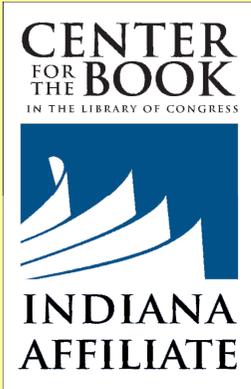


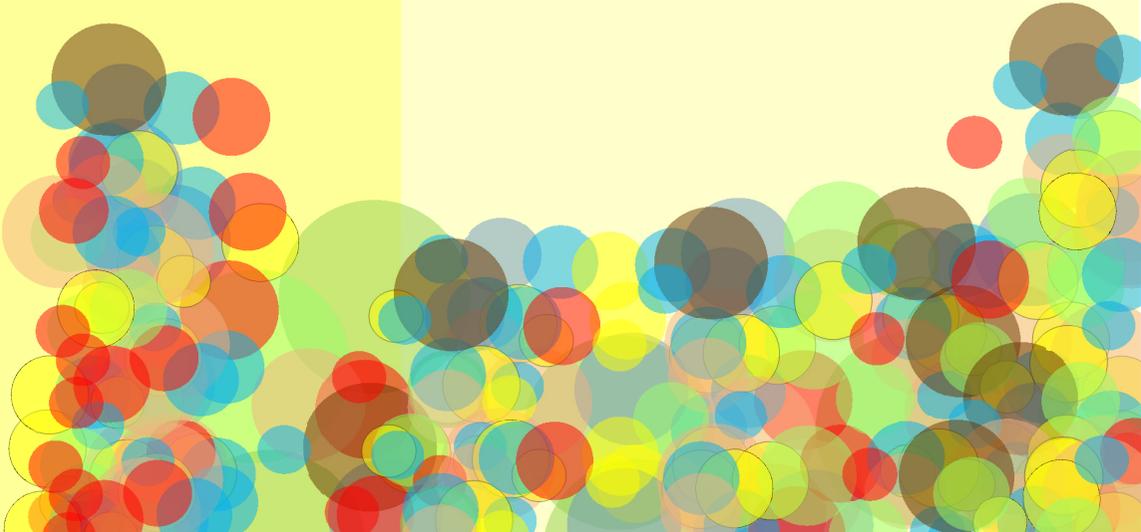
the James & Madeleine *McMullan* FAMILY FOUNDATION

Letters About Literature



Letters About Literature

2016 Winning Letters by Indiana Students







Letters About Literature

2016 Winning Letters by Indiana Students

Indiana Center for the Book Director

Suzanne Walker

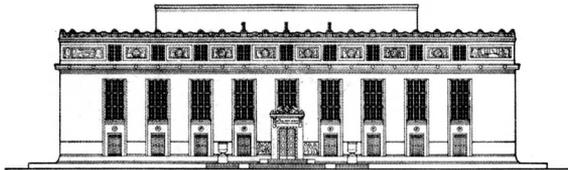
Indiana State Librarian

Jacob Speer

the James & Madeleine *McMullan* FAMILY FOUNDATION
LettersAboutLiterature



Published 2016



Indiana State Library
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Letters About Literature

Letters About Literature is a national reading-writing contest for readers in grades 4 through 12 sponsored by the *Center for the Book in the Library of Congress*, the *Indiana Center for the Book* in the Indiana State Library and *The James & Madeleine McMullan Family Foundation*. We hope you will participate in the 2016-2017 contest!

What is a Center for the Book?

Are there any books in the *Indiana Center for the Book*? Not really... Starting in 1984, the *Center for the Book in the Library of Congress* began to establish affiliate centers in the 50 states. Today, there is a State Center for the Book in all 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 literary heritage and call attention to the importance of books, reading, literacy and libraries. The State Centers gather annually at the Library of Congress for an Idea Exchange Day.



Congratulations from the Indiana Center for the Book

We are excited to honor your work in our 2016 book.

We offer a special thanks to the *James and Madeleine McMullan Family Foundation* for supporting our *Youth Literary Day and Letters About Literature Award Ceremony* that was held on April 30, 2016 at the Indiana State Library. Our *Youth Literary Day* was a great event that included writing workshops, author signings, and readings of the letters by our First Place Winners.

We also offer a special thanks to the *Indiana State Library Foundation*, whose support we are constantly thankful for.

We made the decision to keep the works in this book true to what the child submitted. Sometimes there are grammatical errors, but we like to think that these errors show humanity and also remind us of the youthfulness of our writers. Later in life students will be able to look back at their young writings as a testament to how far they've come in their writing journeys. It should also be noted that several letters won prizes and are not included in this book due to lack of permission by the parent at the time of printing.

The letters in this collection are heartfelt interpretations from young writers that touch on a variety of difficult themes including bullying, growing up, cancer and health, death, racism, drugs, crime, self esteem, war, and other serious topics that our Indiana youth struggle with daily. The letters are collected in age groups and it is not surprising that some of the more serious issues; issues that would challenge the most well adjusted adults, are at the end in the high school section.

Millions of writers create new worlds for us to explore every day. Sometimes those writers have the honor of touching a young life. These letters tell those stories. Enjoy these letters. They are a gift.

Suzanne Walker - Director, Indiana Center for the Book

Level I Finalists:

- 1st Place: Carly Toussant—Crestview Elementary, Indianapolis
2nd Place: Layla Wandel—Castle North Middle School, Newburgh
3rd Place: Kate Bonnell—Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Level I Honorable Mentions:

- Wyatt Clifford—Greensburg Elementary, Greensburg
Yael Cohen—Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis
Corin Dammeier—Custer Baker Intermediate School, Franklin
Addy Laucks—Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville
Lauren Matuscak—Castle North Middle School, Newburgh
Trevor Monroe—Castle North Middle School, Newburgh
Frances Stemme—Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville
Hussein Sulub—Castle North Middle School, Newburgh

Level I Semifinalists:

- Kiara Bahena—Lindley Elementary
Meera Bhatia—Castle North Middle School
Kinsey Bruder—Lebanon Middle School
Claire Carpenter—Park Tudor School
Hazel Crow—Burriss Laboratory School
Jillian Flinta—Riverside Intermediate
Emily Frey—Zionsville Middle School
Tal Friedman—Hasten Hebrew Academy
Anna Gobeyn—Zionsville Middle School
Emmy Gottsman—Brownsburg East Middle School
Hannah Handrock—Zionsville Middle School
Kaley Hurst—Castle North Middle School
Gabrielle Kraft—Park Tudor School
John Latimer—Riverside Intermediate
Gwen Lawler—Burriss Laboratory School
Sarah Maniscalco—Zionsville Middle School
Emma Mann—New Palestine Elementary School
Hailey McAttee—Zionsville Middle School
Elisabeth Melms—Castle North Middle School
Aliyah Moore—Crestview Elementary
Will Nebesio—Zionsville Middle School
Ella Neely—Burriss Laboratory School
Olivia Norton—Mary Evelyn Castle Elementary
Chimaka Okoro—Riverside Intermediate
Catherine Richardson—Zionsville Middle School
Mei Mei Rossi—Zionsville Middle School
Jack Schilson—Zionsville Middle School
Conner Shaffer—Blair Pointe Elementary
Elijah Shemesh—Hasten Hebrew Academy
Emilie Sondhelm—Hasten Hebrew Academy

Level II Finalists:

- 1st Place: Skyлар Rumble—West Noble Middle School, Ligonier
2nd Place: Brenna Weaver—West Lafayette Jr. / Sr. High School, West Lafayette
3rd Place: Lauren Verkamp—Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Level II Honorable Mentions:

- Nolan Jacobs—West Lafayette Jr. / Sr. High School, West Lafayette
Maria Luciani—Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville
Patsy Olds—Greensburg Jr. High School, Greensburg
Lilly O'Shea—St. Paul Catholic School, Valparaiso
Lenny Perel—Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Level II Semifinalists:

- | | |
|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Charlotte Anderson—Greensburg Jr. HS | Ava Kruper—Chesterton Middle School |
| Julia Ankney—Greensburg Jr. High School | Savannah Lee—Chesterton Middle School |
| Niranjan Anoop—Klondike Middle School | Haley Love—Jasper Middle School |
| Ravin Atchison—West Noble Middle School | Kendall Mann—Doe Creek Middle School |
| Melissa Bielawa—Jasper Middle School | Maria Miller—Perry Meridian Middle School |
| Justice Brown—Salem Middle School | Sabrina Morales—Benton Central Jr. HS |
| Rayanne Brown—Benton Central Jr. HS | Amelia Pellman—Salem Middle School |
| Rivkah Bunes—Hasten Hebrew Academy | Quade Popp—Jasper Middle School |
| Brynn Burkart—Wisdom Builders | Macy Prickel—Batesville Middle School |
| Hunter Butz—Greensburg Jr. High School | Bennett Schmitt—Jasper Middle School |
| Sam Calhoun—Salem Middle School | Amanda Schnell—Jasper Middle School |
| Cadence Campbell—Batesville Middle School | Bailee Schwartz—Jasper Middle School |
| Dillon Carpenter—Jasper Middle School | Brianna Stasel—Southridge Middle School |
| Angela Conrad—Chesterton Middle School | Anna Thacker—Southridge Middle School |
| Nataly Davidsmith—Hasten Hebrew Academy | Bergen Tom—West Noble Middle School |
| Zoe Dolack—Zionsville Middle School | Jano Vasquez-Jaffe—Hasten Hebrew Academy |
| Destiny Fender—West Noble Middle School | Lauren Wallen—West Noble Middle School |
| Melissa Fernandez—West Lafayette Jr. / Sr. HS | Tristen West—Hasten Hebrew Academy |
| Abby Fischer—Jasper Middle School | Sarah Yoder—Salem Middle School |
| Michaela Geller-Montague—Hasten Hebrew Academy | |
| Sarah Fiega Gluck—Hasten Hebrew Academy | |
| Hannah Harper—West Noble Middle School | |
| Grace Helming—Jasper Middle School | |
| Kalijah Hessig—Salem Middle School | |
| Emily Hile—West Noble Middle School | |

Level III Finalists:

- 1st Place: Zosha Roberson—Perry Central High School, Leopold
2nd Place: Amanda Findlay—New Tech Academy at Wayne HS, Ft. Wayne
3rd Place: Maggie McCool—Northwestern High School, Kokomo

Level III Honorable Mentions:

- Thomas Biancardi—Griffith High School, Griffith
Levi Hrabos—Northwestern High School, Kokomo
Logan McPeak—Monrovia High School, Monrovia
Cameron Pokrifcak—Zionsville Community HS, Zionsville
Taylor Stierwalt—Monrovia High School, Monrovia

Level III Semifinalists:

- Kayla Bevington—Northwestern High School,
Logan Brittain—Northwestern High School
Kersten Collins—Griffith High School
Brooklin Coss—Bedford North Lawrence High School
Courtney Gullion—Switzerland County High School
Alexsandra Jocius—Northwestern High School
Leah Kennedy—North Putnam High School
Bri Murray—Switzerland County High School
Oscar Nieto—New Tech Academy at Wayne High School
Jolie Rusznak—Centerville Sr. High School
Sha'Brayia Sims—New Tech Academy at Wayne High School
Claire Wallace—Northwestern High School
Sophia Yager-Motl—Northwestern High School

Level I

1st Place:

Carly Toussant

Crestview Elementary, Indianapolis

Letter to Holly Goldberg Sloan

Author of *Counting by 7's*

Dear Holly Goldberg Sloan,

I have never really thought about the people I see walking down the street, or the ones picking up some yogurt at the grocery store. When I see a window I've never really wondered what's on the other side, or who's on the other side. I meet hundreds of people every day, and don't even know it. I don't think about the unique stories each and every person has. And when I hold open a door for them, or wave hello, I've never wondered what they took from that. I don't think about how I may have just changed a life. At least I didn't used to, but because of your book, I do now.

I don't have anything in common with any of the characters in *Counting by 7's*, and it hasn't helped me through a tough situation in my life, but it has taught me a very important lesson. It is the lesson that the smallest of moments make the greatest impact. Your story itself was beautiful, but what really helped me was Jiro's story, which was the butterfly effect that took place all because of a letter from a twelve year old girl. It helped me think about how small things that happen really do matter.

After reading *Counting by 7's* I started thinking about all the people around me, all of the people I ignore, overlook, or don't think about every day. I wanted to know that whatever little thing I did for them counted. It made me want to make an impact in someone's life, and make sure that that impact was a positive one. It made me wonder for long periods of time if I did the right thing while talking to a person. It made me be more mindful about my surroundings, as well as myself. It ultimately made me a better person.

Before I realized this, I felt that I knew everything, I was perfectly fine with not wondering, not wondering about the rest of the world, or what everyone else is thinking. I was perfectly satisfied with my life. I believe that the only

people truly satisfied with their lives are the ones who don't know what I learned from your book. They are the ones not tempted to wonder about what happens as soon as you leave a room. Your book made me wonder this.

Thank you, for making me wonder.

Sincerely,
Carly Toussant

Level I
2nd Place

Layla Wandel

Castle North Middle School, Newburgh

Letter to Bethany Hamilton

Author of *Soul Surfer*

Dear Mrs. Bethany Hamilton,

There was a moment, when something you thought you had, got taken, got snatched away from you. Something, or someone, decided to do it. The shark saw a dangling object just under the water's surface, and went for it, took it, snatched it away from you. A man saw a house, a family with peace and trust toward all. He took it, snatched it away from me and my family. Maybe those things and people meant it as a cruelty, maybe they didn't, but it is still true that just as easily as the shark bit your arm, the man got in our house. Could it happen again?

In 2003, a tiger shark bit off your left arm. At eight years old, a man took away my trust. My family found out a man was entering our house and had been placing cameras. The man lived right across the street from my house, and had always appeared as one of my family's very close friends. The man is now in jail. These actions are tragic, but they make up who we are, whether it is good or bad.

Soul Surfer got to me in a way I can hardly describe. I re-read it over and over, fascinated and surprised every time. Your book made me look at life a little differently. I pondered things and thought about them so much I could hardly comprehend what I was thinking. I look at how fast things happen and how much we take it for granted. If a car was going one more mile per hour faster, would it have gotten in the wreck? If the tree was planted, would the flower have enough sunshine? If the wind wasn't so thick, would the ball have gone in the goal? That's what life is, a series of what ifs; I didn't realize this until you told it to me.

The shark attack took away your arm. The man coming in my house took away a piece of my trust in people. When something gets taken from you that you thought you had, it shakes you up, but also brings new things to mind for you. For instance, when you got attacked by the shark, people you had never heard of began sending love to you and you began meeting people such as Oprah. When the man got in our house, I learned more

about police and detective work and met a kind officer. When things go wrong, they turn into a positive situation.

So, maybe the shark took your arm, the man took my trust, but all in all, those things had a purpose: to shape a character different from the next. There you are, and here I am; right now, today, different than yesterday.

Sincerely,
Layla Wandel

Level I
3rd Place

Kate Bonnell

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Cornelia Funke

Author of ***Inkheart***

Dear Cornelia Funke,

I was not a reader, and listening to me read out loud was a struggle. I stuttered, I mispronounced words, and I skipped lines. Most of the kids in my class loved reading, and had beautiful voices, but I would always shied away from the heart aching pain of embarrassment. *Inkheart* changed this reality and turned it into what seemed like a fantasy.

I practiced day and night reading to my fish, stuffed animals, and sometimes to myself. The words on the page no longer seemed like ink, but they were pictures full of music, emotions, and beauty, but what I hadn't known was that ***Inkheart*** not only helped me with my reading, but it filled my mind with color, astonishment, and thoughts.

Words were no longer just letters they were images. They were beautiful pictures that made me excited, mad, sad, nervous, and happy, and ***Inkheart*** was no longer just a book. ***Inkheart*** was my shelter on a rainy day, it was my happiness when there was gray skies, and it was a whole new world that I dare not let my mind venture too far in.

I had thought ***Inkheart*** had done its duty, and would not help me any further, but I was wrong, because at times I would be the one white egg in a large basket of brown eggs, or the only leaf that stayed on the tree, and sometimes I considered myself as the shades white and black out of a whole rainbow of colors. I didn't think anyone felt the way that I did. Until, I realized that Dustfinger had similar emotions.

I always envied the popular people, because they seemed to have a 'reserved seat'. Even if they did stand up there would always be another seat waiting for them, and I wish I could say the same thing about myself, but ***Inkheart*** changed this. It's hard to believe that a book could hold a seat for someone, but that is exactly what ***Inkheart*** did.

It was a new life for me, a new sight for me, and a new heart full of beauty and warmth. All of these new emotions were wonderful, and the colorful scenery that replaced my monotone universe were astonishing. Reds, oranges, yellows, greens, blues, and even more colors would burst out of every page I turned. So, I must thank you for turning my tedious reality into a fantasy. A fantasy that others cannot even imagine. A fantasy full of hope. A fantasy full of heart.

Sincerely,
Kate Bonnell

Level I Honorable Mentions

Wyatt Clifford

Greensburg Elementary, Greensburg

Letter to Rick Riordan

Author of *The Heroes of Olympus*

Dear Rick Riordan,

The Heroes of Olympus and *The Lost Hero* changed my point of view because it helped me realize that every human being on Earth is fighting some sort of battle whether it's mentally or physically. I read this book and thought about how scary it would be to not have any memory. I'd freak out in an environment that I'd never been in before and be whisked into chaos and battle not knowing what to do. It ended up making me think about how many people in the world had faced something that scary.

I personally haven't had such a horrible and frightening experience. When I thought about having something so terrible happening to me, I realized that everyone is fighting something. It might be much smaller or it could be the same amount of difficulty, but when I realized this I truly saw the world as it was.

The world is full of cheerful people hiding very sad things. I noticed that you need to treat people nicer than necessary even if you don't like them. There are so many things that people might be hiding behind their surface appearance. I have had a few fears over the years and to me they were the worst. but they weren't nearly as scary as it would be to be like Jason While I was coming across this thought, I recalled the saying "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." I realized that this is true because again people should be treated nicer than necessary. It also was the book that made me interested in Roman mythology, and it made me want to study Greek mythology with more intention and purpose.

Thanks to your series, I now know a lot of Greek/Roman mythology. I can name the six original Olympian gods and goddesses and can also spell them correctly. Here they are by age: Hestla (Vesta), Demeter (Ceres), Hera

(Juno), Hades (Pluto), Poseidon (Neptune), and Zeus (Jupiter). The other six are Artemis (Diana), Apollo (Apollo), Hermes (Mercury), Aphrodite (Venus), Dionysus (Bacchus), and Hephaestus (Vulcan).

Sincerely,
Wyatt Clifford

Yael Cohen

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Katherine Applegate

Author of *The One and Only Ivan*

Dear Katherine Applegate,

Sometimes I feel like I am a figure in a video game, and the people around me are controlling me. My teachers, my parents, my peers. I feel that I can't wear what I want to wear because it isn't cool enough or nice enough from the perspective of others. Everyone already has my future planned out on a blueprint, but what if I want to change it? What if I want to change my fate? "Yael, you would be amazing doctor/physical therapist/nurse/teacher etc. ...when you're older." "Yael, you would be really happy at this school." I'm trapped in what I thought was my domain but is really my cage.

Like Ivan in *The One and Only Ivan*, I am trapped in a cage. While I am not a silverback gorilla in a circus, I connected with Ivan's desire to use his art to escape. The only real escape I have from my cage is art. Most of the things a child my age does are under the control of others.

There are rarely times when I can just let loose, forget, and feel like I'm the one that's in command. Art is something that helps me feel in charge of what I want to do. Some people might think that art is just something that I draw or paint, but I know that art is an outlet that is woven with my interests and personality. To me art is not just painting and drawing, but it expands to include playing volleyball, writing, and, thanks to you and your unforgettable characters, reading. When I read, I forget about whatever crazy things are going on in my life and escape into another world. Art lifts a load off of my shoulders. Without art, I wouldn't be the person I am today.

Through reading your book and meeting Ivan, Julia, Stella, and Ruby, I realized that my art makes me the person playing the video game instead of being controlled by the players. It makes me the sculptor rather than the clay. Is your preferred form of art writing books and stories? Do you have others? Do you use art to escape too?

I know that my letter might not be as long as some others, but I believe that a good book doesn't always have to be a long book. When I write, I like to

make every word count. That is what *The One and Only Ivan* did. I really appreciated that and as your book becomes a classic, I hope that others will too.

Love your passionate reader and fan,
The One and Only Yael Cohen

Corin Dammeier

Custer Baker Intermediate School, Franklin

Letter to Pam Conrad

Author of *My Daniel*

Dear Pam,

In the few weeks it took me to read *My Daniel*, I learned something that would last a lifetime. And I will never forget it.

Recently, my great grandpa passed. The summer before that my great aunt and my grandpa passed away. I have had bad summers, but none as horrible as those two.

My grandpa's death was very sudden. Daniel in your book had been a loyal brother, son, and a just an amazing person in general. That was the way my grandpa lived. He was loyal to anyone he knew, and even people he didn't know. He served in the Air Force, and he always had a love for serving and being in the military. He had a prodigious love for the Air Force. Like Daniel my grandpa had a passion, a love for something. There was never a time when he would regret being in the Air Force.

In your book, *My Daniel*, Julie knew Daniel wasn't alive, but she also knew he wasn't gone for good. He was in a better place, no worries or doubts. She was the one, the one to make Daniel live on. She had to be courageous, hard-working, strong, powerful and she had to take initiative. Julie never gave up either. She constantly dug up that dinosaur for her brother. Never did she give up. He was never "gone" his spirit was right there alongside her, watching her dig those bones for him. This can relate to my grandpa because when I read your book I learned exactly what I have been saying.

He is not "gone," he is in a better place, watching from above. I finally, after a year, learned this: People are alive, then they die. Weather they live on or not is up to you.

Never forget. Never forget. Never forget. This has kept my grandpa with me since he left Earth. I've never let him go, I've never forgotten. When I play softball, he is right there, cheering me along. When I am taking a test he is right there keeping me going, telling me I can do it. When I just want to give up and go home, I just remember he is watching, and I say, "I am doing this for you, grandpa." Daniel relates to this because he might not have been with them, but he was right there. He was always with them, especially when

they were digging the bones. Julie loved him, even after he left, and that is what kept his spirit among them.

Memories, those sweet things we use to remember people and things by, no matter where they are. When Julie was little, she always had Daniel. When Daniel died, she always had the memories in the back of her mind. She always had the vivid images of them twirling in the whirlwinds, because she always remembered Daniel. The memories are the things that keep you connected with somebody. They are the things that keep you together, always. When my grandpa passed, I had a quick reaction to just cry and sob. This was until I realized that we had great times together. We may not have seen each other too often since he lived a ways away, but when we did, we made the best of it. This is when those tears became tears of joy, not because he died, but because we had great times and memories.

My Daniel was the book that kept me connected to my grandpa, even when times were tough. I am so grateful that I had your book to teach me these lessons. I would have never been so grateful and thankful if *My Daniel* wouldn't have been there to push me through my tough times, and been there to teach me these lessons.

Sincerely,
Corin Dammeier

Addy Laucks

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Michael Morpurgo

Author of *Shadow*

Dear Michael Morpurgo,

Hope is important. Whether it be about staying alive to the next day or just scoring the next goal in a soccer game, hope will get you through. While reading your book, *Shadow*, in my mind I saw a “hope meter” right in the middle of Aman because he started with a full tank every morning when Shadow first started trying to lead him and his mother to England. By the end of their first travel day, Aman had lost all hope because the Afghanistan soldiers killed his grandmother, took their money, stole the jewels that were the only thing left of his grandmother, and lastly they were sore and tired from walking so long. That day “broke down” his “hope meter” and when that happened it becomes completely empty.

I feel as if throughout the entire book you were trying to show signs of hope but you knew only some readers would get so profound in the book to notice them. Shadow was the biggest sign of hope that you came up with because when they were staying at the camp with the American soldiers Shadow/Polly kept going from the American soldier Brody back to Aman, like he didn't know who to chose. But then when it was time for Aman and his mother to leave and for Polly to stay, Aman realized that his Shadow, not Polly wouldn't chase after him to lead them to England any longer. I was just thinking throughout this book that this story of hope had the same ups and downs as my family did when my little cousin got cancer when she was only 2 years old.

Ruby, my little cousin was 2 years only when she was diagnosed with cancer. She is such a strong little girl because she had to keep her “hope meter” as full as she could in times that were life threatening. Just like Aman, Ruby had times when her meter was completely empty. Even though Ruby and Aman's story are not similar at all, the one thing that is similar is that they both had big reasons why their “hope meters” were so full and completely empty sometimes.

Thankfully after a couple of years of chemo, she was almost cancer free and able to go to school again. However, after 2 months they realized that she was getting cancer again. That means more chemo and making Ruby weaker

and weaker by the day. By at least a year or two she was completely cancer-free!

Ruby and Aman ended up having a great ending for each of them because Ruby was cancer-free and Aman found safety and was a successful asylum seeker. This story really helped me get into my cousins perspective so that I could understand how she felt. Whenever I see her now I can't look at her as just my little cousin, I look at her and see a beautiful, strong girl full of hope. Aman had a happy ending too by just getting to go back to his home in England and live a normal life like he should have had since the minute he was born. Aman and Ruby are just 2 people who have had to go through hard times and keep trying to keep their "hope meter" as full as possible even if that just meant halfway full. Hope.

Sincerely,
Addy Laucks

Lauren Matuscak

Castle North Middle School, Newburgh

Letter to Lois Lowry

Author of *The Giver*

Dear Mrs. Lowry,

Who knew your life could change so much? No matter where you are or what you are doing, there is always a chance your life can change like mine. *The Giver* took me back to where things were easy and life was good. It made me realize how losing all of my memories would change me completely; my life would be different and extremely dull. Jonas, the boy who changed his life, helped me to change mine.

I grew up close to Minneapolis, Minnesota where snow falls from October to March. We owned five divine acres of woods. While living there for six years, I made many great memories; sledding down leaves into a ravine, making tree houses, and playing in the mud. These memories helped to shape the person I am today. They taught me to love who I am, how to surround myself with fun-loving people and family, and how to enjoy nature and its beauty. I knew that I needed to keep them.

One day about six years ago we moved to Newburgh, Indiana. In this small rural community, I made a new life. However, each day I was slowly losing my peaceful memories of my childhood. After reading *The Giver* I felt as though the memories I had left must stay. Although Jonas and I had connections, we did have some differences. He and I fought through our feelings of despair, replacing them with faith. My family was there for me when I needed them, unlike Jonas's.

At such a young age, I didn't know what was true and what wasn't. Like Jonas, I had many questions about my past. First, I had to figure out how to regain my remembrance of long lost Minnesota. When Jonas had meetings with the Giver, it made me think about actually revisiting my past. My parents, brother and I decided to take a trip back to Minnesota, which reminded me about the time Jonas had visions of children sledding down a big snowy hill back home. After my first visit back, we decided to keep going every six months. The trips we took helped me connect with my past like Jonas did when he had dreams of his beautiful past.

Jonas inspired me to keep my memories. He reassured me that things would work out. Our lives were very comparable before, during, and after our

worlds changed. We both chased our dreams of bringing back things that were lost. I would like to thank you for what you made me do differently. Jonas made me go out of my comfort zone to dig deep into my Minnesota roots. He changed my life.

Sincerely,
Lauren Matuscak

Trevor Monroe

Castle North Middle School, Newburg

Letter to Trenton Lee Stewart

Author of *The Mysterious Benedict Society*
and *the Perilous Journey*

Dear Mr. Stewart,

When I first picked up your book, it was just another school assignment. Reynie was just another kid, and Stonetown was just another town. I did not think about *The Mysterious Benedict Society* until I was further into it. To be honest, I really didn't have time to think about it at all.

All my thoughts were directed to making the school basketball team and turning twelve so I could become a Boy Scout. As I read, it helped me to endure the roadblocks that I had at that time. My intentions of this letter are, not to congratulate you, but to say thank you. Thank you for making some upsetting times of my life into some of the greatest of my life.

A few weeks after receiving my school assignment, I was cut from the basketball team I had tried out for. Not only was I upset, but I was frustrated because I knew it wasn't fair to only have two days for try-outs with fifty kids. I decided to try to settle down and finish my book assignment. The part about Reynie standing up to Mr. Curtain in the final fight caught my eye, and I realized what I needed to do. I needed to do what he did, but differing from Reynie, I would ask my coach if I could play if anyone dropped out. I learned that it was okay to stand up to adults. It felt good to know I had the confidence to say something about it.

I was not far into your book before I realized that your book is just a more challenging version of my life. Like Reynie, I too was accepted into an honors class. In addition, I have worked out many problems with logic and the help of my friends. Your book taught me to be like Reynie and emphasized that I should put academics before athletics.

The best parts in your book were those I could use to help me. One of these times was when I got a low score on a paper, which lowered my grade. I was worried that I would not have many assignments to get my grade back up. I had just been reading about when Reynie never gave up while trying to outsmart the Ten Men. He was confident and figured it out. From then on, I asked more questions and focused on what I needed to earn an acceptable grade.

The Mysterious Benedict Society and the Perilous Journey was not just a normal book to me. So I am thanking you for helping me. Reading this book was a gift to me, and the words in it gave me the help I needed at the right time. *The Mysterious Benedict Society and the Perilous Journey* changed me for the better more than I can express in this letter.

Sincerely,
Trevor Monroe

Frances Stemme

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Raquel J. Palacio

Author of ***Wonder***

Dear Raquel J. Palacio,

“Don’t judge a book by its cover,” “it’s what’s on the inside that counts, not the outside,” and “looks don’t matter.” I’ve been hearing quotes like these all my life, and I always thought I wouldn’t. Never would I be so shallow as to judge someone’s looks. I’m in the sixth grade now, and I’ve found that as you get older it becomes harder and harder to not judge. Too often I find myself judging people based on physical traits like how their hair looks, what they’re wearing, or what size they are. And too often I see other people judging me.

After reading your book, ***Wonder***, I realized how much kindness matters. Sometimes I say something insulting because I don’t think that person will ever know or even if they do they won’t care. In the novel, when someone said something about Auggie, positive or negative, it could change the outlook of his whole day. That made me consider, how many days have I changed, positively or negatively? I’ve developed a process now. When I think about saying something, I first ask myself, is what I am about to say going to benefit anyone? Would I want someone saying this about me? Lastly, would this negatively or positively affect someone’s day?

After reading your book, I wonder, in a situation like Auggie’s, would I be like Jack and Summer or would I be like Julian? Jack and Summer were brave and although they knew other kids would be mean to them, they became friends with Auggie. But Julian, on the other hand, bullied Auggie. I want to be like Jack and Summer. Your book inspired me to join the Best Buddies club at my school. In Best Buddies we get to visit the resource room, and do fun activities with the kids with special needs. We get to be their friends. I’ve made a lot of new friends through Best Buddies, and I don’t know if I ever would have joined without reading your book, ***Wonder***. And for that I would like to thank you.

Frances Stemme

Hussein Sulub

Castle North Middle School, Newburgh

Letter to R. J. Palacio

Author of ***Wonder***

Dear Mrs. Palacio,

I have always wondered what the word “different” meant. Some people think it is simply being unique or yourself. It had always bothered me whether or not I was ever going to fit in. Thankfully, ***Wonder*** changed me forever. It showed me what different really looks like and why it only matters what’s on the inside.

I became extremely attached to your book. I was shocked at how quickly and continuously Beecher Prep’s environment changed. At the beginning of the school year, everyone called Auggie a freak. Only a few weeks later, Auggie found himself at the center of attention at school. It really touched me to see kids look past his face and to see Auggie for his personality.

As I trudged through the last few chapters of ***Wonder***, I was being bullied. My first thought was to try to avoid them. That ended up making it worse so I tried to look at it from a different perspective. I pictured myself as Auggie and asked myself what he would do in this situation. Just then, I realized that I needed to stand up for myself.

Auggie repeatedly performs courageous acts and stands up for himself despite the odds, like the time that he sat next to Summer at lunch on the first day of school. Summer stuck with Auggie throughout the whole year. She was given a hard time for doing what she did, but she thought it was worth it. I showed the same courage when I talked to a new student and became good friends with him. He helped me overcome my problem with being bullied.

Wonder taught me many virtues and characteristics to live by through Auggie. From kindness to courage, Auggie symbolizes an ideal human being (who is just an ordinary kid with an extraordinary face). He couldn’t change what he looked like, but he did help inspire the world to do greater things. Confidence was the key to Auggie overcoming his self-consciousness which motivated me to do the same. Thank you, Mrs. Palacio, for inspiring me to have confidence and courage that has changed me forever.

Sincerely,
Hussein Sulub

Level I
Semifinalists

Kiara Bahena

Lindley Elementary, Fort Wayne

Letter to Scott Westerfeld

Author of *Uglies*

Dear Scott Westerfeld,

Your book *Uglies* has changed the way I look at the world. I never really realized how cruel and beautiful people can really be. I always listened to people say being pretty is every girl's wish. I began to believe them.

Then I read your book. I began to ask myself, is pretty really important? When David and Tally get closer Tally questions why she would betray her friends for looks if she's already beautiful in someone else's eyes. I realize pretty is something you could want but it's certainly not worth it to sacrifice and betray your friends in the process. You should always put your friends before looks because you might not have them forever.

The next day I hugged all my friends and said never betray someone who knows you're beautiful, just the way God made you. Never betray someone who loves and cares for you. You may be stuck in darkness but, sooner or later, you'll find the light. We all hugged each other and pinkie promised on it. Your book has really let me connect with my friends and let me see the beauty within everyone whether or not they see it too.

Sincerely,

Kiara Bahena

Meera Bhatia

Castle North Middle School, Newburgh

Letter to J.K. Rowling

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

Dear Mrs. Rowling,

If I were to look in the mirror of Erised now, the thing I desired most would be quite different from what it was a few years ago. A few years ago, what I desired most would be much simpler. I would look in the mirror and see myself surrounded by friends. Friends that wouldn't ditch me. Friends that wouldn't gossip about my faults. Friends that wouldn't bully me. I was never strong enough, brave enough, or smart enough to do anything. Then I read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

When I read the first few chapters, I wanted to stop. I wanted to put this book back on the shelf and go along with my life as if I had never picked it up in the first place. But then Hermione was introduced. I despised her at first. She was too bossy, too much of a know-it-all, too much of a teacher's pet. As I read on, I found out that we were actually similar. We both loved reading and had a hard time making friends. Later, both Harry and I were shocked to see how "Hermione was the last person to do anything against the rules, and here she was, pretending she had, to get them out of trouble." The fact that she had broken the rules wasn't the thing that shocked me; the thing that shocked me was how she, Hermione Granger, had just stood up for something. She had stood up against the rules only to help Harry and Ron, and that inspired me. If an eleven year old fictional character could be brave like that, then surely I could!

