

NEW BOOK FOR YOUNG READERS

Squiggles and Squinter And the Bushrangers

FATHER JAMES TIERNEY, the author of this new book, recalls the foreground and background of its composition.

FOREGROUND

Page 3 is headed with the dedication:

For Julian Vieira (aged 5)

This book was written for him during his three weeks in the Westmead Children's Hospital, Sydney. In this time he had five operations on his left hand, the longest of five hours, after the car accident on New Year's Day, 2008. His story was faxed to him at a chapter a day, and read to him by his mother or siblings.

Actually, earlier that New Year's morning, there was a lesser disaster, though potentially a greater one. The cattle on the Vieira family's 50 acre hobby farm, in desperation for fodder, broke through an old fence into the home-paddock arid then escaped through an even older fence onto the high speed road from Goulburn to Taralga, hence- Oberon. Traffic barrels through at speeds of up to 140 kph.

So for the first half of that January, Fr Tiemey, spent several hours a morning, with the help of John-Paul Vieira and his cousins, and Jim Fanning, his friend from up the road, building a brand new seven wire cattle fence, three barb and four plain wires.

In the afternoons, he would churn out a two-page chapter of *Squiggles and Squinter and the Bushrangers*, with pages the size of those in his more recent *Bush Boys* books. The Connor Court production has superior spacing at 2 ½ pages per chapter, plus a picture, making 4 pages a chapter.

Each chapter was faxed through to Julian's ward in the hospital - where it possibly brought a smile to some of the staff - and delivered to Julian before bedtime.

A difficulty was that his stay in hospital was estimated at two months, for which Fr Tierney envisaged 60 chapters. It was hard to construct a suitably balanced plot in such uncertainty, and, in the event, due to the rapidity of his recovery and the sustained skills of surgeons and nurses, he was there only 20 days. (He's had several lesser operations since, and there is still one to go.) On his triumphant homecoming, the story was quickly wound up.

In Julian's absence, his next siblings Joseph (8) and Monica (10) were a great help as critics to guide the author. However, Joe wanted nothing but lots of Bang-Bang-Bushrangers, which was hard to sustain, especially as Fr Tiemey wanted to get in some farm life on the twin's family's free selection of 40 acres. For this, he used his own father's experiences on 80 acres in the 1890s at Eurunderee near Mudgee NSW, where his Dad had ploughed acres behind two horses by late moonlight, before setting out for a day at the one-teacher primary school, and where "the old hands" had viewed the Tierney family's trendy acquisition of

a wood-burning fuel stove with the deepest suspicions and much shaking of their heads. The open range was good enough for them. As Tolkien would say, "the fanning prospects were not much worse than usual."

Julian, however, did not object to 4 chapters of bushrangers alternating with 4 chapters of farm life.

BACKGROUND

After the dedication on p. 3 of *Squiggles and Squinter* is a background note:

For purposes of this story, the mischievous twins were nicknamed Squiggles and Squinter by their older brother, who had borrowed the names from their cousin's twin rabbits in the Big City.

Originally, however, Squiggles and Squinter were the twin rabbits in bedtime stories told in 1941 by John L. Tiemey to two of his sons.

However Fr Tierney quickly decided that he could never sustain the brilliance of his father's animal fable, so he simply kept the names as a memorial of his father and wrote something kindred to *Bush Boys*.

LONG, LONG AGO...

The following reminiscence from Fr. Tierney's childhood might help the reader of *Squiggles and Squinter* to appreciate the nostalgia of their names. This was originally published in the Cardinal Newman Catechist Centre Newsletter n. 90 of 25th October, 1990, as an apologetic for a priest writing fiction like *Bush Boys*, *An Outdoor Adventure*.

WHEN my brother and I were very young, Dad used to tell us bedtime stories. Sometimes he plagiarized well-known works like *The Wind in the Willows*, freely embellishing the tale with his own literary genius. We loved Toad, probably because of his *naughtiness* - I scarcely remember Mole or Rat.

But Dad made up his own stories too: *his* Squiggles and Squinter were twin rabbits, very mischievous, causing endless trouble to their parents and teacher, and to school friends like Lily Lamb, in whose pigtailed they tied knots during class. Further, they were often rescued from their outdoor scrapes and adventures with an awful villain called Oyce (species, definitely human) by Sergeant Koala and Constable Kangaroo-Rat, who tore round the bush on a motor bike with side-car, and brought Staketty before the sleepy old judge, Silas Bull, who snored in court.

Occasionally Squiggles and Squinter would have a brief bout of being good — which seemed very dull to us and made us restless — then there would come the change in Dad's voice (the stories were told in the darkened bedroom, with only a little light coming in through the door: it was before Pearl Harbour and the nightly anti-bombing

blackout), "But...." and we would wriggle in our beds with delight, because some new wickedness was about to begin, and wickedness was much more entertaining!

