

This sample was written for Scholastic Book Club. The purpose was to mimic the editor's style so that I could take over the job of writing it for her. I was hired by Scholastic for this purpose and other writing jobs however, the Corporate office announced major layoffs the following week so that opportunity was withdrawn.

“Is It Pizza Day Yet?”

Reflections on “Save Me a Seat” by Sarah Weeks and Gita Varadarajan

Many of us would agree that school cafeteria food leaves something to be desired. Something about institutionalized cooking changes the flavor of a home cooked meal until what is placed on the tray is a poor imitation of the real thing. Dry burgers, overcooked hot dogs and, sometimes, ‘mystery meals’ become the norm. Somehow, our children remain immune to the changes and fuel their day with the least offensive options.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m sure the cooking staff tries their best to make the food palatable, if not tasty. The dietary rules and regulations that must be adhered to pose an almost insurmountable obstacle to good-tasting food. Salt, low salt, no salt; no dairy, low-fat dairy, no-fat dairy, lactose free; no nuts, no shellfish, no antibiotics, soy-based, soy free, low sugar, high fiber, vegan; the list is endless. With balancing all these restrictions, having to come up with something the kids want to eat is a formidable task!

The one food that seems to draw children of all ages, and, if we’re being totally truthful, their parents is pizza. That little triangular piece of dough, covered with sauce and cheese, appeals to just about everyone. Walk into any pizzeria and you’ll be amazed at the combinations that have been concocted. Some are so delectable your mouth starts to water on sight; others so bizarre you can’t believe anyone would eat them. Doesn’t matter, with so many available options, this once simple dish now has unlimited appeal. It is so popular that Hasbro made an oven powered by a light bulb so that little girls could make cakes, cookies and pizza by themselves!

So, it should come as no surprise that Sarah Weeks and Gita Varadarajan use Pizza Day to bring the two unlikely protagonists of “Save Me a Seat” together. Ravi, a young Hindu boy, new to America, is a vegetarian who brings his lunch each day. Joe, is a hometown boy all the way, with an appetite as large as his feet. The two have nothing in common – except for the menace of the class bully, Dillon Samreen.

Weeks and Varadarajan use the cafeteria setting to perfection. *“Using the daily school-lunch schedule as a structural device, the authors bring alive a humdrum, ordinary routine, making it crackle with emotion and humor.” Kirkus, starred review.* Joe Sylvester’s hearty appetite gives the reader an appreciation of cafeteria food through the eye of a fellow student. His preoccupation with the daily menu helps his focus, something we learn is not easy for him. Each day, at lunch, he sits at a table by himself, a “zebra” distancing himself from the class predator Dillon.

Into this mix comes Ravi Suryanarayanan, a recent immigrant from Bangalore, India. An exceptional student and athlete in India, Ravi has no doubt that he will easily assimilate into his new school. Even better, having a fellow Indian in the class, ensures he and Dillon will be best friends. It only takes a few days to learn he is sorely mistaken about everything, especially Joe.

“Save Me a Seat” brings us back to a time when we found it difficult to fit in. It could have been a new school, like Ravi, trying out for a sport or joining a club. As we got older, a new job or organization may have posed a challenge. Or maybe trying to make friends in a new neighborhood or church. We’ve all had to go through those awkward first moments of discovery and acceptance. If you were really lucky, you had your own Joe to show you the ropes and ease the transition.

Sarah Weeks is a familiar voice in Children’s Literature with over 50 books published. She was honored with the Rebecca Caudill Young Reader’s Book Award for her novel *So B. It*, which was later made into a movie. Her ability to get into her characters’ heads and relay their thoughts and emotions so honestly is a precious gift that we all can enjoy.

Her collaboration with Gita Varadarajan who, like Ravi, is an immigrant from India, brings a realism to Ravi’s struggles. Her 15 years of teaching in India, combined with her current teaching experiences at the Riverside School in NJ, allow us a glimpse of the culture shock both she and Ravi had to deal with. In an [Interview](#), Gita states “We

need humane education and literature. That's why I went into education. Reading and writing can change the world."

Joe and Ravi's path to friendship was not easy or predictable but it was surely gratifying. Ravi's observation that "Winning is not always about shining the brightest. Sometimes it's about sharing the light with someone who has been waiting in the shadows all along", is a reminder to us all to be open to new experiences and people. You never know where your new best friend will come from; maybe the corner pizza shop!