



Source: Martin Chulov, 'Faced with one more tricky knot to untangle', *The Australian online*, 03/11/07.
Tags: [child/parent](#), [celebrations](#), [literature](#), [war](#)
Writer/s: Ziggy Edwards

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Hugh's school held a spaghetti dinner and book fair this evening, so we went. Hugh's teacher had sent him home earlier in the week with a 'wish list,' which he'd filled to capacity with straggly printed book titles. Chess books. Mapmaking books. The 2008 Guinness Book of World Records. War books.

He was bothered by Halloween ghost stories some of his friends made up: zombies and chainsaws and other laughingly rendered third-grade gore. For the past few months though, he's been fascinated by war—particularly World War II. He asked me the names of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan, and lit up with surprise at how silly they sounded.

For now, I buy him the camo shirts he suddenly wants, and tonight the graphic novel about Hitler and the Battle of the Bulge. I know Hugh is a good kid. He's getting along really well in school and whatever troubles he does have, he refrains from taking them out on anyone but himself.

I worry about the trap, though. Boys are always encouraged to glamorise some kind of shootout and this year it's military all the way. That's where all the camo shirts on the \$2.99 rack come from. And yet, stories pop up on the news all the time about some elementary-school kid getting suspended for drawing a gun. Not out of a holster, but on a piece of paper. He gets written up and labelled and, I fear, prescribed pharmaceuticals. Then if the boy ever comes to school with a real gun, there's a paper trail to follow.

I've had talks with Hugh about this before but it's a fine line between protecting him and stifling him. 'You have to be careful of the things you say. People who know you well can understand, but some others might take you too seriously and get upset.'

He goes to the best school we could've picked, and anyone involved in Hugh's education seems to genuinely care about him. Not many of the kids are neighbours though. As a general rule, kids in school together constitute the only reason we've ever known any of our neighbours.

I did chat with the one other divorced parent in Hugh's class while the kids crawled under the book tables, plates of half-eaten spaghetti abandoned next to us. 'I hear they do Halloween right in your neighbourhood,' I said. Hugh's dad took Hugh there this year. These guys give out full-sized chocolate bars, not the miniatures.

'Yeah, it's pretty cool,' Mark replied. 'They bring tables out to the sidewalk and have candy and games for the kids, wine for the adults.'

'Sounds like a block party. And it was such nice weather this year.'

'It is like a block party. Last year when it was rainy they brought out tarps and basically had a canopy over the tables.'

'My office mate has lived all over the place,' I said, 'and she was telling me about a neighbourhood like that. She and her kids went trick-or-treating there every year they lived in that city.'

Typical trivial acquaintance conversation, except I continued to wax rapturous about Mark's neighbourhood

as if he had blue herons in his back yard.

We had to leave a little early to drive across town and meet Maria and her kids for *Bee Movie*. The movie surpassed my expectations, but then again they were pretty low. Any CGI movie about insects has to deal with individuality vs. collectivism it seems, but I wasn't sure exactly what they were trying to say here. When I gave up and allowed myself to be entertained, the headache went away.

On the car ride home, I told Hugh we would have to skip right to brushing teeth, an abbreviated story, and bed. 'It's late, and I have to write a thousand words after you're asleep.'

'Why a thousand words?'

'Well, up to a thousand words. It can be less, but not a lot less. And no more than a thousand and one words. It's for this project a lady I know is doing online. She has people write stories every night for a thousand and one nights. Which is a pretty long time.'

'How long?'

'A couple years, I think. Somewhere between two and three.'

'But how many?'

'Well, a year usually has 365 days in it...'

A discussion of multiplication and division followed.

Hugh asked, 'What do you have to write?'

'It's a different story every night, and we get a prompt—which is a phrase we start from and that gives us ideas of what to write about. The one I have tonight is 'unstable patchwork.'

'What's that?'

'It can be a lot of things...patchwork—well, the way I was thinking of it, say there are a bunch of different people from different backgrounds. And they are all put together for some reason, like different coloured squares of fabric sewn together in a quilt.'

'But maybe—this is where 'unstable' comes in—the people don't really like each other that much. They're just there to help their own group of people. So unstable means that group might not be around for a long time. They might split up.'

'Like the war?'

'You mean this war?'

'Yes.'

'Yeah. Actually, I think that the articles she takes these prompts from are mostly about the war. This project has a lot to do with this war.'

'I could help you come up with some ideas.'

'Thanks Hugh,' I said as we turned onto the bridge. 'I'd like that.'

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ziggy Edwards.