

INVISIBLE BOYS

HOLDEN SHEPPARD
ISBN (PB): 9781925815566
YEAR LEVEL: Y10–12+

ABOUT THE BOOK

In a small town, everyone thinks they know you: Charlie is a hardcore rocker, who's not as tough as he looks. Hammer is a footy jock with big AFL dreams, and an even bigger ego. Zeke is a shy over-achiever, never macho enough for his family. But all three boys hide who they really are. When the truth is revealed, will it set them free or blow them apart?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Holden Sheppard is an award-winning Young Adult author born and bred in Geraldton, Western Australia. His debut novel, *Invisible Boys*, won the 2018 City of Fremantle T.A.G. Hungerford Award and the 2017 Ray Koppe Residency Award, and was Highly Commended in the 2018 ASA Emerging Writers' Mentorship Prize.

Holden's novella 'Poster Boy' won the 2018 Novella Project competition and was published in *Griffith Review*. His true story 'Fight, Deny, Delete' was published in the 2019 Margaret River Press anthology *Bright Lights, No City*. Holden's short fiction has been published in *page seventeen* and *Indigo*, and he has also written for *Ten Daily*, *Huffington Post*, *ABC*, *DNA Magazine* and *FasterLouder*. He graduated with Honours from Edith Cowan University's writing program and won a prestigious Australia Council ArtStart grant in 2015. Holden serves as the Deputy Chair of WritingWA, and as an ambassador for Lifeline WA.

Holden has always been a misfit: a gym junkie who has played Pokemon competitively, a sensitive geek who loves aggressive punk rock, and a bogan who learned to speak French.

THEMES

- Sexuality
- Masculinity
- Identity
- Belonging
- Mental health and suicide

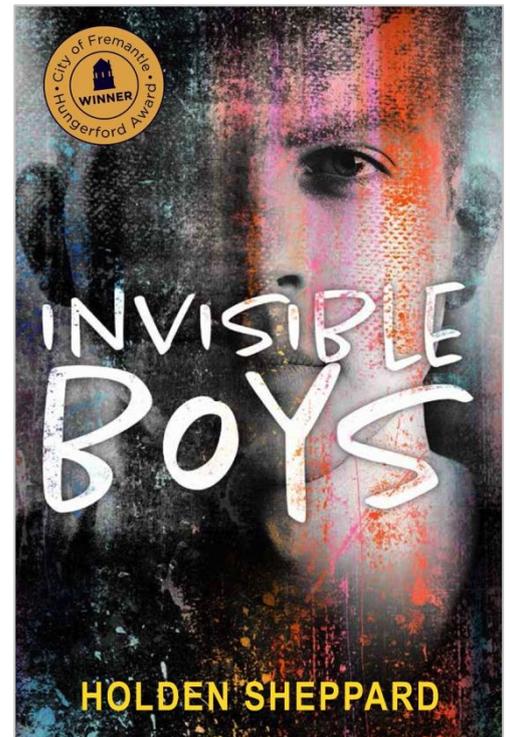
AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

Y10–12 English

Y10–12 Health and Physical Education (Mental Health and Wellbeing)

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Author's website: <https://www.holdensheppard.com>
- Author's Twitter: <https://twitter.com/V8Sheppard>
- Author's Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/HoldenSheppardAuthor>
- QLife: www qlife.org.au
- Bullying. No Way!: www.bullyingnoway.gov.au
- Youth Beyond Blue: www.youthbeyondblue.com
- Lifeline Australia: www.lifeline.org.au



CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

1. What is your first impression of the narrators (Charlie, Zeke and Hammer)? Compare and contrast their personalities. How would you describe the narrative voice of each? Why do you think the author chose to structure the book using three contrasting points of view? How does it impact your reading experience? Who do you think is the author of the anonymous letterbombs?
2. How is the town of Geraldton portrayed? When Charlie is outed, Zeke's mother comments: *You'd expect it in a city, but not here, of all places.* (p. 61) Do you think it's different for LGBTIQ+ individuals to be 'out' in a small, regional community as opposed to a city? In what ways?
3. Create a definition for the term 'homophobia'. Which characters in the novel display this attitude?
4. How are conventional stereotypes of masculinity and femininity called into question in this book? Which characters challenge traditional gender roles? Which reinforce them? Are there any characters who simultaneously challenge and reinforce gender norms? Provide examples from the text.
5. What coping strategies do Charlie, Zeke and Hammer use as they struggle with denial, anxiety, isolation, loneliness, self-loathing, shame and guilt regarding their sexuality?
6. Why do you think Hannah and Rocky abandon Charlie after he is outed? He asserts: *What hurt was all the memes people from school had made about me being gay [...] Not something to be hated [...] but something to mock [...] Not even a human being anymore. Meme fodder.* (p. 75) How is he dehumanised in the onslaught of verbal abuse and bullying that follows?
7. Do you think Zeke's Sicilian heritage and strict Catholic upbringing make it even more difficult for his family to accept him as homosexual? And indeed for him to accept it himself? *Homosexuality. It's unspeakable for [Dad], so he'll never talk to me about what happened.* (p. 99) Why do you think it's so difficult for many of the characters to talk openly about their feelings?
8. Brother Murphy warns Charlie that he cannot bring a same-sex partner to the dance because it *runs counter to the school's moral code.* (p. 158) Do you think this is fair? What is the Catholic Church's stance on homosexuality? What is the stance of other religions?
9. Why do you think Zeke finally stands up for Charlie by dancing with him at his brother's wedding?
10. How does the author utilise satire and sarcasm throughout the story, particularly in the segments narrated by Charlie (e.g. *I hate that I am now literally in the closet. Or in the wardrobe, I guess. I'm a wardrobed homo,* p. 25)? What is the role of humour in the text?
11. *I'd rather be swallowed up by the earth while I sleep than be outed.* (p. 40) Why do you think Zeke feels this way? Tragically, Zeke's conviction is echoed in the suicide note of one of the characters that appears later in the book: *I'd rather be a dead straight than a living homo.* (p. 303) How does the suicide of this character affect the other boys? What supports are available if you or someone you know has suicidal thoughts?
12. Compare and contrast the characters Charlie, Zeke and Hammer at the beginning and end of the novel. How have they changed? How have they remained the same? Why do you think Hammer remains in denial about his sexuality while Zeke and Charlie accept it?
13. What do you think is the meaning of the title *Invisible Boys*?
14. What messages did you personally take away from the story?
15. On his website, the author states: *I want the world to understand that boys and men suffer, and for gay boys in particular, even in 2018, this struggle can feel like the end of the world, but it isn't.* Do you feel he has achieved this?

Creative writing

1. Find examples of simile, metaphor and personification in the text (see examples below). How do these literary devices enhance the imagery conjured for the reader? What do they add to the reading experience? Can you use figurative language in your own creative writing?
 - a. *I like her because warmth radiates off her like a freshly-baked loaf of wholegrain bread* (p. 28)
 - b. *My heart is a clam shell that just captured a grain of ocean sand. I'm going to turn it into a pearl* (p. 199)
 - c. *My bones seem to know intrinsically that I'm gay: it's locked up in my marrow. But my blood seems to rile and boil at the thought; it begs to flood my skin and wash all the badness out* (p. 139)
 - d. *literally shake us until our skeletons rattle and the desire to do the wrong thing just falls off of us like cooked meat sliding off the bone* (p. 109)

2. Both mice and lupins are important recurring motifs in the story. What might they represent? Support your answer with evidence from the text. What other recurring symbols stood out to you?
3. What do you imagine will happen when Charlie and Zeke arrive in Perth? Will they find jobs? Or finish school? Will Charlie join a new band? Will Zeke's family apologise for hurting him and beg him to return home to Geraldton? Or will they give him the silent treatment? Will Hammer eventually follow the boys to Perth? Or will he be drafted to the AFL and keep his sexual orientation a secret? Write the next three chapters of the story OR flash-forward ten years into the future – where are they now?

