



The Lorikeet Tree

PAUL JENNINGS

First love, sibling trouble and
the healing power of nature

*The
Lorikeet
Tree*



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 versus 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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**PAUL
JENNINGS**



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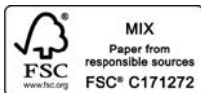
Old Barn Books Ltd
Warren Barn
West Sussex
RH20 1JW
email: info@oldbarnbooks.com
web: www.oldbarnbooks.com

Distributed in the UK by Bounce Sales & Marketing Ltd
sales@bouncemarketing.co.uk

Old Barn Books is an independent UK-based publisher
of picture books and fiction
Teaching resources for our books are
available at www.oldbarnbooks.com

ISBN 9781910646878
eBook ISBN 9781910646540

Cover and text design by Sandra Nobes and Amanda Wood
Cover illustration by Joy Laforme
Set in 12 pt Hoefler Titling Light by Sandra Nobes
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2



www.pauljennings.com.au

*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.

2

I LEFT OUR sprawling wooden house and walked along the track that led to the highest point on our land. There were several kilometres of these dusty pathways meandering through the shrubs beneath the more developed eucalypts and wattles.

Our property is located on the Great Ocean Road some distance from the rural town of Warrnambool and is totally covered in native bush, which makes it stand out from the surrounding farms like an island in an endless sea.

In winter the south-westerly winds shriek ashore from the ocean, transforming the protesting treetops into waves; always running, running, running but never able to leave.

On that day, however, our new woodland was motionless, baking and waiting. Begging for rain.

One hundred and fifty years earlier a thousand-year-old forest had covered the entire landscape. This had been almost totally cleared. The new green paddocks were grazed hungrily by thousands of dairy cows.



Twenty years ago, my father purchased one of these bare farms and turned it, once again, into a thriving forest – a refuge for koalas, wallabies, spiny anteaters and countless birds. Over this period, he seeded, planted and lovingly tended the reintroduced native plants until they could stand on their own.

The main species of tree Dad had planted was manna gum. These can grow as high as fifty metres and are particularly liked not just by birds but also koalas, which munch contentedly on the narrow glossy leaves.

It will take another fifty years before our trees can reach such a height. At the moment they are only a

quarter of this, and can't yet provide the rich habitat of a mature forest with its dropped limbs and natural nesting hollows.

But it will happen – we are well on our way, with hundreds of indigenous birds, mammals and reptiles already in residence.

At the time of purchase, the property boasted only one tree, a magnificent manna gum. This thriving eucalypt was home to a huge flock of squawking lorikeets. From its branches they could stare down imperiously on our developing forest.

As I walked towards Alex's refuge my thoughts leaped between hope, confusion and despair. Life without my father was an idea I couldn't fully comprehend. And tucked somewhere behind those thoughts was the gnawing prospect of life with no one but Alex for company. We would have to leave this property. We could never manage here by ourselves.

The summer scent of eucalypt was heavy on the air and the sounds of dry leaves crunching beneath my feet gave warning that another bushfire could turn this

silent forest into a blazing hell. A large blue-tongue lizard sunbaked on a nearby rock, blessedly unaware that life is a gift that can be snatched away without warning.

The sun had brought out a small family of tiny fairy wrens, each with its cheeky tail feathers flicking and twitching from side to side. These little birds made a wonderful display; the females in their drab coats of grey and the males so splendid with patches of brilliant blue.

Finally, I reached my destination. I stared up and blinked painfully in response to the merciless sun. As my eyes adapted, I could make out the trunk of the huge manna gum up to the point where it split into three branches. Sitting squarely in the middle of them was a small, bent cottage. It had a solid door and walls made of split logs. A tubular metal chimney twisted into the air like a broken arm. The whole thing reminded me of a painting ripped from the pages of a child's book of fairytales.

Access could be made by climbing planks which had been nailed one above the other into the trunk. These

crude rungs ended at a platform, which was surrounded by a set of low railings.

Far above the cottage, an enormous canopy of scented gum leaves shaded the building and provided protection and roosting perches for the lorikeets.

I stared at my brother's addition to the fire platform from my safe position on the ground. Without any help from Dad, he had turned it into something magical.

Alex might have been sensitive and vulnerable but he sure had a way with tools and imaginative design.

'Alex,' I called. 'Come down. Please.'

He wouldn't have heard me. He couldn't have heard me. The lorikeets were screeching in the branches above his head. At times the noise was so loud that it almost drowned out my thoughts.

