

Scot Gardner,
Author of *Bookmark Days* (GF 9) writes

A day worthy of a bookmark

My parents moved to the country when I was twelve. The first real girlfriends I had were country girls and I remember feeling like the most awkward dork on the planet when I was around them...until the music started. I could bush dance! There was a country fair and bush dance every year near our place and it was the highlight of my social calendar – well, it was the only thing on my social calendar so it was BIG. One night I got told off by one of the mums because I wasn't doing the dance right. I was with Fiona that night and she just laughed her head off. We knew the country fairs were lame by city standards but they were fun. Pancakes, music, sheep shearing demonstrations, guess the weight of the pig, dummy spitting competitions (?!), cow pat and gumboot throw. I remember the heat of expectation, the thought that we might actually HOLD a girl's HAND in the dark. It was the memory of the heat that was the seed for *Bookmark Days*.

My first real girlfriend was my next-door neighbour. I kid you not! There's a fair bit of me in Avril. I couldn't tell you which specific bits because I'd probably go to gaol! I've had fights using sheep poo as ammo and I've cut the heads off quite a few chooks. I see my feisty daughters in Avril, too, and my wild-spirited wife, but most of her is made up. Nathaniel is based on a hunk that lives on the farm three doors down from ours, practical and gorgeous in that totally natural boy-next-door kind of way. Deadly smile.

The setting is nothing like where I live. I live in the mountains but most of the action happens in a mythical place on the edge of the Wimmera in north western Victoria which looks a bit like Murtoa where I spent a lot of last year, working with amazing country kids, flying my kites in the wheat fields and being blinded by crops of bright yellow canola. The land is very flat and the sky is big. Avril's school by correspondence actually exists and I was lucky enough to meet some kids who live lives just like Avril's – lessons fitting in around work on the farm. Sometimes they got lonely but for the most part they loved their lives. Who wouldn't??

And what gives me the right to write about romance? It became legal the day girls could aspire to be plumbers, and I know I'm not the only bloke to think the world looks better when you're in love.