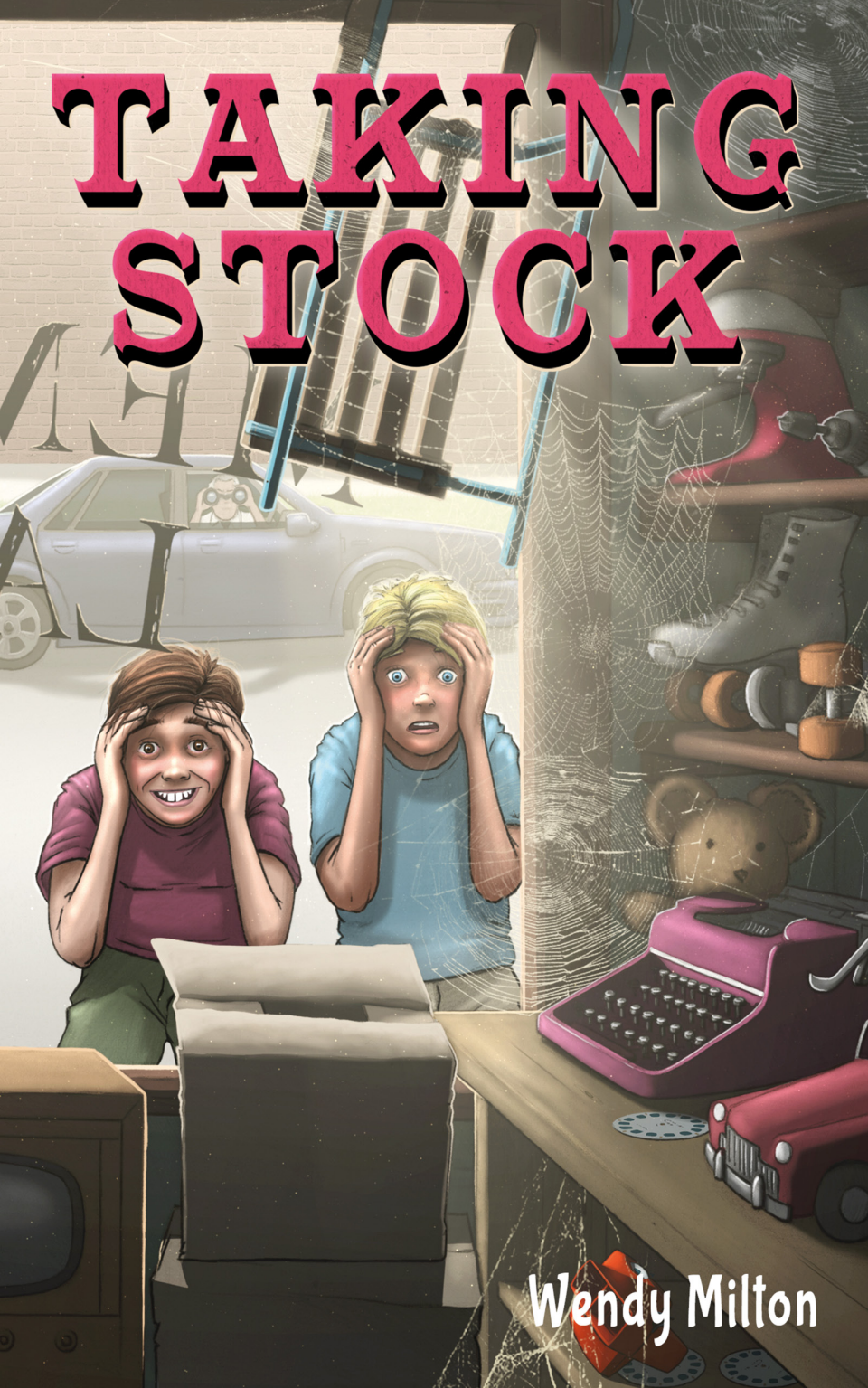


TAKING STOCK



Wendy Milton

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WENDY MILTON

ILLUSTRATED BY PATRICK HAWKINS



ONE

‘Toothy Toovey sucks a smoothie,’ chanted Flip, and there were sniggers from those of Neil’s classmates in the vicinity. When Neil drank through a straw, his top teeth hung over his bottom lip and the straw and the rim of the container from which he was drinking. In fact, it was difficult for Neil to close his mouth. Flip had trouble closing his mouth, too, but that was different.

