

the James & Madeleine McMillan FAMILY FOUNDATION

LettersAboutLiterature

LETTERS
ABOUT
LITERATURE

2023

AWARD
WINNING
LETTERS
TO AUTHORS

WRITTEN BY
INDIANA
STUDENTS

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

CENTER FOR THE BOOK

INDIANA AFFILIATE

Letters About Literature

2023 Winning Letters by Indiana Students

Indiana Center for the Book Director

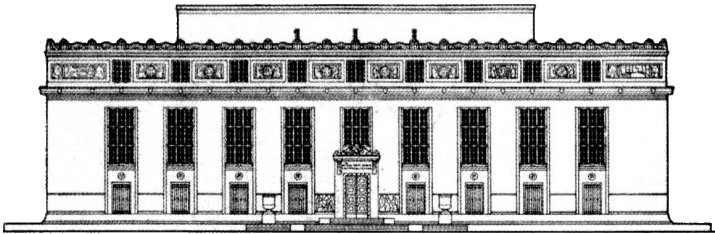
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LettersAboutLiterature



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Indiana Letters About Literature

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

What is a Center for the Book?

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



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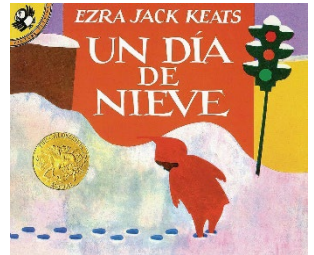
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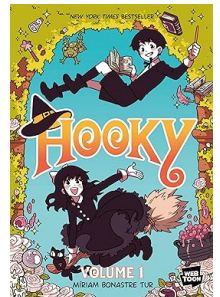


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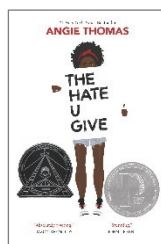
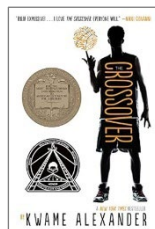
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- Congratulations from the Indiana Center for the Book -

Once again, I am extremely proud of the work featured in this book. My sincerest congratulations to each of the writers who were selected for our anthology. These letters were chosen out of well over a thousand letters written by Indiana students for this year's contest. The students who won are readers and writers. They read a book that moved them and then wrote about it. That by itself is pretty amazing.

Not only did the works they read inspire the students to write, but they also made them think. As you read the letters featured in this collection, you'll see that literature helps children and teens think about all kinds of topics. Meaningful topics like family, faith, and love. Also, complicated topics like racism, power, and death. Literature helps us understand ourselves more fully. Literature helps us feel accepted. Literature helps us understand others, and that might be the most important task of all. Literature has an enduring power to help children, teens, and indeed, all of us accept others and understand that we are not alone.

The human story is vast, wide, and deep. To tell that story, we need all the stories. We need stories about people who look like ourselves. We need stories about people who are vastly different from ourselves. We need funny stories, sad stories, dark stories, and light stories. And we need those stories to be available in our public libraries.

Thank goodness we live in a country where we are free to read. Access to books and literature is easier than ever with the amazing technology we all have at our fingertips. However, librarians and teachers are still at the front lines, pairing books and readers together by curating exciting and appropriate collections for their students and for their communities. These professionals should be celebrated every day for the work they do to further human understanding.

If you have a teacher or a librarian in your life, thank them for the work they do. Because of teachers and librarians, we have students who are learning how to think about themselves and discovering that each of us are part of a bigger whole that together makes the human family. We are more alike than we are different. We should be recommending books to each other and not banning them.

Take some recommendations from the books that the students wrote about in this anthology. You just might find out something new about yourself or about the world. Happy reading.

- Suzanne Walker, Indiana Center for the Book

- Comments from Leah Johnson, Indiana Author -
April 20, 2023 – Indiana Letters About Literature Online Ceremony

It has been such a joy to listen to you all's work tonight and to be able to see what you all are interested in reading and watch everybody encourage each other in the chat. I'm really excited about the future of Hoosier literature and grateful that I get to be a part of this, so congratulations everybody.

I'm Leah Johnson. I write books for children and young adults. I was born and raised in Indiana and ironically enough this is the one day where I'm not actually in Indiana...I'm in Texas for the Texas Librarian Association Conference today, so still talking about books with people who love stories for kids and young adults, but a little farther away from home than usual. I am gonna talk just really briefly about writing and then I'm going to read a little bit from my book which comes out in eleven days actually. It's for middle grade readers and it's called *Ellie Engle Saves Herself* and I'm really really excited to share it with you all, but before I get into any of that I have to tell y'all a story.

So, first we need to go back in time to my high school years. Just take a deep breath...just breathe it in, and if you focus you can probably smell the chemical tang of Bed Head hairspray being applied over thousands of bumps all over the Midwest. It was a really really interesting era in young adult literature and there was a chokehold on us when it came to dystopian stories, and I saw a couple of them today in the popular books that you all have chosen to write about which was really really fun for me.

The Hunger Games, Shatter Me, Divergent...these had an immeasurable impact on a 16-year-old Leah Johnson. In these books the stakes for the girls at their centers could not have been higher. Katniss Everdeen was the figurehead for a revolution meant to topple a fascist government. Tris Prior ultimately sacrificed her life - sorry spoiler alert - for a mission to topple a fascist government. Juliette Ferrars was used as a weapon in service to a fascist government before she too, yes, you guessed it, toppled that government. I was enamored by these stories. I was empowered. I was terrified.

To be both a girl and a hero I learned was to give everything of yourself and then more to a world that had subjugated you without remorse. I don't want to get too into weeds here, even though I could talk about this for hours, but what I mean to say is that these stories reflected a belief that part of being a girl and eventually a woman was to sacrifice. To sacrifice yourself, to sacrifice your wants, to sacrifice your safety in service of the greater good and this idea is where my book *Ellie Engle Saves Herself* was born.

I've watched in the real world as girls - black girls in particular, because that was the experience that I had - were asked to save the world time and time again and to do it with a smile. As I sat down to write, I knew that I didn't want to tell a story about a girl who saved us all. I didn't want to write about a girl who had great power thrust upon her and in turn had to commit herself to a life of great responsibility. I wanted to write a story about an unapologetic nerd whose primary concerns were: A: How to handle the massive crush she suddenly has on her best friend, and B: How to help her mom learn to dance again, while she also just happened to be a necromancer...seventh grade necromancer...super casual, very low-key.

I wanted a story with black girl hijinks and black girl crushes and black girl snark. I wanted a hero who only ever needed to save herself because, if nothing else, I needed the reminder that who I am - who we are - has always been enough, whether we save the world or not.

Ellie Engle Saves Herself is the type of story that I wish I had felt empowered enough to write when I was you all's age. It's the story that I wish that I had on the shelves, and it's a story that I'm still yearning to read more of. But you all have gotten a head start. You're so far ahead of me which is incredible. You guys don't have to wait until you're in college or in your 20s or in your 30s before you finally figure out that you have the power to tell whatever stories you want. That you have the right to talk about the things that matter the most to you, even though there are going to be times when people tell you that the stories you want to tell don't matter, or that they don't deserve space on shelves. I'm here as a reminder, as living proof that not only do these stories matter, not only do these stories save lives, but these stories have the potential to take you all over the world - which currently this story has taken me to Texas, but sometimes they take me to take me to other cool places.

I'm going to read a quick excerpt from **Ellie**. Like I said, this book comes out on May 2nd which is right around the corner. I'm freaking out a little bit, but it should be good.

Ellie Engle Saves Herself is about a girl who is exceedingly ordinary, and she develops the power to bring things back to life with her touch after a strange earthquake happens in Indiana, and y'all live in Indiana. Y'all know how it is. We don't really have earthquakes, and if we do something's really, really wrong. So, this is after. This is when Ellie realizes that she might have something...something a little weird going on...

A fish funeral is a lot like a normal funeral except people wear a lot less black. I'm wearing a pretty regular red Captain Marvel t-shirt and a pair of ratty old jeans with holes in the knees, and I think Bert the Betta Fish would want things casual. He was a laid-back type of fish.

I scoot Bert the Betta Fish out of the bowl and into a towel. I walk to the bathroom to give him his last rites before sending him on to fishy Heaven. I imagine it'll be something like Finding Nemo. I'll flush him and he'll make his way to somewhere beautiful like Wallaby Way, Sydney.

I kneel in front of the toilet and try to come up with something to say. I think of all the days I sat at the computer doing homework with no one but Bert to keep me company. Mom at work, my best friend at practice, dad long gone. Bert with his floppy little tail swishing back and forth and back and forth like it was the simplest thing in the world... like I was perfect company, just me and my math homework and my silence and I know it's stupid but then I get all emotional.

He was just a little fish, but he was my fish. He was mine to take care of and to love and now he's gone. I wonder if my dad even remembers that he gave him to me. Probably not. I haven't talked to him in a long time. Last time he called he said he wanted to fly me out to meet his new girlfriend, but he hasn't said anything about it since...it's like he forgot about the trip and then forgot about me all together.

"I'm sorry, buddy," I say swallowing around the lump in my throat because I have nothing else to offer. I think of one of the prayers my granddad used to make me recite but changed a little to fit the occasion. "Um...God in Heaven, hear my prayer. Keep Bert the Betta Fish in thy loving care."

I forget the rest of the prayer pretty quickly, so instead of a prayer I recite memories like the time I tried to sneak him into school for Show and Tell but the water in his bowl just ended up splashing all over the inside of my backpack and I got caught before I even made it to the car. Or the time when I was almost convinced he could understand me because he kept glug glugging at the perfect points in the story I was telling him. And all those nights it was just the two of us, Bert the Betta Fish in his tiny quiet home, and me in mine in front of the TV waiting for Mom or Granddad to get back home.

I tell myself not to cry even though the back of my eyes start to prickle. I tell myself he's just a fish, but as I tilt the towel towards the toilet bowl and his little scales shine in the light, I know that's a lie. He's not just a fish. He's my friend, he's family, and I don't want to lose him. I wipe my nose with the back of my free hand and say, "See you on the other side, buddy." I wish I could smooth my fingers through his fur like I would if he were a cat or a dog, but since I can't, I run a finger over his scales one last time and...

"Thunderbolts of Jove!" I shout. In one of the old comics, Wonder Woman yells "Thunderbolts of Jove" before going into battle, and I'm not sure who Jove is or why she's calling for his thunder, but it feels fitting for a moment like this. I fumble the towel with Bert the Betta Fish flopping on it and scramble across the floor until my back hits the wall. I can hear Bert land in the water with a little splash and I shut my eyes tight and shake my head.

There's no way. There's just no way. It's impossible. I try to take a few deep breaths before opening my eyes.

Bert the Betta Fish was most certainly dead as a door nail and even if he wasn't dead when he was flopping at the top of the bowl, the amount of time he was outside of water and on top of that towel would have done it.

I crawl forward and my heart feels like it stops beating in my chest. Maybe I'm losing it. Maybe I'm a super villain. Plenty of their origin stories begin with a slow slide into insanity, like Harley Quinn. Yeah, that's gotta be it.

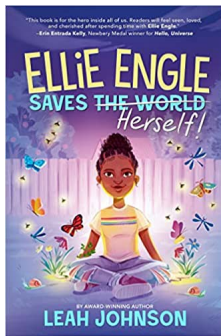
I peek over the edge of the toilet and gasp.

There's Bert the Betta Fish just swimming around back and forth and back and forth like this isn't the most massive, colossal, monumental thing that's ever occurred in the history of humanity.

