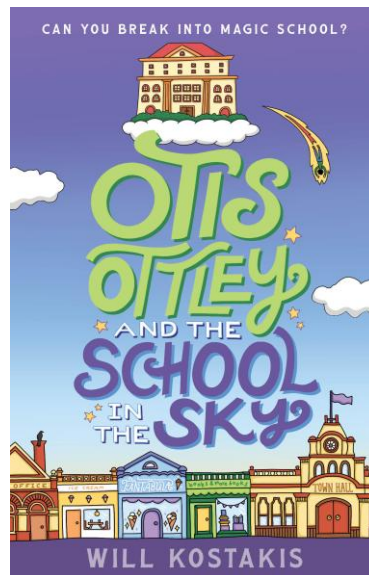




OTIS OTTLEY AND THE SCHOOL IN THE SKY

Written by WILL KOSTAKIS

RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 9–14 YEARS OLD (UPPER PRIMARY/LOWER SECONDARY)

GENRE: Middle Fiction, School Story, Fantasy/Magic

THEMES: fantasy, family, magic, humour, friendship, grief, memory

CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:

- English: Literature, literacy and language
- Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS)
- Visual Arts

NOTES WRITTEN BY: Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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INTRODUCTION

Otis Ottley is an ordinary boy who yearns to go to the magic school in the sky. And he will stop at nothing to make it happen. A funny and warm middle-grade novel about finding the magic in everyday life, from a much-loved, award-winning Australian author.

Otis Ottley lives in the shadow of the Manor School for Magic. Literally. It's an island hovering over his town, and he's determined to reach it.

While many kids dream of roaming the prestigious institution's halls, casting spells and conjuring spectacles, Otis has a specific mission: to seek magical help remembering something extremely important.

The odds are stacked against him, but Otis will break into magic school. Or at the very least, he will break a few rules trying.

A wonderful middle-grade novel, brimming with magic, from a much-loved Prime Minister's Literary Award-winning author.

PLOT SUMMARY

Otis is determined to reach the Manor School for Magic for one important reason. He endeavours to travel there via the magic elevator but fails in his attempt. When an older student, Kean, is kicked out of Manor, Otis befriends him in the hope of gaining access to his magic and a way into the school. Meanwhile, Otis's dad is romancing a baker named Zadie, and planning to merge their two businesses. Otis is unsure how this change in their lives will affect him. With his friend LJ, Otis ultimately gains access to Manor via a levitating bench. How all this is resolved makes for a highly entertaining plot and an action-packed but also moving family story.

BEFORE READING

- Invite students to imagine what the title of the book might suggest about its contents.
- What does the cover suggest about the book's contents?
- What clues on the cover tell you that this story might involve magic or fantasy?
- The question at the top of the cover asks, *Can you break into magic school?* What does this make you wonder about the main character and the story?
- Why do you think the school is floating in the sky instead of being on the ground?
- Look closely at the buildings in the town below. What do they tell you about the setting and the people who live there?
- Who do you think Otis Ottley might be?

Q&A WITH WILL KOSTAKIS

Otis Ottley and the School in the Sky is your first middle-grade novel. What drew you to writing for younger readers?

'I think I was less drawn to writing for younger readers, and more, that was the perfect readership for this particular story. At first, I was scared to make the leap, but my life kept affirming that this was the right call: whether it was speaking to wider, and usually younger audiences while on tour, or noticing that older readers were being drawn to shorter books. So, I tasked myself with writing a novel that would excite older primary readers (like *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* excited me as a sixth grader), but that would also speak to younger secondary readers without patronising them.'

How did the experience differ from writing YA fiction?

'The biggest change was the word count: I'm used to stretching quiet moments, but Otis's character journey required a narrative propulsion to fit it all in. But I cheated and just made the book longer than I intended.'

So many children dream of being accepted to a magical school, but Otis is a character who has been left out. What interested you about telling the story from the perspective of someone on the outside looking in?

