



A BEAR, A BLOKE AND A REALLY GOOD BOOK

It's nearly time to get cranky on a national scale. National Simultaneous Storytime (NSS) is only days away and ALIA is hoping to see this twelfth year for the event break all previous records, aiming for children in around 2000 locations across the nation to be settling down to read The Very Cranky Bear by Nick Bland at 11am on Wednesday May 23. INCITE spoke with Nick and Sarah Hatton from Scholastic Press ahead of the big day.

Nick isn't one of those authors who seeks publicity but in 2012, publicity is certainly seeking him. Along with the selection of his popular bear for NSS, his book *The Runaway Hug* has just been shortlisted for the Children's Book Council of Australia Awards (CBCA). He adds these achievements to his CBCA Notable Picture Book of the Year Award for *A Monster Wrote Me a Letter*, a Kids Own Australian Literature Award (KOALA) for the Honour Picture Book category for *The Wrong Book*, which was also shortlisted for the Picture Book category in those awards in 2010 – and also shortlisted for the same category in 2011 for the REAL Awards. As his publishers, Scholastic Press say, "Nick Bland is just getting bigger and better all the time".

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Nick has lived in Darwin since 2004, having grown up in country Victoria and spending his childhood and teens roaming in the bush. By the time he reached high school, he knew he loved to tell stories but it was only after stints in advertising and a bookshop that his love of the art of picture book writing inspired him to get back to the blank page himself. Then, just as it happens in every aspiring writer's dreams, his manuscript for *A Monster Wrote*

Me a Letter made it off the unsolicited pile at Scholastic to become his first success in 2005. Fourteen more picture books have followed;

proof of just what a happy collaboration between a writer and his publisher can achieve.

This is Scholastic's second foray into NSS, having been involved in 2007 when the selected book was Mem Fox's *The Magic Hat*. Scholastic's Sarah Hatton says the company is delighted to be back again in 2012.

"National Simultaneous Storytime was a great project for us to be part of – it was really positive for us," Sarah says. This year she says *The Very Cranky Bear* is the perfect book for National Simultaneous Storytime.



"It's a beautiful read-aloud story."

On the day itself, Nick will be at Taminmin Library participating in a dramatisation of the story of his bear but NSS has also meant an opportunity to get together with some old friends beforehand. Until the end of last year, Nick was also working as a 'house parent' for 100 indigenous teenagers from about 40 different top end and desert communities boarding in Darwin. Some of these kids were from the Tiwi Islands and Nick headed out there ahead of NSS to put together a podcast for the big day with the help of students at Pirlamgimpi (also known as Garden Point) on Melville Island.

"I know just about all the kids there, and their families," Nick says.

His relationship with these families – and his personal experience with helping to raise over 500 boys in his house parent role – mean indigenous disadvantage and literacy are two issues very close to his heart. He sees reading as a critical component in improving the situation.

"Reading," Nick says, "is quite simply essential to development". And not just reading, but also "engaging in story".

"The bonds it builds between parents and children, teachers and children, and children and their peers are a massive part of social adjustment," he says.

"The sharing of stories is intrinsic in all cultures. We are the lucky, rich, white society, who can take a book for granted. A group of Chinese asylum seekers arrived in Darwin last month and were camped at the ferry terminal that I use when I go to Darwin. At first I went to tell them how brave they were and to assure them that freedom would be theirs, and gave them some Australian currency. But the next day I went back with a version of *The Very Cranky Bear* that contained two versions of the story, one in Chinese and one in English so that they might use it to learn English while they were in detention.

"The money was probably useless to them however much the gesture meant, but when I gave them the book, I had successfully communicated to them on a universal level. The old man was beside himself. I hope they keep the book."

THE VERY
CRANKY
BEAR

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SIMULTANEOUS
STORY TIME

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