

# FLYING COLOURS

When Sue Tredget took a walking trip to Spain the Perth teacher had little inkling of the direction it would take her, writes **Julie Hosking**.



*Crunchy pink apples, deliciously sweet/ Pink cupcake icing, a real birthday treat/ My favourite pink scarf keeps me cosy and warm/ My new pink umbrella when the rain clouds form.*

By the end of her eight-day trek – she hopes to do the full six-week Camino one day – Sue had written two rhyming colour stories for children, Pink and Orange. “Then I

thought it would be really nice to have a set of seven – one for every day of the week, for bedtime reading – and once I got home I wrote Purple and, maybe, Red. And then I did nothing with them.”

It was 2014 and Sue was still in the early steps of a long journey to recovery from debilitating depression, one that had hit out of the blue the year before – “my annus horribilis” – and meant a planned year’s leave from teaching could not have come at a better time. As part of her healing, she went on a retreat to Kerala in India with boutique tour operator Journeys of the Spirit, where she started to write down her thoughts.

“It was kind of very still, I had a little hut to myself and that was when I started writing my journal; it was just amazing,” she says. Feeling energised, she asked the owner when the next retreat would be. “It was the Camino in May. And my first thought was I couldn’t possibly go on another trip so soon but I talked to (husband) Ian and he just said ‘You’ve got to go, it’s your year’. He was wonderful.”

The experience was little short of transformative, though Sue says she didn’t have huge expectations. “I see myself as more spiritual than adhering to a particular religion but a lot of people who walk this pilgrimage have been through ... stuff,” she says. “It seems to be a bit of a rite of passage, a healing kind of journey. It was just away from everything, you could clear your head, out in the most beautiful countryside you’ll ever see.”

As the colour stories formed in her head, Sue wasn’t really thinking about getting them published; she just had to get them down. The turning point came when she joined beyondblue in March 2015 as a volunteer speaker. “At the training day we had to introduce ourselves and say what job we’d do if you weren’t doing the one you’re doing. When it came to me, I hadn’t even thought about it and I said I’d be a writer. I realised then I just wanted to write more, whether or not it ever got published, because ... it made me feel good.”

Sue got out her journal and started to think about how she could turn it into a memoir that might help others who suddenly found themselves in the dark pit of depression. This warm, self-effacing woman had been beating herself up about even being depressed in the first place. She had a great husband, two beautiful teenage boys, and a fulfilling career as a teacher – what right, she would ask herself over and over again, did someone like her have to “fall apart”.

“The biggest thing I’ve learnt through all of this is you never know what’s going in with people despite outward appearance,” Sue says. “And don’t judge people because the person who’s outgoing and bubbly and happy and you might think they have the perfect life ... it’s rarely the case actually.”

That realisation was part of the discovery process she worked through as she wrote her memoir, *Changing Lightbulbs: A Journey Through Depression and Anxiety*, which will be published later this year. “I was originally going to write it as novel and then thought, no this is me. If I want to raise awareness about depression, then there is nothing to be ashamed of, I need to own the story as my story otherwise I’m trying to hide it,” she says. “I’m a little bit nervous about when it does get out there but I needed to do it.”

The 55-year-old has also written a collection of poems called *Transformation* but it was the children’s stories that leapt into her head on those Spanish roads that would come to fruition first after Ian, somewhat fortuitously, bumped into an old acquaintance, Diana Kelly.



“She used to work in my father-in-law’s camera business, and she’d do drawings of all of us, and send us the cards. I knew she was really good so I thought I might just send my words to Di,” she says. “And it turns out she’d been running art workshops for students in WA in primary schools, she’s done art in indigenous communities and with special-needs kids and the books just really touched a chord. She said ‘Yes, I want to illustrate these’.”

Sue couldn’t be happier with the end result. “I didn’t just want them to be big blocks of colour, I wanted proper drawings, with scenes children could relate to. Her work is very creative and imaginative and there was this kind of innocence that I loved. People have said they’re very retro, which I really like. I feel really lucky she agreed to do them.”

The first four in My Colour Collection – Blue,



Purple, Pink and Orange – will be released this week, with Red, Yellow and Green to follow in the coming months.

Having elected to go the self-published route, Sue admits it has been a steep learning curve – “fun but tough” – but she stuck to her original vision to “brighten and inspire”. A teacher for 28 years, she has been able to tap into schools, teachers and parents for feedback, which has been incredibly positive, but it’s the children’s reactions she watches closely. “I just envisaged something that kids would want to pick up and open up and so far the kids who have seen it have done just that.”

Then there’s the importance of sharing the story behind the collection, something she will continue to do as a beyondblue speaker. Part proceeds of any profits will also be donated to the mental health organisation. “I’m really passionate about breaking down those barriers and trying to raise awareness through beyondblue,” Sue says. “I feel that this is something that combines those two things because it’s such an important cause and it’s something I love to do.”

And injecting splashes of colour into a child’s life every night before he or she snuggles down to sleep would just make this journey worth every difficult step along the way. **✎**



My Colour Collection will be launched at St Mark’s Anglican Community School on Wednesday at 11am. The first four are available from [suetredget.com](http://suetredget.com), \$16 each.



Light and shade Sue Tredget hopes her books will brighten and inspire. PICTURE IAIN GILLESPIE



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