

## Q&A with Bill Konigsberg

### Out and about

by Leah Rhyne

Bill Konigsberg is a Lambda Literary Award winning writer of young adult fiction (among many other things). Although he hesitates to call himself an activist, Konigsberg is an outspoken member of a growing community of LBQT writers unafraid to share their tales.

City Paper: What's something you'd love to hear from any of the children (or grown-ups) who come to your YALLFest panels?

Bill Konigsberg: I'd love to hear that either of my books, but especially the new one, *Openly Straight*, moved them. And I'm not choosy about how -- to laughter, to tears, to think. Hopefully not to nausea. There's no better gift for an author than to connect with readers who "got" their book. Alternately, I'd love to hear from parents and kids who read together, talk about books, etc. I think it's the cure for basically everything that ails our society -- more people who voraciously read. It promotes empathy and understanding.

CP: Tell us a little about the panels on which you'll be sitting.

BK: I'll be on a panel that is a reprise of a tour I was on this summer with three other authors. It's called "Openly YA," and it's basically four gay young adult authors. What's so cool about it is how different we are in what we write. My book, *Openly Straight*, is a humorous novel about an openly gay teen who decides to change schools and recreate himself without the label gay; there's David Levithan, whose most recent novel, *Two Boys Kissing*, is told by a Greek chorus of gay men who have died of AIDS; there's Aaron Hartzler, whose *Rapture Practice* is a memoir about growing up in an ultraconservative religious household; and there's Alex London, who has written *Proxy*, a dystopian novel with a protagonist who happens to be gay. This type of diversity in so-called LGBTQ novels is really a new thing. There isn't a simple coming-out novel among them, and the conversations we've had about the incredible growth of this "genre" has been fascinating to be a part of. We also have a lot of fun, lots of laughs.

CP: What other writers are you excited to see while you're here?

BK: Oh God. So many. My panel mates, for sure. I'm a huge fan of Rainbow Rowell's (*Fangirl* and *Eleanor & Park*), so I'm excited to meet her and hear her talk about her books. Gayle Foreman (*If I Stay*) is an author I admire very much, and any time I get to hang out with Lisa McMann (*The Unwanteds*, *Wake*) is always way too much fun. I'm excited to hear Veronica Roth and Rae Carson's keynote, definitely.

CP: Both of your released novels involve young people either coming out of, or going back into, the closet "defining moments in a person's life, I imagine. You're also a champion within the LGBTQ community, breaking barriers in the sports world and elsewhere. What made you decide to become such a proactive, outspoken activist?

BK: I don't really consider myself an activist, but I take your meaning. For me, so much of this is a lifelong search for authenticity. I was so uncomfortable when I started to understand, as a teen, that I was gay. I was filled with self-loathing and shame, and in some ways I think my life has been about getting past that and learning to be exactly who I am. I think a lot of teens (and adults) who like my books are on that same path. People who are trying to figure out what it means to be a person, how to be ourselves in a world that almost always wants us "all of us, not just gay folks" to be different, more, better. For me, that teenage period is like the epicenter of that battle, so that's why I return, time and time again, to the subject area. The place where that "coming out" process typically starts. Coming out is a lifelong process, and in my mind it's not about sexuality, nor is it reserved for LGBTQ people; it's about being who we are, openly and honestly.

CP: Congratulations on receiving the Lambda Literary Award. What was it like to get that phone call?

BK: I was actually at the ceremony in New York. It was crazy. I was going up against a few seasoned authors whom I admire greatly, and I did not expect to win. To have to go up to a podium and say something coherent when my emotions were in my throat was tough. I think I said something about my mom, who was my date for the evening. I got a lot of "aww" responses, if I recall.

CP: What's the coolest piece of fan mail/email/interaction you've received to date?

BK: I love getting fan emails. My all-time favorite was my first. This high school freshman from New Jersey, five years ago, who told me he thought he might be bisexual and that my book had helped him. I wrote back and he and I have corresponded for the past five years. It's been beautiful to watch this sad, scared little boy turn into a confident, out young man. He's a college freshman now. That sort of experience is the best thing I could have ever asked for as a gift. I get emails from all sorts of amazing characters, and it always makes my day to hear what people are up to and how my book played into their own story.

CP: Growing up, what was your favorite book? What's your favorite book these days?

BK: As a young kid, I was definitely a *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* fan. What a memorable book, that all these years later I feel like I could recite scenes by heart. My favorite book of all time is Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*. When I feel lost and disconnected from the world, I pick that up and I feel connected again. If you haven't read the book, and the entire series, you really owe it to

yourself to do so.

**Tags:** Bill Konigsberg, yallfest, LBQT

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