



Teaching Notes by Bec Kavanagh

Simon vs The Homo Sapiens Agenda
By Becky Albertalli

Synopsis

I have no idea who he is. No freaking clue.

But I think I'm falling for him again.

Simon Spier likes English and Drama. He likes his best friends since forever, Nick and Leah, and his best friend since just recently, Abby. He also likes boys. But he hasn't told anyone that last bit yet, except Blue.

Blue isn't really Blue though. And in his emails, Simon isn't Simon, he's Jacques. They use fake names, because both Blue and Simon haven't come out yet. They're still working on that part. Both find safety in their anonymity. As Blue and Jacques they can be completely open with each other. Their emails are easy and genuine and share things with each other that they don't with anyone else. Simon already feels like Blue is his boyfriend. He knows that he wants him to be. But although there's a safety in anonymity, it's also preventing things from going any further.

Simon's own feelings about coming out are complicated when Martin Addison finds one of his emails. Martin is a nice enough guy, but he also has a huge crush on Abby. So Martin blackmails Simon by threatening to out him if he doesn't use his friendship with Abby to push her towards Martin. Simon's uncomfortable about this. He tries avoiding Martin, but every time they end up alone together,

Martin reminds him of the screenshot that he's taken of Simon's emails to Blue. And Simon is too afraid of losing Blue to stand up to Martin the way he'd like to.

Alongside Simon, his friends and family have their own stories, their own issues. Each faces their own awkward 'outings' as they shape their identities and navigate high school.

Leah feels that she's losing her friends, and is jealous of Abby for fitting in so easily even though she's new, and for quickly becoming the focus of Nick's attention. Nora has retreated into herself since childhood, and struggles to carve out her own space. Alice is trying to find a way to introduce her family, who always make a Big Deal out of everything, to her first real relationship since moving away to college. And Abby is still trying to find her place in a new high school in a new town.

Ultimately, Simon gets his happy ending. But it isn't just handed to him. Simon has his 'growing up' moment. He is forced to find a way to reclaim his identity when the choice of how and when he comes out is taken away from him. He must deal with the fallout of hurt feelings and changing friendships. He must also challenge many ideas (including his own) about how he fits into his world.

It's not easy being a teenager, and it's definitely not easy falling in love. In *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, Becky Albertalli explores all of these issues through an easily likeable ensemble of characters. Inside this easy to read, digestible love story, are some complicated ideas, and there is plenty to be discussed in the classroom, particularly about sexuality and the ethical treatment of peers.

Reading Questions

The following are some basic reading questions to consider before, during, and after your reading of the book. More detailed questions and activities follow, and are grouped under theme and character.

Pre Reading

- What do you expect from the book?
- Why do you think you might like/dislike reading it?
- What does the title suggest to you about the story?
- What issues do you think the book might deal with?

During Reading

- Why is Martin able to blackmail Simon?
- Who else is affected by Martin's actions?
- What do you have in common with Simon? Are there parts of him that you don't understand? Can you think of moments in your own life that would help you understand how he feels/acts?
- Which characters do you relate to/ not relate to? Why?
- What challenges do each of the other characters face?
- Who do you think Blue is? What hints are given during the book?
- Why do Nick, Abby and Simon end up excluding Leah? What is the outcome of this? Discuss how they could have handled things differently.

After Reading

- Why is it important to have books about characters with a range of sexual identities?
- Are there enough books like this? Why do you think that is?
- How was the book different to your earlier expectations?
- Who was Blue? Was he who you expected? If you were surprised, why? Do you think the author successfully kept the secret until the right moment?
- What did you like/not like about the book? Why?

EXPLORATION OF THE TEXT BY THEME

Sexual Identity

Sexual identity is a big part of *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*. It is not only one of the defining features of the relationships between Blue and Simon, but drives much of the conflict in the book, and provides the motivation for the actions (good and bad) of many of the surrounding characters.

Books with non-heterosexual relationships and/or characters have only found their place in mainstream publishing recently. Books like *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (John Green & David Levithan), *Pink* (Lili Wilkinson) and *Every Day* (David Levithan) have certainly helped bring non-heterosexual romances to a broader audience.