Everything that's happened since this morning comes rushing back to me. The random earthquake, the plant that I brought back to life in the Ortegas' bathroom, the ability to hear things from far away...there's no explaining this away.

My fish was dead two minutes ago and I just brought him back to life.

Thank you.



LETTERS
ARRANGED
BY TOPIC

Let's Talk About...

READING

Discovering Reading

The Power of Words

Escape through Reading

Dear Miriam Bonastre Tur,

Your book *Hooky* really inspired me to care about others and not just myself. Monica tried to make Dani and Dorian forget the bad things and do something fun to replace that bad memory with a fun memory! That helped inspire me to care about others more than me.

It also inspired me to read more. After reading it I saw that it only took me two days to read. I was so stuck into this amazing book, I didn't even notice the time. I told my librarian all about how fast I finished and how cool it is and how she should read it too!

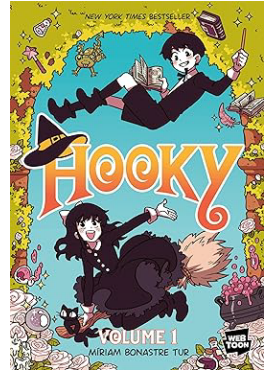
She actually told me that she just started it. I instantly warned her about the cliff hanger, and told her when the next book would be out. When I finished reading the book I was screaming into a pillow because of the awesome cliff hanger. I instantly knew another book was coming so I ran to my computer and checked when it was coming. (P.S. I'm still asking my parents for volume two!)

The day I saw the book on the shelf I stopped drinking my Starbucks, took another look and said, "Grandma, that's the one." She told me to take a look through it, but I stopped her in the middle of her sentence. I said, "No. That is the book I want. I don't need to look through it. I know, I know it's the one." She said "No, it's too pricey, Zoey!" I totally did not beg her for like two minutes. After that she said fine.

"Yay!" I screamed. I was so, so, so happy. I was literally yelling so loud once we got outside. Some people looked at me weirdly, but I ignored them. I was so excited to have that book. It was a lot of money though (\$14.32), but that means it's probably a great book.

I loved your book. It was so great! It's really my new favorite book. It's just so good! I read it three times. I'm so glad you made that book and made me so happy. You are my new favorite author.

Sincerely,
Zoey Benjamin



Kailyn Cloyd

Jeremiah Gray Elementary, Indianapolis

Letter to Lynda Mullaly Hunt / Author of *Fish in a Tree*

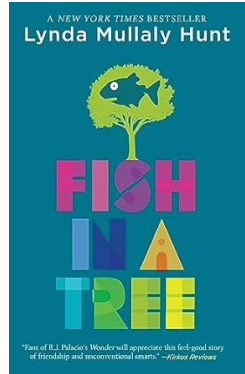
Dear Lynda Mullaly Hunt,

I chose your book *Fish in a Tree* because this book has a lot of characters that remind me of people in my everyday life. I would also like to talk about specific chapters and how they made me feel personally. And I would like to talk about the Author's Note.

This book reminded me of a bunch of people who are in my everyday life. The first character is Albert. Albert reminds me of my friend Ethan. Like Albert, Ethan enjoys learning new things. Ethan is also really into learning about history. They both really don't like to be proven wrong. Another character is Mr. Daniels. Mr. Daniels reminds me of this one teacher I had. His name was Mr. Ruggs. He helped me learn in a way where I understood what he was teaching. I also have another teacher who was the exact same. I had them both in 4th grade. Without them, I don't think I would've passed 4th grade. So, big shout out to them!

Again, like I mentioned, I want to talk about specific chapters and how they made me feel. In Chapter Fifty, "A Hero's Job," Albert didn't stick up for himself until he saw his friends getting hurt (Keisha and Ally). And then, after they go to A.C. Peterson's, Keisha and Ally rally up Albert for sticking up for them. It makes him feel better about what he had just done. I like that they cheer him up like that. In Chapter Forty-Nine, "I See the Light," I like how Ally decides to confront Shay. She goes up and says "hi." It takes great courage to be able to say "hi" to someone who picks on you. Even though she doesn't respond back to Ally in a nice way, Ally didn't let it bother her.

I will now talk about the Author's Note. I like how you said what sparked you to write this book. I found it fascinating that this book is very familiar to you in 6th grade. I also like how you include little notes to the reader like, "But it isn't failing that makes you a failure. It's staying down that does." Now, I don't know about anyone else who read it, but that gave me a lot of motivation to continue doing what I love. Sometimes when I do what I love, I get thoughts like, *this isn't for you*, or



you should stop. You're not good with this. But I kept on going because of what you said. And I am thankful for that.

Now for a quote. The quote is, "But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its life believing it is stupid." This one makes me feel some feelings that I can't explain. Like, I am not happy, but I am not sad. I just feel this unexplainable feeling. But I like the quote. A lot.

I have just now told you all the reasons why I like this book. (And why I chose your book to write about instead of another book). I would also just like to say thank you. Thank you for creating this book. I don't usually like to read books but this one is different in a good way. It also tells a good message to readers. I can't wait to see what books the future has that you've written. But until then, goodbye.

Sincerely with love and support always,
Kailyn Cloyd

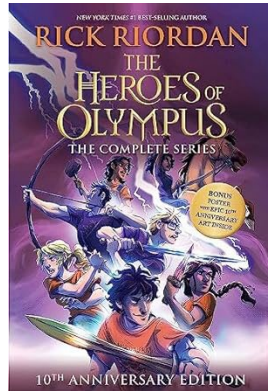
Braxton Dilger

St. James Catholic School, Haubstadt

Letter to Rick Riordan / Author of *The Heroes of Olympus*

Dear Rick Riordan,

I loved your exciting book series *Heroes of Olympus*. I started reading the *Heroes of Olympus* series when I was in fifth grade. I was into Greek mythology and thought that I would enjoy it. It hooked me as soon as I opened up the first book and I fell in love with it! I was always on the edge of my seat trying to find out what was to come. Every day I'd come home and bury my nose in one of your *Heroes of Olympus* books. As soon as I finished reading the first book, *The Lost Hero*, I asked my mom to drive me to the library so I could get the second one.



I also liked your series because of the way that you set up the plot in each book. At the end of each book, there would be a big and important event that follows into and affects the next book in the series. For example, in book three, when Percy and Annabeth fall into the pit of Tartarus, the event follows into book four and they both help each other through Tartarus and eventually escape. I especially liked book four, *The House of Hades*, because all throughout the book, the demigods have to learn to work together. Percy and Annabeth especially have to learn perseverance, as they fight to stay alive in Tartarus. This teaches me that even when times get tough, and things seem like they couldn't get any worse, I need to keep going, because there are certain people in my life that I can trust.

I also think that book three, *The Mark of Athena*, helped me learn that I can come to trust my friends because when all the demigods reunite, they are prepared to fight each other. They don't trust each other, but they soon realize they need each other, and they have to work together to defeat the Giants. They finally learn to trust one another and find a way to beat the Giants with the help of the gods. The demigods also help each other with their personal issues. For example, in book one, Piper and Leo are supportive of Jason and help him in getting his memory back and figuring out who his godly parent is. This helps me understand the true meaning of friendship. No matter what, my true friends will always have my back.

Your ***Heroes of Olympus*** book series also helped me in school. My grades weren't very good in Social Studies, and we had an upcoming Greek mythology and Ancient Rome unit. Then, when I discovered your books, I was suddenly obsessed with reading! I finally understood the hidden world of Greek Mythology. I remember one day when I opened up my report card, and I was amazed at my grades! I had gotten an A in Social Studies all thanks to you and your books.

Thank you so much for writing the ***Heroes of Olympus*** series. Your books changed me in many different ways. It helped my grades, taught me some valuable life lessons, and taught me to love to read Greek Mythology and Ancient Rome books!

Sincerely,
Braxton Dilger

Dear Lynda Mullaly Hunt,

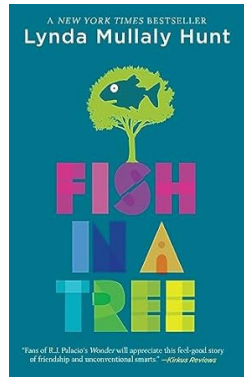
Your book, *Fish in a Tree*, really opened my eyes. It would've never crossed my mind what struggles people go through, especially ones with dyslexia. It also helped me have a better outlook on school. I always feel like I'm not as smart as some of my classmates, but your book helped me to realize that being smart doesn't look the same for everyone.

Normally when someone is different from me, I don't really know how to act. I don't want to say anything wrong and make them sad or mad at me. So normally I don't say anything.

When reading this book, I realized that I can talk to them just like anybody else. I learned that we should embrace people's differences instead of just ignoring them.

I knew people with disabilities had a more challenging life than people like me. This book, however, took it to a whole new level. I didn't realize people could be so cruel to others with disabilities, obvious traits, or habits they can't control. The example of teachers telling you that you aren't smart enough, but still expecting you to give it your all. That is hard to do when you're constantly being put down. I know now to be extra kind to all people. People who may even be mean to me or others because they're probably going through something themselves.

Before reading this book, I had no idea what having dyslexia was like. I just knew reading and writing was harder for kids with this disability. At my school, we took a test at the end of every quarter where we had to read a story as fast as we could. I would always be super nervous about it, but after reading your book I realized that feeling of anxiety was nothing compared to how Ally would feel, especially since no one knew about her dyslexia. Reading is a huge part of our everyday lives and when you can't read, that means you can't do an abundance of things. You can drive, but reading signs on highways can be hard. Going to a restaurant and reading the menu is something I would've never thought about as being difficult before reading *Fish in a Tree*. Your book has empowered me to overcome any obstacles that come my way. I know I'm not alone. Reading this book helped me see the way



everybody has difficult days. Somedays I want to just give up, but reading this book gives me the encouragement I need. Watching Ally push through tough days makes me think I can do it too.

When I started reading ***Fish in a Tree***, I couldn't begin to comprehend how tough Ally's life was. Knowing that people in my school might be struggling with similar things but hiding it just like Ally was hard for me to think about. If I was Ally, I might have hid it too. I would be way too embarrassed to tell anyone, but I now know it's okay to tell someone you're struggling with something. On top of her having trouble with reading and writing, going from school to school would also be very difficult. Ally liked it because it helped hide her dyslexia, but for me I would struggle with this. Having to find new friends constantly would be hard. Wondering if I would fit in would be a huge cause of worry.

Your book helped me see through somebody else's view of the world and helped me have more of an understanding of someone with a disability that affects their everyday learning. ***Fish in a Tree*** made me even more grateful for all the things I am able to do without a struggle. I think everyone should read this book so they can be more aware of what others around them may be dealing with every day.

Sincerely,
Anna Buechlein

Let's Talk About...

CARING ABOUT OTHERS

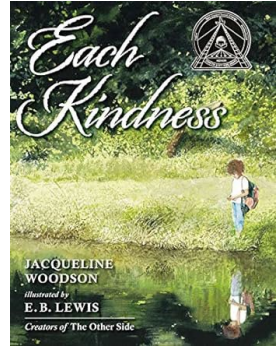
Love

Sacrifice

Empathy

Dear Jacqueline Woodson,

I remember sitting in my classroom, listening to my teacher read your book, *Each Kindness*, recalling how Chloe and her friends ostracized the new girl. How they looked at her with disdain and treated her like an outcast. It hurt me to hear that Maya kept asking Chloe and her group to play with her, but they just kept saying no. When Maya left town and Chloe realized she did, in fact, want to be friends with her, it reminded me of my past. It really opened my eyes to how difficult it is to fit in or make new friends in new places. It showed me that I should give everybody a chance and to never judge based on a person's appearance.



