



Andy Griffiths' MAGICAL MIND

Whether it's runaway derrières or a now 65-storey treehouse with the coolest chill-out rooms imaginable, Aussie author Andy Griffiths is wooing our kids to read. **Juliet Rieden** meets the punk rock star of children's literature and his two genius collaborators.

IT'S FOUR O' CLOCK in the afternoon in a bookstore in Doncaster, Victoria, and there are queues stretching as far as the eye can see – boys and girls, teenagers and parents, more than a thousand waiting to meet their idol. Dymocks bookstore has never seen anything like it. The man they're all waiting for is Australian kids' author Andy Griffiths, whose *The 52-Storey Treehouse* was the best-selling single edition of any book in Australia last year and recently became the first ever children's book to win the Australian Book Industry Awards Book of the Year.

Andy, 53, is slight, wiry, intense and kind of cool looking, with tattoos up his arms, including a sizeable skeleton in a top hat. "It's the dapper skeleton who

is still concerned about his appearance, even though he's dead," he explains, with a naughty grin.

He arrives at 4pm and is still signing books when the store closes at 9pm. Andy then stays on until 11.30pm to autograph pre-orders in the back room. It's astonishing; this man is the rock star of children's literature, which is apt because he once wanted to be a punk rock star, inspired by the Sex Pistols and Alice Cooper, and had his own crazy, anarchic band back in the '80s, playing gigs in Melbourne's underground pubs.

So how do you go from a punk rock lead singer – who actually can't hold a tune – to selling more than five million books and hitting *The New York Times* best-sellers lists? It's taken a lot of hard work and two brilliant collaborators.

Andy's first step on the ladder to publishing stardom came in 1991, when he started working with illustrator Terry Denton at the suggestion of a publisher – and a dynamic duo was formed. Andy was a frustrated English teacher who had taken a sabbatical to try and get his zany joke books published and then gone back into the classroom to support his new wife and baby daughter. Terry was an artist and established and successful children's books illustrator with a 10-year career behind him. The pair actually met in 1995 and it was a meeting of whimsical minds. "We clicked from the beginning," says Terry. "Then Andy said, 'I've got these short stories I've been writing. I can't get them published.' I said, 'Let's go together to a publisher', because I had a name. And that got us started."



Where Andy Griffiths goes, fans follow (above). Left: Andy with his two great collaborators, wife and editor Jill and illustrator Terry Denton.

So Andy wrote the stories and Terry would create a second book in the margins and thus the duo's first story book, *Just Tricking*, was formed.

"That's what we did for a number of years," says Andy. "And I remember one time Terry was behind deadline and he said, 'Why don't you come down and give me some ideas'. So I was sitting in his studio and saying, 'Draw this' ... I was killing myself laughing and thinking, 'This is just so much fun'.

"I said, 'Hickory dickory dock, a mouse ran up the clock. It ripped the

hands off and set fire to it.' And he drew that. I thought 'This is gold. We should do a book just like this' ... And that was

"I was killing myself laughing and thinking, 'This is just so much fun'."

For Andy, finding Terry was the pepper to his salt, the yin to his yang. Both loved Monty Python and Spike Milligan, exploding body parts, swinging on clotheslines and pushing the envelope as far as possible. Their humour was absurd, downright silly and knew no bounds.

"I thought, 'This guy is great'," says Andy, who loved the precise detail in Terry's sketches (with impeccable perspective – Terry studied architecture at university) and the off-kilter mind-set inspiring them.

To date, in all their time together, Terry has never not been able to draw the bizarre imaginings central to Andy's stories and we're talking bums that take on a life of their own and separate from your body, sea-monkeys and, most recently, a 65-storey treehouse with the world's most dangerous disabled ramp.

Right from the start, Andy had a vision to get kids to read and he knew Terry was the man to help him do it.

"I said to Terry, 'I've seen kids picking up books in the library and they flip through them to see how big the print is and, if it's too small, they just put it back. They're really suspicious. I want you to do flip pictures along the corners so they pick up the book and they flick and go, 'Hey, this is cool'.

"I said, 'Do some random doodles as if you're the author and you've got bored and you're just decorating your school book' ... Terry loved it."

The Bad Book. We met every week and started writing and creating together. It was graphic violence and deliberately out of control," he recalls.

