

## Boy on a Wire Jon Doust

### Author Interview by Kiri Falls

What has your previous writing experience been?

I've had two children's books published, *Magpie Mischief* and *Magwheel Madness*.

How different was the experience of writing a novel for older readers?

Quite different. The story was very close to me. It was draining, a bit emotional. Yeah, it was emotional. And I did a lot of research, because I wanted to reconnect with the time. That was fascinating. There were things that I didn't remember happening the way they happened.

Was it a difficult process or did you enjoy it?

It was difficult but I enjoyed reflecting with passion, with those emotional undercurrents. Or not so much enjoyed, that's not really the word. But I wouldn't shy away from writing something like that again, I'm not afraid of it. In the privacy of my own head, that is. Now that I have to go out and talk about it it might be different!

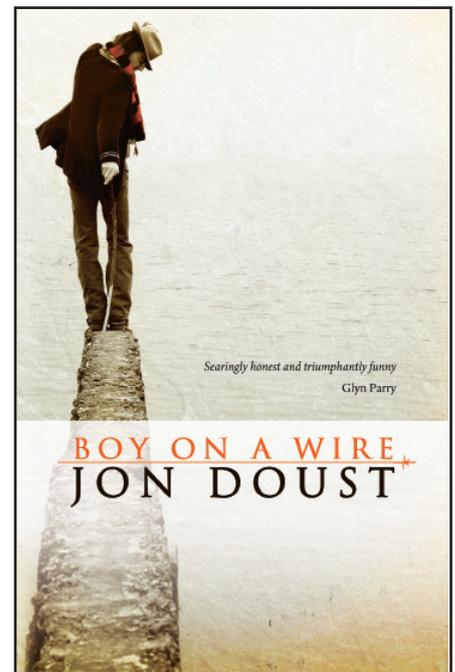
I expect you'll often be asked the kind of question I'm about to ask: where did the character of Jack emerge from?

From deep within (laughs). The starting point was me. But Jack became somebody other than me. Certain aspects of myself are idealised, I might say. Some bits are not like me, some bits are worse than me. Jack is an expansion of some of my characteristics and a reflection of others.

All the characters are compilations. It's difficult to do justice to the different personalities. It's true that they just have to fit the story. You see, I didn't start writing knowing what the book was about. The book simply emerged. Everybody was rewritten at least once, Jack more than once. They had to suit the book, and then they had to suit themselves.

How did you treat the autobiographical element?

I simply took an event as I remembered it and wrote it down exactly. Then I blew it apart. Kept rewriting it until it fit the context of the story. For example, the incident where Jack gets beaten by a housemaster with a broomstick is like something that happened to me. But I couldn't



remember what I was thinking at the time. I was probably thinking, 'The bastards, I'll kill them,' but I don't know. So I had to inhabit this kid's head. It's Jack's thoughts not mine.

This book has a lot of real pain and some joy too – how do you see the role of humour in telling these kinds of stories?

It's crucial, because it's true. Boys' school life is often quite tense and miserable – but there's also a lot of humour. I was quite a lippy boy, talked a lot, probably more than Jack even, but we have that in common.

I've just read Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and it's miserable, very serious. I wanted some humour, so that on the occasions he lets a little through, I think I actually said out loud, 'Oh, thanks mate.' The survivors I've met, both young and old, all employ humour. It's essential.

When people find out I went to boarding school, they often say, oh that must have scarred you. And I say, the biggest scar boarding school left on me was the scar it left on others. I survived quite well. But some others didn't.

The book captures a strong sense of injustice. Did you consciously create that tone, or did it simply emerge?

It came very early, that sense of justice and injustice. Also, the need for revenge emerged as I wrote. That was unexpected.

I was talking to a guy who went to the same school, but after me, and he said he went to a party recently and saw this guy who had bullied him at school. So he confronted him. Said, come on, let's take it outside. But this bully just backed off, didn't want anything to do with it. That's ok, but what would have been better was if the bully had said, I'm sorry about the terrible things I did back then. Some bullies are in denial their whole lives. But then others feel deeply guilty about what they did in boarding school.

