



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Kristin Levine**, author of the critically acclaimed *The Best Bad Luck I Ever Had*, received her BA in German from Swarthmore College and a MFA in film from American University. She spent a year in Vienna, Austria, working as an au pair and has taught screenwriting at American University. Currently, she lives in Alexandria, Virginia, with her husband and two daughters. *The Lions of Little Rock* is her second novel. Visit her at [www.kristinlevine.com](http://www.kristinlevine.com)

**Q: What influences your writing and what specifically inspired you to write *The Lions of Little Rock*?**

My mother was born in Little Rock. When I talked to her about her childhood, she mentioned going to the pool, riding in a plane and listening to the lions roar at night. They were just little details, but somehow they caught my imagination. *The Lions of Little Rock* was also influenced by the fact that as a child my mainly white elementary school was paired with a mainly black school. I loved getting to know so many different types of people and since then, I've always been interested in school integration.

**Q: What is the greatest challenge of writing a fictional work inspired by true events?**

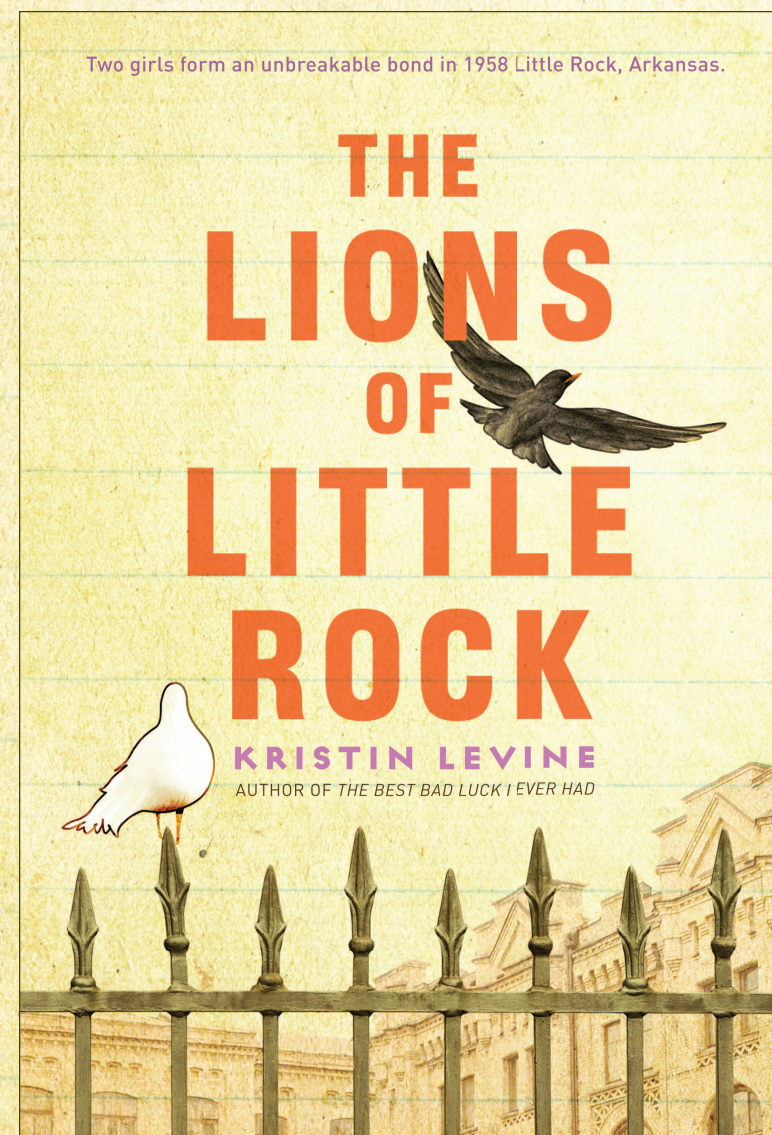
For me, the hardest part is deciding what to leave out. How do I set the scene without making it read like a textbook? How do I describe a conflict without oversimplifying, or bogging the reader down with too many details? How much background is needed about the Little Rock Nine or Buddy Holly or Sputnik, and how do I insert it without being too obvious? My goal is to help the reader learn something new, without losing the flow of a good read.