I was in third grade and a new student entered my classroom and sat next to me. She was kind to me and even drew a picture for me on my birthday. The thing is, I never really got to know her or even talked to her very much. I didn't treat her like an outcast or someone I didn't want to be around. I was always kind to her. I just never really talked to her. I was too afraid. Everyone thought she was different. She drew crazy pictures, used big words, and didn't like the same things that everyone else did. I would try to talk to her, but never really brought myself to have a long conversation with her. My fear of being judged myself got the best of me. I was too focused on what people would think about me. I didn't consider her feelings. I went through three quarters of school like that and barely talked to her. Some days I talked to her more. Others, not so much.

When the fourth quarter started, that's when it hit me. I didn't care what people thought anymore. I finally started really talking to her and got to know her. We weren't best friends or anything, we would just talk and joke around. When the school year ended, I regretted not getting to know her sooner, and I should have had enough integrity to stand up for her when no one else would. She was willing to be my friend and was kind to me. I let her down. I didn't really see her over the summer, but, I knew I wanted to continue our friendship when school started in the fall. Unfortunately, I never got that chance. She never came back. I later

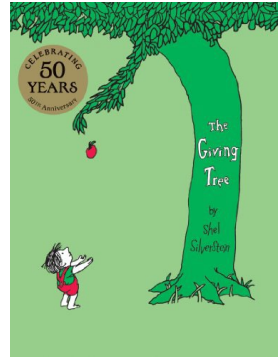
learned she was being homeschooled, and I didn't know how to get in touch with her. I regretted everything that I did. I barely talked to her and showed some kindness, but it wasn't enough. If I had talked to her more, we could have become great friends.

Your story made me look back on my past and think about what I could have done better in this situation, so that I would not repeat history and make the same mistakes going forward. The book opened my eyes to the fact that everyone wants to fit in, be accepted for who they are, and belong, which is something we all deserve. This enabled me to understand that I should give everybody a chance and always be kind and open minded.

May each kindness ripple,
Hunter Fortwendel

Dear Shel Silverstein,

You have inspired me to be a very different person today than I would have been without your work. I have read many of your books, and the poems in them usually find a way to make me laugh. I've always wondered how you come up with your ideas for all the poems you put in your books. One of the books that inspired me the most, though, especially when I was younger, was your book called *The Giving Tree*.



My parents introduced me to *The Giving Tree* about ten years ago. *The Giving Tree* was about a boy and a tree that loved each other. The tree would give the boy things even at her own expense. The reason I think this story inspired me so much is because it taught me to never take things for granted. Just like the little boy didn't realize how much the tree was giving of herself to make him happy, I realized that I don't always think about how much other people are giving of their time, effort, and resources to do things for myself and others. Sometimes there is a lot that goes on behind the scenes to do something out of love that can go unnoticed, and because it is out of love, nothing is expected in return because seeing us happy makes it all worthwhile.

The ending of the story also made me realize that even if we don't think we have anything to give or offer, we do, and sometimes it's the smallest gestures that can make the biggest impact on someone's day or their life. This has taught me to try and make the most out of any situation.

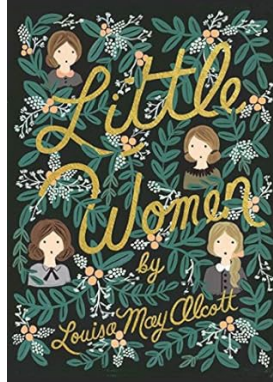
Thank you for writing your stories and poems and inspiring not only myself but generations of people to be compassionate and to try to make the world a better place.

Sincerely,
Logan Addis

Dear Louisa May Alcott,

I have read a few of your amazing books. My personal favorite is *Little Women*. This book has suitable lessons in it along with your other books. Some of the lessons this book taught me were to think of others, not yourself; not to have pity for yourself; and to not get wrapped up in the lifestyles of other people.

In *Little Women*, a good lesson was to think of others, not yourself. Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy show this by their mother giving them a dollar to buy themselves something for Christmas, but since their father was away ministering in the war, they thought of what they had and what they needed and ended up getting their mother a gift instead of themselves. This shows me that in this world we get caught up with our own lives and don't think of what others need...this lesson makes me want to help others more.



Another amazing lesson in this book was to not have pity for yourself. This means don't feel bad for yourself when others could be going through worse. In *Little Women*, Amy has pity for herself when Meg and Jo go to the theater with Laurie, and they say she can't go so she ends up throwing all of Jo's stories in the fire. This made Jo feel worse than Amy did when she wasn't allowed to go to the theater. People often feel bad for themselves because of something little like not getting an up-to-date phone or clothes when somebody out in the world could be hurting so much more than you or have much less than you and you still go on and complain. That's this world, a selfish world.

The final lesson I am going to tell you about in my words is we shouldn't get caught up in other (richer people in this case) lives and we should stay true to your origin. Meg the eldest sister gets invited to stay in a (richer) friend of Laurie's house. Meg gets caught up in all the beautiful (pricier) things that Laurie's friends, maids, and other (richer) friends gave her to borrow, and she drank a little too much champagne and when Laurie saw her he was disappointed and told her that her father, mother, and sisters would not approve of her behavior. In the end, Meg

and Laurie kept this secret for a while, but Meg ended up confessing to her mother and sisters. If you aren't the richest, smartest, or have a bad home life that doesn't mean you have to act like something you're not. The people of this world don't understand that.

Louisa May Alcott, in this final paragraph of my letter I wish to thank you for reading these lessons from my perspective (and the things that happened in the book. I know you know that. I just explain things better when I give examples). One more time, the lessons that jumped out at me from your amazing book were to think of others, not yourself; not to have pity for yourself; and to not give into other people's lifestyles. Again, thank you for taking the time to read this.

Your dearest reader,
Lilly Ison

Jack Gudorf

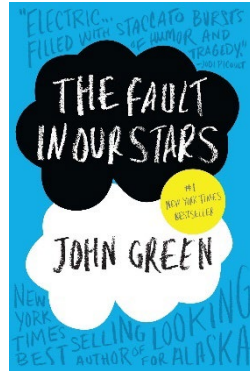
Jasper Middle School, Jasper

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

Dear John Green,

Seeing other people, everyone is so quick to judge. You may be meeting someone for the first time and already have a prerequisite reason you don't like them. I am guilty of committing this act myself, and so is everyone who's ever lived.

John Green, you have given me a whole new perspective on what it truly means to be empathetic. Your book *The Fault in Our Stars* has helped me to try to stop making swift judgements. Seeing things from the perspective of Hazel really put me in her shoes. Think of what she has to go through in her everyday life. Dragging an oxygen tank, having to worry about her lungs filling with fluid, and the rest of the tragedies people who are diagnosed with one of the world's most common diseases have to go through. Also that it is really obvious when you are looking at them. You might not be meaning anything by it, but even just looking and wondering, why she's pulling a oxygen tank around? That is rude and embarrassing if you stare at the person. It is like in Chapter Ten of *The Fault in Our Stars* when they are at the airport and Augustus leaves to go get food, but the real reason he left was because he was embarrassed of everyone looking at him and Hazel. Hazel acknowledges this when the gate agent came over to switch out her oxygen tank with one from the airline.



Empathy is a word that has been taught to me since I was young, but *The Fault in Our Stars* has shown me what it means when someone says to put yourself in someone else's shoes. So, why do we look at some people different than others? Why do we have people who don't like each other just because they have different races? Why do people judge you just because you have an unnatural hair color? Why is it looked down upon for people to express themselves? Why do we judge them for being them? For a lot of people, empathy is just a word that some teacher tells them that the world needs more of. I was one of those people until I read this book. I think this book needs to be read by all people and I realize that some people might not be changed by reading it, but the ones that would change could surpass it by tons.

I know people aren't perfect, and it would be almost impossible for people to cease judging entirely, but why is it so human to just immediately judge before a person could even tell you their name? To already have your mind made up about liking them or forever hating them? They could be the nicest person you ever meet in your whole life, but just because their shirt has a hole in it, or their hair is not neatly combed, you probably won't like them as much as someone else who was wearing a nice suit with neat hair.

This book has helped me realize what empathy means. Helping me look past what the definition of the word is when you look it up. Empathy is putting yourself in someone else's shoes, something that happens in all books, but yours brings a whole new perspective by putting myself in Hazel's shoes.

Always,
Jack Gudorf

Let's Talk About...

**THE IMPORTANCE OF
EDUCATION**

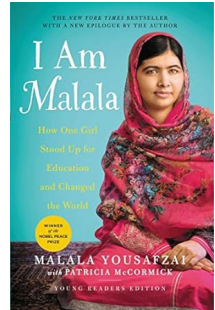
Opportunity

School

Learning to Think

Dear Malala Yousafzai,

I don't remember why I picked up your book in the first place, but I know my brother had to read it for a school assignment. It was just sitting in my mom's office, and I read the back and I thought to myself, "This looks interesting, why don't I read it?" Interesting is not even close to the correct word to describe your book, but I think I was in 7th grade so I couldn't think of a better word. I remember that I was originally amazed by your story, but I was too young to fully understand the lasting impact you made.



Now that I am older, I am able to grasp more of the impact you made. I had to read it for a school assignment, and I remember all my friends dreading to read another book. I reassured them that it was a good book, and it will be worth their time. Not only does your book explain the impact you made, you also explain your childhood and what was going on in your environment.

In *I Am Malala*, you outlined your story and how you followed in your dad's footsteps of fighting for education. You showed that even at a young age, you can still make an impact. You did not let the government or the villains in your life stop you from fighting for what's right. Not only did you fight for girls' education, you showed girls that even at a young age you can stand up for yourself and influence others to make positive changes. Your society wanted to stop you from doing this, but you persevered, and this showed me the significance of your movement.

I am currently a senior in high school, and I plan to study education and become a teacher in my future. You inspire me to want to give everyone a quality education, no matter what their background or situation is, especially since I am a woman, and you are fighting for young girls' education. Your book really spoke to me. I am not sure exactly where I want to teach, but I know that I will be involved with the rights of students. I go to a private school in a small town, so I do not experience all the troubles that other students face, and I am extremely lucky because of this. These problems cause some students to not like school, but everyone should be given the opportunity to go to school, and they should not be penalized for doing so. I cannot imagine if I did not have

the opportunity to go to school; it is where all my friends are, and it will set me up for my future.

Thank you for inspiring me to be a better person and to fight for people who may not have a voice. You give me hope that the education system will improve, and more people will fight for education, especially girls' education. People have tried to talk me out of teaching, but you have reassured me that this is exactly what I want to do.

Sincerely,
Jalyn Stenger

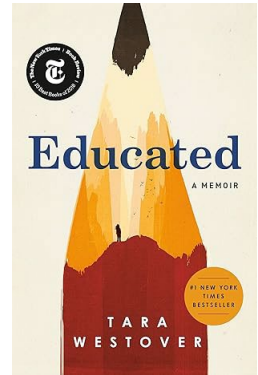
Honorable Mention – Level Three

Yihan Yang
Oldenburg Academy, Oldenburg
Tara Westover / Author of *Educated*

Dear Tara Westover,

I am Yihan Yang, a senior studying at Oldenburg Academy. I read your book *Educated* a couple years ago and it inspired me a lot. I appreciate you for writing your own story into a book. It is a really brave action. In this letter, I also want to share some of my own opinions and feelings after reading the book.

