

## **Rogue Librarians, Episode 19**

### **New Kid: Interview with Jerry Craft**

Welcome to a special episode of Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books. We are your hosts, Marian, Dorothy, Alanna, and we are the Rogue Librarians. We would love for you to participate in our discussion. Please visit [theroguelibrarians.com](http://theroguelibrarians.com) or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod or on Twitter @RLibrarians. Additionally, if you would, if you join our Patreon at [patreon.com/roguelibrarians](https://patreon.com/roguelibrarians), you can hear us discuss some other graphic novels that we love.

Today, we are thrilled to share our interview with Jerry Craft, the number one *New York Times* best-selling author-illustrator of *New Kid*, *Class Act*, and *School Trip*. *New Kid* is the only graphic novel to win the John Newbery Medal, and it is the only book in history to win the Newbery Medal, the Kirkus Prize for Young Readers Literature, and the Coretta Scott King Author award. Jerry received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the School of Visual Arts and now lives in Orlando, Florida. Although *New Kid* is incredibly popular, has won several awards, and has been translated into 13 languages, some school districts began challenging the book in 2020 for its discussions of race and racism. It has been accused of promoting critical race theory and has been challenged or banned in states like Texas, Pennsylvania, and Florida.

Jerry Craft is one of my favorite authors, so I'm so excited that we were able to discuss *New Kid*, *Class Act*, and *School Trip* with him. It was so much fun to get to hear his views on the books and to find out what he did behind the scenes. And one of my favorite things that I learned was that he used kids' input to decide how to do things with the different characters in the 2nd and 3rd books. So for example, kids wanted to find out more about Maury. So he did a lot more with Maury in *School Trip*, and the fact that kids requested having a Muslim girl in the books or um other characters they hadn't seen yet. And I just loved that he listened to what kids thought and incorporated them into his books. What about the two of you? What did you think?

Oh, I loved the fact that he is listening to the readers. I mean, I think that's part of what makes him so likable and so popular is that he gets kids. Um He was a kid, he has, he's raised two kids. Um I really feel like any author who is in touch with children will inevitably be successful. Um and I just, I think that's so cool. I, I love that. Hm.

I loved finding out that, um, girl Alex has a whole fan base. I thought that was so fun. Uh, the characters that, you know, he really hadn't thought that much about and how much people love them. So that, that was fantastic.

Yeah. II, I definitely love that and I, I mean, we felt the same way when we talked about having read the books, we talked about how, you know, there are characters that we'd like to know more about too that, you know, if he kept writing more books, um, more companion books or more books in the series, it would be really fun to learn about more of the characters that, um, that are still a little bit, um, background characters. So everybody has a different interest and, um, in different characters for one reason or another we all have someone that we identify with, I suppose.

Mhm. And I just love it. It's like a dream for me to get to talk to authors and be the one doing the interviews. It, you know, I spent whole days at book festivals listening to authors speak. So it's just such a joy to get to be the one doing it.

Oh, I agree. Absolutely. And I, I just think about, um, you know, when we did this interview with Jerry, you know, we initially gave it an hour and as with most of our interviews. We went over that hour and everyone was perfectly ok with it, including Jerry. Um But more than that, once we ended the interview, I felt like we had all reached this friendship level almost. It was just so great and we continued on talking to him. It was like nobody wanted to get off the call. It was just such an amazing experience.

He was so generous with his time and so thoughtful in his responses.

Extremely. Yeah. II, I love Jerry Craft. I'd love to, I'd love to hang out with him. Um And just, you know, I just, I don't know, there's something just so special about people like Jerry. And um yeah, II, I feel very privileged to be in this position.

Me too. So, without further ado, here's our interview with Jerry Craft.

Jerry, thank you so much for joining us on Rogue Librarians.

Thank you, my pleasure.

We are huge fans of your books, and we've been so excited to talk with you. Congratulations on releasing *School Trip* in April.

Oh, it is. Um It's been great. The response so far has been amazing. I'm exhausted, but I've been loving every minute of it.

Uh That's wonderful. We loved *School Trip* too. Uh especially because I think all three of us have been to Paris. Is that right?

Definitely. I have, I have, it's been a while.

Uh I went there on my first um school trip in high school and I absolutely loved it. So it was so much fun to relive it through the story of your book.

Can I say what a great beginning? This is because the only negative feedback that I got is like, well, what kids go to, what kids actually get to go to Paris on a school trip and you start out by saying that you're one of them. So yeah, that's amazing. Thank you.

Well, Jerry, I also went on a school trip to France when I was in high school. So there's two of us. Yes.

Ok. That's cool.

And it was, it was an amazing experience for me too because um I, I went with my French class. It was the first time I actually got to speak French to French people other than my French teachers. And uh it was amazing. It was eye opening and I loved that. One of your messages is that all students should be able to experience something like that.

Yeah. You know, it just really was something like when I was trying to figure out what could be the finale of the New Kid saga. You know, I knew I had to go out with a bang and I knew that I needed to have all the same characters that you've come to hopefully love. Um But I needed to come up with something that was different. So I figured if I changed the setting, I could keep the same characters because it's very difficult to keep doing uh companion books because as much

as people like to jump on the bandwagon, they also like to jump off, you know. So I was very, I was very nervous that, you know, anyone would say, oh, well, it's more of the same or, you know, I like New Kid and then he should have stopped there or, you know what I mean?

Yeah, we kind of have this slated for later down uh later in the conversation. But, um, this is a great opportunity to bring it up. Uh We noticed how the books go, um, sort of, they get broader with each book. So you go from just inside the school, mostly to various different people's lives outside of the school and then you've taken them out of the country. So it's just, it's a natural progression.

Yeah. And, and there's a lot of thought behind that because like I said, it's, it's very nerve-wracking to put your work out in front of the world, you know, and even though they tell me not to, I still read all my Goodreads reviews and, and NetGalley, and they can occasionally be pretty brutal. So I knew that I had to really, uh make this book the best in my opinion.

