

Book reviews

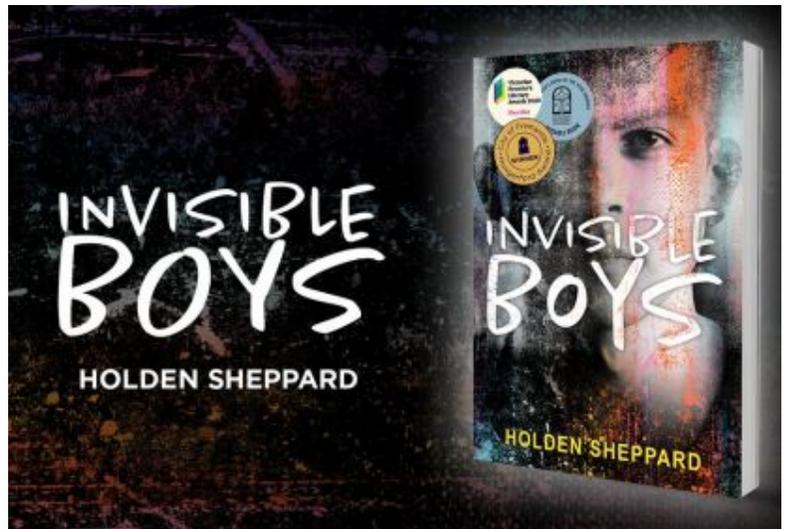
December 01, 2020

Invisible Boys By Holden Sheppard Freemantle Press, 2020

I saw on a post on Facebook about how someone couldn't wait to see the fictional story *Invisible Boys* made into a movie. This spurred me on to read the book. This young adult fiction certainly opened my eyes to what young adults are reading today. Nothing like this was around when I was in my teens.

The story centres on three teens who are in the later years of their schooling in Geraldton in Western Australia.

Charlie is a "hardcore rocker", Hammer is a "footy jock with big AFL dreams", and Zeke is a "shy over-achiever". This unlikely trio is forced together by the one thing they have in common, their sexuality.



Regardless of their own experiences with coming to terms with their sexuality, the underlying theme that is prevalent throughout the story is the non-acceptance of homosexuality within two of the boys' families and the indifference of the third boys' family, but still with a touch of homophobia on the part of the stepfather. The over-riding perception by the families of the jock and the over-achiever that being gay is not an option for their sons, permeates any interaction the young men have with their families.

These young men have their own paths set out before them which doesn't factor in, in a favourable way, their sexuality.

The footy jock has dalliances with other boys but believes he gets to choose whether or not he is actually gay. The shy over-achiever knows he is interested in boys but doesn't want others to know because of his parents and the hardcore rocker pretty much accepts his sexuality but is pretty much a loner with regard to it.

The ending will surprise some and not others. While nothing like my own story growing up, there is a common thread: if we don't talk about it, it doesn't exist. Forty years on from my own late teens and the same can still be said today, although it is getting better. Heteronormative behaviours still dictate, in a lot of cases, how we choose to live our lives because they are the dominant paradigm in our society.

Fortunately, Charlie, the hardcore rocker, is the rebellious character in the story, who isn't afraid to take on the establishment and to be his true self. He is a role model for the other two. Let's see who is influenced by him.

An interesting story. One day it will be nice to read a young adult novel where people can just live their lives

without the fear of being outed or ridiculed over their sexuality; where being different isn't the main theme of the story, just something that enhances it and where the storyline centres on any issue other than sexuality.

Waine Donovan is a Country Organiser

Sphengic
Written and illustrated by Kirsty Esson

Few (animal) couples are as famous and loved worldwide as Sphe and Magic, two male Gentoo penguins who stole hearts when they became inseparable mates in the Sea Life Sydney Aquarium.

This lovely picture book tells the story of Sphe and Magic's relationship, from their early interactions to the growth of their family with the birth of their adopted daughter, Sphengic (later renamed Lara).

Sphe is an older and reserved penguin who becomes fast friends with Magic, an energetic younger male penguin. The pair sing to one another, swim together, and waddle about the ice as a couple. When it comes time for mating season, the two construct the most impressive nest in the aquarium, taking turns to keep it warm. When an egg is born to another penguin pair unable to care for it, the keepers give Sphe and Magic the opportunity to incubate the egg.

