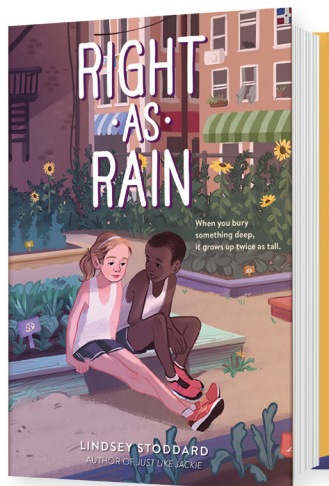
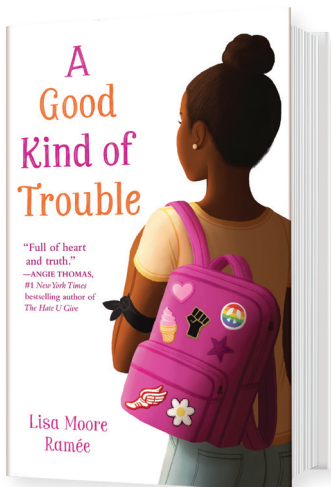
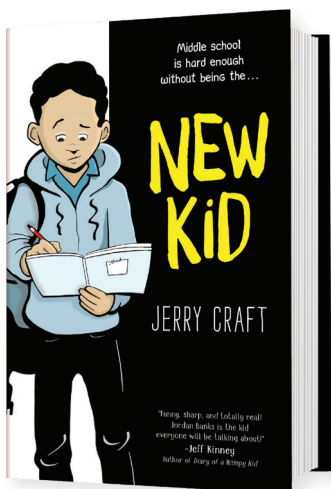
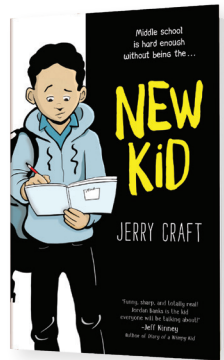


Navigating

Middle Grade Educators' Guide



Features discussion questions and activities for great books about **family, friendship, and fitting in.**



NEW KID

by Jerry Craft

★ “Should be required reading in every middle school in America.”
—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

Grades 3–7

Themes: Fitting In, Friendship, Race, Class, Family Dynamics, Bullying

About the Book

Seventh grader Jordan Banks loves nothing more than drawing cartoons about his life. But instead of sending him to the art school of his dreams, his parents enroll him in a prestigious private school known for its academics, where Jordan is one of the few kids of color in his entire grade.

As he makes the daily trip from his Washington Heights apartment to the upscale Riverdale Academy Day School, Jordan soon finds himself torn between two worlds—and not really fitting into either one. Can Jordan learn to navigate his new school culture while keeping his neighborhood friends and staying true to himself?

Discussion Questions

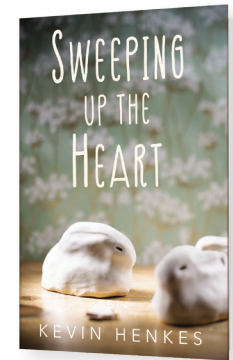
- Jordan’s mom puts pressure on him not only to attend Riverdale Academy, but also to enjoy it. Drawing helps Jordan cope with the pressure from home and the feelings of loneliness at school. What activities do you do to make yourself feel better when you’re stressed or not feeling like yourself?
- When Jordan returns home on the first day of school his friend Kirk is waiting for him, but things between the two of them get uncomfortable when Kirk sees Liam; why do you think that happens? Later, Jordan tells his dad it was “kinda weird” (p. 50). What do you think Jordan is really feeling?
- Jordan’s “Tips for Taking the Bus” (pp. 56–57) show Jordan changing his appearance over the course of his trip. Discuss the concept of “code switching.” What do you notice in each frame? What is different about his clothing, body language, and the people around him? What do you think Jordan gains by code switching in this way? Can you think of a time when you felt you needed to “code switch”?
- Jordan is nervous when he decides to try out for a sports team because he hasn’t played any of the sports before. Have you ever had to try something you didn’t want to? How did you manage to start? By the end of the season, Jordan finds that he actually likes soccer. Have you ever changed your mind about something after trying a new experience?
- Why do you think it takes so long for Drew and Jordan to start talking? Discuss the friendship dynamic when Jordan, Drew, and Liam are together.
- Liam asks Jordan not to judge him before coming over to his house during winter break. What do you think Liam is worried about?
- Do you think Andy is a bully? In your opinion, why does Andy act the way he does?
- It takes a lot of courage for Jordan to stand up to say what really happened during the altercation between Drew and Andy in the cafeteria (Chapter 12). Why do you think Jordan saying something made others step up to report the truth, too?
- When Ms. Rawle reads Jordan’s sketch book she fails to understand how she is making her African American students feel unseen. Why do you think she gets defensive?
- On Jordan’s last day of school his parents comment on how different he looks, and try to figure out exactly what it is, “Whatever it is you look like *a new kid*” (p. 245). Jordan doesn’t see it at first, but in what ways do you think Jordan has grown and changed through the school year? In what ways does he stay the same?



