

Ms. Bixby's Last Day Study Guide

Ms. Bixby's Last Day by John David Anderson

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Plot Summary

NOTE: The following version of this book was used to create this study guide:
Anderson, John David. *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*. Walden Pond Press. 2016.

Ms. Bixby's Last Day is a children's novel by John David Anderson in which sixth-grade best friends Topher, Steve, and Brand learn their favorite teacher, Ms. Bixby, has cancer. The narrative is related from the first-person perspectives of these three protagonists with shifts in perspective from chapter to chapter.

The boys intend to make Ms. Bixby's last day teaching as memorable as possible. When the novel begins, Topher, Steve, and Brand are enjoying their year though summer is approaching. The creative Topher, the brilliant Steve, and the dedicated Brand have enjoyed their years because of Ms. Maggie Bixby, a 35-year-old teacher who is patient, kind, and incredibly wise. The boys are stunned when, in May, she announces she has pancreatic cancer and the following Friday will be her last day teaching for the year. Ms. Bixby declares she will beat the cancer and come back. The three boys are not happy about Ms. Bixby leaving, but desperately want her to get better.

As the following week begins, Principal McNair announces that Ms. Bixby will not be finishing out her last week. Topher, Steve, and Brand later overhear teachers talking about how Ms. Bixby is already undergoing rigorous treatment, and that she will be flown to Boston on Saturday to continue because she has family there. The three boys are stunned because they have so badly wanted to say goodbye and to say thank you. Ms. Bixby has touched each of their lives in important ways. She has helped Topher, whose parents work all the time, and who is an artist, to know that somebody will always notice him. She has helped Steve, who is very rational and scientific, to appreciate mystery and believing in things not seen. She has given Brand, whose father is disabled and refuses to try to get better, an outlet from being an adult by taking him grocery shopping on Friday evenings so Brand does not have to walk.

Brand also carries a secret about Ms. Bixby that no one else knows. One night, when she brought him home from the grocery store, they found Brand's dad unconscious on the porch, having fallen with his walker. Ms. Bixby then drove them to the hospital where she encouraged him to confront his issues in life head on, rather than running away. Now in the present Brand decides that even though Ms. Bixby is in the hospital, they will still give her a perfect final day. Topher quickly agrees, and the cautious Steve reluctantly agrees. The boys skip school on Friday, and through a series of misadventures and mishaps, manage to procure a cheesecake, McDonald's fries, a copy of *The Hobbit*, and Jack Daniels whiskey. Their adventures lead to a confrontation with a man who has robbed them, support for Steve in confronting his older and critical sister, and with each of the protagonists confronting the idea that life changes and changes cannot be stopped.



When the boys arrive at the hospital, Ms. Bixby is surprised but happy to see them. She enjoys the fries and the cheesecake, but saves the Jack Daniels for later. As she did in class, she now reads aloud to the boys from *The Hobbit*, and then thanks them for what they have done for her. She tells them they have given her a better last day than she could have hoped for. She then heads off to another round of treatment. Brand comes to realize that ultimately, it is not last days that matter most, but the days before because they stay with you the longest and stand out clearest – such as when Ms. Bixby gave him rides to the grocery store. In the Epilogue, the novel shifts back in time to January when Ms. Bixby had her students write about what their perfect last day would be like, at which time she shared her own – consisting of cheesecake, McDonald's fries, and wine.



Pages 1 – 67

Summary

Each chapter in *Ms. Bixby's Last Day* is narrated from the first-person perspective of one of the three protagonists. In the first chapter, "Topher," Topher narrates. Fox Ridge sixth-grader Topher and his best friends, Steve and Brand, are all convinced Rebecca Roudabush has cooties. Brand likes to make up words or shorten them, such as calling cooties "coods." The three boys tell Rebecca about her illness, who in turn licks her hand and rubs it on Steve. She then chases after Topher. Topher runs into Ms. Bixby. Topher explains there are six kinds of teachers in the world: Zombies, who are very old and boring; Caff-Adds, who drink lots of coffee and talk too fast; Dungeon Masters, who are very strict and demand quiet; Spielbergs, who show movies all the time; the Noobs, new teachers who are hopeful and optimistic, and who burn out after a year or two; and the Good Ones, who make school enjoyable and who students do not want to disappoint. Ms. Bixby (also known as Ms. B.) is a Good One.

Topher recalls first meeting Ms. Bixby three years before at the circus with his family, where his mother, Linda, introduced everyone to Ms. Bixby as she worked on the PTA with her. Topher remembers how Ms. Bixby was spending her summers working part-time as a circus performer doing juggling. In the present, Ms. Bixby is amused by Topher, Steven, Brand, Rebecca, and the concept of cooties, but tells the three boys to apologize to Rebecca. They do so. Ms. Bixby is impressed by the imagination of the boys, but reminds them their words and actions impact others around them. It is one of her many Bixbyisms, or affirmations – wisdom she has collected or created. Topher notices Ms. Bixby does not look happy. He looks through the window at her to find her leaning against the wall with a crumbled paper in her hand. It is not for another three weeks that the news is given.

In the next chapter, narrated by Steve, It is a Tuesday morning when the news is delivered. Steve already knows something is up because Ms. Bixby has been acting strangely lately. For example, when Steve told her about the world's deadliest snake, Ms. Bixby only nodded rather than finding it interesting. Now, Ms. Bixby explains she has a kind of cancer that attacks the pancreas called ductal adenocarcinoma. The students are stunned. While Ms. Bixby assures everyone she will fight and beat the cancer, she will not be able to finish out the school year. Her last day will be Friday the following week. Grace Tanner cries while Brand looks miserable. Ms. Bixby always asks Steve about the morals in the information he finds. She does so again in the present about being poisoned by snakes. Steve explains that just because something can happen, does not mean it will, and that things are never as bad as they seem. Still, Steve is not happy when he gets home.

In the next chapter, Brand narrates. Brand thinks about his friendship with Topher and Steve, noting that he wonders how they ever became friends. While they have some things in common, such as living in the same town, loving pizza, and loving video



games, they do not have many other things in common. Brand is not intelligent like Steve or creative like Topher. Brand reflects on how he was transferred to Fox Ridge in fifth grade when his family switched houses after his father's disability checks could not cover payments at their old place. Brand reflects on how simply asking to sit and eat lunch with Topher and Steve led to friendship. He also reflects on how happy he is to be in Ms. Bixby's class, for Ms. Bixby is an awesome teacher – from bringing in extra Halloween candy to streaking her hair pink to having a python as a class pet to using *The Hobbit* as the book the class reads aloud from.

Brand is devastated by the news about Ms. Bixby's diagnosis, and he does not look forward to the temporary-farewell party that will be had for her. However, on Monday of her final week, Brand and the others are stunned when Principal McNair explains she will not be coming back because it has been insisted she begin to take the time she needs to get better. McNair plays a video message for the students from Ms. Bixby, who explains she will focus on getting better, that it has been wonderful to be their teacher, that she will be back, and that the students should be good for their substitute. Brand, because of his father, knows about medical procedures and that sometimes it is easier to tell people only a partial truth. Brand has a truth he needs to say out loud to Ms. Bixby, even though he knows she already knows the truth. Brand knows he must see her again.

In the next chapter narrated by Topher he describes sneaking away from the school buses on Friday morning along with Steve. They are waiting on Brand, and intend to skip school. They have decided to do so after learning from substitute teacher Mrs. Brownlee that Ms. Bixby has gone to the hospital earlier than expected and is undergoing rigorous treatment. Topher reflects on how it was Brand's idea in the first place to go and see Ms. Bixby at the hospital, explaining they owe it to her. Topher also considers that he, Steve, and Brand overheard two teachers talking about Mrs. Bixby getting worse and needing to be transferred Saturday morning to Boston, where she has family, making the Friday visit a necessity. In the present, Brand finally shows up. He is wearing camouflage, bringing along a long-stemmed glass.

