

*We are excited to have recently launched Erin Donohue's Because Everything is Right but Everything is Wrong.*

*This powerful coming-of-age story follows 17-year-old Caleb Evans as he struggles to hold his life together while everything around him is falling apart. It comes as no surprise to us that it was recently the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest-selling New Zealand children's fiction title on the Nielsen bestseller list.*

*There was barely a dry eye in the house as Erin shared the experiences that inspired her novel; we are sure you will be moved by her speech too.*

In year 10 English, when I was 14, we studied SE Hinton's *The Outsiders*. I remember liking it a lot and feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment at finishing the book, at making it through the story. I felt different when the story had finished. I felt like something had changed.

I don't remember much of it now. Isn't that always the way it goes? We remember how it made us feel but not why.

Admittedly there is little I remember about high school. I am actively trying to forget most of it, but I do remember learning that SE Hinton wrote *The Outsiders* when she was only 17. I also remember thinking, *I'm gonna do that. I'm gonna write a book by the time I'm 17.*

But then I turned 15 and I started to fall ill. Then I was 16. Then 17 and I had forgotten all about the book I was to write because all that there was was the mental illness. I was diagnosed with anxiety, depression and anorexia in my final year of high school. I had to take weeks off, had to drop several classes, had to get blood tests every day, had to have appointments four times a week. Dieticians, psychologists, nurses, psychiatrists, paediatricians, doctors; I saw them all and I saw them a lot.

It became a real fight. And a nasty one. Every meal was agonising. Me, fighting the food. Mum, fighting me. My sisters crying while they watched from the other end of the table. But it wasn't only meals that were tricky; it was everything. I was watched all the time. Was I exercising when I shouldn't be? Why was I going to the bathroom straight after dinner?

My heart was slowing down, my temperature was dropping, my hair was falling out. Though it sounds dramatic and somewhat silly now, the truth of it was that I was dying.

My family did everything to keep me alive, despite my arguments against it. At one stage, my parents even threatened to take my bedroom door off so they'd know whether I was exercising or not. I had waited for my final year of high school for years and I spent most of it at home or at appointments. I even missed my final exams because I was an inpatient at an eating disorder clinic.

That was when I was 17. I'm 21 now. Since then, I've been hospitalised, been an inpatient at an eating disorder clinic twice, finished a degree, written two young adult manuscripts (one of which is the reason we're all here today) and have nearly finished a graduate diploma in publishing. Although it hasn't been long, it has also been forever.

It had been a lifetime of sadness and grief and loss in those few short years. For more than just me. So naturally, when I was tasked with writing my first full manuscript that's all that came out.

It was like a diary at first. But the more I wrote, the more feedback I got from my classmates and from the incredible Anna Taylor, the more the story grew into itself. I grew as a writer and the story became its own. Caleb's story. But it still had me all the way through it. It still told my story a little bit too.

Since then, the story, and myself if I'm honest, have grown and shrunk a million times over. Have been through so many different stages. And there're a crowd of people who have got me here and this book here with me.

Thank you to the Mixed Genre class of 2015 for always giving helpful feedback and having a great deal of patience for a project that wasn't always easy to talk about.

Anna Taylor always made the time to encourage, to read, to suggest, to brainstorm, and to listen. She was one of the first to believe in this story, and I'm privileged to have learnt from her.

I'm grateful for Pip Adam, Fleur Beale, Mandy Hager and Logan Smith's expert opinions and advice.

Ruby, Gemma, Helena, Sucheta, Hayle, and Elle from the Whitireia Publishing team made it fun even when I wanted to cry. They made the book better and cared just as much, sometimes more, about it than I did.

Thank you to Mary-Jane for all of her support and Adrienne for being a gentle and kind editor.

Thank you to the mental health professionals from various organisations for supporting me over the last five years and doing their jobs with compassion even when I made it difficult. Thank you for keeping me alive.

Grace, Lorelei, Alex, Robyn, Kat and Ashlea, thank you for listening, being there and being proud.

Nana, Grandma, Grandad and all my extended family who gave me so much love and support from all over the country and the world – I'm forever thankful.

Thank you to Peter, Conor and Dad for knowing I could do it and reminding me often, despite not knowing much about the book or the process.

Thank you to Anya and Ciara for your belief, for being the early readers and feedback-givers, for being my best friends.

And finally, and most importantly, thank you to my mum. You are my creative consultant, my first reader, my biggest fan and my person. I couldn't have done any of it without you.

And to everyone here. Thank you for your help, love, support and kindness, and for being here today.

I write because I love writing. I love the power it has, and the profound effect it can have on a reader. I love feeling that irreversible feeling that I get when I read a great book and I love it when others feel that after reading my work.

I was hoping this book would do that for someone. Anyone. Would make them feel connected to others in the way books can. Would help someone to come forward and seek help. Or would help supporters understand mental illness a little bit more. Even one person would make me feel like I had done something worthwhile.

When young adult author Bernard Beckett read the book, he said, 'It's changed the way I attend to those I teach. I cannot give I higher praise than that.'

I was astounded at that quote. And very humbled. What a profound and incredible thing for words to do. What a great thing to come from all that pain and grief. To have someone

maybe understand slightly more, to think slightly differently. I think that's very important. Especially at the moment.

Without getting too political, I think now is when mental health care and mental illness needs more attention. Our mental health system is stretched to its limit and people are dying because of it. Now, more than ever, is when we need to look after each other. To encourage people around us to speak up and ask for help. To speak up ourselves. To continue supporting people even after they have asked for help. To demand better care again and again from our government. To keep each other alive.

I think we owe it to ourselves and each other to work harder at understanding the difficulties of mental illness and celebrating the small successes that can poke through all the bad.

So today I stand up here not only as someone who has and still does struggle with mental illness. But also, someone who has achieved despite it. And today I am letting myself be proud of that. I never wrote the book by the time I was 17. I was preoccupied with experiencing the story I'd be writing later. And I suppose writing a book at 19 and getting it accepted for publication at 20 isn't too bad either.