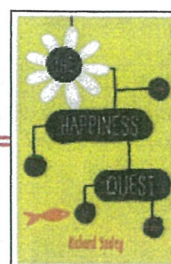
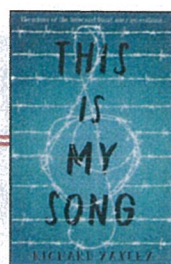


RICHARD YAXLEY: A PROFILE

by Robyn Sheahan-Bright



Richard Yaxley has in recent years received the sort of acclaim that many writers dream of. But his is not the *overnight success publishing story but rather the 'years of hard work leading to very welcome success' story*. For thirty years he has been a highly respected teacher and writer but the accolades he has received for his young adult novels have now cemented his reputation.

Background

Richard was born in Tasmania in 1962 and has lived in Queensland since 1986. He has described himself as a *father, husband, teacher, amateur actor, walker and reluctant gardener*. And of course he is also a writer!

Richard has written educational texts such as *Shorts*, *Short Shorts* and *No Big Dramas*, all published by Wiley, and has also published for adults, most notably with *The Rose Leopard* (UQP, 2003). He has published two plays — *The Tribunal* and *The Right Thing* as well as several adult short stories. His play *Jellybeans* was short-listed for the 2002 Queensland Premier's Drama Award. He was also Joint winner of the 2004 Queensland Theatre Company Expressions Playscript Competition for Heart. His novel manuscript entitled 'The Fourth Window' was Highly Commended in the 1994 Australian/Vogel's Literary Award, and was later published online as

Bloodlines. He has also co-authored numerous textbooks and CD Roms for secondary school students. He was Winner of the 2016 FAW NSW Walter Stone Award for Life Writing for *Homecoming*, a fictional memoir of his great-uncle who landed and died at Gallipoli on April 25th, 1915.

His young adult novels have received considerable acclaim — *Drink the Air* (2010), Winner of the 2010 Queensland Premier's Award for Young Adult Fiction; *Spring Rain* (2011); *Joyous and Moonbeam* (Scholastic, 2013; short-listed for the 2014 Western Australian Premier's Book Awards, Writing for Young Adults); *This Is My Song* (Scholastic, 2017; Winner of the 2018 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Young Adult Literature; Finalist in the 2017 Queensland Literary Awards; also published in the Czech Republic by Albatross Media); *The Happiness Quest* (Scholastic, 2018; CBCA Notable Book for Older Readers 2019).

He was awarded the Medal in the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2011 for services to education, literature and performing arts. In September 2019, Australian Catholic University announced a new program, selecting *This Is My Song* as its first 'book of the year' for 2020 and will provide a free copy to new students, in first-year courses. Professor Margot Hillel, chair of the university's academic board, said *the decision reflected a desire to see the liberal arts sit at the heart of the university's identity. A good book evokes an emotional response, asking its readers to relate to the characters on the page and to 'live their lives vicariously'*. *This Is My Song will do that for anyone who reads it* (Morris 2019). He has also been the recipient of various other grants and fellowships, including the 2015 May Gibbs Literature Trust Creative Time Fellowship for the creation of *This Is My Song*; an

Australia Council Literature Board Grant for Emerging Writers in 2011–2012; and after a thirty year career teaching English and Drama, spent in Hervey Bay and Brisbane, Richard has recently retired although he continues to deliver writing workshops and is a full time writer.

He says, *I can still vividly remember the joy that I experienced, as a child, in opening a book, savouring the beginning, working out who was who, trying to predict what might happen next. If I can help a new generation of readers find that same joy then I will be more than gratified ...* (Speakers Ink website)

The Works:

Richard's work is extremely diverse. Each of his novels has been written in a unique style and about very different subjects. In his most recent, *A New Kind of Everything* (2020), fourteen year-old Dinny Gallagher struggles with the aftermath of his father's reckless death amidst his mother's grief and his elder brother Carl's aggressive rejection of his family in favour of a dangerous group of new friends. When he discovers that Carl has been inveigled into joining a far-right anti-immigration group, Dinny's world crumbles even further. Yaxley's trademark frame of literary reference and his philosophising over what it means to be free and to follow a path of one's own choosing make this a richly resonant novel. Dinny finds 'a new kind of everything' despite the grief, loss and pain which he endures, and the novel ends with him embarking on his adult life with calm self-assurance. Like the river, Dinny observes that life offers alternative choices to either 'run fast and dangerous or drift with slow, benevolent grace'. (p. 213)

In **The Happiness Quest** (2018), Tillie Bassett struggles with sadness and depression without understanding why. She seeks help from her parents and friends who suggest very different remedies. But when her counsellor, *Gilbert the Goldfish*, suggests that the answer may lie in finding the nature of happiness, she embarks on a project to discover the answer. It has been described as *A perceptive exploration for young adults, navigating the many misdirections encountered in traversing mental health challenges, when it feels like the only things that you have in order to find your bearings, is a torn map and a broken compass.* Angela Brown, review, **Reading Time** October 13, 2018 <<http://readingtime.com.au/the-happiness-quest/>>

This Is My Song (2017) is a searing account of generational experiences of the Holocaust. The PMLA Judges' Report said (in part):

In this rich, beautifully written and multi-layered novel, we follow three generations of the one family and travel between three continents. Rafael Ullman, an aspiring musician born in Bamberg, in Bavaria, is little more than a child when he is sent to a Nazi concentration camp. He survives this horrific experience, in part by his musical ability. Following the war he moves to the wilds of Canada with his wife and daughter and later joins his daughter and grandson in Australia.

These different settings become almost characters themselves with the cold and privation of Auschwitz affecting the actions and interactions of the characters there. The vastness and loneliness of the Canadian landscape isolates the family and provides a kind of protection from the outside world. In Canada Annie, Rafael's daughter, befriends a goshawk that becomes an important character and a symbol of friendship and flight. The heat of Brisbane contrasts strongly with the previous settings and reflects the greater freedom Raphael's grandson Joe Hawker has in comparison to his mother or grandfather at the same age.

All the characters are beautifully and convincingly drawn such as Rafael's poor, deluded father who believes until it is far too late that his admiration for Rilke will be shared by the Nazis and will protect him. Rafael's mother tries to cling to normality in Auschwitz by carrying out Jewish rituals as best she can. There are many other people who move in and out of the lives of the main characters, adding a richness and depth to the narrative.

Each section of the book is told by one of the family—Rafael, Annie and finally grandson Joe. Each narrative voice is authentic and utterly convincing. The triptych structure allows the reader to understand more about each character than they, or their family do...

*This book explores the way the terrible events of the Holocaust affect the generations following, sometimes in ways even they don't understand. **This Is My Song** also explores the damage that secrets can do. It is poignant, memorable and intensely moving.' Judges Comments' Prime Minister's Literary Awards 2010 <<https://www.arts.gov.au/pm-literary-awards/current-awards/my-song>>*

In **Joyous and Moonbeam** (2013), a mentally disabled man named Joyous Bowen has been contentedly working for years in a sheltered workshop when he encounters teenager Ashleigh Summers who has been sent to do community service after she has vandalised the library at her school. He immediately renames her Moonbeam and the two strike up an unlikely friendship. As their conversations develop Ashleigh begins to understand the terrible experiences Joyous has had, and to appreciate his optimism in the face of adversity. Moonbeam's fractured family life has made her angry, so Joyous's attitude seems extraordinary to her. He believes in *working things around* and teaches Moonbeam what family and love are really about. The novel is told in a number of alternating voices — the language used in Joyous's first person monologues to himself is inventive and arresting; he and Moonbeam meet and conduct pithy dialogues; then we hear



