

Letters About Literature

2018 Winning Letters by Indiana students

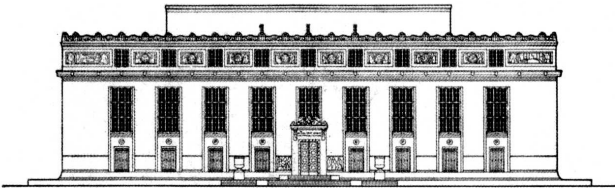
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the James & Madeleine *McMullan* FAMILY FOUNDATION
LettersAboutLiterature



Published 2018



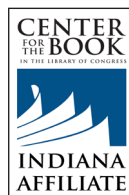
Indiana State Library
140 N. Senate Avenue
Indianapolis, IN 46204

Letters About Literature

Letters About Literature is a national reading-writing contest for readers in grades 4 through 12 made possible by a generous grant from the Dollar General Literacy Foundation, with additional support from gifts to the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, which promotes the contest through its affiliate Centers for the Book, state libraries and other organizations. The Indiana contest is supported by the Indiana Center for the Book in the Indiana State Library and The James & Madeleine McMullan Family Foundation. We hope you will participate in the 2018–2019 contest!

What is a Center for the Book?

Are there any books in the Indiana Center for the Book? Not really...Starting in 1984, the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress began to establish affiliate centers in the 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands. These Center for the Book affiliates carry out the National Center's mission in their local areas. Programs like this one highlight their area's literacy heritage and call attention to the importance of books, reading, literacy, and libraries. The State Centers gather annually at the Library of Congress for an Idea Exchange Day.



Congratulations from the Indiana Center for the Book

We are excited to honor your work in our 2018 book.

We offer a special thanks to the James and Madeleine McMullan Family Foundation for supporting our Youth Literary Day and Letters About Literature Award Ceremony that was held on April 28, 2018 at the Indiana State Library. Our Youth Literary Day was a great event that included writing workshops, author signings, and readings of several of the award winning letters. We also offer a special thanks to the Indiana State Library Foundation, whose support we are constantly thankful for.

Every year we do our best to keep the works in this book true to what the child submitted. Sometimes there are grammatical errors, but we like to think that these errors remind us of the youthfulness of our writers. It should also be noted that several letters won prizes and are not included in this book due to lack of permission by the parent at the time of printing.

The letters in this collection are heartfelt interpretations from young writers that touch on a variety of difficult themes including gender equality, growing up, losing a loved one, adjusting to a move, cancer and health, being adopted, racism, body image, war, and other serious topics that our Indiana youth struggle with daily.

The Letters About Literature contest is changing. This is the last year that students are able to submit letters to the contest through the mail. In the future, letters for the national contest will be submitted through an online portal. I have been reading our state's letters for six years and have noticed subtle changes in the topics that the students write about. Technology and social media are becoming increasingly important in the lives of our youth. It makes sense for the contest to move with the times and become more digitally accessible. It might spell other changes for the contest as well. We hope the diversity of our writers continues to deepen and that the quality of the letters increases. For now, please enjoy the letters from the 2018 contest.

Suzanne Walker – Director, Indiana Center for the Book

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| Tara Gross – <i>West Noble Middle School</i> | Kyah Wright – <i>Belzer Middle School</i> |
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Lynn Smith — *Northwestern High School*
Reagan Swinford — *New Tech Academy @ Wayne High School*

The Indiana Author Letter Prize

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Awarded to the highest placing letter written to an Indiana Author

*Kayli Hoffman – *Jasper Middle School*

Letter to John Green, Indiana Author of *The Fault in Our Stars*

Level I

Level I
1st Place

Yehuda Noff

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Sheila Cole

Author of *The Dragon in the Cliff*

Dear Sheila Cole,

When I first opened your book it was like a door to a different understanding that had opened and invited me inside to learn its secrets. At my first glance of *The Dragon in the Cliff*, I thought it was a story similar to *Pete's Dragon*. Instead I got a shock; a book that took me on a roller coaster of emotions. I looked at the part where Mary becomes a fossil hunter. This is what caught my eye, because I was in a similar predicament. We both got taunted for being different.

Many kids get bullied in school, but I think my story is tougher. I was born an Orthodox Jew in Maryland. There I was fine. I then moved to Israel and lived there for four years. I was happy. After that I moved to Ohio for one year. Again, I was fine. Then I came to Indiana. I threw open the classroom door and took a look around. The kids looked nice, and I thought: "Maybe I'll fit in here too." That was quite a wrong thought. For once, I didn't fit. The school was like a jigsaw puzzle but my piece just couldn't fit in. Most everyone else didn't keep Kosher or Shabbat, the Sabbath. I didn't know what to do. I was trapped in a vortex of emotions swirling around. It seemed to be whispering to me: "Fit in. Become like us." But I didn't. The vortex became stronger and started following me, trying to sweep me up when I was off guard.

Then another obstacle came. This one which I couldn't run away from: Words. The most powerful weapon in existence. You can ruin millions of lives with only one word. I was getting teased about my clothing. I had always worn collared shirts either plain or striped, while everyone was wearing Adidas, Under Armour, and Nike. Then the biggest blow came my way. My Great-Grandmother passed away. I was so sad I couldn't even pay attention to the taunting. But that was in third grade and now I'm in sixth, and it's just gotten worse. Just like when Mary's father passed away and she also had to deal

with taunting. Then during one of my classes, we were told to read your book. Instead of opening to the first chapter called “The Dragon Bursts Out of the Cliff,” I opened to “I am Lost.” And that was exactly how I felt. Your book guided me into being a wall of bedrock. Just like Mary. I learned that I am who I am and should not try to become like everyone else; to fight back against tyranny just like she did at school. Unmoving, unwilling to give in. Your book stopped the vortex and put everything how it was before, and now I fit in.

Sheila Cole, thank you. Thank you for stopping the vortex. Thank you for showing me the light. Thank you for making me proud of who I am. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Sincerely,
Yehuda Noff

Level I
2nd Place

Audriana Varner

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Alan Gratz

Author of *Refugee*

Dear Mr. Gratz,

It was the middle of a dark night when my mom escaped at the age of nine. Laos had been her home since she was nine and leaving for a new and safer place had never been something she had thought about. When my mom told those stories I never really thought about how much she has been through and how a place that you love dearly could be the place where you are the most vulnerable. I started asking myself questions about how I would feel leaving my whole world behind for something else where I would stand alone feeling bare and almost unwanted in a new and intimidating world around me. Then I picked up *Refugee*.

My mother, now living in America, still has recurring thoughts about her old life. She talks about how she could have died and how everything she had was left behind to be burnt by the government. She also talks about how her old life was full of regular days, one just like everybody else's. This made me think about how a regular life of a child about my age could change abruptly without a warning. The book *Refugee* made me think about how my home to me is the safest and most comforting place in the world. I would think of home as a place that I could call my own and do what I want. But, when I opened and read the first few pages of the book I realized I had opened a doorway to things I never in the whole world would have thought of.

I imagined my mother, how she felt leaving her favorite place in the world knowing it was dangerous but still wanting to stay. It was like a nightmare where you want to wake up but you also don't really want to or how it was like she was watching a movie of her life and it just paused. She left her friends, her home, almost a part of herself there. The book made me think of all those things like how those kids my age would almost hate their home in some special kind of way. They

are in constant fear of being hurt because of who they are, or having a chance of dying any second. They even know that there is a better place that is full of freedom and liberty only a few hundred miles away. All of this made me quickly realize how lucky I am that my home is safe and welcoming and that I am not stuck in any of their positions.

The book *Refugee* changed and opened me to a whole new world. You helped me learn to appreciate what I have and be thankful for all the small things in life. No matter how small or big it is, it would be a blessing to someone else. *Refugee* has taught me something new that still and always will be a wonder. Thank you for helping me learn to be thankful for what I have and opening a new world of thoughts to me.

Sincerely,
Audriana Varner

Level I
3rd Place

Lauren Nolan

Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Suzanne Collins

Author of *The Hunger Games*

Dear Suzanne Collins,

The Hunger Games series you wrote has affected so many people (myself included) in infinite ways. Your storytelling is so imaginative and entertaining. Your writing is so vivid, I feel as if I am truly in the story. *The Hunger Games* trilogy has changed my mind, touched my heart, and inspired me to work a little bit harder, be a little bit kinder, and learn a little bit more about the person I am.

In your book *The Hunger Games*, I loved learning about Katniss Everdeen's emotional past. The way you revealed Katniss to your readers reminded me of a puzzle. You gradually gave readers pieces of information until her unique personality became clear. Katniss is the most relatable, powerful, and passionate protagonist with whom I've ever had the pleasure of sharing a journey. Every one of the relationships Katniss formed in your books was so truthful and immensely strong that I couldn't help but be drawn in, and I was unable to put your books down. Katniss' fearless devotion to doing the right thing captured my attention and wouldn't let it go! I was inspired to become a better leader and to be less afraid of challenges in my life because of the qualities I found in Katniss Everdeen.

I think fear is the emotion we as humans think about the most and we as animals react to the quickest. Self-consciousness is the fear of what others think about you (a fear we are all quite familiar with). As a pre-teen, I know exactly what it's like to worry about what someone else thinks about me, just as Katniss does over and over again in her life. In the interviews, she wets her lips to try to coax the shy little words out of hiding. I find myself doing the same thing, standing in front of the classroom, willing my brain to let the words out of my mouth. Katniss falters again in the midst of pulling the bow string back to release an arrow, wondering if she's doing the right thing, not unlike how I overthink every crucial decision I make. Yet again, our

heroine doubts herself, wondering if she is performing well enough to guarantee survival for herself and others. Meanwhile I'm stressing over if I studied enough for the next quiz. I recognized a lot of emotions that I feel often in *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay*. The presence of fierce hatred, steadfast companionship, tenacious devotion, intense compassion, overwhelming tension, prevailing perseverance, and unconditional love are so strong in all three of these breathtaking novels, I was enthralled from the very first page. All of those significant emotions were presented in the way only you can portray them, and I enjoyed every second.

Obviously, I've never had to fight my peers to the death or had to be the inspiration of a full scale rebellion. However, I am extremely competitive and I believe in standing up for justice. I love participating in all of the academic opportunities I can such as M.A.T.H Bowl, Spell Bowl, and Science Bowl. I also am an activist in Student Council, and I often use Katniss as a positive role model in my own life.

Your outstanding series revealed to me the importance of knowing what you believe in and doing anything and everything you can to fight for those beliefs. I am confident now that I must never back down when I stand in the face of fear. I learned more about defending those who might not deserve it and understanding that those who love you always will. I now know how important it is to be so much more than a piece in someone else's games.

I want to thank you Ms. Collins. Because of your books, I am a different person now than I was before I read them. The things your books taught me will stay with me forever. I had an amazing experience following Katniss on her odyssey as she fought through

her hardships and heartaches until she finally found sanctuary in the happiness and love she deserved. I was heartbroken to turn the last page and end the amazing series before I realized that the trilogy will never truly leave me. Now I know that you and your books will always be a part of me. I will carry a piece of Katniss in me wherever I go for the remainder of my life, because only very special books can stay with you forever.

The girl on fire has blazed the trail and proven to me that one young woman can change the world. I feel as if Katniss has spoken to me saying, “I believe that you can do the things you fear, you can use your own two feet to stand back up and move forward after you fall, and you can find your voice and use it to make a difference in this imperfect world!”

Slowly and silently, like Gale appearing in the woods on a crisp, cool, autumn day, I have accepted Katniss’ demand. I have let Katniss make her way into my heart. She seems content there. Although, sometimes I think she is shooting arrows at my emotion buttons, turning them on and off, on and off. Half of the time she has way too many on at once! However, I let her do what she wants with them. Katniss is a treasure I will always cherish. No matter where my games will take me, I want Katniss to play them alongside me.

May the odds be ever in your favor,
Lauren Nolan

Level I Honorable Mentions

Yael Epstein

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Robert Munsch

Author of *Love You Forever*

Dear Robert Munsch,

When I was little, my parents used to read books to my sisters and me every night. *Love You Forever* was one of our favorites. We would sit in our parents' laps and they would sing the special song in the book to us. It was not as if they were simply reading the book, it was as if they were telling my sisters and me exactly how much we are loved. Thinking back on it, my parents must have read the book close to twenty times! When we would near the end, my sisters and I would ask our parents crazy questions always ending with "Would you still love us then?" I remember one of my sisters asking my mom something like, "Even if we tracked muddy boots into the house and said bad words and made a huge mess, would you still love us then?" Our parents always replied with a firm yes. I remember that as if it was yesterday.

When I was very young, I had a kidney problem. If not taken care of, I could lose a kidney. It got really bad when I turned three. One day, when I was visiting family in a different state, I got very sick. My parents rushed me to the emergency room. My parents always stayed by my side, especially during my surgery, which was many months later. I remember that day, walking through the hallways of the hospital with my parents by my side. I was not very nervous, knowing that they would be with me. When I woke up, I remember my parents were standing over me. I asked them if they were there the whole time. They replied with a firm yes. At that moment, I felt like I was covered in a thick blanket of love. Despite the difficult surgery that I was undergoing, my parents watched the entire time. At that moment, this was all that I knew: My parents truly love me.

The mother in *Love You Forever* feels that emotion of true love towards her son. She always sang her song to him, no matter the conditions that they were in. Every person that loves another person

has their little way of showing their love. The way that the mother in *Love You Forever* shows her love is through that sweet song that she sings. My family's ways of showing their love are our family cuddles. We all hold each other close and sometimes read a book or just talk. Those family cuddles are where we first read *Love You Forever*. The little ways of showing love between families are the bonds that hold them together.

The bond between the mother and her son in *Love You Forever*, enabled their family to never stop loving each other. When the son passed on the special song, he made sure that the thin rubber band holding the family together never broke. I want to do the same thing for my family. When I grow up and have children, I hope that I will pass the family cuddles on. Whenever somebody has a family cuddle in the future, I will think of my family and how much they love each other. This passing on of traditions is what will enable my family's love to never end. Love is the today. Love is the tomorrow. Love is (there is no was with true love) the yesterday.

Sincerely,
Yael Epstein

Brooklyn Garner

Blair Pointe Elementary, Peru

Letter to J. K. Rowling

Author of *The Harry Potter Series*

Dear J .K. Rowling,

We all have thought about death at one point. I know I have. About a year ago, my aunt passed away from cancer. We all knew it was coming, including me, but I thought I had already accepted that she was going to die. Dealing with it happening was a lot harder than I thought. I couldn't think straight, and school got harder for me because I would be thinking of her a lot. I didn't talk to anyone about it, and I just threw it into conversation with my friends one day as if it was nothing. I thought that the horrible feeling in my stomach would go away after a while, but it didn't. I still thought of her daily from then on.

Fast forward to the ending months of 2017. These last few months of the year are usually fun ones, with Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. One day my mom came home in tears. She sat me down on my bed and told me that my cousin had just got into a car accident and was pronounced brain dead. This certain cousin was my old babysitter, and my friend. Trying to comprehend that she was never going to show up to any of these family events that were happening in these supposed to be "fun months" was even harder to deal with than my aunt's death. New emotions were released, and I didn't know what to do anymore. I fell even deeper into this hole I dug, and I had no way of getting out. Just like my aunt's death, I didn't talk to anyone about it, but just threw it out into conversation one day. It felt like my brain was mush and slowly leaking out of my ears.

Around this time, I found your *Harry Potter* series. I was addicted, and got through the first two in about two weeks. When I started reading the third book, it felt like I was shot. A sudden wave of emotions came over me, and I started to cry. Wounds I thought healed opened, and I was a mess. I compared Voldemort to the cancer that stole away my aunt, just like he did with Harry's parents. Voldemort was also the driver that killed my cousin. The way Harry

deals with death in that book, and how he tries to accept that he is going to die, really changed my perspective on death.

Instead of fearing death, and hating it for taking my family, it feels more natural than it did before. Instead of this scary monster that was eventually going to take away my loved ones from me, it seems more like a vacation you go on forever. I also know now that my aunt and cousin are happy wherever they are, and they would want me to be happy too, not wallowing about the inevitability of death, that will eventually take us all. Although I wish they lived longer to see more of the world, I am now at peace with my aunt and cousin's death. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for teaching me the value of life and to never take people for granted.

Sincerely,
Brooklyn Garner

Reid Hardin

Crestview Elementary, Indianapolis
Letter to James Patterson and Chris Tebbetts
Authors of *Public School Superhero*

Dear James Patterson and Chris Tebbetts,

Do you know those times when something exceeds your expectations? Such as people. When you first look at a person you don't think much, you see people every day, but as you get to know them you realize they are a very special, lively, good-natured person. Or a form of entertainment like an interesting TV show, a fun video game, or perhaps, just a downright awesome book. This was *Public School Superhero* for me. It gave me a new hobby to explore, and it taught me something that I never thought this book would.

Despite my name, Reid, and the countless number of people making the same jokes about my name, reading was probably my least favorite subject. I didn't get poor grades in literature, or despise the subject. It just didn't stand out to me, especially in this technology-driven world we live in where you can easily pick up a video game to play, and watch anything you want with a click of a few buttons. So as you can guess, going to the school library wasn't as captivating for me compared to the rest of my class that enjoyed reading. I saw the bright red tomato book cover and said, "Sure. Why not?" and went along with my day. Then I laid my book on my desk, and opened it up. Within the first five minutes of reading, I loved it.

On the surface the story looks like a regular children's book that your teacher would read to you, and the average reader is going to perceive it that way. I perceived it that way when I first read it. I first thought about the book, and just saw it as a story filled with adventure. This book was more than that. This book was a necessity because there were things going on in my life. One thing is that my brother has a very serious condition. My brother has autism. My family has a couple of t-shirts with ribbons. So I haven't had the experiences of having a brother that I can hang out with, and relate to. This is always in the back of my head, but this book made me joyful. It made me forget about the sad things, and I had an adventurous time reading. *Public School Superhero* also serves as a good time, a story,

a book, and a piece of entertainment, but what people don't know is that it also serves as a life lesson. Not only did this anecdote make me feel better for the time I was reading it, but it told me something that I will keep forever.

Before reading I felt setbacked, and disadvantaged. I have good friends, good grades, enjoy playing sports, and my life is pretty good. So why do I feel disadvantaged? First of all, my race. Being African American. Some people get discouraged just for the way they look or born into, and I just so happen to fall into that group of people. The second reason is my age. As I look around, adults like parents and teachers seem to have all the power. I mean you aren't going to see a kid teacher, a kid mayor, or a kid president. Which, I absolutely understand why, but I just feel like I have no voice of reason. I am a young African American kid in the 6th grade. That sounds familiar. That is exactly what the main character Kenny is like. The main character really connected to me, and I could see myself in his shoes sometimes. Being able to connect with the main character added to the story, but better yet it also added to the moral.

What I learned from this book is that no matter who you are, and what you look like, you can still make a difference. All it takes is some hard work, and a little courage. This book is what I needed in this time of my life. Not to mention it is just a fun book to read, and it is also refreshing to see diversity in the characters. Thank you for making me enjoy reading, and take a break from my phone or laptop. Thank you for proving that your books are more than to just make readers laugh. Thank you for teaching me this valuable lesson that I was missing. I would have never thought I would get this from your book.

A wiser reader,
Reid Hardin

Adanna Mbanu

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Robin Herrera

Author of *Hope is a Ferris Wheel*

Dear Ms. Herrera,

It's not every day that you find a good book that changes you emotionally and your perspective of things all around. Your book *Hope is a Ferris Wheel* helped me realize just that.

This book helped me realize that different is good. I know, teachers and guidance counselors always tell people these types of things. But, I never really believed them. I always thought that if you looked the same, wore the same clothes, and talked about the same things as everybody else, that was good. That no one would make fun of you. Well, boy was I wrong.

Star Mackie is a very interesting character. Star doesn't care what other people say to her and she doesn't care that she's different than everybody else. She's basically the person that everyone strives to be. But, the characters in the book just don't get that that's a great thing. Now, that's where I got confused. I mean come on people - does anyone ever pay attention to the signs in school that say "No bullying" or "Being different is great."? You wouldn't know because all those kids care about is where they live or what they wear.

I'm a 6th grade girl that has moved twice in the last year, and I know what it's like to be different. The first time I moved was across the country. So, I can totally relate to Star. At the new school you don't know anyone and nobody knows you. It's almost like you're a ghost. You eat lunch alone because you don't have the courage to ask anyone if you can sit with them. You play at recess alone, you hate your teachers, and you really just want to go home! I don't have to imagine that because that was me for the first couple of days of 5th grade. It got much better the next week though, except for the whole teacher thing. My 6th period teacher was so mean! But anyway, I made some really great friends, just like Star met Genny. At the end of the school year my parents told me we were moving across town, so I would have to go to the other middle school in town. It hurt a lot. But, at the end of the day it just built character.

After reading your book I realized that being new or different doesn't matter. It's about what's inside that counts. People think differently on what hope can be. Hope can be a dirty window, a raindrop, or dust in the wind. For me, hope is training wheels because you start with something small. Then, you get better at something until you finally are the best that you can be at that specific thing.

Adanna Mbanu

Arshia Patel

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to R. J. Palacio

Author of *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

Apparently, it's weird to have allergies. Apparently, it's weird to have acid reflux. Apparently, it's weird to have asthma. Apparently, it's a disease to have eczema. Apparently, people aren't very accepting at school. It was only until after reading your magnificent creation of words that I realized I had to stop taking "apparently" so seriously. After reading your book *Wonder*, I gently put it down on a table. Then, I took a moment to just think. Right then and there, I began to cry, tear after tear. Tears of sadness because of the way Auggie was treated when he first started school. And tears of joy because I realized that I wasn't alone. Your piece of beautiful literature changed my perspective the moment the first tear departed from my eye. Your simple, yet so very powerful words helped me find that there are others like Auggie and me out there, and that "apparently" didn't always have to be apparent to the way I think about myself. Those words of yours taught me to cope with my feelings and stand up for myself and what I believe in.

I have never learned so much from a fiction book ever in my life. Your fictional characters taught me to truly love myself. However, what did your book change? My life. What was my life like? Well, that answer is a little longer. I'll have to travel back to the land of "apparently." I have dairy allergies, and I am often bullied about that. Why can't people just mind their own business? I have acid reflux, and that makes me eat a little less than others. Why is it bad to weigh a little less than everyone else? I also have asthma, and people talk behind my back and give me dirty looks, just because I can't do everything in gym. To add on to this long list of problems, I have eczema, a skin disease, and people think it's contagious. It's kind of like the plague that went around in Auggie's school.

A normal lunch at school in third grade would result in someone taking my Oreo and eating it because I was "allergic" to it. News flash; Oreos don't have real milk in them. A birthday party would

result in me bringing a sandwich instead of eating pizza, and eating Oreos instead of cake. Thank goodness for Oreos! I've always hated lunch and birthday parties. They made me feel different and isolated. My acid reflux made me eat less than others, causing me to be skinny. I still looked normal, and I guess bullies were just insecure about their own weight or something. Then there's the asthma and the breathing issues. I can't run the mile in gym, so when my class runs it, I run 75% of it. Apparently, a mean group of girls can't handle that I can't run the whole thing. I mean, they should just chill, because they're lucky they can run the mile without the fear of not breathing. Like you said in *Wonder* though, everyone has their own problems and are usually just insecure, like Julian.

By the fifth grade, the grade I read *Wonder*, I began to feel isolated and depressed after trying to ignore all the mean remarks. However, mid-school year, I read your book. It taught me a lot. I realized I had to seek help from my guidance counselor, and keep on ignoring bullies. I was just missing one thing. I couldn't ignore them alone. This year, I found new friends that always have my back. Like Jack and Summer, my friends play a big role in my life. I was able to cope with my feelings by meditating, too. Your book also helped me understand what it's like to be a planet. I don't always want to be the sun in my family. I realized that my sister might feel like Via and want to be noticed more often. So now, I try to give her some more sunlight and that seemed to help our relationship.

I just want you to know that you get some credit for shaping who I am today. I now know that "apparently" doesn't matter. "Apparently" came from somebody else and the only opinion of me that I should care about is mine. I chose who I am. Because all in all, the things that people were bullying me about were things I couldn't change. I can't magically get rid of my allergies, my asthma, my acid reflux, my eczema, not to mention my short height. Auggie feels good about

Level I: Honorable Mentions

himself because he chooses to. Not everybody stopped bullying him. It's the same story with me; not everyone is kind to me. I must accept that. I feel good about myself because I choose to. I choose not to listen to bullies. My life is my choice. And you are part of the reason why I realize that. "Apparently" is no longer apparent.

Arshia Patel

Christian Slade

Castle North Middle School, Newburgh

Letter to Gary Paulsen

Author of *Hatchet*

Dear Gary Paulsen,

In the fifth grade, we were assigned a book report. I chose *Hatchet* thinking it would be easy to read and not as long as the other books. I started reading looking at Brian as your typical main character with nothing different from the next one. Then, I noticed things that made Brian stand out not just as a character but as a person. After I finished your book, I thought for a while and realized that I wasn't so different from Brian.

To me, *Hatchet* isn't one of those books where you read it, pat yourself on the back for finishing it, and then forget it in a week or two. It has stuck with me, and I still think about it every day. You see, Brian and I have one main connection; a broken family. When I was nine years old, my dad died of testicular cancer. When I read that Brian's parents had separated through a divorce and he had to travel internationally to see his dad, I began to feel for this character.

Then the plane crashed. When Brian's plane went down into the Canadian wilderness, I could relate knowing my plane metaphorically crashed too. With my dad gone, I had been stuck in a world of despair; I felt alone, sad, scared, and depressed. Just like Brian, I was trapped - trapped in an unforgiving world. I felt like everyday reality was slipping away from me. But then, I found my hatchet.

Like Brian, I started taking action. Brian used a hatchet to help him survive. I started to feel better which helped me improve my self-esteem as well as the overall quality of my life. My hatchet was my family, a counselor, a friend, and your book. I learned that even in the darkest times, the lowest valleys, and the smallest corners, there will always be something or someone to help you through. It made me feel good that someone out there felt the same way I did. I wasn't alone.

After I finished *Hatchet*, I felt much better than before, but it still felt like a part of me was missing. It was the feeling that I never got

Level I: Honorable Mentions

to share my story with the world. It felt like a story that was a burden to bear; I wanted to tell people about my past. When my teacher assigned LAL as a project, it didn't feel like homework, it felt like I was getting a weight (my story) off of my chest. Thank you, LAL, for letting me share a piece of myself with the world.

Sincerely,
Christian Slade

Level I Semifinalists

Tahlia Alkobi

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Shannon Hale

Author of *Real Friends*

Dear Shannon Hale,

“Friendship isn’t about whom you have known the longest... It’s about who came, and never left your side” – Unknown

Friendship is when you have a friend always right by your side. We need friends to give us good advice. We need someone we can count on to treat us nice. We need friends because we are social, and having friends makes us feel secure. They will be by your side and help you. Fights will come and fights will go. Friends should always be there for you and have your back all the time.

Mixed emotions came up to me while reading this book: Happy, sad, relatable, uncomfortable and many more. I read your book more than one time, but each time I felt different. It’s like each time I read your book I have not read it before because my mind is refreshed to something new.

I really connected to *Real Friends*. I had a strong connection to Shannon. The reason that I connected to her is because we both are normally in the back of the group. We both try to get along with people and they don’t want to come near us or decide to leave us all alone. Shannon and I don’t understand why they like to do this to us because we act so nice to them and we are a little confused. My best friends used to go to my school. Later on my best friends went to a different school or moved out of the country. Just like Adrienne left, but she came back. Even though she came back Adrienne started to hang out with the popular girls and let Shannon be by herself. We both decide to go be with the popular girls. Even though we wouldn’t be included. I sometimes don’t even know what they are even talking about. No one wants to explain. It’s all new for my brain.

Level I: Semifinalists

Last year I joined overnight camp. Even though I was nervous, I was more excited to meet new friends like me: Jewish modern orthodox. Sadly, I had a bad experience, especially in the first year. Most of the popular girls knew each other. They live in the same community, besides me, the “new girl” from a different state. The fact that I’m shy didn’t help me to make new friendships, and I felt left out most of the time. During activities they talked to me, and sometimes also during free time, but I didn’t have the feeling of a true friendship. I cried several times, missing my parents, my siblings and my real friends in my hometown.

After camp was over, some of the girls contacted me and sent me texts like: “I miss you,” or “Can’t wait to see you,” which confused me. When it comes to social media, they are my friends, but in “real life,” they didn’t act the same. After I understood they weren’t real friends, I decided that from now I will choose my friends. From now on, I will be with girls that really want to be with me for who I am.

Shannon had so much trouble with her friends. We want to be friends with everyone but a lot of people don’t want us. We try to fix the problems between us and the mean girls but it doesn’t work. At the end we realize we don’t need them if they don’t want us. That is why I changed my friends to different people. They are real friends.

Another lesson that I have learned from this book *Real Friends* is how to be a better person. I know I have been talking about other people, but this book made my heart sink when I saw how Shannon felt. By reading this book I have learned that I have done the same things to other people. Some mean things that I have done are leaving them out, being unkind, and making them feel bad. When I did those things to other people I didn’t realize that it hurt them.

We all need true friendship, but we also have to be smart and think before we act. ***Real Friends*** taught me to be a lot more careful with the choices and actions that I make when I choose my real friends.

Yours truly,
Tahlia Alkobi

Emerson Baran

R. J. Baskett Middle School, Gas City

Letter to John Green

Author of *Looking for Alaska*

Dear John Green,

The definition of the word labyrinth is a complicated irregular network of passages or paths in which it is difficult to find one's way; a maze. In *Looking for Alaska* it means something much different. Before reading this book, when I think of the word labyrinth I picture the ones they give you on kids' menus in restaurants. After reading *Looking for Alaska*, I started thinking that I needed my own way to get out of my labyrinth.

While reading this book the first time, when I got to the part when the Eagle said Alaska was in a car wreck I started crying. It sounds silly but it hit me hard. I had got so attached to Alaska that something snapped in me. I didn't even finish the book, I was so upset about it. Now about a year later, I restarted the book for the second time. I got through the whole book and for the required book report for each quarter, I did it on *Looking for Alaska*.

I wanted to give my personal opinion on maybe one of the questions you get a lot. "Why do we only get Miles' perspective?" I think that we only get Miles' perspective because it would be too easy just to read *Looking for Alaska* in Alaska's perspective. We would know why Alaska didn't swerve when she saw the bright lights of the cop's car. We would know what was going on in her head when she was talking with Jake. We would know her thoughts going on throughout the process of her dying. We would know if it was suicide or not. And we would know if she did have any last words. I feel that we only get Miles' perspective because it makes you wonder, and guess what really happened. What was going on in her head? And finally, why didn't she swerve?

A couple of months ago my sister and her family were in a car crash. My sister and her two little kids survived and her husband didn't. It was heartbreaking for all of us, but most especially my sister. When we were driving to pick up her little boy, we had to go on the

interstate where they had crashed and we could see my sister's eyes well up with tears. And the most heartbreaking thing is when my sister had to tell her little ones. It's not exactly the same story as it is in *Looking for Alaska*, but the grief that Pudge and the Colonel had to go through, losing their best friend is slightly like what my sister had to go through.

Your book made a big impact on my life, changing the way I view the world. I notice other people's emotions a lot. I can tell when they're upset, happy, or annoyed. I notice when other people do small things, like push in a chair for someone or hold the door open for other classmates. I now find myself thinking more about the labyrinth, and how to get out. Although I'm young, I feel that I'm mature enough to understand the labyrinth and how to get out.

Sincerely,
Emerson Baran

Karinne Bond

Castle North Middle School, Newburgh

Letter to R. J. Palacio

Author of *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

In school, I have often been referred to as “The Mean Girl.” Though this often happened behind my back, one of my few friends would tell me what had been said. I was bossy, rude, and unkind. And, to be honest, I avoided people who were “different.” This was all true until about fourth grade. It all changed when I read your book, *Wonder*.

Wonder changed my perspective. After seeing how Auggie was affected by the bullies and their hurtful words that told him he was ugly, weird, and a monster, I started to reflect and think about how I must be making people feel when I was excluding them just because I thought they weren’t pretty enough, smart enough, or the “same as me.” For some odd reason, I thought these kinds of people were not as good as me when many of them turned out to be better. I acted as though being “different” was some kind of contagious disease. I saw how I was like Julian, who was rude, selfish and mean when I should be more like Summer, who was kind to others and accepted their differences.

After reading *Wonder*, I started to accept people even though they weren’t just like me. I stopped judging the book by its cover and realized that it’s what’s on the inside that counts. After reading your book, I met Jaden. Though I had known her all that school year, it wasn’t until I read *Wonder* that I actually met her. I learned that she is kind, funny, and shares many of the qualities that I have. I also learned she can be very different. She loves dogs, knows many different people and is kind to everyone. She opened up many opportunities to get closer to people in and outside of my class. She also introduced me to new things such as television shows and books. Until I met Jaden, I didn’t know how cool sci-fi could be! Jaden helped me grow and find new friends. Before I read your book, I had always excluded Jaden and never took the time to get to know her because I thought she was weird and not as good as me. Now, in sixth grade, she is my best friend and has been since fourth grade. *Wonder*

taught me to accept people who are different. Even though I'm not best friends with everybody, I am not mean to them. I now interact with those who try to interact with me. I have learned to be kind; I am not the person I once was. Now, I am more like Summer, instead of Julian.

Sincerely,
Karinne Bond

Lucy Cappa

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Lynda Mullaly Hunt

Author of *One for the Murphys*

Dear Lynda Mullaly Hunt,

My mom goes grocery shopping every week for my family. My family puts together a list of foods/supplies that we want or need, so my mom can buy those things. I came back from school the day that she went grocery shopping. I looked in the refrigerator and the yogurt I wanted wasn't there. I got so furious with my mom that I stomped into her bedroom and started to complain to her about how she doesn't care about me. I squawked and screamed to her and I yelled, "Now I don't have anything to eat before soccer practice!" She replied annoyed, "Well, Costco didn't have any plain vanilla yogurt, so I got a package of yogurt: strawberry, blueberry, and cherry. You can put granola in any of those yogurts."

