

Paul Jennings' gentle, humorous, autobiography weaves together the characters and events that formed the author of *Round the Twist*, the 'Un' series and the *Different* trio of novellas recently published by Old Barn Books. From dyslexic child immigrant and high school dropout to award-winning teacher and Concorde-travelling author, Paul looks back and unpicks both his life and his writing, reflecting on moments of hubris as he confronts his glass-fronted collection of classic cars and his marriage failure. Raw and revealing, in *Untwisted* Jennings has crafted both a quirky, compelling, narrative and a how-to for students of creative writing and of life.



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untwisted

PAUL

JENNINGS

the stories of my life

Honest, funny and insightful reflections on writing, teaching and love from the author and creator of *Round The Twist*

'Paul stands with O. Henry, Wodehouse and Dahl, the great short-story writers. The originality of his imagination and humour shine, but there is a wonderful darkness underneath. This memoir goes some way to explaining that darkness.'

**Terry Denton**

'As generous, sensitive, perceptive and honest as its author, *Untwisted* is a fascinating collage. In deceptively simple prose, Paul Jennings uses key moments and events to make a vibrant, funny and moving picture of an amazing life. If you want to know what makes a writer, read this.'

**Emily Rodda**

*Untwisted* is amazing, I planned to savour it and make it last, but was soon so completely swept away by his gentle, but sincere storytelling that I was utterly gripped!... What is so wonderfully apparent through *Untwisted* is just what a natural teacher and born raconteur Paul Jennings is. As with his fiction, not a word feels out of place and each and every chapter is beautifully wrought and hewn, but here he reveals the inner-workings of his craft showing influences. It is a very inspiring book. I have genuinely roared with laughter (I still can't help spontaneously laughing when I think of the zeppelin episode!) and wept whilst reading, sometimes at the same time. *Untwisted* displays that characteristic ability Paul Jennings has to distill honest and true emotions that not only get to the heart of his subjects, but which also reach the heart of readers. I now want to go back and read many of his stories and novels again in the light of this new understanding and am looking forward to delving back into these.

**Jake Hope** - children's book consultant and critic, CILIP Carnegie & Kate Greenaway Medals Working Party



Paul Jennings' memoir is as elegantly, sparsely written as his short fiction. I welled up but also laughed; to have such a deft, intuitive sense of language is rare. A master class for aspiring young writers.

**Alison Brumwell** - chartered librarian and Youth Libraries Group chair 2020 - 2022

Reading the Jennings' memoir is being gifted the rare opportunity of a bird's eye view at the life of one of Australia's most beloved writers. It allows us to deeply journey inside the making of a man, a writer, a husband, a father and grandfather, a beloved public figure. It is achingly honest and reading '*Untwisted: the story of my life*' feels like a personal invitation into the astonishing head of Jennings.

**Louise Park** - author of *7 Steps to Get Your Child Reading*

'Poignant, courageous and sometimes funny, this is the story of a kind, gentle and deeply thoughtful man who is also one of Australia's best-loved children's authors. I read it in one sitting; it was just wonderful. Having read Paul's kids' books, I was surprised. He's a beautiful writer for adults as well! And I got such a sense of Paul in his writing. It was like he was in this room talking to me about his life.'

**Children's Books Daily**, [www.children'sbooksdaily.com](http://www.children'sbooksdaily.com)

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AN OLD BARN BOOK

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*To all the dear people who have helped me  
along the way but have not been mentioned in this book.  
Among them are many of my friends, office managers,  
publishers, editors, illustrators, book designers and  
publicists. You know who you are and so do I.  
Thank you so much for being there for me.*



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## IN NEED OF HELP

**M**y dear friend, writer and illustrator Ted Greenwood, was the only man I knew who lived anywhere near me in the Dandenong Ranges when I first moved there. He was someone who had his priorities well worked out. From his example I learned that fame and success are false gods. He was someone who knew what was really important in life. He was as wise and thoughtful as I was by now extravagant and impulsive.

