

# **Two Boys Kissing Study Guide**

## **Two Boys Kissing by David Levithan**

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# Plot Summary

NOTE: Due to the structure of the novel, this study guide refers to sections and quotes by page numbers, using the Ember/Random House Teens 2015 First Paperback Edition.

“Two Boys Kissing” is a young adult gay romance novel by David Levithan which examines the relationships and hardships of contemporary gay youth. The entire novel is narrated by a chorus of unnamed gay men who have died from AIDS. They explain that things were incredibly difficult for them to live as gay men years before, but things still need to improve in the present day. The chorus narrates the events of the novel, which transpire over the course of a weekend.

Harry and Craig set out to break the world record for longest kiss. It will keep them occupied from Saturday through Sunday. Complicating things is that Harry and Craig used to be a couple, but no longer are. They decide to break the record in public on their high school’s front lawn. Harry’s parents are among those who gather together to cheer the two boys on. Craig’s parents do not know he is gay. They are angered not because Craig is gay, but because he did not tell them in some other way and lied about where he would be through the weekend. The kiss is not only meant to break a record, but to call attention to the intolerance still suffered in some places by gays. Craig and Harry have a gay black friend named Tariq who was viciously beat up in a neighboring town three months before for being gay. Eventually, hundreds of people gather to either cheer or jeer, and the news outlets pick up the story. Harry and Craig successfully break the record.

Meanwhile, Avery and Ryan meet for the first time at a gay prom. They hit it off instantly, and begin seeing one another. While Avery does his best to be understanding and forgiving of people who cannot accept that he is gay, Ryan is very angry about people who do not accept that he is gay. While out on a date, Avery and Ryan are bullied by four kids from Ryan’s school. Ryan wants to seek revenge on them, but Avery just wants to let it go. The chorus reminds readers that life cannot be lived in anger, and that anger must be moved past to get on to better things.

Meanwhile, Neil and Peter are in a committed relationship. Neil’s parents have accepted that Neil is gay, but they haven’t acknowledged it to Neil’s satisfaction. While listening to the news on the radio, Neil’s parents inadvertently leave the radio on, allowing a talk-show featuring anti-gay comments to play out. Neil is enraged, and demands his parents acknowledge he is gay. His parents do as Neil demands.

At the same time, Cooper feels lost, alone, and sad. He is secretly gay, and hides it from everyone at home and everyone at school. Friday night, Cooper falls asleep with his laptop open, leaving exposed his secret communications with other gays. His father finds it and is enraged. He screams at Cooper, shoves him into a wall, and causes Cooper to run away. In distress, Cooper finds a random guy on a sex dating website to have sex with, then spends the night in the back of his car. He ignores all text messages



from his parents, ruins all his social media accounts, throws his phone in the river, and prepares to commit suicide by jumping from a bridge. He is stopped at the last second by numerous passers-by, including a police officer who tells Cooper it is his lucky day, even if he doesn't realize it yet. The chorus reminds Cooper, and the reader, that life is worth living for, not dying for. The chorus also reminds readers that they must stick around to meet their future selves.



# Pages 1 – 40

## Summary

A chorus of gay men, dead from AIDS, serve as narrator for the novel. They explain that the reader will never understand what it was like for them.

On Friday night, in the town of Kindlign. Korean-American Neil goes to his boyfriend Peter's house to watch movies. After they separate for the night, they stay up late talking on Skype.

Tariq enjoys going into the city on weekends to dance.

Seventeen-year-old Cooper Riggs sits at home alone, feeling lost because he is gay but pretends not to be.

In the past, the chorus also had to hide from being too open. They both resent and are happy for the current generation of gay males.

The town of Kindling plays host to a gay prom. Gay kids come in from all over for the prom. Pink-haired Avery and blue-haired Ryan arrive for the prom, and meet for the first time. They decide to dance. Avery's parents have long known he is gay. They have given him their blessing.

The chorus says that things can change in an instant in life, that years can pass and lives can end.

Meanwhile, Harry and Craig prepare to break the world record for longest kiss. They then go to sleep. Harry's mother is proud of her son and his boyfriend. On Saturday morning, Harry and Craig wake up, ready to break the record. They will be kissing in public on the high school lawn. They have received permission from the principal, but the principal makes sure they know there may be risks. Smita, Craig's best friend, is waiting for them. She worries about the kiss because Craig's parents went through a lot with Craig when he and Harry broke up. Smita worries what will happen to Craig as a result of the kiss. Tariq, Harry's parents, and Rachel also arrive at the school. The kiss is partly in response to what happened to Tariq three months before, where he was brutally beaten by locals in a neighboring town for being gay after seeing a movie with some friends.

Cooper, who has fallen asleep at his laptop, leaving messages revealing he is gay visible, is awoken by his angry father. He is enraged that his son is gay, and thinks Cooper is only out having sex with men. He throws Cooper into the wall, which brings Cooper's mother into the room. Cooper rushes out.

Ryan calls Avery at ten in the morning and make plans to get together. Avery drives over to Kindling.



## Analysis

“Two Boys Kissing” is a young adult gay romance novel by David Levithan which examines the relationships and hardships of contemporary gay youth. When the novel begins, the reader is introduced to a host of characters by a chorus of gay men, all of whom have died of AIDS. The chorus explains that contemporary gay youth have things far easier than they ever did, but that they still have challenges and hardships to face down. Attitudes toward gays have softened over the past few decades, but there is certainly still antipathy and hatred toward them. Attitudes toward gays becomes an important theme in the novel as a result. Principal among these attitudes toward gays is intolerance. Other attitudes include acceptance and understanding (both of which will become themes in and of themselves).

