



The Other Brother

by Jax Calder

Synopsis of Novel:

The Other Brother centres on Ryan, a seventeen-year-old laidback surfer who is constantly chided by his family for joking around and not taking anything seriously. It's the summer between Year 12 and Year 13 and he has no idea what he wants to do with his life.

Ryan comes from a blended family and has a chip on his shoulder from growing up being constantly compared to Cody, the other half-brother of his older sisters Kate and Mel. Through unexpected circumstances, Ryan ends up spending part of the summer at Cody's beach house. There, animosity transforms into friendship as Ryan teaches Cody to surf and Cody teaches Ryan the guitar.

When surfing one day, Ryan saves a drowning child. The rescue brings Cody and Ryan closer, but before it can blossom further, Cody's parents arrive, cutting their time short.

Back in the city, Ryan considers becoming a paramedic but is concerned he doesn't have the grades. Cody offers to tutor him, and they grow even closer. Everything changes when Cody kisses Ryan one night. Cody admits he's gay and interested in Ryan, but they know that neither family would handle Cody and Ryan being together.

Ryan knows a secret relationship with Cody won't end well but they go for it anyway. But when tragedy strikes and Cody's mother has a stroke, Cody tells Ryan they need to break up.

Ryan is left heartbroken yet conceals his pain behind his carefree persona. He struggles with interactions at family gatherings and finally drops his mask of humour to tell Cody how serious he is about them. He's devastated when Cody tells him he doesn't want to be together.

A family argument at his nephew's christening unveils a buried secret - a deceased brother, Joshua, who has been a source of their parents' animosity. This revelation triggers another, the truth about Ryan and Cody's relationship finally out to all of their parents.

In the aftermath of the revelations, Ryan and Cody reconcile. The epilogue shows them two years later at their nephew's birthday, still happily together with the family accepting of their relationship.



About the Author:

Jax is a former high school teacher who lives on the east coast of New Zealand. She is a full time author and has published 14 books for teenagers and adults under different pen names. She became interested in writing *The Other Brother* after mentoring LGBTQ+ teenagers when she was teaching and realising that there weren't many books set in New Zealand with LGBTQ+ protagonists. She wanted to write a book where the main conflict wasn't due to the characters' sexualities but rather the challenges faced by teenagers navigating complex blended families.

Relevant themes/ issues:

- 1. Identity and Self-Perception:** Ryan's struggle with his self-image, constantly comparing himself with his seemingly perfect half-brother, Cody, is a central theme in the book. This can lead to discussions about self-esteem, comparison culture, and the impact of social and familial expectations on one's identity.
- 2. Sexuality:** The book explores various aspects of sexuality, with characters identifying as bisexual and gay. Teachers can use this to introduce discussions about LGBTQ+ identities, the importance of acceptance, and the struggles faced by individuals coming out, especially in unsupportive environments.
- 3. Family Dynamics and Relationships:** The complicated dynamics within this blended family, including the parental animosity and sibling relationships, are a significant part of the story. This can stimulate discussions about different types of families, managing conflict within families, and the impact of parental relationships on children.
- 4. Responsibility and Career Choices:** Ryan's journey from a laid-back high school senior with no future plans to considering a career as a paramedic could be a basis for discussions about making career choices, the importance of having goals, and the responsibilities that come with adulthood.
- 5. Friendship and Romance:** The evolution of Ryan and Cody's relationship from rivalry to friendship and then romantic involvement presents an opportunity to discuss the nature of different types of relationships, the importance of communication and honesty in relationships, and the complications that can arise in romantic relationships.

- 6. Coping with Loss and Grief:** The revelation of the deceased brother, Joshua, introduces the theme of loss and grief. It can be used to discuss how families cope with such tragedies, the impact of unresolved grief, and the importance of forgiveness and healing.

Writing Style:

The novel is written in first person present tense, from Ryan's point of view. The story is told in a humorous tone and follows a straight chronological progression through a series of succinct chapters referencing previous events without delving right back into them. It has lots of dialogue and is a character driven story.

Year level suitability and application

The writing and language would put this at a suitable level for Year 11, but the themes might make it more appropriate for Year 12. An effective and rewarding study could be developed at either level. At Year 11 a focus on teenage slang would integrate well with the language in context standard, whereas at Year 12 a contrast with similar themes in a different country, or a different approach to teenage sexuality would allow for a rewarding comparative analysis.