### 1990–1994

Nineteen ninety was the year I relocated to Belgrave in the Dandenong Ranges with my wife and two stepchildren. The other four kids from my first marriage were now young adults and had left home. The move meant that I could be closer to the film studio while I wrote the scripts for the second series of *Round the Twist*. We bought a fairytale cottage on the edge of Sherbrooke Forest and settled in for a new life among the ferns and tall mountain gum trees.

My wife had a job tutoring at Deakin University and I was at home all day working alone. I now had a lot of time to myself. Too much, in fact. I needed a distraction. It came in the form of a historic car. A 1936 model Riley Kestrel. It was a beautiful old saloon that was so gracious and lovely, I decided to have it restored to mint condition. When it was finished it looked fantastic and I vowed to never drive it in the rain. I had always loved classic cars and knew the names of most of the pre- and post-war English models. The Riley was to be one of many I bought in the following years.

Ted Greenwood liked the car a lot. I knew that he had once been friendly with author Ivan Southall – one of my heroes, who had long before created a series of books about a space cadet named Simon Black. As an eleven-year-old, I had loved his books. I never dreamed that it would be possible to meet him. I asked Ted if he could introduce us.

He shook his head. ‘We’ve drifted apart,’ he said sadly. ‘I haven’t seen him for ages. But I can tell you he would love this car.’

About a year later Ted rang me. He was excited.

‘I spoke with Ivan for the first time in years,’ he said. ‘And he would love to see the Riley. It’s all on for tomorrow. We can drive up to Healesville and take him and Susan for a spin.’

My heart sank a little. Much as I wanted to see Ivan, Healesville was a long way off and we would have to drive over the Dandenong Ranges from my place. The Riley was temperamental and didn’t like hills. But I agreed.

The next day it was pouring with rain. Oh, no. I thought about trying to put the trip off, but some occasions have their moment and you can’t chance missing it.

We reached Healesville without any trouble except a few crunches from the difficult-to-use pre-selector gearbox. When they saw each other, Ivan and Ted embraced with great emotion. They hadn’t seen each other for a long, long time. We all went for a drive and then returned for morning tea. Now in retirement, Ivan was propagating fuchsias. He showed us his collection of these lovely flowers just as we were preparing to leave.

‘Here’s a new variety that I have developed,’ he said.

He produced a photo and showed it to Ted, who was an avid gardener. He looked at the flower in the picture. All purples, greens and reds. Splendid.

‘What’s it called?’ said Ted.

‘Look on the back.’

Ted turned it over and saw the words: *Variety, Ted Greenwood*.

They both started to blink back tears. So did Ivan's wife, Susan. Ted and I drove back to Belgrave in silence. Our cheeks were wet.

And so was my Riley Kestrel.

I had originally met Ted when he accepted my invitation to be a guest tutor at the Warrnambool Institute of Advanced Education. He became incredibly popular with the staff and students. He was a natural therapist who could help others with their problems in a kind and gentle way. Ted put a daily calendar on his office door showing the times he was available. I remember passing his office one day and seeing a long line of people waiting. I had never seen that before. Even other staff members sought him out.

Whoever sat next to Ted at a dinner party received the same interested and enquiring attention. No matter what a person's background or education, he listened in the same involved way. He responded with concern and gentle humour.

I knew that Ted was interested in spoonerisms and that he was a master of word games. I asked him if he would be interested in joining me in writing a fun word book about them and he readily agreed.

We both held the view that anything that makes reading a laborious effort for children will hold them back, so we thought a funny book would be ideal. We got together and designed a tiny mock-up. We were both out of our minds with excitement over this ambitious project and knew that we needed an illustrator with a terrific sense of humour. We

approached comedic genius Terry Denton to illustrate the book and to our great joy he agreed. We were off.

Terry produced a full colour dummy that was wickedly funny. We were thrilled with it, but because the book involved a lot of paper engineering, we were nervous. Would Penguin take the risk on this bold and expensive project? Julie tells me that she and Erica Wagner (who is now my publisher) fell about with delight when they saw it.

