viewpoint

on books for young adults

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TIGERFISH

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THE TRAGEDIES OF THE PAST WILL POISON THE FUTURE... UNLESS SOMEONE HAS THE GUTS TO CROSS THE LINE.
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Booknotes
I sometimes wonder what my life would have been like if not for Mrs Martin. She was my sixth grade teacher, a plump and serious woman who berated me every Monday morning as she handed back the creative writing pieces from the previous week. Her complaint was always the same. Without fail, I handed in a half-page story. No more. No less.

One week I secretly plotted to surprise her by writing a longer piece. The result was a cross between *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*. And it was gargantuan by comparison – three and a half pages in length.

When the time came for the weekly homework to be returned, I’ll never forget her lifting up my homework book and waving it about like Churchill declaring war on Germany. After telling the class I had written a three and a half page story, she proceeded to read it aloud. I sat there, glowing with pride as I heard my story read to the class. It was from that moment I was hooked. I knew I wanted to be a writer.

It’s a long time ago now that Mrs Martin ignited my interest in writing. Some thirty-six years, actually, which shows how long it can take for the seed of a dream to finally bloom. This year, after self-publishing a number of novels, I signed an eight book publishing deal with Text Publishing. It certainly wouldn’t have happened if not for Mrs Martin and the other mentors I’ve encountered along the way. Mentors and teachers illuminate the path for others to follow. No-one achieves their goals without help. Behind every success story, there are a dozen people who inspired that dream and helped to keep it alight during the dark times.

I’m often reminded of Edmund Hillary and his conquering of Everest. Both he and Tensing made it to the top. Possibly one wouldn’t have made it without the other, but there were countless other people involved in helping them reach the summit. By Hillary’s own estimation, there were some seven hundred people involved in carrying equipment, setting up bases and getting them up the mountain. Hillary wouldn’t have reached the summit if not for the help of all these other people. And that’s not including the many people who mentored Hillary in his early years. He didn’t simply teach himself how to climb mountains. He had mentors who helped turn him from an amateur to a professional.

Likewise, Leonardo da Vinci wasn’t born a painter. He was apprenticed to the artist, Andrea del Verrocchio, while he learnt his craft. Would we even know of Leonardo da Vinci if it weren’t for his teacher? How many other writers and artists have never reached their potential because the master did not appear when the student was ready? And where would we be without Gregg Toland? Gregg...who? He’s the cinematographer who taught Orson Welles everything he knew about filmmaking in a weekend (or half an hour, depending upon what story you believe). This crash course happened just prior to Welles shooting *Citizen Kane*. The movie would have been made with or without Toland, but would it have been as successful? And would Welles have become one of the most celebrated directors of all time without that early illumination from his mentor?

Many of those who shone the way for me were other writers. Many years ago, I met Jeffrey Deaver at the Sydney Writers Festival. I mentioned my writing ambitions as he signed a book for me. He wrote the inscription, ‘Don’t ever stop’. I’ve followed that advice, holding it close to my heart when the trail seemed impassable. I also went to workshops run by other writers. This is a common thing for wannabe authors to do and I think it’s always beneficial. Not only do you pick up some tips of the trade, but you discover that writers are just like anyone else. They’ve succeeded as writers because they’ve had some talent, worked hard and enjoyed a little luck.

I attended university late in life, commencing a Bachelor of Arts (Creative Writing) in 2011 at RMIT. Whilst at university, I was fortunate enough to meet another mentor. This time it was writer, Toni Jordan, the author of *Addition* and *Nine Days*. She took an interest in my writing and eventually put me in contact with Text Publishing. Whilst at Text, I’ve had the opportunity to work with editor, Michael Heyward. Need I mention that he has been a teacher to me? I had some skills as a writer
when I met him, but working with Michael has helped me to become a better author in almost every single way. Of course, mentoring works both ways. I recently met someone who asked me my advice regarding a book they’re writing. I’m now working with them to make this project a reality. It seems I’m now passing on the torch that Mrs Martin ignited all those years ago, illuminating the path in my own small way for someone else. No doubt Mrs Martin has long since gone on to teach the choir upstairs, but I think she would be proud to see the fire still burning in her absence.