

Paul Jennings' gentle, humorous, autobiography weaves together the characters and events that formed the author of *Round the Twist*, the 'Un' series and the *Different* trio of novellas recently published by Old Barn Books. From dyslexic child immigrant and high school dropout to award-winning teacher and Concorde-travelling author, Paul looks back and unpicks both his life and his writing, reflecting on moments of hubris as he confronts his glass-fronted collection of classic cars and his marriage failure. Raw and revealing, in *Untwisted* Jennings has crafted both a quirky, compelling, narrative and a how-to for students of creative writing and of life.



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Autobiography



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# untwisted

# PAUL

# JENNINGS

## the stories of my life

Honest, funny and insightful reflections on writing, teaching and love from the author and creator of *Round The Twist*

'Paul stands with O. Henry, Wodehouse and Dahl, the great short-story writers. The originality of his imagination and humour shine, but there is a wonderful darkness underneath. This memoir goes some way to explaining that darkness.'

**Terry Denton**

'As generous, sensitive, perceptive and honest as its author, *Untwisted* is a fascinating collage. In deceptively simple prose, Paul Jennings uses key moments and events to make a vibrant, funny and moving picture of an amazing life. If you want to know what makes a writer, read this.'

**Emily Rodda**

*Untwisted* is amazing, I planned to savour it and make it last, but was soon so completely swept away by his gentle, but sincere storytelling that I was utterly gripped!... What is so wonderfully apparent through *Untwisted* is just what a natural teacher and born raconteur Paul Jennings is. As with his fiction, not a word feels out of place and each and every chapter is beautifully wrought and hewn, but here he reveals the inner-workings of his craft showing influences. It is a very inspiring book. I have genuinely roared with laughter (I still can't help spontaneously laughing when I think of the zeppelin episode!) and wept whilst reading, sometimes at the same time. *Untwisted* displays that characteristic ability Paul Jennings has to distill honest and true emotions that not only get to the heart of his subjects, but which also reach the heart of readers. I now want to go back and read many of his stories and novels again in the light of this new understanding and am looking forward to delving back into these.

**Jake Hope** - children's book consultant and critic, CILIP Carnegie & Kate Greenaway Medals Working Party

Paul Jennings' memoir is as elegantly, sparsely written as his short fiction. I welled up but also laughed; to have such a deft, intuitive sense of language is rare. A master class for aspiring young writers.

**Alison Brumwell** - chartered librarian and Youth Libraries Group chair 2020 - 2022

Reading the Jennings' memoir is being gifted the rare opportunity of a bird's eye view at the life of one of Australia's most beloved writers. It allows us to deeply journey inside the making of a man, a writer, a husband, a father and grandfather, a beloved public figure. It is achingly honest and reading '*Untwisted: the story of my life*' feels like a personal invitation into the astonishing head of Jennings.

**Louise Park** - author of *7 Steps to Get Your Child Reading*

'Poignant, courageous and sometimes funny, this is the story of a kind, gentle and deeply thoughtful man who is also one of Australia's best-loved children's authors. I read it in one sitting;

it was just wonderful. Having read Paul's kids' books, I was surprised. He's a beautiful writer for adults as well! And I got such a sense of Paul in his writing. It was like he was in this room talking to me about his life.'

**Children's Books Daily**, [www.children'sbooksdaily.com](http://www.children'sbooksdaily.com)



untwisted

PAUL

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the stories of my life



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*To all the dear people who have helped me  
along the way but have not been mentioned in this book.  
Among them are many of my friends, office managers,  
publishers, editors, illustrators, book designers and  
publicists. You know who you are and so do I.  
Thank you so much for being there for me.*



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## FLYING HIGH

The flight was brilliant. Smooth and shining. Vapour twisting in concentric circles from each wing. A small shiver as we broke the sound barrier and then eerie silence. It was magnificent.

I've still got the slim pen we were given on the plane. It looks like it's made of titanium. But it probably isn't. My office manager, Fiona, wants me to put it up on eBay.

But as they say on the *Antiques Roadshow*, it's not for sale.

## 1990–2000

The first really big tour that was designed just for me was organised by the popular Myer chain stores. My initial talk was in the formal dining room of their store in Melbourne. A hundred or so children were seated for a meal at tables. The chief publicist at Myer was a middle-aged woman who would later accompany me from Melbourne to Adelaide and then on to Perth. She had contracted Patti Newton, well-known actress and TV personality, to chair my sessions. I was overawed. TV personalities were above my league and even though both women were extremely nice to me, I was quite nervous in their company.

