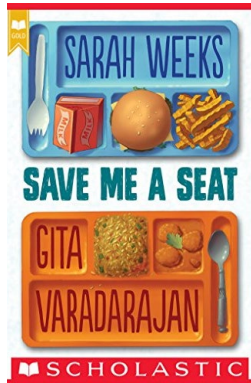




## Winner, High School Category



Essayist: Pranav, age 14, Independence High School

Advocating for: *Save Me a Seat* by Sarah Weeks and Gita Varadarajan

When I first saw the two question prompt, I started to wonder what books I've read that have impacted me the most as a person. I thought about this topic day and night until I saw a student at my school get bullied for his culture and his differences from the "normal" or "popular" students. This sight reminded me of the perfect book to talk about, *Save me a seat* by Gita Varadarajan.

The story is about a stereotypical Indian boy from Bangalore who has just immigrated to the US and started to attend school. He gets mocked because of his accent even though he speaks English fluently. He gets made fun of because of the food he packs for lunch, students go on to say it smells terrible, excluding him from their lunch table. He gets in trouble for using the wrong method of multiplication even though it gives him the same correct answer. He gets made fun of for playing cricket, for it is not usually played in the US.

In the 6th grade, when I first read this book, I was a kid who had no idea about the history or culture of where I had come from. I hated going to poojas (Indian cultural parties). I hated wearing kurtas (Cultural wear for men). I hated worshipping Indian gods. I hated eating Indian foods. I hated calling Indian culture and Indian heritage mine. I had always seen it as a waste of time and nothing else. I chose *Save me a seat* for an English project right before the Covid Pandemic hit, we got to keep our books until the pandemic was over. I started to read the book and after the first page I couldn't put the book down. I was fascinated by how Ravi was not ashamed of his culture and heritage but he was proud and cherished all of it. I wanted to be like him. I wanted to love my culture not because I had to, but because I wanted to. I started asking my parents many questions about my culture and India's history, to the point where they thought something was wrong with me. Throughout the quarantine, I grew to love my culture and wanted to celebrate it each and every moment of my life.



This book is close to my heart because it changed my view on Indian culture and has drawn me closer to my heritage. *Save me a seat* also shows the struggles that many immigrants, not only from India, but from all throughout the world go through. They are constantly ridiculed because of their accents, the food they eat, and their culture. I would recommend others to read this book, and take some time to think about where you're from. *Save me a seat* shines a light on the difficulties of being an immigrant while also helping me realize that nothing is wrong with me and my heritage. I want others who might also struggle with this same issue, to read this book and embrace their true origin.