

Level One - Grades 4-6 - First Place Winner - 2023

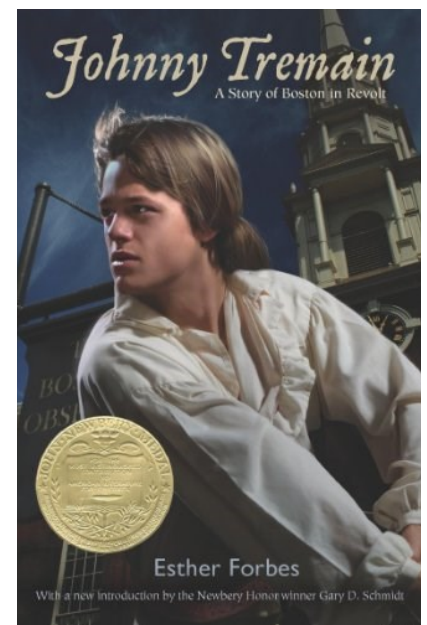
Daniel G.
Indianapolis, Indiana

Dear Esther Forbes,

On September 24th my life changed. My mom, two friends, and I got into a severe car accident. My mom was temporarily immobilized and my friends and I got some broken bones. After reading your book, *Johnny Tremain*, I felt a sense of hope, an emotion I needed to lift my spirits.

In Johnny's silversmithing accident where he gets molten silver on the right hand, he is severely injured. My right hand was severely injured like Johnny's. My hand injury was a broken wrist and a growth plate; plus some bruises and scratches. When Johnny was forced out of work, he went into a melancholy state of mind. I think he felt this way because he might have thought his hand would never heal. Well, that's what I thought with my hand at least. After his accident, Johnny bonded with the Lapham girls. I think being with family shapes your character. That bonding period with the Lapham girls shaped him into a profound, mature young man. In addition, while I was not able to be with my mom at home every day in the same way I was accustomed to, I bonded with my brother and sisters. I think that experience shaped my character. Because when my mom was in the hospital, I found myself doing things I never had to do before. For example, making my lunch, putting myself to bed alone, and most importantly, not being able to talk to my mom when I wanted to. These were things I never thought in my wildest dreams I would have to do. These new responsibilities made me connect more to Johnny because after his tragedy he had to go through the same character-building experience as me.

To me, family is the most important thing in the world, though sometimes I take it for granted. Not having a family member for a few weeks at home meant I had to learn how to function without my mom maintaining her traditional role in my life. The reason why I was so devastated about my mom not being home is that she is a stay-at-home mom. Seeing her every day is just what I am used to.



After the accident, I couldn't see my mom for a few weeks anywhere besides the hospital, but when she came home a few days before my birthday, it was great. It was very unnatural for me to spend time without my mom in our home together with our family. Though physically and mentally she is still not back to one hundred percent, seeing her every day makes a huge difference in my life. With new circumstances come new responsibilities and character building. Just like Johnny, I had to become more resilient. It was hard at first, but because I saw Johnny overcome the challenges that I faced, it gave me some reassurance and hope.

In my opinion, Johnny sealed his own fate. The reason why he got the molten silver on his hand was because of his controlling attitude toward the other apprentices. If he was less demanding towards the others, they may not have tried to humiliate him by giving him the broken crucible. Towards the middle of the book, although he may not have looked like it on the outside, I think he started to forgive Dove and Dusty in his heart. In the very end, he truly did forgive them. When I would lay in bed at night, I wondered if it was my fault for getting in the accident. What would have happened if I was patient and waited another day to go apple picking with my friends? This thought made me think it was my fault and that lowered my self-esteem. At the time, my spirits were broken. I missed my mom and our family being together and that is why I think I thought those irrational thoughts. But as I continued to read *Johnny Tremain*, I saw Johnny feel this same emotion. When Johnny thought it was his fault for losing his best friend, Rab, that is when I really connected to Johnny. Later Johnny forgave himself and realized you can only control what you can control. Between Johnny forgiving the apprentices and Johnny forgiving himself, I felt forgiveness in me. This forgiveness lifted the burden of feeling that the car accident was my fault.

After reading *Johnny Tremain*, I saw myself grow in character. I feel like this book is an instruction manual for growing up. After finishing your book, I saw a common moral: Family is everything. So thank you, Esther, for teaching me how to grow up, deal with adversity, and to be a "Johnny Tremain."

Sincerely,
Daniel G.

