

I’ve always thought one of the worst things that could happen to a person is to lose a son or daughter. It’s against the natural order of things – it’s just not meant to happen. Dubliner Benji Bennett lived that nightmare two years ago when he lost his little boy, Adam, to a brain tumour. He was only four years old.

Though the pain never goes away, Benji’s experiences have taught him to appreciate the short time he had with Adam; to live for the moment with his existing three children, celebrate his son and send out an important message to parents through a series of beautifully-illustrated children’s books.

Work on the first of these, ‘Before You Sleep’, a love-filled, magical adventure for parent and child to enjoy together, began a matter of weeks after Adam’s funeral in 2007. It was published on the first anniversary of his death, and won the Children’s Book of Year Award in Ireland on 6th May this year.

Since winning the award, Benji has left his day job and turned his attention full-time to writing a series of Adam’s Adventure books, with the recent publication of the bestselling Adam’s Amazing Space Adventure and forthcoming Adam Saves Christmas.

I meet Benji in the foyer of a central London hotel. He has just finished a radio interview, and we are surrounded by media types fiddling with Blackberries and the odd celebrity sipping their café mocha. But this gentle, softly-spoken family man draws me into his world, and we could be in Dublin, in his living room, chatting over a cup of tea as he excitedly spreads out proofs for his next book on the marble table.

Explaining how it all took off, Benji has the look of a man who can’t quite believe the reaction his first book has been getting. For a former Vodaphone employee who had never entertained the idea of putting pen to paper, he has been shocked at how “nuts” people in Ireland have gone about it.

“I don’t know...” he says, shaking his head. “The kids love the illustrations, the story. But it’s more than a children’s book, and the feedback has been extraordinary. People are sending me emails, letters, saying it has changed their lives and how they view their own family.”

It was never going to be anything other than writing a book for Adam. Then the project took on a life of its own, and Benji decided he wanted to print it and distribute it. Now, the plan is that each page from ‘Before You Sleep...’ will be a starting point for a new book, based on the activity the little boy and his parent are doing.

At the end of each book, Adam goes to sleep, and gets kisses from mummy and daddy, and therein lies the message: tell your kids at bedtime that you love them.

Says Benji, “Adam’s message is always on the front page of every book – that’s what all this is about. He was taken away from us for a reason, and these books were made for a reason. Now something very beautiful is happening because of him. If Adam’s death means every child gets an extra hug or a kiss, then it makes some sense; some kind of sense.”

I ask about when Adam died. It’s a deeply personal thing to share, but it’s also unavoidable, it’s the reason we’re here today. Before he begins to tell the most painful of stories, Benji shows me some photos of Adam that he takes out of his coat pocket. Before me is a beautiful little boy with a radiant smile and the curly blonde hair of a mischievous little angel.

“He was our middle boy”, he says, with a deep sigh. “Harry was six and a half, and our youngest Robbie was only one when Adam started to feel sick. He was vomiting – we thought tummy bug, usual kids stuff. Before that, he was running round the beach; we have a mobile home down in Brittas Bay, and he’d be down on the beach, playing, Mad into golf, tennis, football, just one of those really funny kids, always laughing. He loved making people laugh.

“We brought him to the doctor, but on the 13th August – which is my birthday – he was up screaming all night, so we thought well he’d better take him to hospital, thinking only that he’d be getting dehydrated.”

As hard as this is to hear, it must be one thousands times harder to tell, and Bennett has to compose himself for a moment, eyes glistening, before he can continue. “They put him straight onto a drip, he got sick on the bed and I lifted him up, telling him he’d be fine. Then his fists clenched, and he shook and just went totally limp.



I thought he’d fainted.”

But it was much worse than that, and the Bennett family were told that evening that Adam had a very serious brain tumour.

The tot was transferred to Beaumont in Dublin, and doctors showed his parents a scan which revealed a tumour the size of a tennis ball. It was only at this stage that Benji realised his little boy was not going to make it.

He said, “We were spared a huge amount of the pain of watching him suffer – that’s something that helps us. We were brought up into intensive care that night, and there were all these old people who had had strokes, and there was Adam in this massive big bed. He looked like an angel, and I was thinking to myself, ‘What the hell’s going on?’”

From then on, Benji remembers, everything was calm and peaceful. There was no screaming, no shouting; just Adam’s family gathering around him to say their

MY SON’S GIFT TO THE WORLD



Irish Children’s Book of the Year Award Winner Benji Bennett tells **SHELLEY MARDEN** about losing his little boy, and about how writing has helped him come to terms with his grief and celebrate his son’s memory...

goodbyes and tell him how much they loved him.