We were accommodated at the Grand Hyatt, where I was allocated a large suite complete with all the trimmings. In the lobby a pianist was tinkling a soft melody.

‘We’ll meet in the breakfast room tomorrow morning, at eight,’ the woman from Myer told me.

I had never been in such a posh hotel before. I luxuriated in the beautiful suite but didn’t sleep well because I was nervous about everything to do with the trip.

In the morning I arrived at the breakfast room early and sat down in a booth. I was soon joined by the Myer executive.

‘You shouldn’t have selected this table,’ she said in a kindly voice.

‘Why not?’ I asked.

‘It’s next to the servery.’

‘Where should I have sat?’

‘Over there by the window. Nice and quiet with a view into the garden.’

I felt stupid. I wasn’t used to this world. But it didn’t take long to adjust to life in the limelight. I might as well admit it: I started to get a bit too used to the top-end treatment.

Soon, even though I was terrified of flying, I found myself travelling business class with a glass of wine and wide, comfortable seats. I began to expect this level of luxury, but it came with a problem. My fear of flying became worse with every flight. On the way home from a gig I could always have a couple of gins in the Qantas Club (more luxury courtesy of my publisher) to get me onto the plane. But I couldn’t drink on the way there because I knew I wouldn’t perform properly.

A year or so after the Myer events I agreed to do another tour. But soon after it was arranged I started to worry about the flights I would have to take. I couldn’t sleep, and the closer it came the more anxious I became. I enrolled in a ‘Fear of Flying’ course run by Ansett Airlines, but it was cancelled at the last minute. I was somewhat relieved because my phobia was now so severe that I doubted I would be able to complete the last two lessons – get on the plane, and then, finally ... take a flight.

It was almost as if this problem was some sort of self-punishment for the excesses of my new life. I was going to have to force myself onto the plane to Hobart, and a

week later take the long flight to Perth. Then, happily and unexpectedly, there was a pilot strike and my trips were cancelled. Hooray, I didn't have to go.

But suddenly the trip was on again. Prime Minister Bob Hawke had ordered the Royal Australian Air Force to start making passenger flights in an effort to break the strike. I was booked onto an RAAF Hercules transport aircraft, which was usually used to parachute commandos into battle.

When the time came, I dragged myself onto the plane. All the passengers were seated on benches and were strapped to the sides by thick red harnesses. The RAAF pilot, who looked like he was aged about sixteen, gave us the safety lecture.

'If this plane crashes,' he said, 'follow me out that door because I'll be the first one off.'

There was scattered nervous laughter from some of the passengers, but not me. I was terrified as the plane lurched into the sky.

When I returned from Hobart I heard that there was no air force plane available to go to Perth. Good news.

Penguin, however, who did not know about my problem, did not give up easily. They booked me a seat on a small private jet. I was told not to worry. The pilot had once been Colonel Gaddafi's personal airman. He was very experienced. I groaned. I could just imagine him taking off and landing in the middle of the desert with shells bursting all around. I had to do something so I went to my doctor and told him my situation.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'I'll give you some sedatives.' He

gave me two pills – one for the four-hour flight to Perth and the other for the return journey.

At the airport I sat looking at the small jet. My fear level kept rising. I wasn't sure that I could go through with it. My stomach seemed to have a life of its own. Businessmen in suits were starting to board. They didn't look like the sort of people who had earned divine intervention if the plane's engines failed. They were probably all mining executives. God wasn't going to save them, or me. I panicked and quickly took both pills before reluctantly boarding.

We took off and the sedatives began to kick in. I felt great. I grinned as I looked down at the desert beneath us. There was only one pilot in the cockpit. The seat next to him was empty but it didn't worry me. These pills were fantastic.

Then came an announcement. We had encountered an unexpected headwind and the jet would have to land to refuel. The trip would be extended by several hours. The plane landed at a small deserted runway somewhere on the Nullarbor Plain. We all disembarked and waited. Time dragged by. Finally, a dusty truck arrived with some forty-four-gallon drums filled with aviation fuel. More waiting around. Finally the jet was topped up.

I was still feeling pretty good from the pills. I said to the pilot, 'Can I sit up the front with you? I'm a writer and I'd like to get a few ideas for a story.'

'No worries,' he said.

I settled into the co-pilot's seat and strapped myself in. I looked at all the instruments with interest. There was a large hole in the front panel with wires hanging out of it.

‘What’s that?’ I asked.

