



## **WE COULD BE SOMETHING**

Written by WILL KOSTAKIS

**RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 14+ (YOUNG ADULT/ LOWER & UPPER SECONDARY)**

**GENRE:** YA Fiction/Romance/Rite of Passage

**THEMES:** LGBTQIA+, queer love, romance, Greek-Australian families and relationships, individual growth and maturity, grief.

### **CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:**

- English: Literature, Literacy and Language
- Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS)

**NOTES WRITTEN BY:** Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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## INTRODUCTION

*We Could Be Something* is a wonderful emotional rollercoaster of a novel about two young men, each on a journey of discovery. It's part coming-out story, part falling-in-love story, part relationship breakdown story, part extended Greek family story. It's warm and funny, a little bit heartbreaking, and completely satisfying.

'The enormous heart of *We Could Be Something* beats with a rare, thrilling authenticity. Every funny, smart, tough word of it rings true. I loved this book.' Patrick Ness, bestselling author of *A MONSTER CALLS* and the *CHAOS WALKING* series.

## PLOT SUMMARY

Harvey's dads are splitting up. It's been on the cards for a while, but it's still sudden. Woken by his father Ba to catch a red-eye flight from Perth to Sydney, he is barely awake when they leave. Now he's restarting his life in a new city, living above a cafe, with Ba, his Yiayia (grandmother) Gina, and Proyiayia (his great grandmother), the extended Greek family he barely knows.

Sotiris is a rising literary star. At seventeen, he's already achieved his dream of publishing a novel. When his career falters, a cute, wise-cracking bookseller named Jem upends his world.

Harvey and Sotiris's stories converge on the same street in Darlinghurst, in this beautifully heartfelt novel about how our dreams shape us, and what they cost us.

## BEFORE READING

- What did the cover image suggest to you?
- Have you read other books by Will Kostakis, and if so, how did they prepare you for reading his latest?

## AFTER READING

- What assumptions did you make when you began this novel, which were disproved or confirmed later?
- *We Could Be Something* is the title and also the final words in the novel. What do these words mean to you, having read it?

## Q&A WITH WILL KOSTAKIS

### a) What themes did you hope to explore with *We Could be Something*?

'The major theme is the pursuit of dreams, and the positive or negative impact on our lives. Every major character in *We Could Be Something* has a dream, be it professional or romantic or as simple as "I want to see the Greek islands again", and it shapes them.

'And family, obviously. And grief...and love. Ultimately, this is one man's life, and most significant relationship, told through his and his son's eyes.'

### b) How closely does the story mirror your own?

'I set out to write a personal story. This novel began its life as two projects: one, a memoir about my childhood and experiences as a teen author, and two, a novel about a kid living with his mother and grandmother. With the latter, I intended to write about my family life without it ending in tragedy (spoilers for *The First Third*). Then, as I was juggling both projects during the lockdown of 2020, my grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Suddenly, the truth of the memoir was too personal, and the happy childhood story felt like I was being oblivious. So I merged the two.

'There are elements of my life here, but I've invented a lot around it to obfuscate it. The central truths: my mum did run a café in Darlinghurst for a time, and I spent a lot of time there; I was published as a teenager (nineteen, not seventeen); we spelt my name wrong; my publishing experience wasn't particularly pleasant at first; a guy in a bookstore poked fun at me for trying to buy my own book; my grandmother has Alzheimer's.

'But this is fiction, and *We Could Be Something* relishes in the contrasts of Sotiris and Harvey's lives. My experiences as a gay guy are different to the experiences of teenagers today, so I needed to make room for Harvey to have his own life on the page. There are truths in his story, but they're observations, rather than my own lived experiences.'

### c) Who do you feel closest to in the story, Harvey or Sotiris?

'As a teenager, I was more of a Sotiris. Similar drive, similar motivations. I think, voice-wise, I'm more of a Harvey. I like to gift my characters a part of me – that way, slipping into their heads and understanding them is easier.'

### d) What attracts you to writing for a Young Adult audience?

'I mean, it started because I was a young adult writing when I started, so it made sense to write what appealed to me. Now, it's because I love stories where characters stand on the edge of the rest of their lives, about to take their first awkward steps into adulthood and

realise who they are. That said, this is the first book where I felt closer with the parent figures (particularly Ba/Sotiris) than I did with Harvey. That may be because it's the first time I wrote a parent who shares so much of my day-to-day life, who has my backstory, but it may also be me taking my own first awkward steps into writing for adults.

## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

### ENGLISH

#### LITERATURE

- The two alternate stories of Harvey and his father Sotiris are told in first person, from their two different narrative perspectives. The reader is not initially aware of the connection between the two narrators, but the novel gradually reveals that they are speaking in different decades but are both on the cusp of adulthood, one having left, the other about to leave, secondary school. There are hints to this in the language used. This is suggested when Sotiris asks Harvey about the language he is using in his new novel: 'All my characters talk like they're almost forty,' he explains. 'What's the new lingo? What fresh words are kids using?' (p 278) Harvey makes up a word, 'badorka', to tease him. Another marker is the lack of digital communications in the younger Sotiris's life.

**Question:** How else does the novelist differentiate between the two voices in these two decades?

- Sotiris's story contains many metafictional references to the role and experiences of a writer. The novel is littered with self-referential quotes about the practice of writing and the pitfalls involved in publishing. Quotes include:
  - 'Writing is a numbers game. One typo ruins it.' (p 51)
  - 'I spent so long preparing to be an author that I figured, when it happened, it would be perfect.' (p 52)
  - 'We're hoping there's nothing libellous in this one.' (p 70)
  - '...but it would be terrible if you rushed your next book because you felt pressured.' (p 71)
  - 'But we track things like buzz and sell-in and early sales, and it doesn't look like it's connecting.' (p 72)
  - 'The world is different. Life will be easier for you than it was for me. Is it rotten that nobody apologised? You bet. They simply switched gears when the world changed and forgot anyone they discarded along the way.' (pp 110-1)

- 'The idea of slapping word after word on the page, hoping it all amounts to something in the end, stresses me out. Give me guardrails. Give me a destination to write towards.' (p 141)
- 'The closest we get to an audience member is the guy in a sparkly vest who waltzes in, notices the two of us onstage and realises he has made an error.' (p 148)
- 'It is enough to make me wonder if I've been unreliably narrating my whole life. Were Benji and I friends? No. He was a dickhead consistently.' (p 225)
- Eliza, his publisher, suggests that Sotiris's reprint should use the pseudonym Sam Baker: 'Sotiris Bakiritzis ... doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. We've got to think about the everyman in the bookshop who's seeing it for the first time.' (p 263)

**Activity:** Discuss any of these quotations and what they suggest about the life of a writer.

- Characters in the book include: Harvey, Harvey's Ba (Sotiris Bakiritzis), Harvey's Dad (Jeremy/Jem), Harvey's grandmother Gina, and great-grandmother Proyiayia; Dr Pangiotis; Miss Fletcher; Mrs Wiseman; Benji Majors; Mr Daniels; Dean; Jeremy's mother, Sylvie, and aunt, Faye; Isabella and her 'kidlets' Felix, Bradley and Stef; Phoebe Turner, the bestselling author; Eliza, publisher of Phoebe and Sotiris.

**Question:**

- Which of the two narrators' characters did you empathise with most?
  - What did you make of Jeremy's character? He seems to be a genuinely loving and generous man. Does Sotiris deserve him?
  - Which minor character would you like to have read more about? For example, Isabella and her mission to rescue 'kidlets' had the potential to generate a raft of other stories. Bradley also reveals that he has hidden depths.
- Character Description: The novel contains some succinct and expressive descriptions which indicate a character immediately: Isabella: 'She can't be much older than me, but it's difficult to tell because her look is edgy Play School presenter – denim overalls, nose ring, wavy brown bob she might have cut herself. She could be nineteen, she could be twenty-nine. Her playlist has me leaning towards nineteen. Songs I recognise from TikTok mostly.' (p 92)

**Activity:** Identify other descriptions which give the reader such a vivid picture of a character.

**Activity:** Watch videos or listen to podcasts about Will Kostakis's writing process, then discuss what you learn from these interviews. [See Films and Podcasts below.]

## LITERACY

- The novel is structured into parts, alternately told by Harvey and Sotiris. They each have intriguing sub-titles: 'The gays are fighting' (p 1). 'The first thing you do is dig' (p 43).

**Activity:** Discuss these sub-titles and how they relate to the content of each part.

- Critical Literacy requires a reader to interpret and to ponder possible meanings and scenarios suggested in a text. Although it is immensely readable and fast-paced, this novel doesn't tie things up neatly and requires close reading.

### Questions:

- Might Gina and her mother's trip prove a disaster with her mother so ill?
- What will Jeremy do when he returns to Perth?
- What did you imagine are the occupations of Sotiris and Jeremy?
- Did Sotiris take up journalism in WA?
- Did Jeremy continue working as a bookseller?
- Will Harvey's management of the café work out?