In China, there was a popular little poem when I was in primary school. “Why do we need to study hard? To get into good colleges. Why do we need to get into good colleges? To have a good job. Why do we need to have a good job? To marry well.” This poem seems to make sense, but really doesn’t answer the question why we need to get education. Therefore, when I was a child, I didn’t understand the meaning of going to school. For me, it sounds like just trying to obey what parents and teachers say.



After reading your book *Educated*, I started to realize the true meaning of getting an education. Parents are always our first teachers. We listen to our parents and follow our parents. When we were children, we saw the world through our parents’ eyes. However, the world that family brought to us always had a filter. This filter could be good or bad. Education helps us remove this filter and build up our own world through our own eyes and minds. From your book *Educated*, I see how you were struggling with your family before age 17. Your father didn’t allow you to go to the hospital even though you and your family were terribly hurt from the car accident. What’s more, your father didn’t allow you or your siblings to go to school, thinking school is bad for you. He always ignored the health and happiness of the family, only waiting for the end of the world.

However, later, education opens another door towards the world for you. You start to realize that your father is wrong. It is your perseverance and desire for knowledge that saves you. When you encounter new knowledge that you don’t understand, you search for lots of information until you do understand it. You never think of giving up.

You made me feel that if I really like or want to do something, then I can start every day of my life, and it is never too late. Life is full of possibilities because of education. Without education, we wouldn't have our justice and logic. All we do is listen to others. We shouldn't use other people's standards to judge our own life.

Also, from your book, I learned that education could give us the freedom to choose. You can go to college, but still choose to have a minimum-wage job. However, without colleges, many jobs would not hire you at all. You would only be able to get what people give to you instead of choosing what you really like. If you didn't get into Oxford, it would be really hard for you to get a chance to write this book and tell people your story. When someone doesn't have the right to choose, it is obviously miserable. When we have education, we tend to have more choices.

When I was reading your book, I was thinking, if I was in your situation, would I be able to be as brave as you? Sometimes I will involuntarily avoid people and things that make me suffer, but later I will find that it is useless to do so, because the pain and hurt from the past are still in my heart, and I cannot get it out of my heart, which is ripped out. When I was child, I was competing to be the secretary of the student council. However, I messed up my speech, standing on the stage awkwardly. My classmates laughed at me which made me never run for any student council positions anymore and try to skip all public speech situations. I thought my fear would go away in this way. However, I can't run away from public speech forever. The only thing I should do is to face it honestly and accept it.

When you were interviewed, you said: "You can love someone and still choose to say goodbye to him, you can miss someone day and night and still be happy that he disappeared from your life." In the end of the book, you did choose your own path. Although you did not change your family, you reached a reconciliation with yourself, and you gained inner peace. This is a real restart and self-salvation. I am glad for you, and I hope I can do that too.

Sincerely,
Yihan Yang

Let's Talk About...

WONDER by R. J. Palacio

Being Kind

Accepting Others

Accepting Yourself

Dear R. J. Palacio,

Hi, I'm Kamiah Davis-Muff and I've read your book **Wonder**. I just wanted to tell you it's a great book. Reading and seeing the movie inspired me to want to become a screenwriter or author myself. It also inspired me to start writing my first book I haven't finished yet but I'm getting there.



In the book what stood out to me is that you included each character's points of view of what was happening in the book, and you also included details about each character's feelings and where they were coming from which helped me as a reader understand the book better. Your work in **Wonder** is wonderful and the main character Auggie (August) is a magnificent person who thrived throughout the story and also learned to love himself no matter what other people thought about him. He even made me feel better about myself and my skin condition.

The first time your book **Wonder** came to my attention was in the 4th grade, my teacher read it to me and at the time I had bad eczema on my fingers and arms. Eczema is a condition that causes dry, itchy, and inflamed skin, and because I have a darker complexion not only was I judged on that but also because of my flaky irritated skin. And going through that was pretty tough as a little kid and the more stressed I got, the more irritated my skin would get. Kids would ask questions and point out how ugly it looked. That hurt a lot to be seen as different from other kids, always feeling like I had to explain myself just because I had a skin condition. So, I started shutting my true self out and tried to fit in by wearing gloves and long sleeves to hide my skin so I could please my peers, but when my teacher read **Wonder**, I realized that I was not different but special. Additionally, I learned about kindness.

"If you have a choice between being right and being kind, choose kind," said Mr. Browne in **Wonder**. "You can't blend in when you were born to stand out," said Mr. Tushman in **Wonder**. These were two important quotes in **Wonder** that stood out to me. They were significant because in school you can either be a good person or a bad person and when Mr. Browne says this quote, he's letting not only the readers know but the

characters in the book know that they have a choice to be kind, so choose to be kind. This stood out to me because I wasn't really mean to anybody in school but when someone else was, I didn't do anything about it. Ever since that quote was read to me, I've stood up for people who I've seen being mistreated and I've always chosen to be kind, and being right has never mattered to me. And the second quote was significant because Auggie was always trying to blend in and be like others and I was doing the same in real life. I think that quote made me, Auggie, and any readers realize that it's okay to be different.

Overall **Wonder** was a fantastic book and it helped me on my journey from the 4th grade all the way through middle school and high school. It helped me realize that I shouldn't have to hide any of my flaws meaning my skin or personality. I should get to be who I am, and if people can't accept me that's ok. I've come so far and I'm thriving. I try my best at everything I do and I'm in all honors classes. I participate in many sports, I'm writing my first book, and soon I'll be in a college. I give not only thanks to the Lord, friends, and family, but also your book **Wonder** for shaping me into the person I am now. Thanks for listening.

This is Kamiah closing out,
Kamiah Passion Davis-Muff

Dear R. J. Palacio,

I'm here to talk about your award-winning book **Wonder**, and how it inspires me in my everyday life to treat everyone with respect and kindness, no matter what you look like or who you are.

Here's my story. One night, I had my first middle school dance. My group of friends and I all went together and had a fantastic time. We danced, talked, took photos and many funny, crazy things happened. As we were doing what average middle schoolers do at their school dances, I noticed that there was a boy who was hanging around groups of his friends wanting to talk and dance with them. As I was watching this boy, he got shut out by the group. So, he lingered by the corner of the dance floor where nobody was and awkwardly danced. Me being me, I went up to the boy (Let's call him Sam) and took his hand and danced with him.



I knew Sam from birthday parties, going out to eat, and family hangouts I was invited to. I grabbed his hand, and started dancing, jumping, singing, swaying and all these crazy dance moves that were hilarious to watch, and Sam eventually caught on that I was trying to dance with him and started to do the same. As we were dancing, a group of individuals gathered around us and asked, "Why are you hanging out with Sam?" The kids acted like he had a disease, like he had some chronic illness that made him forbidden to be touched. I looked at the individuals and turned my back to them and kept dancing. I thought "Is it because he's different? Is it because he's slow? Is it because he's not like everyone else in this gym?" The thought made me want to be sick. Why, because the boy was different, kids treated him differently? But then that's where it made me think and reflect upon your story of **Wonder** and Auggie. He was treated differently because of his facial deformity but once the kids looked beyond that, they soon realized that he was just a regular kid like they were who shared the same likes and interests.

Stating that, this made me think of your quotes "It's not enough to be friendly. You have to be a friend," and "If every person in this room made it a rule that wherever you are, wherever you can, you will try to

act a little kinder than it is necessary - the world really would be a better place. And if you do this, if you act just a little kinder than is necessary, someone else, somewhere, someday, may recognize you, in every single one of you, in the face of God." When I got home and sat down, I thought I will never be the mean kid who makes fun of someone for how they look, talk, act, how big or small they are, how their body looks, or how loud someone is. I will never be that person. I will be the bigger person, and that's what your book has taught me to follow every single day of my life.

As I close this letter, I recognize I relate to your book. I am exactly like the kids who looked deeper into August and saw that he really is just like them, no matter his looks or appearances. Thank you for allowing me to see the good in people, and to not judge a book by its cover.

Sincerely,
Addison Sims

Second Place – Level One

Jozi Mills

Bradie Shrum Elementary, Salem
Letter to R. J. Palacio / Author of **Wonder**

Dear R. J. Palacio,

Before I read the book **Wonder**, I didn't know how bad bullying made you feel, until I experienced it myself. When I read this book I felt that me and Auggie shared a connection. My old friends would make fun of me like how Jack made fun of Auggie on Halloween. I don't talk about this often, but on Halloween two years ago my mom let me go with what I thought were my friends, but instead they dumped my candy in the road and called me obese and a pig. They said I didn't need candy anyway and kept calling me names. Reading **Wonder** helped me understand I'm not the only one getting bullied.

My favorite quote is, "When given the choice between being right or being kind, choose kind." This quote has stuck with me for a while. I remember it no matter how hurt I am. Another good quote is, "...It's not enough to be kind. One should be kinder than needed." I really like this quote because it reminds me of what my mom told me about bullying. Nobody knows how bad words can hurt you and life is too short so just be kind; it takes less effort.

I remember after reading the most important part when Auggie finally sticks up for himself I started to cry because I realized that if he could stand up for himself then so could I. Then I read this quote, "Courage. Kindness. Character. These are qualities that define us as human beings, and propel us, on occasions, to greatness." What I love about **Wonder** is that no matter how bad Auggie got bullied, he always got back up to to face a new day. Small act of kindness can make a huge difference. Before I read this book, I was too scared to tell anyone about getting bullied, but after I read it I told one of my friends and she told my mom for me. **Wonder** changed my perspective on bullying.

Wonder has helped me through a lot. Auggie and I have so much in common: we both have gotten bullied for most of our lives. We also both wished we looked different, but now I love how I look. And that's how **Wonder** has changed me.

With great appreciation,
Jozi Mills

Let's Talk About...

BULLYING

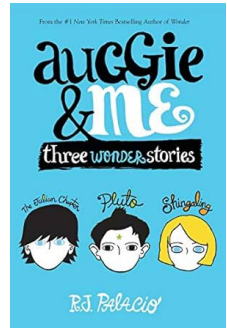
Being Bullied

Standing Up for Yourself

Not Judging Others

Dear R. J. Palacio,

Your amazing book **Auggie & Me**, inspired me to write this precept: “Judging a person solely based on outer appearance does not define them; however, it defines you.” Throughout this book, the message was reverberating in my head. In the early chapters, there was a recurring theme of “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” Initially when Mr. Tushman, the principal, told Charlotte, Julian, and Jack Will about Auggie and how they would be his “welcoming crew,” none of them acted antsy or appeared uncomfortable during the description. Auggie was a perfectly normal character, but everyone overlooked that because of his appearance.



When Julian, the antagonist in the book, reached out to Mr. Browne, the English teacher at Beecher Prep, Mr. Browne encouraged Julian to reflect on why he hated Auggie. Julian’s grandma, shocked to hear that Julian was the bully at school, sat him down for a story. When she was a little girl, her friends made fun of one of their classmates whose legs were disabled by polio. They called him “Tourteau” and avoided being around him. When the Nazi soldiers came to collect the Jewish students, Tourteau saved her. He hid Julian’s grandma throughout the war. Ultimately, the Nazis took Tourteau to a concentration camp because of his physical changes. Grandma revealed that Tourteau’s real name was Julian and that she named her son, who goes by Jules, after him. Upon hearing this story, Julian was overcome with remorse. He wrote an apology to Auggie, hoping that Auggie would not remember how mean he had been. I loved this particular chapter in the book so much! It taught me that everyone is capable of change and we just need to believe in the goodness of people and help them deal with their unconscious biases.

I learned about beauty bias in the chapter where Charlotte encountered Auggie’s parents. Her confusion was caused by the fact that “they were so good-looking.” She assumed that Auggie’s parents were different people because they looked very different from August.