To the Bridge

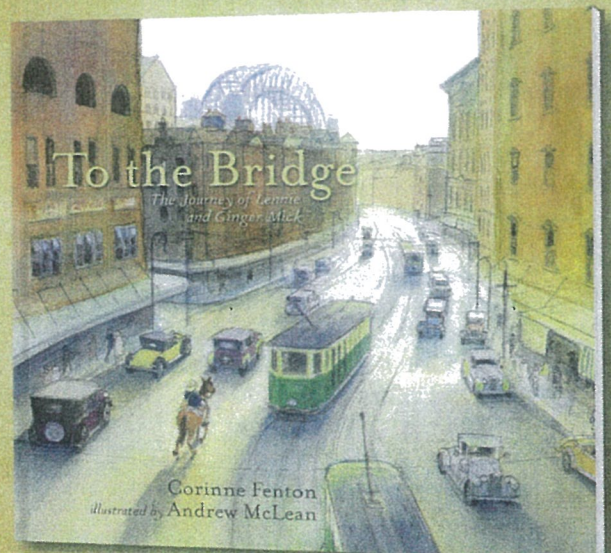
The Journey of Lennie and Ginger Mick

Corinne Fenton
illustrated by Andrew McLean

An inspirational true story about a boy and his pony's journey of over one thousand kilometres to see the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

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Ashleigh Summers' voice in first person, and read letters from Joyous's mother Margaret Kray. This is a heartfelt and uplifting novel about maintaining hope and joy even in the face of dire circumstances.

Drink the Air (2010) and **Spring Rain** (2011) are verse novels about regional teenagers' experiences. In winning The Queensland Premier's Literary Award 2010 Young Adult Category, Judges' comments on **Drink the Air** noted that it was: 'a beautifully nuanced, gentle and moving tale about grief and love. Tom and Zooley have each lost a loved one and have struggled to cope. Tom's larger than life 'Dad-a-saurus' drowns doing what he loves most — fishing and enjoying his world. Tom's left with only his childhood memories: *I wanted him to throw me like a flat stone*. Zooley's wild sister Kat decides one day that life has become too hard, and Zooley, in response to the death, has stopped speaking in order to prevent people talking 'at' her about her grief. The two teenagers are both locked into a pattern of remorse that they can't escape from, until a school production of *The Tempest*, brings them together—and the love of those still with them (and also those whom they've lost), helps them both to get through. Written in a lyrical and yet vigorous style, this is a simple and profound little book which is charmingly conceived and executed. Set in Hervey Bay, the place is an important part of this narrative journey. *Drink the Air*, a quote from Shakespeare's play, is a powerful metaphor for Tom and Zooley's life-affirming decisions to grasp life with both hands and to enjoy the ride. This is a genuinely affective and yet unprepossessing work, which surprised and impressed the judges with the authenticity of the emotions conveyed, the author's literary skill, and his poetic control of his material. **Spring Rain** is a sequel to this novel in which Tom can't wait to finish Year 12 and leave his home town of Hervey Bay, while Zooley feels stranded between a losing-it father and an uncaring mother. This delicately written verse narrative traverses this time of immense change and the feelings of teenagers leaving school behind and *waiting for newness, for change, for the advent of Spring rain ...*

INTERVIEW

Q. Richard, you have published educational texts, short stories and plays, and since the early 1990s have received considerable acclaim for your novels. When did you first begin writing and what are the major influences on your work? Did any particular writer inspire you?

I can't really pinpoint a time when I began; it just seemed that I was always writing as a child and continued from there. I grew up in a cold climate (Tasmania) so finding something to do inside while the rain fell and the wind blew was necessary.

When I was in my early teens, my parents sent some of my stories to a well-known local writer. She sent me a lovely note of encouragement, which made me think more seriously about writing as a possible way of life. Then, aged 15, I read F. Scott Fitzgerald's **The Great Gatsby** and saw — and felt — the power of that evocative, wonderful prose. That book cemented my goal; I remember thinking that, whatever happens in the future, at some stage I am going to write and publish a novel.

Q. You were highly commended for the Australian/Vogel's Literary Award in 1994, and your adult novel The Rose Leopard was published in 2003. The first of five YA novels, Drink the Air, was published seven years later in 2010. Can you tell me a little more about that publishing history? How was that time for you as a writer? What challenges did you face?

