

# BOOK CLUB NOTES

## Spinner Ron Elliott

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### About the novel

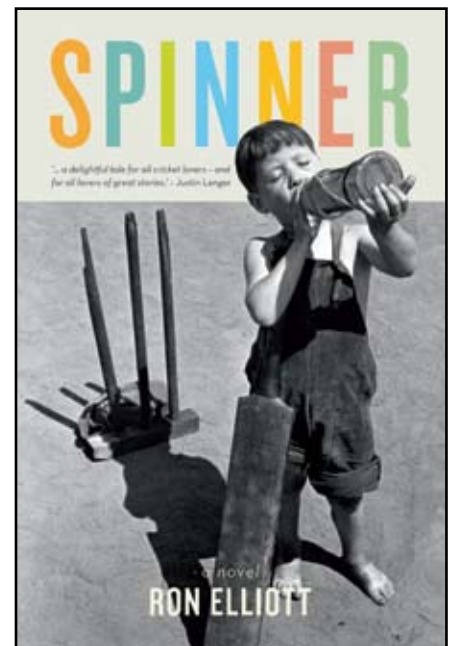
*Spinner* is a novel about a simple boy with an amazing gift. Twelve-year-old David Donald lives with his grandfather on a farm outside the fictional West Australian country town of Dungarin. His parents are dead. His grandfather, The George Baker, was a talented off-spin bowler and one-time coach of the state team. He trains his grandson, David, in the art of spin bowling.

One day David's uncle Michael (a disgraced team member of the West Australian side) arrives to take David away. Together, they cross the Nullarbor on the train and, through a series of twists and turns, David Donald becomes a member of the Australian Cricket Team.

In the course of a couple of Test matches, David Donald will learn about the workings of the world, and about the part men play in it. He will discover the true story of the death of each of his parents, and the complicated face of loyalty, mateship, and love.

This novel is set between the wars, at the beginning of the drought and the Great Depression. It is a kind of a fable, set in a parallel Australian universe (in the way that Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* is both real and magical). It is a yarn written by someone with a great affection for the game of cricket, but it is not just a novel for cricket fans. *Spinner* uses cricket as a way of exploring violence and conflict and honour and the deep bonds and fissures created by the war, and by sport, in Australian men.

Like the spinbowler himself, *Spinner* deploys a deceptively simple method of delivery. This novel is clearly written by an author who has experience as a film and television writer, as the scenes unfold in a beautifully scenic fashion. The story is told from, and limited to, the point of view of David Donald. As the boy acquires wisdom, his ability to understand the world around him increases, and thus the offering of available insight also increases. Late in the novel (no peeking!) a certain revelation turns a beautiful yarn into a sophisticated journey into Australian identity and masculinity at a point in Australia's history where the Australian psyche was being challenged and redefined.



Some of the greatest tension in this novel derives from the juxtaposition of David Donald's innocence, and the worldiness of his uncle Michael, who has custody of the boy, and is quick to exploit his nephew's gift in a way that entirely disregards both the boy's dignity and well-being.

The boy has a pure, undiluted view of the world, but the narrator, his uncle Michael Donald, is a complex, wounded figure, full of self-loathing and inclined to drink. He is a 'spinner', a bullshit artist: he tells tall stories and people believe him. He is a shyster and a showman. He behaves dreadfully, but he also behaves redemptively when the reader least expects it.

Thus the reader is continually tested in what they are prepared to believe. This challenge, from author to reader, leads to some bigger questions: Why do we need to have fairytales? What is the balance between resisting them and believing in them? How far are we prepared to go in a stretching of the truth? What is story telling for? What do we have to gain when we suspend our belief and follow the storyteller on the tale to its logical end?

## About the author

Ron Elliott directed television for the ABC for some years before returning from the east coast to Perth, Western Australia, where he has worked as a freelance scriptwriter and film and television director. He currently lectures in screen writing and production at Curtin University and continues to write for the screen. *Spinner* is his first novel.

## From the Author

I guess *Spinner* started seventeen years ago, when Shane Warne bowled 'that ball' to Mike Gatting in the ashes test of 1993. It was an amazing ball, all the more amazing as his first delivery. It changed the test and the series and the next years of cricket. I daydreamed of being him. I was thirty-five, had two children and a career as a television director and screen writer. I'd never even made it onto my grade seven cricket team, but I imagined being Shane Warne and changing the world in an instant.

But what if you weren't a grown man? What if you were a boy, trying to make it? At the time, I was writing a lot of children's television, so maybe my mind was in a younger mode, but I don't think it was just that. Perhaps my failure at twelve to make the Embleton Primary School cricket team had something to do with it.

Twelve? Yes, that's a question that has been asked over and over by a variety of folks since then ... can't he at least be fifteen? It would be difficult enough for a fifteen year old to do what Donald does. Why does your character have to be twelve?

I named him David, as in David and Goliath. He became an orphan and pretty soon after that I decided he had to go across Australia, during the Depression to try to get into the Australian team. I didn't want to make it easy for him.

There's a book which was very popular with screenwriters after Star Wars came out by Stephen Vogler called *The Writer's Journey* and it's about mythic structures in story telling.

I'd decided to write this idea now called 'Wonder Kid' as a six part television series using a quest structure, a quest to save Australia from defeat by the English. The 1920s seemed a richer time than today to set it in. More evocative and more naïve. It couldn't happen now anyway, this fairy story. It had to be once upon a time.

