

Leading children to a love of books

Living in the creative community of Waiheke inspired Paul Mason to “risk” becoming an author.

“There are so many creative people here, you are humbled.

“If I wasn’t living here I don’t know if I would have had that sense of freedom that I could go out and risk being a writer,” he says.

The words “lucky” and “serendipitous” occur like a repeated refrain as Paul speaks of his new career as a writer of more than 100 children’s stories and novels.

It seems lucky indeed that Paul took the leap to become a children’s writer given his success since his first story was published in New Zealand’s *School Journal* in 2008.

Now, his books are published in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia by companies including Bloomsbury, Pearson and Macmillan Education.

His latest children’s novel, *The Twins and the Wild Ghost Chase*, was released this month and he will be reading passages from it to children at Waiheke Primary School on 4 July.

Like much of his work, it draws on his experiences of travelling and living in

different parts of the world and on his love for his children.

The novel is a sequel to *The Twins, The Ghost and The Castle*, which was inspired by a visit to a castle in Britain with his wife, Jenny, and children Mia (13) and Miles (10) about four years ago.

“We were walking around this beautiful castle and the kids said how cool it would be to sneak in and live in here.

“Part of being true to myself was finding this voice that worked telling stories for children.”

- Paul Mason

“I wrote the story about two kids who sneak into a castle.”

The sequel follows a “ghostly road trip” as the spectral inhabitants of the castle are returned to the places their hearts yearn for.

Many of Paul’s stories are set in far-flung parts of the world, reflecting his childhood growing up in England and in Asia, where his father worked for the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF).

He lived in Thailand, then moved to Pakistan when he was about seven years old and spent seven years there, before spending three years at a boarding school in the mountains in India, while his parents worked in Bangladesh.

“The boarding school was high in the Himalayas, surrounded by jungle with monkeys - it was very cool.

“One morning at assembly, there were reports of a panther and we were told to keep our eyes open.

“I was very lucky and I like to think those kind of places and the people I’ve met come out in what I write.

“I’ve got a lot of respect for all those countries - maybe one day I will get back there,” he says.

Paul gained a Bachelor of Arts degree at Skidmore College in New York and later gained a Master of Science, Political Science and Government at the London School of Economics.

His role as a restaurant manager in London initially led him to New Zealand in 1998 because he was hoping to open a restaurant here.

He worked at Mudbrick Restaurant and became a partner at Vino Vino in Oneroa before changing tack and training as a

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teacher in 2002.

While teaching at Waiheke Primary School he noticed the *School Journal* was calling for stories set in other parts of the world.

“I had always liked writing, but I had shelved that and then when I was teaching, I thought maybe I could write a story.

“I wrote one set in Pakistan for the *School Journal* and sent it off...”

After a long wait, he received a letter that changed his life path, saying that the story had been accepted.

“I got this big boost of confidence and quickly wrote four or five other stories that were immediately rejected,” he laughs.

“But I started writing again and I write regularly for them now.”

Through getting work published in the journal he managed to overcome the “catch 22” situation in which publishers only accept work by published authors.

He continued teaching part time and writing part time before deciding to dedicate himself to writing full time at the beginning of this year.

“I’ve stepped back from teaching and there are days, certainly, when I miss it.

“Right now, it feels like the right thing to do, to write full-time.

“I’m mindful how fortunate that situation is and that it can change.

“I can go through real lulls, when I’m not sure when the next job is going to come.”

He carries around a “little black book” to jot down the many ideas for stories that cross his mind and enjoys watching those ideas transform into fully fledged, published works.

“I’m really passionate about getting kids writing - we have all got our stories to tell.” - Paul Mason

“I really enjoy telling a story and playing with words.

“A big thrill for me is sending off a story and seeing what an illustrator has done with it.”