Using Steve's cell phone and Brand's ability to do voice impersonations, Brand calls the front office to impersonate their parents to let the school know they will not be in that day. Steve worries about this because his parents are so strict and pay so much attention to him. Topher wishes his own parents paid more attention to him. They nearly run into Mr. Mackelroy, a Dungeon Master teacher, who is on the phone. He explains he is late, and cannot be late again or Principal McNasty will be on him. He then notices the three boys, and asks why they are not in class. The three boys use what Mackelroy has said against him as blackmail, and remind him he is late. He gives up and rushes into the school. Steve worries what will come of the encounter with Mackelroy, but Topher and Brand reassure him.



Analysis

There are good teachers who change the world argues John David Anderson from the very start of his novel *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*. Good teachers – the good ones – explains Topher, are the kind of teachers who make school enjoyable and are the kind of teachers no one wants to disappoint. Ms. Bixby is the good one in the novel. Everything from her streak of pink hair to encouraging her students to challenge themselves in how they live and think to her part-time summer job make her a teacher unlike any other. Ms. Bixby has especially come to matter in the lives of Topher, Brand, and Steve, who admire Ms. Bixby beyond words. Each boy will come to narrate the novel in turns, telling their own story in relation to one another, and in relation to Ms. Bixby.

As Steve will explain in the next section of the novel, and as Anderson will argue through the rest of the book, change is the only constant in life. Everything changes and nothing ever stays the same. Initially, the boys thought the only changes they were facing had to do with summer coming and finishing out their year with Ms. Bixby. However, Ms. Bixby's cancer diagnosis and her decision to leave school earlier than intended completely ruptures the worlds of Topher, Steve, and Brand. Ms. Bixby has helped each one of them in some special way – with Brad's own experience being especially secretive (not to be revealed until late in the novel) – and so the boys now want to go and visit her at the hospital.

The journey to see Ms. Bixby, Anderson explains as he lays the foundation for the experience, is in many ways a journey of coming of age as well as merely going somewhere to see someone. The boys are not yet aware of it, but they will become aware of it throughout the course of the day as experiences and circumstances come and go, and as they reflect on the past. They see how Ms. Bixby has helped them to grow better as human beings, and they see how they have grown themselves over the course of their journey to see her. Already, as readers will note, Brand is reflecting on his own home life and the situation with his father. This will be explored in more detail as time goes on and the boys draw near the hospital. The decision to skip school will ultimately be revealed as Brand's, and from the start, the boys nearly run into disaster with Mackelroy. This serves as an omen for things to come.

Mackelroy is not their favorite teacher. Readers should pay attention to Topher's teacher ranking system, which symbolizes the student study of teachers. Topher uses the system to rank all the teachers in the school. This is how students are able to deal with the teachers. Ms. Bixby is noted as a Good One – a rare breed. Among the things the three boys most admire about Ms. Bixby are her affirmations, called Bixbyisms. These symbolize her wisdom and how much her students value her knowledge. These affirmations also remind the boys that they have the ability to impact the world around them. These in part help prompt them to want to go and see Ms. Bixby at the hospital. In turn, Ms. Bixby's diagnosis symbolizes both the end, and a catalyst for the plot of the unfolding novel. Because of the diagnosis, Ms. Bixby will end up in the hospital, and the boys will end up seeking to visit her on what should have been her last day at school.



Discussion Question 1

Describe the characters of Topher, Steve, and Brand. How are they the same? How are they different? Why do they get along so well?

Discussion Question 2

Topher describes Ms. Bixby as one of the Good Ones. What makes Ms. Bixby a Good One?

Discussion Question 3

Why are the boys so shattered by the news of Ms. Bixby's diagnosis, and her decision to leave school early? What do they decide to do as a result? Why?

Vocabulary

quarantine, debilitating, epidemics, masquerading, imploring, transitive property, lurch, perimeter, rigorous, accelerate



Pages 68 – 127

Summary

In the next chapter narrated by Steve, he notes how the ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, said that change is the only constant. It is something he learned about through Ms. Bixby, who wrote the quote on the blackboard. Steve hates it because it is true. For example, he hates having always believed Pluto to be a planet until scientists now say it is not. Now, Steve must deal with being used to Ms. Bixby, and losing her. Steve, Topher, and Brand board Bus 142 at State Street. Normally, they take Bus 17 to school. Everything is new and different for Steve, including the very smell of the bus, and it makes him uncomfortable. Topher notices and asks if Steve is alright. Steve responds by quoting facts about buses. Topher encourages him to text someone in their class to see if Mrs. Brownlee has said anything about them being absent. Brand wants to know if Mackelroy has ratted them out. Steve explains he does not text anyone in class except Topher. Steve thinks about how he has known Topher since first grade, with their friendship beginning over Lego Star Wars. He also thinks about how Topher has been a constant.

Now, in the present, Steve, Topher, and Brand get off at the stop for Woodfield Mall. There, they head to Michelle's Bakery to buy cake. Michelle's is run by a man named Eduardo. The boys are amused and perplexed by this. Eduardo explains the name and the business must match. While everyone would buy Mexican food from a place called Eduardo's, no one would buy Mexican food from a place named Michelle's. The boys are stunned by the price of eight-dollars a slice, and fifty-five dollars for an entire cake. Steve, Topher, and Brand realize they will only be able to afford two slices. The boys get together twenty dollars, but then Brand puts another twenty on the counter, saying they want the whole cake, and that it has to be the whole cake or nothing. Eduardo reminds them of the price. Brand tells Steve and Topher to wait outside. Steve reflects on sitting outside when Ms. Bixby defended him against his father for getting a B rather than an A on a test. In the present, Brand exits the shop with a full cake having paid only 20-dollars for it. He explains it is teacher appreciation day.

In the next chapter narrated by Brand, Brand explains that Eduardo knows Ms. Bixby, and is very sad to hear about her diagnosis. He says that Eduardo was willing to offer him the cake for free, but Brand refused, settling on 20 bucks. At Topher's insistence, he, Brand, and Steve go into a used-bookstore down the street. It is not part of the original plan, but there is some time before the next bus. The bookstore is watched over by an owl named Scout, and is owned and operated by a brilliant and kind old man named Mr. Alexander who looks like Yoda and enjoys riddles. The boys are amused to discover the inside of the store's toilet has been painted to look like the mouth of Jaws. Brand reflects on how his dad would have done this kind of a thing because before he was disabled on scaffolding that collapsed at work, he was a real prankster who also enjoyed having jokes played on him.



In the present, Topher purchases a book. Brand, Steve, and Topher narrowly miss their bus moments later. While waiting for the next bus, Topher pulls out his sketchbook and begins to draw a caricature of Mr. Alexander. Brand and Steve are impressed. Brand knows the drawings make Topher stand out, and Steve's intelligence make him stand out, but Brand does not know of anything which will let him stand out. As he looks through Topher's sketches, he finds one of Ms. Bixby. Embarrassed, Topher lunges for the sketchbook, and he and Brand wrestle for it. Brand cannot imagine how Ms. Bixby could mean as much to Topher as she does to him. The sketchbook breaks in half, tearing the drawing of Ms. Bixby in half, just as the next bus arrives.

Analysis

Change is the only constant, argue both Heraclitus and John David Anderson through the character of Steve in this section of the novel. Steve, who loves reason and evidence, also hates change even though he knows it is a normal part of life. The greatest change he now confronts is a life without Ms. Bixby in it, after Ms. Bixby has come to matter so much to him. As the reader can clearly see, the situation with Ms. Bixby has thrown off all of the boys. At first, it steels their resolve to get to the hospital to see Ms. Bixby – including the purchase of a cheesecake, which symbolizes the sweetness of life – and which is essential to Ms. Bixby's perfect last day (which will be revealed in the Epilogue). However, not all change is good on the journey.

One of the darker moments of the novel comes in the fight that Topher and Brand get into over Topher's drawing of Ms. Bixby. There is a kind of jealousy and struggle for control of Ms. Bixby that develops between the two boys, which in turn leads to the tearing of the sketchbook and the ripping of Ms. Bixby in half. This is metaphorical for the cancer ripping Ms. Bixby is half, but it also symbolizes a loss of innocence, with childhood being symbolized by the sketchbook. Once the harsh world of adults breaks open the world of childhood, nothing can ever again be the same. Things can be put back together, like the sketchbook, but not in the same way. In other words, things are forever changed. Ms. Bixby's diagnosis has forever changed her life, and the lives of the boys.

