

2021 Letters About Literature Anthology

the James & Madeleine *McMullan* FAMILY FOUNDATION

LettersAboutLiterature

**Award Winning Letters
to Authors**



**Written by
Indiana Students**

2021

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

CENTER FOR THE BOOK

INDIANA AFFILIATE

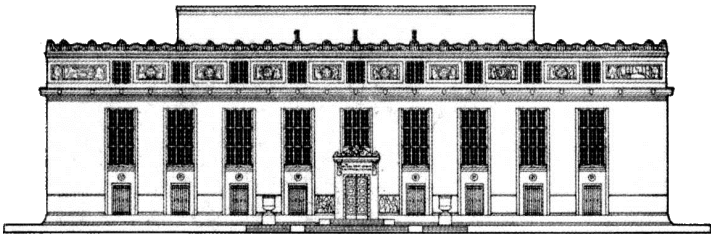
Letters About Literature

2021 Winning Letters by Indiana Students

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the James & Madeleine *McMullan* FAMILY FOUNDATION
LettersAboutLiterature



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Indiana Letters About Literature

The Indiana Letters About Literature program is a reading/writing contest for Indiana students in grades 4 through 12 sponsored by the Indiana Center for the Book in the Indiana State Library and The James & Madeleine McMullan Family Foundation. The contest asks students to reflect upon a work that changed the way they see themselves or the way they see the world. Students are encouraged to include details about the book as well as details from their own lives to illustrate the change-inducing power of literature.

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 local literary heritage and call attention to the importance of books, reading, literacy, and libraries. The State Centers gather annually at the Library of Congress, or virtually, for an Idea Exchange Day.



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- Congratulations from the Indiana Center for the Book -

What a year it's been.

This contest ran during the 2020-2021 school year. It was a school year unlike any other in recent American history. Our country was in the grip of a global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 coronavirus and “normal” was anything but. Classes were held virtually or under strict hybrid schedules that allowed for cleaning and social distancing. Plexiglass dividers literally divided teachers from their students, and everyone was encouraged to wear a mask. Students were kept at home if they had an exposure to the virus. People all over our state suffered the loss of friends and loved ones.

Through it all, we had books.

We had books and stories, memoirs, and poems. We learned by looking back to the 1918 flu pandemic and we coped by reading science-fiction stories about a future full of technology and wonders so fantastical that they made us forget the awful changes taking place all around us.

We also had our pens, pencils, computers, and tablets. Students wrote. Many of them wrote letters for this contest. They wrote about big, important issues like global warming and immigration. They wrote about refugees and gender issues. They wrote about being the new kid in school, and they wrote tenderly about the death of a grandparent. Many students wrote about race in America and the Black Lives Matter movement that became even more prevalent after the killing of George Floyd in May of 2020. And yes, many students wrote about living through a pandemic.

But this contest is all about books . . . isn't it?

Yes. But that's the magic of books. They can give us a springboard to talk about bigger issues. They can comfort us when we're sad. They can take us away from the dramas around us and drop us into magical worlds full of quests and adventures. They can show us people like us, triumphing over challenges that we face, and they can give us a window into the lives of other people, people whose lives we can barely imagine.

Congratulations to all the students featured in this book. These students know about the magic of reading, and they are excited to share their thoughts about books with you, the reader, someone they've likely never met. Read these letters carefully. They were written by the youth of Indiana during a global pandemic. And they have things to say.

– *Suzanne Walker, Indiana Center for the Book*

- Comments from Helen Frost, Indiana Author -
April 25, 2021 – Letters About Literature Online Ceremony

I love this event, a gathering to celebrate reading and writing and to enjoy the community that we create together through our shared love of books. Yes, it is different this year, but I can imagine that you will someday tell your grandchildren about this special time—how we adapted and what you learned. I hope you are keeping journals!

I'd like to tell you a little of my own life story as a reader.

Even before I could actually read, I loved stories. My siblings and I would gather around my father as he told stories he remembered from his childhood, or invented characters and imagined their adventures. These first stories, shared with my family, were the beginning of a community of readers that has always been important to me.

A little later, I remember learning to read in first grade; the teacher called each reading group to the front of the class, where we sat in a circle reading from books featuring three children named Dick, Jane, and Sally. They lived in a boring neighborhood where everyone looked pretty much the same and spoke the same language.

As we were reading, if we came to a word we didn't know, we could ask the teacher what the word was. One day, I wanted to get up and ask the teacher something, so I pretended I didn't know the word "duck." The teacher scowled at me. "Helen," she said, "you should know that word. It's almost the same as this boy's name: "Dick." Embarrassed, I returned to my chair. Now, looking back, I wonder: why couldn't we have learned more exciting words: "roller coaster" or "stegosaurus," or serious words about things we were all trying to understand — "polio" and "enemy" are words I remember thinking about when I was little. Maybe today young children would like to learn to read words like Coronavirus or Pandemic. I heard about one four-year-old who thought everyone was staying indoors because they were afraid of the Corona Pirates.

Soon after first grade, I learned to read chapter books. I learned to find good books by listening to my friends and sisters talk about books they liked, by reading more books by the authors of books I loved, and by doing what I still do today: "When in doubt, ask a librarian."

Do you see?

By the time I was your age, I had become part of this wonderful community of readers, just as you are now. From first grade through high school, and

then college, and on through my life, books have been my friends. And other readers have been my companions.

Now, as an author, when I receive letters from readers, or talk with people who have read my books, I am delighted to see our community expanding and becoming more inclusive.

It took a long time for children's books to reflect the beautiful variety of the world. For many years, judging only from the books available to American children and teenagers, one might have thought that everyone was white, and everyone's grandparents spoke English, and nobody used wheelchairs or read braille or had two moms, or any number of other things that we now celebrate as diversity. Authors and publishers and teachers and librarians are still working on this, and it is getting better.

I am grateful to be part of today's community of readers and writers at a time when books are beginning to represent the real lives of all children. If you are looking for a book about someone like yourself, or someone unlike you who can take you somewhere new, and if you haven't found that book—I offer the same advice I mentioned earlier: Ask a librarian!

And if you still can't find the book you need, start thinking about how you might write it yourself; then share it with your friends and family, because they might need it too!

Your letters show that you have the skills you need to fully participate in this community: you can read, you can think, you can write, you can feel and understand emotions. And just as important, you are brave enough to share important parts of yourself in your honest, thoughtful letters about literature.

Congratulations to all the letter-writers who are with us today. To anyone who has ever read a book and thought about what it means to you, thank you for being an important part of this community.

And thank you to everyone at the Indiana State Library, especially the Indiana Center for the Book, for establishing and maintaining the Indiana Young Readers Center and for organizing this event and publishing the anthology.

Thank you, teachers and parents and librarians for all you do to encourage reading and writing.

– Helen Frost, Indiana Author

Let's Talk About...

READING AND WRITING

Appreciating Teachers

Discovering Reading

**The Joy of Reading
and Writing**

Reading for Understanding

Dear Mr. Buyea,

You never really notice how much teachers teach you about the world and how you see it. Sure, you might take away knowing how to do long division or how to find the theme in a book from their class, but there is much more to teachers than just that. Some may influence you to care more about others and the world around you. Some may subconsciously challenge you to try new things or be daring and find the adventures of the world. Some may teach you that not everyone's perfect, and it is ok to make mistakes, which leads to a growth mindset. Some may even teach you to like learning and coming to school every day.

Mr. Terupt was exactly the teacher every kid in the book needed. For Alexia, he led her to be friendlier and to make friends out of the people she used to make fun of. Peter liked that Mr. Terupt was funny, and Peter was starting to think school could be fun. Mr. Terupt gave Jessica less anxiety, because he was new too, and they liked the same books. Because of Mr. Terupt, Danielle and Anna became friends, despite their parents not being the best together. Anna was shy and quiet, but Mr. Terupt noticed her and brought her out of her shell. Jeffrey used to hate school, but Mr. Terupt makes it a fun place, so now he's thinking it can actually be kinda great!

Because of this book, I started thinking about some of my current and past teachers, and how influential they are. I noticed my kindergarten teacher really focused on learning and growing from your mistakes, which is a valuable life lesson I am happy I have. My first-grade teacher taught me to care about others and our planet, and to always choose kindness. My fourth-grade teacher taught me to be myself, and to not care what others think about me and to do what makes me happy.

It also taught me to be grateful for the opportunity to come to school every day, whether online or in-person. Especially during this pandemic, teachers are working harder than ever, and I don't think most kids realize that. This book, whether you meant to do this or not, showed me to not take it for granted. It opened my eyes about teachers and what a great job they do. For that, I am so blessed.

Sincerely,
Grace Gerstner

Dear Michael Grant,

I have always thought that if a book makes you want to throw it across the room, then the book must be a pretty decent book. That's how I constantly felt while reading the **Gone** series. There were characters that I loved, like Caine and Diana, and characters that I hated, like Drake and Gaia. I feel that if a book series can make you feel so much emotion, then it must be good.

I had started reading the series in fifth grade, but I gave up after the first book because they were too long and complicated for me to read and understand at the time. Now, in seventh grade, I read all the books in about a week and a half per book. Whenever I was upset, anxious, bored, or just wanted to read, I would pull out one of the books and read for hours on end in my room. I've always struggled with finishing book series. Often, I get a few books in and give up, because some books are just so slow at the beginning that it feels physically impossible to finish. The **Gone** series was completely the opposite. At the end of the last book, **Light**, when there was that goodbye letter to all the fans of the series, I cried because I was so sad that the series was ending (and the fact that Caine had died).

These books were so amazing because they really make me think. It makes me think how I would react if everyone fifteen and up disappeared in my town, or a portion of my town. To be honest, I probably would freak out, and then get all the food I could get my hands on and store it. I also love the representation of different minorities in these books. Like Edilio and Roger and Dekka being part of the LGBTQ+ community, different races and ethnicities, Mary having multiple eating disorders, and other mental illnesses, such as depression. I have friends with eating disorders, and I feel like Mary's character gave me a glimpse into how they think and why they don't eat. But of course, eating disorders are different for everyone who has them.

Literature connects people. My mom has read this series, and so has my uncle. It's really fun having a common interest in the same type of books, and it gives all of us something to talk about in what otherwise would have been an awkward silence at the dinner table. And literature

doesn't just connect people that are face-to-face. On the internet, you can find fan pages dedicated to talking and theorizing about the **Gone** series.

I tend to have a hard time finding books that pull me in and keep me interested throughout my entire time reading them. What I'm trying to say is that these books are absolutely amazing. I've always loved reading, but reading this series brought that passion to a whole new level. During the long days I've been stuck at home due to the pandemic, I was almost never bored. I would be playing video games, and when I got bored of that, I would go read for a few hours.

These aren't the books that taught me to love reading. They didn't inspire me to be a "better person." They did inspire me to be a better writer, though. In a way, these books changed my perspective on the world. They more or less taught me that people can lie. Of course, I knew this. I guess I just never realized how easily lying and cheating came to some people. I know the lesson "you can't trust every person that you meet" doesn't sound the most inspirational or sound like a happy ending, but it's true.

Sincerely,
Marinn Fox,

Dear Mac Barnett,

Hi! My name is Noah and I love to read. I am writing to you because my class has been assigned to write to any author of our choosing, so I chose you. My favorite book you've written is *Mac B., Kid Spy* because it has changed me a lot as a person. Before I read the *Mac B.* books, I was not really interested in reading, but when I read them, they changed my perspective on reading as a whole. After that I felt more open to different types of reading. They also taught that small people can do big things. It also told me that just because someone is not very tall or not as strong as some people, don't judge them because of their appearance. It's like playing a game of basketball against someone in a wheelchair. You think you are going to win because your opponent is in a wheelchair. Instead, they demolish you and tell you, "Don't judge people based on their appearance."

When I read your books, I feel like I'm in the same world because I can relate with the characters. Mac is good at math and not very good at sports just like me. When I was younger, I never really participated in physical activities because I was afraid that I could get injured. After I read the book, I felt better about physical activities because of all the daring actions he pulls off in the book. Now I am pretty good at some sports thanks to your writing. Also, Mac had to fight a lot of villains in the books, but he kept getting back up when he was down. That's how I feel when I'm in a race. I normally never win one, but even when I'm losing, I'm able to get back up and try my best. Sometimes when I'm discouraged, I tell myself that giving up is not an option. I have to keep moving forward. Your writing made me see the world in a way where someone's appearance doesn't matter. It's what's inside of them that really matters.

To sum it all up, I really enjoy your books. They have changed me a lot as a person.

Yours sincerely,
Noah Craig

Dear Lynn Plourde,

Who wouldn't want to read a good old dog book? A book with a sweet dog and good people. When I opened your book, I wasn't expecting it to have so many connections with my life. Your book, *Maxi's Secrets*, made me make connections, learn about disabilities, and like reading.

There were so many connections I made while I was reading your book. I was new to middle school and was nervous just like Timminy. Timminy is short just like me. I have a friend at school with disabilities. I had a dog that I loved and was a great part of my life. These parts of the book helped me with my life because they helped me understand my life in a different way. It helped me understand my friend Brady.

I learned so many things about my friend Brady. I would help him in lunch and in some of my classes. Your book helped me understand him better. I would always want to do everything for him. Now I know that he probably wants to do some things on his own. Your book also helped me want to put more time into helping him, but in a way that lets him be independent.

Your book made me like reading. I was not expecting that. Every time the teacher told us to stop reading, I tried to finish the chapter. In the past, my teachers have told me what I had to read. That was probably one of the reasons I didn't like reading. I got to choose your book myself. I chose your book because it was about middle school and dogs which sounded interesting. This was the first time I read a book that was relatable to my life. Thank you for changing my idea of reading. Now I know reading is sometimes better than even watching television.

Reading your book gave me something to look forward to every day at school and at home. When I opened your book, I wasn't expecting it to have so many connections with my own life. As I've gotten older, my teachers sometimes let me pick out the books I want to read. I try to find a book that sounds like *Maxi's Secrets*. Your book has helped me become a better person. Your book, *Maxi's Secrets*, made me make connections, learn more about kids with disabilities and enjoy reading. Thank you for creating and writing this amazing book.

Sincerely,
Charlie Nicoson

Dear Alan Gratz,

Thank you for writing your book, **Code of Honor**. You made me feel for the characters when not many other books do. It made me realize how hard it is to be looked at differently because of the color of your skin, to be looked at like an alien who doesn't belong on earth, or to be looked at like a traitor. You showed me no matter how much you dislike your siblings, you will always have their back. It also taught me to never second guess yourself. This book really made me think about how tough the world is and if you don't fight back, you will never move on.

Code of Honor showed me a lot about racism and how it proves that at the end of the day, all you have is family, and no matter what anybody thinks about them, you have to trust family. I learned this when Kamran's best friend, the football players, and his girlfriend all turned on him. Even people he didn't know hated him because of what happened. I really enjoyed reading this book because it looks at a worldwide problem and expresses what it would be like to be a victim.

One of the most inspirational parts was at the end when Mickey gave Kamran the speech about being a better man than people see you as. I would have to say that the code of honor was my favorite part of the book, and it was a motivational thing throughout the book. This meant no matter how far apart Kamran and Darius were, they were kept together by the code. Those key factors really brought the book to life for me, which kept me engaged because I felt like I had a personal connection with Darius, Kamran, and the code of honor. That alone kept me reading and believing the rest of the story. This book helped me understand racism. I love your books because each one is a new adventure and connection to my life.

Before I began reading this book, I didn't like reading very much. I felt like I would never find a book series that I actually wanted to read. I would get stuck reading stuff that meant nothing to me. I read the first few pages and thought, "maybe this won't be so bad." A couple days later, I was reading like a pro, and I was proud and determined to finish. Now here I am writing about how this book changed my life. I just want to truly thank you for writing this book.

Sincerely,
Max Thompson

Let's Talk About...

FAMILY

Siblings

Parents

Foster Care

Second Place Winner – Level Three

Olivia Tambrini
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer
Letter to Lane Smith / Author of ***John, Paul, George & Ben***

Dear Lane Smith,

What is a book that I have strong feelings about? I sat in Statistics class and pondered the question, ignoring my teacher's description of simple random sampling. I dug through my bookshelf once I got home, throwing trashy young adult books behind me, realizing I really have no emotional connection to these books and their many, many sequels. I moped at dinner and asked my mother the question I had been pondering in Statistics class. "Can you do children's books?" she responded. A lightbulb went off in my head. After dinner, I ran downstairs to the basement. In a dusty box labeled "Books," there it was. It was the book, *your book: John, Paul, George & Ben*.

Okay, please stop laughing; I'm already embarrassed. Do I feel strongly about a comedic retelling of the early lives of the Founding Fathers? Am I probably becoming a history major solely because of this children's book and its effect on me? Did this book make comedy my comfort and default reaction to most social interactions? Did I laugh-cry when I read this book again? Was I, a seventeen-year-old girl with a 3.9 GPA and several high honors credits, struggling to contain myself after reading a joke about extra-large underwear? Is "ye old" a funny phrase? The answer to all these questions is, indeed, yes. I opened the book and sat on the cold, concrete floor of my basement storage room. The words jumped off the page: "Once, there were four lads..."

I began to take in each page as if it was the first time I read it, laughing at the ridiculous quips and sarcastic phrases, and beaming with nostalgia and joy. I began to remember Dad reading to me before bed, voicing each line with drama and great comedic timing that made me giggle uncontrollably. I began to remember holding back laughter in my history classes as I pictured Ben Franklin signing the Declaration and reciting, "Fish and visitors stink after three days." I began to tear up as I remembered finding comfort in this book after a long, hard day when I needed a good laugh. I closed the book and held it tight: this is my book.

It is no lie that ***John, Paul, George & Ben*** piqued my interest in not only American history but also history in general. My father studied history in

college and he, being one of my best friends and role models, greatly influenced my love for learning about the triumphs and failures of humanity. He always read me books like yours before bed. After I begged him to read these books over again and again, he began to take me to museums and monuments. Even at the age of four, history has fascinated me; I have never grown tired of reading and studying historical figures and events. Because of my love for the humanities and learning about the world around me, I have decided to study history in college and to pursue a career in the history field. Without your book, I would not find as much joy in learning about the men and women who shaped and influenced our past. Without your book, I would not know that learning does not have to be bland and robotic; learning can be much more than just sitting in a lecture hall and talking about old, white men with law degrees. History can be funny—and it definitely is.

Speaking of comedy, I would like to thank you, sir, and so many others for encouraging my family's shenanigans. My family's acts of love revolve around poking fun at one another, after all, our love language is sarcasm and overall tomfoolery. Books like yours encourage my family's behavior and shape the people we are today. Now, comedy is my comfort. I am sure that if I read this book out loud to my family this evening, we could not get through a page without ugly-laughing. Your book connects my family in some odd way, creating a bond that has lasted for almost eighteen years.

Who knew that a thirty-page children's picture book would give me so much? This book has taught me that learning does not have to be a drag; this book has shown me that history is a fascinating subject; this book has allowed my family to bond through laughter and joy; this book has built me up to become the witty, sarcastic young woman I am today; this book has given me memories and joy for years to come, and I thank you for this. I can't wait to share it with my own children one day.

Sincerely,
Olivia Tambrini

Dear Charles London,

I read ***Dog Tags: Semper Fido***. It changed my life by showing me to value friendship, value teamwork, and to value family.

The book taught me to value friendship because the soldiers only had each other. I like how you showed us that friends sometimes pass away, and you can never get them back. Also, how it takes a long time to get friends and to value their opinions like how Gus learned to value Loki's orders. Also, his opinions could help keep them alive. I'm trying to listen to my friend's opinions more often.

The book taught me to value teamwork because if the soldiers did not work together then they would all die. I like how you showed in the book that they also need to respect each other and trust each other to fight as a team. I like how Gus and Loki learned to value each other to stay alive during the war. My family and I used teamwork to help fix our new house. Like yesterday, my sister and I helped my dad get a reclining couch back together. My sister held back one side of the couch as I held the flashlight and my dad pushed the couch's other side down onto the other side of the couch.

The book taught me to value family because in the book the soldiers were family and they all wanted to protect their family. I like how you showed us that Gus's father abandoned him to keep him safe. I also like how you showed us that Gus and Loki are family that help each other to stay alive. My mom helps me with my homework and keeps me calm. My dad is always trying to help me find ways to stay calm. My sister tries to help me build Lego sets and loves to play with me. My papa helped fix up our new house and always tries to cheer up my sister and me. That's what my family is like. We always try to help each other in any way we can. Is this how your family is?

Thank you for teaching me all these lessons. As you can see, they taught me a lot more about myself and others around me. I now know to value friendship, to value teamwork, and to value family.

Your biggest fan,
Bryson Ball

Dear Chris Colfer,

People often think that if a child doesn't do well in school, they won't do well in anything. If one's sibling does well in a certain subject, then this places unfair expectations on the other sibling who doesn't do well in studies. I had never realized this before, as I had fallen towards the same stereotypes as many others. However, the book *The Author's Odyssey* pointed out to me that the main goal of learning isn't about how well you learn and how many good grades you get, but it is about how much improvement is shown in your work and how much hard work and dedication you put into becoming the best student you can be.

During the time I was reading the book about you, I was hooked up with the series *The Land of Stories*. Conner's books reflected on how he felt, whether he knew it or not, and modeled many different people he had met over his life. However, there was one story which stood out to me, and that was the story about Bolt and his superhero siblings. Bolt was often disregarded, and everyone thought of him as the 'other' sibling. This directly connected to how Alex and many others outshone Conner and how they pushed Conner down. Conner eventually broke free of his figurative shackles and became the person he was, not the person he was supposed to be.

This connected directly to my life as I have been in both Alex and Conner's shoes. Whenever I would get a medal or certificate, it would put unfair added pressure onto my brother, who is in second grade, to perform the way I did. The thing was that no one would actually put pressure on my brother except for me. However, once I read this book, I realized that my brother isn't ever going to be like me but is going to be what he wants to be. From that day onwards, I have been more patient and open with my brother, and this in turn has bolstered my relationship with him.

Finally, the book showed me that we should be empathic towards all children, as everyone learns differently and at a different pace. The measurement of a child's success should not be measured through their grades, but by their improvement in every phase of learning and the hard work they put into becoming what they want to be.

Thank you,
Gourav Pany

Dear Raina Telgemeier,

A frustrated and teary-eyed nine-year-old struggles to finish her book. Her older sister sits next to her, urging her on. Fresh from the shower and dressed in Christmas pajamas the two are plopped in their reading nook under their castle bed. The young reader's frustration with the book gets projected onto her helpful sister, creating tension, and starting a fight. They yell until the oldest gives up and slips into bed. The young reader is left with the conclusion that she hates reading. That year for Christmas the girl received your book **Sisters**. The book changed her thoughts about reading and her sister for the rest of her life.

I am the girl. It was in fourth grade when I lost interest in books, and I had a terrible relationship with my sister. Reading has never been my strength, but I used to like reading to my parents. In second grade we used curved pieces of PVC pipes to read to ourselves and I was fond of that. Teachers tried expanding my reading, but I never found books that kept my interest. I read enough for AR points but rarely enjoyed it. Then I read **Sisters** and things changed. I read **Sisters** because it's simple and intriguing. I once read three of your books in one night. Your books were below my reading level at the time, but I didn't care. **Sisters** was my favorite and the most impactful to my life.

My sister and I are opposites, and our personalities clash sometimes, but it used to be much worse. We shared a room until recently and that was the root of many of our fights. **Sisters** made me realize I wasn't considerate of her feelings. I'm the little sister so this book being in the big sister's point of view made me think before speaking to my sister. At one point, we used to argue so often my parents were hesitant to even let us be at home alone. We rode the bus to a sitter after school. I was the youngest but there were two boys there also. Since everyone was older than me, I would get blamed for everything. My sister didn't realize this would upset me. I felt alone and like she wouldn't stick up for me. I saw her like a stranger who lived in my room. It made our arguing worse. Our relationship reminds me a lot of the part in **Sisters** where Raina and Amara are stuck in a broken-down car in the desert. There is already tension and frustration, but one minor action taken the wrong way causes an argument. This is how many of our fights began.

We are the only two kids in our family, so I never had anyone to play with or talk to. My sister was the only kid around most of the time because we live out in the country. I thought my sister hated me and didn't want to be around me. It would upset me so much that I wouldn't talk to her except to fight. I relate to the part in **Sisters** when Amara talks about feeling alone and acts like she doesn't care but really it hurts her feelings. I didn't realize until later that my sister didn't play with me because she wasn't the type. She would rather be inside reading or alone in our room, but I would be outside climbing trees and finding toads. She just didn't find joy in the things I found joy in. I didn't understand it at seven. Then once I realized I had the outside to myself, it was an escape. I was outside as much as possible to avoid fighting. It was an advantage most days but some days it was lonely. My sister and I were civil to each other sometimes, but we never connected.

Amara and Raina reminded me of my sister and made me want to read the book. Just like the book, my sister and I figured out a way to communicate and compromise when issues arise. Now I would call my sister one of my best friends and I wouldn't change how we got here.

Now, that frustrated tearful girl is a blooming reader and I've learned what keeps me interested. **Sisters** is the reason I continued to search for books that excite me. You helped me relate to my sister and to use our differences to benefit our relationship rather than harm. We have separate rooms now but are rarely in them alone. We now take random drives into town just to talk. On the way home after school, we talk about what happened that day. Thank you for writing the book that saved my relationship with my sister.

Sincerely,
Ella Barnett

Dear Ashley Rhodes-Courter,

Your book **Three Little Words** has allowed me to look through the eyes of you as a foster child. This book has changed my perspective of the foster care system. I now want to prevent children from ever going through what you had to go through. I want to make a difference and protect other kids in the foster care system, all because of you sharing your story. You are so brave to share what you have been through.

I have trouble staying hooked on a book, but I truly could not keep my eyes off yours. I would recommend your book to anyone. **Three Little Words** was so eye opening. I am so thankful that I came across your book because I very much enjoyed reading it. I imagine it was hard sharing your story, but I want to thank you for doing so because you changed my life along with lots of others. I also want to thank you for bringing light to how flawed our foster care system is.

Your book brought so many emotions to me. I hope other readers will be moved to adopt or help make positive changes in the system. This book is a definite tear-jerker. Whenever you mentioned your story at the Moss's house my heart dropped, reading what you went through. **Three Little Words** is the most real, in-depth book on foster care and the hard life of a child I have ever read. This is a must read for anyone interested in the experience of abused children or foster children or anyone who might be looking for their avenue of opportunity to make a difference in the life of a child. I hope that those who read this book are not only touched with emotion and sympathy but are also compelled to get out and do something.

Three Little Words is my absolute favorite book. It's a good book because it talks about what people would do and how far they will go for their family. I believe that family is a big part of life, so I really connected with the book. When you were surrounded by the love that had so long been missing from your life, hope and joy filled my heart. I wish nothing but the best for you. Your story has altered me for the better!

In appreciation,
Kinzey Schnaus

Let's Talk About...

FRIENDSHIPS

First Impressions

Relationships

Trying to Fit In

Juliet Mastain
Forest Dale Elementary, Fishers
Letter to Dusti Bowling /
Author of *Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus*

Dear Dusti Bowling,

I am writing to you to tell you about how your book *Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus* changed my life for the better.

In Chapter One, I was surprised that Aven had to move away from her school and friends. I know that had to hurt her and make her very sad. I also know it is hard to make friends when you move to a new place when you were happy before. When you move, everything is brand new, and it is not very comfortable. I feel uncomfortable when I go to see new people for the first time and tell them about who I am and everything about myself. I worry about whether they will like me and if I will be accepted by really nice friends. I know you cannot always have everything go your way and sometimes it may go bad, but with time and an open heart and kindness, you can change a cold heart into a warm heart.

Aven was born without arms. When I read this book and added up all the things that Aven would find it hard to live with, it made me feel bad for her. I would like to get to know her and know how she does stuff. If I were at her new school, I would be her friend because I like people who are nice and do stuff differently. Thank you for writing this book because it gave me a life lesson. Don't judge people by their looks. If someone's skin is grey, give them light.

My favorite chapter is when she finds the old shack. And finds that the red-haired girl in the picture is her mom and grandma. That surprised me more than Chapter One. I love this book so much because it's about loving who you are and not caring what anyone says about you.

I love that she meets people that turn out to be her best friends because the people she's friends with are people with different issues as well. Some think they do not look pretty or may be overweight and they have some twitch issues. She is friendly with so many people, even the one ice cream worker who keeps getting her order wrong because he has memory loss. I love this book so much.

Sincerely,
Juliet Mastain

Dear Gita Varadarajan and Sarah Weeks,

While I was reading your book **Save Me a Seat**, one of the things that caught my attention was the fact that Joe and Ravi were completely different and didn't like each other at first but were really good friends by the end of the book. For example, Joe's first impression of Ravi showed that he thought Ravi was weird, short, and funny-looking. On the other hand, Ravi thought Joe was tall, dumb, and had extraordinarily large feet. This made me realize that when people judge by first impressions, they usually judge a person by the cover, not bothering to look past the outside. Therefore, they never get to the character traits of the person. After thinking about that, I then wondered, how might others think of me when they first meet me? How would others perceive me? And how would I perceive them, meeting them for the first time? Being an introvert, I found those questions rather complicated to answer.

As an introvert, I have a natural tendency to be quieter and observant of my surroundings, and less likely to talk unless I feel it's necessary. When first meeting someone this can come across in a number of different ways. People could likely perceive me as timid and nervous as a result of the fact that I am quiet. Being quieter than others, I could also be perceived as having an attitude that I am better than everyone else. And lastly, I realized I could possibly be interpreted as being disrespectful and disengaged.

Your book also challenged me to think about how I perceive others, and how I "should" perceive others. When I take first impressions of others, I usually pay attention to things such as, what do they look like? This is a key thought that most, if not all people are likely to consider when taking a first impression. Well, I don't know about you, but this thought is almost natural when I am meeting someone for the first time and your book helped me realize that it doesn't matter how people look, and that you shouldn't judge them by it. Another question I ask myself when meeting someone is, how engaged are they in conversations? This might not be one of the first questions that pops up in your mind, but I consider it when taking first impressions. This is because I try to comprehend others' attitudes. Lastly, I question how they treat others. I ask this because usually how they treat others is a result of how they view themselves.

Overall, I am glad that you wrote this book because without it, I would not have thought about what kind of effects first impressions can have about the way you view others, and the way others view you. Your book influenced me to stop and think carefully about the way I should express myself in a kind manner, versus how I appear to be expressing myself. I would also never truly realize how those first impressions can have an impact on relationships. Ever since I finished reading your book, I started to be more aware of these things on a daily basis. I am also persuaded not to judge a book by its cover, but instead, read the inside to make sense of the outside.

