

# We need to talk about this: Embracing challenging texts

By Will Kostakis

*With the passage of marriage equality into law, let's discuss how to ensure your library meets the needs of your LGBTQIAP+\* students.*

*\*Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual and other marginalised orientations and identities*



Photo by Walker Rowsey.

## Biography

*Will Kostakis is an award-winning author for young adults. He tours schools internationally, inspiring teens to read and write, and supplementing critical studies of his own work. His sophomore novel *The First Third* won the Gold Inky, and was shortlisted for the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year and Prime Minister's Literary awards. *The Sidekicks* is his latest novel, and despite dealing with three different boys navigating grief, it has been labelled as age-inappropriate for teens (by some) because one of those boys is same-sex attracted.*

**When I had the pleasure of attending the ASLA XXV Conference in the middle of last year, it was the culmination of 18 months spent addressing conferences about my latest young-adult novel *The Sidekicks*, and the ways in which libraries treat texts with LGBTQIAP+ themes. I conferred with teacher librarians from all around the country, some of whom were actively promoting these texts, some wished they could but were restricted by their schools' policies, and others were resistant.**

These conversations were remarkable, and while I wish I could say that at the end of those 18 months, I found a middle-ground solution that pleases absolutely everyone, I didn't. I do, however, have a greater understanding of the myriad of factors at play, and I wanted to take the time to strip what has become a deeply politicised issue

of its *Us-Vs-Themness*, and instead centre the conversation on what matters to us all: our students.

How can we better facilitate our students' understanding of their peers and the world? How do we ensure the library's continued relevance to them in that changing world? How do we want our students to feel in our

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school library spaces? Does the way we treat diverse texts, in this case, texts with LGBTQIAP+ themes, conflict with those stated aims?

## A gay author in Australia

I came out eight years into my career, so I got to experience what it's like to be a heterosexual author for young adults in Australia, and what it's like to be a gay one. The difference is stark. *The First Third* was my first novel to feature an openly gay character. It dealt with the realities of his life with sensitivity and in an age-appropriate fashion. While there were two instances where I was asked not to discuss that character, the book was widely embraced.

By comparison, there was a time after coming out where, after touring for the better part of a decade, the contents of my school visits were occasionally vetted in phone calls from school principals. *The Sidekicks* is largely based on my teenage experience, informed by my experience dealing with the death of a close friend in high school. This has been overshadowed by the fact that in it, a boy builds the courage to come out of the closet. In terms of sexual content, two boys kiss. And yet, it has been deemed inappropriate for its intended audience by some schools. The presence of gay characters makes an all-ages romance adult-only. Literally. There is a school in Melbourne that only allows teachers to borrow it.

Thankfully, the novel has found its audience, and its exploration of grief has begun to resonate in schools. It's a relief, but that initial resistance was disheartening, and it exemplifies just how frightened we can be of texts that reflect difference honestly and openly.

For a long time, I was disappointed in myself for letting my sexuality take over the novel's reception. In much the same way that *The*





### Listen to your students

As writers and as school librarians, we must listen to and be guided by the needs of the young people we serve.

A few years ago, an independent school in Melbourne set *The First Third* as a compulsory text in Year 8. In our conversation about the text, the Head of English revealed that the text was assigned because she was aware that some students would be grappling with their sexuality at that age.

That same year, a school in Sydney advised me not to bring up the gay character immediately before a Q&A with students who had already read the book. I obliged the request, despite the bizarreness of pretending gay people didn't exist to a room of Year 10 girls. Towards the end of the session, I asked the students who their favourite character was. They named Lucas, the novel's key gay character.

I had omitted Lucas, and they had steered the conversation towards him. They began to discuss a scene later in the novel where he revealed he had lost his virginity. I was taken aback that they, a room of — I'm assuming — heterosexual girls had connected with a gay boy's first sexual experience so strongly.

The response was resolute. 'It made me understand my gay friend, Sam, a little better.'