I encounter bullies every day. There are a few students at my school who are brighter than the brightest star but are bullied every day

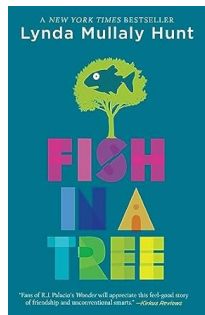
because of their looks. Society has become obsessed with looks. Comments like, “Oh, your braces are ugly,” and “Why aren’t you wearing makeup over that pimple?” are commonplace now. We must realize that the square pegs in round holes will be the ones who change the world someday. I never want to be the person who is known for being mean and judgmental. I remind myself of my precept anytime divisive thoughts creep into my head. I hope that whoever is reading this book gets that same message.

This book is very relevant to the current state of affairs because I see the same theme happening in everyday life. Racism? Ageism? Colorism? All are forms of discrimination. What I am trying to say is that this book made me think very hard about my biases, and I wanted to thank you so very much for writing this wonder of a book.

Thank you,
Zoe Singh

Dear Lynda Mullaly Hunt,

My heart sank into the ocean when I read about Ally's life before Mr. Daniels came into her life. I realized that we both had so much in common. Just like her, I struggle a little bit with reading. I take about three times as long to read a book compared to other kids in my class and every now and then they'll make a surprised face at me if I take too long to read an article in class. This similarity made me instantly want to read how Ally gets rid of the bullies, so I can too. You'd never think that Ally Nickerson, a sixth grader who couldn't read, helped inspire me to stick up for myself against bullies, but she did.



I can feel the frustration and anger Ally is going through because of a group of seventh graders at my school. They try to continually put me down about being slow or weak. Sometimes, they say my name then start whispering about me just loud enough for me to hear. As one of the six sixth grade victims, I can say that it makes recess, lunch, gym, and even walking in the hallway, dreadful. Until I read this book.

Fish in a Tree showed me that there is always someone to help you. I went out to find my own "Mr. Daniels." My school guidance counselor and my mom were the perfect people to help me get rid of the bullies. The first leap of action was writing a letter about what they were doing to me. Then, my counselor had a sit-down talk with the six of us and the four of them. In our talk, the guidance counselor told us to send an email any time they were mean. Eventually they got talked to so much that they got nicer. That showed me what power speaking up really has.

This book came to me at the perfect time in my life, because I was getting really frustrated with these kids just like Ally got really frustrated with people in her community. I hope that this book can inspire other kids to stand up and speak up for themselves against bullies or just something that bothers them. It is not okay for kids to be uncomfortable or have something unpleasant going on, especially in a place where they should be focused on learning, not bullying.

Full of thanks,
Evan Potash

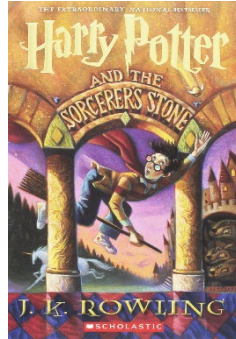
Vivian Alder

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to J. K. Rowling / Author of *The Harry Potter Series*

Dear J.K Rowling,

“Why are you a Jew? Do you know that Christians go through worse things than you, you freak?!” I’m constantly asked these questions by others. Why am I made fun of because I’m different? Is that fair? Do I deserve to be hated on because of who I am? No! Harry Potter was hated by his own aunt, uncle, his cousin, and his cousin’s friends because he was a wizard.



As a child I never thought to even read this series because I was afraid of the concept of dark magic. I’d call myself a wimp. I came to find that Hogwarts is such a magical place that the lost and lonely can always come back to for help.

I have experienced bullying many times. All for one reason: I was weird. I was different. We all have a “Draco” trying to push us down in life. Getting back up is the hardest part about getting bullied. Now at the age of eleven I try to ignore the bullies and instead laugh at them. I was bullied a lot as a little girl. A specific girl would continuously make fun of me when I got things wrong in class. I felt tormented and sad. School is supposed to be a learning experience and a place to make friends. Harry was able to do this. Harry was able to ignore his bullies and enjoy time with his friends. I wasn’t able to make friends. Having friends like Harry’s is like a dream for me.

Middle school is a whole new experience for me. Elementary school was awful. I hated the lack of freedom. Just like how Harry hated living at the Dursleys.

Since reading this series, I understood not everyone is mean because they want to. Sometimes it’s because of personality or it’s because of what your parents want. Draco originally wanted to be Harry’s friend, but Harry refused. You sometimes might think you are so nice but to someone else, you might be the villain in someone else’s story. No matter how many amazing things you’ve done you will always be a villain in someone’s story.

Every day I walk into my small Jewish private school, and I imagine it's Hogwarts. Full of the people I love and care for. It's a place for Jews to finally feel accepted and that we no longer have to fear anything. Help will always be given at your school.

Sincerely,
Vivian Alder

Let's Talk About...

ATHLETICS

Perseverance

Building Skills

Dedication

Dear Wendelin Van Draanen,

The Running Dream isn't just any book. It is a book that once you start reading, you don't want to stop. In this book I was stuck in the moment. Everything seemed so real. This book taught me that nothing is impossible. In life you will face many challenges and there will always be a way for you to overcome them. Some challenges will be harder than others but with enough determination, you can overcome many of them.

Reading this book made me realize how lucky I am. I am a runner just like Jessica and I can't imagine how it would feel if I ever lost my leg. I have had many injuries that have taken me out of sports and have felt unlucky because the majority of my friends have never gone through that. After reading this I have realized just how lucky I am to not have had that bad of an injury.

There are three major parts in this book that have affected me tremendously. The first part is when Jessica first came back to school. On her first day back, she noticed that a lot of people were staring at her and judging her. It bothered her a little at first, but she soon realized that she shouldn't care what people think. I think this was a good lesson because no matter what you do, there is always going to be someone who will judge you. I think that people should live the life they choose because someone is always going to judge you. Why overthink every little thing you do?

The second part was the campaign Jessica's track team set up to earn enough money to buy Jessica's prosthetic leg. I really enjoyed this part of the book because it showed how much her team cares for her. Her team spent so much time and effort to earn enough money just for Jessica and they were successful. Earning the amount of money that they made didn't seem possible to me at first, but this taught me again that anything is possible, you just have to have the determination.



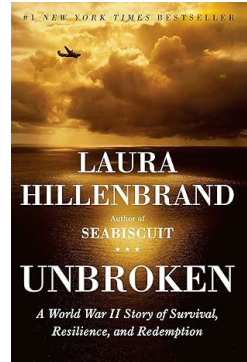
The last part is when Jessica is training after she got her running leg. I loved this part because it showed Jessica's determination. Jessica went through so much and never gave up. Many people would have lost hope, but not Jessica. This has given me motivation to be more productive with my time. I want to take more time to focus on running to get better for next season. Jessica has shown that anything is possible, however, it will take more work to overcome some challenges than others.

Wendelin Van Draanen, you have taught me and others so many amazing lessons from this book. Thank you so much for that!

Sincerely,
Annabel Beever

Dear Laura Hillenbrand,

At a young age, I loved to read, my favorite genre being military history books. The library is most likely where I found my fondness for the military. I decided I would be a Marine when I grew up, so I could feel the pride described in my books. I could prove my worth to not only myself but the world. At that time, I was an excellent runner, and my asthma hardly stopped me from getting the best mile time every year in elementary school. My librarian suggested *Unbroken* to me, and, although it was challenging, I read it twice that year. No matter how many times I read it, I got the same exhilarating feelings. Each time I was amazed by the bravery Louis showed and I felt immense pride for my country.



Louis Zamperini was everything I wanted to be. We even had similar names. My middle name is Louise, so I often go by Lou. He was also a high school track star who made it to the Olympics. He only stopped running when his country needed him. Even after returning as an injured veteran, he was determined to be a runner again. I've always loved to run. I feel as if I can outrun anything. I recently thought about giving up running due to asthma, but I thought about Louis's perseverance and knew I could do the same. I knew that if he could go through what he did and be a runner again, I could have asthma and still be a runner. This will keep me out of the Marines, but it won't stop me from my other dreams.

Louis Zamperini taught me a lesson that means so much to me. Many times, he's kept me going until the end of the race. I think about something he said in *Unbroken*: "I'd made it this far and refused to give up because all my life, I had always finished the race." This quote sticks with me on and off the track. I try to live by Louis's example. If I don't make it to the Olympics, and the Marines don't want an asthmatic, I will do my best to follow in his footsteps by learning to forgive as he did. By showing his forgiveness to the people who did such awful things to him, he healed himself and did his best to help others heal.

Sincerely,
Dorothy Wendel

Madelyn Henry

Oldenburg Academy, Oldenburg

Letter to John Flanagan /Author of *The Ranger's Apprentice Series*

Dear John Flanagan,

I have always loved the outdoors. But it was when I read your series *Ranger's Apprentice* that I found my genuine appreciation and love of all that it had to offer. When I first picked up your books at my library, I couldn't put them down. I found out pretty quickly that this series was going to influence me for the rest of my life.

The main character, Will, is an inspiration to me. He taught me that even though we might be in pain or scared to do something, it is important to fight through it all. I found that after reading this series, I was more in tune with my mind, body, and with my surroundings. In the end, even after a challenge, you will be both physically and mentally stronger. I felt his pain every time he drew back his bowstring and slowly released it, and I felt his frustration every time a knife or arrow did not find its mark. His struggles helped me get through pain in my own life. It reminds me of track, where I pushed myself harder than I have before and ran through the pain. Will taught me to persist because in his case, he eventually became one of the best Rangers from fighting through hardships. He inspired me to master my strengths and learn the ones I didn't know I had. Just as he learned to shoot and throw with impeccable precision, I was able to cut some event times by 7 seconds. It was Will who inspired me to put my all into everything I do.

With so many different skills demonstrated in these books, I was bound to refine and learn a few. Before I read these books, I had begun to learn about different trees and birds, but these books helped to reinforce my dedication to learning. I also began to take an interest in building shelters in the woods. I researched and found different methods to create the best building. Eventually, I made a wooden teepee that lasted for over a year.

In the past, I have also loved making fires, but these fires were of course made with a torch; I was determined to abandon the torch and produce a fire purely with flint and steel, just like the Rangers did. This was, as it turned out, much harder than Will and Halt made it seem. Eventually, after much practice, I succeeded.



Whistling was another found talent. I had always wanted to learn, but it never seemed to work. Again, after much practice and different methods, I was finally able to get a few squeaks out. I was nowhere near to bird call mastery like the Rangers, but it was at least a start. Something that I have yet to learn is knife throwing. I can imagine the pride that must come from seeing a blade bury its tip in the center of a bullseye.

Most of these skills that I have mentioned relate to fine motor skills, attention to detail, and practice. By learning how to build forts, I could train and refine my hands to saw, break, and weave wood together into a seamless structure. This allowed me to find skills in projects such as embroidery and drawing. Those same projects with forts and crafts also go hand in hand with attention to detail. It allowed me to notice the small things, not only in my work but also in my life where I was able to also realize that I couldn't improve in something unless I practiced. I had to practice nature identification, building techniques, fire making, and whistling if I wanted to learn and improve.

This dedication also carried over to my schooling. Subjects like anatomy, biology, and chemistry require time and practice for perfection and full learning. I had to review over and over again to master different terms, just like Will pulled back his bowstring countless times to form the muscle needed.

Repetitions and dedication are the keys to learning and perfecting. Even though Will had to make sacrifices, such as leaving his home, and putting his life at risk multiple times, it made him not only a better Ranger but a better man. This book showed me that I can perfect anything if only I dedicate myself to it. Thank you so much for allowing me to discover just how much I love the outdoors and discovering new things.