Sincerely,
Chloe Thear

Dear Rodman Philbrick,

Your book, *Freak the Mighty*, gave me a new perspective on people. I used to think that people who are very different cannot have close relationships with each other. I thought if they're different then they will have too many arguments. But after reading your book, I realized I was totally wrong.

When I first opened the book, *Freak the Mighty*, I thought it was just another book that would take me a few days to read and wouldn't be interesting, but when I started it, I couldn't put it down. I realized that people that are different can have close relationships and get things done. For example, if Kevin didn't have Max, he couldn't go on those adventures, but Max couldn't go himself because he wouldn't know where to go without Kevin. Sometimes I feel like Kevin. People make fun of me about a lot of things. But sometimes I feel like Max. I feel that I am not good at learning, but I am big.

One part of the book that I connected with was the part when Max and Kevin go on early morning adventures. Sometimes I feel like I want to wake up and go on a walk, or on an adventure, as they would call it. In truth I did once go on an adventure. It was on Passover, an important Jewish holiday, and I woke up early. My cousins were at our house, and we wanted to go on a trip, so we went biking. We got to the creek and went hiking.

I also connected with Kevin because people make fun of me for being bad at sports. That makes me annoyed, but I don't react. That is similar to how they handle getting bullied.

I am friends with people that are different from me. I talk to one of my friends on Zoom because they are much more careful about COVID-19. Another friend plays video games, but I am not allowed to. Even though my friends are not as different as Max and Kevin they still are a little different. Overall, it was a very good book. Not only because it had an interesting storyline but because I connected to a lot of things during the book. Thank you for writing this book.

Sincerely,
Zalman Schusterman

Dear John Green,

What makes a great friend? Is it the way he encourages or listens? Is it how he treats people? Is friendship really that important? Why do we need friends? All of these are questions I wish I knew the answers to on my own, but it wasn't until I read *Looking for Alaska* that I finally found out what a real friend is and how to be a great one.

Over the summer, I was very lonely. I didn't talk to many people, and I wondered why my friends from school never texted or called. Since I didn't have many relationships with people, I turned to books. Your book was one that really showed me that my loneliness was partly my fault. I wasn't being a great friend, and I wasn't treating people how I should. I would talk about people behind their backs and tell lies to their faces. When Pudge made his friendships with Alaska, Takumi, "The Colonel," and Lara, I knew that I wanted to have friends like that. At that exact moment, I decided that this school year I was going to find my people. The friends that I could talk to all the time and tell my deepest secrets to. These friends would help me find myself, my passions, and my dreams. And I would be able to help them do the same.

While reading this book, I felt a deep connection with Pudge. I connected with how he always was looking for adventure and is up for any challenge that comes his way. This attitude is one that I believe I have, and one I strive to live with. I also appreciate his interest with famous people's last words. I keep a list somewhat like that; it has words that only exist in one language. I love the beauty of them, and how there is only one way in the entire world to say these words. I feel like small quirks that people have let you see how they think. Pudge's desire to help his friends shows the value he holds with his relationships, and the way he treats others. This characteristic is one I try to have now that I have made more friends. I also love that he was able to forgive himself, and realize that Alaska would've forgiven him.

One night, I was lying in bed, and I couldn't sleep. Random thoughts were flying through my head, but one that really stuck with me was how it would feel to lose a close friend. The hurt that I would feel losing someone who was very close to me, and how I would react when I first heard the news... I know that it would impact me deeply and change my views of life. After reading *Looking for Alaska*, I changed

tremendously. I wanted to make sure that I was living life to the fullest each and every day. This book really put into perspective the value of life and helped me realize that I shouldn't take life for granted. When Pudge first heard the news of Alaska's passing, I remember sitting in my bed shivering, tears welled up in my eyes, the sharp pain in my throat as I held back my tears: a smothering sadness that you can't escape from. This feeling introduced me to a new level of emotion, one that is constant. My sorrow continued when Pudge said "I know so many last words. But I will never know hers." I would hate to be in this situation, to have someone this close to me die, and not be able to be there for his or her last moments. The feeling of leaving him or her alone, would make me long for another chance, a time when I could be there for them when they needed me.

A great friend is there for another in their time of need. Someone who will listen no matter the situation. Great friends are important. They help with all the hard times and are there for the good ones too. I will admit, finding true friends is really hard to do. But now that I have read ***Looking for Alaska***, it has become much easier. This book showed me what it means to be a great friend, and I will forever thank you for it.

Best regards,
Cooper Deck

Dear Antoine de Saint-Exupéry,

I was introduced to your book, *The Little Prince*, when I was around seven. My mother enjoyed the book when she was young, so she gave me the chance to read it. At first, I did not understand the book, but after reading it a year later, it opened my eyes. The book made me feel a certain emotion; it was a mix of nostalgia, sadness, and wonder. With the various people on different planets, it somehow managed to capture a bit of my confusion as a young child. I would like to reflect on how this book altered my perception of life.

The Prince acts similarly to a young child, and this contrasts with the more mature Pilot. However, both characters do not have a good opinion of grown-ups. Of course, I at the time also shared the same opinion. I did not understand what the problem with adults was, or why they acted so strangely. To this day, I must admit, sometimes I do not understand adults. Some act so shut off, as if they were born and matured from the beginning. As I said before, the people on the other planets acted quite differently, like they were disconnected from reality. For example, the Vain Man showed signs of narcissism. I like to think that these people represent negative aspects of an adult. I do not want to take your work at face-value, but this is my interpretation of your characters.

Yet the Little Prince viewed the world in different ways compared to adults. The Pilot also shared different views. However, he was much older and exposed to the same path many adults went through. These two characters have similar yet different ideas, which makes their interactions much more enjoyable. Another important character, the Rose, seemed to represent the Fox's message of how love comes from one's investment. The Rose was depicted as having both positive and negative traits, which lead to the Prince leaving. The character the Prince meets on Earth is the Fox. The Fox is very wise and tells the Prince about his special relationship with his dear Rose. In my view, the Fox represents a good and healthy relationship. Even when the Prince leaves, the Fox still encouraged his friend to do whatever is best for him. The way each character and their relationships have a contrast to others is the reason why I enjoy this book very much.

The overall emotion I felt when reading this book was just a menagerie of almost every emotion to possibly exist, from small bits of happiness from when the Pilot and Little Prince share the water, to the sadness of when he said goodbye to the Rose. The story's almost nonsensical nature only increased my interest. The illustration only furthered the mood of the story. Simple, yet expressive illustrations that went hand in hand with the writing captivated me.

This book has impacted the way I view my life. It taught me more about relationships and how healthy relationships function, even when one of the parties may have some flaws. In my life, I never felt like I got to experience true childhood innocence, but this book made me feel like I went back in my life to go through life with the main character. Somehow, even as a child, I feel as if I were taken to a much simpler, happier time of my life. I do not know how you managed to capture this feeling so well, but I feel as if you are truly gifted in this field.

After learning your book's origin, it piqued my interest in France. I live in America and was not too keen on geography, but it seemed as if the book made me want to learn a bit more about different places. I studied a bit about food and history as well as a couple of French words and phrases. Eventually, when I went to France many years later, I was delighted by the architecture and food. Overall, I am happy this book gave me a chance to learn about different cultures.

Thank you for writing such a meaningful book. Your book was enjoyed by all of my family. I hope that in the future, your books are preserved so that many other people can enjoy them in the future.

Sincerely,
Anna Hwang

Dear Curtis Sittenfeld,

Since the beginning of time, some people have been willing to give up everything in order to achieve higher social standing. Some move across the globe, some spend years simply working, or some assume a new identity if they think that maybe, just maybe, they have a chance at being part of the upper class. What no one tells you is that higher social standing is not all that it's cracked up to be. This is something that I could never quite grasp, even after growing up listening to the notion that wealth does not equal happiness, until I laid my eyes on **Prep**. As I devoured the words on the pages, I was able to see that social class is something that may quite often determine how people see you, even though that perception may be out of your control.

From page one of your book, I could see that **Prep** was not going to be my usual young adult read, and the only reason that **Prep** caught my eye in the first place was because of how I could relate to Lee. We are both from Indiana, and we both want to go to boarding school. There are also qualities that make up who we are that are so similar, including our financial situation and that we are willing to change to fit in. I knew that I wanted to go away for high school before I read **Prep**, but when I finished reading it, I was scared – not of stupid things like spiders, but actual frightening things like: if I do go to this school, will I be treated the same way? Will I somehow have to change *my* core values to try to fit in with these kids who come from the economic upper class? That's when it hit me – not all people will take the time to look past your social class to see who you are.

I kept going back to the part of the book when Lee does the interview with the journalist and she finally admits, not only to the world, but also to herself, that she doesn't like it at Ault, the school she attends. What surprised me most about this, and what my humanities teacher later pointed out, was that if this was truly a kids' book, then she would have been appreciated and applauded for doing this; instead, she was shunned. Nobody talked *to* her, but everyone talked *about* her. Lee was placed in a role that she had tried to stay out of the entire time she was at Ault, the misfit. The true reason that Lee was shunned wasn't because of the fact that she had finally spoken out, but the fact that people were finally able to see what she really was – a middle-class girl in a high-class school.

Even in my school, I can see this prejudice based on perceived social class. There are some students who are wealthier than others, and though most treat their peers with kindness and respect, some don't, and this is hurtful to see. I am happy to see that racial and gender inequalities are finally beginning to be addressed, but I feel that "classism" also needs to be reexamined. It's wrong that even if you're a decent human being, people will look past that and only see your financial situation. This is why I feel that I should persist in going to a boarding school, because I know that if I want something to change, then I will have to be there to change it. I do hope that if I am able to go to school in another state, I will be able to help change any class injustices that may be happening.

Prep has taught me that if people truly care about you, they will be able to see your true qualities, not your social class. Even though class discrimination has been around forever, I believe that if people truly wanted to change, they would pick up a book like **Prep**, and open their eyes to the subtle prejudices happening around them. In order to break class barriers, we need to reach out to others in social classes different from our own and be willing to see each other as people instead of labels.

Yours truly,
Alexis Konev

Let's Talk About...

GROWING UP

Positive Attitudes
Changing for the Better
Learning Something New
Responsibility

Hazel Peterson
North Liberty Elementary School, North Liberty
Letter to Margaret Peterson Haddix /
Indiana Author of *Among the Imposters*

Dear Margaret Peterson Haddix,

I love your books! *Among the Imposters* is a good book that I can relate to. Sometimes I find myself taking risks and something not so good happens because of that risk. The book *Among the Imposters* encourages me to take chances but to be careful when doing so. The book shows me that you sometimes just have to take a risk and trust different people. But it also told me to not trust someone you don't really know. In one part of the book, Luke was asked his real name by another Shadow Child. Luke did not tell the other Shadow Child his real name. Luke did not trust the other Shadow Child just yet.

I remember this part of the story because it told me not to trust strangers and not to give other people information about yourself unless you're sure you can trust them. Luke trusted the other Shadow Child so much, it got Luke into trouble. Something not so good happened because Luke took a risk.

I can relate to the book because I have found myself taking risks. Sometimes it is good to take a risk. But sometimes it is bad to take a risk. Luke took a risk when leaving his family so he could go out into the world. After reading this book it makes me realize that you can't trust some people. Even though you think you know someone, they can be different. Like in the book, the other Shadow Child, Jason, made it seem like he was nice and that the others could trust him, but he then betrayed them. Now that has never happened to me, but it might.

At the beginning of the book, Luke was very scared and nervous. This is something that I can definitely relate to. I always find myself taking a risk and being very scared and nervous at the same time. In another part of the book, Luke was given an opportunity to leave the school of Shadow Children, but he had a plan to help them, so he stayed at the school. Luke was given the chance to give up. He could have quit. This is another part of the book that I have taken away. This reminds me not to give up. I have taken a lot of things away from this book. This is one of my favorite books that I have read.

Sincerely,
Hazel Peterson

Dear Kobe Bryant,

“**Dear Basketball**” inspired me to be passionate about what I am dreaming about for my future. Your poem helped me realize that you need to come out of your comfort zone to try to accomplish your dreams. I can relate to your poem from the personal experiences I have gone through.

One of my personal experiences was when I was in elementary school. I was a pretty shy girl. I really didn't like to talk in front of big crowds. I actually enjoy making people laugh, but I didn't have the courage to speak up and be myself around others. So, I got out of my comfort zone to play the sport I loved because it was calling me the way you express that basketball was calling you.

Another experience I had that relates to your poem is when I was in fifth grade and joined the basketball team. I knew that I had found my passion as soon as I went to the first practice we had. It was amazing, and I finally felt so alive. After I found my passion, I wasn't afraid to step out of my comfort zone and socialize more. Throughout the sweat and tears of practice, it encouraged me to do better. Raider drills were a big pain. Our coach would tell one of us to shoot off the free-throw line and if we made it, we wouldn't have to do the drills, but if we missed, we would have to do them. We also did a bunch of drills to help us get better at playing what we loved.

I can still remember the first game we had. It was a breezy afternoon around seven p.m. My dad and I arrived at Holy Trinity school. I remember I was anxious because it was our first game, and I was pretty excited to see how we would play. I walked in and went to my friends. We were all talking about how nervous we were. The coach said that the A team plays first, and they gave their all, but it wasn't successful. I was being positive and cheering them on. After the A team finished their game, the B team was ready to defeat the opposing team. I got up with my group of friends and we got ready, then we went! We were doing our favorite drill, CHEETOS, running up and down the court, feet sore, and out of breath. As we dribbled, I saw that we weren't doing so good. At that moment I felt so discouraged since we weren't doing so

well. *"We all have self-doubt. You don't deny it, but you also don't capitulate to it. You embrace it" - Kobe*

Overall Kobe your life has had a great impact on me and many people. Your determination and hard labor for reaching your dreams and never giving up on them have inspired everyone worldwide. I am grateful for reading your poem "**Dear Basketball**" because it has encouraged me to look at life differently and to push through hardships and obstacles throughout life. Your legacy will live on! Miss you!

Jocelyn Marin Dubon

Dear Gary Paulsen,

Stranded, lost, alone – feelings that Brian and I have in common. Like in the book, it feels like there was always a barrier that I had to cross. I could relate to Brian because I felt like I was in his situation. I read your book *Hatchet* at a time when I felt like I was on my own and in a haze. I felt like everything was working against me as nature was against Brian. Your book really helped me through my internal struggle.

When I first read the book in my fourth-grade year, I didn't think much of it. To me, it was a cool survival book I had to read in an advanced class. I went along with the rest of my elementary school years, not thinking much of the book. It wasn't until the beginning of my middle school year that I really started to question who I wanted to be. I was a very crazy kid. I never really had a boundary. Going into middle school I decided that my whole personality would change. I would be calmer. I wouldn't be rowdy or a burden. In doing this, I started to change from an outgoing, rowdy, agreeable kid, to a withdrawn, silent, unpleasant young adult. I had changed, but not the way I wanted to.

Throughout middle school, the way I acted changed drastically. My friends turned away from me because I became rude and ruthless. I only saw the pessimistic side of any situation. The truth is change intimidated me. I thought that I couldn't show my personality. I thought I had to change everything about me. Over time I realized that the way I changed was not helping me be a better person. I felt so lost, I was convinced that if I didn't change, people wouldn't like me. But the way I was changing was making me even more unlikable. Then my mom bought me another one of your books and it had me thinking about *Hatchet*. I found and read the book again, but this time I read it a different way. And then I came across a part in the book that I never really thought of. Brian is thrown around and badly beaten by a moose, then a tornado comes through and destroys his camp. He was broken and defeated, just like me. But there was a difference. After Brian was beaten down, he didn't give up. He persisted to survive. Even though I wasn't stranded in the wild, struggling to survive, I felt like I could connect to it. I felt like my mind was caught in the violent winds of a tornado. But instead of giving up like I usually would, I persisted. I let my personality shine through while staying calm. I began to change again, but this time, in the way I wanted to.

I was friendlier and more accepting. Instead of trying to change everything about myself, I tried to improve myself. I felt like I was actually making progress, like I wasn't stuck in my never-ending cycle of failure. As my year in eighth grade wrapped up, I read the book one more time. It was a warm feeling to reread the book that had helped me through such a hard time. I started to think about how I was before and how the book had helped and changed me. I'm very thankful that I had a story that I could relate to help me through my tough time. I'm very glad I found the book because it helped me grow up.

Stranded, lost, alone – feelings that I still feel at times, but I have a better understanding of them. I'm not perfect, but I like to think that I'm better. I am very thankful that I found *Hatchet* when I did. It helped me learn that I had to persevere through the hard times. I think that without your book I would not have kept moving forward. I would have let the moose knock me down. But like Brian, I stood back up and kept going. Not many people have what I had during my time of struggle. They don't have something, or someone, to help them. That's why, although I'm not perfect, I wish to help people who need a light in their darkness, like your book to me. Your book was the plane that brought me out of the woods. Thank you for your help in my internal battle.

Sincerely,
Evan Swope

Honorable Mention – Level One

Annabel Keith
Mary Castle Elementary, Indianapolis
Letter to Shel Silverstein / Author of *The Giving Tree*

Dear Shel Silverstein,

I really enjoyed reading your book, *The Giving Tree*, because of the deep meaning behind the favorable and sentimental book. The tree gives and gives, never expecting anything in return, never asking for her due, never reminding the boy of all she has sacrificed. It grasps at the life of selfishness and how hard it is to please a needy person. Even when the tree was a stump she continued to give, while the boy, now an old man, continued to keep taking. This book is probably the sweetest, most heartbreaking book I've ever read. It shows the true meaning of being selfless and has a beautiful life lesson.

It made me think about what I would do if I was in a situation where I kept giving and giving, just like the tree. She went on, not thinking about herself and thinking only about the boy. She is a very selfless tree, and no matter how much I think about it, I will never be as selfless as I want to be. Though we all need to think of keeping each other safe and happy, you are your main priority. Putting yourself first isn't selfish. When your own needs are taken care of, you can help others whose needs aren't. Putting yourself first means being as kind to yourself as you are to others. It means taking care of yourself so you can be more productive and organized and a better person in general. It just means loving yourself a little more and that's not selfish, it's necessary. But the tree did nothing to care for herself and kept giving the boy what he wanted. We all should be careful not to give too much, and not to ask for too much.

There was one time where I was at a father/daughter dance at my school. I ran up to my dad in the middle of the dance because everyone wanted to talk to me and have my attention. It was overwhelming and agitating for me because I wasn't used to everyone crowding around me. I tried to make everyone happy and talk to them all, but it was hard because it was really exasperating and made me uncomfortable. I waited until their attention was on something different and I fled. I walked to my dad and told him about what happened. Later he told me that I didn't have to make everyone happy, and that it was okay that I had walked away and ignored them for a minute. This is what the tree could have done but she never stopped giving. If I didn't walk away at

the time I did, things would have gotten really out of hand. I wish there was someone to tell the tree that she didn't have to keep on trying to make the boy happy, and that she could have stopped before she became a stump.

I really enjoyed your book and will recommend it to my friends. My family also loves this book too. Though it may seem like a children's book, it has a much deeper meaning to it. I hope to read this book to my own kids one day.

Sincerely,
Annabel Keith

Annabelle Paton
Lincoln Elementary, Warsaw
Letter to Elizabeth Gilbert /
Author of the speech, **“Your Elusive Creative Genius”**

Dear Elizabeth Gilbert,

Your speech, **“Your Elusive Creative Genius”** changed my perspective on art and creativity. A lot of creators get depressed if their work fails or flops. Because of your speech, I think about our creativity in the way the ancient Greeks and Romans did. You stated that the Greeks believed creativity was actually a divine attendant spirit called a daemon that came to human beings. The Romans thought the same thing but called these spirits geniuses. Daemons and geniuses stop you from becoming too narcissistic because you had help. It also removes the sting of a failure because they would be partially to blame.

You also made a point about how sometimes when we accomplish something big and it's really awesome, we tend to see that as just an obstacle in our way of making another thing even better. I think we should look at our big achievements as just a victory and not try to top that but to get better. It helps a lot to just focus on making your project the best you can make it, not focusing on making it better than your other work. It's very interesting to think about creativity as an external magical divine spirit instead of just internal creativity that comes from yourself; it's a lot easier to think about that instead of all the pressure of it being all your fault or all your success. I believe thinking about art and creativity in this way would help a lot of people improve their mental health because it takes away a lot of stress on the matter.

I can't say I've already had my biggest success yet, but it is really hard to think that I might only have a one-time success or as you put it “a glimpse of god.” I think it would be very hard to find out you might never ascend to that height again. But if we believed our creativity was just on loan to us and everyone knew that's how it worked then it wouldn't hurt as much.

I loved your speech and my whole creative process changed after I heard it. I think about my work in a positive mindset instead of being pessimistic and it really helped me improve. I also think about my creativity as a genius, and it helped a lot.

Sincerely,
Annabelle Paton

Dear David Macaulay,

The title of your book, *The New Way Things Work*, immediately caught my attention. Ever since I was young, I have never stopped wondering how and why things work. I was instantly enthralled by your riveting illustrations of woolly mammoths soaring through the air on wings, and little people running oversized machines. Learning how the ballast affects the buoyancy of a submersible, enabling it to rise or dive, is extremely fascinating to me. If you want to make a raft, you have to understand how the structure of the raft and the density of the materials you are using will affect the raft's buoyancy. Your book helps me understand the world around me.

Many times, I see many broken appliances being fixed around my house, usually by my father. Lots of people would buy a new item and discard the broken one. This can be expensive, and sometimes you may also need professional installation. Repair workers can be expensive too and may charge more for replacement parts you could otherwise buy cheaper. With the knowledge in your book, I hope to be able to perceive the problems in different broken appliances, and then be able to determine if they are worth fixing, and how to fix them. Your book will make me be comfortable with making these assessments.

One summer, my father made paddle boards. He used his knowledge of water displacement, buoyancy, and center of gravity to design the shape and size of the boards. We have used these many times during the summer and taken adventures down the White River through Indianapolis. I really enjoy paddle boarding down the river because I like splashing through the calming water. You can also see many types of interesting wildlife like deer, herons, hawks, turtles, and different types of fish. I hope that I will be able to do this myself one day, and your book will give me the background I need.

I can always refer to your book for answers to specific questions that I have about the makings and workings of different objects. Your book will forever help me understand the mechanics and electronic elements in various objects. It will help me make decisions that will save time, money, and effort.

Sincerely,
Shlomo Gluck

Honorable Mention – Level Three

Leo Alvis
Forest Park High School, Ferdinand
Letter to J. D. Salinger / Author of *The Catcher in the Rye*

Dear Mr. Salinger,

This past summer I read your book *The Catcher in the Rye*. I became engrossed in the world of Holden Caulfield as he wrestles with the challenges of coming into adulthood and the reality of life. I have read quite a few books that follow teens and their struggles, but none have captured the essence of being a teenager as accurately and powerfully as yours does.

One of the main themes of *The Catcher in the Rye* is society's expectation of teens to transition into the adult world. Holden is a senior in high school when the story takes place, and he is failing out of yet another school. Despite the fact that he is very smart, he never applies himself and finds the majority of his peers and teachers to be "phony." Holden recognizes the hypocrisy and corruption of the world around him, and he wants no part of it.

I can relate to Holden's frustrations. When I think about college, entering the workforce, and the steps of momentous change that are only a few years away, it feels overwhelming. Teens are always being pressured by parents and teachers to work diligently for a bright future. We are expected not only to get good grades, but to participate in sports, clubs, and other extracurriculars to have a strong resume for college or a good job. Furthermore, the world we are being prepared to live in does not always seem like a very attractive place. Even though everyone knows how huge the threats of things like climate change are, the people and the government continue to sweep them under the rug. Our society is polarized, and unity sometimes seems like a thing of the past. The free market is monopolized by a few giant companies, which manipulate consumers and seem willing to do anything to increase profits, disregarding ethics, and the environment. Teens often recognize problems like this, which can make them spiteful of the world, just like Holden is.

One of the few things Holden admires in the world is his younger sister, Phoebe, because she is still innocent and pure. He responds to his despair by latching onto the idea that he can save innocent children from the corruption of the adult world. The title of the book comes from

a song about a man who catches children playing in a field of rye before they fall off a cliff. Holden tells Phoebe that this is the only job he would truly enjoy.

Although I could relate to Holden's struggles, I do not agree with his solution. There is no such job as "catcher in the rye;" it is pure fantasy. Your book helped me realize that life is about compromise between ideals and reality. Children losing their innocence is inevitable and trying to stop it is foolish. Although Holden is the main character of your story, he is no hero. The stresses of growing into adulthood can be overwhelming and difficult, but it is important to accept reality and go on living. Just because you have to enter a world that may be flawed, it does not mean that you have to become another phony cog in the system. Holden is focused only on the things that frustrate and aggravate him, which keeps him from seeing the good and worthwhile parts. Yes, life is imperfect, but it is still worth living. Through our efforts, we can make the world better in small ways.

Holden Caulfield has deep-seated issues. Throughout the book he has mood swings, from depression to lightheartedness. He also has destructive habits, like becoming frustrated and insulting friends or acquaintances and disregarding his grades. Despite this, Holden does not reach out to loved ones for help or accept their help when they reach out to him. Holden ends up in a mental facility, which probably could have been prevented if he had sought out help and received treatment. This taught me that if you are struggling with your mental health, you should reach out to others instead of keeping to yourself and letting your problems fester.

In conclusion, your book has changed the way I look at myself, others, the world, and how I live. The book was written almost seven decades ago, but it still rings true. Being a teen is hard. The world will never be perfect, and much of the time it seems like it is almost the opposite, but life is still worth living. There is tremendous good alongside the bad, beauty alongside the shabbiness. By engaging with life, as opposed to opting out like Holden, we can do our part to bring the world a little closer to our ideals.

Sincerely,
Leo Alvis

Dear Ann M. Martin,

Your series *The Baby-Sitters Club* taught me a lot of different life skills, such as responsibility, creativity, and bravery.

In the first book, *Kristy's Great Idea*, the baby-sitters have to take on responsibility while taking on a new challenge. After Kristy finds her mom trying to get a baby-sitter for David Michael and failing, she gets a great idea to start a baby-sitter's club where parents can call in and are almost guaranteed to get a baby-sitter. Although it will be a big responsibility, Kristy and her friends took on this responsibility and it was a success. Responsibility is important because then people know you can be trusted, and they will trust you with more things.

In the seventh book, *Claudia and Mean Janine*, the baby-sitters club needs to be creative to figure out how to make more money over the summer. They decide to host a kids' club. The baby-sitters need to be creative on the details, such as flyers, decorations, and how to have fun. Creativity is important because it opens up your mind to new possibilities and gives you the freedom to have fun.

The tenth book, *The Ghost at Dawn's House*, taught me bravery. A creaky trap door in Dawn's barn leads to her room, but when Dawn reads a story about a man who didn't want to leave his house, people could hear him but could not see him. People said they heard him in between the barn and the house, but the people left him behind when they moved, and he died there. When the baby-sitters found out the guy lived at Dawn's house and he died in the secret passageway, it gave them all a fright, but they were brave and went back in the passage. Bravery is important because it allows you to explore the world and see new things.

I can relate to Kristy because I have a lot of responsibilities, such as getting my schoolwork turned in, keeping my room clean, and because of COVID-19 this year, I have had to be responsible for when to be on Zooms and what I need to be doing at certain times. I can also relate to Claudia because I need to be creative a lot. I like music, so I need to be creative in order to make good songs. I also need to be creative when I am making school projects. Finally, I can relate to Dawn because I have to be brave a lot, especially when I go outside in the dark at night and

when I hear very scary ghost stories in the middle of the woods while camping.

The Baby-Sitters Club has taught me how to be responsible, creative, and brave. You have taught me all these lessons throughout your awesome books. I'm looking forward to reading more of your books and learning more life lessons.

Sincerely,
Eve Smith

Maryn Gilbert
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville
Letter to Raina Telgemeier /
Author of *The Baby-Sitters Club Graphic Novels*

Dear Raina Telgemeier,

This past summer I got to experience a summer like no other. I got to take a baby-sitting class to do what I love! *The Baby-Sitters Club* has influenced me more than you would ever know.

The first connection I have with *The Baby-Sitters Club* is that my friend and I had the very identical idea. My very close friend and I both have been Safe-Sitter certified. We enjoy baby-sitting so much! We wanted to start our own baby-sitting duo. So, we talked about how busy we both were and what we had going on each night. After that we kind of got an idea of what we wanted and could do. Each of us then wrote a bio about ourselves on the same piece of paper and made about 20 copies. We also put our contact information. Then we went around and delivered our bios. Unfortunately, we never have gotten a text/call from anybody. But it did not stop me from doing what I love. So, we both just kept waiting for our chance and it still didn't happen. However, we are so thankful that we have so many good friends that did reach out to us! We both took turns baby-sitting them on the weekends. I also got asked to baby-sit their friends. It made me think of how often Kristy, Stacy, Mary-Anne, and Claudia had to wait for phone calls that gave them a baby-sitting job.

The second connection I had with the baby-sitters in *The Baby-Sitters Club* was how desperate they are to make the kids feel happy while their parents are gone. I love doing things with kids! It makes me feel good to help others. Sometimes it's difficult to baby-sit a new family or a family that isn't respectful. A couple of weeks ago a child's parents that I baby-sit on Sundays told their best friends about me. The mom made a group chat with a new family and my mom. They talked about how responsible I was and how good I was with the kids. Then the following weekend the new family asked me to baby-sit for their kids! I have gotten so close with them in the past few weeks. I baby-sit them about every Saturday. *The Baby-Sitters Club* has inspired me and made me more confident and wanting to go and baby-sit different families.

The third reason I have a connection with *The Baby-Sitters Club* is because I don't baby-sit for the money, I baby-sit because it makes me and other families happy. I always let people know I am a baby-sitter

because: one – it gives me things to do, two – it makes me happy, and three – it gets me closer with the kids in my community. It always makes me happy when I get a text from the moms again. It makes me feel very excited, appreciated, thankful, and happy. When I was younger and before I took the Safe-Sitter class, I always wanted to be a baby-sitter because I wanted money to get things for myself. But now that I am certified and see how important and responsible you need to be to have a family leave you to look after their kids, it is just unbelievable. When I see the world we are in right now I think, do I really need this money? Don't other people need it way more than me spending it on some random candy or gum? I don't need to be spending money on myself for something I don't need. There are people in this world right now that are dying, and I am perfectly fine. So, I have decided to buy some gift cards with my money to give to people at the hospital that don't have a lot of support or money.