I began to change. I raised my hand more frequently. I participated in group discussions. I talked to people I had no desire to talk to before. I ignored the bullies and stood up to the meanest ones. I made friends that I stayed friends with for the rest of the year.

Eventually, those friends ditched me for other people, but somehow I was fine with that. I'm different now. Better. I still get shy talking to other people, and I wouldn't call myself the life of the party. But hey, it's a work in progress. So thank you, Mrs. Rowling, for your book which has made me realize that what I desired most can be made a possibility.

Sincerely,
Meera Bhatia

Kinsey Bruder

Lebanon Middle School, Lebanon

Suzanne Collins

Author of *The Hunger Games*

Dear Ms. Suzanne Collins:

Your book *The Hunger Games* is an amazing book! It was very creative and the imagination it took to create *The Hunger Games* is impressive. Your book inspired me for many reasons. Something that touched me when reading *The Hunger Games* was when the character Katniss volunteered to take Prim's place and fight in the Hunger Games instead. Katniss and Prim remind me of me and my little sister Callie. I definitely know that I would never let Callie go into the Hunger Games and I would always volunteer to take her place just like Katniss did, even though I would be terrified. I think this shows that it is important to sometimes care about others more than just yourself.

Katniss is not only brave and kind but she shows that girls can be just as strong as boys. In one part of the book Katniss fights with a boy who she thought was way stronger than her but even though he was more muscular and bigger than her she was still brave enough to battle him. There are other girl characters that are also strong and brave. For example, Rue was only a little girl but she was brave and kind when she helped Katniss escape from being trapped in the tree and then helped heal Katniss' bites from the tracker jackers. There was also a girl Katniss called Foxface who was very smart and she was able to outsmart the other tributes rather than fight them. Another girl that the readers would consider "bad," was a career tribute and her name was Clove. To me, I thought she was still amazing and strong and had a lot of physical strengths. She could fight very well, even better than some of the boys but her best strength was she could throw knives and never miss. All of these girls in *The Hunger Games* changed the image I had of what girls are capable of and that they can protect themselves and fight back.

After reading this book, this was the first time I understood that this is how the world could end up if we do not work together and if we do not have a fair, organized Government. I did not like how the districts were always making stuff for the Capitol but they were never getting anything in return or getting the time to do anything for themselves. I also did not like how the Government was punishing the people today for the war that happened a

long time ago. I realize that we have a lot of wars that kill innocent people so we have our own Hunger Games every day. I hope that one day we finally will find world peace.

This book has really impacted my life. It has made me want to care more about others and has taught me that I want to be strong even when I am scared. I want to conquer my fears and stand up for myself no matter what I am faced with. Thank you for writing this amazing book and I will continue to be inspired by Katniss every day.

Sincerely,
Kinsey Bruder

Claire Carpenter

Park Tudor School, Indianapolis

Letter to Alex Gino

Author of *George*

Dear Mr. Gino,

Reading has never been my favorite thing to do. If my mother asked me to read a book, I would sulk and whine. She would always say that I have just not found the right book. It turns out, she was right.

When I started to read your book, *George*, I immediately loved it. It was one of the first books to quickly grab my attention, and impact me in a huge way. It made me realize that if a boy or a girl in my school wanted to be the opposite gender, I would be their friend and play with them so that they would not feel that they are alone. Also, when you show an act of kindness, other people will want to do the same.

I really enjoyed how George changed over the course of the book. He started out very shy and nervous to audition for the role of Charlotte, and in the end, she realized she was a brave girl who could accomplish her dreams.

Because of *George*, I learned that I shouldn't judge a book by its cover. Every person you meet has a unique gift to offer the world, and courage can get you through difficult times. Thank you for writing this wonderful and important book.

Sincerely,
Claire Carpenter

Hazel Crow

Burris Laboratory School, Muncie

Letter to Chris Colfer

Author of *The Wishing Spell*

Dear Chris Colfer,

When I was nine years-old, I saw a story in the newspaper about a girl who had given her hair to Locks of Love many times. I was intrigued by how easy it seemed to help someone just by cutting your hair. I decided that I wanted to give it a try. I wanted to be like that girl. I wanted to be able to help. Without much consideration, I decided to donate my hip-length hair. I even convinced my little sister to donate with me. For my sister who was only seven, it just seemed like another haircut, but for me, it was my first real risk-taking adventure, even though I didn't fully appreciate it yet. I remember sitting in the chair picturing a sick girl who would ultimately get my hair.

Then I saw my new reflection in the mirror. I put on a brave face at first, but as the days went on, I felt the change more acutely. My hair felt different when I shook my head. Because of all of the new layers, it wouldn't lay down anymore. I knew I had done a good deed, but I was uncomfortable with this change.

I hadn't thought of this moment for quite some time until I picked up your book *The Wishing Spell*. Last Christmas the only thing on my gift list was your book. I could hardly wait. On Christmas Day a box arrived addressed to me from my grandmother. I was curious to see what it was. I excitedly tore it open and a signed hard copy of *The Wishing Spell* fell into my lap. Your story reminds me to follow my heart and be adventurous in order to survive or fix bad situations. When Alex jumps off the beanstalk, she trusts a soft fall to get away from the giant hungry cat. Conner jumps out of the flaming building with Red's first basket and makes it away safely. Even the Bailey twins represent working hard through challenges when they find their way out of The Land of Stories. Like your characters, I took a risk to help another child, and I learned about cancer along the way, just like Conner and Alex learned so much about their father's land.

I really liked the book because the characters truly inspire me to follow my heart to do what's best. In other words, take some risks and go out of my comfort zone and good will come out of it. One of my favorite parts was

when Alex and Conner were enslaved by the trolls and goblins for trespassing and Trollbella found Conner and started flirting with him. Conner kisses Trollbella because it was the only way Trollbella would free them. This shows that both Conner and Alex were willing to take a huge risk and suffer something unpleasant to get what they need and to make others (from the good side) happy as well.

Even though I didn't care for my new bob haircut, I knew that I had done something good for someone else. Thank you for reminding me that my temporary discomfort with my looks is a small thing compared to fighting childhood cancer. I have read the first four books in your series and I can't wait to see what you teach me in the fifth.

Sincerely,
Hazel Crow

Jillian Flinta

Riverside Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Ginny Rorby

Author of *How to Speak Dolphin*

Dear Ginny Rorby,

1. When in melt down mode hide behind a barrier, such as a chair or couch.
2. Try to calm him down with classical music or pressure, such as a weighted blanket.
3. Try not to fight back unless extremely necessary.

Most people think this list is weird and fake. It is not. My mental list is helpful if my brother, who has autism, gets agitated. I have felt like my family and I are the only ones who have lists like this. Then I read your book *How to Speak Dolphin*.

Before I read *How to Speak Dolphin*, I felt like my family and I were the only ones who had to go through mental lists such as the one above. Like Lily, I felt like no one could relate to my situation. Then after reading your book, I realized everyone struggles but in different amounts and in different ways.

I guess I never realized that sometimes when my older brother has a meltdown, I start to feel sorry for myself. I think about what it would be like to be able to choose a restaurant with no worry or travel further out of the state without fret, but while reading your book I was reminded that others go through similar situations, some even worse. I can't imagine my brother not even being able to talk, like Adam. Neither could I imagine not being able to see (blind) such as Zoe. But I think the hardest part of all would be being away from parts of my family like Lily and Nori.

Now as I look back on how I acted before I read your book, I realized how selfish I was. Now I know that everyone struggles in a way or two, but they'll have checklists to prevent greater struggles. I will always remember, like Lilly, that I am not the only one.

Sincerely,
Jillian Flinta

Emily Frey

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Sharon Draper

Author of ***Out of My Mind***

Dear Sharon Draper,

I am not in a wheelchair. I do not have cerebral palsy. I can communicate easily. I can walk. Although we have our differences, Melody and I are alike. For instance, we are both 11, we both have one younger sister, we both are girls, but one thing is alike us more than any other. I may not have conditions like her, but I know someone who does ... my sister.

My sister is able to walk, although many doctors and physical therapists said it would be impossible. Like Melody, she has been tested, not on intelligence, but on physical ability. Like Melody, the doctors said she wouldn't be able to: walk, skip, run, write, and more. They were all wrong, along with Melody's doctors. She can talk, sometimes, most of the time, too much. But she does have weakness along her left side not allowing her to use the world around her to her full advantage. She has a physical therapist and an occupational therapist to help her gain her strength back. This has greatly improved her muscles, strength, and ability.

Along with those troubles, she also has epilepsy (the disease that causes seizures). Her seizures are special, and rare, because her's are death threatening. Most people's seizures, let them come out of it on their own. Her's however, require the paramedics and ER doctors. Sometimes, even the PICU.

Since her last seizure, she has been traumatized to go to bed at night, kind of like how Melody is afraid to ride in the car.

Your book has changed my life. It helped me see the world more clearly. It taught me to be thankful for what I have. Even though my sister has some issues, there is always someone who has it worse than her. My grandma always says that, "No matter how bad of a situation you're in, there is always someone out there who has it worse than you." ***Out of My Mind*** is the first book that honestly allowed me understand this. It let me re-think how I act. It took me out of me little "pity party" and helped me not only understand my grandma's saying, but also, it allowed me to treat kids, who do have this, differently and better.

Thank you for helping me re-think my actions and way of life. Your book hasn't just been an inspiration for me. It has also opened a window for me that wasn't that I didn't even know I had.

Sincerely,
Emily Frey

Tal Friedman

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Pearl S. Buck

Author of *The Good Earth*

Dear Pearl S. Buck,

“You have to spend money to make money.” “Life is a game and money is how we keep score.” Before reading *The Good Earth*, these quotes about the money would not have meant anything to me. But after reading your book, I suddenly found meaning in these quotes. Some people say money is everything. I know that isn’t true, but money is very satisfying. Your book exploded so many ideas inside of my head that I couldn’t grasp just one. Wang Lung and his family’s story has made me change what I think about my life and how I think about everything related to how money works.

My family is far from poor, or at least not that I know of. But even though I do not know what it feels like to be poor, I learned from Wang Lung about the importance of properly managing money. I learned that even if you have bundles of money to spare, you shouldn’t buy something that you don’t need. It is easy to get carried away with money. You can spend money without even noticing it. When you look back at how much you’ve spent, it surprises you how much you spent on things without even realizing it. Worst of all, many times you don’t even use the things you buy.

When I have to use my own money to purchase things, I have noticed that I don’t often overspend without thinking. Two years ago, I was looking in a gift catalog and I found a portable mini retro video game player. Trust me, I wanted it like a monkey wants a good banana. I did the dishes, the laundry, and yard work until finally, after about two weeks, I had earned \$40 dollars which was just the right amount to buy the video game system. That made me proud, working for something.

I’m thankful to have good parents who model how to work hard. My dad didn’t grow up in a poor family, but when he reached college, he got interested in being a doctor. He went to medical school and worked hard to become a great doctor with a good job. My dad had to be in school for 18 years to get there. My mom also worked hard to become a journalist. She doesn’t write anymore as a job, but she still works hard for the community and has many jobs that she doesn’t get paid for. She teaches me that not all jobs have to be paid to be satisfying.

Maybe this is why the scene at the end of your novel bothers me. When the sons sell Wang Lung's land that he worked so hard to get, I wanted to crawl into the book and change what happened. Wang Lung grew up on that land and lived a third of his life there, but yet his sons don't care about Wang Lung's feelings because they only care about money.

"Money is a very excellent servant, but a terrible master." Your book will always have the power to impact me, no matter what happens. I think I know now why my parents recommended your book to me. It has made me think of many decisions I will have to make as an adult, but also as a young person now.

Sincerely,
Tal Friedman

Anna Gobeyn

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Sharon Draper

Author of ***Out of My Mind***

Dear Sharon Draper,

Thank you for making me a better person. Thank you for making me realize. For making me realize that I take way too much for granted. I opened your book and I started to think. I thought about what I have. I can talk. I can move. I can walk. But Melody can't. She lacks all the abilities that most people have, but she still is grateful.

Grateful that she is alive. Your book made me think that way. I have everything that I need, but I still want more. Melody does not have everything, but she doesn't complain.

There is nothing I need. I have a mom and dad, and two brothers. I have a house and food. I have two dogs. I need nothing, but I always want things. Melody doesn't care that she has to be fed and bathed. She doesn't care that she can't play and run. She will occasionally complain, but we all would. What touched me was Melody's personality. Her "I will" personality. If I was Melody, I would always wish. I would want to be able to walk, talk, and move. But she doesn't. When her parents start talking about the new baby, and she starts to think they are going to take her to a nursing home, I felt so bad for her. They did not realize that she was so smart, and that she didn't really care much about falling out of her chair, being fed and clothed. They did not know who Melody was because she could not express herself. She lashes out occasionally, but if I was her, I would scream and wiggle all of my life. I can't imagine what it would be like to be Melody, but as I think about it, I would always feel like I was stuck. Stuck and always wanting to escape. After I started reading this, I started to play with a kid that has "special needs."

His name is Anthony. He can walk, talk, run, and play. We play cards. He is no different than any other kids. Melody is no different, she just can't do some things that others can. Anthony is really funny and kind. He makes jokes like any "normal" kid, and he is just like everyone else.

Now that I've been playing with him for a month or two, I don't even remember that he is "special needs." I just know him for being funny and nice. If you hadn't written this book, I would not have discovered Anthony, who has given me a whole new perspective.

Sincerely,
Anna Gobeyn

Emmy Gottsman

Brownsburg East Middle School, Brownsburg

Letter to Holly Goldberg Sloan

Author of *Counting by 7s*

Dear- Holly Goldberg Sloan,

“Emmy you are a human calculator and a human dictionary.” Those have been some of the many nicknames that I have been called in the past because I was different. By reading your book *Counting by 7s*, I have been able to relate to Willow and her story has changed me.

I have always been different than my peers. I would always have different interests. When I would be lost in a book, my friends and peers would be doing video games or doing their phones. Like Willow, this would leave me with a lot of people asking me for answers because I was “smart,” or being my friend in order to get good grades. As a result, I would end up with very little true friends, those friends I would do anything for.

Once I read *Counting by 7s*, I knew those true friends who I had to be thankful for. They looked through their own interests of good grades or answers and saw me for who I was, a true friend. Just like Willow, I have seven people who I treat as family, that are special to me. They cheer me on with everything I do, even if I mess up or do bad. If they help me, they will tell me the truth, even if it is good or bad so their meaningful input will actually guide me.

Even though I haven’t lost my parents, as Willow did, I learned I need to be thankful. I need to respect everything I have, and I need to live life to it’s fullest. What I have today, I may not have tomorrow.

I know now that it’s okay to be different. It’s okay to be strange and smart. Being different will lead me to many opportunities in the future. If people decide to call me names in the future, I know to ignore and remember *Counting by 7s*. I want to thank you for making me realize all that I have through reading your book.

Sincerely yours,
Emmy Gottsman

Hannah Handrock

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Lauren Brooke

Author of *Coming Home*

Dear Lauren Brooke,

When my Uncle John died, I was devastated. Your book helped me get through this hardship though. In *Coming Home*, Amy Fleming's mother was killed in a car accident. This was not quite what happened to my Uncle, but in all, they both passed from this world.

I could not get over the death of my Uncle easily, but I thought about *Coming Home*, and how Amy was mad at the world and didn't want sympathy or love. She was just like me, except I did not lock myself in my room! When I read the part where Amy's Grandfather came up to her, and told her how important it was to let in her friend to hang out, I thought of how unthoughtful I had been. I had been keeping myself from my friends and family who wanted to comfort me. Even though I felt like I wanted to be alone, that wasn't the right thing. I was hurting my friends' feelings, but I didn't know until your book pulled me back into the real world.

Only then did I realize that I had been acting like the world revolved around me. I shut out both others and my feelings. My head would say, "Let your friends in, they miss you. And you miss them." but my true self would disagree and keep them out. When I saw how Amy finally realized the true world, I did too. I noticed that everything would be better once my friends and family could embrace me. So I let them in. When I first opened the door to my heart to let my family and friends in, I was embraced both in spirit and in flesh.

Now, whenever I read any of your *Heartland* books, I relate myself to Amy and am taught a lesson by how she reacts and the consequences - good or bad - that follow. Thank you for showing me the real life.

Sincerely,

Hannah Handrock

Kaley Hurst

Castle North Middle School, Newburgh

Letter to Suzanne Collins

Author of *The Hunger Games*

Dear Suzanne Collins,

We look down at our food and think, “I’m really hungry” but that doesn’t mean we’re grateful. Have you ever just stopped and thanked your parents for your food or your clothes? My point, we don’t realize how good our lives are. That’s why your book inspired me.

Before reading your book I didn’t think about these things. Your book inspired me to dig deeper on how and what we should be grateful for. Reading about how Katniss dealt with having to feed herself and her family was very inspiring. When she was given the bread by Peeta she was grateful because she had no food. We, as people with food and water, don’t realize what a piece of bread could mean to somebody with nothing. I have never been scared or hungry and your book has made me realize that I should be more grateful for my things.

I realized that if Katniss could be internally grateful for some bread then I should at least thank my parents or the lunch ladies more often because in truth, I have never realized how important food/water is to some people. I didn’t realize that a loaf of bread could mean the world to somebody or even save their lives. I didn’t understand that I am really lucky for having my house and my food. I’m lucky to be with my family. I’m lucky for being the person I am and I didn’t know this until I read your book.

This letter was just to say thank you, for reminding me what I had and how I should be grateful for it. I am so glad I read your book because now when I get mad or upset about not getting something I want I will remember what our book taught me and that I should be grateful for what I already have. So I just wanted to say thank you for that reminder because it has made a big impact on me and my life. Thank you, Suzanne Collins.

Sincerely,
Kaley Hurst

Gabrielle Kraft

Park Tudor School, Indianapolis

Letter to Markus Zusak

Author of *The Book Thief*

Dear Markus Zusak,

Books have been my one safe place to go. When I was bullied or put down, books comforted me. I have been reading for nine years, and no other book has changed me the way yours has. Liesel, the main character, was always alone. Her words spoke to me when I needed them most. She told me to be strong and brave, to be who you are and to be different.

I no longer see the world as wanting to change me to be skinny or wear tight clothes. I see it as me wanting to change the world. The earth is a difficult place, and I realized that I wasn't an orphan or a starving refugee. I was a girl who wanted to change the world. Your book has inspired me not to see my life as unfair, but to look upon the world and change it. I am not perfect, and neither is Liesel, but I am not on the edge of poverty, or very ill. *The Book Thief* showed me I am lucky. People do not realize how lucky they are to have a place to go home to, or a family to greet, and I used to be one of them, just another face in the crowd.

I knew this book changed me the second I finished it. My life was no longer a bore. I no longer felt the urge to eat out every day, or complain about lasagna. *The Book Thief* affected me like no other book had. I realized that my perspective had changed. I took notice of a sunset, or stopped to smell the roses. No longer was I another ungracious student, I began to not think of my life as unfair, but rather blessed. I was now aware this book had changed me for the better.

This book made me understand that I should be grateful to have the opportunities I have. I can honestly say I am grateful for what I have, and others should too. We are lucky to have a home, parents, and freedom. People just like me, in Africa or America, Egypt and South America, all across the world, children are abused, women are beaten, others are starving, and I have everything. Everything. But yet, people are ungrateful because it is not enough. The food, education, rights. It is never enough. This book opened my eyes and showed me how fortunate I was. Liesel had her world ripped apart when she was bombed. Her adopted parents and best friend were torn away. A simple morsel of bread would be enough to

eat. A toothbrush would be a miracle. I began to be even more thankful for living in a safe place, or having access to an abundance of supplies. ***The Book Thief*** taught me to appreciate what I have, because you can never know how lucky I am.

Gabrielle Kraft

John Latimer

Riverside Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Christopher Paul Curtis

Author of ***Elijah of Buxton***

Dear Mr. Curtis,

Having courage gets you to unimaginable places in life, even those we don't think to reach. It defines us and makes legends out of those who embrace it, though many let fear drown their decisions in something that cannot easily be removed. Your book, ***Elijah of Buxton***, has taught me the importance of having courage.

In your book, Elijah leaves all his rights behind and travels south to find his friends money, even when he has to travel hundreds of miles away from home. When I had an option to go to a different organization that was abnormal or stay with my local team, I felt the pressure that Elijah must have felt if he stayed, I would know everybody and be a star on the team. But if I went to the other team, I wouldn't know anyone and I'd be average at best.

I chose to take the harder and newer path, like Elijah. It has helped me in tight situations and has made me a better person. Sometimes I ponder if I had stayed on my local team. I would have had what I wanted, friends, good coaches, and good concession stands. But the other team was at a higher competitive level, and was faced with better opponents. This would make me a better player.

We all are challenged with different adversities throughout our life. If we cower from these, we are doomed to fail. But if we attack them and have courage, not even the sky is the limit, and reading ***Elijah of Buxton*** has made this a reality for me.

Sincerely,
Johnny Latimer

Gwen Lawler

Burriss Laboratory School, Muncie

Letter to Christopher Paolini

Author of *Eragon*

Dear Christopher Paolini,

When I unwrapped my present on my tenth birthday, I held in my hands your book, *Eragon*. My step dad said that he had gotten it for me because he saw some of his seventeen to eighteen year-old students reading it, and he thought I might find it interesting. I smiled and read the back cover. It did sound interesting. Afterwards, I took it upstairs and put it on my bookshelf, eagerly awaiting the moment I would start reading it. I started it later that summer. After the first few pages, I was hooked and couldn't put it down.

I soon finished *Eragon* and then moved on to *Eldest*. I remember taking it into school, feeling very proud of myself for reading such a large book. But the only time I ever really got the chance to read it was at home after I'd finished my homework. Then I'd delve into the magical world of Alagaesia, where trouble always lurked around a corner, whether it was an Urgal, Durza, Murtagh, or sometimes even a whole army that couldn't be killed! It was always a relief to be able to read another big chapter after I'd gotten into a fight with one of my siblings or simply needed a break from the real world.

I guess I've always believed in a little bit of magic - that somewhere, somehow, it's part of our world. And maybe, well maybe that magic isn't in some far away place, where no one will ever find it. Perhaps it is woven into our everyday lives, but we just don't know it. Perhaps magic is what makes the clouds take their shape, the rivers find the oceans, the scrawniest sapling grow into the most magnificent oak tree. Perhaps magic is what generates the power of friends and family, empowers them to love and care for you, especially in times of need. Throughout *The Inheritance Cycle*, Eragon learned through magic about the power of family and friends. And when the last book ended, I remember thinking for a moment about how many of his Eragon's relations had sacrificed so much for him to get to where he was. Like in *Inheritance*, when he came face to face with Galbatorix, Eragon had Arya, Saphira, Elva, and the many Eldunari with him. Together they defeated the evil king. And to this day, I haven't and likely won't ever forget what it means to have someone there for you, who will always love and care for you.

Well, in a way, I guess I didn't completely start to believe in the importance of friends and family in times of need when I read your book series. When I was 6 years old, my mother and father got a divorce. Sadly just 9 months after that my father died.

Sometimes I try to remember what those difficult days were like, but I can't. What I do remember though is that my family, friends, and family-friends were always there to comfort me, to help take my mind off of reality. It was my own version of magic. I was greatly impacted, just like Eragon was when he lost Brom and Garrow who were like fathers to him (Brom really was!). Even though Eragon lost his father figures when he was 16-17 to the Razac while I lost mine at 7 to depression, we both had someone that was there for us, someone to help us through it. I've realized that 99.9% of the time, having someone there for me when I'm going through a hard time really helps. And, I guess that one of the most important things in life are the people who love me and are always there for me. I think that Eragon and I have learned that throughout our many (and also very different) "adventures" in life.

Thank you so much, Mr. Paolini, for writing this great and extremely well-written book series. It has changed my life in more ways than one.

Sincerely,
Gwen Lawler

Sarah Maniscalco

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Sharon Draper

Author of ***Out of My Mind***

Dear Sharon M. Draper,

Imagine not being able to communicate with the world. Suffocating in your own tiny bubble. I may not have a physical disability, but now I can imagine the conflict and struggle that Melody must have faced everyday. Your book helped me understand her difficulties. Before I read ***Out of My Mind***, I didn't understand the full struggle that kids with disabilities have to go through, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year.

Children with disabilities are often not considered needed in our world. They are regarded as useless human beings when they could be smart enough to invent a life changing invention. After I read your book, I realized the love, support, and attention these kids need. They need a chance.

When I saw a classmate of mine reading ***Out of My Mind***, I knew it was a book I wanted to read. When I finally picked it up to read, my view was changed forever.

Your book taught me that even if you are different than other people, or you have a disability; it doesn't have to mean your difference makes you less valuable. You can be just as smart as anyone else, it doesn't matter what you look like on the outside.

My eyes were opened in a whole new way to the world. I loved reading about Melody's journey and how she found a way to triumph even when everyone around her didn't believe in her. She was able to pop her tiny bubble and journey into the world. When Melody received her computer, it was even a happy moment for me, as a reader, because I could see how happy Melody and everyone around her was.

Nothing touched me more then when Melody told her parents "I love you" for the first time. Her journey gave me courage and inspired me to be the best person I could possibly be. She showed me how much stronger kids with disabilities can be than most people give them credit for.

Now, after I know the struggle these kids go through, I understand how they are so underestimated. They are a part of our world, and we need to embrace them with open arms. So, thank you for writing this wonderful book and for sharing such an important message with the world.

Sincerely,
Sarah Maniscalco

Emma Mann

New Palestine Elementary School, New Palestine

Letter to Eleanor Estes

Author of *The Hundred Dresses*

Dear Eleanor Estes,

I remember wearing my favorite pair of jeans and my new poncho to school the day I got back from Fall Break. I loved this new poncho so much, but it is something I will never wear outside of my house again. It was from New Mexico and had a very different style, and that is what I loved about it. I walked into the classroom feeling so proud of that poncho until some people asked me what I was wearing and snickered. This drained all of the good feeling out of me.

I bet this is how Wanda Petronski, the main character, felt in your book *The Hundred Dresses*. Just like kids made fun of my poncho, they made fun of Wanda's clothes because she wore the same pale blue dress each day. Wanda was taunted and teased for her looks, and I did not want what happened to Wanda to happen to me.

Though this book was written a long time ago, the lesson it teaches still applies to life today. Teasing and making fun of others will likely happen many years from now.

Like me, Wanda was self-conscious about her dress. She told the kids at school she had a hundred dresses. No one believed her, but what they didn't know was that she had drawn 100 dresses. She actually did have 100 dresses - they just weren't real. The kids didn't know this until the class had a drawing contest, and her drawings were posted around the room because she won. Her classmates wanted to apologize, but it was too late. Wanda Petronski had moved away because of the mean words and bullying.

I have read this book twice, once in second grade and again in fifth grade. When I was in second grade I didn't really understand the message that you were trying to teach. When I read it again in fifth grade, I still didn't get it all the way. I thought about it this year when the kids made fun of my poncho, and I finally really understood it.

I still haven't worn my poncho back to school. But after thinking about your book, I might pull it out of my closet and give it a try. Thank you for this.

Sincerely,

Emma Mann

Hailey McAtee

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Erin Hunter

Author of *Seekers*

Dear Erin Hunter,

Before I read your books, friends and family seemed like they would never leave and all of the world's problems would never affect me. After, I started to realize things I hadn't before. I started your book series, *Seekers*, just because it had a bear on it, but it turned out to be a very amazing and emotional book. I have finished book five of *Return to the Wild*, and some of the important themes I have found in the books were family and adventure.

It was emotional when some of the bears left the group because I could connect with the other characters. Because of the character changes, I was able to see each of the bears emotions in different eyes. In the book, *Spirits in the Stars*, I could not imagine what it was like to lose Urjuak. This influenced me because now I know I should be grateful for my friends and family. They could be gone sooner or later, so I should use my time wisely with them, just as the bears in the story.

After reading your books, I have welcomed more friends into my group of friends. This is because the bears were like family and were welcoming others into their friendship. The bears always knew they would have to split up at one point or another so they were looking for new friends to keep them going, which is what I should do now.

Even though the bears were small, they made a big difference. With a little help, I know that I can make a big difference, too. Deforestation, global warming, oil spills, and hunting were just a few of the major conflicts in the books, and the bears were able to fend for themselves and do what was right. Since these bears could do this, even in a fiction book, it made me feel like I could do so much more.

Because of these topics, feelings, characters, and much more were described in detail, I was able to connect them to things that have happened, or could happen, in real life. I never thought a fiction book about animals could be so powerful, but now I can.

Sincerely,
Hailey McAtee

Elisabeth Melms

Castle North Middle School, Newburgh

Letter to Jerry Spinelli

Author of *Stargirl*

Dear Jerry Spinelli,

It was really hard for me to write about how I connected to your book, *Stargirl*. Connecting to your book wasn't the problem. The problem was writing this letter. "But how?" I asked myself. How was I, an average 11-year-old girl supposed to write about how a fabulously quirky high school girl changed my entire viewpoint?

In sixth grade, I jumped at the chance to join a high-ability class. I had spent the summer beforehand waiting in anticipation. One problem, I only knew two people in my new class. When the school year began, I watched my classmates but never became really close with anyone new. I thought that I'd just have a few friends, and that I'd be lucky if I figured out one boy's name. Reading your book changed that.

After reading about *Stargirl*, I decided to try to live like her. She let rude comments roll off her like raindrops on an umbrella, and didn't care if people disliked her hair or thought that her outfit was crazy. I made an effort to be friendly and tried not to care about what others thought. After trying out her ideas, I realized *Stargirl* was actually on to something. I wasn't self-conscious about being in front of all these new people.

When I tried to be friends with them, I actually succeeded. I learned that the secret to making friends was being nice and being myself. Who would have guessed that I'd learn this from *Stargirl*?

Life is not always picture perfect. There have been days when I couldn't stay upbeat, or when people who I thought I were my friends said things that led me to believe otherwise. That is when I learned the most about staying confident and letting mean words breeze past me. *Stargirl* gave me the confidence to stay true to myself.

Stargirl is sure of herself. She always looks on the bright side of things. Because of her, I now have tons of new friends, a new attitude, and a different perspective. So thank you, Mr. Spinelli. Thank you for creating a role model to whom I could look up to.

Thank you for inspiring me. Without you, I wouldn't have realized my connection to ***Stargirl***, and I wouldn't have found myself in the new, promising situation I am in now.

Sincerely,
Elisabeth Melms

Aliyah Moore

Crestview Elementary, Indianapolis

Letter to Raquel J. Palacio

Author of ***Wonder***

Dear Raquel J. Palacio,

Your books gave me wings of courage. Your book gave wings of power over my life. August and my struggles are almost identical, even though I don't have a facial deformity. Hi, I am Aliyah. I have been bullied for years on various topics: size, weight, beauty, and so much more. I never really had the courage to stand up to my bully. I never really had the power to control what they said about me. Then I read ***Wonder***.

In second, third, fourth, fifth, and even now, I still go home crying. When I started reading ***Wonder***. I couldn't put the book down. Once I got my hearing aid, the teasing got worse. Some people even called me old lady. When I first started the book I wish I was home-schooled, but after a while I would never wish that on my worst enemy. Without school, Auggie would have never met Charlotte, Jack, Will, or even Julian. So if I would have never gone to school, I would have never had friends to stand by my side.

Whenever I got near ***Wonder***, I felt like a moth drawn to a flame. It was like when I read ***Wonder***, it made me feel like I had control over my life and what people, but I knew that would never happen. To me, ***Wonder*** had a lot of questions to make you think. Like "will I ever fit in?" or "Am I a pushover?"

This book was almost a mirror of my life except as I said before I don't have a facial deformity. Some people like my hearing aid; some called me old lady before. What I have learned from this book is that I may not be perfect, I don't have to change for someone else to like me. I learned that I am wonderful the way I am.

Yours truly,
Aliyah Moore

Will Nebesio

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Todd Burpo

Author of *Heaven is For Real*

Dear Todd Burpo,

In your book *Heaven is For Real*, Colton has to go into emergency surgery because he has internal bleeding. That is like my sister. She had to go into emergency treatment, not for surgery but because they found she had a cancer in her blood. It was a very hard time for me and my family to get over because she never showed any sign of it. We thought for a long time that she would not make it because we had not caught the disease in time. Then she went to the ICU and later died. She never said, "I met Jesus," but I would like to think she is in heaven now.

That made me think heaven might actually be real. It made me feel better that in heaven she could always hear and see me. I read your book a little while ago and it is a book I will never forget. I still do the same things I do because my sister will enjoy it or have a laugh out of it. My sister and I would always go to the zoo and museums together. Just like when Colton got to hold a spider at the museum, we got to hold a snake at the zoo and a mouse at an animal museum. We had so many great memories together. One of my favorite memories is when we saw who could hold this snake longer because both of us were very scared of snakes.

Your book changed my perspective because I now know that I need to have as much fun as I can in my life. I have read your book more than once and each time I read it, I appreciate it more. Your book never gets old. It always changes me in a different way each time I read your book.

Sincerely,
William Nebesio

Ella Neely

Burris Lab School, Muncie

Letter to James Howe

Author of *The Misfits*

Dear James Howe,

Sticks and stones will break our bones, but names will break our spirit. I cannot stress enough the truth of the no-name party's slogan. In fourth grade, I was bullied by a small group of boys, and it felt awful. I can't imagine how terrible it would be to be teased every year, by everyone, like the protagonists in *The Misfits*.

The Misfits pulled at my heartstrings with heartwarming, emotional (and funny) passages to get its message across. If *The Misfits* had not been emotional, I would not have understood its important lesson nearly as well. It was also a page-turner, despite being set in a middle school, which makes kids more likely to read it and learn its important lesson. I think this book should be required reading for middle schoolers. I truly believe it could bring down bullying (especially name-calling) in schools across the country. I'm sure it would work better than those PowerPoint presentations the counselors show us every year. Often bullying is a side plot, but you brought it to center stage.

The Misfits made me think about how much bullying really goes on in other schools. I go to a relatively small K-12 school (about 40-50 kids per grade), so there is less bullying. I read *The Misfits* for a book club, and all the girls in it who go to my school were very surprised. We had read about bullying before, but I thought the Authors were exaggerating. After reading your book, which was full of truth, I knew there was no exaggeration in those other books.

