

Have a Laugh with Oliver Phommavanh

Put your hands together and welcome author and comedian Oliver Phommavanh to the Book Club stage! We are thrilled to spotlight Oliver, one of our newest Author Advocates and member of Room to Read's Book Creator Collective. He joins a network of authors and illustrators around the world who share a passion for storytelling and bringing unique global experiences to life for young learners.

Born and raised in Sydney, Oliver is a Thai-Australian children's author and stand-up comedian with a background in teaching. His latest book "What About Thao?" was just released in Australia and follows a Vietnamese-Australian city boy named Thao who moves to a small country town. Thao enjoys being the new kid at his tiny school, and when another new kid named Kadir arrives, they join forces as a hilarious dynamic duo.

Q: We know you love to make people laugh through your writing and stand-up comedy. What is the first book or comedy show that made you laugh?

A. The first funny book that I can remember is "Fantastic Mr. Fox" by Roald Dahl. I just love how he described those villainous farmers.

Q: Which authors and/or comedians inspired you as a child? Which authors/comedians inspire you today?

A. I loved Australian funny authors such as Paul Jennings and Morris Gleitzman. Jennings in particular was the master of funny short stories, which had the biggest twists ever. These days, I'm inspired by Australian comedians such as Dave Hughes and Matt Okine.

Q: Can you tell us what a cHEwy gum gum is?

A. A cHEwy gum gum is what I call my fans. I think writing is like chewing bubble gum. You chew on an idea and then when you blow the bubble out — that's like turning it into a story!

Q: How has teaching shaped your career as an author and comedian?

A. I became a teacher as a back-up job for my writing, but I ended up loving my time in the classroom. I had the opportunity to be forever young with my students, and it gave me the idea to write for kids. I think teaching is like a type of performance where you need to be authentic, genuine and engaging, which has shaped the way I do my stand-up comedy and write my stories.

Q: Your book "What About Thao?" explores themes of diversity and acceptance as Thao, a Vietnamese-Australian city boy, moves to a new small-town school. How did you decide upon these themes for your new book?

A. I tend to write the story first before I think about the themes, but I am naturally drawn to writing about friendships, revolving around school and home. For "What About Thao?" the setting was a big part, so I was able to explore the differences between the city and small towns. The themes tend to show themselves as the story comes to life. Thao and Kadir's friendship is forged with both kids being new and different, so I was able to tap into what made them feel that way.

Q: What are the main lessons you hope young readers take away from "What About Thao?"

A. That being different can make a difference in someone's life. Also, the power of understanding and empathy in making friendships stronger.

Q: Room to Read's Girls' Education Program supports girls to continue their secondary education and develop key life skills that help them in and beyond the classroom. These life skills fall under three key domains: self-awareness, self-efficacy and social awareness. What life skills have been most valuable to you?

A. I think empathy has played a key part in helping me better understand people, whether they're my students in the classroom or when I am meeting strangers in new situations. I tend to absorb this life skill in my stories, making my characters much more enriching. I was grateful to have people share their migration stories, which helped me handle characters such as Kadir with delicate care.

Q: Why is diverse representation in books important?

A. I believe there is nothing greater than readers seeing themselves in books. When readers can see that their story matters, it means that they can place value in what they do or say. I am proud to wave the flag for diversity because I get excited to hear fresh voices, who each have a story to tell. So the more diversity, the better. We need to see our society being reflected in books.

Q: We understand you love burgers. As an expert, what do you think makes a great burger?

A. Ah, it all starts and ends with the buns. The burger is considered a one-handed meal, so you need to be able to have a burger bun that holds all the ingredients and toppings. Some of the best burgers I've had are ones where the last bite is just as good as the first.

Q: What is one thing that readers would be surprised to learn about you?

A. I am a sneakerhead with a massive collection of sneakers based on video game and cartoon characters. I guess this won't be too surprising when my upcoming book, "Sneakerheads" comes out, but until then, I love my kicks!

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