I get asked to baby-sit about two times a week on average. Every time I get asked to baby-sit, I get this butterfly feeling in my stomach. Am I going to be able to come back? Will they have fun with me? Are they going to be on their good behavior? When my mom drives me there, I think of what Stacy, Kristy, Claudia, and Mary-Anne do when they baby-sit. How do they react when a child doesn't listen? These books have changed the way I baby-sit since I started reading them. I never want to put the book down! I always try to be a better and better baby-sitter and there is no way I could have gotten where I am without reading these books. Thank you so much for these books!

Sincerely,
Maryn Gilbert

Dear Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool,

Throughout the course of the years, I've read many different types of literature. The one piece of literature that influenced me the most is ***PEAK: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise***. This is a scientific-technological book. It is scientific because it demonstrates to us readers the correctness and importance of the method of "deliberate practice" based on a large number of experiments and researchers. It also gives us readers methods we can refer to. After reading this book, I realized that even if I am mediocre, I can achieve excellence through "deliberate practice." This book inspired me to keep doing things I like, and I would accomplish the task.

While I was reading ***PEAK: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise***, I was really interested in one of the experiments done with Steve Faloon. He was supposed to memorize numbers. He first started memorizing seven or eight numbers and then each time he was correct, he would have to add a number to the memorizing list. If he got the number wrong, he would subtract two numbers from the list to memorize. I also used this in my own life. To be specific, when I am memorizing paragraphs of words, I use this technique. I first start with two sentences and then add up. This helped me a lot since it was hard for me to find the correct way to memorize. I thought I would never be able to memorize many paragraphs, like Steve memorizing numbers. However, after I read the case about Steve, I did it. This influenced my life by telling me that anything is possible if one continues to practice efficiently.

Many other things from ***PEAK: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise*** also influenced me. For example, I learned from an example that the potential of the human brain is unlimited, and the brain has strong adaptability. I learned this from the example of taxi drivers in London. Scientists conducted an experiment on taxi drivers and people who aren't taxi drivers. Taxi drivers are supposed to memorize many different routes in London and every store in London. After taxi drivers trained, scientists tested their brains and compared them with the people who aren't taxi drivers. The result showed that the hippocampus in taxi drivers was bigger than when they first started training and

bigger than people who aren't taxi drivers. This proves that the brain can adapt and is unlimited. I began to practice many things to try to activate more parts of my brain when I learned this.

To conclude, for people who have achieved outstanding results, the traditional perception will attribute them to "talent." However, nowadays, more and more people are getting to know that practice is also very important. I learned that talent isn't always that important. Thomas Alva Edison once said, "Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration." This book influenced me in every way and will continue to influence me for the rest of my life.

Sincerely,
Wanting Wang

Let's Talk About...

**BULLYING AND FINDING
COMMON GROUND**

Bullying

Being Kind

**The book: *Wonder*
by R. J. Palacio**

Dear Gordon Korman,

I want to talk to you about your book **Restart**. My class and I are reading your book. Your book is making a big difference. I have not been bullied, but some of my friends have. They tell me about it, and I kind of feel like I'm being bullied. It can make you feel bad about yourself and hurt. I feel like I am being bullied when they are telling me about the mean stuff that people do and say.

When Chase walked down the hallway, kids ran away and hid and didn't look at him. That is a good sign that he was mean. Chase was this big bully and then he falls off his roof and can restart his life, and he becomes this good-natured kid. If I had just moved to the school, I would never know he was this mean person. I have one question: why are bullies mean and hateful, like Chase? I understand how Shoshanna felt when her brother was getting bullied. I do not like when my brother gets bullied or when people are mean to him. It makes me mad.

I know how Chase felt when he was in court and his parents kept supporting him the same as mine when something happens. I get why he said, "It doesn't really matter," because everyone knows that he is not that good of a kid. However, his parents love him, and you need other people to love and support you, like your friends. We all need a friend like Mr. Solway that loves us even when we do something wrong.

So, in your book when he lost his memory, I thought that it was interesting that he remembered the girl in the dress. One time I forgot something and then I went to bed, but I remembered the last thing I saw.

There was this person that went to my school, but he does not anymore. He was mean to me and my friend. When we saw him, we got a little bit scared, and it was not a good feeling. He never bullied me. This kid was just rude and hateful. He was mean to everyone, and we are glad that he is gone. His friends still are mean still but not as mean. I have one theory: Aaron and Bear brought the worst out in Chase, or how Chase brought the worst out in Aaron and Bear. Your book meant a lot to me, and I hope other people will like it as much as I did. Thank you for writing the book. I was sad when it was over.

Sincerely,
Kendra Simms

Dear R.J. Palacio,

My mother always told me, when I was younger, to be kind to everyone, no matter where they are from, what religion they are, their looks, and more. I never thought much of this. "I am always nice," I reminded myself. However, your book changed my personality aspect immensely. It grasped my emotions and feelings and converted them into simple kindness. After finishing all 310 mesmerizing pages, I immediately realized I need to be kind to everyone, just as my mother said. The underlying theme of the novel **Wonder** is that a small, simple act of kindness can make a big difference, and I have the ability to choose kind. The book **Wonder** gave me intel, evidence, facts, and scenarios where not everyone is pleasant. You also told your readers the reason you created this book, in which, our scenarios are similar in many ways.

As I was reminiscing after reading the novel, I dreamt about becoming Julian, the bully in the plot. At what point in my life would I become mean to someone due to a birth defect they cannot control? Your book made me acknowledge the correct answer, which Julian did not choose. You instantly provided me with scenarios to come to the appropriate conclusion, that I need to choose kind. I stopped reminding myself of the cruel bully and thought back to myself. In my younger years, I tended to be rude and selfish, equivalent to Julian's personality. Today, I look back at myself in disgust. I now chose to be kind due to your book.

The reason you created this masterpiece is the cause of a situation you had in the past. You reacted incorrectly when you saw a child with abnormalities. This situation corresponds greatly to a scenario I didn't participate in, but rather was a witness. When I was ten years old, I was in the mall with my father and saw a young adult with a defect to his face. I stared at him with my big eyes and didn't say a word to him. I hadn't read your book yet, and now I think about the past and cringe.

After reading your book, I realized my action was completely inappropriate and cruel; why would I make him feel uncomfortable for being himself? You brought awareness and understanding to my eyes, you changed my life.

Now I know that my mother is right. I need to be kind to everyone. Whether that is in your situation or in my scenario, everyone needs to

be pleasant with everyone. Your book places a paper on my back saying, "I WILL BE KIND TO EVERYONE." So, thank you for helping me mature and inverting my perspective of life. I am now going to tell my mother thank you.

Sincerely,
Aya Saad

Dear R. J. Palacio,

I read your book in third grade when I used to think that characteristics of a person were mostly on the outside (long hair, tall, fast). But after reading your book, I realized that it was more about what was on the inside. Your book really emphasizes that particular thing throughout the book. You also brought out the importance of kindness in a way that etched itself deeply into me. As years progressed and I matured as I reread it over and over again, I found that kindness wasn't *just* important in the book, it was critical everywhere. It became clear that there was a message beyond my understanding that I am still digging deeper into.

Once I got older, I dug deeper into the real meaning of the book. Away from the characters and to the real meaning, I started to understand that there is no reason to be human if personalities didn't matter. In other words, kindness is what makes us human. Though some people believe that our cognitive abilities, us being bipeds, our languages, etc. make us human, I believe that the reason we can assess the needs of someone is because we understand the principles of empathy and kindness. It even says it in your book, "Courage. Kindness. Friendship. Character. These are the qualities that define us as human beings, and propel us, on occasion, to greatness." Your book also explained just how a little kindness can impact someone. You explored this when Summer showed Auggie a little kindness by sitting next to him at lunch. When I first read that, I thought it was a little nice thing she did. But now, I understand how that impacted Auggie. This highlighted just how an ounce of empathy can change someone's life for the better.

In your book, Auggie has a combination of Treacher Collins syndrome and a hemifacial microsomia, which is the reason he has a different face than most people. This is the sole reason for his troubles. He knows this as he says, "I won't describe what I look like. Whatever you're thinking, it's probably worse." Thus, he gets called hurtful names such as "freak," which are mostly directed at his facial appearance. His personality on the other hand is very social and outgoing. As your book gets closer to the ending, you explore the idea that a person's character is more important than their appearance. This is said: "Don't judge a boy by his

face.” The simplicity but the effectiveness of this statement stuns anyone who reads it, as it is true. What I mean is, that it digs deep into the reader, almost commanding them.

I got inspired, in the simplest of words, to “always be a little kinder than is necessary.” This was one of the most powerful quotes that acted upon me. It showed me to be kinder than needed, which I applied to my life. Because of your book, I learned how to be kind and how small acts of empathy can make a large difference. Simply put, one compliment, or one kind act can change someone’s life for the better. Your book will always and forever be on my list of things that shaped my life.

Sincerely,
Salsri Harshith Devaguptapu

Dear R. J. Palacio,

Your book has been so inspirational to me because it is about treating others the way you want to be treated. The character in your book, Auggie, struggles because he looks different. I have something in common with Auggie; I look different, too. I was diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes at the age of two and have lived with this condition for ten years. To treat my diabetes or monitor my blood sugar, I have little machines on my body.

Most kids my age don't have devices attached to them. These devices make me look different. People sometimes stare at me or look at me in a funny way. Just like it did to Auggie, this hurts my feelings, even though I know that people are just afraid to ask. Sometimes, I have to explain to them that I have Type 1 Diabetes and how it affects me so that people can get a better understanding of what the "machines" are.

I have found that once I have the chance to explain to people what I am dealing with, then they do not think of me as being different. I really enjoyed your book, and it has inspired me to be a better person and make sure that all people get treated equally even if they have differences.

The first time I read your book, I was in the third grade. Your book made me think deeply about how slight differences and insults can make a significant impact on a person. The part in the book where Auggie gets looked at differently and people talked behind his back made me think about how other people's actions and words can hurt somebody so much. This made me think about how every day I must go down to the nurse's office and check my blood glucose to make sure it is at a suitable level.

People often ask me, "Why do you always have to go to the nurse?" I usually explain that I have Type 1 Diabetes and I must go to the nurse to check on my sugar levels before I eat or do physical activities. Some people even think that I am lucky to have diabetes because I get to eat candy when my blood glucose is low. They could not be more wrong! I wish I were never diagnosed and was like everyone else, but I am not.

I must adapt to my differences and treat and manage my diabetes so that I can be as healthy as everyone else. I am so happy to go to a great school like ZMS where people accept me with my differences.

Thanks again for writing such a terrific book. I enjoyed reading about Auggie's journey of going to school and making friends. The story gives me great hope for other kids that are "different," that they will make great friends that accept them for who they are.

Thank you for writing this book, it has been so heartwarming and taught me a big lesson about treating people the way you want to be treated. This book makes you feel empathy, putting yourself in some else shoes. People are faced with a challenge almost every single day, choosing to be kind or not. I choose to be kind.

Sincerely,
Allison Bowman

Dear R. J. Palacio,

When you think of a teenage girl, your mind might go to sleepovers, school, doing each other's hair, sports! Yes, I do all those things, but it's always been a little different for me. I was born with a submucosal cleft lip. It doesn't affect my health, but I've always felt out of sorts from the other kids.

I never realized this until second grade. At lunch a kid asked me what was wrong with my lip, but I didn't know what she was talking about. I went on with my day until my mom picked me up from my grandma's. In the dead silence of the car I asked, "Mommy, what's wrong with my lip?" She looked at me through the rearview mirror with concern.

As soon as we got home, my mom set me on the couch. I was told I had a submucosal, and I've never had surgery for it. Apparently, I've never had to get surgery. A year or two later, when I was around ten, I was taken to the doctors with a specialist from when I was a baby. I was confused and didn't want the surgery. As soon as I got into my dad's truck, I was a teary-eyed mess.

Since then, I've always seen my crooked nose and wonky lip as an insecurity. It's not noticeable to some, but it still sticks out like a sore thumb to me. This is how I relate to your beloved character, August. Even though he doesn't feel ordinary, and he gets bullied, he knows his worth and people love him. In your book **Wonder**, I realized that I shouldn't overthink everything I can't control, like my looks, because that has always been a problem for me.

I've never gotten bullied like Auggie did in the book, but I've had my fair share of name calling. I was in fifth or sixth grade at basketball when I was called an alien. It hit me hard and I couldn't help but break down sobbing right then and there. It hasn't happened since, but I feel like I've really related to August when he got called a freak. Your book helped me tremendously and I don't know where I would be now if that book didn't give me this realization: I need to know I'm beautiful no matter what and that I'm worth more than just another face in the universe. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Sincerely,
Tori Neiger

Dear Catherine Ryan Hyde,

I remember when I got the book ***Pay It Forward*** from a box at a garage sale. My mom found a few of those books for me, and one was ***Pay It Forward***. On the outside it was just a normal, soft cover book. I never once thought how in just one book, I could learn so many things. Or even have the book *change* me.

As I read it, it was heartfelt, other times funny, and sometimes confusing. I learned what paying it forward is and how it can change people. It simply means after you receive an act of kindness, “pay it forward” or do a good deed for another and so on. For instance, when Trevor was tending Mrs. Greenberg’s garden. Sometimes Trevor would hit some roadblocks, like when Jerry, a jobless man Trevor helped, didn’t pay it forward, but Trevor never gave up. When he finally succeeded, not only did he get a good grade on his test, but he also got to meet the president. That one act of kindness that Trevor showed grew from his hometown to all of California, to the United States of America, to the world. Not only did I learn about paying it forward, I learned important life lessons, such as: it can take only one person to change a world.

Though I haven’t ever actually “paid it forward,” there have been many acts of kindness I have done. Giving my neighbors homemade cookies, doing my chores *without complaining*, getting my brother a bike for Christmas. These acts of kindness may sound plain, but they can have a huge impact on others. It may make someone’s day when they’re feeling low. It even makes *you* feel better. A simple act of kindness can also hold or bring a friendship together. Think about helping someone up when they fall. Or making another feel happy when they’re blue. There are infinite possibilities. This book also taught me how lucky I am. Trevor grew up without a dad, and only his mom took care of him, and I’m lucky that I live with both.

This book taught me so many life lessons I needed to learn, how lucky I am, and how one small person can change the world. And maybe, just maybe, I could change the word, just like Trevor did in your book.

Sincerely,
Madilynn Schum

Let's Talk About...

NEURODIVERSITY

Anxiety

Autism

ADHD

**The Book: *Out of My Mind*
by Sharon Draper**

Dear Roald Dahl,

If a stranger appeared in the middle of the night with a bag of green, glowing magic, I certainly would not have taken it. Accepting risk is a concept that is foreign to me. I stick to the rules and rarely step out of my comfort zone. I'm known as the strait-laced cheerleader that always gets the perfect grades and lives a movie-like American teen life. *James and the Giant Peach* revealed to me that the shackles and chains that I feel others have placed on me are my own expectations and me being tough on myself.

Risk. What does it really mean to take a risk? A risk is taking that step into the unknown. It is taking a chance without knowing the results. I rarely even consider taking a leap into the unknown due to the anxiety of getting in trouble or the fear of disappointing others or not living up to my own expectations. I dedicate a large part of my daily thoughts to worrying. My brain is so hyper-focused on daily worries, plus the incessant anxiety in the back of my mind, which takes up at least a quarter of my brain. At certain times, I feel like I want to crawl under my covers and never come out. Instead, my coping mechanism is to read – to read for hours on end. *James and the Giant Peach* is one of my comfort books. It reminds me that it's acceptable to take some risks without knowing the outcomes. I realize that I must move on in life and not get hung up on the small things that won't matter a year from now.

As I get older, I find myself relating to as well as grasping the differences between James and me. On the surface it does not seem that we have much in common. Physically we do not look anything alike, and the way he reacts to situations doesn't match up with me. I am not very outwardly expressive with my inner feelings or thoughts, but internally I am very emotional. James is open and loving even through a terrible period in his life. I would be very defensive and not open to letting anyone in out of fear of being tethered to another relationship similar to the one I had broken free from. I have a loving, tight-knit family, so I relate to James's life before the rhino tragedy better than after, although reading the beginning chapter of his life made me feel a lot of sympathy for the children suffering every day through the same heartbreaking reality. I try to become a little more like James every day by opening myself up to others, which has helped me relate to others and grow my friendships.

My life on the outside may seem perfect like James's life after his harrowing journey, but it's not all puppies and unicorns. In my second-grade year, I moved from a county school to a small artsy school. At the county school, we had to fight to be "popular" or accepted, so as the new kid I became a bully and wasn't the girl that I wanted to be. Even today it is one of the hardest times in my life to remember and accept. Thankfully I had a supportive teacher and ***James and the Giant Peach*** to help me through this difficult time. I found ***James and the Giant Peach*** at a vulnerable time, and it impacted me in the best possible way. Your book taught me how to include everyone and rely on my friends to help me get through hardships. I can't imagine my life without my friends.

I am starting to take tiny steps to break out of my protected circle. For example, it may be silly, the way I would have reacted to getting a B in Geometry. Any grade below an A- would have made my anxiety go through the roof because I have always achieved A's. Referring back to the lessons that I learned from James, I accepted that I did my best and let the anxiety dissipate. I'm learning to release the tension and anxiety that grows around my thoughts like toxic vines. Currently, I'm winning the war inside my head, which is allowing me to focus on following my dreams rather than letting fear and anxiety rule my life. Those chains no longer have a place in my heart and mind because I am using the lessons I learned from James to overcome my fear and anxiety. Today, I would take the risk and grab that glowing green bag of magic and see where the adventure takes me.

Sincerely,
Raegan Barnes

Honorable Mention – Level Two

Ryann Allen
St. James School, Haubstadt
Letter to Rick Riordan / Author of *The Heroes of Olympus*

Dear Rick Riordan,

I love your book series *The Heroes of Olympus*, and I would like to take some time to explain why I think it is one of the best book series ever written! I want to tell you why I love the character arcs. It keeps you on the edge of your seat. It's hypnotic.

Growing up with ADHD, Over-active Anxiety Disorder, and Sensory Processing Disorder has been a struggle. Sensory Processing Disorder makes me very sensitive to certain sounds and textures. ADHD makes me do things without thinking about it sometimes (like Percy), and anxiety makes me so nervous and full of dread of the unknown that I can barely drag myself out of bed. There are some things that have helped, one of the major things being your books. The way that the demigods struggle with being outcasts and find friends in each other reminds me that someday, I too will find my group. That is why I spend a lot of my time reading your books.

Leo and Nico remind me that even in the darkest times you can still find happiness. Percy reminds me that it doesn't matter what others say, the only thing that can stop you is you. Frank helps me remember that you can't spend all your time running away from your fear. Hazel reminds me it doesn't matter what happened in the past because we make our own future. Jason reminds me that it's okay to ask for help. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but of strength and trust. Piper helps me to know that sometimes just being there and holding the team together can be the most powerful superpower of them all, and Annabeth... Well, I saved the best for last. Where do I begin? She's smart, caring, sassy, hilarious, loyal, fierce, brave, relatable, and independent. What more could you want in a character? These are just some of the reasons why she is my favorite character ever!

The one thing they all help me remember is that you don't have to try to fit what others think you should be. You're not a "freak" or a "weirdo" just because you don't fit in. You're just unique and that is okay. You don't have to be the smartest, fastest, strongest, or most beautiful to be a good person, be happy and be worth something. It also showed me that what you think are your greatest weaknesses, could actually be your greatest strengths.

It also helped me learn that nobody is perfect. The reason I like this book more than other “superhuman” books is that they drive home the point that all of them have a major weakness called their “fatal flaw,” and they call it “fatal” for a reason. The characters that don’t learn to control it... let’s say it doesn’t end well.

One example of a fatal flaw is Percy’s fatal flaw, and mine too – personal loyalty. This is an example of too much of a good thing. You are so loyal to the people you care about that you’d trade the safety of the world to save those you love. Some of Percy’s enemies have learned his flaw and try to bait him into their traps by kidnapping his friends and family, but Percy overcomes by saving his friends and protecting the world. His fatal flaw is why Athena disapproves of her daughter, Annabeth, dating Percy. She asks him that when he comes across a problem he can’t solve. Will he save his friends or save the world? These words have made me think, “What would I do? Could I really save the world over my friends?”

Another example of a fatal flaw is Annabeth. Her fatal flaw is hubris, or deadly pride. She realizes she cannot fix everything all the time. It’s okay to accept help from others and that there is no law saying that she can never make mistakes. She shows me that being wise doesn’t mean doing everything on your own all the time, but it means being a good leader and realizing when you make mistakes and learning from them.

Your book series helped teach me how to be strong in hard times and that when you have a few loyal friends behind you, you can get through almost anything. It taught me that the world is not all flowers and rainbows, but that is life; you only fail when you stop trying. People will hate you, try to break your spirit and exclude you because you are different, but you can’t let that stop you. The strongest You is the one where you are true to yourself.

Sincerely,
Ryann Allen

Honorable Mention – Level Three

Kylee Wesseler
Oldenburg Academy, Oldenburg
Letter to Rick Riordan / Author of *The Lightning Thief*

Dear Rick Riordan,

As a kid, I was always involved in way too many activities. I either had softball practice, basketball, gymnastics, or some other type of active way to fill my time. This meant that I was constantly wound up and could never calm down. It also didn't help that I went to a baby-sitter where all the other kids there were nothing but chaotic. On the contrary, I was also a quiet and shy kid because I was told that people wouldn't want to handle me if I was too energetic. My life revolved around my sports and not really talking to anyone so that I wouldn't burden them. It wasn't until we read your book, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* in my fourth-grade homeroom, that my life changed for the better.

Our teacher explained to my class in detail what dyslexia and ADHD were so that we would understand Percy's struggles within his life. As she began to explain to us what ADHD was, I had never related to Percy more. Although I have never been tested or told that I have ADHD, I've always been a crazy hyperactive kid that could never sit still. Then along comes this character that is a hero in the eyes of so many and inspires them to become stronger – and he was just like me.

In fifth grade, I was finally given the whole *Percy Jackson* series. I reread the first book and kept going until I finished all five books. In *The Lightning Thief*, Grover is starting to explain to Percy why ADHD can be a good thing when it comes to being a demigod. It makes it easier for him to fight and move in certain situations. The ADHD helps him have heightened senses and become a natural force in battles. I realized it was the same for me and my sports. My need to always be moving helped me become really good in most sports that I did. I was quick and had natural reflexes that helped me out. When I got an MVP award in my third year of playing softball, I felt like I was just like Percy, a hero to my team.

After reading the full series, I started to gain more confidence knowing that being hyperactive wasn't necessarily a bad thing, it's just hard for some people to understand and cope with. I branched out more and started to make more friends. I no longer went to school knowing I only

had three people at most to talk to. If I ever felt that I was becoming too much for someone, I would think about Percy and what he would do. Knowing that he would never back down, I didn't either.

Mr. Riordan, I would just like to thank you for giving me the confidence and the strength that I needed as a child to become the person I am today. I know I am not alone when I say that you were a big part of my childhood and making it an everyday adventure. Reading about these types of characters and their stories are exactly what kids like me need. It shows us that we aren't weird for being ourselves. We are different and unique and that is what makes us who we are. We should never be ashamed of something that we cannot control. In the end, I knew that being myself was okay and that I should never shy away from who I am. You taught me that being different was not a weakness, but a strength.

Sincerely,
Kylee Wesseler

Honorable Mention – Level One

Emerson Plank
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville
Letter to Sharon Draper / Author of ***Out of My Mind***

Dear Sharon Draper,

I connected with your book ***Out of My Mind*** very much. My sister, who was diagnosed with Autism five or so years ago, got diagnosed with epilepsy this past year, and is not verbal. She gets the same weird looks that Melody gets. Even though people are not staring at me, I still feel it like it is happening to me as well. Your book made me feel more okay about it. I was always okay with the fact that my sister was a little different, but your book made me feel better about the looks that my sister and my entire family gets. Your words make everything feel okay!

Although I cannot connect with not being able to speak at all, I can connect with not being able to express my feelings about the frustrations I have about getting looks and having to adjust things, so they are better for my sister. I know I cannot change that, and your book made me feel better about that. My sister, like Melody, is such a misunderstood and sweet girl.

I also connect with Melody's parents. Always having to worry what people will think of their family! Having to worry about if they will disturb other people! My parents and Melody's parents get stressed. When your parents are stressed out it rubs off on you! For example, whenever my sister's school tells my mom about my sister having a bad day it really makes my mom have bad thoughts. Whenever my mom is having a bad day, it spreads to me! I just feel over all bad sometimes when we get bad news, or we find out something about my sister that we were not expecting.

I am so happy that I got the opportunity to read and enjoy this book! I realize that without reading this book I may not have had such a respect for the people of the disability community. It made me realize that even though my sister and many other people in the world may not act like me, talk like me, or even look like me, they are still valid people with feelings and emotions. My sister and others in the disabled community are just like me and any other able-bodied person in the world in their own special way. Thank you for writing this amazing book!

Sincerely,
Emerson Plank

Dear Sharon Draper,

I recently had the pleasure of reading your inspiring novel, *Out of My Mind*. Although I only discovered it because of my English project, your book has impacted me in many ways. I must admit that after finishing the book, I missed reading about Melody's life each day. Melody and her family had become a part of my daily routine. Reading about Melody's struggles and challenges had a personal connection for me, as it made me think of my aunt and uncle.

My Aunt Chris and Uncle Jon were born with developmental delays. Their developmental delays have affected their speech, cognitive and physical abilities, as well as their social and emotional interactions with others. In other words, Chris and Jon have a child's mind, but an adult's body. People often stare and give them dirty looks and are judgmental. I have witnessed people's impatience and awkwardness when interacting with them. I see their day-to-day struggles from the outside but reading it from Melody's perspective helped me understand how they might feel on the inside.

When I first learned Melody had Cerebral Palsy, I was not even sure what it was. She explained that her condition did not allow her to speak or walk but she has limited movement in her arms. She describes the words in her head as snowflakes piling up like snowdrifts. I could not even begin to fathom not being able to move my body or not speaking to anyone. In the novel Melody talks about her experiences when going to school. At first, the kids stare at her and do not want to accept her because she's in a wheelchair. Even Melody's teachers made rude comments when she aced a quiz. As I read this part of the story, I immediately thought of my aunt and uncle. I thought about how people look at them differently in public just because of their physical appearance. I thought of the rude comments people would mumble under their breath when passing them on the street. Melody also talks about being left behind at the airport because the rest of the Whiz Kids quiz team thought she would slow them down. Melody had lost out on a life changing opportunity because of the judgement of others. This scene really hit home when thinking of Chris and Jon, as I knew how crushed they would be if someone had done that to them.

Your story has given me a different perspective on what it is like to truly live with a disability. I now not only think of their physical disabilities but what it is like for them mentally. Although Melody, Chris, and Jon might not fit in the world like a hand into a glove, their differences make our world a little brighter. I want to thank you for writing about Melody's story and bringing awareness to what it is really like living with a disability.

Sincerely,
Elizabeth Higginbotham

Dear Sharon Draper,

The trapped-in-a-box feeling, the stuck feeling, the stumbling-through-the-dark feeling. The feeling of no escape. It's like a war is happening, but instead of seeing cities and families torn apart, I feel myself being torn apart. I'm imprisoned inside a locked cage. It's like I'm trying to outrun someone, but when I turn around to see who or what is chasing me, all I see is myself. Like Melody, in your book ***Out of My Mind***, I used to feel trapped inside my own head. Even though Melody had different reasons for her problems, I was still able to learn so much from the way she carried herself and kept her head held high. As I kept reading, I felt so many different emotions, more than I had ever received from a book before. I experienced the joy and triumphs, as well as the hurt and frustration that Melody went through. Some of these feelings felt familiar, and I think that's why I latched onto Melody's character so quickly.

As someone who is usually very shy and quiet, I often don't openly express myself or my personality with others. The only times I'll open up to others is when I'm close with them or have known them for a long time. After being with other people, I would sometimes feel almost mad at myself for not reaching out and talking to others. In the moment I would become too nervous and decide not to talk to unfamiliar people. After reading your book ***Out of My Mind***, I saw how hard it was for Melody to express herself. Melody and I both had trouble expressing ourselves to others, and although for different reasons, I still learned a lot from her. She taught me that not everyone can or will convey themselves in the same way. Most people will just talk to others to share their feelings, but that doesn't mean I can't express myself in other ways. I used to think that talking was the only way to relate to others, but I've learned that it's okay to handle situations differently or be different than others.

I also used to be so hard on myself, even when it wasn't necessary. I would feel so frustrated with myself at times, and looking back, I realize that the situations weren't even significant situations in my life. In ***Out of My Mind*** when Melody would become frustrated with herself or her situation, the feelings she felt were like ones that I had felt in real life. When I observed how she handled herself when she was frustrated or having a hard time, I saw that she wouldn't let that keep her down.

When I noticed this about Melody, I decided that I wanted to do the same. When I would start to become mad with myself, I would pause and remember Melody and what she would do in the situation. Eventually, I made this a habit and I found myself feeling much happier with myself. I felt an amazing feeling of accomplishment and realized that was the same feeling I felt when Melody made an accomplishment in your book. It was like I'd finally found the key and could open the lock to escape.

The only problem was, I couldn't find the lock. All that was holding me back was finding the courage to apply these lessons in real life. When I was by myself or around familiar people, I found it very easy to do, but as soon as I was around unfamiliar people, I found that it was very hard. Thinking back, I tried to remember what Melody did. When I thought about it, I realized that Melody had to have so much courage and bravery to do what she did. I learned that it really doesn't and shouldn't matter to me what others think of me. Knowing this, I found it so much easier to have the courage to step out of my comfort zone more. It felt as if I had been carrying around a backpack filled with rocks, and I was finally able to take it off. I knew that I had found the lock and the key fit perfectly.

The lock clicked open, and I escaped. Instead of running from my problems, I was finally able to face them. Although it seemed scary and daunting, I'm so glad that I was eventually able to do it. I was finally given the courage that I didn't even know I needed. Melody really changed my outlook on life. I realized that trying, even if I fail, is better than not trying at all.

Sincerely,
Mayli Yoder

Dear Sharon Draper,

I saw that one person in the hallway. I saw the way they made weird sounds and looked a little different than I did. Whenever I saw that kid, I would turn my head and ignore him. I would act like I didn't see him. I felt bad, so I just acted like he wasn't there. At the time, I thought that this was okay and not a big deal. Now that I have read your book *Out of My Mind*, I have a very different outlook on this student and people with disabilities in general.

Your book taught me so much about people with disabilities. One thing that I never knew is that some people with disabilities could be really smart, but they can't show it. Some can't speak or write. Like Melody, they can have thousands of thoughts and emotions that they want to express. They have so much to say, if only they could say it.

Another thing I learned is that only certain people can bring things out of us. Everyone can use a Mrs. V in their life. Someone to push them because they believe in you, and help you express yourself. If it wasn't for Mrs. V, Melody would've been stuck inside herself for a long time. She never would've been treated normally.