Extension Activities

Middle School Superhero. Jordan imagines himself as a superhero so he can confront Andy in the lunchroom and tell the truth to the teachers about what he saw. Using arts and crafts supplies, create your own middle school superhero. What is your superhero’s name? Does your superhero have powers? What are the things that make your superhero able to stand up to a bully?

Not so New Kid: The story ends with summer break starting; can you imagine what’s in store for next year? Create your own comic book panel showing the first day of 8th grade for Jordan and his friends at RAD.



SWEEPING UP THE HEART

by Kevin Henkes

★ “Spare, luminous, lovely.”
—The Horn Book (starred review)

Grades 3–7

Themes: Friendship, Grief, First Love, Family Dynamics

About the Book

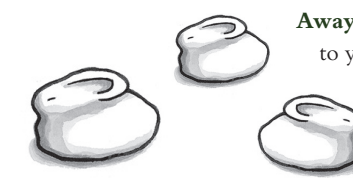
Amelia dreams about going to Florida for spring break like everyone else in her class, but instead is stuck at home with her cranky and conservative English professor father and her babysitter, the beloved Mrs. O’Brien. The week ahead promises to be boring until Amelia meets Casey, a fellow spring break refugee, at her local art studio. Amelia has never been friends with a boy before, and the experience is both fraught and thrilling. When Casey claims to see the spirit of Amelia’s mother (who died ten years ago) crossing the street, the pair embark on a different sort of journey.

Discussion Questions

- Describe Amelia’s feelings in the first chapter. Why is she upset with her father? How does she feel about the week of spring break ahead of her?
- Discuss the role of Mrs. O’Brien in Amelia’s life. What does the author mean when he says that Amelia “wore Mrs. O’Brien’s loving watchfulness like a protective cloak” (p. 9)? How has Mrs. O’Brien made life better for her since her mother died?
- How do Amelia and Casey become friends? What are the circumstances for each of them that make their friendship possible? How do they break the ice with each other to begin their friendship? Why is Amelia so startled when Casey asks her “Do you ever get signs from her,” meaning Amelia’s mother (p. 31)?
- Discuss the Emily Dickinson poem on p. 50 that Amelia finds in Mrs. O’Brien’s book. What effect does the poem have on Amelia? What effect does it have on you when you read it? Why do you think the author chose the line “Sweeping up the Heart” for the title of the book? Consider how many ways that phrase describes different parts of the story.
- Why is it so important to Amelia that Louise appreciates her rabbit sculptures? What meaning do the rabbits have for her? Discuss Louise’s comment: “I didn’t know they were rabbits at first. That’s what makes them interesting” (p. 59). How does Amelia feel when she brings her father to see the rabbits later in the week?
- Why does Casey think the woman they see through the coffee shop window is connected to Amelia? What does he mean by calling her “an impression,” “a symbol,” and “a sighting” (p. 68)? What is the meaning of the word “epiphany”? Why does Amelia choose that as their made-up name for the woman?
- What is the effect on Amelia of her fantasies about “Epiphany”? What does she mean when she says she feels “imprisoned by the uncertainty” (p. 101)? Why do you think Amelia’s father never talked to her about Hannah Barnes? Would it have been better for Amelia if he had told her from the beginning? Was he more concerned about changes in Amelia’s life or changes in his own?
- Why does Casey destroy the sculptures he has been making? How are his reactions to the changes in his life different from Amelia’s? How are they the same? Can you predict what Amelia and Casey’s lives will be like in the future and how they will each cope with changes in their families?
- What does Amelia mean when she thinks about her father, “Maybe ... I’m more like him than I admit” (p. 173)? In what way is Amelia like her father? In what ways is she different?
- Discuss the epigraph at the beginning of the book, just before Chapter 1: “The whole secret is something very few people ever discover.” How does that idea relate to the events in the story? What did it mean to you at the beginning? Did it have more meaning to you after you read the story?

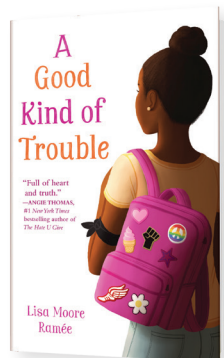
Extension Activities

Who Am I... and Who Are You? Casey creates a quiz for his parents to find out how much they really know about him. Casey tells Amelia what one of his questions is—what else do you think he put in his quiz? Create a quiz for your family or friends about yourself. What questions would you ask that you want them to be able to answer? What questions would you ask to learn more about their thoughts and feelings?