The Misfits also sparked my thinking about people I don't necessarily like. What is their life like? Could there be a good reason for their actions? After reading your book, I have tried to be more accepting of all people. I really realized this lesson during the scene where Mr. Kellerman pours out his life story to Bobby as they walk home from work. Bobby is more accepting of Mr. Kellerman after that conversation, even if he hopes they don't have anything else (other than their name and the fact that they were both bullied) in common. I also noticed this lesson when Bobby was giving his speech, talking about being called "fluff" in third grade.

His reason for eating peanut butter and marshmallow fluff sandwiches had to do with his internal grief about his mother, about which the kids who teased him did not know. I can even use this lesson to better communicate with and understand my brother!

I formed a personal connection with Addie as soon as she refused to say the Pledge of Allegiance. We are very much alike! She reads *The New York Times*; I read *The Week* (a news magazine). We both worry about world issues that other kids don't know about. I am smart, as well, though I try not to act like a know-it-all. Addie is a bolder version of me. If I could talk to Addie, I would tell her to maybe tone it down a little, but I could learn something from her, too: don't be afraid to speak your mind when you care about something. Also, she's right: there is not liberty and justice for all in America.

Racial discrimination and stereotypes are another topic not usually discussed in books for kids my age. There are some books on racial discrimination, but not enough. *The Misfits*, while juggling many important issues, also manages to neatly fit this one. Even Addie, the one person who speaks up against racial discrimination, is somewhat guilty, trying to get DuShawn on her campaign ticket just because he's black. Also, she assumes he has been teased about the color of his skin when he hasn't. I am also guilty of racial stereotyping because I have been affected by everything I hear and see. I am more likely to think an African-American man looks creepy/scary than a white man. I will do my best to not think this way anymore.

I hope you can now see how much *The Misfits* has affected my thinking and worldview, mostly my view of others, but also my view of myself. Thank you so much for writing this heartwarming story.

Sincerely,
Ella Neely

Olivia Norton

Mary Evelyn Castle Elementary, Indianapolis

Letter to Greg Mortenson

Author of *Three Cups of Tea*

Dear Greg Mortenson,

Before I read *Three Cups of Tea*, I thought I had life all figured out. I would graduate college, become an architect, go to Kenya, give lots of money to Kenya, and have a couple of kids and that's kind of all. I always knew that I wanted to help people around the world. My family sponsors 6 children and we donate a bunch of money to foundations. But I always want to do more. I have a lot of free time but I always end up being lazy and saying it's too big of a project. But in *Three Cups of Tea* you're challenging yourself to build a school for the village Korphe. Even though you had little funding, and time.

I'm the type of person who likes school and I'm always doing extra work. I sometimes feel like I use school to work my way out of helping people. So I have decided to push extra school work out of the way. Like when you decided that helping people was more important than living like a king. Or in my case living like a king is the luxury of school work. Since I read *Three Cups of Tea*, I have been inspired to help the world. Like you I'm trying to make our world and community a better place. First, I am trying to start a school garden to lower CO₂ levels. I have also started a coat drive to help Syrian refugees coming to Indiana. So next time I have free time I'm going to do something to change the world.

Whenever you read a book you never really know what's in store for you. With your book, I thought I was going to be reading about some guy who built a school and is now famous. But I was wrong, it was a whole story of hardships and joy. Like my life.

When I try to help it can either bring joy and be a success. But sometimes it won't go anywhere at all. So you have to try, try again so what I'm doing will bring joy and be a success. That's what you did. You tried again until you finished the school (and the bridge too).

So the lesson I learned was anybody can do anything they want, no matter what, including me. So next time I get a chance, I'm going to do something to change the world, or at least someone's life. So thank you Greg for impacting my life so that I can impact others' lives.

Sincerely,
Olivia Norton

Chiamaka Okoro

Riverside Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Marissa Meyer

Author of *The Lunar Chronicles*

Dear Marissa Meyer,

Little Red Riding Hood, Beauty and the Beast, Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and Cinderella. Sound familiar? These are all fairy tales found in *The Lunar Chronicles*, stories to cherish from childhood that are whimsical and gripping, yet frivolous and unrealistic. A lowly servant marrying a prince after they met once at a ball could never happen in real life ... right?

You took these much beloved fables and skillfully wove them into a riveting tale of romance, struggle, and self-worth using oddly relatable characters that I laughed with, cried with, and felt as if they were right by my side as I read, immersed in the future the world that you created. Cinder and all of her friends have the most immense amount of willpower that I have ever seen put down on paper, and her story gripped me with iron claws that refused to let me go. Just as I finished *Winter*, and was preparing to read it again, I noticed the story in the story, the lesson that the book had been teaching me all along in its own secretive way; that everyone has something to fight for, and if they really believe in it they can succeed and more.

One sentence that took 824 pages to explain. Before I read your series, I thought I was just a normal, ordinary kid. When I watched the news and saw people doing extraordinary acts of kindness and being heroic, I would think: I could never do that, I'm only twelve years old! *Winter* changed my perspective and spurred me on to realize that this normal, ordinary kid could actually make a difference. That was one battle that I've won, even though it was against myself.

Winter also opened my eyes to some of the many causes I have to fight for, one of them concerning my little brother, who has a form of autism. He attends a special needs class in school, and my family and I are trying to teach him certain skills such as reading and writing so he could attend a normal kindergarten class.

Along with my brother, I want to help the refugees escaping from Syria, people with cancer all around the world, all of the people in poverty, and fix about two million other dilemmas worrying people worldwide. While most

may seem too large to control and force to subside, one can make irreparable dents in them; and that is much better than nothing.

The last, and possibly most valuable thing your book taught me is the only things that matter more than what you're fighting for is the friends by your side, your allies behind you, and how much you truly, earnestly want to change the world.

So as I sit here in my room, the very room I finished *Winter*, the book I'd be blind without, I realize that instead of dreaming about how I might change the world later, I should be thinking about how I will change the world now. Even if I don't succeed in my dream of changing the world, I hope I can at least inspire people to make a difference like so many before me have, and will to come.

Yours truly,
Chiamaka Okoro

Catherine Richardson

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Ishmael Beah

Author of *A Long Way Gone*

Dear Ishmael Beah,

I thought *A Long Way Gone, Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* was fiction at first. It just seemed impossible that what happened to you could happen to anyone. Ever. How could someone's world be destroyed in a second? That made your book hard to read. It made me feel so terrible about crying when I didn't get the shoes I wanted or the best grade on a test. How could I have ever cried over something so little, so miniscule, so insignificant?

I used to wonder why people killed other people. I used to think everyone who had ever taken someone else's life had to be an insane psychotic maniac who should be locked up in an asylum for their entire life. Maybe they didn't even deserve to live a life. Maybe I didn't realize I thought that, but I did. Somewhere deep in my subconscious mind, I thought that anyone who killed anyone was crazy, that they were something less than human. Your book gave me the raw, ugly truth. It didn't try to hide behind pretty dresses or shiny shoes, but spit it out, naked and unclothed. I think you understood that you couldn't really slowly introduce people to death and war, or to the fact that people who kill others aren't crazy, they're normal, like the people who read your book. Maybe they, and I, still don't get that, but I think I understand hatred, revenge, war, and death a little more now. Even though I've never seen it, never really had it happen to me, I still think I know how you felt. There were some nights that I would be reading and have to put your book down. I couldn't bear to see things through your eyes, to have your memories, to feel your feelings. I can't imagine what it would be like to not be able to put your book down, to be stuck in it, to be you.

After I read your book, I started to find myself thinking more. I would watch a movie or read a book and feel more connected to the antagonist than the protagonist. I felt like the antagonist didn't deserve to die, that the protagonist had just screwed up less than the antagonist and that somehow made them worthy of winning. I think the antagonists deserve more credit than they get. Even in the stories where the antagonist gets off, people seem to sympathize with the protagonist more. I began to think about how in life, real life, there is no protagonist, no antagonist. In real life, we aren't so

obviously good or bad. In real life, we aren't classified, put in groups, destined to be good or bad, not turned into a protagonist or an antagonist. Instead, we're a mix. People say we all have some good in us, but I think it's more important that we all have some bad in us. No one's perfect, I know that, but there's more. No one's anything near perfect. People say we all make mistakes, but it's really that our mistakes don't determine who we are. Most importantly though, the mistakes we've made in the past, no matter how many or how big, are things that we shouldn't be judged on but things that should be forgotten.

Sincerely,
Catherine Richardson

Mei Mei Rossi

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Ying Ying Fry

Author of *Kids Like Me*.

Dear Ying Ying Fry,

My days began as a baby in an orphanage halfway across the world in China. When I discovered that you and I are both from the same orphanage in the Hunan Province, I felt an instant connection with your book. While I have no memory of my life in the orphanage, your book opened my eyes to what my first year of life was like. Reading your book, *Kids Like Me* in China, made me realize how lucky I am to have found my forever family.

In the United States, families are allowed to have as many children as they desire. It is limitless. However, in China, families are restricted to one, occasionally two, children. Therefore, children don't have siblings. They are lonely. When parents grow old, the boys are responsible for taking care of them. This makes parents feel like they are forced to have a boy, so many girls are sent to the orphanage. Like you, Ying Ying, I was one of those girls. What the Chinese government does to the girls and their families is cruel. It is very wrong, but my feelings about the policy are inexplicable. For me, the policy is kind of like a "Catch-22." The good part about it is that I am living happily with my forever family in the U.S. doing what I love most. However, I will never know how my life in China could have turned out.

Your book made me think about what my life would have been like had I stayed in China. I could still have been living in the orphanage. If I had stayed, it is almost guaranteed that I wouldn't have had the opportunity to do what I love most, music. It has changed my life in a way that nothing else can. Playing violin in orchestra has given me the privilege to perform in New York City at Carnegie Hall. Now that alone is a dream come true. I also play flute in my school band and Advanced Jazz Band. If I had found a forever family in China, they might not have been wealthy enough to afford instruments, let alone music lessons.

Staying in China would also mean that I would not have the brother that I have now. However, there is a possibility that I have biological siblings in China. Maybe I was the first born, but I was an unwanted girl. You said that you would like to know whether or not you had biological siblings and you would like to meet them. Unlike you, I don't feel the need to meet any

siblings that I might have because I already have a wonderful brother. If I didn't have the brother I have now, my life would not be the same. My brother has impacted my life in so many positive ways. Without him, I wouldn't have anyone to annoy. He helps me fix my computer when I accidentally delete all of my school files, tune my violin, and complete my math. Even though he laughs at me when I get my hair stuck in my bed frame, he is the best brother I could ever ask for.

Ying Ying, when you went to China and visited your orphanage, it made me think about how my life could have turned out if I hadn't been adopted. From your experience, living in the orphanage didn't seem so bad. It definitely wouldn't be the same as having a forever family, but I would still have friends and go to school. Living in the orphanage would be like living with a big family that just keeps growing which does seem kind of fun. However, I would still prefer living with the family I have now. Even though we are not connected by blood, the family I have now loves and cares for me. To me, it doesn't matter whether or not a family is made up of all biological children. As long as they all love each other, they are a family.

In your book, you wrote, "If I hadn't been born in China, I wouldn't be me." The same goes for me. If I wasn't born in China, my parents would not have adopted me. Without me, they probably wouldn't be traveling to New York City to watch their child perform at Carnegie Hall.

Throughout my life, I have come a long way in both distance and music. I started in China then came to America, where I became a little sister and began violin. If I had stayed in China, I would have been growing up in a different lifestyle and environment. I would be an entirely different person from who I am now.

Sincerely,
Mei Mei Rossi

Jack Schilson

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to J. K. Rowling

Author of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

Dear J. K. Rowling,

According to BBC NEWS, “Every minute, two people are killed in conflicts around the world.” This means 120 deaths every hour, and 2,880 deaths every day. So many people die every day, and many of them are unnoticed. The series *Harry Potter* has inspired me to believe that every life matters, every single one of the 2,880 deaths that happen every day just from conflicts, matter.

When I was reading *Harry Potter*, I had so many emotional responses to the book, especially in the seventh and final book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. When Lupin died, and Tonks died, and Fred Weasley died, and even when Snape died, I felt almost as though these characters were real, they really had suffered a horrible fate at the hands of Voldemort or his death eaters. It was as though I really knew all of the characters, as though they would actually be lost from my life.

Harry Potter did actually know all of these characters, and he felt just as I felt when they died: as though part of me was gone, missing, a feeling of hollow sadness and melancholy. Lupin, Tonks, Fred, Snape, Sirius, Dobby, Dumbledore: all gone, all dead.

People often have so many other people who love them: their family, their friends. If people die, then everyone who loves them will take that burden as well. Every day 2,880 deaths happen. Every day 2,880 lives are lost because of conflict. Every day 2,880 people could have family and friends suffering from their death. Even if you do not know any people that died in a war, that doesn't mean those people's lives don't matter. Even if someone who dies from conflict, or from anything, doesn't have any personal connection to you, they probably have a personal connection to other people. Those other people are hurt inside, and often times each life that is lost results in an equally large amount of suffering to friends and family.

Try putting yourself in those people's shoes. Imagine what it would be like to lose a friend or family member, or to die yourself. If that happened to you, you would want people respecting how horrible that is. You would want people thinking from your perspective as well as their own. The next

time you read about a person or people who died because of some conflict, think deeper in their perspective, and remember how horrible it would be.

Harry Potter showed me that he cared about people I didn't know, and those people mattered to him. Harry Potter taught me that war shouldn't be taken lightly. Soldiers shouldn't be thrown out onto the battlefield without any reason because each and every person's life matters. When war happens, people are killed. Soldiers and citizens and children die because of violence. The two people lost a minute, the 120 deaths an hour, the 2,880 people who die every day from conflicts around the world all of their lives matter.

Sincerely,
Jack Schilson

Conner Shaffer

Blair Pointe Elementary, Peru

Letter to R.J. Palacio

Author of ***Wonder***

Dear R.J. Palacio,

Your book, ***Wonder***, really opened my eyes about other people and how they have it a lot harder than most people do. We just don't realize it, and that is exactly what your book did for me.

I have a twin brother who is disabled; he is not able to talk or function the way I can and a lot of other people can. His name is Carter. I always thought he had it easier because all he does, or can do, is sit on the couch and watch his favorite TV shows, but I know now that he has it a million times harder than me and almost everyone else. Whenever I would carry Carter's backpack into his school, everybody would just stare and point fingers and then tell their friends then they would do the same. There are very few people that are nice to him and understand him. Just like Auggie's friends do for him, ***Wonder*** made me realize how I should be treating other people. It also made me reflect on what I have done, like teasing other people or staring when I was a little kid. I don't do that now. August showed me what it was to be inside of a different type of person's body. Let's just say your book made it a whole different world to me now. Thank you for all of the wonderful things your book has done.

Thank you for August and his loving friends.

Sincerely,
Conner Shaffer

Elijah Shemesh

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Gary Paulsen

Author of *Hatchet*

Dear Gary Paulsen,

I was always looking for a challenge in life and your book *Hatchet* told me about how Brian had one of the hardest challenges I could possibly imagine. To survive on his own with nobody and have his parents divorced is super hard. Brian has to have positive thinking to be free. It was his positive thinking that saved him in the end.

As an eleven year-old myself, I was changed by the way Brian thought through his challenges. He always thought of a way to survive and which tools to make and use. He constantly worked to get better, stronger, and smarter. My dad always tells me that I need to get better and push myself. Before your book, I used to think that I didn't need to change. I thought I was fine the way I was. But what I have realized, is that I was wrong. If I think that I'm good the way I am, that's wrong. I can always get better and better and even when I'm done, there will always be room for improvement. For me, this happens on the soccer field. My dad has always told me in order to learn more, I need to try and practice as hard as I can, until the coach can push me and challenge me. When I play non-competitive soccer with my friends, I can tell that I've gotten better. It is then that I can tell that I have the skills and am creative. Like Brian, I unlocked something new about myself. Many people struggle to do that. If I try as hard as I can and keep on pushing, I know I will always get better and stronger.

After reading your book, my dad and I have gotten closer because now after school I ask him to play soccer with me after my homework. Sometimes he says no, but I have the desire to play. Brian had one special thing to survive: the hatchet. This is like me because I have one special power which is technical ability that allows me to do everything in soccer. This means that I have great footwork. I know I am capable of having more skills than most people. I know that I have the determination to push myself harder than most people. Your book has taught me so many new things I wouldn't think

at all today like being creative, how to handle fear, and the most of all determination. After reading your book I know I have to have determination. Thank you for writing this such amazing book for kids and adults.

Sincerely,
Elijah Shemesh

Emilie Sondhelm

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Raquel J. Palacio

Author of *Wonder*

Dear Raquel J. Palacio,

When I was three years-old, my older brother Kian was the only person who could make me laugh. Because he is six years older than me, he was also great at giving me back rides. When I think back to my favorite memories with my brother, they are filled with Disney World rides from a trip we took six years ago. But it is difficult to find a current memory with him now that I am eleven and he is seventeen. The sad truth is that my brother hasn't spoken to me in quite a while. He'd rather sleep and play video games than talk to me. Reading about Via and Auggie in *Wonder* made me realize that I miss my brother. I miss having a relationship with him. These days he teases me more than talks to me. He always calls me a "Goody Two-Shoes" and could care less what I am doing.

Last year it would have been nice to have a big brother who could make me laugh again. There was a girl in my class who always judged me. Jane always moved away from me when I tried to sit next to her and purposefully excluded me. Before I read your book, I always asked myself questions like, "Does she like me? Is she my friend? Should I tell her?" But I knew she was planning on moving at the end of the year, so I stayed friends with her until then. On the last day of school, I had a sleepover with several girls in my class and invited Jane to come as well. I had been looking forward to this night for several weeks, only to be crushed by Jane's behavior at the party. We tried to play partner games, but when I was supposed to be her partner, she started making faces to show that she didn't want to be my partner. To make matters worse, she didn't help clean up when it was time to clean up our mess. That was the final straw. She hurt my feelings, and I decided I was done.

Thankfully I discovered your book *Wonder* during this difficult time. Your story taught me to never judge a book by its cover, but it also taught me that it's okay to be unique. When I first looked at the sky blue colored book that was recommended to me, I decided it wouldn't be a good book. But I was wrong. As I walk down these new middle school hallways this year, I still feel judged by my friends and peers, but your book taught me not to

care what other people think. I now only care about what I think about myself.

I know that I will continue to make good friends who care about me, but I also know that I have to care about myself first. I know my brother doesn't really hate me. He just acts like it. In fact, a few days ago, he helped me with math homework. It's not a big step, but it's something. Maybe if we talk more about what is important to each of us, we can learn to be friends again. I hope that he won't hate me when we are adults!

Your book taught me many things, but most importantly it helped me understand that I shouldn't care what others think of me. Now when people say I'm stupid or ugly, I walk away without a care in the world. Thank you for writing this amazing book.

Your adoring fan,
Emilie Sondhelm

Level II
1st Place

Skylar Rumple

West Noble Middle School, Ligonier

Letter to Tupac

Author of *The Rose That Grew from Concrete*

Dear Tupac,

The book *The Rose That Grew from Concrete* has influenced my life so much. It taught me that no matter what gets in your way just push through it because on the other side is a brief moment of freedom until another obstacle comes your way. I love to write poetry and do anything with music. And, I would love to follow my dream to get into the music scene. To be honest, I can't stand reading, but I started this book and I couldn't stop.

It's like I can see myself in you, a struggling teen who loves to write poetry. I love to write poetry, and I think that rap has gotten a bad name because it's nothing but drugs, money, and girls. It could be so much better if we used it to help people not to hurt people. I believe it would be more relatable, and that's something you tried to do--- you just wanted to relate to people.

When I was in 5th grade, I had really bad anger problems. It was like anger was flooding out of me, and I asked an older friend how he vents. He said he raps. So, I went home, and I wrote the first poem and right then and there my world opened. I was able to do anything I wanted. And, I still believe if I work hard and never give up, I feel like I can find my way into the music scene. My main goal in life is to make the music scene a relatable place for everyone.

Poetry has helped me through so much breakups, deaths, anger, sadness-- anything. I may lose family or friends, but I know that music will never leave. It's always there to help, and I think that's why I feel so strong towards anything to do with music. I don't think that I will ever hate music. Just because it has become such a large part of my life.

Thank you for everything you have done for me. You have made me feel like I'm able to do anything. You gave me an extra push towards music and that means so much to me. You have become such a role model in my eyes.

“During your life never stop dreaming. No one can take away your dreams.” -Tupac

What really made me choose this book was because I had such a strong connection towards your poem “Untitled.” The way I interpreted this work of art was that you hate your expressions being contained and that you feel like you’re in captivity and that is another reason why I started writing. The way you write is amazing. It’s inspirational and relatable and easy to understand. When I read these lines from “Untitled,” I felt a strong connection between you and me.

“but now like a nightmare i wake to see
that i live like a prisoner of poverty
please wake me when i’m free
i cannot bear captivity...”

Thanks a lot for all of your writings and gracing us with your presence. It’s like everybody held me down, but your writings taught me that if you’re passionate about something enough you should let nobody stand in the way of you achieving it. It’s like I finally feel like a weight has been lifted off of me, and I’m able to fly.

Sincerely,

Skylar Rumples

Level II
2nd Place

Brenna Weaver

West Lafayette Jr./Sr. High School, West Lafayette
Letter to Marilyn J. Harran & Elisabeth Leyson
Authors of ***The Boy On The Wooden Box***

Dear Marilyn J. Harran and Elisabeth Leyson,

My name is Brenna Weaver, I am a 7th grader in a big school in Indiana just another random person in the United States of America. I was in 8th period Language Arts, unknowing that my life was going to be changed forever. We had to pick a biography, read it, and make a poster about it. We were at the library to pick out our book. I had no idea where to even start, so my teacher, Mrs. Forbes, handed me a book called ***The Boy On The Wooden Box*** a memoir of Leon Leyson. It looked like a promising book and it had a rather odd title, so of course, out of curiosity, I checked it out, sat down on one of the chairs, and started to read.

As I read the prologue, I was fascinated at this Mr. Shindler person. As I read along, I thought that the book would be like the normal story about a boy and his normal life. Usually, I would be wishing that it was more exciting, and as usual, it would take me a while to finish the book. But for some reason, I could not even bear to put it down for too long. Often I stayed awake at night, reading under my pillows, pretending to be asleep when anyone crossed by my room, then to go back to reading.

I would not define the book as exciting. If someone thought that massive abuse, killing, and torture was exciting, I would be cautious around that person. I don't really know how to define the book. I just felt a strange desire to read on, to share his sadness, to feel the things he felt. Every single sad thing that happened tore my heart in two and I felt spoiled to be living in a perfectly safe place, not having to worry about surviving to possibly die the very next day. I knew that I would never feel the same way that Leon did, but I could almost feel a thick smoky haze of desolation, want and pain. I noticed how the Nazis killed many, and harmed several, but the most common wound made was one that cannot be seen, their pride and their happiness. Those were not only ripped into pieces but they disappeared altogether. They lived in absolute squalor, and they felt like they were nobody.

After I read the book, I realized that I felt different. I realized that I felt as if I were important, as if I were important to the government, and they would listen to me. This book helped teach me that every single person in the world, no matter how big and bad, they are still human beings, and they are worth something. Every single person that died or knew someone who died were mourned for by their peers, by other countries when they found out, and me. I felt sympathetic towards every single human being who was injured, no matter what shape or form that may be. I know I cannot empathize for those people, because I will never go through anything such as that, but I feel sorry for them, and I hope that the people who have survived that nightmare lived the rest of their life knowing they can live in peace. I also hope that the people who died know they did, still being true to the religion they believed in.

I hope that this crazy nightmare will never happen again, but I also hope that we will keep and cherish people's stories in our hearts, because it gives an amazing morale: never give up, there is always hope, and even though horrid things are going on right now, keep your chin up, stand up straight and proud, because everything will be alright in the end, and the believers will always win.

Marilyn J. Harran and Elisabeth Leyson, thank you for writing this wonderful book that helped me realize that the impossible really can happen if you believe, and know that in the end, everything will be perfect.

Thanks again,
Brenna Weaver

Level II
3rd Place

Lauren Verkamp

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Kiera Cass

Author of *The Selection*

Dear Kiera Cass,

You and America Singer saved my life. I have had so many struggles throughout the years. Starting in third grade, I had depression and frequently injured myself. Starting soon after that, I started avoiding meals when I could get away with it because I thought I was overweight.

After a little but after a year, I started feeling better. I wasn't hurting myself, and I wasn't starving myself. Life was good. Sadly, in fifth grade I learned I had a kidney disease called IgA Nephropathy. News of that brought depression back all over again. I felt valueless and defective. No one could love a girl with messed up kidneys, much less want to be her friend! I loathed myself, and I was convinced the world detested me as well. As I started to feel worse, I started to seriously consider suicide. I obviously could not tell anyone though. My parents would send me to counseling again. Counseling never helped because it felt extremely difficult, almost impossible to be honest with them. My life went on, hating myself, hurting myself, and pretending to be my old self. Happy and confident.

Not a single soul knew what was really happening. Every night, I would bang my head on anything hard I could find, bit and pinched myself, and did anything else I could do to torture myself.

I continued these habits for almost three years. That is 1,095 days of hating myself. Then, one day in sixth grade, my friend recommended your book *The Selection*. When she first suggested it, I was doubtful. It seemed like it was going to be one of those fairy-tale princess books. After all, there is a beautiful girl in a gorgeous gown on the cover. Boy was I wrong! I was amazed! I finished the book in two days, finishing the next two in a week. When the fourth book come out, I got it right away.

Reading *The Selection*, an amazing sensation came over me. I do not even have words to describe it. It was as if the entire weight of the world was lifted off my shoulders, and I just was -- in awe. Reading about how

America was not a perfect princess, and how she felt awkward in the humongous dresses and elaborate hairstyles, but still was an amazing person, kind, and caring, showed me being perfect is not what I should want in life.

You and America also showed me that because I have no proof that I am mean, ugly, or stupid, then I should not say those things.

Once I finished all four books, I felt as if I was a completely different person. I realized I wasn't fat, I was actually underweight for my age and height. I also realized killing myself would not help anything. I would leave life on Earth, away from the people who really did love and care for me.

Now, in seventh grade, I am back to myself. Not the strange being who just went through life planning to take away her life. No more plans for suicide or hurting myself daily. I am, for the most part, comfortable in my own skin, all thanks to you and America Singer. If it hadn't been for your amazing book and the just as amazing sequels, I would have been dead a year ago.

I now realize how precious my life is, and how many people love me. My family and friends would be more hurt than me if I intentionally took my own life and left this earth. For that I say thank you and thank you again. You saved my life and I am so grateful!

Your admirer,
Lauren Verkamp

Level II Honorable Mentions

Nolan Jacobs

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

Letter to Mrs. Ryan

Author of *Esperanza Rising*

Dear Mrs. Ryan,

I was not born with a silver spoon in my mouth or on a large ranch, but I can relate to the special family bonds that were displayed in *Esperanza Rising*. Just when you think that everything around you is wonderful and you couldn't ask for a better life, your world can suddenly come crashing down around you. The people that you love the most can become sick and pass away and people can do bad things that can change your whole world in a matter of seconds. Terror strikes all around the world and for no apparent reason and there are many people dying every day.

I had no idea that I was going to lose my grandfather this past summer. It was so sudden that I didn't have a chance to say goodbye. We did, however, get to spend time fishing together just a week before he passed away. If only I had known, I would have done things so differently.

Esperanza experienced similar grief when bandits killed her father. We both have something in common; we have great memories that we shared with our lost loved ones that no one can ever take away from us.

Life definitely continued to throw challenges at Esperanza to the point of losing everything she had growing up, but that did not stop her from living. She chose to keep working hard and ignore the negative people around her. She had never worked hard labor in her life, but she was going to do whatever it took to help the ones she loved. I have encountered many small challenges in my life, none as big as Esperanza, but I am still working hard to overcome challenges from injuries that have taken away one of my favorite things to do in life, play sports.

Falling fifteen feet out of a play structure at my middle school onto my head, resulting in a severe brain injury, kept me out of sports for two years. I then proceeded to break my wrist and then my ankle. Just when I started to play football again, I strained my hamstring in the first scrimmage game. My athletic days seemed to be over. Your story showed me the courage and

strength it takes to rebuild your life, when everything seems to be hopeless. No matter how bad things get in your life, if you face conflicts head on and stay positive, you can accomplish great things and rise above evil. Thank you for writing such an inspiring book that shows how families can overcome challenges if they stick together and work hard.

Sincerely,
Nolan Jacobs

Maria Luciani

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Maya Van Wagenen

Author of *Popular*

Dear Maya Van Wagenen,

Before anything is said. This needs and has to be said urgently. YOU HAVE GUTS. It has been said, continue.

If you were very unpopular in middle school, we're in the same boat. I am not popular at all in my school. In elementary school, there was no popularity, everyone just stayed in their own little cliques and didn't bother anyone else, but everything changed when the Fire Nation (A.K.A. Middle school) attacked. BOOM! School turned from actually learning to a show and tell of "I'm so smart!" by everyone. It was exhausting. I especially had a bad view of popular people and general popularity. Let's just say that my opinion of popularity has changed a lot since I read your book.

I think my hatred of popularity bloomed from a friend I used to have in third grade. She was a friend who everyone knew and everyone seems to like her. She and I started talking and became friends. At the time I was really shy and had trouble making friends. We even sometimes passed notes in class and if one of us was sick, we would give the other one notes of what we learned in class and told each other what happened. I didn't think that we would stop being friends. We were friends for third grade, fourth grade, and summer came. Our lockers in fifth grade were really close. When we got them, I went up to say hi and compare schedules. I thought she would be like "Oh hey! Nice to see you!" but she kind of just nodded and mumbled goodbye. Um, okay that was strange but I was sure that she'd be back to normal by the end of the day. So I texted her the next day, didn't answer. At that point I could take a hint and knew that she wouldn't want to talk to me, so I just waited until the first day of school to ask her about it. She completely ignored me. No matter what I did, she just didn't do anything. I continued to be friendless for about, a month. Then I met someone in my class who I befriended. She and I have been best friends since. The girl who used to be my friend was instantly popular and has been since. From then on, I had a negative view of popular people.

Then two years later I bought your book and started reading when I heard about it. It seemed like it would simply be a fun read, but reading a little bit

of your book was just the beginning. A girl that I considered popular actually acknowledged my existence. Now that sounds really weird to say since we're kind of friends now, but at the time I was like "WHAT IS GOING ON?!" She was wearing a Hogwarts T-shirt and I said I liked Harry Potter. She and I chatted for a bit and she treats me like an actual friend. Everything I knew and believed just came crashing down on me. I told my friend about this and she simply said "Wow, you're acting like the Illuminate just called you to sell you chocolate."

Thanks friend. At this point, I was STILL READING THE BOOK and it had already made me have four existential crises, so you can imagine what happened when I kept reading.

I got to the point where you started talking to people and became popular. I didn't know what to think. I was just in my room staring into space questioning everything I knew about popularity along with a few more existential crises. Not to mention I was still slightly suspicious of the Who-I-thought-I-was-popular girl who had befriended and then realized that was terrible because we were friends. Along with me so seeing someone else (AKA you), become popular baffled me. A person who I considered to be popular becoming friends with me and you becoming popular? At the same time?! This was the equivalent of the apocalypse for me. That's when I began speaking to new people and making more friends.

Before, I was shy and reserved and by reading your book, I took the journey with you and became way more assertive. I started talking to many people and started doing what I thought was right and not what everyone tells me is right. Then the change that rewired by brain. I started to see popularity in a different light.

Now that I've finished the book. I am completely fine with talking to new people and I still have my shy moments, but now I have friends that are better friends than that girl from third-grade could ever be and I try not to judge people based on their popularity. I am far from popular and don't

expect to get there, but because of your book, I at least can break out of my little Pokèball and actually interact with people. Sure, there are still people that I'm not too fond and I know that won't change, but thanks to you, I'm not as judgmental, I've been opened up to a new group of people, and I'm asserting myself more.

What would I be if I hadn't read this book? I would probably be someone who has one friend that she made when her best friend for two years ditched her. I would probably be super pale because I never go outside, and super shy because I never had anyone inspiring me to interact with humankind.

Thanks for everything,
Maria Luciani

Patsy Olds

Greensburg Jr. High, Greensburg

Letter to Peg Kehret

Author of *Small Steps: The Year I Got Polio*

Dear Peg Kehret,

“You take a number of small steps which you believe are right, thinking maybe tomorrow somebody will treat this as a deadly provocation. And then you wait. If there is no reaction, you take another step: Courage is only an accumulation of small steps.”

— George Kokrad

That quote is not directly from your book, but it emphasizes what it is about. It emphasizes what this book taught me.

I'm a student in Indiana suffering with pockets of swelling and disease underneath my kneecaps, I have had it since I was a baby and it is not fun. The doctor I originally went to didn't know how to diagnose it. But they knew it would make my life be a bit worse. I have to go to physical therapy twice a week and I am putting numerous amounts of strain in my Physical Education Class.

In PE, we do running every day, and every quarter we do a 5 minute run. I'm lucky to get 9 laps. I'm extremely lucky if my knees don't hyper-extend. They happen so often because of running that I've missed about 9 days of school because of it.

Strain is the most irritating thing about my disability. Walking is a form of strain, running, jumping, and even climbing are in that category. If I allow too much strain on it, hyper-extension will be the inevitable future. With hyper-extension comes with falling. On the right surface, the top of the stairs, for example, they can cause me to tumble down and break bones.

The most annoying place where it can hyper-extend is on stairs. That makes up 70% of where my knee hyper-extends. Just the other day, both my knees hyper-extended the same time, sending me tumbling down the stairs and popping my wrist out of socket. I hit my head about 4 times and now have a huge bruise on the back of it. I was in the hospital for a few hours while they popped my wrist back into place, without damaging nerves or veins. No bones were broken, but I would've been better off with a broken wrist.

A few times the pockets burst dislocating my kneecap slightly, causing it to hyper-extend. This makes my life a lot harder, and has brought me nothing but failed hope that it will get better. The pain after hyper-extension was so bad once that I couldn't walk for a week. Therapy only adds to the strain, and the doctors don't know what to do anymore.

Then I started reading your book. My parents got it for me when my knee had hyper-extended around when I was 7. I read the back first, and it looked interesting. Two days later, I was rereading it for the 3rd time. The failed hope in my heart sparked a wildfire. The wildfire that burned as "I will get better, and if I don't, I will live my life to the fullest with it." Your book showed me that even the most deadly of things can be cured. You had 3 types of polio and I have a small disability. They may be different but they are also the same. Both affect us in the long run; they have/will come back to haunt us.