Mental health and wellbeing

1. Have you or someone you know ever been bullied? How did this make you feel?
2. What is the difference between a 'bully' and a 'bystander'?
3. What are 'cyberbullying', 'physical bullying' and 'verbal bullying'?
4. What is your school's bullying policy?
5. What are some actions you can take if you, or someone you know, are being bullied?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What are the origins of your debut book, Invisible Boys?

Invisible Boys actually came about because the first novel I wrote – a fantasy novel – failed to get picked up by an agent. That failure made me realise my writing was missing something: heart. I wasn't writing about anything real, honest, raw or risky. So, after three years working on that manuscript, I put it in the drawer (with no small amount of distress) and sat down to start a new project. I had to start from scratch and it was heartbreaking, but I was determined to never give up on being a writer.

Around that time, I saw a Hemingway quote on Twitter: 'Write hard and clear about what hurts.' It's one of the best lessons I ever learned about writing. So I was lying on the couch one day feeling sad about the failure of my fantasy novel and I finally opened up the notes app on my phone, and asked myself, 'What hurts?'

Talk about opening Pandora's box! I listed about twenty things I had struggled with in life, but the first and most urgent was how traumatic it had been growing up gay in country Australia. I grew up in the remote and rugged Midwest, where it seemed gay people didn't even exist, and where I couldn't imagine existing openly as myself; so much so that I wanted to take my own life for a long time. It was the biggest trauma of my life. I had found it too hard to write about previously, but it had been about a decade since I left home. That had given me enough perspective to be able to write about my life without re-traumatising myself too badly.

You grew up in Geraldton, which is also the setting for your story. To what extent is your story based on personal experiences?

This is hard for me to answer. The truth is both 'a lot' and 'not at all'. A lot of the emotional truth of this novel is derived from my own life: that is, the inner thoughts of Charlie, Zeke and Hammer are often fragments of what I felt growing up, or how I feel now when I look back. Those three boys are all aspects of me, really: the geek, the punk and the jock. I am bold and anti-authoritarian and sarcastic like Charlie; sometimes pensive and anxious and gentle like Zeke; sometimes aggressive and egotistical with a larrikin spirit, like Hammer. I think most people have many facets to their identity and that it's okay to experience them at different times.

Most of the rest of the book is pure fiction: I made it up. The plot points, events, side characters – they are all figments of my imagination. Some elements are drawn from personal experiences. The Calogero family saucemaking ritual, for instance, is inspired by my own family doing that each summer (I'm half Sicilian). I also went to a Catholic school and struggled enormously to come to terms with my sexuality, and was depressed and suicidal for a long time. And yes, I grew up in Geraldton – which I actually loved, by the way, and still do. I think some people will read Charlie's opening line about Geraldton being a poxy s***hole of a town and think I hate my hometown. I really don't. I loved growing up in a small town, close to the coast and the bush all at once. I often get homesick. But I knew I wouldn't be able to live the life I wanted or pursue my dreams if I didn't go somewhere bigger. Which is a more mature version of Charlie's opening line, really.

A few scenes in this novel are very close to things that happened to me, but I don't like to specify which ones – partly because some of them are sexual and/or embarrassing. I'll leave it to readers to guess!

What was the hardest part about writing the book?

Diving headlong into childhood trauma. I had to see my counsellor a fair bit during the first draft of this book, because I was writing about stuff I'd never put into words before, really. And it was heavy stuff. Even as an adult, I was filled with shame and self-loathing about my teenage years, and struggling with addiction and mental health issues. So, working through that was probably the most difficult thing. But writing this book actually helped me get through and out the other side of a lot of those things, too.

On a more superficial note, things like timeframes always bug me, so I kept an Excel spreadsheet to track the timelines through each scene and chapter to ensure things were happening in the correct sequence. This became a nightmare when I got to the editing phase and shifted a scene from chapter 6 to chapter 9, for instance, but forgot to change the day of the week. Thankfully my editors at Fremantle Press were great at picking up my continuity errors. Uh ... I hope we got all of 'em, anyway.

What was the best part about writing it?

