

Comedian
Peter Helliar
has a new
book out and
it's for kids,
writes Peter
Barrett ➤

MEET PETE

PHOTOGRAPHY DEAN GOLJA





Peter Helliar, the popular stand-up comic, actor, director, producer, TV host and father of three, has added another title to his bulging list of job descriptors: children's book author.

Written for eight- to 12-year-olds, *Frankie Fish and the Sonic Suitcase* follows the exploits of a young boy and his grumpy, hook-handed grandpa as they travel through time, encountering vain magicians, villainous racing car drivers and a host of other kooky characters.

Although this first book in a series of three is laced with plenty of fart jokes and pranks, at its heart, says the author, it's about fitting in.

"I just wanted to have the hero be, kind of, not necessarily the popular kid," says Peter, who took a year to complete the book, snatching time to write between various other commitments, including his role as a co-host of Network Ten's *The Project*.

"I wanted him to have one true friend. Because I believe for the kids out there who are struggling to make friends, all you need is one good friend."

Don't be mistaken, though. The characters in his book are not particularly autobiographical. Peter says he grew up in suburban Melbourne with hard-working but supportive parents, sweet grandparents and a great group of friends.

"I had a pretty blissful childhood, playing footy in the streets, cricket on the beach in summer, so nothing to really rebel against," he says.

So what inspired him to write a children's title?

Peter had already written one book (with co-author Paul Calleja), a biography of his obliviously egotistical fictional football



character, "Strauchanie", called *Bryan Strauchan my story: The rise and rise of a genuine superstar of Australian sport*.

Meanwhile, he and his wife Bridget's three boys Liam, 14, Aidan, 12, and Oscar, 8, were growing up before their eyes. A longstanding fan of stories about escaping to fantasy worlds, such as Enid Blyton's classic *The Faraway Tree*, Peter realised that if he had any hope of contributing to the genre before his children became adults, it was now or never.

By coincidence, in the same week, two publishers contacted him, asking if he'd be interested exploring children's literature. "I thought, this is obviously a sign from somewhere, so I got back to both of them and away we went."

Peter tested out early chapters on his boys but stopped short of revealing all 263 pages, preferring to wait until they could hold the finished book in their hands.

"Oscar's review is the best I've had so far. After reading the first chapter, he said, 'It's awesome. It reminds me of David Walliams'."



TOP: Peter on Network Ten's *The Project* with current co-host Carrie Bickmore and former co-host Charlie Pickering.

“

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Peter says. “That was great – I told the publisher that and she said we might put it on the cover.”

Despite his long list of job titles, Peter still identifies first and foremost as a stand-up comedian, a career he started in late 1996. By 1998 he had his first TV spot on C31's *The Loft Live*, hosted by Rove McManus, appearing with other talented comedians such as Dave Hughes.

When *Rove* moved to the Nine Network in 1999 Peter moved with it, and then to Network Ten the following year, enjoying a decade in the national spotlight on football comedy panel show *Before the Game*. Peter has also worked in radio, written and co-starred in film (romantic comedy *I Love You Too*), as well as creating, writing, co-producing and co-directing his own eight-part, award-winning comedy series, *It's A Date*, in 2013.

He joined *The Project* four years ago, but still enjoys the creative aspects of stand-up comedy and aims to perform in a stand-up tour every second year ➤



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to keep himself fresh.

"I think with stand-up you've got amazing freedom," he says. "With *The Project*, I'll have three meetings before the show starts and that happens every day. With stand-up, the only meeting I'll have is with my manager to decide whether I'm going to do another show and how big it's going to be and which cities we're going to go to. But then there's no more meetings. After that, I'm on my own and I can just develop material and succeed and fail on my own terms – it's great."

With all his different roles on the go it's no surprise that something, eventually, had to give. When Bridget was pregnant with their second child, Peter found himself particularly overstretched, spending half the week in Sydney and half the week in Melbourne.

"I really had to take stock and I left *Before the Game*," he says. "That was a really hard thing to do because I created that show; that show was my idea, and it was a really beloved show. But I needed to spend time with my family. People have asked me if I regretted doing that and the answer is no."

Peter and Bridget were the first in their friendship circle to have children, which initially made the transition into parenthood more difficult. Now, though, most of his friends have children, too, and Peter is able to reflect a little more on what being a dad is all about.

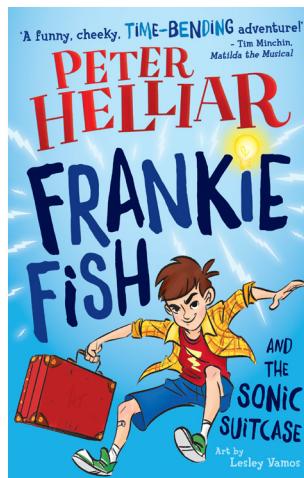
"It's just given me focus on what I want to do and what I need to do and I've loved it every step of the way. People say, 'Four's a good age' or 'Seven's a good age'. For me, I haven't come across a bad age yet.

"It's amazing to watch them grow and evolve – there are a couple of young men in my house now – I'm really proud of them, they're really good kids. And they teach me some stuff. I like being a dad; my wife and I are a team and I really like it."

Among other changes, fatherhood has made Peter more emotional when watching films, he says.

"Particularly if they involve kids. I've shed tears in some pretty embarrassing movies."

Stay tuned – work is now well under way on the second book in Peter's *Frankie Fish* time-travelling series. "I love doing it – I really love the process," he says. ☀



Frankie Fish and The Sonic Suitcase, \$14.99, Hardie Grant Egmont