When the hospital burned your books and bears and other gifts it was like the doctors telling me that there might be no hope for me to get better. I was angry. I was so angry I kicked the medication table. Well that resolved to me getting this book.

You had to go through physical therapy, "Torture Time," too. It was terrible in the first hospital and then in the second it got better. Starting with hot pockets in the first hospital and picking up marbles with your toes, and ending with hot baths and walking with a bar. Not exactly the same story for me. Most of the time they put special cream on my knees and I stretch. The stretching is helping a little bit, but the feeling of numbness comes with it. My nurses that supervise me try to use special medication tape to re-align my kneecaps. The tape doesn't last very long, so all the therapy does is put more strain on my knees. It hasn't worked yet.

What your book did was opened my mind with thoughts of hope and promise that I will get better. A milkshake caused you to be able to breathe on your own again, and a book helped me hope that I will get better.

Because of your book I believe that in the dark tunnel that is my life, there is a lonely string of lights guiding me through. What it didn't do was make my story have a happy ending. To be frank, I'm only starting chapter 1 of mine.

I wish you the best,
Patsy Olds

Lilly O'Shea

Saint Paul Catholic School, Valparaiso

Letter to Eva Mozes Kor

Author of *Surviving the Angel of Death*

Dear Mrs. Kor,

I believe everyone has a story, but not every story is easy to tell. Past transgressions may be difficult to talk about, and the fear of reliving a traumatic event or facing demons is enough to make people keep things bottled up inside. If they only knew of the peace that waited for them on the other side of the mountain, as you described in your book.

I read of the atrocities you and your sister endured: your bodies being experimented on, the needles that were poked into your arms to take blood out and put in diseases. It's unfathomable to me that you didn't succumb to these conditions. But, when you wrote about your stay in the infirmary, as sick as you were, refusing to die because you knew it meant death for your sister, I saw the strength you drew from your horrific experience. It made me realize that as excruciating as your ordeal was, it must have been equally as agonizing to retell the story of what happened to you in that nightmarish place.

In my humble opinion, the most heroic thing you've done was to write your letters of forgiveness and publish your book. You described a feeling of peace, "the burden of pain lifted," after writing. This was something I needed in my life too.

When my dad was diagnosed with cancer last year, to say I was afraid would have been an understatement. I had already had an aunt who passed away from cancer, leaving behind two teenaged daughters, and a close family friend whose cancer was threatening to do the same to his children. The anxiety I experienced made it difficult to focus and hard to sleep at times. In your book, you recounted many times about being unsure of what was going to happen next. This really resonated with me. My dad's cancer was not something I felt comfortable talking about. I decided to keep a journal as a way to let go of the feelings that were starting to consume me. I found that the more I wrote, the easier it became to express myself freely and without need for justification. The paper had no boundaries, no limitations. And, for those whose circumstances are more severe, I can't help think putting their thoughts into words would be that much more gratifying.

Mrs. Kor, you are the most courageous person I know. Not because of the horrors you endured, not because of your will to survive, but for sharing your story.

After reading your book, I experienced the healing that comes from writing. I felt the peace you described in your book. You encouraged me to start to tell my story and I'm sure others as well. I don't think you'll ever know how great a gift that is to me.

Respectfully Yours,
Lilly O'Shea

Lenny Perel

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Elie Wiesel

Author of *Night*

Dear Elie Wiesel,

Faith is a very complex idea. It is not something we can see or touch, but it is the very thing that people turn to in the worst of times. I have always wondered what makes people keep their faith. This is why I could not wait to be old enough to read *Night* because your story answers many of my questions.

No one would blame you if you had lost your faith, not only in god but also in humanity after your horrific ordeal during the Holocaust. I was overwhelmed with your strength and perseverance that helped you keep your faith and survive. Sometimes I wonder if under the same circumstances I would be able to keep my faith in god.

As a fourth generation Holocaust survivor, I know that I am here today because of the strong faith my great grandparents must have had to survive. A story of how my great grandpa ended up on a wrong train that may have saved his life comes to mind. Being a religious Jew, he went back to his house to get his tefillin and missed the train that he later found out was headed to Auschwitz. By the time he made it to the train station, he was put on a different train that took him to a labor camp. Because of his strong faith he survived. Your book gave a voice to what my great grandparents may have wanted to tell me. It showed me the importance of keeping faith. After reading your story, I feel it is up to me and my peers to keep the memories of those from your generation alive.

After reading your book, I will never be able to stand by while someone is being bullied or persecuted. You taught me that it takes only one person with integrity to change the outcome of a bad situation. As I approach my Bar Mitzvah, I strive to be a person with this type of integrity. I have faith in god and humanity that we can create a world where we can live in peace with each other no matter our differences.

Even though faith is something that is hard to understand, we need to embrace it. Faith drives people through the toughest of times. Now I understand what makes a person keep his faith, even when it seems

inconceivable. Your story fills me with a purpose to do good in this world. I take this responsibility of being a mensch very seriously, and promise not to let you down.

Sincerely,
Lenny Perel

Level II

Semifinalists

Charlotte Anderson

Greensburg Jr. High School, Greensburg

Letter to Maya Angelou

Author of **“Still I Rise”**

Dear Maya Angelou,

I chose to write to you about your poem **“Still I Rise”** because it reminded me of my journey to self-confidence and learning to not care what other people think about me. It reminds me just how far I have come since the beginning of middle school, and is one of my biggest motivations to keep going and hold my head high through everything.

As a young child, I was very outgoing and confident. As I grew older, I became very shy.

Once I entered middle school, it got much worse. I could not look anyone in the eye and talk to them, (even some of my friends), without turning beet red. I was extremely self-conscious and tried to refrain from talking to new people because it just caused me stress. I was worried that I would say the wrong thing and I would get laughed at. In some cases, I was right. I was laughed at and called names, (just like everybody is at some point). One day around 2 months after school started, someone made a particularly nasty comment that just sent me over the edge, and I hit an all-time low. When I got home from school, I sat down and talked to my parents about how awful other people made me feel and how I wondered why I cared so much about what they thought about me but I just couldn't seem to let it go. “You may shoot me with your words, you may cut me with your eyes, you may kill me with your hatefulness, but still, like air, I'll rise...” is the line from your poem that helped me realize that no matter what people say, even if it knocks you down, you always overcome it and rise. Since I was already able to overcome negative things, I decided to stop letting them knock me down.

Once I had accepted this, my quality of life improved 100%. I could start to build up my self-confidence by doing things I never would have before. I became a lot less self-conscious and a lot more comfortable in my own skin. Over the next year, I talked to a lot of people that I wouldn't have before, and made a lot of great friends. I joined multiple extracurricular activities that allowed me to make more friends and learn new skills. If I had not

realized to disregard the negativity people throw at you so early in my adolescence, I wouldn't have made so many new friends or had nearly as much fun as I do now.

"Leaving behind nights of terror and fear, I rise, Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear, I rise..." is another line from your poem I feel really describes my story. I went from being extremely self-conscious and getting made fun of to where I am now, confident and happy. I left behind nights of terror and fear (of getting made fun of or making a fool of myself). Then emerged into a daybreak that's wondrously clear, (a place where I am happy with myself and able to brush away any negativity that could ruin my happiness).

Before reading your poem, the concept of total comfort and satisfaction with myself had faded a little. I am still the happy, confident person I have made myself into, but not every day is a good day. I sometimes still get laughed at, called names, and even have rumors spread about me.

Recently, there was something said that was particularly offensive, and I kept telling myself to just brush it off and that it didn't matter what they thought. For the most part, I got over it, but, it still lingered in the back of my mind and just made me feel horrible. When I read your poem for the first time, it was the little push I needed to finally get back to my comfortable in my own skin self. I know I have insecurities, everyone does. This poem taught me to see the world, and myself, in the most positive way I could. Now, whenever any negativity comes my way, I do my best to brush it off. If it does manage to knock me down though, I always rise. No matter how hard people try to bring me down, still I rise.

Sincerely,
Charlotte Anderson

Julia Ankney

Greensburg Jr. High School, Greensburg

Letter to Michael Sage

Author of **“Keep On Keeping On”**

Dear Mr. Sage,

“Pain is temporary. It may last a minute, or an hour, or a day, or a year, but eventually it will subside and something else will take its place. If I quit; however, it lasts forever” -- Lance Armstrong. Pain is a funny thing. Personally, I think you are one who explains this concept extraordinarily well in your poem **“Keep On Keeping On.”** In the first stanza, you started right off by talking about how this ride of life can go from coasting smoothly to a jerking up-down whirlwind. The good times are almost forgotten for that moment. Taken right out from underneath you. You’ve “had enough.” I can easily relate in a few ways. One of these ways is through an experience I had this year in sports.

My name is Julia Ankney and I am an active student. I participate in extracurricular activities, which include volleyball, track, cross country, and dance team. I started playing volleyball my seventh grade year. I had never played volleyball in my life, but somehow I made the team. I thought to myself that if I could do this, I could try out for anything, so tried out for dance team and then following that, track. I was successful in each activity. Time went by, and the 8th grade volleyball season came around, but this year was different. We had several days of tryouts before we found out who made the team. I had a good feeling after those days of trying out for the team; I was optimistic about being on the 8th grade team.

Then the day arrived when we found out whether or not we made it. My heart pounded all day with nervous excitement. I felt knots forming in my stomach and when lunch time came, I couldn’t even take one bite of my food. We played and practiced that day as if it was normal, but my friends and I could feel the tension in the room. After about a half hour, coach had us sit on the bleachers and one of the coaches would come out and call us one by one into the locker room. While we were waiting, all of the girls continued to say to one another “There’s no way you won’t make the team. You’re way better than me! I’m not going to make it!” It went on like this with everyone trying to be nice and optimistic, but we all knew that there would be cuts. Then, my name finally got called.

I anxiously walked down to the locker room with shouts of good luck behind me. The smiles on the coaches' faces masked the devastating news that they delivered. Basically, they told me they were glad I tried out, but since I was not as experienced as the other players, even if I made the team I would not likely get a lot of playing time. So, they decided it was best to just cut me from the team. When I heard this, my stomach dropped. I shook my head in agreement, thanked them for allowing me to try out, and told them I learned a lot in this short period of time. I grabbed my stuff with a dismal goodbye and headed to the car.

Thoughts raced through my head about what had just happened. It was a huge let down and what was I going to do for my extracurricular activity this nine weeks? Well, that weekend a family friend asked me about doing cross country. Cross country in sixth grade was awful, so that idea was rejected. Then, she reminded me how I did very well in track this year, how they would not be making cuts, and I still had until Monday to join. That evening, while trying to think of every bad thing that could go wrong if I joined, I only found that not doing anything at all was the worst possible outcome. I realized that this relates to Lance Armstrong's quote because I knew that there would be pain in doing cross country, but I knew there would be ten times the pain if I did nothing. Lance Armstrong knew that there would be pain in cycling, but if he did not try there would be pain forever. So, the email was sent to the coach and practice started Monday.

Tough. That is the only word I could describe the practices in the beginning. Weeks went by and I was still not understanding why we trained so hard and why anyone enjoyed doing this other than the social and getting into shape aspects of it, until the first meet came. We started off with the Greensburg XC (cross country) Invitational. I had never seen so many kids in my life!

Fear, anxiety, and adrenaline were the only things going through my head. Although not wanting to race, I ran anyways. There are many lessons running can teach you. Running is like life. Sometimes you are running

steady, but other times you may get to the point of collapsing. The good thing about collapsing is that it teaches you to get back up.

As we competed in more meets, I kept improving as much as I could, even if it was only by a few seconds. Time is precious, especially in running. My only problem was that I was doing well, just not improving as much as I wanted to. Then, Brown County, one of our biggest races, came. Still being just as nervous about races I forgot to worry about the most important things.

The significant thing I missed was that I had no idea where to go on the course, therefore knowing how to pace myself was impossible. So, the gun went off, and even though I accidentally stepped on a few girls who fell at the beginning I ended up running one of my fastest races of the season. From then on out, I kept improving and continued running some of my best times.

My experiences this school year relate to your poem in many ways. In the first stanza, you talk about how sometimes “the going gets tough.” In the second and third, you add the statements “How do I move away, from this miserable zone?” and “The best advice I can give, is to keep on keeping on.” These statements can all be compared to my situation. The first one relates because participating in cross country was challenging. The second because I did not know how to get out of the zone of not knowing what to do. Lastly, I can relate to your poem because I now know that even through the pain, if I do my best, I can achieve great things. As we say in cross country, Focus On the Positives (F.O.P.). While being thankful for the choices I have made, I would also like to thank you for your advice.

Thank you,
Julia Ankney

Niranjan Anoop

Klondike Middle School, West Lafayette

Letter to Charles Dickens

Author of *The Tale of Two Cities*

Dear Mr. Charles Dickens,

The Tale of Two Cities was something different compared to any other book that I've ever read. When I took *The Tale of Two Cities* off the shelf in my school library, I knew that I would probably have a tough time trying to read it. Even my parents thought I would have trouble with reading this book (and boy do they know). I must have been a real Carton for doing something like that, right? I was lost and freaked out in the beginning (and the end), but I was able to get through reading the novel (somewhat like Carton's experience in the novel). I was able to understand what this novel was about and what it was trying to teaching me (also like Carton) had faced some difficulties, but not as major as Carton's though.

I always seemed to like history, but this novel had brought me to the reality of how dreadful, violent, and cruel history can be. The things the characters had gone through made me feel so small, but I felt like these were the important things that I should've learned to understand (I did) and feel for. I felt sad for the Darnays and their friends because of their unfortunate situation about Charles; that Mr. Darnay was hated by many people for being an Evremonde. I felt sad that a man like Mr. Cruncher could do bad things. I felt sad that a French woman lost her family, but decided to be a monster of a person so she could enact her revenge (I never knew how terrifying knitting could be.) I forgot someone though, Sydney Carton. He was a total "jackal" in the beginning, but he was a sad man. The lengths he went to save Charles took me by surprise. That made me look at this whole story, and question how every person's lives are like.

I felt glad too, you know. I felt glad that Charles made it out safely; that the bringer of chaos "Madame Defarge" was defeated; that the Darnays and everyone else are living happily ever after; that Doctor Manette was his healthy, intellectual self and not lost and mentally ill like he was before; that Sydney Carton finally came to peace by doing something incredibly good. These were people who were handling serious matters that a kid like me wouldn't understand and normally partake in. But I tried to, and this whole story along with its characters changed me.

These people and their actions made me think about how people can be different and they affect other people and even themselves. Charles Darnay was a man who cares about people close to him and tries his best to help them. Lucie Manette was also caring and kind; she inspired people close to her to do great things and brought out the best out of them. Doctor Manette was a man who was struggling with all that was happening and became mad, but he learned to forgive what had happened and became healthy and happy. Mr. Lorry, Mr. Carton, Ms. Pross, and everyone else that helped the Darnays are people who care and would help the Darnays to handle situations like these. The novel also taught me to think about how many people go through serious situations like this, some even more serious than the next. Take war for example, specifically the French Revolution. It was also violent, cruel, and dreadful, but it was happy in the end and it won the French people's independence.

Thank you, Mr. Charles Dickens for exposing me to the world and how it is and was like. Also, about how every person in our world is different in their personalities and their beliefs.

Sincerely,
Niranjan Anoop

Ravin Atchison

West Noble Middle School, Ligonier

Letter to Linda Sue Park

Author of ***A Long Walk to Water***

Dear Linda Sue Park,

Have you ever thought about what you have? Or how long it takes to get something from your kitchen, and then wondered how long it took other people to get somewhere or wonder if they have the same stuff as you? I am a fourteen year-old that cares about what's going on around the world, but can't save everyone from something terrible happening. It's upsetting, thinking about and seeing children, infants, parents, people that don't know when they're going to eat next, don't know when they can get something to drink. It's also upsetting looking here and seeing what we have and then looking somewhere else and seeing what they don't have. Here, people are going to buy new clothes, new shoes, phone, and so on and not really thinking about people who actually need all of those things. After reading, your book, ***A Long Walk to Water***, I felt more strongly about changing the world.

Nya walked hours just to go get water for her family. Morning til whoever-knew-what time she'll get back. This is exactly what is still happening to this day. Teen girls have to walk hours upon hours just to get water. Africa is one of those places. This really needs to stop. They should have clean water so nobody gets really sick and passes away because of how dirty and contaminated their water is. Here, kids take that for granted. We only have to walk a couple feet to get something to drink or eat.

Salva was in school when the war started. He ran, ran really fast to get to his family. But it was too late; they already left. He thought that it was because he was little and he would complain too much about being tired or hungry. This part made me upset. No kid should have to go through that. They should have been able to just stayed home. But, he couldn't--- he might've been killed.

In the third grade, my teacher read this book to us. After we got done reading it, she asked us if we would like to help them out. We all agreed to it. We had a lemonade stand at recess and just did a bunch of things to raise money for them. This guy had to come in and explain what it would cost to drill pipes in the ground so they could get clean water. He even showed us

how they balanced the container on their head. We raised about \$1,000. I was glad to be a part of it.

This book has taught me even the less fortunate can get what they deserve. If someone puts their heart into doing it. I would do it again in a heartbeat, if I could though. It may take a little time, maybe even months. But, it'll be worth it.

This book made me think about things, that I can spend my money on things or people I care about. I hope that I can help somewhere in the world and give them the resources they need and make their lives a lot better.

Sincerely,
Ravin Atchison

Melissa Bielawa

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Beth Choat

Author of *Soccerland*

Dear Beth Choat,

“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams” - Eleanor Roosevelt.

Eleanor Roosevelt wrote that quote and I basically lived by it for a while until, of course, I found another good quote. When I picked up your book I thought it was going to be just like other soccer books but it almost completely represented what that quote means to me.

My dad’s grandparents died when I was about three or four so I don’t remember them, but my parents are still alive. When I read that Flora’s mom died (in *Soccerland*), and about her connection with her mother, I realized my parents and other grandparents wouldn’t be there forever. People take their relatives for granted.

Her grandfather told her to follow her dreams. This book was all about dreams. Real dreams.

Dreams are wishes about life or something to entertain our brain in the middle of Math or Honors Biology. Real dreams are dreams we think about each night, whether it be about our future, or a date, or what people will think about you. Real dreams come true. Flora’s dream came true, though not in the way she wanted it to.

If it, her dream, came true in any other way, it wouldn’t have made me think like I did. I play soccer and I like it, but I realized it is not my entire life like soccer is for her. I also realized that I don’t know what it has to do with my life. I guess it is just a pastime that I enjoy like some people watching football.

When she gets the call about her grandfather, she decided that he wouldn’t have wanted her to come home just for him. I think he wants her to live her own life for herself and not for him or her family, like she has been doing. So I decided to live for myself too. I don’t want to do something I am forced to do, like some people have to help pay the bills. I want to live for me.

When she got bullied I started to think: What if she had gotten the ball from her mother and felt comforted by it? Or maybe she had a brother who gave it to her? It made me understand something I hadn't before.

You know when people get bullied in a book and your teacher talks about how most bullies bully people because they are feeling neglected or they think they need to act like they are so much better than people, well I think, now, that some bullies bully people because the person reminds the bully of themselves and they think that the person will be better than them.

In my life, and I'm not naming names, at school, there are some girls who whisper about people and make fun of them because the person did something that they didn't want to happen, or the girl has too much hair above her lip or on her arms. Or they'll laugh at a boy because he did something stupid or they think he's ugly. My friends and I feel that they do it to make themselves look better but they don't seem to get that it makes people resent them.

All things must come to an end though, and like the book when Tatiana doesn't make the team, The girls will come to an end they don't want to happen. Like the guys they like won't choose to ask them to prom or something. The book made me think hard about my life, which I wouldn't have done if I hadn't picked it up. I wouldn't have thought about Eleanor Roosevelt and her quote, and I certainly wouldn't have thought about my life. I guess that just happens though, that a book just happens to catch your eye, and you don't even know that your life is about to change. I mean, how could you?

Sincerely,
Melissa Bielawa

Justice Brown

Salem Middle School, Salem

Letter to Samantha Schutz

Author of *I Don't Want to be Crazy*

Dear Samantha Schutz,

I have changed as a person. In the book *I Don't Want to be Crazy*, she has anxiety. As do I. I have anxiety.

I hate to go into restaurants and order my own food. I hate talking in front of the class for the fear that no matter what I say, people will judge me. I see the signs of it in people. The shaky hands when reading off of a paper, the nervous eyes as they search the classroom in hope of an impressed face, the breath of relief once they sit down. I see these things now. I'm more comfortable with myself because of this book. If a teacher calls me up to their desk, the first thing I automatically think is, what did I do? Or I'm in so much trouble. Or they might yell at me. I get embarrassed when the teacher says my name in front of the class, or when I don't know an answer and I get called on to answer. It scares me to think what is running through my peers' minds. I'm an awkward person and this book made me realize I'm not the only one.

When I read this book, I was calm. I zoned out and totally focused on the book. It's a very clingy book. I personally saw a change in myself after reading it. I know not to judge people based on appearances or the way that they do a certain thing. It's all about personality.

I remember a time that a kid in my class didn't want to read her poem out-loud. At the time, I didn't realize what she was thinking. I was thinking that she needed to get over herself because all the rest of us had to read as well. Now I understand. Now I know a person that's the exact same way. It's me. That person is me. I hate when I finally get the courage to raise my hand in class, and my answer is wrong. It's embarrassing. I learned I should try harder to achieve my goals. Goals are above everything else.

Academic goals being the best. I shouldn't let people get to me as much. I know that I'm still going to be a topic of conversation, whether it's good or bad, every now and then. I've just learned that it shouldn't bother me. I have been inspired by this book to get over my anxiety and strive to be the best.

Sincerely,
Justice Brown

Rivkah Bunes

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Sharon Draper

Author of *Out of My Mind*

Dear Sharon Draper,

Words are powerful. As I read *Out of My Mind* I was able to see what life is like for someone who can't talk. I was able to understand just how much words are worth and how they can completely change how a person feels and thinks.

Being able to speak is important in the book; every kid in the regular classroom could talk. I felt such pain for Melody when the other kids weren't nice to her. I reflected upon how I would act towards her. Hopefully, I would be like Rose. But, honestly, I'm not so sure. When I was younger there was a girl in my class with hearing aids. Now that I look back, I wish I was kinder to her even though I was probably the most like Rose. She invited me to her house one day. I found out she's really a nice sweet girl. I misjudged her and I have always regretted it.

Words aren't always used for good. There are people like Claire out in the world. There are groups that use their words to publicize evil, like ISIS. They have a propaganda magazine called Dabiq which says only good things about the group. They use their words to try and recruit people for their evil intent.

The popular saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me," is one of the biggest lies. In *Out of My Mind* we see how this quote is not true. Melody seemed so hurt when Claire and Molly said terrible things to her. I personally can relate. Lots of girls have called me fat and ugly and although I wanted to seem like I didn't care; when I got home I felt very insecure. I don't think people realize that what we say to others really affects how they see themselves. Calling someone fat or ugly can diminish their self-esteem.

Of course, words can be used for good also! Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave the famous I Have a Dream speech to empower others. He used his amazing speaking skills to give people hope that their situation would get better if they worked together. I want to use my words for good. Maybe one day I will be able to use my own ability to speak for the greater good.

Melody was never able to say anything. Even when she got her Medi-talker she was still restricted. I think that at some point we all feel as if we don't have a voice. I have a very hard time saying what is on my mind. So many times I have wanted to be completely honest with a friend when I was feeling upset, but I couldn't. Just like Melody, I didn't want to cause a scene.

One day this world will be different. We will use words to lift people up and not push them down. Words were meant to empower, not destroy. Lots of people are given the power to use words, while others are not. Cherish what you have.

Yours truly,
Rivkah Bunes

Brynn Burkart

Wisdom Builders, Carmel

Letter to Meindert Dejong

Author of *The House of Sixty Fathers*

Dear Mr. Dejong,

When I read your book, *The House of Sixty Fathers*, it brought me back to a moment when I was a little girl. I would imagine most of us, at some point in our lives, have felt the sickening feeling when your stomach drops and you realize you're all alone, even if only for a moment. "I'm panicking, I'm out of breath, I'm lost! Running down aisles frantically searching for a charcoal-grey sweater with beautifully embroidered violet flowers that I saw my mother wearing last. Do you think my mother realized I wasn't trudging along behind her? I'm looking left and right, I feel like the world is closing in around me, I'm so afraid." I'll never forget the moment I found her, what felt like a life time was only a matter of minutes.

I can't even imagine how Tien Pao must have felt, when he lost contact with his family during the war. The thought of knowing that there was a possibility of being killed if he breathed too deeply or knowing that he could be caught if his best friend snorted too loud is overwhelming. Anyone who has misplaced their parents can relate to how Tien Pao must have felt.

The House Of Sixty Fathers wasn't just any normal book to me; it wasn't a book I would read once and check off the list. *The House Of Sixty Fathers* is a book that took me on an emotional roller coaster and kept me so entranced that I couldn't set it down.

Sincerely,

Brynn A. Burkart

Hunter Butz

Greensburg Jr. High School , Greensburg

Letter to Raquel Palacio

Author of *Wonder*

Dear Raquel Palacio,

As far back as I can remember, society has been a judgmental, harsh, toxic pit of lies.

Kids who are “normal” have an advantage over those who aren’t very good looking, intellectually challenged, or have defects. There is a student in my school who has a birth defect.

His arm is incomplete, and isn’t as long or the shape that it should be. Some of us have learned to accept him and that he’s not that different after all. Even though this is true, you could never get everybody to accept him. Whenever he frustrates anybody, you will hear them call him “half T -rex” or “Nemo.” This just plain disgusts me. Even with all of this, he still leads a good life. He has friends. He pulls in decent grades. He’s even on the school basketball team. He’s just like a different form of August Pullman in the book *Wonder*.

I read your book *Wonder* as a sort of adventure, wandering astray from my usual fiction novels like *Harry Potter* or *Percy Jackson*. I wanted to explore a genre that was new to me, and I’m glad I picked the bright blue book that seemed to stand out amongst the others. I thought about reading a classic, but there were so many to choose from and someone else was sure to read the same thing as me. I looked through the library, and your book just struck curiosity inside me, so I read the description. I thought that was pretty good, so I read the first few pages. Then, I read the next chapter. I had read the whole book cover to cover in just over a day.

Wonder could be like a fairy tale if you view it in a different light. It could be like *Cinderella*. August is Cinderella, who is barred of all opportunity by society, or the ugly stepsisters. Then, Summer the fairy comes along and helps August keep going. Jack is like the Prince, and his talking bad about August is the midnight clock ringing. Later in the book, when Jack comes back and apologizes is the prince looking for Cinderella. This is when society no longer shuns August or Cinderella, like when the kids stood up for August during the field trip.

I'm not writing this essay to get a good grade or win a writing contest, I'm writing it to show you how your book has affected the way I see society. If I had never read this book, I would probably be a different person. I would probably look at someone that is better looking than another person, and try to stick with them. The better looking kid would probably be cocky and a little arrogant, but who cares as long as I'm popular, right? There are two different paths I could take, but I chose the right path. When choosing a friend, I make sure that they're a good person. I also want them to have similar interests. As a result, I have better friends and more happiness in life. I don't hang out with the mean people. I have friends that are nice and share interests with me. This is all thanks to your book, *Wonder*.

From,
Hunter Butz

Sam Calhoun

Salem Middle School, Salem

Letter to J.K Rowling

Author of *The Order of the Phoenix*

Dear J.K Rowling;

I have read the *Harry Potter* series many times but one book stuck out to me. The one out of seven books that inspired me was *The Order of the Phoenix*. This specific book has encouraged my view of myself because learning to love and having friendship instead of hating people in your life is an important lesson that pertains to other people, and this theme plays a very important story in my life. There is also another lesson I learned from the story. I read this quote out of the book, "Thoughts could leave deeper scars than almost anything else," and this quote was said by Madam Pomfrey.

In the book *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry gets possessed by Lord Voldemort and Harry has something that overpowers Voldemort. He can learn to love. Learning to love teaches you that you need to be nice and not to hate somebody just because somebody looks differently, dresses differently, or has a darker or lighter skin tone.

Learning to love is very important to my life because I was adopted from China and sometimes people might think that I am a bad person based on my different darker skin tone. In second grade I was bullied just because my eyes were shaped differently. I bawled my eyes out that day. I did not think I was any different than anybody at the time because my friends had treated me like a girl with the same color of skin, the same eye shape, and who dressed in the same type of clothing. I guess I had no clue what I looked like from another set of eyes.

According to this quote, "Thoughts could leave deeper scars than almost anything else." This quote means a lot to me. On the day that I was bullied I wanted to change myself into a totally different person just because a peer made fun of my eyes. Later on from reading this particular quote made me change my mind about wanting to modify my personal self, but when reading this quote I had thought I wanted to change how I looked but if I kept wanting to change myself then that would have crushed who I really was based on how somebody thought I looked like. I remembered that all of

the people who were closest to me did not care about the way in which I looked. They treated me the same as anybody else.

In conclusion, this book has changed the way I look at myself because learning to love my friends and myself has helped me from not wanting to change who I am because I should like myself for who I truly am, and the quote has helped me not to want to change myself because reading this quote has made me not want to change the way I look.

Sam M. Calhoun

Cadence Campbell

Batesville Middle School, Batesville

Letter to Rainbow Rowell

Author of *Fangirl*

Dear Rainbow Rowell,

Hello, I am a huge fan of your book *Fangirl*. I have not read many of your other books, but a friend recommended it to me and I could not have been more thankful. Like Cath, sometimes I worry about what other people think of me because of my love of books. I could see myself as her when I was reading, and it surprised me sometimes. I have very close friends, and we are almost like how Cath and Wren are, and the book has shown me that it is not bad if either one of us wants to branch out a little bit, that it could actually help us.

When she was telling her professor, Piper, why she rather write fanfiction over fiction made up by her, she said, "I'd rather pour myself into a world I love and understand than try to make something out of nothing," and that is what I try to tell people so much when they ask why I rather read and write about that book than write something of my own. But I also believe what Professor Piper says in response, "But there's nothing more profound than creating something out of nothing." That is what my mind is always torn between, reading and write about that, or creating something of my own. Eventually, I end up reading my books and crawling into the hole of my beloved fiction worlds created by other people.

I always felt that, before I had read *Fangirl*, that all of my friends thought that I was crazy for liking books better than reality. They always said stuff like, "It takes too much time to read," "Why do you always have your nose in a book?" "Do you really have to take a book with you every where you go?" and eventually, I tried to stop so they would stop talking to me like that and I thought that they would let me back into the little group. I strayed away from books, but not completely stopped reading them, for almost a year. But then one of my other friends, that always encouraged my reading habits, suggested *Fangirl* to me.

I am so thankful that it taught me that it is okay to love books and be passionate about them, and that my really good friends would enjoy them with me. When I got back into my old habits, some of my other friends picked up the books with me, and no, I can "nerd" out with them, but they

still don't get the entire picture. Whenever we finish a deep conversation about a book, they are always joke around saying, "I can't believe that I was just acting like a nerd," and then go back to talking about what is going on in the real world. Cath really thought the words that I have always thought when they say something like that, "To really be a nerd, she's decided, you had to prefer fictional worlds to the real one."

This book opened my eyes that, even though not everyone will always like that I constantly read and write, but I will make new friends through doing so. I have made numerous friends at camps, and we will go on for hours debating about what fictional couples should be together or not, what Author is the best of all time, or what the true meaning of the books were about. And your book has also shown me that I can branch out, while not always with literature in my head. Music has helped me make new friends and relationships, so has movies. It isn't always a bad idea to be thrown out of your comfort zone.

Thank you again for writing such an amazing book that helped myself see who I really was; I could not be more grateful. It really helped my come out of my shell and see the people around me and myself differently. This book will always have a place in my heart (and my bookshelf) and I will gladly let it reside there. Thank you again for writing *Fangirl*.

Sincerely,
Cadence Campbell

PS. I can't wait to add even more of your books to my shelves. I can't help but love your writing style and the ways that the world come alive.

Dillon Carpenter

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to David Pelzer

Author of *A Child Called It*

Dear Mr. David Pelzer,

I have faced more adversity in my life than most people will in their lifetime. As a kid I was beaten, abused, and mistreated which has lead me to where I am now. My so-called father was a bad man, I mean bad. He abused me both physically and mentally. I have been hit by about anything you can find in a house. Cords, pans and pots, brooms, chairs, tables, you name it, and have probably been struck by it once or twice. Your story showed me that no matter what obstacles come to me that I can beat it, it helped me in some rough times that I felt no one could help me with. As I moved to my mom's, she works two jobs and is not home as often as she should be. I could never talk to her like a kid should. *A Child Called It* saved me from a life of depression.

I cried myself to sleep many times as a child. I was also a target of being bullied. Being bigger than your teacher at a young age isn't a cool thing. I didn't have friends. I was alone, with no father, no friends, and a mother being a teenager. The loneliness gets to a child. I remember my dad coming home one day and he was extra angry with me that day. I remember it like it happens annually. I was walking up the basement stairs and there he was swearing like a sailor. The tears started raining down my face like it would if a hurricane were near. That's when it happened. He shoved me down the steps and since then I have had the ankle problems I have now. During the course of the fall I shattered one of my bones that pinched a nerve. That didn't hurt nearly as bad as what came next.

It's ironic how almost the exact same situation I found myself in was in your book. As I went to school the next day on crutches my teacher was suspicious. As I walked home from the bus stop I saw my dad's red truck. He was already home. I walked in waiting for the yelling to begin, but it never came. He was nice, something that I didn't think he could be anymore. We went out for ice cream and to a store and I got to pick out toys I wanted. About the same time I opened the new gifts and started playing with them there was a knock at the door. It was a lady.

They exchanged words and before I knew it the lady was asking me questions about what goes on at home. She asked questions that made me

want to bawl my eyes up right there and then but, I didn't I hid the tears. I told her what she didn't want to hear. I denied everything. Exactly what you did. Thinking he would change. I got the answer to that as soon as she left. A big fat no.

As I was getting older and I was getting able to read bigger books, I stumbled into *A Child Called It*. I then realized that I didn't have the worst of it. At least I wasn't being starved or not getting clothes. You lost both your parents being put into different foster homes, I only lost my dad. I waited and waited for my mom, as I did she eventually came and took me from that horrid place. He has always called me names but, at a young age I didn't know what many of them meant. I discovered an extent vocabulary riding a bus to and back from school. Many of which I shouldn't know that young. Then it hit me, I started becoming empty and every time I heard those horrendous words I began to cry a river. That made him even angrier saying things like he didn't raise a little girl. At those moments I thought of your book and this is what got me through my younger years.