Sincerely,
Madelyn Henry

Let's Talk About...

COMING TO AMERICA

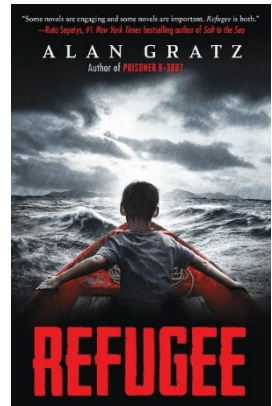
Refugees

Immigrants

Issues Around Assimilation

Dear Alan Gratz,

I really enjoyed reading *Refugee*. It got me into reading more books like this. This book opened my eyes to how cruel this world can be. It also showed me that if I want to be treated nicely I also need to treat others with respect and kindness. Before I read this I never knew people struggled to move into other countries. I always thought people could just go from country to country. But I was horribly wrong. I don't personally know anyone who was or is a refugee but if I did I would feel bad for them. Even though I don't personally know one, I still feel very bad for them. Not because of how rough their life was before but because of how hard the journey is for them to get here.



I personally wonder what it would be like to be a refugee. I imagine it being very hard, and very painful. I can't imagine leaving my hometown to go to some strange place everyone is calling "safe." You can't fully believe whether a place is fully safe or not until you get there. Most of the time that place isn't safe but you still have to stay there. Due to the fact that you can't leave. Being a refugee must be hard. Especially since some don't make it to the country and they die. So many young children have to go through the pain of watching someone they know and love slowly die or go insane. So many people get tricked with nice boats taking them somewhere new, when really it's taking them to a boot camp. No matter how big or small. No matter how young or old. No one should ever have to do that.

After reading everyone's sides of the story, I no longer have to wonder about the struggles that people go through. I felt like I was there every second of every story. When Ivan died I could feel Isabel's pain. When Mahmoud's car got shot up and the two soldiers died in the backseat I felt like I was there. When Josef's dad jumped off the ship, I felt like I knew the feeling. Knowing that you made everything so lifelike, it was so sad but so real. Knowing that happened to someone before. It's absolutely heartbreaking.

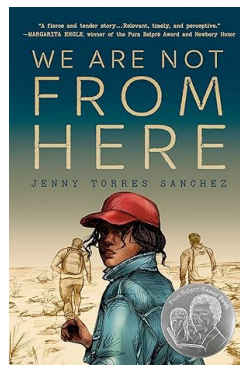
I really liked your book. It was really inspiring to a young girl like me. I know that somewhere someone else is reading this book and relating to everything in it. I honestly wish they never had to go through that pain. I know if I could change lives with any refugee I would to save them pain. No one should have to go through that. No matter how big or strong. They shouldn't have to do that. I wish there were more kind people in the world that would take in and shelter more refugees. But, not many people are willing to do that. Thank you for writing the book that got me back into reading. I now understand that I need to treat people with more respect and kindness. Your book helped me realize that.

Sincerely,
Kinley Catt

Dear Jenny Torres Sanchez,

I was raised by two Mexican parents who decided to take the risk of crossing the border at a young age. Like your book, they didn't cross because they wanted to, they crossed because they had to. They had needs and desires for themselves. My parents had to run away from things like Chico, Pequeña and Pulga did, and they ran towards something. Something as simple as being able to enjoy a nice nutritious meal in the safety of their home.

We Are Not from Here is one of the very first books that I personally feel really impacted my perspective on the journey many immigrants had to take, immigrants such as my own parents and grandparents. As I first began reading this book, I felt a major realization shift. To put it into more simple words I was able to understand why. Why did my parents decide to leave their family? Why did they end their education for a life-risking journey? Why would they want to go someplace where they weren't wanted? Because they had a need, something that only they would understand. As a first-generation Latina born and raised in America, I will never be able to understand their desires and their fears. They faced any and everything to make sure I wouldn't have to.



I can see their memories flood back in their eyes when I ask the question, “¿Por qué?” You left Mexico, your birth country where you were raised the way your mom raised you and the way her mom raised her. Where even though there's poverty and fears are in every corner, there's still laughs and love. I still remember those times where my dad would be watching the news and they would show horrible trailer crashes on the freeway. Where immigrants who were smuggled in any crevice in the truck lost their lives. I can see how horrible he feels inside. How that could have been him, dead on the freeway, left with nothing but dreams. In your book I'm able to see the fear and sometimes even feel it.

The way your book is so detailed really makes me feel like I'm in the actual book, like I too am running from Rey. The reason why the kids decided to run away is so strong and it makes me feel so grateful I was

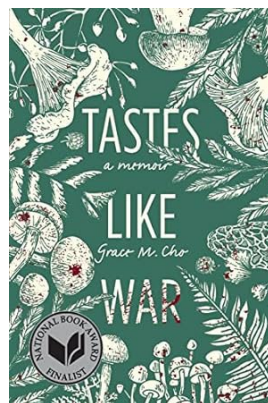
born in a country where, even though it's far from perfect, I can still feel somewhat free. More free than my parents felt, or in this case even Pulga, Chico, and Pequeña.

You went above and beyond with your way of explaining the kids' journey. You made sure to make us the readers feel every bit of fear and worry that the kids felt. I really love how descriptive you were with the scenery too. When you would describe certain places like little shops, it would remind me of the little shops I visited when I was in Mexico years ago. I appreciate the way you were able to take the story of millions and put it into a book for us more fortunate to be able to even understand just a bit more about the border crossing process. You really opened my eyes to understand the needs of those immigrants. You are a very talented author, and you are such an inspiration to me and I'm sure many others. Thank you for sharing this story with us.

Sincerely,
Aleny Zarate

Dear Grace M. Cho,

I decided to read your book, *Tastes Like War: A Memoir*, because of a simple reason, the premise. I am also a Korean American and seeing that your autobiography is centered on a mother-daughter relationship, I knew I had to read it. Going in, I knew that your book was going to touch on some sensitive themes. But my expectations were exceeded after seeing your words, painting pictures of Korea during war, dealing with racism as an immigrant, and grieving over the death of your mother.



I immediately noticed some similarities in our childhoods. From the kids mistaking you for being Chinese or Japanese, to acting as a translator for teachers. Knowing other immigrants went through similar experiences makes me feel less alone. Another example is when your mom bought napa cabbage and began to make kimchi. My mother also makes kimchi at home, and it is eaten in almost every meal. The use of food, both Korean and Western, bearing somewhat symbolic meaning also added more depth and intrigue to the story as a narrative. There is a particular paragraph in “1978” that hit very close to home for me. It was the section where you felt like an imposter not only as an American, but as a Korean as well. Unlike my other family members, I have less knowledge of the Korean language and Korea itself. I never considered myself a “true” American because I never feel like I truly aligned with the image of an ideal American. As a result, there is a dilemma regarding which part of nationality pertains to the self the most. This is a common experience I see in a lot of other immigrant kids as well, and I believe your words expressed the pain of being rejected by both cultures perfectly.

The stories you wrote down about your mother were quite powerful as well. She tried so hard to be considered American. She learned to cook American food, sold blackberries and mushrooms, and took many dangerous jobs. Seeing how hard your mother tried to assimilate into American culture made me think about the newer 1.5 immigrant kids at my school, other Asian kids who weren’t adjusted to the culture of our town’s environment (1.5 generation immigrants are individuals who came

to the United States as children). I realized how hard immigrants try to be seen as an American, even if they are citizens. Even with its faults, I am happy that there has been much progress in America. I am able to go to and from school without being hate crimed and diversity is now much more valued, albeit there is some debate on whether or not this value is superficial. While there is still progress to be made, it seems that America is a step up from the bleakness that you and your mother encountered in the 80's.

Before I read this book, I got into a fight with my mother. I was very angry at her, and I still don't know what made me snap. When I read about your reminiscing, how your mother was able to be strong when dealing with discrimination in Korean and America, how she was strong, talented, and even "alive" after death, I realized I have to deeply cherish the moments I still have with my own mother. I couldn't stop weeping after reading about your stories about your mother; it was like looking through a bittersweet scrapbook filled with tears and smiles. Thank you for helping me realize that I should make lots of happy memories with my mother while I still can. I hope you feel catharsis from writing this book, and I hope you know how much solace this book brought me.

Sincerely,
Anna Hwang

Let's Talk About...

FAITH AND RELIGION

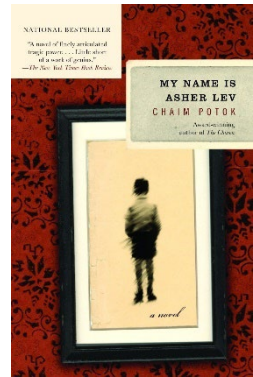
**Seeing Others as
Children of God**

Prayer

Religious Vocations

Dear Chaim Potok,

You, sir, are a genius. You are a master of the pen. I loved the way you conveyed the story of Asher Lev in *My Name is Asher Lev*. Your use of first person showed Asher's feelings and the oppression he faced from his community, family, and friends. It showed that in a religious community people fear and struggle with being their true selves because they do not want to be judged or rejected by their community. You are right, it is not a father who defines what is allowed for a religion, it is not the congregation who defines what is allowed for a religion, it is not a religious leader who defines what is allowed for a religion, but it is God Himself who decides what is allowed.



Your book hit close to home for me. I live in a community similar to Asher's. I have grown up in a close-knit religious community. I have been part of the Christian Reformed Church my whole life. I have constantly been hearing that so and so is not right and should not be in our community because they are going against the word of God.

Having grown up in this community I have joined in with the majority and shamed the minority for the way they act or the decisions they make. I have thought that the majority of religious leaders make the rules and could tell you whether you are out of the community. I have developed a blindness similar to Aryeh Lev and the rest of the Hasidic community. I was wrong, but you are right. Your book has shown me that no human can decide who is in or out of the community, but it is God who decides.

After realizing this, I have now started to view others in a different way. I no longer see them for their sins and actions but as a child of God and His kingdom. I am trying to fix my blindness. If I cannot see them for who they are, I will only scare others away from the faith. I want to help others come to the faith and not leave the faith, and I cannot do this unless I can accept that God lets them into His community.

Sincerely,
Caleb Rozendal

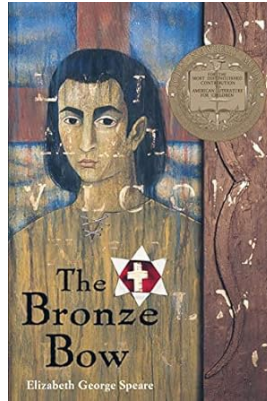
Gabriel Faraone

St. James Catholic School, Haubstadt

Letter to Elizabeth George Speare / Author of *The Bronze Bow*

Dear Elizabeth George Speare,

I read your book, *The Bronze Bow*, and it had a profound effect on me. Your book was very moving, especially when it talked about how Daniel was so blinded by want of revenge in the beginning, but in the end, Daniel was changed by his encounter with Jesus and understood what it means to forgive. I can relate to several characters, and it really opened my eyes to a lot of things.



What makes this book profound is the fact that Daniel is so single-minded in the beginning, but although he turns away from Jesus several times, he eventually realizes that Jesus didn't come to physically drive the Romans away, but to set people free in another way. I sometimes find that hard to understand, like Daniel does in the story. I can see why Daniel was disappointed that Jesus wasn't a war leader. Sometimes I see things that I think look really promising, but don't live up to my expectations, only to find out that they carry something else that I didn't anticipate before but is better.