And, uh, so, ok, we can talk about that when you're ready.

All right. So, uh, but a quick question, is this the last book in the series?

Yeah, as of now it is. Um, I'm already starting my brand new three book series, which unfortunately, I can't, I can't mention anything about it. But, yeah, it is a new series, new characters, new everything. Um, you know, I think initially HarperCollins, my publisher, was a little nervous about what they call, like, you know, story fatigue or character fatigue, um, that they didn't want it to be where you got sick of the characters. And, like, yeah, he really should have stopped at three.

Have they ever seen kids read manga?

Oh, I know. I know.

And they read 20-30 books.

I know. Yeah. And, and there's a, uh, a couple of series. I don't know if you've heard of them. One is about some kid who's wimpy, you know? And the other is this man that's half man, half

dog. I don't remember the name. Um, those are still pretty popular and they've got like, you know, 72 books in this series.

Right. Well, I, I personally love your characters and we would continue to read as many books as you want to publish in the series.

So, and if you need any ideas for storylines or characters to flush, flesh out a little bit more, we could tell you our opinions too.

Ok. Well, there you go. I, I think we're a team now, you know, like, see I'm of the opinion that if you love characters. Um You can just hang out with them for the day, like something uh extraordinary doesn't have to happen every book. But I know that sometimes some readers need for something to happen. Like, even with New Kid, initially, one of the big things was, um nothing happens and I'm like, nothing happens. But that I think that's because in a lot of ways, um especially with African American characters, there's always some catastrophic event that happens that sets the tone of the book, you know, and for me to have this book, um, you know, it, uh, African American character that goes back and forth to different worlds. Um, there was nothing that, that earth shattering moment, you know, and it's so funny because somebody, uh, I talked to read School Trip recently, I think it was the first book in that they had read of mine and they said they read the first couple of chapters and then skipped to the back of the book to make sure that everyone was ok. You know what I mean? Um, because there really is a thing, you know, making sure that, you know, right before they go to Paris that, you know, mom doesn't, you know, something horrific happened or dead, you know what I mean? And, um, so I would do books where it was just them going out for pizza and doing this and doing that. But again, we're so trained that something has to happen. And the last thing I would want to do is have it so crazy where it's like, oh, now they go into space and now they, you know, uh, or out of today's headlines, you know, Jordan Banks goes to Florida to, you know, and, um, so, yeah, I have to think about that a lot and I, I feel like, you know, the people who get me, I could really have Jordan and Alexandra go for a walk in Central Park and eat ice cream, you know, and just really have a conversation and open up and, you know, like things would happen. But again, not, oh, my goodness, it's Godzilla in the middle of Central Park. Sure. Yeah. Yeah. Well, you know, it's those conversations that they're having in the books that I think are so important and that's, that's my goal. But I also know that not everyone is like that. So, you know, I'll at least

take a break for a little while and see if I come back to that. But as of now, you know, I signed a three book deal and those three books are, you know, out into the world as they say, got it.

Well, uh thank you for letting us know about that and we're excited to see your next series. Yes. Um, we want to talk about these books in a lot more detail, but we wanted to ask you a few questions about your background first. Would you mind telling us what was one of the most influential books that you read when you were growing up and why it was influential?

Um I would say the most, the book where I saw myself where I looked again as this young kid from Harlem um looked and it was a life like mine and with a loving family and friends and happy and again, not, did not have that cataclysmic thing. That book for me never existed. And so the book that was the most uh inspiring is a book that I never actually saw. Well, um so if, if I have to have to pick a book, um in 11th or 12th grade, I read Great Expectations by Charles Dickens. And that was the first like 400 page book that I actually finished and enjoyed. And I didn't think that I could ever do either with a book that size. I did not think I could finish one. I did not think it could hold my attention and I did not think that I could enjoy it. And I think a lot of it had to do with, at least it was a kid and he did actually have great expectations and the people around him expected him to do stuff and laid that groundwork where again, most books, you know, when you're looking for books where the kids look like you. Unfortunately, most of them were enslaved or civil rights struggle or police or something.

Um, you know, it really, it really speaks to, um, I think privilege that a lot of the white kids seek out books where they're orphans and they're going on these grand adventures and they're in lots of danger. Um, because they are secure when they're life at home, they don't have to feel like those things are too dangerous.

No. Absolutely. Like all the, all the shows on cable, it's like, ok, you know, take me out of my secure job and then drop me off in the jungle where, and take away all my clothes and food and let me struggle. I'm like, there are people who struggle every day, you know, like trade with one of them and then let them get your nice job and your nice apartment overlooking Central Park West. But right. Oh, absolutely. But when you have that and it's a non-issue then, yeah, that's the fantasy. And, but one of the things with New Kid that is so surprising was that so many people thought that it was groundbreaking and it was like, it's just a kid going to private school, you know, like, I mean, I appreciate it and I, I, you know, accept every accolade given to me, but

at the end of the day, it really shouldn't have been groundbreaking. But because so many of the books, like I said with, with the big three or history and misery, it just, um it just stood out, you know, and so Great Expectations, again, at least it was a kid and he had expectations and most kids who look like me didn't expect to live to the end of the book, you know, or, you know. And so that was one that I also realized that if I could identify with a kid named Pip from England, then some kid from England could one day identify with a character that I wrote if I made the story compelling enough.

Yeah, for sure. Um Well, you've probably been asked this question a number of times. But um for our listeners, we'd really love for you to tell us a little bit about how you, how did you become an author and illustrator when you, you know, just self described as someone who grew up not enjoying reading at all.

So I always love to draw and I needed stuff to draw. So I had to write my own comics. And I always say that if I had a friend in school who was a writer, I may have relied on them to write and then I would have pigeonholed myself as just an illustrator. But since I needed stuff to draw, then I used to make up stories. So I, I always loved to make up stories. I just didn't like to read other people's stories, you know. Uh Now if they had audio books back in the day, I probably would have loved those.

