



AN UNCOMPROMISED VISION:

Spotlight on Brett Axel

The author's *Not Okay*, a intimate and unflinching novel 27 years in the making, finally finds a home

In author, poet, and editor Brett Axel's hard-hitting novel, a damaged young man seeks normalcy after escaping from a sex trafficker and pedophile who abducted him at age 12. In the aftermath of his dehumanizing ordeal, protagonist Peter Wilson struggles to understand his own sexuality while navigating the mundane realities of adulthood. His go-to resource? The pop psychology book *I'm OK —You're OK*.

Peter's circumstances are both painfully tragic and rawly comedic—a testament to the author's instincts about how individuals grapple with trauma. "I respond to pain with humor naturally," Axel says. "I see the two as intertwined. Every wisecrack is a bandage over a wound. If the wound wasn't there, the bandage would not be necessary. Some people drink, some people cry. I joke, and so does my character." His character also dabbles in a bit of murder.

While *Not Okay* certainly isn't autobiographical, there are grains of truth in the novel. "I lived through a lot of what my character lived through," Axel says. "I didn't turn out the same

way he did, but I could have. I suppose I was exploring another direction I could have taken."

Considering the book's frenetic energy and sense of emotional urgency, it may surprise readers to learn that Axel spent 27 years developing the novel. He began writing iterations of the book in 1992 and first submitted the novel to his agent in 2003. "I thought I was done with it then," he says, "but no one accepted it, so I wasn't."

Over the years, a number of publishers took an interest in *Not Okay*, but many requested changes to the book that Axel didn't want to make. "Up to this point, it has been fine to have graphic sex and violence in novels, but only if it's there to titillate," he says. "That is not what my story is. There's nothing gratuitous, there's nothing added to thrill. It's vulgar because the reality of the subject matter is vulgar and it wouldn't be honest without it"

Axel would set aside *Not Okay* to write three books of poetry and edit the poetry anthology *Will Work for Peace*, but it was his

children's book, a trans-positive fairy tale titled *Goblinheart*, that led to the publication of *Not Okay*. When Jeanne Vinal, who operates Vinal Publishing, read *Goblinheart*, she asked to see his other work. "That's when I showed her *Not Okay*," Axel says, "and she said the book was what she was hoping for."

Vinal didn't ask Axel to tone down the book's content or to compromise his vision. "She liked that it wasn't the same as a thousand books already on shelves," he says. "That is how I came to be published with Vinal." For Axel, the long road to publication was well worth it.

The book led to another fortuitous turn. Jeanne Vinal was looking for new team members and offered Axel a job. He now works for the publisher, seeking and signing authors of books "that stand out rather than fit in, that take chances, mean something, and leave a reader changed from the experience"—an apt description of Axel's own unflinching, intimate, and sardonically funny story of survival.