The freedom! Man, the freedom was like a drug for me. When I started writing *Invisible Boys*, I said firmly to myself: 'There are no sacred cows.' I gave myself permission to write about anything I wanted. To hell with what my boyfriend would think, or my family, or my friends, or my boss, or my workmates, or society, or God: screw them all! This was about *me* and how *I* felt.

Giving myself that leeway to speak freely, openly, honestly was the best thing I ever did for my artistic expression. It enabled me to be vulnerable and talk about real stuff without flinching or thinking how I would be perceived. And writing in that open way – without shame or guilt – was incredibly liberating. That liberation didn't just enable me to write my story – it also helped me to find myself and become the man I wanted to be: confident, self-assured, and comfortable in his own skin.

What do you hope readers will get out of your book? Do you have a message for your readers?

I hope readers will have a good time and enjoy reading this book, though I know not every reader will like it. Tough luck, I guess. I just hope readers aren't *bored* by it. If a reader comes up to me at a book signing and tells me they hated my writing style or my plot or characters or whatever, fine, I can deal with that. But I think I'd hate to have someone say, 'Holden, your book bored me s***less.' That I would dread. Ultimately, of course, that's beyond my control. Once the book is out in the world, it's up to people to do what they like with it: respond positively, negatively, or with blithe and utter indifference. (Obviously I'm hoping for the former.)

What I really hope is that this book will find the people who need it most, such as young LGBT+ people growing up in environments where they aren't free to be themselves, particularly gay and bi boys. That said, I've had lots of messages from gay men older than me, for instance, who grew up in the 70s and 80s and experienced more full-on physical abuse than I ever experienced in my teenage years. I know straight male readers have been moved to tears by some of this book, because it displays male vulnerability, and I'm losing count of how many people – male and female – have opened up to me about their own struggles with sexuality and mental health. So I know that people old and young, gay and straight, male and female, urban or rural, might find resonance in the pages of my book, and I feel super humbled by that. I hope my book might help them to process their own trauma, or feel catharsis, or heal, or just feel better or more seen.

I don't tend to use my writing as a way to convey a particular message *per se*, but I suppose I want this book to speak to the idea that it's okay to be gay, and there is hope even if you're growing up gay in a place where you feel you don't belong. I also want people to understand that men and boys suffer, and for gay boys in particular sometimes this can feel like the end of the world, but it really isn't.

If there was one message I could leave the reader with, it would be this: you are totally okay just as you are.

How long did it take you to write the book?

I wrote the first draft in two months. It just came roaring out of me with the thrust of a V8 engine. Often I would go to work, go to the gym, then come home exhausted and push myself to write at night while listening to 90s alternative rock music. I was in a bit of a feverish state for those two months: totally obsessed with completing my novel. I felt like I was extracting poison out of my blood, and I had to work fast in order to stay alive. I pulled some all-nighters, where I wrote from 5 pm through to five or six in the morning. It probably sounds geeky, but those nights were some of the most exhilarating of my life: writing freely, expressing myself without shame, finishing just in time to grab a cup of black coffee and watch the sunrise.

Do you have any advice for budding writers?

I'll start by stealing Hemingway's advice: 'Write hard and clear about what hurts.' It's very good advice. I see and speak to many aspiring and emerging writers, and what I often see is people doing what I was doing with that first fantasy novel: trying to write a 'good' book that will sell, but failing to put any heart into it. I studied creative writing at university and it taught me a huge amount about writing well, but as my mate, acclaimed author Laurie Steed, once said to me, one thing you can't teach a writer is to be vulnerable on the page. This is very true: each author has to reach this point on his own, I think. But that vulnerability is crucial to writing powerfully, and I would encourage any budding writer to work towards being able to do that free, no-sacred-cows kind of writing. It's where the magic happens.

On a more practical level, it's vital for writers to learn their craft and put in lots of hard work to practise it. So, write as regularly as you can: don't just make notes, actually write something, even if it's rubbish. Read as much as you can: in your field, but also books about writing and publishing. Read *On Writing* by Stephen King: it will teach you so much about writing as a craft. And then read *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho: it will teach you so much about the inherent value of following your dreams, even if they seem impossible.

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