



**Random House Australia
Reading Guides**

WILL by Maria Boyd

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Reading level: Young Adult Readers 14+

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SYNOPSIS

Will is in trouble and everyone's worried. They reckon it's because of what happened six months ago. He doesn't know what they're on about.

The latest incident – mooning the girls' school bus – lands him in the deputy principal's office. He could be suspended or expelled, but instead Will's concerned English teacher, Mr Andrews, makes a suggestion that he thinks will solve the problem. Will is to help out with the school musical, playing guitar in the band.

For Will, the new punishment is ten thousand times worse than expulsion. Will doesn't know anyone in Year 11 who voluntarily takes part in school musicals, and even the prospect of meeting girls from Lakeside Girls' isn't enough to make it worthwhile. The musical is definitely just for band geeks and try-hards.

At the first audition and rehearsal, Will fears are confirmed. But he's about to learn that stereotypes aren't always what they seem. Year seven trombone-playing geeks can be wiser than their years, hot girls like Elizabeth aren't just in the musical to pretend they're stars on *Australian Idol*, and rugby-playing jocks like the new guy, Mark, can sing and dance – and they can be gay, too.

Will thinks he can get through the eight weeks of the musical by staying in his bubble and not feeling anything. This technique has worked for the six months since his dad died (a fact that is revealed later in the book), but Will finds out that suppressing his grief and his emotions can't work forever. Things come to a head just as the performances are about to start.

Laugh-out-loud funny on one page, painful and sad on the next, Will is guaranteed to grab your attention and not let go.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maria Boyd has spent the better part of the past eight years working as a teacher in two boys' high schools, a job that ensured her, amongst other things, at least four belly laughs a day. Before that she was completing her Masters in Cultural Studies, and before that, she was travelling the world from her base in London.

She has explored many different types of opportunities in her working life but nearly all of them have had something to do with young people and teaching. There is no coincidence in this, she enjoys and believes in them both. Maria lives in Sydney. *Will* is her first novel.

ON WRITING *WILL*

Author inspiration

The author writes:

'Writers say that it is best when you write what you know, and considering I had spent fourteen years of my life working with young people and more specifically the last eight teaching boys, they are what I know. My day is full of their voices, their stories, their "stuff". But it's more than just knowing. You have to somehow be captivated by that world and most importantly believe in and be inspired by the people and their stories.

'There are so many individual stories within schools but, because of the way the institution works, often these individuals and their stories can go unnoticed – kids who are dealing with grief like Will, or coming to terms with their sexuality or having to defend their sexuality like Mark, or always being the good kid like Chris, or feeling different like the Freak, or who are negotiating boy/girl relationships for the first time. I suppose in a way I wanted to pay tribute to young people's resilience and their capacity to rally together and support and protect each other. How they often just get on with things and yet still manage to have a laugh.'

Writing style

The author writes:

'I knew that if young people were going to take Will seriously they would have to believe that they were reading about real circumstances, real characters and real issues. And since it was Will's story, it was imperative that his voice was authentic. That wasn't hard because each time I sat down to write, it felt like he was already there waiting to tell the next part of the story.

'I especially wanted to capture Will's internal thoughts, the ones that always play in our head that other people never get to hear. That meant at times Will nearly falls into stream of consciousness, like a voice-over in a movie. In a way he becomes more real because we get to hear his vulnerabilities.

'At the same time I wanted to try and capture that sense of fun and play that so many boys have. Humour was an important balance to some of the heavy issues that the book deals with. It was also a way of representing my observations of how successfully boys do balance what goes on in their life.

'A lot of people have already asked why I used I used bold for the dialogue deliberately. I like the idea that presentation of text on a page can also create meaning for the reader. Also, on a very pragmatic level, I thought bold would be more effective. I'm convinced that young people like text to be broken up on the page.'