## LANGUAGE

- **Use of Literary Device, eg Metaphor:**
  - 'He's a drizzle of olive oil on a kangaroo steak.' (p 15)
  - 'They're standing on almost forty years of kindling; one errant spark and they ignite.' (p 84)

**Activity:** Uncover other uses or literary devices such as metaphor, simile, personification and discuss. [See also **Worksheet 1**]

- **Humour:** Proyiayia's trip to Coles King Cross and her subterfuges there are hilarious. (p 27+) "When everything special, nothing special," she says.' (p 28)

**Question:** What else did you find amusing in this text? [See **Worksheet 1**]

**ASSESSMENT:**

- Answer this question in essay format: Does Sotiris really believe in his writing or is he blocked by his emotional issues?
- Write a poem as if written by Jeremy about his dream of spending his life with Sotiris.
- Write a synopsis for a novel continuing this story, set five years after the ending.

**HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

- **LGBTQIA+ Relationships:**

'Having gay dads comes with a lot of pressure' (p 24) Harvey goes on to explain this statement and then concludes with: 'In Year Nine I landed on pan as my identifier of choice.' (p 25) Harvey's later attraction to Isabella is evidence that he is quite comfortable with being attracted both to her and to Bradley. Sotiris doesn't want to tell his mother or grandmother that he is gay; Harvey doesn't feel the need to tell anyone about his sexuality.

**Question:** Does the novel suggest that in these two decades some social attitudes to homosexuality have changed?

Will Kostakis has written about the different attitudes to coming out now, compared to when he was in his late teens. He laments the fact that many contemporary novels are still locked into that mindset. 'Now it's different. The way teenagers deal with it is very different. But we're NOT dealing with stories like that. We're still dealing with the gay pain and the struggle to come out. We fetishise that gay pain.' (Osborne, 2020, p 20)

**Question:** Discuss this statement, and how homosexuality is discussed in your friendship circles.

**Question:** At age 17, Harvey's failed 'hookup' with a stranger named Brad via a social media dating app Grindr was potentially quite dangerous. His Ba's use of the same app complicates things with his ex. Are dating apps to be experimented with, or avoided, in your opinion?

- **Romance:**

Sotiris: 'I can only hope I write like I did before him, after him.' (p 257) Jeremy: 'Being with your father is my dream, Harvey. He has my all. If I leave, I leave without that.' (p 292)

Sotiris and Jeremy's love affair has had both of them seeking a dream they can't quite realise, for nearly two decades. Sotiris has always blamed his lack of subsequent publishing success on his love for Jem; and Jem has always been conscious that he has deliberately overlooked the flaws in their relationship, because of his romantic belief in the dream of their perfect union.

**Questions:**

- Is Jeremy likely to be happier without Sotiris?
- Is Sotiris going to be content as a struggling middle-aged writer?
- Is Harvey correct in concluding that they are better without each other?

**• Greek-Australian Families and Relationships:**

The traditions passed down to members of a Greek-Australian family include not only food and cultural traditions, but moral attitudes and expectations.

**Question:** What morals and ethics has Gina passed to her son and grandson? What does Proyiayia believe in and how does she pass this on to Harvey?

**Question:** Gina's café is the setting for the novel and its emotional heart. What does food represent in the novel and in the broader Greek culture?

**• Individual Growth and Maturity:**

Harvey is trying to navigate his post-school life and to decide what he should be doing with it. He doesn't have a burning passion (like his Ba's for writing) or a great love (like his Dad's for Ba), so he is seeking answers by making friends with Isabella and Bradley, helping his grandmother working in the café, and coming to terms with his parents' break-up.

**Question:**

How difficult is it to navigate the time between school and later life? What choices or decisions have to be made?

**ASSESSMENT:**

- Has Harvey learned to question 'life dreams' from observing his fathers' relationship? How might he live his life in the future? Write an essay arguing this question.
- Is Sotiris likely to be happy in the future if he hasn't achieved his writing goals or resolved his love for Jeremy?



## VISUAL ARTS

- Examine the cover.

**Question:** Who are the two boys depicted, and why are they looking in different directions? Does the image reference any other artwork?

**Activity:** Explain what the image (including the steaming cup of coffee) suggests to you.

**Activity:** Create your own cover for this book and create a classroom gallery of the images.

- Gina's café is the setting for a good part of this novel.

**Activity:** Draw an image of the café from how it is described in the novel.

## ASSESSMENT:

- Create an artwork which is a creative response to the themes explored in the novel, in any medium you consider to be appropriate.

