



# TEACHERS' RESOURCES

## RECOMMENDED FOR

Secondary  
Ages 13+

## CONTENTS

1. Plot summary	1
2. About the author	2
3. Characters	2
4. Themes	3
5. Narrative technique	5
6. Related reading	6

## KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English, Film Studies
- **General capabilities:** Language, Literature, Literacy, Critical and Creative Thinking, Personal and Social Capability, Ethical Understanding
- **Cross-curriculum priorities:** Film Studies, PDHPE

## REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Analysis multiple points of view in text, and how different writing styles evoke mood, tone, tension, and characterisation
- Encourage the study of perspective and open mindedness
- Examination of script writing

## THEMES

- Coming out
- Grief
- Friendship

## PREPARED BY

Penguin Random House Australia and Bec Kavanagh

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## The Sidekicks Will Kostakis

## PLOT SUMMARY

The Swimmer. The Rebel. The Nerd.

Ryan, Harley and Miles aren't friends. They're three guys with separate lives who shared a best friend. And when he dies they become three guys who orbit around the space he leaves behind.

Ryan is a swimmer – a driven young Olympic hopeful. His friendship with Isaac had been a space where he could be completely open – Isaac had been the only one who'd known he was gay. But with Isaac gone, Ryan finds himself closeted again, and struggles to let anyone else get close. With Isaac gone, Ryan's fear that people will 'find out' who he is becomes amplified. He is tempted to lose himself in the routine of swimming practice, until one of his teachers shares his own story about losing a friend. Ryan doesn't want to risk losing it all. There's more to him than being Isaac's sidekick.

Harley is the next to pick up this three-part narrative. He is barely present in the first part of the novel, and as he takes on the role of narrator we discover where he's been. Harley is the rebel of the group, his friendship with Isaac (Zac) fuelled by booze and drugs. When Zac dies, Harley is driven by the guilt he feels at being the friend who

encouraged Zac to party, and at being one of the last to see him alive. He runs from Barton to his dad's house in Gerringong, desperate to forget why he's there. If Ryan's revelation is that he wants people to know who he is, Harley's is realising that there are people who need him. He returns to Barton, to face his friendships and his guilt.

Miles is given the final stretch of the narrative, and it is he who has the most to say about Harley's friendship with Isaac. He calls him his dealer, and places the blame for Isaac's death entirely on Harley, saying that if they had truly been friends Harley would have pulled him up on his substance abuse. But Miles' attack (despite being genuine) is really masking his own fear of being inadequate in his friendship with Isaac. He feels deeply the omission of being overlooked in articles about Isaac's life and death. Miles is a socially awkward young filmmaker who spends his lunchtime re-watching footage of Isaac, hoping that it has managed to capture some essential part of their friendship. As he leads the narrative to its conclusion, Miles starts to define who he is without Isaac, and what his position was in their friendship. It is Miles who gradually describes a future for the three of them that imagines them as individuals and friends – not just sidekicks.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Will Kostakis was only 19 when his first novel for young adults, *Loathing Lola*, was released. It went on to be shortlisted for the Sakura Medal in Japan and made the official selection for the Australian Government's 2010 Get Reading! programme.

In 2005, Will won the Sydney Morning Herald Young Writer of the Year for a collection of short stories.

His second YA novel, *The First Third*, was released in August 2013, and was shortlisted for the 2014 CBCA awards in the Older Readers category. *The Sidekicks* is his third novel for young adults.

Will spends his time working as a freelance journalist, writing and touring Australian secondary schools. His website is [www.willkostakis.com](http://www.willkostakis.com)

## CHARACTERS

Ryan, Harley and Miles start out as being defined by their friendship with Isaac, but by the end of the book they have begun to define themselves as individuals. Each of these characters narrates a portion of the book. As you're reading, keep a record (with examples) of the following:

- How they describe their friendship with Isaac.

- How they describe their friendship with each other.
- The way they tell their part of the story (straight narrative, dialogue, memory, script etc).
- How they change from the start of the book to the end.

## Ryan

Ryan describes himself as an 'Olympic hopeful'.

- How does this label define him?
- How does it limit him?
- What does his friendship with Isaac offer him?
- Why is Ryan afraid of telling people his sexuality?

'My favourite colour is aqua.' (p33)

- Why does Ryan share this information with Miles?
- What parts of yourself do you share with your friends?
- In groups, discuss whether you agree or disagree with the idea that it's better to 'diversify your investments' and to share parts of yourself with a number of people, or whether you think it's better to be extremely close to only one.

Consider how difficult it is for Ryan to come out as gay.

- Why might it be more difficult following Isaac's death?
- What impact does coming out/not coming out have on his relationships with other characters in the book?

## Activity

Choose either the scene on p50 or the one on p54-55 in which Ryan comes close to telling his mum that he's gay. Either write an extension of this scene from Ryan's perspective, or rewrite the scene from his mum's perspective. Imagine that he's told her the truth. How might he tell her? How could she react? How would this make him feel?

## Harley

Harley's section of the book is subtitled 'The Rebel'.

- What kind of character do we imagine 'the rebel' to be?
- Is this who Harley is?



