

About the Author

John David Anderson is the author of many books for young readers, including *Sidekicked*, *Minion*, and *The Dungeoneers*. His book *Ms. Bixby's Last Day* was a *New York Times* Notable Book, an Indiebound Indie Next List Top 10 selection, and an ALA Notable Book, in addition to appearing on dozens of best-of-the-year lists. He enjoys hiking (preferably downhill), playing the ukulele (as long as it's the same four chords), and making stuff up. He is also a dedicated root beer connoisseur and chocolate fiend, and lives with his wife, two kids, and perpetually whiny cat in Indianapolis, Indiana. You can visit him online at www.johndavidanderson.org.

Q&A With John David Anderson

Did you want to be a writer even as a kid?

I don't think so. But I did want to be a storyteller. I knew that much. It was a compulsion, spinning yarns. I often retreated into the elaborate fantasy worlds inside my head, playing out variations on the stories I'd fallen in love with on the page or the big screen, picturing myself as the sword-wielding, laser-blasting, smart-mouthed protagonist. And I was always creative. I just wasn't sure what my medium would be (I sort of fancied myself a filmmaker in my teens). It wasn't until college, really, that I fell in love with writing. Then I was hooked.

Is it hard being a writer?

It's hard being a good writer. I imagine it's almost impossible being a great one—I wouldn't know. I'm not there yet. But it's a challenge I welcome. Solving the puzzle of a plot. Unpacking the personality of a new character. Translating the picture in my head into words on the page. It takes time. Effort. Creativity. Stamina. Caffeine. But it's always worth it.

Do you have to read a lot?

I want to read more than I do. I probably read about a hundred books a year. That includes some really short ones and some really long ones. You can't be a good writer without also being an avid reader. It's kind of a horse/cart thing.

What's the worst part about being a writer?

The constant crippling fear that I'm not good enough.

What's the best part about being a writer?

Oh man. There are so many fantastic things about being a writer. Going to work in my PJs. Visiting with young readers at schools or over Skype. Signing books (yep—I actually love that part). The best part still has to be that first day on a new novel, though. When I boot up the laptop and stare at the blank screen for a few seconds, fingers hovering over the keys. And then I get that first sentence down and it's a rush. Pure joy. In that moment absolutely anything is possible. I feel like a demigod. If I'm being honest, it's all a little downhill from there.

Do you ever get writer's block?

I don't like to call it writer's block. I like to think of it as a knot. You get to a place that's tangled is all, and it takes a little more time to tease it out. You ever have one of those knots that you have to pick at and pick at, but once you get the first little bit loose the rest comes easy? I've never had a knot that I couldn't untie, though some I've had to pick at a lot longer than others.

Where do you get your ideas?

From everywhere. Books. Movies. Plays. Pictures. Dreams. Friends. Observations. Eavesdropped conversations. Some of them come to me while I'm driving, running, sleeping. In the bathroom. Waiting in line for a milk shake. Sitting on a park bench. Staring at the cat. Thousands of ideas. Millions of them. We all have them. It's just that some of us are slightly more adept (or better trained) to catch them as they are flittering by and trap them in a jar for later inspection.

How long does it take you to write a book?

Six to eight weeks. Maybe ten. That will get you 75,000 words, approximately 30,000 of which will actually find their way into the finished manuscript. The other 40K will be replaced with even better words in that months-long agonizing exercise in mental and emotional torture we call "revision." All total it takes about two years to get a story from first sentence to sitting on a shelf at a bookstore near you. At least for me, anyway.

Do you have any advice for young writers who someday would like to get published?

You'll never be perfect. Don't worry about it. Practice makes "good enough." Learn your craft. Try new things. Share your work. Don't get so discouraged that you quit, just discouraged enough that you get ticked off and more determined to prove everybody wrong. Practice your book award acceptance speech in the shower—it will make you feel better. Find the perfect place to write. Marry somebody with good health insurance. Love writing more than anything else you could possibly do.

Discussion questions and activities in this guide can be aligned the following Common Core State Standards Correlations:
RL.4-7.1, RL.4-7.2, RL.4-7.3, RL.4-7.4, RL.4-7.6, W.4-7.2, W.4-7.7, SL.4-7.1, SL.4-7.6

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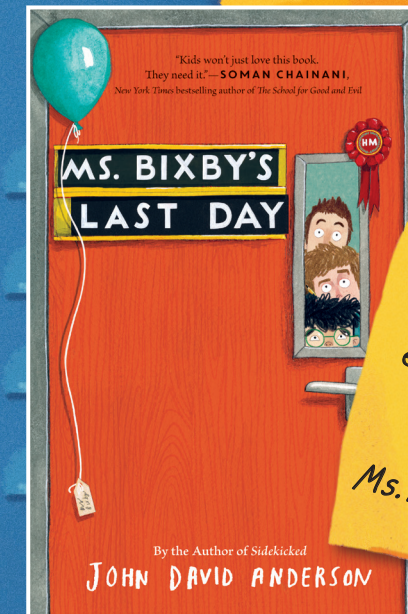
WALDEN POND PRESS
An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

HarperCollins
PUBLISHERS
200

Discussion guide written by Kathleen Odean, librarian, author, and Common Core workshop presenter.