## AUTHOR BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

**Will Kostakis** grew up in a small but potent Greek-Australian family in Sydney. He set his sights on being a published author in year seven, and after several rejection letters, in year twelve, he was offered his first book deal. He studied media and communications at university, and balanced his author career with work as a journalist (copy-pasting gossip articles, writing ancillary content for reality TV shows), then with work writing social media copy for professional wrestlers.

*We Could Be Something* is a reflection on his fifteen years as a published author, and how attitudes have shifted, in publishing and the country more broadly, towards queer stories. He was motivated to contrast the world as it is now with the world he came out into. He remained firmly in the closet through his teens, and when he came out at 26, he suffered a wave of gig cancellations, with schools citing that it was no longer appropriate for him to speak to children and young adults. That was the first time he considered abandoning his career. The coronavirus pandemic was the second.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Will Kostakis** is an award-winning author for young adults. His first novel, *Loathing Lola*, was published when he was just nineteen. It sold a whopping ten copies, including the seven

he bought himself. After a brief break to dabble in celebrity journalism and reconstruct his shattered dream, he returned with *The First Third*, which sold more than ten copies (possibly fifteen). It won the 2014 Gold Inky Award and was shortlisted for the CBCA and the Prime Minister's Literary Awards, among others. *The Sidekicks* was his third novel for young adults, and his US debut. It won the IBBY Australia Ena Noël Award. Will has also contributed to numerous anthologies, including the ABIA Award-winning *Begin, End, Begin: A #LoveOzYA Anthology*. He was awarded the 2020 Maurice Saxby Award by the School Library Association of New South Wales for service to children's and young adult literature and is an ambassador for the NSW Premier's Reading Challenge.

### ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

**Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright AM** operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. In 2011 she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld Branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, in 2012 the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Australia, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award. She is President of IBBY Australia and Deputy-Chair of the Australian Children's Laureate Foundation. In 2021 she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.

## CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

### Fiction

- Clarke, Judith *My Lovely Frankie* Allen & Unwin, 2017.
- Earp, Michael, ed. *Kindred: 12 queer #loveozya stories* by Jax Jacki Brown, Claire G Cole, Michael Earp, Alison Evans, Erin Gough, Benjamin Law, Omar Sakr, Christos Tsiolkas, Ellen van Neerven, Marlee Jane Ward, Jen Wilde, Nevo Zisin. Walker Books, 2019.
- Gale, Emily *I Am Out With Lanterns* Random House Australia, 2018.
- Glassman, Eli *The Boys Own Manual to Being a Proper Jew* Sleepers Publishing, 2014.
- Gough, Erin *The Flywheel* Hardie Grant Children's Publishing, 2015.
- Green, John and Levithan, David *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* Dutton, 2010.
- Horniman, Joanne *About a Girl* Allen & Unwin, 2011.
- Kanakia, Naomi *We are Totally Normal* HarperCollins, 2021.
- Kostakis, Will *The First Third* Penguin, 2013.
- Kostakis, Will *The Sidekicks* Penguin Random House, 2016.
- Kostakis, Will *The Greatest Hit* Lothian Children's Books, 2020.
- Le Nguyen, Trung *The Magic Fish* Random House Graphic, 2020.
- Levithan, David *Boy Meets Boy* Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.
- Lonesborough, Gary *The Boy from the Mish* Allen & Unwin, 2021.
- Oseman, Alice *Solitaire* HarperCollins, 2014.
- Oseman, Alice *HeartStopper* (Series Volumes 1–5) Hodder.
- Pippos, Andrew *Lucky's* Pan Macmillan, 2020.
- Polites, Peter *Down the Hume* Hachette, 2017.
- Sheppard, Holden *Invisible Boys* Fremantle Press, 2019.
- Sheppard, Holden *The Brink* Text Publishing, 2022.
- Tsolkias, Christos *Barracuda* Allen & Unwin, 2015.
- Tsolkias, Christos *Loaded* Vintage, 1997.
- Tsolkias, Christos *The Slap* Allen & Unwin, 2008.
- Tuckerman, Alicia *If I Tell You* Pantera Press, 2018.
- Wilde, Rhiannon *Henry Hamlet's Heart* UQP, 2021.
- Wilkinson, Lili *Pink* Allen & Unwin, 2009.

## OTHER RESOURCES

### Non-Fiction

Burton, David *How To Be Happy A Memoir of Love, Sex and Teenage Confusion* Text Publishing, 2015.

Law, Benjamin, ed. *Growing up Queer in Australia* Black Inc, 2019.

