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## Review of *The First Thing About You* Written by Chaz Hayden

**Educator Reviewer:** Dr. Anne Rose Loureiro Hester, HS ELA

**Student Reviewer:** Emma Henline, 9th grade



Hayden, C. (2022). *The First Thing About You*.  
Candlewick.

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**Adult Review:**

*The First Thing About You* by Chaz Hayden follows a transitional time in the life of the main character, fifteen year old Harris, when his family moves from California to New Jersey. Seeing this change as an opportunity to reinvent himself, Harris who is bound to a wheelchair and requires full time care from a nurse and his family due to his muscular atrophy, makes it his goal to no longer hide behind his wheelchair. The novel brings you on Harris's journey and the many friendships he creates, destroys, and rebuilds as he navigates this new journey - sophomore year of high school in a new place, with new people, and hopefully a new Harris.

This young adult novel appeals to students in upper middle grades through high school students and even adults. The dynamic characters provide opportunities for readers of differing backgrounds to see both a window and mirror into the lives of Harris and his friends. Harris's parents provide an adult perspective that allows readers to understand the highs and lows that come with advocating for a child who is immobile, while Harris's friends who come from different high school cliques, both align and break the stereotypes of high school friend groups. Hayden takes you on a journey into the personal lives of all the characters, making it hard to not empathize, sympathize, get angry and even fall in love with all of them.

While the novel does appeal to ages as young as upper middle grades, there are instances of adult language and content in the novel. If being used in a classroom or for placement in a school media center, teachers and media specialists should vet the novel for appropriateness for their school audience. As a whole, the language and content does not deter from the purpose of the novel, which is to provide a voice for a student who struggles with a physical handicap and to let the readers see that Harris, despite his medical struggles, is just like any other fifteen year old boy.

**Student Review:**

Regardless of your reading preferences, I would recommend *The First Thing About You* to everyone. Chaz Hayden's story about Harris, a fifteen-year-old boy who has spinal muscular atrophy, depicts life and emotion in a way I've never seen before. Harris's perspective sheds a whole new light on how people with such conditions might think, and it's truly eye-opening. Chaz Hayden's writing is beautiful, it's packed with humor, but also has moments that show the painful and difficult sides of life.

Disabilities, mental health, loss, and grief are not nearly talked about as much as they should be, and when they are, it's not approached in an effective way. It is extremely important for people to see situations similar to their own in stories. We need to be able to relate to things and feel as if we are not alone in our experiences. This book does a wonderful job at this by going over all those situations in a respectable and enlightening manner. Reading about all of these characters' struggles makes them seem more realistic; it demonstrates that life isn't perfect, which I respect. *The First Thing About You* doesn't make up a sob story about these things, but it also doesn't bring them up in a superficial way with no emotion attached. It presents them in a way people would experience them in real life, which is critical for this world to see.

I'm 15, the same age as Harris, and I thought it depicted high school life quite realistically, without all the sugar-coating and unrealistic scenarios. Harris, Zander, Nory, and many other characters in the book speak in the same way that my friends and other students do. This creates a sense of familiarity and it makes it easy to relate to. High school books always feel extremely cliché, which often drives me away from them because I find it difficult to put myself into the story, but this one didn't. It brings up sensitive and difficult topics that are often glossed over but occur frequently. I know from other high schoolers and myself that it is difficult finding books that depict school as more than just some magical fairytale. That is why I heavily recommend this book to other people in school. If you struggle to imagine and insert yourself into stories because they seem so far-fetched, you'll have a much easier time with this one.

*The First Thing About You* managed to provoke every single one of my emotions. You will never be bored while reading it. On one page you can be laughing uncontrollably, but the next crying over one singular section for a whole hour, which is honestly just like life. This book has altered my perspective of this world. It made me look around and pay attention to how we treat the people around us and how we respond to their situations. Harris's story is unlike anything I've read and I'm sure many others could agree. Sometimes we need an eye-opener, and Chaz Hayden's writing did that for me.