

# ISLAND



▼ Ideas. Writing. Culture.

## CHATTER MATTERS ESSAY COLLECTION

THE WRITING  
WORM

CRAIG'S  
JOURNEY

ALWAYS IN THE  
BACKGROUND

STICKING UP  
FOR MYSELF

ANOTHER LEVEL  
OF TOUGHNESS

REFUGE FROM  
THE STORM

A SECOND LIFE

## 2017 Tasmanian Australian of the Year

ROSALIE MARTIN, SPEECH PATHOLOGIST



# Introduction

## Rosalie Martin, Speech Pathologist

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I first met Matthew Lamb when he was the editor of *Island* magazine. He won't like that his name appears in the first sentence of this introduction. And he won't like that I'm telling the story of this wonderful collection of essays by starting with the story of him. He's a guy who wants to be left alone to read.

I'd heard Matthew being interviewed on radio spruiking the necessity of more readers in the world and linking this idea to citizenship. The audacious simplicity of his call to action – read! – was a fit with things I was working on, one of which was teaching adults, including prisoners, to read.

Many of the citizens in this wealthy nation, our fellows, our neighbours, cannot read and write well enough to navigate the activities of daily life. They cannot read the street signs. Cannot fill in forms at the doctor's sur-

gery, cannot understand the information on the electoral enrolment form, cannot fill in the census. They cannot change hair-care products or they won't know which bottle is shampoo and which is conditioner, they cannot read the menu in a cafe, cannot understand the bus timetable.

The consequences are grave for them. And for society. Too often they feel stupid (an ugly word, but it is the word I hear them use disparagingly of themselves), self-esteem around their ankles, mental illness in their minds; too often they fall into crime, frustration and an oppositional stance toward authority. Or passively withdraw and make themselves small. Too often they wear themselves into brokenness from the hard-labour jobs which are the only jobs they can get. If they get a job at all. Too often their vocabularies are weak and they can't

## Language is the cognitive basis of knowledge and concepts. It is the internal, mental symbol-system with which we represent the world out there and in here.

express themselves well in spoken language, for it is the written language – which they can't do – which comes to feed the growth of verbal skills.

Language is the cognitive basis of knowledge and concepts. It is the internal, mental symbol-system with which we represent the world out there and the world in here. Matthew's link between reading and citizenship is on target. Active participation in democracy, community and social institutions is an uphill struggle if one has fewer tools with which to comprehend and express.

But it's not the fault of these learners. They suffer the enormous effects in their lives, yet did nothing to cause the problems. For the problems have a neurodevelopmental base. Or a neurodevelopmental base is violently forced in – through trauma. It's not their parents' fault either. For the blame, if it pauses here, cannot be let rest here – for it is likely that their dear parents' experiences were similar.

I have seen that the articulate and literate can have little patience for this. While soaring upon their own fine skills, they may buy in, unreflected, to the 'stupid' position. Diminishment of an 'other' ultimately brings diminishment of self and society, as pause is not taken to see what is really there. And to listen.

I sought conversation with Matthew, and when it turned to the suggestion that my learners write their stories and publish them in *Island*, I could see only good flowing from it. For the learners, it presents the opportunity to authentically and valuably succeed at a challenge they could never have dreamed of, and to be the beneficiaries of the generalising confidence which that brings. For the readers, it offers opportunity to feel a different but real world through the experience of an 'other', and to be touched by empathy and understand that their own abilities are gifts and ought not be taken for granted; to understand that 'fault' is the wrong question, and that 'stupid' is not in the equation. For within the stories – oh, the stories! – is courage, resilience, tenacity, vulnerability, intelligence, joy, acceptance, insight and wisdom. All fine traits which we can nurture in each other. Open, kind communication is a reciprocal flow bringing benefits to both participants; a flow which can continue out into the wider social world.

Across the series of seven Chatter Matters essays published in *Island*, the hoped-for outcomes for learners and

readers have emerged. And now I find further benefit. I have been asking the new learners I work with to read the *Island* essays to me, or I read them aloud to them. I sit across the table from men and women, the authenticating feel and fragrance of the fine literary magazine between us, and see eyes well and throats choke as they read or listen. For in honest language, their own hidden pain is gently spoken. And the same soft syllables carry inspiration for who they are and what can be.

My deepest thanks goes to *Island* for creating a platform for beautiful voices too long stifled by the conventions and arrogances of unquestioned habit and judgment. Such dignity there is in warm and honest sharing across diverse lives and backgrounds, skills and abilities. Words on a page elicit images and emotions that teach us of others and teach us of ourselves. Indulging this learning with empathy, humility and aspiration, builds an inclusive society. Matthew got a lot right in championing this work. Not least of which is that it is good to be left alone to read. ▼

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Rosalie 'Rosie' Martin is the 2017 Tasmanian Australian of the Year. She is a speech pathologist and criminologist bringing innovation to the teaching of language, literacy and social communication to adults – including prisoners. She founded the charity Chatter Matters Tasmania in 2013 to provide a vehicle by which to develop this work.

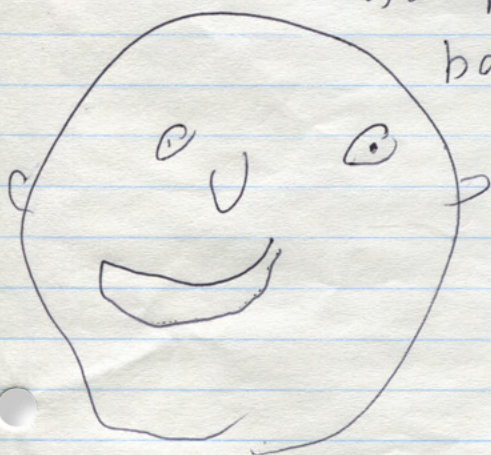
Tuesday about 4 o'clock

Well Rosie's and Richard I let you tell me what you think of me as person? I know that you two are lovely people. The way that you both never put your self's first. You always thinking of others first. That how we all should be. I know I am silly saying that. But that way Rosie and Richard are. I wish I could do more for them for what they did for me. This is hard for me to say with out getting upset. I wouldn't be sitting do this work with out there help.