Curriculum links

Learning opportunities

Before reading – setting the scene:

1. Students make storyline predictions based on the cover, title, and synopsis of the book.
2. Students discuss their own family dynamics. Do they have step siblings, half siblings, step parents? Are there any students with the same family connection Ryan and Cody share?
3. Students discuss their areas of success. Do they have a sibling, cousin, family member, friend, etc. who they feel is more successful than them? Are they envious of that person? Do they feel like they don't "measure up" in the eyes of their other family or friends?

During reading – understanding the content:

Chapter One:

1. At the beginning of this chapter, what do you think the connection is between Cody and Ryan? Are they friends, enemies, family?
2. List Cody's physical characteristics?
3. What are three facts you learn about Ryan during this chapter?

Chapter Two:

1. What are three facts you learn about Cody in this chapter?
2. How are Cody and Ryan different?
3. We know how Ryan felt toward Cody growing up, but how do you think Cody felt toward Ryan?

Chapter Three:

1. What do you think Cody's real motivation is for showing up at the beach house?
2. Do you think Ryan's family also thinks he's "not as good as Cody"? Or is it a scenario that only exists in Ryan's mind?
3. Do you have personal experience with having to readjust your own schedule/celebrations to fit someone else's needs?

Chapter Four

1. Why do you think Cody keeps blushing around Ryan?
1. Who do you think will be more successful in learning their new skill? Cody at surfing or Ryan at playing guitar?
2. Do you have a food you absolutely cannot stand? (Like Cody with raisins.)

Chapter Five

1. What is a new skill you'd like to learn?
2. Why do you think Mel is taking the Design class?
3. Make a short list of similarities and differences between Ryan and Cody.

Chapter Six

1. Do you think Ryan's assumptions about Cody's personality and way of thinking are correct or incorrect? Give evidence to back up your answer.
2. Why do you think Cody gave Ryan his completed crossword?
3. Share a story about a time you won or lost an awesome bet.

Chapter Seven

1. Make a prediction about how you think the party is going to go?
2. Do you have a nickname only a family member or close friend calls you? Are you willing to tell other people the nickname?

Chapter Eight

1. Why do you think Cody reacted the way he did when Ryan told him he's hooked up with both guys and girls?
2. What does Harvey mean by "don't screw the crew?" What's the warning he's giving Ryan?
3. It seems Cody's having a positive influence on Ryan...what type of influence do you think Ryan is having on Cody?

Chapter Nine

1. Do you know how to do CPR? How do you think you would respond in an emergency?
2. What other jobs might Ryan be good at because he's able to keep calm when there's an emergency?

Chapter Ten

1. Why do you think Ryan jokes in serious situations?
2. Ryan's subconscious doesn't want his time with Cody to come to an end. Make some predictions about how Ryan is feeling toward Cody. And how Cody might be feeling toward Ryan?

3. What kind of uncle do you think Cody will be to Kate's baby?

Chapter Eleven

1. How do you feel about how Frank treats Ryan?
2. Do you feel pressure from your parents to be the best at something like an instrument, sport, academic subject, etc.?
3. Make some predictions about what will happen between Ryan and Cody now that their time at the beach house has ended.

Chapter Twelve

1. How do you feel about Ryan's conversation with his mum and dad?
2. Make predictions about what might happen the next time Ryan and Cody see each other in person.
3. Do your parents support your plans for your future?

Chapter Thirteen

1. Do you think the way Mrs. Steinburg treats Ryan is fair?
2. List some of the ways Cody and Ryan's friendship has changed Ryan's outlook on life.
3. Chapter Fourteen
4. What is the importance of this chapter? What do we learn and see first-hand that helps move the story forward?

Chapter Fifteen

1. What do you think Cody's song is about? What do you think inspired it?

Chapter Sixteen

1. Talk about something you've done for a friend that's outside your comfort zone? (Like Ryan attending Cody's performance)
2. Should Ryan have gone to get dessert with Cody?

- What do you think would've happened if Ryan had accepted Cody's invitation?

Chapter Seventeen

1. Make predictions about how Ryan's and Cody's parents will react when they find out about Ryan and Cody's relationship.
2. Make predictions about how Ryan and Cody's sisters will react.

