

Will Grayson, Will Grayson

John Green & David Levithan

ISBN 978-1-921656-23-1

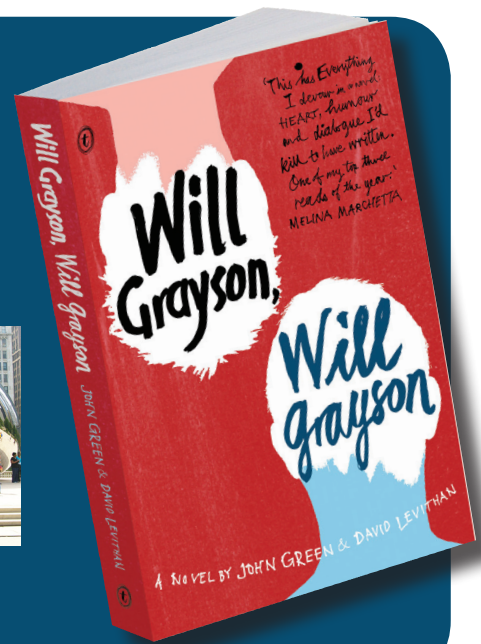
RRP AUS\$19.95, NZ\$25.00

Fiction, B paperback

Recommended for Middle/Upper Secondary

Resource Kit Contains

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- Research topics



Praise

'This has everything I devour in a novel. Heart, humour and dialogue I'd kill to have written.' Melina Marchetta

'Based on the premises that "love is tied to truth" and "being friends, that's just something you are," this powerful, thought-provoking, funny, moving, and unique plot is irresistible. Told in alternating chapters from each Will Grayson's point of view (one in lower case, effectively individualizing identities), complete with honest language, interesting characters, and a heartfelt, gritty edge, this quirky yet down-to-earth collaboration by two master YA storytellers will keep readers turning pages.' *School Library Journal* (US)

Synopsis

The first collaboration of YA indie superstars John Green and David Levithan introduces one Will Grayson, another will grayson and the overwhelmingly lovable Tiny Cooper.

The book's narrative is divided evenly between the two individuals named Will Grayson—Green having written all of the chapters for one, and Levithan having written the chapters for the other.

The first Will, whose name is always correctly capitalised, perhaps to reflect his intelligence, is trying to live his life without being noticed. This is complicated by the fact that his best friend, Tiny Cooper, described as 'the world's largest person who is really, really gay' and 'the world's gayest person who is really, really large,' is not the type to go around unnoticed. Tiny is also, throughout the novel, trying to create an autobiographical musical, which draws even more attention to himself and everyone around him. The other will grayson, whose name is never capitalised, reflecting his depressed and angry state of mind, goes through his life without anything good to hold onto besides an

online friendship with someone who goes by the name Isaac. Intent on meeting up with Isaac, will grayson sets up an encounter one cold night in Chicago. What ensues brings both characters together and changes both their lives forever, in ways they could never have guessed or imagined.

About the Authors

John Green is the bestselling Printz Medal-winning author of *Paper Towns*, *Looking for Alaska* and *An Abundance of Katherines*. He is also the co-creator (with his brother, Hank) of the popular video blog *Brotherhood 2.0*, which has been watched more than 50 million times by Nerdfighter fans around the globe. John Green lives in Indiana. www.sparksflyup.com

David Levithan is an award-winning and *New York Times* bestselling author of young adult books, including *Boy Meets Boy*, *Are We There Yet?*, and *Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist* (with Rachel Cohn). For his day job, he edits lots of books. And he takes lots of pictures. David lives in New Jersey. www.davidlevithan.com.

Author's Statement

David Levithan:

Two boys with the same name—that's how the idea for *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* began. I've always been fascinated with this kind of duality, since one of my best friends is named David Leventhal. I knew I didn't want to write both characters myself, so I asked my friend John Green if he'd be interested in being the other character. Now, almost five years later, the book is coming out into the world. One Will Grayson (John's) is scared of emotion and scarred by love. The other will grayson (mine) is angry, bitter, and, deep down inside, really wanting to be in love and in life. The two meet in, of all

places, a porn store. And Will's best friend, Tiny, entirely steals the show. I won't say anything more than that, but I hope you really enjoy it.

READING QUESTIONS/ACTIVITIES

Reading Journal

The characters in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* are plagued by emotions and questions that are particularly relevant to teenagers. As you read the novel, keep a journal. Note your thoughts and reactions to the text as you read. What do you relate to? What makes sense? What doesn't?

Pre-reading Activities

In essence, *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* is about a couple of teens figuring out how to be themselves. They face issues that may also concern you.

- Before reading the novel, make a list of the things that most concern you. These issues may be personal, social, political, economic or environmental. Number your choices in order of importance, giving reasons for where each choice falls in the list.
- Make a list of the things you believe are most important to your parents or teachers. Is there a discrepancy between your two lists? How do you account for this? Do these differences affect how you relate to these people? Do you think your list will change over time?
- Read the book's blurb and note the cover design. What do you think the book might be about? Make some predictions based on these cues.
- Love can affect us in strange ways. Have you ever done anything strange or desperate in the pursuit of love? Have you ever tried to avoid it?
- Write a journal entry about a time when you have been disappointed in someone. What did you do to address the situation?