Thank you so much to both of you. I just wish I could do something to pay you back. You both been so lovely the way you both given up your time for little buggers like me! Can't thank you both. I will have to stop before I start

CRYING. Thank you so much Rosie and Richard. I wish there was more like you two in this world.

I never for get you two how you helped me. Big hug to you both



If you want to uses this in the book you can. But I did this for you two to say thank you.

# The Writing Worm

**Peter** (not his real name), aged 53, recently completed the **Just Sentences Prison Literacy program**, a pilot program established by **Chatters Matters**. Peter was unable to read or write until the age of 51, but here he writes about his own experiences.

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**W**ell, I am a happy-go-lucky guy and have always been that way. (Why change?) My childhood was lovely, growing up on a farm. You can't beat real cow's milk, yum.

In a way it wasn't hard at school, I just found schoolwork hard. I got along with all at school. I still have old school-friends I keep in contact with.

I know teachers did their best, but it's hard when one side of the brain doesn't work and the other side is doing both sides. That's what the teacher said. I hope you know what I am saying. The work that they were giving me was over my little head, that's why I found it hard to do.

I found reading and writing very hard at school. I do know that may be silly to somebody who can do reading and writing, but I found it very hard and I didn't know what was what in letters and words. The others would say, You can do this work. But it didn't make sense to me. How can you do work when it's over your head? Some would say, You're being lazy, not doing your work. But I didn't know how to start doing it.

I did my best, but I couldn't do the work. It was very hard back when I was at school. I left school and started working in a meatworks as a labourer.

I went to jail and I was lucky that Rosie came in to help the inmates with reading and writing. I know that you are doing your best to help out at the jail. But it's like hitting your head against a wall. You can't get the guys to do writing and reading when they have to do their work or when some guys think you're just doing it to get out of working. That's why a lot will not do it – they get picked on. That's why. But you don't see that side of it, you are on the outside looking in. Sorry to say that, but that's how it works in the jail. But don't give up on them. They need this, but they can't see it. I hope one day they wake up in there and see it, but I can't see that happening.

I can see what you are doing, but to the inmates it's not working. I hope this helps you a lot. How jail life is. Not a nice place to be. When you are on the outside you don't see what happens on the inside. This was eye-opening for me. To know how hard inmates have it with other inmates thinking that doing writing and reading is not a job.

I was lucky, I was my own boss, in a way. That's how I got away with you helping me. If I didn't do my job it didn't matter, nobody else had to do my job.

It's funny, before I went in I didn't know reading and writing, but deep down I must have known how to, but I didn't know how to start before Rosie showed me I could do it. Bloody silly to me, but that is the truth. I didn't know how to. A lot would say, What a load of bullshit, if you can now you could before. But I didn't know what or how to start writing. To me this doesn't make sense. Rosie somehow opened the door and let the man out who would write. I've lost it, you're going to say, and I would say you're right, I have lost it. But I found my way back home with Rosie's help.

I knew there was somebody at home up there, but he didn't want to come out to play. Now he's out and he just can't stop writing. I may be slow but I get there in time. Bloody hell, we all have to start sometime, I'm just a slow starter. It's so hard for me – I have to think, write and use a pen at the same time. That may be okay for you, but for me thinking and writing don't come fast. I did my best to do this for all to see. Thank you all for letting me show you how Rosie got the little man to start writing – he was locked away for a very long time. Now I'm doing well. To think that somebody who was locked away is now out to write.

I still find it hard filling in forms! Whoever made forms didn't think of people who can't read or write. How can somebody fill in a form when they don't know what half the big words mean? It's okay for you if you can read and write, but there's a lot can't, and they just get put down.

That's what hurts the most – people just never think before they open their mouths. You do the right thing, tell them. What some do is say, It's not hard to fill in a form. Why would you say you can't fill in a form when you can? That's bloody silly to say – if you could, you would! So you can get the bloody hell out of the place. Grrr, that makes my blood boil, people who just put others down.

Reading books, I can't do. I just find it too hard. I

**I am a lot happier writing but I can't say why. That's silly but the truth. But it's the only way I can put it into words that I know. I got my own way of putting my thinking – it may be mad to you all but to me it's my way of saying things.**

know what you are all going to say, If you can write this you can read a book. But that's a lot harder to do, for me. Somehow writing comes out. Reading words, I get bloody lost! You are all going to say, What a load of bullshit. I wish it was. Life would be better. But nobody has got time to help.

You are all like sheep: one runs you all do. But that's not fair on the ones that can't read or write. We just get put down and that bloody hurts more than you think.

We all need to think before putting somebody down. When you get put down all the time you start thinking to yourself, Why bother doing it, you're only going to be put down and told you stuffed up. Now you know why I gave up and just said to myself, You can't do it so why worry about it.

I can't say why but doing this is helping me in more ways than you can think of. Still having a hard time at reading, but doing this I find not as hard. The writing worm found itself. So now the reading worm is still lost – can't have both out at one time or I will get lost. Pen to paper plus thinking is hard to do (poor little brain lost with all this).

Thank you so much for helping me and not putting me down. I'll stop before I start crying.

I am a lot happier writing but I can't say why. That's silly but the truth. But it's the only way I can put it into words that I know. I got my own way of putting my thinking – it may be mad to you all but to me it's my way of saying things. I am one of a kind, never find one like me.