Away from Home. Amelia thinks of the clay studio as her “second home.” What does that phrase mean to you? What makes a place feel like another “home” to a person? Are there places in your life that you could call a “second home”? Write a short paragraph describing such a place and what makes it feel comfortable and familiar to you.





A Good Kind of Trouble

by Lisa Moore Ramée

★ “A timely, funny, and unforgettable debut.”
—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

Grades 3–7

Themes: Friendship, Black Lives Matter, Fitting In, Social Justice

About the Book

Twelve-year-old Shayla is allergic to trouble. All she wants to do is to follow the rules. But in junior high, it's like all the rules have changed. Now she's suddenly questioning who her best friends are and some people at school are saying she's not black enough. Wait, *what?*

Shay's sister, Hana, is involved in Black Lives Matter, but Shay doesn't think that's for her. After experiencing a powerful protest, though, Shay decides some rules are worth breaking. She starts wearing an armband to school in support of the Black Lives movement. Soon everyone is taking sides, and she is given an ultimatum. Shay is scared to do the wrong thing (and even more scared to do the right thing), but if she doesn't face her fear, she'll be forever tripping over the next hurdle.

Discussion Questions

- In the opening chapter, Shayla states, “I’m allergic to trouble. It makes my hands itch.” What does this declaration say about Shayla’s character (p. 1)?
- Describe Shalya’s best friends. Why do they call themselves the “United Nations” (pp. 6–9)?
- Frustrated with her English teacher Ms. Jacobs, Shayla slumps in her chair and says, “I hate when a teacher assumes that just because I’m black, I’ll know all about slavery and civil rights and stuff like that. I’m the only black student in the class, so I know everyone’s staring at me, trying to see if I have bat wings or hairy armpits. Like being black is a whole different species” (p. 22). How do you think this type of attention affects Shayla?
- Why did Shayla want to “abolish” the conversation about Emerson (p. 24)?
- Julia plays basketball in an all-Asian league. Shayla was upset that she couldn’t join the league, and her father said that this league was “about lifting up the kids who played in the league” (p. 33). Discuss the value of representation in this space of the basketball arena and in other areas.
- Shayla’s mother takes a different route home due to the protesting that is happening because of the trial. What does Shayla’s mom mean when she says, “People are acting like they already know what the verdict’s going to be” (p. 40)? Describe the conversation that Shayla and her mother have on the way home from school. Why does her mother stay silent at the end of this chapter?
- Shayla talks with her mother about the dynamics of friendships. Her mom reminds her, “Just make sure you’re open to all sorts of people... You may find as you get older that there’s something...comfortable, or I don’t know, comforting, in having friends who can relate to things you might be going through” (p. 121). What do you think her mom is trying to tell her about growing up?
- Bernard, Shayla’s lab partner and track teammate, is constantly reprimanded and picked on in class by Mr. Levy. Later, he is falsely accused of trying to throw Alex in the trash can. Why is Bernard assumed guilty? Why does Shayla change her view of him? In what way does the narrative surrounding Bernard echo the themes of the story?
- How did Shayla’s family and community react after the verdict was announced (p. 260)? Do you agree with the verdict? Why or why not?
- With a shrug, Bernard tells Shayla, “Some stuff it’s okay to get in trouble for” (p. 319). Reflect on this statement.



Extension Activities

Eyeball Journals. Create an “eyeball journal” like Shayla and her classmates did (p. 22). What do you notice in your community? School? The news? Talk in small groups about how these circumstances in your community impact the way you view the world.

Sports & Social Justice. Sports figures have been at the forefront of social justice. The story mentions NFL football player Colin Kaepernick; sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos; boxer Muhammad Ali; and other athletes who have protested police brutality, racism, and other injustices. Group students and have them choose one of these figures to research and prepare a presentation on.



RIGHT AS RAIN

by Lindsey Stoddard

★ “Honest, gut-wrenching, and hopeful.”
—School Library Journal (starred review)

Grades 3–7

Themes: Grief, Guilt, Family Dynamics, Bullying, Fitting In

About the Book

It's been almost a year since Rain's brother Guthrie died, and her parents still don't know it was all Rain's fault. In fact, no one does—Rain buried her secret deep, no matter how heavy it weighs on her heart. So when her mom suggests moving the family from Vermont to New York City, Rain agrees. But life in the big city is different. She's never seen so many people in one place—or felt more like an outsider. With her parents fighting more than ever and the anniversary of Guthrie's death approaching, Rain is determined to keep her big secret close to her heart. But even she knows that when you bury things deep, they grow up twice as tall.