- In what way does he differ from the standard 'rebel' stereotype?
- Why does Harley feel guilty about Isaac's death?
- Is his guilt justified?

Miles blames Harley for Isaac's death, saying that he should have stood up to him about his substance abuse (p118-119). Is Miles right?

### Activity

Look back over the scenes where Harley is remembering his friendship with Isaac. Imagine that Harley had pulled him up on his drinking. What do you think Isaac's reaction would have been? Would it have changed the outcome? See if you can write a new scene based on what you've imagined. Does it fit with the Isaac we see in the book?

Look around the following website (<http://www.ysas.org.au/i-m-worried-about-a-friend/im-worried-about-a-friend>) and discuss in groups or as a class how Isaac's friends could have helped him. Package your ideas into a resource that can be used by the rest of the school.

### Miles

Miles' portion of the book is subtitled 'The Nerd'.

- What does this tell you about who he is?
- Does he really blame Harley for Isaac's death?
- What is Miles worried about?
- Why does Miles feel uncertain about his friendship with Isaac?
- What do you think he hopes to find as he re-watches the videos?

Miles is obsessed with the line 'jumped or fell' in the newspaper article about Isaac's death.

- Why is he so bothered by this phrasing?
- Who changes it?
- How does this change the way that Miles views the whole situation?

### Activity

Look through a recent newspaper and find an article that concerns individuals (i.e. is about people rather than things, places or events).

- Who is the article about?
- Who might be affected by the piece?
- How does the language used in the article put a particular slant on the issue?

- Can you try to look beyond the language to see what the real story is – try to describe how the language used in the piece \*may\* be manipulating the truth.
- Either rewrite the article you've found using language to make the piece read differently, or write an imagined response to your article from somebody involved with the story.

## THEMES

### Coming Out

According to the Australian Human Rights Commission,<sup>1</sup> 61% of LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex) teens report experiencing verbal homophobic abuse. 18% report physical homophobic abuse, and 9% report other types of homophobia, including cyberbullying, graffiti, social exclusion and humiliation. 80% of this bullying occurs at school.<sup>2</sup>

- What type of language or behaviour constitutes homophobic bullying?
- How might this make an LGBTI person feel?
- How might it make other people feel?
- What impacts can you imagine this kind of behaviour would have on the life of an LGBTI young person?
- How might it affect the decisions they make?

Find some current examples of issues facing the LGBTI community in the news. (If you're stuck, check some of the resources or footnotes as these will provide valuable starting points for your discussion). Discuss in class or small groups some of the emotions young people struggling with their sexuality experience.

- What is the issue?
- Who is involved?
- How does it affect the wider community?
- What are the different sides to the story?
- Who is most disadvantaged by the issue?
- What are your thoughts about this issue in your own classroom community?

Consider the theme of coming out in relation to The Sidekicks. Ryan is afraid of coming out because he

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/face-facts-lesbian-gay-bisexual-trans-and-intersex-people>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.glhv.org.au/files/wti3\\_web\\_sml.pdf](http://www.glhv.org.au/files/wti3_web_sml.pdf)



can't predict the impact it will have on his Olympic dreams, on his relationships with his friends and family, or on his schooling. His fear comes not only from feeling uncertain, but from being able to imagine plenty of negative outcomes. But keeping that part of himself a secret is damaging too. By not being honest about who he is, he feels as though his relationship with his mother is suffering, he is unable to feel truly close to his friends (except Isaac), and he is in danger of losing a relationship that is significant to him.

### Activity

Read (or listen to) the personal account of someone who has come out. If you use someone you know, make sure you ask their permission to use their story (and agree to keep their privacy if they request it), or read The Sidekicks author, Will Kostakis' own experience here:

(<http://willkostakis.com/2016/02/26/reintroducing-will-kostakis/>) and here:

(<http://willkostakis.com/2016/03/02/in-case-you-want-to-send-me-this-email/>)

Imagine that someone has just shared this with you. Be honest with yourself.

- How do you react?
- How does this make them feel?
- Why do you react the way you do?

Now read the resources available at Safe Schools Coalition and Beyond Blue (links in Resources).

- What advice can you find that would help you be supportive in this situation?
- Which of Ryan's friends demonstrate this kind of support? And which of his friends demonstrate the kind of behaviour that makes him fearful of sharing who he is?
- Package together your findings in a school blog, and come up with a procedure that your school and classroom can follow to ensure that it is inclusive and supportive to students struggling with their sexuality and/or gender.