Some find life hard on the outside, to live. It's not a place that you would call home, but for a lot jail is their home. They can't survive on the outside. You're thinking I am mad and you wouldn't be far wrong saying that. You all just think, Why worry about them silly buggers in jail? We all need help sometimes and you may need help one day. So stop thinking of yourself and bloody help out.

I may be a handful and a little mad, but who isn't a little mad? We all are in a way a little mad. Oh my god, if we were all the same it would be a mad world out there. Writing to me is one way of letting off steam without going

off. Before I started doing this I would jump in my car and just drive somewhere. That would be my way of letting off steam. Come back, I'd be happy. I know that's silly to say, but it worked for me and now writing is my way.

Now you know a little bit about my life. The end of this mad story. ▼

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Written words are simply language in visually coded form. It was the code which had eluded Peter as a child and adolescent. But when English code was systematically revealed to him in the program, he began to use it. With code in place, he was instantly able to bring the fullness of himself, his thinking, his intelligence, his emotional life, to the page. And by doing so, the reflection enabled in the process of writing allowed him to further appreciate and develop all of these qualities.

# Craig's Journey

**Craig's (not his real name) ability to read and write had been severely impaired throughout his life. Recently, he completed an adult literacy program which allowed him to rapidly develop his literacy skills. Here he writes about his own experiences.**

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**M**y name is Craig. I'm going to try and tell you what it was like for me growing up not knowing how to read and spell.

I started knowing that I could not understand words when I was a young boy. I knew then there was something wrong. I knew I couldn't understand words in Grade 5. There was no support from my parents and the school at this time. When I hit high school I knew I had a real problem. The school picked up on this and put me into a special class, but it was not helping at all. So I left school in Grade 8. I must have gone into some kind of depression because life was a blur until I was 16, and growing up in a world that revolves around reading and spelling was hard. It was impossible to fill in forms for employment, so I had to get help to do so.

It was hard to ask for help as a kid. I was not living at home at this time. From Grade 8 I found a job at the abattoir, and then the drinking started. It was enough to get me in trouble with the police. Even then I couldn't understand the statements written against me, I could not even read them.

I went to Melbourne to look for work with a friend from over there. We got separated one time and I could not find my way around. To get on the trams you had to read where you were going. I had to ask someone to read the board to me and that was so embarrassing for me, so I went back to Tasmania. I was unemployed for a short while in that time. It was very hard because of the dole forms. When I would look for work and ask for a job and they said no, I would then ask them to help fill in my form and sometimes they said no. So I found jobs that didn't require reading and writing: the meatworks, or a concrete company. A timber company that built decking and gazebos didn't require me to read or write, as I was a labourer.

But now I am 46, unable to work at the moment because of a serious back injury. I am trying to help myself with reading and spelling. The Child and Family Centre (CFC) in Chigwell put me on to a course that was going on at the Glenorchy Library (LINC), so I got in contact with Gail from the CFC, then moved to the library and I started working on my reading and writing. She then introduced me to Catherin and Andrea. I started out with some basic read-

ing spelling sheets. This went on once a week for a year. It was helping. Then Gail introduced me to Rosie. She was amazing. We sat down and worked out where I was with my reading and spelling.

It was different the way she approached things with me. It made sense. It was great. I started to understand a lot clearer. The way I was speaking had a big influence on the way I was spelling. Rosie is a speech therapist. Rosie and Andrea met with me once a week, and Gail and Catherin had three classes a week. Sometimes I felt a little uncomfortable but I knew if I wanted to go on I had to face my fears. I felt ashamed, especially when you're 46. I think that the work we have done together has helped me immensely and what I have achieved since. For instance, I have got an L2 (learner) licence.

My reading has come a long way. I still would like some help on my spelling – that would help me heaps. Also it has helped with reading books to my children, which sometimes I found a little difficult, but now I am able to help them learn. It gives me a warm feeling inside knowing that I have achieved something through this journey.

The time I have worked with Gail, Andrea, Catherin and Rosie, I would like to thank them for their understanding of the way I processed things. My own way of understanding, my reading and writing have got a lot better with the help of Rosie's extreme program, and the hard work Gail and I had put into this program. I intend to work with the LINC again in the near future. ▼

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Speech pathologists are specialists in the clinical and educational applications of the knowledge-fields of language- and phonemic-processing; as well as of the processes and sequences within both the normal, and impaired, development of these skills. Evidence-based interventions drawn from these understandings were at the centre of the program which helped Craig to experience clarity about how to read and write. Craig's program was initiated through liaison between Chatter Matters Tasmania and LINC Tasmania, and was funded by the LINC Literacy Program.

# Always in the Background

**John's** (not his real name) ability to read and write had been severely impaired throughout his life. In his early 50s, he completed an adult literacy program which provided specialised phonemic- and linguistic-processing support. The particularised input he received in this program allowed him to rapidly develop his literacy skills.

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I was the clown of the class and very disruptive. I learned lots of things and about lots of people – anything else but schoolwork. I never volunteered for anything. I was never any good at maths and I was never any good at English. I answered questions in social science and history – they just came naturally. I have got a good memory, but putting a sentence together was hard. I'm no good at writing. I copped a little bit of bullying in Grade Six and in high school, because I was only little. I didn't really do any homework. I tended to just stay in the background all the time. That way no one ever bothered me. I was always in the background. Even right up until I started work, I was always the one that was behind everybody else. Even when I started work.

My old man broke his back when I was 12. So I spent a lot of time away from school. Especially in the early years. Before he broke his back, mum had trouble with my sister, and I lived with my uncle for three months. I didn't go to school at all in that time. I went to work with him every day. I suppose I was ten. Maybe nine. My uncle never tried to get me in school, actually.