Your book did more then give me something to pass the time. It helped me in ways I can't explain. As I'm getting older the bullying still continues. *A Child Called It* showed me what the point of living was. It showed me that just because you came from a bad history you can go wherever you want. In some parts of the novel I felt as if it were someone writing about my life. Some may think *A Child Called It*, is sad and may even tear up reading but, I never thought about it that way. I looked at it like a guide to my survival. I knew what it felt like to be alone, mistreated, in constant pain, hiding the real you, not being able to wear certain clothes because the bruises and scars will show. As I make this letter come to an end there are two things I want to say. First beginning with Mr. Pelzer thank you for being my only friend and getting me through some of the roughest times in my life. Secondly, Dad, whatever you are doing, all I want to say are three words, I hate you.

Yours truly,
Dillon Carpenter

Angela Conrad

Chesterton Middle School, Chesterton

Letter to Judy Blume

Author of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*

Dear Judy Blume,

Your book, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, has helped me in different ways that I thought that this book would never do. I thought that it was just a book, what can it do for me? My mom is the one who convinced me to read *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. My mom said that she read it when she was my age. So, I read your book. The more I read, the more I wanted to keep reading.

Margaret is my age. She is learning how to make new friends that she hopes will be her lifelong best friends. She is going through difficulties and changes as a girl in middle school, just like I am. From talking about boys, to learning how to live with challenges, to growing into a mature, young woman.

I have always grown up as a worrier. Wondering what will happen in my future. How will I deal with certain problems? What will happen to me as I grow up?

Your book answered my questions. After reading your book, I feel more confident on how I will handle tough situations and making the right choices. I now have a better understanding about what will happen to me sometime in the near future.

In your story, Margaret does not have a religion and she is trying to find God. I do have a religion. I am Christian. I have many questions about God. After reading your book, I have realized that I will always have questions about God, and some I may never find the answer. But I have learned from your story that even though I may have a lot of questions about God, and I have trouble finding him, I know that he will listen to me in my changing life, and is there to listen, just like Margaret learns.

Thank you for writing this book to help me with life as a girl in middle school. I am very thankful for your book giving me the help I needed and answering my questions about my faith.

Yours truly,
Angela Conrad

Nataly Davidsmith

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Kwame Alexander

Author of *The Crossover*

Dear Kwame Alexander,

The Crossover is a book seemingly about basketball. However, it is much deeper than that. It is about the intricate relationship between family members. The 10 rules of basketball are expressed in this verse, "In the game of life, your family is the court, and the ball is your heart. No matter how good you are, no matter how down you get, always leave your heart on the court." The basketball court is compared to the family, and the basketball itself is compared to one's heart. Family is an important theme in the novel. It involves mutual love, compassion, loyalty, and emotional, physical, and spiritual support of individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who still behave according to the typical family structure. To me, family is very important. The love of a family should be unconditional, and everyone should try their best to provide all they can for the people in their family, emotionally and financially. Family are the people who everyone deserves to feel secure and comfortable with.

In the novel, it is Josh's family, the Bells, and his relationship with them, which forms the theme of family. The book spoke to me and I felt like I was literally in the book. Josh has a good relationship with his dad. He and his dad are very close, just like my dad and I. His dad helps him with basketball like mine does. I think my relationship with my dad is closer than Josh's dad because my dad and I hang out more than they do. He and I love to make jokes about everything including basketball, football, players, commentators, sports referees, commercials of some sort, TV shows and much more. My dad will do anything for me when I am sick, he will literally go out in the middle of the night to get medicine for me or pick me up from any place at any time. He fixes me the best food like salmon, cookies, salad, pizza and much more at a minute's notice. He is the best dad you could ever have.

Josh loses his father to a massive heart attack. The tragedy is that his father could have prevented it because he did not go to the doctor when he needed to after having four heart attacks. When Josh's father died, it reminded me how precious life is. Since I don't have experience of what it feels like to have your father pass away, the closest that I felt the fear of losing my father was in 2014. Like Josh's dad, my father does not go to the doctor often and

so in 2014, my dad had a herniated disc. A herniated disc is when you have leg pain and you start to have lower back pain. You get numb, weak & tingly in your leg or back. I was very worried for my dad. My mom and I had to take care of him, like putting his socks on, putting his pants on, fixing him food, and helping him get in and out the shower. He was laying on the couch all day.

The hardest part was that we couldn't do things together. We couldn't play basketball together, we couldn't wrestle with each other and fight for the ball anymore, but we could still make jokes.

I was wondering how long this would last. It ended in February of 2015, when he finally agreed to have back surgery. On March 1, 2014, my best friend's father died of cancer. When I asked him how he felt, Ethan said, "I felt like, what was life going to be without my father? I was anxious to see if life was going to be so much worse now than before and I felt surprised. I felt terrible, sad, depressed, and I realized that all good things must come to an end." This made me really cherish the time I have with my dad.

The book has changed the way I think because I didn't think that spending time with family was as important but now I know that it is because it affects how we relate, care and love each other.

Family is very important to me because my parents are always with me when I need them and they can also give me pieces of advice with my problems. Family is one of the most important aspects of who I am.

Sincerely,
Nataly Davidsmith

Zoe Dolack

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Annabel Pitcher

Author of *Ketchup Clouds*

Dear Annabel Pitcher,

Your novel *Ketchup Clouds* (also titled *Yours Truly*), has changed my life for the better. I read the book when I was going through a time in my life where I needed to hear what the book was centered around; you have to let go of the past, move onto the future and forgive yourself. I used to be so hard on myself and needed to let go of things I can't change. Now I find myself more focused on the future, rather than dwelling in the past. How do you free yourself from your past? It seems so complicated and so easy at the same time. But it's really neither. It just is. You have to remember to keep moving forward and to never look back because, well, you're not going that way.

Ketchup Clouds inspired me in incredible ways. Your words made me think more, and they made me want to do something impactful, to change something about the world and to think more open mindedly. The story seemed like one of those moments where you all of a sudden get motivation from hearing about someone else doing something great, or of a problem you may want to help solve but have no clue how to do so. Those are the moments where you feel like you could do anything, at least in your mind. It almost feels like you could fly, as if you were a bird coming out of its cage for the first time. The problem with that kind of inspiration and motivation is that somehow, it almost always gets forgotten, left behind. As if the feeling was meant to be temporary. Even though I understood the great motivation, I pushed that inspirational feeling of freedom, like the bird, aside for a second. Then it was gone for what could have been forever. However, even though the escaping feeling was a lost doe in the woods, it eventually found its way to the front of my mind again, back home. When that feel good moment came back, it was different though. It came more subtly and eased its way back into the center of my thoughts. I guess that's what made it stay this time. If it would have been sudden and fast, it would have been gone just as quickly.

How do you free yourself from your past? It seems so complicated and so easy at the same time. But it's really neither. It just is. You have to remember to keep moving forward and to never look back because, well,

you're not going that way. The end of the book was the part that inspired me and changed me the most, when Aaron wrote the letter to Zoe (or Alice). There was so much sacrifice, of knowing that no matter how much he wanted to see her, she needed to be by herself, away from him. He wanted her to fly, and be free from the incident, to forget her past. The way Aaron helped Zoe let go is beautiful. No one knew what Zoe was going through, and they didn't understand why she acted the way she did in parts of the book. That really made me feel sonder, I understood how everyone had just as complex of a life as me, everyone in this world of 8 billion. It's a realization that encourages compassion and understanding. So many people live life in so many different ways. It's an interesting thing, isn't it? You can't live life wrong, or maybe you can. That all depends on how you live. After reading your book, I seemed to understand more about life. Being thirteen, maybe I don't understand as much as a sixty year old philosopher, but it changed how I see the world. Now, I try to look at life through other people's point of view. For me that's what life is about, or at least what it seems to be: helping and understanding other people.

Sincerely,
Zoe E. Dolack

Destiny Fender

West Noble Middle School, Ligonier

Letter to Sarah Tregay

Author of *Love and Leftovers*

Dear Sarah Tregay,

“Dominoes. Do you hate the person who tapped the first domino down? Or do you hate the domino for not standing up for itself? And if you are the second domino and you get toppled, do you hate yourself? Dad tapped the first domino by opening the proverbial closet. Mom fell over. And me? I toppled too.” - *Love and Leftovers*, pg.44

Some may say I have a very different mindset than other kids that surround my everyday environment. In a way, my reality was different from everyone else. I was raised up moving state-to-state due to the army, dealing with mental health issues. Not just my own, but my family’s too. My biological “dad” walked out when I was young. Times were hard. Your book *Love and Leftovers* made a real connection to my life, not in the typical boyfriend-girlfriend-love-hate-heartbreak kind of way. The connection was more about being left, confused, lonely, loss of friendships, broken family, and forgiveness.

At a young age, my father left. He was still a young age himself. He had my older brother at age 16, then me at 19. He was addicted to drugs and full of hate. The cause was his own childhood. At the time, I was too young to realize that he wasn’t ever coming back and why he left. As I got older, I started to question everything. Like, did he even care?

Even love us? Even try?

I felt like Marcie did when her father came out as a homosexual. She was confused and felt like everything she knew was a lie. A year ago or so I found out my “dad” has a new family, that meant new wife, new kids. I wasn’t just mad I was hurt, my first thought was how could he love them but not me? What about me, my brother and mom? We were left to be forgotten. He left and got a new replacement.

But just like how Marcie started to accept the fact that her dad was gay, she also started to realize that he couldn’t control who he loved and how he felt. With age, I started to realize that my “dad” was sick, not in the typical way like a cold, or flu, but in a way that was hard for me to grasp the concept of.

He was sick indeed, mentally sick. He wasn't only an addict, he never really learned to love himself. So, how could he possibly love a family at this point?

Just like Marcie's mom, my mom went through a period in her life where she became very sad, depressed, and well, simply lonely. One of the worst feelings in the world is to witness your mother crying. When I was young, I was scared and sad. I felt like my mom was upset with me.

In the book, you wrote "she explains it is okay for a child to turn to an adult when things get complicated and it would be better for both of us if she were the mother and I were the teenager, and if I wanted to talk about things she'd be happy to listen. I decline.

Within a couple of months of being in Kansas, my world felt like everything was being sucked up into a black hole. My mom and brother were going through some personal issues due to mental health. My oldest brother ended up going to Indiana and stayed with my grandma while my mom, dad, step-brother, and I stayed in Kansas. Shortly after, my mom ended up in the hospital for a month or so due to the meds she was on made her condition even worse.

I didn't exactly understand what was going on, but I did know I was angry. Angry that I couldn't see my mom, couldn't talk to my brother, couldn't go to sleep without crying. I hated everyone, including myself. I couldn't understand the concept of depression. I just wanted my mom and brother back.

At this time I started to write more and more, started out as short little stories about mystical lands I could run to if ever needed, or even short simple poems. I felt like Marcie and Linus, the best escape from my reality, best way to express, the easiest way to explain was to write it all out.

At the moment, I am fourteen I now realize all these things that happened when I was young truly did suck, but it made me into the person I am today.

I learned to forgive but to never forget. Not all blood is family, and not all family is blood. Everyone has a battle even if you can't see it. ***Love and Leftovers*** made a connection to my like unlike any other book I've read so far.

“World returns to its previously scheduled orbit and the tropical storm that has my life dwindled to scattered showers, I close my eyes and listen to my heartbeat. Love dub | love dub.”

Sincerely,
Destiny Fender

Melissa Fernandez

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

Letter to Steven Arntson

Author of *Wrap-Up List*

Dear Mr. Steven Arntson,

I was in 6th grade when I came upon your book. I was with my friends at the so called “cool place” also known as the library. In December, the school had its annual Scholastic book fair. I had yet to reach my goal of spending the humongous amount of \$5, with which I could have bought “so many things” I do not know what compelled me to grab *Wrap-Up List*, but a spark of curiosity came over me. When I picked it up, I saw at the very top in white bold letters: Number of days left to live: 7. What would you do? I mean who wouldn’t want to know?

When I got home that day, I read the back only to find out it was about a girl who encounters a letter written by Death! I thought to myself: is Death a person? I was so confused yet astonished by such a plot! I opened the book and by the end of the first chapter I was hooked!

I was late coming to the dinner table that night. I could not stop thinking about all of these clues which soon would solve the Death’s weakness not only to save Gabriela from unnecessary death but for her to complete her Wrap-Up list. To be honest, before I read this book I really did not think about obsessing every hour of the day thinking about Death in any way nor what would I do if I only had a week to accomplish my goals before I go to the Silver Side!

Like Gabriela, I am an only child. Before I read your book, I really did not think much about my wrap-up list. So I made one with the three main goals I would like to achieve if a Death were ever going to unwittingly pick me. First, I want to somehow help resolve social issues in society such as the access to education for kids and bullying. Second, I want to travel all around the world and use the experience to open new ideas in my mind about how to solve these problems. Third, I want to spend one week, all 168 hours, visiting with patients who are close to the end of their timeline, just talking to them, and hearing about their life story. I know it might seem crazy that a 12-year-old thinks of this instead of wishing for a 12-pound-bag of candy or to have a million dollars. But the wrap-up list made me think about these three goals. What I got out of the book was to be grateful everyday of life

because you never know what is going to happen tomorrow or in seven days.

What touched me most in your story was the Singing Man. He made me think most about how we humans spend our days. Compared to him, I think we spend our time worrying about everything that can happen in the future rather than being thankful for the advantages we have in the present. If people knew the day they were scheduled to die, I think we humans would look at life in a different way.

In *Wrap-Up List*, the Singing Man would sing of happiness and joy for his life and when he faced Death, he thanked her and simply left for the Silver Side. Plus, this event could be seen by all the people. What surprised me the most was that not just the victim himself can see Death but other people can witness Death escorting someone. I do believe this is a world where not many people want to talk about what will happen when they die. Your book explores the subject of death from a different perspective. Death is not to be feared but scares those unwilling to die or to even think about it. Through Gabriela's eyes, you show how a person could deal with such a fate.

Also throughout *Wrap-Up List* Gonzalo, Gabriela's grandfather, meant so much to her. How she talked to his picture was very heart- touching to me. She has never met him but he still meant so much to her in so many ways. How she expressed her feelings about her Death letter was moving in a way I cannot really describe. To Gabriela, it was not difficult to remember his features, his kindness, and his patriotism, because Gonzalo was Gabriela's hero. What got me using my noggins (as my social studies teacher would say) was when Gabriela had a chance to get a pardon if she could find her Death's weakness. At the end of the story, Gabriela and her family abruptly found out that Grandfather Gonzalo was actually scheduled for departure and was pardoned, but gave his Pardon away to someone else. So what was Gabriela's Death's weakness? Giving away pardons.

Finally, I would like to most and foremost thank you, Mr. Arntson, for writing this wonderful book. It taught me not only to embrace life, but also to enjoy every moment of the day. I realize I have to use the time to its full potential, and set goals for myself throughout my lifespan, so that each day I can reach a little higher for the cookie. Your book also gave me a different point of view about death, not in a negative way but in a way that allowed me to see how people feel about death. To conclude, I would like you to know the **Wrap-Up List** changed my life in many ways. Thank you Mr. Arntson.

Sincerely,
Melissa Fernandez

Abby Fischer

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Lois Lowry

Author of *The Giver*

Dear Lois Lowry,

We are all blind. So blind that we are unable to make the simplest of decisions without the influence of our peers. Blind to the fact that we are independent people. We only see the most gruesome parts of society that we are oblivious to the good still being there. But it is. After reading your book, *The Giver*, I now see the world with new eyes. The government was taking away any trace of individuality left in the community, making choices for the people, and extinguishing feelings. Unlike the novel, however, it is not our government that is controlling our feelings and decisions in that way. We are doing it to ourselves.

Going to school as a teenager, I see a lot of things. Good choices. Bad mistakes. And right in between. Most of all, I see hundreds of different people being followers. Looking up to people is a great privilege, but it stops being so notable when you lose your uniqueness in the process. We are even following the current de rigueur just to try to fit in. But where's the fun in that? Style is one of the most idiosyncratic choices that we have, but it is easily taken for granted. I think we take all of our choices for granted. To imagine living in a world where there are no decisions for us to make ourselves, like in the book, is appalling to me. The characters didn't remember color or weather or any feelings at all. We have all of that and so much more; we need to take advantage of it.

Usually, when reading a book, I like to be brought into a fantasy world where I can forget the problems we are facing. But after reading *The Giver*, I was forced to look at the world as it is right now. Like the Giver said in your book, "Our people made that choice. The choice to go to Sameness." I realized, as did Jonas, that the decision is still ours to make: Do you want to let society direct your life in the path of many others, or do you want to carve your own path?

There's much more,
Abby Fischer

Michaela Geller-Montague

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Jennifer Niven

Author of *All the Bright Places*

Dear Jennifer Niven,

The thing about the past is that it begs the question, what if? What if I had done this, said that, gone there? How would that change the person that I am today? Would I be different? More successful? Happier?

When I was 3 years old, my parents called me, my sister and my brother downstairs. They said they needed to talk to us. My dad took a deep breath and told us that Yuval, my cousin, had committed suicide. I didn't really understand what that meant at the time, but I remember looking around at my family's faces and thinking that it was horrible that everybody was so sad, wishing that I could fix it.

When Finch dies, Violet writes a poem asking what she could have done differently. She wonders what she did wrong, why she wasn't enough, why her love couldn't save him. When bad things happen, we tend to think, what if? What if I had told them they were beautiful? What if I had gotten them help? What if I had tried harder?

Finch shares a story about a cardinal flying into a window over and over until it dies. He says, "There was nothing to make him last a long time." But, is that really true? I can't accept that.

Some people believe that our destinies are already determined, that we don't truly have any choice at all because the outcome will always remain the same. But we can do so much in the world, and these ideas can limit us. We can change the world every day, even if it's only in a small way. Giving food to homeless people, smiling at strangers, and complimenting people are all small ways that we can change the world. If you put a dollar in a jar, you probably won't feel a difference in your wallet. But if you do this every day for 50 years, you will have collected \$18,250. Similarly, small gestures of kindness add up and can make a big difference. Many people who have survived suicide attempts say that if a stranger had just acknowledged their humanity with a smile, they would have changed their mind about trying to end their life.

Right before Yuval shot himself, he called his father. He rushed over as quickly as he could, but by the time he had reached his son it was too late.

I'm sure he thought to himself many times, what if I had gone faster? Could he have saved him? Would that last act of love have been the tip of the iceberg?

The truth is, we will never know. Dwelling on the past, regret, and what if? can stunt our ability to grow into the future. At a certain point, we have to let go of what could have been and focus on what will be. All we can do about the past is learn from it. This book taught me that we shouldn't spend our lives worrying about what has already happened. We can find fulfillment by living in the moment. We can change the world by helping others. After reading Finch's letter, Violet begins to understand this. She says, "The thing I realize is that it's not what you take, it's what you leave." Thank you for leaving me with this new outlook on life.

Sincerely,
Michaela Geller-Montague

Sara Feiga Gluck

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Jennifer Nielson

Author of *A Night Divided*

Dear Jennifer Nielson,

If Gerta can do it, I can do it. These words pulse through my mind. At home. At school. At the supermarket. Everywhere, really. If Gerta is strong enough to live her life with no regret, then I am strong enough to live with no regrets. My daily worries seem petty and childish in comparison to what Gerta was put through. Homework, teachers, and schoolwork are nothing compared to death, fear, and betrayal.

Mrs. Nielson, *A Night Divided* taught me more than the mere history, more than the struggle of the people in East Berlin. Your book taught me the meaning of trust and betrayal. As I was reading your book, I imagined what life would have been like for me. Gerta was one of a kind. She seemed like the type who would say what she meant, and mean what she said.

Trust. Just the word brings so many images to my mind. In Gerta's life, there was a lack of trust. No one could be completely sure that their neighbor, friend, or even family member was not a secret Stasi officer, waiting for a reason to turn them in. A normal family might be secretly trying to turn them in, or they might be people just like Gerta, who wanted to give their family a chance for a better life. It's sad that no one did anything when the Stasi were taking away basic human rights, like privacy. If someone's home here in the United States was bugged, the entire country would be in an uproar. At the same time, what most people don't realize is that the government has the right to tap into our phones and listen to our conversations, without a warrant. I think it's interesting that we're so appalled by what the East Germans did, yet we don't realize that this is what's happening in our own country.

Betrayal. This word's never had much meaning in my life, because I'm fortunate to live in a country where, while I don't have all of the privacy I'd like, I still don't have to worry about other people snooping and reporting me to government officials.

But for Gerta, everything was the opposite, the only people she could trust were her brother and her mother. Everything else had to be done in secret, so it must have felt really unsettling for Gerta to know that there were

people whose lives were pretty much devoted to spying on families and people like her. It just seems really sad so many people were being brainwashed and being forced into thinking the way the Stasi did, always looking for ways to accuse people of committing “crimes,” such as telling other people what you think about the government, or trying to bring your family back together.

Gerta’s life is so different from mine. It seems like it would be an obvious statement, but really, it’s not. Before I read your book, I always thought, ‘Sure, the time was different, the styles were different, but the people? Nah, people are people, and nothing you do can change that.’ Now I see that I was wrong. Completely wrong. It’s true that people are people. And people naturally are intellectually curious. But I now realize that Gerta’s way of life was completely different than mine. It was like she was living two lives, putting up a show for everyone around her while secretly doing what she was living for. It’s like she was living with a canopy above her head, blocking all sunlight and warmth. But still, just like we figured out how to create space heaters, they too figured out how to create warmth. The Lowe home was still a loving, warm home even under the restrictive Communist rule. Even so, Gerta wanted more than a brother and mother.

She wanted a loving father, and not one, but two, loving brothers. She saw that there was more than what was being offered, but there was an invisible force stopping her from living.

I know it sounds cliché, but your book definitely changed my life. It changed my whole view of the world. Now, I feel lucky to have a complete family, not just a mother and a brother, I feel lucky to be able to live without being afraid of death, captivity, and betrayal. I feel thankful for everything I have, for being able to speak freely, to pray freely, and just to live freely. I can travel anywhere I want, and I’m allowed to see other places in the world. I’m allowed to make snide comments about the government to anyone I want, without being afraid that I’ll be killed or discovered. The people of Berlin had to suffer so much at the hands of the government, and I truly

admire them for living through the difficult times. So, like John F. Kennedy said in his famous speech and like you wrote at the end of your book, I too am proud to say Ich bin ein Berliner.

Sincerely,
Sara Feiga Gluck

Hannah Harper

West Noble Middle School, Ligonier

Letter to Lois Lowry

Author of *The Giver*

Dear Lois Lowry,

“We’re blaming ‘society’ and yet we are society.
SO to make it a better place, we must change
ourselves first.”

- Unknown

Society. Society is the crusher of dreams. Society wants a pretty face and a good name, not what is on the inside. Creativity and uniqueness are things that are true to you. Sometimes these things are taken for granted. But in *The Giver* Jonas sees things that his community does not. Color, hope, and love are twisted and controlled so that nothing is felt, seen or heard. The community takes away differences to make everyone equal, but by making everyone equal, they made everyone the same. Being the same is not being equal. Lois, you have not only shown that these are not things that should be taken away, you have opened the eyes of others, to see the world in a new way. This does not only apply to *The Giver*. it applies to the world today. Your book has not only opened my eyes to see the world in a different way, it has helped me appreciate not only the beauty of differences, it has helped me admire everything that I have that makes me who I am.

Beauty, love, color. Things we take for granted are all taken away. But society today does not see these things as something to love or cherish. People think everything is about being the exact same as everyone else. That you have to be well liked and have everything that makes you “cool” or “popular.” Your book creates a world that no one would want to live in. A life of no choice, no love, and no ideas. The sameness and equality that people want and crave to have, is taken to a whole new level. These people can’t make decisions about their life anymore. Today, nobody cherishes differences or opportunities. The same as the community in *The Giver*.

Seeing the world in a way that colors are gone, that everything is equal, makes you want to embrace everything you have and every little tiny differences that makes you unique. Freedom to be who you are, freedom to do what you want, freedom to love is given to us in ways that we take advantage of. *The Giver* has not only helped me to be more passionate

about being myself and not taking these things for granted. It has helped me see who needs to be nonconforming to the comfort of being the same. The risk of being different is a lot better than being in the world of being the same. But as people in *The Giver* see the world as black and white, Jonas is exploring the beauty of difference, and trying to help others to see it too. Lois, you have helped me in ways that are hard to comprehend, hard to see. But you have changed the way I look at the world, the way that I look at my freedom, at life and at society.

Hannah Harper

Grace Helming

Jasper Middle School, Jasper
Letter to Alyssa Satin Capucilli
Author of *Biscuit*

Dear Alyssa Satin Capucilli,

I know this may seem silly, but reading your book, *Biscuit*, as a child, made a huge impact on my life. Also, I know you're probably thinking to yourself, "How can such a small book about a dog, have such an immense impact on a little girl's life?"

Well, growing up as an only child with a single mom can get sort of lonely at times. Often, there was no one my age to talk to. If I wanted to play and mom was busy, I would've had to play on my own. (Yes, because of this, there were times I didn't want to share my new toys, or I just wanted some time to myself.) It indeed got lonely after so much of that.

Imaginary friends weren't my thing, and on occasion dolls might have been. However, I really fell in love with dogs. I had two of my own dogs when I was growing up, Copper and Koby.

They became my life-long friends. We did all sorts of things together through the years starting when I was only a couple of months old. In fact, the first word that I managed to squeak out of my mouth was "dog."

My mom said I was standing on my tiptoes, looking out the glass sliding door into our backyard one day. The breeze was blowing through the trees as the sun shone through the branches. My tiny hand was pointing in the direction of the two figures chasing each other around the yard. "Dog," I yelped with excitement.

Since my dogs meant the world to me, books about dogs helped me develop the desire to want to read! I would stare at books for hours exploring all the pictures and words. I couldn't wait until my mom would sit down and read me one of your books. Your book, *Biscuit*, was the first book I completed reading fully on my own, without anyone stopping to tell me how to pronounce a word, or how to say it. I read each word aloud, in every sentence, on every page, throughout the entire book!

Biscuit, even though just a character in your stories, became one of my friends like my own dogs. (He even looked like my dog Copper!) When my

mom would read his adventures to me before bed, I would feel like I was there in the story with him. I would think about him as I fell asleep and that made me feel not as scared, alone in my bedroom at night.

So thank you, Alyssa, for writing books that made me want to read, and I appreciate the passion you ignited within me to read. Thank you for creating a new friend for me, and for making me feel not as lonely. Unknowingly, you made me feel safe at night too. Lastly, I want to thank you for bringing me, Biscuit.

Your friend,
Grace G. Helming

Kalijah Hessig

Salem Middle School, Salem

Letter to J.R.R Tolkien

Author of *The Lord of the Rings*

Dear J.R.R Tolkien,

The Lord of the Rings: the Two Towers changed my view of the modern world after I read it. I used to see the world as a bright sunlight-filled peaceful bundle of happiness. But now I see the world is an industrialized polluted dystopia that is ruled by whomever possesses the most fossil fuels and other natural resources. We, the human race, are killing Mother Nature our original nurturer to whom we all owe our very existence to. Without Mother Nature the human race, or life at that, would not be where it is today or maybe not even exist as we know it. We might be a particle of rock on a distant asteroid hurtling its way through space or maybe some microscopic bacteria at the bottom of a food chain on a hunk of rock you could barely call a planet across the infinitely vast emptiness of space.

In your novel there are many subtopics of how we are negatively affecting Mother Nature: deforestation, industrialization, pollution, destroying habitats and resource wars. Deforestation is discussed at Saruman's tower: Orthanc, and his surrounding kingdom. His armies chopped down almost all of the hundreds of acres of surrounding forests, leaving the land a vast wasteland of stumps and dirt. All so he could build war machines and fuel fires of his underground smiths for his army in a resource war against the rest of humanity and other civilized races. By destroying the forest he ruined thousands of ecosystems and killed thousands of animals, he almost killed the ents, a tree like people, to the point of extinction by destroying the animals' forest homes.

He also polluted the air and water whilst industrializing his kingdom. He poured the tar and trash from his mass weapon producing plants into the river not caring how it would affect anyone or anything else. All the carbon and other harmful gasses from the large amount of forest timber being burned there devastated the air surrounding Orthanc.

While reading this I noticed some similarities between the imaginary world of Middle Earth and the real world that we live in. We too have destroyed hundreds of ecosystems through mass deforestation and pollution of all kinds. We hunted the bison to almost the point of extinction among many

other endangered species that some of which we have hunted to extinction or caused them to go extinct through pollution and deforestation.

The entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is about a resource war when I get right down to it. Sure Sauron and his dark minions wanted to kill humanity, elves and dwarves. They needed their resources. The dwarves had riches such as coal, oil and valuable metals. The elves had control over vast acres of woodland. The humans had control over vast plains for farmland. Sauron had Mordor, a volcanic wasteland filled with rocks, they barely had any trees if any at all, almost no farmland and what little mineral resources there was there they have long since depleted. So Sauron had almost no choice to pillage other races' land for resources if they wanted to survive.

Humanity has always fought wars over resources. The French and Indian War was fought over the land and resources of the land in North America. The Cold War was a nuclear arms race between the U.S.A and the U.S.S.R that could have resulted in nuclear fallout that was fought over natural resources. The United States and other countries have fought wars in the Middle East over valuable oil located in the area.

So in conclusion *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* has changed my view of the world from a naïve innocent illusion to the harsh reality. Mother Nature is being killed by humanity and nothing will change unless we take action towards being environmentally friendly, not as individuals but as a unified species.

Sincerely
Kalijah Hessig

Emily Hile

West Noble Middle School, Ligonier

Letter to Rainbow Rowell

Author of *Eleanor and Park*

Dear Mrs. Rainbow Rowell,

My name is Emily. I live in Crowell, Indiana. Not a lot of people live where I live. I have not always lived in this small town myself. I moved here when I was 11 years old. I had to because it was my only choice. Luckily, I love the school and the teachers and my friends and my new family.

I picked your book *Eleanor and Park* because the book caught my eye as soon as I started reading. When I found out what happened to Eleanor's mom and that her step dad hurt her, it made me very emotional. No teens or kids should hear that and see their mom getting hurt like that. I don't know what I would do.

I relate to Eleanor not having a lot of food. When I was 8 and younger I really did not get a lot of food. My mom did not care about us. She had eight children. The three older boys are still living with her. My brother and sister and I live together. We now have wonderful parents. Our parents adopted us four years ago.

Eleanor had to share a bedroom with her brothers. I used to do it with my sister and my two brothers. We really did not have a bedroom. We had to sleep in the living room on the couches. I feel bad for Eleanor because kids should not go through things like that. Eleanor went to a foster family. Why should kids go through that? They should not, and I should know. I had to go through foster families from age four to twelve then I was finally adopted.

When I was little I always thought I was safe in my home with my mom, but I was not. We kept going back to my mom but it never worked. One day I remember my mom left and I did not see her for two days. Sometimes she would be gone for a week. My older brother had to take care of us. He is not himself anymore. He gets in trouble a lot. I worry about my brothers. What can you do without your brothers and your sisters? I do not get to see my younger brothers. They tell me they cry themselves to sleep. When will I see them? Are they safe? In what home are they now?

Who is going to save them? Will it be me? I believe that Eleanor felt a lot like I do. She wanted to protect her brothers from her step-dad, but she wasn't able to. She could not tell her step-dad how she felt, so instead she talked to Park and his family.

Like Eleanor, I was able to get out of a pretty bad situation. There are times I'm still pulled back in, but I remember I have a family that cares about me. This book changed the way I feel about my life. I'm thankful for my family and friends and teachers. Thank you for writing about what Eleanor's life was like and how it turned around. For girls like me who have lived through similar situations, it gave me strength.

Sincerely,
Emily Hile

Ava Kruper

Chesterton Middle School, Chesterton

Letter to Rebecca Rupp

Author of *After Eli*

Dear Rebecca Rupp,

Your book, *After Eli*, triggered many bittersweet memories for me. As Daniel lost his brother, I lost my sister.

A couple months ago my sister, Madison committed suicide. I do not have any idea why this happened. Like Daniel said, Eli went into the war knowing he was going to die. Daniel always wondered why he would do that and I feel that way about my sister, Madison. Even though I was able to attend her funeral and even her wake, I still feel like I did not get to say goodbye. Daniel felt like that too. I was looking at her and still hoping she would just wake up. I did not want to believe she was gone.

Daniel and his friends were playing with the Ouija board and the spirit that was talking said something to them that Eli always said to Daniel. That made me think about how we get signs. He did not want to believe Eli was dead and that he just got lost in the war. When that happened he got really upset because he did not want to believe it. I feel like we get signs everyday.

When the songs that were played at her funeral come on in the car I think that is her way of saying she is still here, but just in a different way. Eli always gave Daniel life lessons. My sister always did that too. Now that they're gone me and Daniel both feel lost. We do not get to see them on a daily basis. Daniel and Eli did not talk every day because Daniel was away. My sister lived in Kentucky so I did not get to talk to her every day.

All I wish is that we could get one more conversation. Daniel kept a book of the dead. His friend, Isabella said that is how he is coping with everything that happened. I keep a playlist of music from her funeral and that reminds me of Madison. I have her elephant statue right next to my bed and I wear her elephant bracelet everyday.

I really appreciated reading *After Eli* and I hope that it can help other people the way it helped me.

Yours truly,
Ava Kruper

Savannah Lee

Chesterton Middle School, Chesterton

Letter to Shakespeare

Author of *Romeo and Juliet*

Good Sir Shakespeare,

I am compelled to relate to you how much your literary works have affected my being. Perhaps with well-chosen points, I may be able to produce an explanation worthy of your time.

“Our best intentions mark the road to hell.”- Mercutio, *Romeo and Juliet*. This haunting quote from your play has impacted me in ways I cannot verbalize. Your play is abundant with comments, quotes, and keepsakes that will resonate within a person and convince them to sway their routines. To those who say your play can be mind-boggling and hard to follow at times, I would agree. However, not all works are to be understood in their entirety. In most instances, *Romeo and Juliet* is interpreted and connected to all situations in daily lives. The lessons learned from tragedy, to forgiveness, to love, and other trials supply the common man with valuable knowledge through relatable literary experiences.

