

BOY ON A WIRE

JON DOUST

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YEAR LEVEL: Y9+

ABOUT THE BOOK

Jack Muir leaves his south-west country town to continue the family tradition of going away to a private boys' boarding school in Perth. There, his sense of natural justice is tried time and again, in an environment of bullying and belittling – from masters, prefects and all those higher up in the private school pecking order. This is a story of survival, coming of age, and of staying true to one's beliefs. The story is told in the first person with a punchy, witty vernacular and shrewd observation. The point of view allows the reader insight into Jack's perspective and encourages empathy through identification. The focus is on social relationships and on Jack's struggle to make sense of an often nonsensical and cruel boarding school culture. Jack uses humour as a weapon against his enemies and as a means of connecting with his friends. This is also the story of Jack's relationship with his father, and with his brother Thomas, who might seem to be a model schoolboy, but who has his own vulnerabilities and must develop his own strategies for coping.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

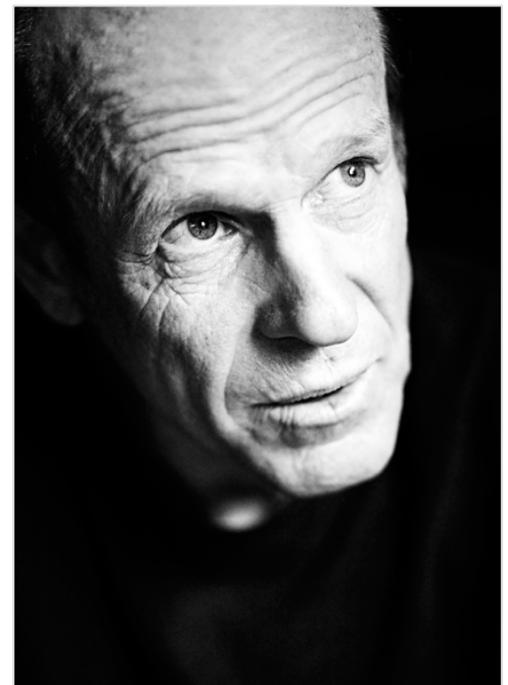
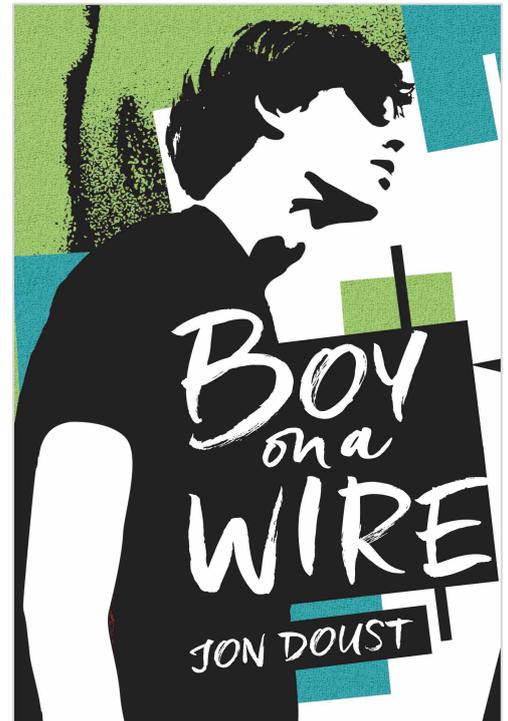
Jon Doust has had diverse careers. He was born in Bridgetown into a farming/retailing family and worked in both until he was old enough to know better. Since then he has been asked to leave jobs in banking, the media, retailing (again), farming (again) and comedy. These days he is best known as a writer, professional speaker, big ideas inspirer and community projects facilitator. Some years ago he asked himself the question: Why are people the way they are? That led him to study Jungian philosophy and to becoming an accredited Myers Briggs Practitioner. None of this has dampened his sense of humour.

THEMES

- adolescence
- identity
- bullying
- sexuality
- abuse
- friendship
- religion
- family

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

- Understanding Language
- Attitudes and Beliefs
- Conventions
- Processes and Strategies
- Listening
- Speaking
- Viewing
- Reading
- Writing



CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

Provide the students with the questions in advance, so that they can prepare, individually or in pairs, for a class discussion.

- Why do people bully others? Explain your reasons.
- How does Jack survive boarding school life? Give reasons. Use examples from the book.
- Do you know anyone like him? Describe what Jack and your friend have in common.
- Is humour important to you? Why? What kind of humour do you find funniest?
- Record the class opinions on a whiteboard or butcher's paper.

Creative writing

- Describe your own best friend or a favourite teacher.
- Many themes are explored. Some are: love and friendship, bullying and violence, politics/war, religion and God, families, hypocrisy, ignorance. Choose one or two themes and identify at least two key passages where these themes are raised. Explain Jack's point of view. Explain if you agree with his attitude or not and why.
- Write a story about bullying. (You will need characters, plot, and setting.)