When Dad broke his back I just stopped going to school. If something needed doing at home, I did it. Then I started working. Mowing lawns every weekend. I made chips at the fish and chip shop. One of my next-door neighbours, I started out doing his lawns, and then I started out doing his shops. So I started making all the

chips of a night. Going down and making chips. So I spent more time away from home than I did at home. Mum would send me to school, but I was always tired, I went to sleep at school most times. I started missing school properly about Grade Eight or Nine.

Mum probably helped me learn in the first place, but once the old man was hurt and there were three other kids, I think they got the better deal, because Dad was home. When they put the old man off, he got to pick them up and he was around with them all the time. Plus they went to private schools and me and my sister went to public schools. Mind you, my sister was dux of the school – and I was the drop-out. Mum decided the other two were going to get a better education.

I did a course when I was 50. And they found out I was dyslexic. I was going to do a writing test for the dole. I had a tutor and she realised I had a very high IQ. She thought I had Asperger's. She realised there was something wrong with me and I wasn't seeing things right. She did a test and I failed it miserably. Mum said I'm not dyslexic, but apparently the tests say I am.

After that course last year, I've got a better idea how to spell things out. Before that, how it sounds was how it is. My spelling is not 100 per cent but I would say it's now about 80 per cent. My maths, that's got better. I can finally read a pay packet, which I hadn't been able to do since I started work. And I'm 53. I don't do a lot of reading and writing. I don't need to in my work. I don't



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need to at home.

If I could read and write easily, I'd probably have worked inside. I've worked outside since I was 15. I don't know if I could make it in an office. I'm a bit rough around the edges, as Mum says. There's quite a lot of jobs I could've gone for over the years, but no, they're above me. I couldn't fit the criteria to write letters – just kept to the manual stuff. But that's been a curse too, because I've worn myself out.

I wanted to be a commercial artist years ago. And do all the things on the side of the road, the boards. I can't get into computers. I don't like them. The education side of them. Mobile phones are the same. I never got into technology. I can't stand to sit there with a phone in my hand all day, worried that someone might ring me. Mine lives in the glove box of my car. This new age catches you out a lot.

I think it's just become too complicated. People trying to justify their jobs. If I was a politician and I was any good at it, I would simplify everything. Because I reckon you'd get more people into work. The world's got too complicated. They think that computers are the answer. They say in 20 years' time they reckon about 70 per cent of the people will be out of work. So what are they going to do with them all? The last time we were in that sort of trouble, they started World War I. The trouble next, they started World War II. They got everybody working again. They've already started World War III – they just

don't know it. It would take someone, politically, who's brave enough to change things. To lead from the front. The way we're going through prime ministers, maybe I could go for it. It seems to be a revolving door job. It must be a casual job – because there are no full-timers there! ▼

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John is a clever, thinking man who is at home discussing politics and world events. He has always had to learn about these topics of interest through what he hears on radio, television and in discussion; he has not been able to learn about them through the written word. John undertook a program to learn to read when in his 50s. Once the key to the written code was in place – discernment of the speech sounds – John's reading and writing took off. John's program was initiated through liaison between Chatter Matters Tasmania and LINC Tasmania, and was funded by the LINC Literacy Program.

# Sticking Up for Myself

**Jodie's** ability to read and write had been severely impaired throughout her life. An adult literacy program has allowed her to rapidly develop her literacy skills. Here she is able to write about her own experiences, in her own words

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I started my school life at a primary school in a low SES area and went there from kindergarten to Grade 4 and one term of Grade 6. From Grade 3 onwards I noticed that I was struggling with reading and writing. I found it harder to understand what teachers and other kids were talking about. I had been wearing a hearing aid in the right ear since kindergarten and I didn't like it because I got teased a lot.

I attended a 'special school' for Grade 5. This is a school that had some special needs kids from the Hobart area. This was a small school that had about ten kids in each class and I was there for just a year and then I went back into mainstream schooling at my former primary, which I didn't like as I got teased even more and called names. This made me really hate school and everything in it. I didn't really want to be at school and struggled even more because I was getting teased because it was obvious that I couldn't spell well or read and it was just hard to understand what the teachers were saying. This was when a hearing aid was more noticeable and kids couldn't understand why I was wearing one. I still don't wear one now because it brings back bad memories.

My favourite primary school I attended was a country school because no one knew I had been to the special school and I knew no one and I didn't wear my hearing aid, so I wouldn't get teased again and go through the pain again. I think that country school helped me heaps and I think if I had gone back to the former suburban school I would've got teased again. I got my confidence back, ready to start high school. Unfortunately, we had to move again and I had to change schools.

When I started at high school, about halfway through Grade 7 I encountered some of the bullies I had known from my first primary school and they started teasing me again. The name I got called most of the time was 'Special' because the kids had known I went to a spe-

cial school and I kind of just started falling through the cracks again. I started playing up and causing trouble to hide the fact that I couldn't do the reading and writing parts of school. I knew I could do the cooking, P.E. and sewing. From Grade 9 I had to stick up for myself because I was getting nowhere because the bullies pointed me out to kids who didn't know who I was, and told them to tease me. I just had to start kind of sticking up for myself. Some of the bullies had left the school when I was in Grade 9 because they dropped out of school. I felt better when I was sticking up for myself because I wasn't getting tormented and my mum and dad were proud of me for sticking up and I could make proper friends instead of going out and being teased and feeling like a loner. I did finish Grade 10 and I did my best and I went to Matriculation College and the teasing and tormenting all stopped because those dickheads didn't go to college. I passed the subjects I needed to pass and left halfway through Year 12 because I got a job. I was there for five years until I got pregnant.

