

Thanks for joining us on The Lerner Podcast! We're here with Joshua S. Levy, author of *Seventh Grade vs. the Galaxy*, an out-of-this-world adventure that School Library Journal called "a perfect bridge for readers looking for a Percy Jackson-esque work of science fiction."

In *Seventh Grade vs. the Galaxy*, 13-year-old Jack and his friends accidentally catapult their rickety public school ship across the galaxy, and straight into the clutches of the first aliens humanity has ever encountered. It's up to Jack and his friends Becca and Ari to get everyone home. Welcome to the podcast, Josh.

Thank you so much. I am really excited to be here.

So I'm going to start out talking about my favorite character from *Seventh Grade vs. the Galaxy*. It's definitely the ship itself. Can you please talk about writing PSS 118?

Absolutely. First, I am so glad you like it. You're not the only one to tell me that they love the ship personality. I do, too. I would say a couple of things. First, as a matter of behind-the-scenes book development, the ship as a character was pretty late addition. The idea had been rattling around in my brain forever, but I actually didn't implement it until my first big edit for Amy Fitzgerald, my editor with Lerner. And lucky for me, she liked it too and didn't bat an eye at the prospect of me adding what what is essentially a pretty major character a little late in the game. Once I knew I was moving forward with adding an element for the book, writing the 118's voice was really easy. At its heart, *Seventh Grade vs. the Galaxy* is about kids and their school, navigating bonkers circumstances and the school itself in the form of the ship is a character. So I just pictured teaching in one of the schools I used to teach at and I asked the question, if the walls could talk how they sound. And for the old, underfunded 118, the answer is a little cranky and a little sarcastic, but full of love for the students and teachers, even if the ship has a hard time admitting that sometimes.

So you mentioned you have some first-hand experience with teaching seventh grade, right?

I do. And it definitely informed the kids in *Seventh Grade vs. the Galaxy*. I would say most prominently they sometimes overreact in these over-the-top ways to little things. They get something wrong on a test or another kid look sideways at them or they're hungry. And they also underreact to things that to a grown-up might be totally paralyzing—alien exist and lightspeed travels a thing, but that particular childhood sensibility is an asset to the story, I think, because I'm not really sure whether adults would have done a better job of navigating the PSS 118's challenges than the kids did. If you tell a grown-up that something they never thought existed exists, they won't believe you in a story probably, even if you show an adult these things, they'll either continue not to believe you despite the evidence, or spiral out, maybe not. But I think it's easier for 11 and 12 and 13 year olds, they haven't decided what they believe yet, which is why they might be more receptive to their worlds turning upside down. And it's why that the kids in the larger world of stories and sci-fi and fantasy are so super compelling, because you can accept a little bit more easily that if someone knocked on a kid's door and told them that this whole other universe exists, they'd follow along.

With that in mind, who is your ideal reader? Who are you writing this book for?

Interesting question. A kid, obviously, around middle grade age, but they'll have to be who wants to read something funny and fun at heart that takes you on the adventure to the edge of the galaxy. I get asked every once in a while if you have to like space to like *Seventh Grade vs. the Galaxy*, and my answer is absolutely not. I don't think you have to like Long Island summer camps to like Percy Jackson or forests

to like *The Girl Who Drank the Moon*. And if you like adventure stories and want to smile and laugh the whole way through, I would say *Seventh Grade vs. the Galaxy* is the book for you.

Awesome. And also if you like hamsters. What is up with Ari's obsession with hamsters?

I love this question. Number one, Ari is a giant sci-fi fantasy nerd like myself and his hamster, Dr. Shrew, is both a subtle and in your face, but unspoken Doctor Who reference so that's the first thing first. More importantly, though, and fundamentally, Ari's obsession with his hamster is inspired I guess by how vivid obsessions can be at that age generally, whether it's a video game or a book or a pet or a toy. I found that especially in the middle school years, kids develop these attachments to things that go a bit beyond the rational. I've certainly had them. So did the students I used to teach. And I'm not saying I don't have those kinds of attachments now, but I don't think they're quite as all-consuming. And Ari will defend and protect Dr. Shrew, to the end of the universe, which makes total sense to me. Because if any seventh grader went to the trouble of sneaking their pet hamster on board a spaceship school, they'd be more protective of it than anything.