Acceptance and understanding of gay youth is seen in this section of the novel through the town of Kindling’s decision to host a gay prom. Gay youth come in from all over the area for the event. In decades past, such an event would never have been possible due to the level of intolerance against gays. Now, the intolerance is no longer prevalent enough to prevent such an event. Intolerance still remains, however, as is demonstrated by the vicious beating up of Tariq in a neighboring town. However, the reader should note that Harry and Craig are set to break the world record for longest kiss in a public place – something which likewise would not have been tolerated years ago. It is through Avery and Ryan that the potential for love arises – and the theme of love herein becomes important in the promise of love between the two, and in the seeming lost love between Harry and Craig.

This is in large part a response to the beating of Tariq, with whom Harry and Craig have become good friends. Here, the theme of friendship becomes important to the novel. Craig’s own best friend, Smita, is on scene to support them during the kiss. Harry’s family has fully embraced Harry’s homosexuality, whereas in the past, this would have been a very unlikely outcome of coming out. However, Cooper’s father’s discovery of his son’s homosexuality is intolerant in consequence. He brutally shoves Cooper into a wall, causing Cooper to flee the house.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does the chorus of gay men both resent and express happiness for the present generation of gay youth? Is their resentment understandable? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

How has Harry’s family responded to his homosexuality? How does Cooper’s father react to finding out Cooper is gay? Why do you believe Harry’s family and Cooper’s family have reacted differently to their sexual identity?



## Discussion Question 3

What are the reasons that Harry and Craig decide to break the world record for longest kiss? What do they hope to gain? What potential risks and rewards do they face?

## Vocabulary

profoundly, freedom, improbable, oblivious, insurmountable, intractable, periphery, pervade, subterfuge



## Pages 41 – 83

### Summary

Tariq will be filming the kiss between Harry and Craig, and will be streaming it live. Three teachers, beginning with Mrs. Luna, will be serving as witnesses. Harry's parents present a gag gift of Binaca to the boys. As they prepare to kiss, Harry tells Craig he loves him. Craig tells Harry he loves him, too. They begin their kiss.

Meanwhile, Cooper pulls into a Wal-Mart parking lot, and pulls out his phone to call someone. He then realizes he has no true friends.

Avery, meanwhile, arrives in Kindling to pick up Ryan. The two hug. Avery hopes it might mean something. They decide to borrow Ryan's aunt's canoe and head out onto the local river. Both boys reveal they are vegetarians. Ryan reveals his stepfather, Don, is very traditional, and while his mother likes that, Ryan does not. Ryan is very close to his Aunt Caitlin, who knew he was gay before he did. It was Aunt Caitlin who told Ryan not to hide his true self. His stepfather reacted badly but came to accept it. His mother cried. His sisters didn't care. Ryan went on to help found the local Gay Student Alliance, and credits Mr. Coolidge, the advisor, with getting the gay prom together. Avery reveals he is transgender, a boy having been born in a girl's body. Ryan is not bothered at all by this.

As Craig and Harry kiss, the chorus explains that they had never been friends with Tariq before Tariq was assaulted. The chorus explains that Craig's parents are deeply religious, and they do not know their son is gay. As Craig and Harry continue to kiss, Tariq sees that almost a hundred people are now watching online. A small crowd begins gathering.

Walking around in Wal-Mart, Sloan, a girl from school, says hello to Cooper. She asks him what he's up to and tries to be friendly, but Cooper just wants her to go away. Cooper knows she is not a real friend, and is angry at her that she doesn't see that something is the matter with him. Cooper then goes to a Starbucks a couple of towns over, and begins looking up dating profiles of gay guys. He contacts a 23-year-old man under the screen name "Antimatter".

Peter and Neil go to the Clinton Bookshop. Peter shows Neil video of Craig and Harry kissing in the town of Millburn. The video link was sent by Simon who has called Peter "beautiful". It upsets Neil. They make up and continue to watch the video.

Craig's mother suddenly arrives on scene, wanting to know what is going on. Craig has told her would be away on a camping trip for the weekend. It is explained to her by Smita and Harry's parents that a world record is being sought, and that Craig is gay. Craig's mother begins crying because of the way in which she has found out. Tariq comforts her but explains she must accept Craig. She responds by saying she knows.





## Analysis

As the novel continues, the theme of love becomes very important to the novel as Avery and Ryan begin something of a tentative relationship. It is clear the two are very much into one another. Because of this, the two are open, honest, and accepting of one another. This leads Avery to confess to Ryan that he is transgender, that he was born a boy in a girl's body. There is no judgment and only acceptance from Ryan, which makes Avery feel much better. Ryan's own family has been relatively accepting of his homosexuality, and Ryan has been understanding of their handling of his homosexuality. His Aunt Caitlin has especially been important in Ryan accepting who he is. There is a general understanding between Ryan and his family that it has taken some coming to terms with, but because both Ryan and his family were at the very least honest with each other, things are better than they could have been.

Craig's mother is horrified to learn that her son is gay – not because her son is gay, but because she has found out in such a public fashion and because Craig has lied to her about where he would be. It is Tariq who comforts Craig's mother and urges her to accept Craig. As the reader will again note, Craig's mother does not have a problem with his homosexuality, but with being lied to and finding out in such a public fashion. Nevertheless, she acknowledges that she knows she simply has to accept that her son is gay.

Meanwhile, Cooper himself continues to reel from that morning's encounter with his father. Cooper feels horribly alone, and realizes he has no friends. However, Cooper reacts badly to the friendship that Sloan offers him. He wants Sloan to recognize that he is hurting even though she does not. Sloan cannot be faulted for this because she simply doesn't know. Friendship is a two-way street. Cooper has a perfect opportunity to reach out to another human being in this instance, but he rejects Sloan's friendliness. Here, while Cooper longs to be accepted and to fit in, he can't find it in himself to accept that the people he wants acceptance from must be understood as people in and of themselves as well.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is Craig's mother so upset discovering that Craig is gay? Is her reaction understandable? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

How did Ryan's family react to his coming out as gay? Which member of his family was especially instrumental in making the process easier? Why?