Yeah, I raised my kids on those and even though one of them has trouble reading, physically difficult to, you know, process absolutely loves books.

Right. So, yeah, it's a great tool.

Right. So, if I had, if I had that then that would have opened my eyes and ears more. Um, but so I always made comic books and comic strips and then, uh, there was a company, well, still is called Andrews McMeel. And, uh, when I worked at King Features syndicate, we did uh comic strips. So Beetle Bailey and Blondie and Hagar the Horrible. And whenever a comic strip would, you know, be around for a year or two, they would release a uh compilation of the comic strips. So, you know, like, um The Far Side and Calvin and Hobbs. So I wanted one of those with my comic strip because I didn't see that with Black comic strips at all. You know, most of my drive has always been to make something that I didn't see. Like if it had existed, then I wouldn't have felt so compelled to create it. But I was like, look, where is it? So I did a comic strip called

Mama's Boyz. And um it was syndicated weekly by King Features, but they, you know, wanted no part in doing the book. So I went to the library because I could read, I just didn't like it. So reading to me was for um information. It was not for enjoyment until I was a grown man with kids of my own um and reading to them, but it was information gathering because whenever my teachers in 7th and 8th grade source reading comic books, they would take them from us like we were doing something illegal. So in my 12-year-old brain that meant that reading fun stuff was illegal. That to be a real reader, you had to suffer and you had to read William Faulkner and not understand it and then try to write a paper on it. So, um I went to the library, I got a book on how to self publish. And in 1997 I self published my very first book, Mama's Boyz: As American As Sweet Potato Pie. It was a maybe 96 page collection of my comic strips. And then a few years later, I did a second one. Mama's Boyz: Home Schoolin' and then I did the third Mama's Boys: The Big Picture and then I would go around to sell it, you know, I book fairs and, you know, outings and things like that and, but it still wasn't for kids because, you know, I was an adult that like comic strips and comic strips used to be really pretty popular. Back in the day, the people would buy the Sunday newspaper for the funnies and the sports section. Right. Right. The news was the third thing. And so I thought that this is for adults like me who like comic strips. And I remember going to a book fair and the guy comes up with his, like, 10 year old son and says, hey, you know, is this for kids? And I thought about it and I was like, well, I mean, I guess he could, like, there's nothing bad. Like I've never, you know, I've never cursed or, you know, had violence or drugs or anything in my books. And I said, yeah, I guess he could read it and he took it and sat down in the corner of the gymnasium and read the whole thing laughing hysterically. And I was like, oh, and then a couple of minutes later someone else comes up and says, oh, is this a kid's book? I'm like, yes, it is. So that's how I became a children's book author.

Yeah, that's a great story. Yeah.

Most of my stuff has been kind of backed into, you know, backed into corners and I look behind me and there's a door and I'm like, oh, what happens if I go through here? And, um, so then other people started seeing my self-published books, other authors and they couldn't get published either and then asked me for help. So I started my own publishing company and over about a 20 year span I published about 30 uh, picture books and early chapter books and just all kinds of stuff.

And is it still, do you still run it?

Well, I don't, because I don't have time anymore, but two of my self published books are still out there where you can get copies of. One is called *The Offenders Saving The World While Serving Detention*. And that's uh five middle grade kids who kind of bullies up their school, they get zapped, they get superpowers, but instead of looking cool like Spiderman or Wolverine or Wonder Woman, they end up looking like the kids who they pick on. So one kid gains like fifty pounds, one becomes very, very tiny and one you know, like that kind of thing. And the other is called uh *Mama's Boyz: In Living Color*. Um But um a lot of the um the authors that I did the books for are still selling their books that I illustrated and published. So there's one called uh *What's Below Your Tummy Tum*, which teaches kids, you know, gives them the language to be safe. Um And then *Baby Boy, What Will You Be?* And *Hillary's Big Business Adventure*. So there, there's quite a few of them that are still out there. Uh My friend David Miller still sells *Khalil's Way* and that was the first chapter book that I ever helped out with and published.

Awesome. You wanna give us an introduction to uh the books uh the to just the trilogy, maybe just the elevator pitch.

Oh, sure. Um So *New Kid* which came out in 2019, it came out um February 5th 2019. Loosely based on my life and my two sons lives of being um you know, some of the few kids of color in a prestigious private school. So it centers around Jordan Banks and a lot was my life in the sense of always being one of the youngest and smallest kids in my class. The house where Jordan Banks lives is the house where I grew up. So I grew up in the brownstone in Washington Heights. And every day, um you know, I always loved to draw. My mom and dad did not want me to be an artist because they had only heard the term starving artist. Um So they, instead of letting me go to art school, they sent me to a private school in Riverdale. So each day I would commute back and forth, uh you know, to two completely different planets and now there's maybe 10 kids of color out of a 9th grade class of maybe 100 and 10 kids. So it really was my first time dealing with issues such as race and class. So I made a book that is Jordan uh dealing with those for the first time. So that's his seventh grade. Uh *Class Act* came out in October of 2020 and that is the eighth grade year also at the same school, which is Riverdale Academy Day school. And that focuses more on Jordan's two friends, Drew and Liam. And you know, realizing that, although they are friends, would this friendship last? Because again, they're in two completely different worlds and what would it take to cement a relationship that could survive some of their differences? And then in *School Trip*, uh it is the end of their eighth grade year and

the class goes to Paris for a week. And I did this one as more of an ensemble where I even promoted some of the or highlighted some of the secondary characters because kids were asking for them, which I was surprised and I just wanted it to be where everyone got a chance to shine. And yeah, that came out April fourth of this year, 2023.

