

2022 Winning Letters

by Indiana Students

**Award Winning Letters
to Authors**

Letters About Literature

the James G. Madelaine

McMillan

FAMILY FOUNDATION

2022 Letters About Literature Anthology

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Letters About Literature

2022 Winning Letters by Indiana Students

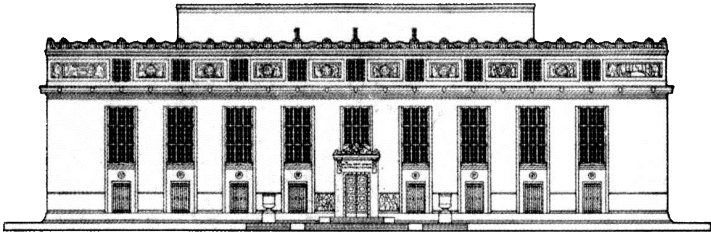
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Indiana Letters About Literature

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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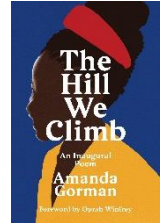
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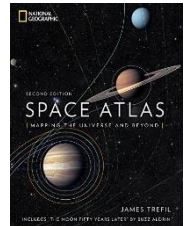
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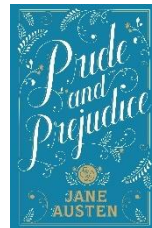
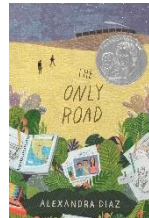
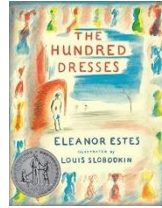
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- Congratulations from the Indiana Center for the Book -

Congratulations to all the students featured in this collection! These students not only read a book that moved them, but they also sat down and thought about how reading that work changed how they see themselves or how they see the world. People seem less and less likely to change their minds lately. We frequently hear about the polarization of our country; how people are entrenched in their belief systems. How people are unlikely to change their minds about anything from global warming to human rights. How incredible it is then that each year hundreds of students write down their thoughts about how books have the power to change their minds about issues? It's frankly amazing and it speaks to the power of literature.

In some cases, students wrote about how books helped them. Many students wrote about how books helped them with anxiety. It's an anxiety-ridden world we live in now, especially with increased time spent looking at screens and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Thank goodness literature exists to help students with issues like anxiety, bullying, identity, racism, belief systems, and so much more.

Yes. Books are powerful. And book banning and censorship efforts have increased exponentially over the last few years. Why is it that some people are so afraid of having their minds changed? It's a mystery to me. You only need to read a handful of the letters in this book to see the myriad of ways that books serve to inspire, save, support, help, guide, and comfort our young people today. Books help us discover new things about ourselves, and sometimes they do assist in changing our minds.

This is the tenth year that we've collected letters from our contest into an anthology. Each year I'm struck by how the letters speak so specifically to current events. Students see what is going on around them. They are affected by national and local issues. And every year they use literature to help them make sense of the world around them. I hope that you, dear reader, find both letters and books in this collection that can help you make sense of the world as well.

– Suzanne Walker, Indiana Center for the Book

- Comments from Margaret Peterson Haddix, Indiana Author -
April 21, 2022 – Letters About Literature Online Ceremony

You may have noticed we are living in strange times right now — the fact that I am speaking to you only virtually, rather than in person is a testament to that. We've all pretty much worn out the word, "unprecedented" in the past two years.

Because I started my professional writing life as a journalist rather than a fiction writer, there's a part of me that would like to say, "Forget this speech — let me ask YOU questions! What is it like to be a kid growing up in Indiana right now? What do YOU make of all the odd events around you? How has your view of the world changed since March 2020, that fateful month when the world became a different place for all of us?" I know I would get many different answers. Based on the letters that I read of yours, I'm also sure your answers would be insightful and wise and amazing.

For those of you who felt a moment of terror when I asked those questions - even rhetorically — I understand. If you are like I was as a kid, you do not want to be asked questions that you have to answer spontaneously. You are full of thoughts, but you want to have time to work them out for yourself before sharing. And that's a good thing — it's quite reasonable not to have everything figured out instantaneously. It is one of the major problems of our culture right now, that we expect speedy reactions to everything. An event occurs, and right away there's someone with a microphone asking, "How do you feel?"

Before March 2020, I was traveling a lot, visiting schools and libraries and book festivals. In the last two years, my world narrowed, and besides writing, my life was all about taking care of my elderly parents and taking care of friends and other relatives who were struggling. I felt like my biggest job was not writing but trying to hold people together. In the past two months, I've resumed a lot of travel, and I've been talking a lot more to strangers, and I feel like I'm checking in with everyone, constantly asking, "What has the last two years been like for you? Was your school remote? Did the people around you unite in healthy ways or divide in hurtful ways that you still feel wounded from?"

I started out blaming my journalism background for that instinct, but I think it's really more of a human instinct. We are all looking for connection. We all NEED connection. I love everything about the Letters About Literature program, because I think books are an incredibly important way for people to connect. My own background is that I grew up on a farm in a fairly remote area of Ohio. Until I was in high school, I only ever went to school with other kids who were also white. Until I was in college, I never met a kid who was part of any religious tradition besides Christianity.

So, when I was a kid, books were both the things that made me curious about the rest of the world and other races, other cultures, other religions — and the things that, for a long time, were the only way I could have that curiosity satisfied.

Sadly, when I was a kid, there were not as many books available about diverse perspectives as there are now — I am so glad that your generation has more opportunities. But long before I met anyone who was Jewish, I felt like I was friends with Anne Frank, with the All-of-a-Kind-Family, with all of E.L. Konigsberg's wise-cracking New York City Jewish kids. I'd also read Ezra Jack Keat's *Snowy Day* again and again and again and felt like Peter and I would be friends if we'd lived in the same place, and we'd both love playing in the snow together, regardless of the difference in our skin color. I'd even read books about American kids during World War II who were sent into, essentially, prisons with their families, solely because of having Japanese ancestry. I felt, reading those books, as though it was happening to ME. So, like BethAnn, who said in her letter to Gene Stratton-Porter that the characters in Porter's books became family and friends, I also identified heavily with all the characters I read about — whether they were much like me or not.

I think it was because of reading so many books — and identifying with so many different characters — that I began to play a particular game on the long school bus rides I had every day — because kids in my area lived so far apart, I spent hours on the bus each day. I spent a lot of that time talking with friends or reading, but I'd also often imagine what it was like to be each person I saw climbing on or off the bus. Sometimes I played that game because I was jealous of something that other kid had — I wished I had long, beautiful hair like a girl named Julie, who also, I thought, had a cooler house and a better name than mine. Sometimes it was just because I was curious — what would it be like to be Tiffany or Amy or Gracie? Sometimes I pretended there was some magic out there that actually could turn me into that other person — I think I was influenced in this by reading *Freaky Friday*. It was probably a good sign for my mental health that I always decided I wouldn't want to switch for real. But I think it was a great thing for my sense of empathy that books prodded me to constantly wonder: What does it feel like to be some other person? What's going on INSIDE that other person that I can't see?

All of that was preparing me to be a writer. But it was also just preparing me to be a human being, in the midst of other humans. My childhood was pre-internet, and in many ways, more leisurely than what a lot of you are probably experiencing. Now, it seems we can all play a damaging version

of that “what’s it like to be someone else?” game through social media. But if you or I look at Instagram posts or TikTok videos, we are only seeing the surface, cultivated image, not what that person’s life is really like. Pictures and video can lie.

Sometimes words and books lie, too, of course, but that can be easier to see through. We NEED books to help us see the world in deeper, more thoughtful ways than quick images flashing by us.

That’s one of the many reasons I’ve been very disturbed to see the calls for book bannings throughout the country lately. At a school near me, in the Buckeye Valley school district in Central Ohio, one parent complained about a book called *It’s Okay to be a Unicorn* — a book with the simple message that being weird or different is fine. Based on that one parent’s objections, the author was told he couldn’t read the book to students during an author visit, and pictures of unicorns and rainbows were taken down from the hallways.

This makes me think of a scene in *A Wrinkle in Time* — a book I read over and over again as a kid — where kids in a disturbingly homogeneous world are bouncing balls outdoors, one kid made a mistake, and then there’s terrible fear of punishment, a terrible fear of being different. As a kid, I thought that scene was over the top — something that could happen only someplace else, or only in an author’s imagination. But have we reached that state here? It feels like a lot of the conversations about book banning have become a matter of people shouting slogans and catchphrases without really listening — or sometimes, even thinking. I commend all of you for doing the hard work of thinking deeply about challenging books, and going beyond slogans.

I can cite Callum’s 4th-6th grade winning letter to Alan Gratz — he went so far as to try to understand the enemy; *Grenede* made him understand a boy on the other side of WWII. I can also cite Naomi’s Grade 7-8 winning letter to Sara Leicht-Weinstein — she tried to understand responding to unspeakable cruelty and hate not with bitterness, but by working toward better things. I love the way she summed up the author’s actions and attitudes in two short sentences: “You escaped the traumas of your past through love and acceptance. That is true power.” I was also blown away by many lines in Loralee’s winning high school-level letter to Markus Zusak about *The Book Thief*, even though she points out a problem with over-identifying with characters in books. I’ll quote a section of her brilliant letter:

"I began to unconsciously recognize the unspoken protection that surrounds important characters. Bad things can happen but not really bad things. Was I honestly supposed to think that Harry Potter was going to be killed in his first book when there are six more in the series? The same naturally had to be true for my life." It is a sign of true maturity to realize that, while we are all the main characters in our own lives, none of us are the main characters of the world at large. We all have to share. And that is one of the things that will hold us together.

In my latest book, *The School for Whatnots*, I write about two best friends, a boy named Max whose entire life has been one of ease, and a girl named Josie, who has secretly faced many challenges she can't tell even her best friend about. Ultimately, she decides the best way to stand up for herself is by writing a note — one that says, "No matter what anyone tells you, I'm real." From there, both Josie and Max — and other kids and lots of adults — have a lot to learn about all sorts of oddities about their world.

I hope you know that YOU are not alone in wanting to understand and improve the world. And I hope you also feel that you have a chance to discover what's possible, and to make good things happen. I commend you for starting on this journey through reading, writing, and supporting Letters About Literature.

LETTERS
ARRANGED
BY TOPIC

Let's Talk About...

READING

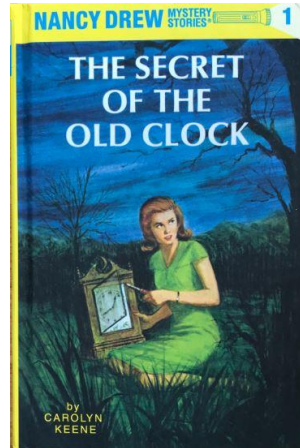
Discovering Reading

The Power of Words

Escape through Reading

Dear Carolyn Keene,

Thank you so much for writing the **Nancy Drew** series. These books changed my life because I used to hate reading books, but after I read my first **Nancy Drew** book, I fell in love instantly. I was on the edge of my seat waiting for the truth to be revealed, and that's when I found my love for mystery books. The **Nancy Drew** series is fun, entertaining, and full of suspenseful cliffhangers. The overall theme of the **Nancy Drew** series is to embrace adventure and never give up when you have something challenging. These books matter to me because they helped me love to read. I have now read many mystery books thanks to you!



My favorite part of your books is when the mysteries are solved because they always catch me by surprise. I think you help readers feel thrilled, astonished, and satisfied when they read your books. My personal favorite is **The Secret of the Old Clock**. This book tells the story of an elderly man, Josiah Crowley, who was not well treated at the end of his life. Josiah was forced to write a will favoring the Topham family who had mistreated and taken advantage of him. While Josiah may have been a vulnerable man, he did not allow the Tophams to get away with stealing all his money. Instead, Josiah Crowley wrote a second will that he hid in the family clock. This second will excluded the Tophams completely. This story was important to me because Josiah proved that writing can be a truly powerful thing. By writing his second will, even after death, Josiah was able to defeat the wicked Tophams.

My absolute favorite quote from one of your books is, "I have solved some mysteries, I'll admit, and I enjoy it, but I'm sure there are many other girls who could do the same." That quote is very powerful to me because it makes me feel like anyone can do something wonderful, not just Nancy Drew. Your work has changed my way of thinking and writing. The **Nancy Drew** series has taken me from a passive reader to feeling empowered to make a difference in the world around me. Nancy Drew is just a regular girl like me. Yet, her curiosity and bravery

help her solve mysteries and assist those around her. This inspires me to be courageous and adventurous when I see an issue in front of me.

Ms. Keene, I am so grateful for the inspiration you have provided me through the **Nancy Drew** series. You have taken me from a person who does not enjoy books to an avid reader. Not only have your books provided a source of incredible entertainment, but they also have encouraged me to face adversity with the same thoughtfulness, helpfulness, and determination as Nancy Drew.

I will be forever grateful for the way your series has changed my life.

Sincerely,
Mara Richardson

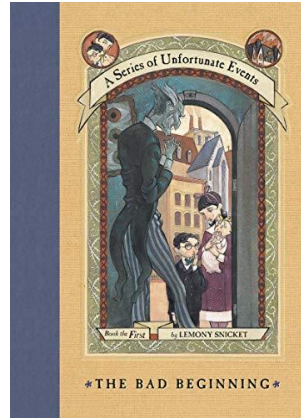
Lillian Weigle

Otterbein Elementary, Otterbein

Letter to Lemony Snicket/ Author of **A Series of Unfortunate Events**

Dear Lemony Snicket,

Reading is my favorite hobby and every time I open one of your books from **A Series of Unfortunate Events** I am transformed to a different world. Your books are funny and have taught me my love of reading is not something I should be ashamed of. Most of my friends don't read on the weekends or when they get home from school, and they look at me funny when I tell them that I finished another book over the weekend. But I know reading is exercise for my brain and whether we like it or not, we compare ourselves to the characters in a book.



In **A Series of Unfortunate Events**, the Baudelaire orphans always work together to get away from Count Olaf using each of their own specialty skills. Violet is really good at inventing, Klaus has read more books than most people read in their lifetime, and Sunny is known for her very sharp teeth. I most connected with Klaus because he and I both read a lot. The books we read form the language in which we communicate with others. By reading books like **A Series of Unfortunate Events**, the better and more refined my thoughts have become. Our communication becomes more clarified as we are able to pick up the right word to express ourselves. In a world that often emphasizes sports over academics, thank you for writing a series that celebrates intelligence!

In the third book, Aunt Josephine emphasized the importance of grammar to Violet, Klaus, and Sunny. I have learned so many new vocabulary words. I think the way you often say, "A word which here means..." is a wonderful way to get kids excited about learning new words. When grammar and new vocabulary words are presented in such a fun way, kids are more likely to remember them and absorb the lessons. An important lesson you shared throughout **A Series of Unfortunate Events** was that even though the Baudelaire orphans have had a very hard and unfair life, they still work together and get through challenges. This lesson is important to me because no matter how negative life becomes you can take those circumstances thrown at you and come out the other side - a better, stronger, and wiser person. It

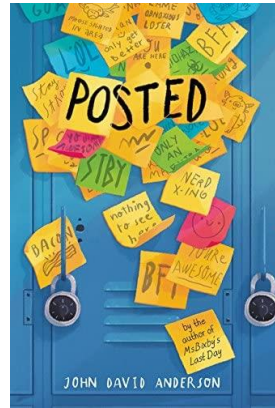
made me think of when I was air lifted to Riley hospital with an eye injury and doctors weren't sure if I'd lose my vision, but I became stronger and more resilient and learned to cope with decreased eyesight until I was fully healed.

As I said before, reading is my favorite hobby and the story lines throughout ***A Series of Unfortunate Events*** were always surprising. You helped me embrace who am I and my love of reading and learning while knowing that is it ok to stay kind, respectful and myself even in difficult times. Thank you for helping me achieve my Accelerated Reading goal while furthering my love of reading.

Sincerely,
Lillian Weigle

Dear John David Anderson,

Your book *Posted* qualifies to be the most meaningful and outstanding book that I have ever read. *Posted* has taught me and changed my perspective on life in many ways. The first way you have managed to change my life is by teaching me how powerful words can be. In the words of your character Morgan (Wolf), "Words are ghosts that can haunt us forever." This statement proves to be true time and time again throughout many people's lives, including mine, and this book has helped me realize that.



The second thing I learned was how anything can change in just a second. Whether it's a friendship, an event, or even a book anything can change incredibly quickly. You have taught me this lesson by illustrating many different situations with words. The times when circumstances changed quickly in your book include the chapter "The Catch," when Ruby got her phone confiscated, and the part where Rose created and accepted the bet to race in the gauntlet.

Posted made me feel many emotions. I felt seriousness, sadness, and I even felt like I understood what the characters were going through. I also felt excited. I felt suspense. I laughed many times, too. You took me through a rollercoaster of emotions while I was reading your book, and it is extraordinary how you do that. Even in the most serious of times, you find ways to make me laugh out loud by sneaking in some jokes.

While reading the book, I really felt for these characters. This is because you developed them so well and made them so relatable to all types of people. I think I related to Frost and Wolf the most. I felt so sad when Eric (Frost) said goodbye to his dad. The story felt so realistic to me, and I would like to let you know that.

I also really liked the way you ended it. It really ends the story off with a smile by referencing an earlier part of the book. With all the events that happened to your characters, it is an exceptional ending that makes the reader say, "Wow," whether in their head or out loud. This

story really made me happy, and I hope knowing that makes you happy.

While other authors do write great books, I rarely see ones as unique and amazing as your writing style. You write with such great descriptions and backstories for all the characters and the details of these characters that can be relatable for anybody. You also have this perfect blend of comedy and sadness, and I love that about **Posted**. Your perfect mixture of the two elements along with many more could make any book outstanding. You also changed my perspective so much on how the world can work and how bullying can come in many different forms including words.

Words can truly be weapons. But these weapons can strike anywhere at any time. Whether you're strolling around in the school hallway or driving to work, words can strike very deeply. This book teaches me to think before speaking and to make sure to comfort people when they are hurting. This book has truly made an impact on my life. I hope you love your book as much I do because it undeniably deserves it.

Sincerely,
Nathan Hardesty

Dear Jane Austen,

Reading has always been my doorway to other worlds and adventures. Reading provides me with an escape from life when reality becomes too worrisome. As an elementary student I would always have a book, whenever I could up until I reached 6th grade. In 6th grade reading became more of a chore than anything. It was as if the doorway to the worlds and adventures that provided me with an escape for so long was locked. I tried many other genres, but the books never satisfied me.

My mom, who is a voracious reader, recommended *Pride and Prejudice*. From a young age, my mom always encouraged my love of reading, for she knew that reading is a passion we both share and bond over. She was devastated when she found out about my reading block, and she tried to help me find the passion for reading that I once had.

When I read *Pride and Prejudice*, I felt an overwhelming connection to the older sisters Jane and Elizabeth Bennet. Elizabeth's free spirit and willful thoughts reflected my personality with my family and close friends. Jane's quiet and modest demeanor reflects my personality with people I have never met or have yet to grow close to. Even though I embody both characters, I feel a closer connection to Jane. She is more reserved, with a kind soul and good heart and has made many friends.

When I lost my reading passion in 6th and most of 7th grade, I felt as if I had lost a piece of myself. I was stuck in the mindset of books being mundane for so long that reading was no longer enjoyable. But when walking through Elizabeth's world I learned that pride can sometimes impede your judgment leading to rash decisions and ideas, and deep down I realized the reason I stopped enjoying reading. It was that I just did not want to be made fun of for loving to read. But from the moment I opened *Pride and Prejudice*, it was as if the door that was locked for so long was opening back up again, and I knew from then on I was never letting that door close again. Thanks to you I have found my love of reading again, something that I thought would be lost forever.

Sincerely,
Madison Middendorf

Let's Talk About...

BEING YOURSELF

Uniqueness

Popularity

Peer Pressure

Jones Nodine
Prairie Trace Elementary, Carmel
Letter to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry / Author of *The Little Prince*

Dear Antoine de Saint-Exupéry,

Even though you are no longer with us, I thought I would like to write to you anyway. Just like my great grandpa, you were in World War II, though you were a pilot and he fought on the ground. Before the war you wrote three books including one of my favorite books, *The Little Prince*.

I first read *The Little Prince* in second grade when I was nine years old. I had to pick a book and do a poster about it, so I chose *The Little Prince*, and ever since then I have loved the book. It was one of my favorites. *The Little Prince* has taught me a very valuable lesson in life in that everyone is unique in their own way, and everyone is special even if they look the same.



My favorite part of the book is the part with the fox that the Little Prince meets on Earth. I think that one part tells the whole theme of the story. The conversation they have about taming and how the fox is like no other fox until you tame it or name it, then to you the fox is unique or one of a kind. I think what you are saying by taming is getting to understand that person or animal. My favorite character is the fox.

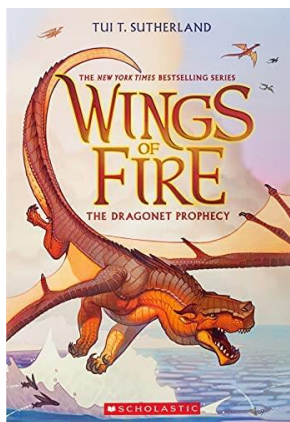
After reading *The Little Prince* I now notice everyone and try to appreciate them more and spend more time with them. I think that this has made me and many others better people.

It was sad to hear that you died at age 44 while piloting over the Mediterranean Sea during the last few years of war. I wish that I knew the whole exact story of how it happened.

Sincerely,
Jones Nodine

Dear Tui T. Sutherland,

Before reading your book series, **Wings of Fire**, I always contained myself in a little glass container. I hid my true personality deep, and I was afraid to spread my wings. After I read your series, I felt like I unlocked my true personality, and I was not afraid to express my true feelings. Everyone needs to somehow unlock their true personality like I did. It's okay to spread your wings and do what you want and not hide yourself. Your book has really shattered my glass container, helping me find my true personality. It let me spread my true wings and fly.



Your books always bring a smile to my face during a bad day. They shine a rainbow during a sad, rainy day. I feel like I could really relate to dragonets, how they didn't really know who they were or who their parents were. They were trapped in a cave, forced to do what they were asked to do, and not able to do what they wanted the most; to spread their wings and explore the true world around them.

Your books have also unlocked another door in my life, showing me another very valuable life lesson that I couldn't do before, learning how to work together as a team. Working together before I read the **Wings of Fire** series was literally impossible. I preferred to work alone, and I didn't do too well in groups, always pushing myself aside and doing the work myself, while everyone else did it together. **Wings of Fire** really taught me how to work together and listen to everyone's ideas and be kind and respectful to each other. The way that the dragonets work together, make plans with each other, and compromise was amazing to me and became a huge role model for me. I started to work more in groups instead of just by myself and to be a major part of the group, suggesting ideas and compromises, just like the dragonets of destiny.

The last of all, one of the most important lessons that I have learned in **Wings of Fire**, is that everyone is unique and special in their own way. We should never, ever, ever underestimate other people, especially people that have different personalities and are different from us. One

major example in **Wings of Fire** is Glory, the RainWing. RainWings in **Wings of Fire** are said to be lazy fruit-eaters that literally do nothing. Even though they might have the most powerful weapon in all Pyrrhia, they waste it by doing nothing. All their caretakers think that Glory can do nothing and greatly underestimate her. Although later in the book, she uses the weapon that most RainWings have never even dared to use, her deadly weapon of venomous spit. She uses her spit on Queen Scarlet of the SkyWings, giving her a deadly scar, and as far as the dragonets know, a very painful death. After reading that, I knew to never again underestimate people, since they might be much different than you thought they would be.

Overall, the book series **Wings of Fire** has really been the hammer to shatter my glass container. It has been my role model and the reason I have found my true personality. I hope more people will benefit from this book like I did, letting the book series be the lantern that leads them through a dark tunnel, as well as a rainbow in their land of rain. Thank you so much for letting this book lead the way in my life, teaching me things that I needed to be taught and opening another doorway in my life.

Sincerely,
Roshna Jeevaraj

Dear Lois Lowry,

I was first introduced to *The Giver* in sixth grade. I can admit that I was not enthused about reading this book because I never seemed to like the novels the teachers chose for me. I can recall slowly reading through the pages of books they would pick, stopping every few minutes to check how much I had left. This was not the case with *The Giver*. I would find myself having read chapters ahead of where the class was supposed to be. At the time I was not quite sure why this book was so different from the others, why I actually liked it. *The Giver* was an outstanding novel but there was something more that made me fall in love with it. I could relate to it in a way.

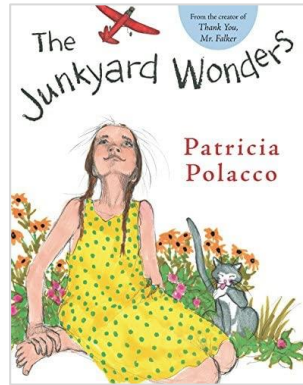
Members of the community in *The Giver* passively do as they are told and ask no questions about it. In *The Giver* babies are killed for being different, people are assigned jobs and told what to do with their lives and aren't allowed to experience many emotions. In a place where pain and hardship don't exist, the people have no individuality. There is nothing unique or special about the people. They are mere reflections of what the Chief Elder wants them to be. I struggled to grasp the idea of a society where everyone was monotone and the same. It was at that time I realized why this book was different from the rest.

As a kid I struggled with feeling like an outcast because I never quite fit in. Whenever I would talk to my mom about it, she would tell me to imagine a society where everyone was the same. I hated my freckles and fair skin when I was younger because they made me different from the other children at school. I never wore the clothes I liked because they weren't the style all the other girls were wearing. I would never show anyone the real me, scared I would be too different or that people wouldn't like me, and instead put up a "perfect girl" facade. Looking back, I realized I lost myself trying to be like everyone else. Your book taught me it's okay to be different. I now love my freckles and pale skin because they make me different. I now wear what I like. Thank you for teaching me it's okay to be different and a little rough around the edges. After all, no one is perfect.

Sincerely,
Kiley Robinson

Dear Patricia Polacco,

I would like to thank you for writing all your wonderful books, but I am especially thankful for *The Junkyard Wonders*. I love the part where the teacher tells the students the definition of a genius is “neither learned nor acquired. It is knowing without experience... understanding without proof. It is ability without practice... invention without limitations. It is imagination without boundaries... creativity without constraints. And it is extraordinary intelligence!” I like how the teacher explains that the definition describes



every one of them. *The Junkyard Wonders* showed me how you can have your own way of doing things, and you don't need to worry about what other people think of you. Because you are different and unique in your own way, you can be confident in yourself.

Sometimes, I feel like I am not that smart. I feel ashamed of myself because I don't know the answer to a question and other people do. I like this book because it made me realize that I am unique and have a different way of learning things. I should never be afraid to be me. I love how the teacher compares the class to a junkyard because in a junkyard everything is different. It is sad how some people in the book made fun of the junkyard kids. I love the teacher because she changes how the kids see themselves. This book helped me to realize who my real friends are, because in the book, you were getting bullied but then Jody came and stood up for you. That is a true friend.

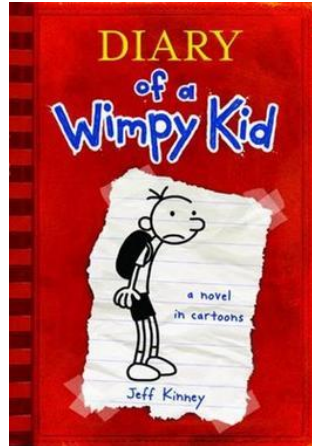
The Junkyard Wonders became a big family in this story, and they looked out for each other. I can see the teacher's goal is to make sure that every student feels comfortable being themselves. A lot of times I am worried about being myself because I don't know if people will like me for who I am. The launching of the airplane was one of my favorite parts of the book because the plane was named after the Junkyard Wonders, and honored Jody's unique personality, and made a true “wonder” that represented each one of them.