## Discussion Question 3

Cooper, who wishes he had friends, faults Sloan for not recognizing that he is in pain. Do you believe Cooper is justified in how he treats and thinks of Sloan? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

crescendo, aberration, serendipity, dissipates, hopegoggling, delinquent, complicity, inadequate



## Pages 84 – 120

### Summary

The chorus notes that it is understandably difficult for Craig's mom to understand the situation, and to accept that his son is a human being rather than just a son. The chorus says that such revelations are two-way streets, and require understanding and patients on the part of parents and children.

Avery and Ryan have lunch with Aunt Caitlin.

Cooper, meanwhile, continues to message Antimatter, telling Antimatter he is 19 and in college. Antimatter reveals his name as Julian. Cooper lies and says his name is Drake.

Six hours into the kiss, the number of online viewers exceeds 100,000. Craig's mother tells him she is mad at him, not for being gay, but for finding out the way she did. She explains she is going to have to explain everything to their family. Craig gives her the thumbs-up. As she leaves to go home, Craig and Harry see how large the crowd has become. Darkness falls. The drama club sets up floodlights. The crowd grows. Only some of the people assembled are there to be supportive. Others are there to gawk or hurl insults. A truck of drunk kids goes by. They shout "faggots" through the window. A police officer arrives on scene. Eggs are thrown at Craig and Harry. The police officer tries to find the culprits, but they run. The egg is cleaned off of Craig and Harry by Smita. Craig's entire family arrives to voice their support, then head home.

Peter and Neil continue to watch the kiss from Peter's bedroom, kiss themselves, then go down to have dinner with Peter's parents.

Avery drops Ryan off a few houses away from Avery's home. Avery says he has had a good time, and the two kiss. Ryan is thrilled.

Cooper arranges to meet Julian at Starbucks at 7:30 that evening. It is the first time he will meet anyone online. He deletes all of the text messages from his father. The chorus says this is a mistake, since recent messages will be less angry than the first one. When Julian arrives, Cooper takes charge and suggests going to Julian's apartment to drink. Cooper takes charge once more and gets Julian to have sex with him. When Cooper leaves later, he feels empty. He spends the night in his car. He believes nothing will ever get better, and is very angry at both his parents.

### Analysis

Acceptance and understanding are a two-way street. The chorus explains that parents need to be understanding of their children, and children need to be just as understanding of their parents. The transition between life before and after a revelation of this nature is usually difficult at best. Patience and understanding are key. The lack of



such patience and understanding on the part of Cooper's father has led to Cooper fleeing home; however, Craig's mother, continues to explain she is merely upset that she has found out her son is gay in such a public way rather than finding out privately. Craig understands his mother's being upset, but would rather his mother focus on him and what he is doing. It is comparatively unfair that Craig isn't more understanding of his mother's situation, but expects his mother to be wholly understanding of his.

As the number of viewers online and people in the crowd continue to mount, intolerance begins to appear on a large scale. A truck of drunken kids who shout "faggots" goes by. Someone in the crowd pelts Harry and Craig with eggs. The police attempt to catch the culprits but are unable to do so. Smita cleans the egg off of Harry and Craig, remaining loyally by their side in a clear show of support and friendship. Friendship therein remains critical to the effort that Harry and Craig are making to break the world's kissing record.

In a show of support, Craig's family, however briefly, still turns out to show their support for Craig. However, they do not remain around for long as the situation is a sudden shock for Craig's parents. Acceptance and understanding, as the chorus has previously noted, is a two-way street. Craig's parents are doing their best to accept their son's coming out in such a public fashion, but they are clearly having difficulties with it. Craig, unfortunately, does not seemingly attempt to truly consider the situation from his parents' point of view.

## Discussion Question 1

Do you think Craig's family should be faulted for not remaining at the kissing for a longer amount of time? Why? Do you believe Craig's expectations of his family are fair? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

How does friendship prove to be critical to Craig and Harry through the events of this section of the novel as it relates to the intolerance they endure? Do you believe Harry and Craig could manage the kiss on their own, or would they be lost without their friends? Explain.

## Discussion Question 3

What forms of intolerance do Craig and Harry face in this section of the novel? How do they handle these instances of intolerance? Why?

## Vocabulary

tangent, subtle, disposable, intones, mischievously, squandered



# Pages 121 – 161

## Summary

Harry and Craig continue to kiss through the night. Local TV stations show up. Yahoo.com picks up the story, which is seen by Peter in the morning. More police officers have arrived to keep order. The crowd of supporters and protestors grows larger as the 24-hour mark passes. Craig wishes his family would stick around the way that Harry's has.

As Avery drives to meet Ryan in Kindling again, he hears a discussion about the kiss on the radio from people calling in. Some think the kiss is disgusting, some think it is brave, others think it's not something meant for public.

Neil comes into the kitchen and hears the radio broadcast as well. He is enraged his parents even have the broadcast on. His mother is apologetic, saying no one was really listening. Neil refuses to drop it. His father explains they had been listening to the news before the talk show came on. Neil says it is unacceptable for his parents not to hear what is being said, and demands that his parents acknowledge he is gay. They say they know he is gay. Miranda, Neil's 11-year-old sister, says Neil is gay, Peter is his boyfriend, and she loves him. Neil demands it of his parents. His father and mother say it as demanded.

Avery arrives to pick up Ryan. He won't let Avery come in to use the bathroom, but directs him to a McDonald's instead. Avery knows Ryan feels a nagging shame about being gay. Avery is annoyed by this. They decide to go get breakfast at Pancake Century Diner, then go to hang out at an abandoned miniature golf course. They kiss, then Ryan sees someone coming.

