

Richard Yaxley – Responses to Greenleaf Press

1. What made you decide to become an author?

I don't know that I really *decided*; it was just something that I always wanted to do. From a young age I was a precocious reader – we owned several shelves of Readers Digest condensed novels, which I devoured – and I can vividly recall writing and illustrating little stories as a child. My brother and I wrote a series based on a character called Merv ... Merv the Magician, Merv the Mechanic etc. In Grade 6, my teacher, the innovative Ms Chappell, initiated a learning regime whereby we were issued with our weekly tasks on Monday morning and had to organise our own deadlines. Early, correct completion meant individual project time, enormous incentive for someone like me who was largely self-motivated. I used to work like a Trojan to knock off my maths, history and geography so that I could write and illustrate stories in the latter part of the week. Ms Chappell even sent my work to a well-known local author, who wrote me a lovely letter of encouragement. After that, the course was set.

2. Did you have a 'day job' before you became an author?

Up until this year, I've always had a day job as well as writing! For most Australian authors, the financial rewards are relatively small and I've had a mortgage and family (and hedonistic lifestyle!) to honour. I worked for the federal government straight out of university then completed an education diploma and taught in secondary schools for over thirty years. Much of that time was spent in middle management roles so I was extremely busy and stretched. No doubt the quality of my writing output suffered at times because of those commitments but, equally, I learned a lot about adhering to deadlines, working under pressure and strategizing my responses to different situations, all valuable tools for the author. I was also given great exposure to my main audience – teenagers – which has been wonderful.

3. What is the book that you loved writing the most?

The next one, always.

I think that you love writing every book for different reasons. My first published novel, *The Rose Leopard* (2003) was an exercise in catharsis after a very dear friend passed away. *Joyous and Moonbeam* (2013) was lovely to write because of the freshness and originality of the voices – a writer's exercise in play. *Drink The Air* (2010) paid homage to my community and was enjoyable to construct because I was purely focused on creating small and evocative word-pictures. With *This Is My Song* (2017), I knew that I was in the midst of a story that had great resonance and that I needed to honour people who had suffered terribly. That kind of ethical responsibility brings its own joy if you can make the story appropriately respectful. *The Happiness Quest* (2018) was my way of saying to young people: it's okay to feel down but understand that, more often than not, you will be happy again.

Writing stories for others to read needs to be contextualised as a privilege. The day I stop loving it is the day that I stop doing it.

4. What's a book you've read that changed your life?

I'll nominate two.

Firstly, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. I read it when I was 15 and was stunned by the deployment of language and what the story said about humanity's fickleness. The quality of that book fired my desire to write.

Secondly, *A Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson. I read this remarkable story in my early 20s, when I was doing my education diploma. The cohesion and power of Paterson's plotting and writing seemed to be on another level. Her book started me thinking about one day writing for young people.

5. What book character would you be, and why?

Winnie-the-Pooh.

He has adventures.

He eats what he likes without the hassles of self-doubt and body image issues.

He has diverse and loyal friends.

He thinks simply and clearly.

He is loving.

And ... he lives in an idyllic forest.

I have a gorgeous book at home called *The Tao of Pooh* by Benjamin Hoff. Hoff argues that Pooh is demonstrative of The Way – he just *is*. I find that very appealing.

6. What are you working on at the moment?

I've just finished the editorial process for a new novel, coming out in February 2020, called *A New Kind of Everything*. It's about two brothers who, having lost their father in an accident, find themselves caught up with an anti-immigration group. That might sound political but I see the novel as a love story. The dominant examination is around how young men, as brothers, can diminish each other with great cruelty but also maintain a deeply felt and definitive love.

I'm also honing the draft of a longer, multi-voiced novel set across generations, and working through the early stages of a piece which shifts certain historical truths in order to see what might have happened. So, busy as always!