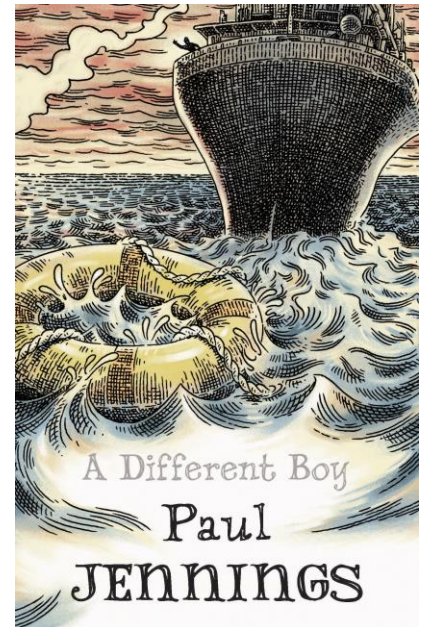


A Different Boy

By Paul Jennings

September 2018 ISBN 9781741757101 paperback
Recommended for 10 – 14-year-old readers



Summary

'If you've got a bad deal,' his father used to say, 'get out of it and move on.'

When he finds himself in a cruel orphanage Anton does just that, and hides on an ocean liner. Fear and desperation are his only companions. And this time there is no escape.

Or is there?

Two other passengers have secrets of their own. When nothing is what it seems, can they help each other? Or will they sink into a sea of troubles?

You'll never know. Until the last page.

Another top story from Australia's master of the trick ending.



Paul Jennings has built his career on an intimate understanding of reluctant readers and what is required to get them to pick a book up and continue reading through to its end. And *A Different Boy* is no exception: this story is exciting and surprising, whimsical and gritty. Furthermore, its short sentences and simple but evocative vocabulary and imagery will enthrall readers until the book's end.

The story is loosely based on Paul's journey to Australia as a 'Ten-pound Pom' and draws on his experiences as a teacher at a juvenile detention centre. But, like Jennings's preceding story, *A Different Dog*, the world of the story—and what is possible in it—has a timeless reality of its own.

Use in the curriculum

This short but powerfully written novel is appropriate for Grade 4 to Year 8 classrooms, depending on the way it is treated.

Language

Text features of note are:

- chapter opening illustrations and hand drawn font for first words of each chapter;
- well-spaced text for readability (consider the audience);
- italicized 'flashback' sections on pp. 35-37 and pp. 49-53 which extend the tension and explain the birth of Max and Christopher and the death of one of them;

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- action sequences written in short sentences and simple past tense with well-chosen verbs, adverbs and adjectives. ('Suddenly his head burst through the surface. He coughed and spluttered and tried to blink away the stinging salt in his eyes.' p. 82)

Literature

The novel is an excellent example of economy of writing producing tension in the plot structure. There are also two terrific plot twists, one only revealed right at the end, but students can find hints about it if they re-read the book. (pp. 14, 15, 32, 61, 72, 76)

In such a tightly-written text, word choice is paramount. Examine in relation to plot tension, character development and the creation of sympathy or dislike for characters.

Compare the novel with Paul Jennings' humorous stories to reveal similarities and differences and examine the author's style.

Literacy

Comprehension questions for Chapter 1 and a question about the first italicised section are provided below in these notes.

Themes

- Loneliness
- Being different
- Missing home and family
- Kindness
- Courage
- Survival

In the classroom

Comprehension questions for Chapter One:

1. Why do you think the bearded officer found the name of the boy's dormitory amusing? (p. 2) What might that suggest about the officer and about Wolfdog Hall?
2. What does O stand for in Wolfdog Hall? What does C stand for? Does this categorisation of boys confirm your initial feelings about Wolfdog Hall?
3. Why might half of the boys have faded hair?
4. What does Anton remember when he hears the word 'rubbish'? What might this story tell us about his mother?
5. Why is Mr Steel otherwise known as The Claw? What rating would you give him as a teacher and why?
6. What country is the New Land? What clues on page 16 suggested this?
7. What might have been the thought that occurred to Mr Steel just before he said, 'For those of you who can't spell your own name, you can copy it from your label.' (Clue: re-read p. 14)
8. What is the bad deal that Anton needs to get out of in Mr Steel's class?
9. How does Anton get out of the deal?
10. What clues on the last page of the chapter suggest that this story is set just after World War Two?



Discussion questions and activities

Building empathy and understanding: (The following questions can form whole class discussions, small groups, or individual writing tasks. Some are more personal than others.)

Invite students to share their experience or understanding of:

- being on a big ship;
- a time when they felt different to others around them;
- being in a new and unknown place;
- feeling lonely;
- feeling homesick;
- being responsible for other children and not feeling comfortable in that role;
- being the 'new kid';
- migrating to Australia;
- a death in the family.

Italicised sections: Read Chapter Three and explain how you think it relates to the people Anton meets in Chapter Two. Why do you think Paul Jennings decided to tell their story in this order?

