



# John Marsden

*November 1995*

**L**ET'S START WITH MASTURBATION. IT was obvious from the moment John Marsden worked it into his third novel, *The Journey*, that it was going to stir the pot. Not with his mainly young readers, mind you, but with adults of the censorious kind.

Some librarians thought the book close to pornographic and refused to place it on their shelves. The Queensland Education Department, still in a cultural coma from the Joh years, recommended against its use in schools with the warning: 'This book contains explicit sexual references.' No matter that *The Journey* was a celebration of the rites of passage of a boy into manhood, more like a Tolkien adventure rich in symbols and folktales than anything to do with onanistic fascination and pleasures. In the eyes of the bureaucracy, even in 1988, masturbation was, well, still masturbation.

But at least Marsden was getting used to fame and controversy. A good thing too. It wasn't long before schools across the country were booking the writer/teacher months in advance for talks and workshops (700 schools in the past five years). Students flocked to see him as if he were the Pied Piper himself, and letters started pouring in, initially by the hundreds and then the thousands. Intense, painful, passionate, trusting, excited letters that thanked him, occasionally berated him, but almost always by implication beseeched him to keep writing, to keep providing them with a voice.

**S**INCE 1986, JOHN MARSDEN HAS written 17 books: sold almost a million copies worldwide and won—or been short-listed for—all the major awards for young adult literature in Australia. Yet the chances are

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that unless you're a teenager, the parent of a teenager, a teacher, librarian, bookseller or former student of Marsden's, you probably haven't heard of him.

That's because Marsden, as a writer of children's and young adult books, is still cast off from the mainstream, as are people like Gillian Rubinstein, Graeme Base, and even the hugely popular Paul Jennings.

'Their books get treated purely in terms of education, rather than in terms of literature, entertainment and culture,' says Agnes Nieuwenhuizen, author and authority on teenage literature. 'Young adult books are not considered real literature. Young people think they are, but it is very difficult to get the academics, educators and people in the adult literary world to accept that these are real authors who write real books. It's a symptom of a society which doesn't listen to young people about anything and, therefore, by extension, doesn't value their authors or their books.'

A FEW YEARS AFTER *THE JOURNEY* was published, Marsden wrote *Letters from the Inside*. This was the harrowing story of two teenage girls befriending each other through their letters. Tracey is in prison for an unnamed crime; the other character, Mandy, is living at home with her parents, sister and deeply weird older brother.

Suddenly, Mandy stops writing to Tracey. Tracey continues to write but a year goes by and still her letters are unanswered. She is desperate—Mandy's last letter had been full of portent. 'I'm so scared Manna. Where are you?' And shortly thereafter, the book ends. Just like that. Some readers, particularly adults, were furious that Marsden had taken their children (or was it them?) onto a window ledge and left them there.

*Dear Mr Marsden,  
I threw the book across the room when I got to the last page.*

Others were more disturbed by the chilling implications: Mandy wasn't writing because she was dead. Her brother had killed his entire family.

*Dear John,  
How could you? I was left haunted and angry with you . . . We need happy endings. This is not the time to induce depression and helplessness in your readers.*

'This makes [Bret Easton Ellis's] *American Psycho* look like a spotless lamb,' railed one reviewer of the book. Others begged to differ. American

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children's author Robert Cormier called it 'unforgettable . . . absolutely shattering', and said Marsden was a writer deserving 'worldwide acclaim'. His young audience concurred.

In its first 12 months, the book went through seven print-runs and became a set text for Year 12 students in Victoria. It was also short-listed for the Children's Book of the Year award; named in the United States as one of the six outstanding teenage novels of the year and was runner-up in the Dutch Children's Book of the Year award.

But still the criticism didn't let up. Marsden's landscape was too bleak for an audience comprising mainly 11-to-17-year-olds. To which Marsden would reply: 'Adults confuse innocence with ignorance, but they're two very different things. I think there is a desire among adults to keep children ignorant, and it comes from their desire to preserve power for themselves.'