It was basically a puzzle book. Spoonerisms are sentences or phrases where a person accidentally makes a 'slip of the tongue' and the individual speech sounds become mixed up, resulting in a ridiculous sentence.

Probably the most well-known example of an Australian spoonerism was an announcement made by the conductor of a train as it approached the Victorian state border. At the time no fruit was allowed into the state because of a fruit-fly infestation affecting crops in New South Wales.

The conductor announced over the PA system, 'Open your flies for a fruit bag inspection.'

In our book, *Spooner or Later*, readers are given a sentence and have to find a picture that illustrates what the speaker meant to say. The spelling is irrelevant – it's the speech sounds that matter.

Here's a few of our spoonerisms with answers.

*Mown Gran – grown man*

*Bee on the peak – pee on the beak*

*Two lunged blizzard – blue tongued lizard*

*Head waiters scaring rats – red skaters wearing hats*

And four others without answers.

*Rex tested the strudel by poking it*

*A handle colder*

*A mild waiter skipping sadly*

*The rude spectre yanks a gnu*

One of Terry's drawings got us into big trouble. It was only a few centimetres in size and hidden among fifty or so other drawings on a big fold-out page. The scandal-loving and now defunct newspaper *Truth* blew it up into a large picture and declared that it was corrupting our youth.

The illustration in question was the one Terry drew in response to the last spoonerism on the list above.

Ted, Terry and I were proud of the design of our book, which involved a number of small pages inside larger ones. Ted and I made up the spoonerisms. Terry illustrated. His crazy and off-the-wall pictures have tremendous appeal to children. He has a mind that sees things completely differently to most other people. Ted and I were amazed by his hilarious interpretations.

We had such a great time that we went on to produce two more puzzle books. Our planning meetings were filled with laughter and camaraderie. There was always a bottle of wine on the table and so many laughs and jokes were thrown around in these sessions that we could have gone on to produce fifty books. It seemed these happy times would go on forever.

Sadly, they didn't. Ted was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Although it slowed him down quite a lot, he

continued working for a number of years. But in the end the condition caught up with him. He collapsed into a coma while visiting his brother-in-law in Portland. Ted had been dancing around in his underpants. I'm sure he would have thought that it was a great way to go.

Ted's family, knowing that he would never wake up again, and aware that I lived nearby, kindly invited me to see him in hospital. They left us alone for a few minutes so that I could say goodbye.

I kissed him on the forehead and told him that I loved him.

Terry and I were devastated by his loss.

I remember someone once saying, 'If you want to know who you are, look at your friends.'

I used to cheer myself up sometimes by thinking, *I can't be too bad. Ted is my friend.*

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When *Round the Twist* was finished and in the can, I returned to writing books. For most of my adult life I had been surrounded by staff and students and had always enjoyed the give-and-take that took place in staffrooms at lunchtimes. Ted lived on the other side of the mountain and I was finding it hard to make any new friends closer to home. Often the only contact I would have with a human being in a whole day was when I walked down the street to the local cafe and could exchange a word or two with the barista. At times my loneliness morphed into despair and depression.

One day my stepdaughter told me that one of her friends

at school had a father who was, like me, interested in old English cars. His name was Keith Hulstaert. I asked him and his wife, Alison, around for a coffee and we immediately became friends.

I was out one day wandering aimlessly in the main street when Keith drove by. He pulled over for a chat. We got to talking about cars. He was between jobs and also at a bit of a loose end.

‘Why don’t we buy an MG and race it in the Targa Tasmania?’ I blurted out.

‘Great idea,’ he said. We both went home and left notes saying, *Gone to Ballarat to buy an MG.*

In the end we didn’t buy the car from Ballarat, because it had only four cylinders and not quite enough grunt for racing. We returned to Melbourne and eventually bought a bright yellow Triumph TR6, which had six cylinders and twin carburettors.

We didn’t make it to the Targa Tasmania, but Keith and I did race at many tracks around the country. Keith later bought another TR6 and introduced me to his friends Johnno and Cheryl, who also bought a TR6. We were then joined by Peter and Marilyn and landscape gardener Arie. With these new friends and their wives, I was on my way to one of the most fun times of my life.