Then I remembered about your book, *One for the Murphys*, when I trudged back out of her bedroom. I remembered when Carley said that her and her mom would make late-night visits to Salvation Army drop boxes to "shop." She would get a flashlight and look in bins for clothes. This made me remember of how thankful I should be to have other flavors of yogurt in the refrigerator. It also made me take the time to consider how my mom thought of me to get other kinds of yogurt. She could've just gotten me none. In that situation I was not thinking about what other people do for me and how I was such a selfish brat to my mom. I didn't think of how she drove her car over to the stores, got groceries that I wanted and still had to work when she got back. I can't believe I argued about such a little thing.

I want to thank you for writing your book, *One for the Murphys*. It has definitely changed me. The way I act and what I say to other people has altered. I have had this book waiting on my book shelf wanting to be read. I was desperate to read a book, so I decided to pick it up and read it. As I got into this book, it made me realize something...how lucky I am, and that I should be so much more thankful for what and who I have in my life. I am truthfully lucky for picking this book off my book shelf. I am also truly fortunate that you wrote such a true, remarkable, heartwarming novel.

All these thoughts, so tough and powerful came to my brain to think more and more of what I should be thankful for. I have exploded from a cloud filled with rudeness and no appreciation for what other people do for me. Now I know, thanks to your touching book, ***One for the Murphys*** what to be satisfied with and what people do for me. Your book helps me all day, every day to be an ameliorated, obliged, and a tender person, that I need to be.

Sincerely,
Lucy Cappa

Noelle Compton

Riverside Intermediate School, Fishers

Letter to Erin Hunter

Author of *The Broken Pride*

Dear Erin Hunter,

I have always been an avid reader. I have surrounded myself with books for as long as I can remember. For me, books have been a way to escape from my life and enter a more fantastical one. Immediately, I took to historical and realistic fiction novels. I looked to these books for characters I could relate to, characters I could learn from. To my surprise, the character that I was looking for wasn't found in a realistic or historical fiction story. This character wasn't even human! This character was brave, loyal, smart and kind. This character was a little lion cub named Fearless.

When I began to read *The Broken Pride*, I expected to find a story about a majestic lion who ruled over the savannah, but was then met with some sort of challenge. "A ridiculous plot," I thought to myself, "I practically know the end of the book." To my surprise, I began to read and instead of meeting this majestic lion, I met a lion cub who in reality is a lot like myself.

In the beginning, Fearless was a proud, confident little cub dreaming of ruling over his pride with authority, commanding respect from everyone he met. But when tragedy struck, the once fearless little lion cub ran, leaving his mother, sister, and father for dead. This would be a decision he regretted for the rest of his life. This section of your book impacted me, not only because I felt for Fearless and his family, but it also touched something inside me. I discovered that Fearless had lots of doubts. He was always struggling with the thought of "What if I had done this?" or "What if I had done that?" In reading this, I realized that I struggle with this too. Many times I have pondered on the choices I have made, saying if only I had done this, and I wish I had done that. Fearless taught me that the past is past, that I can't focus on what I did. I need to move forward and focus on what I am doing now.

Everyone makes mistakes. This is a common phrase, one that I have heard many times, but also one that I have never taken to heart. A

part of me was always kicking myself saying “It was so stupid when you did that.” Until I read your book, I dwelled on my mistakes and shortcomings. Fearless had made mistakes too, and just like me, he let his mistakes haunt him, he let his mistakes keep him from letting go and moving on from these mistakes. When he finally learned to let go of his mistakes, he became braver, and he truly lived up to the name Fearless. This motivated me to truly let go of my mistakes, because I realized that when I did I would become a better person.

I understand that this lesson goes two ways. The first step was to forgive myself, and the second step was to forgive others. Reading this book took me back to my elementary school. On this particular day, I was standing in the car rider line talking to my friend. This friend told me that another girl who I had considered to be my good friend said some really mean things about me, words that truly hurt my feelings. I didn't forgive this girl for years. I let the sadness and hurt I felt grow inside of me, making me bitter and angry. I let this girl's words anger me for three years. When I read your book, I thought about the people who I could have possibly hurt. If I can't forgive one person for saying one mean thing about me, how should I expect people to forgive me for my mistakes? I thought very hard about this, and silently forgave this girl for something she had probably forgotten about a long time ago.

Learning the lessons your book had to teach was like a huge burden being lifted off of my shoulders. No longer am I bitter, no longer do I let my mistakes haunt me. In all, I learned that life is too short to be angry, and it is too short to be regretful and bitter. I am now happier and more confident in myself. I never hold grudges and work hard to be friendly to all those I meet. I can never thank you enough for these lessons that you have taught me.

Appreciatively,
Noelle Compton

Maddey Davis

Covington Middle School, Covington

Letter to R. J. Palacio

Author of *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

All sixth-grade students in my reading group at school read your book *Wonder* as a class assignment. With most books read within class, students tend to tune out the teacher and daydream. I thought this was how reading *Wonder* would be, but it soon turned into a life-changing month for me. Not only did you create a phenomenal story line, but you also changed the way a lot of students view the world around them. For me personally, you taught me multiple lessons that have bettered the way I live my life. These include thinking before speaking, holding back judgment, and sticking up for friends.

Being able to read this my first year of middle school helped me in so many ways. Middle school can be tough, so seeing Auggie be so brave throughout the story helped give me confidence in who I am. I didn't know that an author could connect with me and my classmates this way. I even have a story I can show my younger cousin Maeve, who deals with something a little bit similar to Auggie, Down syndrome. I'm happy to know there is a book that could help boost her confidence in herself as a young girl.

Not only did this book help me with finding confidence and love in myself, it also showed me the big impact kindness can make on others. Since reading *Wonder* with my class, I've been seeing myself and quite a few other classmates show random acts of kindness now to others. I think it's beautiful how much of an effect it has put on us. I'm so happy how much this book has helped us come together as a school and stop our bullying.

Thank you for creating the wonderful book *Wonder*. It has forever changed my mindset on how I treat myself, and others around me. From now on, I choose kind.

Sincerely,
Maddey Davis

Yoav Ehrlich

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to J. K. Rowling

Author of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

Dear J. K. Rowling,

I used to be a kid who didn't have the courage to stand up for myself. I am just a short skinny boy, the youngest in my class and my family, so you can imagine that speaking up to all the giants is a hard task for me. I tend to clown around and make people laugh but they sometimes forget that I also have feelings and it may look like I am always happy but sometimes on the inside I am sad. Everything started to change when I read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

When I was little, too small to read, my big brother was already gobbling up the whole *Harry Potter* series. He is a smart kid who reads big big books with small words and no pictures. The time came for me to read this famous book that everyone was talking about. I felt like I was the last kid in the world who hadn't read it yet. I have to be honest, in the beginning, it was hard for me to get through the first few pages. Gradually I was introduced to Harry and Dudley Dursley and his terrible uncle and aunt. Everyone slowly came to life and I got pulled into their world. I felt I was becoming friends with Harry, Ron, and Hermione and couldn't wait to be with them again each night before going to sleep. They always stuck together like the Three Musketeers and nobody in the world could harm them.

I realized when I read the book I began to feel stronger and braver. While on the train to Hogwarts, Draco makes fun of the Weasleys and warns Harry not to be with the wrong sort of people. Instead of just letting Draco make fun of his friend and his family behind their backs, Harry stands up to Draco by saying that he already knew who the wrong sort of people are. If Harry could stand up to Draco, then why couldn't I stand up to a Draco with no magic powers?

One day, an 8th grader, who likes to push me around in gym class, was calling me a crybaby and said he was going to destroy me. He was very mad at me and before reading the book I always dreaded gym time when I knew he would be there and hurt me again. But

then something inside me changed. It was while I was reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. I stood up to him! Instead of crying, I answered back and looked him in the eye and said in a firm voice, "If you hurt me one more time, I will tell on you." Slowly I could see him getting scared and ever since then, he has been more careful of what he says and does to me. As well as standing up for myself, I also stick up for my friends and always have their back. Friendship is very important to me and I now feel that I have three more friends: Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

Thank you for creating the amazing world of *Harry Potter* and for giving me the courage to stand up to people. I can now say that I am no longer the only kid in the world who hasn't met Harry Potter and I am proud to call him my friend!

Sincerely,
Yoav Ehrlich

Jasmine Forrestal

Park Tudor School, Indianapolis

Letter to Sharon Draper

Author of *Out of My Mind*

Dear Ms. Sharon Draper,

At first, I thought people with disabilities were scary. The way they make loud grunting noises or flail their arms made me feel uncomfortable. If I saw someone who had disabilities, I would purposely turn the other direction or pretend I didn't see them. I felt like they were going to hurt me if they got too close or saw me. Reading the book *Out of My Mind* changed my perspective on how I feel about people with disabilities.

The book helped me understand how Melody lived with cerebral palsy. I learned how people have to function with limitations of their body. Melody also taught me that people with disabilities are just like we are. Even though they sound or act differently doesn't mean they are not smart or have feelings. I understand why people with disabilities grunt now. They are just trying to communicate with you. For example, Melody was grunting and screaming for her mom to stop the car because her younger sister was behind the car. I also understand why they flail their arms. Melody said she has stiff arms and can't control her arms and legs that well. She also needed help eating for the same reason. Since she can't control the muscles in her hand, she had to be fed by someone else.

I liked the book because it told the story from Melody's point of view and how she feels about all her differences. Another reason I liked the book is because it described how Melody feels about people who treat her differently.

I am so glad that I read this book because it helped me to see that my first thoughts about people with disabilities are wrong. I will definitely be helping more with kids who have disabilities to give them the best life possible.

Sincerely,
Jasmine Forrestal

Ashley Frazier

Blair Pointe Elementary, Peru

Letter to Rupī Kaur

Author of *milk and honey*

Dear Rupī Kaur,

When I was 10 my father passed away and I had the option to live with my grandmother or my mother. After about a month of thinking and each relative trying to convince me to stay or leave, I chose to live with my mother. As I lived out the two most depressing, grey, and lonely years of my life, I learned about drugs, but this wasn't the information you learned from school classes. I thought my mother had changed from the last time I saw her. I don't remember how old I was. Maybe five or six. After a late night in January - this was the month my mother was arrested and sent to state prison for child neglect and drug use - I was brought to my grandmother's house. That was a little more than a year ago. Now, I have picked up the book *milk and honey*.

The first time I read *milk and honey*, I almost put the book back on the shelf because I didn't want to be reminded of the two years I spent at my mother's. I read on because I knew that to face my fears and memories, I would have to read on. I'd think that I'd be able to forget about those terrible things, but I can't. They are what make me, me. But, they also make me fear people. It doesn't matter if it's a group of people, one person, my best friend, or my family. I flinch when people tap my shoulder or pat my back because I fear everyone and everything. After reading through your entire book, I realized I wasn't the only kid who grew up this way. I wasn't the only kid told that words don't hurt as much as broken bones. My grandmother (on my mother's side. Not the one I live with.), said I had so much to be thankful for. Yet, I ask myself, how am I supposed to appreciate when I can't look at the joys of life because I'm afraid of people?

They say monsters don't exist, but that's only because monsters are the best at hiding. It's only people like me who can tell where a beast is hiding. It could be a friend, a relative, or even people I don't know the name of. *milk and honey* showed me monsters for the first time. It showed me not to trust and to be afraid, but that was the first time

I read through it. I came back to it a few days ago and realized that it was not meant to scare me, but to help me be braver and smarter.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” No matter how many times you say it, it will never be true. Of course, they do. Don’t try and say that words don’t hurt as much as broken bones because in the end the bone heals quicker and we go on. When we get called names and are insulted, we try to empty ourselves of hate and life. We’re like toddlers walking on a tight rope in the middle of the night while the parents are asleep, and yes, some of us fall, but when you make it to the other side I can look at you say, “You made it,” because not everyone does.

I look back into your book and I can’t help but cry every time and think that I’m not alone. I have changed the way I think because of your book and its words. I know after a year of believing I had a terrible life and that no one could understand what it is like. I know now, that that is not true. In fact, there are so many people out there going through what I did. It comforts me, knowing that I’m not the only one in this big world. It’s a weird sense of knowing that when the time comes, someone will be out there and be willing to listen. I know you would be one of those people, Rupri Kaur.

Sincerely,
Ashley Frazier

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Tommy Frazier

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Eric LeGrand

Author of *Believe*

Dear Eric LeGrand,

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Philippians 4:13.

Every time I feel like I can't go any farther I see Philippians 4:13. Every time I see Philippians 4:13 I see you. Eric, you live this verse, because every day, just as you said in your book, *Believe*, you believe that you will walk again. You have helped me see more clearly the obstacles I have created to keep me from doing my best, which now allows me to remove them, so that I can give my all. Before I read your book, I tried my hardest, but only when I felt like it. Now, I give everything I have in everything I do all the time. I always have to try my hardest in everything I do because you remind me that some people don't have the opportunity to do what I am doing. So, I do it for them, and for you. All of us can try our best, and maximize what we are capable of doing.

Believe. A word that means everything to me because of how you have displayed the importance of it. You have presented to me how in the deepest darkest parts of life all you have to do is believe. Like the time when I had to give my dog away because he injured my brother. I just had to believe that it was the right choice, and trust in God to get me through that time. Truly believing isn't just thinking it because someone else is, it is putting all of your heart, all of your soul, all of your strength, and all of your mind into something and trusting that it will do great things.

Rising back up. Something that you have expressed to me many times throughout your book, and throughout your life. You have shown that to become a champion it's not about whether you get knocked down, it's about getting up when you are knocked down. Every day at wrestling practice I wrestle with bigger kids (a lot bigger) and sometimes I win, and sometimes I get crushed, but every day I still go back to practice and wrestle the same kids. I do this because I believe that someday I will conquer that obstacle. Eric, I believe (I pray) that

someday you will walk again because you rise up and work very hard every day to overcome your obstacle.

Eric, thank you for teaching me to try my best always, and to give my all. Thank you for teaching me to believe, trust in God, and to get back up every day. Thank you for inspiring me to help others around me and not just to think about myself. I believe (I pray) that every day you will keep rising up and keep working hard so that one day you will walk, run, jump, skip, and fly down that field again.

Sincerely,
Tommy Frazier

Brooke Fridell

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to R. J. Palacio

Author of *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

I was stranded in a sea of problems and I found a message in a bottle. *Wonder* is my message, my guide, my shadow, my mirror. With my problems that stand in my shadow your book helped them get better and helped me figure things out.

I am Auggie Pullman. I am the sun. My family orbits around me. My anxiety stands in my personal bubble and every time I kick it out, it comes back like a boomerang.

I formed a connection to Auggie. He was different and had a nightmare that went everywhere he went. When I began fifth grade, I was diagnosed with anxiety. It was like a nightmare that would not get out of my shadow. Towards the middle of fifth grade I would go cry in my cubby because of it. I was like a kindergartner trapped in the body of a fifth grader. I thought that this would be something that followed me everywhere I went throughout my life. It got so bad that I even asked my mom, "Do I have autism? Do I not understand things like I should?" She told me that I did not have anything close to autism. I began to see a therapist after many panic attacks. I was even put on medicine. I would not eat dinner and I was starting to feel sick. One of the main causes of my panic attacks was feeling sick or someone else getting sick. As the year went on, my shadow was starting to get more empty with less anxiety. Now that my anxiety is close to gone, life is better but as I read the book in fifth grade it helped me get through my problems. Even though I will always have a piece of it in me, Auggie will have a piece of his problems in him too. It will get better even if it does not seem like it will.

Now my tears are my relief when I get a panic attack. I believe that this will change. I wish that everyone would understand people for who they really are. I know Jack, Summer, and Via do, but who else does? My Jack, Summer, and Via are a few of my best friends.

The way you changed me was that I felt something that I have never felt before. I felt like my anxiety would end even if it seems like it is never going to. I never think about how lucky I am when it comes to family who looks out for me. I also understood that everyone is unique with their personality, facial features, and many more. With my anxiety I never try to show it on the outside because I think people will stare at me just like they did at Auggie.

I am so thankful you sent this message out into the sea for me to find.

Brooke Fridell

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Amishi Gandhi

Castle North Middle School, Newburgh

Letter to Laurie Halse Anderson

Author of *Fever 1793*

Dear Laurie Halse Anderson,

Independence. This is what Mattie spends her chore-filled days longing for in the early summer of 1793. This is what we both have in common. We both dream for independence. We dream for the future.

While reading *Fever 1793*, I thought about what I wanted for the future. Mattie and I really had the same attitude at the start, but then I realized we were both wrong. Dreams are important but not the dreams your heart doesn't believe in. Mattie's dreams of independence were full of faraway fantasies. Did I really want the same? Or, did I want something more realistic? When I considered this, I thought, "This is silly. I am only twelve years old. Do I really need to be thinking about the future which is so far away?"

Then, I realized even if independence was so far away, it is good to know that good decisions in the present have good results in the future. Good decisions are necessary to be a responsible adult. Good decisions, not silly dreams, will help me become who I want to be in the future. I want to be strong and smart like Mattie was when she took charge of the coffee house.

I thought about what I wanted for myself. Reading Mattie's story helped me learn about my future, and it opened my eyes to what it really could be. Mattie got her future by making it herself. By working hard, she got what she could in the aftermath of the fever. That's what everyone has to do; that's what I have to do.

By the end of the story, Mattie's strong independence is evident. When everyone wanted her to sell the coffee house, she stood firm. She went against everyone and would not give up on her dreams of the coffee house. I saw the wisdom and pride in Mattie's idea of a partnership. So when the time comes for my independence, I will try to make the same smart decision that Mattie made.

Yours truly,
Amishi Gandhi

Jenna Grubb

Riverside Intermediate School, Fishers

Letter to Alan Gratz

Author of ***Ban This Book***

Dear Alan Gratz,

So many things have been taken away from me. Things I truly miss, such as my grandpa and my cats. Simple things like my hair in a haircut or my phone when I get grounded. No matter how much it means to me I feel lonely and isolated without it. Do you know who else feels this way? Amy Anne Ollinger, from your amazing novel, ***Ban This Book***.

Amy Anne's favorite book in the whole world, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, gets banned from the school library. Amy Anne is extremely passionate about this book. She has read it so many times, she might even have it memorized. That book to her is just like music to me. Listening to my favorite songs makes me feel free and careless about what other people think. Without it, I am just a normal, self-conscious girl.

But, does anyone ever give up something without a fight? No way! In some cases, like Amy's, you have to start a secret banned book library. Or in my case, you just have to stay on your best behavior, and do extra for your parents, because if you don't, you will end up getting more things taken away from you.

What I can relate to even more than Amy, though, is the theme that you bless all of your readers with. You are never too young to fight censorship. You have to fight for what's right. Though there are many ways to put it, they all mean one thing. Don't let people get the best of you. Don't let them take what's yours. Sure, you can't get back family who have passed away, but you can surely remember them. And with remembering them it will feel like they're back there with you. You will feel them in your heart.

Normally, I take a book from the library, read it and return it. Yet, your book was different. I kept on checking it out and checking it out again. I did that because I couldn't give up the beautiful gift that you

gave to me. ***Ban This Book*** has taught me to look at the world in a different way. A better way. Ever since I read your book, I've learned what actually means most to me. Now, I only miss the things that are worth missing. So, I thank you for opening my eyes to what is actually, genuinely important to me. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Jenna Grubb

Vivian Hart

Sugar Creek Elementary, New Palestine

Letter to Ally Condie

Author of *Summerlost*

Dear Ally Condie,

Thank you for writing *Summerlost*. It truly changed my perspective on life. I've learned life-long lessons just from reading *Summerlost*. Thank you for changing me.

The first part in the book that truly spoke to me was when Cedar's family found her deceased brother Ben's favorite ice cream, sherbet, in the freezer after he passed on. They all started crying. It taught me to appreciate the little things in life. Ben loved sherbet. And now he's gone. I now know to appreciate every little detail of someone before they slip away. I have had a grandpa and a great-grandma come and go in my lifetime. They passed on when I was a baby. I couldn't learn much about them then. Now I like to learn more about them, including the little details, so that I know what they were like.

Cedar saw a boy riding by on a bike and immediately called him "Nerd-on-a-bike" even though she's never even met him. Just because he wore medieval-looking clothes. She gets to know him and they become best friends. It taught me to never judge a book by its cover more deeply than any other book has. I one time saw a little person at the American Girl Store and immediately stared at her just because she was different. Now I know once you get to know her, she could be a really great person.

Cedar was at school when she saw Ben being bullied at lunch. Other kids were throwing food at him. He kept screeching, "Stop!" but they wouldn't stop. Cedar took him down to the office and he went home. It reminded me to not bully people. It doesn't matter if they're different or not. They could be going through some personal situations. I've seen kids be pushed around just because they're different and they can't do anything about it. I now know to step in and stand up for people that can't stand up for themselves.

My family. I can't imagine what I would do without them. Cedar had a perfect family. Then, in an instant, her dad and brother were

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gone. Sometimes I get mad at them. Sometimes I disagree with them. Sometimes I don't appreciate all that they do for me. Yet I don't know what I would do without them. I will never take them for granted. After all, without them, I wouldn't be who I am today. They do so much for me. I will now appreciate them more than ever. You never know, they might be gone in an instant, just like Cedar's dad and brother.

Cedar went through a lot of hardships in life. She lost her dad, lost her brother, lost her job, she doesn't have many friends, and she sometimes gets bullied because she's Chinese-American. Yet she stayed strong throughout all of it. She taught me to stay strong no matter what life throws at you. I haven't lost a dad, brother, or job; but I know that sometimes life is tough. People aren't going to like you and accidents will happen, but the most important thing is to stay strong the whole time.

My favorite part in the whole book is when Cedar, her mom, and her other brother (Miles) create a jar as a memorial for her lost dad and brother. They fill it with things that Ben would like to fidget with and a piece of wood from a tree that Cedar's dad would like. It taught me to never forget people once they're gone. My great-grandma is gone, but now every night I sleep with a stuffed animal that she gave me on my first Christmas. It comforts me and reminds me of her. I will never forget her.

Thank you, once again, for writing *Summerlost*. It truly changed me. I will now remember every little detail of someone and I will remember them in any way possible. I will not judge or bully people and I will step in and stand up for them if they can't stand up for themselves. Thank you for changing my perspective on life.

Sincerely,
Vivian Hart

Alexandra Hoskin

Park Tudor School, Indianapolis

Letter to Pam Muñoz Ryan

Author of *Echo*

Dear Pam Muñoz Ryan,

I always thought that if you were poor or in a bad situation with your race, religion, or even just how you looked, you would have little happiness and you would only have the slightest chance of having a good life. Of course, I was wrong. Your book, *Echo*, taught me to be more thankful, caring, and so much more. Your writing has changed the way I see things.

As I was reading *Echo*, I realized just how fortunate I am. I have a great family, attend a nice school, have more than enough food, and don't have to worry about my family having enough money. Friedrich's family was so close to not having enough money. He had to start working when he was just twelve years old. But his family was so happy and kind. His father and uncle were so forgiving. They were doing just fine. I now think that anyone can be happy and kind, even when they don't have enough money or are going through something difficult. There can always be a light in your life that can guide you to happiness; you may just have to wait for it.

Another important part of *Echo* is about not losing hope even when all seems to be lost. I usually do that when I'm losing a game or even when I can't think of an idea for a piece of writing. Frankie and Mike stuck together when their family died and even when they thought they would be separated from each other. I feel now that I shouldn't lose hope and stop trying even when the world feels like it is against me. I should persevere and try my hardest no matter what.

Lastly, I think that even if something has changed, we should stay strong and happy. In *Echo*, Ivy has to move and she is upset at first, but found a way to be happy. She makes friends and makes a life for herself there. When I was younger, my family moved a lot. I was very upset when I moved to Indiana from Portland, Oregon, because we didn't walk as much and just because it was different. But now, I don't want to live anywhere else because of my friends and because I am attached to Indiana.

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I will think a little bit more about my life based on your words. I will think about how I should change to be a better person.

Sincerely,
Alexandra Hoskin

Kaden Hughes

Castle North Middle School, Newburgh

Letter to Allan Zullo

Author of *Miracle Pets*

Dear Mr. Allan Zullo,

“Where there is a will, there is a way” and “If at first you don’t succeed try, try again,” are sayings we think of when facing tough challenges in life. Your book, *Miracle Pets*, illustrates that animals possess similar survival instincts to that of humans when facing life-or-death situations. Whether fighting an illness, looking for food, or being attacked by predators, animals will try to do what has to be done in order to survive.

Our family fosters dogs through It Takes a Village Canine Rescue (ITV). There are some animals that are dropped to ITV in very poor condition. Our job as a foster family is to provide nourishment, shelter and love to these animals that were in unfortunate situations. While reading your book, I thought about our eight-week-old foster dog named Vader. He was one of six puppies that was abandoned at the rescue. Vader had difficulty breathing as it was suspected that he had been abused or attacked. While recovering, he was not properly cared for so when he would breath he sounded like Darth Vader, which is how he got his name. I think about what he may have done similar to Roadie, the injured dog that lay between the railroad tracks for several days before being rescued.

It is hard to think about what survival instincts kick in when faced with life threatening situations. For example, I would never consider having worms or eating raw fish for dinner. However, if faced in a situation where food was scarce, worms might be the next best thing to chicken nuggets dipped in ketchup. The survival story of the cat that was trapped for two months under a concrete floor of a building under construction was astonishing. The one thing all these animals had in common is that they just refused to die.

No matter if you are a cat, fish, frog, dog or human, be courageous. If you are surviving, push yourself even harder. If you feel like you are nearing the end and don’t want to be; fight. Don’t be a quitter. It

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isn't the fittest that survive; it is those that are willing to find a way no matter what odds might be stacked against them. Thank you for sharing these true tales of inspiring pets.

Sincerely,
Kaden Hughes

Agastya Ishaan

Riverside Intermediate School, Fishers

Letter to J. R. R. Tolkien

Author of *The Hobbit*

Dear Mr. Tolkien,

Your book, *The Hobbit*, revealed to me a part of myself. It has changed me and made me think about things differently. Your plot reflected human nature and made me think how humans think and how I think as an individual. It showed me my problems and showed me how to fix them.

The first thing that I learned in your book came in the beginning. When the dwarves came to Bilbo's house they were suspicious of his qualities. But they gave him a chance, and he eventually turned out to be the one that was most valuable in the end. Similar things have happened to me in the past. After reading your book, I realized that everyone deserves a chance. I hate it when someone does not give me a chance, so I should make sure other people don't feel like that, too. From then on, I tried my best to give everyone a chance.

The next lesson I learned was at the part in the book where Bilbo takes Gollum's ring. Gollum was obsessed with getting it back. I thought about how I always like to hold things with me. I always keep old things. I realized how getting stuck in the past is not a good thing. I believe now that while memories are sometimes important, we should not get stuck in the past. Hold onto important things, but let go of unimportant ones. They will only burden you.

The final lesson I took from your book came towards the end of the book. Thorin became corrupt with greed with the gold and went crazy to get the Arkenstone. I can remember wanting something so badly just like Thorin. Sometimes this can cloud your mind and not make you think clearly. Bilbo gave the Arkenstone to the elves to help Thorin to come to his senses. Sometimes we need a reminder to think clearly.

The Hobbit changed my view of the world and myself. These three lessons have made me act differently. Now, I try to give everyone a

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chance to do what they want to do. I try to not have useless desires. And I do not hold onto things of the past. Thank you for opening my eyes.

Sincerely,
Agastya Ishaan

Marisa Madrick

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Mira Bartok

Author of *The Wonderling*

Dear Mira Bartok,

Twelve years ago, I was born in Guatemala. My birth-mother was not married when she gave birth to me. The biological father was not noted on the birth certificate. When I was born, my birth-mother gave me to a foster family because she didn't have a lot of money to raise me like she wanted to. I was brought to my foster family's home, I was welcomed by a foster mom, dad and their two little boys. Just a few weeks after I was born, my Mom and Dad started the process of adopting me. I stayed with my foster family until my adoptive family-my Mom, Dad, two sisters and brother came to Guatemala to bring me to Indiana (and my home). This is similar to *The Wonderling* because Number 13, also known as Arthur, was in an orphanage because his parents were never found.

The Wonderling inspired me because in the middle of the book he left the orphanage and went to go find his birth parents. When I grow up I want to find my birth-mother and see if I have a sibling or a half sibling. The person I want to see the most is my birth-mother. If I found her and was able to talk to her, I would say to her, "Thank you, because you gave me up to keep me safe and alive." We are different because Arthur wasn't as lucky as me because he went to a bad place for his childhood life, and I went to a place that loves me and makes me feel safe.

My life is different from Arthur's because when he was in the orphanage the owner would hit them if they broke a rule, had fun, were happy, or were not perfect. For me that is different. I have a family that loves me and if I do something wrong, they will send me to my room or maybe punish me with chores. Most of the time we just talk things out.

The book inspired me to find my parents and gave me the courage to find them. Thank you, Mira Bartok, for showing me that people can do anything in life if they put their heads to it. Thank you because

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now that I have the strength I am going to find them. Thank you,
Mira Bartok.

Sincerely,
Marisa Madrick

Shirel Moalem

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Sharon Draper

Author of *Out of My Mind*

Dear Sharon Draper,

While reading your book, I was on a roller coaster of emotions. *Out of My Mind* made my life smoother and more relaxed. As I read your book, I felt like I was not all alone, I felt loved and cared for.

I loved Melody at first sight. When I opened this book it gave me a feeling that I have never felt before. It gave me the feeling of hope and understanding that being unique is special. Just like Melody could not talk or move, I could not either at one time in my life. I had Guillain Barre Syndrome, an illness that stops you from talking and moving. It happens when your body's immune system attacks your nerves. Weakness and tingling in your extremities are usually the first symptoms. These sensations can quickly spread, eventually paralyzing your whole body. It was getting worse every day.

Looking back, life was hard then having all these words stuck in my head. So many ideas, so many light bulbs in your head, but you can't express it. I felt like I was floating in a bowl of alphabet soup. Looking at my parents and sister that were talking, moving, and speaking. I was not born with this illness unlike Melody. I had to go to therapy. This was so hard for me. Melody was so determined to overcome obstacles, but it took me time to reach that level of determination too.

To ponder about the past is hard. You have to be strong. Melody shows so much to me. She never gave up. It is so emotional throughout this book, I felt that I was somehow linked to it. It made me feel tough. It made me feel strong. She has so much passion and self-confidence. She is a true inspiration to me. Melody shows me the ways to show them what I want, to think of ways to tell them.

Finding out that I was getting better made that special smile reappear. I walked, talked, moved. Now I am just like the rest of the kids in my class: talking fluently with two languages, getting great grades, and

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working hard but most of all helping my friends. It takes courage to push yourself to places that you have never imagined to be in before which is what Melody shows me in this book.

I appreciate all the knowledge that this book gave me and showed me how to overcome obstacles in life, for showing and guiding me the way. Thank you for putting a light in my darkness.

Sincerely,
Shirel Moalem

Cambry Moore

R. J. Baskett Middle School, Gas City

Letter to Sharon Draper

Author of *Out of My Mind*

Dear Sharon M. Draper,

I recently read your book, *Out of My Mind*. I really enjoyed your book, and it changed how I look at the world and other people. I think it made me into a better person overall.

In the book Melody couldn't talk, so she was sent into the special needs class. Most of the kids thought she was dumb and stupid, and not even worth a second glance. This particular part really spoke to me because I feel like that's how some of the kids at my school treat students with disabilities. They called them "retards." I got online and looked up the meaning of the word. I went back to school and told my teacher about it; she eventually put a stop to it. But it still bothered me, because after reading your book, I knew that some of those kids still considered them stupid and beneath them. I found myself sticking up for the ones who never got attention, because they deserved it as much as me.

Then, my fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Moore, told my class that we could go once a week to Miss Linn's room. We would read to the kids there once a week for about an hour. I was overjoyed that I could make a difference to them, and maybe even be a friend. Lots of my other classmates joined in too. We enjoyed spending time with these other kids, and we got to know them better. We realized that they aren't stupid and dumb, but that they're just misunderstood. I think some of them just have it rough like Melody. And if they had a chance to speak out, they could make a huge difference.

I realized, just like Melody, that every one of those kids would be better than any of us, because they learned to live with their different cases, and they are still happy.

I learned to be grateful for what I have. I found myself worrying about little things all the time. But Melody had the problem of not being able to speak out, she didn't have very many friends, and she

suffered under the name of the dumbest kid in school. She still stayed strong and fierce and never gave up for what she knew was right. I realized that it could be harder for me; that I can at least talk, and run, and sing, and dance. Being grateful for what I have is an excellent start to fixing problems.

Another lesson your book taught me is that kindness can really make a difference. Rose was kind and good to Melody. Melody finally felt like she had a friend and was accepted into the world. I started noticing the ones at school who ate lunch alone, or the kids who never had any partners for projects. It took a lot of guts, but I left the safety of my friends, and invited others to be my partner, or I just tried to be a good person. I think what God would want me to do, and I remember kindness is better than popularity.

I think that without this book, I wouldn't be as good as a person. Maybe I would be one of the bullies or judgmental and rude. Your book changed the way I look at other people. I don't judge others on how they look, or if they are the smartest. Now I try to be a person who makes a difference.

Sincerely,
Cambry Moore

Kyaira Orozco

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Michael Lewis

Author of *The Blind Side*

Dear Michael Lewis,

When I was younger, I always judged people for how they dressed or how they talked. I was very judgmental about people. If someone wasn't like me, I wouldn't want to talk to them or even be near them. I didn't care about their back story, or what was happening to them in their lives. I expected people to dress in the new trends and talk like "normal" people. I remember how I never wanted to be near one of my classmates because he dressed in a different way. Later, I realized that he only dressed like that because of his religion and I felt bad. After reading *The Blind Side*, all of this changed. *The Blind Side* really changed my perspective on the world and what people may be going through. It made me realize that not everyone is going to talk like me, eat like me, or dress like me. Your book made me feel so many different things, wonderful and bad.

After reading *The Blind Side*, I sat in my bed for half an hour just wondering what my friends were doing. What all those kids that I teased were doing. I wanted to talk to more people and learn more about them. Maybe talking to them would cheer them up, or at least let them know they aren't alone. Now, I try to be more careful with what I say and do. Your book made me want to be more accepting of people, no matter their religion, race, or clothing, because sometimes people like Michael just need some help or someone to talk to. I got sad when Michael was all alone in school and I was so happy when the Tuohy family took him in. They helped him realize it's not about money or your house, but how hard you work and not caring what others think.

