

september - october, 2014

# northerly

The Northern Rivers Writers' Centre Magazine



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# ON THE ROAD WITH KIDS

By John Ahern

The first writing idea I ever pitched was from the point of view of a chicken. I had just returned from Africa where chickens were always sharing my space. They were above me on luggage racks, tied by the feet and draped over women's arms like handbags or just free-ranging as fellow bus passengers. Inspired by their plight for survival, I wrote a series of letters from the ponderous mindset of an adventurous travelling chicken. It was to the editor of a UK travel magazine that I enthusiastically suggested a series of articles titled *On the Road...with Jack Chickenrac*.

After being marched out of the Earls Court building by security, I buried my writing ambitions. But it was another series of letters that would resurrect these dreams and eventually lead to the publishing of my book *On the Road...with Kids*.

These sprawling diatribes were sent to my mother, written in various states of sobriety and included whatever theories or musings that took my fancy at the time. They were of a similar formula to the African scribbles, except the public transport was superseded by a motorhome and the chickens had been replaced with other annoying squawking animals...kids.

They described the messy tale of the year my wife Mandy and I chucked our careers, packed up our two kids aged 4 and 2, and took off in an old campervan around Europe. Yet as sensational as that rolling setting was, romping through 30 countries from the North Pole to Africa and back, it was what was going on inside the van between me, my wife and the kids, that became the real story.

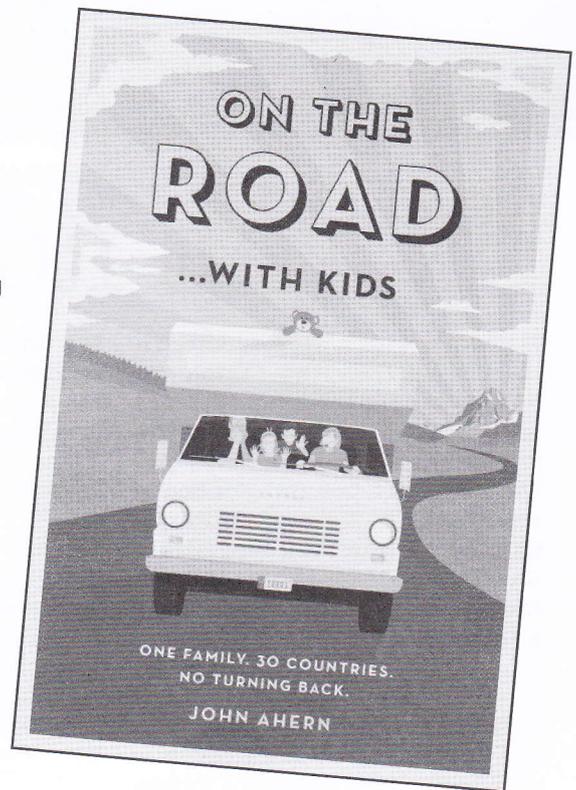
When we eventually returned I discovered that my mum and all her friends had been sitting around each of my arriving letters like they were a campfire, reading, laughing and crying at our adventures. They loved the stories.

They related to our parenting challenges after a lifetime of their own, and insisted I must write a book.

It is a known fact that you can't argue with a group of retired ladies, and so I did what I was told. And in starting the writing romp, I had these letters as secret-memoir weapons. Words smashed down with no conscious thought or editing, the perfect trigger to beam me back to what I was really thinking, feeling or experiencing at any given point in time. They were passionate, ugly, introspective and sometimes plain stupid; more than I ever would have wanted a group of unknown ladies to read.

180,000 mashed words followed, always scribbled, later computerised, and eventually whittled to 80,000. Five years of giving up, starting again and feeling like a writing pretender. But I was driven by the thought of sharing life-changing lessons from our time on the road. Being a good provider did not make me a good father. We had to disconnect to truly connect. Never unwrap a sandwich in front of an ape. Things that would be of critical help to people in everyday life. In one revelation I almost stamped my pen through the paper and the desk under it. 'We complicate things by clamping on balls and chains to our aspirations and freedom in the form of big loans for unneeded 'things'. And then we row hard in the bowels of the slave ship, doing lots of stuff we don't want to, dreaming of the day we can afford to do what we really want. And when that day comes, we wonder why we didn't wake up to the fact that life is short and that we should have chased our real dreams earlier.'

When these words ripped across the page one day, I wondered why I had given up so easily on my writing



dream years earlier, just because one editor couldn't see the genius in my chicken scribe concept. So I got serious. If I wanted to be a writer I had to start acting like one. I stopped wearing PJs while writing. Workshops, writer's festivals and manuscript assessments followed. I attacked them all to hone the craft, many through the Northern Rivers Writers Centre. Over time I had a few articles published, received a small award, and was long listed for a Varuna development award, all giving me tiny turbo boosts to dare to believe the retired ladies were right.

When the big meeting occurred and I had the chance to pitch my book to the publishers at Pan Macmillan, I had learnt many things since my first appearance at the UK travel magazine. First and foremost, I did not mention chickens.



John Ahern is the author of *On The Road With Kids* published by Pan Macmillan on 1 August.