At one point I bought a copy of the book *The Road Less Travelled* by M Scott Peck and inscribed it to *My Friend Keith*. After that he became known in the group as MFK. He is still my dear friend.

For the first time in my adult life I had no debts. I bought an XJS Jaguar. Later I purchased an E-Type – considered by many to be the most beautiful car ever built. At the time I had no idea why I spent so much money on these cars. My father had always lusted after a Jaguar. He was dead by this time, but it still hadn’t occurred to me that my purchases might be some sort of unconscious metaphorical one-upmanship. Or did I just love these restored symbols of an earlier, gentler time?

Next, I employed Terry Wright, a builder who also became my friend, to construct a huge garage with a pit and all the latest tools. The garage was designed with sliding doors featuring huge curved windows so that I could look at my vehicles as I walked by. I would immerse myself in there on weekends and spend hours working on various projects. I bought myself a white mechanic’s jacket and took great pride in my new set-up.

I was having a wonderful time with the cars and the guys and our wives, touring around the countryside visiting wineries and car shows. We would lunch in cafes and nod knowingly at the admiring blokes outside inspecting our shining row of historic sports cars.

‘My dad used to have one of these,’ they would say wistfully. This always made us smile.

It was all such fun. The mateship was great. I will never forget that time and those wonderful people, who became and still are my friends. But deep down I knew that my growing fleet was excessive. Unfortunately, I got carried away. In no time at all I had the 1936 Riley Kestrel, a 1934

MG Special, the E-Type, two Triumph TR6s, and a TVR Griffith.

Seven English cars in all, including the XJS. But despite the picture I have been painting of all the fun times, the excesses could not lift my ever-growing bouts of depression.

After a few years in our fairytale home, I bought the cottage next door and employed two assistants – the incredibly talented Louise McCall and her offsider, Monique. Arie, who tended our garden and was also a close friend, was part of it all. Terry Wright was erecting a series of extensions to the house, including a three-storey turret and a new kitchen. These building works went on for years.

Every lunchtime this growing group would gather around a table in the office. It was just like the staffrooms I had once enjoyed as a teacher. I was no longer lonely, in the sense that I now had company, but some sort of inner loneliness continued to bug me. It was almost as if two parts of me were not speaking to each other.

At the time, someone referring to the cars, buildings and merry band of people, gave me their opinion. ‘You have built a shrine to yourself.’

There was a dark side to the extravagant lifestyle but I largely kept my worries about it to myself. My periods of depression were growing worse and worse. I would look at all the happy people in the street and think, *They are normal. I am not. I am alone and different.*

The problem with depression is that when the gloom descends, the real world seems dreamlike or non-existent. When in the depths of this dark abyss the sufferer does not

believe that a sunlit world exists just nearby. Once I wrote myself a note and sealed it in an envelope. I planned to open it next time I was visited by Churchill’s Black Dog of depression. The note said, *This bleak period will pass. Life is really good. Get over it.*

Of course, the message didn’t work – I simply didn’t believe it, even though I had written it myself. I regarded it as a total lie. I asked my doctor for a referral and he sent me to a psychiatrist. I was nervous about this, especially on my first visit.

I arrived early at the front door of the narrow Victorian terrace where the psychiatrist had a practice. There was only a street number to identify the building and it looked just like any one of the others in the line of terraces. I knocked on the door. After a bit, a whiskery-faced man opened it and barked at me in a gruff voice.

‘Yes?’

I told him who I was.

‘You’re early,’ he snapped. I nodded.

‘Oh, well, come in then.’

He stood aside as I entered and then opened another door on one side of the gloomy corridor.

‘In there.’

I stepped in and he banged the door closed behind me. The blinds were down and it was totally dark. I felt my way to a chair and sat there in silence. I wondered if I was allowed to turn on the light. I felt like a naughty child. Finally, I got up, felt my way to the door and switched on the light.

After a while I heard footsteps and then the sound of the front door opening and closing. I guessed that another patient had left. Whisker Face entered and led me to a bare room that contained a couch and two spindly chairs. He pointed to one of them. We both sat. And stared at each other. I waited for him to speak. Seconds passed. Maybe minutes.