Again, thank you so much for writing all your wonderful books, but I am especially thankful for your book, ***The Junkyard Wonders***. This book helped show me that I can be different and that I shouldn't be afraid to be myself. Thank you for writing this book.

With great thanks,
Abigail Swan

Dear Jeff Kinney,

I want to tell you how much your books have inspired me and many others. Your books are inspiring because your books really bring out the struggles of family and school. Your books bring out the struggles of family because they depict how having an older brother like Rodrick is hard since older siblings are always messing with you and making life harder. Your books also bring out how having younger siblings like Manny can be a struggle since they will tattle on you if you make them just one bit mad. Also, your books bring out how disappointed your parents feel and how parents might embarrass you a lot in middle school. The *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* books also depict how it is hard to keep a good friend happy and not mad like Rowley since Rowley and Greg get in fights sometimes.



In *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, you really bring out the real-life struggles of a pre-teen or teen, and people can really relate to it. Your books also inspire me because they show how just trying to fit in and not being yourself is not always a great choice. Some other great things about your books are that even if Greg doesn't always get along with his siblings and parents, he just finds a way to make it work. Greg also has a hard life at school since he is not necessarily a "popular" kid. At school, Greg works as hard as he can to climb up the "popularity" list, but he gets "knocked down the list" a few times and sometimes it feels like all hope is lost.

Jeff, your book inspires many kids across the world to just be themselves and to not care about how other people judge them. Every single one of your books is based on different types of struggles in middle school like in the book, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Rodrick Rules*, where it demonstrates how having an older brother like Rodrick can feel like he is taking over your life.

I cannot thank you enough for showing kids that they can get out of any struggles like middle school by just being themselves and not changing themselves. You also demonstrated that popularity does not define who you are. You decide what you want to do in life.

Sincerely,
Evan Heldt

Dear Jerry Spinelli,

If you knew the number of times that I didn't do a good thing because it would set me apart from other people, you would be ashamed of me. The price that I put onto others' opinions of my actions and choices is much too high. There is no pressure like peer pressure, and I find that it is often used for cruel purposes instead of beautiful ones. Instead of gathering a group to encourage people to embrace their gifts and celebrate the talents that they are blessed with, peer pressure is twisted to entice a person to feel 'trendy' or 'cool.' Every day I am reminded that the beautiful things in life are often not 'cool,' and that the things which truly matter are pushed to the back so that popularity can take center stage. Your book *Stargirl* has shown me that no matter what the world might say, 'different' is one of the best things to be.



The first time I read *Stargirl* I was a sixth grader; the stereotypical kind with braces, uncontrollable hair, and an uncertainty about my place in the world. I can't remember if I read your book because I wanted to or because I was forced to, but no matter the reason, its lessons have stuck with me since the first time I read it. At first, I remember feeling a sense of discomfort and confusion about why Stargirl would act the way she does. She was always doing things to set her apart from everyone else, like singing 'Happy Birthday' while playing her ukulele in the lunchroom and carrying around a pet rat, and to be quite honest, I found her annoying. I was convinced that her actions were all for attention and that her boldness was a way for her to gain popularity among her new classmates, since after all, she was the new girl in town. Could I have been more wrong?

After reading your book again a few years later, I was touched in an unexpected way and found myself with a strong desire to live differently and to live boldly. Stargirl was not seeking attention, but rather authenticity. Her willingness to be genuine without a care for what others would think about her was a challenge to me when I first read it, and it remains a challenge to me today. Her perseverance in

being kind to those around her though they thought her strange is beautiful. Your story is so much more than just the life of a new girl at school. It's a call to look at what lies inside of people instead of what's on the outside, and more importantly, it's a reminder that there are more paths in this world than the one most traveled. In fact, as I read in your story and have now seen in my own life, the road less traveled is so much more exciting and has so much more meaning than the more populated pathways.

I cannot thank you enough for the example that your character has set. Because she was able to accept her quirks, celebrate her oddities, and embrace her personality, she changed the lives of the people around her. Her situation has encouraged me to do the same. I do not need to be ashamed of the things that set me apart from the people around me. In fact, I should celebrate them. Though my talents, hobbies, or mannerisms might seem strange to others, I know that I can accept, embrace, and appreciate them knowing that as long as I use them to bring God glory, it doesn't matter one bit what the rest of the world thinks. If a certain kindness requires me to move backward in a world that is moving forward, I can do so confidently. *Stargirl* gave me a first glimpse at what it looks like to live upside down, and I am forever grateful. Thank you for teaching, encouraging, and continually reminding me that 'different' is a wonderful thing to be.

With an appreciative heart and an open mind,
Grace Goodfellow

Honorable Mention – Level Three

Christine De Young

Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to Veronica Roth / Author of *Divergent*

Dear Veronica Roth,

What happens when a bubble pops? Do worlds collide or does the bubble simply fade away? In your book *Divergent* Tris is faced with being trapped in society's bubble, so she does what is expected of her and chooses to be in the faction, Dauntless. However, she is more than just fearless: she is honest, intelligent, selfless, and peaceful.

In high school, there are many stereotypes society expects students to fit into. However, those found outside of the bubbles are treated differently. I don't fit in a single bubble. Society expects me to be a peppy cheerleader, a dramatic actress, a nerdy student, popular, quiet, chatty, tired, awake, happy, sad, perfectly imperfect... the list goes on. Since I cannot be all these things simultaneously or simply be perfect at one thing, I don't belong.



Tris fights for her sense of belonging as well. A part of her was each faction, so she couldn't choose to be just one thing. She chooses to embrace her multiple identities, but soon after, her world turned to chaos. Similarly, choosing to embrace every side of me is challenging. Like Tris, I tried to fit in and be who people wanted me to be: perfect. However, I kept falling short, again and again and again. I could never meet their expectations because who they wanted me to be was not who I was. Though Tris is a fictional character, she finds the strength to use her differences to save the world. But how could I do the same?

Throughout my life, I have struggled with belonging: being accepted in a friend group, acting "normal" around classmates, dressing like everyone else, getting perfect grades without being "nerdy" and more. This struggle has led to feeling like an outcast, or in *Divergent*, factionless. I have always had a strange sensation of feeling lonely with

people around. This was derived from not having a person or a group of people that would accept me no matter what I wore or how bad my jokes were. Each day my loneliness increased, and my sense of worth did the inverse. Because I'm different, I didn't fit in their bubble. Because I didn't fit in their bubble, I didn't fit in their group chats or their circles during school break or their weekend plans or their lives for that matter. Instead, I was free falling, looking in from the outside, hoping someone would throw a rope and let me float in the bubble with them.

This began to change after reading ***Divergent***. Because she fits in so many places, she doesn't belong anywhere. However, she remains strong and finds people in her life that would have her back no matter what faces her, whether it be a futuristic tyrannical government or a simple simulation. Learning from her, I began to lean on family and seek out friends who would have my back and support me as I would support them.

Before, I let myself have bad days and wallowed in self-pity. However, I changed this and began choosing to have good days, even if things go poorly. Each day isn't a toss-up, it's a choice. Tris begins a widescale rebellion and doesn't complain or wallow in self-pity after losing her family and her lifestyle. Instead, she carries on with force and strength, making her own bubble.

Divergent has taught me to be confident in who I am, owning my shortcomings, and embracing my beauties. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to learn how to embrace each part of me through the example of Tris and helping me to notice the blessings that await one who stops worrying about acceptance or belonging. Now, I have more boldness in choosing to be kind, to be brave, to be true, to be selfless, and to be smart. After all, like Tris, there is nothing stopping me from embracing who I am and creating my own bubble.

Sincerely,
Christine De Young

Let's Talk About...

IDENTITY

Culture

Sexual Orientation

Representation

Mio Ramos

Central Middle School, Columbus

Letter to Benjamin Alire Sáenz

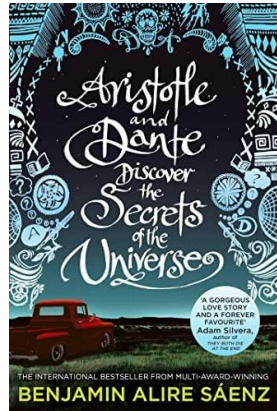
Author of *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*

Dear Benjamin Alire Sáenz,

I have always struggled with connecting to my culture and where I come from, never fully understanding how my parents and I grew up in completely different environments. Your book *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* helped me understand how culture and trauma can impact the way you view the world and interact with it.

Before I read *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secret of the Universe*, I was just like Dante who never really felt like he could relate to his latine roots. For most my life, I have lived in the U.S. and was taught how to speak Spanish by my parents, who immigrated from Colombia soon after I was born. Whenever we would visit, I'd feel detached from everyone around me like I'm an outsider to all my surroundings and never really getting to know what it feels like to live there. After every visit, I notice how I'm losing my Spanish and feel shame when I try to assimilate into American culture. I know I shouldn't feel like I have to change that part of myself, but it's always been hard living in a predominantly white area, where there are very few people I can relate to and share experiences with. My parents are very similar to Ari's parents in the way that they have both made sacrifices for their children to study and succeed in America. Being put under constant pressure to live up to their standards is exhausting. I resonate with Dante when he expresses how scary it can be to feel like you can't live up to the cultural expectations of growing up, getting married, and providing for your family.

When my parents first found out I was queer they didn't know how to handle the situation and they said a lot of things that I internalized. Throughout the year after they found out, they remained silent and instead chose to ignore what had happened. I deeply related to Ari's character when he displayed how remaining silent about something can be just as traumatizing as experiencing something firsthand. My parents' unwillingness to talk to me about the trauma our conversation caused



made me feel like I had to deal with it alone. After finishing your novel and seeing how Ari's family relearns what it means to be a healthy family, I gained the courage to talk to my parents about the pain they had caused me and how the whole thing made me feel, knowing that speaking could help me get better and heal our relationship.

Culture will still be a big part of my life even when I don't fully understand it; I know it will help impact my life. Having things like culture and family can shape who I am. It can also alter my view on the world and myself.

Sincerely,
Mio Ramos

Second Place Winner – Level Two

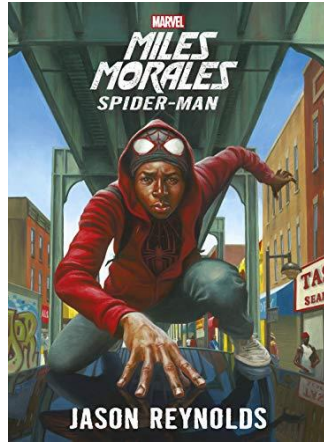
Meg Williams

St. John the Baptist, Newburgh

Letter to Jason Reynolds / Author of *Miles Morales*

Dear Jason Reynolds,

The image of a toddler sitting in front of a TV, eyes wide with adoration for the magical shapes and colors that dance across the screen is not a hard picture to imagine. As a young child, I frequently watched the Spider-Man cartoons; Marvel has been a giant part of my family since before I was born. These characters have always been an escape for me, even though most people would argue that a group of superhumans constantly getting into fights isn't exactly comforting. However, for a few years of my life, from when I was about seven to ten, I grew less interested in Marvel. There wasn't a specific reason; I think I may have just become bored with the predictable "good guy fights bad guy, good guy wins" shtick. However, when I was ten, I read *Miles Morales*. The story wasn't anything new to me, but at the time I hadn't read the *Miles Morales* comics yet, and it was before *Into the Spiderverse* came out, so this was my first experience with Miles's character.



When Stan Lee and Steve Ditko created Peter Parker, they wanted him to be an underdog, someone who represented the little guy. Of course, this was 1962, so their definition of an underdog was a white male teenager. Your adaptation of *Miles Morales* was extremely refreshing for me. This was the first time I had read the story of a black superhero; one that was the main protagonist, too. I had seen Falcon, I had seen War Machine, but they were side characters. I am white, but I'm also queer and non-binary. Though I can educate myself, I can never personally understand the struggles that the black community goes through. That being said, I do know what it's like to be underrepresented in media.

Growing up in an anti-LGBTQIA+ environment, it took me years to come to terms with my identity, and even longer to actually accept it. Honestly, I don't know how I figured it out as quickly as I did, but even afterwards I despised this part of myself for years. I'm thirteen, and it's still difficult for me now, but it'll get easier, I think. But, if I would've been able to see myself in blockbuster movies, best-selling books, or Emmy-winning TV shows, I think that entire process would've been easier. Underrepresentation is certainly an issue every marginalized group faces. But, with characters such as Miles Morales, hopefully black kids can look up to him and truly be able to see themselves. Representation is crucial for any person; it helps you to know that you're not alone in your experiences, and often makes working through your struggles significantly easier.

Though I love it, *Miles Morales* is not my favorite book of yours. *Stamped* holds that place. I read it a few months ago when my language arts teacher recommended it to me, and I also used it as a resource for a passion project I did on antiracism. I think that you perfectly describe your work when saying it is a "present book" rather than a history book. *Stamped* is magnificently crafted; you flawlessly present the foundations of racism with a mix of facts and your own voice. In my opinion, it is a must-read. Not only is it written in a way that constantly captivates you and keeps you focused, but it also contains information that every person should learn. A collaboration between you and Ibram X. Kendi, another favorite author of mine, was sure to be a success no matter what it was, and *Stamped* surely did not disappoint. Additionally, the young readers' adaptation was a good idea, as it is important content regardless of age, but I can see how the original form could be challenging in terms of comprehending all the details. I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and I learned a lot too; I don't always apply both these sentiments to the same thing.

I have loved every book of yours that I've read. The way you write is beautifully distinct from many other authors I know, and that is one of my favorite things about you. Every time I read one of your works, it moves me in a way that many other novels fail to do. Plus, to top it off, you genuinely seem like a kind, down-to-earth person, which is a quality that many lose when they experience success. I hope you write for as long as you have the will to, and I am eager to see what you do next. Thank you for all you do.

Best regards,
Meg Williams

Let's Talk About...

DISABILITIES

Being Kind

Embracing Life

Accepting Others

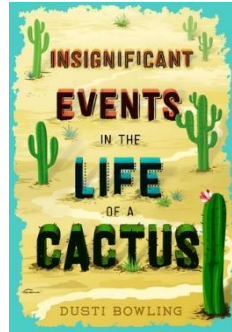
Accepting Yourself

Sloane Schmidt
Forest Dale Elementary, Carmel
Letter to Dusti Bowling

Author of *Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus*

Dear Dusti Bowling,

I am writing this letter to you because your book *Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus* really showed me that I need to be the person that I want to be. The way Aven stood up for herself when people told her she couldn't do things because she had no arms was very inspiring to me. Even though people told her that she couldn't do certain things, she didn't let that get in the way of her doing things. I think the way Aven stood up for herself (and other people too) really showed the readers that they have to be themselves and not let other people tell them what they can or can't do.



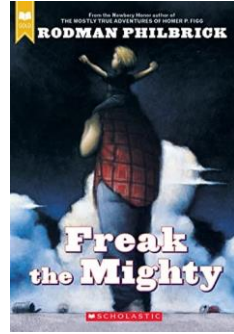
When Aven had to move, she was afraid that she wouldn't make friends, but when she became friends with Conner and Zion, she probably felt really excited and confident that she could make more friends throughout the years. I can kind of relate to Aven in a way too. I mean I have arms, but I am so shy I hardly ever talk to people I don't know or people that are new. I lose friends sometimes too. Your book made me want to go out and make new friends with people that might not have very many friends or people that are disabled like Aven and Conner. Even though she might not be able to do everything, she can do a lot of things. People at her new school told her she couldn't do things (even her new friend Conner told her she couldn't do things) just because she was disabled and had no arms.

I think that Aven's story through 8th grade shows that even though she moved she didn't give up on hope for finding more new friends. When she tried out for the soccer team, she made new friends too. I think that another life lesson about this book is that people need to go out of their way and make lots and lots of new friends. One other life example about this book is that other people should try to talk to people that seem like they need a friend. I think there are a lot of people out in the world that need a friend like me.

Sincerely,
Sloane Schmidt

Dear Rodman Philbrick,

Words cannot express my love for your book *Freak the Mighty*. It made me realize that it does not matter if you have a disease, disability, or are just having a rough time, you can always make your dreams come true. In the book, Freak knows that he will die at a young age. Yet, he still lives his life and does not let it ruin what time he has left. Freak embraces every moment of the time that he has left. In a way, it helped me to understand that we're all lucky we have time to live. *Freak the Mighty* taught me to embrace life.



Freak the Mighty helped me to try and exceed the expectations of life. I've been taught to try even harder than normal expectations because of *Freak the Mighty*. It makes me feel lucky that I am able to walk on my own, and run, and go outside when I want to. It has taught me to use the time I have wisely because you never know when your time is up. It could be tomorrow or even today.

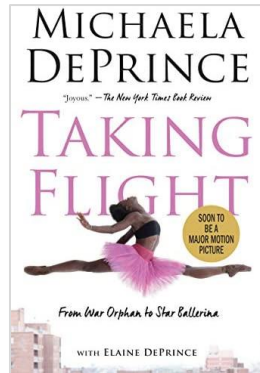
The book taught me that time is precious, and you have to use the time you have to achieve your dreams. It taught me to be hard-working and to try to achieve my dreams such as wrestling, tennis, art, and so on. It also made me have a different view on the mentally and physically disabled. I better understand how hard their life is sometimes and how we shouldn't laugh at them and call them slurs and bad words but instead, we should accept them. They can have great ideas too. It reminded me that I should appreciate people with disabilities. It is important to accept their ideas and the contributions that they make to our community. It is wrong to be mean to them or exclude them.

Thank you, Rodman Philbrick. Your book helped to change my view of the world as a whole, and it encouraged me to appreciate life and all the gifts that I have been given, more than any other book has. Thank you for entertaining me while changing my views. You helped me to understand how important it is to be accepting of all people. It made me want to be a better person.

Thank you,
Joseph Barada

Dear Michaela DePrince,

In your book, *Taking Flight*, I was taught about what your life was like as a refugee and how much you had to go through. You helped me see other people from a different point of view. In the book, you talked about how much hard work you had to put into ballet and that inspired me to get my first pair of pointe shoes. When reading your book, I had more awareness of your skin condition which is very similar to my own that is most noticeable during the summer.



Ever since I was young, I had spots on my neck, like you, that drew attention and questions. I always was angered about my spots until I read your book. You were very relatable to me in a way I've never felt before. When I dance, I always feel scared of making a mistake or a wrong step and that usually ends with me looking scared, but then I remember how hard you worked and how you started out scared like me. You built your confidence with hard work and your book helped put the steps in place for me.

In your book you expressed how your spots made you a "devil child" and how you felt different than the other kids because of it. Sometimes I feel the same way in class because I have Amblyopia. Amblyopia is where you have very limited vision in one or in some cases both of your eyes. I first found out I had the condition in kindergarten, and I began wearing contacts. I had visual therapy up until second grade and then I began using tools to help me see better. These tools included magnifying glasses and a larger computer.

I have always felt like an outsider and to this day, I still try to hide my bigger device to avoid names like "Special Ed," similar to the "devil child" comments you received. You've helped me gain a little more confidence in embracing what makes me different. In the book you made a reference to when you asked your mom if she could notice your spots when you were dancing. That reminded me of the time I asked my mom if you could tell that I had trouble with my turns because of not being able to spot due to my visual disability. My mom of course said

she didn't see any differences in my turns, just like your mom said she couldn't see your spots.

When I first checked out your book, I just thought it was about ballet, but now I realize so many things that I didn't before. I was informed so much and it's a good thing I found your books because otherwise I would never have had the drive to go back to ballet and work harder than I've ever worked before.

Thank you for your inspiration to me and for sharing your story with the world.

With great appreciation,
Myah Troutman

Let's Talk About...

NEURODIVERSITY

Tourette Syndrome

**Obsessive
Compulsive Disorder**

Luca Nunes

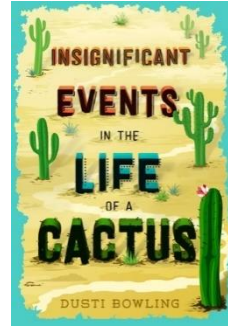
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Dusti Bowling

Author of *Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus*

Dear Dusti Bowling,

In 2013 my parents found out I had Tourette Syndrome. My motor tics got to be so bad I was having neck problems by age eight. In your book, *Insignificant Events in the Life of a Cactus*, I found more connections with the characters in the social group than in real life. When you explained how Rebecca wore padded gloves to make it hurt less, I couldn't believe there could be such an easy solution to tics like mine. I quickly realized that it wasn't that easy. In my school, people have stopped caring, but some people ask, "Why do you roll your neck?" or, "What's up with your eyebrows?" Then I have to say, "I have Tourette Syndrome." Then they ask what it means. By now, I am not surprised by the question because I have come to realize the truth. Not many people know what ADD or Tourette's are. For that I don't blame the kids; I blame the community.



Every year there is a month focused on bullying. Sometimes I wish there could be a month for ADHD, ADD, or even Tourette's! People like Conner and Rebecca do exist, just like me. With seemingly decreasing attention toward the problem, I believe that there is nothing truer in any book I read. I used to watch a lot of those painting shows on PBS. When they take a stroke of a paint to make a tree, the action, or in this case paint, cannot be erased. In one part of the book Conner said his father had told him to Just. Stop. Ticking. Which, in my own statement, could be the definition of impossible.

When reading this book, my thoughts started to shift about disabilities like Tourette's, ADHD, and genetic differences like Aven's. There are not a lot of good things about Tourette's. But I believe there are lots of people who have, or will have, these genetic differences. With that we have no solution. Sure, you can get medicines, maybe even some people can control it! But what will happen when you can't control it, or you can't get medicine? That is where community plays a part. I loved your book in whole, but the biggest part that books like this play in the community is how they can bring attention to problems that other people might not even know about, until it happens to them or to someone they

know. To this, I thank you, for making other people see beyond their scope of vision. Even if it's only by one degree of change.

Sincerely,
Luca Nunes

Hannah Sliemers

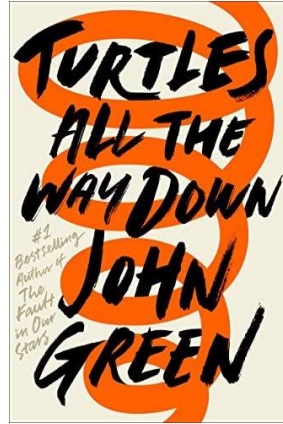
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to John Green / Indiana Author of *Turtles All the Way Down*

Dear John Green,

I tried. I really, really tried. I tried to assure myself that there was nothing wrong with me. I tried to convince myself that I didn't have obsessive-compulsive tendencies. I tried to tell myself that I had stopped reading for fun in high school because I was so busy, not because it took me ten minutes to make it through one page. I tried to make myself believe that my blinking and lightswitch-flipping rituals were things that everyone did. I tried, but I failed.

That is, until I read your book.



I picked up *Turtles All the Way Down*

toward the end of the summer before my junior year. I'm not sure why, really. Boredom? After all, I hadn't read a novel outside of school since eighth grade.

I borrowed a copy of the audiobook from my local library because I knew if I tried to read it on my own, I would never actually do it. I had this habit of hyperfixating on the words I was reading, going over a sentence again and again until it felt "right." Audiobooks helped.

I finished the book in one day. It felt like a slap in the face, like Aza herself had crawled out of the pages and walloped me across the head. I don't think I've ever related to a character more than I related to Aza Holmes.

First of all, she was a normal girl. She lived in Indiana. She knew about Star Wars. She struggled with her friends. She struggled with herself. Because of this, I connected with her in a way I could never connect with a character from a magical world or with one who seems to have a perfect relationship with her family all the time. I saw myself reflected in Aza through her seemingly average life.

Second, Aza was also an abnormal girl. However, her abnormalities were similar to mine in many ways. Her fear of C. diff resembled my

fear of leaving the sink running and flooding my house: completely irrational but still paralyzing. Her description of needing to follow through with a ridiculous habit once she'd started it was a feeling that I had lived with every day for years. These shared experiences forced me to see that what I was going through wasn't normal, and I didn't have to suffer in silence.

Deep down, I had always known that my obsessive routines were absurd and unnecessary but seeing Aza struggle with the same things I was struggling with really solidified that knowledge for me. Her actions often seemed so illogical, and they helped me to realize that my own actions were just as unreasonable. Aza made me look at myself and face the fact that I'd been avoiding: I needed help.

Shortly after reading the book, I opened up to my mom about what I was experiencing. When she suggested counseling, I agreed to it largely because I knew that Aza had gone to counseling. I started to get better. Not perfect, but better. I felt happier and more at peace than I had in a long time.

Turtles All the Way Down disguises itself as a YA novel, but to me it is so much more than that. It is the life I lived every day. It portrays mental illnesses without romanticizing them, a trait that can be hard to come by in literature. It doesn't end happily with everything tied up in a nice bow because life doesn't always end in "happily ever after." It is ugly and real and uncomfortable and exactly what I needed.

Thank you for writing such a painfully accurate story about living with OCD and anxiety. You put into words the emotions and feelings I thought no language could capture. Without Aza, I truly wouldn't be the person I am today. I am still broken, but I am healing thanks to you.

With gratitude,
Hannah Sliemers

Let's Talk About...

ANXIETY

Emotions

Panic Attacks

Pressure to be Perfect

Being in Control

Worries

Ruby Steele

St. John the Baptist School, Fort Wayne
Letter to Jessica Khoury/ Author of **Origin**

Dear Jessica Khoury,

I love to read, but I especially love your book **Origin**. I love this book because it was so exciting and interesting and had so many aspects that I liked about it. It's so fun to read and even though I've read it over 20 times, it is still just as exciting and mysterious as the first time I read it.

I think I like this book a lot because I relate to Pia in a lot of ways. Obviously, I'm not immortal and perfect, but Pia is stressed and pressured to feel perfect and do everything her "family" wants her to do. I feel this way a lot because my mom is my basketball coach and I feel like I need to be perfect and be the best even if I can't be. Pia also feels trapped in such a small place and dreams of a bigger, fuller world. I feel like that sometimes because I live in Fort Wayne. I dream of living in big, fast, moving cities and I sometimes feel trapped in the smallness of Fort Wayne. Also, I love romance and your book is the perfect romance. Pia and Eio have the most amazing love story that people can only dream of. It's a powerful love story that shows that sometimes you have to choose between what you think your passion is and what your heart wants you to do.



Another reason I love this book is because of how easily a reader, like myself, can slip into Pia's skin. I love how relatable you make Pia, and how alive and real she seems. Reading this book makes you feel like you're right in the middle of it all, running through the jungle and escaping the scientist. And it's not just **Origin** that I like, I also love the rest of the trilogy and your other two books, *The Forbidden Wish*, and *Last of Her Name*. All your books that I've read are exciting and interesting and keep me on edge no matter how many times I've read them. I hope you keep writing more books so I can keep reading and loving them.

Sincerely,
Ruby Steele

Dear Chris Colfer,

Before I read your book, ***A Tale of Magic***, I always hid myself from people and bottled up my emotions because I did not want to get into other people's lives or put pressure on them. I also did not want to feel like they must help me, but after I read your book, I found out Brystal was like me - keeping things to herself and feeling like she cannot tell anyone and not wanting to put pressure on her friends. Once Brystal told her friends what was going on, they decided to help her. Also, after reading your book I found that Madame Weatherberry was also like me because she did not want help. After I read your book, I decided to practice not bottling up my emotions and practiced asking for help. Overall, I believe you have helped many in many ways.

After reading ***A Tale of Magic*** I worked on not bottling my emotions every day. I was trying not to be like Brystal, in bad ways, because when she bottled her emotions, she got so stressed and sometimes angry. I realized I could get like that sometimes too, so I decided to try and practice telling people about my emotions. I talked to the wall saying how I felt, and I started to be able to open up about my emotions. I kept practicing different things such as talking to random things, writing my feelings down, etc. Every day I got slightly better, but I was still somewhat like Brystal because she does not just tell people, she waits till they ask her or make her tell them. Not bottling up your emotions can help you in many ways from lifting stress off your shoulders to just getting someone to talk to. Overall, this book helped me because it helped me realize I cannot bottle up my emotions, and I need to share them with others.

