

The power of the short story

By Tim Harris



Biography

Tim Harris is an Australian children's author, educator, cricket tragic, husband, and father of three. He lives in Sydney, New South Wales. Before writing stories for young people, Tim worked as a primary teacher for 15 years. His first series of books, Exploding Endings, will have primary-aged readers both captivated and laughing aloud. He is currently working on a new series, the first of which will be

released in October 2017. When he is not working on a book, Tim enjoys visiting schools and promoting a love of reading and writing in children.

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Mr Semmler would lick his index finger and carefully turn the page. My eight-year-old classmates and I — whole-heartedly intrigued by the business of finger-licking-based traction — would turn to each other and smother our giggles, before re-entering the magical world our librarian had taken us. Mr Semmler's library was a truly wonderful place to visit. It was an exciting time to be a child.

Australian picture book authors and illustrators produced masterpieces-a-plenty during the 1980s. I was privileged to be among the first children exposed to classics such as *Wombat Stew* (Marcia Vaughan, 1984) *Animalia* (Graeme Base,

1986), and *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* (Jeannie Baker, 1988).

While the magic of the library never wore off, I soon found myself in a literary no man's land. I was a strong enough reader to venture out of the world of picture books, but not persistent enough to tackle a full novel. As an 11-year-old boy who wanted nothing more than to play cricket for his country, persistence with a longer book was far from top of the agenda. Reading was too much work.

Like many other boys my age, my love of stories relied heavily on what was read to me aloud. My mother must have picked up

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on this, and I have fond memories of her reading aloud *The Chronicles of Narnia* (C S Lewis, 1950–1956) at bedtime. Aside from this and a weekly session at the library, pickings were slim.

Enter Paul Jennings.

Mr Semmler licked his finger as always, though this time the pages were small. 'I've got a beauty for you today. This story is from *Unbearable* — it's the latest release by Paul Jennings.'

After just 30 minutes of read-aloud hilarity, the picture-less story was complete. I felt rewarded as a listener. My imagination was invited to a neatly-wrapped ending; there was no need to struggle through the rest of the novel to find out what happened. The powerful world of the short story had been opened to me.

'I think I can manage reading one of those Paul Jennings stories on my own.'

Thoughts like this didn't just represent my own; they represented thousands of other children around Australia who were clamoring to borrow Paul Jennings's books. A reading stepping stone had been popularised — one which bridged the gap between picture book and novel. No man's land had been claimed by short stories.

As a primary school teacher many years later, I consciously drew on the memories of my 11-year-old self, and saturated my classes with read-aloud sessions to the tune of Paul Jennings. For many of my students, this was their bridge to independent reading. Such was the appeal of these quirky short stories, my students flocked to buy Jennings's books.

I had the great privilege of meeting Paul Jennings during Book Week in 2014. After watching him discuss his latest book with the students, I took the opportunity to joke with him that I was directly responsible for about 200 of his book sales! It was a token comment, though one which he understood signified a bunch of enthused readers.

For the most part, short stories make for a positive reading experience. The expectation for a lesser time commitment means a





with his students that a short story is like a snack. While not the literary feast of a full-length novel, they can be enjoyed in a single moment and often hit the spot. After all, who doesn't like snacking between meals?

Australia has produced some brilliant exponents of the short story. Along with Paul Jennings, other authors such as Morris Gleitzman, Andy Griffiths and Tristan Bancks have all gained cult followings with their attractive — and often humorous — short stories. One has to only browse the shelves of a school library to see how popular these authors are.

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child can enter the reading contract with little pressure. For a reluctant reader, the importance of this is immeasurable. Short stories are manageable and accessible texts which gently invite students into the world of independent reading.

It is no secret that teachers and librarians are in a constant battle against attention spans. Bright screens, instant information, YouTube videos, Instagram stories, multitasking, and quickly-edited music videos have created a generation of wiggly bottoms. Children want things and they want them now. A close friend of mine — an experienced primary teacher — likes to use the analogy

It is no coincidence that each of the authors mentioned above has also written longer books. These writers know that short stories are an obvious progression in reading development.