I have had lots of self-doubt about my capacities as a writer. There's a big difference between being a capable wordsmith and being an effective writer, and it took me a long time to realise that and to make the leap from one to the other. I was working hard during those periods of apparent stagnation but not really producing anything of great quality. Thinking back, I was trying too hard and cutting too many corners. Writing requires a great deal of preparatory thinking and planning, and I wasn't doing either — instead, tending to dive in and hope that I would somehow manage to create a worthwhile piece. I was also heavily involved in writing bits and pieces for educational textbooks, as well as working full-time in middle management in a school, helping my wife raise our two sons and writing, directing and producing plays for the local theatre. All of these pursuits took up a lot of time and energy. I tended to spread myself too thin, meaning a *down-tum* in the overall quality of my work.

After **The Rose Leopard** was published, I *really struggled to write my next novel*. Again, *I was too anxious, rushing into it rather than waiting for the idea to come through and develop*. By the time I wrote and self-published **Drink the Air** (2010), *I'd reached the point where I thought; okay, this is my writing career from now on, some small works, locally produced and sold. I had very limited expectations because I thought that opportunity had passed me by. Then*

that lovely little book won the Premier's Award and I was rejuvenated. I began writing more works for young adults and my writing career has been on a better trajectory since.

Q. You wrote two linked verse novels in Drink the Air and Spring Rain. Why did that narrative form appeal to you in narrating these stories?

In terms of style, I began **Drink The Air** with one idea in mind; to create word-pictures. I wanted the experience of reading the book to be like walking through an art gallery. I wasn't so much thinking about verse as image. Making every word count in the same way that a brush-stroke counts; nothing extraneous.

Writing those books was a really pleasurable experience. The content the conjoined lives of young people living in my then home town of Hervey Bay — was close to my heart, and the narrative form was a delight to create and hone. I concentrated on making each word-picture small, tight and complete in its own right. For someone who was a) poetically minded, and b) extremely time-poor, it was a perfect way to write.

Q. You have written in these two novels about teenagers in a regional location, and it's fair to say that many YA novels seem to focus on inner capital city life rather than such regions. Is this a gap in publishing which you deliberately sought to fill?

Yes, definitely. In recent times there's been a lot of talk about character diversity in YA fiction; a broader representation of characters and stories. I'm all for that, but I think we need to remember that being diverse doesn't only mean being consciously cross-cultural. Geographical, social, economic and personal boundaries are equally as significant in the lives of young people. Many of our most marginalised kids come from families that have lived here for many generations.

Q. How did winning the Queensland Premier's Literary Award for 'Drink the Air' change your writing, if at all?

Winning the QPLA didn't change my writing but it did change my direction. Suddenly I had a new level of credibility in the area of writing for young people. Pretty obviously, I needed to capitalise on that level by focusing more assiduously on that kind of writing. I felt that, if nothing else, winning the award meant that my work would be more closely scrutinised by publishers. It took a little while but that was what hap-

pened — and now I have a solid and gratifying career with Scholastic Australia.

Q. This Is My Song is a complex alternate narrative written in three voices. Did this style present any challenges?

The subject of this novel is the Holocaust but you tell it in three voices and it is set in different decades and countries in order to trace the influence of such a cataclysmic event on future generations. What was the 'seed' of this story for you?

I'd been thinking for a while about the notion of intergenerational trauma and writing a story that traced the effect of this. As a young man I worked for 5 years in the Department of Veterans' Affairs. I saw and heard about a number of incidents where the traumas of past war experiences had spilled over into contemporary lives, often with serious consequences.

Originally, the focus of my story was going to be the family of a Vietnam veteran — in fact, I won a May Gibbs Creative Time Fellowship on the strength of this proposal, for a novel called *Peril*. However, before I took up that Fellowship, I went to Europe with my wife. We visited the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague and saw drawings done by the children of Theresienstadt Ghetto — a pivotal moment that I have detailed in the afterword of the novel. That became the seed of the story.