I've been a bystander a lot. I just let people who are like Michael get picked on because I don't know anything about them. One boy in my class was labeled as a "nerd" and I didn't do anything about it because I didn't know him. He always got picked on and teased. One time, a kid kneed him in the stomach. But I didn't do anything. Later, he moved schools. One of his friends told me that he moved

schools because of all the kids who bullied him. After that, I wished that I helped him. All I did was stand by and watch the boy, who was like Michael, get picked on.

I would join in with the people who would tease others. I didn't know or care about the victim's background. If people weren't like me, I would make fun of them. I was bad for doing this, but back then I didn't want to be a victim. Ever since I read *The Blind Side*, I realized what I had done. I realized that people aren't going to be like me, and that they may be going through things. *The Blind Side* changed my perspective on the world and people. It made me want to help others and accept them for being them. *The Blind Side* helped me know what other people are going through. Your book made me feel so many different things, wonderful and bad.

Sincerely,
Kyaira Orozco

Grace Poer

Riverside Intermediate School, Fishers

Letter to Alan Gratz

Author of *Prisoner B-3087*

Dear Alan Gratz,

I used to take life for granted. I used to judge others, think down upon others. Then, I didn't realize how rough peoples' lives can be. Some people struggle to get money, or even put food on the table. Others get judged or pushed around because of religion, race, or even gender. Some people have hard lives. I knew that then, but I simply just didn't think about how those kinds of hardships can really affect and hurt people. I then picked up your book *Prisoner B-3087*, and started to read it.

From the beginning I was instantly hooked. I could not believe how awful people could treat others. I did not realize how cruel Adolf Hitler and the Nazis were. It shook me. It made me wonder about how people coped with that kind of abuse and trauma. In my eyes, I see the Nazis as being awful, soulless creatures. One part of the book that I think affected me the most was when they spared Yanek. I was filled with questions and emotions. Why didn't they spare others? He is super lucky to be alive. I thought of so many things.

After finishing the book a few days after picking it up, I felt emotional. I was so happy that Yanek survived, but I was also mad toward the Nazis. How did they think that it was ok to hurt and kill people just because of differences in religion? How was it ok to see someone walking down the street and think to yourself "I'm going to kill that person for no reason."? The one word that continued to linger in my mind was the word "how." After a while I then told myself, how was I so cruel to others. I realized that I was a Nazi to a lot of people. I would judge others based on religion and differences. The only difference is that I wouldn't physically hurt others, like the Nazis. I had to change.

I now walk with a new bounce in my step, a new sense of peace. I now am careful, and make sure to tell myself that whenever I am judging someone to stop. You never know what someone is going

through, and everyone has different opinions. Everyone is different, whether that means different religions, thoughts, ideas, and lives. One thing that your book has taught me is that everyone is different, and people need to accept that.

Sincerely,
Grace Poer

Jetzabel Rivera-Lopez

Crestview Elementary School, Indianapolis

Letter to Meika Hashimoto

Author of *The Trail*

Dear Meika Hashimoto,

All I've ever wanted was to survive; to get through the day. There's usually something that goes wrong every day since I turned 11. My friends are always telling me, "Quiero vivir. No solo sobrevivir," which is Spanish for "I want to live. Not just only survive." I sometimes caught myself wondering while reading *The Trail*, have I lost something or someone that has changed me? I realized there were many things that I lost, and have pretty much denied. Ever since I realized that, I started to feel as if Toby's feelings were my own. I learned that even the strongest people have breaking points.

I learned that while walking our own path, we meet people. Some may walk with us for a long time. Others may only want to steal your food. In other words, some people may want to be friends or become someone special to you like a 2nd family. Others, just want to ruin you and your dreams by messing with you. I haven't realized that throughout my own trail, I've been distracted from my own goal by hanging around the wrong people. I think Toby may have started to realize something like this. My goal was to get to the top of the mountain. Or in other words, keep learning in school. I met people (that I now regret calling friends) and tried to please them and that pretty much ended my good girl behavior.

Life didn't give me answers. I was always looking for them. Taking many paths to get to them. Yet, some paths end up nowhere. I'm not a trail hiker or a mountain climber, but I'm still capable of walking a trail which may not be the one Toby walked, but my own. My life is just as good as other people's lives. I'm not the only one that has lost something or someone. Maybe living life to the fullest is better than just staying at home surviving the outside world. Maybe if I stop doubting I can do something other than remembering the past, like Sean and Denver learned to do. But there's still more adventures to go. Thanks for the advice!

Sincerely,
Jetzabel Rivera-Lopez

Sydney Rose

Kankakee Valley Middle School, Wheatfield

Letter to R. J. Palacio

Author of *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

When I read your book *Wonder* I was inspired to stop bullying at my school. I see all kinds of kids being bullied. People just stand around and laugh. When people do that it makes me feel sad. After I read *Wonder* is when I started feeling sadder about bullying. Your book, *Wonder* inspired me to want to get out there and help change bullying, kind of like how Summer did when Auggie was getting bullied by Julian.

While reading *Wonder* I was almost crying because of what Julian and his friends were saying about Auggie. It made me feel sad inside. Before I read *Wonder* I didn't know that people could be born like how Auggie was. After I read *Wonder* I saw a kid in our school that looked like how you describe Auggie. All kinds of other kids were calling him autistic. I asked them if they have ever read *Wonder* before. They told me yes so I said, "He is just like August Pullman. He's not autistic, he just looks different than us."

After my class and I read the first couple of chapters, and we got an idea of what Augie looked like, I wondered if I would want to keep my face the way it looked. Like Auggie wanted to keep his face or if I would want to change it. That's if I looked like Auggie. If my younger sibling had a condition like Auggie's, I would definitely stand up to the bully for them. Like what Olivia did for Auggie. Even though I am the baby in the family, I still would.

In my school you don't see people like Jack and Summer stand up for people when they are being bullied. Especially when they are being bullied by a 7th or 8th grader. I can't really relate to Auggie because I've never been homeschooled and have to go to school for the first time and try to make new friends. Sometimes I wish I was homeschooled, but after reading *Wonder* and how August was homeschooled and then how hard it was to make friends, he made me rethink homeschooling. Now when school is hard and I think

about homeschooling, I think about the book **Wonder** and Auggie. So now I know that I have to stand up for bullying so people don't get down in the dumps. Your book **Wonder** really made a difference in my life. I think if more people read your book **Wonder** maybe more people could help to end bullying. By writing this book you really touched me and I think you touched a lot of other people. Thank you for writing this book **Wonder**. You made a difference in my life.

Sincerely,
Sydney Rose

Turner Schaming

Park Tudor School, Indianapolis

Letter to Catherine Ryan Hyde

Author of *Pay It Forward*

Dear Catherine Ryan Hyde,

Your book, *Pay It Forward*, taught me so many wonderful life lessons. The one that stood out to me the most was kindness. Kindness was shown so much throughout the book from the time Trevor's teacher gave him the extra credit assignment to change the world until he got invited to D.C. to meet the President.

Trevor's idea to change the world through spreading kindness to three people and then tell them to pay it forward to three more people inspired me to act the same. I try to remember to be kind to everyone whether it is at school, on the basketball court or at home. If I follow Trevor's lead all the time, I will make other people happy and when I make other people happy, then they will be more kind and make even more people happy. Thus making the world a kinder a place.

Just recently our community, Westfield, Indiana, began a kindness campaign where they handed out kindness business cards to people that had written ideas like "smile," "open a door for someone," and "be good." At the end of our basketball game we gave our cards to the opposing team. This is a tradition I hope to continue and reminds me of Trevor's plan.

Lastly, my family will pay it forward on social media by being aware of what we're typing and only saying kind and helpful things. I hope that I can change the world of social media to be a kind and appropriate way of communicating.

Your book changed me in so many ways and I hope you publish more books that teach life lessons just as *Pay It Forward* did.

Sincerely,
Turner Schaming

Tolen Schreid

Castle North Middle School, Newburgh

Letter to Marissa Meyer

Author of *Cinder*

Dear Marissa Meyer,

I'm an eleven-year-old boy, and like Cinder in your futuristic fictional universe you created, I am bullied because of something about me. I have hair that reaches down to the middle of my back, and for some reason, people think that they can make fun of me for it. They say things like "You're a girl," and "You should cut your hair." I am obviously a boy, and maybe I just don't want to cut my hair.

I felt connected to Cinder because I realized she was prevented from doing things just because she was a cyborg. I don't believe I could endure one of the things she had to live with like her stepmom using her as a slave, or how she was not allowed to buy bread from someone. I mean, come on, it was one loaf of bread. What did it matter that a cyborg would get the bread? Bullied does not even come close to describing what she went through.

Cinder's experiences made me realize how little money, shelter, and simple necessities in life some people have compared to me. This includes people like beggars on the street, the homeless, people who rely on food pantries to survive, and people who have never been in a school. Most who walk past these people don't even give them money, a friendly wave, or a smile! It depresses me to think about what these unlucky people go through.

Some wealthy people have way more money than they need. Some donate to good causes, but unfortunately they do it for the wrong reasons. They may be selfish, trying to gain respect, and make themselves look or feel better. They could help the poor, starving, and uneducated, just by doing something for the good of others. Giving money or tools to help the poor survive and have a better life would be enough. Hopefully, in the future the rich will help the poor and the world will become a better place.

Level I: Semifinalists

Reading *Cinder* has opened me up to things that I never thought related to me. Cinder seemed so far away from me when I first read about her, but then I slowly started noticing the connection between her life and mine. She showed me that I should help the people that have less than me. This has made me want to help others more. I love my life and no matter how many times I am picked on, I will still love my life. Thank you, Marissa Meyer for writing *Cinder* and brightening my view of the world.

Sincerely,
Tolen Schreid

Emily Setser

Salem Middle School, Salem

Letter to Raina Telgemeier

Author of *Smile*

Dear Raina Telgemeier,

When I was younger, my parents were going through a divorce that caused me to go into a state of sadness. I stopped doing things I loved, and distanced myself from others. Someone I knew noticed my sadness and gave me your book saying, "It'll put a smile on your face for sure." I looked at the book and put it on my desk, not even reading the cover. I really wasn't into books so I never really tried reading it.

I still didn't think it would do anything but after a while I decided to give it a try since it was a gift. I opened to the first page and I was instantly interested. It was like I was sucked into a different universe. I would hide under my bed with a flashlight, reading your book. There were too many times I could count when I would get in trouble for sneaking a page of your book in during class.

When I finished *Smile* I just looked at the cover, sad that it was over. Then I started to draw up what I thought would happen from after the end. I had lots of theories about what would happen next and even talked about it with other people. The book helped me expand to meet new people. It was like I was never sad.

Your graphic novel made me laugh through my tears and put the biggest smile on my face. It even inspired me to make my own comic series that I'm still working on to this day. Whenever I feel sad sometimes I'll look back at your book to get a smile. It amazes me how much I have changed for the better because of *Smile*. If it wasn't for *Smile* I would never have a love for reading or drawing.

Sincerely,
Emily Setser

Gracie Smith

Northview Elementary, Gas City

Letter to Shane Dawson

Author of *It Gets Worse*

Dear Shane Dawson,

Your book, *It Gets Worse*, was a series of events from your childhood to your adulthood that taught not only me, but many people about how to deal with situations, and be able to use comedy to get through them, while also showing the emotions you are really feeling.

Although I loved all of the book, a specific chapter in your book, “Word Vomit” changed my life, and made me change my thoughts about myself. The chapter was written about when you suffered with bulimia, and how you never felt confident in your weight, or yourself in general. When I first read that chapter I was in the fourth grade. I was having trouble with focusing, paying attention, and putting effort into projects and work, but all of it was coming from anxiety about my appearance. The biggest problem, however, was that because of the anxiety and stress, I couldn’t work up the courage to tell anyone, and that’s when your hidden advice came in.

All of my realization came one day while I was sitting in class and I was reading a couple paragraphs into the chapter. It was where you started talking about going to McDonald’s and ordering basically the whole menu. While I was reading more into it, you started talking about throwing up, and you made a joke about you needing to leave Lisa’s to get a 5 pound burrito which made it more lighthearted and funny, but the idea of you making yourself throw up to get skinny made me feel sick.

Later in the chapter, you went on to say, bulimia is a disease and you joked about how your friends never called 911 because of concern about your body falling apart, but you said it in a joking way. I didn’t think much of the chapter until you added, “I knew I couldn’t get through it alone.”

Every part of your book made me realize something. The happy in sad, the sad in happy. The light in dark, and the dark in light. This

chapter made me realize that I am not only one in millions of people that have self-doubt, but it also made me realize that there are also millions of people out there that could help me, and that I was not alone and if I ever need to remind myself that, I go back and re-read that chapter.

It took me one more year to finally tell someone about my feelings and difficulties, and you were the main person to help me do that. I want to thank you for being an amazing creator, writer, and helper, and helping me get the courage to stand up to my own problems.

Sincerely,
Gracie Smith

Lidya Solomon

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Shannon Hale

Author of *Real Friends*

Dear Shannon Hale,

It is human nature to forget. We forget our keys, our homework, and the list goes on and on. We are also on that list. We occasionally are forgotten, not noticed. I have seen you and other characters in your biography called *Real Friends* be forgotten. *Real Friends* reminded me when I used to be forgotten.

I live in a family of four where I am the middle child. As the middle child I am thought of as unintelligent and am constantly underestimated. I feel like I am contaminated and put into a bubble. In that bubble nobody can see me. Because of the fact that they don't notice me. I have seen that happen many times throughout your book with you.

Like you, I view my imagination as my best friend. It's there for me when I get forgotten. Through the book your imagination has helped you with many problems like Jenny and Wendy. Wendy called you obnoxious and walked all over you. Jenny saw you as unintelligent. She thought she was better than you so she tried to prove that to everyone. They were wrong for what they did although they didn't know that.

I think that because we have been forgotten so much we start to realize that we aren't meant to be forgotten. We only are forgotten because we let ourselves be. We let everyone walk all over us like it's okay but deep down we know that it isn't right. We need to get that needle to pop our bubble of invisibility. Sounds easy right? But we both know it isn't. That needle is something we have to make ourselves. The needle is made of pure courage. We need to have the courage to show the world that we are intelligent. We need to take that needle and pop that bubble. Once we do that we will never be forgotten as long as we are here.

Before I read your book I had lost that needle from time to time but with your book I've found it. And I'm confident to say that I don't think I'll be losing it for a long time. I hope that you and everyone else finds an everlasting needle to pop their own unique bubble.

From the one and only,
Lidya Solomon

Kenna Sondhelm

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Gary D. Schmidt

Author of *Okay for Now*

Dear Gary D. Schmidt,

Sometimes I forget how fortunate I am to be alive with a roof over my head, a full stomach, and a happy heart. Being grateful is super important and changing your ways is always possible. Now after reading *Okay for Now* my visions have changed.

After learning that my parents are separating, it's been a journey. I live basically two lives. The one life with the smoky rooms and stained floors. The other that is clean and comfortable. My dad's apartment isn't the best, but it's only temporary, which I forget. On the other hand, my needs are met and I have everything I need when I am with my mom. I realize that my needs aren't always going to be met. Change is difficult and can be good. That is what I'm holding on to: change; the mean dark word that splatters itself wherever it wants to.

At the beginning of the middle school year, I was out of sorts, trying to set my mind on everything that's been going on. I would be going to the principal's office three out of five days. I was tackling classes with C's and F's on papers. I felt like Doug when he transitioned and moved to Marysville after his dad lost his job. Having to live in a new home, The Dump, represents my dad's apartment. Doug's hometown, represents my house. I feel close to my home, old memories and smells.

Learning to accept change is a tough thing. Whether this is a change for the better or a change for the worst, I know I will get by. Sometimes I wish none of this happened and life was back to normal. But life weaves in ways it wants to.

Life can be cruel and awful but if I let the cracks of sunlight shine through, it will be okay. Seeing Doug struggle and persist though his journey made me realize that even if life is unfair, trying your best every day will make it better. Reading this book made me stronger mentally. Despite the fact that my loving family may not be together,

I have to be grateful for my family in whatever condition it may be in. There may have been some bumps in the road and times may seem tough right now, but I'll be, okay for now.

Best Wishes,
Kenna Sondhelm

Level I: Semifinalists

Gus Sugarman

St. Richard's Episcopal School, Indianapolis

Letter to R. J. Palacio

Author of *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

I have a brother who is as cool as Auggie, a mom who always believes in everyone, a dad who is super cool and funny, and a dog who is super playful. My little brother wasn't born the same way as anyone else; he was born without a 21st chromosome. This means it is harder for him to control his movements. He can't talk, walk, eat, or write by himself. This makes me very mad when people stare at him. I just want to go up to them and say "If you had a little brother without a 21st chromosome would you stare at him?" My brother doesn't have any best friends either, except me. When I read *Wonder* I can definitely relate to Via, even though I am a lot younger.

This book, *Wonder* didn't just inspire me, it changed me in so many different ways. It changed the way I see people; instead of looking at how they look, but to look at their personalities. I try to never stare, but to look at their shoes. I would look at Auggie's shoes and think, "He is totally into science." I also tried to put my feet in Mrs. Pullman's shoes. I thought of how hard it is to leave your boy at school where you know he would get bullied. After one year of torture he would get an award for it! Going through losing friends and making them. Auggie has a great personality, but no one appreciates it at his school at first. Then a girl named Summer comes and summers up his day. They become cool beans.

I can't just thank you for writing this book, I have to get a job and write a biography about you. I loved this book and I could read it 1,000 times. I would have to become invisible to read it 1,000 times so it is probably impossible, but I will try. Now I am reading *Auggie and Me*. I was so sad when I read that Julian's name came from his grandma's boyfriend that helped her during the Holocaust that couldn't walk without TWO canes! Sorry total spoiler, but I can't stop picking that book! Thank you for changing me in a good way. So please write more books!

From your biggest fan,
Gus Sugarman

Julia Vamos

Benjamin Franklin Middle School, Valparaiso

Letter to Karen Hesse

Author of *Out of the Dust*

Dear Karen Hesse,

The book *Out of the Dust* really shows the hardships and struggles that people had during the Dust Bowl. I cried a little bit when Billie Jo's mom died. The book reminds us of how easy we have it. We have doctors that can take care of us if something happens. We have cleaning supplies like vacuum cleaners that can clean up things like dust. Now we can actually have other things clean our house or get us somewhere.

In *Out of the Dust*, you really described what is happening and you illuminated the whole time period. With the sandstorms and the harsh winds, it basically turned the United States into a desert. The sandstorms. The way they were described almost like blizzards but with dust instead of snow. With the winds blowing clumps of snow or dust in your face so hard that it hurts. Almost like a million cannons firing at your face.

I am greatly sorry for the people who lost everything or their lives during the Dust Bowl. Even during the Great Depression, and I hope that such a tragedy doesn't ever occur again. People seriously suffered and were probably permanently scarred from their suffering.

I hope that someday I will be able to meet you. I also hope that you keep writing amazing books and will keep winning awards for them.

Sincerely,
Julia Vamos

Gabriel Vasquez-Jaffe

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Greg Dawson

Author of *Hiding in the Spotlight*

Dear Greg Dawson,

As a Jew, I read many books about the Holocaust to find out more about the harsh times that my family went through in Hungary. No other book has had a person inspire me like Zhana in *Hiding in the Spotlight*. We both play the piano, but Zhana is more persistent under extremely difficult circumstances. Despite our extremely different life circumstances, piano plays a similar positive role in our lives.

Zhana's experiences taught me how easily I give up even though my problems aren't nearly as severe as hers. I can play the piano whenever I want, but when something like a shortage of time becomes an obstacle, I immediately skip practicing. When I lived in China, I didn't want to walk the fifteen minutes to where there was a piano. Also, after long days at school in Indianapolis, I sometimes don't feel like practicing even though I have a piano in my home and love playing it. Zhana rarely had a chance to play piano because of all of the challenges of trying to survive as a Jew. She was persistent in following her passion no matter what was in her way. For example, Zhana played for Nazi soldiers not only to survive but because of her love for piano. After reading your book, I try to take greater advantages of having a piano in my home.

Your book made me see how fortunate I am to be able to just focus on piano and not basic survival needs. I need to appreciate more that I am able to go to piano lessons every week with a full belly. The lessons no longer seem like just a weekly routine. Because Zhana was Jewish, she had trouble even finding a teacher who was willing to teach her during the Holocaust. She simply dreamed of little things such as food and shelter. For example, when Zhana was hiding from the Nazis, she had to live from scraps she found and slept outside. Because of her story, I realize how lucky I am to have all of the food I need and the warmth of my house.

Finally, your book made me realize how piano brings me peace like it did for Zhana. Whenever I am stressed about homework, piano eases my anxiety. I play whatever my heart feels like, from Beethoven to Bach. Zhana also played music by classical composers, which helped her escape the miseries of war in Europe. When she lived on a farm in the U.S., she had to do many chores and piano was her relaxation. Also, just like Zhana, I love to perform for audiences, which makes me forget any problems. Piano is the escape from difficulties for both of us.

My life is full of opportunities and resources that go beyond just piano. Zhana reached so far without almost any of the advantages that I have. Thank you for showing me with your book that I need to take more advantage of all of my opportunities so that I can reach my full potential in piano and in other areas of my life.

Thank you again,
Gabriel Vasquez-Jaffe

Level I: Semifinalists

Nash Wagner

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Josh Medcalf

Author of ***Pound the Stone***

Dear Mr. Medcalf,

“The fear will always be there. Do it anyway.” This quote inspired me to get stronger every day because even when I did not want to put in work that day I said, “Do it anyway.” ***Pound the Stone*** was recommended by my baseball coach and when he handed it to me he said, “This book will change you,” and indeed it did.

On a rainy day in November, I went out to hit baseballs off the tee in my barn. I started getting very frustrated seeing that the ball was not being hit well. I had been keeping track of how many balls I hit well, and it was only 6. Then after several more awful swings I remembered what Russ said in chapter 14, “I understand that you think you know where you want to get to, but it’s the process that gets us there. It’s all the little things.” After remembering that, I just kept on hitting and not getting mad and trusting the process. One week later my dad and I went to hit at the field, and I hit one baseball 300 feet at age 12. I realized it was because I trusted the process and did not think about the negatives.

“If you focus on your weaknesses, you simply become average at a lot of things, but master none.” I wish someone had told me this before I started practicing 3 pointers in practice instead of working on my big man drills. Before I read this chapter, I would always shoot three pointers instead of doing my big man drills or lay ups and I started not to even practice my old drills anymore and just shoot. I started to become good at three pointers but was getting bad at just going up strong with the ball and shooting layups. After a while I just was an average player. When I read this chapter as soon as I got home from school, I went to my barn and practiced my big man drills and layups. After a while my 3-point shooting was not very good, but I had mastered my lay ups and my big man drills. The reason this helped me is because layups and going up strong is my role.

“The path of mastery is a lot of things, but most of all, it’s not a straight line.” Whenever I do not beat a personal record when I am hitting baseballs I just tell myself, *“I pounded the stone today.”* I did not always use to be like this. At the beginning of October when I did not hit a personal record, I would think, *“I did not improve today.”* I never remembered the good things. I always looked at the negative side if I did not do well. A couple days after I did not beat a personal record I read this chapter and realized it is a hard path and at some points you feel like you just want to quit. What kept me going was not if I did good or bad but the prize at the end of the path. Even if it is not sports, a scholarship or an amazing job might be at the end of the path. Or it might be just a fancy dinner but whatever it is, only those with grit and dedication get the gift that is at the end of the path.

“Talent is overlooked. But the ability to pound the stone day in and day out, year after year, until finally the stone splits. That is the rarest, most valuable asset on the planet. And I guarantee that if you can develop it, you will become great in whatever you do.” This is my favorite paragraph in the book because it has so much more in it than it seems. Pounding the stone takes grit, persistence, and dedication. The stone splitting for me would be a great college that I can play baseball at or basketball. Pounding the stone is so important because a goal without putting in work is a wish. All the most successful athletes have had to put hours upon hours in days upon days just into basic footwork drills and years on shooting a basketball to master maybe only a free throw. My point is even the worst player in the NBA has pounded the stone so much. We all pound the stone every day, if it is doing your homework well or getting closer to a promotion at your job and those who don’t are your average Joes. Thank you for teaching me the importance of pounding the stone, grit, the path of mastery, persistence, and dedication.

Sincerely,
Nash Wagner

Zoe Ward

R. J. Baskett Middle School, Gas City

Letter to Sharon Draper

Author of *Out of My Mind*

Dear Sharon M. Draper,

“A person is so much more than the name of a diagnosis on a chart.” In your book, Melody has cerebral palsy. She doesn’t have much control over her body, and she can’t speak. She doesn’t talk to anyone, but she inspires people with her spunk and determination. I couldn’t comprehend that at first.

Words have always been a part of my life. I remember when I was little, when my mom hung letters up on the walls, and we sounded out words together. I remember when I first learned to read. I remember trying to read every picture book in the library. But most of all, I remember writing.

I wrote about a lot of things. I wrote about princesses and fairies, and kids with missing front teeth, broken roller skates, and a dog with a black patch over his eye. I remember turning in a paper to my first grade teacher. There was a picture of a lazy rabbit lying in the grass, chatting to a ladybug and an ant, guarded breezily by balmy trees. I remember how proud I was when my teacher read it to the class. I realized that feelings ride on the words you use, and I was filled with a sort of maniacal power that I was the ruler, and my readers were the puppets on my string.

Later, when I began to devour short chapter books with rude rich brats and down-on-their-luck yet determined heroes, my brother pushed the line. He hid behind the fridge and jumped out at me. I unleashed a torrent of name-calling at him. *Idiot, eejit, brat, stupid...* all words I had learning from the mini millionaires with cruel, stone hearts. I remember how hurt he was. I remember learning words have good and bad influence on people.

When I first read your book, *Out of My Mind*, I was immediately filled with sympathy for Melody. How awful, I first thought, to have all the words inside you, pounding on the door, but you couldn’t

manage to open it. As I dived deeper into the book, I was amazed at her mother's communication with her, how their connection was so deep that she could tell what Melody meant without her even saying a word. Still, Melody had millions of thoughts inside her that couldn't be said.

When I was in fifth grade, I was given the chance to visit the special needs class in our school. It was there that I met Lilly. Lilly was an elementary school student with blonde curly hair and a big smile. She was in either a wheelchair or walking in a walker, and she couldn't speak very well. Every day, I got the chance to go down to her classroom, and quiz her on whatever she was learning right then.

At first, I was a little scared, even when I was just reading a book to her. I was afraid that I was doing something wrong. Was I asking her easy questions? Was I pushing her too hard? Was I not understanding what she's trying to say? When she cried out of frustration or uncomfortableness, I was overwhelmed. I felt like I was failing her because I didn't understand what message she was trying to get across. We worked day after day, and I could see that we were making progress. I found out she liked the color pink, and she loved songs and rhymes. I knew when she was tired or when she was hungry, and I began to figure out what to do when she cried.

After a week or two, I realized that I really enjoyed working with Lilly. She worked so hard, even when it was discouraging, and was fun to be around. I loved it when I could make her laugh, and my family heard of nothing else if she understood the math we worked on. That year, seeing Lilly was the best part of my day.

I admired Lilly. Being her definitely wasn't easy. She couldn't do some of what the other kids did. When we went out on the playground, she didn't climb up the ladder or chase someone during tag. But she

was always so enthusiastic about going on the swing, or simply sitting in the fresh air. There were hard moments when I couldn't understand what was going on, or there was just a bad day, but I learned more and more from Lilly. I saw how much she appreciated the littlest things. If someone read her the book that she really liked to read, she would smile and clap her hands. She was excited when she made it across the gym floor in her walker. Lilly honestly appreciated all the little things in life.

Even as I discovered all these incredible things about Lilly, I still felt sorry that she couldn't speak. Not being able to say the words pounding in your brain seemed awful to me. As I read more of your book, I was thrilled when Melody received her Medi-Talker. I couldn't wait for her to share her thoughts with the world! I even cried when the machine spoke her first words to her mom and dad. I felt so much empathy for Melody, who felt trapped inside a cage, unable to communicate.

When I read of how astounded her classmates were that she actually had thoughts in her head, I felt a twang of guilt. Did I act that way? Like the kids with disabilities weren't just kids...they were kids with something wrong with them?

This book changed my outlook of people with special needs. I learned that they were real people, and so much fun. *Out of My Mind* also taught me the impact of words. Melody accomplished so much with her Medi-Talker. She joined the quiz team, made friends with Rose, and told Claire and Molly that they were wrong about her. People felt so much different about her as soon as she 'spoke' through her Medi-Talker. It made me wonder how people would feel about me if I couldn't talk. Would people be nicer? Would they make fun of me? Would my friends be my friends?

Melody is brilliant. She has memorized so many facts. However, people think she is stupid because she has a disability. She says, “My disability limits my body, not my mind.” Still, her classmates have trouble wrapping their minds around that at first. I realize that it is an amazing gift that I am able to speak, write, and run. Not all other people are so lucky. Reading your book has made me rethink the things I say. Melody realizes the power of words, because she has seen the absence of them. As soon as I learned to talk, I never shut up at home. But now, I think more about what I’m saying. Are my words positive? Negative? Are they going to make my friend laugh, or are they going to make that girl cry?

Your book, ***Out of My Mind*** really improved my outlook on people with disabilities and the effect my words will have. Your book has changed me and the way I view others. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Zoe Ward

Level II

Level II
1st Place

Yael Cohen

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Marcus Samuelsson

Author of *Yes, Chef*

Dear Marcus Samuelsson,

Almost every Friday morning, as I walk downstairs into the kitchen, I can smell the delicious scents of Jewish cuisine. When I ask my mom what she is making for Friday night dinner, usually the answer would be something like spicy Moroccan fish with tomatoes and peppers or hot chicken soup with carrots, onions, and knaidel (matzo balls). Eating these things often is such a privilege because a lot of people don't get the opportunity to have such a rich heritage that manifests itself through food.

I recently read your book, *Yes, Chef*, and I felt a real connection to your quest to discover your heritage through cuisine. I really admired when you felt the need to learn more about your biological family. Your determination to cook more Ethiopian food inspired me to cook more Jewish food.

Like your multicultural family roots, my ancestors also come from many parts of the world. My ancestors on my mom's side lived in Poland and escaped World War II. On the other side, my ancestors come from Morocco and struggled through many hardships to get to Israel and America. I've had a really strong sense of heritage and roots my whole life. Just like you, the way my family and I show it, is through food.

In my house, I've always felt like there is a melting pot of cultures embedded in my soul. I'm part Polish, Moroccan, Iraqi, Israeli, and American. I just feel like I have such a unique identity and that food is really potent in my identity and in my life.

My mom is a chef and makes the most amazing food I have ever tasted. In your book, you used to make food with your Swedish adoptive grandmother and I really felt a connection to having a role

model in life who teaches you all about cooking. My mom is the one who taught me everything I need to know in the kitchen, from how to cut an onion, to what temperature a cake bakes at, to what ingredients go into the best bechamel sauce you'll ever taste. There's rarely a moment when there isn't something boiling on the stove or roasting in the oven.

My mom and I are always cooking together. She's always asking me to get the flour for the cake or the vinegar for the sauce. I love to help in the kitchen and it makes me feel important and like a mini sous chef. When people say food is joy, they aren't joking. Completing the perfect dish always lights up a dark, difficult day.

We've always had ten different dips, challah, chocolate cake, and more every Saturday on Sabbath. Tasting all the flavors at Sabbath connects me to my heritage and to Jewish traditions. Sitting down at Shabbat dinner on Friday night makes me feel at peace as the long week just drifts away slowly. I love spending quality time with my friends and family without the distractions of social media and the daily news.

It was beautiful to be able to witness the way that cooking gave you a purpose in life and that you kept growing as a chef even after you became world famous. You inspire me to always keep learning and keep searching within myself. When people use the term "soul food," they sometimes don't understand its true meaning. To me, food is more profound than just the way it tastes. It's in my history. It's in my soul.

Sincerely,
Yael Cohen

Level II
2nd Place

Alexander Vasquez-Jaffe

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Leon Leyson

Author of *The Boy on the Wooden Box*

Dear Leon Leyson,

When I read your book, *The Boy on the Wooden Box*, I was reminded of my Uncle Sanyi and Aunt Franci, who both survived the Holocaust. Sadly, my uncle died 14 years ago, a couple weeks before I was born, and I am named after him. (Sanyi is a nickname for Alexander in Hungarian.)

During the Holocaust, my aunt and uncle battled hardships to stay alive. In January of 1943, my aunt was in hiding with several other young women in Budapest. When people questioned them, they said they had been bombed out of another city. Tragically, in June, the women were captured and sent to a labor camp. My aunt remained in the camp for two years, digging trenches for the Germans on the Budapest side of the Danube river. Like my aunt, you had to do grueling work. She never told me what the conditions were like, but your book helped me to imagine the cruel guards who may have watched over her and the meager rations she may have been forced to survive on.

When you were not permitted to go to school, that reminded me of my Uncle Sanyi. From an early age, my uncle experienced discrimination. He wanted to go to medical school, but he was unable to enroll in Hungary because the school did not admit Jews. Uncle Sanyi had to move to Italy, where he learned Italian and worked his way through medical school. After my uncle graduated, he returned to Hungary, only to be captured by the Nazis. He was sent to a labor camp on the border of Hungary and Ukraine in the Carpathian Mountains. The Russians then captured him and forced him to work in a Russian mine as a prisoner of war.

Today, my aunt tries to block out the years of horrible memories. She doesn't want to see any films, participate in discussions, or speak to

Level II: Finalists

groups about the Holocaust because the memories give her sleepless nights. Your book helped me understand why my aunt does not want to talk about her experiences and why she only told me the basic outline of her story with little detail when I interviewed her for a school project. She had never even told my mom any part of the story, and my mom is close to her. Her experiences in the Holocaust have scarred her. It was hard for me to relate to trying to fall asleep at night with petrifying images of the war floating through my mind. Your book helped me to imagine what life may have been for my aunt in the concentration camps and working in the labor camps. Also, your book helped me reflect further upon whether someone may have helped my Aunt Franci, a question I have had for a long time. Perhaps, as in your story, a Nazi made my aunt's survival possible.

Unlike my aunt, uncle, and you, I can devote my life to studying and going to school. I do not have to worry about basic survival or have to devote my day to trying to find food so that I do not starve. Although I sometimes consider my life to be stressful due to homework and extracurricular activities, it is incomparable to what my aunt, uncle, and you went through during the war. I don't even come close to having to fear for my life. Schools will admit me even though I am Jewish. Unlike my uncle, no one will be able to stop me from becoming whatever I want.