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JOHN DAVID ANDERSON TEACHING GUIDE



Includes discussion questions and extension activities for teaching *Posted* and *Ms. Bixby's Last Day!*

POSTED TEACHING GUIDE



Grades 3-7

About the Book

The Sticky Notes War at Branton Middle School starts small. Shortly after cell phones are banned, notes begin appearing on school lockers. Some of the messages are friendly but many are not. Eighth-grader Frost and his group of misfit friends become a target of bullies, especially after the four boys reluctantly let an unconventional new girl hang out with them. Can the boys' friendship survive someone new in their group? Can the kids at Branton survive the cruel notes? Life in middle school can be harsh but, as Frost and his friends find out, it can have moments of courage and solidarity that keep their hope alive.

Discussion Questions

1. Frost's mother says, "You find your people and you protect each other from the wolves" (p. 249). How well do Frost, Bench, Deedee, and Wolf fit this description? How does their group change in the course of the book? What other tribes exist at the school? Relate the idea of friend groups to your own experience of school life.
2. Explain the nicknames that Frost and his initial group of friends have, where they came from, and why they matter. What does each nickname tell you about the boy? Discuss the unwanted nickname Rose gets and how she reacts to it.
3. Describe Rose and her personality. How do most kids respond to her? Discuss the impact she has on Frost and his crew. Why does Wolf ask her to lunch the second time? Why do you think Rose and Wolf become friends so quickly?
4. Find examples of how Frost compares middle school to a war zone and specifically how he describes the use of sticky notes as a war. In what ways do the comparisons ring true? In what ways are the school and the sticky note exchanges different from war?
5. What effect does catching the football and making a touchdown have on Bench's life? When Bench and Frost are talking about why Bench changed lunch tables, Bench says, "It's not even *about* you!" (p. 331). What does he mean? Discuss how Frost has misunderstood Bench.
6. First Evan Smalls rides the Gauntlet, and then Rose and Cameron do. Describe the Gauntlet and how the kids at the middle school use it, including Evan. Why does Rose ride it? What's her bet with Cameron? Relate her ride to the "trial by combat" that Deedee mentions (p. 281).
7. Discuss the meanings of the words "I'm sorry" that Rose makes Cameron wear, checking a dictionary for definitions of "sorry." Why does Frost say the note is perfect?
8. What is the significance of the phrase "Total Roman" on Wolf's locker? Who wrote them there, and why? Talk about why Wolf, after he sees the locker, goes home and destroys his models.
9. After the bathroom bullying incident, Rose says to Frost that "telling the principal won't work" (p. 271). Why does she believe that? After the words appear on Wolf's locker, both Bench and Frost do tell the principal. Why do you think they decided to do so? What were the consequences, and was it a good decision?
10. In the end, Wolf decides to go to another school. Why does he make that choice? How does Frost feel about it? Give reasons that it might or might not be a good move for Wolf.
11. "Words are ghosts that can haunt us forever," reads a sticky note on Jason's locker (p. 340). Who put it there, and why? What does it mean? Do you agree? Relate the quote to the fact that Wolf's parents yell at, and verbally fight with, each other. Compare Wolf's parents and how they use words to Frost's parents. How is each boy affected by his parents' use of words?
12. The novel uses imagery and comparisons associated with heroes and knights. For example, Frost describes the sticky notes that other students put on Wolf's newly painted locker as "overlapping like links of chain-mail armor" (p. 339). Discuss that simile and other similar references, and why the author chose them.

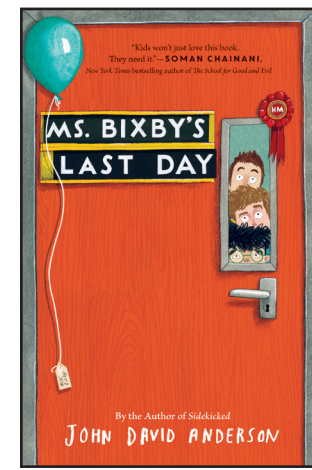
Extension Activities

KERNELS OF WISDOM Mr. Sword defines an aphorism as "a little kernel of wisdom wrapped up in a single sentence" (p. 154). He has students write original aphorisms. Have your students do the same, but have them also collect aphorisms from friends and family. Create a board for posting the aphorisms.

STANDING TOGETHER Adults as well as kids can be bullied. Have your class watch a *New York Times* video of a news anchor who received a mean-spirited email about her weight. Have the class discuss her message: "do not let your self-worth be defined by bullies. Students should relate her experience to Wolf's and discuss how students can help others who are being bullied. (www.thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/03/video-tv-anchor-takes-on-viewer-who-complains-about-her-weight/)

FROST QUOTING FROST The narrative mentions several poems by Robert Frost, including "The Road Not Taken," "Fire and Ice," and "Mending Wall." Have students choose one of the poems and write an essay relating it to the book. The essay should include where the poem is quoted in the story and why.