Melody had to learn to believe in herself. She had to show her parents that she was smarter than they knew. I learned to believe in myself.

The most important thing that I learned from *Out of My Mind* is to say hello. Now, when I see someone, I acknowledge them. Whether that's by saying hello or just a simple smile, I know it makes a difference. I now know what it's like to feel invisible, so I smile.

Before I read your book, I thought people with disabilities couldn't think like we can. I thought that they didn't have real thoughts. Now, I know that they might even be smarter than me, they just have a hard time showing it. Before, I felt uncomfortable around people with disabilities. I felt bad that I could walk around, talk, and laugh while they were stuck in a wheelchair. Now, I know that I should try to be their friend instead of feeling sorry for them. Thank you for changing my perspective.

With appreciation,
Emma Popp

Dear Sharon Draper,

A couple months ago, I was walking down the school hallway when I noticed a girl in a wheelchair. She needed help getting to class, and she looked sad because no one was helping her. I offered to help, and her heart filled with joy. She had a big, wide smile on her face. I helped her get to class and she was very thankful.

Your book, ***Out of My Mind***, inspired me to think differently about the people around me. The book taught me the importance of always having a good mindset and a positive attitude. It really made me think about how I truly don't know what others are going through. Some may look completely normal from the outside but be hurt on the inside. Others may appear different from what we consider normal on the outside but have thoughts and feelings just like anyone else.

An example from ***Out of My Mind*** is Melody. On the outside, people see a disabled girl in a wheelchair who is unable to speak, eat on her own, or even go to the bathroom by herself. But on the inside, Melody is a bright, very smart, kind, caring kid. Other students on Melody's Whiz Quiz team made fun of her. Claire was especially mean by leaving her out of the group, calling her names, and making fun of the way she looked. This really hurt Melody's feelings. Also, when the group left Melody and her family at the airport and didn't invite them to breakfast, this was also hurtful.

Out of My Mind inspired me to think differently about others. It was a good reminder that we should never judge people by how they look, but how they act and treat others. ***Out of My Mind*** could help other people like how it helped me. If people read the book, it could change the world by changing the way people think about their peers around them. ***Out of My Mind*** could inspire people to treat others with kindness. It could also be used to help spread positivity around the world. In the future, I will be sure to think of this book when I see someone that needs help, especially someone with a disability. I will be more intentional with my actions, and my words, and offer to help those in need.

Sincerely,
Katy Horton

Dear Sharon Draper,

I was a ten-year-old girl in fifth grade, leaning back, slumped in a cold, metal chair listening carefully to my teacher read a small baby blue book with the image of a tiny orange goldfish leaping out of a small bowl. I had just returned from recess, so my heart was pounding from the outside activities. The mellow tone of the large room relaxed me as my teacher skimmed through the weightless pages. I am fourteen years old now. I have read the same story from elementary three more times, each time learning and growing. Reading the novel shaped me to who I am and who I want to be. I understand the character's everlasting struggle and how she faced those conflicts. Your book *Out of My Mind* is the reason I strive to face my struggles.

I listened to the story first but reading it myself was different. I could place myself into the story while reading and feel the emotions of Melody. I was moved by her deep thoughts and how she understood that she could never be able to express those thoughts to her family, friends, and teachers because they would never understand. The people around her doubted her intelligence just because of her disability. While reading the parts when her mom or teachers talked to her as if she were a toddler, I was irritated and furious. I don't know how she could stand it. Melody's neighbor and father never doubted her and pushed her to be self-sufficient. They taught her new words every day, to build her knowledge. I surround myself with people that help push me just like Melody's. My parents, friends, and teachers support me and taught me the majority of what I know.

My mindset on the world around me changed. I started becoming more aware of the feelings of the people around me. Not only if they had a disability but even if they were just going through a tough time. Reading *Out of My Mind* I wanted so badly to help Melody and be there for her because I understood now what she was going through. I remind myself how I felt reading your book and use that to help others. It satisfied me that I could make someone smile by just talking with them about what is happening in their life. I took Melody's neighbor and father as a guide to how I should support those around me. For example, in the beginning of the book when her father buys her a stuffed cat, he hands it to her several times, but she can never get a grasp on it. Her father held out the toy for her to touch as a solution. He believed in her and didn't give

up on her. This made me realize that I should not only support the people around me mentally, but to help them as well.

Every day I aspire to be as tough as Melody was. She never lost hope. She never stopped wanting to learn and continued to improve her knowledge and learn new subjects. Her willingness to earn respect inspires me. I understand I will never have the same drawbacks that she had, but what I can do I should work hard for. For example, I play high school soccer in the fall. When I'm on the field with girls that are three years older than me, it's hard to win their respect. I am undermined because of my size, and they think I cannot be as tough as them. I had to prove myself to them, just like Melody did. I was told that I would never play on varsity. I trained every day during the summer, and for what, to play on JV? I reminded myself of Melody and her determination to be on the trivia competition team. I took that determination and showcased it on the field. I've started every varsity game and played most of these games all the way through. I will continue to have that same mentality in all that I do.

I've read countless books throughout my life. However, I cannot seem to push away one specific story. A small baby blue book with the image of a tiny orange goldfish leaping out of a small round bowl. I remember turning the weightless pages and being sucked into the plot of the story. A book with such remarkable writing that I read it four times. Your book ***Out of My Mind*** inspired me as a young girl and continues to keep inspiring every day. I've grown so much in the past years and this story has greatly motivated me to achieve my goals.

Sincerely,
Bethany Loveless

Dear Ginny Rorby,

I didn't understand. I wanted to understand, but I didn't, I couldn't. How could I? Our worlds were so similar, yet so different. Like a strawberry and a kiwi. Both fruits, but in a way, almost polar opposites. One is bright and colorful. The other has a brown colored outermost layer, but as it's cut open it exposes even more than what you see on the outside. He was a kiwi, but I couldn't open him up to see the bright green fruit and ink seeds on the interior. I wanted more. The day I picked up your book, *How to Speak Dolphin*, my whole perspective changed. Finally, for the first time maybe I could understand.

My childhood best friend, Ann, was my favorite person to be around at that time. I was always at her house. We would play games like Just Dance or play Barbies in her room. One time we even built a fort and devoured all the string cheese in the house. Her family was different though. Her brother, Evan, has autism. Evan's words are inaudible, he throws tantrums, and refuses to do what is asked. Evan is the sweetest, most caring boy you could ever meet, though. He has always made an effort to make sure you receive what you ask for. Ann and Evan always fight, like normal siblings do. His family treats him as if he has no disability at all. His parents are amazing people. His dad is a policeman, and his mom is a special education teacher. They help Evan as much as they can and taught him ASL. Just like Adam in the book he learned basics like eating and drinking.

Evan loves sports. He watches baseball, football, soccer, and even bowling. His favorites were baseball and bowling, and that's where he found his outlet. When he is bowling, he listens, never throws tantrums, and tries to communicate to the best of his abilities. I thought to myself, he never is this well-behaved. He's never this eager to learn and listen. Why is he like this only when playing, or being around sports? I never understood why. He later got into baseball and ran track. Baseball soon became his passion. He met many amazing people through this sport, and even has a field named after him. I saw Adam in him through these times. Now after reading the book, I could see that sports were Evan's dolphins. Where Evan felt understood, and love surrounded him. His sister Ann stands behind him throughout every challenge Evan faces, but still manages to have an amazing relationship with her friends, unlike

Lily. Ann is a tremendous student and does well in school. Once again, she differs from Lily. Lily would skip school and sneak to the park or by the docks, but Ann was a very hard worker, and never gave up. She needed help along the way but wasn't afraid to ask for it.

In the book on page 46-47 it states, "He even holds his arms up so I can put on his T-shirt, and he lets me take his hand as we walk to the dock." To me this shows that Adam had a breakthrough. The dolphins made Adam content, but also feel safe. That's how Evan feels around sports. He gives you a glimpse of his world just for a minute. I didn't understand that world at the time, but when I started reading your book I started to understand. I came across your book during Book Fair at my school. Your book was the only one I had enough money for. During the summer, I decided to pick it up and read it. I made an immediate connection with it. After this book I finally understood why Evan acts the way he does. I learned why sports have such a major impact on him, and I finally understood his world. I never thought that a book I picked out for no good reason would have such a huge impact on my life.

The boy who was a kiwi, the boy I never understood. I could finally see the vivid green inside, and the ink seeds. The joy that sports bring us is one thing that relates us and brings us together. It has changed both of our lives, but in such different ways. We continue to watch sports with one another and make appearances at games together. Ultimately the book changed my views not only with him, but also other people who have autism. It showed me that although at first, we might not appear alike, we have to get to know the inside. Because if we do, we find we have so much more in similarities than you would originally think.

Sincerely,
Hannah Moore

Let's Talk About...

**LIVING THROUGH A
PANDEMIC**

COVID-19

Wearing a Mask

Lock Downs

Honorable Mention – Level One

Elle Erickson
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville
Letter to Chris Colfer / Author of *The Land of Stories*

Dear Chris Colfer,

I used to think that books were annoying. Reading used to only frustrate me because it felt like a chore. I did not have an appreciation for reading because I didn't see any value in it, other than complying with what my teachers asked of me. When reading assignments, I would get distracted by my thoughts. Reading *The Land of Stories* completely changed my perspective on books and situations in life.

The Land of Stories immediately caught my attention at a local bookstore where it was prominently displayed and had illustrations that piqued my curiosity. The castles, the gingerbread house, and two children falling from the sky made me wonder about what adventures were inside. Once I began reading, I found that I could relate to each character. Conner did not care for reading at first, but, like me, that eventually changed. Alex's character strives to do her best in and outside of school. I try to be like Alex in life, but I am not always perfect. Conner's character reminds me that I should try my best and I don't always have to be perfect. Conner's character was the most relatable and this made the book especially fun for me to read.

I connected with the characters so much that I got emotional at times. If I had a wish and it was taken away, like what happened to Alex and Conner, I would feel enraged and sad. I would not feel sad for the person who took it away. After reading the book, however, I looked at the situation from a different perspective and understood why the thief was so desperate to have that one wish. Your book taught me that even the meanest people have background stories, and if I walked a mile in their shoes, maybe I would feel the same way as them. Your book helped teach me the importance of having empathy towards others.

A world where classic characters from fairytales are real would be terrifying and thrilling at the same time. While reading, I would think about the consequences of each character's actions. If certain events did not occur, would it change the outcome of the story? I now think more carefully about my actions and words before I take action because this may affect the outcome of my day or someone else's day or situation. Alex and Connor were placed in many inconvenient situations. They

had to think about how their decision would affect their predicament and alliances.

The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed many constraints upon everyone. I miss seeing my friends and family, especially during the holidays. When Alex and Conner traveled to different lands and were separated from their family, it was easy for me to relate to this. They faced each challenge with resiliency; they looked for the positive aspects of each situation that they face. Even though life has its ups and downs, there is usually a good life lesson that can be found in almost any circumstance. I realize that I can choose how I approach challenges in my life, just like Conner and Alex do in your book. I look ahead with more optimism now. I am grateful for what I have because I know that other people may not be as fortunate. Your book has positively impacted the way I think about reading and how I handle challenges in my life.

Your book helped me to understand the importance of looking on the bright side of life and about having empathy for others. I have a greater appreciation of literature now. When faced with similar problems like the ones that Alex and Connor encountered in the book, I do so with optimism and a positive attitude. Tomorrow will always present another opportunity for things to become better. Thank you for writing ***The Land of Stories***.

Sincerely,
Elle Erickson

Dear Emily Ley,

When I read ***Grace, Not Perfection***, it felt like you were talking to me. It has really helped me organize my life. I'm just one of many younger girls that have read this book, and it has really moved me as a reader. You have helped remind me that it doesn't matter how you look on the outside as long as you are kind on the inside! The book has also helped me embrace more of who I am, because on the inside I'm super energetic and on the outside I'm really quiet. Moreover, it has helped me be more social in life and carry on conversations! I have become all around more confident in myself.

My biggest takeaway from your book was how much it has helped me stay organized. For example, organizing and setting out your stuff the night before you have school. With our current hybrid schedule, it really helps me keep my area tidy while I work. It helps me focus a lot better and I'm not so stressed because I have a bigger workspace that isn't messy. Now, I have a habit of cleaning up every night before I go to bed so I can get more rest in the morning!

Your book has also made me be more joyful throughout this tough year by reminding me to always look on the bright side of things. For example, I appreciate being with my family more than ever, because every moment counts in life. Moreover, it has helped me with my stress over the past few months with COVID-19 by making me relax and have a plan for the day, so it isn't so jam-packed. Furthermore, it has helped me be grateful for this year, even though it hasn't been what we all thought it would be. While it has been pretty boring with quarantine, it will likely be one of the most memorable years of my life.

When I read ***Grace, Not Perfection***, it felt like you were talking to me. It has helped me look on the bright side and be more organized in life. It has given me great ideas to help out my parents around the house. It reminds me that everything will be ok even if something goes wrong. Thank you for writing this book, it has really inspired me in life, and it will really help me in the long run!

Sincerely,
Graci Cleveland

Dear O.T Nelson,

I would have never imagined that something I read in a book would someday parallel with reality. However, I find ***The Girl Who Owned a City*** extremely relevant to today's world. ***The Girl Who Owned a City*** influenced how I think about humanity and personal relationships.

The novel connected the fatal virus with COVID-19. Civilians were unable to leave their homes and go about their everyday business. People today are extremely cautious of traveling outdoors, especially without a mask to prevent coronavirus infection. In addition, many are dying. Due to the virus, I have not been able to see my grandparents in many months, or even meet my new baby cousins. When the children were separated from their parents, I was able to relate to the characters.

This astounding book provokes thought about how things can change instantly. In the book, the whole world was completely normal until it got turned upside-down by a devastating disease. The plot of the book was strangely comforting because the characters are in a very difficult situation like us, the readers. We should all be grateful for what we have because many are going through hard times across the world. In the book all the children's parents and older loved ones have died. This is extremely hard. It also makes me think differently about what I can do. If all the kids in the book can survive by themselves, then I can too.

I learned a lot about humanity and personal relationships. In ***The Girl Who Owned a City***, there are countless gangs that stole from and hurt anyone that had access to things like food. That adjusted my perspective on what people will do to bring others down to get what they need. The personal relationships in this book also made me think about the good people in the world. Lisa did so many amazing things to help people and provide for them. This novel made me think about how today we can be leaders and how we can all make a change. It is amazing how people can be so kind in the face of terrible times. Similar to uncovering valuable hidden treasures, your novel has unlocked my mind to a new perspective of thought. This title is relevant to today's world due to the current situation that everyone is facing through together.

Sincerely,
Samar M. Atmar

Dear Jenny Downham,

All I remember years after confining myself to the pages of your novel *Before I Die* was one thing – the emotion I felt throughout the entirety of the book. I forgot the specific events in between, but to this very day, I still remember how much it inspired me to appreciate my life. When rereading the book in my senior year of high school, I found myself looking at my current situation differently and imagining how lucky I am to have loving friends and family. As COVID-19 has ruined 2020 and my hopes of how I would experience my senior year, I became fixated on how terrible my predicament was. My appreciation for small things such as playing with my little brother, drinking hot chocolate on a snowy evening, or my ability to properly function on a day-to-day basis, was degraded. Gradually, my love for the things I had from the comfort of my living room was subdued by the hate I had for the things that I didn't have. This book reminded me of the beauty which surrounds me every day and brought me to realize how there will be always something to cherish in life.

What separates *Before I Die* from any other book I've read about death is the raw emotion captured within almost every scene. You developed this by incorporating Tessa's recollection of childhood memories, her struggle to make the best of what little time she had left, and the love that surrounded her. While I had not been diagnosed with lymphoblastic leukemia, I found myself immersed in her position and contemplating the difficulty of accepting death at my age. This is mostly because I related to her relationships with loved ones.

Every time she mentioned her brother Cal, my brother's loveable brown eyes and fluffy hair took his place. Instead of picturing Tessa's father lifting her up on his shoulders when she was younger, I recalled memories of my father hoisting my younger self upon his shoulders as I giggled and squirmed. You included readers not only in Tessa's acceptance of death but her family's recognition as well. This was a gut-wrenching process as I pictured my father doing the same as Tessa's father did, not losing hope of finding a cure until the very end. The similarities I found within her family relationships to my own made the novel even more surreal. I began to look back on my childhood memories fondly and realize how much I've neglected my family's love recently.

While Tessa's death was expected, the way you conveyed her last moments were not. As Tessa slowly became unresponsive to her loved ones, her thoughts were more fragmented and reflected on the simple joys life brings. It was hard for me as a reader to let go of Tessa's character and understand how teenagers die like this from cancer each year. The mindset and strength it must take to endure the truth of how short life will be is harsh on anybody, especially on a teenager. While I had forgotten specific scenes present in the novel from when I first read it in middle school, I didn't forget Cal's goodbye. It was the most moving dialogue I've ever read. "Bye, Tess. Haunt me if you like. I don't mind," said Cal to Tessa in her last moments. This drove me to tears as it was Cal's way of accepting Tessa leaving – except I replaced Cal with my brother. Before Tessa was in this state, she had joked with Cal about haunting him and he declined the idea. I always joke around with my brother and our relationship usually consists of enjoying our mutual ridiculousness in the height of terrible situations. By revisiting the inside joke in his last words to his sister, it was a sad moment that included a touch of humor and reminded me so much of my brother.

Through every moment Tessa lived in her last days, I eagerly followed her in times of love and pain. It was beautiful. Somehow you were able to capture the pure happiness of breathing and the unbreakable bond amongst family. Although COVID-19 took away my senior year and the moments I could've had with friends, it didn't take away the memories of my family and the love we share. Thank you for dedicating your time to expressing the trials of death in order to emphasize the transcendent journey life allows in its imperfectness. I wish you health and the enjoyment of life.

Sincerely,
Lauren Kelley

Honorable Mention – Level Two

Aviya Melrose
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis
Letter to Jerry Craft / Author of **New Kid**

Dear Jerry Craft,

Throughout life, you have to adapt to change, though it may be hard to accept. Life goes by fast and can change in the blink of an eye. You can look at a picture of yourself and at that moment think, *that's who I am*. Then five years pass; you look back at that same picture and realize how much you have changed – whether it be your appearance, your life, your personality, or the way you think. Your book **New Kid** demonstrates the idea of adapting to change. Just like Jordan, I have learned to adapt to change.

This year, 2020, has been full of huge experiences for everyone throughout the world. The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, which has become a pandemic, has caused major changes in the world, which might never return to “normal.” Jordan had to experience a huge change in his life. Instead of going to the art school of his dreams, he was sent to a prestigious private school where he knew no one and was a part of the minority. Though this experience was a hard cultural shock for Jordan, he had to learn to embrace it. Due to COVID-19, many lives have been lost, our society has completely been reshaped, people wear masks all the time, and they can't be near others, including their loved ones. These are all truly drastic changes that people have had to go through. Though it is crazy, and the effects are tremendously horrible, there are still ways people try to find the silver lining.

Due to the virus, my school has recently gone all virtual. I am not able to see my friends, interact with people, and it is much harder to learn online rather than present in a classroom. To make matters worse, this is my last year before going into high school, and I would like to enjoy it. To cope with all these changes, I have had to really push myself into believing that everything happens for a reason. Maybe this virtual experience will turn into a good thing. I can have a mild break from school, get more rest, spend time with my family, and work on self-improvement. My possibilities are endless, and this unpleasant experience is the cause of it.

Jordan also saw the light in his situation; he tried to be positive, make friends, and even help others who he barely knew. When switching to

his new school, it was hard for Jordan to make new friends and fit in. He had already made connections with people in his neighborhood and old school. Now he had to do that all over again. I know that Jordan had to experience and cope with a lot, while also trying to stay true to himself. Without adapting to change, none of that would be possible. I want to make this year one to remember in a positive way, but this is hard. Everyone around me feels down, demotivated, and hopeless; that isn't the way someone should live their life. I have tried to see the benefits of the situation, to take the negative change and turn it into something positive. Especially during these circumstances, I feel like myself and everyone could learn something from Jordan.

Your book has taught me many things. Even with the hardships of racial prejudice at Jordan's new school, he was still able to adapt and stand up to the change. I have learned that accepting change is good not only for you, but the people around you. Thank you for helping me really realize that though changes may always be occurring, the best way forward is to accept, learn from, and adapt to them. If I do that, I will live a successful, happy, and healthy life.

With gratitude,
Aviya Melrose

Arwyn Tian
Central Middle School, Columbus

Letter to Rachael Lippencott, Mikki Daughtry, and Tobias Iaconis /
Authors of ***Five Feet Apart***

Dear Rachael Lippencott, Mikki Daughtry, and Tobias Iaconis,

I sometimes forget masks existed before COVID. I barely even knew social distancing was a thing. I knew nothing of air-borne diseases. After reading your novel, I was surprised to find these three things mentioned many times. Sometimes it takes being put in someone else's shoes to understand completely what they're going through. After reading your book during the pandemic we're currently in I was reminded that temporary things in some people's lives are what other people go through every day in their own life.

Empathizing to understand other people is something I forget to do a lot. As Stella and Will's love for each other grew, their distance had to grow as well. Right now, it's important to keep a distance from our loved ones. Before the pandemic, I most likely wouldn't have understood Stella and Will's point of view as much as I do now. I probably thought it wasn't that big of a deal and that they were overreacting. However, now I understand how hard it is. I understand that what they went through is a million times worse than my own experience.

Stella meeting Will for the first time is also a good example of judging before knowing. At first, she thought he was ignorant and unappreciative. As she gets to know him though, it's clear he's misunderstood and not what she thought. He's caring, thoughtful, and sweet. He sometimes crosses boundaries but realizes his mistakes and tries to make them better. He feels like there is no meaning to life as we're all going to die at some point.

As life continues, I will try to remember to try to understand things that I cannot understand without knowing people's situations. It is a tough thing to do but it is clear now that it changes how I look at strangers. Before I might have looked at someone and made the conclusion that their life was terrible because of their own mistakes. Now I will look at someone and remember that there are millions of possibilities that might have ended in how they live. Thank you for reminding me to do that. To empathize. To not judge before fully understanding. To imagine what it would be like in other people's shoes.

Sincerely,
Arwyn Tian

Indiana Author Letter Prize

Jack Egan
Notre Dame Catholic School, Michigan City
Letter to Ernie Pyle /
Indiana Author of **“The Death of Captain Waskow”**

Dear Ernie Pyle,

Yesterday I was sitting in my kitchen talking to my dad about a school assignment that I was complaining about completing. My dad asked what the assignment was about? I explained to my dad that I had to write an essay concerning a book, poem, or speech and write to the author about how the piece of literature affected me and my view on the world. Of course, my dad had the bright idea of writing about an author from Indiana. Needless to say, I wasn't very thrilled because I had already started the assignment concerning another author. For the time being I let my father have his way while we looked up famous authors from Indiana. As we scrolled through the many photos of famous authors on the internet, we came along to discover your name on the list. My dad recognized your name amongst all the other Indiana authors. My dad said that you were a war correspondent during WWII. He thought it would be a good idea to learn a little about you and your writings that made you famous enough to stand out on the list. I must admit that neither me nor my father had ever had the opportunity to read any of your writing. We looked up your most famous article.

What came up on the internet was the story **“The Death of Captain Waskow.”** The National Society of Newspaper Columnist selected this passage as “the best American newspaper column of all time.” After discovering this my father and I felt compelled to read the passage.

Of course, Mr. Pyle, I will not go into depth, concerning your story of how Captain Waskow's body was carried by mule down the moonlit trail four days after his death from combat in Italy, on January 10, 1944, for I would like others to read it for themselves. However, I would like to thank you for the telling of Captain Waskow's life and the meaning of his death to those he led into combat. I know it took great courage to write his story because you were willing to risk your own life to tell it. It was beautifully written. It brought tears to my dad's eyes as he read the story to me. My dad stated that “this is why people choose to be writers – it is to bring to life what it is to be human and how to love your fellow man.”

As in your day, today we are also combating difficult times due to a pandemic called COVID-19. By describing Captain Waskow's life and sacrifice so beautifully, you also brought to life all the other men and women who died for the freedom we enjoy today. I am not so sure that the society in which I live today is as willing to sacrifice for others as your generation was so willing to do in your time. Unfortunately, today our society is not even willing to wear a mask to protect others from COVID-19 let alone be willing to be placed on the front lines of a war to protect their freedoms. It is with great sadness that I report to you that many people today are unwilling to wear a mask to protect others from the possibility of dying from COVID-19. I find it sad that so many people today are unwilling to endure an inconvenience of wearing a mask compared to your generation's willingness to sacrifice your life for humanity.

In the end I would like to thank you for your beautiful writing and the ultimate sacrifice you gave towards our country and that of being a journalist. It was extremely special that I got to experience your writing with my father. I also look forward to sharing your story to anyone who has not heard it.

Sincerely with a debt of gratitude,
Jack Egan

Let's Talk About...

IDENTITY

Body Image
Being Yourself
Self-Acceptance

Second Place Winner – Level One

Alaina Sutton
New Palestine Intermediate School, New Palestine
Letter to Alyson Gerber/ Author of **Braced**

Dear Alyson Gerber,

Your book **Braced** has changed the way I think about myself and the way I feel about my back brace for scoliosis. It helped me know that I'm not the only person with scoliosis and not the only one that struggles with it. This also helped me know that you never know what people are struggling with or what medical issues people have. It helped me know to never give up no matter what because things will get better.

Braced makes me appreciate that they have back braces that help avoid surgery. You can wear the brace and have less of a chance of needing surgery. Today we have good technology to help with scoliosis. Sometimes we don't think about what would happen if there weren't advancements like a back braces or x-rays. This book really made me appreciate that I have the choice to wear a back brace.

We don't think about the past and how people with scoliosis got treated. Rachel left in the middle of a soccer game to go get her back checked. They find out she needs a back brace, and she thinks the world is ending. Rachel just thinks about the bad things about her back brace, but never thinks about the good things. She comes to realize that she is fortunate to have these medical treatments. Your book helped me realize that, too.

Your book doesn't just tell the experience of having a back brace, it is also telling you to never give up. **Braced** showed me the experience of someone else having a back brace and that she had a hard time with it, too. It also taught me to always think about the good things you get out of life and that you can't just think about the bad things.

Another lesson that **Braced** taught me is don't be embarrassed over something you can't control. When Rachel first got her back brace, she was scared to even let her best friend know she had to wear it. She invited her best friend Hazel to her house before soccer practice and Rachel rushed to the bathroom to take her brace off, but she couldn't get it off and when Hazel got there Rachel told her that she will be out in a second. Then Rachel falls and Hazel comes in and sees the brace. Rachel was so embarrassed that she started crying like crazy and Hazel

had no clue why and didn't care about the brace. I was embarrassed a little bit about my brace, but your book helped me understand that it is okay not to hide it.

One thing I really liked about your book is all the different characters you added. A lot of the characters wanted to help Rachel and didn't know why she was so embarrassed about her back brace. That made Rachel know that she had the best friends ever who will always be there for her no matter what – even in hard times. This makes me know I have great friends that care about me a lot and don't think differently about me because of my back brace. I think everyone should have a friend like that and that everyone should try to be that friend.

Another thing this book did for me was to inspire me. If Rachel can wear a back brace and live, then I'm sure I can. Rachel really made me know that I can wear my back brace for three years. I know a lot of people go through this, but Rachel's adventure with her back brace really inspired me. It also helped me when Rachel was reading Mia's Ten Reasons Why You Should Love Your Back Brace and some of the things she said I'd never thought about, and she talked about the Curvy Girls. I want to meet people with a back brace and learn their experience – that's exactly what Curvy Girls is.

In conclusion, I definitely feel better about my back brace, and I think everyone with a brace for scoliosis should read **Braced**. It was a very inspiring book and it showed me to not be embarrassed about your medical problems and to know that you never know what someone is going through. Thank you so much for writing this book, it really helped me understand how someone else feels about their back brace and to be grateful that I don't need surgery.

Sincerely,
Alaina Sutton

Dear Chris Colfer,

I have long admired the brave adventurers and daring heroes so gloriously written about in action packed tales, much like *The Land of Stories*. I think this is partly because nothing terribly exciting goes on in my day-to-day living, so reading about characters who take risks and discover new things allows me to live vicariously through them. It turns out that these stories and these characters caused me to realize how I am the complete opposite of these types of characters. I strictly follow all rules, I always choose safe options, and I never put myself in danger. These traits may seem completely acceptable and honorable, but my own characteristics, much to my dismay, couldn't be more unlike Connor and Alex, whom I adore.

Connor is the comical, brave adventurer while Alex is the bright leader. I, on the other hand, would be the boring character, whose only notable attributes would be following the rules and getting good grades. Obviously, I can't save the fairytale world from evil, but I also can't realistically have adventures in my own life. That's just not who I am. That realization may sound pathetic, but it actually benefited me. I learned humility and acceptance because of how different I am from your wonderful characters. It taught me that even though I may not be as clever, courageous, or creative as the fictional characters I looked up to, I have my own strengths and my own way of tackling obstacles. This also gave me immense confidence and helped me think through some tough times.

Over the years I became much more comfortable with the traits I have and much more confident in who I am. These thoughts deeply embedded themselves in my mind and guided me through moments where I wasn't feeling my best. When I was in eighth grade, I was thriving. I had many great friends, I enjoyed school, I was considered to be popular, and I genuinely loved life. When I entered high school, however, a lot of things went downhill. I lost touch with many of my life-long friends, I struggled with body image, and I hated school. During this time, mental breakdowns became a regular occurrence, and every morning I would wake up dreading the day and all these problems.

Despite all the negativity and challenges, a thought in the back of my mind kept trying to get my attention. When I finally gave in to the

persistent thought, it reminded me of the Bailey twins. They endured tremendous difficulties in both worlds, but eventually grew and flourished as they became sure of themselves. This reminded me of my own problems at school and in life, but it eventually led me back to the confidence and positivity I once had. I began to gain back the confidence I had lost, and I began to grow again. Once I was back in that positive, loving state of mind, I discovered new, genuine friends, areas of school I enjoyed, and my identity. I owe this, in part, to you. I still love reading about the treacherous escapades of witty and boisterous characters, but now I have an understanding and appreciation for my own attributes and life as well.

With gratitude,
Olivia Yonkman

Honorable Mention – Level Three

Rachel Bultema
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer
Letter to Becky Albertalli / Author of *The Upside of Unrequited*

Dear Becky Albertalli,

I have so much I want to say to you, but I think you've said it already in *The Upside of Unrequited*. Somehow, you managed to capture me, someone you've never met and managed to wrap me up in a package with a nice little bow. There were pieces of me, elements of myself I've never shown to the world, that I found in this book. By finding the beauty in Molly Peskin-Suso, I was able to find an ember of beauty in myself after I thought the fire had burnt out for good.