Change is simply a part of growing up, and the journey to the hospital will become more and more a journey of coming of age and of change. As the journey truly gets underway, readers begin to realize what kind of an impact Ms. Bixby has had on the lives of the three boys. Steve recounts being defended against his overbearing father for being constantly compared to his sister and getting a B rather than an A on a test. Brand keeps his own experience with Ms. Bixby a secret at this point, but wonders how on Earth Ms. Bixby could mean anything to Topher the way she means something to Brand – and this helps spur on the fight between the two. Even this is a change from their past of always getting along despite their differences. Ironically, Ms. Bixby is something they have in common and this in turn leads to differences between them.



Discussion Question 1

It is argued in the novel that change is the only constant thing in life. In the novel, is this true or untrue? Why? In real life, is this true or untrue? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why do Topher and Brand end up fighting over Ms. Bixby's drawing? Is the fight justifiable from either Topher or Brand's point of view? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Steve hate change so much? How does he cope with the changes he has experienced so far on the journey?

Vocabulary

gravitationally, impatient, retaliation, caricature, mischievous



Pages 128 – 180

Summary

Steve narrates the next chapter. Steve is sickened by the spots of blood on Topher and Brand from where they hit the ground wrestling. Neither Topher nor Brand are saying anything to each other. Topher feels horrible about his ruined sketchbook. Steve has no idea what to do about the situation, so he plays Minecraft on his phone. Topher suddenly says the picture of Ms. Bixby is just a picture, and does not mean he has a crush on her. Steve did not think this was possible until Topher said it, and now Steve cannot help but think it is true. Topher explains his drawing was intended as a way to preserve Ms. Bixby. Brand now speaks up, and says he understands. He says it is like Shakespeare, who believed everything he wrote would make him immortal. Brand says he was just jealous over the drawing because he wishes he could draw half as well as Topher. Brand agrees to buy a new sketchbook for Topher when he has the money. Steve begins thinking about compatibility and getting along; and how he and his sister do not get along, and how their parents do not get along.

Now, Steve, Topher, and Brand head to What Ales You, a liquor store to buy wine. Steve has no idea how three 12-year-olds are going to acquire a bottle of wine. Topher says they will find someone to buy it for them. It is 11:18, meaning Steve should be in writer's workshop class rather than outside an alcohol shop. Topher points out a scruffy looking dragon-tattooed guy in his mid-thirties as their shot. Topher approaches, making up a story about his dad being dead and his mom turning 40 the following day. The man is doubtful, but curious as to whether or not the boys have any money. The man agrees to buy them a ten-dollar bottle of wine if he gets to keep fifteen out of the twenty-five that they have. The boys agree, but Brand insists on going in as well to pick out the perfect bottle. The man agrees to this, saying he will pose as the father of Brand and Topher. The man says his name is George Nelson. The boys have no idea what kind of wine they should pick out. It is then that they are told by the store clerk their dad just left.

In "Topher," the boys are stunned by George's departure. Topher, Brand, and Steve all chase after him. Steve gives out after a while, but Brand and Topher continue on. Topher tries to jump over a garbage can but trips over it instead, wiping out, hurting his ankle, and scraping his chin. He tells Brand to continue on but Brand turns back to help him up. Crashing to the ground has been a shock of reality for Topher, who thinks about how much he does not want to get older and how he is sick of older people lying to him about everything from the tooth fairy to being able to be anything he wants to be. Brand, meanwhile, goes back for Steve. When they return, Steve and Brand are miserable looking. The cheesecake they have purchased has turned to goo. Brand has had enough and wants to go home, saying they screwed up and the entire idea to see Ms. Bixby was stupid because it could never have made a difference. Brand begins to storm off. Topher thinks about Ms. Bixby, and about how she always wanted to be magician like Gandalf the wizard in *The Hobbit*.



In “Brand,” Brand reflects on how his father had two falls. The first fall, Brand considers, was not his father’s fault because it was the scaffolding that broke his spine. The second fall, Brand thinks, was his father’s fault because his father had the chance to recover and be able to walk again but he stopped caring. Brand angrily thinks about how his father simply gave up, leaving Brand to do all the chores, housework, and being an adult. On the bus with Steve and Topher, Brand thinks about how he should have gone to the hospital alone. Even though he knows Topher and Steve like Ms. Bixby, he does not believe it is the same as how he likes her.

Brand thinks about how he wanted to make the visit to Ms. Bixby like what she had imagined her perfect last day would be, and how he could make it perfect – with help from Topher and Steve. Brand thinks about how much he has relied on Topher and Steve to get away from his house and his father – and how he also accepted time with Ms. Bixby to get away from home as well. Topher suddenly breaks the silence by talking about superheroes, and the conversation breaks the bad mood. It causes Brand to remember how he first began to trust Ms. Bixby when he was walking home with six bags of groceries in the snow and she happened to be passing by and stopped to give him a ride. Now in the present, Brand, Topher, and Steve duck down as George Nelson gets on the bus.

Analysis

The journey to see Ms. Bixby is in many ways a journey of coming of age Anderson continues to argue in this section of the novel. Brand, Steve, and Topher already know that life is not perfect – but they are now learning that life can be imperfect among even them. The fight between Brand and Topher over Topher’s drawing of Ms. Bixby highlights the stark reality that fights can even occur between friends. It is a marked change that reminds them they are growing up, and that change is the only constant thing in life. What ultimately comes to make things better between the boys is their decision to listen to one another. Topher explains his drawing has nothing to do with having a crush on Ms. Bixby, but of wanting to preserve her in some way. This creates a deeper sense of understanding between the boys, and brings them closer together as friends.

The friendship between the three boys will matter tremendously in the coming hour. The boys have set out to buy a bottle of wine and enlist the help of the scruffy-looking, ominous George Nelson to do so. To rely on, let alone speak to someone like George Nelson for alcohol, is a radical change from the boys’ lives. The decision to trust George Nelson is a moment when everything changes – and, as Anderson will argue through the remainder of the novel, there is always a moment when everything changes forever. George Nelson’s running away with the money they have given him is one such change. As readers will note, change symbolizes growing up and having to deal with the harsh realities of adulthood in that there are people like George Nelson running around.

George Nelson also presents the boys with the hard lesson that they have to be more careful about whom they trust. This is a part of growing up and a part of coming of age.



They are better, stronger young people for having had to deal with George – but their experience also represents the nadir of their journey. Brand is ready to give up. This is a marked change for Brand, for he has always been the one who sticks to anything he starts. While Topher and Steve attempt to encourage him, the real moment in time that everything changes once more for Brand is when George Nelson gets on the bus. His appearance brings to light the theme of fate, which will be explored more thoroughly in the following section of the novel.

Discussion Question 1

How are Brand and Topher able to move beyond the fight they have had? Why does this matter so much not only for their friendship, but for growing up?

Discussion Question 2

What is the entire experience with George Nelson like for the boys? What does it teach the boys about life and growing up?

Discussion Question 3

How does Brand respond to the robbery committed by George Nelson? Why does Brand respond in such a way? Do you believe his response is understandable? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

extraneous, pout, incongruent, compatible, melodramatic, theologically



Pages 181 – 239

Summary

In the next chapter narrated by Steve, Steve considers that the odds of getting bitten by the Inland Taipan, the most poisonous snake in the world, are rare. Steve considers a discussion Ms. Bixby had with the class about the odds of finding one's soul mate amid more than seven billion people in the world after reading a romantic poem. Steven remembers thinking such a thing impossible, but Topher did not. In the present, Steve considers it impossible that George Nelson is on the same bus as them, but yet George Nelson is. Brand declares that it is fate, and that Nelson has to pay. Steve recalls not liking Brand when they first met because Brand meant change in his friendship with Topher, and it meant that Topher might like Brand over him. Now in the present, Topher tells them they are ninjas going after George Nelson. They follow him to an alley where Nelson recognizes Steve and runs. Steve gives chase. Brand cuts off Nelson from the other side and demands their money back. Nelson refuses, pushing Brand. Brand pushes back and goes after Nelson. He, Nelson, and Steve wrestle with Nelson. Nelson lands a punch on Steve, which hurts his jaw.