The following set of questions and activities are designed to encourage readers to think about why it is important that more books like this exist, and to consider the difficulties faced by characters who identify as LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex), and by extension develop greater empathy for their peers.

Consider the following from www.beyondblue.org.au

**The majority of lesbian, gay, bi, trans and intersex (LGBTI) people lead happy, healthy and fulfilling lives. However studies have found that non-heterosexual people face up to twice as much abuse or violence (including physical, mental, sexual or emotional) than their heterosexual counterparts. This prejudice and discrimination adds an additional layer of risk on top of biological, social, environmental and psychological factors which can lead to depression and anxiety.*

Around 10 per cent of young Australians experience same-sex attraction, most realising this around puberty. They may be more likely to experience bullying at school and/or greater difficulty connecting with others. In an Australian study, 61 per cent of young non-heterosexual people reported experiencing verbal abuse and 18 per cent reported physical abuse.

<http://www.beyondblue.org.au/resources/for-me/lesbian-gay-bi-trans-and-intersex-lgbti-people/factors-affecting-lgbti-people>

In groups or as a class, go through the following

1. Make a list of moments in the book where one of the characters was treated differently because of their sexuality.
2. On the list, include the following. Who was the character being treated differently? Who was treating them differently? Why are they behaving this way? How does the first character respond? What is the outcome? (think of both the emotional and literal outcomes)
3. Consider the issues outlined in the above Beyond Blue statements.
 - Do you think Becky Albertalli has successfully included any/all of them? Why/why not? Give examples.
 - Is it her responsibility as an author to address these issues in the story? Why/why not?
 - What are the responsibilities of an author when they're writing about topics that might be culturally/socially/politically sensitive?
4. Who is in Simon's support network? Make a diagram, with Simon at the centre, drawing lines out to each of the people in his support network.
 - What is his relationship with each of them?
 - Why are they in his support network?
 - How does he feel about coming out to them? How/when does he come out to them? What is their reaction?
 - In what ways are they supportive and unsupportive?
5. Simon and Blue talk about how unfair it is that straight people don't have to have an awkward coming out. Do you think this is true? Discuss how the author plays with this idea to give the characters their own 'outings'. How would it change our culture if everyone had to come out, regardless of their sexuality?
6. Take a look at the posters on the following link (Minus18 is Australia's largest youth led organization for gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans* youth). Sometimes a lack of understanding can be just as hurtful as outright bullying.
<https://minus18.org.au/index.php/news-articles/item/519-looking-at-things-from-another-perspective>
 - a) What kind of attitude/comment do you think inspired the poster you're looking at?
 - b) What's wrong with this attitude?
 - c) What would be a better approach?

Recommended Reading

Brugman, Alyssa, *Alex As Well*, Text Publishing, 2013
Glassman, Eli, *The Boys Own Manual to Being a Proper Jew*, Sleepers Publishing, 2014
Gough, Erin, *The Flywheel*, Hardie Grant Books, 2015
Green, John & Levithan, David, *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*, Penguin Australia, 2010
Horniman, Joanne, *About A Girl*, Allen & Unwin, 2010
Kostakis, Will, *The First Third*, Penguin Australia, 2013
Levithan, David, *Every Day*, Penguin Australia, 2012
Wilkinson, Lili, *Pink*, Allen & Unwin, 2009

Further Reading/Resources

Articles

'Alan Gibbons: Why I included a gay character in my novel *Hate*' by Alan Gibbons, The Guardian <http://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2014/may/13/alan-gibbons-gay-character-in-hate-lgbt>

'A healthy nation is an accepting nation' by Minto Felix, The Drum <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-07/felix-social-stigma-continues-to-hurt-lgbt-australians/5796194>

'Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation' (PDF) Australian Youth Affairs Coalition <http://www.ayac.org.au/uploads/Gender%20Identity%20and%20Sexual%20Orientation.pdf>