Seeing someone else understand the heartache and joy within a different type of family makes me feel understood. I know how Molly feels entirely too well. I know how it feels to feel like the fat on my stomach is a barrier between my heart and everyone else. I understand the feeling of my thighs, being large enough to keep people at an arm's distance.

Many authors before you have tried to write a story like this, but I don't think they've done it as well as you have. It's easy to focus on the image and ignore the feelings swirling below the surface. The elements of doubt, anger, and jealousy swirling around in Molly forced me to confront my feelings when I saw so much of myself in her. I was, and am, sick of having so much doubt crammed into the three-pound mass that controls my thoughts. I'm sick of being so careful.

The Upside of Unrequited found me when I needed it most. Just when the doubt and silent self-loathing began to take over my brain, my friend recommended I read this book because he thought I'd like it. Oh boy, was he right (but don't tell him that, or it'll go to his head). This book isn't a self-help book or a "How to Love Yourself . . . For Dummies," but a piece of me wishes it was. I wish it there was a chapter on "Loving yourself even if you don't make jaws drop." Instead, *The Upside of Unrequited* slapped me across the face and asked, "If you can love Molly, why can't you love yourself?"

Oh, how I wish it was a guidebook. But not as much as I wish it came with a happier ending in which Molly finally realized she was beautiful all along. I wish it ended with Will falling in love with her, telling her

she's beautiful, and Molly saying she knows. I wish it ended with Molly yelling to the world that she's beautiful and doesn't care how the rest of the world sees her.

But it doesn't, and life doesn't end that way either. Part of me wants to scream at you for not giving me this happy ending. You didn't create the traditional "happy ending" because it's not the ending the story needed, and you knew that. It's not the ending Molly deserves, nor the one I do. I don't want the simple, cheesy ending because my story isn't over. Thank you for reigniting the fire inside of me. Thank you for giving me more than a fairytale ending.

With love,
Rachel Bultema

Jaquelin Escobedo
Christel House Academy, Indianapolis
Letter to Cassandra Clare /
Author of *The Mortal Instruments* and *The Infernal Devices*

Dear Cassandra Clare,

“How are you Hispanic? You don’t even know how to dance.” Said by my own classmates, who actually identified as Hispanics as well. They tried to define me before I could even figure it out for myself. In *The Mortal Instruments* and *The Infernal Devices* series, specifically in *City of Glass* and *Clockwork Angel* it gave me a whole new perspective on my identity as a Hispanic.

Ever since I was a little girl in elementary school, people had these expectations of me in my own learning environment. At just the fifth grade when I was learning how to understand *Charlotte’s Web*, I was asked to translate to a new girl who had arrived in my class. The educators at my school pressured me to translate everything we learned in class into Spanish for her. This went on for a quarter of my first semester. One year prior to this I had just got out of my required ELL classes that I had been in for three years. I practiced the English language for years to fit in at my own school. Every time I pushed myself to learn, I strayed further away from society’s standards of what a Hispanic is.

In the span of the next three years, I lost all my friends and my identity as a Hispanic. This is when I started going to my local library and picked up *City of Bones* for the first time. When I read what it was about, I was so intrigued how Clary Fairchild was going to connect to her Shadowhunter blood. Although she is a full-blooded Shadowhunter, she did not grow up the way everyone else did within her race. She had to connect to her birthright as a Shadowhunter to save her mother. Clary was brave and strong willed. Even though she had no training, and can barely understand all the terms and creatures, she still finds a way.

Through all her learning experience in the field, everyone frequently doubts her and tells her what she can and can’t do. In *City of Glass* Jace Wayland says, “You’re a disaster for us, Clary! You’re a mundane, you’ll always be one, you’ll never be a Shadowhunter. You don’t know how to think like we do, think about what’s best for everyone—all you ever think about is yourself!” Throughout the beginning half of *The Mortal Instruments* series everyone consistently tells her she will never be a Shadowhunter as if there is a specific type. Even though this argument

was later resolved and stated that it was not true, it does not change the fact that it was said. Meaning he truly felt that way deep down.

Despite this, Clarissa Adele Fairchild continues to prove that you do not need to abide by stereotypes of Shadowhunters. That it's not the way you grew up but the way it runs in your blood. By the end of *City of Ashes*, she rescues her mother. By the end of *City of Glass*, she helps create a rune that wins the war and awakens her mother by retrieving the Book of the White. *The Infernal Devices* follows Tessa Gray's identity as a shapeshifter. In *Clockwork Angel* you described her loneliness perfectly, in the ways she transforms into others and when she transforms back to what she assumes is her real form. She has this battle with herself about who she is and what she is willing to do to find out.

These series will forever stay in my heart because even though Clary was not raised a Shadowhunter, she will always be one because it runs in her blood. Her courage and bravery to stand up for herself through all the doubt is truly inspiring. That is something I always remind myself of because even though I might not fit into society's standards of being able to dance, being extremely fluent in Spanish and just having different beliefs, it still means that I will always be a Latina. No one can tell me what I am or what I can do.

You have described this self-discovery beautifully and still stay true in what it feels like to be isolated from a society that doesn't understand you. To be trapped in this loop of stereotypes. Thank you, Cassandra Clare for writing books that help me stay true to my identity despite the never-ending doubts.

Sincerely,
Jaquelin Escobedo

Dear Amy Tan,

A land of tigers, delicious food, and cities filled with light – Korea. I've always wondered what the land where my parents grew up was like. Growing up in Indiana, all I got were fleeting snatches in the form of conversational phrases, crackly international calls, and homemade dishes made from what seafood ingredients one can find in a land-locked state. I've always wrestled with my "Double Face;" Korean in appearance, but American in language, the cultures of different generations within me. Your book, *The Joy Luck Club*, helped me come to peace with my "Two Kinds."

In the characters, An-me, Lindo, Suyuan, and Ying-Ying, I could see a reflection of the stories of my parents and others; those who left everything behind for the sake of their children. The courage to plunge into the unknown arising from the strength of their love for their children. Enduring their longing for their home.

Jing-me, Rose, Waverly, and Lena showed me, *me*.

They say knowledge is power, so that was the gift my parents wanted to give to me. My dad told me a story about Two Kinds of fishermen when I was little. One fisherman worked hard all day to provide well for his family. He worked so hard that he left his children tons of fish when he passed from this world. His children were fine while the fish lasted, but when they were all gone, they didn't know what to do for themselves. Another fisherman tirelessly taught his children how to fish even if that meant not having enough some days. When he passed, he could rest assured knowing that his children would be in good hands. While I didn't learn how to fish, my parents taught me other things.

Like Jing-me and Waverly, I had my own piano and chess. My parents taught me math and science; the arguments began soon after. I too learned the art of invisible strength, the one for winning arguments. When Waverly raced down the street, dashing between people away from her mother, I felt my own feelings. That wanting to get away from all those expectations, until we both realized the alleys contain no escape each time. How could it be that the people we loved the most, we could hurt the most? Every single time they just couldn't understand.

We say, “You don’t understand,” or “In my culture, it means something else.” Communication can be so magical and intuitive or make a person feel the most helpless.

I have been to South Korea once, a couple of years back. Even though everyone looked like me, I felt like an imposter, my Double Face. Whenever I spoke, the words died on my tongue. I didn’t know the word or people would smile to my face but then whisper behind my back about all my mistakes. On the other hand, sometimes I wouldn’t know the English word even though the Korean word was perfect in a situation, or I would worry my phrase was weird. Always Half and Half, master of none.

Your book, *The Joy Luck Club*, made me understand. I didn’t have to choose anymore. I learned to embrace my Half and Half. I can be both smart and unique. Dead center in the box and simultaneously in the clouds, thousands of meters out of the box. My Double Face gives me the blessing of knowing two rich cultures. I know two ways to express my words.

And most importantly, in the end, even if I couldn’t communicate in either English or Korean, I would still have the language of family. My parents’ gift of knowledge is further proof of their sacrifice to me. Knowing that while our fighting hurts, it will guarantee my success – my secret fishing method. I can understand this gift to me using the language of family. My grandmother still knows I love her even if we only exchange hellos every once in a while. In the end, all is the same through this language. I know that now. That was the powerful gift *The Joy Luck Club* gave to me. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Grace Choi

Let's Talk About...

RACE IN AMERICA

Racism

Black Lives Matter

White Privilege

Dear India Hill Brown,

Your book *The Forgotten Girl* will always be one of my favorite books. I thought I was going to read just another scary ghost story that would have me sleeping under a blanket at night. I could relate to the main character, Iris, because she was on a step dance team just trying to fit in. I am a Junior Colts Cheerleader who was trying to fit in during my first year. I had no idea that this story would bring racial emotions that I never knew I had. This past year, 2020, I watched protests occurring around the world. Black Lives Matter groups were in the streets protesting for equal justice, respect, and dignity under the law, as is given to white Americans. Your book is about a young Black girl who died during a time when Black and white people were kept segregated in life and at death.

I instantly related to Iris because I used to be scared of the dark. I would see shadows in the corners of my bedroom that I knew were not there but still scared me. Like Iris, I would have nightmares and sleep with a nightlight on. I now sleep with strings of lights that decorate my bedroom. I do believe in ghosts and feel there are good and bad ones. Iris and her best friend Daniel snuck out of their houses at night to play in the fresh snow that had fallen earlier that day. Iris's mom and dad would not let her play in the snow earlier in the day. Daniel, whose father had recently passed away, was being raised by his mom and Grandma Suga. Grandma Suga did not want Daniel to play in the snow because of a weird superstition she had. Grandma Suga would state "The snow preys on children." After sneaking out that night and having snowball fights, Iris decides to lay down to make a snow angel. She soon uncovers a grave with the written name of Avery Moore. Iris begins to get visited by the ghost of Avery Moore and discovers the ghost is angry about being forgotten. Avery wants Iris to become her best friend because she uncovered her grave. Avery Moore wants to lure Iris to the gravesite to kill her, believing when her coat is found the town would see her grave and remodel her gravesite, no longer forgotten. Daniel would never believe her about this ghost but decides to help Iris research the story behind this grave for a school project.

Iris and Daniel discover that cemeteries were segregated by race and the upkeep was done by their own race of people. I recalled a story

that my Grandma Mimi told me when she attended my Paw Paw's family reunion in Lenora, North Carolina. They visited the plantation Paw Paw's ancestors worked on as slaves. The plantation had two cemeteries, one for the Black slaves and the other for the white plantation owner's family. However, the slave cemetery was mass graves with no names, just thousands of rocks to mark the dead. My Grandma Mimi shed tears on learning this. Iris and Daniel discovered their school was built in 1950 by a pond and was a segregated school. In 1955 the school became desegregated and nine Black children were allowed to attend. It took a lot of protests and demonstrations for and against, but desegregation won out. Avery Moore was one of the nine Black students to attend the school. Daniel discovered that his Grandma Suga was also part of the first nine Black children allowed to attend the school. Daniel discovers that Grandma Suga and Avery Moore were best friends growing up. During a blizzard Avery Moore and Grandma Suga got into a horrific argument – it would be their last. Avery Moore died in the blizzard and her family blamed Grandma Suga and her family for her death. Grandma Suga blamed herself the most and that was why she did not like Daniel playing in the snow because “the snow preys on children.”

Iris needed to get Avery to leave her alone and stop trying to kill her, in which she almost succeeded by drowning her in the pond by their school. Daniel enlisted his Grandma Suga to go confront the ghost of her best friend so that Iris would not be killed, and Avery Moore could cross over in peace. Although Grandma Suga was scared, she summoned up her dear best friend by creating a snow angel over the grave of Avery Moore. Grandma Suga was shaken once her best friend's ghost appeared. She let Avery Moore know how nice and kind she was as a child and that she never was forgotten. She also apologized for the argument that they had, and Avery became apologetic too and could now rest in peace.

Your book has historical recollections of a time where races were segregated in all aspects of life. Reading this book has shown me historically and culturally how relevant it is today. The legacy of racism is still a part of our society. However, I have hope in my generation we can make it go away. The Black Lives Matter movement has people of all races fighting for equality for all. Although I thought your book was just another scary ghost story, I learned the following: never judge a book by its cover because you do not know what's inside. The same lesson pertains to people too. I will carry this lesson throughout my entire life. Thank you for writing such a wonderful book.

Sincerely,
Alanah Franklin

Dear Nic Stone,

I was once told that if I didn't know my past, I wouldn't have a future. I always thought I already knew my past, but I clearly didn't until I read your book, *Dear Martin*. The past was never important to me, but when I saw how Justyce wrote letters to someone he thought was in the past, Martin Luther King Jr., and changed the future, I changed.

Before I read your book, I was just playing video games and I didn't care about anything. Then I read your book. When Manny got killed by the brutal police officer, I was infuriated. It pushed me to take a stand for all the racial problems in the world, so I went protesting for not just civil rights, for African American lives. Your book *Dear Martin* helped me stand up for those who lose their lives every day to police brutality. Whatever I'm doing, playing, thinking, eating, or drinking, I think to myself that some people wouldn't be able to do what I am doing due to their lives being taken away. Your book also helped me know that I should look into things before turning my device on and going back to playing video games.

Since reading your book, I've become less lazy. I'm starting to go out, play basketball, and other things. My grades have improved. I have started looking more into history beyond slavery. For instance, I celebrated Kwanzaa this past year, which is something I have never done before. I also know my purpose, which isn't a pro-athlete, an entrepreneur, or a comedian. It's what I know I have to do in life, like giving food or shelter to the homeless. And now I know my past, and my future.

Sincerely,
Jameson Harney

Honorable Mention – Level Two

Anushka Damle
Central Middle School, Columbus
Letter to Sharon Draper/ Author of *Blended*

Dear Sharon Draper,

This year, 2020, has been a whirlwind year for many, and so many things have occurred that it is hard to keep track. However, one of the largest of these events were the Black Lives Matter protests and the movement itself. In the beginning, I didn't think much of them, mainly because they didn't directly affect me, and also because they weren't occurring in my city. However, after reading your book *Blended*, I gained a new perspective on the events regarding racial injustice going on in our world today.

Reading *Blended* made me rethink my surroundings. In the book, you wrote about how many Black people have to dress much nicer than their peers, just to seem "safe." However, that shouldn't be needed. Seeing all of this happen, especially in America, shook me. These acts of injustice are going against the very motto of the country, *E Pluribus Unum*, which means "out of many, one." Also, one of the most significant monuments in the country, the Statue of Liberty, stands for liberty and equal opportunity for all. Even in the book there was police violence, which shouldn't happen anywhere; however, it happens here in real life as well.

The book centered around a biracial girl, whose father was Black, but even she was subject to injustice, and was shot at near the end of the book. She and her friend, who was Black, were ushered out of a high-end store by security, even though they were just browsing. It is sad that people are segregated just because of the color of their skin. Also, this year in social studies, we learned that when the Founding Fathers first created the Declaration of Independence, they declared all men to be equal. However, many of them, including Thomas Jefferson who was the main writer, owned slaves.

The novel also revolved around her problems in her family and having two divorced parents. I am very grateful that my family is intact, and we are all very close. However, reading this book gave me insight about how not everyone's family is like mine. I used to view divorced families as incomplete, or broken, but after reading the book I realize that, even though those families are different than mine, that doesn't

mean that there is anything wrong with them. Their normal just doesn't look like mine.

After reading your book, I became more aware of some things happening around me that I previously felt indifferent toward. I started to better understand the racial injustice going on around me. This book also changed some of my views about divorced families. This book was very eye opening for me and helped me see the world with a different lens.

Sincerely,
Anushka Damle

Dear Angie Thomas,

Your book *The Hate U Give*, has changed the way I look at people, specifically people of different races. It has made me understand that privileged white people treat Black people awfully. Another thing it has given me is confidence. When I read this book it was right at the end of the school year, so I had a lot of free time. I loved this book so much, one day I read half of it.

The Hate U Give gave me so many emotions during this book. I cried, I laughed, I was angry, I felt everything. The part that made me the maddest was when Hailey had no sorrowness for Khalil when everyone but Star went around the school protesting not to be in school. I don't think they should have protested because they were all white and didn't know Khalil.

When Khalil got shot by a white officer everyone in the entire Black community knew it was racism. When the riots and protests were going on back in May and June, all of my thoughts led to this book. Some of the same events that happened in the book happened in real life. Khalil had been shot by a white police officer when he went to grab a hairbrush and make sure that Star was ok. Seconds later he was shot and killed.

In George Floyd's case the police officer had his knee on his neck while he cried out, "I can't breathe!" That was probably one of the scariest moments in my life. I cried myself to sleep every night.

A part I connected to was in the very beginning, when Star was at a party, and she only knew one person. The party had a bunch of people from Garden Heights. She stuck to Kenya the whole time until Kenya saw one of her friends and left her. I have gone to a birthday party, and I only knew the birthday girl. I usually have to stick to myself. I'm usually super shy, so this part I really connected to. I'm the type of person who comes off super shy but once you get to know me, I am kind of crazy.

A little bit towards the end of the book when Star was out protesting at nighttime even though she wasn't supposed to, she still got the word out.

She still made a point. That part gave me confidence that I can make a change even though I'm only eleven. In the book to me it had a lot of stereotypes. I feel like in reality people still do that. The two that I thought were the most common were that white people are "rich" and Black people are "poor." That is something I want to reach out about and talk to people about.

Before I read this book, I didn't realize how much racial inequality there is in the world. I am lucky enough I don't experience any of this in my life. To have lost your best friend, your son, your nephew, whoever he was to you would be awful. I can't even imagine losing my best friend. I have known her since kindergarten and sometimes I think I take her for granted.

In conclusion this book is probably on the top of my list. I would recommend it to my friends. The book taught me so much about racism and treating people equally.

Sincerely,
Ellie Dawson

Third Place – Level Two

Yashika Mehta
Central Middle School, Columbus
Letter to Jewell Parker Rhodes / Author of ***Ghost Boys***

Dear Jewell Parker Rhodes,

Recently, America has witnessed power and unity through countless protests over the Black Lives Matter movement. Our nation is coming together to confront forms of racism and prejudice by preaching for what is right, for what we have yet to earn, equality. Reading your book ***Ghost Boys*** made me wonder about all the untold stories, silenced voices, and lost people that America has yet to learn about. I began to realize so many people are just coming to learn about the lethal acts of racism taking place in what we so proudly call “a free nation.” Even more horrifying, some people are aware, yet they do nothing about it.

While reading Jerome’s story, I angrily thought about how such an innocent kid’s actions could be misinterpreted as committing a deadly crime. Who decided that someone would be judged based on the color of their skin? Who told the people of America that lighter skin would be considered superior over people of color? The problem isn’t just with the people who carried out racism, but with the people who decided it wasn’t a big enough deal to speak out about.

The names George Floyd and Emmett Till both ring a similar bell, despite coming from different times. These aren’t just any common names, but the names of two people, out of numerous others, who have been murdered in the cold hands of racism. It causes me much pain that a great number of people can take just one glance at someone and decide if they are guilty or not. In a matter of seconds, life or death is decided by the shade of our skin, by the people we are told to trust.

Reading your book ***Ghost Boys*** has considerably impacted the way in which I view our nation. America is made up of people who come from all kinds of backgrounds and ethnicities. But why should we let that change how we treat them? As we continue to advocate for the lives of Blacks, we ought to keep in mind the story of Jerome’s and countless other African Americans mentioned in the book. Equality cannot prevail until all lives matter, which can only be achieved if the lives of all Blacks

are considered to be as important as the lives of others. I have learned that racial justice is not about accepting inequality, but about changing it. And that change starts with us.

Sincerely,
Yashika Mehta

Honorable Mention – Level Three

Sreepadaarchana Munjuluri
Columbus North High School, Columbus
Letter to Gwendolyn Bennett / Author of the poem, **“To a Dark Girl”**

Dear Gwendolyn Bennett,

As much as I wish this was not true, the world is still an awfully ugly place full of corruption, crime, discrimination, and violence. The society I live in is not that much different from the society you lived in, and you inspired me to do something about it. Your poem **“To a Dark Girl”** was written 100 years ago. Yet it is one of the most relevant poems I’ve ever read. At a time when people of color and other oppressed groups are struggling harder than ever to fight discrimination, at a time when people are still being targeted and killed because of the color of their skin, your poem is staggeringly empowering.

I want to share your impact on me in a form I know we both enjoy: a tale. Like you, I’m extremely passionate about social issues. I’m a voracious reader with a ravenous appetite for the news and current events. The only problem was, for a long time, I never knew what to do with that passion.

I laid in bed almost every night, vowing to create change and dreaming of the better world I would help construct. I woke up, clueless about where to start, and stowed that burning desire away in a corner. Looking back, I realize I was afraid; afraid of failure to make an impact and afraid of people’s opinions.

I’m not Black, but I’m Indian, a region amongst many where colorism is still a very current issue. I heard comments like, “She’s pretty, but dark,” and saw ads for skin whitening every summer visiting my family back at home. Because of these experiences, I never realized that colorism was an actual issue, that all skin tones are beautiful, and that people should never be treated differently because of how they look.

Reading your poem was an unforgettable experience. You compared people of color to royalty, commenting, “Something of old forgotten queens/Lurks in the lithe abandon of your walk...” That line shook me, making me realize that there were many queens and kings out there, constantly being put down because of their natural features instead of being appreciated.

I saw that all your works written after 1930 were never published, because people were scared of the influence you wielded through your beautiful writing. This reminded me of the privilege I have today, as a girl that is free to express her thoughts and ideas without her voice being cut off. That was the day I decided to speak up. I decided to start somewhere and take a step, without worrying about the size of that step.

For the first time, I talked to my parents about colorism and racism, and the steps we needed to take against them. It felt like an accomplishment, and I've started my journey towards creating change.

Thank you, Gwendolyn, for showing me that I needed to use my voice.

Thank you,
Sreepadaarchana Munjuluri

Honorable Mention – Level Two

Kara Schmitt
Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg
Letter to Nic Stone / Author of *Dear Martin*

Dear Nic Stone,

Your book made me think of how privileged me and my friends are. *Dear Martin* showed me the racial inequalities that are currently happening in America today and it opened my eyes how racism and ignorance affects real people. Even though the book was not based on a true story, it is based on devastating events and situations that are still happening today in 2020. By writing this book, you helped me learn about these inequalities and helped spread awareness about racism.

Since reading *Dear Martin* I've thought more about "putting myself in other people's shoes" and about how I can show empathy for others. I could not imagine what Justyce went through after the shooting and then losing his best friend because of it, let alone not getting justice for what happened to him. I found myself imagining what I would do, how I would feel, and how I would cope with everything if it was me in these situations. The message that *Dear Martin* taught stuck out more than other books that I have read in the past.

Not only did your book help me show empathy for others, it also helped me learn about racism and how we may not notice it every day even though it continues to be a major problem in society. I realized that people can be racist without really noticing it. For example, Justyce's mom told him that he couldn't date Sara Jane because she is white. Stereotypes and assumptions about people because of the color of their skin have been around for so long, that they are ingrained in people's minds, and they now have these prejudices against an individual who has not done anything wrong. *Dear Martin* taught me that we should not judge others by their skin color, but for who they are as a person.

Nic Stone, your book plays an important role in my life and in how I think. You have opened my eyes to racism and how immensely it affects other people in our world today while helping me understand empathy and applying it to my everyday life. Thank you for writing *Dear Martin* because by doing so, you not only educated me on these issues, but you have also educated hundreds of thousands of people around the world.

With warm regards,
Kara Schmitt

Let's Talk About...

GENDER TOPICS

Gender Equality

Gender Identity

Gender Expression

Sexual Orientation

Dear Manon Rhéaume,

I first found your story about how you were the first woman in the NHL for a school project (I looked up famous girl hockey players). I have a group of girls I play hockey with, and you had to play with only boys, and it just makes me think if you can keep going in spite of all that. . . well, I can too.

I was inspired by your story about being the first and only woman to play in the NHL. I am also a female hockey player and have also faced people laughing at my need to shoot the puck. (It isn't as many as it used to be.) Your story helped me remember to move forward. I have encouraged girls to play hockey and helped start a girls' hockey team in my town, and another reason you inspired me is that you did that multiplied by a lot. I have wanted to play professional hockey for a while now, and your story also inspired me that I can do it.

When reading your story, I kept thinking about how so many people think that girls can't be tough, but there are examples of girls being tough everywhere. I read your story and now I am inspired that even when people say I can't, I know I can. Your story talks about how you wouldn't let anything get in the way of your dream, and I want to be able to do that too.

I may grow up in a time where girls are more accepted in the world of hockey, but there are still people out there who do not think girls can play hockey. I have been asked the questions, "How do weak girls play hockey?" and "Can girls even shoot a hockey puck?" It needs to change. Your story inspired me that it just might be possible. Your story is inspiring to me because girls are not always treated the same as boys. I am motivated by stories, not speech, so your story has helped motivate me.

I was inspired by your story because it is relevant to me and what I do. I love hockey. I do not want to let anyone tell me I can't play hockey. I learned from your story to not give up, no matter what anyone else says. Your story taught me that if I persevere, I will do something great in the world.

Sincerely,
Leah Doig

First Place Winner – Level Three

Badreddine Bouzeraa
Wheeler High School, Valparaiso
Letter to George M. Johnson / Author of *All Boys Aren't Blue*

Dear George M. Johnson,

“My second identity-queer is a journey that I will be on until the day I die, and I honestly believe that. Every day I learn something about myself.” In view of your quote, I began to witness snippets of myself that I did not know before. It was not until I gathered *All Boys Aren't Blue* off my public library's bookshelves that I became knowledgeable and aware of my individuality and differences. It was not until I sat sobbing on my couch that I recognized all these identities that made up who I am. I never had the concept of believing that I was truly lost, yet when I turned the last page of *All Boys Aren't Blue*, my sense of direction was ruined. I was lost and was waiting for someone to find me. In your upbringing in a Black community and realization of your LGBTQ+ characteristics, I found myself. It was a version of myself that society deemed unforgivable, crude, and unacceptable. It was a version that I suppressed until I had no remembrance of ever being part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Identity has meant a lot to me in my life. Growing up as the only Moroccan and Muslim in my grade level and being conscious of the cultural level of importance it holds, is a difficult experience. And with the addition of being culturally different from others, my queerness was a difficult part for me to comprehend. In the first Act of *All Boys Aren't Blue*, your unique storytelling of struggling to find a way to express yourself allowed me to realize that many LGBTQ+ members struggle with the same ordeal. Many, like myself, are taught that there are only two genders and one sexuality. However, there are a plethora of unique orientations. On page 23 of *All Boys Aren't Blue*, you state, “However, I was old enough to know that I would find safety only in the arms of suppression – hiding my true self – because let's face it, kids can be cruel.” Millions in the non-heterosexual orientation continue to suppress themselves, and I beg to question, why must we? Why must we shape our own identity to fit society's understanding of what it means to be queer or identify as a different orientation other than heterosexuality? I shall not be shaping my own identity for society's benefit in the future.

On the next page, you also state, "I became a world-class actor by the age of five, able to blend in with the boys and girls without ever questioning my effeminate nature." Continuously going to school and compelling myself to act and restrain myself forced my mentality to change. I developed a persona that I would use daily to anyone and everyone around me. I was unaware that I had a choice in whether I could truly be myself until I realized people go through hardships that I can't imagine. Anybody can act well, but it takes a certain amount of courage and willpower to confidently pose as one's true self. I think back to my school persona, and I pity the child who constantly had to smile and quell his queerness. Yet now I can become my own person.

Despite my strugglings to repress my true self, I was always seen and continue to be seen as a Muslim. I see myself as a Muslim, first and foremost. My Muslim identity is in the way I talk, the way I act, and even the way I cultivated certain ethical pathways. Yet, even in my own community, I am observed as an unnaturally flamboyant man. This too, resulted in a persona I reserved for my family, and the Muslim community. Despite this, after reading your chapter titled, "Losing Hope," I became fearful of the idea of losing a family member without showing myself, entitled to a facade that others would view as my genuine self. In a way, the loss of your beloved cousin, Hope, has inspired thousands of people to regain their hope. You have allowed me to regain mine, the hope of one day being able to show my family, and my community, what lies beneath their son's mask.

Your book has become a shining beacon of empowerment, Mr. Johnson. Your stories, written in a tone that leaves you wanting more, yet content with chapters ending on such happy notes has inspired me to open my true appearance to others. I will not sit by and watch my life slip through my fingers like countless have before me. No, I will continue to strive to, "Be Bold and Brave and Queer."

Sincerely,
Badreddine Bouzeraa

Dear K.A Holt,

I have always been lucky to have great teachers, parents, and peers. I was born into a white middle class family with a mom and dad that love me to death. There was no choice I could make, or way I was born that could change that. Even when some people at school saw me as less than, it never was anything serious. I've never been beaten or seriously bullied, I have a great support group of friends, and even a girlfriend.

Still, I always felt out of place. It was hard for me to relate to most other girls in the past few years. Always talking about boyfriends and drama, I just never really got it. Sure, I knew what it was like to have a partner, but that was just it. I'm also a girl. Who likes other girls, and boys. I was the word. Gay.

It was always something that just felt like a part of me. Nobody ever used it as a label, and I never even really had a big coming out. It was just always kind of accepted by almost everyone I knew personally. So, I should have nothing to complain about, right? Well, despite being a young gay bisexual, or whatever you want to call it, I hardly saw that part of me being represented. It always felt like something to keep hush about. I didn't know how to talk about the little things that bothered me when it came to that aspect about my life. I was scared to make a big deal out of it. Every time I saw it ever made into a deal at all was when others were making fun of me or when people were protesting over rights.

Your book, *Redwood and Ponytail*, gave me that outlet. All the feelings I didn't know how to describe were summed perfectly in both Tam and Kate. Tam was definitely my external view of life, while Kate's very being embodied my internal struggles in such a perfect way. You finally helped define exactly why I felt so out of place, and I thank you for that.

The main focus of Kate's struggle is not just finding out she is gay but accepting it as a part of her. Acknowledging it and accepting it as a part of her. It has been such a struggle not only finding that in me but accepting it and accepting myself as one whole. Not just normal-me or gay-me, but me-me. You taught me not to be ashamed of my identity, you said the word I didn't even realize I feared!

I know I haven't had it the hardest, and I know my realization isn't as monumental as some, but you really opened my eyes and soul to a part of me I was too scared to come to terms with. So, thank you.