Meanwhile, Cooper's depression continues to mount. He begins messaging everyone he can, criticizing them. One man under the screenname "TZ" writes back, asking who has hurt Cooper, and asks if Cooper needs help. Cooper blocks him. Cooper's activities ultimately get his account suspended. He begins posting hateful things on Facebook, getting his account suspended. He does this on every other social media profile he has as well.

Neil begins taking the argument he had with his parents out on Peter, being short and impatient with Peter.

## Analysis

As the novel continues, it is clear that the kiss between Harry and Craig is not merely a question of breaking a world record or bringing attention to the intolerance still directed toward gays, but it is a question of love. Having already admitted they still love one another, their endurance is made possible by the love and strength they find in one



another. Likewise, the number of people both supporting and accepting, and protesting and being intolerant has grown. It makes Craig wish his family had stuck around the way that Harry's family has. Craig clearly desires not only for his family to accept him, but to actually manifest their acceptance in support. However, he still seems to be missing out on the very thing the chorus has previously explained – that understanding has to go both ways. Even though Neil's family has accepted that he is gay, he demands that they acknowledge it after they accidentally leave a negative talk-show on the radio. Truly an accident, Neil still demands satisfaction from his parents.

The kiss has gained national attention. There is support and intolerance on news shows, on television, and in talk shows on the radio. This demonstrates, as does behavior at the scene of the kiss, that attitudes toward homosexuality are still very much divided, though clearly nowhere near as bad as the intolerance of decades before suffered at the hands of those in the gay chorus.

Cooper, meanwhile, continues reeling from the intolerance suffered at the hands of his father. Cooper is clearly in a downward spiral, doing his best to cut off all connections from the world – including on social media. When the user TZ attempts to reach out to Cooper, Cooper simply shuts him down and refuses to listen. It is tragic and ironic that Cooper, looking for a friend or somewhere he can be accepted, has now shut out two people (Sloan and TZ) who may have been able to help him.

## Discussion Question 1

Do you believe Neil is overreacting or justified in his response to the radio program his parents have accidentally left on? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Why has Cooper now not only shut down Sloan's attempts at friendship, but TZ's reaching out as well? Is Cooper's behavior understandable or explainable? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is Avery annoyed with Ryan for feeling a nagging shame about being gay? Can Avery be justified in his annoyance? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

ubiquity, manifold, contemptuously, conciliatory, subterranean, abstain, complacency



## Pages 162 – 196

### Summary

Skylar and three of his friends confront Ryan and Avery. The four boys taunt Ryan and Avery. As Ryan and Avery decide to leave, not wanting to sink to their level, the guys begin throwing bottles and cans. Ryan is furious, while Avery tries to tell him it is all okay. They hang out with some of Ryan's friends, including Alicia. Alicia tells Ryan he must cool down, but Ryan is angry that no one else – not even Avery – shares his anger. Ryan is determined to have revenge on Skylar. He brings Avery to a law office. Avery says that Ryan is ruining the chance of getting the day back. The chorus explains that Ryan is right to feel angry, but he can't live angry. He must get past his anger.

Harry and Craig are in great pain. Harry's legs hurt badly from standing for so long. Craig gets a text message from his brother, saying his family has gone for a drive. This causes Craig to begin crying. Tariq runs to Craig's house to tell his family that Craig needs them, but they are not home. Harry tells Craig he is not alone. The crowd is huge now, and the entire police force is out as the record is broken.

Peter and Neil arrive to see the kiss in person. Neil finally tells Peter about the incident with his parents that morning. Peter hugs Neil and comforts him.

Cooper gets food at McDonald's. He then drives to the massive bridge near the city, and pulls underneath. He throws his phone into the river. Cooper feels worthless and if he will never find a place in life. Cooper prepares to jump to his death from the bridge, but a number of bystanders, and a police officer, tackle him and stop him from doing so. The officer tells Cooper it might not feel like it, but today is his lucky day. Cooper's parents are called. They rush to the bridge. The chorus reminds readers to choose their actions wisely, that they will affect the future just as the chorus has affected the present. The chorus says that Cooper will live to meet his future self, and that all readers should do the same.

### Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, the theme of intolerance emerges front and center as Skylar and his cronies seek to ruin Ryan and Avery's day by harassing them, bullying them, and pelting them with bottles and cans. Their intolerance is appalling. Ryan, who feels a nagging shame about being gay, comes around in anger toward Skylar and his group. He wants revenge. Avery, however, who was previously annoyed with Ryan for feeling ashamed, now insists that Ryan move beyond his anger. This is because Avery has accepted being gay, and has accepted the trials that can come with it. As a result, he is able to more easily handle things than Ryan. All people deal with intolerance and bad days, but it is up to Ryan to determine whether or not that will ruin everything. The



chorus reminds readers – gay or straight – that they must always move past the anger. Instead, Ryan and Avery end up focusing on love.

Cooper's situation very nearly ends in disaster by way of suicide. Cooper has reached the end of his will to live, so he attempts to commit suicide. The reader should note that he is saved by numerous passers-by, including a police officer. The police officer tells Cooper that it is his lucky day, even if Cooper doesn't believe it. What readers should note is that the people who have saved him from jumping don't care who he is, what he has done, but care merely that he is a human being in distress. They recognize in Cooper a human life worth saving regardless as to who Cooper may be personally. It is a kind of acceptance Cooper receives among strangers in recognition of the value of humanity and human life. He fits in, even if he doesn't realize it yet. Just as the strangers make the point that Cooper is not alone, so too does Harry make the point that Craig is not alone. This can be extrapolated to all readers, straight or gay, that they are not alone in their struggles in life.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is so poignant about Cooper's life being saved on the bridge? What does the police officer mean when he says that it is Cooper's lucky day, even if Cooper doesn't realize it yet?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Do you believe the chorus and Avery are justifiable in their insistence that Ryan needs to move beyond his anger? Why or why not?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why is the chorus so insistent on explaining to readers that they are not alone, and that they should live to meet their future selves?