Such examples can be discovered, both intentionally and naturally. I took away the undeniable prejudice of the feuding families. The Lords and Ladies, both Capulet and Montague, were blind with pre-conceived prejudices. Lord and Lady Capulet wished the best for their child, yet in the end condemned her and their bloodline. Romeo and Juliet were madly in love, as seen with the tragic outcome, yet the parents' hatred clouded realization. They overlooked sonder. What could have been joyous celebration became sorrow funerals. I, myself, can connect this to racial discrimination or even our current political state. Your detestation of a label prevents you from actually seeing the person. Why care if you are a democrat, republican, black, white, red, brown, Montague, or Capulet? “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”- Juliet, *Romeo and Juliet*. Aren’t we all people? Disdain for the packaging may keep you from seeing the product inside. I have always been careful to treat every person I come across with respect and equality. The upsetting part, to me, is that people are killing other people because they are gay. I don’t let any label get in the way of my judgement of another. Your work, especially, helped me see that. I want to work with special needs children when I get older because I don’t think they deserve to

be treated as if they are inferior. Every person is a human, yet not every human is personable.

Tragedy is inevitable. At some point or instance in every individual's life, they will come across tragedy. Whether from personal confrontation and experience or simply being alerted of an event on the news, you cannot escape it. "The violent delights have violent ends/And in their trump die, like fire and powder/Which, as they kiss, consume."- Friar Lawrence, ***Romeo and Juliet***.

I personally interpret this as a warning, to always be careful of your actions. Unintentional persuasion is a curse not to forget. Your actions can create your own and others' tragedy. And, as cliché as it sounds, everything you do will impact something, whether yourself, others around you, or even the world. The butterfly effect is an unpredictable foe at times.

I will end with love. "Love is a smoke/Made with the fumes of sighs."- Romeo, ***Romeo and Juliet***. Love is something you have to discover on your own, though we may use your mournful depiction as a cautionary tale to follow. Some say that Romeo and Juliet were too impetuous, and, again, I agree. They were so focused on falling in love, they forgot to fall in love. Love can be quick and consuming, or slow and sweet (Friar Lawrence, although, has many great things to say about this). No one can understand, certainly not me (I'm only fourteen), so there is not much I can say. Only the person him or herself can know what it is like.

I guess everyone has some traits of the Romeo and Juliet trials in them. No matter if someone enjoys your tale or not, every individual can relate.

"Two households, both alike in dignity/In fair Verona, where we lay our scene/From ancient grudge breaks to new mutiny/where civil blood makes civil hands unclean." My last advice? Wash your hands. Keep in mind your actions and how they affect others, because, one day, you will be on the receiving end. Unlike Romeo and Juliet, be cautious. For the Montagues and

Capulets were too late to change their prejudices, but for humanity, it isn't. And you, Shakespeare, related to humanity more than they know, much to our benefit. People change people, I just hope, exemplified from your teachings, we can for the better.

Sincerely,
Savannah Lee

Haley Love

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Sarah Dessen

Author of *Lock and Key*

Dear Sarah Dessen,

All my life, I grew up in a nice home with an amazing family. In fact, anyone would believe I am the exact opposite of Ruby, the main character, in your book *Lock and Key*. Family wise, I suppose that's true. My mom has been my best friend for as long as I can remember.

I've always adored her and longed to be like her whenever I could. My dad and siblings are great too, but I've always been a "mommy's" girl. Obviously, for Ruby that's very different. She grew to be independent because she had nobody.

Well, at the time I read your book, my mom and I were never getting along. We always fought over stupid little things, and my patience with her was growing short. It seemed like everything that came out of her mouth would aggravate me. I guess I can't really tell you why this happened because I don't know, myself. Anyway, reading your book helped me open my eyes and see the horrible way I've been treating my mother. The whole time, she was just doing things the way she did because she loves me. The next thing you know, my mom and I are in a warm hug, tears streaming down my face as I apologize for everything. My mom isn't perfect, but she's close to it. She has always been there for me. Your book made me realize some people have nothing, and I should be eternally grateful for the "everything" that I have.

Also, I am very attached to Ruby's character. I know exactly how she feels. My whole life, I've been very picky about who to trust. I realized a while back that people always change. Not only that, but people always leave, too. Truthfully, I thought that happiness would never last in my life. My friends always moved on, I felt like people always talk badly about me behind my back, and sometimes it was difficult to get along with my family. At that time in my life, I was done trusting anyone. I didn't want to get hurt anymore. I hid my feelings and that's the way I liked it. Hidden. Nobody knew how I felt except me. Then, in your story, Ruby met Nate. At first, I was irritated with Ruby for trusting him. You're just going to get hurt again, I explained in my head. And then I understood. Ruby was taking a risk. Not for Nate, or to be a good friend. She was doing it for herself. She was so

much happier after she let all her feelings flow out of her, and instead of being ashamed of her I was proud. It flickered a light on inside my head. What am I doing to myself? I thought. Why am I trapping myself inside my own head? I was done. I wanted to be like the new Ruby.

Right now, I'm happily living my life. I have a great relationship with my family. I love talking to my friends, and I am open with many more people. I'm still careful about who to trust, but I have many more friends because I took a risk. Thank you, Sarah Dessen, for writing a life changing book.

Yours most sincerely,
Haley Love

Kendall Mann

Doe Creek Middle School, New Palestine

Letter to Amy Hest

Author of *Kiss Good Night*

Dear Ms. Hest,

“It was a dark and stormy night.” This line may be considered a cliché, but I consider it my favorite line ever written. This is the first line from your book *Kiss Good Night* and I remember hearing my Dad’s voice echoing through the room as he read your book each night. This book has influenced me through my childhood and it still influences me today.

Your book was the very first book I had ever read as a young child. It reminded me when my parents would tuck me in. My dad would come in and pull the covers over me and tuck the corners around me. We would call this the “burrito.” My mom would come in and give me a Kiss Good Night.

Just like your main character Sam I would never fall asleep until our nighttime routine was complete. We read a book, covered up in a warm blanket, said goodnight to my stuffed friends, and had a sip of ice-cold water.

I also see another resemblance between Sam and I. Like Sam when I was little I was terrified of thunderstorms. All the crashing and booming would frighten me to tears. Sometimes on those nights I would pull out your book. Reading this book is what made me not afraid.

Another reason that your book has meant so much to me is that it taught me that the little things matter. When I was younger I used to take the simple affection of a kiss good night for granted. Now I realize I shouldn’t. My best friend’s father just passed away. Now she won’t ever get a kiss good night from her father ever again.

Though your book is very simple and meant for young kids, I will treasure it forever. And every once in a while I will slide the book off my shelf out, open the tattered cover, snuggle up with my family and read it like the good old times. And after all who doesn’t love a kiss good night from your parents no matter how old you are.

Thank you for your heartwarming story.

Sincerely,
Kendall Mann

Maria Miller

Perry Meridian Middle School, Indianapolis

Letter to Laura Hillenbrand

Author of *Unbroken*

Dear Laura Hillenbrand,

Unbroken is an amazing story that changed how I think about my life and the world today. The story of Louis Zamperini is phenomenal, and I am glad that you put it on paper so it could be shared with me and others. It gives me a whole new perspective of the problems and troubles I am facing. I always have to remember how critical my own petty little problems are compared to others who are in life threatening circumstances. Louis is a man who has endured more hardship in one day, than I hopefully ever will in my entire life! Your book showed me that very well.

Another thing I saw in the book was evil, real evil that exists today. There's a lot of people in the world that are very mean, and evil, that part of the book was clear, but there is also always good.

Good will always exists somewhere in the world. A huge part of this story was about hope. You showed us how he got through some very tough times, and inspired us to do the same.

Today I try to really live my life to the fullest. I try to be the best person I can be, filled with hope, happiness, perseverance, and determination. The book was filled with good messages and lessons for the reader. Your story showed me the importance of hope, determination, and endurance. You can do anything if you believe in it, and work for it hard enough, even save your own life with nearly impossible odds. Though the story is sad, the end and message of the book is uplifting and joyful. It doesn't only give me hope that good will be able to conquer, but millions of others as well. Everyone that reads this book is given a new hope and light that they will be able to hang on to. Thank you for sharing Louis Zamperini's incredible story with me and millions of others. It has been a true inspiration.

Sincerely,
Maria Miller

Sabrina Morales

Benton Central Jr. High School, Oxford

Letter to Lady of the Manor

Author of *Gothic Charm School*

Dear Lady of the Manor,

You know the book you wrote, *Gothic Charm School*? Well, I have been really inspired by the book. I have always been a shy bookworm interested in things, such as the environment, mythology, folk tales, dark fantasy. I absolutely love Tim Burton movies, such as *The Corpse Bride* and *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. When I was younger I would always go crazy when Halloween came along, always making sure to watch all the Halloween type movies. *Hocus Pocus* was one I loved.

As I grew older, I started wearing darker clothing and everybody started asking me if I was Goth. I, having many of the common misconceptions about the gothic subculture, would always reply with, "No. I'm not." It finally came to the point of me looking Goth up on the computer. I found many websites on the subject, but I never really understood the Goth world.

As I got older, my reading lead me to the darker spookier side of life, and I slowly became obsessed with music, art, literature, movies, and architecture. This is when I first discovered your book. When I did I finally came to recognize my inner Goth and have been exploring it ever since. Thank you for your exhilarating, informative book. It has helped me to better understand and express myself.

With gratitude from a still learning baby bat,
Sabrina Morales

Amelia Pellman

Salem Middle School, Salem

Letter to Mitch Albom

Author of *The Five People You Meet In Heaven*

Dear Mitch Albom,

I have not lost anyone that is particularly close to me. But, that does not mean I should not worry. It does not mean I should not worry about people I do not know personally. It does not mean I should not worry about what happens after death and it does not mean I shouldn't worry about my actions and how they affect others.

When I read your book, *The Five People You Meet In Heaven*, it made me reflect on my own actions. Could my small actions really affect people that I don't even know? The answer, even if it frightens me, is yes. When Eddie, the main character ran across the street chasing a baseball when he was young, he caused the death of someone he didn't even know because he did not look before crossing the street. Even if Eddie's chase for the baseball that rolled across the street was innocent, he should have looked to make sure that no vehicles were moving in his direction. By not looking and unintentionally causing the death of this man, Eddie's birthday was "ruined" because he had to attend the funeral of the man he killed.

Everything is connected. That is an undeniable fact. I can relate to this profound realization because, after reading this book, I have tried to change my lifestyle in a way that positively affects people. Eddie also lived his life in a positive manner. Eddie lost his life trying to save a small child from a falling cart on one of the rides at the boardwalk. Would you happen to know what caused the wire to snap? A man lost his key a month earlier; it fell and became lodged in between a gear and the main cable. Everything is connected. I never knew how a small accident can affect so many people's lives.

Instead of having a pessimistic outlook on life, I would think to myself "Maybe this will help me; maybe this isn't as bad as I thought." I now try to help others, rather than ignore others. For example, if a girl drops her books in the hall, I stop to help said girl pick up her books. If there is someone with their hands full, I help them even if it takes some of my time and effort.

I loved the way this book is so relatable to every person. No matter what background someone comes from, people will go through some tough places in their lives. During tough times in my life, it always seems so easy for me to want to make others suffer with me. It is not worth it to hurt others when I am irritable or angry. After reading this book, I think before I speak. I think before I try to make others feel bad. Even if the person has done the same to me, I try to think; “What have they been through themselves?”

This book and the virtues it presented in a new manner now seem to matter. Creating joy for others does not seem cliché. It makes me smile, because I know that I may have changed someone’s life by my one small act.

Sincerely,
Amelia Pellman

Quade Popp

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Carl Dueker

Author of *Gym Candy*

Dear Carl Dueker,

Sports are rough and deafening. Full of competition and many different styles. Made only for the strong and proven. For football it is the ones who can tackle, run, jump, throw, catch or just the quality of having heart. Nick, in your book *Gym Candy*, was all of the above, and so am I. We both met our challengers playing sports. Our challenger was ourself. We were the ones keeping us from bettering ourselves. Ourselves try to lock us away like a caged bird, to make us push harder and keep going. We won't let ourselves fail, and when we do we push harder. It keeps us fired and fueled for that one moment; that one time. The feeling of being the best, then you are challenged to be even better, is what drives that wrenching machine inside us that will always burn inside of us until our days are gone.

It was a giant moment in my life. It was the first day of football camp and I felt the pressure the coaches put on me. I was the biggest and strongest kid there, and they looked down at me every time and expected greatness, and when I didn't give them that, they pushed me. I was not going to get handed a spot just for my athletic ability. Until the end I competed for my position like Nick. I knew I had to prove I needed to be put in that spot. Five weeks of blood, sweat, and tears went by and we would soon know the roster. The last day of practice before the roster was out ended and I placed my pads on the bottom half of my locker and my helmet on the top. I got picked up and headed home. When it came time, I couldn't sleep. Mixed feelings of making and not raced through my mind and made me sweat. Soon my throat seemed to dry so I went to the kitchen and guzzled down some warm milk.

The next day played out like another other school day. Starting with first classes, then lunch, then ended with homeroom. The bell rang and everyone busted out the door and the football players did as well. When I arrived to the locker room, I was blocked by a large huddle of people in front of the roster, praying their name was on there somewhere. The line dissipated a little bit and I was finally able to spot out the roster. My eyes scrolled frantically down to the lineman section, and there in black printed ink sat my name. I was very excited but I didn't want to show it due to respect to

other players not placed at a spot. This reminded me very much of *Gym Candy*. Reading your book was like reading my short life story. I felt as though Nick and I were the same person living in the same society. I always felt I was him in the book and I felt his feelings and emotions, even when he began in PED's. Nick began them after first game when he lost the game for the team getting knocked back by a linemen, so Nick wanted to get revenge and get stronger. His option was going to the gym, and there he discovered PED's. He knew the side effects but couldn't resist the feeling of the blood coursing through your veins.

Sometimes people have ups and downs in their life but sometimes they are a little more powerful. Some people want help deep inside and some don't. He saw himself as an all star but his classmates saw him as a monster. *Gym Candy* taught me to never remove your family, friends, and other important people in your daily life. My mom once told my little brother those words, but he didn't listen. My brother, who was nine at the time, dealt with minor depression.

He would ignore us and not even spend time with us on a daily basis. He soon rebuilt that structure and he proceeded through his depression. Nick on the other hand, didn't want help or get some from friends or family. He became so depressed he began to think of taking his life.

Soon he thought it would be the best choice to do so, he took a gun and shot. He was saved, as he only grazed the side of his head. When he was found, he was unconscious but was rushed to the hospital in time. After the recovery, he went to a mental center where he received help from professionals. Due to reading this book I know, feel, that a lot of people suffer from this type of disease.

I can also seem to pick out some of the people and I try to hint in on them and try to get them a little bit better. Many people it is hard to see that they are hurt or sad, but under that mask we all put on to hide away things, the true is revealed. "You can be your absolute best, but you can't be better

than your god given best,” a small quote my grandpa told me before he passed. After his passing, I seemed also to go into a hole. I was very sad and wanted him back but knew he wouldn’t. In that case, I took our memories with me even when everything tried to hold me down. I began to come back up, as a better person. Now I am not only physically strong, but mentally fit as well.

Sincerely,
Quade Popp

Macy Prickel

Batesville Middle School, Batesville

Letter to Daniel Keyes

Author of *Flowers for Algernon*

Dear Mr. Keyes,

Through reading your book, *Flowers for Algernon*, I was reminded how terribly others treat and judge people who have special needs. Charlie wanted so badly to feel smarter and in his innocence, he didn't realize it would make him even more intensely aware of his own mistreatment. When he attended the restaurant after his raise, a waiter who was mentally challenged dropped plates. Charlie found himself joining in the laughter.

He also noticed the guy was laughing at himself to deflect the mocking. At this moment he realized, this guy was "pulling a Charlie Gordon." After the surgery, he now understood the factory workers were making fun of him and were not truly his friends at all.

This story touched me because I have an autistic brother with special needs. Special needs students like my brother are often targeted because they are vulnerable, defenseless, and naïve. Despite what others think, kids with special needs have so much to offer the world. From my personal experience, they have an innocent beauty and perspective on life that shines from the inside out. Many individuals are too preoccupied or blinded by ignorance to recognize the worth of these "special" kids. When special needs students are effectively included in the community, everyone benefits from life lessons on compassion, appreciation, and friendship. Changes in perception are difficult to achieve, but exploring some options seems like the only socially responsible thing to do for my brother's sake.

Thanks for inspiring me to raise awareness and take a stand for this exceptional group of people.

Sincerely,
Macy Prickel

Bennett Schmitt

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Todd Burpo

Author of *Heaven is for Real*

Dear Todd Burpo,

Inspiring. Heartwarming. Life changing. Not many words give justice to your gut-wrenching story, *Heaven is for Real*. Your book affected me, it changed me; in a positive way, a permanent way.

I live in a comfortable house with an amazing family, but that does not mean life is a cakewalk. Actually, it is pretty far off. With a house full of boys, excluding my mother, it is hard for me to be who I am, because I get made fun of for being me. It all starts at home. My brothers and I help our dad, who is a farmer, daily. My two brothers are strong and muscular. They love getting dirty and messy, contributing on the farm. I don't. I would rather stay home and do things around the house.

I enjoy drawing and coloring, something my brothers call a girly activity. It was always hard growing up, trying to be myself, but also not being disappointing to my father because of my different opinions. Surrounded by such masculine family members throughout my childhood, I always had to "hold my own." If I showed emotion or acted even remotely unlike how my brothers and father thought a boy should act, I would be picked on and made fun of.

To them, everything was a competition. Who's the strongest? Who's the fastest? Who's the best at sports? The one thing I excelled at was school and education, but all they were ever concerned about was physical superiority. In their minds, life was always about proving yourself. I thought differently.

As a result of this, I never felt that I belonged in a family like mine. I was always worried about what everybody thought of me. I was insecure. That is, until I found a book, your book, leaning off the bottom side of my bookshelf collecting dust. Quietly it sat there, waiting to be read.

The story of your son's journey struck a chord deep within my heart, bringing tears to my eyes. Down my cheeks, the tears ran, trickling down. All worry and insecurities left, contained in my glistening tears. With every word of your profound novel my confidence in myself grew as all negative feelings melted away.

While reading your book, hanging onto every last word, I felt connected to Colton. I felt like we both had the same problems, and it seemed like I finally had someone to talk to them about. As I read those life changing pages it felt as if Colton understood my problems and I understood his.

Though just a young boy, Colton taught me to persevere. He never gave up; he always fought to the end, and was always optimistic, holding onto the smallest slivers of hope.

However, I think it was Colton's attitude toward people who thought of him negatively that altered my thought process the most.

By the time I closed the back cover of your book I was no longer the same person. My attitude and confidence in myself had skyrocketed, all thanks to a little boy who never gave up no matter what anybody else thought. Finally, I was confident in my own decisions, and no longer needed the approval of others. At last, I realized that I was my own, independent human being.

Colton Burpo saved me from the stereotypes and negative people that previously ruled my life. We all know the stereotypes. Boys are supposed to play basketball and football. For as long as I can remember, I have been ridiculed for going against those stereotypes that boys are to fit into, according to other's opinions. I play tennis and do gymnastics. Wait, supposedly only girls are allowed to do gymnastics. Then, why do I excel in that sport? I would like the stereotypical people to answer that one.

I go against stereotypes, and I used to question my decision to do that. No longer. *Heaven is for Real* made me stronger, and more resilient to the rude comments that I hear behind my back. Thank you Todd Burpo, for saving me from quitting something that I am extremely passionate about, and yes, I am passionate about gymnastics, no matter what others say. That's one thing this book taught me. Nobody controls me other than me.

I don't know how I could ever thank you for writing this book. It monumentally altered my view of the world. More importantly, it changed

parts of my character within me. Overall, I am brighter and happier than I was before.

Heaven is for Real made me realize that the only opinion I need is my own. It showed me that as long as I am happy and proud of myself, then I am just fine the way I am. At times, I changed myself to fit in with others, but no longer do I do that. I don't need someone else's approval to be happy with myself. I am happy just the way I am.

I may be different, but that doesn't mean I can't love myself. From reading your story, I realized that stereotypes are not rules and they can be broken, and I thank you for showing me that, but thank you most of all for making me realize that this life is my own, and nobody else's. I own my life and intend for it to stay that way.

With appreciation,
Bennett Schmitt

Amanda Schnell

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Todd Burpo

Author of *Heaven is for Real*

Dear Todd Burpo,

Believe. It is what everyone says you are supposed to do. You go to church and hear an inspiring, heartfelt story about how someone found the Lord, their savior. Do you ever wonder, when will that happen to me? Well, that is how I felt every Sunday, until I read your book, *Heaven is for Real*.

I went to church, said my prayers, but it felt like all God was doing was thrusting me along through life. It was like He did not care. Sunday after Sunday I sat through church, pretending to be engrossed in the sermon.

I actually found the book, *Heaven is for Real*, at my church. It was sitting on a dusty bookshelf, practically shrieking, "Read me!" The book was taken to school with me and left in my locker for over a week. When I finally decided to read it, I could not set the book down.

As I read the faith story, I thought about many things. Just as I was in the dark with my faith, so were you. I felt as if someone understood what I was going through. It was like I was pouring my heart out to you and you understood.

When I finished your book, I realized how difficult life was without God. Many people just go through life without even thinking about anyone else but themselves. I used to care about what I was wearing and how my hair looked. You showed me that the only thing that matters is if you believe.

After you hit rock-bottom with your faith, God sent you a salvation, your son. I think that God gave me this book as my salvation. When I thought my faith was absent, when I thought I was done believing, God sent your book to me. My faith went from nothing, to something. I no longer questioned stories about God, I automatically believed them. Something changed in my heart, something for the better.

Very quickly, I finally started to see things as they really were. It was like I have had sunglasses on my whole life and I was finally taking them off for the first time. I saw the gloomy faces of my peers who did not fit in, the persnickety expressions of the kids who think they are better than everyone

else. Then, I saw the buoyant faces of the kids whose hearts are filled with the Lord.

My faith story is partially like yours. At first, things were not going pleasant, then all of a sudden, they just get more miserable. There is always the same question, is God even there?

God suddenly finds a way to make you believe again. For you, it was your son sharing his experience in Heaven. For me, it was learning about his experience in Heaven throughout your book.

I now know the true meaning of believing in God. It does not matter how much money you have, or how flawless your skin is. What matters is if you have the Lord in your heart. If your heart is filled with faith, then YOU will have nothing to fear.

Best regards,
Amanda Schnell

Bailee Schwartz

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Michael Pollan

Author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*

Dear Michael Pollan,

I am in the middle of reading your book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. Although I have only read most of part one, your book has influenced me a lot. Who knew corn was in everything?!

I am a finicky person. I don't like canned anything or pork or beef. And of the food I do eat, it has to meet my personal quality standards. The rest of my family thinks I'm mad as a March hare, but now that I started reading your book I am beginning to think that they are the ones who are bonkers. They put things in their mouths and don't even realize what it is. (It's mostly corn.)

I was intrigued. There are facts in your book that are amazing. You have made me realize that most food companies sell masked corn, and grocery stores are like costume stores for corn.

Today I am different because of your research. It has changed me tremendously and I am sure the rest of the book will too.

Oddly, when I was younger, I liked a lot of the foods I don't today. Then, as I got older, something changed in me. I'm not entirely sure what happened, but I suddenly wanted to know what was in my food. I got more curious.

You have opened my eyes to a new world of food. Now that I have begun your book, I have a new view of food. My view has changed because I can now find corn in a lot of things I would never expect to find it in. I wanted to, so I could dig deeper, keep reading. Now that I have a chance to think about it and I know a little bit more, I think I can find corn in almost everything I ate when I was younger.

When I was in my school library and I was looking for a book, my teacher mentioned some non-fiction books to the class. *The Omnivore's Dilemma* was one of them. I paid no attention to the books and continued on my journey for the perfect book. I found a book and checked it out.

The next week, in the library, I couldn't find a book. Then I remembered the books my teacher had mentioned. One that had stuck out at me was *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. I picked it up and checked it out.

The day I started reading it, I only got to read a few pages, but I automatically loved it. This was the best book to me. As I read more and more of this, I would come home and tell my mom all about this amazing book and all its amazing facts and treasures that were revealed to me.

If you can't tell, I adore your book. I cannot wait to read part two and three. I feel as if this letter has been about me reaching out to you to let you know that your book has made an incredible change in the way I live and in the way I see food.

Sincerely,
Bailee Schwartz

Brianna Stasel

Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg

Letter to Robert Frost

Author of ***The Road Not Taken***

Dear Robert Frost,

It's often hard to imagine how our everyday decisions can affect the life we lead. How one choice can change everything. We often have to make hard decisions in our lives and sometimes when faced with hard decisions, we turn to what other people have done before us. If everyone else does something, then that means we should do that too, right?

Mr. Frost, you said in your poem, ***The Road Not Taken***, that, "I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." You have changed my life and many others with just these two lines in your poem. You have taught me that I don't have to do what everybody else does in life to be successful. I can take the "road less traveled."

Before reading your poem, I always looked to others, hoping to be accepted by them and following in their footsteps. In my head, I had to look like everyone, talk like everyone, and be like everyone else to be accepted. I was always looking for other people's approval of myself over my own. These were my major decisions in life.

It was in 6th grade when I first read ***The Road Not Taken***. It was then that I realized that I shouldn't have to worry about following the crowd to be accepted. I can go my own way, do my own things, and still be successful in life. The idea of taking the road less traveled has changed my life completely. I no longer have to worry about what others do, or have done, because I can be myself and make my own decisions.

Mr. Frost, I know that different people interpret your poem in different ways. I would like to thank you for my interpretation of your piece. That I can be who I want to be and make the decisions that I want to make and still be successful. I may not have gotten the exact meaning of your poem, but when I first read ***The Road Not Taken***, my interpretation of it changed my life forever. Thank you for this amazing life lesson.

Thank you so much,
Brianna Stasel

Anna Thacker

Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg

Letter to Natalie Babbitt

Author of ***Tuck Everlasting***

Dear Natalie Babbitt

When I was about 8 years old, my four brothers and I wanted to live forever and know how it felt. We wrote what we would do if we did live forever on a piece of paper. Then I read your book ***Tuck Everlasting***. I thought that if I lived forever, I would not want to watch my friends, family, and everyone else die around me. Yes, I would probably be rich because there would be no one else in the world, but also I would be alone and no one wants to be alone. No, I don't want to die. It seems scary, but I also don't want my family to die without me.

When I read your book, I started thinking about if there was a spring that I could drink out of but I could also have my family drink out of it too. If people found out about it, my family would be in danger because they would want to try to kill us. And if we didn't die, they would put us to jail forever. If I did drink out of it, I would want to at least be 21 years old so I would at least have rights.

I would want to have children one day but if everyone is dying I wouldn't know what to do. I would want to be a grandma someday too, but I don't want to see my kids and grandchildren die. I would be heartbroken. So I showed the movie to my brothers and they were overthinking it too. We finally said we don't want to live forever.

If I could get three wishes I would be happy. My first wish would be to have money to support my family. My second wish would be to give every person and animal somewhere to live. My last wish would not be to live forever, that was my last before, but now that I'm 14 and I've read your book, I now have a new wish. My last wish would be to have good grades so I can go to college to be a veterinarian to help animals in need.

Now after reading your book, I don't want to live forever. So thank you for showing me that perspective. Your book was a good book. It changed the way I thought of living forever because now I don't.

Sincerely,
Anna Thacker

Bergen Tom

West Noble Middle School, Ligonier

Letter to Laura Ingalls Wilder

Author of *The Little House on the Prairie*

Dear Laura Ingalls Wilder,

When you are a child, there are memories you gain that stick with you for the rest of your life. They just don't go away, and occasionally there are those quiet, peaceful moments and certain circumstances where you just stop. In fact, take a moment and soak this all in - create a picture in your mind. Maybe you sit on the couch, or go for a short walk outside. Possibly you just simply quit what you are doing and become still. You always have that time, though, when you reminisce about the special areas of your past. You look down or out far into the open, and you see everything happening. It all comes to life again, just like it used to be. It is a play or a movie, with the people you know and the places you've seen before. You could just call it a show of the past, like it was only yesterday when you saw the real thing.

I have these moments often, and I'm putting this one on paper meant for you. It began when I was a very young and small girl, just in second grade. I had the ultimate hunger to read. I would pick up any thick book and sit anywhere - the floor, the couch, my father's chair, or against the trunk of my tall, favorite tree that offered a cool shade. My mind would become engrossed in the book. I became the characters, and I felt the same feelings they felt when they acted and spoke or received words. I imagined the settings and the visual things. I could see everything happening, and I had feelings and learned from it. But there was this one I read in the second grade that pulled me in. *The Little House on the Prairie* series took me. It stole my heart and mind and filled it with wonder. I thought about it often and imagined what it would be like to live as you, Laura, or your family and the people you knew when you were young like me. It was so interesting, and it made me want to live like the pioneers. I thought about residing in a cabin in the woods and eating frozen candy made from snow and maple syrup. I dreamed about what it would be like to work so hard every day, making your own food and harvesting crops by hand and with old tools and lots of toil. I was appalled at the idea of blowing up a pig's bladder to play with like a balloon - your idea of fun as a child. I could hear the sound of your Pa's fiddle in the evening, and in my mind, I watched him making lead balls or bullets for his gun.

But there was also a deeper side to my thoughts and curiosity. As I read throughout the series, I saw you and your family move from place to place to start over and begin a new type of life. You were all looking for a greater success in a place you hoped to be better than before. I imagined what it would be like and how I would be afraid.

I've lived in the same home all my life, and I've never had to deal with the type of adversity that comes with moving. I just know that it would be really hard for me to adapt and adjust. If I had to live in an isolated area away from all of my other relatives besides my family, and then scratch out all that I knew about my life before, it would be difficult. It would make me a bitter person, and my emotions would be so jumbled and would cloud my heart like a heavy fog.

You never really talked often about how hard it was, but I know that it must have been strange for you. You were still happy though, even when you moved so often and had to get used to something new. It amazes me how you could pull through, because I know that I probably couldn't be as strong. Even though I have never been in that same situation, I have perception and empathy.

When I was that small girl, that was what made me love *The Little House on the Prairie* series so much. Having those feelings and knowledge was what connected me with those books, and it kept me wanting to know more. I mentioned that I could tell your family was looking for higher success, and I now realize that is what I have always been doing too. In my short life, I am always on the search for something that can make me better, and that is what I have in common with this book. You took the route that was a better choice, such as moving to a place with better ground to plant a garden and live. But it takes a lot of hard work. You have to watch everything and make sure your plants are growing healthy. You pull out the weeds and water the plants, finally picking them when they are done maturing. And it gave you a great supply of food. I have always pushed myself to try to choose the better choice as well, so that in the end I have

accomplished a lot. I'm like you in the way of making the right choice for success, but in a way I am also like the plants.

When I accept the challenge, it takes care and help from others to nurture me and help me be the best I can be. And I'm always looking for roads to success - just like you and your family did. This series created a lot of memories for me. I would sit in my dad's big blue chair next to the windowsill. The sun would slant through and cover the pages in glowing light so that I could read, and everyday I would always have my mom to tell me when three hours passed so I could try to put the book down. I had the deep thoughts that I talked about before as I read and continued reading. I remember walking down into my grandfather's study filled with books, and trying to find the one that was next in your series. I had good talks with him and his gentle voice and soft eyes. In my second grade class my teacher would give me a congratulations whenever she saw me reading your books. It made me feel good. As you can see, these are really nice memories that I will always keep close in my heart - they warm it up sometimes. So even now, occasionally I will stop and play them in my head's own DVD player, like a movie. Memories that are special like this won't ever fade. I just wanted to share one of mine with you.

Sincerely,
Bergen Tom

Jano Vasquez-Jaffe

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Colin Meloy

Author of *Wildwood Imperium*

Dear Colin Meloy,

When I read your book *Wildwood Imperium*, it touched me and changed me. When the Dowager Governess took control of the ivy, that decision was a consequence of her anger. Like a shadow, the anger followed her and made her start destroying the entire forest.

Sometimes anger follows me too like a shadow. My brother Gabriel is a good brother overall. He likes to play Minecraft and Crossyroad with me. He is a great tennis partner, even though he is more of a soccer player. And we like to get dirty together. He is a perfect partner in crime. But sometimes we start to quarrel. He thinks it's funny to call me mean names, but sometimes I am not in the mood for his teasing.

He has a unique ability to make me mad because he knows me so well. When this happens, I feel my anger start to control me. Sometimes I try to stop my anger, but other times I just start to chase or tackle him. It usually ends by someone getting hurt or our parents stepping in.

My anger emerges from the shadows when he calls me a mean name or hits me. I will say something back or hit him back. These actions are shadowed by anger. Other times it happens with friends or just people in my school or in my class. They maybe say something mean, and I say something back. After I have been mean to them sometimes, I feel sad that I did that. Just like the Dowager, when her son told her that he was sorry, she felt badly and stopped destroying everything. I will go to my brother and see if he is okay and say sorry. I usually will do something to make him feel better.

It is normal in life to have anger shadowing you in life. People get mad all the time. It's not just the younger people like parents and children who get mad, but also older people like our grandparents who become angry. They also have that shadow hovering near them. What we all can do is not pay attention to the anger shadowing us and make sure to make good decisions.

Thank you for shedding some light on my shadow,
Jano Vasquez-Jaffe

Lauren Wallen

West Noble Middle School
Letter to Laurie Halse Anderson,
Author of *Speak*

Dear Laurie Halse Anderson,

Do you know anyone that is shy and doesn't have many friends? I am that type of girl. I'm shy and don't have many friends at school. I have a few that I eat lunch with and my old friends that I just smile and walk away from. Melinda, from *Speak* reminds me of myself. I am too shy and quiet to make new friends. I feel like they would reject me if I did try to ask them to be friends, but I don't know how to ask them. Sometimes if I am alone at a table at lunch, I won't eat because I am too embarrassed of myself. I feel weird eating alone.

Like Melinda, I don't have that nice of clothes. I only go to the mall once or twice a year, which is school shopping. Other people around me look like they go shopping every week. I'm not spoiled with gifts, I'm not rich, and I'm not popular, again like Melinda. I wish I was popular so that more people would like me, but when would that happen? Not many people talk to me. When they do talk to me, I find my brain clogs with thoughts especially if a guy starts to talk to me. I think it's a little weird to me like this - to feel alone most of the time and to have no company. Sometimes I choose to be alone because I find it annoying when people talk to me. So I spend time by myself thinking about all the other things in life.