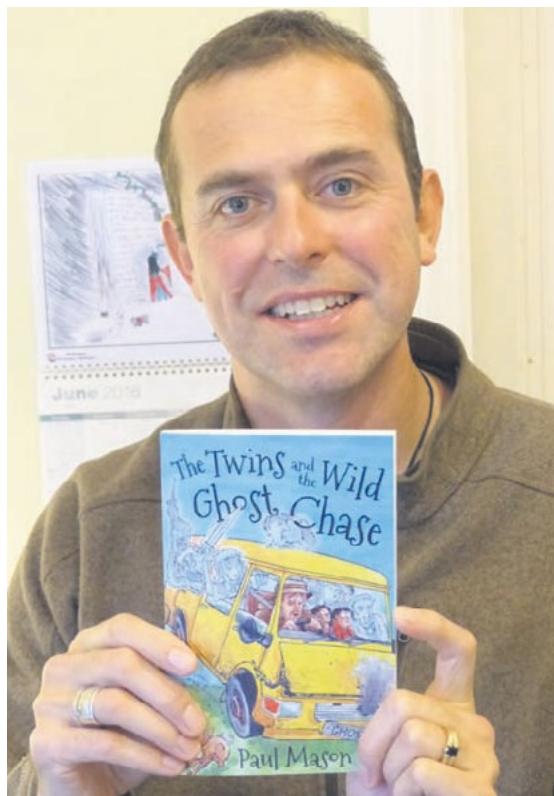
Ant Sang, who designed animation for Bro’ Town, illustrated *Bok Choy*, bringing to life Paul’s story inspired by a visit to an old Chinese settlement in Arrowtown.

Paul also feels fortunate to work with author and editor Jill Eggleton, who is regarded as a children’s literature “guru” for New Zealand.

He emphasises that he doesn’t work in isolation and has plenty of support and input from his father, who worked

as a journalist and on UNICEF communications campaigns, his wife, Jenny, who reads everything he writes, and his children, whose reactions when he reads them his stories at bed time tell him whether he has got it right.

“You have got this voice no one else has got - it’s important you get it out there.” - Paul Mason



Island author Paul Mason with his latest children’s novel, *The Twins and the Wild Ghost Chase*.

Young fans also show their appreciation for his work.

“Sometimes a child will run up and say ‘I read a story of yours’ and run off.

“It’s really encouraging when kids are positive about it.”

The 45-year-old says being a teacher and a father inspired him to start writing for children.

Initially, he wrote stories for his own children and he has returned to that simple sense of purpose over the years.

“One challenging thing is working out what kind of writer you are and to be true to that and not trying to write what you think people will want.

“I had tried to write deep and meaningful stuff for adults and it was no good.

“Part of being true to myself was finding this voice that worked telling stories for children,” he says.

These days, he has learned to “write to express, not to impress” and to “nail” the narrative voices that help make stories convincing.

In becoming a teacher Paul had hoped that one child might remember him as

a positive influence and he has a similar wish as a writer.

“I’m really keen for kids to read and if one of my stories is the one that they get enthused by, that makes me really happy.

“I’m really passionate about getting kids writing - we have all got our stories to tell.

“I say to students, you have got this voice no one else has got - it’s important you get it out there.”

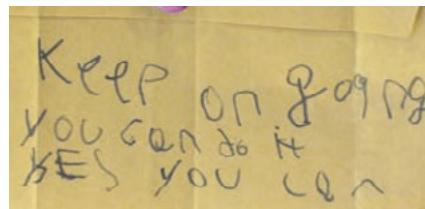
Paul confesses to being lured into procrastination by the Internet and myriad other distractions, such as his love of reading.

While we chat, he demonstrates that love of reading, digressing to explain that an ornately carved wooden book stand on his coffee table once held the Koran, though now it displays a children’s book containing beautiful illustrations of stingrays.

Other fascinating old books are pulled forth, along with stories of serendipitous meetings with their authors or editors.

Alongside distractions, Paul has overcome obstacles that have challenged his confidence to continue writing at times.

A note in his son’s five-year-old’s handwriting, saying “keep on going, you can do it, yes you can”, is pinned on the wall of his office in his Palm Beach cottage, where it continues to inspire the author.



A quote from Paul Mason’s son, Miles, keeps Paul inspired to write.

However, Paul’s accomplishments suggest he generally wins the battle to stay focused on a job that allows him to record small moments of his family’s history for readers around the world to enjoy.

“I get up in the morning and I know I’m doing something I love - I’m writing. It’s made a difference to my wellbeing, being lucky enough to do what I love,” he says.

• Rose Davis