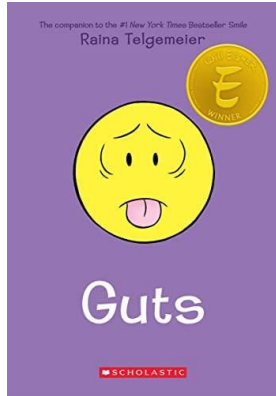
I found out I was also like Madame Weatherberry. I am like her because I do not usually want/ask for help. I have practiced asking for help in many ways. Some ways I have practiced include asking my friends for help on projects, asking my teachers to look over things, and asking my mom for help with work. I personally think I have gotten better at asking for help just like Madame Weatherberry lets Brystal take the academy. Madame Weatherberry not asking for help showed me that if you do not ask for help everything can flop, but if you do, it can help you pull your life together. Thank you for writing this book. It has helped me so much. And thank you for inspiring me to be myself.

Sincerely,
Alexis Clark

Dear Raina Telgemeier,

I have read and loved so many of your books, but your book **Guts** was my favorite. I can relate to that book so well, and that is what makes **Guts** feel so special to me. I felt very connected to your story and similar things that happened to you have happened to me too!

In one part of **Guts**, your character Raina does an LDI or a Lecture, Demonstration, and Instruction with her friend, Jane. Jane does most of the speaking in the beginning of their presentation, while Raina draws a demonstration. When it is Raina's turn to speak, she gets nervous and runs away. Like Raina in these situations, I too get very nervous in front of people and sometimes freeze. Freezing is not the same reaction that Raina had, but I could connect to her emotions.



Later in the story, Raina's parents ultimately make the decision to send her to a therapist when things for Raina were clearly not getting better. There, Raina and her therapist Lauren talk about being in control of Raina's feelings. This part of the book reminded me of myself so much! I went to a therapist last year, and one of the main things we talked about was what I was in control of and what I wasn't in control of. I was dealing with panic attacks at the time (just like Raina) so my therapist and I practiced a lot of breathing techniques, and something called grounding. This is almost identical to what Raina and Lauren did.

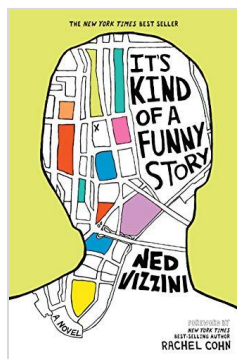
I loved the way that you portrayed anxiety and panic attacks. We both struggled with being in control, becoming overwhelmingly anxious when it felt like you were losing control in a situation. If I were to recommend a book to a young girl who is struggling with anxiety, it would be **Guts**!

Sincerely,
Helen VanFossen

Dear Ned Vizzini,

I was always stuck not knowing if things really can get better in someone's life or if they may just have to live with their problems forever. Your book, *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, really helped change my thoughts on mental disorders including depression.

I got diagnosed with depression at a pretty young age. My parents had been divorced since I was little, but the custody battle never stopped. 2020 was already a really hard year with COVID-19 issues going around everywhere and school shutting down, but my mom winning custody over me finally helped. Your book helped me through those tough times. I reread it many times noticing new details each time. I feel like I can partially relate to Craig, but not completely.



Craig ends up checking himself into a hospital after calling a suicide hotline and they tell him that is the best solution for him. I think Craig made the best choice because you never know what could have happened to him that night. He ends up getting admitted with the adults and makes many new friends. Craig being this brave really amazes me because I feel as if I would never have the guts to be able to just check myself into a hospital, as he did.

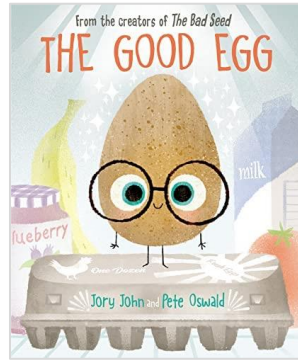
A lot of people with depression try to ignore it until they can't anymore, and I feel as if your book really shows you can deal with it before it gets worse, and you really should deal with it before it gets worse. I am one of those people. I tried to ignore my depression for as long as I could until I got fully diagnosed. I don't know whether I just didn't want to assume it was straight-up depression or if I didn't want to know fully it was depression.

I would like to really thank you for writing the book you did and when you did. It has helped me through so many things, and I hope it has or will help others through them too.

Sincerely,
Abby Dabson

Dear Jory John,

Being an 8th grader, I have read countless books with different plots, characters, and themes. Some have impacted me, but none have touched the significance of your book *The Good Egg* and its life lessons that were uncovered as I read it. Now, it may seem strange that an 8th grade student is admiring your children's book, but the little good egg relates to middle schoolers more than you may think. My English teacher read this book, along with some of your other classics, to teach us not to stress out and to enjoy life. After listening to the book, I was struck by how true this was to my own life. The egg believes he needs to be perfect and tries to make everything around him impeccable as well. Dealing with the pile of homework, expectations of others, and discovering who you are, I have felt that my actions need to exemplify perfection and no flaws are acceptable. Your book, *The Good Egg* has shown that yes, you can work hard to achieve your goal, but you shouldn't go stir crazy achieving those goals when you try to make them flawless.



School is a huge priority to me. Even though this is a good thing, it has become a huge stress to always get extraordinary grades, turn in immaculate projects, but still make time for sports and my social life. I was overwhelmed with the tasks at hand and the everyday package of stress, worry, and finding excellence. The good egg was in the same boat as me by trying to make his projects (in this case fellow eggs) as impeccable as he was trying to do to himself. As you know, the egg cracked from stress and attempting to change the things he couldn't control. I then made my own realization that if I didn't let up from the perfectionism in my own life that I would turn out just like the good egg, anxious and in a worst condition. I would just be going through the motions of the things I love, stricken with the anxiousness for what was coming next. With anxiety from tests, people's points of view, and homework, taking a moment to breathe and refresh is right up my alley. I wouldn't have realized to stop, breathe, and reflect if it wasn't for the good egg's little vacation. There, the egg realized he wasn't happy living the way he was choosing to live. With the little egg's realization, I

took a renewed look into my life and saw that I was unsuccessful and miserable by reaching for perfection, an unachievable goal. The need for perfection in my life caused me to feel anxiety filled, for I feel like there is this high line of expectation that I need to meet each and every day. The good egg helped me understand that being perfect isn't an achievable goal and you shouldn't waste your life reaching for a goal you can't triumph over.

There will always be challenges in life, no doubt. Taking all the honor classes and three high school classes early would definitely fit into a challenge, especially when working to maintain a perfect score. My mind was filled with anxiety from the checklist of homework, studying, and sports. Biology is a class that is extremely difficult, but I still thought I needed to have that highest average. I would throw myself into a panic attack the night before a biology test, making me panicked and toxic to be around. I felt that I needed to achieve a perfect score to be satisfied. The good egg showed by example how mistakes are acceptable, and that I will survive without a 100% on every test. Trying to find that perfection in your life will just make you unsatisfied with your life and always overwhelmed.

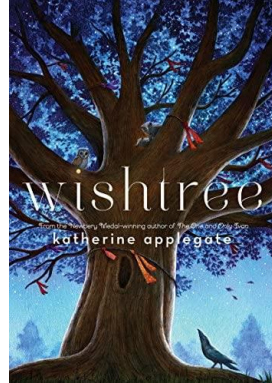
Overall, I'm not saying your book taught me to stop working hard, but it did teach me to not put up a front of perfection for everyone else to see. Finding the satisfaction of others is tiring and futile, which the good egg taught me through his own endeavors. Life is hard but putting the weight of perfection and achievement makes it much harder. Thank you, Jory John, for relieving some of the everyday stress that comes with being an 8th-grade student, keeping my anxiousness at bay, and helping me enjoy the beauties and blessings of my life.

Thanks for the egg-stroardinary piece,
Molly Kramer

Dear Katherine Applegate,

One day when I was about seven years old, I was in my room playing with some of my dolls. All I could hear were my parents yelling at each other. I tried to drown out the noise, but it was practically impossible. No questions asked, I was scared. I feared lots of things like spiders, the dark, and big crowds. I would even get chills from spooky stories. None of those could come close to what my biggest fear was...change.

I feared that my friends would change, my grades, my social skills, and most importantly the people I loved. I thought right at that moment and the days to come that my family was going to change forever and fall apart. I hated that feeling. The next few days, I felt a distance between me and my family, like it was awkward to be around them. Almost two weeks after, my teacher introduced me to the book **Wishtree**. My first thought as she passed out the book was, "Oh great, another book we have to read." My thoughts quickly changed before the end of the first chapter of the book.



When I started reading, I immediately fell in love with Red. I felt like Red could solve all my possible problems just by one wish. Red also taught me things that made a difference in my life. For instance, I have learned to listen and watch around me more. With that I have learned more about the world. I have learned that the world can hold both bad and good in it. Most importantly, Red taught me to believe and have hope. This was especially helpful when my parents were fighting because I would have hope that my family would not change and that they would be okay.

When I saw the picture with many ribbons, bows, tags, and much more on the tree, I felt the need to make a wish myself. So, I went ahead and got a ribbon. As I was writing on the ribbon, I felt for once in my life, not scared. I actually believed that this one ribbon along with that one wish could give me and the people I love strength to fight through difficult situations. I finally finished the ribbon and headed for the park. I chose a tree that was special to me. It was a tree that my sister and I had

always climbed when we were younger. I climbed up onto the tree where we would always sit. I tied the ribbon on making sure it was tight. On that ribbon was, "I wish that my family's life will be long lasting and fun, with lots of hopes and dreams that come true." That is when I left the park, leaving the ribbon hanging from that special tree.

With all this I just want to say thank you. Thank you for writing **Wishtree**, which has changed me in many ways. It has given me a more positive outlook on how I see the world, my fears, and my family. Now every time my parents are fighting, I can always look back at your book. **Wishtree** has brought joy to my life. Once again thank you.

Sincerely your friend,
Tori Robinson

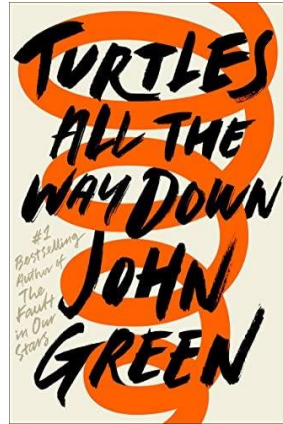
Payton Campbell

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to John Green / Indiana Author of *Turtles All the Way Down*

Dear John Green,

Your story *Turtles All the Way Down* has brought living with a mental illness into a new light for me. While I may not struggle with OCD, I do struggle with anxiety. The way I relate to Aza is stronger than any other book I've ever read before. The problems she goes through with Daisy and Davis are all too real for me.



The argument Aza and Daisy go through in the car tugs at my heart. It was like being slapped in the face with a reality check. I had never really thought about how struggling with anxiety could impact others around me. A lot of times I'm so caught up with stupid thoughts or worries, I don't give myself time to think about others. It's always me, me, me. I assume other people will always be there to help. Everyone can't always be there for you though. They're struggling with their own problems and sometimes can't handle mine. It's not just a burden to me, but my problems can burden others. Now, I don't mean it negatively. It's just a thought I should keep at the back of my mind. I can't always expect others to know or help me with what I'm going through.

The book was almost like a sigh of relief too. I'm always told that some people know what you are going through, yet I still can't quite believe it. I have friends who struggle with mental illnesses, and we talk about it! But it helps to know that there's a random adult that knows how it is. A fictional character. Just someone knows how it is. It fills me with relief. I'm at an age where I don't believe my parents understand me. With this book, it's a completely unbiased opinion. It feels like I'm looking into a whole new world that's still similar to mine. When Daisy and Aza are in the cave and Aza explains what her reality is like, it's amazing. I have never been able to put into words, or even a comprehensible sentence, how it feels to be trapped in your own mind. I've always avoided the question of, "How does it feel to have anxiety?" Now I know what I can say, or at least some version of it. It's yet again a sigh of relief.

Another big thing is just the bad thoughts Aza has. It's like a random voice in your head telling you to do things. Everything it says you feel you have to do. The voice makes me feel as if I'm under its control. There are days when I feel as though I'm not strong enough to fight them, and I finally give in. Those are the worst kinds of days. You feel disappointed in yourself. It's that way with Aza too. I keep relating back to the main character, but it's the strong connection that makes me love the book so much.

Mental illness is really just turtles all the way down like you say. It's a spiral of things that never stops. You can get a breath of fresh air though. Your book was that breath of fresh air.

In much thanks,
Payton Campbell

Let's Talk About...

BULLYING

Being Bullied

Being the Bully

Second Chances

Dear Eleanor Estes,

Imagine being a kid who is poor, has no friends, and is being bullied. For most kids, that is not unimaginable because 1 out of 5 kids in the US claim to get bullied. Your book, *The Hundred Dresses*, has affected the way I see myself in many ways.

Your book has changed the way I see myself. I have thought about which character I am like. Am I Wanda, Peggy, or Maddie? To be honest, I think I have been two out of three. I have been bullied, and I watched a kid get bullied and did nothing about it. I have been a Wanda because once I was in this really toxic friendship. I didn't know it at the time, but it was really affecting me emotionally because of the relentless name calling. It was only this year that I found out how much it was affecting me. I finally tore myself away from that friendship and I felt so much better emotionally because I now have friends who are kind and support me. I connected to Wanda because she too didn't know she was being bullied.

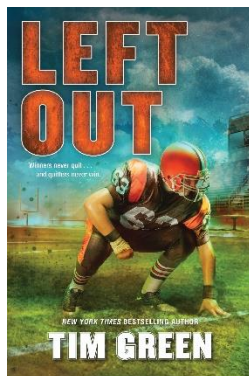
I have been a Maddie as well because I had this friend who was being extremely rude to this one kid, and I just watched and said nothing. It felt as if I was watching a raging fire and I had a hose, but I wasn't courageous enough to turn on. After reflecting, I feel terrible about it. It was such an unchristian-like thing to do. It was as if my heart left my body for a period of time. I understand that Maddie felt this way too and declared to never be a bystander ever again.

I want to say thank you Eleanor Estes for writing this amazing influential book. I want you to know that your book has helped me think of when I was bullied. I also want to spread this message for every kid who is bullied. I don't know who said this, but I really like this quote. "Your skin isn't paper, don't cut it. Your face isn't a mask, don't cover it. Your size isn't a book, don't judge it. Your life isn't a movie, don't end it." I want to tell you that it is horrible that 14% of high school students think seriously about taking their own life because of bullying. It is so sad, and people should spread awareness for this.

Sincerely,
Ava Ballard

Dear Tim Green,

The book **Left Out** is one of my favorite books to read, because it taught me it's not cool to bully people. It doesn't feel good to not fit in. Some people bully just because people are different. It's hard to fit in sometimes. Being nice to someone new could make a big difference in their life. It will make you a good person showing someone around the school or just letting them be friends with you.



In the book it says winners never quit and quitters never win. I was so inspired by this, and it is one of my favorite parts of the book. I have wanted to quit before but didn't. You can't quit when something gets hard. You have to keep trying. I ended up being happy that I didn't quit. I felt better about myself for trying harder at my sports until I got better. Now I don't care what people think. I just worry about my own self and focus on me. We didn't always win the game, but we never quit. We kept getting better and better. By the end of the season, we were so good. So, we never gave up on ourselves and worked really hard as a team.

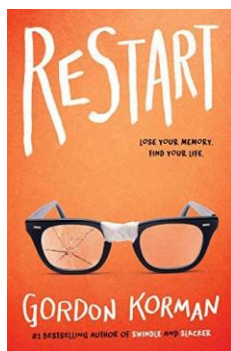
Also, the book made me think that you should stand up to bullies. If you see someone being bullied, stick up for them, or you need to tell someone to help. I would stand up to a bully to help someone out, and if I couldn't stand up for someone, I would tell my mom and dad, or I would tell the teacher or my principal. Being a bully is not cool at all.

The book taught me just because someone is disabled doesn't mean they can't fit in. You can still do things to be part of the team, and always keep trying and don't give up. You should always treat people the way you would want to be treated. There are things that I have to work really hard at in school and if I was bullied, I would feel really bad about myself. It's not always easy to stand up for yourself when you're new or not feeling good about yourself. You can do whatever you put your mind to.

Sincerely,
Chase Heaston

Dear Gordon Korman,

Sometimes all we need is a second chance to prove ourselves. I loved how you portrayed this in Chase's adventure of going back to school after he lost his memory in the book **Restart**. He managed to change and become a better person than the bully he used to be. Everyone makes mistakes, including me, but you need to move on from the past, focus on how you're going to change the future, and get back up to accomplish whatever you were trying to do. Reading this book made me feel like I could do those things too. Like I could grab at a second chance, let go of the past, and become the best person I could be.



After reading this book I realized that you need to move on from the past and stop hating or being angry at yourself for whatever you messed up on. Chase sometimes hated his old self and couldn't believe he made a kid switch schools because of how bad he acted. At one point he said, "Back then I had such a high opinion of the great Chase Ambrose that I considered myself untouchable. Now it's the opposite. I hate myself so much that there is no way any judge could hate me more." This shows how much he wants to change. I've never lost my memory, nor have I gone through something as big as Chase did. But I've gone through little things, like not making a skill in the sport I play, getting a bad grade on a test, or saying something I didn't mean. I replay the thing I did wrong in my head over and over and think of every possible way I could have done something different, but that isn't going to help anything at all. The second chance Chase got, and the second chance I have started to take might be different, but it still encouraged me to never quit and to keep trying until I make it.

Everyone in the school was proof of the person Chase used to be. People that were angry at him and yelled or dumped their frozen yogurt on his head, others that hid away because they were afraid of him, even his two bully friends peer pressuring him into the same person he used to be. Through all this he still managed to change. The way Chase changed and tried to make himself a better person, even after he started getting his memories back made me feel like I could do it too

even if it's not in the exact same way. Before he lost his memory he even got arrested and was assigned community service, which he enjoys during the book. He started doing small acts of kindness, for example when one of his bully friends who was also assigned to community service stole twenty dollars from a room and refused to give it back. Chase then used his own money. Small acts like these can make a huge difference. I don't think I am a bully but there are plenty of chances where I could help more people, where I could become a better and more outgoing person too.

The story you wrote of Chase's second chance to become a better person was amazing. It taught me so much and had many great morals to it that have always stood out and stuck to me through difficult times. It has helped me never give up and always take second chances, move on from the past, and be kind to others.

Sincerely,
Kaitlyn Hopkins

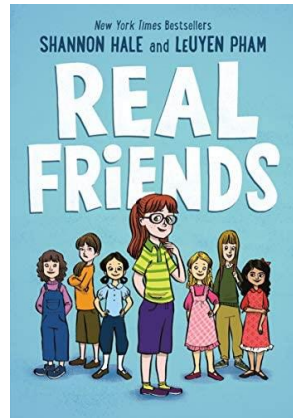
Honorable Mention – Level One

Natalia Powers

Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers
Letter to Shannon Hale/ Author of *Real Friends*

Dear Shannon Hale,

Your book *Real Friends* has helped me leave unhealthy friendships. Like Shannon, I tried to fit in so I wouldn't be judged by others for who I am, or what I like. I empathize with Shannon because I too have been bullied by those who wanted to gain popularity. This book has helped me gain confidence in who I am and who I want to be. This book is also a great example of what a person might be going through and how popularity can ruin special friendships.



I recently ended a “friendship” because I realized that my friend was bullying me to make him feel good about himself. I've found new friends that make me happy, and we treat each other fairly. This book has taught me to look out for people who are being rude. Not just for myself, but to look out for others too. Sometimes, it's important to look at things the bad way. To see if something or someone is trying to accomplish something good or bad. Your book has also taught me to be kind to others because you never know what they might be going through. Like Shannon, I used to think that I was the only one who had problems to deal with. Then I realized that others might be going through something too.

I relate to Shannon with a lot of things. I'm shy when I first meet people, but once I get used to being around others, I start to be more myself. I always like having one person I stick with but, like Shannon, I've learned that having at least a few friends is also good! I have friends that I have known since kindergarten and some that I have known for only a few months, but they are all great people that I talk to on a daily basis.

Making friends was hard for me at first, but now it just comes naturally. I start a conversation and try to find something we have in common so we can talk about it. I tend to notice the way that they talk and their body language to see if they are comfortable. Eventually we talk more often,

then bam! We're friends! My friends have helped me become less shy and get used to talking to others.

Sometimes it's hard to leave a friendship that isn't healthy, but it's always for the best. Sometimes you have to have bad experiences to learn how to make good ones. Try to avoid it, but when you're in that situation, you should benefit and learn how to make good friends. Even in official relationships, you might find that your partner is not treating you well. But before you end things talk it out with them and say, "Hey, I don't like how you are treating me. Could you please be nicer?" Then if things don't work out, leaving is the best option. No matter how much you might love them, you need to know your worth and you need to be treated better than some can that someone found at the side of the road. Or that rock in the street that you kick around.

There is more than just physical harm. Sometimes someone could be mentally or verbally abusing you and you might not notice. This book taught me that emotions are not something I should be embarrassed about. It's normal to cry. It's normal to feel angry. It's all part of being a human!

Real Friends is a great way to realize how friendships might come to an end and how some might start. Always treat others with kindness and don't be afraid to make new friends. Enjoy life to the fullest and do what you like as long as you are not hurting yourself or others. Thank you for sharing your story and writing your book ***Real Friends***.

Sincerely,
Natalia Powers

Let's Talk About...

***WONDER* by R. J. PALACIO**

Bullying

Personal Precepts

Dear R.J. Palacio,

You inspired me to write this Precept, “She is beautiful, he is beautiful, you’re beautiful.” I made it because throughout your book, **Wonder**, I keep getting the same message. You’re beautiful just the way you are. It reminds me that everyone is the same, and that everyone is beautiful. I wish people were kinder to others and could see past their differences of all kinds. I would tell someone to read the book because it reminds us to be kind to others who are different.



My Precept relates to the book because August is beautiful even though he looks different. One of the big reasons is the last sentence in the whole book, “You are a wonder August.” It is so sweet. At first, I didn’t know what it meant, but now I do. Another reason is the first chapter. It explains that August is ordinary. It is like he is beautiful in his own way. Summer is beautiful on the inside. She hung out with August because she wanted to get to know him. Jack Will is beautiful also. He saw past his face and August was just like him in so many ways. Via is beautiful because she was always there for August, just like August’s parents.

I will use my Precept for the rest of my life. It reminds me that everyone is beautiful. It will encourage me to not stare at someone who may look different, but instead play with them. If I did not make that Precept I would probably still stare. A Precept is a goal or rule. This is a great Precept to me. The book taught me that everyone is beautiful. Life without the Precept would be rude. This is a good Precept for all ages. It is like a friendly reminder to be kinder to others. Especially people who are different.

What I am trying to say is that the book taught me so much. I will try to be kinder to others who are different. I feel like everyone is a wonder. I might read it again. I liked the part where Jack Will changed his mind. It showed me that I can change. Always remember, “she is beautiful, he is beautiful, you’re beautiful.” Thank you for the book and its sweet message.

Evelyn Kaminski

Dear R. J. Palacio,

I think your book, **Wonder**, is great! I chose the Precept “Be a Good Friend to Others.” I was inspired to write my Precept after reading about August and Jack Will’s friendship. I think kindness is at the heart of any good friendship and is a good thing all over the world. I think people value having strong friendships. Some qualities of a good friendship are trust, loyalty, compassion, and respect.

When August first started at Beecher Prep, he did not know anyone and needed a friend. He met one, Jack Will, when he took a tour of the school. They quickly became friends and enjoyed hanging out. However, Jack Will was not a good friend when he complained about August in front of Julian. Jack Will told Julian that he was annoyed because August was following him around. August overheard the conversation and it hurt his feelings. However, Jack Will fixed his friendship with August when he later stood up for August. Julian told Jack Will to stop being friends with August. Jack Will refused and punched Julian in the face, knocking out one of his baby teeth. This shows that friendships are important and worth standing up for even when times get tough.

I will use the Precept “Be a Good Friend to Others” now and in the future by being a good friend to the people in my life. I will be a loyal and trustworthy friend by not talking bad about my friends behind their back. Instead, I will stand up for my friends and always protect them. I will be compassionate to my friends by showing them that I care about and understand them. I will be respectful of my friends and even those that are not my friend. I will always try to be a good friend to myself and treat myself with kindness.

My Precept “Be a Good Friend to Others” was inspired when I read about August and Jack Will. The ups and downs of their friendship shows that good friendships are important and should be cherished. I will live by my Precept now and in the future by be kind to my friends and family. Anyone can be a good friend to others by showing kindness. I really enjoyed the book **Wonder** and its lesson about the power of being a good friend.

Sincerely,
Jackson Estridge

Dear R. J. Palacio,

I just finished reading your book, **Wonder**. I love it because to me it is the unimaginable story of a kid named August having a facial deformity and trying to overcome his first year of middle school. While reading your book, I learned all the sides of the characters, like how Via does not like being stared at when she's with August. Or how Summer's dad was a platoon soldier and died. And how Justin's parents are divorced.

The parts of the book where August was bullied were heartbreaking. But most of the bullying was not physical, because they did not actually fight. An example is the "Plague," where if you touch August, you have thirty seconds to wash or clean your hands. While reading the book, it was obvious that August wasn't the only one who was harassed. Jack Will and Summer were also harassed. Summer was asked about why she was spending time together with August, and Jack Will was stared at by Julian and his friends, while at the store.

But the way I relate to the book is dreadful, because there was this person I didn't like so much so I ignored them, left them out of things, and other bad things. But I was told on and got in trouble. I was then taught a lesson and tried not to bully again, so I said sorry to them and got on good terms. But that's the only difference between me and the bullies in **Wonder**. They didn't apologize.

But the happy parts were written well. There were many happy moments made the most of by the characters, like how I try to make the most of happy moments with my family or friends. You balanced the good parts and the bad parts throughout the book well. The amount of time and brainstorming for the massive number of ideas for **Wonder** would've taken me so long to figure out. Your story is extremely unique. I would have never thought of this plot! From the causes to the effects, to the problems and solutions! While reading your book, when I was supposed to stop reading, I still just kept on turning more and more pages. Thank you so much for your great book and hard work.

Sincerely,
Redmund Edo

Dear R. J. Palacio,

I'm not sure everyone knows how special they are. I've read **Wonder** many times and learned something different every time. Ordinary kids don't have to stand out! Everyone has that one special talent whether its juggling, sports, making the best ice cream, rock climbing, or even dance moves.



Boys and girls do not know how important it is to stand in their unique way and go catch their dreams! Auggie is a ten-year-old boy who just wants to have a normal life. He obviously can't with the 27 surgeries he has had. For me, going to a new school with strangers would scare me. After finishing the book, a tear streamed down my face thinking how Auggie was treated in the book. I remember walking and seeing someone with a face like Auggie's. I never truly understood why people were treated like this. After reading your book I finally knew what it meant.

If I was in Auggie's shoes, I would not like the feeling of someone looking at me like something was wrong. Living life is not about what people see you as, it's about how you see yourself. I would not like living in a community where someone like Julian makes you feel like the bullying will never stop. Auggie never really reacted when he was getting bullied because he knew that it wasn't a great idea. His sweet mind made people think that it's not what someone looks like on the outside but what someone looks like on the inside. Auggie may have become popular in his school because of what he looked like, but he also became popular because of his kind heart! After reading **Wonder** my life will not be the same. Looking at myself in the mirror makes me wonder what Auggie would say to himself if he was looking at himself. I just want to tell everyone in the world that they are unique and stand out in their own special way.

