



**The First State of Being by Erin Entrada Kelly**

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## Discussion Questions

1. What is Michael like when the novel opens? How do his interactions with Ridge change him by the end of the book?
2. Discuss the relationship between Michael and his mother. What happened with her last job that makes Michael feel guilty?
3. Who is Mr. Mosley? What role does he play in Michael's life? Discuss Mr. Mosley's advice, "Before you go to sleep at night, ask yourself: Was I the best person I could be today? If the answer is no, do better tomorrow" (p. 101).
4. Delve into the dynamics between Michael and Gibby. How does Michael feel about her? How does she feel about him?
5. What remarkable fact about Gibby's future is revealed at the end of the novel? What foreshadows that future role? How did she end up with the LEGO robotics set?
6. What is peculiar about Ridge? Discuss his interest in 1999 and how his presence impacts Michael and Gibby.
7. Discuss Ridge's description of a mall: "A place filled with contemporary sights and sounds and teenagers and everyday, ordinary life. A place where you can get anything you need in the 1990s and find all kinds of things you didn't know you needed. A place where people shop in real-life, in real places" (p. 77). Compare Ridge's perspective to Michael's.
8. Talk about Ridge's explanation of "the first state of being" as "the present moment. It's the first state of existence. It's right now, this moment, in this car. The past is past. The future is the future. But this, right now? This is the first state, the most important one, the one in which everything matters" (p. 118). How is this concept significant in the novel?
9. Why does Ridge say that revealing where he's from "might destroy the entire space-time continuum" (p. 39)? How could a time traveler affect the past and the future? What does the document in the founder's hall reveal about the impact of Ridge's journey?
10. Discuss the book's structure in which documents from the future are interspersed with scenes in 1999. What does it add to have the future documents? How is the writing in them different from the rest of the novel?

## Author Biography

ERIN ENTRADA KELLY was awarded the Newbery Medal for *Hello, Universe* and a Newbery Honor for *We Dream of Space*. She grew up in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and now lives in Delaware. She is a professor of children's literature in the graduate fiction and publishing programs at Rosemont College, where she earned her MFA, and is on the faculty at Hamline University. Her short fiction has been nominated for the Philippines Free Press Literary Award for Short Fiction and the Pushcart Prize. Before becoming a children's author, Erin worked as a journalist and magazine editor and received numerous awards for community service journalism, feature writing, and editing from the Louisiana Press Association and the Associated Press.

Erin Entrada Kelly's debut novel, *Blackbird Fly*, was a Kirkus Best Book, a School Library Journal Best Book, an ALSC Notable Book, and an Asian/Pacific American Literature Honor Book. She is also the author of *The Land of Forgotten Girls*, winner of the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature; *You Go First*, a Spring 2018 Indie Next Pick; *Lalani of the Distant Sea*, an Indie Next Pick; *Those Kids from Fawn Creek*, named for numerous best-of-the-year lists; and three acclaimed novels for younger readers, *Maybe Maybe Marisol Rainey*, *Surely Surely Marisol Rainey*, and *Only Only Marisol Rainey*, which she also illustrated. She lives in Delaware.

## Reviews

“Kelly (also a Newbery medalist, for *Hello, Universe*) shines when acknowledging today’s readers’ justified fears while showing them that the key to surviving an uncertain road is traveling it in good company. As Ridge encourages Michael to occupy what he calls “the first state of being” — focusing on the here and now, not fixating on a future we can’t control — Michael forges friendships and comes to accept that ‘not knowing is part of life.’” — New York Times Book Review

“This short but suspenseful novel is Rebecca Stead’s *When You Reach Me* meets Tae Keller’s *Jennifer Chan is Not Alone*. Though it takes place at the turn of the millennium, modern readers will be able to identify with Michael’s anxieties over the future of the world, and find his journey compelling.” — BookPage (starred review)

