

Q&A WITH REX OGLE

You tackle quite serious, difficult subject matter in your books. How do you approach these topics for young people, and balance truth with levity and hope?

Rex Ogle: I firmly believe the only way to approach non-fiction is with brutal honesty. The author can't, and shouldn't, shy away from the hard parts. Neither should readers. Some parents want to be protective of their children (which I completely understand) and keep them from material that they deem too mature. But I don't think that gives enough credit to today's youth. Right now, almost every kid is spending more and more time on the internet, learning about topics and issues and subjects in the most explicit form. Rather than avoid this material, let's offer it to them (if they're interested), and have a frank discussion. I'd like to think my stories are conversation starters and can open up lines of communication about the heavier things in life.

As for balancing truth with levity and hope, that's a lot more difficult. For stories, I think it's necessary to paint a full 360 picture, to show life in all its complexity and well-roundedness. For me though, finding a light in the darkness has always been a struggle, one that I still deal with today. So each day, I try to remind myself that life in and of itself is an ever-changing landscape. Not every day is going to be good, not every day is going to be bad. The best thing we can do is try to focus on the more positive things in life, to appreciate the little things that make life worthy of joy. Before she passed, Abuela offered me this advice (which I wrote down): "Life is full of surprises. Some good, some bad. Some make us happier, some make us stronger, some make us wiser. We have to accept them all."

Why is it important for young adult readers to learn about the experience of an unhoused teen? What do you hope young readers will take away from your story?

RO: Every week, I get dozens of messages from teachers and librarians (and even young readers themselves) saying students can't put down *Free Lunch*. And every one of them says they appreciate the candor, and learning how people with different circumstances live. I think all true stories—whether you're reading a book, watching the news, or listening to a podcast about the world—offer a new and fresh perspective from someone else's life. And that cultivates compassion and even some understanding of those who live around us, but aren't necessarily following the same path we are. So for someone with a stable home, it's eye-opening to read about someone without access to adequate and safe housing.

We live in uncertain times, and homelessness is on the rise. So many people are living in overcrowded homes, sleeping outside or in cars, staying in shelters, or living in substandard places without basic amenities like plumbing, heat, or electricity. It's terrifying for them, and awful to live under such extreme conditions. It's important for people to know this reality exists for some of their peers.

Q&A WITH REX OGLE

Road Home beautifully depicts human complexity; you encounter people who both help and hurt you tremendously. Why is it important to represent people as they are, capable of both good and bad?

RO: I grew up reading X-Men comics. And some of the villains, such as Magneto, were doing terrible things for somewhat understandable reasons. Magneto was a holocaust survivor who wanted to make sure that such atrocities were never committed again, and in doing so, became something of a terrorist. Just as the *New York Times* often presents both sides of the story, I try to illustrate the duality in human nature. It's important for readers to understand that no person is all good or all bad. And those who are hurting others are usually hurting themselves first. While it's not possible for someone to comprehend the minute details of others' situations, it is powerful and important to be empathetic and offer up kindness and a smile. And I try to instill that sensibility in my characters.

You've written almost a hundred children's books, memoirs, graphic novels, and comics. How do you stay inspired?

RO: From a young age, I wanted to write because I had an overflow of creative ideas. So I pursued writing with all my heart. It didn't come naturally, so I really had to work at it. Early in my career, I was writing readers and 6x9s and early chapter books for young readers, which came easily. After all, I was working on stories for LEGO, Marvel, and DC Comics. It was pure fun. But still, I had more ideas, with my own characters and histories and worlds. I wanted to write more middle grade and young adult. I wanted to play with formats and prose and verse as well as non-fiction and fiction. I read as much as I can, which makes me want to write as much as I can. If you think about it, the world is filled with an endless potential for stories, and we just need creators to capture them and put them down on paper.

What would you say to kids who are questioning their sexuality, facing homelessness, or feeling alone?

RO: I would first say that they are not alone in what they are dealing with. No matter how scary it is, there are other people who feel the same way. I would suggest reaching out, finding a community of other like-minded individuals. Share your story and ask them to share theirs. You'll find strength in knowing how to contend with your situation. For those struggling to find their way through identifying as LGBTQ+, there are so many groups and organizations waiting to help. Look for them. For those dealing with home instability, there are also resources, more than ever. So look for them as well. I know having to do the work is... well, work, but it's worth it to survive. And for those feeling alone, trust me, I know what it's like and it can be the scariest thing in the world, but again, I want to repeat it, *you are not alone*. Life is difficult, but it is worth living and you deserve to find happiness.

Q&A WITH REX OGLE

You didn't have access to resources when you were going through the events of this story. What are some resources you hope LGBTQ+ or unhoused youth know about today? How can other people help?

RO: I am happy to say there is an abundance of resources in today's society. Internet search engines make finding service a much easier task, but there is still a lot of information to navigate.

For the LGBTQ+ community, I recommend GLAAD, HRC, and The Trevor Project as good starting points. Many of these also include services for at-risk youth, as well as those who have run away or been kicked out. And many of them have hotlines that are available 24 hours a day, and always confidential.

<https://glaad.org/resourcelist/>

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/>

<https://www.hrc.org/resources/direct-online-and-phone-support-services-for-lgbtq-youth>

If you, your family, or someone you know is experiencing home instability, know that there are many state and national organizations that can help. Dialing 211 is a good place to start as they can often connect you with local services. If you are below a certain age, there are specific youth-targeted aids.

<https://www.211.org>

<https://www.1800runaway.org>

<https://nationalhomeless.org/finding-help/>

If you or someone you know is struggling with thoughts of suicide, please dial 988 for the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline or visit the website below. They are available 24 hours to listen and help.

<https://988lifeline.org>

If you want to help, there are so many ways you can offer your time and energy. You can volunteer in shelters and soup kitchens, or join a team to handle incoming calls from those requiring assistance. You can also donate food, clothes, and home goods to charities that pass them along to those in need. But perhaps the most important thing you can do? Do not ignore those people on the streets or living under dire circumstances. They are not invisible and shouldn't be made to feel so. Compassion is key. And something as simple as a smile goes a long way.