'We all have moments in our lives, usually around the time we're "younger readers", when we feel this acutely, don't we? If we can't join our siblings on a sleepover, or if we don't get that birthday-party invitation. And that feeling is so big at that age. I've also made no secret of the fact that after my parents' divorce, Mum struggled to keep my brothers and me in our particular school, and we were asked to leave on several occasions due to unpaid fees. That fear of losing my friends, and the only life I'd ever known... It's something that stays with you, and I wanted to write a book that affirms that no single school is the be-all and end-all, and there's always something amazing around the corner if you're brave enough to look for it.'

Beneath all the magic and adventure, Otis is searching for help to remember something very important. Without giving too much away, why was memory such an interesting theme for you to explore?

'Piggybacking off that last answer, while Kean is embracing a life after magic school, Otis is learning to embrace life after a significant loss. We're stepping into a world where companies are marketing grief tech ("Upload chat histories and photos to an LLM and we'll rebuild your loved one and they'll be here forever!"), and it feels like we're on a dangerous trajectory where we're letting the worst people in the world convince us that loss is optional. But it's not. We must face it, no matter our age. Otis's personal journey allows me to explore that idea in an age-appropriate way.'

The book has been described as funny, heartfelt and full of magic. How do you balance humour with the deeper emotional moments that have become such a hallmark of your writing?

'In media, we like to treat drama and comedy as silos, but in life, they bleed together, and I always want my work to honestly reflect that. Getting the balance right is something I've learned to do over time, choosing the right joke for the right moment, and trusting that when the book requires it, readers will engage with something serious without me clowning out.'

If the Manor School for Magic really existed and you could enrol in just one class, what subject would you choose – and how well do you think you'd do?

'Just one class? Impossible. I would love the History class because I find alternate, secret histories so fascinating, and as in real life, I would flunk out because I'm useless at remembering dates and details. I like to think I'd be drawn to one of the more creative subjects, but in my heart, I know it would be Memory. I've lived enough life now that I've lost, and I seem to have found myself in a stage where I'm actively losing loved ones, and the idea of avoiding loss entirely would be too intoxicating to resist. This book is as much for me as my readers.'

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

ENGLISH

LITERATURE

- **Genre:** This novel is both a fantasy and a school story.
 - A) What are the tropes of a fantasy? Fantasy relies on building a 'secondary' world with credible details; for example, the elevator that descends from the floating magic school to deliver people to West Orlow, levitating benches, auto-writing pens and a market stall that sells musicboxlava, 'a layered pastry dessert that sings while you eat it' (p 40). How important is the idea of a quest in writing a fantasy? Identify other fantasy details or tropes employed in this novel.
 - B) What are the tropes of a school story? In this one West Orlow High is the setting as well as the Manor School of Magic. Identify familiar school-story tropes employed in this novel.
- **Comparative Literature:** Read other school-based fantasies and compare to this one. [See **Corresponding Literature.**]
- **Literary Responses:** Discuss the book and then invite students to write a review of it.

LITERACY

- *Comprehension:* Invite students to answer questions about this novel. For example, why does Otis want to go to magic school? What is the elevator's magic word and why is it important to use it? How do students who fall from the island get saved? Name one thing that is different about Moriarty's Bookshop to a normal bookshop? Why was Kean expelled from Manor? What is a Halo? Why does Otis want to go to the magic school?

- *Critical Literacy:* Discuss characterisation.

Major Characters: Otis Ottley; LJ Glynn, Otis's best friend; Otis's dad, an ice-cream maker; Evelyn Ottley, Otis's grandmother (Nan); Zadie, a baker, and dad's girlfriend; Kean Betts, a student who escapes from the Manor School for Magic.

Minor Characters: Mrs Heath, Otis's English teacher; Mr Darcy, the school librarian; Arrabella Moriarty, a bookseller; Tabitha Tabernacle, a magic ice-cream maker and owner of Fantabula; Professor Arthur Frummage, principal of the Manor School for Magic; Tasha Egan, a student; 'Fridge', another student; Prudence, Nan's friend in the nursing home.