Reading your book gave me a new perspective on what my aunt and uncle went through in the Holocaust. Because my uncle is no longer alive and my aunt feels uncomfortable talking about her experiences, I appreciate being able to relate their lives to your story. Also, your book powerfully reinforced my feeling of how lucky I am to live in a place where I do not have to worry about my basic survival.

Sincerely,
Alexander Vasquez-Jaffe

Level II
3rd Place

Alexandra Fleenor

Greensburg Jr. High, Greensburg

Letter to Tupac Shakur

Author of "*The Rose That Grew from Concrete*"

Dear Tupac Shakur,

The first time I saw your poem "*The Rose That Grew from Concrete*" was in my 8th grade language arts class. I'm going to be honest, when I saw the poem the first time, I blew it off. I thought it was some little cheesy poem that the teacher was going to make us read. But then later in the year, I saw it again, so I read it. I reread it over and over, and I thought about it. The poem just got to me and made me think about how much my life is like that rose.

I grew up in a very dysfunctional family. My mom was a drug head and my father said I wasn't his and my step-father was an alcoholic. One of my little brothers was diagnosed with cancer when he was three. I had an older brother who died when he was only three, and my little sister begs for attention. Then there's me; the one who doesn't show her emotions. The one who has trust issues, and the one who doesn't say much because she is afraid she would say something wrong.

For the longest time, I would just lock myself in my room and not say a word to anyone. And when people asked me if I was okay, I would tell them "I'm fine," but in reality, I wasn't fine. I had so much sadness and so much anger inside. I was tired of people telling me I couldn't do anything. Then one day, my little brother tried to tell me I wasn't good enough at basketball because I was a girl, so I tried out for my 7th grade basketball team. And guess what? I made the A team, and was the team captain and point guard.

Often, I have the feeling that no one cares. Every time I try and tell my family how my day has been or how I feel, no one listens, or they act like they don't care. Many of my friends and family doubt me. Since I am the oldest, they say that I am going to be the one who ends up like my mother, or that I'm going to be a nobody like my

dad. Whenever I hear people say this to me, I think to myself, *Why try if everyone is just going to tear me back down?*

I'm sitting here reading your poem now, and one line jumps out at me: "Proving nature's law is wrong, it learned to walk without having feet." I'm the rose that learned how to walk without feet, I'm the rose that proved everyone wrong, I'm the rose making A's and B's, and I'm the rose that made my 8th grade basketball team.

Later in life, I plan on going into the Air Force for 4 years, then traveling to the places I want to go. So thank you Tupac for writing this poem because now I realize that I'm the rose that proved nature's law was wrong.

Yours truly,
Alexandra Fleenor

Level II Honorable Mentions

Julia Fensel

Bloomington, IN

Letter to Ally Condie

Author of *Matched*

Dear Ally Condie,

Never have I seen such a wonderfully crafted novel that depicted society's oppressiveness with thoughtful inner conflict. It manages to portray the main character's inspiring metamorphosis from an acquiescent part of society's game of suppression to a defiantly creative individual who accepts her yearning for remembering and creating powerful pieces of poetry. Her journey to discovering herself and her identity in a controlling environment is truly awe-inspiring. Not to mention that along the way, she managed to learn and understand the ingenious ways of Ky Markham and his unremarkably remarkable way of blending into society's mold for a perfect citizen, obedient and ordinary. The book also tinkered and fiddled with heavy but philosophical concepts. From death, creativity, and power-thirst, the book is filled to the brim with concepts that changed my perspective of the world.

Reading about Carissa's grandpa dying brought me to the verge of tears and caused my mind to whirl with varietized notions. One thought that pierced through my mind surprised me. My first contact with death was when I had been diagnosed with a potential brain tumor. At the time, I was only 9. I was quite naive about my diagnosis at first and was perplexed when I caught my mom hiding in the bathroom, crying. Brain tumors can be potentially fatal and at the time, death had just been a hollow word, empty of meaning. Slowly, during the laborious days before my MRI, I got a better grasp of the word death. Thankfully, it turned out to be drusen, not the dreaded tumor. The whole experience has made me realize that death is a paradox. It's a necessary tragedy. The dilemma between we as Homo sapiens and death has survived through our entire existence. Death itself is very simple. Everything that is blessed with life is at the same time cursed with death. Death can end everything as quick as a heartbeat. Everything from the person's memory to personality

is wiped clean in a millisecond. This person's existence is ripped off the face of the Earth, the Universe. Yet our feeling towards this fact is mixed. Our natural instinct is rebellion. From stories of immortality to the afterlife, we refuse to accept the fact that everything we have thought, fought, feared, and loved will be lost, never to be understood. The pain of knowing life is slowly slipping out of our fingertips is unbearable. After all life is about acceptance, fear, remorse, jealousy, hope, passion, love, joy, greed, regret, rage, and once again, acceptance. Life is about living.

Our domestic and mature instinct on the other hand pressures us to accept death with dignity. Acceptance of death is the only way to help ease the pain of death. It is in some ways selfish yet simultaneously selfless. Accepting death means in a sense, you're giving up the reins and letting death dictate your life. Nonetheless, it helps your family cope with the agony of your passing. You end up juggling with the different approaches to gripping the numb hands of death. Understandably, these ideals are frustrating and so deep into the depths of our knowledge that we would almost rather forget than know.

In your book, Cassie's grandpa approaches death with an admirably tragic attitude. He himself clearly accepts death but he doesn't accept society's forceful hand tinkering with the job of death. The officers don't pity the fact that every citizen is forced into the hands of death at 80 regardless of nature. They use family as an excuse and claim to only want for their citizens to die with their family by their side. Natural death itself is too unexpected and wild for the officers to control. Control and power are what truly drive the officers. Who wouldn't want to be in control of death? Their greed and lust for power is so strong that they will destroy everything in their path, even citizens if they must. But, the officers have forgotten an important

factor. Nature is forever in control. The wild and craziness that is feared by the officials will forever exist. The officials can only delay this for a certain amount of time. Already, there are cracks in their prestigious society. Perfection can never be achieved. Soon their unproductive and ruthless tyranny will end.

Mankind climbed to the top of the animal kingdom because of creativity, a gift from nature that we don't take time to appreciate. Creativity led us to fire, the wheel, and so much more. It's priceless and yet it's been looked down upon for decades. No, don't become an artist, be a doctor, or don't be a musician, become an accountant. I am an artist myself and living in world where artists are perceived as poor can be stressful. The most devastating thing that I witness almost every day is people changing themselves. Every day we deliberately cage ourselves and our creativity, conforming into society's ideal citizen. We let society shape us into their mindless, rule following workers. At school we are only taught to be employable, constructing us from children to the pawns of the powerful.

The power-hungry officers in *Matched* transformed a potentially thriving society to a repressed city populated by hollow beings. We humans are all unique because all of us contain creativity that flows through us along with our blood. It's truly amazing that we all possess the power to create something that has never existed. Without creativity, we are just meaningless beings wandering the planet, no different from animals. The same goes to say for the citizens living in the futuristic Oria Province. They are all the same. Even their once unique artifacts that distinguished one person from another was taken. Everyone simply lives their lives in shallowly unrealistic bliss. Yet what the officers don't know is that bottling up creativity only makes it stronger. Dormant at the beginning, it will slowly rise and expand, until it breaks through and explodes similar to a volcano. In fact, Carissa and Ky are just a few of the vastly secretive

societies peeking through the cracks of the officer's abominable rule.

Garden Borough, a perfect province, is just another well-fabricated illusion for the citizens. The powerful officers manage to create the illusion of a perfect society, where everyone lives in harmony and their lives are constructed to the maximum fulfilment, even though in reality, it is just a dystopian town: filled with mindless beings that are pieces in the government's game of power. This is just one of the many concepts that you masterfully weaved into the book.

I thank you for helping me change my lenses and look at the world from a different angle. In this world, we do have people like the officers, who crave power and use others as pawns. But unlike the book, we possess the freedom to think. We have the freedom to choose who we are as people. We have the power to change and design the world.

Sincerely,
Julia Fensel

Gracie Ferguson

Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg

Letter to Neil Gaiman

Author of *Coraline*

Dear Neil Gaiman,

When I first read your book *Coraline*, sometime in my early elementary school years, I will admit I actually did not like it; or, to be more precise, I did not enjoy the ending. I had no problem with the daring storyline, the invigorating plot, or the odd yet likeable characters. I had disliked it because, in my childish, youthful mind, I had grown naively jealous of Coraline and her happy ending.

Jealous may not be the correct word. I think I felt more along the lines of cheated, which can be confusing without a little backstory. I do understand now that being jealous of fictional characters is silly, but back then I was young and impressionable and still believed that my toys came alive at night and ate the food from our cabinets. I can also admit I was not in a good place or state of mind upon reading *Coraline*. My mother had disappeared from my life much like the ghosts I read about in books and saw on TV. I can still remember the night she left, so many years later; we had been baking a chocolate cake for no good reason other than to have fun and eat poorly. “Don’t frost it without me!” she had called as she left our dingy little apartment I lived in for a large portion of my life, and I particularly remember she gave me a sweet kiss on the forehead; perhaps she meant it as a goodbye. I can vaguely recall that she had left for a pack of smokes. How many times I had asked childishly ‘How much longer?’ As hours ticked by, I can vaguely recall my confusion as we put the bright frosting on the cake without her, and the clock ticked and chimed near midnight.

We found her a year later, in a rundown motel out of town, obviously drunk or maybe even high; I had seen it in her red, drooping eyes and slack face as my father demanded to know why she had never answered the calls we sent her every day after school since she left. I remember how much I hated those calls; endless ringing and tormenting voice machines full of hopeful messages that would never be heard. Inevitably I started to refuse to call as I began losing the

hope I had held onto so dearly, that one day my mother would come back. I recall staring at the snow on my bright little boots while she demanded a hug, as if this whole little disappearing act was a game that only she found fun. I had quickly decided then that I despised the person my mother had become, detested that she had been turned into this ugly monster that didn't match the image of my mother I had before. I didn't hate her; I don't think I ever could. But I knew at that point that I wanted nothing to do with the person she had become.

I think around that time I became resentful; sometimes it wasn't even because of her. The world suddenly seemed far too unfair. I went to a counselor to talk about her dramatic leaving, something I found pointless. Why did I have to draw silly pictures or write letters about my feelings to a person that had taken money from my painted piggy-bank and kissed other men without decency? I hated when Mother's Day would come at school and I had to make a gift for a person that I had then decided ruined my chances at normal parents. I had always given those presents to my aunts, who I thought were better mothers than she could ever be, even if it wasn't the same and probably never would be. I hated when I saw other children with a nice, nuclear family, a loving mom and dad, and siblings they got to live with, all conceived by the same parents. They did not have half-sisters or brothers, or a dad who sometimes couldn't afford groceries and still tried to form ties with a mom who had left without a trace and caused endless worry, anger and stress. My mother eventually got an apartment across from ours, on the other side of the crossway, where she lived with a new boyfriend. Sometimes, I was angry that my dad tried to get me to go to my mother's new apartment. I didn't like that my mom got to move on with a man when my dad still sometimes gave her money. I clearly remember reading your book and hating that Coraline got a happy ending with her parents, a happy ending with her mother, something I had then decided I would never get. It was around then that I truly lost hope.

I reread your book later, with more information and a better understanding. I still didn't know why my mom suddenly left that night, but I did realize that just seeing a family that seemed happy didn't mean they were (told from experience). I knew that my father wasn't a saint either; he had done his fair share of time in jail from selling and taking drugs, and I spent much time with my aunts, who have become like second mothers. I think I will always hold my father in higher regard than my mother. He did not leave me, not on purpose or for lack of want. Upon reading your book for the first time, my younger self loved everything about it. I thought I was quite like Coraline in the beginning; our homes were dreary, we had odd neighbors, our mothers ignored us. I liked the story Coraline told to the mysterious cat about her father's bravery when facing the wasps to protect her, and thought of it as something my father would do as well. I always believed he loved me more than my mother; he seemed far more caring when he was the only parent in my life. It was just the ending that disturbed me. There was no daring adventure or perilous journey I could go on to make my family whole again. When I reread the book, however, I did not have the same feelings of resentment. I took your words in a new light. Who said there was no way to get my family back together? Who said I couldn't help my mom and dad, and be supportive in my own way?

I thought about how, in your book, Coraline has to find it in herself to reject the Other Mother, despite the fact that the Mother had shown stark evidence in the beginning that she would be a better parent. She proved she would not make food that Coraline disliked, would not stop Coraline from going outside in the rain, and would not ignore her. Later, of course, Coraline understands that the Other Mother is evil and wishes to trap Coraline in her world forever, but before that, Coraline gave up everything she could ever hope for on her own, all for parents who she had found unfair. It was this that helped me decide to try to connect myself with my mother more. She

Level II: Honorable Mentions

had been unfair and unnecessarily cruel to me, but I was giving her a second chance, in my own eyes. It wasn't completely the same; I knew I would never get to live with my mother again. But I did desperately want to have some form of bond, no matter how small. I wanted something from my mom, the same way adopted children go out and search for their birth parents. It didn't matter that she left me; I used your words as inspiration. I tried harder to connect my siblings too, who I hardly saw unless they wore orange with glass separating us and a payphone to speak with each other. Perhaps my haphazard attempts to reconnect with my mother, brothers and sister weren't appreciated, but I still made an attempt. I was still so young, so I have no idea how much of a difference I made then, or if it was even noticeable, but I do know there is a difference now.

I live with one of my aunts today, which I know is best for me, my education, and my health. My dad has spoken about his own struggles aloud, and his words have been an inspiration to others with addiction problems just as yours have been to me, which I'm incredibly proud of. My mom lives in a town near mine, and I feel we are finally reconnecting; I get to see her more than I probably have in several years. Many people believe she will relapse, but I have faith in her. She is going to her own meetings, where she learns about others who have had issues with addictions and want to get better. My sister, who I get to see more, has also been doing better now that she has her own children to care for. I don't see my brothers as much, but I will continue to use your example to try and get them back within my life, even if I am afraid or worried. I strive to be more like Coraline, and to show my own courage just as Coraline shows hers.

Be brave,
Gracie Ferguson

The Indiana Author Letter Prize

Kayli Hoffman

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to John Green

Author of *The Fault in Our Stars*

Dear John Green,

I never truly believed that a single book could change my life. Then I read your book, *The Fault in Our Stars*. Let's just say that I was proven wrong...very wrong. This book sent me on a roller coaster of emotions; I cried, I laughed, and I learned. More importantly, it changed me, and the way I view the world.

The biggest thing your book taught me is that I need to stop demanding answers and start living in the questions. In the book, Gus and Hazel have monstrous question marks over their future. Their "what ifs" are about life, death, love, and loss. I used to worry about the "what ifs" way more than necessary. The future is a mystery and the past can't be changed.

Living in the moment had a whole new meaning after reading this book. Because we never know what is going to happen with the people who we love in our lives, we have to cherish our time with the people in our lives right now. In the book, Hazel is trying to enjoy her time with Gus while they are both still together. As Hazel acknowledged, "Some infinities are bigger than others." I take this personally, as we sometimes are given more or less time with the people in our lives that we truly care about. Some infinities are bigger than others, but it is what your personal infinity is made up of that makes it count.

As your book says, "The world is not a wish-granting factory." Maybe there will always be someone who has more than you, or that you think is "better" than you. But you have to realize you are enough. Not only are you enough, you are perfect in your own way. I developed a deeper appreciation for what I have instead of hating the life I've been given. Some people are given worse hands than others, some battle cancer, some don't have a family, and some struggle in school. Of course everyone, including me, loves to believe in fairy tales and happy endings.

But reality is that not all wishes come true, and endings aren't always happy. I only have one life, and I want to make sure that I make it count. We are all on a roller coaster and we should all hope that it only goes up.

Augustus Waters feared oblivion and wanted to be remembered. In the past I have felt the exact same way. He didn't want to die without making his impact on the world. Which I without a doubt understand. But Hazel Grace encourages us to ignore the fear of oblivion for it will come no matter what. I now understand that whether you help one person or one thousand people, you will make a difference. It's okay to be loved deeply instead of widely--some people would even argue that it's better.

It's important to enjoy the simple pleasures. For us to recognize that life, in fact, is not fair, but that we must still make the most of the time we have. Above all, I have come to the realization that life can be good, if we only allow it to be. This book will forever be in my heart. I can never thank you enough. I have to say, it was a privilege to have my heart broken by your book.

Sincerely,
Kayli Hoffman

Elijah Jackson

Wisdom Builders, Indianapolis
Letter to Elizabeth George Speare
Author of *The Bronze Bow*

Dear Elizabeth George Speare,

There are moments in life when a piece of art will magnify and echo the very fabric of your existence. You see yourself in a character, and when observed as a third party it brings clarity and healing to your experience. This moment confronted me when I read your novel, *The Bronze Bow*.

In your novel the supporting character, Leah, is without hope. She has lost her grandmother, and she is now living with a good intentioned but misguided brother, Daniel. Her brother is a protectionist and wants nothing more than her happiness. Unfortunately, Daniel's tutelary nature sequesters Leah from true friendship. Her loneliness becomes a disease. It eats away at her until her human nature is hardly recognizable. She is unresponsive and no longer wants to live. Daniel's love eventually overcomes fear, and Leah's heart heals as she finds true friendship.

For the first eight years of my life, I did not have one friend outside of my family. This is not an exaggeration. You see my dad was Daniel. He loved me. He wanted the best for me, but ultimately fear clouded his good intentions. He chose to homeschool me, and I had almost no outside interactions with kids my age.

By the time I turned nine, my dad realized something was wrong. He thought he could fix the problem by moving our family ten minutes away from Walt Disney World. He didn't realize that the happiest place on earth could not make his wishes come true. You see, what I really needed was a friend, and my dad was finally coming to this realization.

One day on the way home from Disney World, I saw a kid my age in our neighborhood with a lemonade stand. My dad figuratively removed the heavy chain I was carrying and allowed me to become friends with Roman. For the next six months, my mirth was without

Level II: Honorable Mentions

measure. Tragically, this felicity turned out to be nothing more than a fantasy as my dad's business went upside down. Without warning we moved to Chicago so that he could quickly finish an MBA program.

Once again I was without friends for the year we would be in Chicago. My parents tried to get me to meet other kids, but I was shut down inside. Similar to my dad's previous state, I became enslaved with fear and did not want to hope again.

After my dad graduated, we moved to Indiana. Like my dad, I began to let go of fear. My heart once again was filled with hope and love. My family got involved in large homeschool cooperatives, and I have made so many dear friends. I have found peace and happiness.

Your novel spoke to my soul. It was more than a book. It was my life. It helped me process and heal from difficult and unfortunate events. It also showed me that my dad was Daniel. He was full of love, and this love overcame his fear.

Gratefully,
Elijah Jackson

Eliza Lutgen

Western Middle School, Russiaville

Letter to Tahereh Mafi

Author of *Shatter Me*

Dear Tahereh Mafi,

Most people probably wouldn't notice the small, seemingly insignificant, change in me after reading your book, *Shatter Me*. This change was virtually unnoticed to most as it only altered how I view my life and myself. Your book made me understand I can have anything I want in life if I go for it.

I am frequently asked how I do it all; I get good grades, compete on academic teams, play sports, sing, and play piano and guitar. The simple answer is easy, I just make time to get the work done. The more complicated version, the one no one expects to hear, is because of a monumental change inflicted by this book.

I frequently like to think of myself like a heroine in a book. I like to imagine myself being able to do everything, but most times my life doesn't compare well to the heroine. I'm just an average girl, without any powers or magic, so how could these bigger than life characters connect to me? Somehow you managed to make Juliette relatable for me. Juliette, while more than human, has issues like everyone else. With all of her oh-so-human flaws, I could easily associate with her. In the book, she struggles within herself while at the same time she is fighting to stay afloat in her hectic life. I like to compare that to living my average, everyday life while struggling to keep up with all the things going on around me.

Have you ever been so stressed it's like you're paralyzed? It feels like you can't seem to do anything about it? I have, and so has Juliette. She is afraid of life and herself. She even thought herself a monster, but she learned that was not the truth. In time, the reality of her situation became clear. Exactly like when I'm upset about something, I always feel it will be forever, but I will be happy again. Juliette's final rejection of her negative thoughts about herself also made me see that, no matter what thought was ravaging my mind, I could and would get past it.

After learning that I could get through any mental block stifling me, Juliette goes on to show me that I must fight for what I want. I've always had big ambitions for things I want to do, from things as small as cleaning my room to as big as going to a good college. However, sometimes I don't want to work for it. I would rather just ignore what I need to do hoping it will fall into my lap. Juliette does not have a problem working for what she wants because she knows nothing is falling into her hands. She refuses to comply with an organization that will ruin her society and her world. She literally fights back when the enemy tries to force her to do their whim. So now, whenever I don't feel like doing something, I remind myself that if I really want to be my own heroine, then I'm going to have to act like it and work for what I want. To be a good heroine, as I've learned from Juliette, you need to believe in yourself and believe in what you want, even if you don't at first.

Thank you for giving me Juliette to look up to and model myself after. ***Shatter Me*** has showed me I can believe in myself, even if I'm not a real-life, power-wielding heroine. After reading your book, I came to the conclusion that I can do whatever I want in life as long as I go for it. You showed me I can have faith in my thoughts and actions. I will aspire to be a heroine like Juliette.

Sincerely,
Eliza Lutgen

Shay Orentlicher

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Angie Thomas

Author of *The Hate U Give*

Dear Angie Thomas,

When I was a little kid, I went around claiming that I was going to end slavery. It was the easiest kind of racism for a preschooler to understand, and when my mom told me that the slave trade still existed in modern times, I was set on my goal. I wasn't really capable of accomplishing it, but I was determined to do it when I grew up. Years later, racial injustice is still an issue that I care deeply about, but now I understand more deeply the different manifestations of racism in our society. My focus has shifted recently to another part of the problem: police brutality.

I read anything and everything I can find to educate myself about police brutality, but the book that stuck with me the most was *The Hate U Give*. As soon as I read the description online, I knew I had to buy it. Once I had my own copy, I read it immediately, and it blew me away. It gave me a richer understanding of police brutality in more ways than I can count, but one lesson in particular was most important to me: I have to speak up if I want to fight this problem.

Starr spends the majority of the book trying to decide whether she should speak up or not, and while reading it, I understood why it was so hard for her. She'd been through so much, and she'd face even more trouble if she talked about it. But in the end, she discovered that Kenya was right: she had to do what she could to get the truth out there. As Starr began to use her platform to tell the world the truth, I realized that I need to be doing the same, even if it's on a smaller scale.

Too often, I will stay quiet when I see small incidents of racism around me. When a classmate makes a racist joke that some people would pass off as "harmless," I don't always call them out on it. I'm afraid of the kind of reaction that Starr gets from Hailey, the same kind of reaction that I've gotten before. They'll laugh at me, call me a social justice warrior, and ask if what they said "triggered" me. Even

though I know the joke is offensive, I don't speak up. I just sit there, pretending I didn't hear it. But who am I to stay silent when the only backlash I get is a little teasing?

The truth is that I'll never go through half of what Starr does. I'm never going to be pulled over by a cop over a minor thing because of the color of my skin. If I do get pulled over because of something small, it won't escalate until the cop shoots me. And even if that were to happen, no one would be debating whether I deserved it or not. The world would be praying for my family, not criticizing me. All because of the color of my skin. Coming from this level of privilege, I know it's my responsibility to speak up and call out racism when I see it. I don't face the same consequences a person of color will, and by staying silent, I'm allowing myself to be complicit.

After reading *The Hate U Give*, I truly understood that I have to speak up. I can't be complicit in this. If I want this kind of thing to stop happening, using the Black Lives Matter hashtag online isn't enough. My activism has to carry over to real life. If I want to fight racial injustice, I can't let microaggressions slide. Supposedly "harmless" jokes are just making racism seem more acceptable, and nothing's going to change if I allow that to continue. So, the next time someone I know makes a racist joke, I'm not going to ignore it. I'm going to call them out. It doesn't matter if they tease me. This issue is bigger than my feelings. *The Hate U Give* was the push I needed to rethink my behavior and realize that I need to speak up. Thank you for that.

Sincerely,
Shay Orentlicher

Niah Patel

Western Middle School, Russiaville

Letter to Ray Bradbury

Author of *Fahrenheit 451*

Dear Ray Bradbury,

Some books have the power to validate the reader, to tell them that what they're feeling isn't crazy or completely unique to them, that someone else has felt it too, even if that someone only exists in a book. Your work, *Fahrenheit 451*, is an exceptional piece of literature. Prior to reading it, I had already feared and been disturbed by humanity's growing dependence on technology. As I began to read, the confusion of Montag began to reel me in. It was like a whirlpool, and I was entrapped. It was like an infusion of all the characters into me, so I became the characters, and they became me.

I could feel all of Montag's fear and suspicion as the hound growled at him, and I could feel his fear of the world crashing and burning in dystopia, parallel to my own fear. The more technology invented, the more I am reminded of what can happen, haunted still by the *Fahrenheit 451* society. Suddenly I am less interested and more fearful of the growing of technology that is invented in modern America. I feel even more like a fish out of water because everyone else thinks the new inventions are clever or cool, but I can see, above all cleverness, the danger of allowing people to become lazy. The lazier people can be, the happier they think they are, like Mildred, whose only friends were her television "family." Already, people are finding a friend in the voices of technology, such as Siri and Cortana. Light switches are being replaced by cylinders named Alexa that you can simply tell to shut off the lights. Without focusing on living and real social interaction, people only focus on themselves, like Mildred. Mildred is now the embodiment of what I do not want to be.

Reading *Fahrenheit 451* has created or revealed a desire in me to find fulfillment as Montag did in the end, getting away from the dystopian society and finding others like himself. I have trouble finding anyone else who shares my views on developing technology, but maybe if more people read your book, they would begin to see the way I do, and maybe, this could begin to get us out of the cave,

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like in the Allegory of the Cave, as you alluded to in Montag's speech about reading. The day my English teacher introduced this allegory, I was seized by my own allegory that was parallel to a problem that I had been desperately trying to solve. I was inspired by Montag's use of the allegory, though I am not sure he knew what it meant.

Anymore, all anyone cares about is having fun, and people have begun to lose what matters, just as Mildred did. Technology, happiness, and comfort supersede family, success, and preparing for the future, and, frankly, this scares me. It was always on the edge of my mind, but after reading your book, I think of it more than ever. Thank you for bringing these issues to light. Maybe someday, the world will realize that we have become *Fahrenheit 451*.

Cordially,
Niah Patel

Lydia Acra

Greensburg Jr. High School, Greensburg

Letter to Katie Davis Majors

Author of *Kisses From Katie*

Dear Katie Davis Majors,

My sister had recommended your book *Kisses From Katie* to me, but I judged it by the cover and thought I already knew the story. A missionary goes to help someone, they immediately love it, and it transforms their life. So, I pushed the book aside. Day after day, my sister raved about how I should read this amazing book. I finally gave in when she proposed the idea of persuading our parents to let us go on a mission trip. As I dove into your book, I was entranced. By learning about you, I learned about myself. People judged you and thought you were crazy for giving up everything. But it was your passion and your purpose and everything was worth it.

From when I was young, I danced at a great studio, loving what I did. Unfortunately, my teacher moved to New York and so did my studio. For a while, I put dancing on the back burner and tried different things, but none of them brought me the joy dance did. During that 2 year break, I realized dance was my passion. You taking a risk and doing the unexpected, even when you weren't sure what your parents would think, inspired me. So, I approached my mom and told her that I wanted to dance again. My schedule is crazy busy, but we will find a way to work things out. When I walk into my first dance class in two years, I will be confident and determined. Your perseverance and eagerness while teaching and caring for children in Uganda is truly incredible. Things were difficult, but you showed me that nothing can stop you unless you let it.

Parents, teachers, and other mentors try to point me in the right direction, but only I can determine my path in life. What do I want to become? What is my passion? Following my path can become scary and uncertain, but that doesn't mean I should stop. If I decide against following my path, all it can offer is unhappiness.

When you left Uganda to try college, you knew it wasn't where you belonged. After reading your book, I knew dance belonged in my

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life. Katie Davis Majors, thank you for showing me the importance of following my path. I hope one day my journey will turn into an experience as powerful as yours.

Sincerely,
Lydia Acra

Level II Semifinalists

Cam Barker

Central Middle School, Columbus

Letter to Ryder Windham

Author of *The Wrath of Darth Maul*

Dear Mr. Ryder Windham,

It is an honor to write to a fellow Star Wars fan. I figure you must be anyway since you have authored so many Star Wars books. I consider myself to be quite knowledgeable, loyal and faithful to all things Star Wars related, so I'm thankful for the opportunity to read another of your books. Today, I'm writing in regards to the book you authored titled *The Wrath of Darth Maul* and how it has changed my views on others in our world.

Even though *The Wrath of Darth Maul* is categorized as science fiction, if one digs a little deeper than what's on the surface, they can find situations that are quite similar to real life events and people. For readers such as myself, they just might gain enlightenment on the choices made in life by others and develop a new perspective and understanding. For example, it is perceived by everyone that Darth Maul is a most evil character that lives to see everyone else die except for his Master. As shown in *The Wrath of Darth Maul*, he commits savage acts of brutality which include him pretending to play dead only to reach out to snatch a rat and eat it alive. Let us also not forget his various evil missions assigned by his Master, which he successfully and dutifully completes, notably, but not limited to, the time when he killed all of the members of the Orsis Academy one by one with his bare hands.

All of Darth Maul's evil actions are worth mentioning and necessary to shed light on the fact that he was taught this behavior. He was once an innocent child, not much different than any other, aside from his upbringing by his evil Master Darth Sidious. Darth Maul was raised from the age of three to become an instrument of dark power. He was physically tortured and mentally abused. He was not allowed to be afraid. He was not allowed to show emotion. Over the course of the book, his way of thinking becomes molded by evil. As

a child, Maul was purposely exposed to tragedies by Sidious to make him full of hate, anger and pain. Because of this upbringing, Darth Maul became a product of his environment.

As I reflect on the character Darth Maul, I compare it to the world in which we live and those that I see or hear have committed crimes or acts of hate. I ask myself, what kind of upbringing did this person have? Was there any love? Were they abused? Were they taught to hate like Maul was taught to hate by his Master? Are they a product of their environment? I have given these questions a lot of thought as I try to put things in perspective.

Your book has served as a reminder to me not to be too quick to judge others who make bad decisions. Although we all must be responsible for our poor choices, I find myself viewing the lives of others with more compassion since I may not know what might have caused their behavior. It's easy for us to all assume that we should know right from wrong. But, what if you haven't been taught what was right in the first place? It would seem someone like Darth Maul was not, and he never had a chance.

Sincerely,
Cam Barker

Kinsey Bauer

Fall Creek Jr. High, Fishers

Letter to Joan Bauer

Author of *Almost Home*

Dear Joan Bauer,

“It’s not fair, but sometimes a kid just has to act older than their age. You just pray hard to know what to do.” This is my favorite quote from your novel *Almost Home*. This quote means a lot to me because last year my family had gone through two very difficult losses. Both of my great grandmas (one from my dad’s side, and one from my mom’s) had passed away. The loss of two amazing women in my life wasn’t the unfortunate event that had caused me to grow up, it was family members who had chosen to cause dysfunction with my family. Their dysfunction caused less time for grief and more time for anger with the family members who were causing chaos. Now I didn’t find this quote until very recently, but reading this quote gives me an odd feeling of peace that I didn’t have when dealing with the unnecessary problem. It gave me peace because I realized that I’m not the only thirteen year old that has to grow up and has to be exposed to things that no kid should have to go through at such a young age.

This quote has stuck with me since I had found it again, and it has changed my life for the better. This quote wasn’t the only thing to stick with me and change my life. It was also Sugar’s story. Sugar had been in and out of two foster care homes. Reading her story and realizing how children in those types of situations feel gave me a better understanding of how the kids that my mom works with feel. My mom is a child and family case manager. She works with kids who have been removed from their homes due to unsafe issues that are substantiated. My mom works with kids who are in foster care, and a lot of times the teenagers build walls around their hearts, and do not bond with their care taker. They do this because they know that they may be moved to another foster home like Sugar was, and they’re afraid to be taken away from someone that they care about again.

Almost Home really changed my perspective of kids who are in the foster care system. I didn’t understand how they felt before I had

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read this book, but now I understand how tough those kids have to be and how much they have to grow up. Your book has changed my perspective of myself because I feel like I am a better person now because I have empathy for kids who have been taken away from their families. I know that I won't go through anything like this, but it helps to know how kids in those situations feel so that I can maybe help them through rough patches that they may be facing.

Thank you Joan Bauer for writing this amazing book that has changed my perspective of myself. You have put Sugar's story in to such beautiful words, and the book had really brought foster care situations to life for me.

Kinsey Bauer

P.S. I like your last name.

Felix Bodin

Central Middle School, Columbus

Letter to Kathryn Lasky

Author of *The War of the Ember*

Dear Kathryn Lasky,

Your book, *The War of the Ember*, the last book in *The Guardians of Ga'Hoole* series, made me feel happy, powerful – a big, fresh batch of different emotions, and the end made me feel especially strong emotions, like sadness, but also bliss, and a touch of happiness. This combination I felt stronger than after reading other books, because this was the last book in a 15 book series and had such a beautiful ending. Caryn (also known as Nyroc) had been a good king, and he was satisfied with what he accomplished in life – and it taught me something that will be important for later in my life. Something important on multiple occasions in the future. Something that can help other people, too. Your book taught me that death is not necessarily a bad thing – it doesn't have to be bad to die.

There are always people who say that they wish that they would live forever, but there are consequences that come with that. It would always get boring at some point, and there are fun things that happen in all stages of life: As a child, you look for Easter eggs in spring, you have water fights in the summer, play in leaf piles in fall, and have snowball fights in the winter. Then there's the teenage stage: Always hanging out with friends, texting them, having Nerf battles (Nerf blaster enthusiast right here), going snowboarding and skiing, and so much more. I'm not even going to get close to all the things you get to in adulthood and when you're a grandparent, because first, of course, I'd have to experience it all myself, and I could write whole essays – no, stories – about everything that could be done and that I would do.

I don't want to be a child forever. I'm already past that stage, anyway. I don't want to stay a teenager forever. I don't even have my driver's license yet, and acne is very annoying. Sure, I would have a wife and children as an adult, but there is a lot of work associated with that. And then, as a grandparent, I couldn't stay old with pains forever. All things have to come to an end, good or bad, one way or another.