## **Vocabulary**

extricate, altering, approximation, subsumed, palpable





# Characters

## Cooper

Cooper is a closeted 17-year-old gay youth. Cooper knows he is gay, but hides it from his family and everyone at school. Secretly, he explores gay sex dating sites and gay social media where he talks to strangers. Because of the cover, Cooper feels lost and alone. When his parents discover he is gay, Cooper's father throws Cooper into a wall, compelling Cooper to flee the house. Cooper goes into a downward spiral, hooking up with a random adult male from the internet, feeling he will never find a place to fit in, and ultimately seeking to commit suicide. He is saved by a number of passers-by, including a policeman who tells Cooper it is his lucky day even if Cooper doesn't realize it yet.

## Chorus

The chorus serves as narrators for the novel. The chorus consists of an unknown number of unidentified gay men who have died of AIDS. The men both admire and envy, and both resent and are glad for the gay youths of the contemporary world because the chorus suffered far more discrimination and intolerance than in the present day. The chorus not only speaks to events in the novel, but speaks directly to the readers, telling them life is worth living, anger is worth moving past, and that tomorrow will be better even if it doesn't seem like it.

## Neil

Neil Kim is a 17-year-old gay Korean-American who is in a committed relationship with Peter. Neil's parents have been accepting of Neil's homosexuality, but Neil is angry they haven't been more vocal about it. Neil has a showdown with his parents when he realizes they have left the radio on, tuned into a talk-show which deals in homophobia. He demands his parents verbally acknowledge his homosexuality and his relationship with Peter, which they do.

## Peter

Peter is a 17-year-old gay youth who is the boyfriend of Neil. Peter is kind, patient, and supportive, and enjoys simply spending time with Neil. Peter becomes crucial in making Neil feel better about his confrontation with his parents. Neil and Peter themselves become in-person witnesses to the kiss between Harry and Craig.



## Avery

Avery is a 17-year-old pink-haired transgendered gay youth. Avery attends a gay prom in the town of Kindling where he meets and quickly falls for Ryan. Over the next two days, the boys spend much of their time in one another's company. Avery is annoyed that Ryan feels a nagging shame about being gay, but also encourages Ryan to move beyond his anger towards intolerant acquaintances from school. Avery teaches Ryan that it is up to him to choose to move past the anger and intolerance.

## Ryan

Ryan is a 17-year-old blue-haired gay youth. He attends a gay prom that his school GSA organizes, where he meets and quickly falls for Ryan. Although Ryan's family has largely accepted his being gay – especially his Aunt Caitlin – he still feels a nagging shame about being gay, and anger towards those who bully him for it, such as Skylar. Avery reminds Ryan that he must move beyond anger if he is to get along in life.

## Tariq

Tariq is a tall, gay African-American 17-year-old youth who is good friends with Harry and Craig. Tariq mans the cameras and internet during Harry and Craig's kiss, and later encourages Craig's mother to accept that Craig is gay. The entire kiss is done partially in Tariq's benefit, to raise awareness. Months before the novel, Tariq was brutally beaten up in a neighboring town for being gay.

## Harry

Harry Ramirez is a gay 17-year-old Hispanic-American youth who is the ex-boyfriend of Craig, though he still loves Craig. Harry and Craig spend the novel breaking the world record for longest kiss. They receive support and suffer intolerance due to their homosexuality. Harry reminds Craig that, whether or not his family comes around to his being gay, Craig is never alone. The two become a couple again during the kiss.

## Craig

Craig is a gay 17-year-old youth who is the ex-boyfriend of Harry, though he still loves Harry. Craig and Harry spend the novel breaking the world record for longest kiss. They receive support and suffer intolerance because of their homosexuality. Craig's public exposure is how his family finds out he is gay. Craig wishes his parents would go all-out to support him. Though they accept him, they cannot get over how they found out. As a result, their support of the kiss is marginal.

## **Police officer**

An unnamed police officer is among those who save Cooper's life by preventing his ability to commit suicide. The police officer serves as an unsung hero and tells Cooper it is his lucky day, even if Cooper doesn't realize it yet. The police officer and the passers-by represent common human decency and kindness. They do not care who Cooper is – that he is gay –but merely see another human being in distress, and intervene.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Cameras

Cameras are set up and positioned on the front lawn of the high school by Tariq. The cameras are designed to cover the kiss between Harry and Craig from multiple angles, recording and live-streaming the attempt at breaking the world record. The video feed is watched by over 100,000 people online. Local television news stations show up with cameras of their own to film at and report from the scene of the kiss.

## Binaca

Binaca is a popular brand of breath-freshener spray, usually mint-flavored. A large canister of Binaca is purchased as a gag gift for Harry and Craig prior to their kiss by Harry's parents. The Binaca is meant to freshen their breaths and provide some gentle humor before the record is undertaken.

## Live video feed

The live video feed that Tariq sets up streams video of the kiss around the world. Ultimately, more than 100,000 people come to watch the live video stream. Among them are Peter and Neil. As a result of watching the live video stream, Peter and Neil decide to go watch the kiss in person.

## Instant messages

Instant messages are exchanged between Cooper and various gay men and youths on the internet. These instant messages are sent by Cooper when his parents and kids at school are not around. After falling asleep at his laptop with the messages opened, Cooper's father discovers he is gay. This leads to his father shoving Cooper into the wall, and Cooper fleeing the house.

## Dating profiles

Dating profiles on a gay sex hookup site are viewed by Cooper throughout the novel. Through these profiles, Cooper sets up a sexual encounter with 23-year-old Julian. Cooper later deliberately has his profile blocked by antagonizing other users as a way of shutting down what social outlets he has in his life prior to committing suicide.



