

# What Difference Does Writing Make?

## Leading Writers on Writing

Published in *What Difference Does Writing Make?: Leading Writers on Writing* in 2007  
by Future Leaders ([www.futureleaders.com.au](http://www.futureleaders.com.au))

### More than Anything

By Jessica Bowman

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Amidst the calm and quiet of a warm October's day, an old man sits silently in an ancient wicker chair on his front porch. He does not speak to anyone as they pass, nor does he often move. No, this old man just sits and stares off into the distance.

No-one really knows why. The local adults think he's just lonely; the local children think he's mad. But neither is correct in their judgments, for William Granger does not mind solitude, nor is he crazy. He merely enjoys being able to sit and sweep away the cobwebs of the mind; to reminisce upon times gone past. Sometimes, if he closes his eyes and concentrates hard enough, people and places seem so real it's as if he's living the memories all over again. Some are sad, others so good they bring tears of pure joy. Sadly, however, it's been a long time since those memories were realities. Today, he remembers the last time he felt truly happy. It was on a day much like this one, on a dock just south of Sydney. The year was 1942, and William was just 22 years old ...

The noise of the farewell parade was almost deafening. Above the cheers and cries of the bustling crowd, the army marching band's familiar tunes pierced the still air of the hot, sticky afternoon. Streamers fell from unknown sources whilst the soldiers' shoes slapped the tar street in a steady, drumming beat. Amongst the crowd, women clutching babes to their breasts wept and waved their handkerchiefs as their older children silently watched the passing men in awe.

William, perfectly in step with the rest of his squadron, scanned the crowd for just one of those women in particular — his darling wife Emmaline. Since their marriage just over three

years ago, the pair had produced one child, Jack, and another was on the way. Jack was Will's pride and joy — a true Granger. He was as adamant as a mule and as temperamental as a grumpy old man, but from his mother he had inherited an air of inner quiet and charm none could match.

At first William was worried Emmaline hadn't made it there in time to see him leave. Slowly he felt his heart sink as he got closer and closer to the ship and still there had been no sign of her. Surely she would be there somewhere? Then, as he rounded the last corner before the docks, he saw her. As if in a dream, time stood still. A single ray of sunshine had caught her long blonde hair, making it glisten like gold, and as she turned to see him and smiled, she glowed with a radiance he'd never seen before. He took in a sharp breath, taken aback by her beauty, and he felt himself smile the widest he'd ever grinned.

"Daddy!" came a joyful cry from the crowd.

There was a short look of confusion on his wife's face as she looked down in search of someone, quickly replaced by one of relief. Both William and Emmaline spotted their son at the same time, as little Jack ran free of the crowd's sea of legs and launched himself upon his father.

"Daddy!" the small voice repeated. "Guess what?"

"What, son?" William bent down under the weight of his pack to face Jack's beaming grin.

"I love you more than anything else in the *whole* wide world. Did you know that?"

William smiled. "That I did son, that I did."

And in that moment, with his wife watching on, William was the happiest he had been in his entire life. After he had said his goodbyes, William proudly strode up that ramp on to the ship, willing to meet any challenge or adventure that it led him to. Little did he know of what was to come.

The old wicker chair creaks and groans as the elderly man sitting in it leans backward to rest his head. With a sigh, William opens his eyes to see two children playing in the street. An iron fist grabs at his heart, as he remembers how he missed out on this most glorious stage of his own son's life. For you

see, the war didn't just change men, it destroyed lives. It destroyed William.

That summer, Will discovered what war was really all about. It was not fought fairly, or with any ounce of chivalry. Contrary to what the troops were led to believe, victory was not easily snatched from the enemy. Men suffered. Men died. Every waking moment was spent in fear; every sleeping moment too.

After seven months of service, Will was unsure of how much more he could stand before the war finally broke his spirit. Sweltering tropical days gave way to suffocating tropical nights. Disease and decay were everywhere, and sleep was a rarity. Then, late one afternoon, as Will and his troop trudged slowly through cold, knee-deep mud amongst dense forest, they were ambushed. Shot at from all sides, not one stood a chance. Fifteen troops were killed. William, one of only two survivors, somehow escaped with seven bullet wounds to his right leg. Unfortunately, there was so much muscle and tissue damage that his leg had to be amputated. Will was sent home.

Back in Sydney, the Granger family was sent a telegram to tell them of William's return. Since he had left, Emmaline had given birth to their second child — a baby girl, Vera. Together with both children, she stood at the docks awaiting eagerly, yet apprehensively, the arrival of the naval ship. But the man that hobbled off that ship was not the husband she remembered. The young, energetic, joyful man that was once her husband had been replaced with a thin, sallow-skinned, hard-faced stranger.

William hobbled over to greet his family with a weary smile. But the old sparkle in his eyes was gone. Emmaline felt as if she were looking into windows of darkness; cold, still and damp.

"Daddy?" Jack asked. "What's wrong?"

The truth was, William did not know. He had expected that when he reached home the sight of his new baby daughter together with his beloved son and wife would ignite a warmth inside he had almost forgotten.

Instead, he felt empty and hollow, just like the depths of his eyes.

Jessica Bowman

“Nothing son,” he said. “Let’s go home.”

But home just wasn’t the same either. Jack missed his old Daddy; Emmaline missed her old William. That, coupled with the added stress of caring for Vera, proved too much for Emmaline. A blind person could see their relationship was falling apart. Within two months she’d taken the children and moved far, far away. William was left to recover and grow old with no family to support him, and an empty house to match the emptiness inside his soul.

The old man sits bolt upright as he is brought back harshly from memory to reality. It’s a sad story. Unfortunately it’s true. But William tries not to remember those dark times in his life. Instead, he reclines and reminisces upon the days before the war, when days were spent with his wife and son in such sweet bliss. He watches the children as they run away down the street, and wishes upon them the blessings he would wish on his own children. Some day, he knows they’ll come back to him. When they do he’ll be there, in the shadows of his front porch, waiting.



**Jessica Bowman** wrote this essay in 2006 when she was in Year 11 at Model Farms High School, Baulkham Hills, New South Wales.