'James Dawson: The importance of LGBT visibility in children's books' by James Dawson, The Guardian <http://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2014/may/13/james-dawson-importance-lgbt-gay-visibility-childrens-book>

'Welcome to our LGBT themed week: an overview' The Guardian <http://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2014/may/12/lgbt-books-week-childrens-books-teenagers-ya>

'We Read to Know We Are Not Alone' by Danielle Binks, Kill Your Darlings Journal http://www.killyourdarlingsjournal.com/?post_type=article&p=15202

'What are the best LGBT books for children, teenagers and YA's?' the Guardian <http://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2014/may/12/best-lgbt-books-children-teenagers-ya>

'Writers Discuss Gay Fiction Relating to Reality' by Gregory G. Allen, HuffPost Gay Voices http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gregory-g-allen/writers-discuss-gay-fiction-relating-to-reality_b_4874059.html

Websites

Beyond Blue <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/resources/for-me/lesbian-gay-bi-trans-and-intersex-lgbti-people/factors-affecting-lgbti-people>

Freedom Centre (WA) www.freedom.org.au

Lambda Awards, The <http://www.lambdaliterary.org/awards/>

LGBTI: National LGBTI Health Alliance www.lgbtihealth.org.au

Minus18 www.minus18.org.au

Safe Schools Coalition Victoria (SSCV) www.safeschoolscoalitionvictoria.org.au

Stonewall Book Awards, The <http://www.ala.org/glbtrt/award>

Twenty10 (NSW) www.twenty10.org.au

Zoe Belle Gender Centre (VIC) www.gendercentre.com

Ethics

Martin seems like a nice guy, however his actions raise serious questions around the ethical treatment of our peers. What should we do when we are privy to someone else's secrets?

As a class, or in groups, consider the following.

- What is meant by the term 'ethics'?
 - Are ethics important?
 - How are ethics and morals different?
 - Is Martin's behaviour unethical or immoral?
 - Do you think Martin has a reason for acting the way that he does?
 - Does that make it ok?
1. As an individual write a list of your own personal values or morals. As a class, come up with a set of classroom ethics. Write these on a poster, and come up with consequences for breaking the ethical code of your class.

Although Martin blackmailing Simon is probably the most obvious example of unethical behaviour in the book, there are others. One is the way Simon treats Abby.

- How is Simon's treatment of Abby unethical?
- Is it justified because he is being blackmailed?
- How does it make Abby feel?

- Is there a better or worse when it comes to unethical behaviour or is it all just as bad?
1. What other kinds of unethical behaviour can you think of outside the book? Discuss how these are regulated on a national and international scale, and find examples of ethical and unethical behaviour at each of these levels. Why is it important to ensure that people behave ethically?

Given the way that Simon is outed, online ethics are also called into question.

- Why is doing something online different to say, saying it in person or writing a nasty note?
- What are the repercussions for Simon and Martin?
- How are online ethics regulated at your school?
- Discuss online bullying – share your experiences with it if you've had any, and discuss why people sometimes feel ok about saying things online that they wouldn't say in person.
- How can this be changed?

Further Reading

'Values, morals and ethics'

http://changingminds.org/explanations/values/values_morals_ethics.htm

Books (with morally ambiguous characters, or ethical themes)

Badger, Hilary, *State of Grace*, Hardie Grant Publishing, 2014

Bailey, Em, *Shift*, Hardie Grant Publishing, 2011

Marr, Shirley, *Fury*, Black Dog Books, 2010

Reece, Gordon, *Mice*, 2001

Additional Themes

- Growing up
- Friendship
- Family

EXPLORATION OF THE TEXT BY CHARACTER

Character Studies

Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda is a real ensemble novel, in that although Simon is the focus, it is a novel made up of many characters and their stories. You could choose any character that interests you to look at, however I've provided two studies of Martin and Leah following the list of characters below.

Main Characters

- Simon
- Nick
- Leah
- Abby
- Nora
- Alice
- Martin
- Bram
- Garrett

Martin

Martin is quite a complex and interesting character to discuss. He is described as goofy, and the class clown by Simon, even at the beginning of the book, which serves to add to Simon's surprise about Martin blackmailing him.

