
22
Feb
21

by

**JESSICA
CATON**

Me and Earl and the Dying Girl Book Talk



Image taken from: <https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2015/sep/04/jesse-andrews-me-earl-and-the-dying-girl-interview>

JESSE ANDREWS

<http://www.jesseandrews.com/>

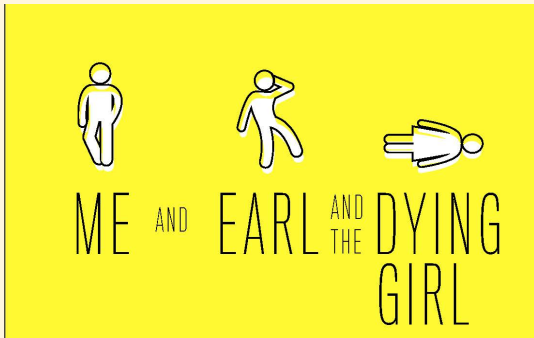
is an American novelist and screenwriter with his most notable work being his debut novel, *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, which has, since its release, been adapted to film. In an interview with The Guardian, Andrews recalls how when writing the aforementioned novel, he was inspired by the passing of his ailing grandfather, stating that "you want a storybook kind of closure with someone when they die, but I think that kind of thing is impossible."

SUMMARY

Greg Gaines has one goal and one goal only: to remain as invisible as possible amongst the absolute chaos that is Benson High School. Although he's managed to keep the entirety of his student body at arm's length for nearly eighteen years without a hitch, everything changes the day his "accidental" ex-girlfriend from sixth grade is diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia. Suddenly, the invisibility cloak Greg had created for himself begins to disintegrate before his very eyes as he faces his greatest challenge yet –

friendship.

SIGNIFICANT QUOTES



- "So in order to understand everything that happened, you have to start from the premise that high school sucks.... It is a universally acknowledged truth that high school sucks. In fact, high school is where we are first introduced to the basic existential question of life: How is it possible to exist in a place that sucks so bad?" (1)
While this opening line is iconic in that it encapsulates the general population's thoughts about their time in high school (or their experiences currently), it also signifies Greg's poor relationship with himself having been rejected his whole life. Due to these circumstances, Greg forms a rather nihilistic view of life and builds a barrier between himself and his peers to appear invisible -- close enough to remain amicable with everyone, but removed enough to remain anonymous. Unfortunately, this tactic makes it near impossible to form close relationships, which is a struggle he will endure throughout the novel.
- "Can I tell you something? It was exhausting to keep coming up with these riffs. And maybe I should have just chilled out. But I felt like I had to make her laugh, or else my whole visit was a failure" (191)
This moment relates to the idea Andrews mentions in his interview with The Guardian where, as a friend to the dying, you feel responsible for their happiness else your role in the relationship is meaningless. However, as the book draws to a close, Rachel informs Greg that he doesn't need to "put on a show" so to speak to make her happy: just having his company and getting to experience life with him and Earl brought her joy. Greg eventually realizes he does not have to endure his comedic persona to appease Rachel but can be his authentic self.
- "... it made me so bitter and fucking angry that this was impossible, and she was just going to be lost, Just as if she had never been around to say things and laugh at people and have favorite words that she liked to use and ways of fidgeting with her fingers when she got antsy..." (278)
This moment is, in my eyes, the true climax of the novel. Suddenly, Rachel's inevitable demise comes to fruition, and Greg must face it head-on with nowhere to hide. Greg is now burdened with the emotional trauma that comes with love; whether it be platonic or romantic. At this moment, the Greg who had felt relatively little in regards to Rachel's initial diagnosis -- even feeling guilty for not crying -- has now been reduced to a sobbing mess. Though this moment is painful, Greg finally comes to the realization that life is fleeting and precious and connections are not meant to be feared.

