

Spinner

Ron Elliott

Themes: Sport, Adventure, Historical

Year Levels: 15+ Secondary students

Cross Curriculum: Sports, History

About the novel

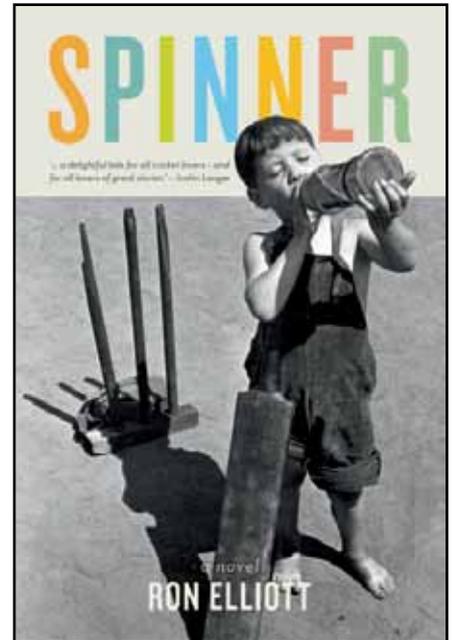
Spinner is a novel about a simple boy with an amazing gift. Twelve-year-old David Donald lives with his grandfather on a farm outside the fictional West Australian country town of Dunganin. His parents are dead. His grandfather, The George Baker, was a talented off-spin bowler and one-time coach of the state team. He trains his grandson, David, in the art of spin bowling.

One day David's uncle Michael (a disgraced team member of the West Australian side) arrives to take David away. Together, they cross the Nullarbor on the train and, through a series of twists and turns, David Donald becomes a member of the Australian Cricket Team.

In the course of a couple of Test matches, David Donald will learn about the workings of the world, and about the part men play in it. He will discover the true story of the death of each of his parents, and the complicated face of loyalty, mateship, and love.

This novel is set between the wars, at the beginning of the drought and the Great Depression. It is a kind of a fable, set in a parallel Australian universe (in the way that Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* is both real and magical). It is a yarn written by someone with a great affection for the game of cricket, but it is not just a novel for cricket fans. *Spinner* uses cricket as a way of exploring violence and conflict and honour and the deep bonds and fissures created by the war, and by sport, in Australian men.

Like the spinbowler himself, *Spinner* deploys a deceptively simple method of delivery. This novel is clearly written by an author who has experience as a film and television writer, as the scenes unfold in a beautifully scenic fashion. The story is told from, and limited to, the point of view of David Donald. As the boy acquires wisdom, his ability to understand the world around him increases, and thus the offering of available insight also increases. Late in the novel (no peeking!) a certain revelation turns a beautiful yarn into a sophisticated journey into Australian identity and masculinity at a point in Australia's history where the Australian psyche was being challenged and redefined.



Some of the greatest tension in this novel derives from the juxtaposition of David Donald's innocence, and the worldiness of his uncle Michael, who has custody of the boy, and is quick to exploit his nephew's gift in a way that entirely disregards both the boy's dignity and well-being.

The boy has a pure, undiluted view of the world, but the narrator, his uncle Michael Donald, is a complex, wounded figure, full of self-loathing and inclined to drink. He is a 'spinner', a bullshit artist: he tells tall stories and people believe him. He is a shyster and a showman. He behaves dreadfully, but he also behaves redemptively when the reader least expects it.

Thus the reader is continually tested in what they are prepared to believe. This challenge, from author to reader, leads to some bigger questions: Why do we need to have fairytales? What is the balance between resisting them and believing in them? How far are we prepared to go in a stretching of the truth? What is story telling for? What do we have to gain when we suspend our belief and follow the storyteller on the tale to its logical end?

About the author

Ron Elliott directed television for the ABC for some years before returning from the east coast to Perth, Western Australia, where he has worked as a freelance scriptwriter and film and television director. He currently lectures in screen writing and production at Curtin University and continues to write for the screen. *Spinner* is his first novel.

Writing style

Spinner deploys a deceptively simple method of delivery, with very filmic scenes and a largely chronological progression. (This is not surprising, given the author's experience in film and television. What is lovely is the way he has translated his gift to prose.) The story is told from, and limited to, the point of view of David Donald (third person limited narrative). As the boy acquires wisdom, his ability to understand the world around him increases, and thus the offering of available insight also increases. Late in the novel the revelation of the narrator's identity transforms a seemingly simple yarn into a sophisticated journey into Australian identity and masculinity at a point in Australia's history where the Australian psyche was being challenged and redefined.

Editorial comment

Some of the greatest tension in this novel derives from the juxtaposition of David Donald's innocence and the worldiness of his uncle Michael, who has custody of the boy, and is quick to exploit his nephew's gift in a way that entirely disregards both the boy's dignity and well-being. The boy has a pure, undiluted view of the world, but the narrator, his uncle Michael Donald, is a complex, wounded figure, full of self-loathing and inclined to drink. He is a 'spinner', a bullshit artist: he tells tall stories and people believe him. He is a shyster and a showman. He behaves dreadfully, but he also behaves redemptively when the reader least expects it. Thus the reader is continually tested in what they are prepared to believe. This challenge, from author to reader, leads to some bigger questions: Why do we need to have fairytales? What is the balance between resisting them and believing in them? How far are we prepared to go in a stretching of the truth? What is story telling for? What do we have to gain when we suspend our belief and follow the storyteller on the tale to its logical end?

Discussion questions

1. Comment on the novel's title, *Spinner*. If a 'spinner' is also a bullshit artist, what is it we are being asked to believe, and why?
2. In what ways might this novel be described as a fairytale or a fable? Why do people need 'tall stories'? What is the function of a fable or fairytale, particularly in times of need?
3. In hard times, what are the things that people hang on to?
4. How is this novel like the Australian history we know, and how is it different? Why does the author depart from history in this way? Why does he tether some of the novel to certain historical facts (such as Charles Kingsford Smith) but not others? What is Elliott asking of the reader by doing this?
5. What difference does the choice of the narrator make to the novel? (It could, for example, simply be narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator, but the author has chosen to do something quite different.)
6. What is the role of women in this masculine world of cricket, war, and underworld villains?
7. Who are the important female characters in *Spinner*?
8. How does David Donald's discovery of the truth about each of his parents change his view of the world?
9. What changes do we witness in David Donald across the course of the novel?
10. What changes do we witness in his uncle Michael?
11. What do you think the author is telling us about the effect of war on men? Have a look at the scene on pp. 378–379 as a beginning point for a discussion on the way the first war (or any war) changed (or can change) lives.
12. Does this novel reinforce certain aspects of Australian identity? What are they? How are the resonances of this particular historical setting and location still relevant to our time?
13. What are the differences between the Australian and the English cricket teams as depicted in this Test series?
14. What is the difference between the two captains, John Richardson and Henry Longford? What do you make of the interaction between David Donald and the English captain?
15. Does this novel have a happy ending? Why, or why not?