I wrote each of the voices as a separate piece then 'quilted' those pieces into a whole. The main challenge was ensuring continuity and consistency across the different sections — which came back to thoughtful, comprehensive planning. I didn't rush the novel, which was key. I also did a lot of preliminary work, particularly research around Theresienstadt and the post-war Jewish diaspora. By the time I took up the Fellowship, I was ready to write and the novel emerged fairly quickly.

Q. What did winning the PMLA for the latter mean to you?

I gave myself no chance. I was genuinely stunned when my name was announced. It was a beautiful moment, a vindication of many, many years of toil and perseverance and battling against disappointment and over-stretched expectations of self.

For the first time in my writing career, I feel like I belong in the industry. I'm not the best or the best-known or the biggest seller or the most popular but I don't mind about any of that — I belong. And that's a wonderful thing.

Q. Your novels have dealt with a range of themes including regional teenagers' experiences; the value of writing, reading and literature in our lives, living a meaningful life, overcoming adversity, accepting others and the legacy of past historical trauma on future generations. Would you like to comment on any one of those themes in your writing? For example, both *Joyous* and *Moonbeam* and *The Happiness Quest* deal in part with mental illness or teenage depression. Is this a subject you often encountered amongst your students during your teaching career?

Looking back at my body of work and trying to be objective (very difficult!), I see that I write predominantly about redemption. I would like to think that my books offer hope—the hope that we might rise above personal difficulty and restate or reinvent ourselves. *The Rose Leopard* ends with a family recovering from the loss of their mother. *Moonbeam* will live a better life because of her friendship with *Joyous*. Joe maps out a plan for the future at the end of *This Is My Song*. Tillie Bassett better understands herself and her family.

I think it's important to offer readers hope, particularly younger readers. A teenage girl came to me recently at a book signing for *The Happiness Quest* and asked, with tears in her eyes, *How did you know to write about me?* Writing for young people carries a weight of responsibility because our stories can have a significant influence over their self-and world-perception. It's crucial to remember that.

Q. You have been a teacher throughout your writing career but have retired from teaching recently. What has your teaching philosophy been and how has it related to your writing?

I taught with stories. I found that was, for me, a natural fit, and a good way of relating to the students. As a way of transmitting information, stories resonate. They're certainly more memorable and longer-lasting than many other educative media, or trends.

Q. Has retiring from teaching changed the way you work as a writer?

I've got a lot more time!

That said, one of the best aspects of continuing to teach while I wrote for young people was constant exposure to my audience. Being able to speak with and listen to adolescents over three decades has been an enormous privilege. I feel great affection for the generation and I hope that affection comes through in my writing.

I do go out to schools to conduct workshops and lectures about writing, which is a great way to both keep in touch with young people and also share some of my skills and knowledge about the writing process.

Q. Have you any projects you'd like to mention? What can we expect from Richard Yaxley in future?

I've just finished the first draft of a manuscript called *Harmony* which Scholastic has very kindly offered to publish in 2021. It's a family saga that begins in Australia in the early 1900s and travels around and across the world for the next eighty or so years.

There are many threads in the novel but for me, the main idea is that we live in a world where, despite our best efforts to rip and tear and destroy, harmony will always prevail.

I'm also researching and writing a story set in Renaissance Italy, so very busy!

Conclusion:

Richard Yaxley is a writer who celebrates the immense power of hope in his character-driven stories. His understanding of young people and his empathy with them distinguishes his profoundly moving novels. And the works he has planned certainly promise further riches for his readers in future.

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Bloodlines (Strictly Literary, 2009)

Young Adult

Drink the Air (Richard Yaxley, 2010) (Winner of the 2010 Queensland Premier's Award for Young Adult Fiction)

Spring Rain (Richard Yaxley, 2011)

Joyous and Moonbeam (Scholastic, 2013) (Short-listed for the 2014 West Australian Premier's Awards)

This Is My Song (Scholastic, 2017)

(Winner of the 2018 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Young Adult Literature; Finalist in the 2017 Queensland Literary Awards; also published in the Czech Republic by Albatros Media)

The Happiness Quest (Scholastic 2018) (CBCA Notable Book for Older Readers 2019)

A New Kind of Everything (Scholastic, 2020)

OTHER:

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