INTEGRATION INTO THE CLASSROOM

- A major element throughout the novel is the idea of expressing oneself through filmmaking. In fact, a large portion of the novel is written in a script-like format to represent Greg's love of films. Talk to students about how these films represent Greg and Earl's relationship, as well as how Greg's switches to script format enhance the story.
- Adding on to the first point, this novel gives you a great chance to incorporate a unit on scriptwriting and engage students in the various forms/professions of English!
- Another predominant theme in *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* is death and acceptance. Give the class a chance to discuss their relationship with death -- lost loved ones, fears, etc. This novel encourages students to be vulnerable when experiencing tough situations and that it is ok to express grief.
- Could potentially pair this novel with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as it deals with the themes of death and dealing with grief.

COMPLEXITY

While the Dale-Chall Readability Index varied quite drastically depending on the passage chosen, the Lexile Complexity test was the most accurate (in my opinion) of assessing the novel. Despite its use of strong language, the vocabulary used throughout will definitely be understandable by a high school-level audience.

DALE-CHALL READABILITY INDEX

Raw score: 3.6658

Adjusted Score: (3.6365 + 3.6658)

Final Score: 7.3

Grades 9-10

LEXILE COMPLEXITY TEST

820L

"Upper-Level Indicators are provided for text with Lexile measures of 660L or above and are based on two factors: word frequency and sentence length. These factors have been shown to be reliable predictors of how difficult a text is to comprehend" (Lexile)

Suggests an age range of 14-17

ADOLESCENTS IN THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

This novel relates to the concepts presented in Dr. Warner's piece in two key ways

● Chapter Four: Books about Real-Life Experiences

While not everyone will experience the trauma of being diagnosed with cancer, this novel prepares younger audiences for the inevitable. Additionally, *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* may inspire increased empathy towards others going through similar circumstances, as well as a heightened awareness in situations of grief. This novel encourages readers to experience life and all of the emotions that come with it rather than fear it.

● Chapter Five: Books about Facing Death and Loss

As sad as it may be, the themes within Andrews' novel are not that of fiction. Dying is something that we all must face as living creatures on Earth and, unfortunately, is it something that some face sooner than others. Rachel's acceptance, Greg's resulting grief... these are experiences that young readers will endure at some point in their lives and it is vital to give them that reassurance that their emotions are valid.

WHY TEENS SHOULD READ THIS

If you still aren't convinced that teens should read *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* after all of this, I honestly don't know what to tell you. This novel is honestly the most wholesome and honest story I have ever encountered about the tragedy of death and just trying to survive as a teenager in general. We're given a boy who doesn't fit the traditional depiction of men in literature: he describes himself as chubby and not-that-good-looking, he's intensely self-deprecating and painfully aware of his shortcomings. Greg is the perfect personification of everything we worried about in high school dipped in an extra layer of trauma that comes with losing a friend. I believe that characters like Greg are incredibly vital to today's youth who are still exposed to the pathology that is toxic masculinity -- giving younger male readers an opportunity to see that crying and emoting is human. I have no doubt that students will easily connect with Greg and his nihilistic view of the world (and especially high school), and learn with him what it means to be a friend.

MORE FROM JESSE ANDREWS

Summaries taken from Google Books

● MUNMUN (2018)

"In an alternate reality a lot like our world, every person's physical size is directly proportional to their wealth. The poorest of the poor are the size of rats, and billionaires are the size of skyscrapers. Warner and his sister Prayer are destitute - and tiny. Their size is not just demeaning, but dangerous: day and night they face mortal dangers that bigger richer people don't ever have to think about, from being mauled by cats to their house getting stepped on."

https://books.google.com/books/about/Munmun.html?id=PndDDwAAQBAJ&source=kp_book_description

● THE HATERS (2016)

"Wes and Corey are convinced nothing cool can come of their lame summer at jazz camp, when along comes Ash - all blonde hair and brash words - and cracks their world wide open. Finally, something they can't seem to hate. When Ash convinces them that a great musician is made on the road, the three friends flee camp and begin an epic, hilarious road trip."

https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Haters.html?id=Gt8vCwAAQBAJ&source=kp_book_description