One of the tricks I used to use when I first got a job was watching people and remembering what they did. Learning new things was just watching and taking it in because I couldn't take notes. It kind of confused me when I started because I didn't know how to use a cash register, but I picked it up through watching other people use them.

I was referred by Centrelink to the Glenorchy Library (LINC) in 2013. I wasn't really wanting to go and missed the first three appointments to go and meet Andrea at the library. When I did go they just went through a lot of testing and reading to see what I could do. I was afraid to do testing because when I was in high school I knew I was going to get a low score and I hated it because I used to have panic attacks because I couldn't read or under-

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stand the questions very well. I was a bit scared to ask the teacher because I was afraid of how they would react. I didn't have the confidence to go up and ask. After the testing, I met with Andrea a couple of times and then got matched with a tutor (Amelia) and we have been going ever since. She pushes me to do my best and we have covered a lot of different things, like cooking and reading a recipe. We also did some learner driving because I only had my Learner's when I started and Amelia helped with the practical driving and some theory practice as well. When I went for my test, I passed first time and I never thought I would pass because I haven't passed a test before on my own because I didn't have the confidence. I didn't think I would be able to get my Learner's because I could understand the question but didn't understand it on the computer. It was daunting to do it on the computers in Service Tasmania. I didn't really understand the questions. I am now into my second year as a Provisional Driver and that was one big thing I didn't think I would ever do.

In the last two years I have read four and a half books and I thought I would never do that. I didn't think I could ever sit down and read one book, let alone four! Instead of not liking reading and liking spelling I now prefer it the other way and I never ever thought that would ever happen. We also worked in the pilot program at the Glenorchy LINC with Rosalie Martin, working on speech and sounds and different strategies to learn different ways and to work on spelling and reading and learning in different ways. This program was called 'Sound Systems'. It went for about five months and Amelia and I met three times a week for that time. We went over deletions and spelling different ways. I enjoyed most of it. There were bits that I went, 'Oh God! Can I do this?' But it was fun once I got into it and understood it and what we were doing. I have learned different ways of breaking words down for reading and spelling to make it easier, and we still use some of the exercises, but not as often. We do more reading, journal, spelling and playing hangman and I like it when I get to hang Amelia. She uses some of the words from my spelling tests this year and I use spelling words from a list for Year 12 students. I enjoy my time and have learned a lot. I feel more confident in myself and I feel that if one of my kids asks me for help I am able to help them with their homework whereas before I wouldn't have. I still have assessments every six

months or so but they don't frighten me as much. I know I have improved based on the results that Amelia has shown me from when I started.

One of my kids struggles with reading and spelling and I have noticed she is doing a lot of the things I used to do when I had trouble with school. I have told her teachers what she is trying to do and have told them to not let her get away with it because Amelia doesn't let me get away with that. She is off to high school next year and I hope she has an easier time of it than I did. She still gives the teachers a hard time and tries to get away with doing the easier work and I have to go in twice a week to check on her progress and talk to the teacher about how she has been in class. I have two other children who are at the same school and they don't have the same issues that the eldest child has. I am still helping my kids with their schoolwork where I can, mainly the youngest with his reading and spelling, and I am still enjoying learning. ▼

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Thorough assessments of the language-learning profiles of children with learning differences should always be the starting point from which to support a child's learning. Jodie was sent to a special school even though her challenges arose not from cognitive impairment, but from the language disadvantages associated with hearing impairment. She was wounded by this error and felt its sting throughout her education. With pluck and tenacity, she is now righting the wrongs of the past and advocating for her own children. Jodie's program was initiated through liaison between Chatter Matters Tasmania and LINC Tasmania, and was funded by the LINC Literacy Program.

# Another Level of Toughness

**Sharene** (not her real name) struggled with reading and writing through school, higher education and work. Dyslexia made it even harder for her to cope as an international student and to achieve permanent residency. Finally, she is accessing the help she needs, and tells her story in her own words.

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remember when I was in Grade 2 or 3, I remember not knowing alphabet, and not knowing how it sounds. I was living in Thailand. I remember struggling with English especially because it was my second language, but that doesn't mean that I didn't struggle in my own language. The older I got, it was easier for me to pick up my own language because I was speaking the language more often – and it wasn't fully reliant on reading, it was listening.

I really didn't like reading and writing – especially English. Even in my mother language I would change letters around when I was writing – and it would be a totally different meaning. Even when I was doing maths, if it was meant to be '23', I would write '32'.

So up to Grade 9, I had failed my way through. It's from that point that things improved. It was my maths teacher. He realised that I was good at visualising. When it came to geometry I got full marks. I wouldn't be good at anything else except that particular piece of work. I was also good at drawing. Not great, but good. It kind of helped me to get over the frustration, and to realise that I do have a skill that I could work on.

At school I was a loner. Till my teens I really didn't care about my studies, simply because I felt like a failure. And I felt like I wasn't as smart as everyone else. I can't remember getting any help for reading or study even at school. I was laughed at when I was making mistakes. I felt rejected, and I didn't feel like part of the rest of the class.

I came to a realisation at that time 'if I don't study I wouldn't get anywhere'. So I started working hard. And though it took me time, I took the extra time to read – and I also found this book called *How to Study for Exams*, so in there I found clues. Like listening to the teachers, and realising that whatever the teacher is writing on the board are the most important facts – so those

are the ones I should concentrate on. And I learned to summarise things so that I don't need to keep on reading lots and lots. So that I had most of my work in key points and then try to remember the details from key points.

And then I tried to reduce my amount of reading and writing in order to survive. I'm really slow in my reading. And even if I read slowly, I sometimes still won't get some of the words.

I also learned to listen more carefully, and from the listening I learned different words. My vocabulary would be developing, but I wouldn't know how to spell it. So when a person speaks to me they think 'Oh wow, she's amazing', but not really – they don't know what's going on behind the picture. I'm like a sponge when it came to listening. And I used to remember all the idioms and whatever I could gather. It would come from my listening.

