'At a time when communities and government are searching for ways of reducing road trauma among youth following recent horrific road carnage, this is indeed a timely novel.' Kevin Steinberger, Viewpoint

Shortlisted for the 2006 Children’s Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards – Older readers

**SYNOPSIS**

How would you and your family cope with a major tragedy? Would you be bitter, argue, cling together? And more importantly, how would you even begin to move on with your life?

The Story of Tom Brennan by J.C. Burke starts with a fatal car accident – a young driver who’s had too much to drink goes too fast and in an instant two of his friends are dead and his cousin is left with permanent spinal injuries.

But the book isn’t about the car crash; it isn’t even about the driver. This is a book about seventeen-year-old Tom Brennan, and how his life
changes when his older brother, Daniel, kills two people and paralyses another.

While their cousin Fin lies in hospital, unable to move, Daniel goes to jail and the Brennans are forced to move towns - they've become the victims of a small town's prejudice against the family of the boy they saw as 'an accident waiting to happen'.

Starting again in a new town and at a new school, how can Tom even begin to rebuild his life when his mother won't get out of bed, his father is struggling to hold the family together, his sister is threatening to spill the family's secret, and he can no longer play rugby with his beloved Mumbilli team?

It's a long, slow recovery, but there are things that will help bring the real Tom Brennan back: finding out that he can play rugby without his unbeatable partnership with Daniel, running with his Uncle Brendan, the possibility of a climbing trip to the Himalayas, seeing Daniel drag himself back from the brink of suicide, and finding love amidst the chaos - all these things will help Tom to find a ticket out of the past.

**WRITING/ILLUSTRATING STYLE**

Always daring to ask the hard questions, Jane keeps pushing when others would have hesitated. Her powerful issues-based writing, sense of realism and distinctive voice strike a chord with teenagers.

Written in first-person from Tom's perspective, The Story of Tom Brennan has an immediacy and rawness that makes the story all the more powerful.

Beginning in the present, when we see Tom at his grandmother's house and hating every minute of his new life, we soon begin to see glimpses of the events in Tom’s recent past: the ‘sudden death’ football party where all the trouble begins, and the terrible, tragic events of that night and days that follow. This use of flashbacks, showing readers only a glimpse at a time of past events, enables J.C. Burke to tell a story within a story, and to link the dramatic events of the past with Tom’s present emotional state to increase drama and tension.

J.C. Burke says, ‘To present the story in chronological order seemed heavy-handed. Also, weaving the past into the story in the form of flashbacks meant the reader’s experience of meeting Daniel was not so straightforward. Not so “easy” - which was what I wanted to accomplish. It’s not until page 138 when the reader finally meets Daniel in “real time”. And when they do it is not that simple to feel disdain for him. For Daniel is a broken man.”
AUTHOR BACKGROUND

J.C. Burke was born in Sydney in 1965, the fourth of five daughters. With writers for parents, she grew up in a world full of noise, drama and books, and the many colourful characters who came to visit provided her with an endless supply of stories and impersonations.

Burke decided to become a nurse after her mother lost a long battle with cancer. She specialised in the field of Oncology, working in Haematology and Bone Marrow Transplant Units in Australia and the UK.

A creative writing course at Sydney University led to a mentorship with Gary Crew and the publication of CBC Notable book White Lies (Lothian) in 2002. Burke has since written The Red Cardigan, also a CBC Notable Book, and its sequel Nine Letters Long (Random House Australia).

J.C. Burke lives on Sydney’s Northern Beaches with her husband and two children. She does a lot of yoga, a bit of nursing, and housework only when absolutely necessary. She loves writing for children and young adults, as they still have an optimistic eye on the world.

Visit www.jcburke.com.au for more information about J.C. Burke and her books.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

J.C. Burke says: ‘I didn’t want to tell the story from the victims’ families’ point of view, nor did I want to tell it from Daniel’s side either. I wanted to explore how many lives are changed through the actions of another. I wanted to really get into the heart of how a family, a community, a town can be split apart.

‘Tom telling the story immediately confronts the reader with a problem - how can you hate Daniel when Tom doesn’t? In fact, Tom struggles with the question, ‘Was it so bad to be happy that my brother lived, knowing what he did that night was so unforgivable?’

‘Part of Tom’s journey is being forced to see situations and people as they really are, not as he thought they were. The fragility of family structure is something I understand through my own experiences. And as we’re all members of a family perhaps many will recognise the machinations and politics that families run on.’
DISCUSSION POINTS

• The subject of *The Story of Tom Brennan* ties in with a number of current news issues, such as drink driving, acceptable blood alcohol levels, and the age teenagers can get their driving licences. Could changes to the law have prevented Daniel’s accident?