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Reading time in class. A good book. Parties. Weddings. Life.
Everything. We can have all the fun we want when we live, and when
we're done, we can go. Peacefully.

Sincerely,
Felix Bodin

Sidney Brown

Salem Middle School, Salem

Letter to Dave Pelzer

Author of *A Child Called "It"*

Dear Dave Pelzer,

There are some books that the reader loves just to read and they do not love the book because they connected to it. By golly, I love your book because it connected to my life and changed me as a person for the greater good. As I read your book, I went on a roller coaster ride with my emotions. Every word in your book, *A Child Called "It,"* pulled me deeper into the story and situation that the characters were in, from the beginning to the very end. Growing up all these things were hidden behind a curtain but your book pulled open that curtain for my eyes to see.

Your book really intrigued me and while I was reading I realized that it connected to my life. In no way, shape, or form am I a victim of child abuse. However, I am a victim of a very protective family. By no means am I mad or ungrateful for it. I am over the moon and very grateful to belong to such a family as the one I am blessed to call my own. I will be honest with you, before reading your book I had no idea things like this even existed in the world we live in today. There was no record of anything like child abuse happening in the world around me. I had no idea about these terrible things because of my parents. You may be thinking that if I was not a victim of child abuse, then there is no way for this book to connect to my life. While you were a victim of child abuse, I realized that I had been a victim of an enclosed space or boundaries because of my parents. They never opened my eyes to the real world, but you did. They locked me in a room full of gumdrops and lollipops, but you set me free. I was a hurt bird with broken wings, and your book was my rescuer. *A Child Called "It"* saved me and released me into the real world to soar. This book was my savior.

Your book has truly been a blessing to my life. It has changed me and made me a better person. Before this book I was a little girl who was wrapped up in her own little world. I only cared about my family and the things around me that affected me. I was completely unaware

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of the things going on around me. When I was younger I could be described as caring and loving, but now I realize I only acted that way to the people important to my life. After reading your book I blossomed into an amazing young lady (I like to think). I am now aware of the things that go on in the world around me. I strive to help others that are in need or struggling. Ever since I read your book, I have been more passionate about the world I live in today. I now work to help and care for all people no matter what.

After reading your book and life story I really took a look at my plans for my future. I have decided to quit playing travel sports and to quit focusing on things that only apply to my life. I now plan to volunteer most of my time this summer to different places including my local food bank. I also plan to spend time helping kids who are in need. My future plans will consist of helping others, training for sports, and studying for school. I hope to help younger kids in school and sports. I will also spend time with the elderly. ***A Child Called "It"*** has really changed my future and me for the better. I hope to truly make a difference in the lives of the people in the world.

In conclusion, your book has made a huge impact on my life. ***A Child Called "It"*** has set me free into the world. I was truly able to connect with your book. It has completely changed me as a person, for the better. Thanks to your book, my future is way brighter than the North Star ever was. I now strive to be the change in the world that I wish to see. Thank you for writing this book. It has truly been a wonderful blessing to my life.

Sincerely,
Sidney M. Brown

Eli Buse

Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg

Letter to Christopher Paul Curtis

Author of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*

Dear Christopher Paul Curtis,

The Watsons Go to Birmingham is a book I have read countless times and each time I read it, it gives me a new perspective on something. The first time I read it I was young and didn't really understand but now that I've grown I realized how much this book can connect with me. This book showed me that it's not ok to be a coward and that if my life counts on it I should stand up. Kenny stood up and took matters into his own hands when it counted most. I, much like the main character, was cowardly and very oblivious to the world around us. I feel like your book changed me and now that I'm older I realize how much impact *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* had on my life.

I read your book and I realized how lucky I was not to live in the time Kenny did. My family is an average family that lives in a very culturally diverse community and there isn't a lot of racism but Kenny had to grow up around racism. The book took place in 1963 and racism was a big problem but in Flint, Michigan it was less of a problem. I am proud to say that this book gives me a new perspective on racism and changed how I act on racism. Now that I have read the book multiple times I realize how affecting the civil rights movement was on people and I realize how wrong the U.S. handled it. Throughout time everyone has handled racism incorrectly and it is sad to say the U.S. is the worst. Instead of listening to what people had to say we ignored them and didn't work to resolve our issues. This caused tons of backlash to the U.S. and it is still affecting us.

Since I am an American and I'm white I never had problems with my race but other people did have problems. Now that I have read about the Watsons it helps me realize how much racism does affect me even if it doesn't affect me individually. I now know not to take sides based on race but by the content of their speech which really affects racism. Kenny is a perfect hero and inspiration because, in theory, a

single person isn't going to solve racism let alone a fourth grader but anybody can help regardless of age, beliefs, or even race.

One day America will grow to have every ethnicity in unison and I hope this book will still be around at that time. I am just one of the many that are inspired. I want to see the world change and I want to be there when it happens. The reason why it's only getting worse is that there is no one to try to make a change and no one to inspire people in making that change. If we look back a few decades ago we had Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, but now we don't have anyone helping fight for a change. Our president needs to do something and/or we need a new person to lead us in the right direction. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* will leave an impact on readers by showing a perspective of a young boy going through a tough time and trying to find himself.

Sincerely
Eli Buse

Grace Donoho

Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Sara Shepherd

Author of *Pretty Little Liars*

Dear Sara Shepherd,

I have recently just completed your first book of the *Pretty Little Liars* series. This is not a fan letter, but instead the truth. Your book has made me realize that everyone has an ugly secret, something that they want to hide. That they do not want others to know. These secrets trap them into feeling that if it was to get out, then they are done for.

It has made me realize that we live in a world where we are expected to be perfect. To look perfect, to act perfect, and to be perfect, but we are humans. We are simply not perfect. My secret is that I have an eating disorder. I have struggled with this for three years and I continue to seek help. Although it seems hopeless, your book has given me hope. Just like Hanna, I know I am not alone. I connect to her and realized the world does not care if we are happy, it just wants us to be “perfect.” The world wants us to lie about our truth. When people ask “How are you?” and you say “Fine,” they do not really want truth. They want you to be “happy,” so they can move on with their life and not worry about you. Just imagine, just for a second, that we live in a world where all we could speak is the truth! When someone asked you “How are you?” and you say truthfully, “I am not fine, I need help okay!” A world like that would be so much freer of lies! Instead, we feel so ashamed of who we are, that we are afraid to tell the truth. Causing us to lie and hide behind a mask. A mask that makes us seem happy, even though we are not. Makes us seem fine, but we’re not. My mind has warped into a train of thought that if I get fat, no one will love me. I do not want to be “perfect” anymore. I have now realized I only feel this way because the media has pressured me to be something I’m not. I need to speak my truth now! The world needs to empower people, not tear them down and make them feel judged or ashamed!

The truth is the world is cruel, everyone should be nicer to everyone. The world should accept us for us. *Pretty Little Liars* has taught me

that I'm not alone and that other people crave control and want to be "perfect" too. That there are many other liars, who are scared to tell the truth. Who are scared to say, "I am sick, help me, heal me, I'm not perfect!" I feel like I am being controlled, my day-to-day life is based on my eating disorder and I will only be happy once I speak the truth. I am so tired of living in a world who does not want the true me. If being "perfect" means it is going to continue to affect my mental, physical and emotional health, then I do not want to be "perfect" anymore! I just want to be happy. We all want to feel free of lies and be accepted in this world. When I told my family the truth, that I was sick, it caused pain, suffering, and yelling, not to mention expensive medical bills for me and my disabled brother. They could not understand why I saw myself as "fat." I really did not want to tell them that I was sick, but after I read your book, it was my only choice. Now, I feel so relieved. It's true what they say, the truth really does set you free!

Truthfully, I really did not want to talk about this part of me that no one knows, but I have to tell. I cannot hide behind my mask any longer, I cannot be embarrassed of my problems, of my depression and anxiety. I feel I have to speak out and tell my truth. Once you tell a lie, it buries you deep and then you tell another, and you feel like you cannot breathe. Lying is like suicide, it's the coward's way out. You feel like you have no choice but to lie. Too afraid to tell the truth. These lies make you feel like you're being drowned by your demons or buried in the ground like Allison. We cannot run from our problems, we have to face them. Sometimes our fears won't go away, so we have to go in head on.

The truth is we all struggle with depression and anxiety no matter how much we do not want to admit it. We all have regrets, like the girls in *Pretty Little Liars* and I think the book is much deeper than some teenage drama. It reflects on painful memories, like the

Jenna Thing. Memories we cannot forget and that continue to affect our day-to-day life and can affect us forever. I am only thirteen and already regret so much. I've lied to my family and friends about food. Your book teaches me why I should not lie, not be afraid of who I am, and to make good memories in life. If I make good choices and tell the truth, then I will not live in regret. I am slowly accepting that I am not going to be perfect, but I will be happy, satiated, and whole. So now I am trying something new. It's called telling the truth, wish me luck!

Sincerely,
Grace Donoho

Level II: Semifinalists

Amelia Eicher-Miller

West Lafayette Jr. / Sr. High School, West Lafayette

Letter to Eliot Schrefer

Author of *Threatened*

Dear Eliot Schrefer,

Last year, my teacher required our class to read at least 5 Young Hoosier books. I had been looking at *Threatened* in the library for a while, but was not allowed to read it yet because it wasn't my class's turn. I am very interested in rainforest conservation, and I want to become a zoologist or marine biologist when I grow up, so the cover immediately caught my eye. Once I was in the library, I saw the two copies were already checked out, and I was forced to wait my turn.

Eventually I checked it out and began reading it, and I was shocked by the chimpanzees' humanity. I know everyone says, "Oh, chimpanzees are some of the smartest animals." But I didn't realize how similar we really are. They are our closest relatives! How can we possibly go about destroying their home?! Your book stirred me to find out more, and I keep begging my parents to go to South America, or West Africa, or someplace where chimpanzees live. When I hear that 20,000 acres of rainforest are destroyed each day, I want to jump out of my chair, run out the door, get on a plane, and lead a protest by chaining myself to a tree.

Threatened is one of my favorite books. With some books I have read, I think "Oh, that was fine, now I'm going to make a sandwich," or something along those lines. But with your book, I thought "Wow! I'm going to donate \$100,000 dollars to rainforest conservation efforts and \$3,000,000 dollars to chimpanzee sanctuaries!"

I changed along with Luc, and I felt as if I was right there with him, caring for the chimps. Your book gave me a glimpse into the wild jungles of Gabon, the home of creatures remarkably like ourselves. It showed me we are living in their home, too, so we can't treat the planet like our trash can, because we depend on it, and need to coexist together in harmony. This book has changed me, and I hope others who read it will be changed too. Thank you for inspiring me to help save the rainforests and our cousins, the chimpanzees.

Sincerely,
Amelia Eicher-Miller

Hannah Flamion

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Gary Paulsen

Author of *Hatchet*

Dear Gary Paulsen,

While some of us love reading, others do not carry that trait. I happened to be one of the kids who hated reading. I wanted to read more, but most books failed to stimulate my interest. My best friend would get lots of AR (AR stands for accelerated reader. It's a system of points based on the books we read) points and go on these reward trips. I wanted a zest for reading like her. It would make reading easier and more enjoyable. I had an exceedingly burdensome time finding books I loved. For me, books were something you read, took an AR test on, and put back on a shelf. I never dived deeper into the character's lives or wanted a book to continue. Don't get me wrong, some books I really cherished. Most of the time, I'd read one or two extraordinary books a year, and the rest were all boring: I grew a healthy lack of interest in books. Until, I discovered the PAU section of the library.

In February 2015, my 5th grade class read your book *Canyons*. It introduced me to some of your other books. After that, I read *Guts* which inspired me to read the Brian Robeson series. I started your book *Hatchet* in 2016. It hooked me within the first pages of it. I fell in love with the way Brian yearned to survive. Brian took me to the woods when I couldn't go myself. It kept me on the edge of my seat. I finished the series, and treasured every moment of it. I delightfully followed Brian into the book, and researched the wildlife. The series was so amazing that I didn't want it to end. One of the quotes I remembered was "You can take a man out of the woods, but you can't take the woods out of a man." This quote made me want to go out and enjoy nature but also follow other characters in their adventures too. That started the Gary Paulsen era of my literary life. I've even made a goal to read all your books. Your books have brought me so much excitement for reading. The adventure keeps me on the edge of my seat, and the love warms my heart.

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Now, I'm in 8th grade, and reading isn't a big rigor for me anymore. You are my literary parent, the author that inspired me to read the most, and without your books I might still not know the answer to "What kind of books do I like?" They were not only some of the best books I've ever read but they also paved a way for my reading career. I can now seek books I enjoy. I have you to thank for that. Thank you for writing the best books ever!

Your adoring reader,
Hannah Flamion

Brayson Fuhs

Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg

Letter to Lois Lowry

Author of *The Giver*

Dear Lois Lowry,

It's not easy being a teen. Everybody knows that. Although being an adult usually includes parenting and working, there is no period in life that is comparable with adolescence. No other time in your life includes so many confusions, distractions and temptations. This is all in a time when you're changing and learning to be a mature member of society. Teens are forced to find their place in a world full of judgement and hate. This can be one of the hardest parts of being a teen. Often, teens find themselves categorized in specific groups from geeks and goths to jocks and hipsters based solely on what they enjoy or wear and they often struggle with the culture of having to fit in, to be more like others. Your book helped me see that good decision making at this age is important because it can shape my future and impact those around me.

In your book *The Giver*, Jonas is a teen growing up in a world without much color, pain, diversity or memories. Jonas is forced to make important decisions concerning who he wants to be in a world that aims for equality. At first this world of equality and no pain might sound good, but in the end I realized that it does not allow us to appreciate the greatest wonders of life.

Jonas receives the role of The Receiver and soon learns that this is an incredibly hard task. Often times throughout our teenage years we get into things such as relationships or extracurricular activities that, at the time, may seem like very simple, kind of, side-jobs that will not hugely impact our lives. As we all know Jonas was soon to realize that he was taking on an incredibly exhausting, sometimes frustrating role that requires much time and commitment. He didn't back down from the fight though. This story also taught me that although we are young and still learning some of the basics of life, we can still make mature decisions, make an impact in our society, and work to make a change. In my life, I can make the community a better place by using my abilities. This past summer I went on a mission trip to Atlanta.

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On my mission trip my job was to paint. For four days straight I painted and painted. This wasn't an easy task but in the end it was all worth it. When the residents of the homes saw the finished work they were extremely thankful and excited. Most of them were smiling ear to ear the second they saw what we had done. This was a very heartwarming experience and it is a memory I'll have forever. I, as a teen, had truly impacted their lives by providing a cleaner, better home.

Being The Receiver, Jonas was given certain privileges such as the ability to experience certain memories, lie, and see color. In our lives we are all blessed with different abilities and privileges. We must understand how to make the best of these and use them to become the best version of ourselves. Our goal is not to be like everyone else, but rather to celebrate our differences and individuality and use our unique gifts to make a difference. Even as a teen I can make a difference in my community.

Finally, while eliminating suffering from one's life might sound wonderful, this book made me realize that pain is an important and necessary human emotion. By suffering in our lives, we grow to appreciate and cherish the good memories we have. Although my grandma is no longer with us, I'm thankful for the good memories we had together. The countless nursing home trips that I despised are now the times that I cherish most and wish I could have back. By feeling loss and pain, I've learned that I should make the most of the times I have with the people I love because these are the things I will remember when they are gone. Feeling both positive and negative emotions is just part of being a human.

There are plenty of great lessons, themes, and morals to take away from your story. And because Jonas is a teen, he can connect to many teens like me and help us set our vision back into reality. Although,

Jonas may have grown up in a very plain world, each and every teen can relate to this book and learn from this book somehow. Thank you for writing this book that challenged me to think about the dangers of sameness and equality, about appreciating difference and memories, about my purpose to my community and that all human emotions have value - even pain and fear.

Sincerely,
Brayson Fuhs

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Sruthika Gangisetty

Central Middle School, Columbus

Letter to Andrew Clements

Author of *The Report Card*

Dear Andrew Clements,

Ever since my first day in Kindergarten, I have always strived to be the best. I aimed for perfect grades and test scores in every class, and my heart was set on being the smartest person in the room. Every time I received a bad grade, I felt like I wasn't smart enough. It wasn't until I read your book, *The Report Card* that I started to rethink about what my grades really mean. Do they represent how intelligent I am, or are they just a set of letters that unconsciously label kids as "smart," "average," and "dumb?"

When I first started reading, I was shocked at the grades Nora received on her report card. However, when I found out that she had intentionally earned those grades, I was horrified. Who in their right mind would purposely get all D's and one C on their report card? I was intrigued by the fact that Nora and I seemed to be complete opposites when it came to school and grades, and was inspired to keep reading.

Soon, I realized that Nora's view of the education system and grades made perfect sense. Students should never feel pressured to acquire all A's, and if they don't, they shouldn't feel like they're dumb or not smart enough. The kids who receive all A's are not any more privileged than those with B's and C's.

The Report Card has taught me an important lesson. Grades are not important themselves, but what they represent is. A grade shouldn't be something that describes the intelligence level of a kid, it should be something that portrays all the perseverance and determination that was put into obtaining that grade. Now, every time I look at my grades, I feel proud of what they represent. Thank you for taking the time to write an inspiring book that helped me realize this.

Sincerely,
Sruthika Gangisetty

Hayden Gilbert

Fall Creek Jr. High, Fishers

Letter to J. K. Rowling

Author of *The Harry Potter Series*

Dear J. K. Rowling,

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, Chamber of Secrets, Prisoner of Azkaban, Goblet of Fire, Order of the Phoenix, Half-Blood Prince, and Deathly Hallows. These aren't all merely book titles. They are memories and life rafts. When I was 9, I read your series for the first time, then again at 11, and yet again at 13. Each time rereading this magical series I had a different perspective of it. While I was 9, I read it solely for entertainment. Then at 11, I was suffering with anxiety and depression and read it again to distract myself. Then at 13, I read it a last time to find something; purpose.

I had an urge to read it again so I did but half way through the first book I asked myself, why? Why this series, of all the books in this world, three different times? Then as I continued to read I looked for this reason. Finally after finishing all 7 of your books I found it. This series takes me away into a magical world. In this world I meet all kinds of creatures from mandrakes to Dementors. All while I was alongside Harry Potter himself. Now I may not be a wizard, but I feel that I can relate to him in some ways: feeling abandoned or not wanted. Yet the thing that always makes me want to read more is the fact that he gets over it. He comes out on top and although he may have a few scratches, he fights against it with courage.

For an example, in the final battle, The Battle of Hogwarts, Harry lost his mentor, Dumbledore, and was at risk of losing many people that he loved. He also had to pull together everything that he had to battle the murderer of many of the people that he cared about, including his parents. I feel that I can really connect to this part of the book not in the way of battling anyone but the fear of losing someone I love. My biggest fear is losing someone that is very dear to me. From connecting to this I learned that even though something may be scary, you just have to pull it together and give it your all. Things might not always go as planned but things will always find a way to work out.

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I feel that this series has changed the way that I view things. I used to think that my anxiety was something negative or something wrong with me, but after I read your books I changed my outlook on things. Now I look at it as a new challenge to overcome. Something for me to work for. This has definitely changed my life for the better because now I wake up with a smile on my face and I'm ready to take on the day. Thanks to the wonderful and magical world of *Harry Potter* I feel that I am ready for anything that life chooses to throw at me.

So in the end, I have learned that in your books I have found a safety blanket that sucks me in but gives me the courage to go out. It distracts me but keeps me focused on what's really important. It lets me know that I can, I can beat anything dragging me down and I can beat it with a smile on my face. I have learned that it takes work but I can do it. All I have to do is keep my head high and my courage higher. So I just want to say thank you, thank you for introducing me to a magical world but also introducing me to the real world where although things may be far from perfect, I have to give it my all. So thank you J. K. Rowling, thank you for everything.

Sincerely,
Hayden Gilbert

Eva Glazier

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Ingrid Law

Authors of *Scumble*

Dear Ingrid Law,

Our lives are a balance between our own wishes and the wishes of our families. We rely on our family, trust our family, and most importantly, love our family. With all of this in mind, we still have to make room for ourselves and what we want. Your book *Scumble* shares the journey of how Ledge Kale discovers his true self and inspires others to do the same. Our families cannot mold us into something we naturally are not. As a Jewish woman, I need to make room to figure out what I believe in and what I want. Ledge and I are like a ball of clay being molded into different shapes by other people. We need to find ourselves, find our own shape.

On November 5th, 2016, I had my Bat Mitzvah, which is a ceremony in Judaism when you are considered a woman at the age of 12 or 13. Following a Bat Mitzvah, you have different obligations that you did not have before. In Ledge's family, at age 13 you develop a savvy, or power. Once you get your savvy, you will always have to be more cautious than before. The pressure of a Bat Mitzvah is insane. You must make sure you are prepared to read from the Torah and say many other prayers in front of a giant crowd. The pressure to get a useful savvy is also intense. When his great aunt says how awful Ledge's savvy of being able to build and destroy things with his mind is, it must have felt like a punch to the stomach for Ledge. People can say things about us, but we have to overcome them.

Like a ball of clay, we try many different shapes. When I was younger, I believed that God could do anything and believed anything that I was told about him. As I grew up, I had to rethink everything that I believed in. Can God do everything? Do I even believe in God? Ledge discovered that having a savvy is actually harder than he thought and he started rethinking his life. When Ledge was learning to scumble, his mind was rebuilt because he just gained something, his savvy, which changed him forever. We believe and rethink things to figure out what we truly believe.

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Making choices is a very important part in discovering who you are. Ledge made choices that led him to learn to scumble. I have needed to make choices about myself that I am okay with. Some are simple choices, like what my favorite color is. Then I have bigger choices, like who I sit with at lunch and what kind of people I choose as friends. Once Ledge could scumble his savvy, he could decide if he wanted to continue to run or take more art classes. Ledge and I still have to stay connected to our younger selves, but we also have the responsibility to ourselves to discover new things.

I am still on the search to find exactly what I believe in. ***Scumble*** explains how it is okay to not know yourself, but in time, you can discover who you truly are. I am still a ball of clay, but I am on the path of becoming a magnificent shape.

Thank you for leading me on my spiritual journey,
Eva Glazier

Emmy Gottsman

Brownsburg East Middle School, Brownsburg

Letter to John David Anderson

Author of *Posted*

Dear John David Anderson,

Words. They shape my actions, my speech, my thoughts, my hobbies. Their power wields magic that I would never want to lose. Words aid me with every aspect of my life today, but at one point in my life, words harmed me. They dug into my skin and I had no way to deflect them. They flew at me and penetrated through my skin. The words festered inside of me and ate away, like a cancer, at my self-esteem.

Most of my elementary school years, I was subjected to the harsh words and teasing from some of my peers. I knew many of the answers in class, resulting in people labeling me as a nerd. I was made fun of for easily understanding the subject and was used by my peers for answers. I also was marked as different for enjoying reading and preferring it to video games or TV. These differences caused me to be teased and hit with harmful words.

After that period in my life, I built a wall that often deflected every possible word, positive or negative. I buried words in the back of my head, hoping to forget them. I lost understanding for the importance of words. Your book, *Posted*, transported me back into that experience in my life. I transformed into Morgan, known as Wolf, and I saw the similarities of his situation compared to mine. I felt the hurt the sticky note messages inflicted on him, much like how many of my peers' words impacted me. Your novel retaught me the power words can wield. It instilled into me the notion that words don't only harm, but can transform someone's life into a more positive place. I now place more importance into looking at my own words and the impact they could have on someone else.

I was immediately drawn into Wolf's character. His quiet nature reflected my own, often only speaking when he thought it was impolite. His sometimes limited conversations made me contemplate every remark he made in the book. When he states, "...it means something whether they mean it or not," his reflection made me

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think about the power words hold, especially for him, where many people would call him names saying it was out of good fun. I would flashback to the times I was called a “nerd” or told to “shut my brain off.” Then the same people would say it was a joke and would laugh, not realizing how much their statements hurt me. Remembering all of the times both Wolf and I had been hurt made me realize the true power and influence words have on not just me, but everyone.

Wolf’s part in the story not only made me think about the influence words have had on me, but how my words influence other people. I place importance on looking at my own words now and reflecting how it may impact a peer’s thoughts and emotions. It retaught me to always use words in a positive way and use them to change someone’s life for the better and improve his or her day. I look at every word and sentence, placing them under scrutiny and determine whether it will hurt or help someone. I no longer only remember the negative effect words have had on me, but the positive result my words can have on other people.

Through reading *Posted*, I travelled back to when words often had a negative effect on me. Wolf’s part in your novel brought me to a time where I built walls around myself, in a desperate attempt to protect myself from the wounds words inflicted. *Posted* showed me that words are not all negative and that encouraging words can build up self-esteem. Your novel has taught me that I can change a life with a single word. I have since not only looked at the way words have impacted me, but how my words influence others. I have learned to fully embrace them. Thank you for writing a novel with a message that will impact so many others. Thank you for letting me see the power of words in my life.

Sincerely,
Emmy Gottsman

Tara Gross

West Noble Middle School, Ligonier

Letter to Sharon Draper

Author of *Out of My Mind*

Dear Sharon Draper,

*“Never judge someone
By the way he looks
Or a book by the way it’s covered;
For inside those tattered pages,
There’s a lot to be discovered.”*

- Stephen Cosgrove

Reading this book made me think differently about the world, and it made me look at people differently. I got emotional reading the book because the kids in the book would make fun of Melody because she couldn’t talk. It made me mad because she took what they said and felt like she wasn’t worth being on this planet anymore. It made me mad when it came to the Wiz Kidz competition tryouts. No one thought that she had what it takes to be on the team because she was different. They all thought that everyone would stare because they have a child that is so different from the rest of them. Which in my eyes, I think it’s foolish because kids are kids. Saying stuff to kids can really get to them.

Words hurt people, and kids don’t realize that. But, trust me, everyone was put on this planet for a reason. That reason is not to make fun of them for what they have to go through. It’s to be you. Be unique. Be your own person.

I can connect with this book in so many ways. Melody is a type of girl that is different from everyone because she doesn’t have the ability to speak or walk or feed herself. She gets bullied and made fun of a lot. She feels like no one really sees her or wants her to be here anymore, just because she isn’t like the rest of the kids in her school. I feel what she is going through because I have been bullied for a very long time. Melody reminds me of myself because I am this shy girl who wishes she can say everything in the world to everyone and how I feel. But, for some reason, I can’t. It breaks my heart knowing that

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these things are happening to her. It makes me look at the world differently because we have a lot of bullying at my school. And, it seems like every time it happens, the teachers want to give us a talk, but it never seems to help. Because it continues to happen and happen.

Growing up I was bullied for a really long time. One of the reasons was my last name. People would say that I'm gross and for no one to go around me because they thought I was disgusting. They would make fun of the way that I looked or dressed. I was made fun of last year because I wore some of my comfortable clothes to school. I wasn't feeling well, and I wanted to be comfortable. They called me horrible names. It was a turning point in my day. It hurt really bad to the point where I started being insecure about myself more and more. Those kids don't understand how hurt that I was. And, I have been through that stage where I was thinking about suicide, and I was depressed all the time because of what the kids at school treated me like. I know that I do have the ability to talk and Melody doesn't. But, it's so hard to talk to people about these things. Sometimes, they laugh, or they don't want to be my friend anymore, or they just don't want anything to do with me. Sometimes the kids at school treat me badly, and then, they act like nothing even happened. They don't get that words hurt people. I try really hard not to let it bother me, so I hold it in. But, it gets to the point where I will explode and I will just cry my eyes out. After reading this book, whenever I see bullying happening like it did with Melody and me, I will stand up for that person. I'm tired of it, and I don't want it to happen to anyone else. Being different is a good thing. It's not a bad thing to be different. It just means you are special and unique.

This book changed my thinking on a lot of things. And, it made me a better person. Because now I know that different is good and being different doesn't mean you are dumb or stupid. It means you are

special and worthy and unique. If everyone in the world read your book, I think that the world would be a better place. People would look at the world differently like I did, and they would stop bullying people. It feels great knowing that I can share my experience with the world.

Sincerely,
Tara Gross

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Josie Hahn

Greensburg Jr. High School, Greensburg

Letter to Graham Foust

Author of *“And the Ghosts”*

Dear Graham Foust,

I think a lot. I spend a lot of time everyday thinking. Sometimes I feel as if instead of controlling my thoughts, my thoughts control me. And that is not easy. It sucks to constantly feel like there is something controlling your mind. Like it chooses which thoughts you have and which thoughts you don't, which ones only occur once and which thoughts reoccur, always repeating in your head.

The poem that you wrote, *“And the Ghosts”* is one of the very few poems that have ever stood out to me. Although it is a super short, one line, three worded poem, it is amazing and has meaning to me. Here is why. Your poem got me thinking that ghosts probably control our thoughts. Not like ghosts of dead people or the white illuminated image thing that often shows up on Halloween decor, but a ghost of a thought or emotion. Such as a ghost of negative thoughts, or insecurity, or doubt, or the ghost of a mistake you have made or something like that. These ghosts don't always have to be negative. You could have ghosts of positivity or happy memories, you could have very happy reoccurring thoughts as well.

“And the Ghosts” got me thinking about my thoughts, especially the negative ones. I started thinking about how ghosts can invade homes or haunt people and all of that fun stuff. Which lead to the realization that I can GET RID of ghosts! I don't have to be haunted by these negative thoughts forever! I can empty my brain of the ghost of sadness, anger, negativity, jealousy, and all of those ghost friends who have decided to live inside my mind.

I can replace those negative ghosts with ghosts of positivity and happiness and even better, different thoughts that can bring me peace and joy and help me actually remember what it feels like to be happy instead of constantly hearing the voices of the ghost of negativity whispering “Look at that, you've messed everything up once again!” Or the ghost of jealousy saying, “Hey, remember when she was a way

better friend to her than you were and now you've been replaced? I remember that."

Because of "*And the Ghosts*," I can help shift my mindset and work on making progress in my life. I can find happiness and smile more, remember what it is like to go to bed at night, calm, relaxed, with a positive attitude, ready to take on another day instead of lying awake at night, bawling my eyes out because I feel like I have screwed up everything in my life and have become a huge disappointment and now there is no turning back, let alone ever stepping forward in life.

So thank you Graham Foust, for helping me make a few important realizations and helping me during a very rough time. I will never forget that important piece of literature you wrote.

Josie Hahn

Ava Harmon

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to J. K. Rowling

Author of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

Dear J. K. Rowling,

You're a wizard! A wizard with words and of storytelling. I first picked up *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* when I was 7 years old. Everyone else was reading *Magic Tree House* books or *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. I was bored with short, unsatisfying stories that ended in happily ever after. Without knowing it, I was looking for characters I could connect to. Once I was given your books I found that and a whole other world.

The first time I read *Harry Potter*, I may not have caught every detail or known every word. However, the first time I read it I discovered an escape. I'd never been locked in a cupboard or battled a dark wizard, but I related to that boy with jet black hair. Ask me about a math problem and you'd get a short, concise answer. Ask me about Harry Potter and I'd go on and on like Harry, Ron, and Hermione were my best friends. Even if I didn't completely understand the books the first time I read them, I understood more about myself. I learned to love those characters for who they were and it changed me for the better.

I've reread the series twice since then. Every time I notice one more detail or an instance of word choice, I fall in love with the story all over again. I've experienced loss now and can relate to the way death leaves a stain on your life. I understand the feeling of Dementors sucking out happiness because I've felt that way after losing people I loved. Harry lost Sirius and the way you wrote his experience is what I didn't know how to put into words. I know how Ron felt seeing Harry become a Triwizard Champion. I understand Hermione's fight for house elf rights. I've felt sorrow, jealousy, and injustice in my life. The first place I ever felt these things was in your books.

For the time I was reading, I lived and breathed through your characters. I was taught more by your story than school could ever teach me. I gained a greater understanding of love by reading than I would by having someone explain it to me.

Never before had I felt safe more in books than in reality. Now I find I can open any page of a book and fall right in. I feel as if the potential was always there but *Harry Potter* showed me what books could do and how they could make you feel. By living through the characters, I started to live in other people's shoes and gained a greater understanding of the hardships everyone faces.

I can truly say that I owe my love of reading and writing to you. *Harry Potter* has spread into almost every corner of my life. Without it there'd be a hole in my heart and I'd be a totally different person. When I read a book those characters and that story become a part of me. You've given a gift to millions of people and so many more to come. A gift of safe harbor, of adventure, and of love when they need it most. Because of you I feel comfortable in a world completely different from my own. And I can say; Hogwarts will always be my home.

Mischief managed,
Ava Harmon

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Maximillion Hill

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Helen Keller

Author of *The Story of My Life*

Dear Helen Keller,

This summer I read your autobiography, *The Story of My Life*. While reading, one part that really struck me as important was when you talked about how your parents treated you. When Ms. Sullivan walked in your house and saw you eating, she described it as if she was watching an animal eating. Because your parents had never had to deal with a deaf or blind person, let alone both, they had no idea how to teach you that shoveling food into your mouth was incorrect. The passion your mentor, Ms. Sullivan, had for you was incredible. She would not give up on you. I would not have the patience to write each individual letter of every word into someone's hands. It makes me realize that I should never complain about what I have. There are millions of people that don't have a fraction of what I have.

Being blind and deaf is extremely difficult. It is hard to imagine having to deal with your conditions when there was less technology and information about them. Even though it was hard, life got better. You were able to go to college. Of course school was hard but you had Annie Sullivan who came to every lesson and wrote in your hand what the teacher was saying. You learned how to read. You learned how to speak. You took what you were given as a child and used it in your everyday life. You were and still are a very powerful woman that girls and women can look to for inspiration. It teaches everyone that women can do anything men can and that women deserve better.

After reading your book, I now have a better understanding of people with disabilities. I have a cousin who has autism. He has social issues and doesn't know how to deal with people very well. He used to have this habit of getting in your face. I used to think it was so annoying. Now I understand that he couldn't help it. He didn't think that it was wrong. The mechanism of getting him out of your face was to simply say, "Sam, personal space." This was just like Ms. Sullivan spelling the letters out one by one into your hand. Thank you for making me realize that what my cousin is doing isn't bad.

Sincerely,
Max Hill

Greyson Johnson

Fall Creek Jr. High, Fishers

Letter to Shannon Hale

Author of *The Goose Girl*

Dear Ms. Hale,

I used to look at a soldier and say they were brave. I used to think that protesters were courageous because they stood up when everyone else shot them down. I thought these traits just came to someone naturally, but after I read your book, *The Goose Girl*, I realized that it was experience that gave you these traits. That's why I want to thank you for the new perspective your book gave me.