**Q: As you became entrenched learning about this dark time in American history, did you encounter any particularly unusual or surprising historical facts that you chose to include in the book?**

When I first decided to write a book set in Little Rock, I assumed it would take place during the first year of school integration (1957-58). It was only when I started my interviews with people in Little Rock, that I considered moving it to the next year. The story of the Little Rock Nine had been told before by those who were there—how could I do a better job? But the story of the “Lost Year” (1958-59), when all the high schools in Little Rock were closed, was not as widely known. I had never heard of school closure being used to prevent integration, even though it had happened in my home state of Virginia as well. Eventually, I decided to set my book during the “Lost Year” in hopes of giving this part of American history a little more attention.

**Q: The issue of finding one’s voice is a recurring theme throughout *The Lions of Little Rock*. What inspired you to focus on this throughout the novel?**

When I started working on this book, I struggled with defining the character of Marlee. My editor kept encouraging me to work on her “voice,” and I guess at some point I took her very literally. I started to think about a girl I had known in middle school. Like Marlee, she rarely said a word. I spoke to her a couple of times, but when she didn’t respond, I lost interest. Over the years, I’ve always remembered her and wondered what would have happened if I had not given up so easily on being her friend. When I realized that “speaking up” was also a theme in the work of the Women’s Emergency Committee to Open Our Schools, it seemed like the right decision to make Marlee a “quiet” girl. I think sometimes everyone struggles with figuring out who they are and what they believe in, even those of us who like to talk.



**The Lions of Little Rock**

By Kristin Levine

978-0-399-25644-8 (HC) • \$16.99 • Ages 10 up

Twelve-year-old Marlee is not a talker and she doesn’t have many friends. That all changes when she meets Liz, the new girl at school. Liz is bold and brash and not afraid to say what’s on her mind. She even helps Marlee find the courage to do the unthinkable—speak in front of her entire class. But then Liz is gone, without even a good-bye. And the rumor is that Liz was a colored girl caught passing for white. Marlee doesn’t know about that. All she knows is she misses her friend. But staying friends with Liz might mean more than finding the courage to speak. It might just mean finding the courage to take on segregation.

This guide was created by Rose Brock, a teacher, school librarian, and doctoral candidate at Texas Woman’s University, specializing in children’s and young adult literature. Guide meets Common Core standards. For more downloadable discussion guides, please visit [www.penguin.com/teachersandlibrarians](http://www.penguin.com/teachersandlibrarians)