Debate

1. The family is the most important influence on a boy's life.
2. Bullying can be stamped out.
3. Modern schools are better than schools in the 1960s.

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What has your previous writing experience been?

I've had two children's books published, *Magpie Mischievous* and *Magwheel Madness*, and a YA/adult book *To the Highlands*.

How different was the experience of writing a novel for older readers?

Quite different. The story was very close to me so it was draining, a bit emotional. I did a lot of research, because I wanted to reconnect with the time, which was fascinating. There were things that I didn't remember happening the way they happened.

Was it a difficult process or did you enjoy it?

It was difficult but I enjoyed reflecting with passion, with those emotional undercurrents. I wouldn't shy away from writing something like that again, I'm not afraid of it in the privacy of my own head, that is. Now that I have to go out and talk about it, it might be different!

I expect you'll often be asked the kind of question I'm about to ask: where did the character of Jack emerge from?

From deep within. The starting point was me, but Jack became somebody other than me. Certain aspects of myself are idealised, I might say. Some bits are not like me, some bits are worse than me. Jack is an expansion of some of my characteristics and a reflection of others. Everybody was rewritten at least once, Jack more than once. They had to suit the book, and then they had to suit themselves.

How did you treat the autobiographical element?

I simply took an event as I remembered it and wrote it down exactly. Then I blew it apart. Kept rewriting it until it fit the context of the story. For example, the incident where Jack gets beaten by a housemaster with a broomstick is like something that happened to me. But I couldn't remember what I was thinking at the time. I was probably thinking, 'The bastards, I'll kill them,' but I don't know. So I had to inhabit this kid's head. It's Jack's thoughts not mine.

This book has a lot of real pain and some joy too – how do you see the role of humour in telling these kinds of stories?

It's crucial, because it's true. Boys' school life is often quite tense and miserable – but there's also a lot of humour. I was quite a lippy boy, talked a lot, probably more than Jack even, but we have that in common.

The survivors I've met, both young and old, all employ humour. It's essential.

When people find out I went to boarding school, they often say, oh that must have scarred you. And I say, the biggest scar boarding school left on me was the scar it left on others. I survived quite well. But some others didn't.

The book captures a strong sense of injustice. Did you consciously create that tone, or did it simply emerge?

It came very early, that sense of justice and injustice. Also, the need for revenge emerged as I wrote. That was unexpected. Some bullies are in denial their whole lives. But then others feel deeply guilty about what they did in boarding school.

I had my first bout of depression when I was twelve. And what can you do about it? Who can you talk to? Not your dad, he'll say, go and milk the cow, or go and shoot something. Not your mum, because if she's depressed herself she'll be scared. She doesn't know what to do about herself, let alone you.

How did you approach a treatment of those characters who were 'bad', in that their role was entirely negative?

Among all the bullies in the school [in the book] only one is instantly recognisable. All the others are compilations. If someone said to me, oh that's me, I'd laugh. Because it's not. And in the end, all the characters are there for their particular purposes in the narrative. Also, I have an actual friend called Harmanis but he's nothing like the Harmanis in the novel. The character Harmanis, though, is a solid guy, doesn't get involved to the same extent. His life and family are kind of seductive to Jack, but in the end Jack is drawn back to a different lifestyle.

The relationships between Jack and his family prove fundamental to the shape of his actions and personality. How did you envisage the Muir family when you began writing?

Not like any Muir family I know! Well, I didn't envisage them you see. I wasn't even sure how many were going to be in the family, but later it seemed someone else was needed so they had another baby. I'm not a person who plans well, I'm more evolutionary.

I felt at certain stages that they needed some tension. So I would either think of an incident, an event, an explosion, then go back and rework the characters so the tension would build sufficiently, to such a point as to warrant such an explosion or outburst, or I'd egg characters on until the tension arrived. One or the other.

The thing that surprised me more than anything else was this: when I re-read the book, in certain parts I found myself crying. But I had finished sobbing before I realised that those were the parts that hadn't happened in real life. The bits that were fabricated got me more upset than the bits that did happen.

By the end, Jack has changed and matured. Which characters or events do you see as having the most impact on Jack?

There are lots, but the event that has the most impact – that sets off his vengeful instinct – is the initiation of the sad boy. That really is a turning point.

Do you see writing this book as an opportunity to reflect on your own life?

I think few people actually take the time to reflect on their life. But also, I think anybody who engages in an artistic activity is blessed. Firstly, because they get to work through 'stuff'. A lot of people go through horrible things and never recover. But maybe they could if they wrote or something. All that stuff that plagues you, you get to play with it in a book. I have total control over that world. When I was at boarding school I had very little control, but now I'm the dictator.