

Questions for Richard Yaxley from Sarah Robinson-Hatch, book blogger at Written Word Worlds (7800 followers plus [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#)) and [The YA Room](#) (3700 followers plus [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#)), a Melbourne-based YA bookclub.

What an incredible achievement it is to have even been shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, let alone won - congratulations!

\* If you could have given yourself one piece of advice before getting this novel published, what would it have been?

Trust your story and trust your writing instincts.

I've been writing for a long time but it is primarily a solitary pursuit. Sometimes it is easy to allow self-doubt to infringe upon the merits of the story and the process. I have to remind myself: you can do this! Persist, be meticulous, be aware, be confident - and it will happen.

Being shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Award provided a significant boost of self-confidence. I had not seriously contemplated winning the Award and am still coming to terms with that. It's affirming and humbling.

• In their own ways, each of the nominated books deal with some powerful, hard-hitting topics and themes. What compelled you to write about your particular subject matter?

As a young man, I worked with the Department of Veterans' Affairs and saw, first-hand, how the traumas that are associated with war do not end when that war ends. Sadly, we continue to see this phenomenon in the current world with difficulties and complexities around the resettlement of refugees who naturally struggle to cast off the terrible weight of their experiences. I had wanted to write about the idea of transferred trauma for some time but was struggling to find the right characters - and I was especially aware of not being unwittingly patronising or disrespectful to those who have experienced such trauma. However, as I indicated in the note at the end of the novel, this changed when I visited the Holocaust Memorial in Prague and saw drawings and paintings done by children from the Theresienstadt Ghetto. I found this to be a very moving exhibition and saw how the experience of those children could be fitted, respectfully, into the emotional tenor and themes of my intended story. As soon as I arrived back in Australia, I shelved other versions and fragments of the novel and began to write afresh. *This Is My Song* emerged relatively quickly after that.

• What's the most challenging and most rewarding aspect of the writing process for you?

I love the weaving. By that I mean the little extra threads and stitches that add to the complexity and meaning of a novel. For example, I'm very careful with minor characters; I want to make them as valid and intriguing as the major drivers of the story.

The most challenging aspect is getting the story to the point where I am satisfied that it is as completed and as healthy as it should be. I'm a compulsive tinkerer; the wrong choice of a single word will keep me awake at night. I don't think you ever really 'finish' a manuscript ...

- If you could write a book with any author, dead or alive, who would you like to collaborate with?

I learned a lot about writing from reading the crime novels of American Elmore Leonard, who passed away in 2013. Brilliant control of language, characters who strive and wallow in equal parts and a wonderful briskness and economy – he was masterful. His handbook of the 10 rules of writing is legendary for a reason; it's excellent advice. Avoiding over-description, cutting back on qualifiers, being okay with the verb 'said' – Leonard shaped my view that good writers are first and foremost good editors.

- Can you share anything with us about what you're currently working on?

Since *This Is My Song*, I've had a new novel published by Scholastic – *The Happiness Quest*. I've also completed a draft of a novel about a compromised relationship between two brothers whose love for each other ultimately outweighs their differences.

- What have been some of your favourite YA novels of 2018?

Um, sorry – I don't read a lot of YA, even though I write mainly in this area. This is not out of any sense of disrespect to my fellow authors – quite the opposite; it's such a strong and thriving field in Australia – but more because I prefer to read in other genres such as crime, literary fiction and biography. I hope that my novels appeal to a broad readership; in line with that, I guess I'm not really into the classification of stories based on potential audience, even though I completely understand the desirability of that from a marketing point of view.

*Quick fire round:*

- Coffee or tea?

Coffee, but I'm an easy-going, Moccona Instant kind of guy.

- Cats or dogs?

Birds.

- Summer or winter?

Winter, which is probably silly for someone who lives in Queensland, but I love cold, clear, cut-glass kinds of days.

- Writing to music or writing in silence?

Silence. Music takes over and doesn't let go.

- Plotter or pantsier (or neither)?

Plotter, but loose enough that I can flex and shift if necessary (and I invariably do).

- Writing in the morning or at night?

Write in the morning, review in the afternoon, consider at night.

- Would you prefer your book to be adapted to film or TV?

Either! The three-part, three-narrator format of *This Is My Song* would probably lend itself better to TV.

- Audiobooks or podcasts?

Podcasts for their versatility and accessibility.