Marsden makes no apologies for the fact that his characters are full-blooded: defiant, heroic, tragic and tormented. They come from families which sometimes implode. They come from his obsession with the dark, reverberant journeyings of adolescence—his students', as well as his own.

**T**HE FIRST BOOK JOHN MARSDEN ever wrote, *So Much to Tell You*, was a feat of some courage. He wrote it in the voice of Marina, a 14-year-old girl who has retreated from the world after her father throws acid in her face. (He'd been aiming at her mother.)

*Dear John Marsden,*

*One thing I find truly amazing is the fact that you are male and you can get inside a teenage girl's mind like that and capture just what we think about.*

*Are you sure you aren't Jane Marsden in disguise?'*

Marina was an amalgam of two people: the first, a mute girl whom Marsden met when he entered a psychiatric hospital himself, at the age of 19. The second was Kay Nesbit, the Melbourne woman who was horribly disfigured in 1985 after being shot in the face.

Marsden wrote it in 1986 while on a three-week vacation from teaching English at Geelong Grammar. He later showed the manuscript to three of his students and was encouraged by the fact that each returned it to him in tears. (That's one way of currying favour with your teacher!) He then sent it to six publishers and received six rejection slips. One of them wrote back saying, 'This would have no interest for high school students.'

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Finally, a chance conversation with a Melbourne bookseller resulted in the manuscript being published in 1987 by publishers Walter McVitty Books.

The following year, it won four Australian literary awards, including the Victorian Premier's award and Children's Book of the Year award. In the United States, *So Much to Tell You* took out the prestigious Christopher Medal, a prize given to books which advance the cause of human understanding.

In terms of sales, the figures were—and still are—staggering. It has sold more than 250,000 copies worldwide, 160,000 of them in Australia, making it probably the biggest-selling teenage novel in the country's history. It has also been translated into 13 languages, including Afrikaans, Norwegian and Farsi, the mother tongue of Iran.

That's considerable comfort to a man who was terrified by what the book might reveal about himself.

'I just felt that I was exposing aspects of myself that I'd never exposed,' he says. 'I was writing as a female for a start and I was writing about very sensitive, emotional issues. And for someone of a conservative, Anglo-Saxon background, those are quite radical things to do. I was disturbed by the possibility that people might make assumptions about me from the book, and they might look at me differently.'

**J**OHN MARSDEN BELIEVES HE WAS born with one skin too few. He feels things, not just intensely, but in the catacombs of his soul. He's not sure where he developed such hypersensitivity, only that he possesses it—or it possesses him. He remembers, for example, reading a Blinky Bill book at the age of five or six and coming to a passage where Blinky Bill's father is gratuitously shot by humans.

'It had a profound, terrible effect on me,' he says. 'I was in shock. I read it and read it and re-read it and re-read it . . . I just couldn't believe it. The sadness of it was just unbearable.' Even today, when he hears a news bulletin, he will rush to the television set or radio and turn it off as soon as there's a hint of tragedy. 'It's not just that I get depressed,' Marsden says. 'It's like I get ill. I just have such pain in my stomach, in all of me.'

The absence of that layer of protection was apparent the first time I spoke to Marsden by phone. He was warm, but clearly nervous. 'I don't feel that what I do gives the public an automatic right to read about my private life,' he said. 'There is stuff I won't talk about, but there is plenty of stuff I will.'

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It was the stuff-that-he-will and the bits-that-he-might that took me to John Marsden's home—beyond the Macedon Ranges in Victoria, to a town called Sandon and a small, converted pub from the gold rush era where he lives on weekends and which is, his friend Mary Edmonston says, the 'perfect statement of his life'.

To arrive in Sandon, you must drive through a landscape of farmhouses and churches, through a place of fallen leaves, blue curling smoke and converging natural springs; where sharp bends and spurs alert you to places with tub-thumping names like Blowhole, Breakneck Gorge, Shepherd's Flat, Jim Crow Creek and Providence Gully Road.