So I came to Australia when I was 19 and started doing my diploma in information technology (IT), and my flat-mate started noticing me doing really strange things. The way I leave things behind; and I would forget things – and she started questioning me as to what was happening. And then, she saw my hand-eye coordination was not that great either. So she asked 'Do you struggle in your study work?' I said, 'Yes, I've always had trouble reading and writing'. And then I went to the TAFE and asked for help. And they told me that I had to be diagnosed for it. And that's when I first found out what dyslexia is. I didn't get help because I was an international student. All I could get was extra time.

It was helpful that IT was more logical and everything is structured, and it was all binary and zeros and ones, and if it's not 'this', it's 'that' – there was no grey. And that helped me do the programming and understand different languages and how they are structured.

When I moved on to the university, it was more work. And when I showed them my diagnosis I was told to go

here, there, to get help, but I didn't get help.

That first year I failed all of my subjects. And I didn't have any friends either, and I decided to go to a different university, because my friends from TAFE were there. So they had to give me another chance to do university – and it was to do the degree in computer science. At first I struggled and then, again, I didn't get help. So I did the same things that I did at TAFE, like writing notes from the blackboard. Highlighting was helpful for me. To remember.

So, I came to the end of my university. I did well, the last couple of years. And I was even good enough to get a scholarship – that was more in web designing, so it was more graphical. And eventually I started working with clients in a software company.

I guess another level of toughness came into that because it meant reading lots and lots and lots of paper regarding their software and how it works. And at first I was told that I would be given someone – like a mentor – but that didn't come about. Because I didn't tell them about my dyslexia at all. Because before this point I had been shunned – even though I said 'Hey, this is going on, help me', it was constantly 'No no no no no' and nothing happened. So I was working and I was reading all this work and I found it really hard. And I found it draining. Everyday I would go home and I don't feel like doing anything else because I don't have energy.

At that point I was applying for my permanent residency – and I also had to pass the IELTS exam, an English exam. I was getting good marks for the speech and listening side of things, but writing and reading, always somehow I haven't done well in that exam. So I did it three or four times, that exam. So that means I didn't have permanent residency also.

I gave them the diagnosis that was done when I was 21. They said 'Oh, that's too old, you need to get one done now'. By this time I was 28. So once again I went to get the assessment done. In the assessment it mentions that I haven't got my permanent residency and that I am trying with this exam. And when I gave them that piece of paper, my work came back and said 'Oh, you never told us that you are not a permanent resident'.

Eventually, I passed that exam. But it was too late. So I had to go back to Thailand and apply for a permanent residency to come back to Australia. That kind of set me back a couple of years.

When I came back two years later, I was a permanent resident. My first thing was to survive and find a job. So I started working in a takeaway shop, then eventually in the aged care industry.

I had the same problem in this industry, struggling to read and write quickly as everyone else. I struggled to quickly read client care plans and realise exactly what was needed. So the way I survived was to get on the phone to the case manager so I would know the background knowledge without having to read all that.

So it did get better, but still I was so tired coming home. The days were a lot of organising. There were more than 1000 clients and every person is different

and you need to remember those details when you are handling them, so it was emotionally and physically and mentally draining.

And it was more draining because I was trying to read all these things and write all the details. There were many times that I actually wrote the wrong date. Thank God the carers called me up and said 'By the way, Sharene, did you mean this?', and I said 'Oh yes, I'm so sorry' and then I was able to fix it. I thought 'Oh my God, I can't rely on myself to write the date properly'. Or sometimes I would be writing a different name – because there are surnames that sound the same – and I would get the wrong person. So the amount of times that I had to clarify and confirm was more than a normal person.

This was making me depressed and eventually I just broke down. And I did move away from the coordinating position to part-time administration, but I think I made it worse for myself by going to admin because that meant more reading and writing and making sure everything is in order.

And it just snowballed. And I was never able to get on top of things. And my manager questioned it – Why was I struggling? Was it because I didn't want to be there? It wasn't the case; it was the fact that I was struggling with the disability. And once again I didn't tell them that I had dyslexia. Only after getting sick – a depressive episode. By the time I told them it was too late, and I was struggling with depression and the dyslexia.

I left my job and moved to Hobart to recover. I was able to access a supportive non-government organisation, and from that I was able to access speech pathology help. See, all this time, I wish somebody would have told me – even when I was getting diagnosed I was told that I could get someone to teach me, but I wasn't able to access that. It wasn't clear and I wasn't given good instructions as to how to go about doing it. And also, I had to think about the financial side of things. It's not accessible for all people to get speech pathology easily.

I try not to say a lot because I don't want to sound dumb. And I know I don't say point of views because I don't want to be laughed at. I remember one of my managers telling me that I was shy. And I thought 'No, you don't know me, it's just that I don't want to come out feeling like a stupid person'.

When I was at work, I never felt like I was part of it. I still carry that doing-things-alone personality. It doesn't mean that I'm not good at team-working, it's just me. It's harder for me to connect with people. And I think that's influences from my childhood. ▼

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Reading-writing ability is too often casually, damagingly and erroneously, conflated with general intelligence. But the cognitive processes mediating the development and uptake of these skills are much more complex and nuanced than such simple conflation permits. Sharene's story shows that vibrant intelligence can be doubted and the burgeoning of the joy-of-life kept down, when such careless evaluations are made by others and by social institutions.

# Refuge From the Storm

**Perrin Scarborough** explains how the ability to engage in literature gives him refuge from the storms he has suffered in his life, the ability to challenge the judgements he encounters, and the freedom to express himself, as he does here, in his own words ...