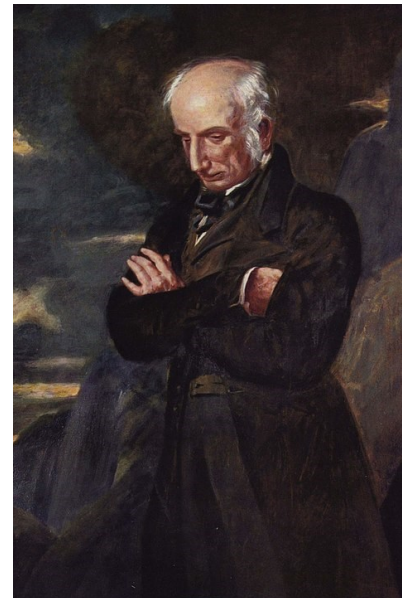
Level Two - Grades 7-8 - First Place Winner - 2023

Elizabeth Jo G.
Fairland, Indiana

Dear Mr. Wordsworth,

When I first read your poem, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," I was intrigued, to say the least. Within a week, I had read it four times. A week after that I had memorized it. After reading it, I couldn't get it out of my head. I thought about it at home, at school, during basketball practice – the meaning and importance of this poem chased me around. I reread it several times, trying to figure out why – how – one random poem could be so alluring. I couldn't help but be pulled into the magic that "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" induced.

*"For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils."*



The last stanza caught my attention immediately; I couldn't stop thinking about it, repeating it in my head. Oftentimes, we see nature as just there. It isn't extraordinary or beautiful. It's nature. It's always been there, and yet we never truly see it. But if we only looked closer, if we truly gave thought to nature, then the flowers are not just flowers. They are candles, filled with the most natural fragrances; they are art, each a different color and size. Flowers are a part of nature that we so often walk past and don't give a second thought to. Now I go into nature with new eyes, ready to wonder at every anomaly that we deem normal – average.

When I was little, I loved to play outside. As a child, everything was new and exciting. But a few years later, it was just. .. Well, *nature*. There was nothing special about the leaves turning yellow, orange, and red in the fall. Or the new flower buds in the spring, or the little droplets of frozen water that fell from the

sky in the winter. I wasted my time indoors, scrolling aimlessly through my phone and watching TV. The cold bite of wind was annoying, and the heat of summer felt insufferable; the grass made me itchy and the flowers attracted bees and other insects.

But reading your poem made me realize that we only have a short 90 years here, if that. And if we don't get outside and enjoy the brisk chill of the wind coming off of the lake, or the hot, dry sand beneath our toes, then we may never experience the true and utter peace of being in nature. The solitude and silence of being alone in the mountains, huddled beneath an evergreen; the cozy feelings that come with the winter season; the lapping of the waves and the warm, balmy breeze that sends us to sleep – it is all well worth our time.

*"I gazed-and gazed-but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought..."*

Nature is an inspiration; a miracle. It is not just a tree – it is a giver of oxygen, the very thing we thrive on; a home to the summer insects and animals; a miracle in and of itself – the very tree you may be looking at could be well over 200 years old. That tree may have a bullet lodged in the bark from the Civil War.

And yet we overlook the incredible beauty of the world we live in. We don't pay attention to the history nature holds. We ignore its needs and the gifts it gives us, failing to see the true value that is right in front of our faces.

This poem taught me to take in and appreciate God's creation, and to celebrate the ever-changing phenomenon that is our earth.

Sincerely,
Elizabeth Jo G.

Level Three - Grades 9-12 - First Place Winner - 2023

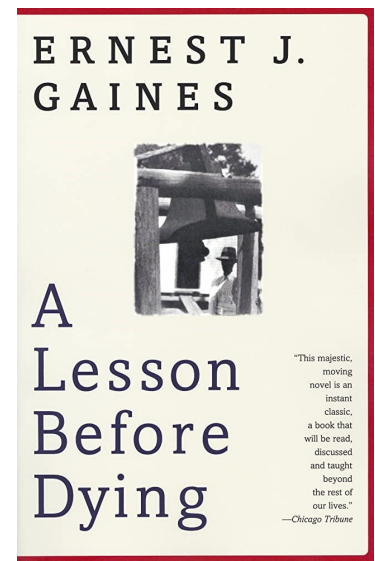
Anika L.
Oldenburg, Indiana

Dear Ernest J. Gaines,

When I first heard about your book *A Lesson Before Dying*, it was assigned as a summer assignment, so you can imagine I was not entirely thrilled. I procrastinated in reading the book to, in my opinion, prolong the summer before school began. However, as I continued to read I became enthralled by the development of the characters and how you captured and portrayed the experiences of many Black people during this time. Before reading the novel, I always believed it was best to conform to my surroundings and to allow others to fit me into a box based on how they perceived me. Reading your book freed me from the restraints I placed on myself.

Reading *A Lesson Before Dying* the summer before my freshman year set in motion a metamorphosis, from who I was before opening the cover to who I am today. In middle school, my two siblings and I were the only Black people attending the school. Nonetheless, I was determined to assimilate with my peers no matter what. I became "friends" with people who did not respect my identity as a Black person and would make fun of my Black phenotypes: "nappy" hair and large lips. Throughout middle school, I was seen and treated like a one-man minstrel show. This would not only affect my self-esteem but also my self-worth, but I thought because I had "friends" all that was said about me became void and null. In this way, I felt connected to Jefferson.