I was born with extra skin on my finger. A couple years ago I wondered why I had a scab on my left pinky finger, so I asked my mom. She told me about it, and I asked myself, "Do I relate to Auggie in some sort of way?" Now I am inspired to change the way I look at other people and myself. I would never be the same person I am standing here right now

if it weren't for me believing in myself every minute of my life. No matter what anyone else says, no one will change your face or anything about your body, so just be you, BE YOU! I am a human just like everyone else, but we are all so different in many ways. Seeing people that look different makes me smile now.

I was sad when the book ended because I felt like Auggie's best friend. An extraordinary amount of inspiration was put in me because of reading **Wonder**. Auggie is lucky to have such great friends by his side when he went to school. Sometimes, it's hard for me to think about what Auggie went through when he was that young.

Now, when I see someone sitting alone at the lunch table or always walking by themselves in the hallway, I will invite them to sit next to me. I will not be afraid to stand up for anyone! No one deserves to be treated unfairly just because of what they look like. Laughter is contagious and so is happiness. Don't let people change the way you see yourself. This book will keep inspiring kids and adults!

To wrap it up, thank you for making people believe that no one should be treated unfairly because of what they look like on the outside.

Sincerely,
Ava Swedarsky

Let's Talk About...

**LEARNING ABOUT
CHALLENGES OTHERS FACE**

Being Thankful

Empathizing with Others

Helping Others

Dear Malala Yousafzai,

When I read your book, *I Am Malala*, it changed my perspective of what I can do as a person. There are nearly eight billion people in the world, and I never thought that my voice could change the world. I never expected that one girl could change the world. Sometimes I wonder what it was like for you and other women not to have anything at all. I loved the fact that you wrote your book and I think it has a great lesson to never underestimate yourself and to never give up.

My voice is powerful, and I learned that from you. I can use my voice to stand up for others and myself. I felt stronger when I read your story. I feel more confident in myself after what you did for yourself and other women around you. To stand up to someone is hard. It is even harder when you could get killed for it. I can use my voice by teaching young children about rights and by being kind to people so they can be a better person for themselves and other people around them.

“I feel like no one can protect me, not even my parents.” This has impacted me so much because I felt bad for you and how you did not even feel your own parents could do anything to protect you. I really could not even imagine what you were feeling every day of your life because I have my parents that can protect me, so it really made me see a new perspective. I could really picture what was happening in the book and what you described was happening. When you went to school it was like a happy place for you and it is nice to have a place where you feel safe and feel happy with other people around you who you can trust because school is fun, and I feel happy in it when I go.

All these feelings and thoughts are so powerful, I could not keep them in. Thank you for your life story and sharing it with people. It made me really think about the life we live in and what I can do to change it. I know now how you felt in all the parts of your life because I could really feel your emotions while you were in those moments. Your book inspires me every day and I just want to say thank you for that.

Sincerely,
Maryn Carter

Dear Mr. Gratz,

I remember what it was like for me as a younger kid. I would storm down the hallway of my house demanding everything that came to my mind. I wouldn't be able to stand someone telling me "No." I would lose it. Now I see how foolish and spoiled I was. I was late on my first day of middle school and almost missed the morning book fair. I burst into the library, flailing the \$20 my mom had given to me. She had strictly told me to not get a "graphic novel," which I thought meant "No pictures whatsoever." I scanned each book I came across. The bell was going to ring, and I picked up *Ground Zero*, one of your newest books. During our 20-minute reading period, I flipped open your book, and my eyes were instantly glued to the pages.

I read and read every night and every day until the book came to an end. I then went to my mom and showed her your other books on the back of the cover. She flipped on her computer and got me many of your books. My favorite was *Refugee*. It showed me how wealthy and fortunate my family was. I would complain that "it wasn't fair," but now, I realize how lucky I am. I have three siblings, who I used to hate for constantly bugging me, but I have changed my thoughts and thank Heaven for giving me such a great family.

Your books taught me to be less greedy and to be thankful. I was impacted by your books much like the moon getting a new crater. It doesn't make the moon something else, but it molds it to be unique. After reading *Refugee*, I found more ways to be helpful instead of selfish. Now, every time I see someone on the highway who is dressed in rags and using cardboard signs, I think twice before neglecting or looking down upon them.

I'm one of the shortest kids at my school, but now I realize it is nothing to complain about. I may be picked on at school, but I'm not going home complaining like I used to. Your book *Refugee* taught me how it would have been if I was around during wars and conflicts. Wars, bombings, and raids, and even living in Nazi Germany as a Jew. I had never felt more attached to your books. It felt like it was narrating directly to me. These people who had survived had their life changed, like mine.

Thank you, Mr. Gratz, for your great books.
Jack Tyner

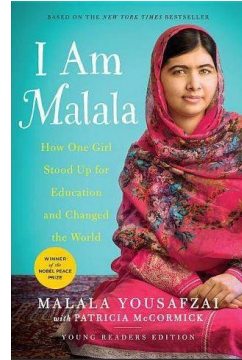
Eleni Scordalakes

St. John the Baptist Catholic School, Newburgh
Letter to Malala Yousafzai / Author of *I Am Malala*

Dear Malala Yousafzai,

I used to take school for granted. School was something I dreaded. Yep, I was one of those kids. I would always wish for snow days or icy roads, and I would seek any valid excuse I could use to miss school. Alas, I never found a valid reason and kept going to school. But that was before I read your book, *I Am Malala*.

My class was going to read your book for our class novel. Before we started, we filled out a pre-reading survey. We were given a statement and had to choose whether we agreed or disagreed with that particular statement. One of them said something like, “I would be happy if school closed.” I, being the kind of kid that I was at the time, put agree. I mean, who wouldn’t love having no school?



It’s not that I didn’t like school itself. I loved my teachers and friends. I just wanted a break from all the classes and homework. I knew that school was a very important part of my life and future career, but a week or two or a year wouldn’t hurt. You helped me open my eyes to the fact that I am very lucky to have the opportunities for education that I do, and that other people may not have. Your book described a life with no school and how sad it made you and your friends. It started to dawn on me how much I needed and relied on school for my life. Without school, I would never be able to accomplish what I have always wanted. When I tried to imagine what it would really be like if I couldn’t go to school, I knew I had been wrong to wish for what I did and to take school for granted.

You not only opened my eyes to the importance of education, you showed me how much of a difference words can make. You are a perfect example of the statement, “the pen is mightier than the sword.” You, Malala, inspired me and plenty of other people all over the world. You made me realize that what I took for granted was probably one of the most important parts of my life.

Your book had me very intrigued. It was so well written, and I feel like I could understand what was happening and what you were going

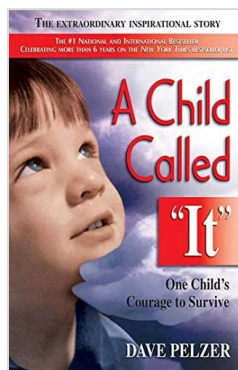
through in a very clear way. It was as though I was experiencing what was happening. You are such an idol and inspiration to people just like me. You show the power education holds in this world and the power of women, both of which are underestimated.

I want to seriously thank you for all you have done for the world and for others and for the book you have written. It has both inspired and informed me. Thank you, Malala, for making such a huge impact on the world and for creating a book that will stick with me forever. You taught me not to take anything for granted.

Sincerely,
Eleni Scordalakes

Dear Dave Pelzer,

I sat in 7th grade English class bantering and fooling around with my fellow classmates. After a short time, my English teacher took notice of our disruptive behavior and advised us to go grab a novel from the school library. With the fear of getting detention, we took the hall pass and went to pick our books. I grabbed a random book off the shelf. At the time, I did not care what I had chosen. However, I soon learned that I had chosen your book, and that all the appalling and dreadful stories it contained were true.



As a 12-year-old reading a book about such a difficult topic, I did not fully understand the feelings and emotion behind every word you wrote. Child abuse is not something that is usually shared or talked about with children at younger ages. It wasn't until a few years later that I noticed that there were kids I knew, kids I sat by in my classes that were also having the same experiences as you did. My mother never stabbed me or subjected me to the awful treatment that you received. I faced a hard realization: my life was not as bad as I thought. I had everything I would ever need. I was never starved or beaten like you, or other children facing abuse were. I was overcome with selfishness and guilt. How could I have felt so bad for myself when there were other children with life threatening problems?

I wasn't sure how I was supposed to help, but I knew I wanted to do something. I attempted and still attempt to change my way of thinking. Instead of being another person who ignores what was happening right in front of me, I decided to make a difference. If I noticed another student having a rough day or even a teacher who seemed strained from the day's events, I would attempt to make them smile or laugh. Any little thing I could do to take their mind off their problem, I would strive to make it happen. To this day I still aim to raise people's spirits and try to improve their day, even if it's only for a second. Because of you I believe that every little bit counts no matter who or what it is.

Your book, ***A Child Called "It"*** not only made me change my thinking, but it also persuaded me to think about being a foster parent when I'm older. I could make a difference in a child's life just by giving them a place to live, putting food on the table, and being kind to them. It is a small price to pay when it could be the difference between life or death. It had never occurred to me that I could make such a huge change for myself and others.

You were my wake-up call. Every day I am thankful for your writing of the book and for waking me up to see that there are other children out there who are the "It" of their families too.

Thank you,
Madesyn Sunderhaus

Alyssa Fingerle
Fingerle Foundations Homeschool, Roanoke
Letter to Victoria Jamieson and Omar Mohamed
Authors of ***When Stars Are Scattered***

Dear Victoria Jamieson and Omar Mohamed,

I fondly enjoyed reading your graphic novel ***When Stars Are Scattered***. It was an easy read with a profound message about hope, courage, and unity. It helped me develop a broader perspective toward others who have a more difficult lifestyle than I do as a typical American teenager today. It reminds me to be grateful of the many blessings I have been given. While I am aware there are poor in my community, it saddened me to realize the depths of despair with food and clothing shortages around the world. ***When Stars are Scattered*** urged me to seek ways to show compassion and lend a hand to help those less fortunate. I regularly donate some of my excessive belongings and have volunteered at my local food/clothing drives as follow-up to this book.

Another takeaway from your work was how inspiring you personally were, Omar, having so much hope and perseverance despite your strenuous circumstances. Being forced out of your home and separated from your mother as a young child was surely devastating and defeating. It makes me appreciate the sense of security a family provides; something I've rarely stopped to ponder. But you loyally protected your younger brother and used it all to fuel your drive to survive life in a refugee camp and later to thrive in America. You even took the opportunity to pursue an education to reach your own life goals, while seeking ongoing ways to give back to your homeland. I was impressed with your heart for others and determination to achieve, proving to me that a little faith goes a long way!

Your book also educated me about the diversity among different cultures. The competition was fierce for you to pursue fighting for your freedom. I had no idea how long the journey from your old life in Kenya to your new life in America would actually be, and how much patience and adaptation it would require! Thank you for your wonderful example of diligence, and for sharing your story in ***When Stars are Scattered***. It teaches kids like myself to refrain from complaining about our problems (simple in comparison), and instead follow your friend's powerful advise: "Be like a star. Shine your light. Shine your story. For stories will lead us home."

Respectfully submitted,
Alyssa Fingerle

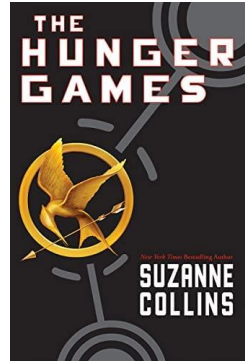
Honorable Mention – Level One

Morgan Thompson
Crestview Elementary, Indianapolis
Letter to Suzanne Collins / Author of *The Hunger Games*

Dear Suzanne Collins,

I read your book *The Hunger Games*. You made me think differently about something. That something is food and how much food I waste every day and how little food some people have.

I've never really wondered if we will have food. I always just sat down at the table when my dad said dinner was ready. But your book changed my view on that. I realized that not everyone had that and also that in your book the higher the sector number got, the lower the amount of food there was. I know your book is fictional, but it is a real problem that not too many people my age think about, unless they are one of those people.



I loved how Katniss was so brave and how she went outside of the wire to feed her mom, sister, and herself. The whole book itself changed my view on life. I've never had to worry about having enough food on the table, but after reading your book I realized that not everyone has that luxury.

Everyone has a different situation. Some barely have enough food, some have enough food to get by, some have lots of food, and some have more than enough food and will never have to worry. There are so many people in each of the different situations and some are in the middle of the two. The ones that have the least amount of food are sometimes the ones that are the most overlooked.

I now know and pay attention to how much I waste and think about how I take everything I have for granted. There are so many things that I don't really think about, but that so many other people have to think about. Thank you for helping me realize that life is not just a summer day, but that it can be very hard.

Sincerely,
Morgan Thompson

Let's Talk About...

**FINDING YOUR WAY
IN THE USA**

Immigration

New Languages

Fitting In

Dear Dr. Seuss,

When I first entered the United States of America, I was only 7 years old, and I was not as good at English as my fellow classmates. My teacher put me in ESL (English as a Second Language) and in those classes, I was handed many picture books and easy-to-read pieces of literature. I remember the first book I was given to read was *The Cat in the Hat*. It was a hilarious and clever book with rhyming words that did not exist. It got me more invested in books and I believe taught me how to read English in an American school. The book itself does not relate to my personality in any way, but it has its own impression on me as being a book that got me to love English as it is and to open new doors to better opportunities.

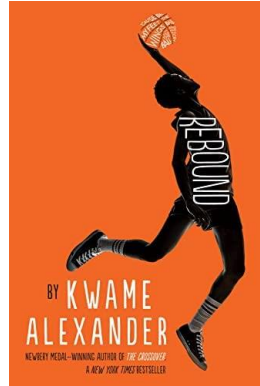
After reading, I would have to complete a sort of book report and the “would you like to recommend this book?” questions. I answered all of the questions truthfully except one, “What was one thing that relates to you with the book?” I put Nothing. But after some realization I think that I was not totally truthful. Mr. Cat had been showing the kids some games they could play and when all his stuff crashed down, he was stubborn to be helpful and be the good guy. I think I could relate to that because I have created a lot of messes, but in many of the cases I did not accept them and tried to fix it all by myself.

I do consider that when you wrote the first book such as this one, you had to break boundaries of laws in literature and come up with something new to present. Making new words as you go along, rhyming in a sense that made no sense but got understood, and making fun stories to go along with it. Moving along with that I tried to make poems, books, and novels like the ones I have seen in your stories. I have always loved reading and have always enjoyed the sense of diving into another unexplored world where pigs could fly. Literature is not only fun and creative, but mischievous and daunting, like Thing 1 and Thing 2. The ability to create characters with their own backstories and development, with hardships and challenges is a very powerful thing and I hope to master it one day.

Sincerely,
Aksh Ranjan

Dear Kwame Alexander,

Some people read books and move on to another, but your book made me realize there are benefits and downsides to change. While looking through my school library I spotted a book named **Rebound** and it had a basketball player on the cover. Because I was playing basketball at the time, I decided to read it.



After reading that Charlie went to his grandma's and grandpa's house for the summer, and that he didn't have friends, I realized that other people might have had similar experiences to moving like me. I moved from Israel, where all my friends and all my family lived, to the United States due to my dad's job. I was four years old, and my sister was about one year old. When my parents told me we were moving, I didn't fully understand what that really meant. At first, I thought I was just moving to a different house but not moving countries. When we got on the plane, I asked my mom what we were doing here. She explained to me that we were moving. I finally understood what was happening. It didn't bother me much until I heard I was going to a new school. I was so nervous and hated it. I thought my parents were punishing me. After a while I calmed down and just went with it.

When Charlie first came to his grandma and grandpa's he had no friends until he met his cousin, Roxie. When I first got to the United States, I had no friends. Eventually I found someone else who spoke Hebrew. His name was Yonatan. When I found someone else who spoke Hebrew, I didn't feel left out anymore. It made me feel better that someone else spoke the language I did. Then after I learned English, I made new friends. It was hard for me since everybody around me was speaking a different language than me. Learning English was a roller coaster, since I was still young and I still had more to learn about Hebrew, which was my first language.

At the place where Charlie's grandpa worked, there was a gym where Roxie played basketball with other people. Roxie convinced Charlie to just try it out and then he fell in love with the sport. In kindergarten, all

my friends started playing basketball. I decided not to play. They told me I should try it once. I agreed. When I played basketball, I felt like it was the missing piece to my puzzle. I loved the sound of the basketball when I would dribble, and the texture of the ball, and especially the sound of the net when anybody would swish the ball through the hoop.

After looking back at all these comparisons, I realized something very special about how much one thing can change your life. When Charlie started playing basketball, he had a new perspective on life and how people can impact someone's life so much. Just from Roxie and his grandparents he changed so much. Your book helped me realize that there are benefits to change. That made me feel better about moving somewhere else.

Sincerely,
Liron Blinkov

Honorable Mention – Level Two

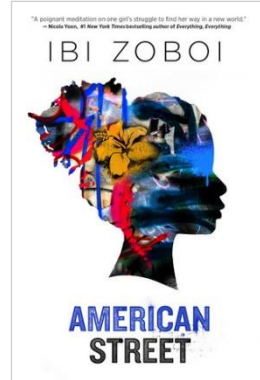
Bernadine Dure

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Ibi Zoboi / Author of ***American Street***

Dear Ibi Zoboi,

“Your family’s from Haiti, right?” Those words normally mean nothing to me; I’d simply answer with a quick “yes” and continue with my day. It’s not that I wasn’t proud of my origins, it was just that many brought up only the negatives of Haiti. When someone only hears one side of the story, it can be rather hard to take anything else as truth. But that small sentence was also the one that got me to read your book, ***American Street***; and because of that book I have begun to look at the country of my parents and my ancestors in a new light.



Let’s get this out of the way first: I *instantly* felt an attachment to your main character Fabiola as soon as I finished the first few chapters. I’m not an immigrant, and neither of my parents faced the terrifying possibility of being sent back to Haiti, but both Fabiola and I are black people trying to find our place in the US, which sometimes feels like it’s out to get people like us. Fabiola clings to her traditional Haitian practices, especially to the *Vodou* traditions her mom instilled in her heart. Because of this though, her mind remained caught up on her mother, impeding her from enjoying the *American* part of Haitian-American. I, on the other hand, was born and raised here in the United States, and at times I struggle to love the *Haitian* part of being Haitian-American. Seeing a teen like me fight to find balanced love for herself (and both of her cultures) is refreshing and reminds me that I’m not the first one who feels this way nor am I the last.

Speaking of finding a balanced love of my cultures, living in a predominantly white city put into my head that to be on the inside of anything, you need to know how to fit in with the majority. Even before I knew what code-switching was, I was doing it with each person I came across. Hold your tongue with one person, let it relax with another. If someone starts laughing at me and asks me to repeat myself,

whatever I had said prior might've been dumb. Seeing characters like Donna and Chantal (Fabiola's cousins) also code-switch to fit into their Detroit school made me feel refreshed. On the other hand, seeing Fabiola remain true to herself despite major changes happening in her life made me wonder if all this code-switching was worth it. Is losing my culture to fit in with kids who barely know me worth middle school popularity? Is losing *myself* worth five seconds of fame? Seeing words in my mother's tongue like *Papa Legba*, *Matante*, and *Merci* be used so casually in the text, seeing other characters such as Kasim be interested in the positive aspects of Haiti, it all made me realize something. Diversity in the United States? That's a blessing to have, and I shouldn't have to be ashamed of my being different. Just as Fabiola learned to embrace American culture while holding onto her Haitian roots, I'm starting to learn to embrace Haitian roots while holding onto my American-ness.

Your book helped me accept myself a little bit more as a Haitian. It may take time to unlearn what I thought was truth, but nonetheless I'll be just as determined (if not more) as Fabiola. I treasure the fact that, although I don't live in Detroit, I have the blessing of living in my own personal American Street.

Mèsi anpil,
Bernadine Dure

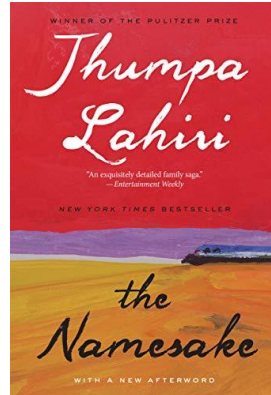
Third Place Winner – Level Two

Shamyant Boda

Honey Creek Middle School, Terre Haute
Letter to Jhumpa Lahiri / Author of *The Namesake*

Dear Jhumpa Lahiri,

Immigrating is a big step. It doesn't only affect the immigrant: it affects their families and future kids. Second generation Indian immigrants are a prime example of this. Their parents immigrated from India to a different country, and they are heavily affected by this. They try to balance their Indian roots and the American culture around them, but they end up confused. This struggle is perfectly showcased by Gogol Ganguli, who is a second-generation Indian immigrant. He tries to balance Indian culture and American culture, and he learns an important lesson about respecting his roots during this journey.



Throughout my life, I have faced many struggles balancing American and Indian culture. One of the most notable struggles is with food. Indian food and American food are extremely different cuisines. I remember that people in elementary school used to make fun of me for the Indian food I brought to school. This is because it "looked disgusting" and "smelled terrible." Also, most Indians don't eat beef or pork. This makes life very inconvenient in America, which is centered around foods like hamburgers, hotdogs, corndogs, etc. Not being able to eat these foods can be embarrassing in front of friends. Also, I have a hard time balancing Indian and American traditions. One significant problem I face concerns Thanksgiving and Karthika Masam. Karthika Masam is a celebration that celebrates Lord Shiva, which is one of the primary gods in Hinduism. During this month, my family and I are lacto-vegetarians, which means that we don't eat eggs or animal flesh. This celebration lasts for a lunar month, and Thanksgiving usually lies in this month. This is an extreme inconvenience because when we are invited to Thanksgiving parties, we are the only people that are vegetarian. At moments like these, I sometimes wish that my family and I followed American culture. This would allow me to eat all the foods my friends do and not get left out. These are some of the overlooked struggles second generation Indian immigrants like me face.

Gogol had two different parties for his fourteenth birthday. One was with his school friends. At that party, he had pizza, watched baseball, and played table tennis. However, he had another birthday where his parents' Bengali friends came, and they brought their kids. At that party, Indian food was served, and people wore Indian clothes. Gogol had to take care of the little kids while the parents enjoyed themselves.

This situation is one I am familiar with. I have a birthday party where I invite my school and sports friends, and we go paintballing, play dodgeball, or hang out. Then, I have a second birthday party where my parents invite their Indian friends. This party is full of Indian food and Indian clothes. Just like Gogol, I have to spend my time taking care of the little kids while the parents talk and have fun. Also, Gogol starts drifting away from his Indian culture. He stops speaking Bengali, and he starts eating food with a fork. This is because he spends a lot of his time with his friends and is around American culture.

I can definitely relate to this, and I face some of these struggles. I have stopped speaking my native tongue of Telugu, and I am constantly scolded by my parents for this. It doesn't come naturally like English does. Also, I often battle the urge to eat with silverware. I have gotten so used to eating with silverware at school, so this causes me to instinctively do this at home. Along with this, Gogol starts to dislike India. On his trip there, he thinks that the food, living conditions, poverty, and air are poor. On my last trip to India, some of my thoughts mirrored Gogol's thoughts. I looked at all of the litter and tiny, dirty houses, and I had similar thoughts about India. This truly shows the difficulty of balancing American culture with one's Indian roots.

This book has shown me that eventually, I will figure out how to balance my life. It provides me with the motivation to enjoy American culture while staying true to my Indian roots. Gogol's journey shows that at the end, I will regret it if I abandon my roots. I wanted to show my appreciation to you for speaking about such a touchy topic. You have inspired me, and countless others, to stay connected with their Indian roots while incorporating American culture into their lives. Thank you so much for offering this critical piece of advice.

Sincerely,
Shamyant Boda

Let's Talk About...

COVID-19

Living Through a Pandemic

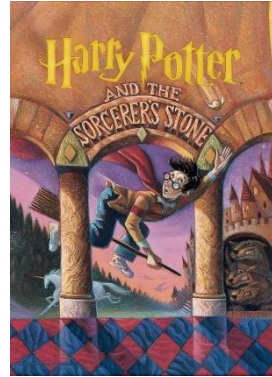
Lock Downs

Boredom and Stress

Death due to COVID

Dear J.K. Rowling,

I did not want to read your *Harry Potter* series. All my friends were reading it. I was in the fifth grade, and the *Harry Potter* books were very popular. I was that kid who wanted to go against the grain by not reading them. Frankly, I hated reading, and the series seemed very long to my little fifth grade self. In fact, it wasn't until it was required in school for me to read longer books that I even considered the series. My mom encouraged me to use an audio book to make the task less daunting, so finally, I bit the bullet and just started the first book.



I could not put it down, and I am not lying when I say that had never happened to me before. Reading for fun had been almost non-existent in my life. My reading time was magically transformed to be something I craved. Going to bed and reading for hours was the best part of every day. I didn't mind that it was going slow because I was savoring the experience, letting every sentence take its time sinking in. It was truly a whole new way of reading for me, and my reading habits have never been the same.

When I shared my experiences and thoughts about the series at school, I was able to talk to people I normally wouldn't have talked to. I was (actually still am) a very shy person, so I rarely made new friends. Through reading your books, I began to bond with others by sharing what house we would want to be in at Hogwarts or by guessing what our Patronuses would be. I was brought into a fun little community just by reading some books.

I finished the entire series when I was in seventh grade. By that time, I had taken multiple house tests to determine that I am a proud Hufflepuff. I wish I could say that the *Harry Potter* hype continued through eighth grade, but I would be lying. As I got older, life got harder. I started to drift away from fun fantasies towards a reality of sadness. I went through a dark time when I started high school, and I felt I had no room for wizards and witches anymore. Life was serious now.

Fortunately, like a lot of dark periods in life, it passed over time, and I began to find myself a little bit. As an introvert, I thrived in quarantine. When I got bored, I wanted to read, which was a feeling I had not felt in years. I remember walking through my room, looking for a book to read, and I picked up ***Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone***. That's when I decided I would reread the entire series again. I never reread books. Ever. But I was determined to reread every single ***Harry Potter*** book by the time school started again, and this time, without an audio book to help me.

I regret nothing. Even though I knew how it would end, I discovered new things about the book that I had no recollection of, found a deeper meaning to a lot of moments in the book, and made connections between themes in the books and my life. For example, the depth between Harry and Mrs. Weasley's relationship actually made me cry. Also, Sirius Black, after my second read, became my favorite character in any book ever. His entire character was amazing to me, and I found it absolutely heart-breaking when he was murdered. There were more parts that I enjoyed a lot, and to this day, your ***Harry Potter*** series is the only book series that I have completely reread.

The ***Harry Potter*** series changed the way I read fiction forever. I am able to identify character depth better, and I am less shocked when the main character of a story is killed off. I was truly changed by your books, and I am very thankful for their existence.

Sincerely,
Emma DeBoer

Dear George Orwell,

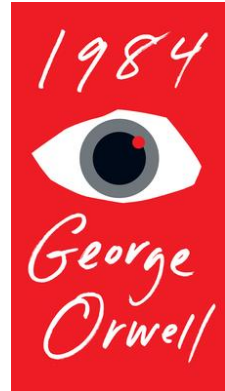
As I read through the mesmerizing pages of **1984**, I wondered why people allow themselves to be stalked online, like a mouse about to be snatched by the claws of a hawk for a morning breakfast. Until reading **1984**, I didn't realize how terrible the internet is and the effect it has on the human race.

The internet has changed and developed exponentially over the past twenty years. It hasn't necessarily been for good. The internet has been developed with the intention of being addicting and entertaining, and this is what the internet does very well. With the internet being more easily accessible and the goal of keeping people on it, people are constantly on the internet.

Recently there was a pandemic and many countries practiced socially distancing. Being locked in your house made many people go crazy out of boredom, as people could not be around each other. This made me and many people go to the internet for a way to pass time. Throughout the pandemic, I was guilty of being on the internet for an extensive amount of time. It kept my mind off the things that were happening around me.