As Nelson gains the upper hand, Topher makes his appearance with Steve's smartphone, filming the entire thing. Topher says he will not call the police, but Nelson tells everyone to calm down instead. Steve's lip is now bleeding. Nelson says he no longer has the money the kids want, saying he has spent it on Jack Daniels whiskey. He shows them his wallet. His license reveals his real name is Hazel Meriwether Morgan. Morgan agrees to leave them the Jack Daniels, the two dollars he has left, and to walk away and forget everything happened. He calls the three boys psycho as he leaves, while Brand calls him a flopsucker. Steve, Topher, and Brand then go and sit under a tree while Topher gives Steve a napkin for his bloodied lip. Topher also reveals that Steve's phone was dead, and that he was bluffing about it the whole time. Brand decides they will continue on rather than going back. Steve thinks about how there may not always be a plausible scientific reason that human beings do what they do, but that some things may have a reason no one knows about, or that some things are simply a mystery. Despite his reliance on evidence and certainty, Steve finds this comforting. Steve reflects on looking up the certainty of survival with pancreatic cancer, as Ms. Bixby declared she would survive, only to find out the one-year survival rate for her kind of cancer is 25-percent.

In the next section narrated by Topher, he, Steve, and Brand get waters and fries at McDonald's. The girl who checks them out, Clarisse, is pretty and kind. Topher thinks Clarisse likes him. It is then that Christina, Steve's older sister by five years, walks into McDonalds and comes straight toward them. The three boys are shocked. She demands to know why they are not in school. Topher says they could ask the same of her. She says she is in the work-study program and on her way to the animal clinic. Christina is prepared to call their parents, but Topher intervenes again, telling her to stay out of it for once. Christina ignores him and prepares to call her mom at work. Steve,



who has been stunned into silence, erupts. He tells her this is not about her, and that he is doing something important and does not care if she approves of it or not. Christina then pulls Steve aside and the two talk quietly for a moment. When they come back, she tells the boys she wants no part of what is going on, that they never saw her, and that she does not want whatever they are doing to become a regular thing. She then leaves.

Topher reflects on the idea that there is often a moment in time when everything changes, from standing up to a sister in McDonalds to facing down a flopsucker in the alley behind Walgreens to Ms. Bixby saving a drawing he made of a spider and a web from the trashcan. Topher reflects on that day, when Ms. Bixby made him promise to keep something between the two of them – a set of file folders she kept containing drawings, sketches, poems, and other creative things from students over the years. Topher remembers how Ms. Bixby wanting to be a magician growing up but that she lost confidence when she messed up a trick she was performing for her family, causing them all to laugh at her and not notice how serious she was. He remembers her telling him that as kids, people feel invincible like they can do anything, but then the next day the same is no longer true. He remembers her saying that everyone feels like no one really notices at some point, but that somebody always does notice. Topher considers how Ms. Bixby noticed him. Steve reflects on how he had planned to give Ms. Bixby the drawing he had made of her for her collection. In the present, as Steve, Topher, and Brand approach Saint Mary's Hospital, Brand says he has something to tell them.

Analysis

There are good teachers who change the world. Through Ms. Bixby's journal assignments and her fostering of class discussion, she has changed Steve's world in even a small way that now comes back center-stage with George Nelson's arrival on the bus. Steve, as readers already know, lives his life based on certainty – facts, evidence, and science. Although Steve is Catholic and believes in God, he still bases his life on things that can be seen. However, it is Ms. Bixby who gets him to think about truths that are unseen, and to consider the idea that there are things in life that may never truly be understood. George getting on the bus is one such thing – whether an act of fate through God or not, his appearance cannot be clearly explained.

The appearance of George on the bus sets the stage for a major step forward in the boys' coming of age journey. They have relied on themselves all along so far, and now they rely on themselves again when they confront George. Although the boys are bruised and bloodied, they take on George and manage to gain a small victory over him. The boys have faced down a horrible adult in George, and won. Life will be full of George Nelsons, they come to realize, and each one must be confronted. There are moments when life changes, Anderson argues, and these moments often take the form of challenges. Such challenges will never end, either. This makes confrontation of each challenge all the more important. Steve faces down his sister at McDonald's a short time later, fully embracing the idea that all challenges must be taken on. While it is



never revealed what private words pass between Steve and his sister, it can only be surmised that Steve has explained the situation to Christina, who in turn relents.

As the boys head down the final stretch toward the hospital, readers learn more about Topher's own connection with Ms. Bixby. Topher feels unnoticed at home because his parents work so much, and he feels that no one takes his art seriously. Ms. Bixby reveals she herself had similar experiences when younger – but that somebody always notices in the end. Here, Topher has a step forward in his coming of age as he realizes that everyone in life has similar challenges, and that they can indeed be overcome. Ms. Bixby's use of herself as an example is telling, for it demonstrates not only a sense of relatability for Topher, but a role model as well. Ms. Bixby has turned out to be a wonderful and amazing woman, and Topher takes strength in her success and her comfort. Topher's being noticed by Ms. Bixby underscores the importance he now places on wanting to remember her through his drawing of her. She notices him, and he will remember her.

Discussion Question 1

How does Ms. Bixby allow Steve to see beyond reason, evidence, and science? How does this help Steve to grow as a person?

Discussion Question 2

Why do Brand, Steve, and Topher decide to confront George Nelson? How does this matter in the context of their coming of age?

Discussion Question 3

What is Topher's own personal experience with Ms. Bixby? Why does this matter to him so much? What does it mean for Topher given Ms. Bixby's diagnosis?

Vocabulary

intrigued, fate, unprovoked, bluffing, spontaneously, plausible, catatonic, exacerbate



Pages 240 – 300

Summary

In the next section narrated by Brand, Brand tells Topher and Steve that Ms. Bixby would take him grocery shopping, but he does not go into the details. In reality, he reflects on how he spent an hour every Friday evening with Ms. Bixby for two and-a-half months straight. He reflects on how Ms. Bixby said not to tell anyone because people would frown on it and the school board would have an issue with it. He reflects on how he loved the time he spent with Ms. Bixby at the Kroger grocery store. Brand reflects on how his time with Ms. Bixby saved him from running away, from falling apart, and how he felt a kindred spirit in Ms. Bixby. He remembers how she told him she had difficulty making friends when she was younger, that she spent a lot of time alone, and how she also wanted to run away. He remembers her telling him that troubles are like shadows in that they cannot always be seen, but they cannot be run from, either.

Brand reflects on the last day in March when, as Ms. Bixby dropped him off at home, they found his father lying on the porch with his walker tipped over. Brand reflects on how Ms. Bixby rushed them both to the hospital, where Brand learned his father probably tripped and fell over the threshold. He remembers Ms. Bixby putting her arm around him like his mother and staying with him until his father was properly checked out and had awakened and asked for Brand. Brand recalls telling Ms. Bixby he could not face his father alone, that he could not keep doing everything all alone. He remembers that it was then that Ms. Bixby told him his special quality, his unique gift, was that he never gave up, which finally made Brand cry in strength.

In the present, as Brand, Topher, and Steve enter the hospital, they are stopped by security at the elevators since they have not signed in. Topher says they are there to visit their grandmother who has suffered a heart attack after smoking three packs of cigarettes a day. Upstairs, they are stopped by Nurse Georgia, who says only family is allowed to see Maggie Bixby. Topher insists they are family. Nurse Georgie knows something is up, but allows them in for ten minutes. Brand has been rehearsing what he will say in his mind, but as soon as he, Topher, and Steve enter Ms. Bixby's room, Brand is speechless.

In "Topher," Topher considers that one must slay a dragon to be a hero, but dragons do not always appear as dragons. He considers that sometimes they appear as secrets you are afraid to share, or an angry sister, or the feeling that nobody understands or appreciates you – and sometimes a dragon is a monster like cancer. In the present, Topher, Steve, and Brand enter Room 428 to see Ms. Bixby. Ms. Bixby now has no hair and is very pale. She is happy but surprised to see them, asking what they are doing there at 1:30 on a school day. They tell her it is her last day, and that they did not get a chance to say goodbye. She apologizes for the lack of a going away party. The boys explain they took to heart how she would want to spend her last day. They give her the fries, and tell her they have something else but they have to give it to her outside of the



hospital. Ms. Bixby says she is not allowed to go outside, but agrees to sneak out with them. They make it to the elevators just as Nurse Georgia sees them. In the elevator, Ms. Bixby explains she cut off her own hair before the treatments would cause it to fall out.