## Cooper

Cooper uses his cell phone not only to exchange text messages and make calls, but to view gay hookup site profiles. He uses his phone to communicate with Julian. As a way of preparing to commit suicide, Cooper hurls his cell phone in the river prior to seeking to jump.

## Eggs

Eggs are hurled at Harry and Craig by intolerant onlookers during the kiss. The eggs are a way to bully, harass, and humiliate Harry and Craig. The hurler escapes before the police can apprehend him. Smita gently wipes away the egg from Harry and Craig, demonstrating both care and loyalty.

## Slurs

Bigoted slurs are thrown at Harry and Craig throughout their kissing record. Among these are “faggot”, which is yelled by a group of drunk kids driving by in a truck. These slurs are intended to hurt and bully Harry, Craig, and other gay youth.

## Radio talk-shows

Radio talk-shows are listened to by Avery on his way to pick up Ryan, and overheard by Neil in his kitchen. The talk-shows that they hear in particular at best do not support gays, and at worst support homophobia. Avery is morbidly fascinated by the radio show, listening to people defend or bash gays. Neil is enraged his parents have accidentally left the radio on, leading to his hearing a talk-show. He thus demands that they acknowledge he is gay and has a boyfriend.

## Stage lights

Stage lights are set up by the drama club around Harry and Craig as they kiss. The lights are set up to provide illumination through the night, so that filming can continue and so that the kiss can be seen. The lights are assembled voluntarily by the drama club who support what Harry and Craig are doing.



# Settings

## Kindling

Kindling is a small, rural suburban town where Ryan and his family live. The town is notable for its beautiful river that Ryan and Avery take a canoe out onto. Kindling is also home to a gay prom at which Ryan and Avery first meet. Kindling also features an abandoned miniature golf course, which serves as a date for Ryan and Avery. Kindling, despite what stereotypes might suggest, is an overall respectful and tolerant town apart from some individuals like Skylar.

## Millburn

Millburn is a small town located near Kindling, and various other small towns. Millburn is host to the high school where Harry and Craig decide to break the world's record for longest kiss. Millburn is also the hometown of Tariq, Harry, and Craig, and is where they and their families reside. Millburn becomes a magnet for supporters and opponents of Harry and Craig, and the small police force there does its best to keep order and protect the rights of Harry and Craig.

## Unnamed town

An unnamed neighboring town of Millburn is where Tariq goes to see a movie with friends one night three months before the novel begins. While awaiting the arrival of his father, Tariq is targeted by local youths who beat him up for being gay. Tariq's father arrives to rush Tariq to the emergency room. It is in part because of the violence suffered by Tariq in the unnamed neighboring town that Harry and Craig decide to break the world record for longest kiss.

## Miniature golf course

An abandoned miniature golf course in Kindling is visited by Avery and Ryan during a date. The place is a popular hangout spot for locals. While there, Avery and Ryan are bullied by one of the kids from Ryan's school, Skylar. Skylar and his friends cruelly taunt and throw bottles and cans at Ryan and Avery. Ryan becomes enraged at them, feeling the day is ruined as he and Avery leave. But Avery and the chorus explain that the incident at the course cannot determine how the rest of the day will proceed, that anger must be moved past.

## **Millburn High School**

Millburn High School is located in the town of Millburn. It is where Harry, Craig, and Tariq attend classes. The school features a massive front lawn which is where Harry and Craig set out to do their kiss. The high school gains national prominence as the host to the kiss when the news media descends on the area following Tariq's live streaming.

# Themes and Motifs

## Attitudes Toward Homosexuality

Attitudes toward homosexuality form an important theme in the novel “Two Boys Kissing” by David Levithan. Attitudes toward homosexuality essentially includes the general thoughts, words, or actions of individuals toward the gay community. (For specific discussions and instances of intolerance and acceptance and understanding, please see those themes below.)

Much of the discussion of attitudes toward gay men comes through the context provided by the chorus. The chorus consists of an unknown number of unnamed gay men who have all died of AIDS. They explain early in the novel that they both resent and are happy for the current generation of gay youth. The chorus explains that the current generation of gay youth has things far easier than they ever did, though the current generation still faces their own obstacles and challenges. Likewise, the chorus had things far easier than previous generations of gay men did.

The chorus explains that, although there are still issues to be dealt with, public attitudes toward homosexuality have largely softened over time. For example, never in the past could Harry and Craig have publicly kissed to break a world record. The chorus relates how general unacceptance of homosexuality in the past led to secret rendezvous, systems of meeting, and an in-person network for meeting other gays. In the present, such things can be openly done, including on the internet.

Additionally, the chorus reveals that homosexuality in the past was something that, where it did appear, was largely ignored. The chorus notes that these are family members, friends, or acquaintances who were like “ghosts”, who existed but did not truly live. Likewise, the chorus notes that as they all wanted to die, the irony was that they truly did begin to die from AIDS. The chorus explains several times that attitudes towards gays have changed, and that gay readers should never feel doomed in their lives the way previous generations of gay men did.

## Intolerance

Intolerance is an important theme in the novel “Two Boys Kissing” by David Levithan. Intolerance includes words and actions directed toward another with the intention of denying rights, and causing emotional or physical harm. Intolerance is one of the specific attitudes toward homosexuality expressed during the novel.

The first major demonstration of intolerance toward gays comes through an event which occurs three months before the beginning of the novel. Tariq, in a neighboring town with friends to see a movie, was waiting for his father to pick up him when he was followed by a group of locals. These locals chased Tariq down and savagely beat him because of





Tariq's homosexuality. The attack was so brutal it required Tariq to go to the emergency room.

