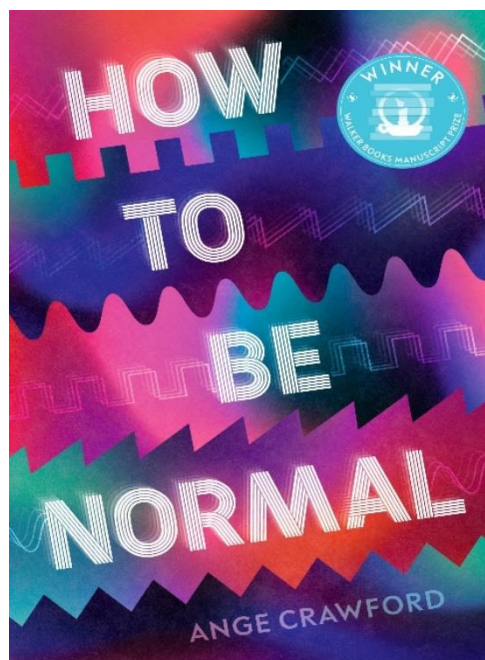


WALKER BOOKS AUSTRALIA

Q & A with Clare Hallifax, publisher at Walker Books Australia, and Ange Crawford,
author of *How to be Normal*



Tell us how this story came about. How long did it take you to write?

How to Be Normal came about all at once and then slowly. I know that's the opposite of the usual saying, and it's also a fair representation of my writing process in general. One day, during lockdown, I went on an hour-long jog on my own around my neighbourhood in Naarm. I'd found strange echoes of my own earlier life experience in that pandemic-gripped world, with its rules about grocery shopping and going outside, not to mention the sudden near-ubiquity of home-schooling. The reasons for my own restricted experience were very different and, unlike the pandemic years, not at all about keeping anyone safe—I grew up in a household impacted by coercive control—but I saw my own isolation reflected back at me especially strongly that day, while I was running. By the time I came home, Astrid's voice, and her story, were with me quite clearly.

But I had to draft the story many times; each time I reached only a little more towards what I really wanted to say. At first, I did this mainly on my own, but this story went on to benefit from more input from others than anything I'd written before. I ended up spending almost four years on the story before you saw it, and of course we worked on it some more together. I'm glad for every moment I spent writing and editing it (and taking pauses to reflect, as well). Some things take a long time to figure out how to say, and I owed it to Astrid to spend that time—that's something she understood all along.

This is your first novel, but you have written in other forms. How do you think different forms of writing speak differently to readers?

This is an interesting question, and one that I think about quite a lot. As a writer and as an editor, I'm quite interested in form in itself, and the ways that structures (social structures as much as story structures) can shape our experiences. Novels are so fascinating to me partially because they can take so many different forms, but in general, I've found that I'm most drawn to writing a novel when I want to give myself (and any readers) an extended opportunity to dwell somewhere, whether it's with a concept or something more concrete, and see it from a lot of different angles. And some truths are easier to reach towards with fiction—this is where I feel I can tell them slant, as Emily Dickinson said. I like the way this slanting writing invites the reader to bring their own understandings into the story-world, too, which feels sometimes like a good way of recognising nuance. Of course, readers bring their own interpretations to work of any genre, but sometimes I enjoy playing with ways of giving the reader (and their own context) a particularly active creative role, and this seems to work best for me in shorter, sparser forms, like poetry for example.

When you wrote the story, did you know exactly what you were going to write, or did the characters surprise you in a way?

You know that classic question—are you a plotter or a pantsler? In response to this, I always claim to be a plotter; I'm someone who finds my creativity thrives only once I have a structure around me, or so I usually say. I knew, for example, that a friendship 'love story' between Astrid and Cathy was going to be one of the main things that happened in *How to Be Normal*. But it's also true that some things can only emerge in the writing. For example, there is a romantic subplot in this story that I didn't plan at all; and some characters who ended up being very important to Astrid, like Leila and Connor, insisted on their centrality to the story only as I was writing. In life, no one is really a 'background character'. These two particular characters reminded me of that, and then insisted my story move a little closer to real life, if that makes any sense.

This story deals with some difficult themes, but does so in a compassionate way. What would be your advice if a reader, or their friend, was going through a similar situation?

The first thing I'd say is that, if you are or have been in the same place as Astrid, you're not alone. Recent research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies suggests around a quarter of Australians survived coercive control before turning eighteen (like Astrid), while many, many more—overwhelmingly but not exclusively women—are in the same situation as Astrid's mum. In the thick of it, it can be hard to see what's going on in an environment of domestic abuse; this is the origin of that term 'gaslighting', which we now use so flippantly, but which can be very systematically done by abusers—alongside a lot of isolation and uncertainty ... and in a complicated and often very painful way, love. So

the next thing I'd say is, if it's your friend, believe them, and understand that extracting oneself from such an environment can be difficult and dangerous (and thus sometimes very gradual)—harder still, of course, for young people, who might not have any say at all. I surrounded Astrid with people who listened to her and cared for her at different moments, because I knew that's what she'd need at the start of her healing journey. If it's what you need, you can also call 1800RESPECT or Kids' Helpline (1800551800). If you want to know more in general, I'd encourage you to seek out the (much more eloquent) writing of activists like Jess Hill and to support the work of tireless organisations like Djirra.

What do you hope that readers will take away from reading your book?

How to Be Normal is about coercive control—and I hope that readers understand a little more about this experience (or feel seen)—but it's also a book about friendship and music and love and all the things that can offer us safety when we feel broken and confused. So I really hope readers leave the story with a sense of warmth and hope. Astrid will certainly have a lot of healing still to do after the end of this story, but she is going to break the cycle. Many, many others in Astrid's generation will too. I hope my book can give a little energy in that direction. It's one step on a long, long road.