Outside the hospital, they head to the nearby park. Ms. Bixby offers fries to the boys, but they refuse. They try to set things up for Ms. Bixby, but the wine glass is broken and the cake has not gotten any better. At least they have the Jack Daniels, they think. Without music to play through Steve's cell phone, Steve sings instead. Ms. Bixby is enchanted by what they boys have done, but worries about them having Jack Daniels. She says it is still beautiful, and hugs the boys. She saves the Jack Daniels for later, but shares the cake with the boys now. Topher then takes out his gift for Ms. Bixby – an old copy of *The Hobbit*. She gratefully accepts the book and reads to them the chapter "The Last Stage." Afterward, Nurse Georgia tells them it is time to come back.

In the next chapter narrated by Steve, he considers both the ending of the *Hobbit* and the end of Ms. Bixby's last day to be anticlimactic. Steve knows they will all be in trouble, and that their parents will find out about what they have done. Ms. Bixby thanks them for making her last day even better than she had hoped. She tells them if they want her again, to look for her under their boot soles. Brand then gives her a pink carnation as she leaves with Nurse Georgia. Steve, Topher, and Brand then catch the bus back to school, where they decide to wait for the rush of kids to head home. Topher gifts Brand with his drawing of Ms. Bixby. On the bus ride home, Steve puts his head on Topher's shoulder and tells Topher he had a good day.

In "Brand," Brand explains that Margaret "Maggie" Eleanor Bixby has died in Boston due to blood loss from surgery in the attempt to remove the cancerous tumors. Principal McNair personally calls the families of each student Ms. Bixby taught for the past five years to tell them the news over the summer. Brand says that the last days are not the most important days, but it is the days before that stand out the longest. It is that summer that Brand's dad knocks on his door and asks him if he wants to take a walk.

In the Epilogue: "Topher," the novel now shifts back in time to January 7. Ms. Bixby has placed a journal prompt on the board, asking students what they would want to do with their last day on Earth. The students then share their desires, and ask Ms. Bixby for hers. She explains that she would want to eat cheesecake, McDonald's fries, listen to music like Beethoven, drink wine, but not say goodbye. Ms. Bixby says she would never say goodbye to everyone in class, but only *au revoir*, which essentially means they will see each other again, soon. Ms. Bixby also says she'd want to be remembered – and Topher knows he will never forget the good ones like Ms. Bixby.

Analysis

There are good teachers who change the world, Anderson notes in the closing of his novel. For Topher, Steve, and Brand, this teacher remains Ms. Bixby. They skip school and endure hours of misadventures and mishaps in their desire to give her the best last



day she could possibly have. She has changed their lives dramatically over the course of the past school year, and she has continued to change their lives even in their single-day journey to the hospital. The boys have truly come of age (as much as they can at the age of 12): they have finished what they started in doing something for someone else; they have sought to repay someone for kindnesses that can never truly be repaid; and they have faced down countless demons and dragons along the way. Demons and dragons can take many forms, such as Christina and George Nelson, but Ms. Bixby's metaphorical dragon takes the form of cancer.

Change is the only constant. The boys recognize this when they see Ms. Bixby at the hospital. She has cut off all her hair in anticipation of cancer treatments that could cause her hair to fall out anyway. She is pale, tired, and looks much less like she did even a week ago – but she is still the same Ms. Bixby, as her heart, warmth, and kindness shine through. Change may be the only constant in life, but that does not mean that who someone is cannot shine through. The boys may be losing Ms. Bixby, but Ms. Bixby will always be Ms. Bixby to them. Their meeting with Ms. Bixby signifies the final step in their journey of coming of age. There is no real happy ending, as Ms. Bixby's dragon cannot be slain by the boys. But in a sense, they still manage to rescue her because they give her the best last day she had longed for. As readers learn, this is especially important for Brand given everything Ms. Bixby has done for him – from grocery shopping to helping his father to the hospital.

The novel, like life, has a bittersweet ending. Ms. Bixby passes away in Boston, devastating the boys even though they knew the end was probably coming. It perhaps seems fated to them, and certainly unfair that someone as wonderful as Ms. Bixby could die. As Anderson has previously noted through Topher, there is a moment in time when everything changes. Ms. Bixby's death is a moment that awakens Brand to the understanding that it is not the last days that count more than any other, but all the days that come before. Fittingly, the novel shifts back in time to end not with Ms. Bixby's last day, but a class that occurs months before in the winter. It is there that the boys learn about what her perfect last day would be like, and this is what comes to inspire them through the preceding novel to do everything from buying a cake to attempting to purchase wine.

Discussion Question 1

How do the boys react when they see Ms. Bixby at the hospital for the first time? Despite her health, what parts of Ms. Bixby shine through? How does this affect the boys?

Discussion Question 2

Ms. Bixby explains her day with the boys was better than what she could have hoped for. Why does she say this?



Discussion Question 3

Why does the last day not matter compared to the days that come before it? How does Ms. Bixby help Brand to realize the difference?

Vocabulary

frantically, mythology, preemptive, dilapidated, serenading, anticlimactic



Characters

Topher

Christopher “Topher” Renn is one of the three protagonists and narrators of Ms. Bixby’s Last Day. Topher is a sixth-grader at Fox Ridge Elementary School, and is best friends with Steve and Brand. He is the son of Saul and Linda, and is very creative. An artist, he carries around a sketchbook with him all the time. Because his parents work all the time, he feels as if he lives unnoticed. He is happy to learn that Ms. Bixby notices him, and he is comforted by her and the understanding that somebody always notices.

Because Ms. Bixby has noticed him and his love of art, she becomes his favorite teacher. He is devastated when he learns of Ms. Bixby’s diagnosis. Topher, Brand, and Steve set off together to visit Ms. Bixby. Through the course of the day, Topher comes to accept that not all dragons in life can be seen, and not all dragons in life can be defeated – though they must always be confronted.

Steve

Steven “Steve” Sakata is a sixth-grader at Fox Ridge, and is best friends with Topher and Brand. He is also one of the three protagonists and narrators of the novel. Steve is Catholic, is Japanese-American, and is a lip reader. He is very intelligent and very competitive for accomplishments and awards with his older sister Christina. Steve loves information but he does not always know how to find the moral context of what he learns. Ms. Bixby helps him to do this.

Steve absolutely hates uncertainty, so the potential outcomes of Ms. Bixby’s diagnosis throw him off. Yet, it is also Ms. Bixby who helps teach Steve to appreciate the mysteries in life, and to accept that sometimes, there is a reason to things no one knows or understands. Though Steve is apprehensive about it, he agrees to join Topher and Brand on their journey to see Ms. Bixby. Through the course of the day, Steve learns to stand up for himself against his overbearing family.

Brand

Brand Walker is the third protagonist and narrator in Ms. Bixby’s Last Day. He is a sixth-grader at Fox Ridge, and is best friends with Steven and Topher. Brand enjoys shortening words and making words up. He is lighthearted and outgoing by nature, but worries there is nothing special about him that will make him stand out. Brand also hates being at home, for his disabled father has ceased trying to get better and relies on Brand to be an adult.

Brand despises this reliance of his father’s, but Ms. Bixby comes to his aid. She helps him grocery shop, and to bring his father to the hospital when his father is found passed



out on the front porch. Brand therefore believes he has a kind of connection with Ms. Bixby that no one else has, and this leads to a temporary fight with Topher. Brand is the one who comes up with the plan to visit Ms. Bixby in the hospital, and it is Brand who later comes to accept that last days are not the best days of one's life.

Ms. Bixby

Ms. Maggie Bixby is a 35-year-old sixth-grade teacher at Fox Ridge. Known as a Good One, she makes school enjoyable and is the kind of teacher students do not want to disappoint. A full-time teacher and part-time circus performer, Ms. Bixby is loved by her students and admired by parents. She is deeply compassionate and very moral. Her diagnosis with cancer of the pancreas devastates her students, but she is determined to fight and beat it.

