

The Lorikeet Tree

By Paul Jennings



Emily loves the bush and the native animals on her family's reforested property, particularly the beautiful rainbow lorikeets that nest in one of the tallest trees. But then her father is diagnosed with a terminal illness, and Emily's world enters a tailspin.

Her twin brother, Alex, refuses to accept the truth. His coping mechanism is to build 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.

RECOMMENDED FOR

11– 14 years old, Years 5-8, Upper Primary, Lower Secondary

THEMES

Family, siblings, pets, grief, terminal illness, love

ISBN (UK)

9781910646878



CLASSROOM DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why is Alex so fixated on building his treehouse? How might his strange behaviour relate to being read *The Little Match Girl* fairy tale when he was young? How much of his behaviour is really about him trying to control his world?
- Emily, receiving the news about her father's illness, says, 'I felt as if he had just tossed me an invisible medicine ball that was too heavy for me to hold.' (page 9)? Do you think this simile works as a way to describe the physical and emotional aspects of receiving bad news? How do you feel when you hear bad news?
- What role does Matthew play in the story? How do you feel about him at the end of the novel?
- Why does Emily find the kitten so confronting? What do you believe about cats being outdoors? Should people be allowed to have cats in Australia?
- Why do you think Paul Jennings decided to frame his story as a school assignment? How would you feel about having such a personal story being read for the purpose of being assessed?
- Read each entry of feedback from Emily's teachers. Do you think Mrs Henderson was fair to give Emily a B+ on the first feedback sheet? What about the comments from the other teachers? Are they fair in your opinion?
- The story starts with a title page called *What's Going On* or *As It Happens*? Why does Mrs Henderson think it is clever that there is no question mark on the title?
- What do you believe in as passionately as Emily believes in the protection of the lorikeets?
- 'It's not a gift,' I complained. It's something I do. It's hard work. It's putting up with the pain. I hate being strong. It hurts but I just keep going because I have to. And it's lonely.' (page 46) What do you think it means to 'be strong'? Does being strong mean that you don't need help? What does Emily learn about 'being strong' as the story progresses?
- What is the significance of the last sentence in the book, 'She has become one part of the whole.'? Do you think this sentence might relate to the earlier conversation between Alex, Emily and Matthew about death on pp 103-105? How are they related?
- How did you feel when the novel ended? What do you predict would happen next to the characters?

- Here are three dates. On which of these years do you think the story is most likely to have been set?
1943, 1962, 2022. Why?
- Which characters were your favourites? Why?
- Would you read a sequel? Why or why not?
- Write a list of the fabulous language Paul Jennings uses in this novel – what are your favourite new words? Have a go at using some of these words in your own writing.
- Extension Question: Paul Jennings said that he created the story of the cat and bird as a metaphor for the struggle between Emily and Alex. Explain what you understand him to mean by this.

A WORD FROM PAUL JENNINGS

'Most of my stories originate from one small idea or event. I can say, right now, that finding one of these gemstones is the hardest part of the writing process. For me it is agony. I know that some authors like Enid Blyton and Ray Bradbury said that ideas flow like magic but I think that writers like this are in the minority. Most of us struggle to find something fresh and original to write about.

'When I have finally come up with an idea, I sometimes begin sketching out a plot. At other times I just begin writing without knowing how the story will develop. Usually, I don't know what the tale is all about until I finish. Often, I am amazed at what I discover in my own books.

'After about ten years of writing, I realised that I was unconsciously returning to a small number of themes. The most common of these related to the separation of parent and child. To me, this is the most powerful theme about which one can write. I have had scores of moving letters about tales which seem funny, but in reality, contained moving content about human nature.

'*The Lorikeet Tree* once again is a riff on my most used theme. But in other ways it is different. The two teenagers in the story have no mother and in the first line of the book we find out that their father is dying. It seems that, unlike my previous stories, there will be no uplifting reunion.

'Am I transgressing any rules by writing about death for younger readers? I think that it is acceptable. By the time we are twelve or thirteen we know that death is a reality. Pets die. And grandparents. Fatal car accidents fill the news every day.



'How should I as an author handle this? Is there ever happiness in life after the loss of a loved one? Is there an afterlife? How can we keep going? Does anything remain in us that was once part of someone we loved? How should we behave at such times?

'Literature tells us how others have managed. It offers solace and help.

'Some of my readers might not go past the first sentence in *The Lorikeet Tree*. This is a risk I have taken because I hope that my story, besides being about ordinary people who discover what is important in life, is filled with adventure and excitement.

'Having finished the book I can see that, without meaning to, I have written about courage, the environment, hope, mental health and - most of important of all - love.

'*The Lorikeet Tree* is the most biographical of all my stories. It is set in a developing forest along the Great Ocean Road near the country town of Warrnambool. I established such a forest there more than thirty years ago and have enormous feelings of attachment to it. The memories of the re-introduced native bushland on that property enabled me to start the story in a setting with which I was totally familiar.

'My protagonists are a teenage girl who loves a wild bird that has been attracted to the area, and her twin brother who is smitten by a growing kitten. Angry exchanges result in life-threatening conflict and thoughtless reprisals. Cat and bird, both driven by instincts, merely want to survive but more is demanded of the two teenagers who must somehow solve their problems with love for each other, their father, and the natural environment in which they live.

'In *The Lorikeet Tree*, cat and bird serve as a metaphor for the struggle between brother and sister. Can such a story have a happy ending on both levels?

'All I will say is this. Upon reading the first draft, my editor Julie Watts, made the following comment, "Once again we are all reaching for the box of tissues, Paul."

'That's good enough for me. There's nothing wrong with happy tears.'

AUTHOR PAUL JENNINGS



Paul Jennings has written more than one hundred stories and sold over ten million books. Since the publication of *Unreal!* in 1985, readers all around the world have loved his stories. 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, was awarded the prestigious Dromkeen Medal in 2001 and was made a Fellow of Monash University in 2010. In 2019 he was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Children's Book Council of Australia. He lives in Warrnambool with his partner, comedian, actor and author Mary-Anne Fahey.