**Seeing yourself: How the English texts we choose can change lives**

**Will Kostakis**

By Year 9, I was pretty certain I wasn’t straight. And I was petrified.

‘Gay’ was a schoolyard slur, reserved for kids who weren’t wild about sport, or were too wild about Kylie Minogue.

I wanted to write books for teenagers, and I was afraid that I couldn’t be both gay and an author.

It might seem ludicrous, but I can understand how I came to think that. In the media back then, coming out was less celebrated than it was scandalous, and school was particularly gay-free. Nobody on my campus was openly gay, and certainly nobody in the class texts we read.

During one of the throwaway final weeks of term, my teacher had decided that instead of watching movies like the other classes, we would study Shakespeare’s Sonnets. As you can imagine, the class groaned. Not going to lie, I probably did too.

We worked our way through the greatest hits—we compared thee to a summer’s day, lamented that our mistress’ eyes were nothing like the sun—and eventually came to Sonnet 20.

It was a revelation. William Shakespeare had written about being attracted to a man with a ‘woman’s face’. A student asked if that meant Shakespeare was gay. My teacher explained he may have been commissioned, or he may have written his own feelings, but I didn’t care. Shakespeare had written about gay attraction, and he was still being studied in every classroom in the land.

So, I could be both gay and an author. It was like someone had popped the closet door open a little to let the light in. I saw a future for myself.

Ensuring the texts students study represent diverse human experiences—from sexuality to ethnicity to socioeconomic status—allows students an opportunity to see their place in the world.

Unfortunately, the discussion around LGBTQI texts in schools has been dominated by the idea that gay themes are not age-appropriate. I am regularly told to shy away from raising gay characters, and even *The Sidekicks* in its entirety, in my school presentations. If, laws of time and space permitting, William Shakespeare was available for a school talk, can you imagine a teacher pulling him aside to say, ‘Will, don’t mention the gay characters’?

The first time I was told not to mention the gay character in *The First Third*, it was to a presentation for Year ten girls who had studied the novel, and were probably familiar with the concept of homosexuality. I did as the school asked, but when I asked the students who their favourite character was, one girl answered: the gay character. I asked for their favourite scene. That same girl was the only one to raise her hand. She said, ‘The one where Lucas talks about having sex with a boy.’

I was surprised. I couldn’t understand why a, I’m assuming, heterosexual girl connected most with that scene. She said, ‘It helped me understand my friend Sam a little better.’

Some fear that LGBTQI texts will turn impressionable minds gay, but if that thinking was sound, every student who studied *The Happiest Refugee* would be identifying as a refugee by now. In actual fact, texts with queer representation work as any other kind of text does. It encourages empathy.

That’s the marvellous thing about English. Yes, we’re talking about techniques, and use of language, and the creation of meaning, but at the same time, we are preparing students for the world, and the people they will interact with in that world.

And—shockingly—it’s a world with gay people in it.