- Which major character was the most memorable for you and why?
 - Which minor character would you like to have read more about?
 - Choose any character and analyse how they are presented in this novel, using quotes to illustrate your answer.
- *Knowledge Building:* What did your students learn about creating characters in reading this novel? Direct characterisation involves the author telling the reader something about the characters. Indirect characterisation is conveyed by the five S.T.E.A.L. elements: speech, thoughts, effects on others, actions and looks. Examine any character and observe how these elements are used to develop their character.

LANGUAGE

- *Literary Devices:* A simile is a figure of speech that directly compares two different things to highlight a shared quality, for example: 'a voice not unlike pebbles in a blender' (p 109). A metaphor is a figure of speech that describes an object, person, or situation by stating that it literally is another unrelated thing, creating an imaginative comparison to highlight shared qualities or hidden meanings, for example, 'I'm on a good wicket' (p 86) is a cricket metaphor. Humour is among the other devices employed in this novel, for example: 'The tenth graders aren't exactly known for their vibrant personalities. They keep to themselves in Siberia, aka the benches by the demountables, where they can compare the chips on their shoulders, and the rest of us can pretend they don't exist' (p 43). Locate other examples of literary devices in the novel.

- *Narrative Structure*: The novel follows a chronological structure in 47 chapters. Suspense is created by the opening and closing sentences in each chapter, eg Beginning: 'Now, I don't want to sound like a roadblock, said LJ' (Ch 8, p 27). Ending: 'And I feel a pit in my stomach' (Ch 23, p 76). How else is suspense created in this novel?
- *Narrative Voice and Point of View*: The novel is written in Otis's first person, present tense voice which offers his view of the action. How might LJ have told the story differently?

or

Otis and LJ encounter a Fourth Year who has snuck out of bed to visit the Cloister of Ordeals in Chapter 36. Write an alternate chapter from that character's perspective, exploring her motives and what the Cloister of Ordeals actually is.

- *Humour*: Humour gives readers moments of relief, makes difficult emotions easier to explore, and reminds us that hope, joy and connection still exist even during times of loss. Why do you think the author chose to include humour in this story? How do you think you might have responded to the story if it didn't have any humour? Explain your answer using examples from the text.

ASSESSMENT:

- Why would you like/not like to attend a magic school? Write an answer in essay format.
- Draw a map of the Manor School of Magic from the hints given in the novel.
- Write an additional short chapter to the novel, set a year after the ending.

or

Otis Ottley and the School in the Sky has been adapted into a successful TV series for Netflix, and now you need to pitch a second season. The problem is, the actor who plays Otis is too old to reprise the role, so the episodes will need to follow a different Manor School for Magic student. What is their story and how does it connect to the themes of Otis's story?

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

- *Family*: Otis and his dad are close and the loss of Otis's mother some years earlier has brought them even closer. Theirs is a relaxed household in comparison to LJ's, whose parents who are very conservative and anti-magic. Compare these two families.

- *Friendship*: Otis and LJ are very different characters but are firm friends who support each other. Otis also becomes a friend to Kean. What aspects of friendship are celebrated in this novel?
- *Grief*: Otis's mum died a few years before the novel begins, and he's still very troubled by the loss: 'I'm worried I'm forgetting her. I need this Frummage bloke to teach me how not to' (p 65). How important is grief as a theme in this novel and how does it suggest that grief should be confronted?
- *Memory*: The novel deals with memory and how we treasure the memories of times and people past. The magic stickers that re-create a person who has died, prove to be flawed. How does Otis instead learn to restore his memories of his mother?
- *Public vs private education*. *Otis Ottley and the School in the Sky* is about the impact of our nation's obsession with private education on a young boy whose family can't afford it. Will Kostakis has said that: 'When I was young, I thought my having a future was tied to attending a private school (silly in retrospect, but the marketing was strong...), and the threat of getting the boot was constant (and constantly distressing). I wanted to explore those feelings in the book.' Invite students to discuss this theme.

