

# LettersAboutLiterature

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## Level One – Grades 4-6 – First Place Winner – 2020 - Indiana

Maria S.  
New Palestine, Indiana

Dear Jerry Craft,

Your graphic novel, ***New Kid***, really touched my heart. When the central character, Jordan Banks, experienced difficulties because of his race, I immediately connected with his situation. Jordan wanted to go to art school, but his mother insisted he'd go to Riverdale Academy Day School, a school for high achieving students who were mostly white. At that school he didn't face direct bullying, but he felt different because of his race.

I can relate to Jordan. I go to a school with mostly white students, and I have Hispanic heritage. I don't exactly get bullied, but a lot of kids at school come up to me and say things like, "Wow, you look like the character in this book!" or "Are you Mexican and do you speak Spanish?" Because of the show *Dora the Explorer*, kids at school have been calling me Dora because they say I look like her. They aren't necessarily trying to be mean. They don't know it, but I do not like being labeled as something I'm not. There are many situations in your book ***New Kid*** that also involve unintentional racism. I love reading books that I can relate to in some way. It helps me understand the book more, it also helps me enjoy it more than if I didn't relate to the main character. But I don't think just kids in my situation should read your book. I think it would help open the eyes of all kids if they read ***New Kid***.

I know what it feels like to get called names or to be bullied in a way. It is never a good feeling and nobody should be treated that way. Jordan Banks was a new student at Riverdale Academy Day School. I too moved to a new school in second grade. I was sad to leave my old friends behind, just like Jordan. At the new school I didn't know anyone. It took me a while to make friends. Everybody in my class had been together since kindergarten, I felt like I didn't fit in. It helped me to read about a character who went through the same thing.

One thing I learned from this book is that you should not judge people until you understand their situations. In ***New Kid***, a girl named Alexandra was considered weird because she always had a puppet on her hand. Everybody just assumed that she was weird because she acted

different than everyone else. Later in the book it is revealed that when Alexandra was little, she and her younger brother were playing around a stove which had a hot pan on it. They heard the doorbell and ran to get the door. Alexandra's little brother accidentally knocked the pan over. To save her brother, Alexandra reached to stop the pan from hurting him. She was burned badly, and to hide her scar she wore a puppet on her hand. This really made me think about times I also might have been too quick to judge.

After some time in the story, Jordan became friends with Alexandra, so she decided to tell Jordan about the incident and why she wore the doll everywhere. She agreed that Jordan could tell one person. In what turned out to be a good plan, Jordan decided to tell the biggest blabbermouth in the school. This girl told everybody and soon Alexandra, who was once considered the weirdest girl in school, became accepted by others. It makes the reader really stop and think.

I have learned a lot from reading this book. I now know that people will judge and treat you differently, but you should just ignore them because later on they will appreciate who you are. You don't have to change and be like others to fit in. Jordan didn't have to change to make the great friends he got because they appreciated him for who he was. Once other students figured out how Alexandra saved her brother, they started to accept her for who she was. Alexandra didn't have to change to be appreciated. Your book ***New Kid*** helped me realize and understand the struggle that some kids go through trying to fit in with others at school, and that I am not the only one that has felt this way. I have read many books about bullying, but yours was the first that let me see the bad situations from all points of view. It wasn't just about kids being mean, it helped me see that there are also people who can be unintentionally hurt by words we don't realize are hurtful.

I really enjoyed reading ***New Kid***. Thank you for writing it.

Sincerely,  
Maria S.

**Level Two – Grades 7-8 – First Place Winner – 2020 - Indiana**

Lidya S.  
Indianapolis, Indiana

Dear F. Scott Fitzgerald,

America is viewed as the land of new beginnings and second chances. Your book, *The Great Gatsby*, sheds a whole new light on how I picture the “American Dream.”

When I think of the American dream, I think of my parents. They emigrated from Africa to America. They made the decision to come here and give me the best life I could get. I always took for granted what they had given me. The advice that Nick Carraway’s father gave to him at the beginning of the first chapter is what really got me thinking. His father taught him to never judge others because not everybody had the same advantages that he had. I started to realize how many advantages I have. And how I need to be grateful for it.

Jay Gatsby was the one who really reminded me of this. With his magnificent mansion and servants, he had everyone under the illusion that he was “living his best life.” While he was too busy fooling others, he was also subconsciously fooling himself into thinking that it was in his best interest to base his world around Daisy Buchanan. He risked everything for her, he waited years for her, he sold illegal alcohol to get a mansion to impress her, and he took the blame for the murder of Myrtle Wilson for her. I don’t even think she was worth it. Gatsby never appreciated his hard work and success. At all of his extravagant parties, he never enjoyed himself because he was too occupied with Daisy. He focused on what he couldn’t have instead of enjoying what he did have. I had the same problem.

Living in America and having access to social media, I knew what was stacked against me as a black girl. Social media convinced me that because I’m not a white male, I would automatically struggle. Because of this, I denied the fact that I had privilege. I just wouldn’t accept it. I’m constantly comparing myself to others and wanting what they have. Before, I wouldn’t have given a second thought to how I had been raised in a nice house in a good neighborhood while being surrounded by a safe environment. I took for granted that I had access to an academically challenging private school, and how lucky I am to have my family with me.

Those who pursue the “American dream” are always left wanting more. I find that to be a sad life. I would rather not live a life wondering if I could be more than I am now. That’s why I use Gatsby as a reminder of what to avoid. Because of ***The Great Gatsby***, I face reality now by focusing on what really matters. I am now accepting my advantages and disadvantages and using them to better myself, so I can enjoy my life without any regrets.

Sincerely,  
Lidya S.

