

# Jeni Mawter

---

21 Barina Road  
Lane Cove NSW 2066  
Telephone: (02) 9428 1092  
Mobile: 0407 247032  
Fax: (02) 9427 4628  
jenimawter@hotmail.com  
ABN 59944081950

## Interview with Jeni Mawter

### When did you start writing?

My earliest recollection of wanting to be a writer was in Year 3. I was desperate to win first prize in a school writing competition – a bag of sweets. Needless to say, I did not win, although I can still feel the pain of envy when listening to the winning entry being read out – something about 'emerald green leaves swishing and swaying in the cool, dry, gusty wind.' In those days, adjectives were all.

I wrote my first book when I was in Year 6 and illustrated it. It was a shocker! Fortunately for the rest of the world my teacher was in complete agreement and didn't encourage any more forays into the literary world. Through my teens I wrote poetry – loads of it – all very anguished and private. It wasn't till my mid-thirties that I took up writing again in earnest.

### What did you do before you were a writer?

I used to work as a speech pathologist, then as a case manager for people with brain injuries and psychiatric problems. A challenging day at the office involved talking someone out of attempting suicide. Nowadays, a challenging day at the office involves: discovering the word 'fartleberry' in a dictionary of preposterous words; working out the past life of a prune; concocting recipes for deadly muffins or goop soup; writing down all the things that come to mind when I hear the phrase 'black and hairy'; working out how to make a fake scab; and highlighting the long-term effects of constipation.

I've been writing for 7 years now. Who'd go back to their day job!

### What inspired you to start writing?

Two events of great magnitude happened almost concurrently. I lost my job as a case manager and I read Tim Winton's book *The Bugalugs Bum Thief* (and thought, I can do that!). Both were earth-shattering experiences. Both propelled me towards writing.

### How did you get going as a writer?

One of the first things I did was to sign up for courses. I started with a Diploma in Editing at Macleay College, at the same time attending WEA courses in creative writing and writing for children. It was then that I began to realise that although I had read hundreds of children's books I was still very ignorant about them. So, I enrolled in the MA in Children's Literature at Macquarie University. This opened my eyes to the enormous complexity of children's writing. Fortunately, I was able to link in with the MA in Creative Writing students and joined them in my second year. I graduated in 1998. Some of us still meet today. I am very proud of this writer's group. Between us we've had approximately 20 books published and there's more on the way.

### **When was your first book published and how did it feel?**

In 2000 I had an education book published called *Maisie's Race*. It's about a little girl who never gives up. I'll never forget when the editor from Macmillan Education rang to accept the manuscript. It was a Friday. 12.36pm. The call was *so* unexpected. After all, I was the Queen of the Rejection Letters (I lost count after 123!). I leapt around the kitchen like a demented goat, clapping my hands and talking to whoever would listen. My dog was highly amused. I swear she was laughing.

### **How many books have you had published?**

The trade books I have published include: *There's a Sun Fairy In Our Garden* (2001), *So Gross!* (2001), *So Feral!* (2002), *So Sick!* (2003) and *So Festy!* (2004). The fiction education books are *Maisie's Race* (2000), *Go, the Mobile!* (2001) and *The Most Unusual Pet* (2001).

I've also had 6 non-fiction education books published for the Classroom Focus series: *Special Days* (2001), *Natural Disasters* (2001), *Food* (2002), *Families & Homes* (2002), *Feelings* (2003) and *The Snowy Mountains Scheme* (2003).

### **What books do you plan to publish in the near future?**

The fifth book in the So series, *So Grotty!*, will be out in August 2004 and the next book is being written now. I also have other projects underway.

### **Do you enjoy writing?**

I love it! Especially the early stage when it's purely creative – just me and my imagination and the blank screen. It's true what they say. In those early moments you are so involved in your work you forget to eat and completely lose track of time. I'm surprised I haven't forgotten to pick up my children from school! Later on the writing gets harder. Each story I write gets re-written and re-written till I'm happy with it. Sometimes I can do up to 20-30 drafts before I am happy with it. The fact that I also get paid to slob around all day wearing ugly boots and T-shirts suits me down to the ground.

### **What is the hardest part about writing?**

The So series is a humorous series that targets boys who are reluctant readers. Sometimes it's hard to write funny stuff, especially if real life is telling me the opposite such as, the dog's swallowed a razor blade, the deadline has come and gone, the car's broken down and the freezer has decided to defrost itself. Other things have been a challenge, too. I find it harder to write a commissioned work than one that bubbles up spontaneously from inside. I also find it harder writing to a deadline. Deadline. Such a terrible word! It means that by the time you cross the line you are nearly dead.

### **Why are you writing books for boys?**

I am not only writing for boys – girls like my books, too – but I must confess I started writing the stories for the So series with reluctant boy readers in mind. I wanted to write something that was not too daunting – each short story in the series is made up of lots of short chapters. I also wanted to write something that would hook them into reading more -there are lots of male characters and fast moving plots.