• How do you think the media would have reported Daniel’s accident? Does reading *The Story of Tom Brennan* help you to ‘read between the lines’ of news stories about drink driving?

• Tom’s sister, Kylie, describes the way the Mumbilli townspeople treated the Brennan family (such as spitting at them, painting graffiti on their house) as terrorism. Do you agree?

• Each member of the Brennan family deals with their grief and shock in a different way – Tom’s mother won’t get out of bed, his sister gets angry, and Tom wants to avoid talking about what’s happened. What would be some more effective coping mechanisms? Would your suggestions be different for each person?

• Was Daniel ‘an accident waiting to happen’? Could the accident have been prevented? For example: would Daniel have benefited from counselling to reduce his aggression? Should his friends have stopped him from driving that night? Was Daniel’s rugby fame within the Mumbilli community a factor in his attitudes and the way the town treated him?

• One of the tragedies in the story is that Daniel’s parents resisted discipline as they feared how Daniel would react. Yet ultimately the consequences of Daniel’s uncontrolled behaviour were destructive beyond his parents’ fears. This example of ‘tragic irony’ is often used in books. What does it tell us about real life?

• Explore the different positions of siblings in families (Daniel is the eldest, Tom is in the middle and Kylie, the only girl, is the youngest) and how this influences the way a family functions and relates.

• Explore the idea that physical exercise (such as Tom’s running) can also improve your mental state.

• Tom is devastated when Kylie tells everyone the family’s secret, but Brendan says there’s a difference between people’s attitudes in Mumbilli and Coghill because Coghill is a larger town. What are
the advantages and disadvantages to living in a small country town, or a larger town or city?

• Tom is disappointed to be playing rugby with St Bennie’s because they’re not as skilled or successful as his previous Mumbilli team. Is winning everything, or is there more to sport than winning?

• J.C. Burke chose to explore who Daniel is from a distance as she felt it was more powerful this way. Are the things we find disturbing in a character often the things we see in ourself?

**PRAISE FOR THE STORY OF TOM BRENNAN**

Shortlisted for the 2006 Australian Publishers Association Design Awards - Older Readers

‘A must read for all teens’ David Koch, Channel 7 Sunrise

‘The prologue immediately piques the reader’s interest ... It is just one page of plain, matter-of-fact narration but which is powerfully effective in its implicit suspense ... Burdened with shame and remorse, the Brennans travel a long, hard road to redemption and recovery ... From my small town childhood and youth I can vouch for the verisimilitude of the events that course through The Story of Tom Brennan ... J.C. Burke is right on the money. It is a memorable book. Through the eyes of Tom Brennan she has convincingly related an all too common experience but she also manages to draw light out of the darkness. At a time when communities and government are searching for ways of reducing road trauma among youth following recent horrific road carnage, this is indeed a timely novel.’ Kevin Steinberger, Viewpoint 13 (4) Summer 2005

‘Horrible car accidents involving young people, isolated roads and booze are a reality of country and city life. While we all see the effect in the weekly road toll figures, the impact on the living – whether physically or emotionally scarred – is more hidden. Burke gently probes the pain suffered by Tom and his family and uncovers, realistically, some of what goes on behind the headlines.’ Eliza Metcalfe, Schools Bookseller & Publisher, September 2005

‘As with all Random House books you’ve sent me so far, The Story of Tom Brennan has made an excellent addition to my bookshelf. This was an excellent story - rather than focusing on the perpetrator of the crime, this novel focused on how the lives of everyone around him were affected - his friends, family, and the victims’ families. It was quite sad at times and it changed my perspective of the criminal cases I see on the news. Instead of thinking, ‘Poor man, he’s in prison’, I now think, ‘What about his family?’ This novel is an excellent piece of work,
detailing how a shattered family gradually picks up the pieces and builds their lives once again. The characters are masterfully presented, and their reactions are (refreshingly) not cliched. That is how I think real people would react. Well done J.C. Burke!’ Teagan Killoran, age 15, Random House Book Buddies Club

‘I found this book interesting and I particularly liked the way the story about the accident was revealed bit by bit, rather than all at once. It was a good technique because it helped to build suspense and to make me want to keep reading ... This was not an easy book to read because the subject matter is fairly confronting. The events described are tragic and the aftermath of the accident is absolutely devastating for Tom’s family. However, it is probably a very worthwhile book for teenagers to read, since it delivers an important message about the dangers of drink driving.’ Christian Sexty, age 14, Random House Book Buddies Club