When Daniel comes into town for his grandmother's funeral, Simon approaches him and says that Daniel can use his house to live in if he will take up Simon's blacksmith business. At first, Daniel rejects that idea. But eventually, he gives in because, "...the weakest one of them had defeated him. He could not leave Leah to sit alone in a house with the door barred." This quote, summarized, is that guilt can drive people to do some of the things that they do. This has happened many times to me before, when I want to do something but can't because my conscience didn't let me. Also, I know some people with conditions like Leah's, so this part of the story made me have more sympathy and understanding for those people.

Sometimes I do something that I know is wrong, but I think will achieve a greater good. Good for me, anyway. I see this in your book too when Daniel hero-worships Rosh for attacking the Romans. That part taught me that this can sometimes be bad if it is leading you down the wrong

path. I looked at some things in a new light after reading that, so now I do wrong things for the good of myself a lot less often.

One recurring theme that I saw throughout the story is kindness to others, even if it puts you out on a limb. For instance, when Leah needed to move but wouldn't, the carpenter made a litter out of his own bed curtains and chairs for her to be carried in. This really made a resounding impact on me, because sometimes I take those things for granted. Now, I can see how much other people help me, even at a cost.

I think that Daniel would have very readily followed Jesus if he was preaching a message of war, but he would not have changed to become a better person. Even though Daniel was reluctant to listen to Jesus and disappointed with the message he preached, he was a better and less impulsive person in the end. I knew that everyone wants to hear certain things, but this showed me that sometimes hearing things that you don't like is good for you, if those things are for the better. This definitely resonated with me, because I like to hear what I want to hear, but sometimes that isn't good for me.

Also, I think Rosh and Jesus were conflicting forces in Daniel's life. Rosh was actively fighting against the Romans, which Daniel liked. That is, until he met Jesus. Jesus preached a message of peace to all, which Daniel didn't understand. Soon, though, Daniel, spurred on by Simon, began to see the truth in Jesus' words and began debating the things that Rosh did. I have experienced this, if not in myself. Some people I know really liked something. Then, when exposed to something more productive, they tend to do that more, in some cases even if they think the other thing is "more fun."

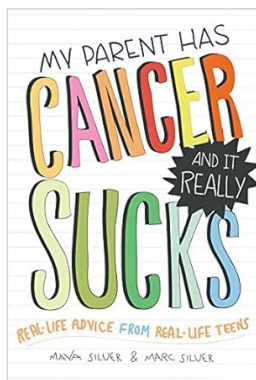
This book really helped me to see the motives of some people, why they do what they do, even if it seems wrong. It taught me to understand people and appreciate willingly given help.

Sincerely,
Gabriel Faraone

Hannah Lickey
Columbia City High School, Columbia City
Letter to Marc Silver and Maya Silver
Authors of *My Parent Has Cancer and It Really Sucks*

Dear Marc Silver and Maya Silver,

It's safe to say that being told that your mom has cancer isn't the most enjoyable topic to talk about, and you guys understood that so well. My family had this fun experience on June 21, 2021, when my parents informed me and my siblings that my mom has CML, a type of leukemia. This news left my family feeling numerous different ways. My dad took this differently than the rest. His dad passed away from lung cancer when he was 20, so he knows what cancer can do to a person. I was so lost and confused I decided



to lean on something that I do to separate myself from others, reading. I resorted to Google, and I plugged in "books about your parents having cancer." The first book that came up was yours. To be completely honest I mostly chose it for the title, *My Parent Has Cancer and It Really Sucks*. I read this book in one day. It provided so much guidance and made me feel not alone. I related to other kids. You guys provided me with the answers I couldn't find elsewhere.

Immediately after learning about the cancer, my family went to our different "safe locations." I went up to my room, put my headphones in, and stared at my ceiling for about an hour. I felt so much self-pity. The idea of telling people, "My mom has cancer," mocked me in my head. Going to school after this wasn't any better. All my friends were telling me how sorry they were. Saying sorry changes nothing. I would then hear people complaining about how much their lives suck and how terrible their day was. I just want to scream at them that they have no clue what it's like in my life. I am juggling my personal life at school and now I have more to do at home. Their terrible day consisted of laying on their couch along with a minimal amount of conflict. Your book had a passage about being mad as well as having patience with your friends. After reading that, I came up with a different way of thinking. I am so appreciative that you added stories about other kids whose parents had cancer and how those kids felt the exact same way as me. You showed me that it's normal to feel bad for yourself, but you need to remember that you're not the one with cancer so don't drag your self-pity on too long.

To allow myself to not feel sorry for myself, I knew I needed to be stronger in my faith than ever. My family has always been Christian. When this news hit, one of the first things my mom said was, "We are going to need a lot of prayers." I was so confused about what to pray about. After reading about prayer, and what to be praying for in this book, I understood. Instead of only praying for a miracle, pray to listen to God too. If you were to pray for only your mom to get better, what about all the other 18.1 million other people who have cancer? Pray for everyone. Listening to God while praying is a great coping mechanism. It allows you to just have time with God and to not just be focusing on yourself. Also, just because your prayer isn't answered doesn't mean that it's because you are doing something wrong or because God doesn't like you. Overall praying is an exceptional way to relieve your stress, which for me, was very helpful.

My parents made it very clear that this type of cancer doesn't have a high death rate. Honestly, if you were for some reason choosing a type of cancer, this would be one you would want to have. The idea of that completely confused me. I thought that it meant that I shouldn't be telling people about it just in case of the rare occurrence someone else would have worse cancer than she had. She isn't on harsh chemo, so you can't even tell she has cancer. Your book mentions countless different stories kids went through with their parents that had all different kinds of cancer at different stages too. No matter what stage, type, or death rate, cancer is cancer. It made me think of an analogy about two people who are drowning, and one person is deeper in the water than the other, but they are both still drowning no matter how deep.

I can't put into words the amount of support this book delivered for me. It's hard to find support like you guys delivered in your book.

Thank you,
Hannah Lickey

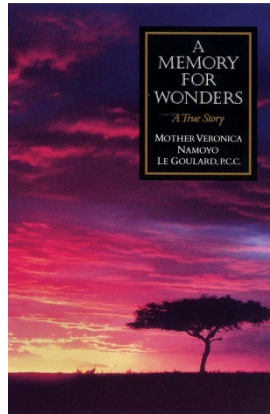
Honorable Mention – Level Three

Bailey Shidler

Columbia City High School, Columbia City
Letter to Mother Veronica Namoyo Le Goulard
Author of *A Memory for Wonders*

Dear Mother Veronica,

My name is Bailey Shidler. I am a senior at Columbia City High School. I am passionately Catholic and am embracing this season of Advent, not only the liturgical season of Advent, but also this time of transition as I move from high school to college, and as I discern my Vocation. Our priest was out of town a few weeks ago, and I really appreciated the sub priest who came to fill in for him. I ended up having an email conversation with him, and he unexpectedly mailed me your memoir, *A Memory for Wonders*. I immediately felt like it was providential and was very excited to read it. I knew it would be moving based on what he had told me about it, but it was truly life-changing and exactly what I needed to hear.



The entire memoir was so incredibly inspiring. Being from France but growing up in Morocco, and eventually living in Algiers in a cloistered convent must have been such a unique experience. Morocco is definitely on my bucket list to travel to someday. The culture there is endlessly fascinating to me. Additionally, in your memoir you talk a lot about not only your relationship with God, but also with your dad. I was really able to connect with what you said about your relationship with your dad and also how his rejection and lack of conversion hurt your heart for a long time. My dad, while not rejecting my faith, is no longer a practicing Catholic and due to the distance he lives away, he isn't a super big part of my life right now. Before I read your book I had really been struggling with my relationship with my dad. As I made my way through the story of your life, your own dad's conversion from basically Communism to Catholicism moved my heart and was such a beautiful reminder that God has a plan that is perfect, and it's all going to be okay.

Another thing that struck me about your memoir was your faith journey. As someone who has really made my faith my own since I entered high school, reading about how the Lord invited you to know Him was beautiful to read. Especially touching was the story of how you were at your grandparent's house for a time, and while they couldn't talk to you about religion because of your parent's communist beliefs, you saw a crucifix. Just gazing upon Jesus on the cross, you knew that He was someone to love and admire, even calling him, "INRI" because you didn't know His name. It was such a beautiful example of humility and how God provides even through impossible circumstances. The world would look at your life and wonder how in the world you ended up a nun, but it is truly by the goodness and grace of God. As I am discerning my own vocation to Consecrated Virginity, as a religious sister, or being married, your story reminded me that God's got a plan, and everything is going to work out even if I can't see the big picture yet.

Thank you for your memoir; it has inspired so many people, including myself, to trust in God and His plans that are more perfect than we could possibly imagine, and thank you for your witness to living out a vocation authentically. I find that often people think nuns are boring and scary, but your memoir proves they are exciting, fun, and joyful!

Thank you,
Bailey Shidler

Honorable Mention – Level Two

Maleah Dearing

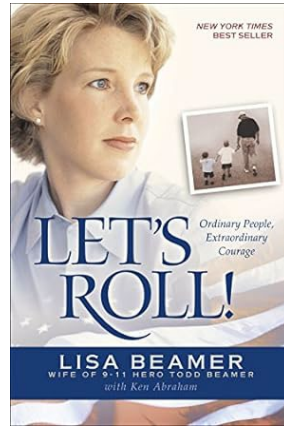
Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg

Letter to Lisa Beamer

Author of ***Let's Roll!: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage***

Dear Lisa Beamer,

My mom used to work for the American Red Cross, so the day of 9/11 stands out clearly in her memory. Though she didn't know anyone in the planes or the buildings, she lived the tragedy right at home (just like lots of other people in the world). Ever since that day she has enjoyed reading articles, autobiographies, biographies and much more about 9/11, so it makes sense that her interests in learning about people's stories on that day rubbed off on me. I have always been a big reader but none of the books I have read have stuck with me as much as your book, ***Let's Roll!***



Reading about you and Todd's life really brought a new perspective on it all, listening to your faith based insight and determination when others saw despair really made me put myself into your situation. In the beginning of your book I was mesmerized by how you spoke of your husband, Todd, how you shared your lives before 9/11 and how he was your best friend. He helped with the youth at church, was a great father, and was a big sports fan, so when the unimaginable event struck, it really brought me to a related view point.

When I was 7 years old, I too, had a tragedy strike when my dad died. I saw my Mom become a person who never let the circumstances around her deter her from God. While reading, ***Let's Roll!***, I love how you made sure that God was your standpoint. You and Todd made God your priority in your life together, as well as making sure to not stray away from that. As you were swarmed with many different emotions; shock, overwhelming disbelief, and fear, you realized that there was a life that you needed to continue. You had two kids with a baby on the way and had no idea what your next step needed to be. With that, questions started swarming in my head: How did you keep going? How many times did you question yourself? Did you ever lose sight of what was important? I know that life sometimes throws curve balls and it is so

easy to fall right over or just give up even with small everyday trials, let alone with life changing events.

Above all, reading your book reminded me that you must live by faith everyday because faith is like a safety net. When you go too far or question yourself, God grounds you or reels you back in. You being able to just sit down and ask God what is my next step just reminds me of how we just want life to go our way. As I kept reading more questions surrounded me. What was it like to have to be a pillar of strength to your young children? It must have been so hard for you to tell your young sons what had happened, especially when they were so happy at that moment and reminding your daughter everyday that her dad loves her very much and would be here if he could.