Jefferson in your book was described as "a dumb animal" by his attorney and as less than human. He was never contended with this idea of himself, but instead accepted this alias. Jefferson was made to feel lesser than and did not stand up for himself. However, thanks to Grant, Jefferson soon was able to learn how important he is as a person and that he is a human man rather than a hog. Before his execution, Jefferson was able to transform and metamorphose, from a "hog" to a man in seeing his impact on Black people in his community. So as I got to the end of your book, Jefferson's execution, I found myself crying because throughout the book I felt a connection between Jefferson's character and myself.



Thanks to your book, like Jefferson I was able to undergo a personal transformation in which I found that I, too, was not an "animal" to be gawked at and made fun of, but instead someone who deserved and would get respect. It was amazing to see Jefferson's impact go even beyond the book. You will never understand how influential *A Lesson Before Dying* was to my growth, and I truly do not know where I would be had I never been forced to read this book. I am so appreciative of you and your ability in helping Black youth overcome their internal battles. I am so appreciative of *A Lesson Before Dying*.

With the utmost gratitude,
Anika L.

LettersAboutLiterature

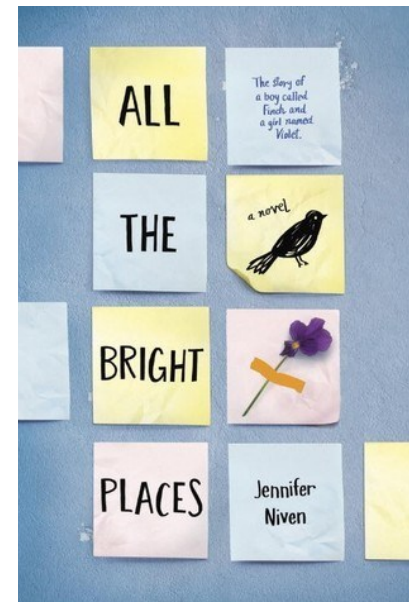
Indiana Author Letter Prize - 2023

Mya N.
Jasper, Indiana

Dear Jennifer Niven,

The world is full of "Why?" You could sit in a room for hours, wondering why things happen. Why did that situation end in that way? Why couldn't the results change? Why, why, and even more why's. In your book *All the Bright Places*, Violet is flurried with angry thoughts of Why. Why did Finch commit suicide when he convinced her to live? Why would he leave her? She couldn't understand why he would do such a thing. Why, why, and even more why's.

Sunday, December 18th, 2022, I found myself asking the same questions. Why would cancer take his life? Why couldn't he stay one more day? Why did this Sunday have to be the day he'd take his last breath? I sat on the porch in the freezing wind just waiting for someone to save me. Sitting there, an overwhelming feeling of hatred toward myself attacked me. Regrets from when my stepdad and I didn't get along came flooding back.



After Finch passes, Violet writes a poem asking what she could have done differently to change the ending. She writes that she wishes that she could have done something to prevent his suicide. As I read this now, I finally can feel how she felt. Except now, I understand that she did all she could. Not only did Violet do all that she could, but so did I.

Even though my stepdad and I had a rough patch, we made a vow to love each other no matter what. I held his hand in that cold hospital room promising that nothing could tarnish our love for one another. I told him that I loved him every single day, even if he wasn't able to say it back. I did what I could, and that is what matters.

Your novel reminds me that the life I lived with my stepdad is more important than any rocky time in our relationship. What Violet could have done wasn't as impactful as what she actually did in her short time

with Finch. I'm reminded of our memories together and how amazing they were, rather than what I could have done better. When grieving, thinking of what you have accomplished actually makes the process easier to understand. After awhile, the questions of "Why?" become "I understand." Violet helps me tackle the emotional baggage that comes with grief. She helps me grow through the hardest times.

Although, it's going to take awhile for me to be able to understand all of my "whys," I think that knowing that I did all that I could eases the storm inside. Doing activities that remind me of him doesn't always have to be upsetting. Violet swims in the water where she and Finch made memories. If Violet can find peace in the hardest situation, so can I.

The world is full of "Why?" but I can change that. I don't need to focus on why he passed, I need to focus on all the happiness and greatness he brought to his society and his family. You helped me realize that. I no longer need to dwell on the past. I see the world with a new look. I now let people know how much I love them, no matter what the circumstance. You never know when your world could flip upside down, so you have to leave your mark on someone's heart. Thank you for helping me understand how much of an impact someone can leave on another. We never know what the next day will bring, so we have to appreciate the little things we have done.

Sincerely,
Mya N.