Stand tall,
Marley Hildenbrand

Dear K.A Holt,

When I was told that you would be the author coming to my school, I was interested to learn more about you as a person. The truth is I was not the biggest fan of reading, I never have been, so the author visit wasn't as exciting for me. Little did I know your books were gonna emotionally impact me in ways I would never have imagined. Me and my class read your book *Knockout* together and I already enjoyed it so much so that I decided to read *House Arrest*. Those books were amazing, but something that I liked about them, that made them unique was that they were written in verse. Then sixth grade came around and I had to choose my first book to read. I thought, hey, I never got to read *Redwood and Ponytail* last year...why not start with it this year? Redwood as Tam and Ponytail as Kate. That is when the real adventure began. *Knockout* and *House Arrest* were outstanding books, but *Redwood and Ponytail* changed me, definitely for the better.

I knew this book was about two girls who liked each other and that was really close to home for me. You see, one of my family members is part of the LGBTQ+ community, so I am so open and appreciative towards that topic. *Redwood and Ponytail* helped me understand that some people aren't like that. They don't feel the same way I do about things. It also really helped me understand how people go through it, when they don't know what to think, when they are new to the whole idea. Especially Kate and her mom. Kate was scared because she was the perfect girl, but as you know, no one is perfect and Kate figures this out. Kate's mother was unsupportive, her mom didn't think her perfect Katherine could be "gay," as her mom said in a whisper voice. On the other hand, Tam's mom was super supportive! She loved Tam so much, no matter what. These two girls might have been completely different, but they were perfect together.

Everything about the book is authentic and all the words are so real. It's an emotional roller coaster and that's why I love it. I took every word to heart, every fight they had, every moment they spent together. Even pinkie to pinkie was almost magical. Your story wasn't just about two girls. It was about life itself and how tough it can be sometimes. Some of the most powerful words that impacted me were from Tam herself: "Seems to me, if you are talking about your own happiness, you might have it backwards. If everyone else is happy, Ponytail, where does that leave you?"

Redwood and Ponytail is like a movie for me. I could read it over and over again, and still feel the same strong emotions. This book has taught me a lot, not just about the world around me but also about myself. It's almost like I could feel myself in every moment, every heartfelt talk, every walk down the halls. If I were to take away my favorite lesson from your book, it would be don't change yourself for someone else, and don't try and be something you're not. If you love someone, embrace it. Don't hide it. Don't try to bury it deep inside yourself. Hold on to it, because that might be the only time you will ever love someone that much.

Sincerely,
Lauren Krack

Dear Lesléa Newman,

Growing up in a small, rural town it was rare to see a lesbian couple, much less one with daughters. Now in 2021, I'm proud to say that our community has grown and developed and become more diverse than I may have ever previously imagined. That still doesn't change the fact that growing up subject to people's judgment wasn't easy.

Sometimes I felt sort of alone or would get a particularly nasty comment from a school mate or uneducated adult. Those things hurt. Especially in the mind of a little second grader, who can't even begin to understand why someone would hate love if it wasn't between a man and a woman. I mean how do you think any parent could possibly explain homophobia to an eight-year-old? So, when I felt out of place, or came home crying, my mothers would read me your book, *Heather Has Two Mommies*.

Your book made me feel less alone. My moms too. It reminded us that there were others out there, people with similar stories. It made me feel like I could relate to someone. I felt like in this crazy world, I was tethered to someone, even if it was a fictional character. I felt like Heather was my friend. I could go to her, tear up a bit, and she would pat me on the back and tell me that things would get better, that she understood what I was going through.

It also helped me to realize that I had an opportunity. When kids make seemingly rude comments, oftentimes they don't understand. I realized that most kids had probably never seen a same sex couple or didn't even know they existed. Instead of getting offended by all the questions, I tried to make my peers understand. I found that after educating my classmates, most were super nice, many even thought it was super cool. And well, the ones that weren't, I didn't care to be their friends anyway. So those experiences have given me a lot of strength and given me and many members of my community a mutual understanding and empathy for one another. In a way, I have your book to partially thank for that.

Sincerely,
Zoie Warner

Let's Talk About...

ESCAPING PERSECUTION

Refugees

Human Trafficking

**The book: *Refugee*
by Alan Gratz**

First Place – Level Two

Melani Martinez Blanco
Jasper Middle School, Jasper
Letter to Alan Gratz / Author of *Refugee*

Dear Alan Gratz,

I came to this country without anything, only looking for reassurance and a purpose, and this book gave me exactly that. Hot. Sweaty. Disoriented. I was only five years old feeling all these emotions in a country I was so foreign in. I didn't know when to run or when to walk or even when I was allowed to speak. This feeling, I thought, couldn't have been described better than it was in the book *Refugee*. You made a character who was named Isabel and she was a Cuban girl who was escaping from her mother country, Cuba, because of the riots and communism.

It was 2010 when my dad decided that we, as a family, could not live in Cuba. Cuba, during that time, was full of madness. It's a communistic country, of course. There was barely any food and people were mad at the horrendous government they had. I, as a 4-year-old girl, had barely any food and protein to keep me healthy. The mosquitoes of the Caribbean ate me up and I was ill frequently. We had to flee. My dad had decided to come first and then we, my mother and I, would come around a year later. We decided on this because it was better for me and my mom to come to America with my dad already knowing the environment there and having a stable job. So, he went. He went through many dangers in unknown countries. He was jailed many times and was deported back to Cuba a couple of times. He couldn't take the water route, so he had to go through the land, which was different than Isabel, who went through water. My father went through eight different countries until he could stop at the Mexican border and obtain his paperwork and residential papers. Isabel went through many obstacles and precarious events to get to the country we now call home. I thought that I could never relate to someone like this, but this book made me realize how many more others there are like me.

My family knew that I would have nothing and be nothing while living and growing up in Cuba. To put this into your perspective, imagine being one of the smartest students in your class, but having the same job as the lowest-scoring student. That's what Cuba was, and my parents knew that I deserved better than that. In the book, Isabel's family realized that that country was not good for their well-being or their

possible futures. Now, Isabel went through the tough waters, but we decided to go through land. Mexico. The trip was rough and harsh with barely any food and water. We couldn't wear any jewelry or else we could've been killed because of it. At this point, my dad had already arrived in America, and we came after. It was just my mom and me, which was terrifying.

Isabel was such a strong person to endure the rough waters and to have to flee a country she basically grew up in. Isabel was older than me in the book. I was only five when we decided to flee. When I first reached American soil, I thought I was the only person in the world who I could relate to, and I thought that was that until I read this book in the seventh grade. It opened my mind and made me realize that I wasn't alone in this situation. This book and especially this character made me understand that fleeing a country that only wants the worst for you isn't a feeling you have to have alone.

I was an immigrant, a foreigner to a country where I had no idea of the language or its system. I was made fun of constantly when I didn't know certain words or phrases, but then I started to get the hang of it. I am now fourteen years old, and I cannot imagine never having come to this country that I and many immigrants call home. Isabel and her journey were the first time I didn't feel alone in a long time. We would discuss this in class and many students would listen to my family's journey and how I felt personally connected to Isabel and her many obstacles. Alan Gratz, I want to personally thank you for having this character whose story made me feel stronger and more connected to my roots and the way I came to be the person that I am today.

In deep appreciation,
Melani Martinez Blanco

Third Place – Level Three

Rachel Labi
West Lafayette Jr./Sr. High School, West Lafayette
Letter to Cesar Chavez /
Author of the speech, **“Lessons of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.”**

Dear Cesar Chavez,

In seventh grade, I learned about human trafficking. After stumbling upon images of collapsed garment factories adorned with anti-suicide nets and the corpses of child laborers, I knew I needed to be an advocate. I was enraged at the foundational exploitation that worked for the comfort of my community. To start my advocacy journey, I wrote letters to several fashion brands and a luxury magazine, inquiring about labor standards and anti-trafficking efforts in the supply chain. I then wrote to the federal government about company transparency. However, your address, **“Lessons of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.”** taught me that even after my efforts, I had failed to support two professions that are highly vulnerable to trafficking: domestic workers and agricultural workers.

In the fall of 2020, I embraced the opportunity to present my policy ideas to hundreds of policymakers across Indiana through a virtual summit. I chose to focus on trafficking, but my past advocacy had involved fast fashion research exclusively. Your speech showed me that America not only continues to suffer from racial and economic divides, but from labor disparities as well. You encouraged me to research, and I learned that agricultural and domestic workers have been excluded from labor laws since the 1930s to maintain poverty among minorities, who were in abundance in these sectors. Even I, who extensively researched anti-trafficking, knew only surface-level information about your landmark civil rights campaign until I began reading about your activism.

The first articles I found about farmers’ rights summarized your organization, the United Farm Workers. I could hear the passion when you spoke of children dying from pesticides, and the humiliating lack of toiletry supplies. This disturbing reality reminded me that I live in a state that heavily relies on agriculture, and there is no room for the exploitation of those who serve as the foundation of this nation. To begin my presentation, I summarized the Hanapepe Massacre to capture the horror of the conditions migrant workers faced. In your speech, you emphasized nonviolent discipleship in honor of Martin Luther

King Jr., and I also felt it was important to show that maltreatment often leads to total ruin, both on the side of the oppressor and the oppressed. While I had an engaging opening, I still pondered about what exactly I wanted to see implemented. The answer soon became clear.

In front of policy makers ranging from city council members to senators, I advocated for the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights and the Fairness for Farm Workers Act. These two bills would provide long-needed assistance to these two groups, and some states have already adopted these as legislation. The Domestic Workers Bill of Rights would provide domestic workers protection against discrimination, the right to unionize, and the right to a safe and healthy working environment. The Fairness for Farm Workers Act would guarantee a minimum wage and overtime protections, and I recommended an amendment to guarantee safe working conditions as well. The bill also repeals the exemption from overtime pay requirements for employers in various agriculture-related industries, including certain small farms, irrigation projects, and sugar processing.

Your speech inspired me to make lasting change through these proposals. I learned that I need to do further research on trafficking in various industries, especially during this pandemic. While labor trafficking is my cause of choice, I will also include sex slaves and child soldiers in the labor rights conversation. Since the summit, I have reached out to attendees and expanded my course of action. I have joined an anti-trafficking subcommittee in Indianapolis, and I have published an essay about my advocacy experience. I also communicated with a senator who would be willing to educate herself and take action to combat trafficking in Indiana. I would like to work more with lawmakers to determine appropriate agricultural policies and potential changes in pre-existing regulations. My future will also involve activism with anti-trafficking organizations, hopefully through an internship or an executive position. To raise more awareness about this issue, I also plan to initiate an annual banquet dedicated to trafficking victims, where attendees can hear personal stories and receive statistically based updates about the issue.

“Lessons of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.” is timeless. Every day provides an opportunity to fight for equality and dignity in some sector of society. In a time when we rely on health care providers for the weak and food providers for the hungry, agricultural workers and domestic workers deserve better. In honor of you, I will never stop fighting for a slave-free future.

Sincerely,
Rachel Labi

Honorable Mention – Level Two

Elaine Zeng
West Lafayette Jr./Sr. High School, West Lafayette
Letter to Alan Gratz / Author of *Refugee*

Dear Alan Gratz,

I wasn't born in a place where I had to worry about sleeping and being able to wake up next morning. Nor have I ever experienced bombings, gunshots, and shark attacks. But your book, *Refugee*, gave me a new insight on things and turned my world right-side up. Before I read your book, I was a pessimist, a random person on earth trying to get life over with. I would only do things to avoid upsetting my parents, and I did not have a mind of my own. I felt that life was just a process of doing things, pointless things, and then dying and being no more. I felt that I was the person who struggled most in my class, and that everyone should pity me and comfort me. It was only after I read your book that I realized how lucky I actually am.

I made fun of the book at the beginning. There was this class wide joke (that I started; I'll have to admit) of re-naming the title "*F-you-cheese.*" At that time, I wasn't reading it, but my friend was, and she said that it was a good book. I was naive so I didn't listen and kept on making the joke. Every time I passed her desk I would point to the book and say, "*F-you-cheese!*" and then run to my seat before the teacher would get suspicious. Other people started picking up on the joke, and every time we passed the large poster in our library with all the Young Hoosier books on it, they would point at your book and whisper, "*F-you-cheese!*"

Time was soon running out. We were supposed to read five Young Hoosier books by the end of the second nine-weeks of school. I did pick out several books, but I gave up on most of them because I thought they were boring. One of the books remaining was yours, and I decided to give it a try. At first, I thought it would be boring (like any stereotypical Young Hoosier book, in my opinion) but it stuck to my hands as if its cover was made of bubble-gum. I simply could not stop reading. Sometimes I would sneak out of my bed in the middle of the night, turn on the light, and read. When I was finished reading, my mom requested to read it. I told her about the nightmares of the kids in the book. My mom simply shook her head and said that it was a children's book and there were far worse nightmares in life. I urged her to read it, and when she was done, she admitted that I was right, and she also said that it was one of the best books she had ever read. I totally agreed with her.

The way you illustrate the stories of these children painted a vivid picture in my mind. Sometimes I would have nightmares of my house being bombed, my family being shot down by soldiers, or war occurring between states. Then I would wake up, breathe, and mutter to myself that everything's going to be okay. These experiences did not harm me though, but in fact I felt that I was getting stronger. I now truly cherish the sound that I would make when I would pluck a string or hit a key, the steady beating of my heart when I went to exercise, the smell of the thick math books on my desk, and the even the wrinkled smile of my old martial arts master. I used to despise him and be frightened of him. I had never seen him cry, and then I noticed that my classmates had never seen me cry before either. Now I understand the hard battle that everyone is facing, and that we should respect each other the way we want to be respected.

Your book is truly phenomenal. It taught me to love life and hug it tightly in my arms. I hope that no one will ever experience the terrible things that happened to the characters in your book. But it is important to hear the stories of those who experienced terrors of war, so we can remember how lucky we are to be alive. It has taught to me to respect, because each and every one of us has an untold story that I do not know about.

After all, we are all human, and no one's destiny is to suffer.

Sincerely,
Elaine Zeng

Honorable Mention – Level One

Mercy Labib
Forest Dale Elementary, Carmel
Letter to Jasmine Warga / Author of ***Other Words for Home***

Dear Jasmine Warga,

I wanted to tell you about the book you have written: ***Other Words for Home***. A book about a girl who leaves her family in Syria due to war hoping for a better life in America. It really was a heartwarming story. It stood out to me as an Arab myself. Although she moves in with her American cousin, she gets bullied by her too. I can't relate myself, but I have heard about bombings and stories like 9/11 and many people think that all Arabs like myself only want to hurt others because of a few stories. Also, I'm an immigrant myself and didn't know English properly until second grade. Because of this, I felt what she felt when she didn't know English that well.

One of the things that I loved about your story was the detail. Detail can be very hard to include. I say this because, you want to give the reader an idea of what's happening but on the other hand, if you give too little, the reader won't get a vivid idea of the text. You have put a perfect amount of detail in your story. I loved how you made it feel as if I was there with Jude (the main character) experiencing everything with her. Something that was new to me, was how she said:

*Lucky. I am learning how to say it over and over again in English.
I am learning how it tastes—
sweet with promise
and bitter with responsibility.*

This line made me understand and dive deeper into what Jude thinks and why she may think this way. Aside from that, I enjoyed that she was different. If I read books that I can completely relate to and that reminds me of my life, I wouldn't be exploring the world's new perspective when I read. To me, reading can be a new way to explore the world while staying right in your seat. Your book made me travel to Jude's home, her new home in America, and her middle school.

The book has taught me that you shouldn't judge people because they are different from you. When people did this to Jude's mother for wearing a hijab, it really opened my eyes about how Muslims can be treated. It also made me think about the phrase, "I cover my head not

because I am ashamed, forced, or hiding. But because I want to be seen as what I am.” Another example of this in your book was when that man was following her off the bus. It really hurt my heart to read that just because someone is different, they are treated unfairly.

When Jude talks about her old life in Syria, I can feel that she was unsure about how much she loved it there. Although she loved that her family was there, she didn’t like how her brother was always going to protests about the Syrian government. When she talked about her new life in America, she described it as scary. I didn’t blame her. I couldn’t imagine leaving my brother and dad in a dangerous place and then going to live across the world with a cousin that I have never met in my life. I would be scared too. That’s why I describe Jude as brave. When she wanted to audition for a part in the play and her cousin Sally told her she wasn’t good enough, I felt her disappointment when she cried in the bathroom by herself. But she still got the part and worked hard to get it.

Thanks for writing ***Other Words for Home***.

Sincerely,
Mercy Labib

Let's Talk About...

IMMIGRATION

Citizenship

Equality

**The book: *Front Desk*
by Kelly Yang**

Dear Kelly Yang,

The book that changed my point of view was your book *Front Desk*. It was about racism and immigrants and so much more. The thing was it was not a light topic. It changed my point of view about how cruel the world can be.

Mia, from your book *Front Desk*, had a really hard life. She had to deal with racism, being an immigrant, and more. She got through it. Mia is such a strong character, she even fought against the owner of the motel that her and her parents worked at. The thing is the owner was racist, but Mia got through it.

I figured out how hard life can be and how careful you have to be. That's how *Front Desk* changed my point of the world's view.

Your fan,
Marcella Budiman

First Place Winner – Level One

Noelle Carey
McCutchanville Elementary, McCutchanville
Letter to Kelly Yang / Author of *Front Desk*

Dear Kelly Yang,

I just want to take a moment to thank you for writing such a beautiful, inspiring, and life changing book. I am an avid reader, and I love reading books that relate to real world issues. When I read *Front Desk*, I knew it was my new favorite book. The parts that resonated with me the most were the messages that you should not judge a person by the color of their skin and that our world is filled with many injustices needing to be addressed. Many world changers have said this before, but sadly it is still a problem in our world.

In *Front Desk*, Hank, an African American man, is accused of stealing a car by the hotel owner, Mr. Yao, based on the idea that he is Black and could be a “bad guy.” Not only did I think that was unfair, I could not believe that he would jump to that conclusion just based on the color of someone’s skin. I most connected with Mia because she treats everyone with respect, kindness, and an appreciation for who they are regardless of what they look like. These attitudes of Mr. Yao are what’s holding back America today. We need more “Mias” in the world. Thank you for bringing up this issue in a way that is personal to kids like me.

Mia Tang and her family went to America to have a better life, but when they arrived it wasn’t anything like what they expected. Her family worked for very little money and willingly did so to hopefully get the “American Dream.” They worked for a boss that repeatedly made them feel meaningless and replaceable. This brings to light another imbalance in our communities. People of color are sometimes forced to take any job available, and sometimes for very little pay, to survive. Immigrant families like Mia’s look for a fresh start but sometimes don’t get what they imagined. Our world needs to be better, know better, and do better.

As I mentioned before, this is my new favorite book. This book was unlike any other book that I’ve read before. All kids should read this book, and teachers should be grabbing it off their shelves to share with their students. The messages of equality, bullying, acceptance, and opportunity are really powerful and have the ability to change the way people think about the world. This is what we need now. We are the

future, and children need to hear your message, so they will make a world that is the “American dream.”

Thank you for changing my life and creating a better understanding of what’s happening in our world today inside me.

Sincerely,
Noelle Carey

Dear Kelly Yang,

I read your book *Front Desk* this year. Before I read *Front Desk*, I thought that I was having a bad year. Then I realized that for some people crazy years like this one are just another obstacle. I never realized how privileged and awesome my life was until I heard about how hard it is for immigrants to come to America. In my community everyone is kind and caring but that is not the case for Mia. In the book Mia and other immigrants were very mistreated and still are so kind and positive. Mia also shows great confidence in everything she did, which is something I admired. Overall, I learned a lot about the world and myself from your book, *Front Desk*.

One of the main things I learned was that when people come to America, they are not always treated well. Whenever we learned about immigrants at school, teachers always made it seem so amazing and that they were always treated well. I now know that that is not the case for most immigrants. This book truly opened my eyes to how immigrants are treated so unfairly when coming to America.

Whenever I go to do things I always second guess myself. Always thinking about everything that could go wrong. Although Mia always considered what could go wrong, she looked at what could happen instead if she did not do it. Mia, when writing a letter to the boss taking the immigrant passports, was so nervous that it would not work. But she knew that if she did not, then the immigrants would be in a lot of trouble because if someone asked for their passports and they did not have them they would have had to go back to where they came from.

Overall, I learned a lot about the world and myself from your book, *Front Desk*. The book helped me to learn to see the good in all things. In life I have so many things that I should be more grateful for. Mia was grateful for the smallest things in life. She got a five-dollar pencil from her dad and made it so important. If my dad got me a five-dollar pencil I would have been grateful, but I would have lost it in a month. Thank you, Kelly Yang, for giving me a new perspective on life. Your book really made a huge difference to my life.

Sincerely,
Brooklyn Willoughby

Let's Talk About...

HISTORY

The Past
Soldiers
Military Service
War

Dear Dan Gutman,

I read a lot. Most kids in my grade don't. I know. It's crazy! I bet you've heard this a lot, but I'm different. I exceed the number of books I need to read. My classmates just meet the requirement. Heck. Some of them don't even meet the requirement. Just hear me out. Kids my age don't read anymore. They're too distracted by technology. My classmates would rather be on their phones than read a book. I guess things have changed. Your *Baseball Card Adventure* books stuck out to me. I liked all the books in the series. They shared something more than baseball. They all talked about history. What it was like back in the day. I learned a lot from your books.

I got to know more about Jackie Robinson and how hard it was for him in your book *Jackie & Me*. Through your book, I got to understand what it was like for Blacks and how they were treated unfairly. Your book also taught me about controlling my anger. I get mad sometimes, but I don't let it distract me, I just keep going.

In your book *Mickey & Me*, I learned that girls can do what men do. I didn't know that women played baseball during World War II, but I like it. I've always been a strong believer that girls can do what boys can do. I've always believed that girls can play baseball and football. Your book helped inspire me to go after things and that I can do anything no matter what.

In *Ray & Me*, I learned that everything has a bad side to it. Ray Chapman died from baseball. I guess baseball is lucky that only one person died. I also learned that if something bad happens, something good might come out of it. Now when you bat, you have to wear a helmet. What would've happened if Ray didn't die? Where would we be today?

So, I was at the baseball field, and I was just throwing a baseball up in the air and hitting it. I kept missing the ball and I had to go soon. I thought about what Roberto Clemente said: "So make sure you get three swings every time you come up to the plate." I had to swing at everything. My dad was yelling that I could try one more time, then it was time to leave. I threw the ball up in the air, let it come down, and hit right on. I knew as soon as I hit the ball it was going to go far. I look

up and the ball went straight out of the park. Homerun! Your books really inspired me and I'm so glad I chose to read them. I learned about history, important life skills, and I got a few tips on playing baseball.

In appreciation,
Kalea Uebelhor

Dear Dalton Trumbo,

My first exposure to ***Johnny Got His Gun*** was similar to that of many other people: not even through the novel itself. Rather, the masses and I first learned about the tragic story of Joe Bonham through the song “One” by the band Metallica. This horrifying song about a man who had lost all his limbs and senses terrified me and left me curious about what the inspiration for such a song could be. I would only reach my solace when I discovered that its inspiration was, of course, a novel by the name of ***Johnny Got His Gun***. Both disturbed and intrigued, I plunged into the novel headfirst, hoping to figure out what exactly about the novel was inspiring enough to have a band as big as Metallica write a song about it.

I think that it’s fair to say that many people out there hold an unrealistic, idealized picture of what military service and war is like. They think only of the honor, duty, and pride that comes with military service rather than the loss, pain, and suffering that it brings. Instead of viewing soldiers as survivors of horrible conflicts and battles, they view them as if they were conquerors who run around and crush their enemies. I feel ashamed to admit it, but I was one of the people who held these delusions. I was hell-bent on becoming a soldier so that I could fulfill this vision of honor that I and so many others held. Both of my grandfathers had been soldiers, and I believed that I should be one as well. I wanted them to be proud of me, so I must prove that I can be just like them. I needed to fight on the front lines, risking life, limb, loyalty, and labor for whatever reason the U.S. had at the time. Only through the contents of ***Johnny Got His Gun***, was I saved from this delusion, and possibly a terrible fate.

To put it bluntly, your novel tore down my beliefs about war and soldiers. The way you wrote the opening makes good use of empathy. Its description of Joe’s slow realization of everything he’s lost puts me in his shoes instantly. The sheer horror and panic he experiences as he realizes he has lost his limbs, eyes, mouth, nose, and all his senses terrifies me every time I read it. I cannot help but put myself in his position. You are unable to communicate with anyone, you’re trapped inside your own body, and there is no way for you to end it. I’d never heard of such a horrible fate in all of fiction, and it instantly shredded much of my perspective on soldiers and war. Were the honor and glory worth it if I stand to lose so much? As the novel went on, I learned of

Joe's life before the artillery shell decimated him, and this only made me sympathize with him more. When Joe spoke about the lack of nobility in death during the war and how soldiers who were about to die almost definitely thought not of whatever cause they were fighting for, but rather how badly they wanted to live, it crushed my worldview like a steamroller. If I was to talk to a man on the battlefield who was breathing his final breaths, would he have told me to go and walk the same path as he did, fighting for ideals that weren't his, or to live a peaceful life, free from battle?

The most impactful moment overall though, the killing blow to my wish to become a soldier, was the end of the novel. When the military officials refused Joe's offer to let others around the country see how disfigured war can make someone, I truly realized that there was no honor to be found in going to war. The way that the seemingly unstoppable war complex in America kept continuing, no matter how many people were physically or mentally destroyed by it started to disturb me. I no longer wanted to be a soldier, to be shipped off to some foreign land to further the interests of men who I have never met, whose purpose in sending us somewhere I may or may not agree with. I wanted to live a peaceful life. To not have to worry about such horrors.

Thank you, Mr. Trumbo, for you have saved a life from being potentially torn to shreds by war. I wish nothing but good luck to you and your family.

Sincerely,
Alex Cregar

Dear Lois Lowry,

Thank you for your great novel ***Number the Stars***. When reading this you can learn more about yourself and others. This novel has really warmed my heart, and presented me with a challenging, new novel. It has taught me teamwork, not to be prejudiced against others, bravery, empathy, and what love truly means. Without a doubt, I would recommend this novel to readers of all ages.

Your writing first taught that with teamwork you can accomplish any task you are passionate about. In the book, Mrs. and Mr. Johansen were both friends with a Jewish family, the Rosens. They were passionate about saving them, and by working as a team, they came up with a precise plan to get the Jews out of Denmark. This family's care for others really warmed my heart. It awed me how by working together they were able to accomplish so much. It showed me the importance of teamwork.

This amazing book also taught me that we should never be prejudiced against others. I realized that what Hitler was doing was wrong, and that no one should ever be discriminated against because of something such as their race or their religion. Annemarie didn't care that Ellen was Jewish, she learned more about her, and they became friends. This book truly opened my eyes. It helped me realize that I wasn't grateful enough. I realized that we are so lucky to be in a country where we can be whoever we want, and worship whatever we believe, because no one deserves to live in a community where they are treated unfairly, like Ellen.

I didn't realize the importance of empathy until I read your novel. It went into detail about a man named G. F. Duckwitz. He empathized with the Jews and realized how horrible it would be for them, so he released information about Jews who were being sent away. It's amazing that one simple act of kindness is capable of saving an amazing number of lives. Duckwitz is one of my biggest role models, and I love how he positively impacted the results of the war.

This great book also taught me the importance of being brave and thinking quickly. Annemarie found out that her parents' plan was to ship the Jews away so that they could stay safe in Sweden, but she realized

that they forgot to take a mysterious envelope that would be important for their success. Annemarie asked her mother and was told to run out in the middle of the night and deliver the envelope miles away. She was exhausted and scared. She learned to think joyful thoughts to subdue her fears. Although she encountered a Nazi, she was able to think clearly and tell a convincing lie, in order save her Jewish friends. Her courage helped her run out at dark, face Nazis, and deliver her envelope. I learned what a vital role bravery plays in life. If not for it, Annemarie's friends would not be safe in Sweden. This book encouraged me to be brave.

Your novel also taught me what love really means. Love is standing up for others and taking care of them even if it means death, as Mrs. and Mr. Johansen did for the Rosen family. Love is releasing information like Duckwitz and saving lives. Love is also not discriminating against others but empathizing with them and valuing them for who they are, as Annemarie did with Ellen. Annemarie valued Ellen for who she is. I realized that is love. This book helped open my eyes to the truth that we should all be more loving, that we should value others. It helped me love.

Number the Stars really changed my life, and it changed me as a person. It taught me about teamwork, it helped me realize that you should never be biased against others because of their religion or race, it taught me bravery, and what love truly means. This book touched my heart and my changed point of view. I find the impact words can have on your life amazing. I picked up this book hoping to have a challenging new novel to read, but when I put it down and finished it, I came out as a new, loving, caring, brave, and understanding person. This book truly changed me.

Sincerely,
Brock Hehmann

Dear John Boyne,

I read your book, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, and I enjoyed reading it so much that I have already started to read it for a second time. The part when Shmuel was working in the kitchen and Bruno offered him a piece of food, really bothered me. When the guard asked Bruno why he was eating, instead of taking the blame like he should have, Bruno said the Shmuel stole it. I do not understand how a friend can do that to a friend. If I were Bruno, I might have gotten in trouble, but I would have done the right thing because I love my friends. After Shmuel ate the food, he was beaten by the guard badly. I could never let that happen. When Bruno went back to the fence, a couple of days later, he found Shmuel sitting there with a black eye and a red nose. When he asked what happened, Shmuel replied, "I was beat up in school." The people that were in the concentration camps did not go to school. They worked all day, and sometimes all night. Bruno was shocked and said he was sorry. I knew right away that Shmuel did not want to say anything that might cause his friend to get hurt. I thought this was touching because no matter how bad his life was at the time, he still put others first.

After reading your book, I found it is unsettling that people could be so ruthless and not even realize it. Some things have changed over time, but a lot has, unfortunately, stayed the same. In the present times, 2020, the world has experienced a lot of tragedies. People are, once again, treating people badly. With Covid-19, the media and the big election, people have become more divided than ever. I really hope that everyone can find a way to get out of these tough times better and more united than before.

Your book made me realize that hate and tragedy in society has been going on for centuries. There is a lot of evil out there in the world but getting to know Shmuel's character made me see that there is hope. There are just as many people out there with love in their hearts as with hate. I just hope that we, as a country, can learn to get along so that history will not repeat itself again years down the road. Thank you again for writing such an inspiring book for us to read.

Sincerely,
Ayden Childers

Atharv Pawar
Central Middle School, Columbus
Letter to John F. Kennedy /
Author of the speech, **“We Choose to Go to the Moon”**

Dear John F. Kennedy,

If I could travel back in time to any moment in history, I would go back to Sept. 12, 1962, to listen to your speech in person. The moon speech at Rice University was one of the most famous and influential speeches of all time. It not only propelled the United States to the stars and beyond, but also influenced many more people. Listening to that speech, improved the way I think about doing anything.