Themes: Paul Jennings has said that loneliness, being different and missing home are themes he wanted to explore in the novel. (a) Choose one of these and discuss how characters, settings and events within the novel come together to illustrate it. (b) Choose a theme that you can relate to—one that you may have felt at some time in your life—and discuss your response to the story.

Language: Read Chapter Eight and find examples of the following literary devices that serve to highlight the chaos and drama of Anton's drowning.

- Simile
- Metaphor
- Repetition
- Alliteration

Extension Question: What does the term 'stream of consciousness' mean and how is it used in this chapter to increase the drama of Anton's drowning?

Characterisation: Make a list of words to describe Anton in the story. Give examples of things he said or did in the story that made you think this about him. For instance, you might say he is educated because he knows about art, Dali and the Impressionists (p. 15) or he is lonely because all his family have died.

Plot twist: (a) Define the term 'plot twist' and (b) explain the plot twists that relate to Max/Christopher and Anton. Which plot twist did you find the more surprising and why?

Extension Question: Once Anton's secret is revealed in the last chapter, go back to the beginning of the story and see if you can find clues left by the author that hint at what we find out later.

Title: Why do you think Paul Jennings named his story *A Different Boy*? Do you think the 'Boy' in the title is Anton or Christopher? Can you come up with an alternative name for the book?

Writing Exercise: Write a book review for *A Different Boy*, making sure that you:

- a) include the book's title and author;
- b) give a summary of the plot that doesn't give away too much;
- c) comment on the book's strengths and weaknesses, and
- d) provide specific examples to support your praise or criticism.

From the author – 'the Paul Jennings twist'

'I know that my readers expect a surprise ending. These 'tricks' are very difficult to come up with, especially after having done so many. I always think that I won't be able to do it again. I literally groan when I face the prospect of finding another. So imagine my feelings when my publisher read the first draft of *A Different Boy* and said, 'The trick ending is mainly about a secondary character, can you think of a second surprise involving the main character?'

'It meant yet another draft, but I am happy to say I managed it.'

— Paul Jennings

The author

Paul Jennings has written over one hundred stories and has won every Australian children's choice book award. Since the publication of *Unreal!* in 1985, readers all around the world have loved his books. The top-rating TV series *Round the Twist* and *Driven Crazy* were based on a selection of his enormously popular short-story collections such as *Unseen!* In 1995 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to children's literature and he was awarded the prestigious Dromkeen Medal in 2001.

Find out more at www.pauljennings.com.au, where there is an 'about' page written for children, telling about Paul's life and writing. He has also written for children:

'I always knew deep down that what I really wanted was to be a writer—right from when I was young. When I was 16, I wrote a story and sent it to a magazine. When they rejected my story, I was so upset that I didn't write again for years. I always tell people now *never be hurt by being rejected. Just keep on trying and most of all don't give up.* Many years later I decided to write again—the sort of stories which I thought would make reading fun for children. This time I decided not to give up and my book *Unreal!* was published in 1985. Interestingly, I made a decision to never use an exclamation mark in my stories and the publisher put one on the cover.

'The question that every writer is asked the most is 'where do you get your ideas from?' and I think the best answer to this is 'everywhere'. Everything that happens to you and the people around you can give you an idea for a story. That's not to say it's easy. Thinking up ideas can be very hard work and for me it's the hardest part of writing a story. It takes about a year to write my collections of short stories and the part that takes the longest is actually thinking up the ideas.

'It's great when I eventually think of a plot that I know is good. I have to write down any new idea straight away, because if I don't I might forget it. I keep an 'ideas book' and I always write my story plans in it. I only type it up when I know exactly how the story ends and what I want to write. Not all writers work in this way—some just start writing and see where it leads them. It's a good job that we're not all the same. That would be boring.'

For older readers and teachers: Paul writes about *A Different Boy*

English migrants to Australia did not do it as tough as those from non-English-speaking countries and they certainly did not do it as tough as refugees. But they did have stories and they did miss 'home' and, in some cases, suffer greatly. Many of them, like my parents, were running away from personal tragedies. I used my experiences on the boat and my personal family history as background for this book.

When I arrived in Australia as a migrant (Ten Pound Pom), I realised that all was not well. The day before we left England my grandmother had a dream that she would die on the boat and refused to come. My mother missed home so much that she was never really happy again. When I was a man, I found out that she had had a brother. We had migrated, in part, because he had killed himself six months before we sailed.

Unlike the boy in my story I was not an orphan. Nor did I stow away on the boat, have alopecia, run off from a youth training centre, fall overboard or get mistaken for someone else.

This book has my usual trademarks: a twist in the tail, a fast-moving story, accessible text and, I hope, a powerful theme—loneliness. It is also one of my favourites.

It might even be my best so far.

But then again, I always think that.

Cheers,

Paul Jennings



Photo credit: David May