The second major demonstration of intolerance towards gays comes through Cooper's father discovering that Cooper is gay. Cooper, who has fallen asleep at his laptop, inadvertently leaves the screen – full of messages to other gays – open. His father sees these messages, and is enraged. He screams at Cooper, and shoves Cooper into a wall in anger. This causes Cooper to flee the house and nearly commit suicide. However, the chorus reveals much later that Cooper comes to meet his future self, meaning that it is likely his father has by then accepted him for being gay.

The third and fourth major demonstrations of intolerance include verbal and physical abuse. The first comes during Harry and Craig's kiss. Radio shows pick up the story, and feature a number of intolerant callers who criticize the kiss and say disparaging things about homosexuals. A truck of drunk kids shouting "faggots" passes by Harry and Craig as they kiss. An unknown assailant in the crowd that has gathered to watch throws eggs at Harry and Craig. The second occurs on the part of Skyler, who together with his friends, harass Avery and Ryan and then throw bottles and cans at the two as they leave.

## Acceptance and Understanding

Acceptance and understanding form an important theme in the novel "Two Boys Kissing" by David Levithan. Acceptance and understanding –of one's homosexuality, or one's reaction to someone being homosexual – is crucial to the novel and the lives of the gay youths featured in the story. Each of the characters of the novel must deal with acceptance and understanding in some form – or a lack of it.

Harry's parents have warmly accepted that their son is gay. They are wholeheartedly behind him as he attempts to break the world record for longest kiss. Craig, however, has not revealed himself to be gay to his parents. His mother and his family find out that he is gay through the kiss. Craig's mother is angry, not because Craig is gay, but because she had to find out in such a fashion. Craig expects that his mother and his family will immediately line up behind him to support him, but when they don't, he grows angry and upset with them. As the chorus reminds readers, acceptance and understanding go both ways. Craig needs to understand that his family needs time to process things, especially given the nature of how they found out.

Tariq, like Craig, had not previously come out to his parents prior to the beating. However, Tariq urges acceptance and understanding from Craig's mother on behalf of Craig. Cooper himself is seeking such acceptance and understanding, but he doesn't receive it from his father. Instead, Cooper receives violent intolerance as he is shoved into his bedroom wall upon his father learning he is gay. Ironically, Cooper does not immediately receive acceptance and understanding from those who know him best, but from those who don't know him at all. His life is saved by passers-by and a police officer who recognize a human being in pain and, therefore, pull Cooper back from the ledge.



Ryan receives warm acceptance and understanding from his Aunt Caitlin, who knows he is gay before he does. Likewise, Avery receives warm acceptance and understanding from Ryan when Avery reveals he is transgendered. Later, Neil, appalled by the fact that his parents have accidentally left the radio on, allowing a homophobic talk-show to be heard, becomes enraged. He demands to be acknowledged as gay and having a boyfriend even though his parents have already accepted his homosexuality. His parents concede to Neil's demand.

## Friendship

Friendship is an important theme in the novel "Two Boys Kissing" by David Levithan. Friendship comes to be incredibly important for several of the characters in the novel, and becomes something desired but not truly found by another. Friendship is seen in the novel as an immensely positive and necessary thing.

Harry and Craig have remained friends despite their breakup. However, the kiss brings them back together romantically. Neither Harry nor Craig had been friends with Tariq previously, but after Tariq was viciously attacked for being gay, they reached out. Tariq has since become a big supporter of the kiss. Tariq goes through great efforts to set up cameras, document, film, live stream, and handle social media relating to the kissing attempt.

The friendship Harry and Craig have with Smita also comes to be incredibly important. Smita, like Tariq, does everything she can to support the kiss. This includes providing fans, water, and anything else that Harry and Craig might need. When they are pelted with eggs, it is Smita who gently and lovingly cleans the egg away. Her loyalty and dedication to Harry and Craig is undeniable.

Cooper, on the other hand, comes to realize he has no friends. He desperately wishes he had friends so someone could see he is in pain. However, Cooper ironically rejects all offers of friendship and understanding he receives – including from Sloan and TZ – because he is so depressed, and because he doesn't understand that friendship is a two-way street. He has to be willing to reach out as well. Fortunately, Cooper's life is saved by strangers by the end of the novel.

## Love

Love is an important theme in the novel "Two Boys Kissing" by David Levithan. Love comes in many forms, but it is primarily romantic love that is dealt with in the novel. Indeed, the title of the novel "Two Boys Kissing" is reflective of the romantic love that will be found in the novel.

When the novel begins, the chorus of gay men looks with both envy and happiness upon the current generation of gay youths. The chorus does this because they are happy to see the current generation falling in love and living better lives than they did, and were able to. The chorus wishes they were still alive to experience life and romance

the way the current generation is. They eagerly watch as romance unfolds between Avery and Ryan from their first meeting at the prom to their first kiss.

The chorus also looks with envy and happiness upon the kissing record between Harry and Craig. They look upon it with envy and happiness because such a public display of affection between gays could never have happened several decades before. They also look upon the display of romantic affection with happiness because it demonstrates how times have changed. The kiss between Harry and Craig also reignites the romance between them, as Craig and Harry both confess they still love one another.

The chorus also looks upon the relationship between Neil and Peter with happiness. Neil and Peter are able to have a loving and committed relationship with the acceptance and approval of their parents. Such a relationship would never have been possible in decades past, which the gay chorus acknowledges. However, they are glad that such a loving relationship is possible in the present.

# Styles

## Point of View

David Levithan tells his novel “Two Boys Kissing” in the first-person omniscient narrative mode from the point of view of the chorus. The chorus consists of a group of unnamed dead gay men who succumbed to AIDS. These men narrate the novel as it unfolds, drawing on their collective experiences and lives to provide context and guidance to the reader regarding the present. For example, as Cooper prepares to commit suicide, the chorus explains that things will get better, that nothing is ever as bad as it seems. They know everything that is going to happen, and know everything that has happened in the past. They are present at all points of the novel, and are observers of each of the subplots as they unfold. However, the chorus lacks any power to interfere as demonstrated when they want to prevent Cooper from seeking to commit suicide, but are unable to stop it.