There are only about three homes in Sandon. Marsden's is the cottage practically submerged in ivy, behind the two giant peppertrees. He greets me at the door with a firm handshake and a diffident smile. His voice has a soft, soothing cadence but at first glance, he could easily be a wood-chopper—or a Franciscan monk. His arms are thick, his chest beefy and his salt-and-pepper beard ragged.

We go into the kitchen and sit down at a large table cluttered with pens, papers, books (mostly his in various translations), margarine, tea towels, a torch and a bottle of Diet Coke.

A blazing fire burns in front of us and, as I begin to romanticise about the joys of writing fiction in a converted gold rush pub, he offers this rather priestly revelation. 'Putting logs on a fire and killing insects really does distress me and I only do it when visitors arrive. In fact, outside there are some half-dead logs where I've poured water over them because I realised there were ants in there that I hadn't noticed before. A lot of logs I won't use because I can see there are ants in there.'

Is this Buddhist non-violence talking or Christian stewardship? I ask. More the first than the second, he says, but really just a general sense of a spiritual presence in the world. 'I don't know where all this comes from ... I'm not a vegetarian ... and it's no good trying to find any consistency in my life because it's not there.'

**S**TILL, WE MUST LOOK, if not for consistency, then for patterns. When Marsden entered the adolescent psychiatric unit of Prince Henry Hospital in Sydney at the age of 19 it was because, like Marina with the disfigured face in *So Much to Tell You*, he had withdrawn from the world.

He was emotionally mute. The first patient he saw in the hospital was a boy who had been two years behind him at The Kings School.

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'I thought, "My God, they must have a special ward here for ex-students of Kings."'

Marsden had arrived at Kings at the age of 11, after a succession of moves brought about by his father's work commitments as a bank manager. The family had gone from Melbourne, where John, the third of four children, was born in 1950; to Kyneton in Victoria, then on to Devonport in Tasmania and finally to Sydney. In Devonport, Marsden had developed his love of books. Every afternoon, he'd borrow the maximum three from the local library, hurry home to read them, and then return and borrow another three before the library closed. That way he could read twice as many books.

He was enrolled in Kings for his final year of primary school, and loved it. He climbed trees and built cubbyhouses with his friends, and the teachers were good to him. He became dux of the year.

Secondary school, though, came as a rude shock. The culture was dominated by rugby, the cadet corps and rampant homophobia. Anyone artistic or academically inclined was branded a 'poofter' and sometimes mercilessly beaten by other students. In Marsden's retrospective view, it was nothing less than institutionalised violence, although at the time, he felt he was failing every test of manhood. 'The classic punishment was called "socking", where prefects were allowed to sock any boy they felt deserved it. That meant bending you over and belting you across the backside with a sandshoe . . . They belted you as many times as they wanted and they would increase it by, for example, launching themselves from a windowsill.'

In this bull-calf enclosure, Marsden felt like the stray yearling. 'I was very confused myself. I didn't understand life at all. Still don't. I remember at about 14, this explosion in my head when I was standing next to the lockers at school one day. Suddenly, all these thoughts flooded into my mind and I thought, "Gee, maybe there isn't a God and maybe all these rules are just bullshit, and what I've been taught is just lies." It was a very powerful moment.'

At the same time, he'd begun reading such books as *Catcher in the Rye*; begun realising a way of writing he had never been aware of; begun seeing himself in characters like Holden Caulfield. He viewed the teachers as unenterprising and the schoolwork as pointless. A part of him wanted to conform, another part wanted to rebel. The part that wanted to rebel won.

At one point, his parents were called to the school and told that their son's teachers were afraid of him. Even then, Marsden was so skilled in his use of words that he would sit up the back of the classroom firing off verbal grapeshot. 'I fought against everything and everyone. And that was

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very uncomfortable for my teachers . . . and it was very uncomfortable for my parents,' he says.