Reading Activities

- After you have finished reading the novel, compare and contrast yourself with the teenage characters in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*. Are your thoughts, experiences and beliefs similar in any way?
- The novel is very contemporary in language and feel and, of course, in the methods of communication used by the characters. However, do you think the themes would have been relevant to teenagers 20 years ago? 50 years ago? 100 years ago? Discuss as a group, listing the key themes of the novel as you go.
- Re-read chapters one and two. Note your reactions to the introduction of each of the Will Graysons. How long did it take you to realise they were two different characters? List the key characteristics conveyed by each. How do they differ? What are their similarities? What is the function of the use of upper and lower case?

- Both chapters are filled with fabulous sarcasm and observational humour. List five examples from each of the Will Graysons. How does the humour differ in tone?
- Consider the language used in the novel. Does the dialogue ring true? How does one successfully write from the perspective of characters of a different generation to their own? Write a short journal entry about your morning, but from the perspective of an 80 year old. Now try again as a 30 year old. Finally, try as an eight year old. Was this more difficult a task than you anticipated? Compare your entries with those of a classmate.
- Text messaging, email, social networking sites, IM etc. are all used by the characters in the novel. How do you think such modes of communication shape friendships? Do you think the nature of friendship changes with the changing modes of communication available to us? Write a journal entry in which you imagine life without the tools of communication you're currently using.
- will grayson is gay, depressed and only has one friend, Maura. She's more a friend of convenience with their 'snarkiness' holding their friendship together—'maura is the kind of friend I enjoy swapping doomsday scenarios with. she's not, however, someone who makes me want to prevent doomsday from happening.' (p. 56)
Write a journal entry from will's perspective, expanding on the nature of this friendship. Now try from Maura's perspective.
- In chapter five Will Grayson and his father discuss the future. How would you characterise Will's relationship with his parents? List at least five adjectives to describe their relationship. How would you characterise the other will's relationship with his mother? Does your opinion of this change by the end of the novel? Do you think the Wills interact with their parents in a realistic and/or meaningful way? How do you think the roles of parent and offspring best function? What are the key things you feel a teen and a parent can do to best get along?
- 'Two of the characters in this novel happen to have the same name, but not much in common outside of that. Yet their serendipitous friendship sets the stage for a much larger, braver, and more candid story than the simplicity of the plot might suggest. The relevance for teens here is clear—high school is the only time in your life when you have the undivided opportunity to obsess over your every move, sentence, and outfit change—but the part about understanding who you are doesn't stop when you graduate.' Anne Bartholomew (shelfari.com)
How do you react to this review? Use it as a launching pad for a short piece on the meaning of this thing called life.
- Tiny Cooper is larger than life in every way. What are his motives for staging Tiny Dancer? What are his motives for matchmaking Jane and Will? How

would you describe or classify his modus operandi? Do you think Tiny knows who he is?

- Re-read chapters eight and nine. What is the mood of these chapters? Choose two songs that represent the feelings of Will Grayson and will grayson. Explain your choice in a journal entry. How would you explain Maura's actions? What do you think she wanted to achieve?
- Though both Will's are different, there are similarities. They both want to avoid feeling things too deeply. Straight Will Grayson thinks that crying is almost totally avoidable if you follow two very simple rules: '1. Don't care too much. 2. Shut up.' List the pros and cons of this tactic. Write a journal entry about how their lives, and their attitudes, change after meeting each other.
- 'I always thought that being Will Grayson meant being me, but apparently not. The other Will Grayson is also Will Grayson, and now Gary will be, too.' (p. 165)

'this is not, I have to admit, how I thought being gay was going to be.' (p. 176)

Discuss the nature of identity as a class. What does it mean? Is it a fluid concept? How would you define your own identity? Why does it matter how others see us? Can one's identity be copied or stolen? How do your expectations and prejudices play into your sense of your own and other people's identity? Can one's public identity differ from one's private self? Choose a politician or celebrity to tease out this idea.

- 'by saying you don't care if the world falls apart, in some small way you're saying you want it to stay together, on your terms.' (p. 182-183)

Write a journal entry reflecting on will's statement. What do you think he means? Are there examples of this in real life, perhaps politically or historically?

- Re-read chapter 13. Discuss the analogy between Will and his toy Marvin, and his changing friendship with Tiny. Discuss the analogy between Schrödinger's cat and Will's relationship with Jane. Do you think analogy is a good way to convey emotions and meaning? Is it an epiphany of sorts or a cop-out when Will Grayson says, 'We grow up. Planets like Tiny get new moons. Moons like me get new planets.' (p. 224) Note down some other examples of analogies from the book.
- 'i think the idea of a 'mental health day' is something completely invented by people who have no clue what it's like to have bad mental health.'(p. 226)

This will grayson is very direct emotionally, and frank about depression. What do you think are the key points on the topic that he conveys? How do you think depression and mental health are dealt with in the novel? What about in your social network or community?