Fantastic. I think, I think with School Trip, I mean, the, the fact that you mentioned it as an ensemble, it's so cool because um when you create characters and we talked about this at the beginning and you, and you love the characters that you read enough that you want to read three books with the same characters. You know, you never know which character a reader is going to identify with. And I think that's part of, you know, the beauty of it is that, you know, you identify with Jordan Banks, but you know, someone else is identifying with Alexandra.

Oh, my goodness. I get, I, I read a review last night and I could tell that whoever was writing it was probably crying because she was like, and I'm so proud of Alexandra who with the weird puppet girl to blah, blah, blah, like she has um not necessarily the biggest fans but probably the most intense loyal fans. Um And I'm just so glad to be able to give that to all of the Alexandras in the world. I, I think that one of the reasons that my book, um my books are popular is I don't, I don't really let bad things happen to good people in my books, you know. So that's why if you read uh School Trip when he has that whole thing with Charlie Brown that he just hated the fact that Charlie Brown never won. You know, so if there's anything that's gonna happen in my books that's over the top, you know, it's gonna happen to Andy or Miss Rawle or someone where you could like be like, yeah, ok. They kind of deserve that, you know, as opposed to, you know, imagine if it was Alexandra and Andy change her, uh dye for Halloween, you know what I mean? Like that just wouldn't be funny if she had to go around green for two or three weeks, you know what I mean? And so I just, I didn't want to do that to my fans and my sons uh are really uh strict. They're, they will, they'll let me know if they don't like something. So initially in New Kid, I did have Drew get suspended uh when he has the pushing match with Andy and just to show that, you know, a lot of times black and brown kids get suspended at a greater rate and they were so mad at me uh for having him suspended. And I was like, how can you be mad at me? I just bought you an Xbox and I said, either I'm gonna have to change this or I'm gonna have to buy every kid in America an Xbox. And so I ended up rewriting it and it's a much better book because then I had Jordan actually speaking up to defend the one kid who had always defended him. Um And that had a lot to do with definitely with, with my sons complaining.

Oh, that's great. That's awesome. Yeah. Um So did you, you mentioned that, you know, you had, you had a contract to do the three books? But what was that, the original contract or, or was it originally New Kid meant to be a standalone?

Yeah, it was meant to be a standalone. Um I was just so happy to get the, um, the contract in the first place. You know, I would have signed a deal for half a book, you know, if that's what they wanted, you know, and um, the one and I'm putting fight in air quotes, the one fight that I did have was that initially once New Kid started doing well, they wanted two more books but about some other school or some other kids, they didn't necessarily want me to do those same kids. And my thought process was my whole life. I had never seen iconic African American characters, you know, so when you talk about Percy Jackson and Harry Potter and you know, Greg Heffley and Dog Man, like you need multiple books to get them to that level, you know, you need to develop them that, you know, you need um to, to see them more. So, and so I really told my agent that I really needed to have two more books with the same characters. So that was where that came from.

I'm so glad you did it that way.

Yeah, me too because yeah, I mean, I just really wanted those characters to be on a level that I had not seen or witnessed myself growing up and most times, to be honest, you know, at what Black characters would most people even relate to? You know, um you know, if you're growing up and I mean, even Black kids when I was growing up are not going to relate to Harriet Tubman or Martin Luther King. I mean, they're, they're important and they're amazing people, but we're talking about relatable books, you know, and so that's Black kids. So Black kids are having a hard time is a white kid going to say when I grow up, I want to be Frederick Douglass, you know, uh and then some of the lives are so hard that, even if it's not historical fiction, you know, again, what kid wants to put themselves in that position. So, the books to me just aren't relatable and it was a disproportionate amount of those kinds of books. So, how could you ever live in our shoes? Um, if the shoes that we give are uncomfortable, you know, and too big, you know. So. Right. So I wanted to give you a nice comfortable pair of shoes to wear and walk around the block and come into my neighborhood and be like, oh, hey, this is pretty cool. And the fact, I mean, I never thought that one day it would be New Kid would be in 13 languages. You know, kids are reading it in Romanian, Albanian, Spanish, French, uh Taiwanese, Greek, you know, I do Zooms with kids in New Zealand or with translating my interviews into Italian.

Um, I never saw that coming, you know, but again, like, what, what character would you have even said is the closest, you know? But meanwhile, you know, as, you know, my friends and family grew up like, oh, I related to Judy Blume even though she couldn't be any more different than me. But the characters in her books, you know, or the characters in here or, you know, Dorothy or, you know, like those were characters that, that you wanted to relate to.

Right. Yeah. Yeah. What, um, that's one of the things I love about the Wizard of Oz aside from it, uh, positive female role model for a young girl. But, um, you know, anybody can identify with the scarecrow. It doesn't matter what you look like.

Or Dorothy, like even as a, as an African American boy, you think I didn't like Dorothy. She was the best, you know. Um, so, but how often could you have related to a black boy from literature and said, oh, that's me or I wish I was there. You know what I mean? Um, and this is, I'll, I'll be deep for a second and then we can go back to, you know, um, one of my big aha things is I always say that, um, if the only books for or about women, you know, so that you as young girls had to read, if those books were only like Handmaid's Tale, you know, like, what would that have done to you as a reader? You know, not that they not that it's not an amazing book and well written and all that stuff, but it puts you, it makes you so powerless that after a while. It's like, ok, you know, if it's book after book, after book, um, it just kind of sucks the, the enjoyment out of you and it becomes a homework book rather than a book that you, um, fall asleep with it in your arms. And I felt like most of the books that I had as a kid where I was supposed to relate to them were Handmaid's Tale kind of books, you know, that kind of level of oppression. Um And that was another thing where I was like, yeah, I could, I'd rather play with my video game or go outside with my friends.

Jerry, you mentioned this a little bit already. But one of the things I loved about your books was how you focused more on certain characters like Drew, Liam, and Maury as their friendships with Jordan developed throughout the books. And we also get to understand characters like Andy and Ramon much better by the end of School Trip. What prompted you to give us these different characters' perspectives, and how did you choose which characters to focus on in each book?