Eventually, I said, 'Well, what happens now? What do we do?'

He said, 'How old are you?'

I said, 'Forty-seven.'

He said, 'Well, a forty-seven-year-old man must have had a lot of things happen to him.'

I said, 'Yes.'

He continued to stare at me without speaking. After a while, I started to tell him about some of my problems and my childhood experiences.

He listened without commenting. If there was a pause or silence, he would not fill the gap. I hesitantly spoke for fifty-five minutes until it was time to leave. He had not made one comment since I started talking.

I left confused and disappointed. I couldn't see how this was going to help.

On my second trip it was pouring with rain. I had promised to meet my daughter Tracy and give her a lift to the station but had been delayed and unable to contact her. I stopped the car several times to ring her from a phone box but couldn't get through. I knew that she would be worrying about where I was.

When I finally arrived for my therapy session, I asked the psychiatrist if I could use his phone. He showed me into a small kitchen and stood there silently listening to what I was saying.

I hung up and we returned to the consulting room.

He glared at me angrily. 'You requested that phone call in order to exert your dominance over me,' he said. 'You are a control freak.'

I mumbled some sort of apology as we went through a session identical to the first one.

When I reached home, I wrote him a letter:

*Dear Dr X,*  
*I will not be coming to any more of your sessions.*  
*After two hours with you I feel normal.*  
*Yours sincerely,*  
*Paul Jennings*

The depressive periods began to get even worse. I still needed help. I decided that I would have to look elsewhere.

This time, on a recommendation, I contacted Dr Peter O'Connor, the well-known therapist and writer who was known to have a more friendly approach. I knew that he had an interest in Jungian theory and dreams and had written several books, including one titled *Understanding the Mid-Life Crisis*, which I had enjoyed greatly.

His waiting room was on the first floor of an old mansion. It was filled with warm sunlight. This was a good start. He greeted me with a smile and indicated a comfortable chair.

I told him that I just wanted a quick fix for depression and would only need a few sessions. He smiled again and nodded kindly. Little did I know that I would still be seeking his help five years later.

He asked me why I had come and I began to blurt out my problems. He asked me if I'd had any dreams prior to coming to see him.

'Yes,' I said. 'In the dream I was in my father's garage. And one of the friends from my church Youth Fellowship days arrived and used chloroform to put me to sleep.'

It was quite a long dream and I described it in detail. Peter nodded. 'Tell me about that garage.'

I wondered why he wanted to talk about that specific part of the dream. It seemed such a small detail to pick out.

'It was nothing special,' I said. 'Big enough for a car. My father's workbench and drills and tools were at the far end.'

He nodded. 'Anything else?'

There was. I told him about the agonising weekends I spent there with my father. And later, after many sessions, I was able, for the first time, to speak about my shameful secret. The mental stings from invisible bees – the unwanted images of bashing my father on the head with a hammer. Oh, the relief that it brought just to talk about it to someone who understood. I had half-expected that he might send for the men in white coats, but he was not in the least surprised at my story. How reassuring. The calm way he informed me that I was far from being the only person with that problem instantly lifted my spirits.

One thing that particularly impressed me was the way Peter listened. Like my friend Ted, he would let me speak for ages, concentrating in an engaged way. I used to wonder how he did it with patient after patient. After my long rambling he would come out with a few observations and suggestions, which inevitably led to the nub of the problem. He was also extremely insightful as to the meaning of dreams.

Although I would sometimes find myself weeping during the sessions, I looked forward to every visit. Peter was amazingly helpful. Over those five years we covered a lot of ground together. I told him about the time I finally had a confrontation with my father. And the problems I faced with my new-found fame. As a result of his sessions I was now starting to feel as if I was part of the human race. I was neither crazy nor special. And, given all the ups and downs of the sort that everyone has, I was finding myself at peace with the world. I'll never forget his patient and insightful assistance.