There is a fear that when difficult (read: LGBTQIAP+) topics are raised in the classroom or a school setting, the aim is to convert kids, as if exposing them to gay stories might corrupt their rigid heterosexuality and inspire them to pursue a gay lifestyle. I write gay stories for my younger gay self, and for the gay kids who do not see their world reflected back at them. I want them to know they have value,

that their experiences have value. A positive side effect is that others who don't identify as same-sex attracted see other people's experiences and understand their gay friends and peers a little better.

The importance of that became clearer the more I toured *The First Third* and saw its impact. I was guided by teens and inspired to be more open in my work. When my coming out attracted a heap of publicity, I was in the middle of a term-long residency at a Catholic school. My goal in the short term was to keep my job, and I was petrified.

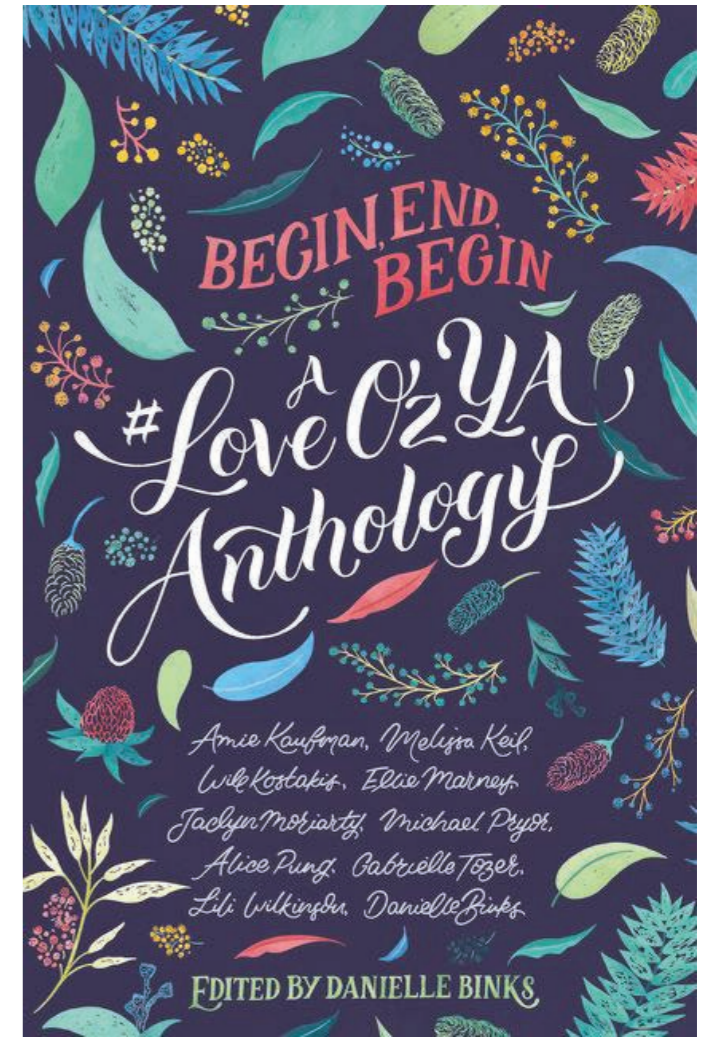
During a workshop with an entire Year 9 cohort, a student raised her hand and said, 'I found your blog.'

As the school's writer in residence, I had been required to sign a contract stating that my actions would be in keeping with the teaching and values of the Church. I was quietly terrified of her raising my homosexuality in front of 200 students, so I pivoted with a polite, 'Oh, really? That's great. Thanks for reading.'

I tried to field another question, but she persisted. 'No, we just wanted to let you know, we really, *really* like your blog.' The cluster of girls around her nodded, and the subtext was clear: They knew I was gay and they supported me, but they said so in a manner that would not get me, or them, in trouble.

Their hesitance to speak openly is a matter for another day about how we treat the issue in schools more broadly, but to have them speak up was a remarkably affirming experience. I wonder, however, if their library's collection speaks to them and their interests.