So a lot was doing school visits because kids will call you out. Um I remember going to one school where kids loved the book. Any questions from Mr Craft? Yes, Mr Craft? Yes. How come

there's no girl from India in your book? I don't know. I'm like, what's your name? Malaika? OK. I'll put a girl from India named Malaika. OK, Mr Craft. Yeah. Yeah. How come there's no Muslim girl in your book? I don't know. You know, because so I was so intent on having the African American perspective from a positive point of view with loving parents, a mom and a dad and a grandfather and friends around the neighborhood. I wasn't thinking that I had to represent the whole world. And once kids started feeling safe around me and my books, then they were like, ok, well, what about me? You know, it's fine that you did that the whole African American thing. But what about me? And I was like, I didn't realize that that was my job, but I realized now that it is and I will, I will take it head on. And I remember doing a signing like in Buffalo, New York or something. And I, I have my head down. I, I have to sign like 200 books. And this young Latino kid comes up to me and he's like in my space, you know, like uncomfortably in my space and I'm signing. So I look up and he doesn't say anything. So I look back down because I have, you know, 1000 more books to sign and with his head still down, he just says thank you for Ramon. Oh, wow. And I was like, oh, you know, it's like a Dr. Phil moment, you know, where, you know, you can't help but like choking up a little bit, you know what I mean? And I'm like, Ramon is a tertiary character if best, you know, at best, but it meant the world to him. And then so School Trip now again, one of the reasons all my author friends say don't read your reviews, you know, don't read good, definitely don't go on Goodreads, you know, uh, because you will regret it. And there are a few times I've regretted it but there are times when, um, you know, I do something as a, uh, an actual response, you know. So some of the angriest letters I got was, oh, he makes it seem like all the white characters are rich, you know, and, you know, and just very angry about that. And I'm like, ok, well, if you don't like the fact I, I don't have every white character rich, but if you've ever gone to a school like that and the tuition is probably \$40-50,000 a year, you're either pretty well off or you're on financial aid. There's not a whole lot of in between. Uh Yeah. Yeah. So in this particular school setting, yes, most of the families who just happen to be white are well off, which is why I had the whole thing with Colin happen where he gets asked to leave the school because they withdrew his financial aid. I specifically made him a white kid to show that all white kids are not wealthy, right? And to show that it's not the assumption that everyone assumes the black kids are the ones financial aid. So then I was like, ok, well, if you're still upset, then I am going to make Maury the wealthiest kid of all of them.

That was so great.

So how do you like me now?

I loved Maury's scenes in School Trip. They were so funny and the fact that he was the only one who knew Paris really well and could pay for everything was perfect and pronounce everything.

So I'm always like, careful what you wish for. So now are those same critics saying like, well, wait a minute, how come the black kid is the richest of all of them? Or somebody's gonna say that somebody who is gonna say that and you know, I had kids say that they want to see more about Maury. And I was like, I don't even know who Maury is. What am I gonna do with Maury? Like, you know, Alexandra. Yes. You know, and the, the big three, but once kids start saying that they wanted more of Maury, I was like, huh, I don't even know who that kid is. Um But I really had a fun time, that whole Maury and Ramon thing in Paris.

Yeah, that was great. It's one of my favorite subplots of all the books.

Yeah, I, I love that arc too and I think the fact that you listen to what kids wanted and gave that to them is wonderful. And I thought it gave your books so much more depth to develop these secondary characters in more detail.

Yeah. And to have, well, thank you and to have uh Samira the Muslim girl not being a victim, you know, like she's never the victim. And I had just never seen that either. You know, she's never being teased and in fact, she's got the sharpest tongue out of all of them. So you don't want to get in a sparring match with her because it will not turn out well for you.

Right. And I love that. She teaches Andy how to poke fun at people in a kind way because he does not understand that at all.

Right. And because me and my friends have always had very sharp tongues and we have always just gone in at each other. But there's nothing that I've ever come away with, uh, hurt feelings, you know, because we don't, we never go for that thing that you can't change about yourself, you know. Um, but I know kids are going to tease each other and poke fun. So a lot is that I wanted to give ground rules to help kids, um, navigate, uh, without trying to be overly, uh, didactic or forceful or, you know, like, like you're in school, you know, right now.

That, that's exactly right. And Dorothy, I think that leads really well into, uh, the question we were going to ask about Jordan's drawings.

Uh, I guess, uh, let me hang on. I was scrolling down thinking we should probably get to the, the book banning stuff before we run out of time.

But wait a minute, my books have been banned?

That's kind of what our podcast is about, but we also just love to talk about books, so they don't want to jump straight to that stuff. Um So how did you decide to include Jordan's drawings? There are those little many stories within, within the books, his sketch book. Uh And just as a, for instance, in School Trip, uh it's during one of those uh little sketches that he sort of realizes that the friends from his neighborhood don't, they don't have long term goals. Um So it, you seem to kind of use these little um these little drawings to help absorb the sort of process information. We're just wondering what your thought process was on those.

