FIGHTING A DAN CER

FAR FROM BEING SILENCED BY THROAT CANCER, POET AND BOXER GEOFF GOODFELLOW BECAME EVEN MORE OUTSPOKEN.

POET GEOFF GOODFELLOW has discovered a new voice...in fact, two new voices. The former construction worker and boxer hit the canvas in a bout with throat cancer in 2008. Now he's up again, throwing verse around like jabs and hooks, although the cancer gave his voice the equivalent of a cauliflower ear.

Shortlisted for the Age Book of the Year in 2002, Adelaide-based Goodfellow has performed and written poetry for 25 years. He says an important part of his writing process is speaking drafts aloud. During and after his illness, however, he had to change his poetic voice to suit his damaged voice box.

"I was a ranting, screaming poet at times [in my career]. These are powerful poems, but in a different way to my previous work," he says, explaining that he was "Whispering Geoff" for eight months until he received a synthetic voice box.

"I knew I would have to readjust the way I wrote to suit my voice because I am, after all, a performance poet; I wrote most of these poems lying in bed..." And, it should be added, while he was unwell and undergoing radiation and chemotherapy.

His new book, Waltzing with Jack Dancer (rhyming slang denoting his battle with cancer), sees the author of Poems to a Dead Father (2002) and Punch On, Punch Off (2004) discover greater sensitivity, but his work has lost none of its political impact. The book's central poem, 'The Seventh Doctor', is such a powerful piece it will have many in the medical profession ducking and weaving.

Goodfellow dealt with seven doctors: only one offered him the respect he believes he, or anyone, deserves. His GP, the "first doctor", misdiagnosed him twice, and when Goodfellow arrived at Emergency, slurring his words due to the medication his GP had put him on, he was told to go home, have a shave and a shower, and see his GP in the morning. But his body was telling him that no amount of grooming was going to help. "I made the doctor examine me. I shouldn't have had to do that, but if I'd taken notice of what that doctor had said and went home, I quite possibly could have died."

Guy Rees, Goodfellow's seventh doctor, told him as he was wheeled into the operating theatre on 20 March 2008 that he should write about his experiences as a wake-up call to the Australian medical profession. Goodfellow did just that, and he launched Waltzing with Jack Dancer on the same date three years later. He says Rees gave him back his life, and the book is dedicated to him in gratitude.

And he adds, about his experience: "If it happened to me, it's happening to other people. Our bodies tell us when we are in dire straits, and I knew I was in all sorts of trouble."

Goodfellow sees himself as still on the mission Rees set for him. He has read from his book to medical students at Adelaide University, challenging them to care for all their patients better.

His Adelaide launch saw magistrates, judges and lawyers among his regular fans, and he is hitting the school circuit to educate students about cancer and what people should expect from the medical profession. "Everyone has a cancer story and we have all been misdiagnosed by doctors on occasion. One of the reasons I want to get the poetry out there is to make people realise we have to challenge figures of authority; we can't just be pushed around."

Waltzing with Jack Dancer breaks the mould for published Australian poetry. While other books have attempted to marry images and poems, Goodfellow's book achieves a seamless interaction due to photographer Randy Larcombe's high-quality documentation of Goodfellow's illness.

Then there is the inclusion of The C-Word, a novella by Goodfellow's daughter, Grace, which bookends the volume. "I knew she was writing a new novella, but I didn't know what it was about," says Goodfellow of teenage Grace, who has already won the under-age award in The Somerset National Novella Competition and was shortlisted last year for The C-Word.

"She gave it to me while I was cooking breakfast on Christmas Day, and was annoyed when I wouldn't take my eyes off the stove and give her my full attention. I read halfway down the first page and then my eyes welled up... I thought it was a fantastic piece and should go in the book. These sorts of things need to be understood by families."

Grace's story gives Waltzing with Jack Dancer a cross-generational emphasis. Further broadening the book's scope, Grace also writes about how she became ill after the stress of living with her dad during the worst phases of his illness and recovery.

These days, Goodfellow gets a bit tired during the afternoons, but he is otherwise fit and healthy and is back to weightlifting, running and swimming. His physical voice remains shaky, but his poetic voice is strong. "I learned a bit of humility," he says. "The new voice I've got is a more powerful voice than the yelling, screaming Geoff of the mid-1980s."

by Paul Mitchell

Waltzing with Jack Dancer is out now.