Ms. Bixby has tremendously influenced the lives of her students, especially Topher, Brand, and Steve. She is surprised and delighted to see them at the hospital, though she questions why they are visiting her in the middle of a school day. Ms. Bixby thanks them for giving her a last day better than she could have expected. Over the summer, Ms. Bixby dies of blood loss during surgery to remove the cancerous tumors.

Christina

Christina Sakata is the 17-year-old sister of Steve. Christina is a perfectionist who excels in school and at whatever she does. She is the model by which Steve is constantly compared. Christina does not get along well with Steve, for she is overbearing and strict. Christina is ready to tell her parents about Steve skipping school when she finds him at McDonald's, but ultimately relents when Steve stands up to her.

Eduardo

Eduardo is the owner and operator of Michelle's Bakery. Eduardo is friendly and has a spry sense of humor. He dramatically reduces the price of a cheesecake for Topher, Brand, and Steve when he learns Ms. Bixby, a customer of his, is in the hospital.

George Nelson

George Nelson, real name Hazel Meriwether Morgan, is a scruffy-looking, dragon-tattooed thirty-something-year-old man who Topher, Steve, and Brand ask to buy alcohol for them for Ms. Bixby. George instead runs off with their money. He is later confronted and gets into a fight with the boys, after which he relents, surrendering the last two dollars he has and giving up the bottle of Jack Daniels he purchased with the stolen money.



Mr. Mackelroy

Mr. Mackelroy is a teacher at Fox Ridge. He is noted as being a Dungeon Master – strict and unfriendly. He nearly ruins the plan Topher, Brand, and Steve have when he catches them sneaking away from school. The boys blackmail him using both his own lateness in getting to school, and his calling Principal McNair “Principal McNasty” on the phone to encourage him to move along into the school.

Principal McNair

Principal McNair is the principal of Fox Ridge Elementary School. Not much is said about McNair, but it can be determined she is dedicated to her job, fair in her work, and is respected by the students (but not by Mr. Mackelroy). It is McNair who breaks the news that Ms. Bixby will not be returning to school.

Nurse Georgia

Nurse Georgia is a nurse at Saint Mary’s Hospital. Nurse Georgia is large and resembles a Viking. She is fair and kind. She questions why Topher, Steve, and Brand are at the hospital, and gives them ten minutes to see Ms. Bixby. She later gives them extra time when they head outside with Ms. Bixby, waiting as long as she can before Ms. Bixby must come in for her treatment.



Symbols and Symbolism

Topher's Teacher Ranking System

Topher's teacher ranking symbolizes students' study of teachers. Topher ranks all the teachers in the school according to this system, and this is how students are able to deal with them. Topher explains very early on that there are six kinds of teachers: Zombies, who are very old and boring; Caff-Adds, who drink lots of coffee and speak too fast; Dungeon Masters, who are very strict and demand quiet all the time; Spielbergs, who constantly show movies; Noobs, who are new teachers who are always hopeful and optimistic, but who burn out after a year or two; and the Good Ones, who make school enjoyable and who students do not want to disappoint. Ms. Bixby is a Good One.

Affirmations/Bixbyisms

Affirmations, called Bixbyisms, symbolize the wisdom of Ms. Bixby. Ms. Bixby's affirmations – sayings she has either created or collected – are used when needed, such as at the beginning of the novel when Topher, Steve, and Brand tell Rebecca she has cooties. Ms. Bixby in turn reminds them, with one of her affirmations, that their words and deeds impact the world around them.

Diagnosis

Ms. Bixby's diagnosis symbolizes both the end, and a catalyst for the plot of the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Topher watches through the window as Ms. Bixby leans against the wall for support, holding a crumbled paper in her hand. The paper is a medical diagnosis which reveals that she has a kind of cancer that attacks the pancreas, called ductal adenocarcinoma.

Poisonous Snakes

Poisonous snakes are metaphorical for cancer. Steve learns about poisonous snakes and shares the information with Ms. Bixby. She asks him to search for the moral context of the information when she reveals her diagnosis, which he explains as that just because something can happen, does not mean it will. Just because cancer can kill someone, does not mean it will.

The Plan

The plan symbolizes the determination of Topher, Steve, and Brand to go and visit Ms. Bixby in the hospital. The three boys, upon learning that Ms. Bixby is to be transferred



to Boston on Saturday morning, decide to skip out of school to visit her at the local hospital on Friday instead. Their plan denotes how deeply the boys care about, admire, and respect Ms. Bixby.

Change

Change symbolizes growing up, and the truth in life that the only constant thing is change. Nothing ever stays the same. Steve prefers constants in his life – from his parents to Topher to Ms. Bixby – and so hates change. When Ms. Bixby is diagnosed and stops coming to school, this is a change Steve is not happy to deal with. It forces him to realize that nothing in life is ever guaranteed, and that change will always happen.

Cheesecake

A white chocolate raspberry supreme cheesecake symbolizes the sweetness of life. It is among the things that Ms. Bixby wishes to enjoy on her last day. Topher, Steve, and Brand purchase the cake from Michelle's Bakery. Even though the cake is ruined through the course of the day physically, it retains his sweet taste upon being eaten. As such, it demonstrates that there will still be sweetness and good times in life despite the circumstances and situations that may arise.

Topher's Sketchbook

Topher's sketchbook symbolizes childhood innocence and loss. The ripping of the sketchbook by Topher and Brand represents the harsh reality of the world – by way of Ms. Bixby's cancer – crashing into the innocence of childhood. The ripping of the sketchbook demonstrates that nothing – including childhood innocence – can ever be put back together the same as it was before, if put back together at all. The ripping in half of the drawing of Ms. Bixby in the sketchbook serves as a metaphor in that she is being ripped in half by cancer, just as she is being ripped out of the lives of the boys. At the same time, the rip in the sketchbook also symbolizes a rift between Topher and Brand over Ms. Bixby.

Dragons

Dragons symbolize the challenges of life. Dragons come in all shapes, sizes, and forms, notes Topher. Some appear in the form of angry older sisters or jerks like George Nelson, while others cannot be seen on the surface. Such a dragon is cancer. While the boys are able to come to make Ms. Bixby feel better at the hospital, they cannot defeat her dragon.

The Best Days

The best days are a symbolic message for the loving of life. The best days, Brand learns through Ms. Bixby at the end of the novel, are not last days. Rather, they are the days that come before the best days. These are the days that will be remembered and will stay with a person for the rest of his or her life. Brand, at the end of the novel, no longer heavily reflects on Ms. Bixby's last day, but instead focuses on all the days that came before because they are good days, and because they do not mean the end has come.



Settings

Woodfield

Woodfield is the small city in which Topher, Brand, and Steve live with their families and attend school. It is the home of Fox Ridge Elementary and Saint Mary's Hospital. Woodfield serves to be the primary setting of the novel. It is a city large enough to have its own bus service, but small enough for three 12-year-olds to walk around reasonably safely. It is a city small enough for independent places like Michelle's Bakery to thrive, and for larger chain stores like Kroger and Walgreens to survive.

Fox Ridge Elementary School

Fox Ridge Elementary School is located in Woodfield. Fox Ridge is the school where Ms. Bixby teaches, and Brand, Steve, and Topher attend class. The boys have been thrilled to have sixth grade at Fox Ridge with Ms. Bixby. Early in the novel, the boys sneak out of Fox Ridge Elementary, which proves not to be a difficult task as it is a safe place and so has few people watching entrances or exits.

Room 213

Room 213 is where Ms. Bixby teaches class at Fox Ridge Elementary. As such, Room 213 becomes Topher's, Steve's, and Brand's world at Fox Ridge because they have such high respect and admiration for Ms. Bixby. It is in Room 213 that Ms. Bixby challenges her students to make a difference in the world, and encourages them to discuss the things she prompts them to consider in their journal entries. It is in Room 213 that she first talks about what would make her perfect last day, and this sets off Brand's plan when Ms. Bixby goes to the hospital.

Saint Mary's Hospital

Saint Mary's Hospital is located in the downtown area of Woodfield. It is a massive building, overseen by security guards and nurse stations. It is the ultimate objective of Steve, Brand, and Topher as they seek to see Ms. Bixby and give her the perfect last day. Topher lies their way into the hospital to get past security and Nurse Georgia.