Recently a woman told me her 15 year old son turned off the television at 8.30 one night and said he was going to bed. When she asked him if he was feeling sick he announced, 'No. I have to find out what's in the box!' which is a story from *So Gross!* It was the first book her son had ever read voluntarily. Hearing that story and others like it makes it all so rewarding.

### **Where do you get your ideas?**

He's going to hate me for this but lots of the ideas come from my son and his friends. They know/do so many disgusting things. Sometimes when there's a few friends over I pick their brains, munch them up and digest them, then spew them back at the reader. Actually, I find that *everyone* has a gross story to tell. The trick is taking something that's a little bit off and making it really disgusting.

### **How does it feel to be a woman who writes gross and disgusting stuff?**

I love it! I think I was a boy in a past life. When I was little I loved doing boy stuff – catching cicadas, collecting spiders, concocting potions, playing with clay and mud. I had short hair, hated dresses and could out-run, out-climb any boy in the neighbourhood. Even today my husband says I'm not a real woman because I hate shopping and I can read a map.

### **Has the fact that you are a woman had any influence on your work?**

Not in terms of writing but definitely in terms of publishing. HarperCollins asked if I would mind being published as J.A. Mawter, rather than Jeni Mawter. They were worried boys would not read my work if they knew I was a woman. It was also decided that I not reveal my identity. That meant I

could not do any promotional appearances. It felt very odd writing a book without being able to go public.

**You are being interviewed now, so what changed their mind?**

When *So Gross!* came out and I wasn't allowed to actively market it, I felt sort of cheated. I felt like someone who's been made a princess for a day but is not allowed to tell anyone. I mean, what's the point of being a princess if you can't tell people? When I was invited to a children's literary luncheon in Penrith I approached my publicist and told her how much I'd like to go. She relented fortunately for me.

**How did you come up with concept of writing gross stories?**

It was something that evolved. Despite having no future as a stand-up comic I found that I was drawn to writing humour. I have this warped sense of humour, you see. The first gross story I wrote was The Krypton Crystal Caper from *So Gross!* It came about after eating too many bran muffins. I would have called the story Deadly, but that name was already taken! After getting a positive response to this story I wrote, *With a Milkshake*. Although no one wanted to publish these I was getting the most wonderful rejection letters from editors like, 'Love this but it does not suit our list'.

Eventually, after visiting the Sydney book fair I found a small publisher who published books in a similar genre and approached them. They asked for more and I went from there. After initially agreeing to publish five stories, the small publisher pulled out. Fortunately, HarperCollins picked them up. Since then, it's been a case of 'More! More!'

One pleasant surprise is that the combination of humour plus grossness seems to appeal to most people – adults as well as children, girls as well as boys.

**How did you get to work with Gus Gordon?**

It's all thanks to Lisa Berryman at HarperCollins. She recommended Gus and sent me a sample of his work. After checking him out on the internet it was obvious that Gus had the same irreverence for life as I do.

I did not get to meet Gus till after *So Gross!* came out. It's weird how you can collaborate on a book without ever meeting. The funny thing was, a few months later we were both scheduled to do a book signing at exactly the same time for the CBC's Fabulous Family Day Out and that's where we met. The organisers had no idea that they were bringing us together for the first time. Gus brings a freshness and a cheekiness to the *So* series that it could not be without.

**You have been likened to Roald Dahl, Paul Jennings, Andy Griffiths and Morris Gleitzman. How does this feel?**

I think it's a great honor, although misguided. I am my own person with my own style – but I would not mind having their sales!

**Are you married?**

Yes. I've been married to David for 22 years.

**Do you have any children?**

I have three. One fantastic son and two beautiful daughters.

**Do your children help with your books?**

Most definitely. They give me great plot ideas, read the drafts and tell me what they don't like. They're getting very good at that! They tell me if I'm using old-fashioned words or if the ending doesn't work, that sort of thing.

**Do you put your family in your stories?**

Every chance I get. And my friends, too. *And* my acquaintances, my neighbours and best of all, my enemies. Or little bits of them.

**What does your family think of your books?**

My son has disowned me and swears he's not related to anyone with the same surname as his. One daughter calls me her 'Popstar Mum', and the other daughter I'll quote: 'Don't worry, Mum. You're perfectly normal. You're just a bit sick in the head.'

**Do you have any pets?**

I love pets. I'll nurture anything. I've had two wonderful dogs over the last twenty years – Ellie, a cross Red Setter Lab and Bella, a beagle. Bella sits at my feet all day and sleeps. I call her the 'pillow with a head'. Other favourite pets were four beautiful black hens, a crayfish that adored frozen peas and six nestling finches that I hand reared. Apart from these, I've had mice, goldfish, budgies, quails, a rabbit, guinea pigs and exploding silkworms. Yes, you read that right. The silkworms ate and ate but would not spin till eventually they exploded – yuck! I think they were inbred. Our most unusual pet is a scorpion. We did not know she was a she till many months passed and one night we discovered her carrying twenty babies on her back. Some of the babies escaped. One day I was working at my desk when one marched beside my foot!