### Resources

- <http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org.au/resources>
- <https://www.youthbeyondblue.com/>
- <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/who-does-it-affect/lesbian-gay-bi-trans-and-intersex-lgbti-people>
- <https://www.beyondblue.org.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/bw0258-lgbti->

[mental-health-and-suicide-2013-2nd-edition.pdf?sfvrsn=2](http://www.mental-health-and-suicide-2013-2nd-edition.pdf?sfvrsn=2)

- <https://minus18.org.au/>

### Grief

*Miles speaks. 'Do you ever worry about getting depression?' He asks it plainly, like it isn't heavy or personal. 'I mean, we are sad now, but are you worried you might get stuck?' He places down his comb. 'I am.'*

*If I keep perfectly still, will the conversation keep going without my intervention?*

*'And how long are we supposed to be sad for?' he continues. 'What is normal? What is expected of us?'*

*'There's no marking criteria for grief.' I can't help myself.*

*'No.' He swallows hard. 'There is not, is there?'*

Grief plays a large part in *The Sidekicks*. We see how it affects Ryan, Harley and Miles, but also how it plays out in the lives of those around them. There are the small, strange moments captured as the teacher skips over Isaac's name in class, as Isaac's sister clears out his locker, as Mrs Roberts tries to find parts of her son in those friendships he's left behind.

- How does the author explore grief?
- In what ways is it unexpected?
- How is it made personal?
- What is the difference between grief and depression?
- How does grief play out in the lives of Ryan, Harley and Miles?
- How does each of them deal with their grief? How does their attitude towards it change as they become friends?

### Activity

Read the excerpt on this page

(<http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/40771/the-year-of-magical-thinking-by-joan-didion/9781400078431/>) from Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*. In it, she talks about the 'ordinary instant'.

- What does she mean by this?
- What 'ordinary instants' can you find in *The Sidekicks*?
- How do these moments set the experience of grief apart from day-to-day sadness?



- Think of a moment when you've experienced grief (this exercise can be done as a transcribed interview if you'd rather not/are unable to write from experience), and see if you can write about the 'ordinary instant' in your experience.
- How does finding these moments in writing make the piece move beyond stereotypes of how we expect to feel (or, as Ryan would say, beyond 'the marking criteria for grief')?

## Friendship

Ryan, Harley and Miles are defined by their friendships with Isaac, and with each other.

- What is the title of the book referring to?
- Do each of them see Isaac in the same way? How do they see him?
- How do each of them behave in their friendship with Isaac? Do they behave differently when he isn't around?

### Activity

Isaac is an absent character. What we learn of him, we only learn via his friendships with Ryan, Harley and Miles.

- Based on this, what do we know about Isaac? What can we say for certain? What can we guess at and why?

Write your own version of Isaac (it could be a letter, a scene with one of the other characters, or even a piece of artwork). Base your 'portrait' on the evidence you can find in the text, and then use guesswork to make up the rest. Write a short paragraph describing the reasoning behind the guesses you've made, and why you feel that it's reasonable to portray Isaac in this light.

- What things are not possible for us to know based on the text?

### Activity

Choose one friendship in *The Sidekicks* to explore in detail. Consider the following

- Who is involved in the friendship?
- What does each of them get out of it?
- Is the friendship equal?
- Is the friendship the same in all circumstances (does one of them change when other people are around)?
- Is it an unusual or surprising friendship? In what way?

- How does exploring this fictional friendship make you reflect on your own friendships?

## NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Will Kostakis has used the technique of dividing the narrative between each of three main characters. Doing this means that he can explore parts of the story from several different perspectives and allow us more insight into specific moments. Each character has their own way of writing, and this gives us different insights into the story.

- What perspective does each character use?
- Are they a reliable narrative?
- What storytelling techniques does each character use (eg script, dialogue, memory)?
- Where does the narrative overlap? What new information do you get from each character?
- How would the novel have been different if only one character had told the story?
- Did you prefer one segment to the others? Think about what you felt worked better in some parts than in others.
- Is the voice of each character distinct in their writing? In what way?

### Activity

Write your own story that is told from three different perspectives. Think about

- How and why the story overlaps.
- What insights each character brings to the piece.
- Maintaining distinct voices for each of your narrators.
- Keeping the story moving forward.

Read your pieces out to the class (or swap them in pairs). Discuss where this technique has worked and where it hasn't, and why.

- What stories can you think of that would be best told using this technique?
- Can you think of any stories where this wouldn't work?
- What other way have you seen authors play with narrative style to tell their story most effectively?





## RELATED READING

### **LGBTI**

- *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli
- *The Boys Own Guide to Being a Proper Jew* by Eli Glassman
- *The Flywheel* by Erin Gough
- *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* by John Green and David Levithan
- *The First Third* by Will Kostakis
- *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out* by Susan Kuklin
- *Grasshopper Jungle* by Andrew Smith

### **Grief**

- *The Other Side of Summer* by Emily Gale
- *Pieces of Sky* by Trinity Doyle
- *Wildlife* by Fiona Wood
- *The Protected* by Claire Zorn

### **Friendship**

- *Frankie and Joely* by Nova Weetman

### **Split Narrative**

- *A Shadow's Breath* by Nicole Hayes
- *The Accident* by Kate Hendrick
- *Cooper Bartholomew is Dead* by Rebecca James



## ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QTY	TOTAL
Sidekicks	Will Kostakis	9780143309031	7-12	\$19.99		
The First Third	Will Kostakis	9780143568179	7-12	\$17.99		
The Other Side of Summer	Emily Gale	9780143780113	5-9	\$16.99		
A Shadow's Breath	Nicole Hayes	9780143781097	7-12	\$19.99		
<b>TOTAL</b>						

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