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*What is that*, in my frantic mind I wondered when I saw it placed on the side of the windowsill where my mother had left it when she went to take some clothes into the bathroom where I was about to sit in the warm, soapy water.

I reached up for it from my sitting position to wrap my small fingers around the shiny, hard surface. As it slipped out of my grasp, such delight I felt when I saw the wash of colours from the drawings on the open pages, it felt like a garden of peace and excitement in my head and heart and I felt such a strong desire to see what it was.

*What was that*, I wondered as the drawings told a story so magical it was soothing to my soul and lulled me with happiness.

When I finished my bath my mother found the item on the floor and said, 'Let's read this together,' and so we sat, with me on her lap, and she read and pointed to the black markings and I realised the drawings were about what she was saying, and so with that she unwittingly showed me how to fire my imagination. You see, I had just read my first full book and I was so small I couldn't even turn the pages properly. The world in my imagination and wisdom had just opened up to me where I have had to travel at times to hide. But more of that later.

I started life on the resuscitation table. Not the best start I must admit, and certainly not the descriptions given

for 'baby's arrival' that my mother, with rose-coloured glasses, had read in the various baby books she devoured before the imminent arrival. Hell, but that's life, and my parents had no idea at the time the heartbreak and trauma they and I would have to go through to try to navigate a way for me to be taken seriously, a human being really, and as an intelligent person, a person who has feelings, who is severely restricted with problems affecting the motor planning of speech and physical movement.

Whilst it might appear to many people that I am restricted in intelligence as well because I have difficulty planning the physiological movements involved in speech and some physical activities, I fully understand everything that is said to me or things directed to me. I was only four years old when my first speech therapist said to my parents, 'Just because he finds it difficult to speak doesn't mean he doesn't understand what's going on.' For her to say that in my presence at such a young age showed me there were people who could see I was worthy to be taken seriously and given respect.

We have, over the past 24 years, had to retrain my brain and body as well as rebuild my self esteem, to have me respected as an intelligent human being who cares about the world and about the impact of prejudices and biased labels put on people, which affect their lives in so many ways. That same speech therapist took a frail four-year-old boy and, whilst trying to help me to phys-

## **Words cannot express how singularly important I believe it was for me to be given the gift of words through books and stories from a very early age.**

ically plan speech, helped me so deeply in another way, I can never thank her enough. She introduced me to a keyboard communication device, at first only typing words to answer questions, then progressing to forming sentences for normal conversation, which opened my world to the ability to express myself which I have been doing ever since. It is damn hard to live in a world where justice isn't directed to you because you have incurred a more unfortunate life. To treat people who are sitting in hardship of any kind with the openness we hope to receive ourselves is a worthy thing to be encouraged. While people think it is quite acceptable to believe their own experiences as the correct way, we all need to widen our readiness to give other possibilities credence.

Words cannot express how singularly important I believe it was for me to be given the gift of words through books and stories from a very early age. When I was a toddler, seeing arrays of words and wonderful drawings in books gave such a feeling inside me of warmth, security and wonderment, I was able to withstand the endless rounds of medical and therapy appointments. Time and time again the inconsiderate ways people unfairly judged me instilled in me the path to happiness was to sit and read.

Frequently I have been asked 'Perrin, how did you learn to read?' What rambunctious feelings I get when people ask me that. The thought obviously in their minds is that because I have trouble planning speech I then must be stupid and could not possibly know how to read. Would a person who was disabled in another way, for example, they unfortunately only had one leg, be asked such a thing? While some areas of my brain are disadvantaged, it shouldn't be presumed that all my faculties are troubled.

What would the attitudes be, were we to take stillness of speech and think what stillness can yield? You see, whilst I have rested my speech vocally, I have treaded a path in silence to wisely attend to educating myself in other ways. I started to learn to read when we sat with that book and such was my interest that whenever

my parents read with me it taught me the wonderful English language. They instilled in me my love of words and expressive writing and I took every opportunity to extend their willingness to expose me to the written words. I riled against the turbulence inside my soul by reading, diving into forests of imagination in stories written by others, where discoveries can take me on travels so interesting I can lose the harshness that life sometimes gave me.

Literature takes many forms, not just books. I have often listened to people stating that their son or daughter has been disadvantaged because their families have had difficult times, citing their lack of wealth as a reason for a poor education, but reading can be free and set everyone on a path to education. Our public libraries have wonderful resources – all free; the floating newspaper which lands on the park bench – free; the find of books and magazines at friends' and relatives' homes – all free; the great wealth of reading material we see in public spaces – free; it's all the beginning of and expansion of education through literature. Too many people dismiss this as education, but what a wonderful foundation we would be providing if a somewhat more simplistic idea of literature was given to people overwhelmed with reading and writing.

At some point in the beginning of my life's journey, through reading, my imagination and the differing emotions I felt when my mother read that first book with me have given me the ability to expand my wealth of reading and also provide a place to enjoy as stories take me. With all literature we can experience travels to faraway places, differing ideas, subtle suggestions and confronting opinions and from that I write with my heart.

Words have given me freedom expressing myself but that has also got me into trouble at times when people try to side with what they believe should be expressed. Like anyone, when you express an opinion there are

**I riled against the turbulence inside my soul by reading, diving into forests of imagination in stories written by others, where discoveries can take me on travels so interesting I can lose the harshness that life sometimes gave me.**

people who do not share your views or ideas and that is alright, as we are all different and have the right to our own opinions. Lost findings of respect I sometimes have had aimed at me by people criticising how I could possibly be able to entertain particular points of view, yet I find it so difficult to plan motor movements. There are those who somehow feel people who have a disability are unworthy of expressing their own opinions where it really is everyone's right.