I loved these beautiful parrots. I stood there transfixed. Each one had a dazzling blue head and belly. Brilliant green, orange and yellow patches covered their backs. Their beady eyes and hooked beaks gave them an appearance of alert curiosity.

I would have done almost anything to protect them. I wasn't really happy about the treehouse, which might

have driven off the lorikeets, but so far they seemed to tolerate Alex's residence quite well.

Like me, Dad was a bird lover. He would talk for hours about them, pulling out his worn bird book in which every second page was marked with a little sticker.

'Look at these,' he would say proudly. 'Every bird is new to the area. Brought back from the brink of extinction. All we had here before were introduced starlings. Now they've been scared off by the kites and other raptors attracted back here. All because of this new forest. There's nothing like the sight of a wedge-tailed eagle floating on a prayer. Or the sound of a boobook owl hooting in the dark of the night.'

I admired his extravagant way of speaking. I even adapted it into a style of writing that I could use to impress Mrs Henderson, our literature teacher at school.

Dad always finished up with the same chant, waving his hands in the air like an actor on the stage.

'Magnificent. Glorious. Free.'

My thoughts returned to Alex.

‘I know you’re up there,’ I called again.

I picked up a stone and threw it with all the care I could muster. It hit the metal chimney with a clang. Alex would have heard the stone hit its target, even over the sound of the squabbling parrots. Normally I would have smiled, pleased at my accuracy. But not today.

I waited for a face to appear at the railing.

Nothing.

I picked up more stones and began to throw them at regular intervals. *Clang, clang, clang.*

Without warning the lorikeets rose in one squalling cluster and fled across the treetops. I felt guilty for disturbing them but I was confident that I had not put them in any danger.

Still no sign of Alex. If he was up there, he was definitely lying low. I threw more stones. The sound of my successful shots echoed through the bush. *Clang, clang, clang.* Every single one hit the target.

Silence was my only reward. Was he up there? Was he weeping silently? Had grief torn him apart? Or –

I tried to stop the unthinkable entering my mind – was he still alive? I had to get up there and find out.

I looked at the rungs and started to feel giddy at the thought of putting my feet onto those crude, rough-cut planks. I had a terrible fear of heights. I couldn't do it.

I sat down on the hot ground and waited. And waited. I thought that if I stayed there long enough, he would poke his head over the side and give himself away. I started to grow anxious, not just for Alex but also for Dad.

Was Dr Price still with him? Were they discussing some miracle cure that was being trialled in a far-off country? I needed to know more.

Half an hour passed. *Please, Alex*, I said to myself, *please come down.*

Still nothing.

'Okay,' I shouted. 'I'm going.'

No reply. I decided to hide in the undergrowth. I checked around for any hidden reptiles. Last year I had come across two tiger snakes and almost stepped on a red-bellied black. The summer before that I had

seen one of the most dangerous of them all – an eastern brown.

I stamped the ground with my feet. ‘No, snakes, no snakes,’ I called out to the heavens.

I waited a few minutes and then crawled between some of the head-high saplings and dense wattles that sheltered beneath the maturing eucalypts.

It was uncomfortable and dangerous sitting there in the thick undergrowth. I began to feel resentful about the way I always had to help Alex in times of trouble.

Many thoughts swirled around in my mind as I lay there in the grass looking up at his handiwork.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, there was a movement.

Yes. There he was, peering over the rail, checking to see if I had gone. I remained hidden. I waited until he was on the ground and then stepped into the small clearing that surrounded the tree.

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.

Other Paul Jennings books
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ISBN 9781910646427

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Shortlisted for the CILIP Carnegie Medal 2017

Alice Nightingale is 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

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– LoveReading4Kids Debut of the Month

This is a remarkable book – a window into an unfamiliar culture, a critique of racism and a story which bites hard and refuses to let go.

5* review, Books for Keeps

The Raven's Song, by Zana Fraillon and Bren MacDibble

shortlisted in Australia for Children's Book of the Year and the Aurealis Award

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Be swept away by an inspirational story of pandemic, survival, determination and courage with (this) thrilling and prescient novel – The Lancashire Post



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.

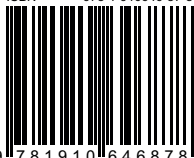
When Alex secretly adopts a feral kitten, going against everything that's important to Emily, the siblings' emotions reach boiling point – with potentially dangerous consequences for them all.

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

£7.99



ISBN 978-1-910646-87-8



9 781910 646878

Cover art by Joy Lalorme