It's, it's as much to help you process the information as it is for Jordan. Um Because again, when I got the opportunity to do new kid, I really didn't know if I would get another opportunity. So I kept putting in more stuff and more stuff and more stuff. And by the end it was almost like a suitcase that is packed too much that you can't close it. You have to sit on it to zip it up. And I, you know, having had kids, um I wanted a book that was more like Shrek where when I took my sons to see Shrek, they laughed hysterically at some parts and I laughed hysterically at other parts. Um So that I wanted a book that was not painful for adults and that would be secretly like, wait a minute I just read this book because it's my job and I wanted to see what the kids are reading, but I had as much fun as they did. So that's where, like, the chapter headings came in. Yeah, that was, that was for you, you know, and then to also open up conversations where a kid is, like, um, I don't get this one. What is this like? Oh, well, that's the Road to Riverdale. That's a Lord of the Rings spoof and like, oh really? You know, and then each book became, how do I top it? You know. So in, in Class Act, it was other graphic novels or middle grade books. And then in, in School Trip it was just his comics because um it, it really is a way to just, sometimes you just have to say it, you know, that most times there are inferences and, you know, you pick up, oh, that's what's going on. But sometimes Jordan needs to say, you know, this is how I feel, you know, and have people go. Oh, you know, and I've liked that and I've loved the discussions that adults have had, teachers and librarians. I remember a big thread on Twitter and a librarian

said, well, you know, I really like these books but I don't like the librarian, Miss Brickner because, you know, you, this is your opportunity to show how helpful a librarian could be, and then I had other librarians go, you know what? I didn't realize it, but I was Miss Brickner and that helped me to change some of what I did. Uh You know, I remember one saying that a young black girl had read *The Hate U Give* and loved it and came to her and asked for another and she gave her, you know, like *The Mean Streets of South Uptown* and the girl didn't like it, you know, and she realized that she wasn't looking for another gang book or police book, but she was looking for a strong uh female lead uh in a book and that was what she was looking for. Not just, you know, a gritty urban reminder of the grit of today's urban grittiness.

Yes, I love that. Can I ask a little bit more about the adults in your books? Uh because we were interested in how you have several positive adult role model like Jordan's parents and grandfather, Drew's grandmother, and Mr Pierre, and some adults who try but don't always succeed to be role models like Mr Roche, and some adults who fail the kids like the librarian or Liam's father and Miss Rawle. So how did you decide which adults you presented in a more positive light and which adults you allowed to change for the better?

So that's one of the things as a kid growing up in the seventies. Um Most adults and parents and teachers were pretty idiotic, you know, like they, they would always have the moms with the, the big cat glasses on and hair and curlers and, you know, embarrassing the kids and I did not want to do that and, um, you know, like the teachers and Ferris Bueller and, you know, that kind of thing. Um, I definitely wanted Jordan to have a strong family unit, mom, dad and grandfather and I give them little idiosyncrasies like mom babies Jordan and everything is like, oh, my little sweet potato. Of course, Mommy would never embarrass you. Uh, and dad with his, you know, frugal.

Yeah, that was so funny. That, that was, that was one of the ones that, um, in School Trip where I was like, ok, this is something that I, it made me laugh.

And I just, I just wanted to be a fly on the wall when people got to that page because I specifically made it a page turner. So you didn't see it coming? Yeah. You got all the food places.

You got me right. I thought it was gonna go to like, uh, oh, how much better the food was in France or something? And then it went a whole different way.

Yeah. I mean, because I wanted to show early on that it's not what you think. My books are not what you think. So when I talked earlier about the catastrophic stuff, um, that's why in *New Kid*, I had the whole scene with the grandfather where he comes in and he's got this blue light, like, he's some astral projection. And I'm leading my readers to think that, you know, whenever Jordan is sad, grandpa will come as some, you know, ghostly Obi-Wan Kenobi and give him advice and like, oh, poor grandpa, he's moved on to a better place and I'm like, really in, really, in, really, in and then boom and that would set the tone of, I didn't want you to ever assume you knew what was coming. Mhm. Um, so I, I have some of my best jokes that when you turn the page it just slaps in the face and it's like, oh, wow. And it just like one of my favorite, um, interactions on Twitter was, oh, my guy has been reading your book for the last hour and he has been laughing out loud. He's having so much fun and I'm like, oh, that is so cool. How old is he? 42. Uh, so, yeah, those are the kind of things that, um, so with the parents, I had them with little things but not no huge flaws. Um Coach Roche is one of my favorites, uh, to write for. He's well meaning, but I wanted to show teachers well, meaning isn't necessarily well doing because you have to do the work and if you don't know, ask questions, um, the only one who is bad per se is, uh, um, I just forgot her name that fast. You just told me. Yes. Yes. Yes. Thank you, Miss Rawle. Um, and that was important too because sometimes those teachers set the tone like I do a gazillion school visits and sometimes I would go in and the teacher would pull me aside and say, oh, ok. Well, you see that kid there, that's DeAndre and he's a real handful. So just you're gonna have to look out for him and then I'll start teaching and I'll say, hey, I need a volunteer to hand out pencils and that kid's first to raise his hand, you know, and I'm like, he just needs a little bit more attention or, you know, you can't undo in eight hours in school what his life has, uh lay down in the 16 hours when he's not here and sometimes just take that, you know, extra moment, what do you need, you know, what would help you and hear them say it as opposed to assuming when it's not a kid that you've ever identified with in your entire life. So I needed the Miss Rawle character to show that, you know, there is work to be done on all sides. And I think by the end of *School Trip*, um everyone has tried, you know, I, I feel like it ends with hope, uh hopefulness, you know, Miss Brickner is now on the same page. You know, the librarian. Uh, there's more, there's more graphic novels than this. Right. Exactly. Yeah. And um you know, Coach Roche, you know, he brings in Mr Garner. Um So I really didn't want it to be a generation

versus generation. Um I want us all to be on the same team and, you know, I, I hope I, I achieved that.

Yeah, definitely. Well, I definitely feel like you achieved that. And um you know, we, we had some similar conversations when we were prepping for this interview. So, um it caused us to, to do a lot of thinking as well. Um If, if we're still OK, on time, I would like to ask you, um or we would like to ask you a few questions about um about the banning of the book or the challenges of the book. Um So, um my understanding is that the book came out in 2019, it won the Newbery Award in 2020. Um And it wasn't until late 2020 or 21 when it was first challenged. Is that correct?

Yeah, I think it was like October of 2021 and a teacher or librarian DM'd me on Twitter and said that there was a woman in Katy, Texas that uh was collecting signatures to have my school visit canceled and my books pulled off the shelves and that was the first time I had heard of it. Yeah.