The challenges faced by anybody in times of turmoil, heartache, pain or disassociation causing loneliness and rejection sometimes feel insurmountable and quite unbearable. Finding an oasis from this harshness in words is such a gift, one that should be encouraged by all.

Thinking ahead to where my life shall find me, I sit here ringing in the agile limbs to rise to what they have still to do to enable and sustain my actions and what the future has for me. To sit on the ledge of literature is the life I yearn for as my emotions and imagination give way to words travelling across the pages. I symbolise the written words rising from me as rungs up the ladder of what I have achieved in my life so far, from the start of yesterday's trauma to what I am able to do today, and I am so eternally grateful that my mother picked up that tiny book from the floor, instead of leaving it unread. ▼

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To 'respect' is to 'look again'. When one 'looks again' at Perrin Scarborough, one will see what one might have missed upon first glance. Perrin is severely restricted in speech, able to form only a small number of words verbally, but his mind and internal language are alive and rich, incisive and poetic. Perrin's story shows the importance and wisdom of holding a mindset of willingness to give the second look of respect to all fellow human beings.

**Image:** David Fenoglio, *Abstracted Reflections*, 2012, gouache on cold-pressed paper







# A Second Life

**Monna Mirkazemi** was badly injured in a car accident as a child. Here she describes, in her own words, her journey to recovery ...

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They call me a little fighter.

On 14 December 2000 at the age of eight, my life changed completely when I was involved in a horrific car accident. My mother and brother were killed instantly, and I was left in a critical condition. I had a head injury, and I suffered a stroke a few days later. The right side of my body was paralysed so I couldn't walk or move my right hand. I bumped my head so hard that my optical nerve was damaged, impairing my vision. I could not speak or read.

Luckily I don't remember the accident and I had no idea how I ended up in that hospital – not being able to do anything, just in bed and struggling. I was unconscious at the time. My mind was numb, blank. I couldn't feel a thing.

Recovery was like living a second life – learning everything again from scratch – but this time it wasn't easy for me. I struggled, and it was hard and painful as I had to concentrate and focus more, forcing myself to get better each day.

My life was limited to the appointments that I had to attend every day – physiotherapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy, hydrotherapy, appointments after appointments, surgeries after surgeries. At school I had to concentrate harder just to keep up with students in my grade. It wasn't easy for me, especially at that age, and I feel I missed out on most of my childhood.

I remember doing lots of practice with my speech therapist. Everything was new to me, from learning simple words, relearning the alphabet, spelling, pronun-

## Sixteen years after the accident, I still have difficulties with talking, speaking and reading, even though others think it is easy for me. They forget I had to relearn how to talk, write and read.

ciation, grammar and structuring sentences to physically delivering them with my mouth movements.

At times I was frustrated with myself. The impact of my brain injury was that I lost the ability to formulate language easily. I often knew what I wanted to say, but random words would pop into my stories as I was retelling them. Those words would divert me away from the main idea, which meant I might end up saying something that I didn't want to say. Sometimes I would notice this, but often I wouldn't notice. I knew it wasn't my fault – it was just that the part of my language processing system responsible for monitoring language wasn't working properly – but at times I felt sad that I couldn't do what most other children did, including after-school activities and socialising with other classmates.

Speech therapy really helped me to communicate and build my confidence to connect with other humans. My therapist would say a sentence as she showed me picture cards and I would have to repeat the same sentence until I got it right. This was a very structured way to help me to learn how to monitor the words I said, and to keep those words focused on the main idea. I also practised drills to rebuild my ability to use grammar, and I played a lot of games.

I learned alphabet letters and sounds so I could work out new words like a puzzle. I also worked on creating visual images for the information that I was reading, which helped me to understand and remember information.

During my high school years, I got help with forming paragraphs and editing my writing. My brain injury meant that I often couldn't recognise issues. A program read my writing aloud, and I found I could pick up on my mistakes when I heard what I had written. I could better identify any parts that didn't make sense or notice when random words or ideas had been included.

For ten years I was determined and dedicated to my recovery, attending various appointments many times during the week as I knew I had to get myself better and overcome my difficulties. However, by the time I finished schooling at the end of Grade 12 in 2010 I was so sick of appointments that I stopped going to them. Instead, in 2011, I started university and focused on fine art and design.

Sixteen years after the accident, I still have difficulties with talking, speaking and reading, even though others think it is easy for me. They forget I had to relearn how to talk, write and read.

Because I am partly blind, I read very slowly. Reading

is a pain. As I read each word, I never know what the next word is. Sometimes I read the same sentence over and over again until it makes sense. Other times my eyes get tired of reading.

I still struggle when I want to explain things to someone or in a group. I know what I want to say in my mind but, when I speak, it is unclear and gets mixed with other words. People get very frustrated and sometimes angry with me when they are not sure of what I am saying. Sometimes I have to write a paragraph and edit it until it makes sense, then read it out loud. With my limited vision, I often get embarrassed doing this. Sometimes I read the same line twice, and other times the sentence does not flow because I pause without commas or read through without noticing a full stop.

Despite these difficulties, I am known as a cheerful, bright and bubbly person who understands and is aware of my problems but doesn't let them hold me back. For example, instead of reading for pleasure as other people do, I paint to express myself with bright, bold colours. This has been such a passion that this year I graduated with a Master of Fine Art and Design specialising in painting.

I have always been surrounded by amazing and supportive family and friends, but I would like to especially acknowledge my speech therapist, without whom I would never have achieved the success and quality of life that I enjoy today. ▼

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High expectations, hope and the pleasures of fun and shared relationships buffer and direct the sheer hard work and mental grit which is required by all parties, to make a recovery from brain injury and family devastation. Monna's amazing story has all of these elements.

Images: Monna Mirkazemi, *Untitled*, acrylic on stretched canvas, each 102 x 76 cm



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