As you hinted at in **1984**, this technology does help alleviate problems such as boredom and stress, which are two of the main things happening during a pandemic. When writing this book, you undoubtedly had your own struggles. Politically, things may not have turned out the way you wish. The economy was struggling. The economy for you is what the pandemic is to me. You may have dealt with bouts of depression. Similarly, with the increase of technology use during isolation, much of my society felt depressed. Technology only added to it.

Your book made me think about my childhood without a lot of technology. I actually prefer a life without access to the internet. But as time has gone by, I find myself on the internet for longer periods of time. As that happens, I become more and more isolated and see less and less of the wonderful world.

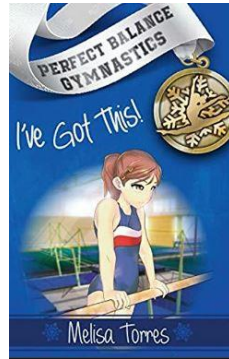


Another concern about the internet is the lack of privacy. Information is taken and given to other websites and people frequently. This is a problem because they give you more of the stuff they think you will like, but this is evil. It makes you addicted and makes you spend too much time on the internet. They also give our information to advertisers and sometimes the government. In **1984**, you were scared that the government would keep watch over the people through technology. This is exactly what is happening. Technology is more easily accessible to get misinformation from the internet.

With admiration,
Matanya Goldstein

Dear Melisa Torres,

As soon as I opened your first book, *I've Got This*, I immediately found myself running into Perfect Balance Gymnastics Academy and hopping excitedly toward the front desk just like Trista. All the books in the series have greatly helped me in my gymnastics career. As a level 6 gymnast, I have had to be the leader, like Paige, and I have been one of the youngest like Savannah. I have had trouble "scoring out" like Carmen, and I have struggled with mental blocks like Trista. Any time I have trouble at the gym, I know that I can come home and read one of your books to help me feel better or help me understand what I need to do.



My first couple of years of doing competitive gymnastics, I had always considered gymnastics to be an individual sport. However, my perspective changed in the year of 2020. In 2020, the whole state had to go into lockdown because of the Coronavirus pandemic. For the first few months of quarantine, my team had to practice via Zoom. This was the first and only time I have ever asked myself "do I want to quit gymnastics?" As soon as I asked myself this, I immediately realized another question, "Why do I want to quit now?" After a few minutes of contemplating, I suddenly realized the answer. I wanted to quit because I missed being in the gym with my teammates.

That night before I went to bed, I started to reread your second book, *Nothing Better Than Gym Friends*. As I listened to Savannah, I finally realized how much my gym friends really meant to me. About two months later, we were finally able to return to the gym for practice. As soon as I got into the gym, I ran over to my teammates and told them how much I missed them. Thanks to Savannah, I have always been very grateful for my teammates, and I have never again viewed gymnastics as an individual sport. Thank you so much for taking the time to write your books. I know that they inspire me as a gymnast and as a person, just as they do for many others!

Sincerely,
Kerrigan Ulmer

Sam Buswell

Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Alexandra Diaz/ Author of *The Only Road*

Dear Alexandra Diaz,

I just finished reading your book, *The Only Road*. It has changed the way I think in my everyday life. I now realize more than ever how hard life is for some people. Sometimes when somebody does something that was not the preferred decision, I think that they might possibly have a very hard life, like Jamie and Angela in your story. You never know what somebody else is going through!

This book has also helped me think more when I make decisions. For example, while I was reading the book, I remember thinking that Jamie and Angela should've joined the gang around the midway point of the book. Honestly, if I didn't know what would've come with leaving my home, I would have done the same thing! I would've woken up the next morning and thought, "Why did I do that?"

The book also helped me because of El Gordo. There were several things that he did that would have made me regret going with him. I also was nearly brought to tears after reading about the dog, Vida, and all the bad things that happened to her. I think it was good for Jamie and Angela because dogs can really help in a tough time. I even have a personal example. A little over a year ago, my stepdad, Corey, tragically died due to COVID-19. I was extremely close to him. Ever since then, I've been super nervous about others dying. I think about it practically every single night. I still do, to this day! My mom decided to get us a family dog to help cheer us up. So, we got a dog named Josie. Josie is very special to me. She didn't have a very good home and she needed a better one. It was a perfect match! I couldn't ask for a better dog! It's hard to go an hour without missing her! So, I know how important Vida was to your characters.

Your book also made me a better person overall. You have inspired me to be kind and help others. Whenever it looks like somebody is struggling, it's too hard for me to not step in and ask if they are ok or if they need help. I have gained respect from teachers, friends, and even my coaches have commented on my empathy towards others! I am very thankful I discovered this book. In conclusion, this book has changed me as a person and as a friend. Thank you!

Sincerely,
Sam Buswell

Kylee Bolser
Franklin County High School, Brookville
Letter to Nicholas Sparks/ Author of ***A Walk to Remember***

Dear Nicholas Sparks,

I first saw your book ***A Walk to Remember*** on the cold stone floor of my basement. It was covered in layers of thick dust, ready to be tossed into the garbage. It had an old, bent up, worn cover with faded colors. I decided to give it a shot. Little did I know how this book would not only change me, but my entire perspective on life.

I connected with the main character, Landon Carter. He lost someone so close to his heart. I felt the grief wash over me when I read the book and the gut-wrenching pain he felt after he was told Jamie was dying. I was a train-wreck while reading your book. I understood Landon because I know what it feels like to lose someone that you love at such a young age. Especially to a virus, disease, or sickness that you cannot control. You feel like you are powerless.

We lost my cousin Amanda to COVID-19. She was young, healthy, and had no underlying conditions. None of us knew that it was coming. She would have been 35 this month. We had to celebrate without her. However, Jamie had the chance to experience her marriage before she died. This also connects to me because Amanda spent her remaining days with the two people she loved most: her two little boys.

The book changed my life and my perspective because it taught me something. You have to hold the people you love close and remind them how much you care. You need to make time for them and take care of them because you never know when they can be taken away from you. It can happen at any age, old or young. No one is perfect, but you can try to become better than your past self. If this book has taught me one thing, it is that we need to always tell the people we love most how much we care about them because one day they will be gone and there is nothing we can do about it. It is impossible to go back and hit some magic rewind button. There isn't a pause either and there is nothing you can do to change things you've said. So, you need to say them while you still can.

Thank you for writing this book. It had so much of an impact on me and it truly changed my life.

Sincerely,
Kylee Bolser

Second Place Winner – Level Three

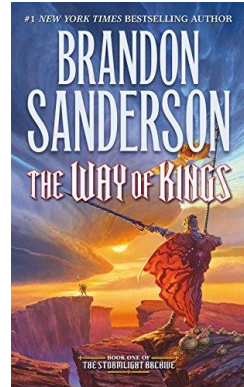
Abby Grubbs

Homeschooled, Fort Wayne

Letter to Brandon Sanderson / Author of *The Way of Kings*

Dear Brandon Sanderson,

I am an enthusiastic fan of your work, an aspiring writer, and a cancer survivor. From the age of seven, while I was in the hospital getting chemotherapy, one of the highlights of my day was being visited by Kate's Cart, an organization in northeastern Indiana that gives books to children in area hospitals. Because of COVID-19, I have discovered myself more frequently in the company of books. I can humbly declare I am a voracious reader. In 2021, I read fifty-seven new-to-me books. During the early summer of 2021, my brother-in-law introduced me to *Mistborn*. I owe you both a substantial debt.



When I came upon *The Way of Kings*, I fell instantly in love with it as well, and it is now my absolute favorite book. I found people I could root for and believe in. I was shocked when I realized how much the book correlated with the real world. For example, even though the characters do what is right, they still end up at rock bottom in Bridge Four. Additionally, none of the characters realize that there is a bigger picture. A lot of the time, we all forget that there is a larger story. In the middle of the pandemic, that reminder helped me have patience with the chaotic world around me.

Kaladin is my all-time favorite character. Even though he makes the right decisions and puts himself before others, many terrible things still happen. Above all, I admire how he elevates those around him, even in dire situations.

While reading the book, I constantly placed bookmarks on pages I wanted to remember and jotted down quotes in my commonplace book. The characters' courage and perseverance to do what is right no matter the consequences inspire me to do the same. Whenever I feel depressed, picking up *The Way of Kings* always encourages me. One of the pages I turn to most is page 831, when Teft is instructing Kaladin

about the Knights Radiant. When he informs Kaladin on the third part of the first ideal, the passage challenges me: "Journey before destination. There are always several ways to achieve a goal. Failure is preferable to winning through unjust means...In the end, all men die. How you lived will be more important to the Almighty than what you accomplished." This passage explains the significant difference between walking into a room with your head held high or held down. It is possible to believe that if the outcome is the same, then the way to achieve it does not matter. Nevertheless, the path taken makes all the difference in the world. As Nohadon wrote, "It is the path that shapes us. Our calloused feet, our backs strong from carrying the weight of our travels, our eyes open with the fresh delight of experiences lived." ***The Way of Kings*** reminds me that my choices affect more than just myself.

Being a cancer survivor taught me to make hard choices, such as sacrificing my present pleasure to protect myself and others. Recently, I have felt like Dalinar when he was abandoned on the battlefield by the one who was supposed to be his friend. I have had to make some grueling decisions due to COVID-19, choosing between what is right for me and my community and what is easy. As a result, I have lost many friendships. However, the friends I still have I cling to as much as Kaladin did Bridge Four.

A friend once asked me if I felt like I had my life back after having cancer. I could not answer her question at the time, but I can now. The answer is no. I do not have my life back. The life I could have had is gone, and I will never have it back. However, I still have a valued life. The same could be said of Kaladin. The life he could have had in Hearthstone was torn from him, as well as the life he could have had as a soldier. The way he succeeds despite the tragically dramatic changes in his life is emboldening. Like Kaladin, I am a different person because of my experiences. However, my battle against cancer has made me stronger, wiser, and more altruistic.

Thank you for writing such a wonderful and encouraging story! I have greedily finished all but one of your series in the Cosmere and continue to devour your books. The quintessential characters you created help me cope with the world. I hope I can write like you someday.

With an abundantly grateful heart,
Abby Grubbs

Let's Talk About...

DISEASES AND HOSPITALIZATIONS

Rare Diseases

Cancer

Stroke

Dear Sharon Draper,

Thank you for writing the book ***Out of My Mind***. Your amazing book made me cry several times and I'm proud of it. The reason I cried while reading your book was because of the things Melody went through.

One of the things that stands out in my mind is when Melody was in Spell Bowl, and her team all went without her, which made her feel horrible and left out all because of her illness. Your book has inspired me in many ways as well. I have never read a book I can relate to physically and mentally. Nor have I read a book with the main character having an illness. Here is a little glimpse of my background. I was four years old when I was diagnosed with Ulcerative Colitis and when I was six years old, I was diagnosed with a rare genetic kidney disease that turned my kidneys into scar tissue and made them almost stop working. Since being diagnosed with two illnesses at a young age I felt I could relate to Melody. A way your book has changed my life is realizing I'm not alone, and others with illness probably feel alone just as Melody and I did. We are all braver and stronger than we think.

Your wonderful book has inspired me to want to go to Riley Children's Hospital, (where I had my kidney surgery), to talk to kids that are about to go through what I went through. With kidney failure, dialysis, transplant surgery, biopsies, and other various procedures, I have the need and desire to talk about my illnesses and can hopefully encourage or inspire other children by sharing my story about what I went through. I want them to know they are not alone in their journey, just like I wish I could tell Melody she was not alone.

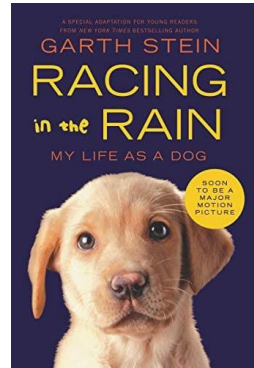
Another part of the book I enjoyed is when everyone realized the mistake they made, misunderstanding that because she was physically impaired, she wasn't mentally capable as well. It made me feel glad and happy for her that they helped and tried to understand her more. Thank you for writing the book ***Out of My Mind***. You have inspired me and so many others.

Sincerely,
Lydia Check

Yazenia Cordova
Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg
Letter to Garth Smith / Author of *Racing in the Rain*

Dear Garth Stein,

Your wonderful book *Racing in the Rain* made me realize the hardships that people experience throughout their own life. In your book, you wrote that Eve was fighting for her life to survive cancer. Her family was devastated because Eve had been doing so great, so her family thought she was going to make it. Also, during her fight against cancer, Enzo was her awesome companion, and that just made me realize even more how animals can make humans feel greater in life.



A few years ago, my aunt had cancer. If she had died, I don't know what my family members and I would do because she always hosts our amazing family Christmas, and it wouldn't be the same without her.

I connect to the part where Enzo, the golden retriever in your story, was frightened of his friend Zoey's stuffed zebra. Enzo thought it was creepily staring at him and laughing at him. Anytime I see a doll, I usually think it is staring at me. So does my sister, and it gives both of us the jitters!

My favorite part of your story is when Enzo dies but comes back to life as a human and meets his owner, Denny. I like how Denny has a bright smile on his face as he remembers that he once had a dog named Enzo. I first saw this book at a library. I thought that since I like dog books in general that I would like this book. I completely loved it out of all the dog books I have ever read.

What really amazed me about your book was that the dog expresses his feelings deeply, and I feel like he explains and can feel what other people feel more. *Racing in the Rain* makes it easier to put yourself in the other character's shoes. Thank you for writing *Racing in the Rain*, so I can cherish this book forever, and hopefully pass it on to others.

Sincerely,
Yazenia Cordova

Pia Rai

Central Middle School, Columbus

Letter to Ally Carter / Author of ***Not If I Save You First***

Dear Ally Carter,

I have never thought of myself as a strong person. Reading your book got me through one of the toughest times of my life. I was 11 years old. My dad had dangerously high blood pressure. An average person's blood pressure should be around 120/80. My dad's was 200/100. He laid down on the couch all day, not doing anything except staring at the ceiling. He would eat barely once a day. I had no idea what was going on. My parents wouldn't tell me. I stayed at my friend's house after school so my parents could go to doctor appointments up in Indianapolis. Seeing how Maddie and Logan could be so strong, even when they were my age got me thinking. If they could be strong when Maddie's dad got shot, I could be strong for my dad. For him.

Maddie and Logan were hostages for about the first half of the book. In my life, I relate it to how closed up I felt during that time. I had no one to confide in. No one to tell me that it was going to be okay. I felt like my dad's condition was holding me hostage, making me not be able to find happiness in the things I used to. I felt closed up, with no one there for me. Like Maddie and Logan were there for each other.

The other half of the book was them running away from Stephen. Like I was running away from the truth. Maddie and Logan eventually ran into Stephen again. And I came face to face with the truth; my dad was in danger of a stroke every second he spent lying on the couch. And I knew that there was nothing I could do to help him. In the end, everything was okay though. Maddie and Logan were back home safely. And my dad was safe too. A few weeks later, my dad was okay. He was back to being the fun, caring dad that I love.

I saw this book from a different perspective than most people might have. What they might have seen was two childhood best friends, escaping Russian criminals. But what I saw was completely different. I saw two people working hard for things to go back to the way they were. I want to personally thank you for writing this book. Because if you hadn't, I wouldn't have been able to stay strong for my dad.

Sincerely,
Pia Rai

Let's Talk About...

GRIEF AND LOSS

Divorce

Drug Use

Death and Dying

Lana Wisler

Central Middle School, Columbus

Letter to Holly Jackson / Author of *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*

Dear Holly Jackson,

In life, there is a lot of loss. People lose people. People lose pets. People lose jobs. This list could go on forever. It has happened to everyone no matter what. An example of loss is in your book, *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*. One thing in this novel that stuck out to me is when the main character, Pip, lost her dog. All she was trying to do was help others, but she lost something herself. I can relate to this loss. Just within the past couple of years, life has been rough. My parent's divorce, losing my pets, and facing COVID-19 have all created a sense of loss and uncertainty. It is comforting to know that I am not alone, since I can relate to Pip's experiences.

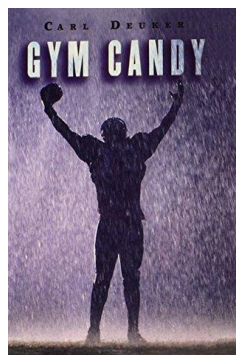
Although Pip figured it all out in the end, she suffered a lot in the book. I noticed that even though she was going through hard times, she kept her head up. I needed this feeling of encouragement in a time when I felt nothing. When my parent's divorce happened, I was just a couple years younger than what I am now. I did not know how to deal with my emotions. Still, I am not very good at it. A lot of times, I find myself keeping every thought and feeling in until it all escapes at once. I remember times when I would express my emotions towards my parents, siblings, and friends in harsh ways that only put them down. Controlling my emotions has never been easy for me.

Slowly, I have learned to adapt to my situations. Whether this is emotions, places, or circumstances that have changed, I have learned that I need to change with them. I need to accept it and move on, just like Pip did. When Pip's dog was killed, it was rough. Things were changing, not only with herself, but people around her. Her family was grieving. But even though Pip lost something, she kept investigating. She kept looking forward to her main goal, to solve the case. She didn't let that bump in the road stop her. Of course, her dog was very important to her, but sometimes the best thing to do is let go. That is the lesson that Pip taught me. She showed me that I can't let those things get to me. I need to brush it off and look at what the future holds. I have learned so much about myself and the world around me all because of your book. Thank you for the amazing lessons that I have learned. They will forever stay with me.

Sincerely,
Lana Wisler

Dear Carl Deuker,

I sit here wondering what life would be like if my dad hadn't done the things that you call "gym candies." I think about how different I would be. Good or bad, I'm not really sure. My biological dad was a steroid user. A very bad one, too. His addiction took his life from underneath him. In your book **Gym Candy** Mick started taking steroids because he felt as though he needed to be better, the strongest out on the field. My dad was not a football player, but he was a big, strong guy. I don't know much about his addiction, but I do know that he was abused and abducted by drugs, and so was Mick.



Addiction is said to be "running through my veins." I come from a family of drug and alcohol addicts. Why does everyone always assume I will do the same? I am to the point in my life where I realize how badly those things can take a toll on you. I was only one year old when my dad decided to take his life. Growing up I was always told, "Daddy just got very sick." I now know that is not completely true. Addictions can override you. Take control of you and do terrible things with you. In **Gym Candy**, Mick never wanted to start taking steroids to begin with. He was totally against them, but he started doubting himself and started thinking that he "needed" them. He did not need them. My dad was said to have been a very good person without the drugs. I hold on to that every day. I want to believe that there was someone else on the inside than the monster that drugs created on the outside.

Drugs can ruin a person. It happened to Mick and my dad. It's a scary thing to think about. You never really understand how bad it can get until it takes hold of you. Mick had mental and emotional reactions to the steroids. My mom always tells me that my dad would freak out for no apparent reason. He was said to have screamed at her without any reason behind it. My mom did not want that experience for me, so she planned on cutting him out. She didn't want her daughter to be under the influence of an addict, and I don't blame her. I seem to always ask myself, was I not enough for him to get better? Was I not worth living for? But I always concluded that there was nothing that I could have

done. I was so little and have no memory of what he was like. Really, I am thankful for that.

No kid deserves to go through what I might've gone through. A dad in and out of jail, always yelling at Mom, never being home. In the book, Mick got so aggressive and didn't know how to control it. He was falling in a deep, dark hole with no way up. It got so bad for him, but it got worse for my dad. Luckily, Mick never ended up dying. But in the end of the book, he shot himself. You get that high that you so longingly strive for, and then it's gone, and all those feelings of self-doubt and discouragement rise to the surface. From reading and hearing about all of these experiences, it shows me that I am enough, and that I don't need drugs to make me feel better because in the end, it will only make me worse.

Reading your book made me realize that I don't need to follow in my dad's footsteps, nor do I want to. Those things have the ability to change me into the person that I do not want to be. I will overcome my relatives who were addicts and become the person that they never got the chance to be. So, in conclusion of this letter, I want to say thank you for writing **Gym Candy**, and for informing me and all the other people that read it how badly drugs can affect you as a person. It's truly a lifesaving book, and we all owe you great thanks for that.

With a positive mindset,
Landrey Fegan

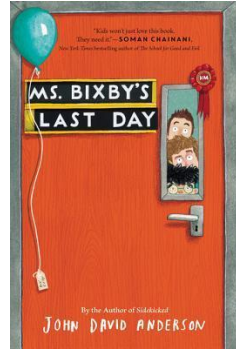
Hibah Mussa

New Palestine Intermediate School, New Palestine
Letter to John David Anderson / Indiana Author of *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*

Dear John David Anderson,

I appreciate you for writing *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*. It really connects to my life and my family. When I found out my grandma had cancer I was devastated, not only because she had cancer, but because I found out from my teacher.

My teacher was telling me it was going to be ok and that she'll make it. But when I got home my dad told me that she was very sick, and she may never come home. Then I realized what he had just said. He was telling me that she was most likely going to pass away.



What really connected me to the book is I felt the same way the boys did when they found out Ms. Bixby had cancer. I felt like a hole had been punched through me. I would argue with my mom to go see my grandma in the hospital. I finally got to go see her. I was expecting her not to have hair, but still when I saw her, I was scared. She had at least 10 tubes in her, pale skin, and no hair. Everyone was crying. When I went back to Mom's and told her everything, she told me that's why she didn't want me going.

Then about a week later, my dad asked if I wanted to go see her again. I said no because I didn't want to see her in pain anymore. I realized the next day I should have said yes because she was gone. I cried for hours. Then I read your book and it made me realize that you should always try to spend time with your loved ones.

The boys never stopped even when it got hard. Now I realize that you should appreciate the time you have. I have learned that the little things do add up. For example, I now help my mom and dad with the dishes, laundry, and help with the dogs because I know it means a lot to them since they are busy with providing me and my siblings with a good life. I used to take a lot of things for granted, but after reading this book I have learned to appreciate the people around me, because you never know what might happen.

Sincerely,
Hibah Mussa

Honorable Mention – Level One

Avery Slade

St. John the Baptist Catholic School, Newburgh
Letter to Markus Zusak / Author of *The Book Thief*

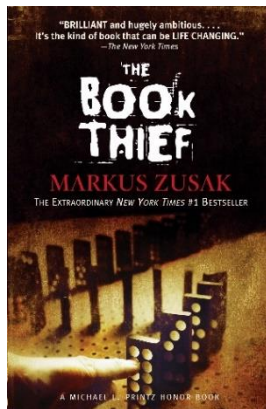
Dear Markus Zusak,

If I'm being honest, I'm not the most avid reader. It seems like everyone in my class is reading book after book while I'm still dwelling over one. However, when I found *The Book Thief*, although I was intimidated by its size, after reading the first few chapters, I couldn't take my eyes off the pages.

Your book drew me in like no book had ever done before. I would read before bed and be upset with my clock's digits. With *The Book Thief*, your clever writing inspired me. Your subtle ways of making the readers fall in love with the characters, how you incorporated German words to make the plot feel authentic, and, of course, the clever narration made your book unique.

There were many memorable details in the text, but one that stuck with me was Liesel's brother's death. How she could tell Death was in the room and upon her brother. I sympathize with her. Watching someone die. Someone you love. I have sadly witnessed my father's death when I was five years old. Dealing with grief is different when you're younger. You feel at fault. You feel that you're alone. You feel like if you gave them one more kiss, one last hug, they wouldn't have gone. With personal experience and your relatable words, I was able to relate closer and see myself in Liesel's reflection.

Although the life I was given is far more fortunate than Liesel's, I knew how she felt when Max fell ill. Waiting at his bedside, hoping he was still alive can change a person. I can also see myself in Liesel when Max leaves. One day they're here, and the next they are gone. You portrayed Rosa like my mother, tough on the outside, sweet and loving on the inside. They grieved similarly to me after Hans left and my dad passed. Hans, a caring father to Liesel, taught me how to love, even when the world is falling apart. And then there was Rudy. He was one



of my favorite characters. He made me laugh and cry. I envy Liesel's relationship with him, how close they were. I also empathize with his loss.

I cried throughout *The Book Thief*, but other times your writing made me laugh. I felt anger toward some characters and empathy towards others. For example, the Hubermanns' neighbor Frau Holtzapfel, gave me the wrong impression before I realized her fears and got to know her. World War II is a frequently written topic, usually depicting a Jew in hiding or a concentration camp. Your original writing of historical fiction gave me a new perspective. Before, I hadn't stopped to think of families like Liesel's who conceal Jews. The narration by Death gave a fresh and new idea of observing the horrors of the war.

You have inspired me to think in creative ways when it comes to writing, just like your idea of Death. I learned from you to add more engaging ideas in my own writing like the stories Max made and the German you added. Your well-crafted and heartfelt book devastated me when the pages were over.

Sincerely,
Avery Slade

First Place Winner - Level Three

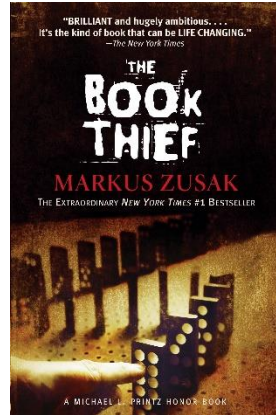
Loralee DeYoung

Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to Markus Zusak / Author of *The Book Thief*

Dear Markus Zusak,

Before a good friend recommended your novel to me in junior high, I had never even heard the title. I can't remember her exact motivation for suggesting *The Book Thief* to me, but I doubt it went beyond the superficialities of being a "good book." Although we both loved to read and did so voraciously, your story connected to me on a far more personal level that kept it above the shifting seas of more forgettable literature which fills my brain. Key images and events clawed their way into my subconscious and still refuse to let go. The difference likely came down to starting the book by chance in the ideal emotional mindset, created by a recent and bitterly painful event: the death of my Great-Aunt Harriet.



Having had both of my grandmothers pass away before my first birthday, it was my wonderful great-aunt who reached out and took up that role for much of my early life. This was not something anyone ever asked her to do but an act of pure love and kindness. I remember the times she would babysit my younger brothers and me, teaching us how to kick our legs to make the swings move. I remember the ever-present plate of cookies and pitcher of lemonade on the kitchen table. I remember pretending to sleep on her small white couch as she and my parents exchanged funny stories about recent happenings. Even now, I keep her stained-glass ornaments in my bedroom window. I was happy.

Meanwhile, I quickly learned to read so that I could dive into *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and dozens of *Magic Treehouse* stories: fantastical plots featuring bubbling characters that still hold a special place in my heart. Soon, I graduated into *Hatchet* and *The Lightning Thief* and was proud that my teachers felt that I could handle the more "mature themes." I began to unconsciously recognize the unspoken protection that surrounds important characters. Bad things can happen but not really bad things. Was I honestly supposed to think that Harry

Potter was going to be killed in his first book when there are six more in the series? The same naturally had to be true for my life. If the important people in my life were to suddenly disappear from orbit, that would throw off my lovely universe. I don't believe that I trusted in my own fundamental importance much more than the average child my age did, but it was a foundational part of my worldview, nonetheless. Then one of my beloved planets suddenly disappeared.

At about the age of ten, my parents called my brothers and me together. My Great-Aunt Harriet had suffered a major stroke. She wasn't going to get better. She wasn't going to wake up again. Since there was no chance of Great-Aunt Harriet ever regaining consciousness, her children decided that the best choice was to take her off life support. Everything was coming too fast. For better or worse, my parents decided that my brothers and I were too young to go to the hospital to say good-bye. Nothing was fair. Why did I have to lose a person I loved so much? Why did it have to happen that way? If she had to die, why did it have to be split into two parts like a knife cutting into me a second time? By the time I began your book, about a year had passed, but the wound was still fresh. My faith, family, and friends did much to ease the sorrow; however, a quiet and continual mourning continued. Sometimes, in the time at night between turning out the lights and falling asleep, I would think of her. All I could do was cry hot tears until sleep finally came.