Peter also helped me with my enlarged ego. I wasn't exactly in rock-star territory, but I was living in a manner a long way from my previous anonymous life. And it was starting to go to my head. With the extravagant house, the cars and all the publicity, I had finally got my dream. I had become the boy in the pirate's costume.

In response to this realisation I swung to the opposite position. When people asked me how I could ever come up with so many different stories I began saying, 'It's just an aberration – nothing special.'

Peter said to me, ‘Stop saying that. You should respect your talent.’

There is always a middle ground. On the matter of owning seven cars he had a different view. I had come to worry about it. It was excessive. And I was definitely starting to project an image of success and wealth.

‘Do you think it’s okay to have seven cars?’ I asked. ‘They’re worth about half a million dollars.’

I thought he was going to give me a lecture about all the good and worthy things I could have done with the money. But he made only one comment:

‘Your ego might be able to handle it,’ he said. ‘But mine couldn’t.’

I knew he was right. The real purpose of the glass doors on my garage was for other people to look at the glistening cars as they passed by. I was aware of looking at the reflection of my vehicles in shop windows when I parked.

I went home from the session and put most of the cars up for sale.

But not the Riley.

There’s more to controlling a rampant ego than selling a few cars, however, and I discovered I still had a long way to go.

Not long after this, children’s author Morris Gleitzman and I co-wrote a serial novel in six small parts called *Wicked!* I wrote the part of the boy character in my chapters and he wrote his from the view of the girl. Because the books were written in the first person there was a possibility that the readers might become confused as to which character was

speaking at the beginning of each chapter. We decided to put a silhouetted drawing of the girl at the beginning of Morris’s sections and one of a boy in front of mine to signal which character was speaking.

Keeping in mind my obsession with making things easy for struggling readers, I was very attached to this device. I didn’t want the kids to become confused.

When one of the books was printed, some of these silhouettes had been placed incorrectly – the image of the boy had been placed at the beginning of the girl’s chapters, and vice versa. I was terribly upset about this. I rang Peter Field, the managing director at Penguin at the time, and asked him to pulp the books already printed and issue a new edition. He was very nice about it – he actually came to my house to talk it over, which I knew was a generous compliment.

But in the end, he said, ‘We are not going to pulp seventy thousand books, not even for you, Paul.’

It was a great print run, but all the more reason to increase the pressure. I replied, ‘Hundreds of parents and teachers will write in and complain. If you don’t pulp the faulty books, I won’t publish with Penguin anymore.’ This saddened him but he refused to budge. Others at Penguin, including Julie, thought that I should reconsider. She felt that my writing voice was distinctive and the kids wouldn’t even notice the slip-up.

But I was adamant. I decided to leave.

A little after this I dreamed that I was stuck up on the spar of a huge sailing ship. Far below was the pier. I was

shaking with fear looking down from this enormous height. Suddenly Julie appeared with a long ladder. She held it up to the spar but I was too frightened to put my leg down and step onto the top rung. I awoke trembling.

I relayed this dream to Peter O'Connor and he said, 'Typical of you, Paul. Impulsively taking the high moral ground and then refusing to budge even when you're offered a way out.'

I went home and considered his words. I thought about all the people at Penguin who had supported me on my publishing journey – Kay, Julie, other editors, book designers, illustrators, publicists, sales reps and the friendly administration staff. I would also be walking out on them. And this was the company that had given me my start. But changing my mind now would make me look stupid and weak. How humiliating.

In the end I made an appointment with Peter Field and went into his office and apologised for kicking up all the fuss. He was very good about it and we shook hands.

After the book was published, we did not receive one complaint. No one even seemed to have noticed the mistake.

I don't believe that dreams necessarily tell you what to do. But I do think they help you to know what you are really feeling. I have had many dreams like the one above that have made me reconsider some of my actions.

The most interesting dreams seem to occur in the morning. I think that we are close to our unconscious mind at this time and I know that I do my best writing just after

sunrise. Most of my new ideas seem to occur around this time.

On the other hand, I know a number of successful writers who work at night. There are no rules in writing. Everyone is different.

There isn't any such thing as normal.