- How did the closing chapters of the novel make you feel? Do you think all the loose ends were tied up effectively? What significance do the other Will Graysons have in the closing pages of the novel? Discuss will grayson's 'gift' to Tiny Cooper.

Debate Topics

- 'Being in a relationship, that's something you choose. Being friends, that's something you are.' (p 260)
- Love is tied to truth
- Truth is changeable

Drama Activities

- Choose one character from *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*. Write a song or a poem from their perspective where the character explains what they fear, desire and regret. Perform this for your class, using props to enhance the piece.
- Form groups. Each of you choose one of the 'other' Will Graysons present in the audience at the opening night of the musical to personify. Flesh out this character in an interview format for radio or television. Alternatively, appoint someone as Tiny Cooper and act out a first conversation between Tiny and each of the Wills.
- Appoint someone as a journalist to interview Tiny Cooper, Will Grayson and will grayson after the premier of the musical. As in the musical, use clothing/costume, posture, and language to embody each character.

Themes

- As a class, discuss the meaning of the word 'theme'. In groups brainstorm the themes from the book. Present these to the class.
- Love, truth, honesty, peer pressure, identity, personal loss, acceptance, understanding etc. are just a few of the recurring themes. What do you think is the significance of each of these? Choose your favourite character and write a short piece from their perspective, reflecting on one of the key themes from the book.
- Awkward adolescence, first love, frustrating parents, and complicated friendships emerge within the worlds of the Will Graysons. What impact do these very human concerns have on the reader? Do you relate to the characters? Do you think older readers will? Are these themes universal?

Structure/Plot

- As a class discuss the structure of a novel. Construct a timeline or order of key events for *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*. Now compare your timelines in groups. Are your timelines similar? Did you find it difficult to plot out what happened and when? Did you need to refer back to the novel?

- Many novels have clear endings or resolutions. What do you think is the purpose of this? What effect does this have on the reader? Despite this, are you left wanting more? Did you find the resolution in this novel affecting? Uplifting? Positive? Negative? Realistic? Discuss your reactions as a class.

Creative Responses

- Write a final chapter for the book set one week or one year on from the premier of the musical.
- Write an IM text message conversation between two of the characters the night of the performance.
- 'We've been friends too long to pick, but if we could pick, I'd pick you.' (p. 260)
Write a short story about Tiny Cooper and Will Grayson 20 years on.
- Write a review of *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*. Stick to a limit of 500 words or less, and remember to consider who your audience will be.

Discussion/Essay Topics

- Of his earlier novel *Boy Meets Boy*, David Levithan says 'I basically set out to write the book that I dreamed of getting as an editor—a book about gay teens that doesn't conform to the old norms about gay teens in literature (i.e. it has to be about a gay uncle, or a teen who gets beaten up for being gay, or about outcasts who come out and find they're still outcasts, albeit outcasts with their outcastedness in common.) I'm often asked if the book is a work of fantasy or a work of reality, and the answer is right down the middle—it's about where we're going, and where we should be.'

Discuss this statement with a partner. Do you think this has been achieved in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*? What do you think Levithan means by 'it's about where we're going, and where we should be'? Is the acceptance of people's differences, which the novel largely portrays, present at your school? In your circle? In your society? Where do you think Australia sits on this topic? Where do you think Australian society is going?

- Discuss the concept of *Weltschmerz*: 'the depression you feel when the world as it is does not line up with the world you think it should be.' (p. 302)

Do you think everyone experiences this to some extent? Why is there not a word for this in the English language? Can you think of other concepts or ideas expressed in other languages for which we do not have words?

- Discuss the writing style and structure each author adopts to portray his Will Grayson. Do you think the approach of assigning a different author to each Will has worked? Do you think it helps to clearly define the two characters or does the change of style detract from the reading experience? Do you think the style of either of the characters changes throughout the novel? Did you find one perspective easier to read than the other? Which did you prefer?
- Are there any villains in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*? Are there simply people who do the wrong thing, who get scared and make mistakes, who let their friends down and then try to pick them back up? Discuss in relation to Maura and Will's friendship. And what of Tiny and Will's friendship? Do you think this is a reflection of how things are in real life? Do you think it true in a broader context?
- As the authors explore truth and love and honesty, they keep peeling away complex layers of character and motivation so the reader never quite knows what to think or feel. Use examples from the book to illustrate this. What is your take on pithy comments like: 'If you don't say the honest thing, it never becomes true'?
- Male friendship is explored thoroughly in this novel. Write a short piece on the nature of male friendship. Can it be generalised? Are there certain qualities you notice? How would you describe or qualify it?

Research Topics

In small groups research one of the following and report back to the class:

- The history of musicals or a specific musical of your choice
- Erwin Schrödinger
- Chicago
- Your favourite Young Adult author
- Forms of communication throughout history