In 4th grade my teacher gifted me with the book *The Goose Girl*; at first, I thought it would just be a book about a princess finding her true self like all the other princess books. I was very wrong. When I picked up that book, I was thrown into a world where a girl was an outcast; she was important but others did not know it yet. She had suffered, lost someone she loved, and was trying to fit in with a world of people who thought she was wrong. When I read your book, I felt her pain, her joy, her hope, and her thoughts. Young Ani showed me that no matter what, if you put forth your best effort then you will find your true self. This lesson in your book has changed me. Since reading your book I try and be my best self all the time. My attitude toward everyone and everything has changed drastically.

When you had Ani become Isi, I saw what Ani truly was. When she was with people she could become friends with she let herself shine in a way she never had. During that time, she developed so many traits like courage, self-respect, and bravery. Those traits helped her later. I was amazed to see that she was a good friend, good mentor, good ruler, and a good leader at the same time. I wanted to be just like her; to have strength and courage. Yet Ani's definition of strength and courage were different.

Ani was able to show her strength mentally, not physically. I was so surprised. I thought the main character was always super strong physically. This meant a lot to me. My perspective had always been that the stronger you were then the more power you had. Your book

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showed me differently. When I was in 5th grade, a girl was breaking me down. She did all she could to tear my happiness away. I thought that because she was tougher and bigger, she was just allowed to do that. After I read your book I started to realize that I could stand up for myself. Like Ani I did not directly attack to get revenge on the antagonist; instead I started to fight them in a secret way, by standing up for what I knew was right. I knew I shouldn't just let that girl bully me. It was wrong. So I started to ignore her words, knowing that her power just came from hate. When I stood strong, she started to crumble. Her pain wasn't getting to me so she stopped. I learned a very important lesson that day. Never let someone hurt you.

Your book has changed me in ways I can't have imagined. I want to thank you, Ms. Hale for all your book has taught me. I have learned that staying strong can help you in many scary situations, like bullying. I have also learned that your best effort means that you can be the best you. I am so glad my teacher gave me this book. I am so glad that I read it and learned.

Sincerely,
Greyson Johnson

Kaegan Johnson

Fall Creek Jr. High, Fishers

Letter to Alan Gratz

Author of *Prisoner B-3087*

Dear Mr. Gratz,

Your work *Prisoner B-3087* has changed how I see different opportunities, how lucky I feel, and most importantly, how I value my freedom. It has impacted me in a way that I would have never believed possible. The book has a certain tone that made me rethink a lot of little things that I take for granted. Your book has definitely changed me in a positive way.

The main character, Yanek, is based on a real person which makes the whole book so much more realistic to me. I could relate to small things I had in common with Yanek, like his age, on an entirely new level. Something I found myself doing while I read the book was putting myself in Yanek's shoes. For example, what would I do if I found out that I may never see my parents again at age 13! When Yanek was finally free again after the war it was like I was free. I was so happy for him when he moved to America to start a new life and even changed his name. When I read that he was also drafted into the Korean War after coming to America, I was in shock. I am glad he eventually got some peace in the end. By putting myself in Yanek's shoes the book was that much more suspenseful, that much more realistic, and I think that is the reason this book changed me so much.

Before reading *Prisoner B-3087*, I took all the little things in my life for granted, like getting food three times a day, having clean clothes to wear every day, and even having a toothbrush to clean my teeth with. When Yanek was at the ten different concentration camps and didn't have any of these things, I had to stop reading sometimes to think about how lucky I really am and how different my life would be if I didn't even have one of those things, let alone all of them. Your book has brought me closer to reality and educated me on the Holocaust and its hardships. You must have been honored to work with Jack and to actually hear the stories from him.

When I finished your book, I started noticing myself recognizing things like freedom not as something that I have, but as a gift. I

wish I could have shared my gift with Yanek and everyone in the concentration camps in World War II. Another thing that I realized was how far we have come since then. Not even a century ago, Yanek was faced with death along with millions of other Jews and today we have some peace. I think there is still much for our world to learn, but I hope one day to have all peace and no war.

Mr. Gratz, your book has changed me for the better, and opened my eyes to something new. I want to thank you for educating me on the Holocaust and Ruth and Jack Gruener's story. You must have been very touched writing this story. I definitely want to read some of your other books about World War II in the future, but I might reread *Prisoner B-3087* first!

Your friend,
Kaegan Johnson

Caroline Kaiser

Jasper Middle School, Jasper
Letter to Nicholas Sparks
Author of *A Walk to Remember*

Dear Nicholas Sparks,

Your book, *A Walk to Remember*, changed my view on certain things in life. Jamie had only a few months to live, but she never let that stop her. She was so strong throughout the whole book. She never took no as an answer, nor did she let her struggles get in her way. She tried to hold onto life as long as she could.

If Jamie, a girl suffering with cancer, can make each and every day the best one yet, so can I. Throughout the book, she always had a positive and uplifting attitude. She taught me that each day is a blessing, and we shouldn't take anyone or anything for granted. Also, she had a goal to make it through the Christmas pageant and even make it the best one yet. Every day, I know I need to set new goals and even be overachieving in life. It's not about how long you live, but what you do while you're living.

Each day, I have to face challenges. Just like Jamie, I don't like to share all of my problems with people. I don't want sympathy or pity; I want to be treated equally. I don't let any complication get in my way of success. One day I hope to go to college and be completely healthy. We all have to work towards a goal of some kind to stay humane. If we don't set goals, then we have nothing to live for. Jamie died knowing that she completed a lot, the pageant and marriage. I know if I have the same drive and determination that Jamie had in everything I do; I would be a very successful person. She had the three things I want in life: love, faith, and happiness.

Your book was outstanding and even though I don't have cancer it was so relatable. It taught me more than one life lesson and changed some of my views on the world. All you have to have is a little hope, and you can go very far in life.

In appreciation,
Caroline Kaiser

Madelyn Lau

Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg

Letter to Judy Blume

Author of *It's Not the End of the World*

Dear Judy Blume,

It started with little fights. They always seemed to find something to argue about. Then there I was, trapped with words flying back and forth, hitting my heart like knives. I used to tell myself that it was all just a game and soon someone would win and it would all be over. No one ever won, it was the same game with the same words over and over again. I hated it. I hated being stuck in the middle of two sides, trapped in the middle of all the conflict, with nowhere to run. I am forced to listen to which parent is right and which one was wrong. This all seemed like a game of tug of war. Each side so desperate to catch up and win the fight. Each tug was a painful and unforgettable sight. With every single tug, a piece of my loving family is ripped away from my grasp.

I caught myself thinking of running away, to try and escape this great pain put down upon me. I tried, but I always came back. I never truly realized why I kept coming back, but I guess it was just the massive amount of guilt I felt. I'd pray to God and asked him to help heal all the hurt in my family, and to get mommy and daddy to love each other again. In case you were wondering, my wish didn't come true. I gave up and shut everyone out. Then I stumbled upon your book. It helped me cope with the idea that my parents, the ones I loved dearly, were getting a divorce without asking me, their daughter, how I felt about it. This book gave me something to be happy about.

This is where I caught myself comparing myself to the characters Karen and Jeff in the book *It's Not the End of the World*. I would describe myself at the time as very insecure, scared, and extremely confused, just like Karen was. I also felt a strong connection between Jeff and myself. At the same time I jumped to conclusions and found myself explaining what was going on to my younger brother, who was too innocent to know what was going on. Jeff always seemed like he knew what was going on, and he kept his feelings to himself. Like Karen, I had a very difficult time talking about what was going

on with my friends. While reading this book, it felt like I was living with the characters and being put into their shoes. I felt the scenes play a major role into my life. I felt as though it was displaying a tape of my life on replay. I could very easily relate to them and I felt all the emotions that this book expressed to me. It felt really comforting to be able to realize that the characters were going through the same things as I was. It gave me a ray of hope when I was lost on the outskirts of the world. Overall this book gave me something to feel happy about. It kept me motivated while I was in doubt of what my future would turn out like. Like Karen, she had doubts toward the beginning of the book about getting married. This book showed me that things happen for a reason and that you have to grow and become stronger from them. This book gave me open eyes to the real world. I realized that sometimes bad events are there for you to overcome and feel before everything is right. Happiness was a major role of what I felt while reading this book. Happiness was all I needed and while reading it, I took advice from it and became physically and emotionally stronger.

I'd like to say that books like these make us more aware of the lives we live. I've learned that opening up and talking about my feelings makes me more open to people. Five years later, I am now currently in 8th grade. I've felt so much change in myself over the years. Recently I've been thinking of what my life would have been like if the divorce was all just a fantasy. What would my future hold for me? What is my home life like? Am I still me? Am I still hurt? Is it still the same game? Since reading your book, I have also noticed the people with "perfect lives." To be honest, it doesn't seem very perfect to me. It all seems very boring and predictable to me. I was able to see the pleasures of this "perfect" life as well as the dangers. Since I went through this I am able to notice when others are going through hard times. It feels amazing to be able to help them because I needed it once too. I always tell them, "Life can be hard sometimes, but you have to be willing to listen and to have strength in yourself."

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Without a doubt, my feelings were changed when I read this book. I was trapped in a world of hate, sadness, and the most pain I have ever felt. After this book helped me feel happiness and hope in my life, I was able to look past all that. The most important thing I learned was that divorce and other tragic events are not the end of the world. Things may feel like the end of the world, but trust me, everything will get better. Whether it's 3 hours or 3 years of hate and sadness, you will always realize that you do have a purpose to make the world a truly happy place for others. I now know what I want to do with my future without dreading that I may make a mistake or hate it completely. I will continue to pursue my dreams and my life without anything getting in the way. I will no longer be afraid of my past, because I know that it's not the end of the world.

Sincerely,
Madelyn Lau

Gloria Li

Fall Creek Jr. High, Fishers

Letter to E. B. White

Author of *Charlotte's Web*

Dear E. B. White,

I read *Charlotte's Web* for the first time in elementary school, but keep reading and learning from it. Your book is one of my favorites because it's a simple story, with complex meaning hidden within the text. The love showed between Fern, Wilbur, and Charlotte taught me many lessons that proved to be useful in life. I learned the true meaning of friendship and loyalty through the characters' actions. *Charlotte's Web* changed the way I thought about myself and others, as a friend.

I finally understood what it meant to be a great friend after I finished reading your book. After Wilbur got sold to Mr. Zuckerman in the book, Fern visited him every day to make sure he was okay. Then when Charlotte weaved a web that said "Some Pig" to try to save Wilbur's life, it showed to me that Charlotte wanted to make sure Wilbur was always safe. From these two events in your book's plot, I learned that in friendship, protecting and really caring for each other is what's most important. This realization changed the way I thought about myself because after reading your book I really tried to show to my own friends that I cared and always had their backs.

Mr. White, not only did your book show to me what it means to be a true friend, but it also taught me a lot about loyalty. I read this book when I was very young as I said above, so I think your book was one of the first things that finally made me understand the concept of loyalty. When I read the part about how Charlotte stood up for Wilbur when a lamb walked in and started making hurtful remarks about Wilbur, I learned that if anyone's hurting (mentally or physically) someone I care about, I need to stand up and do something. This was probably the most important lesson I took away from this book because I'm still applying this concept in my life now and most likely in the future. Also, another very important lesson I learned from this story was that a true friend stays by my side during my weakest moments. This was greatly shown in your book

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Mr. White, especially when Wilbur helped to save Charlotte's egg sac when he knew that she was about to die. This changed my overall view of the world because now I can tell more easily who really are my true friends in life.

I personally need to thank you E. B. White for teaching me and other readers all these very important life lessons through your writing. The lessons I learned from reading *Charlotte's Web* were needed because they continue to help me through some of the important choices I need to make. The friendship and loyalty the book showed through the characters were very heartwarming. How the book touched my heart from the love showed between Fern, Wilbur, and Charlotte is why I think I took so much away from the very important life lessons the book had to tell. I will always remember reading this book because it changed the way I viewed myself and others as a friend, while also teaching me the true meaning of friendship.

Sincerely,
Gloria Li

Olivia Lopez

Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg

Letter to J. K. Rowling

Author of *The Harry Potter Series*

Dear J. K. Rowling,

When I first read your *Harry Potter* series I was going through a very tough time. My mother was very sick in the hospital. I was sitting in this library in the hospital she was staying at and as I was sitting there, I looked over and I saw an entire shelf of *Harry Potter* books. I picked up the entire series and brought it to my mom's room. When I walked in the room her eyes lit up. Although she didn't have much strength, she tried to stay awake enough to listen to me read these books to her. Even after she fell asleep, I kept reading. Throughout her stay in the hospital, I finished the entire series.

My mom gets sick a lot and that really messes with our time together, so whenever she is sick or in the hospital, I read this series to her, or we will watch the movies together if she's really tired, but most of the time we spend these times reading, reading the *Harry Potter* books. When *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* came out, my mom was sick in the hospital again. I told my dad the book came out a few weeks ago and I wanted to read it with mom. So my dad took me to our local library and I got the book, took it back to the hospital and read it to my mom. She fell asleep halfway through it but I continued reading. The Harry and Albus relationship in the beginning, as a father and son, reminded me of mine and my mothers. Which just inspired me to make our relationship even closer.

Our relationship consisted of arguing and pushing each other away until I almost lost her. Until I almost didn't have a mother again. We as people take our parents for granted, you don't realize it until you lose or almost lose a parent. It breaks my heart that I spent almost two years without her by my side, because "it wasn't cool." And it wasn't until I was almost motherless that I realized it.

No, we didn't have a close relationship. I had refused to try and be close to her. Your books made me make an effort to try to become closer to her. Ever since reading these books with her, my mom and

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I do things together. We watch all the movies together, we read the books over and over again. We go to the local Barnes and Noble for *Harry Potter* events. Before reading these, I locked myself in my room and didn't want anything to do with spending time with my mom. Now me and my mom have a very close relationship and we can't go a day without spending some kind of time dedicated to us. Every month we have a day where we just dedicate everything we do to us. We would go to a bookstore, shopping for clothes, painting, whatever as long as we're doing something together. It's the most fun ever. All because of these books. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Olivia Lopez

Abigail Martin

Salem Middle School, Salem

Letter to Amanda Lovelace

Author of *The Princess Saves Herself in this One*

Dear Amanda Lovelace,

When I first saw your book, *The Princess Saves Herself in this One*, I thought it was going to be some big feminist statement, but I bought the book anyway. I was pleasantly surprised when I saw that your book was so much more.

Without going into specifics, I'm in a bad place mentally, but your poems always make me feel like I'm not the only one struggling, especially "I didn't know anything" because the line "there were some secrets that threatened to chip away at my porcelain pieces but felt necessary to keep myself whole," makes me aware of the fact that there are some secrets that you can't tell to just anyone, because not just anyone can help you. Your poems gave me the courage to tell my friends about what I was going through, and I'm trying to get help.

After I had finished the book, I started to draw and play music more, and tried to find more things I enjoyed because if you could find comfort in writing poems, then I wanted to find comfort in something I liked. When I'm feeling bad, I read a couple of poems from your book and they make me feel a lot better about my situation. I would just like to thank you for writing this book and helping me feel better when I need it.

Sincerely,
Abby Martin

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Alina Mcneely

Central Middle School, Columbus

Letter to Megan Shull

Author of *Bounce* and *The Swap*

Dear Megan Shull,

I would have never thought that other people's lives were so bad. I know the saying *Don't judge a book by its cover and Don't judge someone else until you walk in their shoes*, but everyone else's lives always seems so perfect. All my friends seemed to have the perfect family, the perfect boyfriend, the perfect life, until I got the chance to read your books. I never really took a minute to imagine what my life would be like without the family and friends I have today, but now, I realize how blessed I am to get to spend each and every day with them. Your books *Bounce* and *The Swap* have changed how I feel about my everyday life, and how I look at others.

Both *Bounce* and *The Swap* had so many great lessons. As I was reading these books, I felt like I too was living somebody else's life. Since both Ellie and Jack thought that it was easy being the other gender, I could easily relate. I had often noticed that the relationships between boys and girls seemed to be different at school. While the boys at our school always seemed to be joking around with each other and never seemed to be truly mad, the girls always seemed to have some drama. Whether it was whispering gossip or plain out insulting each other, the relationships of the girls always seemed to be so much more complicated than the boys. I had always thought that they had it so easy. As I was reading your story, I was shocked at how hard Jack's life was. I started wondering if anybody I know could have a life like this at home. I know what it's like to have a strict parent but it's nothing like Jack's experience. I couldn't imagine walking a day in his shoes. I would have never even thought that some of the boys in my grade might be having personal problems until I read your book *The Swap*. I felt like I was seeing things in a whole new way and I felt so bad for thinking all these years that other people had it so much better.

Your book *Bounce* also gave me some new perspective on life. Like Frannie, the lives of others always seemed to fascinate me. I felt like

people who were famous were so lucky in life. They always seemed to have beautiful homes, they were loved by millions, and their life seemed to be an endless party. I have also thought of the quieter life. Since my father grew up in the country, I had always wondered what it would be like to be able to wake up and smell the fresh air, or have a yard so big you could run for miles. Since I was always thinking about what I didn't have, I never actually considered what I would miss. It seemed to me like Frannie went through the same problem. As I was reading, I sympathized with her feeling left out. With two older siblings, I have often felt like I am living in their shadows, and have wondered how life could be different. I thought about how lucky all of my friends were because they had little siblings or they had a sibling closer to their age, but I never thought that maybe somebody was thinking the same thing about me.

Now that I've gotten older and have read stories like yours that talk about the lives of others, I realize that I should be thinking about how great it is that I get to have 2 older sibling that I can learn from and who love me so much. While reading, I was surprised at first with the way that Frannie felt. I thought that if something like that happened to me, I would take full advantage of it and would love living somebody else's life. As the story progressed, I started to understand her feelings. I know what it's like to feel homesick but not knowing if you would ever get to go home would be a thousand times worse. Once I got near the end, I could absolutely see why Frannie wanted to go home, and I realized that it was because my personal view on life was changing as well. I felt as if I had gone everywhere with Frannie and had felt everything she did. Reading your books gave me such a great view on life and taught me a lot about looking deeper, instead of just scratching the surface.

In the end, your books have taught me some of the most important lessons that I will ever learn. I learned that life is a gift, and you

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shouldn't take it for granted. Instead of wishing for things I'll never have, I need to start being thankful for what I was given in the first place. Life is short so instead of wishing for something else, we need to appreciate what we have. After reading the books *Bounce* and *The Swap*, I have realized that every moment counts so I might as well make the most of it.

Yours Truly,
Alina Mcneely

Edith Moser

Klondike Middle School, West Lafayette

Letter to Lois Lowry

Author of *The Giver*

Dear Lois Lowry,

Joy, a feeling of great pleasure and happiness. Joy has helped me out of the times of sadness and pain. It has brought a light into a dark tunnel.

When reading *The Giver* I thought the world they lived in was perfect. It opened up a new idea for a society that I hadn't known could exist. I would have never imagined that there could be a place where people have a committee chose your job, a place where you can only have one boy and one girl in your family, and a place where every day would be predictable. Then, however, I had to think if I would never want to feel joy or sadness. Jonas never got to experience the joy of doing something right or the sadness of getting hurt. This book taught me that we have pain and sadness so we can really appreciate the goodness in life. If every day was normal with no emotions then you could never have true happiness.

I read *The Giver* right after I started middle school. There were times I wanted to be a part of this society where I didn't have to feel sad. My best friend in elementary school met other friends and started to hang out with them. During the first few months of school I hung out with some of my old friends and met some new people, but I missed my best friend. These new friends became some very good friends, but I still struggled to find a core group. I thought middle school was going to be an endless tunnel, but by then end of the year I was starting to see some light. I realized that without having these struggles and sadness, that I wouldn't appreciate the fun times and joy I have with my new friends.

The way Jonas, as Receiver, experienced joy and pain with the memories is similar to the way I experience memories. I have to learn about wars and disease through books and stories. Jonas had to learn about joy and pain through the memories he is given, but he couldn't share the memories with others. You helped me appreciate the fact

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that I get to discuss the wars and diseases with my class, where Jonas couldn't share the memories with anyone.

In closing, *The Giver* taught me that there is always a light in a dark tunnel. There is always joy in times of sadness. So I thank you. Thank you for bringing me out of the tunnel and bringing me into the light.

Edith Moser

Bethanie Needhamer

Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg

Letter to Stephen Chbosky

Author of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

Dear Stephen Chbosky,

All my life I've been told by people that I wasn't normal. That how I feel isn't okay. That how I dressed was weird, or maybe that my hair color/style looked stupid, etc. But ever since I read your book, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, I don't believe those people anymore.

I know that at a time in my childhood, I was always extremely happy. Truly happy. I started off my life like most people. I had my one sibling, both of my parents with nice jobs, food always on the table, and an actual home to live in. I thought that everything was okay, but in reality, it wouldn't be in a few years. My family fell apart. Everything kept getting worse as time went by and I got older. We all know people who take happiness for granted. I wish I hadn't been one of those people. Sometimes there are people who never have experienced happiness and never will, then there's the people like me, the people who were always happy, and then they just weren't. I was also one of the people who took my happiness for granted. Learning eventually that my happiness would be turned into sadness, I wish I made the happy moments count.

For the longest time ever, I kept my emotions inside, just like Charlie, the protagonist in your book. I thought it wasn't okay to feel like this because that's all I was ever told. I was called horrible names and bullied a ton at school, which made the way I was feeling worse. At the beginning of my eighth-grade year, I found your book. I read it in a group for about a month. We were supposed to only read 9 pages a day, but some days I couldn't help myself. I related to Charlie so much, just on the first page. I was so scared that he was so relatable. I had many people tell me that Charlie reminded them of me. At the time, I thought that was an insult, now I take it as a compliment.

When I was nearing the ending of the book, I was full on crying. Here I am again, about to cry, just thinking about how much the book changed me. I never had the motivation to get up in the

morning. I had no motivation to do homework. I had no motivation to try and help myself. I had no motivation to get help in general. After finishing this book, I wanted to be someone. I didn't want to feel this way all the time. I didn't want people to see me as someone who always needed help. This book helped me realize that I shouldn't care about what others thought. That even if I wasn't like most people, I still needed to be me. I'm still working on self-love, but I wouldn't be if I hadn't read this book.

Charlie was probably the main character that helped me. He was so focused on other people, that he wasn't focusing on helping himself. He always wanted to make other people happy and never wanted to upset anyone. But, the important thing is that he got help. That's why I relate to him so much. I wish I was able to notice that I wasn't okay as fast as he did. Luckily, just like Charlie, I am doing better. It's a process that will take me a while, but I know I'll get there, even if I have to be broken to be fixed. I don't know what kind of person I would be without your book, and I never want to know.

Sincerely,
Bethanie Needhamer

Gabriela Paredes

Fall Creek Jr. High, Fishers

Letter to Roald Dahl

Author of *Matilda*

Dear Roald Dahl,

Your book, *Matilda*, has unequivocally changed my perspective on myself, others, the world, and the wondrous life I live. *Matilda* has taught me so much more than just how to spell the word “difficulty.” This book conveyed many life lessons to me. Some of which I still live by to this day. The way you used your voice and unfurled emotions took my breath away. It was one of the first books in which I could really relate to one of the characters. I never knew that this book would still hold a special place in my heart to this day.

In the book, Matilda was somebody who I looked up to as a character. I aspired to be like Matilda so much that I begged my mom to teach me how to make pancakes. That scene was everything I wanted to be; an independent seven year old. Seeing her being independent at such a young age, made me want to do so as well. Her character has taught me to be outgoing and independent even if people try and bring you down. Today, I love meeting new people and trying new things! I am even a part of my school musical which is something I never would have imagined myself doing. She also made reading look so enjoyable! Her character is part of the reason why I read and love reading as much as I do now! One lesson I learned from your amazing book is to always cheer on your friends no matter what they are doing. Even if it means yelling out “You can do it Bruce!” as he finishes a gigantic chocolate cake.

Throughout my life, I have had great parents who have always supported me and given me everything I have needed. Your book taught me that children do not always have this in their life. Harry Wormwood was a terrible parent and role model for Matilda. He was dishonest and valued looks and money, yet Matilda valued honesty. He despised Matilda, and even told Miss Trunchbull, the headmistress at school, that Matilda was certain to be trouble. Worst of all, he failed as a parent and did not think twice about leaving Matilda with Miss Honey at the end of the book. This scene changed

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my perspective on the world because I began to understand that there are terrible people out there. These people will go out of their way to do egregious things. At age seven, I had already made a promise to myself that I wanted to be like Miss Honey as a parent, and not Harry Wormwood.

Your book has taught me many things, but it has mainly taught me to appreciate my intelligence. I have been in advanced English for a couple of years now, and there are times when I love it and times when I do not enjoy it. I love it because I get to learn things that are more challenging for myself, yet sometimes people would make fun of me for being in a class like this. Not to sound arrogant, but I have always been a really intelligent kid. However, I would get teased about it. Some people would say “You try too hard” or “Stop trying to be the favorite.” When in reality, I was not trying to do or be any these things. One time, a teacher even took my iPad away in a friendly game of Kahoot because he thought I was doing too well. All of these moments were harsh on me, but your book helped me get through these experiences and helped me embrace my intelligence.

Roald, your book *Matilda* has taught me many lessons that still have a momentous place in my heart. Your writing has helped me get through innumerable arduous experiences in my life. Your book has been life changing for myself and I am sure many others as well. I truly believe that I would not be where I am today if it were not for your book. Matilda, the character that you created, taught me to appreciate my intelligence, be there for friends, be a good parent, embrace differences, to stand up for yourself, and so many other lessons I could go on and on about. For this, I would like to thank you for creating such a wonderful book that has completely changed my life.

Sincerely,
Gabriela Paredes

Tarynn Reeves

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Dave Pelzer

Author of *A Child Called "It"*

Dear Dave Pelzer,

Thank you for writing *A Child Called "It."* Your writing has taught me how grateful I should be, and how ungrateful I actually am. Before I read your books, I thought my life was a lot worse than it actually was. I truly believed that since my mother wouldn't let me go to parties with upperclassmen, stay out past 12, and hang out with older boys that my life was ruined. Thinking as though she was depriving me of social interaction, I thought of this as social abuse. I used to use that word very freely. We fought about my wrong doings constantly for months, and there was usually no good outcome, not until that night. While my mother and I were fighting about me breaking curfew, she told me about your book. She told me that if I wanted to see what true pain is, true suffering, that I should read *A Child Called "It."* The next day I went to the library and my life has been truly changed for the better.

I didn't think that reading *A Child Called "It"* would impact me the way it did when I first started reading. I didn't think I could connect with the abuse David encountered, but little did I know that I would never again connect with a book the way I did with yours. Not connecting with the physical abuse opened my eyes to the hidden hurt throughout the story, the emotional abuse David's father had placed upon him. His father neglected him as he was being beaten and as he was suffering at the will of his own mother. His father simply didn't care about him and how he was going to turn out. Though, neither did mine. My parents got a divorce when I was very young and I don't see my father much. In the beginning though, much like David's father, he tried to make it seem as though he cared. I very much was a daddy's girl and I believed he would make everything okay. I was very wrong. As I get older, I've realized that he was never going to make the situation better because he was an alcoholic. How was he supposed to take care of two little girls when he couldn't take care of himself? Unlike David though, my mother was there to help me realize what my father was doing. Until I read

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this book, I never realized how much my mom does for me and my sister. I never realized what she emotionally put on the line to get out of a bad relationship, to make our lives better.

This was one of the hardest books I've ever read. The emotional roller coaster this put me and millions of people through still leaves me in awe every time I read it. Along with connecting with the book, I have learned many things. I have learned that not all people have the best intentions for you, even though they may act like they do. I have learned that all some people want is to help you, even when you push them away. I have learned that people aren't always as they seem, no matter how hard you try to picture them as your hero. Most importantly though, I have learned that I shouldn't be scared of the monsters in my closet, but that I should seek help when it is very much needed. You have taught me so many lessons in the short 184 pages you poured your heart into. I will always be thankful for one child's courage to survive.

With much appreciation,
Tarynn Reeves

Emily Roby

Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg

Letter to R. J. Palacio

Author of *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

About three years ago, in fifth grade, *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio changed me. After I read it, it was like I was walking on thin ice, and the book was enough to break the ice from under me. It was like the book was plunging me in freezing cold water to wake me up from a dream.

When I went to a theme/water park, I saw a boy with a facial deformity. I stared at him when he walked by. I tried not to. I didn't know what else to do. I didn't even smile. I wish I did. As I think back to it I could tell he was uncomfortable. He was walking with his mom and looking around.

When I remembered this, I felt like one of the kids that just stared at Auggie in the book. I was disgusted with myself. Before I read this book, I never actually thought about how people with deformities or disabilities felt. I always thought they were used to being stared at. They don't teach you about this stuff in school. You never know when you might meet a person with a disability or deformity. I was lucky enough to experience this. I now know that people with deformities or disabilities are the same as us. They are human. They just have a little difference that I say makes them more special.

After I read this book, I actually put myself in his shoes. How would I feel if everyone stared at me like I was dumb or something was wrong with me? I would probably be embarrassed and avert my eyes from looking at everyone. I would feel all alone.

I thought about how it affected me. I am a better person because of this book. I actually think about how my actions will affect someone else, even if it was just me not smiling at that person. If I could go back and change one thing, I would change that day. I would have smiled at the boy and wouldn't have stared at him.

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If I see someone with a disability or a deformity, I will not stare. I will smile at them if they look my way. *Wonder* gave me an understanding of how the person with the deformity or disability thinks. I never had an understanding of that until I read the book. I wouldn't like it if everyone stared at me and judged me just because of how I look or act. Thank you R. J. Palacio for waking me up from the dream I have been living in and introducing me to the world around me. I have been living a dream where no one judges and I would never have to worry. Thank you for letting me step into another person's shoes and walk around with them. I can now have an understanding of a person's life that is so different from my own. I can also now accept change and the way things are instead of living in a dream world.

Sincerely,
Emily Roby

Alyssa Schwenk

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to J. K. Rowling

Author of *The Harry Potter Series*

Dear J. K. Rowling,

Whizz! A bludger barely misses my head. I watch the Quidditch game with awe. Players are flying on their broomsticks with ease. I've never been to a sports game that was this intense. Wham! A Hufflepuff player gets nailed in the back of the head. I can hear Lee Jordan's voice announcing how bad that must have felt, to the whole stadium. I am in the book.

When I read the *Harry Potter* series, I was teleported to a whole new world. The world had scrumptious food and magical creatures. Chocolate frogs, butterbeer, and cauldron cakes, were a few of the amazing treats I got to experience. Hippogriffs, dragons, fairies, mermaids, trolls, unicorns, and pygmy puffs were suddenly real. Everyone was appreciated for who they were, even if they were a little odd, like Luna. Animals were treated with the respect they deserve, if Hermione had anything to do with it. People's backgrounds didn't matter, how they used their talents did. Life was spectacular! I didn't have to worry about homework or chores or anything going on in life. All I had to worry about was whether Harry Potter was going to defeat Voldemort or not.

The *Harry Potter* series gave me a place to get away from whatever was worrying me. The books took me away from my hectic life and kept me wanting to read more. When I was reading these books, my grandfather wasn't sick, I didn't have a really difficult test coming up, and my father wasn't gone to who knows where. I was just reading the books. You can't understand how calming and distracting these books were. They kept me sane, when everything seemed to be crumbling down around me. I can't thank you enough for that.

As I say goodbye to all the magical books and wonderful friends I made in them, I reminisce about the important life lessons Dumbledore taught me. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Dumbledore says, "Do not pity the dead, Harry. Pity the living,

and, above all those who live without love.” I’m going to try to do everything with love because Dumbledore was right, love is the most important thing. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Dumbledore also says, “Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?” This quote has made me realize how important mental health is just like physical health.

It’s going to be difficult leaving behind this magical world, but I know that I will never fully leave it behind. These books have made an impact on my soul and I will always carry that magic with me. Thank you!

Sincerely,
Alyssa Schwenk

Bradley Screen

Klondike Middle School, West Lafayette

Letter to Brandon Sanderson

Author of *Steelheart*

Dear Brandon Sanderson,

I am writing this letter to you as somewhat of a thank you note for being such an inspirational author to me, especially through your book *Steelheart*. At the time I discovered this book, I was going through a tough period as far as reading goes. Books couldn't hold my interest for more than fifty pages or so, especially since I felt that there were better, more enjoyable ways to spend my time. On the rare occasion where I found a book that I truly liked, my parents would dance like Michael Jackson performing "Billie Jean." You could say that I had "reader's block." My dad, understanding my English anguish, introduced me to the book series he was reading at the moment, and luckily for me, it was one of yours. He probably still has regrets about that, since I read the next two books in the trilogy as soon as he got them off the top shelf in the bookstore for me, leaving him waiting for me to finish. In that moment, he not only introduced me to you as an author, but he introduced me to reading again.

I see David undergoing a powerful internal conflict throughout this book. He wishes to kill Steelheart through a vengeful act, since his father was murdered by Steelheart. Joining the Reckoners gave him his chance to do that. However, he later realizes that killing Steelheart doesn't have to be about avenging his father, but instead, helping the people who were alive in Newcago and many other places. This was what the Reckoner's true duty was. It wasn't their job to kill the Epics, the murderers, but to save the innocent. David's journey throughout this book is realizing that and making good use of it.

While reading *Steelheart*, I thought about many real-life scenarios, which I found a little wacky, since it's a fantasy novel. The group I considered the most was our military. Every day, they serve, and for most of them, it's not for themselves. It's not for avenging their dead fathers. It's not to kill out of hatred and bloodlust. It's for the rest of us. In a way, I thought of them as the Reckoners of our world. They

are the ones that bring upon peace for the rest of us, while going through strife selflessly. I thought about the firefighters, the police officers, and even the teachers, who work hard and give up their time and even their lives to better ours. These people are the ones who help to bring upon the new day of our world. Sure, they're not killing superhuman freaks that threaten people's existence every day, but they do a job that's just as important to them. Really, I never considered this. That's helping us.