'They were conservative people and they had a clear sense of right and wrong, clearly defined values. But somehow, I seemed to live in a kind of ambiguous world where nothing was clear.'

To this day, Marsden is uncomfortable around two kinds of people. The first are those who have never experienced depression or sadness—to him they live in a 'false glow'. The second are those who bristle with confidence. (He might have played the braggart but he never felt confident.)

'Confident people, they just bewilder me,' he says. 'They're like Martians. It's like, "How can you be so sure about anything?" To me, everything is ambiguous; so as soon as someone says something with absolute certainty, I just look at them with wonder and think, "Wow, are they right? How do they know? What would it be like to think like that?" At the same time, I also think that they're pretty stupid. I assume they're fools, which is probably not an unreasonable assumption.'

For almost 10 years after leaving Kings, Marsden drifted in a kind of chaotic, nocturnal haze. He lived in squats. He made connections with people but found many of them tenuous. He dropped out of four university courses in five years.

He worked as a cleaner, courier, blood collector, hospital orderly, truck driver and pizza seller, but no sooner did he master the tasks than he was gone. He was riddled with self-doubt and, at times, self-loathing.

'They were strange years, really,' he says. 'In a way, they were the perfect background for a writer, but I didn't know that and I still would rather not have had those years. They were not too pleasant.'

At the age of 28, after finally completing a Bachelor of Arts degree and a Diploma of Education, he got his first teaching job at All Saints College in Bathurst. There he met another English teacher called John Mazur, who showed him that if you were brave enough, you could teach creatively, even defiantly.

'He was not just concerned with teaching facts and figures,' Marsden says. 'He was concerned with the students' spiritual, emotional, and intellectual development. It was just breathtaking to sit and watch him teach. He encouraged me to take risks.'

So it would seem. Tim Ferguson, comic writer, credits John Marsden (and John Mazur) with redemptive powers. 'I went to nine schools in my life, but All Saints was probably the best and it was made the best because of the two Johns. No-one had ever taught like them before, or will probably teach like them again. They wanted us to learn about ourselves first, and understand from that, everything else would follow.'

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'I wouldn't be where I am unless someone had let me off the leash. John Marsden was instrumental in saying, "This is good, the way you are carrying on; what you're writing." It was important to be told that, "No, you're not insane."'

In 1982, Marsden applied for a position at the prestigious Geelong Grammar. The school asked him for three references. He sent 30, figuring the best way for his credentials to be assessed was to read them from the students themselves. Marsden was to teach English for nine years at Geelong, four of those at the famous Timbertop campus. By any yardstick, he was a radical teacher. Rebecca Joyce, winner of a gold medal for rowing in the world championships in Finland earlier this year, remembers him as 'a breath of fresh air. Up until arriving at Timbertop,' Joyce says, 'learning had been rote, so it was a shock to find yourselves suddenly standing on tables like in *Dead Poet's Society*, or massaging each other's feet in class, or listening to Bruce Springsteen songs and analysing them.'

However, Marsden wasn't universally loved. 'Getting people to open up is a hard thing to do and some people resented it,' Joyce says. Marsden agrees. 'I make mistakes. I can be unjust. I can be quick-tempered and I can discriminate between students, consciously or unconsciously.'

**I**N OCTOBER 1995 THREE OF Marsden's books took out first, second and third place in the NSW Kids' Own Australian Literature Awards (KOALA). Two of them, *Tomorrow*, *When the War Began* and *The Dead of the Night*, form part of his frightening but gripping trilogy about an invasion of Australia in which six teenagers go camping only to return home and find their families missing and their animals dying. (The third part *The Third Day*, *The Frost*, has just been published in hardback.)

Again, the books were condemned by some adults on the basis that they were depressing as well as xenophobic. 'People thought I was writing an anti-Indonesian book,' Marsden says. 'One teacher of Indonesian came up and said, "You've undone all the good work I've done in the last 10 years"—she'd been teaching all her students to feel warm towards Indonesia. And I said, "Yeah, well tell that to the people of East Timor."'