## Level Three – Grades 9-12 – First Place Winner – 2020 - Indiana

Maria B.  
Harlan, Indiana

Dear Mr. Lewis,

I enjoy reading today because of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. By the end of 4th grade, reading had become a chore for me. In desperation, I asked my father to suggest a book that I might like. He handed me *The Magician's Nephew*, and I became a loyal citizen of Narnia.

The first time I read your stories, I became one of the characters. I jumped into the pool with Diggory and Polly and watched in wonder as Narnia was created. I wept by Aslan's body at the Stone Table. I rode over the misty mountain pass beside Shasta. I stood by Caspian as High King Peter knighted him. I felt the pain of Eustace's transformation when the Lion ripped away the old dragon-skin. I was Jill struggling to obey. And I stood at the stable door beside the kings and queens of Narnia as they watched its destruction.

I don't know how much of that first whirl-wind journey my 4th grade mind comprehended, but I vividly remember the moment I recognized whom Aslan represented. My father and I watched the movie version of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and he asked me, "Whom does Aslan represent?" As I mulled over my response, I realized there was only one person like Aslan who had sacrificed himself for the guilty: Jesus of Nazareth.

Recently, I read the books again, and I grasped so much more. The allegorical nature of your stories helps me see better...no, they help me see *me* better. For example, my *mind* enjoyed the account of Narnia's creation and corruption in *The Magician's Nephew*. But my *heart* resonated with Diggory as he resisted the witch's temptation. His example gave me strength and inspired me to walk away from evil.

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, I was deeply moved when the Stone Table cracked and Aslan came back to life. I realized that Jesus did the same thing, and I *experienced* why everyone who saw him couldn't keep quiet!

***The Horse and His Boy*** is probably my favorite story. I resonate with the characters, especially their obsession with others' stories. Aslan's admonition that he was telling them their story (not another's) felt like you wrote it to me!

I look forward to so many gems in the story arc of ***Prince Caspian, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader***, and ***The Silver Chair***. I listen for the desperate but hopeful winding of Susan's horn! I cherish every scene with Reepicheep but especially his unwavering loyalty and love; he inspires me! When I'm afraid or angry or sad, I fear heaven may not be real and that we are just making it up. But then I remember the brilliant, spunky rebuttal of the evil enchantress that you wrote for Puddleglum: "I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia!"

Your book ***The Last Battle*** is my second favorite. I treasure the picture of heaven that you created inside the stable! What inspired the idea of something bigger on the inside than on the outside? Whenever I contemplate heaven now, I hear Jewel's voice: "Come further up! Come further in!" I want you to know that whenever I want to give up, I remember that Aslan will return!

I know that as I mature, what you wrote will make more sense to me - the best stories are always like that. But, even now, I see myself and the world more clearly because of what you've written. I feel like Lucy when Aslan says, "...every year you grow, you will find me bigger!" I feel like my faith truly is *bigger*. In the face of evil thoughts, the strength of Aslan helps me to do good. When I hear bad news, I know Aslan has a plan, and I can choose to follow him! I hope I can be as brave and loyal as Reepicheep.

Mr. Lewis, your stories introduced me to a world I will never forget. You taught me to love to read, to be brave, and to imagine a better world. I hope I never grow too old to "read fairy tales." Thank you for every adventure I've taken in Narnia. I eagerly await my next journey through the door of the wardrobe.

Your devoted and grateful fan,  
Maria B.

## Indiana Prize – Highest Ranking Letter to an Indiana Author – 2020

Kristin E.  
Zionsville, Indiana

Dear John David Anderson,

Last year, I was given the news. It was around dinner time, and my mom was the one who told us. My mom told my sister and I that my Aunt Toni had stage 3 cancer. I was shocked, sad, and scared. I wasn't sure what was going to happen. I was up all night worried and stressed. Was I going to grow up with an aunt? Will I be in this same scenario when I am older? Will this occur with another important person in my life? How will this affect my future? My aunt means the world to me and I really hoped she would be able to get cured quickly. About the beginning of the school year, I decided to read your book *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*.

When I finished reading your book, I found a connection that I had with Topher, Brand, and Steve. They were going through the same thing I was, having someone that is very close going through something tough. I feel like I have really connected with Brand. In *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*, Ms. Bixby and Brand go to the grocery store every Friday and it was something very special to Brand. I think of it as a bond that they have. My Aunt Toni is very special and means the world to me because she lives in New York, so every time we see her, we always do something special. We play *Clue*, do makeovers, and hang out with each other. When we lived in Tennessee, we would come up to Indiana for a visit every so often, and we would have a contest to see who woke up the latest. It was always so much fun (even though I lost). This book has showed me to keep moments close and enjoy time with family and friends. When Ms. Bixby went away, Topher, Brand, and Steve all felt like they needed to give her something more than a get well soon construction paper card. Something special to show how much they care for her. When my aunt is over, I feel like I need to give her something special too. I like to show appreciation for my aunt by making cool things for her and doing some of her favorite things with her. Just like how Topher, Brand and Steve showed appreciation for Ms. Bixby by giving her the things she mentioned she wanted on her last day (her cheesecake, wine, fries, the picnic, and music). Now, my aunt is almost cured, and I am thrilled about that.

Because of your book, I now know I am not alone in the world and that I am not the only person dealing with a loved one with cancer. This book has also taught me to be thankful for all the memories I have made with my aunt and to enjoy the good parts in life. I want to thank

you for creating this book because it has lots of emotion that I can connect to. I hope that others will have hope like me that people that they love with cancer will win the battle. I also hope that the people with cancer can stay positive and continue on. Thank you for **Ms. Bixby's Last Day** and for showing me that even though there are ups and downs in life, you should remember the good ones and enjoy them. Thank you.

Sincerely,  
Kristin E.