Danielle Binks, literary agent and editor of *Begin, End, Begin: A #LoveOzYA Anthology* embarked on a year-long tour to promote



her book in Australian schools, and took the opportunity to let her two roles intersect. She spoke about supporting Australia's youth literature through the #LoveOzYA movement and asked the teens she was meeting what sorts of Australian books they wanted to read more of in the future.

'Overwhelmingly the most popular request was from teen girls, and those in Years 7 and 8 in particular — who wanted more lesbian teen fiction,' Binks remarks.

'I was told they felt there was a severe lack of such books in both the United States and Australian markets, while there were plenty of American books about gay male teenagers. Some merely wanted to correct this imbalance, but it was made very clear to me that many others who were requesting

these books were doing so to feel seen, and to know that their stories existed and mattered.'

What's interesting is that the students were after stories that reflect the true kaleidoscope of queer lives, beyond simply contemporary coming-out narratives. There's an appetite for romance, fantasy, science-fiction novels with LGBTQIAP+ themes.

### The influence of Hollywood

We can bemoan the way Hollywood dictates students' reading habits, but I'm of the belief that if a film adaptation directs students to discovering new texts, then it's a good thing. This month will see the release of *Love, Simon* (in cinemas 29 March). Australian teens will flock to see a prominently marketed film about a closeted boy's first love, and that will undoubtedly lead them to the book on which it's based, *Simon Vs. The Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli.

Speaking about the adaptation, Albertalli says she is proud of the film and grateful for the care director Greg Berlanti and his team have taken with the story.

'I've already heard from so many LGBTQIAP+ teens about what it means to them to see themselves represented in a trailer for a mainstream rom-com,' she says.

'I can't wait for my readers to experience the full movie, because it's so special. I can't take credit for it, but I feel incredibly honoured and lucky to be along for the ride.'

The release of the adaptation of David Levithan's *Every Day* could prove similarly effective at driving teens to the library. Both have sequels that make for logical recommendations, with Levithan's *Another Day* already out and *Someday* on the way, and Albertalli's *Leah on the Offbeat* released

in April. There are also similar novels from local and international authors that could help turn students' newfound interests in reading into lifelong habits. These adaptations are opportunities, much like *The Fault In Our Stars*, *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight* before them, and our libraries must be equipped to meet the demand they spark.

### Future-proof your library

An inviting library has a collection that is robust and fresh, and with budgetary pressures, purchases can't just be made with yesterday in mind. Library collections must be future-proof.

Consider the other stories students are exposed to, with LGBTQIAP+ stories becoming more prominent in film and on television, with LGBTQIAP+ personalities attracting huge youth fan bases the world over — our libraries can't be the one place these stories don't flourish. It's an artificial omission and it reflects a society that frankly no longer exists.

As of this year, our students are growing up in an Australia where they can marry members of the same sex. In my 10 years as a touring author, I have seen the shift in attitudes towards LGBTQIAP+ people on campuses and recognised the increasing openness LGBTQIAP+ students exhibit in schools. This ought to be reflected in texts for young people and has been. A resistance to those texts is a resistance to reflecting the world in which our students live, and it's a resistance to some of the most exciting works for young people being released today.