Marsden says he is sure the reason that the first two books of the trilogy have done so well—125,000 copies have been sold since 1993—is that they give their young readers the chance to be heroes. 'That's a chance they just don't get anymore, whereas in other cultures and other times they did have that chance. If you were a young Aboriginal boy, you would



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be initiated to manhood at 11 or 12 and you would be out there spearing kangaroos and joining in tribal battles. If you were living in some countries like Afghanistan, you might have a rifle in your hand and be fighting in a war by the time you were 12.

'I'm not saying those things are good, but I'm saying that we've now constructed a society where teenagers have no chance at all to do anything brave or independent or daring. So instead, they'll drive down the wrong side of the road at 90 kilometres an hour.'

*Dear John Marsden,*

*God, all the characters are so brave. It makes me wonder what my group of friends and I would be like in the circumstances . . . Please, please, please, please, please write some more.*

**B**EFORE WE LEAVE THE FIRE (and who knows how many burning ants), Marsden tells me about his constant fear of death and his struggle to, as he puts it, 'stay in the light'. There's the pain he's inflicted on people just by being alive. There's the fury at the way he was taught. There's the horror of injustice and tragedy. There's the angry, sick feeling that comes from being with people he feels no connection to. Boredom verging on madness, he says. There's the aching need to be alone to write, but also the yearning for a family of his own, something he fears may have eluded him now.

And yet alongside this hypersensitivity is a subversive streak that makes him want to burn the school down, write books that are dark but challenging, teach students in ways that are progressive and daring. How else could he find his own voice, let alone the authentic voice of teenagers? How else could he crash through the walls of high certitude and chilly restraint so typical of the Menzies world into which he was born?

We go outside and Marsden begins to explain that the trick (of gardening or life?) is to maintain a state of perpetual tension between the not-too-neat and the not-too-wild. We are standing in the long grass, surrounded by wallflowers and weeds. On the other side of the creek is a lush, green meadow that looks as if it could enfold us. It is here in this splendid isolation that John Marsden is happiest, and it reminds me of something Hugh Mackay, the social commentator, said about him.

Many years ago, when Marsden was still teaching at All Saints in Bathurst, he went to Mackay's house for dinner. (Marsden was teaching Mackay's son.) The conversation turned to vocation and how we should spend our lives. Mackay remembers Marsden saying that his dream was

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to one day be able to 'wander around the country like a Buddhist monk with a begging bowl, just telling stories'.

It would seem then that, notwithstanding the ghosts still haunting him, John Marsden might have arrived, although, as he would tell you himself, you can never be too sure.

*Dear John,*

*I haven't read any of your books and seeing as I hate reading I probably won't. Don't worry about that because I won't read anyone else's books either. Thanks anyway. Good luck in the future, and with other things as well.*

## Postscript

*John Marsden's 'trilogy' was to become a literary phenomenon, and a seven-book series. At the time of writing, the first in the series, Tomorrow When the War Began, had been reprinted 18 times and, with 350,000 copies sold, overhauled So Much to Tell You as his biggest-selling book.*

*In 1998, Marsden traded his flat in Melbourne and cottage in Sandon for 'his dream sanctuary', a 340-hectare property in the Macedon Ranges near Hanging Rock. It was here that Marsden began holding regular writing workshops for teenagers from all around Australia. It was to here that teenagers continued sending their messages, as many as 40 e-mails a day, thanking Marsden for having caused a 'reading revolution'.*

*Marsden was still living a solitary existence, at times enjoying his isolation, at other times, overcome by a desperate loneliness. He said he'd shaved off his beard recently because he'd come to the conclusion that it was a mask, and he was sick of hiding behind it. Finally, he said he'd almost stopped killing mosquitoes and that it was uncanny how, with this new approach, they didn't seem to be bothering him as much.*