How did that make you feel?

I was surprised because up until then it had been a love fest. It was the Kirkus Prize in 2019 and then January of 2020 is the Coretta Scott King and the Newbery and just the accolades and the school visits. And I had won so many state awards and, um you know, so it was nothing but positive feedback. So to all of a sudden, uh find out, you know, and the books that had been controversial up until that point um, were, you know, heavy duty, you know. Um, so they talk like Maus, which is about the Holocaust, and some Toni Morrison books and a lot of books that had these really heavy adult messages. So I was like, well, wait a minute, New Kid, really? And then everything changed and I started getting like, really nasty emails and, you know, like I'm gonna burn your book and I'm like, well, if you, I can't stop you from burning it. But if you are, please. Right. Just buy it from an independent bookseller, right. You know. Right. So that we can at least, you know, two birds with one stone, you know. Um, and go ahead.

I was just gonna ask, has it affected, um, your other school visits?

No. Um, so with that one, the school board actually did something, uh, very novel. They said, hey, you know what, let's actually read the book and they read it and within a week they were like, there is nothing wrong with these books and they put it back on the shelf and then they

came with their hat in their hand, like, um so we know we told you we didn't want you to come. But can you do that Zoom after all? And I was like, absolutely. Good for you. And I did the Zoom and I think maybe five kids opted out, you know, well, obviously it was their parents had opted out. Um and I just talked about, you know, I mean, one of the biggest things is that my, my normal school presentation, whether via Zoom or in person is going from a reluctant reader to a Newbery-winning author and following your dreams and baby steps to get to goals and, you know, kids find it very identifiable, you know. Um, I go to schools and I've shot hoops with kids and, you know, going out and played with them at recess and, you know, and I've always been the dad that is coaching baseball and my kids' basketball teams and all the kids want to play on my teams. And so to all of a sudden be made out like I was, uh, this monster who was trying to indoctrinate a generation of kids into critical race theory, which I didn't know what it was at the time or Marxism or all these things.

Was Marxism actually mentioned?

Oh, yeah, yeah. If you listen to the, um, the NPR piece, the best thing that they could have done is actually interview the woman that caused the hubbub and this is a woman that, you know, just made up stuff and even the host was, like, wait a minute. That's not true. That didn't happen, you know, and she's someone that wouldn't know if Marxism was Karl Marx or Harpo or Groucho, you know.

Yeah, I noticed that, that nice little, uh, Harpo Marxist.

Yeah. Exactly. And, um, that was the kind of thing where it's like if you're gonna say, at least say stuff that happened in the book.

You know, I don't even get the critical race theory um, point because it's simply, you know, you've said it's somewhat autobiographical, it's just simply someone's experience of the world that pretty much everybody who reads it, black white or whatever, you know, race you are goes uh-huh. Yeah, that happens. Like there is nothing that's news to anybody in there. Do you have a way now that you talk to people about what the difference between critical race theory and just, you know.

Yeah, it's so, it's so interesting because again, shouldn't read my reviews, but I do so on NetGalley for School Trip there was, uh, you know, I'm looking at like five star, five star, five star, four star, five star, one star and I'm like, ok, here it comes and it's like when Drew is in the mall and they leave the tag on his, the security tag and he's afraid to go back to the store without the receipt. You know, that's just blah, blah, blah. Why does everything have to be about race? I'm like, that actually happened. You know, my, my son, my son bought a shirt for July 4th picnic and didn't realize that the tag was on till he went to put it on. And he's like, oh dad, I'm gonna run to the store and have them take the tag off. and I'm like, I'm coming with you. All right. And even with me, you know, Newbery-winning author, um the amount of flack that this guy gave us. And I'm like, dude, I have a rewards card, just pull up the receipt on my card, you know, something and just mumbling the whole time and this is with me with him. So if he had gone in by himself as a 19 year old, you know, things escalate on the news all the time. So, right. So to tell me that this doesn't happen and why do I, so one of the things about the whole banning thing is no one ever asked why do kids like me grow up to write these books in the first place? You know, and it's because of having to read Huckleberry Finn as a kid, you know, I'm not relating to that, you know, so to never see myself, then I have to write my own book and now I write my own book and that's what you ban. So now if I was to write a book about a kid who grows up to write a book that's banned, then wouldn't that, then also be banned for teaching critical race theory? Because the reason it's banned is that so it's inception, you know, it's a thing inside a thing inside the thing.

I feel like it's, it's simply, it's simply a way to say we're white, you're black, stay in your place.

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Because they don't care what the book is about. If it's got a black protagonist, if it's got a gay protagonist, it's got a trans protagonist.

So she said that she stopped reading it after that one mall scene and then gave the entire book one star like, ok, or even worse than banning. Um, also one of the, uh, things on Goodreads was, and, and this is a teacher and I think that I would rather be banned. Right. And know where I stand then have a teacher say, I don't think my largely black, largely poor students are going to be able to relate to these kids, going to Paris. So I'm not even going to bring this book in my classroom. Oh, my goodness. Now that's Miss Rawle. That is someone who's doing more

damage than good because then what every book she gives is about being the struggling in the hood, you know. So these kids are not going to think that they could ever go to Paris so they'll always know their place. And to me that's more dangerous because that's a supposed ally who is teaching these kids that she really has no idea who they are.

Right. You've been so generous with your time. Is there anything else that you would like to add about your books before we wrap up?

Um, well, let's see, there is, uh, a New Kid live action movie in the works.

Oh, wow.

