

DOWN TO EARTH WITH PHILIP BUNTING

In 2021, an astronaut aboard the International Space Station will read a specially produced Australian picture book to over one million children for ALIA's National Simultaneous Storytime 2021 (NSS 2021).



On receiving a call from ALIA suggesting we could be sending a book into space for NSS 2021, and what titles could Scholastic submit for the mission — I couldn't quite believe it or even fathom how this was possible! Taking it straight to our publishing team for discussion, it was immediately obvious that there was one author/illustrator that was up for the challenge!

The idea was put to Philip Bunting and within a few months came the first draft of *Give me some Space!*

Covid-19 has meant I am yet to meet Philip in person, but our first meeting by phone lasted over an hour. We talked about snowboarding in Queenstown to market days in Noosa and everything in between. Philip is so candid and down to earth it's easy to end up chatting for ages.

To help you get an insight into Philip, I recently put some questions to him about where his ideas come from and the challenge of writing a book for the Storytime from space project — here's what he had to say.

INTERVIEW BY SHARON TURNER
Corporate Communications Manager
Scholastic Australia

What was your favourite childhood book and what books have had an impact on your life?

Like many a rascal I was massively into dinosaurs, and so my favourite books were all non-fiction compendiums of the ol' terrible lizards. In terms of impactful fiction, Jurassic Park was released when I was 10 — but my parents wouldn't let me see the movie — so I read the book. In hindsight, I probably should have pursued a career in palaeontology. Never mind, creating picture books is far less dusty. Dick Whittington put me off ever moving to London (but taught me the value of a good walk). And The Minpins still scares me to this day.

Where do you get your inspiration when working on a new book?

It's hard to say — the inspiration for an idea for a book typically arrives as a pretty strange conflation of a few concepts, thoughts and memories from various stages of my life. Using Mopoke as an example, there were probably three major causes or sources of inspiration that led to the book:

1. I had been trying to do something creative with a mopoke, for a while. I love pretty much everything about these little birds, from their stern faces to our oddly unonomatopoeic translation of their eponymous call (the word 'mopoke' is phonetically wonderful, but it sounds nothing like a mopoke's call).
2. I have always loved this old visual gag my grandfather used to reel off, called 'Puffin. Nuffin' (look it up!). I am a sucker for this Spike Milligan-era humour.
3. And I knew I wanted to hand-make a keepsake gift for my daughter Florence's first birthday.



So, these three factors — along with a hundred more subtle thoughts and ideas — came together one day while I was riding my bike, to create Mopoke.

What comes first, the illustration or the story?

Typically, I begin with a key idea I'd like to share with young parents and their children — the words, and then the illos follow thereafter. For example, with The Wonderful Wisdom of Ants (Omnibus, 2020), the key idea was that we could learn a lot from certain ant behaviours, and in doing so, leave the world in slightly better shape than it was when we got here (just as ants do). From this, I was able to extrapolate an unashamedly anthropomorphic non-fiction picture book based on stuff we can learn from anty interactions.

What were your initial thoughts when you were approached by Scholastic to write a book to be read by astronauts from the International Space Station?

I was first told about the project over the phone while on a train, in Catalonia, with my better half Laura and our three children (6, 4 and 1 at the time). The kids must have been reading George Orwell in preparation for the trip, as they'd formed a rebel militia against me while I was trying to speak to my Publisher, Clare, who was on a patchy line, on the other side of the planet. But I couldn't believe what I was hearing (and to be honest, I still can't). Although I knew what the key idea would be, almost instantly.

How did your family respond when you told them what you were working on?

As above, the kids show me very little respect. And fair enough, they're well within reason most of the time. I told them about the book being sent up to the ISS, which placated their war against me for a minute or two, but they soon remobilised their tiny militia.

Tell us about the process of writing Give me some Space! specifically for the Storytime from Space project? Where did you start?

