

John Marsden

John Marsden is a man of 'generous wisdom' and proclaimed 'Poet Laureate of Australian teenagers'. A romantic notion but one John questions, he wonders whether teenagers would even know what it means. He ponders the 'weird situation' of a fifty year old man giving teenagers a voice but he does concede that maybe he 'brings a perspective to the voice, a reflective ability gained with age and experience.'

It would take more space than his award winning seven book series *Tomorrow When The War Began* to chronicle the twists and turns in his life that have brought him to this wisdom and the article can only hope to glean a brief overview.

'Life is a tragedy for those who feel, and a comedy for those who think' said seventeenth century Christian writer Jean de La Bruyère and John readily admits ascribing to the first view. He feels life deeply.

As a young boy his family moved several times, from Melbourne, to country Victoria and then Tasmania. At Devonport Primary School he developed into a voracious reader, exhausting both the school and town libraries, already the young loner was storing it away for his future career.

In his late primary and teenage years he attended The King's School in Sydney, a conservative boarding school with extremely strict military values. He questions a system where older prefects were given cart blanche to discipline the younger students with a canning and he resented the authoritarian nature of his world. In retrospect it was not the right school for him and he felt he was left 'emotionally mute' at the end of his schooling.

He felt powerless as a teenager, the experience still unforgettable, and it explains why he feels such empathy and sympathy for teenagers and their lack of voice. He understands the complexity of their lives and takes very seriously their concerns.

Late teenage hood was a difficult time for John and he suffered severe bouts of depression. He laughs when he tells me of his time in hospital, 'it wasn't like Cuckoo's Nest or anything it was a really positive experience. It was here that I finally started to learn the language of feelings, confront things and look at them more honestly. "People would ask me, How do you feel? and I honestly didn't know.'

A series of unusual jobs followed but all the time he was still 'reading extensively and starting to experiment with writing'. At twenty eight, 'he found a career which suited him: that of teaching.' This led him to Geelong Grammar School where he became the head of English at the Timbertop campus.

He remembers a defining moment in his last term at Geelong Grammar. When he relates the story he is quiet and thoughtful as he evokes the feeling in the Headmaster's office so many afternoons ago.

John had been appointed coach of the tennis squad, a dubious distinction compared to the more prestigious sports like football and soccer. The tennis squad had not won a game in years. He agreed, on the condition that they give it a go for a year and after that time, if there had been no improvement, they would disband the squad.

'It doesn't do anything for anyone'. John told the headmaster

Training camps followed, afternoon practise and before long the team was successful, their kudos in the school rose from the bottom of the barrel to one of sporting elite.

'The headmaster was reflective, there were long silences', finally the comment,

'John, you made them feel important.'

And this is what he does in his books, makes teenagers feel important.

It is Australian literature folklore how his first book *So Much to Tell You* came to be published. Six publishers had rejected the manuscript until a chance conversation with Albert Ullin, legendary Melbourne Bookseller saw Albert handball it to new Sydney publisher, Walter McVitty and in 1987 it was named children's book of the Year for Older Readers. It doesn't seem that long ago that a heavily pregnant I waddled of to the Ballarat library to hear a talk by new children's author John Marsden. The voice he had given Marina was so inciteful I remember wondering if 'John' was really an alias for a female writer.

He still feels more 'comfortable writing about feelings as a female, and some characters are mute in my story because they still haven't found their voice.'

This early success and a lot of hard work opened the floodgates and saw John move in and out and through various genres as well as defining new Australian literary standards of his own. Accolades, awards and Fellowships flowed in a steady succession. Not just adult awards but state awards that are judged by children and teenagers themselves. In 1995 *Tomorrow, When the War Began* won the older readers' section in every state award.

It is the response of these young readers that John finds particularly gratifying and one of the compelling reasons that he continues to write for them. '...their responses are so strong, so passionate, so intense and so heartfelt.'

His genuine concern for teenagers is palpable and his admiration for them is continuously evident. He beams at the thought of a young girl writing to him, 'Dear John, I am an enthusiastic thirteen year old girl.' He acknowledges that he has meet 'many teenagers who go though life so gracefully.'

But still sometimes he despairs at the isolation and abuse many of them live with, Many of 'today's teenagers are wealthier than any other age' but they have 'replaced spiritual life with material life'. He knows that a 'you are what you buy' mentality will not equip them with skills to live a full and rich life.

Like myths and legends of old that offered frameworks for our life, John's work is sometimes the only voice of reason in a hostile world for some young people. As student Jess Bieniek wrote on January 23, 1996, 'Thanx for creating a world in which I can escape the...pressures which contribute to pulling us teenager's lives apart...With each story you write, you knock down a brick in the wall of hate.'

In John Howard's world we all live in happy middle class homes and some critics have railed at his 'grim violent realism'. Marsden maintains that it is only by putting these stories into

context can we start to understand them, 'even the darkest tale ever told is not destructive if it is true.'

He knows from bitter experience that 'by honestly and directly confronting problems they lose the power to damage. While evil remains inexplicable its troubling nature it can never be resolved.' Time and time again our society glosses over the concerns of teenagers .

John tackles some very complex issues in his writing but above all he is an extraordinary storyteller. The "War" series had it all. Adventure, intrigue, loves won and lost and but ultimately the spiritual growth of his protagonists.

As I re-read *So Much To Tell You* , Australia's highest grossing teenage book ever, the other day, I hurried through to the finale. Once again it brought tears to my eyes. Finally the story is revealed, the bitter circumstances, her love for her Dad. Marina hadn't said a word in over a year and there it was, 'Dad.....I've got so much to tell you.'

John is a gentle man with a love of nature and the bush, whilst visiting Tye Estate his pride is obvious, he likes being 'a famous author with a great lifestyle'. The Estate lies in a beautiful valley where the sound of running water is constant after heavy rains and splashes of pink rhododendron dot the landscape. Dogs yap and the CFA are here to check out safety procedures. We stop for a chat with the properties caretakers.

Bunk houses and classrooms higher up the hill are where John conducts his writing courses, he still has a passion for teaching. The storytelling Guild members would benefit hugely from a weekend of explorations with John.

I could have talked to John for hours his considered, reflective answers and his congenial companionship were very generous and illuminating. As a family friend we sometimes pick up old threads and it's been a thrill to watch the writer blossom.

Which leads me to a request from John. We had turned the tape off but he turned it on again after a moment, I have got one request, I've been in New Guinea recently and there crying out for picture books. I was embarrassed and mortified to find such titles as *Solving the Balkan Crisis* on shelves to introduce children and develop in them a love of language and literature.

Not tattered old books, but new picture and storybooks. So how about it storytellers, keep your eyes peeled for suitable material.

And send it to John Marsden The Tye Estate RMB 1250 Kerrie-Romsey Road ROMSEY VICTORIA 3434