While listening to your speech, there are several great attributes that I learned. As you said, “We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.” Your efficacious words guided many like me to choose to do the hard things because those will serve to measure the best of myself. One of the things you emphasized in your speech was getting the United States to the moon by the end of the decade. This has taught me to set goals that are compelling, demanding, and challenging. Every time I attempt to achieve these sorts of goals, they truly measure the best of my energies and skills.

I have also learned that when doing anything, it should be done to the best of your ability or more. This had me thinking for a very long time. For a long time, I would do my chores lousily to just get them over with, though that caused me to put even more time into the chore, to finish it. Now, while doing any task, I try to do it to the best of my ability. This has helped me to not only get things done faster but also to have the satisfaction of completing the task the best way I possibly could have.

I believe that one of the most important reasons why the United States was able to achieve so much success in the space race was because of the daring goals you set for the nation. Because of this, the country was tested on the best of its energies and skill. Your speech not only caused the United States to achieve unprecedented success but also to many other people to go on the same path of success.

Sincerely,
Atharv Pawar

Dear Leo Tolstoy,

War and Peace has changed the way I look at the world. Let me be clearer; the masterpiece of literature that is *War and Peace* has forever changed the way I view history, the way I see human interactions, and the way I choose to live life.

Never have I been able to read a novel written so long ago and yet still been able to find all its applications to my life in the modern world. Each of the characters, despite being fictional, are so incredibly *human* that it's difficult to believe. Just about anyone can read your work and find (at *least*) one character to which they relate. Some can relate to all the characters, for better or for worse. That's because, despite falling under the general genre of "a story about a war," your book does not constrict itself to a grim story about the horrors, (or in the eyes of some authors, *glories*) of a war. You choose to deal with arguably much more difficult themes, like the eternal search for a sense of self in this difficult world, or the difficult and fascinating nature of the emotion generally referred to as "love." Interestingly, what makes the book understandable to this modern generation, and to the American culture more specifically, is that the idea of war is one which appears rather distant to most young Americans. Surely most of us personally know someone in the military, but it has become exceedingly rare that we lose someone who we are close to as a result of an armed conflict. For those who do lose someone in this manner, it can be especially devastating, especially as it tends to come as quite a shock. (However, having personally been lucky enough not to have suffered such a traumatic event, I will refrain from speaking for those who have).

In the end, it's the elements of *War and Peace* which were reflective of normal life at the time (and somehow still manage to reflect elements of normal life in the modern day) which make the book so worth reading. Anyone, at any stage in their life, can see something of themselves when they look at Pierre's quest to find meaning in his life, hindered greatly by his pursuit of meaningless pleasures to sate himself during his search. Alternatively, it's not difficult to see the harm caused by taking life *too seriously*, emulated in both the Bolkonsky Princes. For a number of people, it's not difficult to see themselves as bearing both the flaws of Count Pierre Bezukhov and Prince Andrei Bolkonsky, contradictingly feeling a pressure to live a perfect life in accordance with society's (or

perhaps their own) definition of what that means and seeming to be constantly trapped in a Hedonistic state of drunkenness; finding what pleases them in the moment, and then moving on to the next thing. Really, and what you manage to so clearly point out is that neither of these is a very good way of living one's life, and certainly neither could be described as a path to *happiness*. But then again, *War and Peace's* truth to reality goes on in that, arguably, not one of its characters found *true* happiness in the end. Some characters were definitely better off than others, but the novel would appear to contend that, truthfully, there is no one way in which to be happy, and there are very few worldly things preventing one from being happy. (Pierre was arguably his least happiest when his wealth was greatest, another apparent contradiction which very much ties into the state of humanity in our modern world; many people wrongly believe that with wealth will come satisfaction in life, or a sense of *happiness*). Despite not being said in the book, your quote, "If you want to be happy, be," rings true.

So far, I have failed to do justice to the overarching story of the book, which has helped me to deeply understand why humanity is constantly fighting with itself, which is Napoleon's futile invasion of Russia and the wasteful death and destruction that came about as a result of it, but alas, it's very hard to relate to such events, when the past 2-3 generations of Americans have been almost entirely separated from the tragedies of wartime. Perhaps, this is a good thing. But looking around, it concerns me that so many people (myself included) are entirely clueless as to what *war* really means.

In summation, I want to say thank you for your toils, and the time you invested into the creation of this book, and the magnificent contribution that it is to the literature of this world.

Sincerely,
Luke Diehl

Dear Dan Smith,

Before reading your book, I had a much different interpretation on WWII. I thought that every person in Germany was a horrible Nazi. I never knew how many rebels were in Germany fighting against Hitler, such as the Edelweiss Pirates. After reading *My Brother's Secret*, I can now see how many good people were brainwashed and didn't know what was good or bad. Also, how many people inside Germany were severely punished for standing up and not ignoring what Germany did to Jewish people and the entire world. Your book has changed the way I think about history and current world events drastically and here's how.

Your book changed my views on WWII and society in general. At first, I thought the youth in Nazi Germany were all horrible and knew every detail of what the Nazis were doing to the rest of the world and Jewish people. However, I now know that they were brainwashed into believing it was all good and that Hitler was some kind of savior. I also know more about the cruelty of the Nazis. When I was younger, I only knew about the Holocaust and the horrible things that happened. After reading your book, I now understand how the Nazis also killed and brainwashed their own children. Not to mention raising them as child soldiers. It's made me hate the Nazis even more and think about how low humanity can go. Lastly, I now understand how much education can be biased and favor a certain group of people. I've realized that almost everywhere education teaches different things so that children grow up strictly believing only one side of a story or only certain details that were changed. Such as in your book when the Deutsches Jungvolk brainwashed the children into thinking that Jewish People were bad. This still happens in most places and greatly changes my view on the world and education. That was how your book affected me and changed my views on WWII and society in general.

Secondly, your book taught me more about brainwashing, manipulation, propaganda, etc. After reading your book, I now know how the Nazis were able to convince children that they were doing good things and that Hitler was their savior. Like how they lied, put the words "Heil Hitler" into children's heads, awarded them in child soldier training, etc. This greatly affects me and increases my knowledge of how people are able to take advantage of developing brains and use propaganda to get the young on their side. It also affects my view on certain people

and how they get others to help them. I also now know why people use things like brainwashing, manipulation, propaganda, etc. to get others on their side. Before reading your book, I slightly thought that the world was a sort of perfect and happy place. However, when I read it a few years ago, your book has taught me how selfish people are and the lengths they'll go to so that they can get power. This greatly affects how wary I am of others and my perception of history and current world events. That was how your book affected me and changed my views on brainwashing, manipulation, and propaganda.

Thirdly, your book affected me because it relates to current world events. For instance, how the Deutsches Jungvolk brainwashed kids can easily relate to how places like North Korea are brainwashing their youth to blame things on others and ignore the problems with their nation. This may not affect me personally, but it affects the entire world and can change the world for the worse. Also, discrimination and even concentration camps for certain people in the current world eerily relate to the Nazis locking up Jewish people because of their religious beliefs. This also affects the entire world and especially the people at risk of being put in concentration camps. That was how your book relates to current world events and affects me and the rest of the world.

Books can teach us, entertain us, change our perception on the world and people, help us, and do so much more. Your book did all those things and have helped me realize more about WWII, how people can so easily brainwash others, and how your book can relate to the current world. Because of your book, me and so many others have discovered much about the past and want to make sure nothing like this will happen or continue happening. While reading, my eyes flew around the pages, and I always wanted to see what would happen next. Thank you for writing ***My Brother's Secret***.

Sincerely,
Dhanush Pandya

Let's Talk About...

GRIEF AND GRIEVING

The Death of a Loved One
Moving Away
Climate Change

Dear Carrie Newcomer,

Your poem book *A Permeable Life* is really nice. I love reading the poems. My favorite poem is **"To the Ridge Top."** I can relate to this poem because our dog was old, and he would often wander off. My family and I would get a bit nervous, but he would always find us, or we would find him. Our dog was a stray. We would see him running around the neighborhood. We caught him when he was coming down the ridge, I think that is why he liked the ridge top so much.

Having an almost blind and deaf dog who has arthritis would be a challenge. Our dog was similar, but it did not stop him from trying to be a young puppy now and again. When our dog was young, we would race to the ridge top. Now I only race with his ghost. **"To the Ridge Top"** is a really nice poem to read when I miss our dog. I often like thinking that our dog is racing up the ridge top or acting like a puppy. I would like to see his ghost one day.

Whenever I read **"To the Ridge Top,"** I think of a time when our dog went up the ridge and just sat there. We were worried, but our dog just needed to rest his achy old bones. Reading this poem makes me feel like I am not the only one who had an old dog that had arthritis.

*She roused her achy old bones
And headed out with a purpose,
With doglike determination,
Walking stiffly but quickly,
Up the long winding path
Which starts at the backdoor
And leads up to the ridge top.
Where you can see the dappled sunset...*

This is my favorite part of the poem. This part gives me an image of our old dog. He would "rouse his achy old bones" and climb to the top of the ridge. Recently, I have wished that a dog would walk with me up to the top of the ridge top. So, when I read **"To the Ridge Top,"** I feel as if a dog was walking with me. Reading this poem makes me feel good and understood.

Your poems really speak to me. I think that **“To the Ridge Top”** is one of my favorite poems in all the poem books I have read. It is one of the poems that I like to read before bed and fall asleep peacefully. If I were to tell someone what book to read to calm down before bed, I would tell them to read your poems.

Thank you for sharing this special poem about your furry old friend. It brings comfort to readers like me.

Sincerely,
Charlee Peine

Honorable Mention – Level Two

Lea Rue
Jasper Middle School, Jasper
Letter to J. K. Rowling/ Author of *The Harry Potter Series*

Dear J.K. Rowling,

The **Harry Potter** series has gotten me through the toughest times in my life and has saved me from feeling too much hardship. When reading what Harry went through, it made me realize that everyone goes through difficult times; it just matters how you handle your feelings. I read the whole series and I am rereading it because of the way the characters got through hard times. It is the best advice anyone could give me. All of my friends think I'm crazy taking advice based on what characters in a book do, but they have got me out of sticky situations by doing exactly what they did.

When I was twelve, I lost four people in my family and I didn't know how to deal with it, but about a year later I read the **Harry Potter** books five through seven and saw how Harry dealt with all the loss he went through. It helped me to know that it is ok to feel sad and that it is ok to miss those people even after a few years. Harry made sure that he kept his friends close when he needed them the most. I have a whole friend group who has gotten me through this for all these years. In the end, I have made peace with the fact that my family members are gone, but they are always with me. Dumbledore was the one who told Harry during his third year at Hogwarts, "You think the dead we loved truly ever leave us? You think that we don't recall them more clearly in times of great trouble?" I use this advice every day. Knowing that my loved ones are with me gives me a sense of happiness. A few months ago, I lost my Grandma. It reminded me of how much Harry lost in the years leading up to the Battle of Hogwarts. I am going through a lot of pain, but I know I can get through it with a **Harry Potter** book in my hands and my friends by my side.

I have had a lot of mental stress with losing so many people in a short amount of time but reading **Harry Potter** has helped me to stay positive and happy. **Harry Potter** deals with a lot of issues that teenagers have, and it gives you solutions on how to deal with issues, such as relationships. Harry, Hermione, and Ron went through so much during their seven years at Hogwarts, and they stayed friends until the end. You can learn a lot from them, and it helps to know that the right friends will stick with you until the end of time. When the right group of friends

came into my life, I knew I could count on them through whatever I was feeling. Horrible things have happened in my life but reading Harry Potter has gotten me through all of them.

When I am in a fight with my friends, I think back to Harry's fourth year at Hogwarts and how mad Ron was at the time. Then I remember how brave he was to apologize to Harry, so I decided that I would do what Ron did and apologize for being mad. Friends fight but you have to forgive each other to stay friends and talk through what made you both mad. Harry and Ron fought a lot through the series, and they stayed friends, so why wouldn't I follow them if their friendship worked out so well? I hope I have the same relationship with my friends.

Halfway through the series, I realized that Harry and I are going for the same goal which is to belong somewhere. The only difference is that Harry found where he belonged, but I am still looking. Harry found a whole other world and I am still trying to figure out what I want or where I belong. I believe following Harry's way of finding somewhere to belong is the way I am going to find the same thing. Harry Potter said to Dobby in *The Chamber of Secrets*, "I don't belong here. I belong in your world, at Hogwarts." He knew where he belonged the moment he went to Hogwarts, and I want to find the same thing. I also admire Hermione and Ginny for their independence and powerful spirits.

It may seem odd to base your life choices on what characters in a book do to solve problems. Through hard times and good times, the *Harry Potter* series has always been there for me. The advice is used well. We can learn a lot from books if we try. That is how *Harry Potter* changed my life completely.

Stay magical,
Lea Rue

Dear Veera Hiranandani,

One day in sixth grade, my teacher assigned us a book to read. When she gave us our book, I said to myself, *I don't want to read this*. The book was called ***The Whole Story of Half a Girl***. I basically judged a book by its cover, and I regret it so much because when I finished the book, I loved it. When I was reading ***The Whole Story of Half a Girl***, I had different emotions floating inside of me. I felt sad, excited, angry and many more feelings. I connected with the book a lot, especially with the character of Sonia.

The first way I connected with Sonia, was when her dad ran away, and she thought she'd never see him again. That's what happened to me, but with my grandpa. A couple months ago, my grandpa got diagnosed with cancer. I was devastated and I burst into tears, but I thought to myself, whatever happens, it's going to be okay. I didn't get to see him often because everybody in my family is French, so they all live over there, except for the family I live with obviously. Anyways, my mom flew over there to be with him, and I really wanted to go, but it wasn't possible. I hoped and hoped that he would get better, but he didn't. He didn't have the energy to do ANYTHING. For weeks I was heartbroken, and I really wanted to be there with him, just like Sonia did with her dad. My grandpa was getting worse and worse, and then the day came. He passed away due to him not having enough energy to breath. Sonia's story was a little different because her dad came back, but I thought of my grandpa when I read that part in the book because she thought she lost someone that she loved. In this part of the book, I learned that whatever happens, other people are around to help you, and to always think positive even when it's a negative thing.

The second way I connected with Sonia, was when she didn't care what people thought of her. I remember when she became friends with Kate, she wanted to buy school lunch instead of bringing her own lunch because she thought everyone would look at her weirdly. In first grade, I was basically hiding my lunch because it wasn't like everybody else's, and I didn't bring a typical American lunch. Like I said, my family is French, so that's why I didn't really bring a lunch like everybody else. I regret that so much because I learned from this book that you should just do what you want to do. You should be who you want to be. You shouldn't care what other people think of you because that will affect

your life later on. When Sonia didn't really want to be friends with Kate anymore, she started being herself again and bringing her own lunch. I wasn't myself because I thought people would look at me weirdly, but I've grown up and thought about it. When I read this book, I even thought about it more, and now I actually feel like I can do what I want, wear what I want, bring whatever lunch I want etc.

I learned a lot through this book. I learned that it doesn't matter the way people look at me. I learned that if something terrible happens and makes you burst into tears, that you just have to think to yourself, *it's going to be okay*, and that you'll get through it. Other people around you are here to help. I learned so many important things in ***The Whole Story of Half a Girl*** that will help me and many other people in life. Thank you so much for writing this book. It really made me think about how to handle things and to be a better person. If I hadn't read ***The Whole Story of Half a Girl***, I would still think negative things about my grandpa instead of positive things, and I would still be bawling my eyes out every day because of my grandpa. I wouldn't still be worrying about what people think of me. It has truly helped me, and I am going to tell everybody that I know to read this book when they have the time. It's one of the best books I've ever read. Once again, thank you very much Veera Hiranandani for writing ***The Whole Story of Half a Girl***.

Sincerely,
Josephine Gregoire

Dear John Green,

What did Shakespeare mean when Cassius spoke, “Men at some time are masters of their fates: The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars. But in ourselves, that we are underlings?” Was this the purpose of the title for your book? This sentiment made me think while reading *The Fault in Our Stars*. You made your book the opposite of that statement, but why?

While reading your book I related to many of the characters. I never had cancer like Hazel, Gus, or anyone else in their support group, but even with their hardships they were able to see the joy life can bring. This made me realize that if people who are fighting this dreadful disease can see that greatness, I can too. Like Hazel, I'm a homebody. I don't leave my house much unless it's for school or sports. This affects my social life because I usually will only talk to the same people. I try to keep the same people around because I'm not a huge fan of change. After Hazel met Gus, her life changed. He helped her out of her shell and took her places she had never been. This is how I feel about someone I met about two years ago, and how they helped me open up more, and actually helped me to start talking about how I feel. The bond between Hazel and Gus is kind of like the bond I possess with this person named Andrew, and how close we've grown through the years we've known each other. I never really thought much about how one person can change someone else so much for the better, until I looked back at all the people I've met and how they taught and molded me into the person I am today.

Growing up does come with some negative impacts though. When I was about ten, I lost my grandpa. We all knew his time was coming to an end, but that didn't lessen the pain of his passing. I still bawled, just the way Hazel did when Gus died. The way I could relate to Hazel through the death of a loved one, just made this book so much more special to me. Death, and all other negative impacts are how we grow and learn. After Gus's cancer relapsed, Hazel stated, “The problem, of course, is that there's no way of knowing that your last good day is your last good day. At the time, it's just another good day.” After reading that I realize how true this was, and it made me look back at all the last good days I had with people, whether it was the last Christmas I spent with my grandpa, or the last goodbyes to a childhood friend. Hazel spent her whole life at home, thinking about her cancer, and if she died, how it

would affect the people in her life. Later in the book she stopped worrying about her illness and started seeing the joy in life. Once Gus died, she realized how much you must cherish the time you share with someone, even if it doesn't last long.

As life moves on, I've gained and lost people. I have obtained memories of the time we were together. Friends are one of those people. Tori and I have been friends since birth, our sisters were friends, so we grew to be friends too. We were inseparable, then she moved to a new town two hours away. Hazel and Kaitlyn's friendship came to a halt when Hazel's cancer started to act up again. My friendship with Tori is ongoing, but it's just not as strong as it used to be because of the distance. Kaitlyn came back into Hazel's life after seeing her in a mall, and from there they started to reconnect. Like Kaitlyn and Hazel, Tori and I still keep in touch and whenever we're together we act how we used to before she left. Gus's death brought Hazel into grief. Kaitlyn helped her cope with it. Friends that are there at the hardest times are never lost.

I figured out Cassius's sentiment means that fate does not exist, and we control our own lives. I find it appealing that you argue this with your book title. You wrote that Shakespeare never was so wrong because of Cassius's note. I think the purpose of this was not to make readers think Hazel's life was certain, but that the love her and Gus had was. You made them soulmates, destined to meet. You made me realize that my life is not in the stars, but the people in my life are stars. They are the ones who guide me through life, helping me wherever I may tread.

Sincerely,
Alexandra Hale

Dear Lynn Pederson,

Your poem "**How to Move Away**" changed my view on a new event that is happening in my life. I recently discovered my dad received a job transfer to Florida and my family has been struggling with it. Indiana is our home. We love the changing seasons and the fact we have made memories in our house since 2003 makes it hard to understand our lives will be changing by the beginning of next summer. The house I'm living in was my parents' dream home. We never intended to move away from it and never even imagined we would move somewhere where the lifestyle is completely different. This poem walked me through the process of moving away and nearly brought me to tears thinking about it.

"**How to Move Away**" made me think about how my kids won't be running in this backyard or sitting in the same living room I did when I was a kid. It made me think about how I won't be able to push my kids on the same tire swing that I got swung on by my dad growing up. It made me think about how my driving routine will never be the same again. Lines 35-36 made me stop reading because they explained what I have been feeling for the past 4 months: "But leaving disturbs the fabric of a place. I'd rather stay and witness change." I relate to this feeling because there is a miniscule amount of excitement when I think about moving. Leaving changes the entire dynamic of a life and a place. A dynamic I am scared to encounter.

On the other hand, I'm thankful for this poem because it mentally prepared me for how I will feel on the day we sell the house and pack it up for good. I will look around at all the memories created in Crown Point, Indiana and wish things weren't changing. I will look around and reminisce on how much I have grown in this home. I will think about how I am leaving everyone. My cousins, aunts and uncles, friends, grandparents, and older siblings. It will be hard for me to understand why we are leaving the past when it seemed perfect for our family.

This poem also made me think about making sure I have the right attitude about this new change in my life. The poem was dark and full of sadness, which I am feeling and will feel when I move, but it also gave me a realization of having an alternate attitude. Being positive and realizing change can be a good thing. It made me realize Florida

can bring new friends, warm weather, new opportunities, and the list can go on and on. Having an attitude that is full of negativity is toxic, especially when moving away from all you've ever known.

In conclusion, this poem brought out elements of sadness and elements of hope for me. Sadness overcame me when the poem was describing all the ways I will look at my house when I am moving, but a feeling of hope also overcame me when I realized change can be a good thing. This poem helped me walk through this difficult time in my life and made me realize even though I may be leaving childhood memories behind, a new future awaits me full of new opportunities and new memories. Thank you for writing it.

Sincerely,
Emma Olthoff

Maggie Webber
Indianapolis Public Schools, Center for Inquiry, School 84, Indianapolis
Letter to Greta Thunberg/
Author of ***No One is Too Small to Make a Difference***

Dear Greta Thunberg,

This winter I read your book ***No One is Too Small to Make a Difference***. Each speech was different in a way, but they all gave the same message. I must admit, that when I first read the speeches, I was shocked by the facts. The world has about ten years before we are in an extremely dangerous position. I was even a little scared. I think that these speeches have inspired the world in so many ways. After I read the book, I did a little bit of light research to figure out about your movement. You have inspired me in a multitude of ways as well.

I am only 12 years old. Even the title of the book started inspiration flowing. I am only 12 but, “No one is too small to make a difference.” I also believe in what you say about how, “Our house is on fire.”

As I get older, I am starting to realize more and more every day, that with facts, I might not always like what I hear. In one of the speeches, you mention that facts are not always easy to hear. But you made me see that you cannot escape the truth. No matter how hard it is to hear, the dangerous level that we are letting our climate get to is not fake.

The world knows about climate change. They always have. But I never hear it mentioned. When I glance at my parents’ newspaper, I never see anything about climate change. I think it is upsetting that kids must forfeit their education for a mess they did not start, and that if we do not do anything, our generation will have to suffer the consequences. Thanks to your speeches, we might not have too. I am not saying we do not have work to do, because we really do. But we are getting closer.

I also watched a little bit of the speech you made called, “How Dare You – You Have Stolen My Dreams and My Childhood.” This was one of my favorite speeches. I just could not help thinking about the mass extinction that we might create. My other favorite is called “A Strange World.” It was a simpler one, but it just kept me thinking, we *do live in a strange world*. Your speeches made me think. We need to think about this Earth. And its ecosystem. I think you have changed the world.

Sincerely,
Maggie Webber

Let's Talk About...

FAITH

God

Beliefs

Religion

Honorable Mention – Level One

Caroline Stein

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Veera Hiranandani/ Author of *The Whole Story of Half a Girl*

Dear Veera Hiranandani,

I remember the first time I read *The Whole Story of Half a Girl* was life changing. It all started in class when we were getting book club assignments. My teacher was giving out books and yours was the only one I didn't want to read, which was *The Whole Story of Half a Girl*, but I am overjoyed I got your book for many reasons. One reason is being able to connect with the book.

In the book, Sonia is half Jewish. Well, believe it or not, so am I. Sonia's mom and my dad are Jewish and neither of our families talk about Judaism. To be honest I would like it if we talked about Judaism a little more considering it was a big part of my dad's childhood. The only thing we do with it is celebrate Hannukah. I realize that my mom is not Jewish at all, and neither is Sonia's dad, but I think it is something we should at least talk about. In this way, Sonia and I could really relate because I don't think she would mind learning a bit more about her mom's childhood and maybe even talk a little more about this religion. This is one of the many ways this book has impacted me.

I loved reading *The Whole Story of Half a Girl*. I immediately had a connection with Sonia. She was dealing with change, like going to a new middle school and trying to fit in. I did not have to change schools but last year, in fifth grade, I was in a friend group that was not the right fit for me. I hated going to school because I knew I would be made fun of, judged, and worst of all they made me feel like I had to be someone I was not to impress people. One day, when I had grown the courage to stand up to them, I left the friend group. I had no one, like Sonia, when she moved to a new school. She had lost Sam just like I had lost my friend group. Just like in the book, how Alisha and Kate found Sonia, a girl named Maria, found me. She walked into my life and filled the hole that the rest of my friends made. She made me feel like I had a place at school. She cared about me just like Kate and Alisha cared about Sonia. I was able to be myself around her, and she became someone that I never want to lose. Sonia, at the end of the book, finally chooses the right person whom she could be herself around. Alisha is Sonia's best friend, just like Maria, is mine. It just took a while to find the right person. This is another way this book has impacted me.

So, thank you Veera for writing this book that made me realize it is all about finding your true friend that will make you feel whole, and opening my eyes to see that I do want to learn more about the Jewish faith. I truly didn't realize how much a book could impact someone. I have loved this book and I never wanted it to end.

Sincerely,
Caroline Stein

Dear Rabbi Aharon Margalit,

From the first fascinating page of *As Long as I Live* to the last, each word formed a puzzle piece which came together to reveal an extraordinary masterpiece of a story. The events of your life made me evaluate my own reality and personal life experiences. You exemplify strength, hope and powerful bravery. I realized that my personal challenges are also pieces of a puzzle that I believe and hope that one day will become my own unique masterpiece.

Every morning as I look at my reflection in the mirror, I take notice that I am different. I cry that half my hair is missing from Alopecia, a condition where one suffers severe hair loss due to anxiety and stress. It's pretty painful to receive injections in my scalp every month. I go to school thinking that I'm ugly since I have to wear my hair in a low ponytail to cover up my bald spots. I feel like people take pity on me. I don't like having attention called to my Alopecia or being called the bald girl with no eyebrows. It makes me feel very uncomfortable when people stare and ask me if I have cancer.

Reading about how you handled your extreme challenges and hardships made me realize that I have the strength to do the same. For example, my heart broke for you when you described spending most of your childhood sick with polio and isolated from the world. Everyone, besides your mother, had given up on you. But you managed to pull through miraculously. You survived cancer twice, beating the odds that the doctors gave you, only to lose your son in a most tragic way soon after. You then had to endure cancer for the third time and this time every doctor gave you a terminal diagnosis. You still didn't give up or lose faith and you hoped for recovery. You always remained positive even in the darkest of times.

You spend your life inspiring those who feel alone, hopeless, sad, and depressed. You visit hospital wards that most people go out of their way to avoid. You always see the glass as half full. You dedicate your life to spreading faith, joy, and hope. Your book taught me that as long as I'm alive, I can help others – that is a gift. You showed me that I am capable of using the challenging aspects of my life to inspire others to overcome theirs.

My Alopecia helped me realize that I can get through anything. It showed me that beauty is not reflected by my outer appearance, but rather from within me. I am capable of being independent and gaining confidence and I have the determination and courage to grow. Reading your biography strengthened those feelings of faith and hope that I didn't even realize I had within me.

As long as I live, your captivating life story will remain engraved in my *neshama* (soul). I will keep it on my bookshelf near to me for all the times I may need a reminder that I am capable, I am strong, and that my faith can get me through anything that lies ahead.

My deepest admiration and appreciation,
Naomi Cohen

Honorable Mention – Level One

Aedan Hassett
Notre Dame Catholic School, Michigan City
Letter to J. R. R. Tolkien / Author of *The Lord of the Rings*

Dear Mr. Tolkien,

Your books have influenced me in many ways. They have shown me to be courageous and have faith even in the darkest of times. They have also shown me to see God in even the smallest things, from the single grain of sand to the largest mountains. They have made me want to learn more about God and his teachings. Your books have many Catholic references and plenty of references to my life and what I do.

Your books have taught me so much about what to do for others and to be kind to those around me. One time I witnessed a kid who was being bullied on the playground. I immediately reacted to this. I stopped the bully before he could cause harm to the kid. The lesson I learned was that a true act of kindness always causes another. The kid gave me some candy. I was very thankful and so was he. Aragorn in your book reminds me of my dad. He always tries to help others even if they don't need it, like when Aragorn helps the kingdom of Rohan in their battle against Isengard, even though they had a very small chance of prevailing.

Aragorn is my favorite character and, in my opinion, represents one of the apostles trying to unite other people with one kingdom, God's Kingdom, against one evil, Satan. In the book the character is known as Sauron. This has taught me to fight temptation. When I wanted to know what my birthday presents were, I resisted the temptation to look even though I was right next to them. I have also learned to unite others, not with force, but with love and grace to show what you can teach them. You can give happiness with just a simple, "Jesus loves you," or by giving a compliment. That could change someone's day, and this has happened to me. A friend gave me a compliment when I was droopy, but the rest of the day I was happy.

Now, this is going to be hard to say without tears. Tolkien, you know how Gandalf came back because it was not his time and left all of them in the end, but not by death? My uncle Bill passed away. He died of lung cancer. The doctors said he was going to die at any moment; he did die, but then he came back. He told everybody that God had told him that his time had not come and told Uncle that he would need to say

goodbye first. He died the next morning. It was very hard to take in, but I knew he was there watching over me and that he will always be there for me.

This is frightening. Frodo feels like he has the entire weight of middle earth on his shoulders. I did not have the entire earth on my shoulders, but I had my brothers. One day when our baby-sitter was over, a huge storm rolled in, and my brothers were frightened and continuously asked me what to do. Sometimes I did not know what to say. They had faith in me, and I was scared but I used their faith to push me through that difficult time. I learned an important lesson from your character Frodo. Those are some ways that your book has shown me what to do in the darkest of times.

Sincerely,
Aedan Hassett

Second Place Winner – Level Two

Chaya Mushka Schusterman
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis
Letter to Shevy Schottenstein / Author of *The Promise of Freedom*

Dear Shevy Schottenstein,

I used to think I was weird. Everyone around me was different and I was the odd one out. However, after reading your book *The Promise of Freedom* I realized the opposite. I am not strange, I am privileged. The people around me are different and I must stay true to myself. Rochele is surrounded by people different from her, yet she holds strong to her beliefs. I come from a very Orthodox Jewish family, but my friends and surroundings are different from me. Most of my friends are not Orthodox and have different beliefs. Like Rochele, I learned that there is nothing wrong with being different from the people around me. I have to stay strong to my values and not be influenced by other ideas.