As I read the first few pages of *The Book Thief*, it became clear that this novel was not like the ones I had read before. Confusion grew, then shock. Not only is the strange narrator the embodiment of Death, but he unceremoniously visits Liesel's younger brother. The character Death was desperately foreign to me; there had not even been a single warning in advance. As I journeyed farther into the story, the kind of story I was reading grew increasingly clear. There was never going to be a happy ending, and a lot of people were going to end up hurt or dead. This was the kind of book that I usually tried to avoid, a reminder of the hurt I had felt. Yet, with this one, it was different. It wasn't the bleak "reality" of the grimdark genre. Try as I might, I have never found another book like it, a story that dares to try carefully to balance between depicting life as a precious jewel and a dry leaf. The world of *The Book Thief* held both cruelty and hope in a way nearly identical to our own. Reading about both the good and the bad brought a kind of catharsis. This was a novel that truly contained the "mature themes" my teachers so often talked about.

As I reached the climax, Liesel's journey into the aftermath of the bombing, all I could feel was immense grief: grief for Liesel's parents, grief for Rudy, grief for Liesel herself, and in the background, grief for

my Great-Aunt Harriet. Never had I witnessed character death of such a massive scale, characters that had been well-developed and meant something to both the narrative and the reader—and so realistically portrayed. Liesel doesn't emotionally shut down for the rest of her life or swear revenge on the ones who wronged her. Despite her grief, she doesn't crumble. Despite all the death and tragedy that falls into Liesel's life, she has to stay alive. Your novel offered me the most meaningful interpretation of this complex and somewhat abstract idea that I have as of yet seen, far more relevant than the Hallmark card advice that so often follows a death. This is even more true in a literary landscape chock full of poorly written books that too often just use the idea of death as an empty threat to keep bored readers engaged.

What I mean to say from all this is thank you. Thank you for being one of the first to show me that I was not alone in my pain of grief. Thank you for Liesel's resiliency. Thank you for your book.

Sincerely,
Loralee DeYoung

Let's Talk About...

HISTORY AND GOVERNMENT

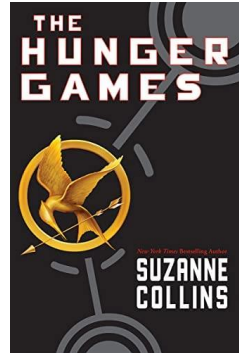
Power

Trustworthy Leaders

World History

Dear Suzanne Collins,

Before reading your book *The Hunger Games*, I had never realized how important having a good government is. I had always thought of governments as being the same and that the only differences would be the few laws that the leader would put in place. This was from living in the U.S. and not being very aware of other countries' government systems, but after reading your book, I saw how important government could be.



At first, I thought that the entire idea of the government in *The Hunger Games* was made up, but I seemed to notice more and more examples of governments. In school or in the news I would hear about places like Russia, China, or North Korea. These entire countries were ruled by only one person, and it always reminded me of President Snow.

As I finished the next two books, the importance of a good government became even clearer. For a government to be successful, it doesn't just need wealth, it needs people that are able to live a happy life in the country. I think this shows up in the series quite a bit. For example, the way the Districts are set up. They are only for producing resources, and in District 12 you can clearly see that people aren't happy.

Out of all the books, the most recent one: *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* was the most impactful to me. It showed how Panem had become the way it was, why President Snow acts the way he does, and how unfit President Snow is to be President. This applied in the way I saw countries with dictators. It shows that people can be put into power even if they could be harmful for the country.

This all really showed how downhill a thriving country can go because of bad leaders. Panem's people are mistreated, dying, and unhappy, and it was done purposefully by the government. A government that keeps its people happy, allows them opportunities and freedoms, and keeps them safe is a good government. It seems like a simple thing, but if a person is trying to do what's best for them rather than the country and they are put into a position of power, they could easily ruin a good

country and it's hard to fix a ruined country. A good example of a country that has been struggling with fixing itself is Russia. Russia has had several revolutions where the people have tried to make their country better, but they're still struggling with stopping corruption today.

In conclusion, your books have really put the importance of government into perspective for me. I now see why it's important to have trustworthy leaders and trustworthy systems, because if the wrong person gets in the wrong place, it could cause chaos.

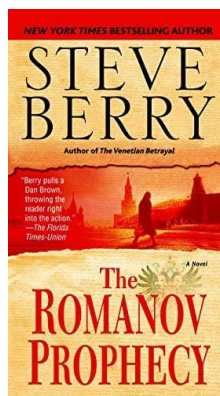
Thank you for creating your books. They have definitely changed my life for the better.

Sincerely,
Maxwell Hall

Dear Steve Berry,

In my mind I have thought that historical fiction books are very, very boring, but then I read your book *The Romanov Prophecy*. Your books have changed the way I think about reading.

I never wanted to read unless the reading was required. I especially didn't want to read historical fiction books like yours. I thought I would never like history or social studies classes, but now they are all my favorite subjects. My dad loved *The Romanov Prophecy* when he was younger and thought I would like it, so he really wanted me to read the book, but I refused. Then one day after I got home from school my dad left the book on my bed with a sticky note on it that said, "Just try it. I know you will love it." I debated reading it for a couple of hours, but eventually gave in because I didn't have anything else to do.



I had almost no knowledge of any Russian history and had no idea who Tsar Nicholas II or Rasputin were. All I knew was at one point the country of Russia was the largest member of the USSR and that they were communist. After I dove into *The Romanov Prophecy*, I kept wanting to learn more about Russia. I started learning the language, I have learned so much more about Russian culture, I have learned so much about pre-communist Russia and everywhere else in the world.

Now that I have started learning about all things history I have gotten better at history and social studies. I have been more open to other cultures and how they work. I started learning about cultures all around the world. My family has bought almost all your books. They are all so, so great and they all have helped me with school and other things outside of school. You have helped me learn so many things about all different subjects, cultures, and all sorts of things about the world. You are a great writer and I wish that I can eventually write stories as well as you can. Thank you for everything you have done for me and other readers.

Sincerely,
Braeden Farrell

Dear Jennifer Nielsen,

The Storm. The Storm was powerful. As I opened your book, the Storm flew out. I felt the Storm sweep through my heart. It inspired me. Changed me in a way I never thought a book could. It made me think about history in a different way. A heartwarming and powerful way. That Storm was Audra. Cossacks, books, religion, and words. How powerful could that be? Not that powerful, right?

Reading your book **Words on Fire** changed that thought. The small history of Lithuania became a large part of my reading time. The book showed me the power of words and language. Language shows your ancestry and words show your personality. After I closed the book, I felt more confident, like Audra was inside me the whole time. I just needed to hear her story. Reading this book changed my way of thinking. If there was something challenging, I thought of Audra. Her journey is thrilling. Her thoughts are strong. Even though Audra was unsure about her destiny, she kept going. There were roadblocks, but that didn't stop her. Audra knew that she was a rebel, but that didn't make her stop. Knowing about the wrongs of history makes you feel like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders to make things right.

During school, sometimes I get stressed. I'm not used to Middle School. We have at least two tests every week and tons of projects due. Reading **Words on Fire** helped me cope with these struggles. I realized that my struggles were nothing compared to Audra's struggles. Knowing about her determination pushed me to do better in school. I got better grades and felt more organized! After school, I feel like Audra at the end of the book. Happy and satisfied.

I followed the Storm everywhere. Through secret bunkers, bushes and even cold, damp coffins. It swept me away into the close calls, the battles, and the demons. The Storm had courage and determination. It didn't give up. Audra is a brave and strong young woman. The world needs more of these people. This book inspired me to be the real, living Audra. To be the best person I can be.

Sincerely,
Emmy Walborn

Third Place Winner – Level Three

Amelia Austin

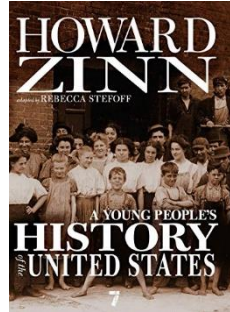
Oldenburg Academy, Oldenburg

Letter to Howard Zinn

Author of *A Young People's History of the United States*

Dear Howard Zinn,

Your book *A Young Peoples History of the United States* was never meant for me. You wrote the book for high school students forced to read it in their English or History classes. Instead, little second grade Amelia picked up the book from the shelves of a bookstore and was immediately enthralled. Your book was never meant for me, but it still changed my life. Your book influenced my view on life, my actions as a student, and my job choice in the future.



The first pages of your book are dedicated to exploring the arrival of Christopher Columbus - and they are shocking. As a kid, I was taught that Columbus discovered the New World. He established peaceful communication with the natives and began exploring. I never knew about the genocide of the native Arawaks or the burning of entire villages by Columbus's sailors or the land stolen by settlers who manipulated treaties. Your book brought to light issues that school-issued history textbooks gloss over.

I learned very early on that everyone has a different perspective on life. Their past experiences influence their thoughts today, and that has made me an empathetic and tolerant person. Thanks to you, I am able to sympathize with the plight of others. I'm able to understand that although we all have different beliefs, we are able to coexist.

You wrote your book from the point of view of the minority. You wrote about Native Americans during colonization, Germans and Irish during the Industrial Revolution, and Japanese Americans during World War II. As a kid who had only ever read school-issued history books, the idea that history could be explored from different perspectives was novel. My textbooks had always explored history from a patriotic perspective. I learned that America always comes out on top and that it was a fair and equal country. My textbooks told me that historical issues and

conflicts were in the past, and America had resolved the issues. Your book, by tying different conflicts together and exposing the treatment of minorities, showed that issues that happened hundreds of years ago still affect the government today. Thanks to your book, I understood the civil rights movement is still happening today. It helped me connect issues in the past to struggles people face today. It completely changed the way I view the world.

Your book influenced my actions as a student. Through ***A Young Peoples History of the United States***, I discovered my love for learning. I set out to read everything I could and acquire all the knowledge. I read everything: books in the school library, my dad's newspaper, and the back of the cereal box at breakfast. I found that if I discovered a subject I was passionate about, I could explore the topic for days on end without growing bored. My passion for learning helped me excel as a student, and I owe that to you.

However, your book hasn't just influenced my past actions. It affects my future, too. Thanks to you, I became passionate about the plight of immigrants in the United States. Immigrants have repeatedly become scapegoats in America. Benjamin Franklin wanted to stop German and Irish people from entering this country. Japanese Americans were placed in concentration camps. Today, the influx of Mexican immigrants has caused divisions in the capitol and throughout the whole country. I want to become an immigration lawyer in college so I can stop history from repeating itself with the border crisis.

Howard Zinn, your book has made me the person I am today. Although I will never get to thank you in this life, your legacy lives on in each and every one of the students you inspired and changed.

With thanks,
Amelia Austin

Honorable Mention – Level Two

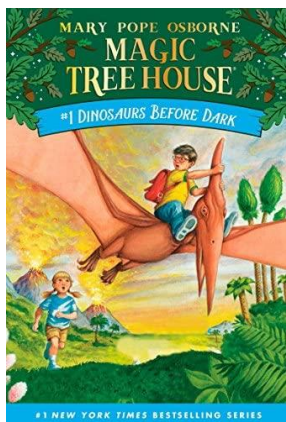
Maximo Lopez-Wong

Central Middle School, Columbus

Letter to Mary Pope Osborn / Author of *Dinosaurs Before Dark*

Dear Mary Pope Osborne,

The first time I listened to the adventures of Jack, Annie, and their magic treehouse, I was in kindergarten. Before listening to the book, I had no interest in history at all. My teacher read *Dinosaurs Before Dark* to my class. For many, it was the first chapter book they had ever listened to or read. Although it was my first time listening to a chapter book or any type of literature more than twenty pages, I loved the story.



I come from a Hispanic family. Though I was born in the U.S., Spanish was still my first language. I moved to Indiana when I was about four years old. At first, I struggled with school since I was still learning lots of English. However, after a few years, I started to improve greatly. By the time I started kindergarten, I would understand most of what the teacher was saying. Once she started reading, I began to improve even more. While she was reading, I learned many new words, how to pronounce words, and I even started to learn how to find the definition of a word by just using the context of the text. Though I started to read English in first grade, your books did help me place the fundamentals in my brain of how to read and write.

One of the things that appealed to me was the book *Dinosaurs Before Dark*. The concept of going back in time to learn about the world at the time fascinated me. Your book made me realize that I love mysterious and fanciful plots that include futuristic ideas such as time travel. Your books introduced me to the sci-fi genre of stories which is my favorite genre today. I have even made sci-fi stories of my own for school assignments and projects. Jack and Annie also go around the world in their adventures with the magic treehouse. They have gone to Japan, France, and even the South Pole. After I learned how to read, I began dreaming about going to those places and making adventures of my own. Your book made me realize that I love traveling, exploring new places, and going to countries I have never been to.

My kindergarten teacher had many toys and games in her room. Surprisingly, lots of them were geography related. My teacher read many books of your ***Magic Treehouse*** series, and each time Jack and Annie went to a new country or someplace I didn't know about, I would try to learn about it. I began to roll in this research snowball of countries, flags, and even some of their capitals. Reading your books after kindergarten gave me the pleasure of learning more about countries, flags, and geography in general. Your book introduced me to geography, one of my favorite subjects to this day. After my year in kindergarten, my teacher even gave me many of the geography-related things in her classroom. Your book also introduced me to history, another of my favorite subjects. I loved learning about the past and how it affected the present. Learning about our past mistakes is how we can build our future. Jack and Annie help the reader learn about the past and the world.

Thank you for helping me find some of my passions such as history and geography, and for helping me read and write in a new language.

Sincerely,
Maximo Lopez-Wong

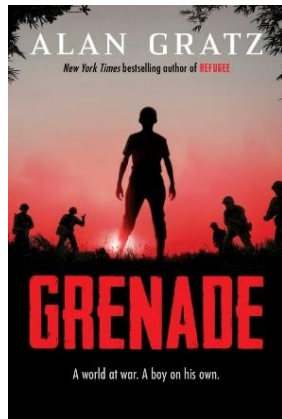
First Place Winner – Level One

Callum Green

New Palestine Intermediate, New Palestine
Letter to Alan Gratz / Author of *Grenade*

Dear Alan Gratz,

I really should blame this whole thing on my great-grandfather. I mean, the reason I got interested in WWII was to know more about his past. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge and was captured. He was a POW from about Christmas to Easter in 1944 -1945. He is still alive today, at 98 years old. I would always listen to his stories and not fully understand them until one day I decided I would learn about this major conflict. From the first book I read about the subject I was fascinated. As I started to dig deeper, I looked at his war stories differently, even imagining what it must have been like to live through such a significant event in history.



Due to my interest in the topic, I immediately got hooked on your writing. Your style of writing and the perspectives makes me feel like I am actually in the setting of your books. For example, in *Allies*, when Dee watches The Achilles go up in smoke, I swear I could feel the heat from the burning Sherman. After that I sought to quench my thirst for your books.

When I read *Grenade* though, it changed my point of view of the war in the Pacific. When I picked it up, because I had read a lot about the topic, I thought I knew what I was expecting—valiant heroes in green, rifles in hand determined to protect us from some evil monsters that needed to be stopped, all taking place somewhere foreign. But when I read *Grenade*, I realized what I'd thought was wrong. Sure, it had the foreign lands and the determination, but there was something else. A boy, one whom I could connect with.

I understand why Hideki was given the grenades. I understand why he chose to do the things he did on that day. The reason is fear. The Imperial Japanese Army was afraid the Americans would win, so they gave the Blood and Iron Student Corps the grenades. Hideki chose to drop that grenade out of fear of the American. That was why Ray fired

at Hideki in the first place; it was because he was afraid of this Okinawan boy. They both made bad decisions because they also each didn't understand who the other person really was. I can connect to this. Everyone can. We all make rash and consequential decisions when we are scared. I have been afraid when I was unsure about something as well. It has led to me making instantaneous decisions, more of them bad than good.

Seeing this fear from the so-called "enemy" made me realize that we are all the same, no matter race, ethnicity or even religion. Just because you are different or do something bad doesn't make you the enemy. I think Hideki realized this too, after he killed Ray. It's why he feels remorse after he uses the grenade. I thank you for writing this book, as it changed my view greatly. I hope you continue to write more books to help change the views of people like me. It will make the world a kinder and more understanding place.

Sincerely,
Callum Green

Let's Talk About...

BOOK BANNING

The Right to Read

Censorship

Fahrenheit 451
by Ray Bradbury

Eli Schultz

New Palestine Intermediate School, New Palestine
Letter to Ray Bradbury / Author of *Fahrenheit 451*

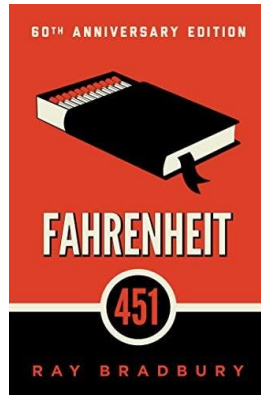
Dear Ray Bradbury,

I would like to show gratitude to you for writing such a thought-provoking book, *Fahrenheit 451*. Your story taught me that technology can be good, but it can also be used as a distraction from the truth. Books are a major part of our culture, and sometimes we need to stop rushing around.

In your story, a fireman by the name of Guy Montag lives in a world where books are illegal. It is Montag's job to make sure of that by burning the books and the homes the books were in. However, Montag's point of view is changed by a young woman named Clarise and a professor named Faber which causes him to become a rebel, lose his wife, have his home destroyed, and become a fugitive.

The world Guy Montag lives in is terrible. People are always dying because they feel like they are missing something in life. Mildred, Montag's wife, overdosed on sleeping pills one night because she was overwhelmed with all the bad things that go on in her world. I've noticed this in my world too, but with another object. Technology has been used to distract people from the terrible things going on during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they also distract themselves from the truth which people must always face, no matter how bad.

In your story no one has any culture. This is because they do not have books to give them culture. People are always killing each other, and the murderer simply does not care. This is because they have no culture surrounding the idea of death. After all, they don't have books and the television is filtered by the government who tries to keep their citizens brainwashed with no emotion. When they vote, they do it based on looks, not opinion. They don't have books that give options of opinion to the people of this fictional world. As technology is on the rise in my world, people have abandoned reading books and have been using new technology more. The fact that books are being banned doesn't help either. The book I am writing to you about has been banned in several libraries across our nation for being "too violent." We need to



savor the value of books, or we will end up like Montag's world and become cultureless.

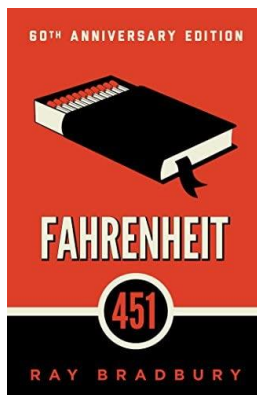
Your story features a world where everyone is only focused on where they are going. No one is focused on where they are. People have cars that can travel 150 miles per hour. They never slow down to look at the mountains or rivers they drive by. When Montag is walking home from work, Clarise tells him to look up at the moon. Montag admits he had looked at the moon before but never focused on it and noticed its beauty. I have noticed this in myself. Sometimes I will be in the car and will only be focused on what I'm going to do when I get to the place I'm going. I don't take the time to look at the beautiful countryside out my window. This book showed me that sometimes I should "look up at the moon" and notice the beautiful world around me.

Your story taught me that technology can be a distraction from the truth, and we must always know the truth. Also, books are culture, and we should savor our culture. Finally, sometimes we need to stop rushing and we should notice the beautiful world around us.

Thank you,
Eli Schultz

Dear Ray Bradbury,

Fahrenheit 451 changed the way I see and value books, writing, and learning. It is very important to have your own views and not let the government control you. Having the ability to think for yourself and view things in different ways than others is important. You might not always get along with someone because of different views, but letting others control you with their beliefs isn't okay, and it will never be okay. Currently my school is being forced to take books out of the school library because these books have topics that some parents don't want their children exposed to. Then other parents are fighting back and saying they can't have any books about Christianity in the library. Something that I took away from your book was that the process of thinking is important, and some people lack the ability to think for themselves.



Another thing I realized is that I never want to be like Mildred: selfish, boring, obsessed with electronics, ignoring the real world, and too blind to see her own stupidity. Being like everyone else is boring. She pretends everything is okay and denies that something is wrong. I want to be more like Montag, seeing what is actually happening and being brave enough to take charge and help make everything better in the world. I want to see the world around me and be the change the world needs. I want to be grateful for the things I have and the things around me. I want to be different from everyone else because I don't want to be what everyone else wants. I want to be my own person. I don't want my house to be burned into ashes because I want to have knowledge and read a book and slow down and have a conversation with my family. I want to be able to value something and not just live my life like a robot.

Having no control over who you are leads to societies like the one Montag lives in: no choices, no time, no friends, no books, and brainwashed. Living under the constantly watchful eye of the government is not the way humans should have to live. The value of books is important, and understanding is even more important. Books

are a part of my life and being able to understand books and what is going on is very important to me. Growing up in a household with not one but two parents who are English teachers, it was important I understood books. Then as I got older books became more important to me. Books are a part of my everyday life whether I am reading for English class or if I'm writing a part of my own books. Books are a part of thinking and being yourself. Books are important and they always will be. No one should ever be able to take that right away from us.

Sincerely,
Jyllian Keener

Let's Talk About...

WOMEN'S STUDIES

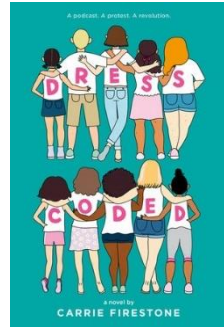
Dress Codes

Inspirational Women

Standing Up for Yourself

Dear Carrie Firestone,

Middle school is rough. No matter who you are or what you do, it is always going to be confusing. During these years, kids like me are developing and growing mentally, emotionally, and physically. It is hard for young kids to find their path so quickly. Your book, *Dress Coded*, perfectly captures what it is like to be a young teenage girl like Molly, and me.



Your book helped me understand that biased dress codes are everywhere, and isn't a simple issue, but a big one. Not only does your book spread awareness, but it empowers young girls to speak up for themselves and others. Girls might finally have the chance to realize that they are worth more than their bodies and clothes, and they have more than a heart to offer, but power and intelligence. We should be able to stay comfortable in our bodies, without validation from anyone else.

Your book helped me to be brave enough to stand up for myself in times I felt degraded. Especially, and ironically, in times of any boy presence. I feel strongly knowing that girls like Molly are right by my side to let me know how worthy I am. I am able to use my now confident voice to speak up for girls who don't have one yet. I spread awareness throughout my school and city, and help others find their power within themselves.

So, when I get out of bed in the morning, I no longer dress to please anyone or anything. I wear what I am comfortable, confident, and free in. Nothing can define me, other than myself, my goals, my work ethic, and my personality. I refuse to stress over my body, or outfits at thirteen years old. Because I want good grades, I want to be an athlete, and I want to put my goals first. And because, "Middle school is hard enough." I want to thank you, Carrie Firestone, for helping me understand that my body is not a distraction, and not something I should feel guilty about.

Sincerely,
Ava Wilson

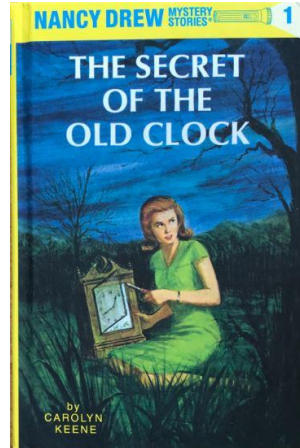
Jessica Bergfors

Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to Carolyn Keene/ Author of *The Nancy Drew Series*

Dear Carolyn Keene,

My small feet shuffle through the library, “American Girl!” magazines in one hand, and the other empty, looking for books to grab. “Go find a new book to read for this week!” calls my mom. My feet know exactly where to take me, the mystery section. Rows of books face me and I’m only looking for one author, one book series. Searching for mystery’s ‘It girl,’ I skim the rows and rows of books, looking at the all too familiar book covers. Nope, read that one already. Already read that one too. I decided on *The Hidden Staircase* and *Without a Trace* this time. My mom looked at me as I approached her, a smile on my face. “Nancy Drew? Again?” She lightly laughed. I just smiled in return.



Growing up, *Nancy Drew* was one of my favorite series. There are over 50 original *Nancy Drew* books, and even more revisions or versions of the books, and I’m pretty sure I’ve read and reread all of them. I remember being so upset after finishing all the *Nancy Drew* books that my library had. I loved all the original books and loved the newer books like *Lights, Camera... and Action!* Nancy was a young girl who was solving mysteries, helping her town, helping her friends and family, going on adventures, and so much more. Ten-year-old me aspired to be like Nancy. She was fierce and courageous. She was wise and witty. She was fashionable and confident. Who doesn’t want to look good and solve crimes? Nancy sought justice and solved mysteries that no one else could solve. Nancy thought of others, not just herself. She was what I wanted to grow up to be like.

In a sense, these books raised me. Reading these books at such a young age inspired me to be more confident, adventurous, and wise. I wanted to be persistent, strong headed, and independent like Nancy. In the books, she was only a couple years older than me, and I felt like I could relate to her in a way. She had a single parent, just like my mom, and because of this I felt as if I had a friend who understood me. She

was also still young, and naive at times, which made her even more relatable to my ten-year-old self.

These books took me to a different world. They were an escape from reality, as cheesy as that sounds. Reading whatever **Nancy Drew** book I chose from the library in the backseat of the car while my mom drove to our family vacation destination, I was transported into the mystery, cliff-hanger, adventurous world. The world where I wasn't thinking about family drama, or middle school drama, or any other problems.

So, thank you Carolyn Keene. Thank you for creating a female hero to inspire me to be a strong woman, and for raising me on **Nancy Drew** mysteries.

Sincerely,
Jessica Bergfors

Rhea Singh
Daniel Wertz Elementary, Evansville
Letter to James Trefil
Author of *Space Atlas: Mapping the Universe and Beyond*

Dear Dr. Trefil,

Space Atlas: Mapping the Universe and Beyond has been a favorite book on my bookshelf for a long time. I've always loved space, but it was this book that introduced me to my obsession with astrophysics. In fact, I'm looking forward to pursuing a career in astrophysics.

I enjoyed reading and watching videos about space from the moment I knew what space was, and I was very interested in the laws of the universe after watching *The Big Bang Theory* episode on string theory. But it was your book that made me see how I could take my passion and turn it into a profession.

My mom took me to the Red Bank Road Public Library, the first library I had ever been to. I saw a book about women in the field of science. In 2019 my family and I just moved halfway across the globe from Saudi Arabia to the United States. Since living in Saudi Arabia for seven years, it never really dawned on me that I, being female, could have a career in science. You see, in Saudi Arabia, women had only two professions; you could either be in the medical field or you could be in teaching. With my love of science, I thought I would be restricted to the medical profession only, since being a teacher would not suit me.

In fourth grade, I got two gift cards for the bookstore Barnes and Nobles. I was very excited to buy a book about space. I bought ***Space Atlas*** and read the section on Jocelyn Bell Burnell, who discovered neutron stars. After reading that, I realized I can be a scientist. I can be an astrophysicist. I can discover new galaxies. I can go to space. After that, it finally sunk in that I could have a future in whatever career I would like to pursue. Thank you for being my inspiration and giving me a better understanding about astrophysics through your book. I loved learning how stars form and go supernova, and how black holes and neutron stars form. I would like to study the Higgs field, stars, quasars, neutron stars, black holes, and the multiverse. I think the chapter on string theory and the multiverse is explained better than any other book I have read on that specific topic. Your book has influenced me more than any other and I'm extremely grateful for that.