Dad would be very, very tired, and sometimes go to sleep telling the stories.

He now reminds me of a seminary lecturer who was later chosen to be a bishop in spite of his going to sleep *giving* a lecture in dogmatic theology, This future bishop had often put his classes to sleep, but on one memorable occasion — and three independent witnesses testify to it — he did put himself to sleep!

Well, in 1940-41, the years when I turned 5 and 6, Dad had been teaching high school all day and often technical college [now TAFE] in the early evening, so his dozing off was understandable, but my brother and I simply would wake him up — without mercy.

Further, if he finished an evening's episode at a really exciting climax, we refused to let him stop there, We would seize his arms and legs and demand more, at once, now! No waiting till tomorrow night!

So he would have to rescue the twins from whatever crisis he had left them in, and give us another five minutes, to stop at a slightly less exciting point.

The next night, Dad might not remember where he was up to — he was so tired — but we would! We would brief him on the situation, and off he would go again.

Mum wanted Dad to write the stories down, but unfortunately, he never did. This was before 1942 when, on his 50th birthday, Dad had the first of many short stories on farming and rural town life published in the old Sydney *Bulletin* — the radical weekly journal in which Lawson and Paterson had cut their literary teeth some 30, 40 and 50 years before.

Dad's children's stories might have rivalled anything ever published for children, and would only have needed an illustrator,

Alas, my brother cannot remember the details at all, and my sister was already reading big books for herself, and my second young brother who died in late 1942 was but a babe in arms.

Later on, when I was in 5th and 6th class at Beecroft Public School, 1946-1947, I used to entertain my classmates in the shelter shed (where we spent time on wet days) with stories about monsters. I have absolutely no recollection of doing this, but, at our school re-union in 1984, the others assured me that I did, and that I kept them enthralled.

FEATURES OF SQUIGGLES & SQUINTER

THIS BOOK is Connor Court's first venture into fiction, and children's fiction at that. It is also the first time a mainstream publisher has produced one of the author's books, whether religious or fiction - all his others have been published "in-house" by the Cardinal Newman Faith Resources Inc.

The great strength of this book, as assessed by an older sister in a big family (see back cover blurb). is in being an exciting and easy-to-read adventure.

The author's summary (also back-cover) is:

The twins Squiggles and Squinter live on a family farm in Victoria. Nearest neighbours are newly arrived, desperate for help, yet hours away by foot, or on or behind a horse.

There are no cars, mobiles, nothing electric, but lots to eat, fun in the creek, chopping down trees with father, mother's school on the kitchen table, and board games by candlelight - the world of 1875. A world with bushrangers and new adventures as the twins encounter them with lots of BANG BANG in this fast-moving story of boys and bushrangers.

There is also a low-key presentation of Catholic life.

The author has declined, in the teeth of the prevailing political correctness, to privatize Christianity by silence - which would be to relativize it, exactly what Pope Benedict XVI is warning us against. Any adventure story, children's or otherwise, should be capable of portraying the life of the characters. Now Christianity was part of the life of most 19th century Australians. And it is a vital part of the lives of the two families in this story.

Hence the boys say their prayers, and parents are ready to call down blessings from God on them.

Divided Christianity was, and still is, a fact of life. When Squiggles and Squinter stay over Saturday night at the Protestant family's farm, and they are invited to the family's Sunday Worship, their older sister politely declines, and instead, reads her brothers the Epistle and Gospel for the day, and leads them in the Rosary.

Further, the story brings out the tyrannies of time and distance with Sunday Mass. The weekly parish Mass is 35 miles away, a mere 60 km, but this is a four hour journey each way in a horse-drawn sulky. Each month there is Sunday Mass an hour away, but even then, one of the family, taking turn-about, must miss out, to mind the farm and deal with any crises with the animals.

The items on p, 6, **Who's Who** and **What's What in 1875**, help the reader situate himself in the story.

As might be expected, *Squiggles and Squinter* shares many features with the author's *Bush Boy* books. Perhaps the latter are a subliminal longing for those earlier days, when family life generally, and boyhood in particular, were greatly honoured.

Even this briefest of stories has some interesting characters, ranging from Old Ben Axletree, the coachman, to Miss Margaret Montmorency, the governess, who carries a small revolver in her bosom.

In addition to the heroic twins, the new boy from the city, Fred, makes an interesting extra for the story.

The bushrangers Nifty Ned and Nasty Nat are fairly much stereotypes, but that is allowable in such fiction.

What with the concluding mention of more visitors coming soon, the story cries out for a sequel. New characters are the dynamic for new "story-lines".

Squiggles and Squinter and the Bushrangers, James Tierney, Connor Court Publishing 2009, copiously illustrated by Ian James, 100 pages, **\$19.95**.

Order as below, or in Victoria, or for bookshops from the publisher, PO Box 1, Ballan Vic 3342