The writing process

The author writes:

'The first draft was finished in a term. It was a fantastic, frightening ride, where Will and his mates seemed to just fall out on to the page. It was a skeleton version of what *Will* is today but I have never deviated from the original story line. As soon as I was done, I knew I had to get it into the hands of Will's audience, so I asked some boys at school to do a read and tell me honestly what they thought. And they did! That set the pattern for every rewrite. As soon as I would finish, I made sure there was always a select group of young people who let me know what they thought.

'The hardest part of the process was the last three months before the final publication. This is when I had to redraft the book three times, taking on board editorial notes. I spent many hours every day frowning at a computer screen, making sure that every single word fitted in just the right place so as to maintain the text's authenticity and integrity. It's like I say to my students, every piece of writing has to be drafted and redrafted if you want it to be at its best. But it was hard work, painful. Somehow, though, you just trust that it will be worth it, or at least the characters are worth it and finally you arrive at the end.

'It has been worth it.'

STUDY NOTES / POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- Will discusses with Mark the differences between how girls and boys react at co-ed schools versus single-sex schools. Would you behave differently if you were at a co-ed or single-sex school?
- Continue the discussion that Mr Andrews has with his English class about stereotypes. What stereotypes of males and females have you come across? Do those stereotypes have positive or negative consequences?
- What is the significance of the vegetable patch in Will's character development throughout the novel? Is it as beneficial for him as it is for his mum?
- Will talks about the 'Armstrong Projects' his family used to undertake together, such as renovating the house or deciding what to have in the lounge room.
How has Will's experience of losing his father changed the way he sees his home?
- Discuss the different reactions to threats in the book: Will ignores the 'tuckshop boyzzz', Mark stops them by turning their teasing back on them, and the boys fight the intruders at the after-musical party.
Which response is best? Are different responses appropriate for different situations?
- The author deliberately chose to create a fictional school and setting for the book rather than a real school – why might she have done this?
- Imagine the author is writing a sequel to this novel. What would you like to see happen and which character would you most like to see developed and why?
- The author has left the ending slightly open – we don't find out whether Elizabeth and her parents will forgive Will, and we don't know what he might say to his dad.
Why might the author have written the ending like this? If there was another chapter to finish the book, what do you think it would say?
- Do you think Will's response to Mark's sexuality was believable? Is homophobia an issue in your school? How are gay students accepted in your school?
- Do you think schools should deal with students' grief more directly?

PRAISE FOR WILL

'Will's voice is so authentic and strong that you feel as if you either knew him, want to know him, or hope that one day you'll come across him.' Melina Marchetta, bestselling author of *Looking for Alibrandi*

'This book is to boys what *Looking for Alibrandi* was to girls. Highly recommended.' Australian Booksellers Association Kids' Reading Guide 2006-2007

'Maria Boyd draws on a wealth of experience teaching at a Sydney boys high school to write her first novel. *Will* grapples with the weighty issues of grief, relationships, teenage sexuality and social codes, managing to present a remarkably realistic narrative, punctuated with great humour ... With a fresh style, an innovative approach to dialogue to hook the boys, and lashings of teen angst and emotional development to entertain the girls, *Will* has great appeal for a wide audience. Highly recommended.' Four-starred review by Ben Beaton in *Australian Bookseller & Publisher*, July 2006

'Boyd's experiences as a teacher in a Sydney boys' high school were reflected in the deadly accuracy of the dialogue, internal and external, and the often hilarious playground scenes. This is a funny, touching and appealing account of Will's progress from a walking stereotype of an adolescent male to manhood. Recommended.' Helen Purdie, *Magpies* magazine, Sept 2006

'A very confident first novel ... *Will* is an enjoyable novel that has much to say to the younger readers about the complexities of relationships, the value of true friends and the need for honesty and integrity in our daily lives.' *Reading Time* Vol 50, #4, Nov 06

'What makes this story so different from a myriad of embarrassing boy stories is that it is written so well and is so engaging ... *Will* conveys such an intense sense of connection that you can almost smell the testosterone of the boys in the class and the yard ... a terrific read ... the end result is a triumph, both for Will and for Maria Boyd.' *Viewpoint* Vol 14, #4 Summer 06