Even though *Steelheart* is a fantastical thriller that seems on the surface as the story of a man achieving vengeance on his enemies, it truly can be seen as a tale of hope, hard work, and selflessness. It's beautiful, really. David, along with many others, learns to live for people other than himself. This is a theme throughout the entire trilogy, for the books really show how these characters have grown and changed in their morals and outlook on life. This carried over to me, truly helping me, giving me the UV light I needed to see the hidden text of the world. Once again, thank you for *Steelheart*.

Sincerely,
Bradley Screen

Gabrielle Thixton

Salem Middle School, Salem

Letter to Eva Mozes Kor

Author of *Surviving the Angel of Death*

Dear Eva Mozes Kor,

You helped me see history in a magnificently new light. Have you ever heard the phrase “those who fail to learn history are doomed to repeat it?” Well I practically live by this phrase. Since around third grade I have been obsessed with history books. Hopping from Greek mythology to the Civil War to numerous natural disaster books lead me to stumble upon World War II and holocaust books in around the fourth or fifth grade. I became interested in them, finding them deep and more awake in my readings. But, like all the other history books I’ve read, even though I knew that most of the words on the pages of my book were real, and my mind viewed them as fiction or not real; they didn’t feel real to me. And as a result the truly interesting stories that I have read before your book have felt a little dull and forgettable. My love for history books was slowly dying away. That’s when I came upon your book.

Firstly, in your book *Surviving the Angel of Death* I was surprised at how much I could truly feel what was presented to me on the pages. When I first picked up your book I approached it with the same thought in mind as the numerous other history books I have read over the years. But I noticed that because of your striking detail and tremendous use of words that I began to see the story for what it truly is: a true story of a true event in time and not something made up in the corners of the mind. I began to read the story through your eyes and continuously held on to the thought of how this is true and how the bravery and sacrifice and love in the story was real and not just added in for dramatic effect, and this book opened up my mind to my history books. That the bravery and sacrifice and everything in between in all my other books were true.

Secondly, through the many years that I have been reading history books, none of them have been able to pull at my heart and put my emotions into overdrive while reading it. While I read this book I found myself feeling angry, happy, and even crying at times. This left

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me baffled for I have never read a piece of literature that was filled with such raw emotion that it was able to release the emotion in me and left me wanting more. You gracefully managed to weave such vivid detail and true emotion together to create a glowing story that has touched my heart and soul. And because of this I have gone back to this book many times and have even bought it for my own.

Thirdly, the message at the end of the book was absolutely inspiring. The part where you decide to forgive the Nazi doctor was truly inspirational for me. When I was young I was often bullied but after reading this part of your book and seeing how after everything they did to you; you still forgave them, I decided to forgive my bully. I'm not there yet, but I am working towards it. Everyday letting more and more of my anger towards them go. Even after years of her unkindness towards me, after seeing you forgive people who took your home and your family, I found it in my heart to try. And I thank you kindly for that.

Furthermore, your book has reimagined the way I read and the way I think about books, especially history books. The way you presented the text and the raw detail and emotion that you craftily poured into this book has allowed me to see that history stories are not only stories, they are like mirrors to another time. Mirrors to someone else's thoughts, emotions, and experiences. Before reading this book I now realize that I was blind to the true content of the stories. Before I could not see through the eyes of the author, or feel the emotion run through my blood or even look beyond the surface of the story. This book unlocked my emotions, my mind, and my ability to forgive. The amount of gratitude I have for you and this book is beyond measure. And I would like to end this letter with this: thank you Eva Kor for your inspiring bravery, love, forgiveness, and the truth that has set my mind free.

Sincerely,
Gabrielle Thixton

Lillianna Touhey

Fall Creek Jr. High, Fishers

Letter to Lisa Graff

Author of *Absolutely Almost*

Dear Lisa Graff,

Your book is honestly an inspiring novel with the truths that everyone faces in school. The need to fit in, to be part of the in crowd and be “popular.” I am a 7th grader who tries to keep up with the trends of my fellow students. I have the problem of being a perfectionist and I’m insecure about what others think of me. This book is a reminder that there is no such thing as perfect and the greatest gift is the power of kindness. I learned that you should always be yourself.

Before I read your book I thought that popularity was everything. I thought it was either fitting in or being an outsider or weirdo. I thought anyone who was not as smart, funny, etc. was lesser than me and instead of getting to know them I shunned them with my nose in the air and lost myself in the process.

Absolutely Almost is different from any book I have read. Not the usual average kid turned incredible but someone embracing who they are. Someone who finds the true power in being themselves.

This book really makes me appreciate how good I have it. I’m an all A student who plays soccer. I didn’t realize that there were people out there who couldn’t express themselves with something that they specialized in. Nothing comes natural to them, they are just plain average. Of course I’m not saying I’m a genius or the best soccer player in the world but I have found something that I connect with and that makes me feel like I’m extraordinary. This point really got to me when Calista said, “Find something you’d want to keep doing forever...even if you stink at it. And then, if you’re lucky, with lots of practice, then one day you won’t stink so much.” Albie then asks what if he might still stink at it and what then? Calista responds, “Then won’t you be glad you found something you love?”

Your book made me question how I thought. What is average? How does it define us? Does that mean we have to be treated differently?

Level II: Semifinalists

If you search up the definition of average you come up with words like typical, common, or ordinary. Yet no fingerprint is the same so how can we compare each and every person if none of us are alike. Sure our impacts in life aren't as profound as others but that doesn't mean we don't make a change. If we are "average" does that mean we don't earn the respect of others, that we are a disgrace? Yes, it can be annoying when someone isn't as smart as you and you feel as if their brain is just a pile of rocks but does that give us the power to make fun or even bully them? After all, they are just as human as you are.

Along the book Albie faces problems with grades, bullies, and his best friend involved in a reality show. Yet all around him there is support whether it is his parents or his babysitter Calista. They help him through tough situations in life just like my parents and friends. It gave me an understanding of how thankful I was to have someone to help me work out my problems when I was stressed and find the true meaning in life.

In conclusion, I am inspired by your book and it made a big impact in my life. A few weeks after reading this book, I came across a questionnaire. One of the question on there said "Would you choose to be kind or smart?" Thinking back to your book, I made my decision. I chose kind.

Sincerely,
Lillianna Touhey

Carter Whitehead

Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg

Letter to Jay Bilas

Author of *Toughness*

Dear Mr. Bilas,

Getting down and working hard on defense, picking up a teammate when he makes a mistake, or making 10 more free throws. These are a few of the examples on the basketball court that you project in *Toughness*. Little things like that are what make us tougher and build more character. Now, as we do the little things more and more it becomes a piece of our life, something that no one could ever take away from you.

Imagine life as a game. Think of yourself on one of the teams along with your parents, coaches, and teachers. Then think of all the things that try to bring you down on the opposing team. The people on your team are key players that help you rise to the top and defeat the other team. Putting that into perspective now, your parents, coaches, and teachers are important to helping you to overcome challenges and make you more resilient. Being resilient is something that will play an important role in your life. You know when a challenge comes your way that you won't break down under the pressure and that you will stay strong in that situation.

My parents are passionate about the importance of being tough just like your parents were as you grew up. Though they do not come straight out and talk to us about the purposefulness of being tough, they guide us with the knowledge they have to make the best possible decision to be successful. Our parents show that toughness goes beyond the court or field. They teach us the importance of getting a job done right. They also teach us that school is the place to try new things and work hard on our education. Our parents set us up to achieve in life and become the best person we could possibly be.

After reading *Toughness*, the one concept that you talked about that I find really important to me is persistence. Persistence is something I try to do every day. For example, if I don't have a good day with shooting, I will go home and shoot some more to make sure I get that

shot down or if I don't get a question right on my homework, I'll try it again to get it right. And there are some cases where a challenge is too hard. Giving up is an option that people may choose to do. But giving up is the last thing I would want to do. You show that persistence can go a long way. Even though there were many more elements that you talked about, I found this one the most interesting and important.

I think ***Toughness*** is an amazing book and really inspiring. I really enjoyed reading the stories and the conversations you had with coaches, well respected athletes and other analysts. Not only do the concepts help me become a better player on the court, they help me become a tougher person off the court. I appreciate, with many others, this book you have written from your experiences.

Sincerely,
Carter Whitehead

Kyah Wright

Belzer Middle School, Indianapolis

Letter to R. J. Palacio

Author of *Wonder*

Dear R.J Palacio,

All of my life I walked around, attempting to hide myself from the world. Ashamed of the person I was, but praising the person I wanted to be. Self-conscious about almost every feature on my body. A person who found almost every single way to change herself just to please others. I thought I was alone and no one else understood, until I read *Wonder*.

At first, I was extremely hesitant to dive into this book. I had heard wonderful things about it, but still, was not keen on the idea that this would be a book that would spark my interest. Oh, was I wrong. When I first started reading the book, it took a while for me to take everything in at once, but I finally started to grasp all the information at about the 2nd or 3rd chapter. Once things started to get interesting, is when I began finding connections between Auggie and myself.

The connections started off small. Some things were as simple as him going out in public as little as he could, and hiding himself whenever he had to be in public. Other connections I had with the book weren't so small. The bullying, staring, no one wanting to play with you, etc. I did not spot them right away, at first the similarities would fly right over my head. I would read a sentence, and think to myself how bad it was that someone would ever have to do something like that just because others would not accept them for who they appear to be. After a while I started to notice myself doing the same things, or certain situations were happening to me in real life.

Once the connections started to set in and become more real to me, I finally began to accept the fact that I had been closing myself out to the world based on other people's judgements. When I realized what I had been doing I started to make changes in my personal life. I stopped caring about what others would say and became more social. By doing that I have gained a lot of new friends and was exposed to a bunch of new and amazing experiences that I would have, probably,

never gotten without reading **Wonder**. It is weird how much someone can relate to a fictional character and how their experiences can seem a lot like your own. While I was reading **Wonder**, it was like I was connected to it somehow. Whenever I would read the negative things happening in Auggie's life it seemed as if bad things were happening around me as well, but towards the end of the book when everything got better for Auggie, is when my life started to fall in place and things began to look better for me also.

Wonder not only taught me how to love and appreciate myself, but it also taught me that you shouldn't be afraid to make new friends. It also showed me that sometimes change is good, and in my case a big change was needed. Without **Wonder** who knows where I would be right now or if I would have ever made my leap of faith decision and changed for the better. I cannot thank you enough for writing this book. I related to it so much on a personal level and it helped me overcome some very dark times in my life, so once again thank you so very much. I enjoyed every word I read and every second it took me to read it. **Wonder** literally saved my life.

Sincerely,
Kyah Wright

Level III

Level III
1st Place

Sophie Ball

Jasper High School, Jasper

Letter to Mitch Albom

Author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*

Dear Mitch Albom,

Hello there, old friend. I know we have never met, but it seems as though our souls could be good friends. I met you for the first time on a rainy Thursday when I was first given your book *Tuesdays with Morrie*. We became fast friends. I appreciate how you skipped past the pleasantries, and got straight to the meat. Just as much as I loved that, I needed it.

Opening your book began a journey I did not know was beginning. In the weeks shortly after I finished your book someone very near and dear was diagnosed with ALS. My grandpa, or as I liked to call him, “Gramps” was in his 70s. Managing a farm, attending church, and keeping up with all his friends. Until his diagnosis, he and I hadn’t spoken much. He lived states away. I always felt the pangs of regret when I heard of my friends adventures with their grandparents. But those pangs were typically accompanied by waves of pride. I couldn’t admit to myself or him that I was to blame for the lack of communication, so instead I just said nothing. On that fateful, misty Saturday when we heard the heart wrenching, gut punching diagnosis I could hear your words playing. I could replay your interaction with Morrie upon your graduation, your promise to stay in contact, and your failure to do so. But the part I drew courage from was the part where you swallowed your pride to visit your old professor. So, I began calling my Gramps. We would chatter about corn, the weather, and eventually the real stuff. With each passing conversation that guilt was wiped further from me, and replaced with relief. I might not have had forever with him, but what I did have was conversations.

Our rekindled connection led to me learning more about him, about me, and ultimately life. Although Gramps was never a scholarly man, he was quite sharp. He ran a farm for nearly his entire life. It taught him about hard work, faithfulness, and investment. He poured this

wisdom into my eager ears. Gramps and I talked about many of the same topics you and Morrie did: marriage, society, and family. I stored up his nuggets of wisdom and bits of knowledge. When Gramps and I were ready to hang up I would always schedule our next chat so Gram could schedule everything accordingly. He replied to my question asking if the next date I suggested would work with, “Bean I wouldn’t miss it for the world. These days there isn’t much I enjoy more than talking to you.” Phone calls with Gramps were never to be missed, and I never wanted to.

Your book was honest, raw, and heartwarming. It made easy steps out of what I made to be huge jumps. I could not conquer the inner war with pride until I could see someone before me had done it. Until, I could see and hear the guilt, the shame, and the pride someone else had to work through to arrive at a relationship that was once lost, I never thought it to be possible. From the bottom of my heart I want to say thank you.

Until I read your book, I only ever read books people wrote about themselves. I read biographies people wrote asking the world to join in applause congratulating them on their many accomplishments. Your book was different. From front to back, it was a celebration of someone else. You told us of his wisdom, character, and lifestyle. You told us how love always wins in fights. You told us not to let the little things in life rule you, stop at the stop light, but create your own culture. Morrie’s wisdom was impactful to you and you selflessly poured it out to our listening hearts. I want to shout my gratitude to you. I want to store the wisdom up and live it the way Morrie did. I want to share it the way you did.

I want to thank you for a book that beckons and calls for vulnerability and selflessness. I want to thank you for words that carry weight and that alleviate the burdens we all carry. Your work will continue to be important until the end of all ages, until we no longer struggle to love or to let love in. While Morrie taught you, you taught me. You taught me greater joy comes from celebrating truth whether or not you were the creator of the truth or not. Morrie once spoke with gentleness saying, "Love is how you stay alive even after you are gone." How beautiful are those tender words to a mourning heart. They whisper a hope that even though someone is gone, your memories of them are not erased. Their love for you cannot be diminished and their wisdom does not become less true.

Sincerely,
Sophie Ball

Level III
2nd Place

Cora Dunkin

Northwestern High School, Kokomo

Letter to Harper Lee

Author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Dear Harper Lee,

Society is full of people with differences. Some people have different hair colors than others, different eye colors, different skin colors, and some people have disabilities. The world puts me in the disability category. I have a skin condition called Lamellar Ichthyosis. It's a condition where I have an extra layer of skin. Also, my sweat glands are covered and I cannot sweat. My skin is constantly dry. There is no cure for this type of disorder, but there are ways to relieve the pain. When people see me they see my skin flaking from my hands, head, and face.

I walked over to my classroom bookshelf and picked up *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I opened the front cover and read the first page. I vowed never to read it again because it was so dull. Around the same time the next year, I sat staring at my desk as the teacher passed out the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I thought, here we go again. The next day I couldn't put the book down. It took me a week to finish it. I went from laughing so hard my stomach began to ache, to crying so much my head started to throb.

The part that intrigued me the most was when Atticus decided to defend a black man, Tom, when no one else would. I believe in racial equality for everyone. You should never judge someone by what they look like. I have personal experience with this. I am different. I am not society's normal. I have setbacks in my life. There isn't a day that goes by when I don't get stared and pointed at. There was an incident when a little boy and his friend pointed at me in the store and laughed. Something as simple as running errands is hard for me. I used to avoid going out in public and I stayed inside my house. I was depressed thinking that no one would accept me. Then I read your book.

I read the passage in your book where the children are afraid of Boo Radley. They think he is a monster. Then, Boo saves Scout and she says, "Atticus, he was real nice." This part really spoke to me. They thought this person was a monster, but they found out he was a nice person. People see me like this. People see me as a monster who is different, but when they meet me they discover I'm a nice person. When Scout said that quote I cried. She looked at his personality and not his appearance. I wish people would look past my condition and discover the real me.

Your book inspires me. When Atticus sits outside the jail cell, just to defend Tom, I feel enlightened and empowered. I feel enlightened because he stood up and protected someone who was abandoned and shunned from society. I feel empowered now to do what is right and to defend anyone who needs help, because of Atticus' bravery.

There was an incident last year that I witnessed. A boy told a friend of mine that he couldn't sit with him because of his skin color. Everyone who also witnessed it said nothing. I was paralyzed with shock for a moment. How could someone say something so hateful to another human being? I finally came back to my senses and started to defend my friend. I told the boy he shouldn't say that to him. He can't control what he looks like and it doesn't matter. You can't go around saying such awful things. If I hadn't read your book, I don't think I would have enough courage to stand up to the bully.

Atticus Finch once said, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." I reflect on this quote frequently. If someone were to climb into my skin, they would be shocked. They would see the stares and wonder why people were looking at them.

Then they would realize they are looking at my skin. They would soon choose to ignore the stares and overcome the snarky comments. They would see that I have friends and a wonderful family that cares for me. They would see that I'm happy and I don't cry anymore. They would finally embrace me as a human being and friend.

My parents taught me from a young age that accepting people is key. It is key to making friends, living life as a Christian, and treating people how I would want to be treated. Like Atticus, my parents taught my siblings and me to not judge people because you don't know what they are going through. We were raised to treat people with respect. We were taught this because we were different. Like the Finch family, my family wasn't the typical family. My family consisted of six people, and two of them had a skin disorder. My older sisters who were unaffected looked out for us and made sure they treated people right. They did this so people wouldn't treat us wrong. Like Scout and Jem, my siblings and I looked out for each other.

Your book makes me happy. When I am having a bad day, I re-read the part where Scout dresses up as a ham and I laugh. I laugh so hard I cry. I also enjoy the passage when Dill is the lookout when Scout and Jem write Boo a letter. He starts ringing the lookout bell vigorously. Scout and Jem look back to see Atticus standing over Dill. Another instance where I laugh is when Jem and Scout build snow people to look like their neighbors.

Harper Lee, you are an inspiration to me. You published your book about racial inequality when the Civil Rights Movement was happening. You didn't care what anyone thought. You did what you knew was right. I thank you for making people who feel different feel like they belong. They feel human. As I sit here, I feel it's an honor to

even write to you. Your book has changed the way I view myself. I end my letter with a quote that inspires me and helps me live my life day by day. In the famous words of Martin Luther King, Jr., “If you cannot fly, then run. If you cannot run, then walk. If you cannot walk, then crawl. But whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.”

With love,
Cora Dunkin

Level III
3rd Place

Jacob Martin

Northwestern High School, Kokomo

Letter to Virginia Lee Burton

Author of *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*

Dear Virginia Lee Burton,

The year is 1839; bustling streets come to life with the ever-changing world. Average citizens flow in and out of industrial factories in mucky work attire. The air is filled with smog and the smell of hard work. Word on the street hints of a ground breaking invention that has been created: a steam shovel. This steam shovel has the capacity to help boost the growing economy.

Your book, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, was handed down to me from generations within my family. The story reflects on the Industrial Revolution. My Grandpa Dan worked in a car factory in my hometown, Kokomo, called Delco. The factory consumed most of his time, but he always made sure to spend time with all of his eight grandchildren. He read this story every once in a while to us. I remember thinking about how hard-working Mike Mulligan was and his dedication to help others.

Sadly, Grandpa Dan passed away a couple years back, but I still read and recall the book today. The first time I experienced the book was at Grandpa Dan's rustic house. He read it to me late one night while I was falling asleep on the couch right before bedtime. I remember Grandpa Dan telling some of his one of a kind stories from the factory that resembled *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*. One of my favorite stories was the time when he started as just an average employee and worked his way up to a head ranking position. I knew this meant a lot to him, and he took the new role very seriously. The book back then to me was just for entertainment and enjoyment, but it now provides a sentimental value to me and my family. The story acts as a reminder to always be positive, help others, and persevere through all situations.

Throughout the times I have read the book, I have picked up new ideas and lessons. I still carry these moral lessons and connections from the story today. The exciting moment in the book when Mike and Mary Anne were cheered on by the surrounding town and dig a cellar in just one day appeals to me. The cheering reminds me of football, my favorite sport to play on Friday nights. I live for Friday night lights in the fall. The crowd fills the steel bleachers and they scream and shout cheering on their team. I feel the adrenaline begin to kick in and excitement runs through my body. The rush feels like an Olympian winning an Olympic medal for the United States. Mike and Mary Anne felt this same way when they completed the task of finishing the cellar quickly.

Recently, iPads were given to every single student in my school. Student use the iPads as an updated version of learning. New forms of communication are being introduced, and people's thoughts are changing about technology. The new types of steam shovels are introduced in your book while Mike and his steam shovel were the best in the business. Diesel and electric shovels eventually take over Mike and Mary Anne's jobs and put them out of business. Mary Anne and Mike are forced to adapt to their surroundings, and the same adaptations are happening in the world today. I am constantly learning how to use new technology and programs to help complete my schoolwork.

When I read the book, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, I will remember how Mike and Mary Anne always helped others and persevered through difficult times. Eventually, I plan on going to medical school to specialize in anesthesiology. This goal is sure to be a challenge, but like Mike and Mary Anne, I will always strive to do my best at all cost. The confidence that Mike and Mary Anne show

in the story is encouraging and translates to my life today. I continue to set goals and push myself to be a better person. In the classroom or on the football field, I aim to have the work ethic that Mike demonstrates in the book.

I thoroughly enjoy your book because it reminds me of my Grandpa and all the memories we have shared together, like watching basketball and hearing his unique stories from the factories. As I age, I reflect on the values and morals presented throughout your story. I plan on passing this book down to my children in the future to keep the tradition alive. Also, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* is a positive book to escape from everyday stress. Just like Mike and Mary Anne had to evolve throughout the Industrial Revolution, I need to continue to work hard, stay positive, and always help others. Maybe one day I will invent a world changing idea as brilliant as William Otis's steam shovel.

Yours truly,
Jacob L. Martin

Level III Honorable Mentions

Aalia Aliwa

New Tech Academy @ Wayne High School, Fort Wayne
Letter to Kimberly Willis Holt
Author of *My Louisiana Sky*

Dear Ms. Holt,

Before the fall of 2016, I had my life planned out. I like planning, meals, family trips, everything. I spent junior high studying my friends and taking advanced classes, all to aid in planning my life in high school. Before fall 2016, I was growing into the mold I had made for myself. I knew the people I would take with me, the ones I would leave behind, the advanced classes I would take, the clubs I would join, the minimum-wage part time job I'd apply for, the dress I'd wear for prom, and the exact amount of birthday money I'd need to save for it. I didn't plan on reading *My Louisiana Sky*, nor did I plan for the change it would have on my perspective of life.

No amount of planning could prepare me for my sophomore year of high school. You see, as a film geek, I had fantasized of what school would be like; Friday nights at football games, being a part of a popular clique, the mall downtown becoming my second home, though I loathe shopping.

So far, it's been pretty much the opposite.

There's been no time for hanging out with friends at the mall. No time for Friday night games. No time for after-school clubs. Not nearly enough time for homework and studying.

No planning could have prepared me for my grandfather's sudden health decline. Three strokes, which meant around the clock care, something my mother, a single parent could not provide. It meant an hour long drive after school to his home nearly every day. Much like Tiger, I was completely unprepared for the way things changed from one day to the next.

My friends couldn't comprehend my sudden absence, but teenage girls move on quickly. I watched my friends from a distance, saw the pictures they posted on social media; smiling faces at games, manicured hands holding overpriced smoothies at the food court. I had been prepared to leave behind my middle school friends. In the end, I was the one left behind. I was Tiger Ann.

I was overwhelmed by the changes that came from one day to the next. I was never one to vocalize my feelings, and I felt guilty for desperately wanting to escape from the everyday routine. When I picked up *My Louisiana Sky*, I saw my feelings reflected in Tiger. Feeling chained down by a loved one. Longing to be a part of a group. Her handling of the sudden death of her grandmother and taking on the role of a caretaker; at her age, something to admire.

Tiger's story was my escape for a bit. I thought about how I'd choose, if I were given a choice to leave it all behind. I had been ignorant of the feelings of my family, who were going through the same thing. Looking back, I was given an opportunity to grow, one I wouldn't have seen or appreciated if I hadn't read your book. I learned to appreciate the constraints in my life. Life, which you can't plan for. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Aalia Aliwa

Rhiannon Clayton

New Tech Academy @ Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Ned Vizzini

Author of *It's Kind of a Funny Story*

Dear Mr. Vizzini,

Waking up every day I am immediately met with a series of questions. Did I oversleep? Am I hungry or am I tired? What was I supposed to accomplish yesterday? What have I worn in the last three weeks and how do I avoid wearing the same outfit in case someone calls me out? What am I doing today? Do I have a test? Even if I don't have a test could I pass a test right now? As you can tell, it's kind of a mess. After reading your book *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, I was met with a new question; am I the only one like this? I was also finally given an answer. I was able to address my anxiety and depression and instead of viewing the world as a gloomy ticking time bomb, I began to view it as a hopeful gloomy ticking time bomb. Though not all of my days are great, they have gotten better. I started to find joy in the smaller things such as seeing a dog in the park, putting on a sock just right, or even peeing after holding it in for way too long (similar to Craig).

Growing up homeless, I built a huge wall that I surround myself with. I never wanted to let people in, in case they would try and break it down and I was always scared of the unexpected. It eventually escalated to me believing that getting anything below a 90% was considered an F and knowing exactly how many minutes until my next class, the end of the school day, the time my bus would drop me off (approximately which drove me mad), and what time I'd lay down for bed. Believe it or not, this lead me to taking the same medicine as Craig, Zoloft. I also stopped taking it after a few months believing that I was better and that I didn't need it anymore. By the time I had read your book I was in a better spot mentally and instantly felt like I wasn't alone. I always addressed my mental health with a side of humor and by reading your book I believe it was one of the major reasons I was able to express myself without as much anxiety. I knew that I couldn't have been the only one to feel this way seeing how you wrote an entire book similar to my situation and my struggles, I began the process to better my mental health even more which started my journey of loving myself. I never got to the point of

Level III: Honorable Mentions

checking myself into the hospital, but I did find someone to talk to like Craig because I was tired of feeling the way I was.

Instead of creating brain maps to put my mind in one place, I began to write. Words began to crowd my mind just waiting to get written down and it was a perfect escape. I wrote about my passions, my anxieties, and my depression. I would often have conversations with my old therapist about parts of your story such as standing on the bridge and how I would handle the situations or how I used it as a gateway into high school in regards to peer pressure and hearing my peers talk about experiences I had yet to go through. I didn't have anyone around me publically going through what I was going through so my therapist was the only person I was able to de-stress and calm down with. I remember telling her it wasn't that school and life were necessarily hard, but they were just things I couldn't handle and you can imagine my shock when you wrote a very similar quote in your book. By using your book to compare and contrast who I was and who I am, I believe that I was able to grow for the better.

By bettering myself, I feel I am able to better the community and those who surround me. Your story sticks with me every day, especially when I feel alone. This hopeful gloomy ticking time bomb we live in gets better every day as I grow to love more and more from it. I would like to personally thank you for this.

Sincerely,
Rhiannon Clayton

Maison Hardin

Northwestern High School, Kokomo

Letter to J. K. Rowling

Author of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

Dear J. K. Rowling,

Growing up, I would have sworn that my mom is more of a bookworm than she is human. Every night before bed, for as long as I can remember, she would tuck me into a cozy, gray blanket. Which, unfortunately, smelled of the floor of a grocery store and laundry detergent due to my incessant need to drag it everywhere I moseyed my teeny body along. I would lie in bed with my mother's soft voice conjuring me into a deep sleep as she read at the foot of my bed. I had absolutely no desire to listen to the book but rather listen to her mellow, comforting voice. I despised reading, in fact. The very last thought in my mind was to listen to my mother when she ordered me to read. Those nights that she read to me, her words that slipped from her lips entered into one ear and out the other for me. That is, until I met *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. It was so enthralling that I instantaneously craved more. The infamous, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," had my curiosity storming inside of me. I longed to know the truth behind The Marauder's Map. With every word from then on, I desired for more.

Hermione Granger swept me in with her unceasing curiosity and relentless pursuit towards excellence. She reminded me of myself, always doing more, not just to ease by, but to power ahead. Hermione has a drive in her from her own conscience, knowing the right choice is to give all you have to do your best. She inspires girls of all ages, especially me, to be the best woman she can be.

Harry Potter has always been a fairly large deal in my family. "Potterheads?" That's us. We all thoroughly enjoy the movies, since it is entertaining family time. The *Harry Potter* series, books, and movies, brought us closer together as a family. Though, instead of having other people's versions of what the book should envision, I had my own. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* completely altered the way I viewed reading. Your book was my first magical experience of seeing the world of reading in a whole new perspective. I was hooked like a fish out of water yearning for a pond.

I still remember the night my mom strutted into my room with the book in her left hand. I was eleven years young at the time. She placed the book where she usually sits, the foot of my bed.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Looks like you’ll have to find out yourself,” she replied, with a soft smile on her face. After eyeing it up and down, in and out, I let it sit on my dresser for a few weeks. I knew one day I was to pick up the book and give it a shot for my mom. You see, as I was growing older, Mom didn’t always read to me anymore. I was busy with sports, and she had papers to grade. It was time I read to myself.

A few chapters in, I didn’t want to just keep reading, but I couldn’t put it down. I remembered not wanting to admit to my mom that I finished the book in a mere three days. My mind kindled with images of the entire book. I had the power to make my own version of the movie, I thought. I liked to refer to this skill as my “reading superpower” at the time.

After finally admitting to my mother that I loved the book, I immediately asked if I could have the rest of the series to read. She obviously had no problem ecstatically handing me *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. My mother was very pleased to just see me enjoying books. I quickly finished the next book, and couldn’t fathom how much I had actually loved reading. Being able to imagine every word in my mind as I read was incomprehensible to me. Reading was what you did to learn how to assemble a bed frame or understand the nutrition facts on the back of your favorite cereal box...or so I thought.

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban not only opened me up to the six other books in the series, but also to reading in general. My

reading dexterity has benefited me in all aspects of life, most certainly school. My comprehension skills, vocabulary palette and reading fluency has all generously improved. I used to definitely be the type of kid to judge a book by its cover. Now, all I do is pick up a book to skim through to conclude whether this book appeals to me or not.

All my thanks to you, J. K. Rowling, for leading me to have an appreciation for the joy of reading I had not previously experienced. Your work uplifted me to a whole new realm of literature. Who knew such a minuscule alteration could have such an immense impact on the life of an eleven-year-old? Little did I know, three years later I would be the bookworm I always brushed off my mom for being.

With love,
Maison Hardin

America Vazquez

New Tech Academy @ Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to John Boyne

Author of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*

Dear Mr. Boyne,

Social classification can still be present today which influences the intake of those who don't necessarily fit the norms. As I read your book, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, it helped me realize that people categorize and judge others because of ignorance and the lack of knowledge but their criticism does not define who a person is. Bullying, racism and stereotyping can affect everyone, including me. For most of my life, I put up with the cruel judgement of people who believed and saw me as a "different" person. I was treated differently and bullied because of the way I spoke English and how I presented myself differently due to the fact that I grew up around a different culture and different customs than what was expected. All of the bullying and stereotyping I dealt with throughout my life transformed me into the strong person I am today.

Imagine moving to a completely new country far away from your homeland where everything is new to you. I saw myself in the character of Shmuel. Just like Shmuel I felt completely lost and scared because at that point in my life I was put in a completely different place than what I was used to. In this different place I did not speak the language expected therefore I could not communicate with anyone around me. When people talked to me, I could feel the sweat building up on the palms of my hands and my face slowly turning red. I hated the feeling of people waiting for a response that I could not provide or having a different appearance than others. When I did try to communicate with my grammatically incorrect English I was judged and told to learn the country's language. It was hard to learn a new language and adjust to a completely different environment but I somehow pushed through the judgment of others and achieved my goal of becoming some part of what society expected.

As I kept reading your book I started connecting with Shmuel even more. Like Shmuel, I met people in my life that saved me from my sorrow. Even after I learned English, dressed according to society, and

connected with people, I was still not enough and a “minority” as the so-called cool people who still bullied and made racist comments about me said. In the book Shmuel was in the concentration camp with his father but he still felt lost just like me because if I had some friends I was still not enough and felt like I was nothing in my own life. However, I did not let all of the racism and bullying affect me and I kept opening the doors to new friendships just like when Shmuel met Bruno. As I started becoming friends with more people I started getting more comfortable and happier. Shmuel also felt this way as his relationship with Bruno grew. Even with friendships, Shmuel and I were still different and did not qualify society’s expectations but we did not let the judgment of others affect us and our lives, and we continued to improve ourselves not because we wanted to be like what was expected but because we knew it was the best for ourselves.

Your book, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, made a tremendous impact on me because it slowly made me put together all of the struggles related to racism and stereotyping I’ve come across in my life. Your book taught me that I should not let those struggles define me. I utilized the cruel opinions of people to become a better person. I followed Shmuel’s steps and did as he did. At the beginning of the story Shmuel felt completely lost and powerless when he was taken to the concentration camp and did not know anyone but his father. Even though Shmuel was at the lowest point of his life he opened the doors to a friend who had a completely different way of life which brought positivity and happiness into his life regardless of their differences. Shmuel’s character inspired me to surround myself with the positivity of others and not let people weaken me. Your book has helped me and can help others recognize how strong of a person they can be if they do not let the judgment of others get to them. Your book also made me realize that there will always be racism and that people will always judge others by their appearance. However your

Level III: Honorable Mentions

book helped me learn and realize that their opinion doesn't define who I am.

Sincerely,
America Vazquez

Level III Semifinalists

Allison Biancardi

Griffith High School, Griffith

Letter to Dave Pelzer

Author of *A Child Called "It"*

Dear Dave Pelzer,

At my high school, I take a Human and Social Services course that introduced me to your book *A Child Called "It."* Although I was never abused as a child, I understand that many people have to overcome hardships they have encountered in their lives, whether it be something so serious like being neglected, or something so simple like finding a job. Whatever the situation may be, the experience has a major impact on their life. Personally, I have never had to undergo an experience that caused me to have a serious hardship, but I grew up with a cousin that did.

My cousin was born with a mild form of autism that made it difficult for him to fit in with his peers when he was younger. The behavior associated with his condition alienated him from the other children. As he grew older, that social awkwardness stage diminished and fitting in was more manageable, until the day his dad died. My uncle died when my cousin was 16 years old, and this traumatic event took a heavy toll on my cousin's life. It was painful for me to recognize that I would never see or hear my uncle again, and even more so that I had to watch my cousin tremble at the thought that he no longer had a father that was living. Grief-stricken, he again isolated himself from society, and to this day has not found a way out of the vast hole that was dug. My cousin's situation, along with your book, has inspired me immeasurably and has influenced me to make a difference in the lives of children who struggle with finding themselves.