Molloy, Shannon *Fourteen* Simon & Schuster Australia, 2020.

Zison, Nevo *Finding Nevo: How I Confused Everyone* Black Dog Books, 2017.

### Articles

Osborne, Sue 'Meet Will Kostakis' *Magpies Talking About Books for Children* Volume 35, Issue 3, July 2020, pp 18–21.

## ONLINE LINKS IN FULL

'Christos Tsiolkas' *Reading Australia*

<https://readingaustralia.com.au/authors/christos-tsiolkas/>

'Gay YA Books' *goodreads*

<https://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/gay-ya>

'Monday musings on Australian Literature: Greek-Australian literature' *Whispering Gum* December 6, 2021

<https://whisperinggums.com/2021/12/06/monday-musings-on-australian-literature-greek-australian-literature/>

'Must-Read YA Books featuring Gay Protagonists' *Epic Reads*

<https://www.epicreads.com/blog/25-must-read-ya-books-featuring-gay-protagonists/>

Price, Sarah 'Author Will Kostakis' *The Saturday Paper* September 1, 2018 [Subscriber-only]

<https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/2018/09/01/author-will-kostakis/15357240006771#hrd>

Ue, Tom 'The Matter of Form: An Interview with Will Kostakis' *New Writing* [This requires purchase or academic access.]

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14790726.2023.2165108?journalCode=rmnw20>

Whyte, Marama 'Author Interview: Will Kostakis on undermining YA stereotypes, finding inspiration in family, more' *Hypable* July 8, 2013

<https://www.hypable.com/author-interview-will-kostakis-the-first-third/>

## FILMS AND PODCASTS

'Hello Holidays: Memoir Writing - Writing Fiction with Will Kostakis' Inner West Council Sydney *YouTube* [20.49 minutes]

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_dukys7txqc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_dukys7txqc)

'2019 NSW PRC author interview – Will Kostakis'

Filmed and edited by David Todd *NSW Government The Arts Unit* [9.05 minutes]

<https://artsunit.nsw.edu.au/video/2019-nsw-prc-author-interview-will-kostakis>

'Will Kostakis: A Conversation About Diversity in Children's Writing #3' (Better Reading Podcast) *Better Reading* July 27, 2020 [32 minutes]

<https://www.betterreading.com.au/kids-ya/will-kostakis-a-conversation-about-diversity-in-childrens-writing-3/>



**WORKSHEETS**

**Worksheet 1**

Literary Device	Quote
<b>Metaphor</b>	'He's a drizzle of olive oil on a kangaroo steak.' (p 15)
	'They're standing on almost forty years of kindling; one errant spark and they ignite.' (p 84).
<b>Simile</b>	
<b>Personification</b>	
<b>Alliteration</b>	
<b>Humour</b>	
<b>Other</b>	

## Worksheet 2

### Writing Exercises

We can learn so much about creative writing by emulating others – using the same literary devices or structural choices for similar effect. Here are some moments from *We Could Be Something* that can be used as a springboard for your own writing:

1. 'There's a lot you can learn about a guy from the walk to their bedroom. Brad's family's loaded, for one. Polished floors, little statues on marble tables in the hall, no obvious damp smell. Somebody rules the house, probably his mum, who's probably an interior designer. She doesn't give him much leeway to express himself. His walls are bare. The metal lamp by his bedside matches one from the living room, but this one has liquid-paper lightning bolts drawn on the base. Whoever rules the house hasn't noticed those.' (p 34)

Here, Will uses description not only to set the scene, but to establish who Brad is – his family's wealth, their dynamics and his own rebellious streak. Compose a short descriptive paragraph about a place that illuminates something about those who regularly occupy that space.

2. 'My breath catches in my throat. There's an autograph that isn't mine. And I'm in ancient history.' (p 52-3)

Observing the practice signatures in his exercise book, Sotiris stumbles upon Dean's autograph. It hurtles Sotiris into the past, and he recounts their whirlwind romance. Try composing your own original short story, where spotting an object prompts the narrator to recall a significant life experience.

3. "The call came," he says with a shrug.' (p 213)

Jumping between decades allows Will to demonstrate how past experiences inform character motivations in the present. For instance, Jem rushes to Sydney after a call about Proyiayia's ailing health in the same way he rushed to Perth after the call about his mother's ailing health. Both Brad and Isabella are itching to live their adult lives. Brad isn't sure if he wants to be writer, but he is 'ready to do something with his life. Be something' while Isabella 'click[s] into the world' when she helps kids. Imagine a future experience for either of them that has been informed by their experiences in the novel.