Yeah, unfortunately, like everything I've done, uh, you know, now there's a writer strike. So, you know, I've had, I've had, um, so New Kid actually got rejected, like, maybe five times and I had the rug pulled from under me and then it came out and I had all the stuff and then there was like COVID and then it was this, it was that, so when I finally do my autobiography, you know, these all be like, wow, really? That happened too. So now that there's a movie in the works, like, hey, there's a writer strike now, and an actor strike. Right. Exactly. Um, but no, that's, those are the big things again. I just really appreciate everything. If you have any last questions, I'll give much shorter answers. If you want to do like a lightning round. I want to make sure that you have all your stuff. But other than that, I'm, I'm good.

Jerry, if you don't mind answering one last question, um, what do you think would be especially helpful for our listeners to do to address book bannings?

So one is, I think you just have to make it a little bit more difficult and know that because so many people that are complaining at school board meetings don't actually have kids in the school system and they, I won't say have nothing else to do with their days, but I will heavily imply that um and they go on the internet and they download words like indoctrination and, you know, again, all those other Harpo Marxist and terms um but you know, having them fill out an actual thing, like if you're gonna complain about anything, you know, have you actually read this book? Two, have you actually read any book? Uh three, what specifically, you know, is it that you find offensive about this book and then, you know, not make it where one person can decide the fate for an entire school. You know, if I want to raise my kid to be a vegetarian that doesn't

give me the right to go and slap a hamburger out of your kid's hand, you know, you don't want your kid to read a book and they just won't read the book. But you know, there was a woman in Long Island who did a, a school board meeting and she used her entire five minutes on the fact that she's not gonna let her kid come to their school because in eighth grade, they read New Kid as an all-class read and, um, how books should be uplifting and books should be this and books should be this. And meanwhile her kid is like two years old, like, not even in the school. Um, so, yeah, just, just have conversations and one of the, the worst things is no one that is complaining has ever offered to have a conversation with me, uh, to learn anything. It's just, you know, blank things. So they find one or two books that they really don't like. Um that may be deemed for older kids and then they just take a hand grenade and try to take out, you know, full shelves uh of books. Well, and it's, it's not about, it's not about what the kids are actually reading and it's not about trying to come to understanding. It's only about making us all mad at each other. So they have no vested interest in talking to you, right? Because no one has ever said my kid read this book and is offended by this. I've never actually had that happen. You know, my kid felt bad because the thing is if your kid identifies with Andy or Miss Rawle, that's on you. You have not done your job as a parent. If your kid identifies with a villain, you know, like what, you know, kids are empathetic. Kids will root for whomever the hero is. In Shrek, they rooted for a green ogre. In Avatar, they rooted for blue people. You know, they can, they can root for black and brown people.

I'm always amazed at that, that all, all of the kids identify with the underdog. And I'm like, you know, some of you guys are not the underdog.

Right. Right. But on that, you know, when they have dress up like your favorite character day for me to get a photo of a white girl with freckles and red, uh, braids dressing up like Drew on the cover of Class Act is like the world is a better place. Yes, it is. You know, and the, the last thing is our kids are not Ok. You know, my son is 25. His very first day of school was 9/11. His last day of his last day of school was a global pandemic and in between he had to do active shooter drills. And so of all of those things you take away a book that he likes like that's the villain. Um And that's the part that is the most sad and also infuriating, you know. Yeah. And the last thing because I know, you know, we said three hours ago we'd make it quick. One of the books that I illustrated and published years ago is called What's Below Your Tummy Tum. And again, it teaches kids to keep their privates private. The, the author of the book gave a copy to a woman. The woman said she went home, she read it to her kid. The kid didn't say anything. And the next

morning, the kid wakes up and says, mommy, next time we go over to cousin so and so's house, I'm gonna tell him not to touch me down there anymore. So that book is going to protect that kid and change his life. Now, if that's not a thing for people, then they're gonna be like, oh, this book talks about that. So we're gonna ban it without looking at the good that the book is doing, that's life altering. And that's what now, you know, I was just minding my own business making books to make you laugh about moldy food and stuff like that. And now to be thrust on the forefront of like being on The Daily Show and Don Lemon and Joy Reid, I'm like, I wasn't on those shows for winning the Newbery. You know, it's, you know, I grew up and do the only book ever to win those three awards. The trifecta. I'm not on TV for that. But let a woman in Katy, Texas say she doesn't want my book on the shelves. And now I'm a global news story being interviewed by the BBC and NPR and all that. So that's also sad that um we don't get celebrated. Um because I just always felt like my life was a Disney movie, you know, and they're rewriting the ending.

Yeah. Well, our hope is that things are going to start to change and these books will be available again, but it seems like it's still going to be a long road before we get there. So I, I really hope that kids will still have access to your books because they are so valuable and so funny and moving. I hope that every kid can have the opportunity to read them and, and the grown ups as well.

I mean, I, yeah, I was very touched by your books um as a grown up. And so I just want to thank you for that. They, they're just so well done and all the, the fun little things that cycle through and appear again later in the story or in the next story. I just, they're just so very well done. So, thank you. They're really beautiful.

Thank you Jerry. Thank you so much for talking with us tonight. We really appreciate it.

My pleasure.

Thank you all speed and, and hope, hope to uh the end of your Disney movie comes out the way it should and, and this is just a tough time right now.

Well, me too. And thank you all, everyone listening for your support. I appreciate it.

And there are more books on the way. We can't wait to read them.

We loved talking with Jerry Craft. It was such an honor to speak with him, and he was so generous with his time. You can find him online at [jerrycraft.com](http://jerrycraft.com). On Instagram and Twitter @jerrycraft or on Facebook @jerrycraftbooks. His information is also in our show notes.

Please join us next time for a close reading of *New Kid*. If you would like to leave us a question or comment, please visit [theroguelibrarians.com](http://theroguelibrarians.com) or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod or on Twitter @RLibrarians. If you're enjoying this podcast, as much as we're enjoying making it, please subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you find your podcast. And please, please, please please leave us a rating and review. Without ratings and reviews, it makes it really hard for other people to find us and certainly recommend us to your friends.

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