he, and sometimes even Dad, failed to see that at times I had my own problems.

Alex snatched one last glance at the grey kitten. 'I really want it, Emily. Talk to Dad about it. He lets you do anything. The little grey one. I really, really want it. Just to love.'

I sighed. *Just to love.* Most fifteen-year-old boys wouldn't say something like that. Alex didn't know

it, but my new friend Matthew, a forest and wildlife officer, was coming to take the mother cat and its litter away sometime in the next few days. I had called him myself.

I shook Alex by the shoulder.

'Come on, Dad wants to see us.'

'Don't give me orders,' he said. 'Don't boss me around. I'm older than you.'

He loved this little joke but I didn't bite. I wanted to say, *Yes, but only by ten minutes. And I'm always the one watching out for you.*

But of course I didn't. He was my twin brother and I loved him.

We made our way inside. Dad's bedroom was full of light. He rarely closed the curtains because he liked to be awoken every morning by the sun as it climbed over the tops of our trees. The mood in the room, however, was sombre. Dad seemed deflated, drained of energy. He was propped up by pillows and struggling to keep his eyes open. His face was pale and he was breathing slowly.

He had a visitor.

Dr Price was Dad's best friend. They had known each other since their primary school days. Every Thursday night until recently, they had met in the local pub for a meal and a few drinks. They loved to argue over politics and the state of the world. Jack liked to tease Dad over his left-wing leanings. On that day, however, his expression was that of a caring doctor, not a best friend.

'Your father has some bad news,' he said. 'This is going to be very hard for you to accept, but I want you to know that I'm going to do everything I can to support you.'

Dad looked at us both seriously.

'As you know, I'm pretty sick at the moment. I've been spending a lot of time in this bed and getting headaches and dizzy spells. Over the past month or so Jack has investigated every possibility. Things are not looking great.'

He paused and then sighed. He seemed to be having trouble finding the right words. Dr Price took over.

'Your dad has been in and out of hospital a lot.

We've done exhaustive testing and brought in several specialists. Now we have a diagnosis. It's not great news. I'm sorry to say that Phillip has a brain tumour and it's growing quickly.'

My whole body seemed to turn to ice. If this had been about some stranger, I would have immediately realised what these words meant. But with Dad it was different – I didn't want to know the terrible truth.

'What's going to happen, Jack?' I whispered.

'He will gradually get weaker and will need a fair bit of medication and help.'

The reality of the situation suddenly hit me. I spoke without thinking.

'Is it terminal?'

Jack nodded.

I felt as if he had just tossed me an invisible medicine ball that was too heavy for me to hold. I moaned and then threw myself onto the bed with my head on Dad's chest.

Alex couldn't or wouldn't take it in. 'What do you mean, "terminal"? That's ridiculous.'

Dr Price tried to take the heat out of the moment.

'Nothing is going to happen straight away,' he said.

Dad reached out for Alex's hand. 'I'm dying, mate. There isn't any other way to say it.'

Alex stood paralysed, staring at him with wide eyes.

Dad tried again. 'Everything will be all . . .'

Alex covered his ears with his hands, screamed and then ran from the room, stumbling and yelling as he went.

'Alex,' I called after him.

Dad spoke softly.

'He's going to need you more than ever now, Emily.'

He's gone to his usual hideout, I thought. I just hoped that his old magical thinking hadn't returned.

His problems could be traced back to one of the stories our mother used to read us at bedtime.

Alex's favourite was the Hans Christian Andersen fairytale about the poor little orphan girl who was freezing to death out in the snow. Every time she lit a match a wonderful scene appeared and she was warm and safe inside a cosy house for a few brief

moments until the match flickered out. In the end she burned all of the matches at once, died and went to heaven where she was reunited with her beloved grandmother.

When Alex and I were six, our mother died in a car accident. It was a terrible time and we cried for months. Dad took over the story reading and at Alex's request he read *The Little Match Girl* every night. In the end I began to protest. I wanted something different and finally Dad stopped reading it altogether and hid the book.

Was this the right thing to do? Who can say? But one thing is for sure. It was the beginning of Alex's strange behaviour.

Dad had planned an overnight trip to Melbourne. He was going to leave us in the care of a lady we didn't know named Bree. Alex didn't want Dad to go. He was terrified at the prospect of his father driving so far and possibly dying in another car accident.

He built a tiny house out of a matchbox and made a plasticine figure of a boy, which he placed inside it. After this he lit a match and made a wish.

And sure enough – Dad didn't go to Melbourne.

Not long after this Dr Price told us that his cat, Bella, was dying.

Alex built a new room on top of the first one and placed the plasticine figure inside it. Once again, he lit a match and made a wish.

'Bella won't die,' he said.

And he was right, Bella lived for another three years.

Not long after, when the lower parts of Warrnambool were threatened by floods on the Merri River, yet another room appeared on top of the matchbox house.

The floods subsided as they always do and of course Alex thought that he had made it happen.

Dad took him see a psychologist but after one visit Alex refused to go again. Dad didn't make him return because two good things had come out of the session. Alex gave up lighting matches and he stopped talking about his magic wishes.

However, he kept building his little rooms right up until three years ago, when a fierce bushfire was

approaching our home. Predictably, another level appeared on the matchbox tower.

What really saved us was a sudden change of wind and the work of the Country Fire Authority. But I was almost certain that in Alex's mind the new toy room had done the trick.

In order to spot future fires before they reached us, Dad and Alex built a lookout platform halfway up a very special tree. Interestingly, this was the exact time that Alex stopped building rooms on the tower in his bedroom. And just as well, because the wobbly structure had almost reached the ceiling – forty-five storeys in all.

Did he abandon his obsession because he could go no higher? Or did the new fire lookout have something to do with it?

I wasn't sure, but I knew that was where I would find him the day he fled after hearing about Dad's tumour. He had been very busy up there over the last three years.

'I'll go after him,' I said to Dad.

'Take it gently,' he replied.

I nodded. ‘Don’t worry. We’ll talk it through and work things out.’

I must have sounded quite controlled. But inside I was struggling with my own grief.

I walked along the corridor and passed Alex’s bedroom. His little tower seemed so silly and futile. Just a fantasy.

I stepped out of the front doorway and looked up at the heavens angrily. There was no help coming from there.

One day there would just be me and Alex.

About the Author

Since the publication of Unreal! in 1985, readers all around the world have loved Paul Jennings's stories, and he has sold more than ten million books. The first two seasons of the top-rating TV series Round the Twist were based on Paul's popular short-story collections and he received two Awgie awards for screenwriting episodes. He was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to children's literature in 1995 and was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Children's Book Council of Australia in 2019. His books have been nominated and longlisted for the Carnegie Medal here in the UK.

Much of Paul's writing draws on his childhood experience of emigrating to Australia from England and his subsequent career working as a teacher and speech therapist.

Teacher's notes for the titles published by Old Barn Books are available from our website.

www.pauljennings.com.

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