ASSESSMENT:

- Write an analysis of any of the themes of this novel, using quotes from the novel to illustrate your points.
- Write an acrostic poem using the letters in Otis Ottley's name to explore the themes in the novel.

VISUAL ARTS

- *Cover*: The cover is a stylised image of the school in the sky above the main street of West Orlow. Design a new cover for this book.
- *Visual Literacy*: What do you imagine Otis would look like? Draw an image of him with LJ, based on descriptions of them in the novel.

ASSESSMENT:

- Create a graphic novel interpretation of a scene in this book using speech bubbles and frames to illustrate the dialogue and action.
- Create a book trailer promoting this book.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

WILL KOSTAKIS is one of Australia's most renowned authors for kids and young adults. First published at nineteen, he writes whip-smart comedies that break (then mend) hearts. His latest young adult novel, *We Could Be Something* is a moving family epic that won the 2024 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Young Adult Literature. *Otis Ottley and the School in the Sky* is his middle grade debut. See <https://willkostakis.com/>



ABOUT THE WRITER OF THE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright AM operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. In 2011 she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld Branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, in 2012 the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Australia, and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award. In 2021 she was appointed a member of the Order of Australia.

CORRESPONDING LITERATURE

(In alphabetical order of authors)

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Chainani, Soman *The School for Good and Evil #1* Ill. by Iacopo Bruno. HarperCollins, 2018, 2013.

Riordan, Rick *The Lost Hero* (The Heroes of Olympus #1) Disney-Hyperion, 2010.

Townsend, Jessica *Nevermoor* (series) Hachette.

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McMurdie, Dena 'All-Time Fantasy Books for Tweens and Teens' Brightly
<https://www.readbrightly.com/time-favorite-fantasy-books-tweens-teens/>

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https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/76001.Middle_Grade_Fantasy

OTHER RESOURCES

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Jones, Andy *Creative Writing Magic: 80 Tips and Tricks for Young Writers* Ill. by Olaf Falafel. Walker Books, 2026.

Nannestad, Katrina *The Story Writer's Handbook: Adventures in Creative Writing* Ill. by Cheryl Orsini. HarperCollins Publishers, 2025.

Pagani, Balthazar *How To Draw a Graphic Novel* Ill. by Otto Gabos, Marco Otto Gabos and Marco Maraggi. Thames & Hudson, 2023.

Stowell, Louise *The Usborne Creative Writing Book* Usborne GB, 2016.

Youles, Christopher *Teaching Story Writing in Primary* Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024

ONLINE LINKS IN FULL

'Characterization' *LitCharts*

<https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/characterization>

'Defining Characterization' *Read Write Think*

https://www.readwritethink.org/sites/default/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson800/Characterization.pdf

'Fantasy Stories' *Twinkl*

<https://www.twinkl.com.au/teaching-wiki/fantasy-stories>

'Fantasy Story Ideas: 100+ Creative Writing for Kids and Students' *PlanetSpark*

<https://www.planetspark.in/creative-writing/fantasy-story-ideas-creative-writing-kids-students>

'How to Craft a Tense School Plot That Isn't Absurd' *Mythcreants*

<https://mythcreants.com/blog/how-to-craft-a-high-tension-school-plot-that-isnt-absurd/>

'How to Improve Writing Skills for Children in 11 Easy Steps' *ABCReading*

<https://readingeggs.com.au/articles/11-ways-to-teach-kids-how-to-write/>

'How to Make a Book Trailer' *Tristan Bancks*

<https://www.tristanbancks.com/2016/03/how-to-make-book-trailer.html>

'12 Writing Books for Teen Writers' *Alison Tait*

<https://allisontait.com/2019/07/12-writing-books-for-teen-writers/>

'Writing About High School in Young Adult Fiction' *Good Story Company*

<https://www.goodstorycompany.com/blog/young-adult-fiction>