Boston

Boston is where Ms. Bixby is flown on Saturday, and represents the point of no return for the boys. Topher, Steve, and Brand realize that if they do not visit Ms. Bixby on Friday, they will never have the chance. Ms. Bixby will be flown to Boston for continued treatment, and because it is where she has family to support her.



Themes and Motifs

The Value of Good Teachers

There are good teachers who change the world, and John David Anderson presents this theme through the character of Ms. Bixby in the novel. Early in the novel, Topher provides his system of ranking teachers according to type. The best kinds of teachers are the Good Ones, like Ms. Bixby. As readers learn, Ms. Bixby changes the world of the boys and of all her students.

Ms. Bixby is a different kind of teacher to begin with and earns the respect of her students by remaining true to herself and to her teaching methods. She encourages discussion, never demeans anyone, and encourages everyone. She has a pink streak in her hair, brings in leftover Halloween candy, and works as a part-time circus juggler in the summers. Here, she provides nothing but positive influence on her students.

In particular, Ms. Bixby pays attention to her students. She realizes that the talented Topher feels unnoticed and believes his art to be unappreciated. She reminds him this is not true, and that somebody always notices. Steve is so focused on reason and evidence he misses the beauty of things like romance and reasons for things happening that exist in the realm of the mysterious, and so Ms. Bixby reminds him otherwise. She also reminds him that he does not have to be like his sister, and should be his own person. Ms. Bixby also comes to see what a difficult home life that Brand has and helps him and his father to the hospital the night of his father's accident on the porch. She reminds him that, despite what he thinks, he is good at something – and that is moral dedication.

Ms. Bixby's kindness and selflessness also moves the three boys to be the same way. In appreciation for what she has done for them, and in acting on the things she has taught them, they visit her in the hospital to give her the perfect last day. Yet, even in death, she still teaches them important things and influences their lives. For example, Brand comes to realize that the best days are not the last days, but all the days that come before – and those days should be lived for.

Change is the Only Constant

John David Anderson presents change as the only constant in life in his novel *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*. The idea that change is the only constant thing in life comes from the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, quoted in the novel. The idea of so much change is seen primarily through the eyes of Steve.

Steve, who loves math, science, and reason for their certainty, hates the unknown. He also hates change because it brings about a period of uncertainty. Yet even Steve realizes that the only thing that never stops changing in life is change itself. It is one of life's few guarantees, and change affects Steve greatly in the novel. For example, his



decision to go with Brand and Topher to see Ms. Bixby – skipping school to do so – is something he never thought he would do.

Steve faces numerous other changes in the novel. These range from riding on unfamiliar buses in different seats with different smells to getting into a fight with George Nelson to finally standing up to his sister. Each time, the change is scary, but Steve recognizes it helps to make him a better and stronger person. Indeed, Steve's very confrontation with change itself helps him to be able to handle changes, however they may come.

The greatest change that Steve, as well as Topher and Brand face in the novel is Ms. Bixby's leaving. The boys admire and respect her tremendously, each for different reasons, but the thought of her not being there because of her diagnosis is more than they can bear. When Ms. Bixby leaves school before scheduled, it is change the boys cannot handle so they decide to seek her out at the hospital to give her the best last day they can. The boys come to the sad conclusion that despite making Ms. Bixby feel better, they cannot actually make her get better. The change she is facing is permanent; and the change the boys are facing is permanent. She has changed their lives forever, and now they will see their lives changed again without her.

Coming of Age

The journey to see Ms. Bixby is in many ways a journey of coming of age for the three protagonists in Ms. Bixby's Last Day. Topher, Steve, and Brand set out on a quest to bring happiness to Ms. Bixby (to save her), but along the way, the three become better and stronger young men as a result of their pasts and their experiences on the journey.

When Ms. Bixby is diagnosed with cancer, the metaphorical dragon makes its appearance. Ms. Bixby's having to go to the hospital early makes her something of a damsel in distress, kidnapped by the dragon. Topher, Brand, and Steven represent three knights who have had their lives changed forever in good ways by Ms. Bixby, and now their desire to make sure she has a good last day is in effect a quest to find a way to save her.

The journey itself is filled with twists and turns which test and strengthen the three boys. Along the way, they each stand up to their own dragons and grow as a result. For example, Steve not only comes to be able to better contend with change, but he stands up to his overbearing sister. In reflecting on the past, Topher comes to accept that he never goes unnoticed. Brand learns that he is indeed good at something – at seeing things through to the end, whether it is at home or on the journey to see Ms. Bixby. The boys all learn they can rely on each other and overcome immense odds, like George Nelson.

However, the boys must also accept that some dragons simply cannot be overcome, though all must be confronted. This is an important part of growing up. The dragon that holds Ms. Bixby, cancer, cannot be defeated by the three boys. They accept that they



can only do the best they can to make a bad situation a little less bad, and they succeed. The greatest lesson they take away, which propels them into maturity, is noted by Brand. Brand says that it is not last days that matter, but all the days that come before.

Fate and Mystery Deserve Respect

Fate and unknown reasons must be respected, as argued by Ms. Bixby in the novel. It is Ms. Bixby who helps bring her students, including Steve, to the idea that there are truths which cannot be seen, and reasons that may never be understood. Things that may appear to have been destined to happen may have indeed actually been destined to happen.

The first major exposure Steve and the other students have to these ideas are through a romantic poem which begins a discussion about soul mates. Steve believes the chances of finding one's soul mate are impossible, while Topher believes such a thing is very possible. The very idea of a soul mate is fate or reason at work without anyone being able to understand that reason. No one can later make sense of why Ms. Bixby ended up with cancer. Sometimes, things just happen. While Topher and the others can acknowledge this, they do not like having to accept it.

The encounters that Brand, Topher, and Steve have with George Nelson and with Christina also seem to defy reason and indicate fate. Of all the people that the three could have encountered in McDonald's, it is the person most likely to turn them in – Christina – with the result of their confrontation being that she chooses not to turn them in. The reason why is never truly understood. After being robbed by George Nelson, the three boys are amazed to find him on the same bus they are on in a city full of thousands of people and numerous buses. Topher considers it fate and even Steve is hard-pressed to mathematically explain it. Still, they respect it has happened.

Brand, after being robbed by George and seeing the condition of the cheesecake, is ready to give up and abandon the plan. Brand believes that anything they can do cannot possibly make a difference, meaning everything has been fated to fail. However, Brand, Topher, and Steve decide to see things through, indicating that they were fated to see everything through despite the difficulties they encounter. In the end, they may not be able to change the cancer diagnosis, but they give Ms. Bixby a gift unlike any she has ever been given by giving her the perfect last day.

There is a Moment when Everything Changes

There is a moment when everything changes, as articulated through Topher after Steve stands up to Christina. The novel is full of such life-changing moments. Each affects the plot in some important way.

Topher, Steve, and Brand each have such a moment with Ms. Bixby. Topher relates his own life-changing moment first. It is when Ms. Bixby saves one of his drawings from the



trash, having noticed he is an artist and having told him that somebody will always notice him. This makes Topher realize he is valuable and worthwhile even if his parents cannot see him. Steve, who shies away from the unknown, is encouraged to think about and respect mystery and the idea that not everything can be rationally explained.

For Brand, it is when Ms. Bixby brings him to the grocery store, only to bring him home to find his dad passed out on the porch. Ms. Bixby brings them to the hospital, where she tells Brand his uniqueness comes in his moral determination to see things through. This ultimately compels Brand to see through the plan for the last day. Brand's determination to see things through comes at some of the darkest moments of the novel. When the boys are robbed by George and the cake is discovered to be gooey, Brand has had enough and is ready to call it quits. Only at the last minutes does he decide not to – both drawing on the inspiration of Ms. Bixby and the support from his friends.

Steve himself is ready to quit when his sister confronts them at McDonald's, but drawing on strength from Ms. Bixby and from his friends, Steve stands up to Christina and saves the day. The confrontation matters not only for the plan, but because Steve has never stood up to Christina before because Christina is overbearing. Steve also experiences another such moment when the boys catch up to George Nelson and confront him for stealing from them. Steve personally takes a punch in the struggle against George, and because of his determination, Steve helps to ensure that George does not get away. This gives the boys the encouragement and the victory they have needed to continue on to the hospital.



