

Literature as Springboards for Issue-based Discussion

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There is no denying it. Like never before information is at our fingertips.

So ... do we still need books? Does the written word in the form of fiction still have a place in the lives of the young of today? My opinion, and I'd hesitate to guess that the opinion of many of you people here today as well is YES ... more than ever!

Stories have played an important role since the beginning of time. In all cultures. Throughout the world. Myths, legends, fairy tales, stories.

Stories that explored and explained the human experience, our place in this world; that passed down history, values, morals, traditions.

Unfortunately, the oral story telling tradition is diminishing, and so with it the stories that shaped the traditions and values of the world's cultures. It has been replaced with the Internet, TV, videos, computer games and the like. And although there are many fine games and movies and websites that provide

provide the youth of today with opportunities to explore and better understand the human experience, there are also many questionable ones. One does have to ask the value of computer and video games that allow us to go on amazing journeys where our progression in the game is dependent on how many people we shoot in any given session.

So, more than ever, story in the form of the written word is crucial.

Paul Jennings in his book “The Reading Bug” (Penguin 2003) highlights the importance of story. “They [stories] can change people's lives and attitudes. They make us more human. Stories can end suffering and prevent violence. For a little while we become someone else. We know what it is like to be lost and alone. To be shy or anxious or weak. We know what it feels like to get the sack or be the subject of bullying.” [Page 55]

Stories are important. And as an author of stories for young people, I am very conscious of the importance in the growth and development of my intended reader that my stories can be. Something I don't take lightly.

There is a strong “YUK” factor in my novel *Battle of the Rats*. There are rats leaping out of nowhere, scuttling over shoulders, nibbling on toes, being splattered in traps. And I don't make any apologies about this; it was very deliberate. All aimed at hooking the reader and creating a page-turning adventure.

Juxtaposed to the story about the family battling the rodents is the story of the human rats. In many ways the rodents become a metaphor and a symbol of betrayal.

Battle of the Rats is issue-based realistic fiction. It speaks the language of today's kids and deals with issues of bullying loyalty and betrayal, friendship and family and the issue I am going to concentrate on today: Peer pressure.

Peer pressure can be extremely strong and hard to resist. We only need to cast our minds back to our own childhood to remember the powerful pull of the “in group”, the potent desire to be popular and at what lengths some would go to get the attention of those wearing the popularity crown or to fast track their acceptance. Moth, the central character in Battle of the Rats, is embroiled in such a situation and is seduced by the lure of popularity.

Now when I was writing this story, I began to worry that I might be committing “literary suicide”. One of the first rules of writing is to create believable, likeable characters. Well, Moth, isn't very likable. He actually becomes one of the “rats”. He is a bad friend. He makes some very poor decisions. He succumbs to peer pressure and is seduced with the idea of popularity. When the “in group” glance sideways at him, he dumps his geeky friend (since kindergarten) Tom in a flash and jumps ship. To ease his conscience he tries to find fault in Tom: Tom's a geek, he wears the wrong clothes, they have nothing in common, he's a baby and so on.

He gets swept along with the “in group” and their way of doing things. He lies to his parents, disobeys his grandmother and gets involved in pranks that ultimately result in a girl breaking her arm and requiring surgery, all to stay in favour with Jaike and his gang. Now Moth has to live with the consequences of his poor decisions he ends up being the target of bullying, name calling and alienation himself. He has a miserable summer. Eventually, after some dramatic events, Moth finds the

courage to face up to Jaike, the bully, and to try to rebuild his friendship with Tom. Though the problems are by no means solved, Moth has grown and is ready to stand up for himself and admit his mistakes.

Advance copies of the book arrived on the first day back at school this year. I gave a copy to three teacher friends of mine and asked them if they'd mind reading a chapter or two to their Year 5 classes and let me know the kid's reaction. Then I waited nervously for their response. Well ... it was amazing, better than I could have ever hoped for. All three classes dumped their planned program, completed the novel and studied it for all of Term 1. And the feedback I received was fabulous. Phew!

The thing that shone out overwhelmingly from the feedback from these first three classes was that all the kids empathised with Moth. To my delight and enormous relief, Moth's weaknesses, the aspects of his character that I had worried about, became the very strength of the book.

They forgave him. They understood him. They identified with him. (I hadn't committed literary suicide after all!) This was their world. They all knew about dumping friends and being dumped. They knew about making bad choices and decisions and feeling regret. And the fact that the central character of this novel was paralleling their own lives, making the same mistakes as them, gave them the opportunity and the **courage** to open up and discuss the issues in depth. In all three classes it provided the perfect vehicle for stimulating frank, open discussion.

As a teacher, and even more so as a parent, often it is not the worries and troubles my kids tell me about that concern me. It's the one they don't speak about - the

ones they bottle inside. Kids need vehicles, such as books, to help them come to terms with life's dramas; to help them understand themselves and others and to make them, in the words of Paul Jennings, "more human". Stories that are written sensitively and honestly that deal with the human experience provide the reader an open door into a parallel world and as has been my experience with *Battle of the Rats* gives them permission to feel, empathise and to open up. Something as educators we should all aspire to encourage. It can only benefit.