The key idea for Give me some Space! (Omnibus, 2020) is to translate what astronauts call the Overview Effect — whereby many experience a pretty profound shift in perspective when they see the Earth as one, from Space. They report an instant and deep understanding of the interconnected, delicate and singular nature of life on Earth. An immediate and permanent shift from 'me' to 'we'. This would be the key idea for the book.

In terms of the process, I began by talking through some variations on this theme with my wonderful wife Laura, who is a far more qualified author than me. I then cobbled together three or four unillustrated manuscripts — with varying degrees of fiction — and sent them off to you guys. Happily, Scholastic opted for the manuscript I liked best, and so I began illustrating a first draft from there...

What, if any, collaboration did you have with the team from Storytime from Space?

Excitingly, we consulted with a NASA astronaut and Storytime from Space. He wasn't so keen on my sense [or lack] of humour, however. There were a number of valuable learnings from the astronaut's council, which helped to shape the book, particularly in terms of the non-fiction asides that pop up throughout the book.

Probably the most significant change requested by Storytime from Space was that Una should reach space in a rocket — as this is the only practicable way for humans to exit the Earth's atmosphere. My original story saw Una take off with a giant weather balloon filled with hydrogen. So, balancing the fictional narrative with particular non-fictional prerequisites was a little challenging.



Reading at home in Eumundi, Queensland.

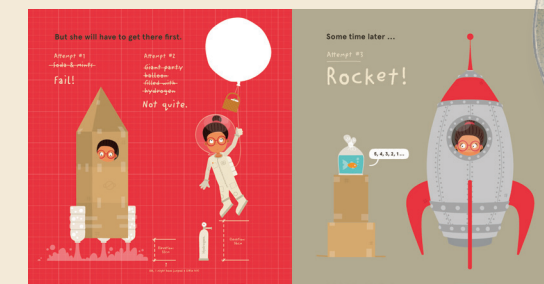
Photography by Bridget Wood

What challenges did writing a book that was to be sent into space present?

Beyond the challenges of balancing those non-fiction prerequisites with a very fictional narrative, the balancing act with this book was in trying to create an entertaining read-aloud story, that could also deliver numerous interesting facts and figures about our solar system. This was achieved through setting out the story in two distinct voices — a narrator (set in sans serif font), and the main character, Una (whose voice is set in her handwriting, as she jots notes in her notebook along the way).

What do you like to do when you are not working on books?

Above all else, I try to be the best dad I can be to my kids, who are still very young (7, 5 and 2). So most of my life outside books is dedicated to them, or defending myself from their coordinated assaults. Laura and I see the world in the same way, and we do everything we can to ensure the kids have as happy, varied and balanced a life as possible.



Una dreams of a life in Space. Life on Earth is just so so-so.

Where did the name Una come from?

Una is another subtle reference to the Overview Effect and the oneness of all life on our planet.

Fun fact: Una was originally called Dot! This was in reference to Carl Sagan's famous Pale Blue Dot remark. However, I was advised that Sagan's ghost is a particularly fussy little spirit, and so Una was an easy fix.

Outside all of that I love the outdoors and in particular silent sports. Mountain biking, hiking, climbing, and paddle boarding are all high on my downtime list, but trail running is my thing at the moment. We're lucky enough to live in an area where there are far more trees than people, so the forest trails around here are wonderful. Although I still keep an eye out for the Terrible Bloodsuckling Toothplucking Stonechuckling Spittler along the way.

NATIONAL SIMULTANEOUS STORYTIME... From SPACE!

REGISTER NOW and together we can get 1 million kids reading for NSS on 19 May 2021! www.alia.org.au/nss

PRE-ORDER your copy now!
www.schoolessentials.com.au
#NSS2021 #1MillionKidsReading



Australian Library and Information Association

SCHOLASTIC

LIANZA



FIND PHILIP'S OTHER CHILDREN'S BOOKS AT schoolessentials.com.au