Chapter Eighteen

1. Do you agree with Ryan's decision to avoid the conversation about his and Cody's relationship status? What consequences do you think might come from not having the conversation?

Chapter Nineteen

1. How do you think your friends would react if you started hanging out with people who were in a different economic class than you? Would they be accepting, or would they be jealous like Harvey?
2. Choose a friend you have in your life and figure out what could have gone differently that would've resulted in the two of you having never met. (Similar to Ryan's contemplation of how Cody and he may or may not have met if they didn't have the family connection.)

Chapter Twenty

1. What did you anticipate Mel's reaction would be to finding out Cody and Ryan are dating? Were you correct or incorrect?

Chapter Twenty-one

1. Make a prediction: do you think Kate and Mel will keep Cody and Ryan's relationship a secret?

Chapter Twenty-two

1. Why do you think Ryan keeps defaulting to being the jokester? If he wants people to take him more seriously, why doesn't he give more serious answers?

2. Have you ever had a friend not trust you with something important? How did that make you feel?

Chapter Twenty-three

1. A happily ever after doesn't seem possible for Cody and Ryan at this point. Do you think they'll eventually get one?
2. Have you ever been in a situation where you thought your parents would react a certain way, but their actual reaction is completely different? If comfortable, share the situation and the expected and actual reactions.

Chapter Twenty-four

1. Ryan tells his friends that Cody isn't his stepbrother. Describe how the way they are connected is different to that of normal stepbrothers.

Chapter Twenty-five

1. Do you have any predictions as to what actually happened between Julia (Ryan's mom) and Frank (Cody's dad)?

Chapter Twenty-six

1. Please share about a time you had a friendship or a relationship with someone your parents would rather you not share a connection with.
2. Ryan hesitated when speaking to his dad about his relationship with Cody. What do you think Ryan's real feelings are towards Cody?

Chapter Twenty-seven

1. Do you think Cody's father was right to tell Cody and Ryan they have to end their relationship? Explain your answer.
2. What do you think would've happened if Frank had discovered their relationship before his wife's stroke?

Chapter Twenty-eight

1. Ryan thinks he's replaceable in Cody's life. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

2. Why did Cody apologize after kissing Ryan in the bathroom?

Chapter Twenty-nine

1. Do you think Cody has the same feelings for Ryan that Ryan has for Cody?
2. What do you think he meant by "don't wait for me"?

Chapter Thirty

3. Do you have any siblings? Tell me how they would handle you being sad about a relationship ending.

Chapter Thirty-one

1. Make a list of the ways Ryan has changed from the beginning of the book until now. Do you think these new characteristics were always a part of who Ryan was?

Chapter Thirty-two

1. How do the events of this chapter show how Cody has grown and changed in the book?
2. What do you think about the revelation about Joshua? Does it explain their parents animosity?

Epilogue

1. Write a two-paragraph essay about Cody and Ryan ten years in the future.

Post Reading activities:

Theme analysis, role play, research

Theme analysis:

Activity one: Group work activity

Discuss the following questions as a group:

1. What was at least one challenge faced by Ryan or Cody in *The Other Brother*. How did this challenge help you understand the character?
2. What's one thing that happened in *The Other Brother* that changed your viewpoint on an important moral standard in your life?

Activity two: Individual work - NCEA Level 2 Written text essay questions

Using examples from *The Other Brother* write an essay exploring one of the following statements:

- Setting is essential in creating the mood of a text.
- The main idea is often suggested rather than stated
- Character change is essential in a text.
- Simple and straightforward language is the best way of communicating ideas

Role Play activities:

Adopt the role of either Kate or Mel and explain how it felt to grow up as a child of divorced parents.

1. Adopt the role of Ryan or Cody and give a speech about how you should either be taken more seriously or given more freedom to be who you are truly meant to be.

Beyond the text activities:

1. Research something new you would like to learn. How would you learn more about it? Where might you take lessons to get better? What materials would you need to be as successful as possible?
2. Research how society's acceptance of LGBTQ+ people has changed over time. What do you think the growing number of books and movies featuring LGBTQ+ characters will mean for attitudes going forward?
3. Produce a poster providing guidance for adults going through relationship breakups about the long-term effects of toxicity on their children.

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for OneTree House