“A teen time traveler from 2199 visits 1999 and befriends an endearing, anxious tween boy in this wholesome and splendidly entertaining middle-grade novel about embracing the unknown. Kelly has written one of the kindest boys in children’s literature.” — Shelf Awareness

“Kelly has deftly assembled a community of empathetically rendered characters, making this an enjoyable, uplifting reading experience. The elements of sci-fi will be enough to sate fans of the genre while remaining approachable for all audiences. A lovable cast buoys this time travel drama by one of the most reliable authors in children’s literature.” — School Library Journal

“An epilogue reveals a delicious, thought-provoking twist on a question posed early on by Kelly: would the disruption of time influence past, present, or future events?” — Publishers Weekly

“Kelly’s memorable character development is on full display as anxious and sensitive Michael learns to embrace the present, while Ridge’s charming misuse of slang adds humor to this amusing ride. A warmhearted blend of nostalgia and futurism.” — Kirkus Reviews

“Newbery winner Kelly gives us a time-travel book that stays grounded, despite the subject matter, and draws on the power of human connection through time and space . . . a solid emotional core will treat readers who love stories about found family and bravery, as well as those who would empathize with Michael’s anxieties about the unknown future.” — Booklist

“Michael serves as an admirable foil to Ridge’s privilege, and the book takes care to highlight his empathy as he struggles to figure out how to find and keep joy in a world filled with pain. Indeed, it is Michael—anxious, vulnerable, and ultimately brave—who will carry readers of all ages to the book’s close.” — Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books

“Kelly neatly grounds the mind-bending what-ifs of cause, effect, and the nature of time with real, present relationships and situations. . . . A well-crafted adventure surrounding a big philosophical idea with a side of middle-grade romance. . . . Tantalizing.” — Horn Book Magazine

Reviews taken from *The First State of Being* book page on Amazon.com

## Miscellaneous

### Extension Activities

#### The Millennium Bug

The book opens by describing Y2K, a.k.a. “The Millennium Bug” or “The Year 2000 Problem,” one of Michael’s worries (p. xi). Find information about Y2K by using print and digital sources, and by talking to adults who remember it. Gather quotes from those sources and use them as a class to create a digital or classroom bulletin board. Drawing from the quotes, hold a classroom discussion about the fears, preparations, and reality of Y2K.

#### Act It Out

Because it features a lot of dialogue, including transcripts of Ridge’s family talking, this novel is perfect for readers theater. In groups, have students create a script by converting a scene into dialogue, starting with a short overview by a narrator. After practicing, present the scenes to the class. (Find advice on readers theater at [aaronshp.com/rt](http://aaronshp.com/rt).)

#### “Your One Wild and Precious Life”

Have students write an essay on one of these quotes or concepts, reflecting on the novel and their lives:

- “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” (p. 49)
- “It’s always a dangerous time to be alive. Depending on who and where you are” (p. 76).“
- Before you go to sleep at night, ask yourself: Was I the best person I could be today? If the answer is no, do better tomorrow” (p. 101).
- “The present moment. It’s the first state of existence. It’s right now, this moment, in this car. The past is the past. The future is the future. But this, right now? This is the first state, the most important one, the one in which everything matters” (p. 118).
- The Conklin Principle: “For every bad outcome you can anticipate, you should consider at least one positive outcome” (p. 149).
- “Everyone makes mistakes. It doesn’t mean you deserve only bad things” (p. 215).

#### Signs of the Times

The novel integrates many examples of popular culture among young people in the US in 1999. As a class, make a list of some of those examples and put them into categories such as music, television, clothing, slang, and so on. In groups, have students choose another decade and research the popular youth culture of the time using print and digital resources. Create a multimedia presentation to share with the class.

### Time Travel: Pro or Con?

Is time travel, if possible, likely to benefit society or harm it? Debate this topic by dividing into groups of four, with two students arguing the affirmative side—for time travel—and two arguing the negative. Follow a debate structure with each side presenting their ideas and then each side explaining why they disagree with the other (rebuttal).