Sincerely,
Rhea Singh

Dear John Feinstein,

I went to school dressed in sweatpants and a sweatshirt just waiting for recess. School has always been very important to me, and I loved my teachers, but nothing could compare to those thirty minutes a day where I could show my true self. Just like Andi in the book **Benchwarmers**, I loved soccer, but there were no other girls with the same passion for it as me, not even my twin. I wasn't afraid of boys. I wouldn't let silly comments get to me. I knew one thing. I deserved to play soccer at recess, whether it was with all boys or not. Eventually, the boys let me join them and play soccer at recess. I proved myself, but I remember those first days when I had to beg for them to pass me the ball. I slowly began showing my true self. I remember at one point almost all the boys were scared of me because I wouldn't hold back my aggression.

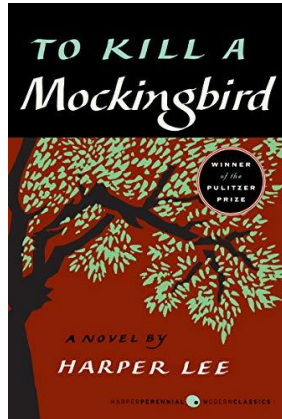
This wasn't just some silly game at recess, it was my passion. Not being able to do what I loved made me mad. Just like Andi had to prove herself and push past all those people that thought negatively about her playing with the boys, so did I. Since reading **Benchwarmers**, I have noticed more of this in the world and continue to hear about others in this situation. Now I look at it with fresh eyes. I see a young girl just trying to do what she wants to do in sports and not letting boys or anyone else hold her back. I have also seen a boy not being able to play what the girls are playing. My outlook on the topic has broadened since reading the book and now I don't view it as an act of social outcast but as an act of rewriting the social rules.

Looking back 100 years, girls didn't have a voice, choice, or even really a place on the social scale. They were just here, not allowed to do anything. As we continue to change, some very traditional people won't agree with these changes. Coach J. was Andi's problem. He didn't let her play, and he did everything to stop her even if it meant hurting the team. Unlike Andi, I never had a Coach J. I had a teacher who encouraged me. She would tell me to keep playing soccer and that playing with the boys would only make me a better player. Andi's version of the hate was definitely worse than what I have experienced. As we look to the future our focus should not be on hate, but on building each other up and encouraging us all to be our true self.

Most gratefully,
Ellie Leonard

Dear Harper Lee,

I was first introduced to *To Kill a Mockingbird* in class as a reading requirement. However, unlike most people in my class who felt that reading the book was a burden, I found myself wanting to keep turning the pages. This was purely due to how you captured a major problem in the 1930s and displayed it through the minds of young children. Putting the narration in the point of view of a young girl named Scout really opened my eyes to how differently people perceive the world, and how opinions can drastically vary.



Through Scout's telling, I related and connected to how unfairly she was treated because of her gender. Like Scout, I too have experienced times where being a girl felt like you were being looked down upon or was not good enough. Whenever Scout was angry, her immediate reaction was to fight whoever made her mad. In this way, Scout made me realize that I shouldn't have to deal with things that are unjust. Even though being physical is not the best solution, she showed the other person who made her mad how it made her feel and how she will not tolerate people offending her. Scout taught me to start standing up for myself and to stop acting like a cowardly lion. Through Scout's fiery personality, which is unlike my more reserved ways, I have now made a goal for myself to confront people when I do not agree with them.

While reading this book, I had many emotions based on different scenarios that were presented. At times I felt frustration and anger because of the unfair treatment of black people just because of their race. I also felt shocked when a trial case had an unfair outcome based on the simple fact that the jury was clouded by their own personal prejudiced views. When the children were playing carefree on their street, I felt nostalgia and wished that life would remain as simple as that. However, the main emotion I was experiencing was empathy. I empathized with the man who was wrongly convicted and his wife who knew it was a losing battle from the start. I empathized with Scout's father who was an older man trying to raise his two kids without a wife.

I empathized with the black people who lived in a prejudiced place and received repercussions just because of their race.

You instilled many emotions in this book, and it is through these emotions that in the words of Atticus, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb in his skin and walk around in it.” Just like Atticus, I too was able to put myself in the positions of other characters. I experienced prevalent issues and the perspectives of those whom different matters concerned. Unlike some books that only dip into the surface of important matters, this book allowed me to dive deep and let me formulate my own opinions. Unsurprisingly, this book changed my perspectives on racism, inequality, the impact words can have, and innocence. This book changed my perspective about the world by leaving me to question why this world is such a wretched place. On the other hand, it also gave me hope that there are good people who are willing to fight for what is right. I feel that everyone should be enlightened and exposed to subjects deemed “delicate” because we cannot be blinded by this fake conception that this world is perfect. By reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I now realize this. In a perfectly crafted way, you put exposure to things that are rarely talked about to allow readers to better understand the topics that should be concerning to everyone.

I am left to ponder if things on the surface are really what they seem, or is there more depth to things than I have realized?

Thank you for allowing me to question and doubt my own understanding to better myself.

Audrey Weaver

Let's Talk About...

RACISM

Empathy

Gentrification

White Privilege

Luís Rivera
St. John the Baptist School, Fort Wayne
Letter to Alan Gratz / Author of **Code of Honor**

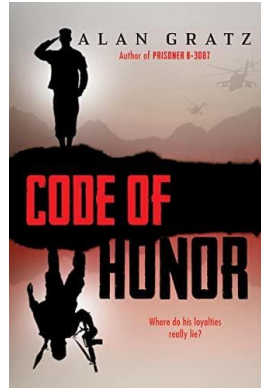
Dear Alan Gratz,

I have read many of your books including **Code of Honor**, *Project 1065*, and *Allies*, and I have really enjoyed all of them. Out of all your books, my favorite is **Code of Honor**. This book has really changed the way I look at other people. This book has taught me that I should always get to know someone before I judge them. I have also learned more about how you should never judge someone based on their looks or race.

In your book, Kamran and his brother Darius are both seen as terrorists since Darius has been recorded while doing some bad things against the United States while he was being forced. After that, Kamran is looked at as a terrorist by everyone since he was the brother of Darius. Kamran does not like everyone thinking that he is a terrorist, and this part of the book taught me more about how I shouldn't judge others because if I was in Kamran's place, I wouldn't like for others to assume that I was a terrorist either.

In conclusion, your book has really taught me that I shouldn't judge others without getting to know them.

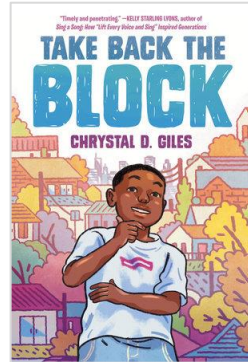
Sincerely,
Luís Rivera



Tyson Pompy
Allisonville Elementary, Indianapolis
Letter to Chrystal D. Giles / Author of *Take Back the Block*

Dear Chrystal D. Giles,

Sorry to waste your time but I wanted to say thank you. Thank you for making a good book like *Take Back the Block*. I like the part that says, “no matter what you do, let people hear your voice.” I thought that was a magical thing to say. Reading this book made a bond between me and my neighborhood. I am glad that you are the author of many things. In my opinion I think that you deserve to be rich and famous, either now or in the future.



I notice that Mia has white privilege. I also notice that racism comes into play a lot. I love the bond between Wes and Kira. I was really mad that Mia did not want to help. I was sad that Brent had to move. I think the cop is prejudiced!

Once I had to sell my house to people and I was really mad. I learned that sometimes you have to do something for people in need even if it hurts. I put myself in Wes's shoes and I would be depressed about selling my home. I connect with Wes because we are both black. We are both the only child.

I thought that gentrification was not a big deal. The more I learned about it from this book, I learned it was not a big deal, it is a HUGE deal! If I did not know about it, I would be helping gentrification and hurting lives. Gentrification is a reason that people are dying. We need to help not hurt.

Sincerely,
Tyson Pompy

Kaelyn Menc

Mary E. Castle Elementary School, Indianapolis

Letter to Amanda Gorman / Author of the poem **“The Hill We Climb”**

Dear Amanda Gorman,

I really enjoyed listening to your poem **“The Hill We Climb.”** I feel it’s about the challenges we overcome and the things that are happening in the world that we can fight. I really love this because it has all these challenges and dreams. I think this poem shows the real challenges and not the small ones, the big ones. I feel like this also talks about how much this community has grown and all the things that we’ve gone through. I think this is the most meaningful poem that I have ever read, and I think that this poem is also a very inspirational poem.

I really loved listening to this poem. When my class heard it, I had so many ideas and throughout the rest of the day I was just thinking of it and how I can relate to it. I remember that when I came home, I told my mom and dad about it, and I felt like they didn’t understand it as much as I understood what you were talking about. I feel like no one gets me except for my family and my close friends, but when I read your poem, I felt like it made me open up. I felt like a different person after I read your poem. I think that this part, “Somehow we’ve weathered and witnessed a nation that isn’t broken, but simply unfinished…” really speaks to me, and I think it’s about the nation and how we’ve grown. Another part of the poem that gets me thinking is, “We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.” I feel like this is about society and how we don’t help each other but we should.

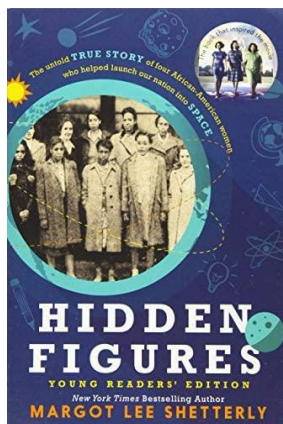
I think this poem is about our nation that we need to help. I think it is also about the challenges that we must go through so that we can climb the hill. Even with all the challenges there are some we might want to see, to be there and be proud that our nation got through that difficult time and say we were there for that. This is a poem about how we can change our nation and make it a better place for the next generation.

I think you wrote this poem at the right time because everything that was going on like COVID and racism. It gave me hope that if we all work together then we can stop it all. Even when you’re young like me you can still try to change it and help it. I think that this gave almost everyone hope because you face challenges and you’re not alone. We have each other. Thank you so much for writing this.

Sincerely,
Kaelyn Menc

Dear Margot Shetterly,

As a lover of space, I was very interested to read your book *Hidden Figures* to expand my knowledge of our space race history. I would like to thank you for changing my life. You changed my life because you helped me understand that people are often overlooked because of their race and sex as well as the complexities of the mathematical requirements needed to ensure success at Langley. When I began to read *Hidden Figures*, I wondered why I had never heard of the four women mentioned in the story. As the story continued, I realized that they were left out of history because of their race and sex. I was also amazed at the complexity of the math equations these women performed that you presented in the book, which was a challenge for me to comprehend.



When you described that Dorothy was working in the camp laundry, making more than a black high school teacher, I was shocked that black workers and teachers were so underpaid. I was perplexed why such a brilliant mathematician like Dorothy worked in a camp laundry. The ladies had many challenges in the workplace. For example, when Mary from the West Computers traveled over to the East Computers to work and asked where the bathroom was, the white workers responded by giggling and saying that they did not know where her bathroom was. There was also a sign in the cafeteria for “Colored Computers” that designated where the black employees could eat. Not only at work, but the women also experienced racism in town since Virginia did not follow Brown vs. Board of Education so the schools were still segregated. There were very few white people that would socialize with the Black Computers because of racial tensions.

While reading *Hidden Figures*, I imagined that I was a black female in that generation facing extreme sexism and racism, and I took it personally. I believe the West Computers were not given the appropriate respect and credit for our success in the war and the space race. I always hear about Buzz Aldrin, Neil Armstrong, and Michael

Collins, but I never hear about the black women and others involved at Langley who were responsible for the safe landing on the moon. I feel ashamed for overlooking them in the history of the space race. I never knew about the story of these incredible women because their stories are often overlooked by teachers when talking about the space race. When videos or channels talk about the space race, they almost never mention the West Computers who were behind it all as referenced by ***Hidden Figures***.

My English Language Arts class has been reading several books about racism which has helped to broaden my knowledge about racism and how it continues to be prevalent today. I have never personally experienced racism or sexism in my life, but as an avid reader, I attempt to put myself in the character's position to fully understand their experiences. After reading the stories you told, I have a new appreciation for how black lives have been affected by racism in this country. I am disgusted that people in our human race would openly discriminate against people because of the color of their skin. I honestly believe all students should read books about racism so that our generation can solve this systemic problem in our country.

Thank you for writing this book to help me understand more about racism and how knowledge is not limited to skin color.

Sincerely,
Nash Conen

Honorable Mention – Level Three

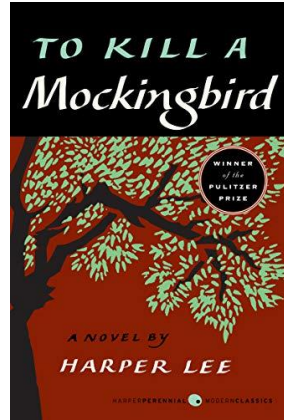
Oliver Postma

Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to Harper Lee / Author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Dear Harper Lee,

During my childhood leading up to my time spent in the sixth grade, I must admit that I had a very sheltered view of the world. The young me was unable to understand the plight of other people in the world who were not born into the same circumstances that I had been. I was, and still am, a white boy living in a small community filled mostly with other white boys. Obviously, it wasn't a completely homogenous society, but those that I chose to associate with were always friendly and respectful towards those who were not the same as we were, and as such I did not yet realize that not everyone in the world was the same.



For this reason, reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* when I was approximately twelve years old was akin to a slap on the face of the perfection that I had always perceived the world to hold. Of course, I had learned of the existence of slavery in my various history classes and had heard discussions of racism, but it had always seemed unrealistic in a way. I had never encountered any such phenomena in my life, at least not that I remembered, and, as such, I never found myself capable of truly understanding that real people, people who were just as human as I was, were in such a way tortured and discriminated against.

In this way, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was eye-opening. And, frankly, I'm sure it was eye-opening for many other children just like me for one simple reason: it never talked down to its readers. Despite being a book that was obviously intended for a younger audience, it treated that audience with respect. The story that you tell is a serious one which does not hold back in any aspect, even when the plot covers rape, lynching, and systemic racism. It assumes that readers will be able to understand these topics, and therefore includes them within the plot to strengthen the realism as well as horror of its story.

By making this assumption, you did something important: you introduced your readers to the horrors of racism in a way that they could finally understand. Rather than discussing it as long-forgotten history, you displayed racism as a reality, a way of life that minorities had to face every day, and in doing so you allowed your readers to feel a genuine connection to the topic. You, in the best way possible, horrified them. You presented them with the brutal reality of racial discrimination, a problem just as real now as it was back then, albeit in a less blatant way, and you shocked readers with a graphic depiction of its consequences.

To put it simply, your book fundamentally changed the way in which I empathized with those around me. It made me realize that others around me were often faced with problems that I had previously never even considered. And, as a result, it instilled in me the healthy mindset of assuming that those around me are faced with either just as much hardship or, in many cases, much more hardship than I am, whether it be racism or something else entirely. Your book, to summarize, made me a better and more empathetic person.

Sincerely,
Oliver Postma

Third Place Winner – Level One

Izzy Donato

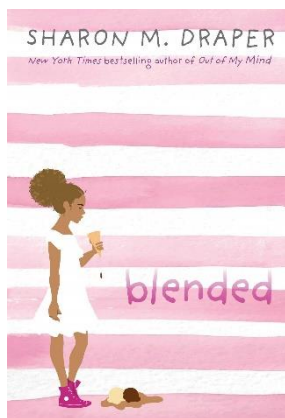
Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Sharon Draper / Author of *Blended*

Dear Sharon Draper,

I recently read your book *Blended* and it changed me. I had to choose a book to read for my book club novel and I was unsure what to pick until my teacher played trailers for the book options. When I saw the trailer for *Blended*, I knew it was the book for me.

In the book where you wrote, “I wonder if other people are watching us, like we’re some kind of reality TV show. The caption would read: Chocolate family meets vanilla family in the artificial reality that is a mall. Caramel daughter caught helplessly between the two.” I pictured in my head a ping pong ball going back-and-forth, and just as the ping pong ball (Isabella) got settled in on one side it had to go back to the other side (parent).



When I got to the part where the noose was in Imani’s locker, I never really knew what a noose was or how much it can hurt people. I asked my parents what a noose was and why it was such a bad thing. They explained saying that it was something where white people formed a club and hung black people with thick ropes and killed them. Hearing that people did something like this made me hurt inside. I could only imagine how awful it must be for Imani who is just an eleven-year-old girl to have that put in her locker.

Before reading this book, I didn’t really think or understand how hard it is for people who have a different skin color. When I got to the part where Isabella was shot, I felt upset, mad, sad, and hurt. As an 11-year-old white girl I put myself in her shoes. With all these cops surrounding me, I would feel safe, and I wouldn’t expect to get hurt. But you showed me that an 11-year-old black girl being surrounded by a bunch of cops would feel scared and worried that she might get arrested or hurt or shot because of her skin color and that’s because some cops are racist.

Blended changed the way I look at people and the world. Isabella inspired me to stand up for myself and others. Your book also inspired me to not look at people from the outside (looks, skin color, etc.) but instead to look at them from the inside (personality, character, how they treat others). It also helped me with empathy by putting myself in her shoes and seeing how different the situations would be for me compared to what it is like for her.

Thank you for opening my eyes and showing me a new perspective.

Yours respectfully,
Izzy Donato

Let's Talk About...

POLICE VIOLENCE

Black Lives Matter

***The Hate U Give*
by Angie Thomas**

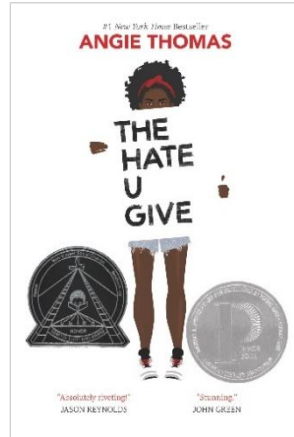
Dear Angie Thomas,

Over the last year, I have read three of your novels: *The Hate U Give*, *On the Come Up*, and, most recently, *Concrete Rose*. With tremendous confidence, I can say that your books have had an amazingly positive impact on my life and the way I think about modern-day issues.

Before I go on any further, I would like you to know that I come from a white, suburban, middle-class, and progressive family. I was lucky enough to be exposed to different cultures when I lived in the suburbs of Chicago for the first 9 years of my life. That being said, moving to

Indiana has been a completely different realm of opinions and experiences. This can be easily supported with US census data showing that Valparaiso, Indiana is 90.4% white and only 3.3% Black or African American as opposed to my old town which was 68.7% white and 18.2% Black or African American. Given the fact that every one of the above stories is written from the perspective of a black teenager, these viewpoints and experiences are far different than what I am used to in books and around me, offering a great gateway to stand in the protagonists' shoes.

One of the biggest impacts of your novels is the way they illustrate what black teenagers go through so that readers of different backgrounds like me can understand and enjoy them as a result of the first-person narration. For instance, I have been lucky enough to not have to worry about bills and other household necessities, while both Maverick and particularly Bri have to worry about these things day in and day out. By including this conflict in the story, my perspective on a lot of things I considered "normal" or "standard" changed with this new perspective of them not being included in everyone's lives. That being said, these novels have also opened my eyes to larger issues of class disparities in America.



Truthfully, reading these books has been an amazing and humbling experience. Additionally, all of these novels also talk about racism, prejudice, and various other racial discrepancies. For instance, racism and prejudice is a central idea in ***The Hate U Give*** when Starr's best friend, Kahlil, is wrongfully shot and killed by a white police officer that had been harassing him. It is worth mentioning that I read this novel shortly after George Floyd was murdered at the hands of a white police officer over an alleged counterfeit \$20 bill. Although Mr. Floyd's death was not caused by a gun like Kahlil's, both stories are prime examples of racism and prejudice in US policing.

Lastly, one topic that deeply enlightened me was gun violence and drug trafficking. In each of the stories, the protagonist is deeply affected by these two problems. For example, in *Concrete Rose*, Dre, Maverick's cousin, is fatally shot over an alleged bad relationship with a rival gang. This plot twist was utterly shocking and helped me empathize with those who have lost a loved one to gun violence by opening my eyes to how impactful the tragedy was for Maverick and how much Dre meant to Maverick through Dre's character development in the story. Further, in *On the Come Up*, Bri's father was killed by a rival gang when she was young, sending her family into vicious turmoil and causing a lot of trauma for her.

With that being said, I sincerely thank you for writing these novels and continuing to write in this style as it has exponentially helped me develop a better understanding of different people and their perspectives as well as given me an amazing story to read.

Sincerely,
William Orban

Dear Angie Thomas,

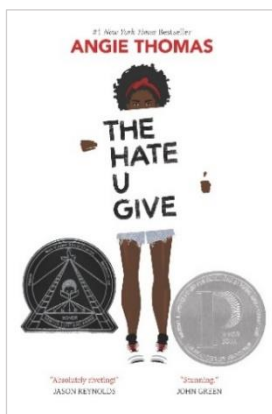
Thank you for writing *The Hate U Give*. This book has changed my life dramatically. I can't believe how a book could change the way I see myself and the way I see the world. Your book has given me the power to be proud of my skin color and not be afraid to point it out.

In your book, Starr Carter, an African American girl, is living in Garden Heights and goes to an all white prep school. Starr separates her personalities when in her neighborhood and at her school. Starr goes to a party and ends up meeting one of her old time friends, Khalil. An

argument goes down and someone pulls out a gun and starts shooting. Starr and Khalil run off to Khalil's car. Khalil offers to take Starr home. I relate to these parts the most by Starr going to an all white prep school and feeling like she doesn't fit in. When Starr is having to change the way she acts at school and at home, I feel equivalent and can relate. It feels nice to know that someone is going through the same things I am.

When Starr and Khalil are on their way home, Khalil brings up Tupac Shakur's quote/idea, "T.H.U.G L.I.F.E." This stands for, "The Hate You Give Little Infants F---s Everybody." I agree with this a lot because you never know what someone went through during their childhood, and this could affect them growing up in life. If you grew up in a broken home, it could affect the way you see other people, yourself, and the world around you. On their way home they get stopped by a white police officer. He asks for Khalil's driver license and registration. Khalil asks why they got pulled over. Khalil was asking a civilized question so there was no reason for the officer to continuously hold his gun while talking to them and while looking up Khalil's information.

One Fifteen, the white officer, got tired of all the questions and told Khalil to get out of the car. Khalil got out of the car and the officer went



back to his car to finish looking up Khalil's information. Khalil saw that Starr was worried and scared so he checked up on her. The officer saw this and shot Khalil. This hurts me deeply. The fact that the officer almost shot Starr as well for trying to save Khalil is just plain wrong. I love this part because it brings awareness to real world issues that need to be fixed. If Khalil was white, would this have been the same outcome? This book is my favorite book of all time. It explains a lot of what I'm feeling when in a complicated situation with school. This book is very different from every other normal, fantasy book. This book addresses real life issues that need to be solved. This book leaves me wondering why? Why does this keep happening in today's society? This book blew me away because I never knew that all I've ever wanted in a book was right in front of me. This book has made me hooked on being involved in issues that are extremely important.

I would like to share one of the many experiences I've encountered in my short life. One day, while I was in school a student approached me while sitting at my desk. They asked to write something on my hand. I said yes, and they proceeded to write. I asked to see what was written and it said the n-word. I was shocked. How cruel could a person be? I went to my teacher and told her what happened, and I was sent to the principal's office. I felt very embarrassed and humiliated. I felt like that's what I went by. Like, I didn't have a name. I now know that whatever I get called or said to me will never define me.

Thank you for writing this book. This book changed my life forever. I will always be proud of the skin I'm in. Furthermore, I will always embrace who I am and won't be afraid to stand out in the crowd.

Wishing you the best,
Lauren Herman

Honorable Mention – Level Two

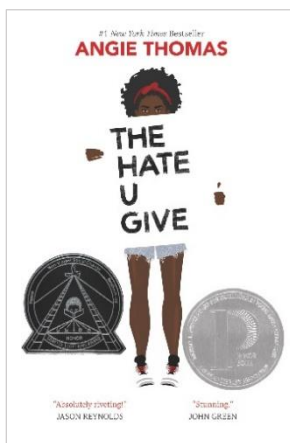
Holly Pardo

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Angie Thomas / Author of *The Hate U Give*

Dear Angie Thomas,

As a Hispanic I can't say I know how Starr Carter feels, but I understand where she's coming from. I know how it feels like to go through poverty. I know how it feels to be discriminated against because of the color of my skin. I know how it feels to be stereotyped because of what people of my race have done. Most importantly, I know how it feels to be "different." After reading *The Hate U Give*, it made me realize how unfair people of color are treated in the real world. It made me realize that I as a teenager have experienced these kinds of things. I always thought that it was a Me Problem, and not a Them Problem.



In public I would get weird stares from people when I would speak Spanish. They would look at me like I was the most disgusting thing they've ever seen. There was one incident where I was at a grocery store speaking Spanish with my mom. My mom walked away to grab something. Then a lady approached me saying, "You need to speak English. We are in America not Mexico or wherever you are from. You need to teach your mom how to speak English. If you can't, then just go back to where you came from." Since I was young when this occurred, I didn't know how to respond to that. Why would someone put that kind of responsibility on a child to teach their parents a language that they have a hard time with?

Even though I was born in America, I had a pretty rough time picking up English. For that reason, I didn't really have friends. It was hard to make friends with people who spoke a different language. So, I just hung out with the Hispanics. It wasn't till I was seven that I started making friends because I knew enough English to get by. In school it was harder to fit in because kids don't really know how to keep their opinions to themselves. They don't realize that their words can be hurtful. I always felt like people looked down on me because I couldn't really speak English.

There were occasions when my teachers would treat me like I was an idiot simply because I “couldn’t speak English.” I’ve had classmates assume or accuse me of being a drug dealer, thief, or a gang member. It wasn’t just the students and teachers. There were also police officers. Although my experience can’t even compare to what happened to Starr, Khalil’s family, and other individuals, I still felt something would happen if I were to encounter a police officer. I’ve seen police officers put their hands on their guns when all I was doing was walking by. I was a harmless kid who just wanted to fit in. I remember one specific event where I told my friend that I wished I was never Hispanic, because of how I was treated growing up. I don’t think I will ever understand why POC’s are treated like this.

Money wasn’t really a problem growing up, but my family did struggle at one point. We were limited on the things we could and couldn’t buy. I never got to have the toys that I wanted growing up. I could only get the cheaper toys, or the toys that were on sale. I didn’t care though. I was grateful that I at least had toys. Now that my family is pretty much stable, all I want to do is spend that money on things that I couldn’t have growing up, but I won’t do that. I don’t want to be the reason why my family has to go through poverty again.

Reading *The Hate U Give* played a big impact on my life. Starr made me realize that people will hate you no matter what. She helped me understand that it was okay to be different. I’ve now learned how to stand up for myself in times like these. She helped me understand that I am who I am, regardless of what people think. That I shouldn’t have to change who I am to please others. It was never a Me Problem. It was always a Them Problem.

In best regards,
Holly Pardo

Let's Talk About...

RELIGION

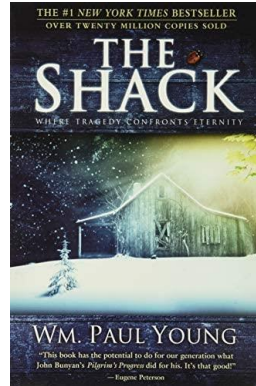
Faith

Spiritual Healing

Devotion

Dear William P. Young,

In 2018, my aunt, whom I am very close with, recommended your book *The Shack* to me, telling me, "You need to read this book." I did, and later we decided we both wanted more of the story, so we watched the movie. Your book touched me when I first read it, and it continues to affect me today because of its faith component.



My sister won a hunk of my heart the day she was born in 2012. I always cared for her in ways that a big sister should and did what I could to help look out for her, but after reading *The Shack*, and reading of Missie's abduction, my perspective on keeping her safe intensified. What happened to that poor baby girl has always been one of my greatest fears. While reading your novel my baby sister was around the same age with a similar appearance, so the fear and intensity of the novel reflected in my personal life.

