



## PINK SHIRT DAY



### Promised Land

Adam Reynolds and Chaz Harris (2017). Promised Land Entertainment, NZ



This children's picture book provides a beautiful and refreshing interpretation of what it means to be "normal" and that includes being LGBT. This is a rare text in which a typically minority identity is presented in an organic, natural and positive light. Unlike the usual expectation of an LGBT storyline, where the characters face fear of coming out and navigating a world that does not accept them, *Promised Land* presents the opposite.

The main characters Jack, a farm boy, and Leo, a prince, live happily and peacefully in a world "where no one cares if you were straight or gay". They both long to be free, not because where they live is unaccepting but because their spirit for adventure surpasses the idleness of their kingdom. Leo and Jack meet by chance on their adventure through the forest and immediately fall in love.

What is interesting about this story is that there is not an obstacle to overcome, as the kingdom offers acceptance. In the opening page of *Promised Land*, the author suggests a world like this kingdom is in the near future, "a land not so far away", implying acceptance is possible as well as LGBT love. The illustrations depict Leo and Jack, hand in hand, happy and full of life. Their sexuality does not appear as a barrier in their lives, which is a sobering and refreshing possibility to witness - images that the LGBT community need in their lives.

This text also contains another surprising aspect, which compliments the presence of diversity in *Promised Land*. The Prince Leo and his mother, the Queen of the Kingdom, are also characters of colour. In their world, identity is an emblem of unique power. Like sexuality, racial and ethnic elements are not setbacks but something to celebrate simultaneously. Diversity characterises *Promised Land*. In this world, no one is short of it.

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The challenge comes when an external ‘intruder’ by the name of Gideon appears and seeks control of the land by marrying Leo’s mother. Reading this text reminds us that control comes in many forms and if we were to situate these forms in real world events they would appear in the shape of bullying and discrimination. Jack and Leo find their harmonious world turned upside down by the evil Gideon casts over the kingdom. Though instead of remaining idle they respond with a force that shows they will not tolerate this control, and they do so with the help and support of their fellow peers, such as their mothers, guards and other inhabitants. The key message of this text is that group effort prevails and goals can be reached.

As a bookseller I find *Promised Land* to be a unique and interesting spin of expectations. A Google search of this children’s book comes up with subheadings such as, ‘an LGBT illustrated picture book’, ‘LGBT children’s book with a happily ever after ending’. These signature descriptions immediately pique our interest. Wow, an LGBT children’s picture book? But at the same time, why should these kinds of texts be so hard to come by? There have been a few instances where customers have asked for such books and unfortunately there is little available in the way of illustrated literature targeted at a younger audience. This needs to change. Not only have I noticed the scarce availability of such texts, I have also noticed how literature from children’s to adults’, like the media, can perpetuate ways of understanding our world and ourselves, whether for good or worse. A book contains themes, meanings and ideas that can swiftly alter our experience by the mere fact of being in print.

Children’s literature is a primary platform to set an example. For instance, gender and what it means to be a boy or girl (as society deems ‘normal’). This can be found in our beloved picture books. But what if these narratives do not suit everyone? Do and can others exist? Of course! I believe this is the time to publish more LGBT themed literature, especially for a younger audience, as we are living in an era of increasing acceptance. Exposure to positive LGBT narratives will instill a greater perspective for us all – the younger the better. And I am so happy *Promised Land* exists.

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The back-story behind the publication of *Promised Land* deserves a lot of attention. Writers Adam Reynolds and Chaz Harris expressed a need to write something that their eight-year-old selves needed. In their kickstarter statement, they wrote:

*"During our childhoods and teen years, we had no role models or stories that represented the notion that 'happily ever after' could even exist if you're gay. As such, we felt there should be more stories like that, and so we wrote one together".*

We all understand the desire to see our own narratives portrayed in literature and media. As an LGBT person I will always want to read characters like myself and will never lose the feeling of wanting more than what is generally available.

Furthermore, the real world back-story of *Promised Land* compliments the story that takes place within the picture book, which primarily concerns the theme of responsibility. The publication of *Promised Land* would not have been possible without the generous donations from the public, of which \$25,000 was needed. The fact that the collaborative team behind this book reached their goal shows how needed *Promised Land* really is.

*Promised Land* is a book that warms the heart. It instills a sense of faith that a world of acceptance is possible and not so far away. This book is not only a "picture" book intended for a younger audience but for everyone, young and old. It should sit among New Zealand's bookshelves. Community effort goes a long way and nothing can be done alone

**Reviewed by Demi Cox, Bookseller**

The Mental Health Foundation's Information Service brings you reviews this Pink Shirt Day on books with bullying prevention themes. To view the full Book Review section go to [www.pinkshirtday.org.nz/good-reads](http://www.pinkshirtday.org.nz/good-reads)

