

GRAPHICALLY CONTRASTING CULTURES: A REVIEW OF JERRY CRAFT'S *NEW KID*

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Jerry Craft's 2019 Coretta Scott King and Newbery Medal-winning novel *New Kid* is a thought-provoking, aesthetically pleasing study in comparison-and-contrast between protagonist Jordan Bank's home life in his neighborhood (Washington Heights, near the George Washington Bridge in New York City) and his school life where he is a new 7th grader (Riverdale Academy, an elite and exclusive prep school) that benefits from the medium: graphic literature.

For example, Chapter 2 "The Road to Riverdale: There and Back Again" delightfully depicts middle-schoolers on the First Day of School. Craft's artwork allows us to see students as universally alike (they're zombies), while the backgrounds of settings from Washington Heights to Inwood to Kingsbridge illustrate diversity in shops and languages that reflect local—and, eventually, contrastive—cultures. At the end of Chapter 6 "Jordan Banks: The Non-Winter Soldier," Craft reverses the journey, showing Jordan's change in attitude and personality as he takes the bus from school across the bridge and on home. Both chapters are rich in content in ways that I am not sure words could convey.

The book relates the usual middle school angst with a bit of bullying, cliques, loneliness and misguided teachers on campus while at home the conflict is mostly between Jordan's parents: his mom (an upwardly mobile corporate drone) wants him to climb the academic ladder to eventual economic success while his dad (who manages the local neighborhood community center) wants him to cultivate sensitivity to his racial heritage. Jordan escapes parental disagreement by drawing in his sketchbook; and, by hanging out with his grandfather, the novel's stellar sympathetic adult.

New Kid should appeal to students new to middle school. The author provides a variety of characters in whom they may see their classmates, their teachers, and themselves.

Craft is not only a skilled artist, he is also verbally sly. For example, my students and I delighted in recognizing some of the popular culture/film/TV allusions in chapter titles. Among the fourteen chapters are these reverberations:

"The Hungry Games: Stop Mocking J";
"Upper Upper West Side Story";
"Straight Outta South Uptown";
"A Kwanzaa Story"; and,
"The Socky Horror Picture Show."

Each chapter's beginning is—as you can imagine—appropriately illustrated to reflect and reinforce its references.

If you want to offer an alternative or augment this book with another great graphic novel about being a new student at middle school, then you can't go wrong with *Awkward* by Svetlana Chmakova. Or, if you want to go totally verbal, then consider *The Wednesday Wars* by Gary D. Schmidt.

Author Biography

John Franklin (BA Rice, MA Miami of Ohio, PhD Florida; certified to teach English and economics) began his career at Jones High School in Houston. During that time, he combined his love for literature with a love of travel, spending 12-week summers biking or backpacking to visit the settings of the drama, fiction and poetry he loved to teach: Scotland for *Macbeth*; London for Dickens; Canterbury for Chaucer; and the Lake District for Wordsworth. One Fourth of July he ventured further abroad, discovering himself atop the Acropolis in Athens, thinking, “Here I am at the birthplace of democracy on the birthday of the greatest democracy that has ever existed.” He has spent his life since then appreciating and sharing his good fortune. John Franklin (pronoun he) is a Professor of English and Director of English Education at Pittsburg State University in Southeast Kansas where he teaches Literature for Middle and Secondary Schools. He may be reached at jfranklin@pittstate.edu.



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