While I read and observed what you have overcome in your memoir, many emotions flooded my brain, such as sorrow and pity. The way you described your brutal experience had me filled with tears and left me heartbroken inside. I couldn't even fathom the hurt and despair you felt from being neglected by your alcoholic mother. Your perseverance shocked me and has led me to believe that a person

can overcome anything if they put their mind to it, regardless of the circumstances. While reading, I made a connection between you and my cousin. That connection was that you both have gone through what you would call a “living hell.” I knew from the moment I read the last word in your book, that I wanted to help children like you and my cousin.

I have always have had a passion for helping others, especially children, but your book has drastically changed the way I want to express that passion. Before reading your memoir and taking that class, I thought I knew exactly what I wanted to do with my life, which was become a pediatric nurse. Your experience has influenced me to want to become so much more than that, and express my love for children indefinitely. After finishing your book, I have decided that I not only want to become a nurse, but also foster children that have been taken from their families due to a dismissive environment.

Although your experience was substantially more severe than my cousin's, the meaning behind your words has had an impact on the way I view the world today. I will share this book with others that have undergone a difficult situation to help them overcome what they are going through. Thank you for sharing your experiences in your memoir because they have greatly affected my outlook on children who struggle, and it led me to want to become the difference in their lives.

Yours truly,
Allison Biancardi

Delia Booker

Griffith High School, Griffith

Letter to James Frey

Author of *A Million Little Pieces*

Dear James Frey,

I am not an addict and I honestly hope I never will be. As you know, most people see addicts as people who are homeless and live from high to high. That's not completely wrong and for some people that's their reality. But mostly when addiction (drug or alcohol) hits, it affects common people that you would never believe would be sucked into such a mess. In your book I saw you; someone stripped raw and open to the world who, to be blunt, was the picture of an addict. You started young, couldn't hold down a job, and were always high or drunk or both. But along with you, I also saw people that reminded me of people close to me. There were broken people that you would never expect to be in a rehab. There were people who lived a seemingly perfect life on the outside, but who let some substance take control of them and ruin them. You taught me through this book that these people aren't enemies. They are still people.

Before your book I always thought that the people around me who succumbed to addictions weren't really trying to get better. I would see them spend money we didn't have on a case of beer or get so drunk that they wouldn't remember anything that happened the next day. Sometimes they would try to stop; most of the time it didn't last long. To be completely honest with you, I resented them. I was mad at them. I saw people who could have been anything and who were smart and funny and loving, throw it all away. They were completely different people when they were drunk or high and then when they sobered up they acted like nothing was wrong. I know that they don't remember what they say or do, but I think that made it hurt more. They would cut deep and couldn't even say sorry later on because they didn't know they did anything wrong.

In your book I really went into the mindset of someone trying, really trying, to get better. To be honest, it was not a fun read. I thought that it was just stubbornness or something keeping people from pushing through the withdrawal and pain following addiction but it's

Level III: Semifinalists

more than that. I see that now. It's not just some pain and then you're done; you're all better. It is a forever conscious effort to stay sober. It never stops. The worst thing about your book is knowing how so many of those people, and how many addicts everywhere else, relapse. All that work down the drain. It scares me to see the ones close to me recovering because of the others who are still addicted around them and one small push could bring them back to square one.

I never gave much respect to the people close to me for taking action and choosing to go to rehab or AA. It may sound cliché, but your book proved to me that it takes a lot of heart to admit you have a problem and try to overcome it. It hurts seeing how much pain and suffering actually happens when addicts give up their addiction. It seemed like a story; it wasn't real but too real at the same time because I witnessed it at the same time. I understood better what my loved ones were going through, and I also gained so much more respect for people who have and are going through this.

Your book, James Frey, showed me reality. It's as simple as that. It opened up the door to show me what people who have an addiction are really like, not what the world makes all of them out to be. Addicts are not just homeless people with no job and no sort of stability save for their addiction. They are parents and neighbors; family and friends. Seemingly normal people can be addicts, and we would have no clue the pain and suffering they go through because of their addiction. You showed them to me. You let me see real people, who are going through real pain, and deserve to be helped, not looked down on. They deserve to get better and they know it's not easy. Sometimes it's just easy to fall off the wagon, but they're not falling because they want to, it's because they need to. This broke my heart to read and it hurt me to connect the experience and emotions in this book to my loved ones, but it was something I needed to be told about. It was something that needed to be showed to me, and you did just that. All I can say for that is this: thank you.

Delia Booker

Emma Cannon

New Tech Academy @ Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Rick Riordan

Author of *The Lightning Thief*

Dear Mr. Riordan,

When I was about ten-years-old, I came across your book, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*. I was instantly drawn into the world of these demigods and their adventures, especially the quirky parts in the books and heartfelt moments. But it wasn't those moments that kept me reading. It was the fact that I could see myself in these ultra-strong kids that were barely older than I was at the time.

The time that I had found your series wasn't the best for me. I had just moved to Indiana from North Carolina and I was still finding my way around and trying to find friends. Well, I eventually did, but they weren't really friends. The kind of people that I had managed to "befriend" were using me for their benefit. See, I was the smartest girl at the elementary school. Within a month of me arriving, everyone in my grade somehow found out about 'the new girl that was insanely smart'. That alone made me happy because I had gained more popularity there than I had back in North Carolina; it blinded me from what was really going on. The girls that I hung around constantly made me feel like crap. They made jokes about my weight (as I was a heavier girl that hadn't quite developed yet) and constantly questioned me on why I didn't dress the way they did or do my hair the way they did. Sometimes I was subjected to race jokes. It led to me trying to erase the fact that I was black - a fact that I was already deliberately trying to ignore back home. Experiencing all of that just made it worse. So naturally, I suppressed the parts of black culture that I enjoyed to fit in with their agenda and it ended up making me popular - if only for a moment. Like when someone needed to copy off of my homework or have me do their assignments for them. Or just be the butt of a joke.

The one thing that hadn't changed was my love of books. I was - and still am - an avid book reader. One day I decided to pluck the first book of the *Percy Jackson* series off of the school library's shelf. I

fell in love with it because of the adventure and the excitement at the end of every sentence, and again, because I saw myself. I found aspects of my personality in each of them, as if you had known about me and threw certain traits in the books to make a connection. Like Annabeth, who is the genius daughter of Athena with such an intense stubbornness embedded in her bones that it made me kind of ashamed to read about those parts. Ashamed because I instantly knew that I was like her. Or Percy, who was an outcast at his school. Just like I was, no matter how “popular” I thought I was. Just the entire idea of the demigods not feeling like they belonged in the world until coming to camp was how I felt at the time. I felt that I didn’t belong anywhere. Not until later, at least.

That part of my life didn’t last very long, only about a year and a half. But it was long enough. By the end of my fifth grade year I had hated myself. I hated how curly my hair was and the fact that I had tan skin. I hated that I wasn’t less than 110 pounds like all of the other girls and that I didn’t get my clothes brand new from the mall. I remember sitting up some nights, usually the ones that my mom had to work late, and just sobbing so loud to the point that my brother had to come in my room to calm me down so I could sleep.

I managed to find some peace and comfort within the books. I had finished all of them by now, yet I kept re-reading and doing anything I could to stay connected with them. During that time of my life I could identify with Nico, more specifically after he had lost his sister. He became a recluse, trying his best not to get close to people anymore. That connection with his character only deepened once my brother finally left home. I didn’t have my older brother - my protector and my best friend since I was in kindergarten - around all the time anymore. And that hurt. But eventually I began to grow out of that stage, finding actual friends at the new school that I had transferred to. Friends that made me laugh and smile and embrace

everything that I hated about myself. Because of that, instead of feeling as dark as Nico had, I began to relate to Grover and Silena Beauregard more. I was attempting to be a really happy person and be as energetic as I could, which in turn brought out a side of me that I hadn't gotten to see before. A kind and caring person that could be defensive if she needed to be - the kind of person that Silena had been. Never in my life had I stood up for myself and it was such an exhilarating experience. That feeling of actually taking control eventually made me turn into someone else who I now realize wasn't a very good side. But we'll get into that later.

My favorite part about these characters were their fatal flaws; the traits that could make or break them. It helped to solidify the constant reminder in the books that no one is perfect, not even the gods. I couldn't really connect with any of their flaws except Percy's. For the simple fact that, while his loyalty was a great thing, I had been very loyal to girls that did nothing but hurt me and managed to turn me into someone I wasn't. But I knew that I had a fatal flaw of my own - trying to please everyone. Whether it was saying what they wanted me to say or wearing what everyone else was wearing, I always felt compelled to listen and grant their wish. And once I had realized what my character flaw was I fought so hard to change it. I developed my own sense of style and shrugged off everyone's negative comments. I found activities that I loved and stuff that made me happy. One of which ended up being Greek mythology, which the book introduced me to. I even ended up stepping out of my comfort zone and tried some sports in middle school, something I know I wouldn't have even dreamed of doing if I was still the shell of myself that I had been in elementary school.

Eventually, I found out that a second series of books came around and I immediately rushed to read that very first book. I had discovered the books around the beginning of the eighth grade year

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and by that time I was so far from where I had begun. My memories of who I had been were (and in all honesty, still are) far from gone. So were the memories of the books that I loved so much. I can recall my heart thundering in my chest as I read about how these new demigods felt. It was exactly how I did as a ten-year-old, except they were all fifteen and sixteen, close to the age I was about to hit. Which made me thankful for finding the *Percy Jackson* books, otherwise I might still be that same, insecure little girl.

The first person I remember identifying with was Leo. Leo's feeling of inferiority mirrored exactly how I felt before I gained some confidence in myself. I felt less important than everyone else. He was pretty much the only person that I could connect with fully. In the second book, I found similar feelings within Frank and Hazel. His low self-esteem went hand in hand with Leo's feeling of inferiority. Reading about the two separately made me wonder how I even survived dealing with both. Hazel struggled with getting over her past, and that is something that I have trouble with even today. Not to mention her background, a child of mixed race who is pretty strange. But all of the characters were strong in their own way, whether it was being super smart or fighting off monsters. Which was mind-blowing for me as a kid. And as a teenager, I could finally understand and appreciate how much energy it took to be that strong because I was (still am) gaining the strength to fight against my everyday battles.

Both series showed me that you don't have to be perfect to be someone. The kids that were chosen for the quests all had flaws, everyone in the book and in that universe had flaws. But all of them were important and that meant a lot to me as a kid. I don't know what I would be like today without those books and I, for obvious reasons, never will. So I just want to thank you for writing such an incredible book and indirectly helping me learn to love myself.

Sincerely,
Emma Cannon

Jaymason Curry

New Tech Academy @ Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Paulo Coehlo

Author of *The Alchemist*

Dear Mr. Coehlo,

When I first picked up a copy of *The Alchemist*, it was because I had to. My class has a required reading time, and I did not have a book that day. Little did I know my lack of preparation would turn out to be one of my best mistakes!

My name is Jaymason Curry, and I too dream of travel and excitement. Every time someone asks me about my plans for the future, I tell them I want to write books or become an engineer. What I really want though, is to travel the world and enjoy what it has to offer. I always feel held back about this dream though, because like everyone else, I need money to travel, and I want to eventually settle down and care for my family. However, your explanation of “Personal Legends” opened my eyes to the reality of the world. I realized that if it is my purpose, nothing but myself could stop me from completing this legend.

After reading *The Alchemist*, I found it easier to look at life. Jealousy suddenly did not exist, because people are made to do certain and unique things. I do not doubt that Santiago wished to make gold from lead, but when he hears that it is not his Personal Legend, it suddenly became clear to me that you should not be jealous of others. Santiago may not be able to make gold, but the Alchemist will never find a treasure like that of Santiago’s.

The “Soul of the World” is what stuck to me the most. The idea that everything in the world is not only connected, but also speaks the same language awoke a new idea within me. I suddenly understood how the slightest change in a room’s atmosphere could tell you someone’s life story. The way Santiago becomes the wind made me realize that knowing yourself and the world makes you closer to God. I myself struggle with seeing the wonders of my everyday life.

Too often, I realize that we, as people, are slowly losing our touch to the world and instead engross ourselves in technology and vices. *The Alchemist* allowed me to retreat from our electric hideaways and see the world in a new and exciting light. It showed me that the world speaks in the same language and shares the same soul. There is nothing you cannot understand if you understand the language of the heart. The only thing stopping me from following my dream is myself.

I am eager to read your other works Mr. Coehlo, and I have no doubt that they will not disappoint. I cannot imagine anyone ever disliking the heartfelt humanity described in *The Alchemist*. This book spoke to me in a language I thought no one shared. If someone asked me, "How would you describe yourself?" I would say, "Read *The Alchemist*. Then you'll know me."

There will never be a book that I will read that can outdo the message you taught me. I hope I can teach others what this book has taught me.

Maktub,
Jaymason Curry

Ashlynn Johnson

Taylor High School, Kokomo

Letter to Scott Westerfeld

Author of *The Uglies Series*

Dear Scott Westerfeld,

I've read your *Uglies* series. The series impacted my life so much because it has helped with my confidence and self-esteem. Tally does not want to get the face surgery to make herself pretty because she believes everyone is beautiful the way they are. I agree with her because girls think they have to look a certain way to make people like them. Some girls think they need to wear a lot of makeup to make themselves feel cool and to get boys to like them. They also like to wear it to make themselves feel better about themselves.

The *Uglies* series impacted my life because Tally was an inspiring character in the book. The stories also have a positive message to its audience that you don't need to change how you look to please other people. She believes no one needs the surgery to look beautiful. Everyone is made to look a certain way for a reason. These books helped me realize that you are great the way you are. You don't need to change anything about yourself to become a great person. I have also noticed that I need to be myself to become the person I want to be.

It made me realize how mean people can be and how cruel this world is. How can someone make another feel so bad about herself that she has to change her appearance? How can people judge someone on how he looks and make him feel bad about himself and to put him down? Their families may not have the money to buy them the nicest things and they don't need to be judged on that. You can't judge someone on how they look. You don't know their story or their background. People go through so many struggles every day you don't even know about so you should not judge anyone. I have problems, too, and I don't want to be judged on how I look. I could be the nicest person and look like a bum but appearance doesn't matter; it's all just about the personality and the person. Don't judge a book by its cover.

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The *Uglies* book series impacted me because it helped me realize I need to be myself. It also helped me know that I don't need to wear makeup or fancy clothes to impress someone. The stories helped me to always be happy and not let anyone judge me on how I look. I have learned that there is always a bright side to every situation. The *Uglies* books inspired me to be more positive about other people and myself.

Sincerely,
Ashlynn Johnson

Simrandeep Kaur

Whiteland Community High School, Whiteland

Letter to Simone Elkeles

Author of *Perfect Chemistry*

Dear Simone Elkeles,

It's an honor to be able to talk to you. *Perfect Chemistry* has been my favorite book since I've read it. And the next two books, *Rules of Attraction* and *Chain Reaction* are just breathtaking. I always wondered where you came up with the idea of the storyline. When I first read the trilogy, I was in middle school. Then I just thought, "This is the best!" But I didn't think too much about it then. I needed a book to read one time and I thought I might as well read the trilogy again. I mean I loved it the first time. What caught my attention was how you used something that I think is a national problem overall in your book. Mexicans are downgraded and seen as drug dealers all the time or even worse. They don't ever get the benefit of the doubt as "white" people do. It all comes down to the race. Which it never should.

The way you show Alex and how he goes through drug dealing yet he takes his life seriously once he meets Brittany is encouraging. How true love can change a person and make them a better person. I'm not saying someone should change for the one they love, but this was a life or death situation almost. The chances of Alex dying after his friend Paco were higher. I think at least, since he was starting to question what Chuy and everyone else was doing. Love stories are my weakness. Reading *Perfect Chemistry* and the rest of the trilogy gave me encouragement in a way. I think anyone that reads your work and thinks at the level you thought or try to be up there they will get the message. Throughout the book I love how you showed Brittany continuing to be on top of Alex for being a gangbanger. How it's not safe, he shouldn't do it, etc. The way you show Brittany challenging her friends in the beginning to say, "Have you seen him do drugs?"

I feel throughout the book, at some point something was based on true events. I think I once read something about the trilogy being based off a true story, but I don't remember. What makes me think that is, the best writers have their own stories and lessons they can

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share. And I think throughout this trilogy in a way, you've put your beliefs and values along with Mexicans and did the research. This trilogy is wonderful. Beyond wonderful. It's really been an honor to get a chance to talk to you.

Sincerely,
Simrandeep Kaur

Rachel Labi

West Lafayette

Letter to Kim Purcell

Author of *Trafficked*

Dear Kim Purcell,

As soon as I saw your book in my school library, I fell in love. *Trafficked*. The title alone was enough to electrify me. I was ecstatic at the thought of reading a book about an issue for which I cared so deeply about. In seventh grade, I learned about human trafficking, primarily in the fashion, farming, and technological industries. Although I was fairly educated in these sectors, I was not fully aware of the indescribable horrors immigrants face when searching for work in this country.

When I read *Trafficked*, I was disgusted at how much Hannah was domestically exploited and threatened with immediate deportation if she dared to tell others about her situation. Her possible entrance into the prostitution industry is the fate of many female immigrants. Although your novel was fictional, I ached at her suffering chapter after chapter, especially her awkward, borderline sexual encounters with Sergey. There are many like her; poor foreigners trying to create a better future, but instead, they fall victim to predators. Stories similar to this are told each day in the media, and the constant negativity numbs society toward such events.

I dearly appreciate your work. I have written to the government about implementing stricter labor laws and increasing company transparency, and I am currently working on a fundraiser in which my friend and I will sell clothing. With the money, we will create a shoe company in which we donate 80% of our profits to the Polaris Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to combating global human trafficking.

As a student working to end labor and sex trafficking, it saddens me to meet people who would consider contributing, but don't want to be associated with such a sensitive topic. If we don't speak about the issue, nothing will change. It's vital that we continue to further educate ourselves, as well as others. We must emotionally connect

with society in order for the horrors of human trafficking to be fully fathomed.

As much as I would like to believe otherwise, human trafficking is a growing problem in my community, as well as in other parts of Indiana and the United States. People choose to believe this only happens in developing countries, but that is untrue. Sex trafficking is considered the fastest growing crime in Fort Wayne, with 15 reported sex trafficking cases in 2017. An FBI investigation launched in Indiana last year arrested 120 traffickers, and a Lafayette man was recently arrested for trafficking an 18-year old woman. I am very thankful that our new state representative, Sally Siegrist, has joined the effort to eradicate this. She is proposing new legislation and has spoken about trafficking in public events. We must all assist in the journey to create a safer future for all.

Reading stories like yours further fuels my life aspirations: to stop human trafficking in labor-particularly in fashion and farming-in Central and South America. Hannah was blessed to have a happy ending, but many other remain in the cycle of trafficking, familial threats, probable deportation, and poverty. For Hannah to have escaped when others remain bound in their chains is incredible.

The least I could say is thank you. Thank you for educating others. Thank you for speaking about such a taboo topic. Thank you for working toward a better future for all. I will forever work, pray, and motivate others to take action so that those in human trafficking can become as Hannah is: unbound.

With much gratitude,
Rachel Labi

Erika Martin

Northwestern High School, Kokomo

Letter to Tony Diterlizzi

Author of *The Spider and the Fly*

Dear Tony Diterlizzi,

Your story, *The Spider and the Fly* was truly a grim and haunting tale. Its black and white color scheme perfectly reflected the story's message. The book's tattered and crinkled seam is held together with tape from my father and I reading late into the night. Every page has a memory with it. Every single black and white creature brings up a good memory. Every wrinkle in the book cover reminds me of a comfortable and warm feeling I got from reading your book.

Growing up, I never saw much of my dad. We rarely had time to spend together because he is a radiologist, and was always at work. He would leave extremely early in the morning and I wouldn't see him again until the sky was as dark as your story's message. As you can imagine this was hard on me. I was very young at the time which made not seeing him often harder. It made spending time together and making memories tougher. It most definitely put a strain on our relationship. Whenever my father was home, he loved to read to me.

He mostly read cheerful and lighthearted stories to me before bed. Your story, however, was exotic and a completely different type of story. He picked your book because he liked your message, "To be cautious of strangers, and not to let flattery blind you to danger." Between you and me, I think he was bored of reading stories about princesses. When he brought it home, and read it for the first time, I instantly fell in love with your story. I especially loved all the rhyming words and detailed pictures. I was a fairly new reader at the time so I truly enjoyed how you used simple words, but still managed to make the story so exciting. Your use of simple words made it easy for me to read along, which made our reading sessions even more enjoyable. After that day, he began to read it every night to me before bed. Reading your book made time stop. When we read your book it felt like nothing could interrupt us, and that the feeling of happiness and comfort would never end. Curled up on our brown leather couch reading your book made not seeing him all day bearable.

Your book opened my eyes to how much effort my father put into trying to spend time with me. It showed me how badly he wanted to spend time with me too. This is something I had started to forget as I got older. When my teacher instructed us to write letters to literature, I immediately thought of your book, *The Spider and the Fly*. When I arrived home I found the book hidden away like a present before the holiday. When I held it I had flashbacks. I saw my father and younger me sitting together on our brown leather couch. I could even hear my father's voice reading your rhymes and could remember listening intently, even though he had read this book many times before. These memories and flashbacks reminded me of a lesson I had learned many years ago. Your book affected me as a young girl and still continues to affect me today.

Even though I couldn't directly relate to the characters, because I was neither a predator nor prey, it was still very important to me. It had brought on so many great memories. Like the feelings of happiness and comfort of reading with my father. It had also taught me many lessons. The most important lesson it taught me was that my dad does love me and does try to make time for me. Your story helped me to see clearly that I wasn't second to my father's patients. It continues to help me to see beyond my own jealousy. It has made me a happier and more understanding person. I know that without your beautifully grim tale with its rhymes and spooky color scheme, I wouldn't be the person I am today. My relationship with my father also wouldn't be as strong as it is.

Sincerely,
Erika Martin

Moe Oo

New Tech Academy @ Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Rupi Kaur

Author of *milk and honey*

Dear Rupi Kaur,

Live up to what you're entitled to do. Live up to what others entitle you to do. If one of those options don't make me happy, does that mean the alternative will? I've always found myself stuck in the meaning of things, constantly in a battle with myself. Why am I not happy? Is it the self-worth I've never been taught? The labels that doubt my abilities? Or is it the burden I would bring upon others if I started making decisions for myself? And then suddenly, it all leads back to self-condemnation. But, through your book, *milk and honey*, you've shown me that when it comes to finding happiness, all I needed to realize was that every day is always another chance to redeem yourself.

To be truthful, I've never put thought into how much I could impact others through my own decisions, and honestly, I didn't care. All I wanted was to find my pursuit of happiness and live my life freely. If I tried to run away from my self-conscious thoughts, I'm assumed to be nothing but an insecure person, but if I stuck with my doubtful side, I would only live to be a pushover. I can say that I've never been taught to accept myself, but to rather make myself presentable to the people around me. My faith made me believe that my actions would go against everything I believed in. I've always learned that making mistakes were the first steps towards success, but each time I made one, I felt that I was digging myself a bigger hole.

Being born into a life with stereotypical Asian parents, I already had high expectations set from a young age. We weren't like most families. My job and career possibilities had already been decided and I was to live the way I was told. I felt restricted and I grew impatient as the kids around me would be able to do the things I couldn't. While everyone went out with their friends and spent the holidays with their families, I was stuck inside studying math equations and was pushed to work on my studies. While other kids could tell their parents "I love you," I was too hesitant. My parents weren't exactly

the best at helping me deal with my self-esteem, as their standards of beauty stood apart from American standards, but I couldn't blame them. They just couldn't understand. I yearned for acceptance, but social disconnection made it difficult for us to communicate with each other. This continued on for a major part of my childhood. I wanted to become rebellious because enough was enough. It was time I started living for myself. At the start of high school, I no longer had any self-motivation, but what I saw as "punishment" for my parents, only hurt me the most. As times changed, I became more frustrated with everyone around me and myself. There was more anger built up inside of me than anything else. I was a ticking time bomb. Every second that passed would soon lead up to an explosion. I was failing my family, I was failing as a student, but most importantly I was failing myself.

If I'm honest, looking back, I was never really the person who was self-driven enough to just pick something up and start reading, but scanning through my bookshelf one day, I found myself with a copy of your book in my hands. Even if by accident, I believed it was fate. Picking up your book, I remembered...

*what is stronger
than the human heart
which shatters over and over
and still lives*

My parents made tremendous sacrifices coming to this country. Escaping from the military regime in Myanmar, with little money in their pockets, they worked hard to create a better life, working tirelessly, and taking jobs they never loved. Later on in my life I learned that what they wanted most, was to give their children the life they couldn't have. In the process of it all, they struggled with acceptance as well. I realized that I did not give them the acceptance

they so desperately needed. I understood, but I was still hurt. I didn't get it. How could anyone possibly come back from all the hurt and agony they've gone through? When there was so much to bear, I just wanted to give in. But, then again, you've also taught me that...

*if you were born with
the weakness to fall
you were born with
the strength to rise*

I still had a chance to grow. A chance to prosper. A chance to be a happier person.

Through your work, I've come to realize how much I've grown from all the things that I was originally entitled to do, and I've come to appreciate my differences with the comfort of being in my own skin. I've learned to forgive my parents, as I now understand them. For the longest time I believed I needed support to gain acceptance, but what I really needed all along was myself. I was entitled to living my own life. Things always fall into place. So thank you Ms. Kaur, for guiding me and giving me strength through pain and loss. There is much beauty to life and just like milk and honey, you can find sweetness.

Sincerely,
Moe Oo

Cortlynn Shull

West Noble Middle School, Ligonier

Letter to Sharon Draper

Author of *Out of My Mind*

Dear Sharon Draper,

This book has always had such a deep meaning to me. When I read this book for the first time, it hit me the hardest. But, it keeps getting better after every time I read it. When I read this book, I was more lost for words than Melody was. *Out of My Mind* has changed my views on so many things.

When I first read this book, I was a girl who did not talk a lot. I was different from everyone else. I was going through chronic depression and just starting 8th grade. It was one of the worst years of my life, but this book helped so much. In that year, I had lost two grandpas. I had given up most hope and did not talk. When I read the book, it changed everything. I had never cried harder from book than I did in this one. It had just hit me to the core that maybe my life wasn't as bad as I was making it out to be. Maybe I was just being selfish and not seeing the whole picture, just the one of only me in the frame. I saw a new light when I read this book.

I have never really liked talking about my sickness. It is something that most people cannot pick up on without me telling them. Melody, on the other hand, couldn't hide it. When I was quiet, no one ever asked me to speak. They just thought that I had nothing to say. I was the complete opposite of Melody. She had all these words and could never use them. It made me feel bad because I took my silence for advantage when I could be speaking.

My biggest fear in life is losing my voice. I have always been passionate about a lot of things, and now I use my voice to express them. I tend to write down a lot of my thoughts and that is something that Melody couldn't even do. She would not have even been able to write a letter to her favorite author. It scares me thinking about what would happen if I lost my ability to talk or write. I would not feel safe not being able to say or write what I am thinking about.

Writing has always been a big passion of mine. I love writing about how I can make the world better, my thoughts about the world and of course, all the little silly love stories that make all the men groan. I feel like writing has helped me through a lot of things in my life. Writing has helped me find an escape and put my feelings into something that could help another person. This book has helped me get into reading.

This book gave me my voice. It helped me understand the power of my words. It helped me get my thoughts into words. It helped me use my voice to help other people. You are the reason why I am no longer depressed. This book has helped me put my voice into words that may help someone else someday. This book helped me know I want to help others. Because of this book, I want to write to help others get through all the tough situations that other people may be going through.

Sincerely,
Cortlynn Shull

Lynn Smith

Northwestern High School, Kokomo

Letter to Kevin Henkes

Author of *Wemberly Worried*

Dear Mr. Kevin Henkes,

I bolted to my room and slammed my door. My mom and I had just been in an enormous fight with each other. This argument was the worst fight we had ever been in. My blankets covered me as I laid on my bed sobbing. Tears ran down my face like rain dripping down from a window. My bed had wet spots on the sheets from my tears. When I laid down on my tear-filled bed, I knew exactly what I needed to do to take my mind off of the argument. A tiny fact about me is that when I am extremely upset, I clean like crazy. As I dusted my shelves and rearranged my knickknacks, I pulled out a children's book. At the time I did not know it would mean so much to me later on in life.

I pulled out the book my mom used to read to me every night as a child. The book was yours, *Wemberly Worried*. The book's pages were wrinkled from me always turning and flipping through them. I started to read your book, and immediately saw flashbacks of my mom cuddling me in her bed and reading your book to me. I could feel her brown and fuzzy bedspread and her sheets that always shocked me from the static. Most of all, I remembered her comforting arms wrapped around me. As I was reading, I realized I actually related to the main character, Wemberly. I connected with multiple pages in your book. Many problems that Wemberly had thought of, I had also thought of too. I also thought of my mother when I read about Wemberly's mom.

One of the pages in your book that I connected with stated, "And always, she worried about her doll, Petal." I felt a strong connection to this because I had a bear that I brought everywhere. I cannot think of a time that I did not have that bear with me. He was blue with dark brown eyes. His body was made of wool, and had a silk heart patched in the center. He was different than other stuffed bears. That is what made him very special to me. His name was Blue Bear...very original, I know. Every time I lost Blue Bear, I would worry so much

about where he was. But every time I lost him, my mom found him, just like Wemberly's mom found Petal each time.

I also related to the page that stated, "On her birthday, Wemberly worried that no one would come to her party." It was my fourteenth birthday and I wanted to have a party. Mom and I planned every single detail for it. Finally, the night had come, and I was so nervous that no one would show up to my party. All I could think about is how embarrassed I would be if no one showed up. Wemberly's mother replied to Wemberly, "See, there's nothing to worry about." Yet again, my mom promised me that everyone would come. Sure enough, most of the people I invited came.

The line from your book, "Wemberly had a new worry: school," was the line I connected with the very most. My freshman year started in one month when I found your book, and I was so nervous for school. Now I am two months in and I surprisingly love it, like Wemberly did. My mom and Wemberly's mom both told us we did not need to worry. Wemberly and I both thought about issues that did not need to be worried about. I looked at the last page, and it is a drawing of Wemberly, Petal, her mom, and her dad dancing in a circle. The drawing reminded me of my special family.

I closed your book, put it under my arm, and smiled. I jolted up and sprinted to my mom's room. I shouted, "Mom I am so sorry! I love you!" My mom had a confused look on her face. "Lynn, what happened? Why are you acting so thrilled to see me?" My mom asked. I understand why she asked that because we were just in a fight and so she was probably irritated with me. I told her how I was cleaning my room, since I was upset, and found your book. She pulled your story out from under my arm. "What is so special about a rabbit who worries?" she questioned. I told her about how I was like Wemberly and my mom was like Wemberly's mom, who was always there to

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reassure me. We both apologized to each other and snuggled up to read your amazing story together again.

Somehow your children's short story has brought my mom and me closer than we have ever been. You have created such a powerful message for me in just a short children's book. Right after our argument, I never thought that we could be as close as we are now. You, Kevin Henkes, have helped me realize how lucky I am to have a great mother like Wemberly's. All I can say is, thank you for developing such a meaningful and special book to me. Thank you, Mr. Henkes.

Sincerely,
Lynn Smith

Reagan Swinford

New Tech Academy @ Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to John Green

Author of *The Fault in Our Stars*

“Sometimes, you read a book and it fills you with this weird evangelical zeal, and you become convinced that the shattered world will never be put back together unless and until all living humans read the book.”

John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars*

Dear John Green,

Having an “evangelical zeal” does not describe how I felt when I first read *The Fault in Our Stars*. In fact, I had to put the book down the first time I launched into reading it. I disliked the book deeply and I could not figure out why. I realized I had a connection with the book, and I was not used to the relationship. Other books had never influenced me as much as *The Fault in Our Stars* had. After realizing this, I picked the book back up and finished it all in three days. *The Fault in Our Stars* made an impact on me because, it was the only book, at the time, I was finally able to connect to and have an “evangelical zeal,” that is described when one reads a phenomenal story, according to Hazel Grace.

I formed a connection to the character, Hazel Grace, for many reasons. The first being, we both are suffering from the emperor of all maladies, cancer. While cancer is a terrifying word, strength is attained with having cancer. The second reason is I can relate to wanting to travel halfway across the world. Traveling to a foreign land would be the last chance to do something with my life while I am healthy. I too wasted my wish when I was young on Disney World. It was an amazing trip. I wish I had not used my one wish now that I am older, because I could use the wish to travel to Europe, a place I have always wanted to visit, much like how Gus and Hazel wanted to visit Amsterdam.

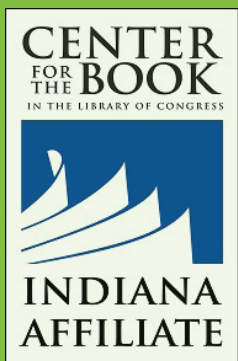
The Fault in Our Stars opened my eyes to a different kind of story. It was a story of strength and perseverance, even when you feel like you want to give up. I know giving up is never the answer, because

even if I felt like I did not have enough energy to go on, the options of advancing are highly limited. I relate to when Hazel Grace was bitter and dead inside at the beginning of the story. That is how I felt during my many, many treatments. You sit in a bed and wait for what is going to happen with your life. Nevertheless, towards the end she finds strength with Gus. That is how I am finding strength, through others.

I had the privilege to read *This Star Won't Go Out* written by Esther Earl, Lori Earl, and Wayne Earl. Now I know you did not write the book, but you did write one of the two introductions. I have to say, you wrote genuine points. One point being, "...a short life can also be a good and rich life, that it is possible to live with depression without being consumed by it, and that meaning in life is found together, in family and friendship that transcends and survives all manner of suffering." Yes, a short life can be "good and rich" if one focuses on living their life. Depression is a side effect of cancer that cannot be prevented. I chose to focus on the positives in life. If it were not for my family and friends' support, I would not know who I would be.

Mr. Green, you surprised me immensely. For a person who had not experienced cancer itself, you were descriptive and accurate with the details of the character's treatments. Not many authors can provide that much vivid detail into what cancer actually does to the mind and body. Research can only give you facts, but you turned them into real stories. Real stories that helped me form a connection to your written words. This shows you that you genuinely can appeal to all audiences through writing.

Sincerely,
Reagan Swinford



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