**Do you have a favourite story in your books?**

What's in a Name? and What's in the Box? in *So Gross!* Death Breath and the Lie Detectors and The Work of Art in *So Feral!* I also like Jellyfish Undies and

The Smelling Bee from *So Sick!* and from *So Festy!* I like The Fantastic Fart Factory and Tales from the Freezer.

### **What authors have influenced your writing?**

All of them. I read as much as I can – from picture books, to junior fiction to young adult fiction. I think that if you want to be a good writer you need to read. You probably learn by osmosis, soaking up bits here and bits there, learning what our great Australian writers can do.

Two people who have been prominent in nurturing me as a writer are Susanne Gervay and Stephen Measday and to them I give my heartfelt thanks.

### **Do you suffer from writer's block?**

I don't like to call it writer's block – more like writer's loss of momentum. When you've started a new piece of writing and the ideas are flowing there's this incredible momentum and you just write and write. The words pour out – especially if you've planned where you're going. Sometimes, however, I don't plan where I'm going and just see where I end up. This doesn't always work and I might stall a bit, but I usually get going again after some deep thinking or brainstorming with my writing friends. The hardest time is when there is no project on the boil, no editor asking to see your work, or no deadline to meet. Then, the impetus to write only comes from within. I have my fair share of avoidance behaviours but now, when I don't write, I appreciate that these lulls are part of my writing life. There's no point beating myself up over them. They come and, hey, they go.

### **What's the most adventurous thing you've done?**

Had children. That completely turned my life upside down and has taken me places I'd never have gone if I had not had them. Children hurl you out of your comfort zone, which is a wonderful thing. I did throw myself out of an aeroplane, once. My instructor's name was Eros. I couldn't believe my luck. Imagine falling out of the heavens with a Greek god! I've tried lots of other things, parafling, scuba diving and more recently, water skiing. Now, that was a disaster! I've still got the bruises to prove it. Must be too bottom heavy...

### **What's the most unusual thing you've done?**

At one stage both my daughters were learning classical ballet. I asked their teacher to choreograph a ballet for them and I to dance to. It was only a short piece of music – Celine Dion's *Fly*. We rehearsed and rehearsed, got costumes made, invited all our family and danced the ballet as a present for my husband. He's not keen on ballet and wasn't rapt in the music but he stuck it

out. We had it filmed for posterity and yes, all copies are under armed guard, stamped Never To Be Released.

### **What's your advice for aspiring writers?**

Realise that there is an awful lot to learn. We never stop learning. Keep working at your writing and with persistence, perseverance, patience and a liberal dose of luck it will pay off! Immerse yourself in the world of writing. Join a writer's group, do courses, go to literary festivals, do workshops. Not only will you get to meet a lot of wonderful like-minded people, your writing will also improve.

### **Is it hard to get published?**

Yes, it's extremely hard. I mentioned that I had over a hundred rejection letters before I actually had a published book in my hand. The first publishing success came from writing articles for magazines and book reviews. I still write classroom resources. I enjoy working on both fiction and non-fiction. Besides, non-fiction is much easier to get published in.

I'd also recommend that new authors try the educational market, first. A lot more is published in education and it's not as cut-throat as in trade publishing.

One thing I was ignorant about as an aspiring author is the fact that being published is no guarantee that your future work will be published. Unless something is commissioned, everything you write is a gamble. There is no comfort zone - no sitting back on your laurels. Being a published author is hard work.

### **What other things were you ignorant about?**

Have you got all day? One of my initial problems was not doing my homework properly. I sent manuscripts to the wrong publishers which is a complete waste of time. I know a lot more about the industry now so I'm getting better with this.

Another huge shock was the time delay between sending out your work to a publisher and getting a response. It can take months – even years. And that doesn't include the time spent on editing, proofreading etc that goes into a book after it is accepted but before it is published. The down side of this is that when the book finally comes out the delay is so long that it's not as rewarding as you think it should be. Basically, the writer has moved on.

Another thing I'm wrestling with is the amount of time I have for writing. The more success I have the more other demands are made on my time. Things like pitching ideas - or myself, negotiating contracts, editing, proofreading, writing blurbs and press releases. Not to mention running workshops, doing readings, giving talks. Recently, I said to Jen McVeity that I would make a fantastic author - if only I didn't have to write!

I am still on a steep learning curve but that's exciting, too. Every step is a challenge.

### **What's the best part of being a writer?**

Being a writer makes me the luckiest person in the world. I get to disappear off the planet and escape into a world of my choosing. I get to meet and mingle with children - who can teach us adults a thing or two! And lastly, I get to meet children's authors. Children's authors, without exception, are the loveliest group of people you will ever meet. They are generous, inspiring, visionary... I could go on. Whenever I meet a children's author for the first time I get so excited – my heart pounds, my hands sweat. I feel like a groupie!

Jeni Mawter