Discussion Questions

- Why do Rain and her parents move to New York City? How does Rain feel about it, and why? Compare and contrast her life in Vermont with her life in New York
- Describe each of Rain's parents and how they are dealing with what happened to Guthrie. What has happened to the parents' relationship with each other? How does Rain try to fix it and why does she blame herself?
- Describe Frankie's personality including her strengths. Why is she unfriendly to Rain at first? What causes them to grow closer? Explain who Reggie is and why she's important to the story.
- How does Amelia make Rain feel welcome at school? What kind of person is she? How does stuttering affect her and how does she deal with it? Why does she agree to run in the relay? Discuss whether it was a good decision for her, and why or why not.
- Why does running matter so much to Rain? How does she feel when she runs? What role does running play in the plot? Talk about the positive effects on her of participating on the track team.
- Rain reads *The One and Only Ivan* by Katherine Applegate. Why does the book appeal to her so strongly? When does she feel like a “one and only” and when does that feeling go away? How does reading *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander help her?
- Although Rain's very comfortable with numbers, at first, she's uncomfortable writing poetry. Why do you think that's the case? Why does it change? How does poetry become important to her?
- The community service requirement leads Rain to the church and to Ms. Dacie's. Who does she meet and what does she do at each place? Explain how Rain and the others set about trying to save Ms. Dacie's.
- We find out slowly what happened to Guthrie, and Rain's role in it. Explain what happened and why she feels guilty. How does she end up feeling better about it? Discuss why the author chose to reveal that part of the story slowly.
- The phrase “Change is hard” comes up several times throughout the novel. Relate this observation to different characters and how it's true for them. Talk about what Rain learns about change throughout the novel, citing specific examples.

Extension Activities

Appealing to the Senses. The author brings Vermont and especially New York City to life with vivid descriptions of sights, sounds, smells, and even tastes. Have each student identify words throughout the book that convey the setting and consider how the words evoke their senses. Then, have students write a few paragraphs that vividly convey a place in their own life.

Welcome! Rain is struck by the welcome sign on Ms. Dacie's door. Ask students to think about how the symbols and words on the sign create a welcoming environment. Then students should work in pairs to create a Welcome sign for their classroom or another room in the school such as the library or school office. When they've completed their signs, have them explain their choices to the class.

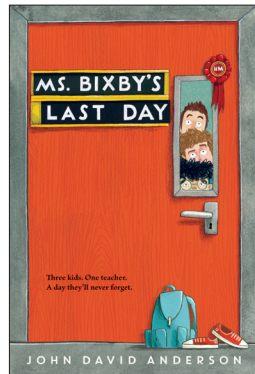


More Great Books

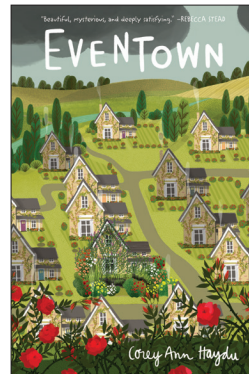
to Help Students Navigate the Challenges of Middle School



Posted
John David Anderson



Ms. Bixby's Last Day
John David Anderson



Eventown
Corey Ann Haydu



The Lost Girl
Anne Ursu



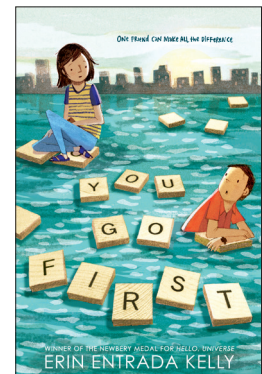
Ungifted
Gordon Korman



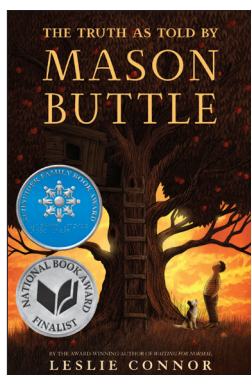
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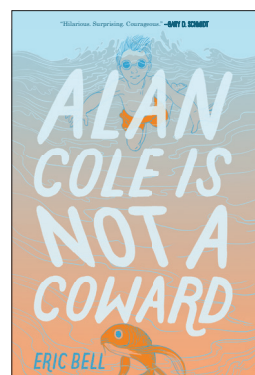
Hello, Universe
Erin Entrada Kelly



You Go First
Erin Entrada Kelly



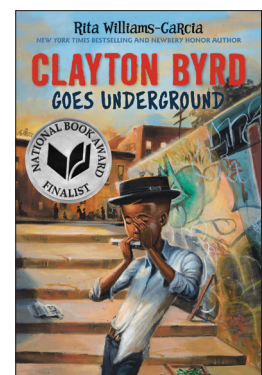
The Truth as Told by Mason Buttle
Leslie Connor



Alan Cole is Not a Coward
Eric Bell



Just Like Jackie
Lindsey Stoddard



Clayton Byrd Goes Underground
Rita Williams-Garcia

