

# An Analysis of Bridge to Terabithia

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In 1977, Katherine Paterson wrote her second children's book, *Bridge to Terabithia*. After her son lost his childhood friend to a lightning strike (Elliott, 2007), Paterson was inspired to write the book, as is reflected on her dedication page which includes both her son, David, and his friend, Lisa:

"I wrote this book for my son David Lord Paterson, but after he read it he asked me to put Lisa's name on this page as well, and so I do. For David Paterson and Lisa Hill, *banzai*."

Since then, the book has faced numerous challenges, restrictions, and ban attempts. It has been targeted for its inclusion of realistic language, bullying, death, and anti-Christian views. These reasons have either been declared as necessary to the story or as false by the author as well as librarians, teachers, and the review committees which dealt with the challenges. Despite the challenges to the book, it remains highly esteemed in libraries across the country. Its ongoing success is due to Paterson's discrete narrative and commitment to three primary themes: grief, friendship, and overcoming adversity. Paterson handles these themes indirectly throughout the book, allowing the characters actions to carry the weight of the story.

The book is a work of fiction, inspired by true events, following the friendship of two ten-year-old's: farm boy Jesse Aarons and the new neighbor, Leslie Burke. It is set in the time it was written, the late nineteen-seventies, in rural Virginia. Jesse, a secret artist, and Leslie, the new quirky girl, bond over the experience of being an outsider to the life around them, developing a close friendship. Jess and Leslie soon find an untouched forest behind their houses and create an imaginative fantasy world named Terabithia, which they rule over. One day Jess's teacher invites him to visit a museum and, wanting to enjoy a day alone with the beautiful music teacher, he does not invite Leslie. While he is gone, Leslie tries to cross the creek into Terabithia alone and drowns. Jess is left feeling responsible and struggles to cope with grief at a young age. As he

mourns the death of his friend, he builds a bridge over the creek. He invites his little sister, May Belle, into the kingdom as the princess of Terabithia. The themes seen throughout the book are why the story is relatable to many young readers even if they have not experienced the death of another person in their lives. By focusing on themes of grief, friendship, and adversity, Paterson invoked empathy in her readers.

Death is a theme commonly associated with *Bridge to Terabithia*, but little space is given to death itself or the details of Leslie's death. Paterson focuses her attention instead on the grief experienced by Leslie's parents, teachers, and most of all, Jess. This theme is the most explicitly written one by Paterson but maintains a level of discretion by avoiding the use of the word grief in the book. Paterson instead shows the process Jess goes through while trying to understand the loss of his friend as he denies her death. Once, Jess mistakes his own sister, May Belle's, cry for help as Leslie calling out for him. The only position Paterson makes on this theme is expressed through her narrative of Jess beginning to cope with the grief and move on from his pain, setting a tone of hope in the face of tragedy. By showing the aftermath of Leslie's death and the way it changes Jess's life, she speaks to our collective humanness and the scope of his pain, while also showing the scope of his strength in honoring Leslie's life after she is gone.

In addition to the strong theme of grief, Paterson focused the book on the friendship between Jess and Leslie. In the beginning, Jess feels out of place in a house full of sisters and an emotionally distant father who is often seen treating Jess differently than his daughters. Jess's art is not openly encouraged within the home, and he seldom finds time to enjoy being a kid. When Leslie enters his life, their friendship begins to change him, giving him the time and space to experience childhood. . . to grow and develop his own sense of self. Their friendship helps Jess to establish independence over his circumstances and find the magic in the world around them.

This theme is handled subtly by Paterson throughout the entirety of the book. This is not an opinion or a position, but rather an expression of Paterson's value of friendships and the way our bonds help us grow.

Adversity is the third central theme of *Bridge to Terabithia*, which runs parallel to the to friendship as a consistent theme throughout the book. In the beginning, Paterson laid the foundation using school bullies such as Janice Avery, an eighth grader who earned a reputation for being cruel to other students. Shortly after playing a prank on Janice to get revenge, Jess and Leslie find her crying in the bathroom. Leslie talks to her and learns that her dad was abusing her at home. When the entire school found out, Janice felt ashamed and isolated, resulting in her monopolizing the bathroom. Jess is also set as a rural farm boy coming from a family with few resources; his father often at work and asking Jess to work harder. However, after Leslie's death, Jess's dad is the one to comfort him. These two subplots helped Paterson establish a framework of adversity for both Jess and Leslie to overcome with empathy and compassion. Paterson is discreetly using these situations to show her position on dealing with the card's life hands us; that no matter our circumstances, we can be understanding and support one another in overcoming our challenges.

The themes of the book are one reason *Bridge to Terabithia* stands today as one of the most valuable books for children in America. Paterson has taken these rich experiences of humanity and taught us about weathering them through Jess's experiences. Herbert Foerstel has quoted Paterson with saying, "We cannot protect our children from this world, which is a scary place. The only thing we can do is help them develop an inner strength to meet the inevitable challenges they will face," (168). Leslie acted as his guide in a similar way Paterson did as the

author, a subtle figure showing readers a series of choices about how we might show up in the world to be better to ourselves and each other.