A dodgy uncle. I'm not sure when the dodgy uncle came from. It feels to me like there was always one there somewhere. I lost my own father to schizophrenia and alcohol when I was twelve, so maybe something is going on there. If David was an orphan, then he might be brought up by his wise, but too hard grandfather. Someone had to train David, even with his natural gifts. But what if, in David's quest, he was not guided by a wise sage? What if David were under the influence of a trickster? Aha. An Australian Fagin, a bit like John Hargreaves in the film *Careful He Might Hear You*. Part damaged war veteran, part larrikin and teller of tall tales.

This is where The War entered my story. It had been there from the start, but the more I researched the time and thought about how David's father and mother might have died, the more the victims of war edged into every aspect of the story. I know it sounds particularly dull of me, but I realised that while the First World War ended in 1918, the effects did not. The consequences of war live long afterwards. Promise, as well as promises, can be utterly destroyed, in a moment or over a long time.

The idea of healing and salvation adhered to my story of wonder, derring-do well and adventure.

I was ready. I wrote my six part outline and I went to producers. No one wanted it. How many people could be interested in cricket? Do you know how much this series would cost? Twelve. Does this kid have to be twelve? And so, the half story that is now *Spinner* went into my bottom drawer for about ten years, while I wrote unproduced feature-film scripts and television dramas and directed a feature film.

But David's Uncle Michael would not leave me alone. What if I didn't worry about film and television? What if I just wrote this story out for me — as a novel? The more I thought about it, the more I felt David Donald's story could be a novel. Although, I had been writing a lot of television scripts for such shows as *Ship to Shore*, *Minty*, *Bush Patrol* and *Street Smartz*, I had never written a novel before.

I'd read a lot and still love reading. I'd also studied literature at university. I was good at dialogue and I was pretty good at action. Yet interior stuff is kind of forbidden in screen drama except maybe in narration or voice over.

I had to think about point of view. Whose story was this, but also who told the story? I decided, in the first instance at a kind of restricted third person, which is telling the story in the third person but from David's point of view and mostly, I kept to that. It meant I didn't have to explain lots of history stuff if I didn't want to. It also meant I could really get into David's mind and see what he felt about every step of the way to becoming very famous. For the most part it really worked, although later, when he achieves some of the pretty amazing stuff at cricket, I used a newspaper article to convey how the world saw

David, in spite of him not being used to seeing himself that way.

I mentioned that I never really played cricket, in spite of watching a lot. I did play basketball, so I felt I knew something about being in teams and what training, tactics and 'getting in the zone' actually means. I read up a lot about cricket, but my book is about the psychology and tactics and personalities rather than technique.

I also did do a lot of research about the 1920s and 30s, mostly concerning trends and some details. It was very difficult to keep weeding out inventions that hadn't happened yet, including lots of American slang. You might notice that Michael uses some slang as he met Americans during the war, but few other characters do. I had a bit of fun with automobiles and horses. I felt that although rich people might use some things straight away, some farmers and the poorer folk would not until later. Some of the criminals are based on real people I researched, but I fiddled with the names.

I have read books including *The Great World*, *Songbird*, *The Merry-go-round in the Sea*, *Atonement* and many more. They've contributed to my feel about the war. I've read *Great Expectations* and that kind of vague guilt in Pip helped me with some of David's fears. *Wuthering Heights* introduced me to the idea of the unreliable narrator, which I have used extensively in conceiving how to tell Spinner. I also like to think there is a little Lemony Snicket and Indiana Jones in there too.

And that's my final thing on research. I feel it's a bit like sports training. You practise and practise and then, finally, you just don't think about it at all. You step up to the three point line and you shoot — and swish. Like David's bowling. Like the reading I did. I eventually stopped worrying about all that and just wrote my story.

And that's when I began to negotiate this thing called 'the willing suspension of disbelief'. Oh, then there was all the rewriting. But that's another story too.

## Discussion questions

1. Comment on the novel's title, *Spinner*. If a 'spinner' is also a bullshit artist, what is it we are being asked to believe, and why?
2. In what ways might this novel be described as a fairytale or a fable? Why do people need 'tall stories'? What is the function of a fable or fairytale, particularly in times of need?
3. In hard times, what are the things that people hang on to?
4. How is this novel like the Australian history we know, and how is it different? Why does the author depart from history in this way? Why does he tether some of the novel to certain historical facts (such as Charles Kingsford Smith) but not others? What is Elliott asking of the reader by doing this?
5. What difference does the choice of the narrator make to the novel? (It could, for example, simply be narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator, but the author has

chosen to do something quite different.)

6. What is the role of women in this masculine world of cricket, war, and underworld villains?
7. Who are the important female characters in *Spinner*?
8. How does David Donald's discovery of the truth about each of his parents change his view of the world?
9. What changes do we witness in David Donald across the course of the novel?
10. What changes do we witness in his uncle Michael?
11. What do you think the author is telling us about the effect of war on men? Have a look at the scene on pp. 378–379 as a beginning point for a discussion on the way the first war (or any war) changed (or can change) lives.
12. Does this novel reinforce certain aspects of Australian identity? What are they? How are the resonances of this particular historical setting and location still relevant to our time?
13. What are the differences between the Australian and the English cricket teams as depicted in this Test series?
14. What is the difference between the two captains, John Richardson and Henry Longford? What do you make of the interaction between David Donald and the English captain?