I had my first bout of depression when I was twelve. And what can you do about it? Who can you talk to? Not your dad, he'll say, go and milk the cow, or go and shoot something. Not your mum, because if she's depressed herself she'll be scared. She doesn't know what to do about herself, let alone you.

How did you approach a treatment of those characters who were 'bad', in that their role was entirely negative?

Among all the bullies in the school [in the book] only one is instantly recognisable. All the others are compilations. If someone said to me, oh that's me, I'd laugh. Because it's not. And in the end, all the characters are there for their particular purposes in the narrative. Also, I have an actual friend called Harmanis but he's nothing like the Harmanis in the novel. The character Harmanis, though, is a solid guy, doesn't get involved to the same extent. His life and family are kind of seductive to Jack, but in the end Jack is drawn back to a different lifestyle.

The relationships between Jack and his family prove fundamental to the shape of his actions and personality. How did you envisage the Muir family when you began writing?

Not like any Muir family I know! Well, I didn't envisage them you see. I wasn't even sure how many were going to be in the family, but later it seemed someone else was needed so they had another baby. I'm not a person who plans well, I'm a person who evolves, I'm evolutionary.

I felt at certain stages that they needed some tension. So I would either think of an incident, an event, an explosion, then go back and rework the characters so the tension would build sufficiently, to such a point as to warrant such an explosion or outburst, or I'd egg characters on until the tension arrived. One or the other.

The thing that surprised me more than anything else was this: when I re-read the book, in certain parts I found myself crying. But I had finished sobbing before I realised that those were the parts that hadn't happened in real life. The bits that were fabricated got me more upset than the bits that did happen.

By the end, Jack has changed and matured. Which characters or events do you see as having the most impact on Jack?

There are lots, but the event that has the most impact – that sets off his vengeful instinct – is the initiation of the sad boy. That really is a turning point.

What do you hope that readers will take away from this?

Every reader will read it differently. I just hope they take away something about themselves, that they can reflect on the way they moved through their years, and the way their children do. I hope they have a laugh, just have a laugh.

I read because I want to learn, to be shifted and moved. To find out about something from a different perspective.

Do you see writing this book as an opportunity to reflect on your own life?

I think few people actually take the time to reflect on their life. But also, I think anybody who engages in an artistic activity is blessed. Firstly, because they get to work through 'stuff'. A lot of people go through horrible things and never recover. But maybe they could if they wrote or something. All that stuff that plagues you, you get to play with it in a book. I have total control over that world. When I was at boarding school I had very little control, but now I'm the dictator.

I spoke to the Rotary Club here in Albany last night and I said, I went to a private school and failed. I failed and failed and failed. And yet now, just before I'm dead, here's a book. A book of that failure that I've made into something.

## Discussion Points

1. In your opinion is *Boy on a Wire* creative non-fiction, a memoir or a novel?
2. Jack uses humour as a survival mechanism. But this would not work at all if the book itself were not funny. Discuss techniques used by the author to make this book funny, together with the importance of humour in this book.
3. What is the metaphorical relevance of the novel's title? How many characters might share Jack Muir's sense of isolation?
4. Questions of justice and injustice lie at the heart of the narrative. In what ways does justice prevail? What difference can one boy make to the system?
5. Make a list (or several!) of possible lists Jack himself might write. In what ways are these representative of a time?
6. Describe Jack Muir's relationship with his father. In what ways is it a product of the 1960s?
7. Describe Jack Muir's relationship with his brother Thomas. What kind of character is Thomas? The brothers share a bond, but each might view that bond quite differently. Discuss.
8. This is a book about boys and men. How does Mrs Muir fit into this world? What is Jack's relationship with his mother?
9. Discuss the possible relevance of Jack's preoccupation with Hungarians and Swabians.
10. Describe survival strategies and their effectiveness as employed by different students as they move through the school system.
11. In what ways is this book confined to an era? In what ways might it speak to adolescents today in a boarding school system? Does your reception of this text shift if you consider this as a novel or a 'dislocated memoir'?