When Rochele is diagnosed with consumption, her father reaches out to his brother in America to help out. After only a few weeks of being in America, Rochele realizes that American life is not for her. Rochele is in a world that is different from her own. I go to a school which isn't fully geared for my lifestyle. My classmates listen to music, watch movies, and lead social lives very different from what my family and I approve of. Through your book, I learned to really cherish my friends who are similar to me and make sure I stay true to myself. I often find myself in uncomfortable conversations with my friends. I make sure to let them know, and they respect me for it, like when Rochele's cousin Laura respects her for staying true to herself. Before Rochele goes to her first party in America, Laura tries to make her put on a fancier dress. Rochele refuses, saying it will make her feel less like herself. After reading your book, I realize that however hard it is, I must not be influenced by the others around me.

At times, Rochele feels pulled to assimilate to American life, which looks so fun with all the parties and fancy things. My best friend and I feel the same way. She also finds it hard to be in a class where most people are different. Together, we talk and work things out. We validate our feelings and think of ways to climb out of them. Most of all, we both feel the need to stay true to who we are and support each other. Just like me, Rochele has a friend, Zisel, to talk with. Zisel went through the same challenge of staying true to herself and she used her knowledge to help Rochele. People respect her for staying the same as she was

before and don't think she's strange. After I read your book, I started to act more like myself in front of my friends. I now feel fully comfortable because I know that they aren't judging me, they are respecting me. There is a saying, "Don't look on the outside, it's what's on the inside that matters." Rochele realizes the importance of this and now, after reading ***The Promise of Freedom***, I do, too. Rochele realizes that her friends and cousins value the outside more than the inside. They value dresses, hair styles, and riches. Most of their conversations are about the latest style of hat, hair, or clothing. Rochele, on the other hand, values what's inside. She values her identity and doesn't feel comfortable putting on fancy dresses to impress others. Like Rochele, I try to value my identity, my connection with G-D, and kindness more than materialism. This is a challenge because my surroundings seem to be all about externals. From Rochele, I learned that I need to stay strong and work hard to stay who I am, and not to give all value to external things.

Although I am different and may seem strange in the eyes of others, I know in my heart that it is the inside that matters. I will always value my inner strength, and not assimilate. Just like Rochele, I can be strong and stay true to myself and my beliefs. All my privileges shape who I am but I didn't realize this before I read your book. You helped me find myself, and who I should be. You uncovered the person who was there all along, but afraid to show herself. Now, I'm proud to be who I am and stay true to myself. Thank you for teaching me to value my own identity.

Sincerely,
Chaya M. Schusterman

Dear Stephen King,

I have read many of your works. All the ones I've read are horror, but none hit me quite as hard as *Pet Sematary*. It wasn't so much the horror element as the emotions I felt when Gabe was hit by the Orico Truck. I haven't really lost a family member or a friend, but I *felt* it.

It's pretty rare that I feel emotion over a book or movie, but it really struck home. It shaped the way I feel about death. I feel that not enough people know that not only do you write terrifying horror, but you also create stories of families and people that the reader grows to care about and love. You really are an incredible author.

Before I read *Pet Sematary*, I hadn't really thought about death. Of course, I knew that it happened to everyone and that supposedly if you were a good person, you went to Heaven, and if you were a bad person you went to Hell. After I read *Pet Sematary*, I started to question my thoughts about death. Much like Rachel, I became unsure and afraid. I would wonder if it all just ended. I'm not sure about Heaven and Hell, or if there's even an afterlife at all. It was scary because I had never had these thoughts before.

I even started comparing God to Santa Claus, as ridiculous as it sounds, wondering if God had just been made up to stop children from worrying about death, just as Santa Claus had been made up to entertain and interest children in Christmas. There were a few days in which I continuously went back and forth, from believing staunchly in God to thinking he was nothing but an old tale people used to justify morally wrong stereotypes and opinions. In the end, I landed on the choice that was least decisive. Agnosticism; believing there is no way to know or understand what happens when we die. I will live every day to the fullest, but I will also never abandon my moral compass. Whether there is an afterlife or not, I want to be a good person.

There is one character of yours that I always think back to when I'm in an argument or any other tough position. There were times even before I read *Pet Sematary* that I had borderline solipsistic thoughts, and I only include this because I will never forget the character in *It* called Patrick Hockstader, who was so horrifying and terrible that I was *glad* the monster killed him. He was solipsistic, and I always use him to remind

myself that other people have thoughts and feelings when I'm in an argument or moral dilemma. He was just so *terrifying*. I was more scared of him than *It* itself, and *It* was an evil clown from space.

Despite always being scared Mrs. Massey is behind my shower curtain or worrying every time my dog growls at me that they're rabid, I really think your writing has changed me in a very philosophical way. Whether it's the dawning on me of the permanence of death, or the reminder to always empathize with everyone, I have really grown since I decided to read *It* and *Pet Sematary*.

Sincerely,
Connor Fair

Dear Elizabeth Acevedo,

When I first got *The Poet X* in my hands, it was a Friday. To be honest, I didn't mean to start the book at all. I don't know how or why but there was this feeling inside me to just pick it up. So, I did what my heart told me to do. I started it in seventh period and since it was a Friday our English teacher gave us a full class period to read. I grabbed the book and read. Let me tell you. For me, it is a little hard to read books in verse, so I usually avoid them. This book though, I understood. This book made me feel like I was in my world because I related to it so much.

It taught me that I'm not the only one that feels like religion takes away from what I really would want to believe in. You see, like in the book, I feel like Xiomara. My mom wants me to act a certain way and be a certain way. She wants me to act spiritually but I sometimes can't. I want to be different from that. I want to be just me.

"If I were on fire, who could I count on to water me down?" This part got me thinking a lot. Made me stop what I was doing and go back into my past. I would think no one was there for me. No one would care if I was on fire or not. No one would put me out. They would just leave me to burn. But then I realized that there are people in my life that truly care about me. Even though I sometimes can't see that, they are there for me when I need them.

"A poem Mami will never read." Wow. All I can say is that the words you gave there were so amazingly written down with a lot of detailing. "Mi boca no puede formarse el lamento que tu dices tu y Dios merecen." Translation: "My mouth cannot be shaped into the apology that you say both you and God deserve." This statement that you wrote down was a perfect description of what I have to face with my mama. I am not going to admit that it is my mouth's fault for all the things I do. It's my mom's words that hurt me the most. Those words make me feel unworthy. I asked my mom once what she thought about the LGBTQ people. She said, "None of you guys better come out gay or else you are out of this house." Those words that my own Mami said - those words burned hard. It felt like someone was throwing rocks at me and my heart was shattered into tiny pieces. I haven't told my mother anything about that subject after hearing her own voice say that.

The Poet X showed me that there are people struggling with the same things. But even in tough times, don't ever let your voice be swallowed down by other people even though they are your loved ones. ***The Poet X*** showed me that you have to accept yourself and love yourself the way you are. This book helped me discover all of this. So, thank you so much for writing ***The Poet X***.

In appreciation,
Liliana Serrano

Honorable Mention – Level Three

Jacob Vander Zee
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer
Letter to Graham Greene/ Author of *The Power and the Glory*

Dear Graham Greene,

Your book, *The Power and the Glory*, has changed the way I view myself and others around me. First, the pious woman struck me to the core. Growing up in a religiously conservative community, my life draws many similarities to the pious woman. However, your book pointed out the large hypocrisy of my life that I had grown comfortable with. I realized that I look down on others who may not be as conservative as me. I am the one that looks down on others for being “unholy,” or at least for not hiding their sin as well as I do. This has opened my eyes to my own shortcomings as a Christian. I sin by viewing myself over other Christians. I never realized my fault in proudly viewing myself as “more Christian” or more pious than others.

A second thing your book has opened my eyes to is the false dichotomy between good and evil. I used to think that most things could be categorized as either mostly good or mostly evil. However, through the characters of the whiskey priest and the lieutenant, I have learned that that is not always the case. We are all mixes of good and bad. The lieutenant obviously seemed like the “bad guy” in my head as I started to read the book. Nonetheless, he carried such good qualities: he wanted to help the poor and deliver justice in his country. His ideals aren’t that different from my own, even though he despises the Catholic church. I learned that I couldn’t label him as a purely evil man. On top of this, the whiskey priest, who I took at first glance to be the good guy, turned out to be a considerably bad person. He is a “holy” man who is greedy, can’t control his addictions, and is prideful. Your book made it clear to me that a man can be good yet so evil at the same time.

Recognizing false pluralities also helped me look at politics differently. Often, each side is calling the other wrong or evil, but as I learned from *The Power and the Glory*, that can’t be entirely correct. I started to look at both sides not as enemies, but as platforms that present their own solutions to problems. This allowed me to stop blocking out what the opposite party has to say and to actually listen and apply what they think would help our country. Seeing politics this way also allowed me to see the common ground that both political parties share and ways that people might work together. Just as both the lieutenant and the whiskey

priest want to help the poor and struggling, both political parties want to see the country flourish. Thanks to your book, I no longer look at one party as evil and the other as good.

So, Graham Greene, thank you for writing ***The Power and the Glory***, for it has opened my eyes in ways I didn't think were possible before. I cannot begin to fathom where I would be without your book.

Sincerely,
Jacob Vander Zee

Dear Robin Jones Gunn,

My life felt like I was being hit by waves that pulled me under. I was in a hurricane and couldn't get out. All my emotions were ripped away from me, and I felt God was punishing me in 2011 when my mom passed away. This, and other trauma, led to me having self-image issues and difficulty trusting God. These feelings really started to hit in fourth grade, but in fifth grade, I started to hate myself. I didn't like the way I looked, or that I was a bubbly person.

Sometimes I would find myself sitting on my bed in front of my mirror thinking, *Why me? How could God create a person just for them to break down? Why would He put me through a part of my life that I can't handle?* When my stepmom read the first collection of **Christy Miller** to me, I secretly didn't want her to read it. I was dead set on the thought that the cover looked boring and assumed it would be just another cliché book. When I finally read it, I fell in love with it. It was the best book (and still is) I had ever read. I fell in love with the book because I could relate to it. I finally found someone (even though they aren't real) to relate to. I would reread the book over and over because I could find myself, some parts of myself, in these people.

As a kid maybe some people see the world as "full of rainbows and sunshine." Maybe, just maybe, others have to learn to grow up. I saw that there are well-founded people in the world, but there are also a lot of corrupt people. I believe that all people have a light on the inside, whether or not they choose to show it. I've been told that I'm not enough or that I should change. I never realized how much a person can change another until it happened to me. **Christy Miller** really helped me see that I don't need to change for anyone, she showed me I am special, and I have talents. We both had somebody criticize a part of us we thought was perfect about ourselves. I remember a moment in my life where all the emotions of grief and anxiety exploded out of me. I was angry at God for putting me through what I had gone through. I never had anyone in my life to help me deal with the grief of my mother. Todd helped me learn to trust God. He helped me see that God is with me, and I need to give all my worries to him.

I have felt alone at times like no one was there for me when I struggled. It's really difficult not being able to relate on this level with somebody. I

have times that I know God is with me in my struggles. Other times, I doubt that he is even there. Todd helped me realize that I have to trust and be in the moment. As a kid, I never really understood why terrible events happen. I didn't realize that I just had to look past it and move on. I was very sensitive and even the littlest comment would stay with me wherever I went. I let the criticism decide who I was. I read your book to escape. I needed to hear the advice you have written in your books. The lesson that stuck out to me, was when Todd explained to Christy that, "Hawaii is Heaven, and to get to Hawaii you need a boat. Jesus is that boat." Without Jesus, you are swimming in the darkness alone. I thought that God had forgotten about me, that no one was here for me. I fell off the boat a lot and I'm trying to climb back on. I forgot that I had people in my life who loved and supported me, but I pushed them away.

I know my journey with God isn't done. I have learned how to deal with the loss of my mom. I have a lot more to learn about trust and finding out who I am in God. I need to learn how to love myself, not to listen to those who criticize me. I no longer feel like I'm being pulled under by waves. I'm slowly pulling myself out of the hurricane, and I can feel the emotions I should. I will keep praying about what to do next. I want to thank you, Todd, and Christy for all the lessons you have taught me, for understanding, and the advice that you gave me.

Forever thankful,
Lexie Farrell

Dear Don Freeman,

Finding acceptance with oneself can be very difficult sometimes. In your book, **Corduroy**, this theme is very prevalent. Corduroy gets rejected by a little girl's mom and he's determined to fix himself by finding his button. He later realizes that the little girl from the day before, Lisa, likes him just the way he is. He finds satisfaction with himself. Like **Corduroy**, we should be proud of and satisfied with ourselves and how we were made.

It is said that we are our own worst critics. It would be understandable that I have had issues with myself and the way I look. When I was a young child, I didn't have body image issues because I didn't know the difference between how I saw myself and what others saw. I did, however, feel like a lot of people didn't like me or thought I was weird. Something about me just felt off and different. Even now, I feel like an outcast. I feel like I'm always doing something wrong, even when I'm just trying to be helpful. I've never had severe anxiety over it, but I do wish there were parts of me that were different and better. I often feel like Corduroy when he was rejected by Lisa's mom for not having a button. He strived to find that missing button and to change himself, like how I wanted to change my image so badly.

This image of myself has not only come from what I think of myself, but from what other people have said about me as well. The comments from other people such as, "He won't date you because you aren't skinny enough" to, "I hope I never have daughters because I don't want them to be like you," have confirmed my thoughts about myself. This is similar to Corduroy's case where he didn't know he was missing a button or had anything wrong with him until Lisa's mother pointed it out. However, other people have said more positive things about me than negative. My friends have told me I'm funny and beautiful. My mom has told me that I'm smart, compassionate, and adorable. She often quotes a line from the movie, *Wreck-it-Ralph*, where Ralph says, "And everyone loves an adorable winner!" Even random strangers like to tell my mom and I that we look exactly the same. This is a major compliment to me because I believe that my mother is beautiful.

At the end of your book, when Lisa comes back to get Corduroy, after she had saved up her money, she tells Corduroy how badly she wanted

him and how she liked him exactly the way he was. Even afterwards, when Corduroy reminded her of the things he had wrong with him, she still loved him for he who was, and she looked past his flaws. Your book made me realize that God loves me for who I am. Even if others don't like me and think that there are things wrong with me, God loves me in spite of my flaws. In fact, he loves me so much that He gave His own son in payment for me and allows me to be a part of His amazing and glorious family. Thank you for showing me that my doubts and fears are just that – doubts and fears, not the truth. It doesn't matter what I think of myself or what others think of me. God loves me and that's all that matters.

With gratitude,
Valerie Disselkoen

Let's Talk About...

GRATITUDE

Being Thankful

Gaining Perspective

**Learning About Challenges
Others Face**

Honorable Mention – Level One

Mary K. Sarver
Notre Dame Catholic School, Michigan City
Letter to Joan Bauer / Author of *Almost Home*

Dear Joan Bauer,

Almost Home was super amazing, spectacular, and the awesomest story I have ever read. It taught me how hard it is to be truly homeless.

Almost Home taught me to be grateful for what I have. It gave me hope that light can shine through even in the darkest times. It taught me to never give up, ever!

This book made me laugh, especially when the dogs that Sugar was walking tried to go in different directions. It made me cry when they had to leave their home and had nowhere to go and when Reba's cousin kicked them out of their house. I was scared when Reba had a mental breakdown. This story made me think of many different things in life that I never realized were happening to people all around me.

My favorite character is Sugar. She taught me that even during the hard times you should always go on and make the world a better place one step at a time. She also taught me that for every bad decision, try to make a better one next time. She taught me what it is like to be really lonely. I am glad Sugar made friends when she moved to Chicago. Even though Sugar had no real place to go she tried to make the best of it. I think she did an amazing job! She kept going and never stopped.

I can relate this story to my life. When we sold our house, we didn't have anywhere to go for four years, so we lived at my grandparents' house. I wasn't truly homeless, but my family didn't have a house of our own. I can also relate this story to the pandemic. During this time, many people had nowhere to go for supplies during the lockdowns. Homeless people might not be able to get food and other supplies they need.

This story inspired me this Christmas season to give books to kids who are poor and might not get presents this year. This book gave me the opportunity to know what being homeless really is like. I know how hard it is now to be homeless. This book should be on every bookshelf in every house in the world! Thank you for writing this wonderful book and helping me to know more about homelessness!

Your friend,
Mary K. Sarver

Dear Cynthia Lord,

During the span of our lives, we are often told that everyone has challenges no one knows about. Your book, *Rules*, proves that loving and seeing through people's flaws is not always easy. Sometimes, we have to put our own feelings aside to realize everyone else has challenges in their lives.

My mom always tells me to judge people kindly, because we do not know what anyone might be going through. It is sometimes difficult to judge people favorably because what they say or do usually has a permanent impact on the way we see them. Most of the time though, people who act unkind actually have something going on in their lives that they can't deal with.

Catherine reminds me of myself. I have had challenges where I would have to look beyond someone's surface and see the good in them. Catherine needs to look beyond the surface of her brother's actions and see he can't control the way he acts. She has many challenges, as the sister of an autistic brother. She has a lot of trouble making friends and there is a boy who is always teasing her. What annoys her most though, is when David has a tantrum or does something embarrassing in public. She feels that David is trying to embarrass her on purpose. Later, she realizes he cannot control the way he acts, it's just the way he was created. In recent times, I have had people ask me insensitive questions or make thoughtless comments about me being adopted. At first, I thought these comments and questions were made to be mean, but after reading your book, I realized it was not the case.

Since I have had people make rude comments or ask thoughtless questions to me, I have had to ask myself, why would someone ask me such questions? Was this person trying to be mean? Were they trying to be rude? I realized these people may have just been curious, and I needed to adjust to the fact that being curious is in most people's nature. They might have had something going on in their life that I didn't really know about, just like Catherine doesn't really know how challenging it is for David to act the way everyone wants him to act.

In the end, Catherine realizes the love she has for her younger brother is one of the most important relationships she'll ever have. I have learned

that we should all be treating everyone equally and judging people favorably, because we really do not know what challenges a person has in their life.

Sincerely,
Rikki Fogelson

Dear Anthony Doerr,

There are multiple books I have read that have made an impact on my life, but *All the Light We Cannot See* is different. This was not just some book that I enjoyed reading, returned to the library, and never thought of again. This book stuck with me like glue, randomly appearing in my thoughts, causing me to think deeper than I ever have about different points of view. I am lucky enough to have near perfect eyesight, good hearing, and all other normal sensitivities. Some people, such as Marie-Laure in your book, are not as fortunate. I realized, after reading the novel, that I had taken the simple things in life for granted.

Growing up, I really did not know much about people who were born without one of their senses, such as being blind or deaf. I had heard of Helen Keller, and I found her story touching, but your book impacted me in a different way. The only other things I knew about people who were unable to see, I had learned from my cousin. She was born prematurely, causing some issues, the biggest one being that she was blind. The couple of occasions from my childhood when I saw her, I would think of millions of questions I wanted to ask her about what it was like. I was filled with curiosity about the whole idea and spent a lot of time trying to comprehend a life where one of my senses was missing, until one day I decided I would never understand how a blind person lived, and I pushed the thought aside. Reading this book finally answered questions I had ever since the first time I saw my cousin, along with giving me the realization that I had taken things for granted that other people were not able to experience.

I originally picked up your book and began to read it because I had heard only good feedback about it. I also had read a summary and the fact that the narrator was blind intrigued me, and I wanted to know how the character would experience the story. I was never expecting to be genuinely impacted by the story. Since the words were written from Marie-Laure's perspective, I gained a whole different, more optimistic view of the world.

Marie-Laure did not let her lack of eyesight prevent her from doing what she needed to do. She was curious about everything, and she learned like a sponge, soaking in as much information as possible. When I read about her determination to learn so much, I felt motivated

to expand my own knowledge on things that interested me. When she narrated the story and described in depth every small detail of what she felt, even just doing simple everyday activities, it opened my eyes to how I had let the small, methodical things in life merge into one monotonous blur that I paid no attention to. Once I finished reading the book, it took me a while to fully take in the words I had read. I told myself that I would try and finish out the day paying close attention to my actions and words, and not take for granted the fact that I could see, hear, and feel everything normally. After just one day of doing that, I decided I should never let even the simple things in life slip through the cracks of my consciousness and into the corner of my mind where only thoughts of tedious activities were kept, like pictures in your house that you walk past everyday but never stop and look at. I felt that I should look at everything I do with motivation and interest, along with fully enjoying what I do and learning about what I want to learn. Marie-Laure's story made me feel that life is too short to take anything for granted, and that I should be thankful for what I had.

Thank you. Thank you for your inspiring words that gave me a new view on my life. The book brought to me a realization that I didn't know I needed, but I'm so grateful that I had the opportunity to learn such an amazing outlook to have on life.

Sincerely,
Shannon Stenger

Dear Tara Westover,

This past year I have read multiple books but *Educated* really opened my eyes on how the western part of the United States was in the past. Throughout the whole book, Tara had to overcome many obstacles and I could easily relate to that in my own life. The more I read, the more I could understand. Once I finished reading this book, I thought to myself, "If a girl in the middle of a desert in Utah can go to a prestigious school in the UK, then I can make it too." This book really inspired me to do more and become more than average.

When I read *Educated*, I tried to put myself in the shoes of Tara – trying to feel the emotional stress that she went through and other obstacles. When things became intense, I would think that Tara might give in to her father's ludicrous thinking just like most of her family already did. The betrayal that Tara felt on multiple occasions and how disconnected her family was from the rest of the world made me realize that even though my family doesn't go out much even before the pandemic, I noticed that I took this lifestyle for granted and how easy I have it. When one of Tara's siblings caught on fire, it also made me notice that there are a lot of people who live in slums in America today and are forced to survive off subsistence-farming and produce everything themselves. While people over in Congress are squabbling over how they should please rich lobbyists, people are starving and living in harsh conditions.

With *Educated* having multiple relatable experiences, it shows that us humans aren't too different from each other. It brings us together and we shouldn't care what other people look like because we all experience the same things. With each ugly encounter which includes betrayals, alienation, conflicts, and more, most of these situations were really similar to what other people have experienced, but in their own way. This novel was very relatable to life and shows that all humans are the same.

Sincerely,
Luis Valerdi

Third Place Winner – Level One

Tehilla Rutstein
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis
Letter to Alan Gratz / Author of *Refugee*

Dear Alan Gratz,

Some books are good because they are scary. Some books are good because the characters accomplish something that you would like to accomplish. Some make you feel warm inside. Some are action packed page turners that you read in one sitting. Some though, can change your life forever. For me, *Refugee* was all those books.

Refugee showed me that I can do anything. The characters in your book encountered and overcame many things that I can't even imagine. Sometimes, when I get home, I will complain to my parents that I had such a "bad day;" that I went through so much. Joseph, Isabel, and Mahmoud had to do things that brought out their courage, made them stand up for what's right, and be thoughtful of others' situations even if your own is just as hard. They went through such hardships, but they were brave through it all. This really puts having what I thought was a bad day into perspective.

I have had to have courage at certain times like the characters in your book. My brother was born with a heart defect. When he was a baby, he had his first surgery. We lived in Canada, and the one hospital in all of western Canada that could do the surgery he needed was around 200 miles away! We were told that he would need to be in the hospital for 5-7 days, so we all packed up and hit the road. During the surgery, there were many complications, just as your characters' journeys were harder and scarier than originally planned. We ended up needing to stay for about 2 months. The time stretched and Passover, an important Jewish holiday, was rolling around the corner. This part reminded me of Josef and how his Bar Mitzvah was nice although not the same because it was in an unsuspected way and place. We were going to need to stay in the hospital for this 8-day holiday on which we are required to not eat any bread except for matzah, which is unleavened bread, almost like a cracker. This would be a hard enough feat in the hospital, let alone with two very little kids. My parents decided that my sister and I should go to my grandparents in Baltimore, Maryland. It was a long plane ride, and we were only three and four-years-old. Some friends from our community were planning on going to Baltimore for Passover as well. They kindly offered to take us. We were little kids, and it was

hard being away from our parents. But, like Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud, we had to be strong.

In the end, the surgery went well, and my brother now lives a pretty normal life. He still needs surgeries every five to ten years but between that, he is a cute, funny, and active seven-year-old kid.

Minister Will Bowen said, “Hurt people, hurt people.” When we went to our grandparents’, we could have been angry and stubborn, and hurt people that we were with because we were “hurt.” Instead, we went without complaint (but with some tearful goodbyes I’m sure) and we were okay. We didn’t make a fuss or throw a fit. We were in a hard situation ourselves, but we didn’t make a difficult situation for someone else. Ruth took in Mahmoud’s family and helped them even though she had such a hard and sad life herself. She could have turned them down and followed through with the idea that “hurt people, hurt people.” Instead, she went through with a different one. My mother once told me, “Hurt people that don’t hurt people, are great people.” Your book helped me learn to be more thoughtful of how other people might be feeling and to put others before yourself when you go through something hard, because *that* is how you help yourself. Thank you for teaching me that.

Sincerely,
Tehilla Rutstein

Dear Suzanne Collins,

I wanted to share how your book *The Hunger Games* really made an impact on my life. District Twelve made a huge collision in my view of the world. When I read about how poor they were and how they had to hunt for food, I realized how blessed I am. Along with safety and the right to freedom, I am blessed with material items like clothes and shelter. The districts have so little compared to my family. While they lived in shack-like houses and scavenged for food, I have a pantry full of goodies. It hurts me to imagine living like that.

I cannot fathom being separated from my family! When Katniss took Primrose's place for the Hunger Games, I realized what I would do for my brother. Although we often fight, I love him and would do anything for him. Therefore, I am inspired to change our relationship. Because I want to have a great relationship with my family and cherish the special moments, I would like to keep this book as a reminder. I know that one day in the future my family and I will be separated, which frightens me.

I also felt a connection with Katniss. She always hunted for her family's food and figured out how to get outside of the border. That shows that she is brave and good at problem-solving; characteristics that I share. She endured so much in the arena and in her trials before. Although I have not yet gone through most of her experiences, I have had issues with my family and friends that have hurt me and made me feel upset and depressed. That is why I felt a connection.

Katniss was so lonely in the arena. She did not have her family and friends to lean on and talk to. I would absolutely hate being away from my support system. I have had nightmares before about being separated from my family, and it is not enjoyable. Although it was a terrifying experience, she was so strong and brave. I am like that sometimes, but Katniss inspires me to be like that all of the time.

The Hunger Games is a difficult but inspiring story that helped change my point of view of life. It is also such a thrilling and entertaining piece of work. Thank you so much for all the creative lessons and life-changing moments that you have given through *The Hunger Games*.

Sincerely,
Gabriella Dishong

Dear Sarah Crossan,

Everyone always says do not judge a book by its cover, but I still find myself drawn to colorful covers, bold words, and interesting titles. The only books I ever tend to enjoy are fantasy. Books about places far away. Books where I don't have to be a part of the real world. Places where I can fight monsters and live in a castle. Places where I can do what I want and feel free from the weights of reality.

After reading *Being Toffee*, I see that there is so much more to the world than fantasy. Allison's story pulled me out of my imagination to show me what things can be like in the real world if I cared enough to take a step back and accept it. I only chose this book for a project at school. Never did I ever imagine that this book would light up my dark room, like pushing the curtains aside in my safe little space, and just letting me glimpse at what I had been hiding from. What I ignored because I was too scared to think about. *Being Toffee* became my window into reality.

As I read, it opened my eyes to things I was only vaguely aware of. I knew they existed, but I never cared about them because I thought they never directly affected me. I found myself being uncaring, rude, and ignorant to the things around me. Taking what is not mine and not caring about whom it once belonged to. I was being the girl that cared not about the people around her, only what she could gain from them.

Every word I read felt more real and lifelike than the next. This was not just a simple story about some girl finding herself in the world. It was real. It was her emotions and mine and all the problems either of us had ever faced. It was the flaws in society and the discrimination no one did anything about. It was the girl being beaten by her father because of something she could not help. It was the woman with dementia being treated like a whiny child when she could not remember. It was everything pushing down and back at once in the opposite direction of where we needed to go. It was short and breathless and sharp like a punch to the gut. It hurt to read but felt so familiar. Felt so real. Like curtains being drawn away from a window in a dark sheltered room.

The more I read, the more I realize how much I never really care to take a look at the world around me. How I never spare things a second glance. The things I shrugged off as normal or common when in all

reality they should never be accepted as normal. Things I should reach out to stop.

It is not pride or image that matters to me. It is what other people are suffering through that I could have prevented. The things I did not do to aid the very society I live in. The cold starving children living in the streets while I am living my life of apparent luxury. Complaining about what class I have next or what I have for lunch. It is the children that would give anything to have the very same classes I complain about. It is the people that have given everything for the education I shrug off. The meals I do not want to eat because I think I will not like them. The little things I push aside and ignore that are keeping those people in their situations.

So many people could see what was going on if only they cared to step back and take in the world for one minute. Just one minute of looking at the world around them and they could see what they reject. What they could prevent.

It is people like Allison throwing themselves into the world without any help or shelter not knowing when they might find a home again. Not knowing if they will ever make it to find home. People like me walking around pretending I cannot see the landfills of trash being buried into precious earth. Pretending I do not see the invasive species killing trees and plants in my own backyard. The people I walk past that are living in the streets begging for help.

Being Toffee has become my window into the real world. It showed me what I did not care to see. What I could prevent. What I, as much a part of society as the next person, should have prevented. If only I had spared a minute to pay proper attention to what was going on around me, and if only others had spared a minute to listen. To listen to the cries of the people around them and finally stop to help. Not to boost their pride or egos but to truly make things better. To make a difference. The difference every person dreams of making as a child. Those dreams could be reality. If only we stopped. If only we stopped to listen, to glance at what was around us, and realize what we have is only a fleeting moment in time. We only have so much time to make a difference, so why not one for the better?

Allison and Marla's story has been that difference. That chance to stop and listen. To take in the world around me and make me long to make it better, showing me how I had been acting. To make me revive those dreams I had as a child. To let me stop and see the problems I can help fix. The difference I can make in my society. The people like Allison and

Kelly Anne that I could help find their home. The people like Marla I could help find their family. The children I could teach. The people I could save. The difference I, or anyone around me, could make in this world if they stopped and listened to the voices of the people. Their people.

If I had taken a chance to look beyond the covers, past the bright colors and bold fonts, I could see what the world was. The people like Allison I might walk past every day. The people like Kelly Anne I could meet. The honest, true, good people walking around me. The ones that listen to the voices and make the change. The ones with the strength to pull away from their fantasies, no matter how comforting, and make that difference for the better.

Being Toffee has shown me a whole other side of the world. And no matter how dark or scary at times, for that I am thankful. I am thankful they gave me the chance to really see. To see what was around me and encourage me to make a change. Allison once said she liked the name Toffee. She said it was a name that could break teeth. Strong and courageous and everything she was not. But in all honestly it was everything she could be. And everything she became. She became the change she wanted to see. And I will too.

Sincerely,
Hannah George