Styles

Point of View

John David Anderson relates his novel *Ms. Bixby's Last Day* in the first-person narrative mode from the points of view of Topher, Steve, and Brand. The perfect last day for Ms. Bixby consists of Brand's plan that he, Topher, and Steve go and visit Ms. Bixby in the hospital. Each character approaches the journey from his own perspective and place, and so it is fitting that each character be allowed to narrate their own part in the overall journey. Each has had a unique relationship and set of experiences with Ms. Bixby, and each has a unique set of circumstances relating to their home lives. This allows the reader unique insights and understanding of the lives of each of Anderson's three main characters – insights and understanding not readily available to one another in the novel. This further allows Anderson to fully explore the characters of each of the boys, giving them dimension and emotional depth.

Language and Meaning

Ms. Bixby's Last Day is a young adult novel and is related in language that is straightforward and distinct according to each of its three narrators, Topher, Steve, and Brand. Because Topher, Steve, and Brand are the narrators of the novel, and because they are each unique individuals, the language they use will vary accordingly. Topher, who is optimistic and creative, is quick to use brief, descriptive, and imaginary language – such as when he imagines they are police officers chasing down George Nelson. Steve, who is brilliant and highly thoughtful, uses language that features a vocabulary of large words to demonstrate his intelligence, coupled with an array of facts and pieces of information ranging from Greek philosophers to poisonous snakes. Brand's language is simple and straightforward, but full of hesitant language because he is struggling to find out what makes him unique and because he is worried about how his plan may turn out.

Structure

John David Anderson divides his novel *Ms. Bixby's Last Day* into unnumbered, titled chapters bearing the names of his characters, all succeeded by an Epilogue. Each chapter is narrated by one of Anderson's three main characters – Steve, Brand, or Topher – and so that particular chapter bears the name of the narrating character as its title. The three distinct lives and stories of the boys come together through one common friendship and one common story – the plan to go and see Ms. Bixby to give her the best possible last day imaginable. Only by allowing each other to tell their own stories can they come to appreciate and understand one another in light of Ms. Bixby. She has made a difference in each of their lives, and now they seek to do the same for her.

In examining the plot structure of the novel, there is a clear and linear arch of events which is set off by the revelation of Ms. Bixby's cancer diagnosis. The opening chapters



establish the exposition, revealing the back-stories of the three main characters and their relationships to one another and to Ms. Bixby. The plot begins a steady rising action as Steve, Brand, and Topher set out on their mission to visit Ms. Bixby in the hospital. After facing many setbacks and conflicts along the way, they achieve their objective and spend a last day with their beloved teacher. The author reveals the characters' outcomes through the denouement in the Epilogue.



Quotes

Three weeks later she gives us the news.

-- Topher (Topher)

Importance: Ms. Bixby is everyone's favorite teacher at school. When she announces she has a kind of pancreatic cancer, everyone is stunned and upset. No one has been expecting this. However, it is Ms. Bixby's diagnosis that sets the stage for the rest of the novel.

Just because it can doesn't mean it will. Things are never as bad as they seem.

-- Steve (Steve)

Importance: When Ms. Bixby announces she has pancreatic cancer, Steve is stunned. Steve, who has been learning about poisonous snakes, is asked by Ms. Bixby about the moral of them. Steve explains that just because a poisonous snake can kill, does not mean it will. Here, the snakes become a metaphor for the cancer Ms. Bixby has.

...I have something I need to tell her. Something she already knows, but I feel like I have to say it out loud, in person, just in case she's forgotten, because she needs to hear it just as much as I did. Which means, somehow or another, I've got to see her again.

-- Brand (Brand)

Importance: Here, Brand speaks about his heartbreak and dismay over Ms. Bixby leaving work early to begin treatments. Brand harbors a deep secret that only he and Ms. Bixby know, but it is important enough that Brand wants to see and speak to her regarding this truth. Although it is not revealed until later what this truth is, Brand's insistence sparks the plan for skipping school to see her.

Let's do this.

-- Topher (Topher)

Importance: Here, Topher organizes and sets off the daring school skipping plan to go and see Ms. Bixby. Topher, Steve, and Brand are very determined, but are caught by Mr. Mackelroy. Only by blackmailing him with things he has said about Principal McNair do the boys manage to get away. This demonstrates just how risky and daring they are willing to be in order to see Ms. Bixby.

Change is the only constant.

-- Steve, after Heraclitus (Steve)

Importance: Steve finds the wisdom of Heraclitus here to be frustratingly truthful. As soon as he gets used to something, it changes. For example, he got used to the idea of Pluto being a planet, only for scientists to come out and say it is not a planet after all. The same is true regarding Ms. Bixby.



George Nelson is gone. And all of our cash with him.
-- Topher (Topher)

Importance: Topher decides that they will ask a scruff-looking, dragon-tattooed man by the name of George Nelson for help in buying them wine to bring to Ms. Bixby. Rather than helping them, though, George takes off with their money. The boys give chase, but are unable to capture him.

It was a stupid idea. All of it. It was stupid and pointless and a complete waste of time, because there was nothing – nothing we could do that would make the slightest bit of difference.
-- Brand (Topher)

Importance: After George runs off with their money, and after it is discovered the cheesecake has turned to goo, Brand has had enough. He believes the entire day is ruined, that the plan has failed, and that the plan was stupid to begin with because no matter what they did, it could not make a difference.

There may not always be a plausible scientific explanation for why humans do what they do... Ms. Bixby would probably say there actually is a reason – we just don't always understand it at the time. Father Massey would probably say the same thing. I suppose there is some strange comfort in it... Sometimes, despite all the evidence to the contrary, things can go your way.
-- Steve (Steve)

Importance: Here, Steve considers the idea that mystery, and reasons beyond his comprehension, can be comforting to him. Reason and science are important and matter in his life, but so too does the idea that something else is at work. Despite the horrible day he, Topher, and Brand have had, they have gotten justice against George Nelson/Hazel Morgan, and are now back on track as best as they can be with their plan.

It's funny how, as kids, we get these ideas in our head about what's possible and what's not. One day we're invincible and the next day we are afraid of what's in the closet. I grew up wanting to become a magician, but I became a teacher instead.
-- Ms. Bixby (Topher)

Importance: Here, Ms. Bixby tells Topher that she has kept the drawings and doodles that he has thrown away because she notices him and what he wants to do. She explains her own parents never noticed how serious she was about being a magician, and that everyone feels as if nobody sees at some point. Ms. Bixby gives Topher a confidence boost when she reminds him that somebody, somewhere, always notices.

Your troubles are like your shadow: you can't always seem them, but you can't run from them, either.
-- Ms. Bixby (Brand)

Importance: Ms. Bixby reminds Brand that troubles are a natural part of life. Troubles



are always present, seen and unseen, and can never be run away from. They have to be faced, whether the problem is a difficult home life or cancer. This helps give Brand the courage to begin dealing with his own situation at home.

Turns out real life isn't like the movies. Life doesn't come all the way back around again. It's not a straight line, either. It angles and curves, shoots off a little, twists and turns, but it never gets right back to the place it started.

-- Topher (Topher)

Importance: Topher and the others are all praying and hoping for a happy ending with Ms. Bixby. They hope things will turn out alright. But Topher reminds readers that life is not like it is in the movies with happy endings. Life is full of twists and turns, ups and downs. It rarely turns out as expected. The only constant thing is change. Nothing ever remains the same, or comes back to be as it once was.

The truth is – the whole truth is – that it's not the last day that matters most. It's the ones in between, the ones you get the chance to look back on... They may not stand out the most at first, but they stay with you the longest.

-- Brand (Brand)

Importance: Here, Brand reflects on the idea of last days and the days before them. He, Topher, and Steve have spent so much time dwelling on Ms. Bixby's last day that they have forgotten about all of their other memories with her over the course of the past year – times she helped them, made them think, and made them laugh, as well as the time they have simply spent with one another. These days, in the end, are more meaningful, because they end up meaning the most when time grows short. Life is about the things one does, not the things that happen last.