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- As the novel opens, readers learn that Little Rock has been a hotbed of national conflict due in large part to the governor’s stand against integration. Given what you understand about the story’s setting during this perilous time in the history of the American South, predict what will be the most difficult challenges to be faced by Marlee and Liz.
- Consider the novel’s title. Explain the significance of it, and offer evidence of the ways it supports the themes of Levine’s work.
- When considering Sally’s poor treatment of Marlee, Judy asks Marlee why she chooses to be Sally’s friend, and Marlee thinks, “This was true. But she was also familiar. I like familiar.” What can readers learn about Marlee from her explanation? Are you the kind of person that craves the things that you know best? If so, why?
- Early in the novel, Marlee shares, “You see to me, people are like the things you drink.” She likens her brother to a glass of sweet iced tea on a hot summer day, her father to a glass of milk, cold and delicious, that on occasion goes sour. Her mother is like strong hot black tea, while her sister is like an ice cold Coca-Cola. Do you agree with Marlee’s assessment of her family? Why or why not?
- Describe your early observations of Marlee’s family. Do you consider them a strong family unit? How do the opposing viewpoints regarding the issue of integration impact their relationship? Are there any ways that make them similar or different than your own family?
- Marlee shares that she prefers numbers to words. Why do numbers provide her comfort? In what ways are words unsettling to Marlee? In your personal life, do you know anyone like Marlee?
- In your opinion, how do Marlee’s actions serve as a catalyst for her mother? In what ways does recognizing her daughter’s convictions help her grow as a person? Offer textual evidence to support your position.
- Describe Liz. What makes her such a dynamic character? Does she remind you of your classmates? In your opinion, is she a good friend to Marlee? Why or why not?
- Though she initially finds him extremely handsome, Marlee’s attraction to JT lessens the more she interacts with him. What are some of the specific reasons for her change of heart? Is she justified in feeling the way she does? Do you agree with her assessment of his character? What role does his family play in making him the person he is?
- After she leaves Marlee’s school, consider the treatment Liz faces at her new school; why are her classmates unkind to her? In your opinion, are they justified in the way they behave?
- Discuss the character traits that allow Marlee and Liz to ultimately persevere. How are these characters similar to each other? In what ways are they different? Which character are you most like?
- After a discussion of the whereabouts of the hairbrush Sally planned to discard after having lent it to Liz, Sally tells Marlee, “What you say with your friends is one thing. How you really feel, that’s another.” What can you infer about Sally’s attitude toward her friends? To Liz? Why does this change leave Marlee feeling sympathetic toward her?
- Throughout the course of the novel, Marlee’s family learns that the world as they know it will never be the same. In what ways will it be better or worse for them? Have you had an experience that reshaped your life? In what ways have you changed due to this incident?
- How does time spent working to develop her friendship with Liz help Marlee to better understand herself?
- Using the phrase, “In this story, belonging means...”, discuss the issue of belonging in *The Lions of Little Rock*. Explain your choices.

As a pre-reading activity, have students complete an anticipation guide structured in the following manner:

BEFORE READING	AFTER READING	STATEMENTS
<input type="checkbox"/> Children always need adults to help them make the right choices.	<input type="checkbox"/> If you disagree with choices made by a leader, it is better to remain silent than to take action and risk consequences.	<input type="checkbox"/> Acceptance is the most important part of a relationship with family and friends. <input type="checkbox"/> A government should infringe on a person’s individual rights if it’s for the greater good of many.

Instruct students to complete the guide by placing a “+” sign in the box next to the statements for which they agree, and a “0” next to those for which they disagree. They must commit to agreement or disagreement—there are no conditional responses. Students should be assured that there are no correct or incorrect positions.

Once students have had the opportunity to complete the guide, the teacher reads each statement aloud and has students who agree show it by standing or raising their hands. Each student should be permitted to provide their rationale for agreeing if they wish.

**Integration of Central High in Little Rock:** The integration of Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas was a watershed event in American Civil Rights history and the catalyst of the closing of schools in 1958. Using information provided by the Little Rock School District and the State of Arkansas’ historical archives, have students research and prepare a Glogster poster ([www.glogster.com](http://www.glogster.com)) which details an overview of the events and the key players.

**Create a Character Trait Silhouette:** In groups, have students identify and list at least 10 traits, values, or goals possessed by the main character in the text. Then choose a member of the group whose silhouette they’ll trace onto butcher paper. The silhouette should be “life size” and should reflect the physical traits of a book character. It’s ok to modify as they draw. Next, the groups will cut out this silhouette and include the 10 values from their list. These need to be the most important traits of the character. For each trait a quote that supports the description needs to be included. Also, they need to include correct parenthetical documentation.

**Write and Perform a Readers’ Theatre:** Have students select a favorite scene from *The Lions of Little Rock* and write and perform a Readers’ Theater production. Assign each student a different part to play—whether they’re an actor or the narrator or part of the set crew, encourage the whole class to get involved! Have a group of students design a playbill with a summary of the story action, the names of the characters, bios of the actors, etc. Then invite students’, parents’ and other classes in your school to attend the performance!