Attentive and caring parents, Sphe and Magic successfully hatch their chick, then care for her with all the love and engagement that makes a beautiful family. When Magic feeds her, Sphe sings to them. The book then tells us of Lara's first swim, accompanied by her proud and doting same-sex parents.

A love story and a tale of what can make a family, these sweet anecdotes are accompanied by charming illustrations. This picture book would make a fantastic addition to any primary school library but could certainly become a text used in the classroom to explore an array of areas such as family, identity, wildlife and science.

Sphengic is the result of a Sea Life Sydney Aquarium philanthropic and educational project, with all profits of book sales donated to Rainbow Families.

Rebecca Langham is a member of the LGBTIQ SIG

Backyard
By Ananda Braxton-Smith & Lizzy Newcomb
Black Dog Books, 2018

This calm, gentle book reminds us why backyards are so important. They can be places for children to watch, listen and observe wildlife. Some backyards still remain viable habitat for an array of wildlife that includes bats, tawny frogmouths, frogs, water dragons, spiders and other insects, possums and birds.

Author Ananda Braxton-Smith's rich poetic language is enhanced by Elizabeth Newcomb's lush and vibrant illustrations that celebrate moments of contentment when we are connected to nature. Backyard is a quiet plea to protect our garden suburbs for both their enchantment and biodiversity.

Climate Rebels
By Ben Lerwill
Puffin, 2020

Our planet is in serious trouble but this book inspires us with the stories of climate rebels, young and old, as well as environment groups who lead battles to end the destructive forces against nature.

Some of the climate rebels include Dr Jane Goodall, who is famous for her research on just how similar we are to chimpanzees; Sir David Attenborough, whose TV nature programs continue to inspire millions around the world; US marine biologist Rachel Carson, whose book *Silent Spring* ignited the modern environment movement; Wangari Maathai and her Green Belt Movement in Africa; and Greta Thunberg, who inspired millions of young people to go on school strikes.

No matter where we live, how old we are, this book inspires us all to make the difference that is needed to heal the hurt we have inflicted on Mother Nature.

Idling in Green Places: A Life of Alec Chisholm
By Russell McGregor
Australian Scholarly, 2019

Alec Chisholm (1890-1977) was a popular writer/journalist who wrote prolifically about nature from the 1920s to 1970s. He was an avid bird lover, naturalist, conservationist, as well as a historian, biographer and editor of the 10-volume Australian Encyclopaedia (1958).

Alec grew up in the small Victorian country town of Maryborough, surrounded by box-ironbark forests filled with Swift Parrots and Regent Honeyeaters. Later, he enthusiastically wrote about the birdlife found in backyards and in the bushland surrounding Sydney suburbs. He wanted Australians to be inspired by Australia's unique birds and animals. His first book *Mateship with Birds* (1922) was a plea for Australians to become "mates" with birds and protect them.

This book is a great addition to Australia's environmental history and shows the importance of the amateur natural history movement that was a foundational force in the development of Australian environmentalism. Alec's passion still resonates today and is a call for us all to become unashamed bird lovers.

Janine Kitson is a Life Member

Editor: These are Janine Kitson's last book reviews for the journal. Education thanks Janine for her commitment to writing for the journal for more than 10 years. See Janine's letter to the editor on page 14.

Late Bloomers: The Power of Patience in a World Obsessed with Early Achievement
By Rich Karlgaard
Currency, 2019

Rich Karlgaard, a journalist, entrepreneur, publisher and self-labelled "late bloomer", presents his case for the potential of late bloomers and their importance in both workplaces and broader society as a whole.

Based on his personal experience, research and the latest neuroscientific findings, Karlgaard argues the need to foster growth and development in people of all ages, individually and within organisations.

Nothing can be more disconcerting than walking into a staffroom to hear a colleague express surprise that someone over 50 was honoured for an achievement. Many older employees experience workplace exclusion on the basis of age and some organisations lose valuable talent due to ageism.

In addition, obsession with early achievement can lead to burnout and a litany of mental health issues in those who are successful, or feelings of failure in those who aren't.

Here Karlgaard gives a thoughtful treatise on how and when we achieve our full potential, and why today's focus on early success is so misguided, and even harmful.

Jennifer Tilby teaches at South Sydney HS