There are some days that I don't want to go to school. I used to try to fake that I was sick and try to stay home. Most of the times I would lean over the furnace to get my face hot and have my mom feel it. I would drink lots of water before I went to bed and throw it up in the morning. I would have a glass of hot tea and stick the thermometer in the tea and would run a fever. In the book Melinda fakes her sickness and her mom says that she could stay home. Melinda and I both skipped school because of how we felt. Now I don't fake my sickness, because school is important to me and if I'd miss a day I would be so far behind. Through Melinda's life experiences, I've realized that being popular isn't always the best. Instead it's better being true to who you are.

Melinda taught me not to be shy and to speak out for yourself and others. I am now out of my shell and have more friends, plus more people talk to me.

I will be nervous if I have to give a presentation in front of people, but once I start it's a piece of cake and I want to do it again. This book has inspired me and gave me lots of advice, such as: look at who you're with and what kind of friends you have, if something bad has happened tell someone about it, don't be afraid, help yourself and others. I have used all these to help me through my life and I will keep using this advice until my life is over. I know I will have obstacles, but I know I will overcome them.

Sincerely,
Lauren Wallen

Tristen West

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Margaret Haddix

Author of *Among the Hidden*

Dear Margaret Haddix,

Your book taught me that bravery is a good thing, and can get you through tough situations. You need to be brave in many situations when you are afraid to do something, like skydiving. But, sometimes being brave can be bad, as your book tells us.

My father passed away from a heart attack when I was four and my grandma just recently passed away from cancer. I had to be brave in these moments like Luke when he first learns he can never leave his house again. There are also insignificant parts of my life where I needed courage. Sometimes to face my fears of spiders, darkness, the ocean, sharks, clowns, and heights, I had to be brave. I am very shy and socially awkward, except with close friends or family members. I normally don't have the courage to go up to people and try to befriend them.

This makes me feel like I am locked away in an attic by myself like Luke. Your book showed me that now I should start being brave and talk to people I don't know to befriend them. When Luke came out of the attic this inspired me to take risks in my own life.

Sometimes, being too brave can cause problems. When some of the shadow kids decided to go to Washington D.C., they had no chance to make a difference and they got killed. Sometimes when I'm too brave I can be reckless and do something that I would totally regret later. Also sometimes I am pressured by friends into being brave and doing things I wouldn't usually do and sometimes get hurt physically or emotionally. Jen sometimes pressured Luke into going onto the internet to talk to strangers even though he still believed the government and the Population Police monitored all computers.

When I read your book it made me think a lot about courage in my own life. Now I am brave enough to make better choices and better decisions. I will try to be less shy and more social, think of consequences before I act and face my fears. Thank you for showing me to be more brave.

Sincerely,
Tristen West

Sarah Yoder

Salem Middle School, Salem

Letter to Evan Roskos

Author of *Dr. Bird's Advice for Sad Poets*

Dear Mr. Roskos,

Dr. Bird's Advice for Sad Poets has changed my view and perspective of the world and it has made all the difference in my life. I was first introduced to your book earlier this year which is my 8th grade year by a friend who had read it and knew I would love it. She was right, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Your book made me feel a variety of different things as I read through it. I felt the pain, happiness, sadness, humor, and the feelings of utter despair and darkness that you express in your book. I have often felt many of these and often other feelings of failure and disappointment.

I felt connected to you through your book, but at the same time it was slowly changing my perspective. I had always felt pity for myself, that I was the only one being wronged in life, that I had things unfair, but that isn't the truth. I wore my heart on my sleeve some might say. James never told anyone, James wasn't looking for pity; James was looking to please others, to be happy, and to be set free from his desolation.

There could be a million kids in the world who are in the dark abyss of depression, but until reading your book not once did I stop and think of them. In the 7th grade I learned that someone very close to me had a sickness. It was depression. At that point in my life I was usually happy around people and with people, but I was disappointed in how school was going and when I was alone I would get depressed and lonely being by myself and thinking. In 8th grade it got worse and the darkness widened to include school. The only time I was happy was with friends, and when I could lose myself in books, which is my way of escaping to a different reality.

So upon hearing someone that close to me had a separate dark world that differed from the happy personality everyone else saw, finding this out made me resent him. I resented him because he had never told me and to me he was saying that I didn't know what he was feeling and he thought I couldn't help him. After reading your book though, I felt differently, I now understood he was handling it in his own way, the same way James helped himself by taking pictures and seeing them in ways other people didn't, the

way James would make many pictures into one larger picture. After reading your book I also realized I had my own way of coping as well: friends.

Your book revealed to me that others around the world were hurting. It was a small difference but at dinner I would start thinking about this book and I would remember those who were more unfortunate. So I wouldn't complain about what we were having for dinner that night. It was a small difference but it changes my perspective of the more unfortunate. After realizing all these new thoughts I had never come across before I started looking at life differently. Knowing I wasn't the only person out there feeling down and bad about themselves I realized something incredible, compared to others around the world, I got off easy. I have a family, home, and friends; I even get to go to school every day. All around the world there were those who thought there was no other option than suicide, there were those who were starving and who had lost all family to war, orphans abandoned by mothers too young to care, and lives torn apart by greed and destruction.

Your book has changed me and the perspective I now have of the world. I like the ending to your book because James was going to be okay, and James finally felt like he had a choice at home and in the new life James created. Day to day I try my best to think of others and know that I have a good life and I know that it is not as bad as others but a little worst then the best. You have made me want to be in control of my life, and you showed me and others that read your book that we have the option to be sad forever or to help ourselves. And like you chose, I will also choose to help myself or get help. I hope that like James, I can also help others and I'm happy to know that I already have because like my friend who handed me this book, I have already handed it to another friend. Thank you Roskos for the change you have made.

Sincerely,
Sarah Yoder



Level III
1st Place:

Zosha Roberson

Perry Central High School, Leopold

Letter to John Green

Author of *The Fault in Our Stars*

Dear Mr. Green,

I am farsighted, so every morning when I roll over and open my eyes I am greeted by a blurred image of the universe. It's only when I grab glasses off my bedside table and slide them on my nose that the world suddenly becomes crisp and clear and seemingly right. This is the only way I can actually describe the sensation I felt after reading your book, *The Fault in Our Stars*.

In most cases, vision impairments develop gradually over time, so you don't notice how hazy your sight may be until you are shown what it looks like with correction.

When I first tried on glasses I was amazed at how beautiful the world could really be. This is comparable to when I discovered that my outlook on life also needed correction. I was fifteen and had slowly digressed into this state of teenage angst that I thought accompanied being in high school. Negativity became my brand, and I neglected so many positive areas in my life that could have been making me so much happier than I was. Relationships with my family and friends suffered because of my undesirable personality. However, after reading *The Fault in Our Stars* my perspective was shaken like a snow globe, and when it settled I found myself a better and more mature person.

Maya Angelou once said, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." This can also be applied to books. I will never forget the way I felt while reading *The Fault in Our Stars*. I didn't realize how empty I was until your book filled me up. It gave me this sense of fulfillment that I had never felt before. I empathized with the characters, and it made my own petty conundrums feel insignificant. When I started the novel I was a child, but I emerged an adult. The book demonstrated beautifully that our lives are what we make of them. We can choose to curse the universe for wanting

attention, or we can embrace the few miracles it gives us and make the best of them.

Last summer, I became very ill. I was hospitalized and diagnosed with lupus, a chronic autoimmune disease. The whole summer I dealt with extreme fatigue and dangerously high fevers. I had to spend most of my days in bed and missed out on many social events, as well as being unable to play volleyball, which normally took up the majority of my time. I struggled with being lonely and disconnected from the world. It would have been easy to slip into a depressing state of being.

My mother would come into my room every morning and ask, “How do you feel today?” An image of August Waters would flash in my mind, and I would reply, “Grand.” Because even if I was battling fatigue, I still felt lucky when I took everything into consideration. Shortly after I got out of the hospital I read *The Fault in Our Stars* for the fifth time and it showed me, as it has time and time again, that an optimistic outlook on life is our choice. We are blessed as humans to be able to look at the world with whatever lens we choose.

Yours with admiration,
Zosha Roberson

Level III

2nd Place:

Amanda Findlay

New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Jay Asher

Author of *Thirteen Reasons Why*

Dear Jay Asher,

Having someone suddenly ripped out of your life who was close to you is soul crushing. The confusion that comes with the unending question of why or how someone could do this to themselves is overwhelmingly frustrating. The back and forth commotion going on in your mind; not knowing whether to be heartbroken because they were so immensely depressed or to be infuriated because they hurt you by the way they left. The connection that I felt with Clay's confusion in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, was close to calming because it helped me to realize that I am not the only person who has gone through this loss. Your book forced me to open my eyes to the impact that you can have on someone's life. It also revealed to me that I am not alone when dealing with an event that is so traumatic.

Relating so intensely to Clay is what compelled me to connect to this book. Clay and I are both in high school, so it was easy for me to grasp his teenage thoughts. This feeling was important to me because I needed assistance in understanding what was going on in my mind, and Clay did just that. When I read the part where Clay was yelling at Hannah for what she had done to herself, it was almost as if he was taking the words directly from my mind. I couldn't be more relieved to have felt connected to Clay because he helped me get my mind straight after going through the same traumatic event of my cousin taking her life.

Hearing the thirteen reasons why Hannah committed suicide completely broke my heart. As the reader, I felt like the reasons were so simple and nowhere near serious enough to have caused someone to commit suicide. Although in my heart I know this is the point, or more importantly the lesson I have learned from your book. Sometimes we don't realize the effects that we may have on someone's life. Clay was furious when hearing the thirteen reasons why Hannah committed suicide because to you and me, they don't seem crucial. As the reasons built up in Hannah's head, it became too much for her and she explained that through her tapes that she left so her story would be heard. If Hannah were to just tell the reasons and not

explain them, the story would have been pointless to me. I learned that anything you say or do can affect someone else, so now I enforce that I am always impacting someone in a positive way.

Since I have read your book, I have tried my absolute hardest to make positive impacts on the people who surround me. I work at a McDonald's where I encounter a couple hundred people during my shift. I never fail to tell someone to have a good day or ask how their day is going. I have had mixed reactions; people ignore me or tell me a five minute story as though they need someone to just listen to them. ***Thirteen Reasons Why*** proved to me that you never know what someone is going through and how it is essential to be kindhearted to others.

I thank you Mr. Asher for creating this masterpiece of a story for teenagers like myself. You gave me someone to relate to and connect with when my mind felt absolutely lost and my heart was broken. You empathized with teenagers who can relate to this traumatic event so we realize that we are not alone. We each carry the power to brighten or darken someone's life. My mindset to brighten others' days changed for the better after reading ***Thirteen Reasons Why***. I feel forever grateful to have been given this book during a time in my life where I couldn't understand.

Sincerely,
Amanda Findlay

Level III
3rd Place:

Maggie McCool

Northwestern High School, Kokomo

Letter to Kristin Cashore

Author of *Graceling*

Dear Kristin Cashore,

As I roamed the second story of Kokomo's public library, a blue-brown book worn by all the hands that have touched it, called me over from the shelf, enticing me to read it. The book was entitled *Graceling* which seemed ironic to me because on the front cover of this book was the image of a knife. I didn't think a knife had anything to do with grace. Through the many adventures and misfortunes of Katsa I've gained new friends and learned valuable lesson I might not learn elsewhere. Your book has also helped me be able to go through tough times in my life.

On April 21st of this year my sister passed away. I was lost without her and wanted to jump in a black hole to get away from everyone. I locked myself in my room and dove into books. I reread all of my previous favorite books and new books to try and redirect my thoughts from my sister. Upon rereading your book *Graceling* I realized I missed something the first time I read it. Something that seemed so small in comparison to what I thought was a big deal in the sixth grade. The idea of Grieving. Sure I've had Grandparents pass away before, and I was distressed by the loss of a family member, but it wasn't grief. I was grieving when Sara died; it was like my heart had been ripped out of my chest and stomped on. What some people don't understand is that grief is different from sadness. Sadness has an ending, but grief doesn't. Grieving is like a race that never ends and the track is bumpy and rough. You'll go over one hill, breathe for a second, and then find Mount Everest waiting for you to climb. I will always be grieving for my sister, but I won't fall half way up the hill. My saving grace was in chapter five of *Graceling*, when Katsa states her opinion on grieving. The line that brought me to tears and realization was "But she wouldn't close herself in her rooms." Something that sounded so simple but truly matched my predicament, because that was exactly what I was doing, locking myself in a room, so people couldn't see the aching pain of my heart. I acted on this and started going out of my room, which hurt knowing that my sister wouldn't be out there to hug me, to talk about music with, or to be my maid

of honor when I wed. But I continued to stop hiding and when I did I came to be able to accept what had happened. I was able to stop running away from reality.

Even a little over half a year after her death, it still hurts to think about Sara.

Everyday I'm reminded of the sister and best friend I lost. I see her everywhere, from the laughter in the cafeteria to the portly cat that hobbles around my house. Katsa never gave up in times of trouble and neither will I. Every day I try to not be pained by the memories, but grateful for what time I did have with her.

Graceling not only taught me to never hide or back down but it has also helped me make a friend. When I first brought *Graceling* to school on a breezy fall day in sixth grade I did not assume that a girl I barely knew named Sasha, had also brought *Graceling* to school. We bonded through our discussions of books. As we got closer Sasha become one of the few people I felt I could trust. Our friendship has always had little arguments, but there is always one problem that could light the flame to ensure bickering. It was the battle between Team Po from *Graceling* and Team Brigán from another one of your books called *Fire*. I loved the grace of Po, his kindness towards everyone, and the way he accepted Katsa for who she was. Sasha loved how Brigán and Fire quarreled when they first met which blossomed into a strong friendship. Even three years later after coincidentally bringing the same book to school, we still have a friendship that could never be broken.

When I walked up the stairs to the second floor of Kokomo's public library little did I know that I would find a book called *Graceling* that would help me in a multitude of ways. I learned that hiding won't solve all of your

problems and I gained a friend. ***Graceling*** will be a book I'll share with my kids in hopes that maybe they could find something in the writing that has helped me tremendously.

Sincerely Yours,
Maggie McCool

Level III Honorable Mentions

Thomas Biancardi

Griffith High School, Griffith

Letter to J.K. Rowling

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

Dear J.K. Rowling,

Life can be a terrifying adventure, especially when venturing through it alone. For most of us, we need not endure the entire harshness of life, as our family provides immediate relief when the going gets tough. However, for some of us, like Harry Potter, family is not an option. Let me just say now, this letter is not about how I relate with Harry and have had to rely on my friends to help me through each and every obstacle that life has thrown at me. Your books, however, have instead led me to strive to reach out and be the surrogate family member that other people, like Harry Potter, need; someone who aides with compassion, an ear that's ready to listen, and hopefully, some words of advice.

My name is Thomas Biancardi, but you can call me Tommy. In the awkward adolescent years in which a person must leave the naivety of childhood behind and embrace maturity, I decided to start reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. At the time, I had little involvement in any organization that had to do with helping others and performing acts of charity. I come from a small town where little more is expected of the average student than to go to school, get decent grades, and return home without causing any trouble. I did not really have a model to follow that encouraged me to make a difference in the community and the world. Your works were that model; they are the seeds that continue to grow my passion for doing everything in my power to aide as many people as possible.

When first reading your books, I, of course, was hooked on the entertainment appeal created through the action and adventures that Harry experienced. It did not take long, however, until my motivation for reading the books was fed by an insatiable craving to see deeper into the complex relationships that formed between Harry Potter and other characters, like Hermione Granger, the Weasley family, Albus Dumbledore, and Sirius Black, to name a few. It intrigued me that such average characters were so willing to sacrifice opportunities throughout their lives in order to help an innocent young boy. My fascination grew even stronger after reading of

Harry's constant benevolent treatment to Neville Longbottom. How could Harry, a boy with no parents, be so kindhearted? How could these other people be so kindhearted to Harry, a boy who was basically a complete stranger? These scenarios made no sense to me at the time ~ but they sparked a change in my view on life which has led me to be who I am today.

Approaching my final semester as a high school student, I am forced to reflect on the choices I've made throughout the last four years. At first I started as merely a member of the school clubs that focus on giving back to the students and community. Now, I lead most of them. J.K., your words have touched my life in a very important way. I would not be the person that I am today without the unconditional benevolence that was portrayed through your characters. They've been my inspiration: whether it be when fundraising for a large cause like a Children's Miracle Network Hospital or lending a helping hand to a fellow student who has a problem. Ever since I first read your books, I have kept this simple yet powerful message in my heart; I do not plan on ever throwing it out, at least not until I'm dead.

Sincerely,
Thomas Biancardi

Levi Hrabos

Northwestern High School, Kokomo

Letter to Louis L'amour

Author of *The Last of the Breed*

Dear Louis L'amour,

A battered blue book, with no name on the cover, held together by a single shred of masking tape. A giant coffee stain covers the cover and the first few pages. Your book, *The Last of the Breed* was my mom's favorite from when she was in college. She gave it to me, and thought I should read it when I was in the fifth grade. At the time, my mom and I had a lot of opposite points of view, and we argued a lot. When she gave me this book I thought I would hate it. Your book gave my mom and me at least one thing to agree on.

I remember coming home from school and my mom gave me your book. She just handed it to me and said, "Read it." So, being the kid I was, one who had a lot of free time in school and time the school put aside just for reading, I read it. In the fifth grade the first few chapters were boring, mostly because I was into more fantasy books as a kid. But as I went along and Joe escaped the prison and started living in the wilderness, I realized how much my mom and dad have to do for me so we don't have to live on the streets.

I started coming home every day and doing little things around the house. I made it into a game for myself: See how kind of an act I can do without her noticing. I was trying really hard to be like Joe when he stole the cans of food and sweatshirt from the miner's house or the countless times he had to cover his tracks. When I started getting into the later chapters of the book. My mom and I would sit in her room and talk about the book. We would say what we liked about it, what we thought you could have or should have done differently. Eventually we came to a cross-roads in our opinions but it didn't matter then; we both loved your book and that was all that mattered.

As I grew older into my teenage years I started to fight with my mom again and started to take things for granted again. Now my mom is really sick and any stress makes her worse. I started reading your book again and started to reflect back on the elementary school years. I started to remember what your book made me do and feel back in those days. I'm trying really hard to not fight but it keeps happening. Just like how Joe Mack tried his hardest to

stay away from people but he ended up looking down the barrel of two different guns from two different people. I'm not saying my mom has ever held up a gun to me, but when she yells at me for something I did, it hurts as much as a gunshot. Maybe this letter is the bridge that gets me back into the book, and back into a healthy relationship with my mom.

Who knew that this blue battered book could make such an impact on someone's life? Giving that person the chance to stitch up a broken relationship with his mom. Giving us something to agree on, that we both love and thank the things this book, and Author, of ***The Last of the Breed*** did for us.

Hopefully a better son,
Levi Hrabos

Logan McPeak

Monrovia High School, Monrovia

Letter to Rick Riordan,

Author of *The Percy Jackson Series*

Dear Rick Riordan,

Before you read on, sit back and think about the last time you told your mom, spouse, girlfriend/boyfriend, or whoever is close to you that you loved them. Think about all the people you still wish you could tell that you care about them. Think of all the people you would fight for- even die for. Have you thought? Are you sad? Angry? Happy?

Now imagine all of those people never existed, except for one. Who is it? A parent? A friend? How far would you go for that person? Would you search till the ends of the Earth? Would you battle monsters? Go toe-to-toe with gods? It sounds terrifying to do alone, so you make friends. Friends you will learn to love just as much as the person you are trying to fight for and find. Is this an action packed thriller worth millions of dollars? No, this is high school, and you're a demigod.

My grandparents were Randy and Nancy Slaughter, and when I was little I lived with them for eight years. They were basically my parents. My mom and dad were in bad business. That's all I have to say about them. Both of my grandparents were hardworking, fun to be around people with amazing morals. My grandma (Mamaw) taught me to be myself and how to be goofy. My grandpa (Papaw) taught me how to work hard, chivalry, and how to be a man.

They were superheroes in my child eyes and I wanted nothing more than to be just like them when I grew up. I thought they were invincible. Then many years later, I moved back in with my mom, and everything went downhill from there. Mamaw passed away from cancer, an unfightable evil. Papaw took it hard. He died two years after her. I had just lost my best friends and the people who raised me. I had lost my superheroes. So I went on a quest to get them back with *Percy Jackson*.

We started off as high school kids but eventually transformed into heroes. As Percy fought monsters, I fought grief. As Percy searched for his Mother, I searched for a way to get my mind off things. A way to escape. I didn't find a way to escape in your books. I found a way to remember and be happy to remember. Percy has been through so much, but he always has a

positive attitude. He lost his mom, his best friend, and his girlfriend. Many of his friends have died, but he doesn't let that get him down. He doesn't let that stop him from finding his mom, best friend and girlfriend. He doesn't let it stop him from saving the world, so why should I let it stop me? The answer is simple, I won't.

As I read your series, I felt myself climbing a mountain. A treacherous mountain with monsters at every mound. At first, I was scared to fight them, or didn't want to. Then Percy taught me something. He taught me that everyone has a hero in them. No matter how dark things may seem, you can be the light.

So I fought my demons, and, I won't lie, it was hard alone. Then I realized that Percy wasn't doing all of these extraordinary things by himself. He had friends helping him. Side by side he fought the most dangerous monsters. I sought to find help as well.

I thought back to the last time I had said "I love you" to someone. That someone was my mother. I asked her to come with me on my quest, and she said, surprised, "Of course, Logan." Together we bested everything in my way. Our way. At the end of our journey we came out successful and closer as a family.

My monsters are defeated and I am happy again. Thinking back on it, I don't know how to feel. Sad? Angry? Happy? A little bit of all of them. I think about my mom and only one word comes to mind: Superhero.

With the strength of Hercules,
Logan McPeak

Cameron Pokrifcak

Zionsville Community High School, Zionsville

Letter to Arthur Miller,

Author of *All My Sons*

Dear Arthur Miller,

I was originally persuaded to read *All My Sons* because of my favorite band, Twenty One Pilots. As you can see, your play inspired the band name. This band is known for their poetic lyrics describing the struggles of battling personal monsters and turmoil. Twenty One Pilots has influenced my perspectives of the world, myself, and others. I reasoned that if such an influential band discovered insight from a play, I must see if my spirit could find inspiration from it as well. As I sat down in my town's public library to read *All My Sons*, I readied myself for an emotional, yet predictable story. Words cannot express how incorrect I was, as the story was anything but foretelling. Once I concluded *All My Sons*, I could not stop thinking of how many times in my seventeen years I have gone against my morals.

There are so many different possibilities for why I did not stay true to myself: because I was told to, because a certain solution was easier, because I did not wish to hurt another person's feelings, because I desired to "fit in," or simply because I chose to go against them. However, I do not think this makes me a bad person. I now realize that it is simply a part of growing up and finding one's self. Knowing what is believed to be right and wrong and staying true to those beliefs is what helps an individual stay alive and sane.

After reading *All My Sons*, I began to look closer at how quickly and aggressively people will defend their decisions and actions when questioned. They are swift to justify themselves with a sharp tongue, a look of annoyance, and a firework flash of anger and shock in their eyes. Does this mean they went against their morals and are trying to persuade themselves that it is okay? Or is it simply in human nature to defend oneself when the opportunity presents itself? As I looked closer at other people, I also began to reflect into myself. I would sometimes find myself interlacing the truth with small lies. I would see myself abandoning my own values in order to please another person. The strong, righteous person, I like to think I am, seemed to shrivel up and retreat to a hidden corner inside of my body. Why am I throwing away my own beliefs for someone else? Why would I try to convince myself that it was okay?

In response to reading your play, I found myself questioning my actions, my reasoning, and even my morals. Until now, no Author has made me question both myself and my existence to such an extent. Your writing has had a profound effect on my soul; lighting up my inner stars to a blinding radiance, yet at the same time, dimming them to a mere grey twinkling. A constant battle within me between the light and the dark.

While I have never committed a crime, killed someone, or sent faulty parts to the military, I have done wrongs. I have lied, talked behind people's backs, and I have gotten into trouble due to breaking rules and neglecting duties. How can I look in the mirror and justify such actions? The truth is ... I can't. I cannot support my actions when I violated my own personal morals. I must accept that what I did was wrong. I cannot go back and change my actions, so I must live with whatever consequences and guilt arise from them.

This acceptance was intentionally absent in your play. I thought it was absolutely absurd that a man could commit such a horrific thing - knowingly send cracked plane heads to the military, thus, causing the death of air force pilots and the imprisonment of an innocent man. Not only was Joe Keller responsible for the death of twenty one men, the conviction of a friend, and the suicide of his own son, but he also denied liability for his action. He did not accept responsibility. He rationalizes his behavior as what he had to do to save his business and provide for his family. His refusal to be accountable had me reexamine the harsh realities of society. I was aware of the greed in the world; how people can be so quick to walk away from their values for money and materialistic possessions. Yet, I had overlooked how some arrogant people cannot handle the burden of their own actions once it is thrust upon them. Joe Keller could not handle the burden. Joe killed himself because his secret had bled out like ink on wet paper. I had also forgotten that the strings inside of a person can snap because of other people's decisions. That moment in the play, when the characters discover that Larry committed suicide because of his father, felt like an explosion inside of my

mind. Fragments of sorrow ricocheted into my heart and cracked it apart just like those hairline fractures cracked apart the plane heads. I never could have guessed that Larry intentionally crashed his plane. The song of his strings snapping played in my head as I finished reading, and its cacophonous melody echoed for several minutes afterwards. That instance touched me deeply. I was reminded that what I do today can affect others, especially my loved ones. My own decisions can be like poison, seeping into others physically and emotionally. My venom can potentially hurt them, it may even destroy them. The pain might not come today or tomorrow or the next day, but it can eventually come.

The thought that my actions can and will alter the course of life. That is what I think is truly terrifying. The game of morals - trying to figure out which move to make, trying to figure out whether to stand by my principles or conform and leave them behind. One would like to think it's an easy decision.

"Stand by your morals!" they preach. But you, Mr. Miller, understand it is anything but easy. Every single moment of our lives is part of the game and my strings, your strings, everybody's strings are resting against the edge of a knife. As the Twenty One Pilots lyric goes "... and we should take a day to break away from all the pain our brains have made, the game is not played alone." All of our games are connected. We influence each other, we interpret each other, we pressure each other, we help each other, and we hurt each other. I can only hope that I play my game the right way.

Thank you for reminding me of the rules.

Sincerely,
Cameron Pokrifcak

Taylor Stierwalt

Monrovia High School, Monrovia

Letter to Roald Dahl

Author of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

To Roald Dahl,

Are morals even around anymore? Does anyone know the difference between right and wrong? What is generous and what is selfish? As a child I was straddling the fence, trying to determine which way my moral compass should point. I was always told by my elders and teachers to make proper decisions and do what is ethically correct. However, the majority of my acquaintances in elementary school did the exact opposite of this, usually breaking the set rules and not caring what anyone thought of them. I wanted to follow these rules, but I sought the approval of my classmates as well.

This seesaw of questioning my ethics continued until age ten when I chose *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* for a reading assignment. In the past my mother had read this book to me as a bedtime story; it had been extremely popular in her own childhood. Because it had been read to me before I even started kindergarten, I had never understood this work as well as I do now; I thought of it as an Alice in Wonderland-style piece of writing that was always a joy to hear. The wording and imagery influenced my young mind, possibly being one of the reasons for my creative nature today. The many varieties of sweets, singing Oompa-Loompas, and hilarious hijinks made the story exciting for a girl my age.

Once I read this work by myself, however, my view on the story (and my life) changed completely. As I went through the book, I thought about the character of Charlie Bucket: the way he was portrayed, his attitude, and his interactions with the people around him. In a way, I saw myself in him, especially once he entered Wonka's factory. He was constantly being tempted by both the people and situations around him, to be selfish and go against his morals.

Although he was dealing with types of candy while I was dealing with cheating on tests, the wavelengths of personality still ran close together. While my attention was drawn to Charlie, the four other Golden Ticket winners were not left unnoticed. These children represented not only my classmates', but the world's growing problems: gluttony, greed, inflated egos, and laziness, to name a few. As these children blatantly broke the requests

Mr. Wonka asked each to obey, they were punished in over exaggerated ways. While it was completely comical when I was younger, I realized as I matured that disobeying orders that are meant to protect can leave someone with serious consequences. Although I had a slight understanding of cause and effect at that age, I did not consciously understand the concept until I read this work.

Once I put down the book, I could not see my situation in the same light again. In that moment, there was no longer any doubt in my mind that making an unethical decision was NOT an intelligent decision. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory made me realize that in some cases the nice guy can finish first. It made me see that a person does not always have to lie and cheat to succeed. Maybe sometimes the ones who unfairly claw their way to the top do not always win.

In the end, I no longer straddled that daunting fence. Yes, I will admit that I have not always done the right thing in certain situations, as I am only a human being. However, whenever I am able to deliberate on a thought or decision I ponder the situation so I can determine what the right choice is.

Mr. Dahl I have read many of your works, and each has taught a lesson in one way or another, although I have to say ***Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*** is the work that has had the most impact on me and my well-being. My morals have been set onto the right track, so now all I have to do is hop in my boat and row down life's chocolate river, smiling happily all the way.

A sweet goodbye,
Taylor Stierwalt

Level III

Semifinalists

Kayla Bevington

Northwestern High School, Kokomo

Letter to David Arnold,

Author of *Mosquitoland*

Dear David Arnold,

It was a rainy summer day when I found your book. It had a strange cover and an even stranger title, *Mosquitoland*. I knew immediately upon seeing it that I had to read it. I took it home and read it within two days. This book helped me through my third knee surgery. It doesn't sound like the type of book that would help or like the type of thing I would need help through but being the kind of person who loves to travel, being cooped up inside all summer bored me to death. So I forced my mom to take me to the library where I then found your book. I surprised myself by how much I could relate to Mim. Even though my parents are not divorced, I have lived in neither Mississippi nor Ohio, and I have definitely never road tripped anywhere without my parents, let alone without them knowing it. In the words of Mim, "It sounds strange because it is, and it is, because I am strange."

I cannot begin to describe how this book made me feel with only words, but I will. I think you should know. Your book made me realize what it is to love something with every part of yourself. It angered me when I found out her dad had been cheating on her mom. When you ended it I cried, a truly liquid goodbye, but nonetheless a goodbye. I suppose if I'm being completely honest with you, I think your book sparked something inside me. A match to a hidden candle, a flame springing to life. I think I'm hoping this letter will help me figure out what it was.

"I wish wishing were enough, but it's not. Sometimes you need a thing." This may be the saddest and most relatable quote you wrote, at least to me it is. It reminds me of all the people I lost who I never really knew. When I was in 3rd grade my Uncle Ben was diagnosed with cancer. I remember thinking he wouldn't die. I remember thinking that cancer was just another illness, like the flu. I thought he would get better. He didn't. From the moment he was diagnosed he got worse. He couldn't even live on his own. The worst thing I remember from that time though is when his prized silver

saddle was stolen. He cried, a grown man dying of cancer cried because someone had stolen that saddle. He died a month or two later. I wish someone had been watching his house to make sure no one broke in. I wish I would have talked to him more. I wish I had seen him more. I can no longer remember the sound of his voice or how he looked. I cannot agree more sometimes wishing is not always enough.

I should write something happy now especially after that last paragraph. Well here it is, your talk of vinyls made me want a record player. And I actually ended up getting one. It's light blue and looks like a classic record player. It has actually become one of my prized possessions even though I only own three records to play on it. (The Guardians of the Galaxy Soundtrack, ACDC Back in Black, and Johnny Cash at San Quentin) While we're on the topic of music you actually got me listening to classic rock, sounds strange doesn't it. Well you can't simply own a record player and not listen to classic rock. That'd be a crime against nature. (My dad must be so pleased with you, he's been trying to get me to listen to classic rock for ages.) "You spend your life roaming the hillsides scouring the four corners of the Earth searching desperately for just one person to effing get you. And I'm thinking if you can find that you've found home." I think that may be what you sparked in me, the want, the need to find that person who I can call my home. Needless to say, I haven't found that person yet but I think that may be why I love to travel. I think I have been subconsciously searching for that person my whole life. Your book just made me realize it.

Sincerely yours,
Kayla Bevington

Logan Brittain

Northwestern High School, Kokomo

Letter to Antoine De Saint-Exupery

Author of *The Little Prince*

Dear Antoine De Saint-Exupery,

I know you're dead, and French, but I have some things I would like to discuss. A few months ago, my mother came into my room and handed me a book. It was a hardback, comic-book rendition of your story *The Little Prince*. At first, I had examined the cover artwork and decided it wasn't something I had to read right then and there. The longer I had just left the book there, the more I started feeling guilty for not giving it a try.

Eventually, a few weeks later, I opened it up. I didn't just like the book, I couldn't put it down. It took me a good hour or so to finish, and a couple hours of sobbing.

It left me paralyzed. It took me a while to digest all I had just taken in. I guess I should start at the beginning. What better place to start? At the introduction of the Pilot, or the narrator, I quickly found him pretty relatable. I connect with his views. He, just like me, doesn't really understand why adults prioritize their work, and sometimes forget to have fun. They almost lose their imagination. Even as an adult, the Pilot is still a child at heart. The average person doesn't really understand the Pilot, or at least hasn't taken the time to try; this was another place I connected with him.

The journey of the Little Prince on his way to Earth calls forth experiences I have had. Though the events in the book are a little silly and dramatic, I feel like they represent things that are very real and certainly real in my life. On the first asteroid the Prince visits, he meets a king. This king claims to rule over everything in the universe, however, the Prince realizes, the king only orders things that would happen anyways. For example, he tells the sun to set at a certain time (the time it would set normally, which he has no control over.) This character, to me, represents people who feel like they need to have power, and will go to extremes to maintain the feeling. I can recall specific events in which I have encountered people like this, though I'd rather not go into detail.

Another character the Prince meets is simply "the conceited man." I feel like this doesn't really need too much explanation, but, I must. The man asks the

Prince if he thinks he [the man] is the most wonderful man on the planet. To this, the Prince must answer yes, because the man is the only man on the planet. This feeds the man's ego.

The Prince decides to leave because he doesn't really understand why the man acts like that. This is where my connection to the Prince widens. I deal with people like the conceited man almost daily. And, to an extent, I cope with it similarly to how the Prince does.