During my 15 years as a primary teacher I was fortunate to work with some exceptional librarians who wanted nothing more than to foster a love of reading in their students. These librarians made a conscious effort to expose their students to a range of texts, from picture books through to novels. I always smiled when a library session involved a short story, because there was usually an extra sparkle in the librarian's



No man's land had been claimed by short stories.

eye. They knew the students would be captivated by a bite-sized narrative.

Short stories aside, librarians should never underestimate the power of their library sessions. The library is truly the hub of learning, and easily the most powerful medium for stories of any kind. Students arrive at the library with an expectation of imagination, and this is met with the wisdom of selection that puts books in hands. I was privy to it as a teacher, and now I'm privy to it as a visiting author. Bravo to Australia's librarians.

As I matured in my teaching, I began to notice a direct correlation between a student's choice of book and how they were able to execute a piece of writing. Students who read lengthy novels — while proficient in spelling, vocabulary and sentence structure — often struggled to conclude a story. They were simply too occupied with 'epic' plots to achieve a necessary outcome — the end.

The harsh reality is that students will spend about a decade of their schooling being

forced to write in approximately 40 minutes. NAPLAN, scholarship tests, general assessments and HSC examinations are all performed under the control of a stopwatch. Students must be able to plan pieces of work that not only capture their writing skills, but harness their knowledge of meaningful narrative. As such, short stories are necessary to teach children how to write what is expected of them — short stories!

But short stories go much further than simply acting as examples of a starting point and end. Because they have fewer words to play with than extended texts, short stories are, by nature, more intense, as well as highly sensitive to character and plot. They are designed to be read in one sitting, which heightens a reader's expectation of the unfolding narrative. Because of this, the discussions that accompany the shared reading of short stories are naturally rich. Students tend to tune in to characters' emotions more easily when there is less surrounding plot to decipher. Empathy is at a peak.

Short stories also act as wonderful examples of individual or limited scenes. They afford fewer segments to the story puzzle, thus the scenes carry more weight. Due to their restriction in length, short stories put emphasis on setting, dialogue, backstory and a character's motives. And this is essential when teaching students how to write.

When visiting schools as an author, I'm often requested to run writing workshops. One of the things I stress to students is the idea of word economy. I use the simple illustration of a man who is choosing between two cars. The first car drives fifty kilometres on a fuel of tank, while the second car drives

a hundred kilometres on the same-sized fuel of tank. Which is the better car? The second car, of course, the students respond. In the same way, writers who use their words carefully will achieve much more in the same amount of time than writers who don't. Word economy is an important concept — one which is neatly presented in short stories.

memories of shared reading back in Year Five. To this young teacher, short stories were embedded in her literacy plan. And the seed had been planted when she was the recipient of such narrative.

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Many professional authors begin their careers writing short stories. When penning a short story, the writer has the ability to experiment with techniques because less is at stake. This allows a writer to understand much about their strengths and style. My first ever attempt at writing ended with me shredding 40,000 words of a science-fiction novel because I hadn't yet learned enough about my writing voice. I hated what I had written. Disheartened, but determined to improve my craft, I turned to writing a short story for my then Year One class of all boys. It ended up being one of the stories in my first *Exploding Endings* book.

Last year I was contacted by one of my ex-students. She had just embarked on her teaching career and wanted to discuss reading selections for her class. After I suggested a few new-release titles to her, I asked if she had any books readied on the shelf. 'Of course,' she replied. 'One of the first books I bought was a Paul Jennings compilation.' She then recounted fondly her

I'm so often amazed by the book-friendly environments you create in this digital age. Continue to share the power of the short story and the important role it plays in the development of reading and writing. And as Mr Semmler would have it, remember to lick your finger before turning the page.

So, librarians, be encouraged and continue doing what you do so well. The landscape of libraries in Australia is an exciting one, and I'm so often amazed by the book-friendly environments you create in this digital age.