Neil’s mother couldn’t afford expensive dental work, so Neil wore a plastic mouth brace at night that was *supposed* to straighten his teeth, but which fell out as soon as he went to sleep. She also bought larger sizes in clothes so that he’d grow into them, which meant that he was ridiculed because his uniform didn’t fit.

‘Hey, Toothy! Are you shrinking or are your pants growing?’

‘Flip’ Benson (the nickname was a corruption of Phillip) had perfect teeth and a uniform that fitted. He was also the richest boy in Neil’s class. His father

drove a Maserati and owned a string of antique shops for which he made trips overseas to purchase stock. Not only did Flip have a jet-setting father, but he couldn't do anything wrong. If something was uncool, it became cool when Flip did it.

Neil tried to ignore the ridicule by chanting a rhyme he'd learned from his uncle: *'Sticks and stones may break my bones / But words will never hurt me.'* The rhyme might have worked for Uncle Rex, but it didn't work for Neil.

Uncle Rex was Neil's *great*-uncle (Neil didn't bother with the 'great'), and he was, according to Neil's mother, 'eccentric'. To Neil, this meant seriously weird. Uncle Rex loved old things – possibly because he could remember using them? ('I'll make an exception in your case,' he'd say to Neil, a comment generally accompanied by a broad wink.) 'Your uncle lives in the past,' was how Neil's mother explained it.

Uncle Rex would sing songs and recite poems written by people long dead, which was embarrassing. On one occasion he turned up at the school, apparently at the principal's invitation (they'd met at a parent-teacher evening Neil's mother couldn't attend). His unexpected appearance was an invitation to Flip. Not only did Neil have buck teeth and clothes that were too large for him, but he had a loony uncle as well!

Neil didn't know his uncle was coming to the school. 'We wanted it to be a surprise,' his mother explained. It was a surprise to everyone, including the principal,

who'd issued the invitation jokingly in response to Uncle Rex's assertion that children didn't know enough about poetry. 'Perhaps you should come and read some to us,' she'd said, so he did. The poems (*The Man From Snowy River* and *Clancy Of The Overflow*) were recited by Uncle Rex with gusto, leaving his young audience so astonished that Mr Schneider (Neil's class teacher) had to prompt them to applaud.

Uncle Rex also loved paintings, and when Neil was tiny they'd leaf through books with pictures by an artist whose name Neil could no longer recall. There was one with yellow flowers against a yellow background, their tendril-like petals seeming to move. The importance of the artist didn't mean anything to Neil, but he could point at the pictures and name objects he recognised, which was enough to delight his uncle.

Uncle Rex was eighty-something, but age didn't stop him doing things. He was tall with grey hair, a sallow complexion, piercing dark eyes, and a luxuriant grey moustache and beard. He generally wore a suit with a bow tie. He was supposed to live in a flat above his second-hand shop in Belvedere Street, Ferndale, but on the rare occasions Neil had been upstairs, there was no bed. So where did Uncle Rex sleep? In any case, Uncle Rex was rarely there. Where he went when he wasn't there was a mystery. All Neil's mother would say was that he was 'a hard man to catch'.

How did Neil's great-uncle keep his business going

when he was hardly ever there? He didn't employ anyone to look after the shop, and if a customer did turn up, there'd be a notice on the door saying: 'Temporarily closed. Try again next week.' Customers were rare, however. In fact, Neil had never seen one. Uncle Rex never seemed to sell anything.

Was this why Uncle Rex's shop had attracted the attention of the police? They'd raided it several times, once when a burglary victim claimed to have seen his property through the shop's grimy windows. It turned out not to be the man's property, but the fact that it might have been planted suspicion in the mind of Sergeant Cunningham ('clever pig').