Jesus Christ. I mean, I guess I figured Martin was harmless. A little bit of a goobery nerd, to be honest, but it's not like that's a bad thing. And I've always thought he was kind of hilarious.

Except I'm not laughing now.

-p4.

- What does Martin threaten Simon with?
- What does he want in return?
- How does the author describe Martin during his first exchange with Simon? (consider things like his tone, his body language, his wording)
- After this first chapter, what are your thoughts on Martin?

Over the course of the book, Martin has quite a complex narrative arc. He continues to blackmail Simon, and does develop a friendship with Abby, but he seems to feel more and more awkward about it.

- What indications are we given that Martin feels uncomfortable about what he is doing?
- Why do you think he keeps going?
- Is he truly a threat to Simon?
- What makes him finally turn on Simon, and what does he do when he feels that Simon has wronged him?

Once Martin has outed Simon, his actions weigh even more heavily on him. The extent of Simon's disgust towards him makes him cast himself out, and every time we see him he is miserable and alone.

- Why does he care that he's upset Simon?
- Does this make him a good person?
- Should he be forgiven?
- How does he try to make amends?

Because, Simon won't talk to Martin, Martin writes him a letter to explain his reasons for behaving the way he did, and to apologise to Simon. (P287-289)

- Discuss Martin's revelations in the letter. Does it change how you view him?
- Does it make his actions easier to understand?
- Has he done the right thing by writing the letter? What else could he do?

ACTIVITY

Think of a time you've done something that you regretted to someone else. Write them a letter explaining your behaviour, and apologizing.

Following the letter, write a journal article commenting on how you could have acted differently. Think about how you responded at the time – is there a way that you could have made amends sooner? Would a letter have helped? Is it too late to send it now?

Leah

In many ways Leah is the outsider. Although she has known Nick and Simon forever, she is drifting apart from them.

- How do we first meet Leah?
- What are your first impressions?
- Write a short summary of who you feel she is as a character after her first scene in the book.

Simon can see the tension building between Leah and Nick because she has feelings for him, and he has feelings for Abby. Simon describes Leah as snapping at Abby, and sometimes finds it awkward being stuck between the two of them.

- Find a moment when Leah and Abby are in a scene together. How do they react to each other? What clues does the author give that there is tension between the two of them?
- How do the others react?
- Does Leah actually dislike Abby? Why does she respond the way that she does to her?

When Simon first comes out, it's to Abby. He keeps meaning to tell Leah and Nick, but can't make himself do it. And then it's too late, and everyone knows.

- Why is Simon more afraid of telling Leah and Nick that he's gay than Abby?
- How does Leah respond when she finds out that he told Abby first?
- Does she have a right to feel this way?

Leah is disappointed that Simon told Abby and not her, but she tries her hardest to be understanding. There are a few moments in the novel where Leah says that it's not her 'right' to feel anything negative about who Simon chose to share his secret with.

- What makes Leah stop talking to Simon?
- Why is she so upset with him?
- Is it Simon's fault?
- How has he contributed to making her feel bad? How could he make things better?

One of Leah's struggles is finding her identity, and finding a niche where she can be herself. At the end of the book though, when her secret is revealed, Simon describes how free she looks.

Then Nora's hand stills against the body of the guitar, and Taylor stops singing, and everyone stops playing, except Leah, who gets this pissed off, determined look on her face. And then she launches into the most freaking awesome, badass drum solo I've ever heard. Her eyes are focused and her cheeks are flushed, and she really looks so pretty. She'd never believe me if I told her.

-p294

- How is this description of Leah different to earlier descriptions of her?
- What is she doing differently?

ACTIVITY

Think of something that makes you feel one hundred percent yourself. Write a scene in which you are the star. Describe how this activity makes you feel – what are you thinking about when you're doing it? What happens to your concerns, anxieties? Try to get as much description into this scene (1000wds) as possible. You want to evoke to the rest of your class the feeling that you get from your favourite thing as emphatically as possible!