CHARACTER CARDS Have each student create a trading card about one of the book's characters using the "Trading Card Creator" interactive at www.readwritethink.org. Students can insert a picture they've drawn of the character and print out the card to share with others.



Grades 3-7

MS. BIXBY'S LAST DAY

TEACHING GUIDE

About the Book

As teachers go, Ms. Bixby is one of the Good Ones. She sees something special in kids whose parents barely see them at all. So when Ms. Bixby takes medical leave for the rest of the year, three of her sixth graders—Topher, Steve, and Brand—plan the perfect way to say thanks. But their ambitious plan turns into a day-long journey of overcoming obstacles, drawing on their courage and strengths. The friends exchange stories along the way about what Ms. Bixby means to them. With distinct voices, the boys alternate narrating chapters in this funny, inspiring, and heartbreaking tribute to teachers who change lives.

Discussion Questions

1. In the first chapter, Topher identifies six categories of teachers, including those "we simply call the Good Ones" (p. 7). Talk about his six definitions and relate the definition of "Good One" to Ms. Bixby's words and actions throughout the novel. What makes her special to each boy? Would you want her for your teacher, and why?
2. "You have to slay the dragon," according to Topher (p. 208). How does that observation and the paragraph that follows it relate to the story and the boys' mission? Give some other examples of Topher's vivid imagination. Discuss how his imagination enriches the story.
3. Steve's parents loom large in his life. Describe Steve's relationship with his parents and the problems it causes him. What is Ms. Bixby's interaction with Steve's father? How does it help Steve?
4. Steve reflects, "Dad says there are tigers and there are sheep. My sister is a tiger. I can only assume I'm a sheep. Not compatible" (p. 134). To what extent do his sister's actions in the story confirm this view? How do they contradict the view? Explain Topher's beliefs about Christina. Do his beliefs change?
5. Describe Brand's personality, his home situation, his relationship with his father, and how Ms. Bixby helps Brand. Why do Brand and Ms. Bixby keep Ms. Bixby's help a secret? Why do you think Brand's father makes a major change at the end of the story?
6. The three boys have to work as a team to accomplish their mission to visit Ms. Bixby. How are the three of them alike and how are they different? What strengths does each of them bring to the journey?
7. Why do you think the author uses three first-person narratives to tell the story? Why not use only one? What tense are the voices, and what effect does that have? Give examples of the ways that the three voices are distinct.
8. Why does the novel, which is very serious in parts, open with the scene about Rebecca and cooties? What does it reveal about the boys and about Ms. Bixby? What other elements in the book add humor?
9. Flashbacks supply information that readers need to understand each boy. Find a flashback in each of the boy's narratives and discuss how it's important in helping you understand that boy and his personality.
10. Why is the book's epigraph from *The Hobbit*, and how does the epigraph relate to the novel? What role does the book *The Hobbit* play in the story? Why does it matter so much to the boys? If you're familiar with *The Hobbit*, relate its plot to that of *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*.
11. Discuss the last chapter and your emotional reaction to it. Why do you think Brand narrates that chapter? What parts of the chapter provide hope? Analyze the epilogue, why Topher narrates it, and how it relates to the rest of the novel.
12. One of Ms. Bixby's favorite quotes is: "Courage is not a man with a gun in his hand. It's knowing you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what" (p. 296). Talk about the different ways that the quote applies to characters in the story, pointing to specific actions and attitudes.

Extension Activities

HERO'S JOURNEY Topher makes several observations that link their adventure to a classic hero's journey. Have students visit www.readwritethink.org to use "The Hero's Journey" interactive tool. Students will choose one of the characters as hero, click on the icons to learn more about the pattern, and enter information. Have students print out their final product and share it with the class.

FRAWESOME! Topher calls Brand "Shakespeare" because Brand combines words to make new ones. For example, "tank" plus "flunk" becomes "tunk." As students read, have them jot down words coined by Brand and even Topher. Have students use the internet to find words coined by Shakespeare and share them with the class. Finally, students can work in pairs to invent ten new words by combining two words together, and post their neologisms on a bulletin board.

BIXBYISMS Ms. Bixby likes quotes that she calls affirmations and the boys call Bixbyisms. She also puts writing prompts on the board for students to respond to. As a class, compile a list of the affirmations and writing prompts. Have students choose a topic from the list and compose a short essay based on it, spending "fifteen or twenty minutes" as Ms. Bixby's class does (p. 44).

"STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN" At the picnic, Steve sings part of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven." Hand out copies of the lyrics and play the song for the class. Have students meet in small groups and talk about how the song's lyrics and mood connect to the novel, coming up with at least five connections. A member of the group will report those results to the whole class.