Paterson has won numerous awards for her impact on children's literature. Most notably is the John Newbery Medal, for *Bridge to Terabithia*, and the Hans Christian Anderson Award in 1998 for her entire body of work (Foerstel p. 170). 56 years after its original publication in 1977, *Bridge to Terabithia* remains in school libraries across America and on curriculum lists, speaking to its successful legacy. Although the book itself is only 128 pages long (Harper Trophy Ed., 1987) it contains a rich and simple story which introduces children to grief and the undying power of friendship and imagination. Relevant in 1977, and still relevant in 2023, Paterson shows young readers the importance of keeping an open mind and enjoying each day of childhood—because one way or another, it does not last forever. The book's most successful impact has been on children and the guidebook its author created to show them that even in the face of death, they can recover and find the magic again. Due to the nature of the book's realism, it has faced challenges, restrictions, and bans.

*Bridge to Terabithia* has been challenged in school libraries for a variety of reasons, such as its inclusion of bullying, adult language, gossip, death, and its depiction of fantastical children's play. Within twenty years of publication the book was challenged by parents in Nebraska (1986), North Carolina (1990), Connecticut (1990), and California (1991) who sought to have it removed from classroom reading lists. Then, parents in Pennsylvania (1992), Texas (1992), and Kansas (1993) sought to have it removed from the school library, revoking complete access to the book. When Burlington, North Carolina school officials offered an alternative selection to the book, the initiating parent declined, stating, "We care about not only what our daughter reads, but what other children read as well," (Sova p. 57) the school board kept the

book on the reading list. When the book was challenged to be removed from the school library in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, multiple challengers “demanded that all material in the library should reflect the opinions of parents,” (Sova). Although school officials from both these challenges maintained a position of support for *Bridge to Terabithia*, there were other times it was removed from the required reading list. When asked about these challenges to her books, Paterson expressed that the parents who challenge books deserve respect, “Frequently, these are people who are desperate to be heard,” (Foerstel p. 169). As for the reasons *Bridge to Terabithia* has been challenged, Paterson defended against all of them.

The reasons *Bridge to Terabithia* has often been challenged ranges from its inclusion of adult language, such as *damn* and *hell*, as well as providing a negative view of life and a “morbid fascination with death” (Solnit p. 57). Parents have also expressed concern over its depiction of escapism, bullying, and Satanism. Paterson defended Jess’s story by expressing the importance of the realism within it, which is shown through the language and bullying present, as well as its depiction of death. When the book was challenged in 1992 in Pennsylvania, the responding committee defended the book’s use of language by stating that it was “not meant to be disrespectful and that it was integral to the purpose of the story,” (Solnit) for which Paterson gave the same defense. As for the claim to Satanism, Paterson considered herself a devout Christian, stating to Foerstel, “In fact, it would be much more reasonable to accuse me of a pro-Christian bias,” (p. 170). Compared to some banned texts, *Bridge to Terabithia* has remained a well-defended book by its author, librarians, educators, and school administration. Paterson herself expressed the need to listen to parents who challenged books, “We should be less defensive and more sympathetic to these people, because all of us want to protect our children,

don't we?" (Foerstel 169). The arguments for *Bridge to Terabithia*'s removal, although well rebutted, are reasonable considering well intentioned parents.

The concern, and the place we find ourselves in today, is related to the parental statements made in Pennsylvania, where objectors to the book "demanded that all material in the library should reflect the opinions of parents," (Sova p. 57). This suggests an ulterior motive of establishing curriculum and content that reflect personal morality instead of supporting diversity in identity and values. Parents do have the right to express concern or objection over a book, but that authority remains within their family only—not over other children, families, or educators. *Bridge to Terabithia* touches on this subject when Leslie attends church with Jess and his family, showing both Jess and Leslie that different people live different lives but neither one is better nor morally higher than the other.

Today, schools and libraries have an ever-growing list of literature to choose from. Regardless, *Bridge to Terabithia* remains in most, if not all, libraries across the United States. Through challenges, restrictions, and 56 years on shelves, the book continues to be an important piece of literature, both for adults and children. When David Paterson, the authors son, lost his friend Lisa to a tragedy, he was left adrift in a world where literature did not often reflect the emotional experiences of boys. Years later, literature still often fails boys in this way. By writing about her son's experience, Paterson wrote a story for all boys, all children, all people, across the world—because grief, friendship, and adversity are universal experiences. No matter our age, our race, or our circumstances, *Bridge to Terabithia* speaks to the emotional vulnerability of loving and losing people. It speaks to the *importance* of loving people, even if we may lose them, and of remaining compassionate in a world that might seek to bully, to challenge, or to ban.

## References

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