“We lay beside him, took a lock of his hair, sang a song to him and... we were just waiting quietly. The nurse came in then, and said, ‘I’m sorry. He’s gone.’”

This was at 6am, the same time of the day Adam came into the world. Bennett says that, the minute he was born, clouds parted in a grey sky and a ray of sunshine came through the window, quite literally landing on the newborn’s head.

Adam’s birth, says Benji, marked a turning-point in many respects. It was the end of a difficult year; Benji had been finding it difficult to get a job – it was when the whole IT sector that he worked in went belly-up, and he found out he had a new position at Vodaphone.

From the minute he was born, he says with a smile, Adam was always their ‘angel’; a “special little fella”. They had their usual ups and downs like every family, but they were generally living in a happy little bubble of contentment, until suddenly, their lives fell apart.

Following Adam’s death, there were moments when Benji wondered how he would ever get out of bed. He and his wife have since read something a grieving parent wrote called ‘The Pit’ about this same situation, which he says describes it all perfectly.

“You’re in a pit: it’s dark and slimy and the walls are slippery and made of glass. You’re drowning in this sludge that’s dragging you down like quicksand, and there are different kinds of people that come to help you.

“There are the people that don’t think twice, and literally jump in there with you – they’re the ones holding you up; your family and your close friends.

“Then there are the people who abseil down, saying, ‘Give us the hand, you’re nearly there!’ They’re not fully committed, but they’re around. Then there are the people looking in and going, “Are ya alright? C’mon, we’ll be back in a minute” – and then they’re gone.”

Benji’s family rallied round, and organised a last-minute holiday for them abroad. Laughing, he tells me how they packed him, his wife and kids off to Disneyland a matter of weeks after the tragedy.

“Our son had just died and we were off to Disneyland, which is all about happy children! It was *bizarre*. While we were away, the family came in and totally redecorated the



house. They didn’t know what to do, so we ended up getting a new bathroom, new carpets...”

The idea for the book was there from the start. The night they lost Adam, Benji’s wife said to him, “Why has this happened to us?” and he replied, “Because we are able for this. We loved Adam; we did right by him, we told him we loved him; we have no guilt, no regrets.”

He was immediately seized by the need to tell as many people as possible about his beautiful son – and to remind

them to tell their kids that they love them. The day of Adam’s funeral [which was attended by some 3,000 people], the seed for a book was already planted.

“I just started writing. I remembered when we were out camping at Brittas Bay when Adam was only four; there he was under the stars, having a great time. I decided I wanted to write about these things, and tell parents to go and do things. It was lashing rain, and a couple of the parents chose not to go, but we decided to go anyway.

“I love you much more than a big sandy beach, With sand dunes so high they seem far out of reach”

“And sure enough, the weather cleared up and we all had a ball. I know if the roles had been reversed, I’d have killed myself! Now I focus on giving the kids experiences, even something as small as sitting with them on the grass and pointing out a little ladybird. I put nothing off; in fact, it’s starting to border on the obsessive!”

As I marvel at the strength and determination of the man before me, Benji tells me about just one in a series of little coincidences that have led him to the belief that Adam is there, looking down on them all.

Soon after Adam died, Benji and his wife Jackie went to see a bereavement councillor. There they witnessed couples that, years after losing a child, looked like ghosts, still stuck in a rut – and they both swore they would not suffer the same fate.

The couple decided to try for another child, but after a while they were starting to think it would never happen.

The day they went to collect Adam’s ashes, Jackie decided to take a test and just check one last time. She bought a test from the chemist, stopped off at her sister’s house, did the test and discovered she was pregnant. Jackie later gave birth to a girl, Molly.

Says Benji, “The son of the writer Danielle Steele committed suicide, and I remember she once said, ‘To lose a child is nine tenths unbearable suffering, and one tenth a gift.’

That resonates very strongly with me; Adam has given me these books, and he has also given us little Molly. These were his gifts to the world.”

BUY THE BOOK

‘Before You Sleep’ (Adams Printing Press) is out now in WH Smith in the UK and all good bookshops in Ireland. A donation from the sale of each book published is made to a children’s Charity. ‘Before you Sleep’ supports Barretstown camp for sick children with a donation from Benji Bennett’s other two books going to the Make a Wish foundation. Visit www.adamsprintingpress.ie or email info@adamsprintingpress.ie.