On a more serious note, the Prince stumbles upon the tippler. The tippler, to me, is a representation of addiction. He drinks to feel less ashamed of drinking, which causes him to become more ashamed. It is a vicious cycle. I feel like addiction, in any form, is a very relatable topic. Whether it be your own addiction, or someone else's, it is a concept that is present in almost every life. Some friends and family members of mine have become addicted to things that harm them. They want to quit, are ashamed of their addiction, but cannot find it in themselves to quit, so they keep doing it. Addiction is a very personal topic to me, as my life and the lives of the ones I love have been deeply affected by it.

Through those characters and others the Little Prince meets, the theme that adults are odd and focus on all the wrong things stays true. But, there is also the theme of just how different things seem to separate people. For example, when the Little Prince asks the flower on Earth about where to find people, the flower says that there are only 6 or 7 men in existence, because that is all she had ever seen. She is very wrong, but she has never been given any evidence that she is. Perspectives vary greatly between different people. Not all minds think alike. Why would they? Every human being's experience here on Earth is completely unique. I think your book does a very thorough job of teaching that lesson, or at least causing the reader to ponder.

When the Little Prince left the Earth, I cried. When the Pilot wrote about how he missed him, and still wonders about how he's doing, and how he

looks up into the stars and knows he's out there somewhere, I cried. At the time, I didn't have anything to relate it to. I hadn't ever really had someone that was very important to me taken away.

I will say this, though. It certainly prepared me for future events. It gives me something to model how I feel after, something to reference; something to sympathize with.

So, yes, you are dead, and French, but your ideas and concepts still live on to influence the minds of readers. If there is any particular impact your book has had on me, it has caused me to be more open minded and cautious when making decisions. It has taught me how easily something can be given, or taken away from you. It uses characters to represent common themes that I encounter in my everyday life, and provides new outlooks as to how to deal with the problems through how the characters respond to them.

Thank you for impacting my life.
Logan Brittain

Kersten Collins

Griffith High School, Griffith

Letter to Tim O'Brien,

Author of *The Things They Carried*

Dear Mr. Tim O'Brien,

As a child born into the coming of the second millennium, I, without fault, was partially blinded on the subject of war's true effects on its soldiers. As a high school senior, I constantly battle with the responsibilities of beginning my adult life, but my eyes were never opened enough to realize the daily struggle connected with many people in this country: living life after experiencing a war. I finally learned the truth after endeavoring in your book *The Things They Carried*.

My family has grown to be strong and is primarily held together through two important people, my grandmother and grandfather. During my childhood, I was told many stories of my grandfather's early years in adulthood such as his first encounter with my grandmother and memories behind the origin of his jokes that he tells the whole Collins family at Thanksgiving dinner. But, I was never introduced to any significant details of his experience in World War II. In fact, the only information that I have regarding my grandfather, Tom Collins, and the war is a faded and wrinkled picture of him in uniform that hangs from a magnet on his kitchen fridge at home. At times, I used to wonder what kind of dark and evil thoughts went through his mind or what kind of undesirable things he must have endured while serving his country. Although I was curious, I was always brought back to normal by his sweet smile and constant laughter.

I have just recently read your book, Mr. O'Brien. It has changed my views and ideas that used to exist in my brain when I was a child. I now know a great deal about the kind of effects that a war can have on a human being. The uncertainty, the risk, and the glory that comes with deciding to protect the freedoms of others. You explained that each and every person carries something with them whether it's emotionally or physically. I firmly believe that my grandfather constantly thought about my grandmother and the reunion that they would have when he returned home. In a way, he resembles Jimmy Cross and the good luck charm that he carried from Martha. He constantly played back his history with Martha in his mind. He wondered what kind of life they would have had if he did or said something differently. But instead, my grandfather carried his memories of his beautiful girl in his mind and used that as his determination to fight fiercely and

focus on completing his mission in order to come home. He knew that he would come home to her, he knew that the war was worth finishing all because of one person.

The thoughts of love may make the time away seem a bit easier to handle, but the descriptive language that is incorporated within the pages of your novel shined a new light on the true values and experiences of war. Although I am aware that the sights are not pleasant, certain chapters in your novel took the bad sightings to another level. As the granddaughter of a proud military veteran, I am beyond shocked that my grandfather was possibly subject to things such as dead teenagers in an open field, the brutal death of a fellow fighter, or animals blown up by bombs. I find it nearly impossible to process how my grandfather still lives his life normally in today's world. The memories and stress from fighting a major war are powerful enough to alter the way one thinks, but I do not see that change in my grandfather. I may not have known him in his years before going to war, but I do know him now and when I compare him in present day to the stories of him in his twenties, I see no difference. He is still the same compassionate and loving man that will always be proud of his achievements and sacrifices made for this place we call home.

Another way that this book touched my heart was by allowing me to gain more understanding. Since my grandfather was not as affected by the war as others, I was still able to sympathize with those who have developed serious diseases such as PTSD. I do not know the true pain and trauma that comes with post-war life, but I can truly say that I can imagine the struggle with more confidence thanks to your experiences in *The Things They Carried*. I appreciate you sharing your vivid war experiences as well as your genuine thoughts. You evoked emotions inside of me that I didn't know I had regarding a topic that I wouldn't normally explore. Thank you for enlightening me on not only the history of the country, but also providing an insight to my grandfather's past..

Sincerely,
Kersten Collins

Brooklin Coss

Bedford North Lawrence High School, Bedford

Letter to Tamara Ireland Stone,

Author of *Every Last Word*

Dear Tamara Ireland Stone,

Society has taught us that we have a void to fill. From childhood, we tried to be this person we weren't. We hide our true identity from family and friends so they won't be disappointed in us. This "mold" is generally the perfect person. A picture perfect woman or man. We feel like we have to be skinny, beautiful, and normal in order to have some importance. We are taught that mental illnesses are glamorous and taken lightly. However, this isn't true at all. They are monsters that will destroy your life if they aren't controlled. So in reality, the perfect person doesn't exist. Your book *Every Last Word*, has taught me that it is okay to be imperfect.

Recently, I was diagnosed with anxiety and OCPD. This affected my life. I was able to understand why I had a hard time with my feelings and thoughts. I had a difficult time telling anyone about this, fearing that they would judge me. Samantha felt this way too. "My friends can't know about my OCD or the debilitating, uncontrollable thoughts, because my friends are normal. And perfect. They pride themselves on normalcy and perfection, and they can't ever find out how far I am from those two things." Then I came across your book in the library and it changed my thinking. It was able to teach me that everyone in this world has their own definition of normal. I was able to see that it is okay to let people in and show them how broken you truly are. Those people have even helped me to figure out who I am. "But now, here you are, and somehow, in finding you, I think I've found myself." When you hold something inside for an eternity, it can make you miserable. Now, I can let people around me know how I feel. Finally, I feel like my family and friends truly care about me.

I am able to view the world and society in an alternative way. I walk around and treat everyone with kindness and love. Truth is, everyone deals with something that no one may know about. Stone expressed this beautifully with "Everyone's got something. Some people are just better actors than others." Every human has their own struggles. I now view a simple act like holding the door open, or a smile as a huge gesture of love. If I have the impact to cheer someone else up, it makes my day. Humans want to feel loved and simple acts of kindness can make a huge difference in a person's

life. I know that your book has helped my view to change. The way that Caroline and AJ showed affection to Samantha taught me that those who don't want to be loved are actually the ones who need it the most. Samantha was terrified to let others into her life. However, when she finally let others in, they taught her how to love herself. *Every Last Word*, has showed me that anxiety and OCD are not signs of weakness. It is just a sign that you have just remained strong for too long.

I now realize that it is normal to me to walk around afraid and terrified of all the things that could go wrong. I can live with the fact that no amount of anxiety will change the future. I have to live day by day. My journey hasn't been easy. However, I can now say that for once in my life, with the help of medication, I am truly happy.

Thank you Tamara Stone for writing a book that shows the reality of mental illnesses. With your help, I am finally able to say that I am one hundred percent myself. Tamara, you showed me that my feelings were normal. Now I am not afraid to show the world the real Brooklin. I am proud of who I am and how hard I struggled to get to this point in my life. I am finally content with saying that I have anxiety and this is me.

Sincerely,
Brooklin Coss

Courtney Gullion

Switzerland County High School, Vevay

Letter to Sylvia Plath,

Author of *The Bell Jar*

Dear Sylvia Plath,

As I sit here today, writing you this letter, I am thinking about the brutally honest, self-critical woman that you created in your novel. Esther was living the dream on the outside but was struggling on the inside. Thoughts, actions, and her past dominated her life and future. I have never been able to understand the full extent of why people would want to kill themselves or why the people around them allowed them to reach that point. Although I have never considered taking my own life, the subject has always interested me. It may seem crazy, but I think about what could happen more than I think about the present. Instead of thinking about what I should be concerned with, I think about what is on the minds of others. Ever since I was six years old, I have wanted to become a mental health psychiatrist. Many factors have created my future goals and ambitions, but you inspired me to continue pursuing my dreams.

The world can be viewed as a blind and judgmental place. I wondered why people did not see Esther's constant pain, but after reflecting back on the piece, I now see why people refused to see her struggle. It is difficult to see someone's pain on the inside, but it is harder to accept what people see on the outside. Although your novel had many themes ranging from sex to women and femininity, I saw something different. I viewed the book as a case study. Piece by piece I learned about Esther and the underlying reasons for why she felt the way that she did. I created my own complex image of her and learned that people like Esther can be found in so many places, but they could also be overlooked in many places as well. In the 1950s, young women had a significant amount of potential that was overlooked because of the way that society viewed them in comparison to men. I believe that everyone should be treated the same and not compared to one another based on sex, ethnicity, or beliefs. Through your writing, I learned that everyone should be treated how they deserve to be treated, no matter what the case is.

I never knew that reading words on paper could change someone's life. I always thought that in order to have a life changing moment, you had to experience it physically rather than mentally. You proved me wrong and

showed me how to have a real mental experience. I went on my own journey while I was reading about life in the 1950s. Stepping into Esther's world, feeling her constant pain, and learning about her struggles was something that I could easily do. I felt as if I related to what she was going through and was able feel her pain throughout her life, even though I was not there to experience it. Maybe it is because I have pain of my own. Maybe it is because my best friend took his life in order to escape the pain of society. Although I was able to step into Esther's shoes, I also had the ability to walk in the footsteps of my best friend as well. Life, in my eyes, is not about what I present to people's eyes but instead is what I present to their hearts.

Through your words and underlying messages, you opened my eyes to the real meaning of life and allowed me to uncover the explanations that I have been searching for.

Courtney Gullion

Sasha Jocius

Northwestern High School, Kokomo

Letter to Kristen Cashore

Author of *Graceling*

Dear Kristen Cashore

I glance over at the book on my desk. The book cover seems like it is being smothered with flames. I look at the carved, intricate, and graceful lines that are on the slim bow and arrow. I see the bottom of a girl's face. Her lips look like they have been stained with blood. Her face resembles a porcelain doll. I pick up the book and walk over to my bed. I get comfortable, preparing myself for an all-day binge-reading session. I skim through the first pages. I see a map. I don't know how these places relate to the story, but I can't wait to find out. I flip to page one and begin to read, "Larch often thought..."

With every character I could somehow relate to them. Fire is someone who keeps to herself. I suppose if you asked anybody who knew me they would say that I keep to myself. Brigan is someone who cares for his family and protects them. I am someone who tries to show they care and love their family. Garan does not trust easily. He has to get to know someone very well before trusting him or her. I do that frequently and I have that problem with some of my closest friends. I could even compare myself with Leck. Leck tries to become a more powerful person who wants things done his way. I am guilty of wanting things done my way, but I continue to try to improve that quality of mine. The one character that I truly thought I could relate with was Hanna. Hanna often gets lonely because her dad is away fighting for his kingdom. Coming from a family where my grandfather and father have served in the military, I understand how she felt every time her dad left. The relief of knowing that you can hold them and talk to them whenever you want and that they are out of harm is like no other feeling. Another way I can relate to Hanna is by always trying to please our fathers. When Hanna says, "Papa will be disappointed," I know exactly how she feels. Not only am I disappointed in myself, but also I know that my father would be disappointed in me too. When I get a bad grade or do a bad pass in a soccer game I imagine my dad shaking his head. Thinking or seeing that makes me strive to be a better person that has done something worth telling about and do something my dad can proudly share to his friends.

Some of the situations in *Fire* remind me of similar situations I have encountered throughout my brief life so far. One of the reasons why I love this book so much is because I can relate the events to ones I have experienced. Something as small as Fire getting embarrassed for being on her monthly cycle to the moment where she is reunited with Brigán are similar to events that have happened to me. When Fire decides to go to King's City, it reminds me of a similar situation I have experienced. Fire is uncomfortable at first, but eventually cares for the new people she has met. This summer I went to Peru to visit my family. I don't speak Spanish, and that's all my grandparents can speak. It was awkward and strange in the beginning, but I quickly learned that I loved the whole journey. I will always remember when Fire said, "I won't hide in a room with the doors and windows shut. That is not a life." It will forever remind me that there will always be a new place that is waiting for me to visit. Not only do I enjoy this book, but my friends are also attached to it. I have one specific friend that has shared their thoughts about the book with me. One day in sixth we walked into homeroom together. I glanced over at the book in her hand and realized that we were reading the same book, *Fire*. We immediately started discussing the book. She and I talked about your previous book *Graceling*. We talked about which man we liked better. Po or Brigán? I never talked to her that much, but suddenly it had felt like *Fire* had led me to a new friend.

Fire was the book that made me realize reading is like a new journey you can go on and go to a far away place. I never had thought reading was something a person could enjoy and do in their free time. After reading *Fire*, I began to read other books. I could tell that my vocabulary was increasing and I was doing something more productive than just watching television. My family could also realize that I was reading instead of being on social media. This book has made me read books of all different genres. I have been opened to a new community of people that love reading equally to me.

I sit there stunned. I don't know exactly how to feel at the moment. Should I sit in awe or go downstairs and share my feelings with my family? I close the book and look at the cover. I look at the girl on the cover, Fire, knowing that she is a beautiful woman and has a flawless face. I open the book and go to the map. I know which characters visited which places. I sigh and set the book back on my desk. I decide that I want to become a person similar to Fire. I want to be able to go to a far away place and overcome all the obstacles thrown at me. I want to find that person that completes me once I get older. I want to make others happy and make relationships with people that I never thought would become my friends. I start to walk down the stairs, thinking of my next book.

Sincerely,
Sasha Jocius

Leah Kennedy

North Putnam High School, Roachdale

Letter to Jenny Han

Author of the *Summer* trilogy

Dear Jenny Han,

Since I started reading I've been on a quest to find the perfect book, but instead of finding one, I found three. Your *Summer* trilogy never fails to whisk me away to a place I consider my home.

Cousins Beach is a place I long to visit, and Belly, Conrad, Jeremiah, and Beck are people I adore. I relate the way one romantic relates to another. The way Belly feels, the way she has to grow into herself, makes me remember how it felt for me--and still feels for me--to be growing up and making life decisions. Belly's in love with Conrad, and he loves her; my heart alternately breaks and heals with Belly's.

I think I found my home at the beach house. It's a refuge to which this Midwestern girl can escape, a place with sand and water, and I don't even have to leave my bedroom. There certainly have been times in recent years where I needed a place to run away from real life. Nearly three years ago, I had to say my hardest goodbye. My grandfather passed away after fiercely battling Lung Cancer, COPD, and age. His death still doesn't seem real. I spent my fifteenth birthday with him in the hospital. All I wished for was for him to wake up. And he did!

What people don't understand is when someone is that sick, he doesn't act how he normally would. Papaw didn't know what day it was, and it broke my heart. But I am thankful. You understand how I could be thankful, don't you Mrs. Han? I am thankful my wish was granted, and that we had that last bit of time together. I was a pallbearer at his funeral. I said goodbye to him that day. I can remember looking out the window and wondering how people could be living their lives like normal. Didn't they know my world had just come crashing down? The ache never lessens, never goes away, so I thank you for making the ache that Beck's boys, Belly's mom, and even Belly feels, so real. It is tangible and correct, not cushioned or fake. I cried like a baby when I read it.

Your work sucks readers in. I'm no longer in small town Indiana when I open the *Summer* trilogy. I'm at Cousins in the beach house. I'm hunting

through the halls of MIA. I'm on the road with Jere. I'm at Belly's wedding. I'm far away from my real life, and that is what I've always longed for in a book. I want to be taken away from my life.

Recently, I had to say another hard goodbye, and that goodbye was to my first love. We believed we could live through the Navy's distance, college--anything. Nothing could tear us apart. He promised me a ring, and babies, and the world. And then he left me crying in my room at three o'clock in the morning. He broke up with me over text message, and called to make sure I got it. All I could do was wrap my arms like a tourniquet around my chest and sob. But then, I went to Cousin's. I picked up your book and sank into the familiar arms of Belly, Con, and Jeremiah. As long as I had that book in my hand, I could breathe, because at that point I couldn't on my own. It was like I was standing in Times Square with a million people swarming around me, yet no one saw me turning blue. The love that had grounded me for so long was gone, and I couldn't remember how to breathe.

The books of the *Summer* trilogy really made me feel like my emotions were valid. My family is very hush-hush when it comes to emotions, yet I have so many. I'm like a time bomb under pressure so full of all these feelings, ready to explode and obliterate the world around me. All I want is to feel validated! I want someone to tell me I'm not crazy, that it's normal to be feeling these things, and Belly confirms that I am okay because she lives the same emotions. She lives the heartbreak, the pain of your favorite person in the world dying, the ache of just wanting to rid your life completely of the one person who will always have a hold on your heart--who you will always love--regardless of whether or not they love you back. It's soothing, an anchored rock in an ocean of chaos.

If you taught me anything Mrs. Han, it is that love isn't perfect, and a person may not have one love. That if a person waits-- If I wait-- and the timing is right, Love wins.

I didn't get my first love, Mrs. Han, but just because someone is my beginning, doesn't mean he won't be my end. Thank you, Mrs. Han, for propping me up when I come close to giving up my adoration of love.

See you in Cousins,
Leah Kennedy

Bri Murray

Switzerland County High School, Vevay

Letter to Brent Runyon,

Author of *The Burn Journal*

Dear Brent Runyon,

I have been chasing after my father's shadow since before I can remember. As I went through his belongings hidden away in storage, I found *The Burn Journals* sitting at the bottom of a cardboard box: In reading it, I realized that the emptiness in my chest had already become a part of me. It eased my mind to know there are others who have faced similar situations. When feeling down, I tell myself that everything could be so much worse than what it already is.

There is a scar on me that only I can see while others are blind to it. I do not hate the man who lacks interest in his child; instead I become greedy for his attention. As a child, going to my father's was surprisingly lonely since he was always leaving me behind--whether it was with a friend of his or a family member. Every other weekend we were at a different woman's house, and I either had to share a room with other kids or sleep on a blow-up mattress in a closet, like Harry Potter. Just as in *The Burn Journals*, Brent was afraid to disappoint his parents, I was afraid of disappointing my father. Though I have never tried to commit suicide, I cannot say that I have not thought about it; I would be lying to myself and to you. I have lost the ability to trust in those who I do not personally know. Now my father is married and has a new family with which he is trying to start over, but it has only erased my presence to him even more. To this day I have not told anyone how I have been feeling for the past fourteen years, yet you have opened up my bottled emotions.

The closer people get to me, the more rude I am to them. It is the fear of their abandoning me if I get too close that makes me the way I am. I push my mother away more than anyone, and I feel regret grabbing me where it hurts. I was so mean to her when I was a child because I blamed her for everything. I blamed her for the divorce, my father, for always lying in bed being too tired to do anything, for never being home, and leaving me alone when I needed her most. When Brent started to regret burning himself, it brought back memories of the biggest regret I have ever had.

Around the age of nine, I found out that my mother had cancer in her blood. The reason she was never home was because she was at the hospital and the reason for her lack of energy was because of the chemotherapy. I know it wasn't her fault for the marriage ending, my dad acted like a child; and she couldn't help that my father wasn't there for me. Nowadays, my mother is rarely home because she has two jobs in order to earn money for the family. I hope to one day be able to convey my thought better to her and treat others how they want to be treated.

To me, this was more than just a mere book that a stranger wrote. It dug its claws right where it really hurts and picked out the sharp glass stuck in me. My father may have not wanted me, but *The Burn Journals* made me see what I couldn't see before. It showed me there were others who reached out to me even when I didn't want them to. My mother went through a hard time, but she was never unhappy or at least she never showed it. One day I will be able to sit down with her and have a normal conversation. I will not be afraid anymore because I know I am not alone and I have friends and family that will do their best to support me all the way. No words can express my gratitude to you for allowing me the chance to have a second chance to heal my scar.

Sincerely,
Bri Murray

Oscar Nieto

New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Yann Martel,

Author of *Life of Pi*

Dear Mr. Martel

What is one to do? What does one do, whose mind seems to be trapped within itself, longing for freedom. Dreaming of soaring through the skies of the Earth. Trapped and dreaming, while constantly being focused on school work? “You have to finish this now and well. There is no time for any distractions,” I think to myself. Well, what can one do? For starters, people with imaginative minds that have so little time for their minds to flourish, can read your book. I certainly did. Your book, *Life of Pi*, made an impact on me because the story, the writing style, the characters, they all put my rampant mind to good use. The story you created, full of life, allowed me to envision the story, journey, and life of Piscine Patel.

Throughout my life, I’ve had a strange relationship with books. I would read so much as a child, creating such vivid stories in my mind with mere words, an amazing feeling. And as I grew older, I read less and less. Perhaps books were becoming boring to me? I was never sure. I would keep telling myself that I just haven’t found “that special book” yet. It may have been what was going on in my life that influenced what I read and how often I read. During this time, my life was about to change immensely, and I had not caught wind of the storm to come. I was still in that stage of “innocence.” Speaking of innocence, early on in your book, I was taken by the chapter of how Pi lost his innocence. Of how he watched a tiger mutilate a goat right in front of him. I know his father did this to teach him about the dangers of the zoo. But I took this lesson as teaching Pi about reality. I was taken by this chapter because I had a similar experience, except there was no tiger, no goat, and no intentional lesson. I lost a part of my innocence and learned about the harsh realities of life through abuse from my father. I’d say, that this experience began the large change in my life, and my way of thinking.

The loss of innocence is not the only similarity Pi and I have. Pi’s perception of religion is more than intriguing. I’ve always considered myself to be an open-minded person, after maturity that is, and I can’t help but be impressed at how Pi handles religion. I was born into a family of Catholics and had little choice of whom I followed. I never liked being forced to take

in information as truth regardless of the information being true or not. I preferred to discover life for myself. As I grew older, I had a difficult time maintaining a relationship with God. I became an Atheist, then an Agnostic. I became an Agnostic because I still had hope that there may be a God somewhere in this existence of ours.

Strange. Strange how Pi became so faithful, so devout to religion. Three in fact! When I can't even bring myself to believe in one. I have become a person who finds peace and happiness even without God, and it's gotten to the point where I may just be an Atheist. After all, if I search for answers in our reality, then why am I worrying about God? Perhaps it's an old grudge. Rivalry in the search of peace? Resentment? Or, the search for closure from the loss of an old friend? I'm not sure. My point is, I admire the perception that Pi has on life, and religion. It reminds me of a part of me, in the back of my mind.

With this book, the writing, the characters, and Pi himself. I'll be sure to maintain insight on the situations around me. Whether that would be about the life of another, my life, or of religion. I will be true, open minded, and free. Your book, *Life of Pi*, made an impact on me because the story, the writing style, the characters, they all put my rampant mind to good use. The story you created, full of life, allowed me to envision the story, journey, and life of Piscine Patel. It also gave me insight on what is to come. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Oscar Nieto

Jolie Rusznak

Centerville Sr. High School, Centerville

Letter to Paige Rawl,

Author of *Positive*

Dear Paige Rawl,

The world is an awfully ugly place full of crimes, discrimination, and violence. Being a teenager in this society is definitely not the brightest of times. Bullying is one of the main culprits in making teenage lives a complete disaster. From clothing choices, to family history, and to a medical diagnosis, bullies search for anything and everything that will make someone completely fall apart. Everyone tries their best to fit in to the peers around them, but why should we do this when we are born to be unique?

I have always been my own person, no matter who my friends are or where I lived. When I moved from my hometown at the age of ten, things began to change. I began to blend into the crowd, and follow my so called “best friend” in everything we did. We had matching outfits, matching bags, and eventually matching personalities. Then one day everything changed. I was constantly ignored and received death stares in the hallway. This girl, who I told everything to, was suddenly on a different team.

Your book *Positive* touched me deeper than it probably did for most people. Similarly to you, I was put down by my “best friend,” whom I was honestly just trying to help. Although I was not bullied by all of my classmates, my first year of middle school was somewhat miserable.

However, the best things about your book are the lessons it has taught me. I have learned that I was born a leader. I am now involved in several activities where I am able to reach classmates, friends, and community members who may just need a friendly smile or something even deeper than a prayer. I have stopped blending in with society because that is not God’s plan for me. I vow to stand up for someone or to someone, no matter the circumstances. This book, along with several speakers I have recently had the opportunity to listen to, have finally made me realize what I am supposed to use my skills for: to make a difference in my school and community, as well as leading others to do the same. Bullying needs to end once and for all, and it only takes a spark to start a whole blaze.

Thank you for being such a positive influence on everyone you meet and every person who ever reads your book. You have made a difference in the

world, and are continuing to make a change. I want to personally thank you for helping fuel my fire for helping others become who they are meant to be.

With admiration and thanks,
Jolie Rusznak

Sha'Brayia Sims

New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Edgar Albert Guest,

Author of *See It Through*

Dear Edgar Albert Guest,

Everyone had hard times, how did you choose to fight them back? I am so happy that I read the poem *See It Through*. It helped me get through a lot of things in life. When I am at home, and things get out of hand I have to Meet it squarely face to face.

Basketball can become a little bit overwhelming, but I know to fall still fighting and don't give up whatever I do. School work can cause me to give up on everything, but I don't let my nerves desert me, I keep myself in fighting trim. Your poem, *See It Through*, made an impact on me because it helped me fight and get through rough times in my life.

When I am at home and I have so much on my plate I have to see it through to conquer. When I have to deal with my mom cussing me out for the things I do right. She tells me that am not going to be anything in life. When she says that I have to try to dodge it. I hate it when my mom tell me that I think I am better than everyone even though I don't. I have to See It Through. My dad treats his girlfriend better than me, and I have to dodge it. I have been in a lot of situations where I just want to break down and cry but I can't because I have to See It Through.

Basketball is something I use this poem for a lot. I tell my team when we are in the huddle and we are losing we have to fall still fighting. When I am out there on the court I am planning my future. I have to work hard and be the best I can possibly be. I don't give up at all I just keep playing to I gave it my all. I have to remember that I am facing just what another basketball player have met. At the end of it I See It Through.

School work is something that I have trouble with. I try very hard to keep up with it. I know running from it will not save me so I run with it. I feel like when is comes to school work that I am just not fit for it. I have to deal with my family and basketball. I tried to quit playing basketball but how will I get to college for free. So I plant my feet and take a brace. I try to give everything its own time and work hard on everything I do to See It Through.

Your poem ***See It Through***, made an impact on me because it helped me fight and get through rough times in my life. Thanks for writing the poem. You may have made lots of peoples' lives better because they See It Through. Your poem has helped me, as well as many others learn to See it Through.

Sincerely,
Sha'Brayia Sims

Claire Wallace

Northwestern High School, Kokomo

Letter to J.K. Rowling,

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

Dear J.K. Rowling,

I first heard about an orphan boy who found out he was a wizard when I was about ten. I don't remember who told me about him, but I do remember thinking I hated the whole idea when I didn't even know the half of it. Two years later, I came home from school and - after I finished my homework - turned on the TV. The first scene that popped on was after Harry, Ron, and Hermione had seen the three-headed dog in the forbidden third corridor. Of course, I didn't know that then, much less that what I was watching was in fact *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Nevertheless, I kept watching and I heard a bushy brown haired girl announce she was off to bed before the two boys with her came up with "another clever idea to get [them] all killed. Or worse expelled." It was this girl, who reminded me very much of myself, that made me interested in Harry Potter.

During a commercial break, I found out the name of the movie, and realized it was based off a book I had once despised despite having never read it. In the room I was in, there were two bookshelves on either side of the TV. While I was sitting on the couch, I had wondered whether or not it contained the book I had in mind. So, I stood up and began to look for it. Funnily enough, I did find the book. It and the next four books on the top shelf. I remember having to climb on a counter below the shelves to reach them. As soon as I had my hands on the first book, I started reading. It was only when the pain in my knees distracted me from what I was reading that I jumped down to sit on the couch to continue reading.

I continued reading and reading. When Harry and Ron were on the Hogwarts Express and Ron was trying to turn his rat yellow, the girl that made me want to read this story finally appeared. She noticed Ron with his wand in his hand and asked if he was doing magic. Before he could answer, she told him to perform a spell. When it fails, she reveals that she had already tried a few simple spells and they had all worked for her. As she told them that, it reminded me of myself. I am usually one of the first people in my class to understand a new concept. I always thought it was something that other people didn't like. It always seemed like the "cool people" in school weren't smart, and that people who were smart weren't liked by

anybody. You showed me that when you find the friends who really care about you, they don't care that you understood something before them; they care about whether or not you're feeling happy.

After she left the compartment, Ron voiced his hopes that she isn't in the same house as him. Sometimes when I'm around other people my age, I feel as if I'm not welcomed. One time I was standing with a bunch of people. They were all talking to each other, but nobody was talking to me. I felt like I didn't matter. It makes me feel a bit better that someone else understands that.

During their Charms lesson on Halloween, Hermione tried to help Ron. I do this all the time, and people don't always appreciate it. I had a friend who used to call me "Correctemundo Claire" and I hated it. It made me feel like when I corrected someone that person felt like he or she was stupid. I don't like making people feel like they are less intelligent than me because they might know something I don't.

After the lesson, Ron called Hermione a nightmare. There are times when I feel as if everyone thinks that about me too, whether it's from what they say to the expression on their face. Hermione became friends with Ron later, and that showed that Hermione had the ability to forgive people who hurt her. You subtly showed me that people can be forgiven.

At the end of the book, Harry and Hermione are in the chamber before the confrontation with Voldemort. She and Harry realize that there is only enough of the potion to go forward for one. Harry decided he should be the one to move on. Before Hermione left, she told Harry that he is a great wizard. Harry tried to argue, but Hermione insisted that there are more important things than "books and cleverness." I used to think that I was only smart, and that I could never be anything other than smart.

You taught me, through one simple sentence, that friendship and bravery are more important than doing well in school. Even though Hermione is

extremely intelligent, she knows that there is more to life than that.

Hermione was not the only person in *Harry Potter* to change my view of the world, but she was the very first. As I grow up, I relate myself more and more to Hermione as she grows up throughout the novels. I personally think it's a good thing.

You made Hermione a strong, loyal character who stands up for what is right even when everyone else thinks she is crazy. I hope that I can be half of what you made her to be.

Thank you, J.K. Rowling. Thank you for showing me to not judge a book by its cover. Thank you for making me realize that I am more than what I appear to be, and that there is more to life than doing well in school. You have shown me what it is like to be a friend, how to forgive and forget, and how to live life to the fullest.

Now, whenever I watch, read, or hear about an orphan boy who finds out he is a wizard, I smile and remember to always try something before you form an opinion about it.

Claire Wallace

Sophia Yager-Motl

Northwestern High School, Kokomo

Letter to Laura Ingalls Wilder,

Author of *Little House in the Big Woods*

Dear Mrs. Wilder,

Your novel, *Little House in the Big Woods*, is a cornerstone of my childhood. The vivacious descriptions you put in everyday possessions still makes me look closer at the items we consider normal. The fascinating experiences you had as a child entranced me to fall in love with a book that swore to keep me safe. Though I never personally experienced the fear of living on the wild frontier, Laura did and transferred those memories in the form of a novel to me. The time link between a pint-sized girl in the 1800's and a minute girl in the mid 2000's is oddly enough firm. Laura fears the wild wolves outside her small and secluded sanctuary, while I fear the terrors of my mind-horror neither of us can hide under the bed from, but we must come to terms with.

What is one of the most touching qualities in this novel, at least to me, is the tiny border between the unknown, which daily her father must traverse into, and the small island of the known in the vast expanses of the big woods. In Baton Rouge, Louisiana, my childhood home, the wild land and vast expanses of swamp were a wonder and a mystery to me, much like Laura and the big woods. (Though my experience was on a much larger scale). Laura's mother is her civilization, her safety and security from the dangerous unknown, like many mothers before her (though the wilds of a child's imagination is represented quite literally in this book). Pa is the narrow stretch of in-between, often playing 'mad dog' with the girls and hunting in the big woods. The authentic symbolism is abundant in your book, a quality I cannot get over.

My mother often read this book to me as a child, like her mother before her. We all still use the same copy, a beat-up excuse of a book that is missing several pages. Though it is still kept at my grandmother's house, it is very weary from a lifetime of travel. The sukie impersonator they met in the pen set me on edge and let my creativity run wild as a small child, and I found wonder and could make up stores of nearly everything. Pa's stories he told to the girls was the kindling on which my imagination burned. This book has always been associated with assurance of safety for me, Mrs. Wilder, and my mom's vocal skill animated the words on the page, filling me with a love for the unexplored wild and reading.

A peculiar quality of mine is that I have nightmares often (usually one or two a week), a habit I have possessed since childhood. Though truly not ‘scary’ the dreams are vivid and disturbing enough to wake me, and unfortunately I am a very light sleeper. The colorful imagination I possessed as a child made it very hard to fall asleep in the first place, and near impossible after the remnants of a nightmare. When I was young after a nightmare I would waddle in the dead of night to my parent’s room and my mother would come over and read this book to me. My mother’s soft and silken voice created a shield from the monsters under my bed, and the lullaby of her speech quickly pushed me to sleep. Because of this, I quickly learned how to read and to this day I will wake up, grab your novel and read until I sleep again.

Overall, Mrs. Wilder, your book has changed my life for better. Because whenever I see someone less fortunate than I, my tender heart tends to start to beat. Laura’s squabbles with Mary made me question my want for a sibling at first, but as the story grew and the small girls grew as well, I came to the conclusion family is a part of life, and it’s a virtuous thing. The bravery expressed by Pa and Ma throughout the story is sadly, very uncommon in families these days. Pa comes home, tired and weak from a day trapping in the big woods, and stops to sing a song on his fiddle and stop the girls and tell them a story. Ma often would make the girls maple syrup candies and would let the girls play with cut out dolls she made for them. Your book is my safe haven from the wild world inside and outside my mind. Thank you, Mrs. Wilder.

With love,
Sophia Yager-Motl



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