The spiritual healing your book provided for me was amazing. Reading about someone else who is struggling in their faith and hearing how God pulls through for them gives me hope that the same will happen for me. Like Mack Philips, it has taken me a whole lot of effort to be in the friendship I am with Jesus right now; years of struggle, lack of faith, and hardship can be what it takes to find God. Going from chapter to chapter of this novel showed Mack's progression and growth in his faith, and I see similarities between him and myself; Papa taught Mack that good outcomes come from tragedies, Jesus opened his heart to a more personal relationship with God - more like a friendship, and Sarayu guided him to see God's all-knowingness and everlasting presence.

The experience my aunt and I shared over your book created a bond between us that has been such a blessing in my life. I believe Mack's faith sparked something in our relationship that allowed us to reciprocate God into each other's lives, which we both greatly needed. At different times in our lives and in different ways, both of us have struggled with severe depression. In our times of struggle, one helped the other by being there as a friend and companion of Christ. The line,

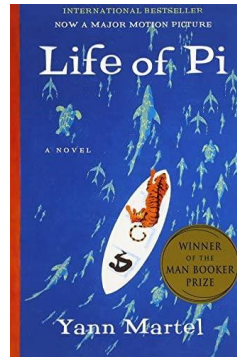
“When all you can see is your pain, perhaps then you lose sight of me?”
taught us to see God through the pain. It was only when I dedicated
myself to doing so that my heart was healed.

What I would just like to say to you for writing this book is thank you.
Thank you for sending out the message that God is what we need, and
He will provide.

Sincerely,
Anna Hudepohl

Dear Yann Martel,

For most of my life, I have blindly accepted everything that I have been told. Whether it be by my parents, grandparents, aunts, ancient scholars, or the rest of society, I always accepted what I “must” believe in as a Hindu. However, when I read your book, *Life of Pi*, I wondered if I could join multiple religions or even let go of all religions.



I have always lived in an environment rich with Hindu Beliefs and been given many opportunities to shape my view of the world. I have always tended to support science instead of religion. The reason being; I have trouble believing in something that I have never seen. For example, I have seen my grandmother waking up in the morning and worshiping Sun God with a glass of water. I used to wonder how people in Hinduism worship Sun and Moon in the first place? When Sun and Moon are two different objects in space, each being totally different from the other, the logic behind worshipping them baffles me. I also realized that you could remain unattached to any one interpretation of God and can instead, be open to all interpretations of religion. When I read your book, I learned that even Atheism is a faith because it is the faith of not believing in God. I also learned that Agnostics is not a faith because it is a way to say that you do not support one side.

When you wrote, “this story will make you believe in God,” I felt like this will be another one of those miraculous stories that would never happen in real life. However, when I finished reading your book, I felt like even the story with animals was believable, even if to a slight degree. I enjoyed how you did not say that the boat had all the supplies Pi needed, but instead, you gave him enough resources to survive in a believable way. I would say the two unrealistic things were that he was out at sea for 227 days, and he found another castaway that was also blind. I was very skeptical of how Pi would be part of so many religions, but as the book went further along, I realized that Pi became a part of all three religions by not being attached to any of them too closely. And instead, loved them all equally. I also like the twist

ending at the end of the book. I would say that the story with the animals is the better story, but I think the story with the humans is true.

I had seen my parents follow Hindu Religion in India. When we shifted to the USA I got to know about the culture and traditions that built America. My friends had a Christmas tree at home, and I asked my mom if we could get one? My mom immediately agreed, and we got the Christmas tree, decorated it with ornaments, and got immersed in the holy Christmas spirit. That strengthened my belief that you may not be a follower of a single religion but can be appreciative towards other religions as well. I was skeptical about how religion would play a role in this story. This was because when I read the back of the book, it did not sound like a story with religion in it. However, as the book went further along, I realized that religion was the only beacon of hope that Pi had, and it was the reason that Pi survived.

Up until now, I had accepted everything that I was told. But after reading your book, I see that being an Atheist or belonging to multiple religions is not bad. I also realize how believing can be seeing. But the most important thing that I have learned from this book is how certain decisions are affected by religion and how influential religion is. There are many examples of religion being influential in the book (like when Pi gives up a lot of his food for prasad). However, religion is also influential in my life. For example, I do not eat meat, or anything sour every Friday because of religion. So, Yann Martel, I want to thank you for creating a story that will make anyone believe in God.

Sincerely,
Aryav Das

Indiana Author Letter Prize Winner

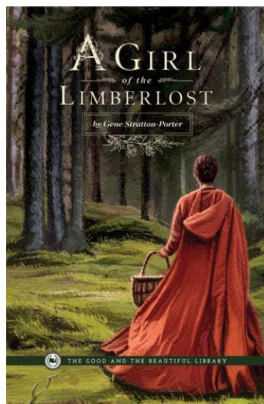
BethAnn Fairchild

Fairchild Academy, Madison
Letter to Gene Stratton-Porter

Indiana Author of **Laddie, Freckles** and **A Girl of the Limberlost**

Dear Gene Stratton-Porter,

I grew up reading your books about nature and they have changed my life in so many ways. I greatly enjoyed **Laddie, Freckles**, and **A Girl of the Limberlost**. Thank you for preserving the beauty of nature and wildlife for future generations. Because of your writing, I can lose myself in a world of God's creations. Your books have taught me so many lessons. **Laddie** taught me how important family is in hard times, to believe in what I love, to be good no matter what other people think, that forgiveness is always the right answer, and that holding onto secrets and grudges will only lead to pain and hardship. **Freckles** taught me to fight for what is right, to push beyond my boundaries, to not judge people by their appearance but to make friends, that love is the greatest gift of life, to always be aware of my surroundings, and that nature is a gift. **A Girl of the Limberlost** taught me how important beauty is in my life, how to plan and achieve the future, that pain and sadness are beautiful because happiness and joy are more meaningful after hardship, to care about others no matter what, to be respectable and modest in all things, to be good at the things I love, and to be a person of hope in hard times.



Your characters have become more than just protagonists, they have become friends and family. Laddie learns a great lesson when he realizes how unforgiveness can destroy a family when the Pryors' son comes home. Pamela Pryor begs the Strantons to keep her brother's return a secret because her father might hurt him. When Mr. Pryor finds out about his son, he finally sees the hardship he has brought to his family and greatly regrets the ways he has acted in the past. But I can't even begin to explain how grateful I am to have a friend like Freckles. Because Freckles was neglected at a young age, he understands what it feels like to not be loved, therefore he always tries to encourage and befriend everyone.

Freckles never tired of studying the devotion of a fox mother to her babies. To him, whose early life had been so embittered by continual proof of neglect and cruelty in human parents toward their children, the love of these furred and feathered folk of the Limberlost was even more of a miracle than to the Bird Woman and the Angel.

Freckles never looks down on me. He is always there to encourage me. Elnora from ***A Girl of the Limberlost*** has become a faithful friend through hard times. She stands by me when everything feels like it is falling apart. She says, "To me, it seems the only pleasure in this world worth having is the joy we derive from living for those we love, and those we can help." Elnora has become a dear friend because she has experienced hardship but has found joy in other things and she teaches me how to do the same. Lastly, I can't forget about the Bird Woman. She lets me explore creation alongside her. She teaches me about birds, flowers, butterflies, and trees.

Gene Stratton-Porter, thank you so much for painting elaborate pictures of the creation you love. It makes me able to experience what you experienced when you were young. And I have gained so many lessons from my friendships with your characters. The world has changed a lot but because of your books, everyone can encounter the beauty of the Limberlost.

Gratefully yours,
BethAnn Fairchild

First Place Winner – Level Two

Naomi Cohen

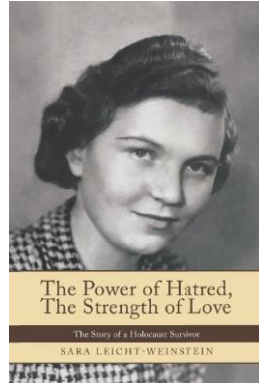
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Sara Leicht-Weinstein

Author of *The Power of Hatred, the Strength of Love*

Dear Sara Leicht-Weinstein,

From the very first page of *The Power of Hatred, The Strength of Love* to the last, tears began to sting my face as I envisioned a girl my age stepping off a filthy cattle car into the gates of hell—Auschwitz. I began to question the world and people around me. What causes people to hate so deeply? Why do people find it so difficult to put their differences aside? Which is more powerful—love or hate?



As a 14-year-old Jewish Orthodox girl, your feelings really resonated with me. I have been bullied, made fun of, and judged because of my political opinions and devotion to Judaism. I feel like an outcast to people in my school and city as the Orthodox community is so small. People make rude slurs and say terrible things about my modesty and the way I talk. I am so sick of hearing, “Why is your skirt so long?” and “Why do you even pray? God is not real.” I am afraid to share any opinion that I possess about the world for fear of being judged. I admit I am also guilty of being quick to judge others and dislike them because of their opinions and beliefs. Reading your book forced me to reflect on my behaviors. We do not always need to agree with others, but it is possible to disagree peacefully. Of equal importance, I need to treat others with kindness, no matter their beliefs.

You found the ability to love even though I am positive your hatred of the Nazis was consuming and that’s how you were able to survive and thrive, despite the inconceivable horrors that you witnessed as a child. You were miraculously spared death from the Nazi-built gas chambers by being pulled out as the doors were closing behind you. You had every right to live your life in bitterness and hatred, but you chose a different path—one of love, acceptance, and joy.

You devoted your life to help others in need by becoming a neonatal nurse, dedicating yourself to saving as many tiny lives as you could. Having lost your parents at such a young age, you made it your life's mission to be a loving devoted mother and grandmother. You escaped the traumas of your past through love and acceptance. That is true power.

The Nazis were animalistic villains, who committed atrocities against Jews and minorities. Despite that, you still figured out how to find light in total darkness and love within hate. While spending your time at Auschwitz, you found ways to occupy yourself, to keep your mind on the future and not on the nightmares of the present. You were able to see past the barbed wire and envision a future away from the hell that you were experiencing.

Each night as you watched the new transports of prisoners arriving to the death camp, you would secretly hope that in the midst of the crowds of people you might recognize a family member, neighbor, or friend. You found that making friends and having your second cousin by your side kept your spirit alive as your body starved from hunger. The suffocating stench of death never left you as you grew older, but you refused to let it stop you from smelling the beautiful aromas of the Israeli markets you would frequent.

Your book ***The Power of Hatred, The Strength of Love***, showed me that loving is so much more difficult than hating. You showed me that it takes more strength to put aside differences and agreements and find common ground. You made me believe that this was possible even during challenging times like today. If you were capable of letting go of your feelings of hatred, I know that I can with utmost certainty. You did not allow the flames of Auschwitz to extinguish your soul, rather you used them to keep the embers of love alive in your heart.

My deepest admiration and appreciation,
Naomi Cohen

Let's Talk About...

DETERMINATION

Courage

Looking to the Future

Perseverance

Never Giving Up

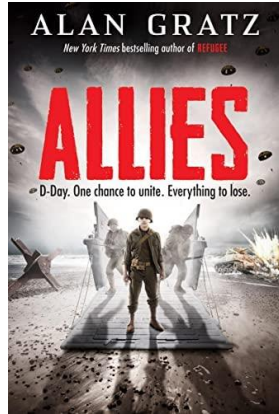
James Masaka
St. Patrick School, Terre Haute
Letter to Alan Gratz / Author of *Allies*

Dear Alan Gratz,

The book *Allies* affected how I see myself. After I read this book, I viewed myself as important no matter how different I am or how young I am. Dee was in the army at age sixteen, even though eighteen was the youngest age you could join the army. Even at his young age, he was very helpful in the war and survived. Even with his young age, he survived in a battle thousands of others did not. He kept on fighting and did not give up even though there were people dying all around him.

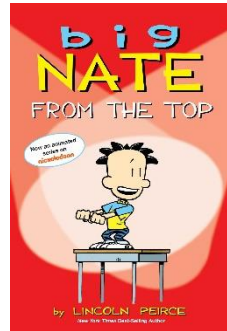
The book *Allies* also made me feel important, but this time how different I am. Henry was black and wasn't allowed to fight in the army. Luckily, he was permitted to become a medic. He, same as Dee, survived this brutal battle. Even though he wasn't allowed to fight, he healed. I was really inspired by this because even though to do what he wanted, he got the most important part of the army. Healing people is really important to me because it saves lives.

Sincerely,
James Masaka



Dear Mr. Pierce,

In 4th grade, I had thoughts rushing through my head about middle school. Everyone was worried night and day about middle school at one point. I was worried about finding my classes, being organized, homework, and all that stuff. I had no clue how hard it was going to be. Middle school was like the highest of the high at the time. Everyone was excited, nervous, or worried. So was I at first, then I found **Big Nate**.



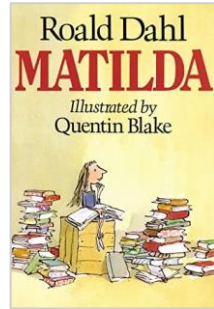
Big Nate opened me up to a whole new world and made me enjoy reading. Every single time I flipped the page it was like going on a new adventure. Your **Big Nate** books taught me everything not to do in middle school and in a funny way. Nate's locker taught me to be organized, his notes told me to pay attention, and his goofing off told me to not take everything so seriously. It also taught me to respect others and how to act in a polite manner. When Nate went through something in school or stressed over homework, he managed to figure out a solution. In **Big Nate: From the Top** you wrote, "Take a look, kid! Everywhere around you, there are moments happening! They happen, and then they're gone!" To me this quote meant that when something bad happens in life or you mess up, just look to the future. This quote says that whenever you mess up, do not worry about the past. If you make a mistake, do not look at it as a dreadful thing, but just a chance to improve. This helped me prepare for middle school and the life ahead of me in a good, exciting, and funny way.

Your books have taught me so much and have taught me how to prepare for the wild unknown. Nate's life in the story shows how hard it can be sometimes in life, and that there are road bumps in life. Nate always managed to get over that road bump though and keeps going into potholes and getting back out. I had thoughts rushing through my head about middle school, but when I found **Big Nate**, I found excitement and confidence in myself. Thank you for letting me prepare myself for those road bumps in middle school. Thank you for writing the amazing series of **Big Nate**.

Sincerely,
Isaac Antcliff

Dear Roald Dahl,

I unearthed your book while organizing my closet. It was the last in a set of books I'd received for Christmas many years ago. From the whimsical story of *The B.F.G.* to the darkly humorous tale of *The Magic Finger*, these books, with their spunky protagonists, were staples of my childhood. The book I had discovered was *Matilda*. Though I knew the story, I'd never read it.



That day, when the book beckoned to me with its carmine cover and creaseless spine, I committed to reading it. I dissected the book's ideas and became invested in the plight of Miss Honey. A soft-spoken woman and a deeply caring teacher, Miss Honey is a shining light to her students. Though she has a kind, gentle exterior, on the inside she's fighting a battle. Miss Honey has an abusive aunt, Trunchbull, who stands in the way of her happiness.

The teacher stood out to me because, that summer, I had discovered my own desire to teach. However, as an introvert, I still had some doubts. Could I be a good teacher as an introvert? Could I thrive in a career with constant social interaction? Like Miss Honey, I have a Trunchbull standing in my way: the anxiety that creeps up and whispers in my ear, "You cannot succeed as a teacher. You're too quiet."

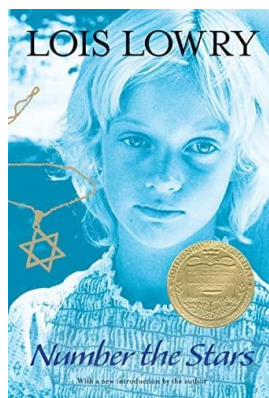
As you know, Miss Honey stood up to Trunchbull and triumphed. The story of courage illustrated in a timid, yet strong teacher inspired me and increased my confidence. Your book taught me that we all must overcome our own Trunchbull to become the person we're meant to be. If a literary character can be a role model, Miss Honey is mine. Her character assures me that even though I now struggle to overcome my Trunchbull, I will one day do so. And, in spite of this challenge, during the journey I can be a light to others. I can make a difference as a sister, a friend, and, some day in the not-so-far-off future, as a teacher. Thank you for inspiring me to pursue my goals and overcome my Trunchbull.

Sincerely,
Olivia Oostema

Dear Lois Lowry,

I am not that brave, that is, before reading your book *Number the Stars*. I haven't done anything that has changed the course of humanity. Nevertheless, you have changed me for the better.

While I was reading your book it appeared to justify the uneventfulness of my life. After all, the bravest thing I have ever done is to perform in a concert, whereas Annemarie defied all odds and did incredible things to save her friend, Ellen. Your character is far more exciting than the mundane life I live in. Strangely, when the book came to an end, my perspective changed. Instead of focusing on big things, I turned it around: I started to look at small things.



There was one particular quote that by far changed my thinking the most. It reads, "That's all that brave means—not thinking about the dangers. Just thinking about what you must do. Of course, you were frightened. I was too, today. But you kept your mind on what you had to do." To me, it means that it's possible to be frightened and brave at the same time, but it is your determination that matters. It changed me because it shows that my fears are validated as long as I have the drive to get through it. After reading this quote, I changed, changed from unobservant to an active observer. I did things like calling out a bully, getting over a fear, getting the cereal someone couldn't reach, or checking on the person who sits at the back.

What you and your book taught me is that emotions do not dictate how much courage someone has. My tears do not show weakness. In your book Annemarie herself tries not to cry, tries to be brave. Even though she is such a courageous young girl, she still has feelings, feelings of sadness, almost enough of it to let the glistening pearls of sorrow trickle past her cheeks. Hitler's genocide focused particularly on the dehumanization of their victims, the vast majority being Jews. The evidence is evident; Jews were tattooed, clothes were stripped, and names were forbidden. One of the most saddening of these was the relocation of this oppressive regime's victims, as spoken about in your

book. This indicates that indifference and lack of emotion is not what constitutes fearlessness—it is what leads to hatred.

I've also thought about how Annemarie acts right before running to Uncle Henrik with the packet. She thinks about the importance of the packet as well as the importance of that packet being delivered. She showed me that one of the most important aspects of bravery is being willing to step in, even in the most dire situations. What I believe is one of the most important things to be learned from Annemarie is that it is important to be adaptable. I think that adaptability comes in many different forms, Ms. Lowry. It could include delivering a secret package that goes against genocide, or it could be as simple as filling in for a role in the school play.

I realized that I am brave because of your book, ***Number the Stars***. I learned that it's fine to be scared, so long that I have determination. I discovered that emotions do not prove incapability. I realized that adaptability and the willingness to step in is a show of courage. All in all, Ms. Lowry, your book gave a new definition to the word of bravery.

Sincerely,
Saisri Harshith Devaguptapu

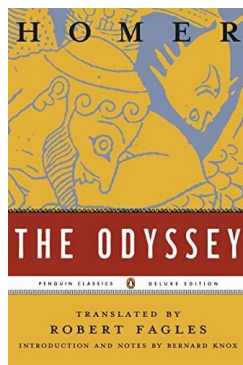
Honorable Mention – Level Three

Leo Alvis

Forest Park High School, Ferdinand
Letter to Homer / Author of *The Odyssey*

Dear Homer,

I recently read your legendary book, *The Odyssey*. After immersing myself in the world of Odysseus, it became clear to me why your epic tale has stood the test of time. On the surface, it is an exciting account of adventure, in which the protagonist overcomes great obstacles, including tempestuous seas, powerful monsters, and hostile deities. On a deeper level, it speaks to the human condition. Your book explores themes of courage and cowardice, loyalty and betrayal, which are all parts of our complicated human natures. These themes have helped *The Odyssey* remain relevant for so long. As we read the story of a man struggling to return to his home after 20 long years and all the characters he meets, we can recognize aspects of ourselves.



Of all the characters in *The Odyssey*, I felt a particular connection with Telemachus, Odysseus' son. In the story, Telemachus is becoming an adult and is having a hard time taking on his role as the man of the house. The palace of Odysseus is overrun by greedy suitors trying to woo Odysseus' wife, Penelope. Telemachus is faced with the tremendous task of keeping the suitors at bay and protecting his father's estate. He struggles to adjust to the new responsibilities; he feels helpless and doesn't know where to turn with his father away. As a teen growing into adulthood, I can relate to the confusion and stress that Telemachus experiences. As I prepare to leave the roost and go to college, I have to learn to make important decisions for myself. I can no longer be as reliant on my parents. I have to become more independent and start taking charge of my own life. Fortunately for Telemachus, he had loyal, reliable friends that were there for him. The goddess Athena guided Telemachus in the form of Mentor, and the servants that remained loyal to Odysseus proved to be valuable allies. Similarly, as I mature into adulthood, it is important that I make good, loyal friends that I can lean on during hard times.

Your book also taught me a valuable lesson in perseverance. In ***The Odyssey***, Odysseus never loses sight of his goals. He is set on returning home to his wife and son despite the innumerable obstacles he faces on his journey. Odysseus could have wasted the remaining years of his life at Calypso's island or whiled away the rest of his days at Circe's temple. He resists these temptations, however, and he keeps his eyes on the ultimate goal of returning to his home and reclaiming the throne of Ithaca. The unwavering perseverance of Odysseus inspired me and taught me the importance of never giving up or settling for "good enough."

I also learned a lot from the many flawed characters in ***The Odyssey***. When Odysseus and his crew are confined on the Island of the sun god, Helios, their food starts to run short. Odysseus commands his crew to stay away from Helios' prized cattle, but they slaughter one of the cows anyway. In so doing, they violate Odysseus' command and betray Helios' hospitality. Helios requests that Zeus smash their ships and kill the crew. Zeus agrees, sparing only Odysseus. Even more loathsome are the suitors. They make themselves comfortable in the palace and have feasts seemingly every night, slaughtering much of Odysseus' livestock. They do not listen to Telemachus, they are arrogant and rude to the servants, and they are constantly pestering Penelope to choose a new husband. When Odysseus returns home and learns of the suitors' behavior, he is outraged. He formulates a plan and slaughters all of the suitors in his palace. Your epic taught me that if I give into my appetites like the disobedient crew or go through life with the entitled, haughty mindset of the suitors I will one day have to face the consequences. A successful life requires self-control and respect for the property and authority of others.

The Odyssey is the most challenging book I have ever read, but it was definitely worth the effort. It transported me to the distant world of Odysseus, Telemachus, and Penelope, and the tremendous challenges they faced. Along the way, I learned many essential lessons, including the value of good and loyal friends, the necessity of perseverance, and the importance of self-control and respect for others. These lessons will serve me very well as I embark on my own odyssey through life.

Sincerely,
Leo Alvis

Second Place Winner – Level One

Ifeoluwa Oguntunde

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Matt Haig / Author of *The Midnight Library*

Dear Matt Haig,

Often when I lie in bed at night staring up at my ceiling, I wonder whether I would be happier if I could go back to another reality and change all the things I regret not saying or doing, like in *The Midnight Library*. I wonder how my life would be different if I had made different decisions like Nora. In the end, Nora was able to drown out all that guilt and self-pity she felt, and she was able to genuinely love herself despite all the regrets she had. Before reading *The Midnight Library*, I felt all these regrets about things I did in the past. The mistakes I made, the things I said, and what I didn't say. I experienced Nora's emotion and her guilt when she flipped through the book of regrets and realized all the hidden emotions she had stored away and forgotten. Through the book, I heard Nora's voice speak to me from the pages of the book. She guided me, laughing with me at the funny parts, and crying with me at the sad parts.



As I read your book, *The Midnight Library*, I came to understand Nora on a deeper level than I had ever considered. I understood her pain and her anger towards life as if she were one of my friends. I cried, laughed, felt upset, felt mad, but most of all I felt inspired by reading about Nora. Whenever I feel guilty or unhappy about something, I always reflect and remember Nora, and how I'm not alone. It's as if she were standing in my living room talking to me and giving me advice through tough times.

While I read your book, I followed Nora on her journey through *The Midnight Library*. I found myself invested in Nora's story. I watched as she traveled through different dimensions and slowly realized she wanted to live. She learned that life doesn't have to be perfect to be wonderful. In Nora's eyes, I saw both the good and the bad, the hilarity as well as the sorrow. I felt Nora's heart grow and her emotions develop throughout the book. I realized that growth and a desire to live changed Nora as a person. Like Nora said herself, "Love and laughter and fear and pain are universal currencies."

I am a better person because of your book. It taught me not to have regrets, live in the moment, not the past, but also how to have a positive attitude, to look at things differently, find the beauty in everything, and never give up so easily. The way Nora's outlook was changed by a few books, a librarian, and a pen is truly remarkable to me.

As a result of Nora, I have learned how to accept pain and become stronger because of it. My strength has risen like a volcano, signaling life, destruction, and peace. You showed me that you don't have to understand life. You have to live it. This has taught me that we all have a choice in the matter of our lives. Each person must decide for themselves what to do. Their path. But at the end of the day, each of our decisions is our own. Therefore, we must not resent them but live with them and make the most of them. Hence, I say, "Don't give up! Don't you dare give up, Nora Seed."

So, I will end this awfully long letter with my favorite quote from *The Midnight Library*, "We only need to be one person. We only need to feel one existence. We don't have to do everything, to be everything because we are already infinite. While we are alive, we always contain a future of multifarious possibility." I admire the way you have given your characters such depth. Thank you, Mr. Haig, for showing me what it is to truly live and be free.

With love and appreciation,
Ifeoluwa Oguntunde

Honorable Mention – Level Two

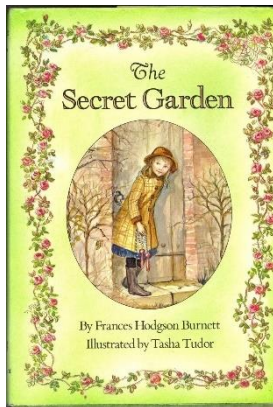
Jalynn Keith

Triton Central Middle School, Fairland

Letter to Frances Hodgson Burnett / Author of *The Secret Garden*

Dear Frances Hodgson Burnett,

I first read your book, *The Secret Garden*, in my seventh-grade year of middle school. It changed my perspective of myself, the people around me, and life. I've been pushed down and mistreated, and it was the only way I could think of myself. Colin was told over and over again that he would die, he would grow up to have a crooked back, and that he couldn't do anything. I was always being told that I would never fit in. I couldn't do things that others could because I was "weird." But, what's so wrong with that?



Colin found his light and his magic. His magic was nature: the garden, staying outside for hours, and never wanting to go inside. That was his motivation. I spent most of my childhood inside not wanting to go anywhere, only wanting to read. That was until my father's friend changed my life forever. I was given the choice to try out for a softball team. I didn't want to, of course. What kind of child who only wants to read and play with toys would want to go to softball tryouts? I can tell you; it wasn't me.

Although I never wanted to leave the house, I didn't want to disappoint my dad, so I went. Now if you think that I loved it, you were right. I fell in love right away. I may have played absolutely terribly, but I made the team. As the years went by, I become better and more attached. Just as Colin did, I found what inspired me. Softball gave me confidence. It opened my eyes and revealed to me that I can do anything, I can be anything, and I can be myself without feeling bad about myself.

Softball became my motivation just as the outdoors was for Colin. Colin and I are the same. We may have different lives and live in different worlds but deep down inside we are the same people. I can't escape the fact that I will never be like the others, but I don't want to be. Colin was always told that he can't. He was told he will never be like

everyone else and thankfully he doesn't want to, just like me. I desire to excel in life, in softball, and in school. I crave it. This book has completely changed my outlook on life.

Colin lived a rough life growing up being discouraged. I wish I found my magic sooner. I needed it in my life. ***The Secret Garden*** made me rethink everything. Passion, power, motivation. Softball retrieves those for me. Softball reminds me that I can prove others wrong. I realized I found my magic after reading this book. I can't thank you enough for writing and publishing it. I found my magic in softball just as Colin found his in Mother Nature.

In appreciation,
Jalynn Keith

