

## Starter

*In secondary school, being different is the worst crime you can commit.*

- Do you agree? Why?
- What kind of different is bad?
- Read the text and check if you had the same ideas as Alex, the narrator.

## Welcome to the Monkey House

In case you didn't know, in secondary school – especially in the early years of secondary school – diversity is not celebrated. In secondary school, being different is the worst crime you can commit. Most of the things the UN considers crimes are not considered crimes at secondary school. Being cruel is fine. Being brutal is fine. Being obnoxious is fine. Being superficial is especially fine. Explosive acts of violence are fine. Taking pleasure in the humiliation of others is fine. Holding someone's head down the toilet is fine (and the weaker the someone, and the dirtier the toilet, the finer it is). None of these things will hurt your social standing. But being different – that's unforgivable. Being different is the fast-track to Pariah Town. A pariah is someone who's excluded from mainstream society. And if you know that at twelve years of age, you're probably an inhabitant of Pariah Town.

Being different sounds like a simple concept, but actually, it's quite complex. For a start, there are a few types of difference – a selected few – that are acceptable and won't result in you getting mud and stones hurled at you. For example, if you're different because your family is unusually rich (as long as it's the right kind of rich) and has three cars (the right kind of cars), then you'll probably be okay. Secondly, there are some combinations of difference that can cancel each other out. For example, if you're abnormally stupid in almost every area but also happen to have abnormally good hand-eye or foot-eye coordination – that is, if you're abnormally good at sports – then you'll definitely be okay.

The crime of being different is really the crime of being *offensively* different, and this can be broken down into several sub-crimes.

1. **Being poor.** This is the worst crime you can commit, but, again, it's not as simple as it sounds. Being 'poor' really means not having the right stuff – Nike trainers, an appropriate amount of pocket money, a PlayStation or Xbox, a mobile phone, a flatscreen TV and computer in your bedroom and so on and so forth. It doesn't matter if you don't have these things for reasons other than poverty. You're still poor.
2. **Being physically different** – too small, too gangly, too spotty, buck teeth, braces (to prevent buck teeth), too skinny, too fat (equals *very* fat), too hairy, not hairy enough, excessively ugly, tendency to stutter or stammer, unacceptable pitch of voice, unacceptable accent, unacceptable odour, disproportionate limbs or features, cross-

eyed, bug-eyed, lazy-eyed, poor vision/crap glasses, lumps, bumps or humps, excessive freckling, large visible moles, unacceptable skin colour or tone, sickly, disabled, unacceptable bone structure, ginger hair.

3. **Being mentally different** – too clever, too stupid, too swotty, bookish, nerdy, weird hobbies and interests, just weird, incorrect sense of humour.
4. **Having unacceptable friends or relatives.** Associating with people who commit the crimes listed above and below is also a crime – even if you live in their house and have little choice in the matter. Having a parent who won't let you do all of the things you should be allowed to do – the things everybody else is apparently doing – is also unacceptable.
5. **Being gay.** This has surprisingly little to do with what you do with your private parts (or, more accurately, what you'd *like* to do with your private parts). Being gay is more a state of mind, or sometimes, less often, a state of body. You could almost include it as a sub-crime in 2) and 3), but really, it goes beyond both of these categories. And because of the number of times it crops up as a specific accusation, it definitely deserves its own special category. But the best way to explain what 'being gay' means is to tell you some of the things that are gay.

If you're a boy, any display of sensitivity is gay. Compassion is gay. Crying is supergay. Reading is usually gay. Certain songs and types of music are gay. 'Enola Gay'<sup>1</sup> would certainly be thought gay. Love songs are gay. Love itself is incredibly gay, as are any other heartfelt emotions. Singing is gay, but chanting is not gay. Wanking contests are not gay. Neither is all-male cuddling during specially designated periods in football matches, or communal bathing thereafter. (I didn't invent the rules of gay – I'm just telling you what they are.)

Girls can be gay too, but it's much harder for them. And girls don't tend to call each other gay as much as boys do. When a girl is gay, she's called a dyke. Reasons for being a dyke include having thick limbs, bad hair or flat shoes.

Extract from Gavin Extence, *The Universe versus Alex Woods* (2013)

## Speaking

1. Without looking at the text, list the different 'crimes of being different' with your partner. Try to remember as many details as possible. In English, of course!
2. How accurate is Alex's description? Justify with examples from your own life.
3. Who do you think decides what is 'acceptable'?
4. Alex is twelve years old. Do you think these 'crimes' change with age? What do you think crimes at 16 or 18 will be like?
5. Why do you think boys use the word 'gay' more than girls?
6. What do you think the effects of bullying are on its victims?
7. What can be done against bullying?

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<sup>1</sup> An anti-war song released in the 1980s by a band called OMD.

## **Cyberbullying**

1. What is cyberbullying?
2. Do you think it's worse than physical abuse? Why or why not?
3. Read the following extract from a newspaper article. How does it compare to what you said?

Online bullying can be worse than physical abuse. Online bullies follow their young victims into their bedrooms, the places where they should feel safe. They can post things that will be seen by hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. The victim can look at the post of photo again and again – there is no escape.

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4. What can be done to prevent cyberbullying or help its victims?