Meanwhile, over at Reed Publishing in suburban Melbourne, where publisher Janet Rowe had seen the genius in Andy while other publishers had continually turned him away in 1996, this new children's author was about to meet his other great collaborator, the woman who was first his editor and later became his wife, Jill.

"I was in my office on Dingley industrial estate and Andy came in. He was quite ▶

FAIRFAX MEDIA. JULIAN KINGMA. ANDY GRIFFITHS/TWITTER.

Jill and Andy Griffiths, who now have a splendid house of their own thanks to the success of the *Treehouse* series.

Jill works and a pool table in the front room. It's pure Griffiths.

Today, creating a new book is a three-way collaboration. Andy comes up with a plot. He and Terry then head off to Andy's parents' beach house in Wilsons Promontory National Park for an intensive retreat, where they nut out the narrative, and then Jill steps in to help editing. So when Andy and Terry came with up with the idea for *The 13-Storey Treehouse*, it seemed only natural that Andy, Terry and Jill would be the central characters.

What do the men do on their retreat? "We get up in the morning, go for a walk, often separately, and then we meet back for brekkie and start working until six or seven at night. Then we have dinner ... Andy always cooks," confides Terry. "I think the key is that we share a sense of humour, but we come at it from different directions. His is a more ordered direction, mine

is a more chaotic direction ... It's like a marriage without the sex," he jokes.

For the latest book – *The 65-Storey Treehouse* (Pan Macmillan) – Terry has created around 800 drawings, each of which has been roughed out at least four times. That's 3200 drawings. It's an intensive process that takes a year per book, fuelled by Andy's obsessive attention to detail and Jill's incisive editing.

"We put a lot of work into the books. It's not an accident. We go over and over and over," says Jill.

Will the Treehouse ever run out of stories? Terry, who's 65 this year, says he has at least two more books in his arsenal and, in any case, Andy is on a mission to please his audience.

"Andy is very conscious of not disappointing the kids," says Jill.

"He's conscious that there are all these children out there who are counting on him to put out the next book."

Thank goodness for that. ■

shy and nervous," remembers Jill. "I said, 'Would you like a cup of tea?' And he said, 'Yes, I've got a tea bag', as he tried to pull out one of a bunch of green tea bags from his pocket. They were all tangled up and I remember I just had to stand there for what felt like ages while he tried to untangle his tea bag strings."

It's a story both Jill and Andy recount lovingly, each relishing the absurdity of the situation, the day when love struck over a tangled herbal tea bag.

Jill was amazed that her boss, Janet Rowe, had seen Andy's potential because the 100 or so practical jokes he had presented that got his foot in her door were pretty off the wall. He had been asked by Janet to put the jokes to one side and instead go away and create a character who tries to play his practical jokes.

And this is where Jill came in. "I felt very confident that I knew how to improve the books and he was great to work with, really open to feedback and we just got on really well," she says. "We would have these really intense phone conversations, saying things like, 'Would bum be funnier in this instance?' He was very serious. And I thought that was very entertaining."

Says Andy, "We instantly found that we were a great match because she was able to cut through my waffling and cut to the chase of a story and suggest jokes.

"I'm interested in giving the reader the easiest way into the story because I'd seen all my kids at school. They're reluctant readers. They're not just begging for books, they're trying to get away from them, so you've got to do everything you can to compel them to read the book."

At the time, Andy was a stay-at-home dad to daughter Jasmine, writing in the middle of the day when the baby slept. Yet when Andy's marriage broke up, he and Jill started dating with – what else? – an outing to a comedy night.



"It was increasingly clear to me that we were highly compatible."

"It started very slowly and cautiously because I knew he'd just had a marriage break-up," says Jill. "And I knew I had to keep working with him. It was nice, kind of like a courtship, old-fashioned, I suppose."

"With Jill's editing, the stories were just getting infinitely better," says Andy. "We enjoyed talking on the phone and we shared a lot of comedy loves. And it was increasingly clear to me that we were highly compatible."

Later that year, Jill and Andy moved in together, amicably sharing custody of Jasmine with Andy's wife, Pauline. In 2001, their daughter, Sarah, was born and, many years later, they married.

Recently, they moved into a fabulous waterfront house in Williamstown in Melbourne that has been financed by the considerable profits from the success of the *Treehouse* books. They have a swimming pool, an office filled with crazy kids' paraphernalia where Andy works, a more grown-up study where