'He thinks I'm a fence¹,' Uncle Rex explained after one such raid.

'Why would he think that?' asked Neil's mother.

Uncle Rex didn't know. He wasn't fazed by the police raids, perhaps because he had nothing of a criminal nature to hide. But he did have something to hide, because he was secretive and evasive and wouldn't answer questions directly.

Today was Neil's eleventh birthday, though he didn't make this known because he didn't want to draw attention to himself. Boofer knew, but Boofer wouldn't say anything because Boofer was his friend.

¹ A 'fence' is someone who receives stolen goods and sells them to people who might not know they're stolen.

'What'd yer mum give yer?' Boofer asked.

'New shoes,' said Neil, pointing to his feet.

'Do they fit yer?'

Neil shook his head. 'She got me these things you put inside 'em to make 'em tighter, and we'll take 'em out when my feet grow.'

'Yeah . . . right.'

Neil had wanted a pair of Nikes that he'd pointed out to his mother the last time they went shopping. But he knew his mother couldn't afford Nikes *and* school shoes, and his old school shoes had holes and were too tight.

'There'll be another present when I get home . . . from Uncle Rex.'

'Somethin' ter look forward to,' said Boofer.

. . .

'Aren't you going to open it?' Neil's mother pointed at the parcel she'd placed between his knife and fork. The tag said: 'Love from Uncle Rex.'

Neil knew the parcel wouldn't contain what he wanted – a smart pen to record his notes, drawings and doodles. Flip Benson had a smart pen and everyone in Neil's class wanted one. If this parcel contained a pen, it would probably be one people used hundreds of years ago . . . a goose feather, maybe? He tore off the paper and stared at the green leather case. Inside

there was indeed a pen, nestling in creamy satin. On the inside of the lid was the word 'Meisterstück'. What was that supposed to mean?

'It's beautiful,' crooned his mother. 'Look at that enamelwork! It's got a hand-crafted gold nib, and those bands on the cap are gold, too. No one else at school will have a pen like that. I doubt you'll find a smarter pen anywhere. You said you wanted a smart pen, and now you've got one. You'll have to ring Uncle Rex and thank him.'

'He won't *be* there, Mum. If he was there, he'd have brought it around.'

Neil's mother couldn't dispute the fact, having tried on many occasions to contact her elusive uncle. 'I heard sirens today, and I worried they were heading for his shop. You don't think . . .?'

'He'd have told us, Mum. He's probably away on one of his trips. How am I supposed to write with this?'

'You fill it with ink.'

'Ink?'

'People have forgotten about ink. When your Uncle Rex went to school, there were ink wells in the desks for children to dip their pens into.'

'No kidding!'

'Scout's honour. He couldn't use anything but the pens the school provided. Use my computer and try googling "desks with ink wells" and see the old desks with holes in them where the ink wells went.'

'Did he use one of these?'

'I'm not sure whether they could use fountain pens when your uncle went to school. Probably he wouldn't have been able to afford one.'

'Has he given me one because he wanted one when he was a kid?'

'Possibly. He likes you to have things that are functional as well as beautiful. Most of the things he buys for you are collectors' items, so it could be worth a lot of money.'

What was the point of owning something worth a lot of money if you couldn't use it and you couldn't sell it? He couldn't sell it because it was a gift, like the other things Uncle Rex had bought: the wooden spinning top; the ancient yo-yo; the toy soldiers his mother hid away in case their lead content was toxic; the solo paddle ball set that made opponents unnecessary; the kerosene-fuelled steam engine his mother wouldn't let him use; the action-heroes from bygone television series, still in their original plastic wrappings; the pellet gun that was too unsafe to be played with. There was a cupboard crammed with toys that were either too boring, too uncool or too dangerous to be played with, and there were other presents, too – like books written by authors he'd never heard of.

'Why don't you go on your way home from school tomorrow . . . see if he's there?'

'He won't *be* there, Mum!'

'I'd like you to look, anyway . . . okay?'

'Okay.'