So did you have a Dr. Shrew growing up a hamster or something that you protect to the ends of the galaxy?

My version of Dr. Shrew would probably have been my Nintendo 64. And in particular, my Miyamoto signed Legend of Zelda Ocarina of Time, but that's a super specific answer to your question. But I still have it today. And if I could put it in a vault like Scrooge McDuck's lucky nickel or dime or whatever he started with, I probably would.

So, changing gears—now you're a lawyer. How does that factor into *Seventh Grade vs. the Galaxy*?

So yeah, I am a lawyer now. And it does factor into *Seventh Grade vs. the Galaxy* in a few ways. Nothing front and center, but here are some examples. First, there's this scene of the book where the kids find themselves in an alien video game arcade. And inside the arcade is what looks like a time machine. And that time machine comes with this convoluted set of terms and conditions, what is allowed what isn't allowed, and it's a lot of fun, even if you don't practice law for a living, trust me. We made it into a pretty cool poster too.

The other example, which is something I'm so proud of, but which has never stated anywhere in the book at all, is that every single last name is a reference to some United States Supreme Court case that has some connection to the character, even if it's subtle or prominent. So a couple examples. One, one of the main characters is named Becca Pierce. And she is named after a 1920s case called *Pierce v. the Society of Sisters*, which is a multiple layered reference. One of the most important relationships in Becca's life is with her sister, Deanna. The Supreme Court case itself is about whether states can force kids to go to schools, their families not wanting to attend. So there's this school-based thematic connection there too. And the case today or into the 20th century was really important and Supreme Court case law about civil liberties and individual freedoms, and Becca is nothing if not an independently-minded kid. And I don't know if anybody on the 118 is stronger than she is.

One other example—but keep in mind I could do this with every single character—is Ari's last name. And we talked about with respect to his hamster, Dr. Shrew. So Ari's last name is Bowman. And he is named after a pretty recent case, *Bowman v. Monsanto Company*. And that case was in part about genetic engineering and self-replicating technologies, which is reminiscent of Ari's genius. In the book, he solves all sorts of problems in clever ways, including by hacking his 3D printer pencil, and he gets the kids out of jams. And Monsanto was also a unanimously decided case and I like to think that Ari is a consensus

builder at heart. And there's actually another reason why the case makes sense for Ari, but it's a spoiler, so I'll save it.

Oh, man, well, yeah, you're leaving readers on the edge of their seats. Nice work. And something well, first, I'm just going to ask you who would win in a game of zero gravity dodgeball, you or Becca, and why?

Well, there is no question that Becca would win. And I don't just mean she would win if we were both in seventh grade. I mean, she would win even with me here now. And to be honest, the why is twofold. One, Becca is just an awesome zero gravity dodgeball player, period end of sentence. And I am just not the best sports player generally. I'm probably more of a Jack or Ari in that respect.

So she might beat everyone, that's what you're telling me?

I don't know if she would be everyone. Certainly she's the best zero gravity dodgeball player on the PSS 118, that's not a question. And I would bet my money on her in a competition any day.

Awesome. A question we ask everyone: what's on your nightstand waiting to be read?

So these days, I'm always working my way through other 2019 debut middle grade books. Right now I'm halfway through Naomi Milliner's *Super Jake and the King of Chaos*, which is wonderful and lovely. And I'm looking forward to starting Gabrielle Byrne's *Rise of the Dragon Moon*. Then not kidlit at all, but I also can't wait to start the newest novel in The Expanse series by James Corey. It's hard space sci-fi published by Orbit and it's awesome. The eighth book, which I've been waiting for, it feels like forever, came out a couple weeks ago, and I am excited to dive in.

Awesome. Well, thank you so much for talking to us here at The Lerner Podcast.

Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it.