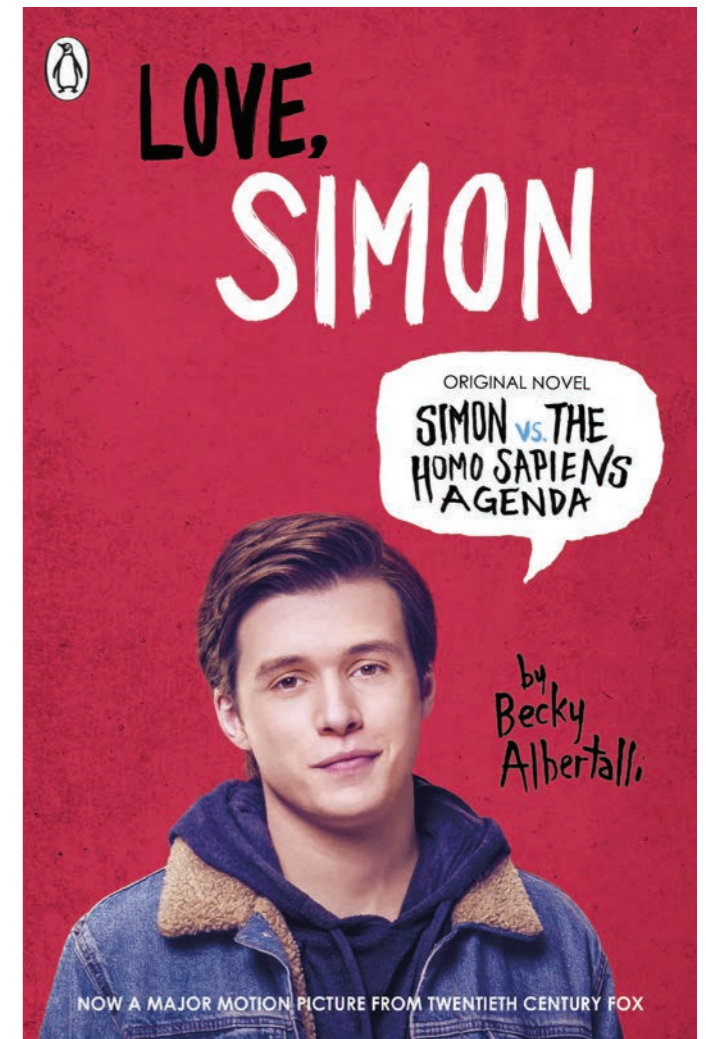
The prevalent feeling I have encountered is that, in some schools, books that feature LGBTQIAP+ issues or characters are instantly deemed books for senior students,

or sometimes, strictly for the teachers. This ignores one of the big trends in youth literature at the moment: the rise of middle-grade fiction as a necessary bridge between junior and young-adult fiction. Middle-grade fiction typically appeals to students aged eight to 12 and can deal with a range of real-world issues in an appropriate fashion. The local industry is currently playing catch-up to the United States in this area — middle-grade makes more sense given their school system splits middle-grade and high schools — but rest assured, we are catching up. Books that deal sensitively with LGBTQIAP+ issues have been produced in the United States for years. With the rise of initiatives that promote representation in texts like #ownvoices (books written from lived experiences) and #weneeddiversebooks (books featuring diverse characters), these LGBTQIAP+ middle-grade texts are becoming more prevalent. Local authors are also producing similar books for that space. The year 2018 is one that will see many Australian young-adult authors writing novels that will appeal to that lower age bracket. Some of these will undoubtedly feature characters who are not strictly heterosexual.

To dismiss books that have LGBTQIAP+ themes is to ignore the needs of students now, and to restrict your collection's potential to reflect their lived experiences into the future. Students suffer the same information overload as we do. They are just as bombarded with digital media as we are ... What will make them come to a dated collection that wilfully presents a world that doesn't exist, and reflects attitudes that our world has moved past?

### Where do we start?

There are resources and reading lists available online to help cultivate these collections, from the Centre For Youth



Literature (<http://loveozya.com.au/wp-content/uploads/formidable/6/Diversity-Recommendations-Reading-Matters-2017-1.pdf>), the Stella Prize (<http://thestellaprize.com.au/readup/lgbtqi/>) and #LoveOzYA (<http://loveozya.com.au/love/lgbtqia-loveozya-poster-1/>).

If you don't feel you can actively cultivate a collection that is more diverse in your school, I encourage you to, like me, take the time to have this difficult conversation with your peers. I have visited enough schools to know that there is no one set way to do things at a religious school, just as there is no one set way to do things at independent or public schools. Share solutions, book recommendations and positive stories ... We need to talk about this.