## Language and Meaning

David Levithan tells his novel “Two Boys Kissing” in language that is simple and straightforward, and is told by a chorus of gay men. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the novel is geared toward a target audience of gay young adults. The language used by the chorus is reflective of that age range and level of education. Secondly, the language used in the novel is reflective of the age range and level of education of the main characters, all students in high school.

## Structure

David Levithan divides his novel “Two Boys Kissing” into small, untitled, unnumbered sections and asides. There are no chapters or hard breaks in the novel, but only one long, continuous narrative that shifts back and forth between the chorus and various subplots, including Cooper, Harry and Craig, Tariq, and Neil and Peter. The novel occurs over the course of a single weekend, beginning on Friday evening and ending on Sunday. The structure of the novel therein represents life – a series of events, instances, and situations that occur one after another, often in quick succession.



## Quotes

You can't know what it is like for us now – you will always be one step behind. Be thankful for that. You can't know what it was like for us then – you will always be on step ahead. Be thankful for that, too.

-- Chorus (Section 1)

**Importance:** Here, the chorus explains that modern readers will never know what it was like for gay men to live a few decades ago. Their lives were full of challenge and discrimination. In the present, because the chorus of gay men are all dead, the reader does not know what sorts of experiences they have now undergone. It demonstrates how changing times alter perceptions and attitudes towards people.

Freedom is also about what you will allow yourself to do.

-- Chorus (Section 1)

**Importance:** Here, as the chorus begins introducing the reader to various characters, the chorus explain that freedom in life matters –from voting to kissing on the street. Yet, the chorus also reveals that freedom is about what people allow themselves to do. Freedom is about being oneself and embracing one's true nature.

You have no idea how fast things can change. You have no idea how suddenly years can pass and lives can end.

-- Chorus (Section 1 paragraph 10)

**Importance:** The chorus explains the sad fact that things in life can change in an instant, and this includes the ending of lives. Death is a tragedy that comes with life. This serves a warning and a bad omen for future events in the novel. The reader should bear this in mind as the novel progresses.

Then it's here. Months of preparation, weeks of practice, and years of living have led up to this moment. They kiss.

-- Chorus (Section 2)

**Importance:** Harry and Craig are seeking to break the world record for longest kiss. Their kiss forms the title of the novel, "Two Boys Kissing". It becomes one of the central events of the novel, and will have important consequences for them and for those around them.

I like whatever it is that makes you the person you are.

-- Ryan (Section 2)

**Importance:** Avery reveals to Ryan that he is transgender, that he was a boy born in a girl's body. Avery worries that Ryan will not see him the same anymore, but Ryan puts this fear to rest. Ryan likes Avery for who Avery is. There is no judgment from Ryan, only acceptance. It makes Avery feel better.



Two boys kissing.... What power it had.  
-- Chorus (Section 2)

**Importance:** Here, the chorus alludes to the title of the novel in the kiss being shared between Harry and Craig. They explain that kisses have real power. A kiss, they explain, has the ability to open up the world a little more. They also explain that a kiss has the power to truly bring someone to life.

It's hard to stop seeing your son as a son and to start seeing him as a human being. It's hard to stop seeing your parents as parents and to start seeing them as human beings. It's a two-sided transition, and very few people manage it gracefully.  
-- Chorus (Section 3)

**Importance:** Here, the chorus explains the difficulty of coming out, or being discovered as gay. Parents need to be understanding of their children, the chorus explains; and children need to be just as understanding of their parents. It is a two-way street. The transition between life before and after a revelation of this nature is usually difficult at best. Patience and understanding are key.

Cooper doesn't believe tomorrow will be better. Or any tomorrow. Not really. We want to tell him in a thousand different ways that he's wrong.  
-- Chorus (Section 3)

**Importance:** After the fight with his father, and after the sexual encounter with Julian, Cooper spends the night in his car. He feels lonely and lost. He believes that nothing will ever get better. The chorus wants to tell Cooper that things will get better in time, but they don't have the power to do so.

We know: An almost certain way to die is to believe you are already dead. Some of us never stopped fighting, never gave up. But others of us did. Others of us felt the pain had become too much, and that there was nothing left to life but the struggle for life, which was not enough reason to stay.  
-- Chorus (Section 4 paragraph 129)

**Importance:** Here, the chorus speaks about the growing depression of Cooper. They relate Cooper's depression to their own difficulties and hardships. They explain that for someone who believes he is already dead, it is easy to die. This is possible when the pain of living becomes too great. This serves as a very bad omen for Cooper, but also highlights the struggle that many gays face.

It's one of the secrets of strength: We're so much more likely to find it in the service of others than we are to find it in service to ourselves.  
-- Chorus (Section 4)

**Importance:** The chorus explains that the strength people have is usually found in helping others. Rarely do people – straight or gay – find strength in themselves.



Whereas Harry and Craig draw strength from each other in their record-breaking, Cooper cannot seem to find strength in himself.

You are not alone.  
-- Harry (Section 5)

**Importance:** While kissing Harry, Craig is upset by the fact that his family has gone for a drive rather than sticking around for the kiss. Craig begins crying, feeling utterly alone. Harry tells him he is not alone. However, Harry's words are not intended merely for Craig, but for any reader, gay or straight or anything else, who feels alone in life.

Choose your actions wisely... Cooper will live to meet his future self. You should all live to meet your future selves.  
-- Chorus (Section 5)

**Importance:** Here, the chorus reminds gay readers that they must choose their actions in life wisely, and that they must always endeavor to live no matter how tough life gets. The chorus explains that who someone is today is not who someone will be in the future. The chorus explains that life for gays will get easier as time goes on, and holding on is worth seeing who they will become in the future.