

**You're one of Australia's favourite entertainers – and you've got your fingers in all sorts of pies – comedy, tv writing (and acting!), your radio work, music – and now you've written a novel. Do you think having experience as a performer has influenced how you approached writing this book?**

It's always risky having your fingers in too many pies. For starters, you end up with very messy fingers. And secondly, nobody wants to eat the pies, which is why I've been banned from my local bakery. Thankfully, whether it's through my TV series, *The Other Guy*, or in a three-minute talk break on the radio, I've always told stories, and I recruited all that experience in writing my debut novel.

TV taught me a lot about plotting. Comedy taught me to find my voice, and that it's not just about what you're saying, but how you say it. Radio taught me that the simplest of life's observations are usually the things that connect with people the most. Writing this book has essentially been an extension of my storytelling, through one of storytelling's purest formats: the paperback pie.

**Do you want to tell us a little bit about the book?**

*Being Black N Chicken, & Chips* is based on my award-winning stand-up show of (almost) the same name. It's about a twelve-year-old boy, Mike Amon, who is trying to start high school while his mum dies of cancer. It's funny, and silly, and ambitious, and loaded with nostalgia, but also sad at times, and sets out to honestly capture the hormones and heartbreak of someone trying to navigate the path to adulthood, whilst losing the person who's supposed to lead them on that journey.

***Being Black N Chicken, & Chips* has some very biographical elements – why was it important to you to tell this particular story? How do you differ from the main character and how are you similar?**

This book walks the line between fact and fiction like Humpty Dumpty straddled the wall before his tumble. Is it a documentary? Definitely not. This book falls onto the fiction side of the wall, but many elements of it are true in their nature, from the suburban shopping centre backdrop right through to finding my mother on the bathroom floor and rushing her to hospital.

I always write from a place of truth, so there's plenty of similarities between myself and the main character, Mike. The desperation to fit in with the other kids. The disconnection from his African heritage. The willingness to always joke around... Everybody thinks they know how they would act in certain situations, but the reality is always different. Our brains are hardwired to protect us in times of grief. Sometimes we shut down, sometimes we ignore it, sometimes we submit to the sadness. My character deflects to humour. I wanted to capture exactly how a twelve-year-old processes grief, knowing how I processed it when I watched my mother pass away at that age. The internal conflict when you're going through something so out of the ordinary, but all you want to be is ordinary.

**Coming-of-age stories can be really popular with readers (think books like *Jasper Jones*, *Boy Swallows Universe* and the like). Why do you think people like these stories so much?**

It's such a formative period in our lives. I think we like to experience all the curiosity and cringe in someone else's shoes with the comfort of our adult wisdom. I cringed so hard writing moments of this book that I felt like I'd shrivel up into a walking prune at times, but it's in those moments that I would realise (or at least hope) that I wasn't the only person thinking like that or acting that way. It's a reminder that the problems we look back on now were actually gigantic at the time because it was the first time we'd ever gone through them.

I had a friend today message me and ask my opinion because he didn't know whether a girl that he liked, liked him back. We're thirty-four years old! An unrequited crush, wanting financial independence, feeling shame about our bodies, dealing with bullies, these are problems we deal with until the day we die.

**Do you have any writers that inspire you?**

I can safely say that if it wasn't for Stephen King, I wouldn't have written this novel. About two months before she passed away, my mum bought me *The Green Mile* and that kick-started a fascination with his style of storytelling and his grasp on the supernatural, and his ability to make lead characters that were frustrating and deeply-flawed, but still likeable. I spent high school reading almost every book he'd written at that time, which formed my desire to one day transfer my storytelling to the page.