

Non Fiction: How to Write about a Hero like Weary Dunlop for 8-13 year olds

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Naively, I assumed most Australians would know about surgeon Weary Dunlop's humanitarian contributions, but I was wrong.

While having my hair cut, I had Sue Ebury's thick biography 'Weary; The Life of Sir Edward Dunlop' with me. My 19 year old hairdresser, who had talked of pop singer Michael Jackson for half an hour, asked me 'Who's Weary?' She genuinely didn't know. Neither did she know of Fred Hollows, Dame Nellie Melba nor Sister Mary Mac Killop, the other planned titles in the New Frontier Publishers' Aussie Heroes series.

Obviously there is a need for this themed series which concentrates on humanitarian and not just sporting contributions. Maybe there's also need for new formats in audio for Ipods and a TV serialisation to reach the teen audience like my hairdresser who doesn't read?

To me, the initial challenge was how to write about Weary's POW (Prisoner of War) experiences on the Death Railway in a factual way, relevant for 8-13 year olds, without overly stressing the cruelty of his Japanese military captors. This had to be balanced with a view that all nationalities and races have their own kind and cruel people. And that wartime circumstances bring out extreme behaviour, both risk-taking courage and sadistic bullying.

I like a challenge. But I appreciated my colleague Gail Arkins' research assistance.

The issue of 'heroism' was central. But what makes a hero? Is it what is done or the way it is done?

Most 8-13 year olds are familiar with the cult of celebrity: of being famous for getting your photo in the media. This is being a 'celeb'. It is NOT the same as being famous for your achievements or innovatively solving problems for others. An important distinction.

Once I started mentioning 'Weary' as my current project, serendipitous links occurred. A school friend's mother had trained as a pharmacist with Weary. As a rugby union player, my husband knew of Weary. Researcher Gail Arkins, a nurse had a personal letter from Weary and knew of his housekeeper. En route to Sydney, the woman passenger alongside me was a surgeon whose doctor father had also operated with Weary. A colleague collected Burma Railway books as one of his specific interests. Many people 'know' and respect Weary.

After considerable reading, one challenge was what to leave out. Another was how to format the ideas . I jotted possible approaches.

- Magabook-style with lots of diagrams , maps and illustrations?
- Plus student involvement possibilities e.g. Writing a letter to your hero.
- Letter based chapter as a kind of collage?
- Chapter headings. Questions a 10 year old might ask?
- Use of anecdotes? Explanations of terms like P.O.W.
- Timelines were vital. Young children think all 'old' wars are the same.
- Maths chart: how long it took, how far...?
- Maps
- Diagrams of innovative medical prosthetics etc

A narrative chronological format was required.

So I wondered if starting with a photo of Weary's statue with a contemporary 10 year old alongside and then flashbacks to his childhood, might be the way to start.

Then there was the issue of the title.

Something based on his nickname Weary ? He did have a few titles. The Japanese called him 'DUNROP' . His real name was Sir Edward Dunlop but christened Ernest. After university, everybody called him 'Weary' , based on Dunlop tyres.

Many themes were possible but what was more likely to interest 10 year olds? Especially if when you say 'war', they think Afghanistan not WW11. I listed some idea threads. Any story needs an underlying conflict to provide the drama. War versus peace is too obvious.

Themes & Idea threads (not in child-centred language)

- Resourcefulness of ex-farm boy in designing/adapting medical equipment in POW camp. Problem-solver.
- Innovator: outsider challenging authority
- Height. Big man. Challenges stooping over operating table. Noticeable. Physical fitness. Strength as role model.
- Stoicism about injuries. Importance of hands for surgeon
- Rugby Union prowess & blokey prestige & medical school opportunities.
- Singlemindedness (study, patients, operating, supporting V lateness, bad driving , family absence etc) Priorities.
- Hospital organisational skills in difficult circumstances. E.g. cholera, raids, bombing etc
- Risk taker (football, work, surgery) e.g. panache of walking past guards with radio etc but also accepted the consequences.
- Medical innovations in unpopular or difficult areas. Patient care genuine priority.
- Challenges of being a POW. Establishing camps. Internal worlds such as poetry..
- Battling Bureaucracy V Outbursts (British and Japanese class systems)

- Survival by Sharing. Pragmatic
- Importance of Letters (not just after your name)
- Family/ wife Helen; time challenges
- POW follow up, post-war solicitude.
- Compassion/ overcame hatred of enemy
- Compassion of later Asian/Columbo Plan medical support
- Modesty versus self-promotion. Are some heroes unsung because no-one knows about what they did? Did they lack advocates? Or did their personality upset those in authority who took their revenge by petty obstruction, deleting or leaving out mention.
- Wartime was less than one eighth of Weary's life, yet that surgical experience defined the rest
- One-liners quotes about Weary
- Statue: significant photos and tributes

The risk taking and problem solving seemed to dominate. And possible visuals could be the medical innovations in the POW camp since photographs quirky enough to interest a ten year old, were available.

e.g. Weary's Innovations: (could be collage of diagrams)

- Razor blades became scalpels
- Bamboo slithers became syringes
- A blood separator: Vase strapped on a bicycle wheel
- Distilled water and rough kitchen salt into a saline drip.
- Rubber stethoscope, rubber tubing made into an IV drip.
- Sawn off beer bottles, with bamboo joints.
- Sawn off needle for canula.
- A tent fly inner was used to keep flies out of operating area
- Operation table was made from a frame to take a stretcher, with bamboo poles with holes to raise or lower .
- To a man with injuries to legs and back, a splint from wire, twisted double in a padded ring, using stones as weights, cotton reels or tins as pulleys, and a canvas spat to attach the apparatus to his legs. A Japanese canvas boot and untwisted rope for the cords.
- Theatre light from a tin and coconut oil, 4 oil burners , a frame attached to the roof and pulled up and down.

But then it was decided to use illustrations only.

Writing and researching a short biography for children is no easier than an adult biography. It's just shorter in eventual wordage. Plus the need to explain some concepts that kids may not be familiar with.

Decided to compose a time line to give some context to Weary's life.

d.o.b.

significant rugby play

entered pharmacy apprenticeship

medical school

1st op

POW dates

Wedding

Children born

Pioneering surgery

Asian re-visits and why/Colombo Plan

Support of POWs

Death

Statue

Our family had a photographic picnic near the Weary Dunlop Statue on St Kilda Rd in Melbourne. I photographed our ten year old alongside Weary's statue. Then we matched the facts I'd found out about the symbolic sleepers etc and checked what most interested a ten year old. The size of the statue had an impact.

I pointed out the symbolism of the hands in a Buddhist sign for peace. 'What if Weary's statue could speak to others in the city? What would the statue heroes ask each other?

Military historian fact-checkers queried a few pieces of dialogue and official military terminology. We fixed these. But in the process, the vocabulary level rose and the paragraphs lengthened. So it was necessary to re-work the manuscript again.

The Statue chapter was moved to the end of the book and merged.

I was invited to open History Week .

One of the issues I posed was the difference between fact, fiction and fiction. To what extent do you need to dramatise in order to 'hook' child readers into historical stories? If you cannot annotate every phrase, is this a problem? Or is the real problem that young people will not read history unless it is entertainment?

When 'Weary' is released, I'm giving my hairdresser a copy. She has promised to read it. But she did ask, 'Is it on Ipad?'

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