‘The radar,’ he said. ‘It’s been taken out for repairs.’

The pills started to wear off. My old fear returned with a vengeance. And the weather began to turn nasty. Why in hell was this plane allowed to fly without radar? By the time we approached Perth it was pitch black outside and lightning was flashing across the sky. The jet began to shake and buck crazily. I tried to peer out but the windscreen might have been made out of steel – I couldn’t see a thing. The plane suddenly dropped and then bottomed out with a bang. It began to bounce around wildly. I felt a clunk as the wheels were lowered. The pilot began to prepare for landing. I couldn’t see where we going. That meant he couldn’t see where we were going.

‘What’s happening?’ I said in a trembling voice.

‘Shut up,’ he said. ‘I’m trying to concentrate.’

The plane kept rocking from side to side and my imagination went into overdrive. In my mind I could see the plane falling out of the sky. Or one of the wings tipping too far and hitting the runway and the lot of us going up in a ball of flame. I closed my eyes as we bumped and bounced onto the runway and finally came to a stop.

Two nights later I saw the pilot sitting alone at a table near me in the dining room of the hotel where I was staying. He had a bottle on the table. Was that wine or water? My imagination knew no bounds.

I rang up the railways and booked myself onto the train for the return trip. The journey back to Melbourne took three days. I looked out of my little sleeping compartment

at the featureless Nullarbor Plain – beautiful in its own desolate way, but monotonous after hundreds of dusty miles. Someone had scratched a little message on the windowsill. *I am so lonely.*

I tried to imagine what sort of person had desperately engraved that message. I began painting a melancholy picture of them in my mind. In the windowpane I suddenly caught sight of my own reflection and I had my answer. Despite all my success and all the people who were sharing it with me, I always felt achingly alone. At the time no one else knew this about me. Somewhere in the back of my mind a thought was trying to surface – my life was starting to unravel.

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Over the next couple of years, I kept forcing myself onto planes and in the end, after countless flights, I managed to cope with flying reasonably well.

At one stage Penguin sent me on a promotional trip to the USA and the UK. They arranged for me to fly from New York to London on the Concorde.

I was now largely over my fear of flying – but this was the Concorde. I was filled with a gut-stirring mix of apprehension and excitement. The John F Kennedy International Airport had a special lounge that overlooked the plane we were about to travel on.

An announcement came over the loudspeaker. There was a problem with the aircraft. Something to do with the hydraulics. I knew a bit about hydraulics from my knowledge of cars. I was pretty sure that even the Concorde



could not fly without hydraulics to operate various moving parts. This was serious.

It was announced that a new part for the plane was being flown out from London on another Concorde. This would take about three to four hours.

We waited. It wasn't too bad. The surroundings were sumptuous. Finally, a van pulled up next to our plane. Looking straight down from above I saw a workman step out and put a ladder up to the fuselage. He climbed up, took out what appeared to be a screwdriver and removed a small panel from the side of the aircraft.

This plane was going to travel at twice the speed of sound and he was using what looked like an ordinary Phillips-head screwdriver to repair it. Where was the supersonic, atomic, neo-facilitating reactionary titanium extraction device which flashed and hummed like the one used by Doctor Who? My old phobia returned with a vengeance.

The workman finally replaced the panel and left. Shortly after this we boarded. The plane was amazing. Two rows of two seats on either side of a narrow aisle. It was like sitting inside a steel pencil. Everything was sleek. It filled one with confidence. The plane began to taxi. Then came an announcement:

'Sorry, folks, it's malfunctioning again. We'll have to return to the main building.'

I decided that when I got off, I was going to cancel my flight on the Concorde and fly to London on a good old jumbo.

The plane stopped and then started taxiing again. Another announcement.

'No, it's working. Let's go.'

I was really shaking by this time. But oh, that experience. The speed at which we were accelerating along the runway pushed me back into my seat with seemingly unlimited force. The nose confidently lifted. I snatched a glance outside. New York was already disappearing behind us. In only a few seconds it turned from a patchwork bed cover into a postage stamp. And then it was gone. The plane suddenly but smoothly tilted and pointed at the heavens, seeming to stand on its tail. The seat seemed to be trying to suck me into itself. I was enthralled.

Finally, the plane levelled and fell silent. We were alone in a different world.

Suddenly a uniformed flight attendant disturbed my reverie. I had a hard decision to make.

Was it to be lobster claws or the wild pheasant?

There was one other choice, but it was something posh I'd never heard of. I gave that a miss and went for the lobster.