

Shy poet's therapy with words

Stephen Easton

reports



Alchemists often dream of turning lead into gold. Through writing poetry, I have turned the lead in my pencil into gold.

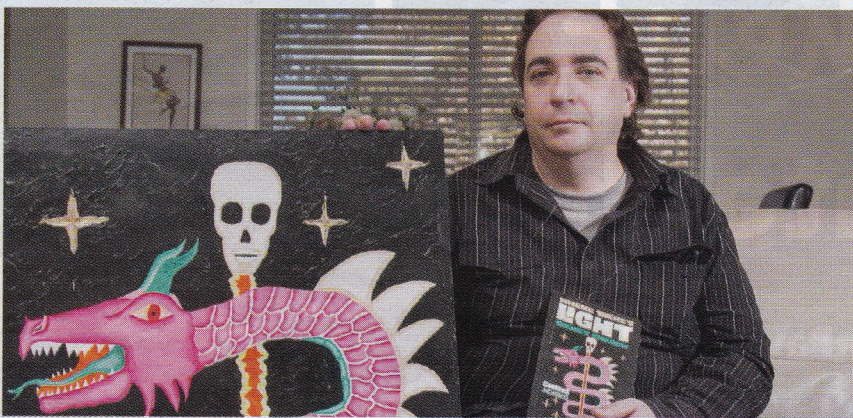
The words glitter upon the page like sunlight on water. Poetry has made me wealthy.

SO begins part one of "Where there's light, there's shadow", a four-part poetry collection by Canberra poet Chris Jones.

The metaphorical "gold" he is referring to could easily be relief, through this creative outlet, from the mental illness that has affected most of his life. But "relief" doesn't quite cover how important creative endeavours such as writing and painting have been to Chris, who began to experience depression and anxiety in his teens and was later diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Another stanza which seems to better describe the role words can play is found in the poem "Blind", which seems to describe a battle against dark emotions such as anger, loneliness and anxiety.

Eventually I came across the noun knife, and the adjectives which gave it detail. I felt the knife in my grip, and it was as sharp as a shark's tooth.



Poet Chris Jones and his book cover artwork... "Getting published makes you feel better, obviously, so it helps your self-esteem."

Photo by Brent McDonald

Jewels were encrusted in the handle.

"I started writing when I was 16, just as a way of expressing my feelings," says Chris. "I used to write short stories in my English class in Alice Springs. I won a poetry award in Alice Springs, too."

His major influences – horror, fantasy, crime and science fiction – are all evident in the poems, some of which were written as far back as those teenage years.

The 41-year-old poet speaks softly and in short sentences, not at all like the flowing words he puts on the page. He says he has been always shy, and that growing up in a Defence family, moving around a lot, contributed to his depression.

"I find that people discriminate against you for shyness a fair bit, too, as well as things like depression and schizophrenia," he says.

Being overlooked or ignored because you are shy is one thing, but Chris says the stigma attached to a condition with such a baggage-laden name as schizophrenia means that "...you not only have to deal with the mental illness, but also discrimination by other people."

For this writer, the usual measures of success as an author seem less important than the cathartic effect of the act itself, and the potential to reach out to others like him through his work. When he launched the

book in April, he made a choice to publicise the fact that he has schizophrenia.

"Getting published makes you feel better, obviously, so it helps your self-esteem," he says. "And it might help other people who are suffering from schizophrenia as well."

Another thing that makes him feel better is painting, he says, and you can see his work on the front of the book.

"Where there's light, there's shadow" (\$19.95) is published by Sid Harta and available from most bookshops in Canberra.