With all your determination you have inspired many people no matter what their age may be. Did you ever think you would be called a 'Hero?' Just like Todd you have helped save people, though in different ways. Your battle through grief and the love you have for your children and God will always be heroic. You are a true beacon of light to those who have been tossed in the raging sea called life. You have taught people about the trauma from a tragedy, being left behind to pick up the pieces and rebuild their lives with God in it.

The amazing awe-inspiring words you said at the end of your book will continue to be forever branded in my heart, "I can't claim to walk with God perfectly (or even adequately sometimes). What I can claim is that despite my human fragility and regardless of circumstances, God is strong. God is faithful. And God is big. His character is constant; His promises are true." Your words have had a huge impact on my life because it is true. Regardless of the circumstances you are in right now, God's plan is bigger than just the things we see around us.

Thank you for writing and sharing your story with the world. With your book, you have inspired and changed so many lives, and also thank you for showing me that I cannot go forward without God in my life. My hope is that your story continues to influence others and you will always continue to walk in humility and strength.

Kind regards,
Maleah Dearing

Let's Talk About...

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Lockdowns

Vaccines

Living Through a Pandemic

Dear Shannon Messenger,

Thank you so much for putting so much love and effort into ***Keeper of the Lost Cities***. It is truly an amazing book. When I first read this book, I was at home, quarantined. The Covid Pandemic was in full blast. I had been very depressed at the time, without seeing my friends and no sports. Basically, during quarantine, all I had been doing was sulking and eating chips. (I know, so depressing!) But then, I got the book ***Keeper of the Lost Cities: Illustrated and Annotated Edition*** as a birthday present, and once I read it, it slowly started to bring me out of the “sadness phase.” I started to feel so much happier.



Ever since, when I feel down, I read the book over and over. The way you wrote the book made me fantasize about everything around me. I also absolutely love the way you offer an illustrated and annotated edition because it really helps you understand what is happening better. For the annotations, it felt like I was personally talking to you and not just reading the book. It was nice to see how you see the book and characters, it helped me to understand the story much, much more.

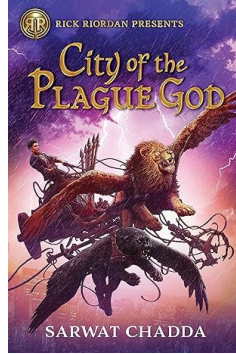
The book ***Keeper of the Lost Cities*** also encouraged me to be brave, just like Sophie. This book left a lasting impact on me, and for once it made me feel like I wasn't the only one who felt like I was different from other people. For example, when Sophie was brand new to Foxfire, and felt shy, it was exactly like how I felt when I started something brand new.

Thank you for making me feel confident and loved. You have motivated me to make new friends and feel confident enough to write my own stories. I have read this book so many times that I have started to believe almost everything you put in the book. Even though it is fiction, you make it as though the things that the characters do are something a real-life human would do. You are truly the most amazing (and convincing!) author, and I can't wait to read many more of your books.

Lots of love,
Kate Elizabeth Kappes

Dear Sarwat Chadda,

COVID-19 was a pandemic that changed lives, in both a positive and negative way. One side of me wished it never happened and another believes that we can learn from it, and it wasn't that bad. But either way, it changed many lives, several who are not with us today because of it and several who have lost family members. It has changed my life too, from masks to tests to mandates. It has evolved the way we have looked at the microscopic world of sicknesses.



When I read your book, *The City of the Plague God*, it was at the near end of the COVID pandemic and everything was returning to normal, except it wasn't. I hear every day about the mandates in China and see people wearing masks in school which was foreign to them about a year ago. I see people who were just returning from online classes and people grieving for family members whose lives were taken because of this pandemic. When I dived into your book, I realized just how much the pandemic has changed the world.

In your fictional story, a city was changed because of a virus, with deaths and panic. In the real world, the international community was changed because of a virus, with deaths and panic. I believe your book reflects on everything that has changed my life, and everybody else's life too. I also enjoyed how you added mythology to your book, making it a joy to read through your book and reflect on what happened in the past few years.

When I read your book, I feel like I was in the shoes of Sik, trying to save my family from the virus and end the pandemic. I could empathize with Sik coming out of his little perfect New York City bubble and realizing the truth of the hard world. The reason for this is because I have actually experienced this. When the pandemic struck, I was living my pretty normal life with my friends when the news started blaring about this new pandemic. I thought the virus could never reach my small city in Indiana, but I was very wrong. Within a month, our school had established new mandates and regulations to attempt to stop the spread of this contagious virus. At first, I disliked the uncomfortable

masks and inconvenient handwashing, just like Sik was blown away by the amazing power of the Gods and Belet's home.

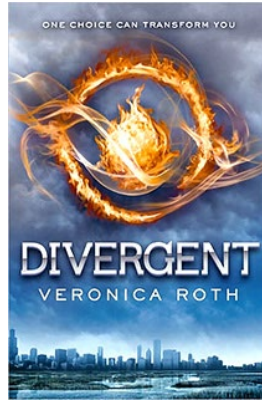
After a month or so, I got used to it, just as Sikander got used to all the remarkable ways of the Gods. While Sik was off saving New York from doom, I was at school, wearing a mask, doing my normal life. It was only after one year that I realized how much of an impact the pandemic had, not only in my world but in Sik's world too: the death of many, many people. When I read this book and looked back at the pandemic, I finally realized how much hygiene matters, and how even one person who is not careful can impact the entire globe.

Your book has changed my views of this world greatly and has made me reflect on the pandemic. Thank you for writing this amazing piece of literature and changing my life forever. Thank you for making me realize how the pandemic changed the world. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Jason Xu

Hello Veronica Roth,

I hope this letter finds you well! I personally love your book *Divergent*. It is one of my favorite books! This book changed my life. When I first read *Divergent*, I was in 5th grade, and to be honest I didn't think I was going to enjoy it. Until my teacher told us all to read our library books for 20 minutes, I was dreading even reading it because little ten-year old me thought the book was too big and I would never finish it in three weeks. Though I read it anyway and by the time I read half of the first chapter I was in love. I never put the book down. I missed out on going to see *Mary Poppins Returns* in theaters because I was determined to finish the last ten chapters.



I think if I were anyone from *Divergent*, I would be Christina. I say this because I often tend to make people laugh or feel better in bad situations. I think Christina is one of my favorite characters because she is very blunt. She doesn't care what anyone thinks, and she is very open minded. I feel she really changed the way I look at myself and she taught me that even when situations are going wrong or bad you don't have to be sad and hopeless.

When I first got this book, it was exactly two weeks before the big COVID-19 outbreak. Soon after we were out of school and doing e-Learning. The theme of this book, "never give up no matter what life throws at you," truly got me through my hard times in quarantine. It taught me to be patient like an Abnegation, brave like a Dauntless, curious like an Erudite, joyful like an Amity, and honest like a Candor. I learned many life lessons from this one book, and I will never forget the things I learned.

Divergent showed me that no matter what obstacles are in your way you can overcome them with a little bit of blood, sweat, and tears. This book was a big milestone for my whole life because it helped me overcome a lot of my fears, especially heights, dying, and being kidnapped. It made me realize that a lot of my fears are very unlikely, and a lot of

people have it way worse than me. **Divergent** wasn't just some good book I found at the library and decided to read. It was the turning point in my life, it taught me so much, and it made me who I am today. I am so thankful that you wrote this book because without it I don't know if I would be the same person today. Thank you so much for giving me a memory no one can take away from me.

Sincerely,
Madeline Huntsman

Zoe Stubos

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to O. T. Nelson / Author of *The Girl Who Owned a City*

Dear O. T. Nelson,

Being sick is terrible. But when you are sick and it is contagious, then you must be cautious. It all started back in 2020 with a terrible virus that killed many people. When we were in school, we had to wear masks so they would protect us from getting any type of virus. The virus that we have now is called COVID-19. Just like the flu, people must get shots.



I can really relate to the book *The Girl Who Owned a City* because the book starts out telling us there is a virus that kills people ages 12 and up. The virus that is in the book is very similar to what is going on now with COVID-19. Both viruses kill people, and everyone is afraid and worried.

I loved reading your book because the lesson of the story was trying to teach the importance of thinking through problems rather than acting badly and irrationally. I can really relate to the book because when COVID-19 first started everyone was trying to get all the food and all the things they would need to survive from stores. The same thing happened when all the kids in the book were trying to find food, and everyone kept looting houses and stores. Even though the book is fictional, something similar is happening right now in the real world.

The book inspired me to think through problems if I am stuck in life and to not rely on myself for everything that I do. This book really explains how the kids struggle to find food, but the main characters Lisa and her brother come up with ideas of how to survive and keep themselves safe and happy even though they have a world with a virus and no adults to get money and food from their jobs. *The Girl Who Owned a City* is an amazing book filled with things that hopefully will not happen in the future.

Sincerely,
Zoe Stubos

Let's Talk About...

DEATH AND LOSS

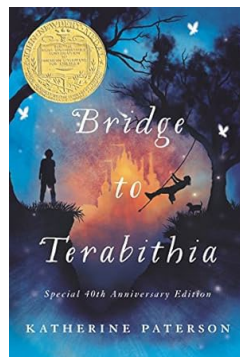
Death of Family Members

Suicide

Surviving Loss

Dear Katherine Paterson,

I recommend your writing to just about everyone I meet because you have affected my life on such a deep level. My favorite one of your fiction masterpieces is **Bridge to Terabithia**. I am writing this letter to you to express how this book has changed my life. **Bridge to Terabithia** has not only helped me through the loss of my grandfather, but also opened my eyes to the wonderful world of reading and for that I am so grateful.



When I was first introduced to this book by my mother, my grandfather had recently passed away. This book showed me what I was feeling was okay and that it would get better. When Jesse lost his best friend, he thought that he could just run away from his feelings, but eventually he realized the only way to “escape” those feelings was to face them. This book was so astounding to me because it shows how Jesse is going through these stages of grief but through the perspective of a child.

With each page I turned, I felt less and less alone, not to mention that it was the gateway to my love of reading. The description of Terabithia truly inspired my love of reading. In my mind Terabithia is a place where you can go to escape all your problems and worries. At the time, all I wanted to do was to escape my feelings and have my grandfather back, so in that way I feel that I can really relate.

In a world where losses occur regularly, this book is almost therapeutic in the sense that it shows children what grief feels like and how to deal with it. Thank you so much for writing this book. It has truly changed my life in so many ways. **Bridge to Terabithia** will forever be my all-time favorite book.

Sincerely,
Kieran O'Connor

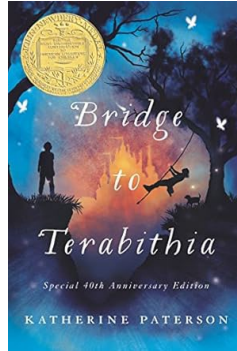
Anna Pagliarini

Saint Matthew Cathedral School, South Bend

Letter to Katherine Paterson / Author of ***Bridge to Terabithia***

Dear Katherine Patterson,

When I opened the book ***Bridge to Terabithia*** it was like a vertical bridge to a new understanding. I cannot explain how it changed me in this feeble human language, but I will do my best. This book has changed me in a way no other book did. It told me that the world is not all candy sugar and that bad things do happen. Like when Leslie died drowning in the river. When Leslie died it was like a storm was going on in my eye. Tears were splashing everywhere. Mrs. Balderas and I would have made a hurricane if not for Jesse and his comforting words. In the story it was thundering after her death, and so it was in my heart.



Yet, ***Bridge to Terabithia*** also taught me that there is a bright side to things. My sadness was a beautiful kind of sadness. Even though Leslie's imagination had died with her, she had set fire to a new imagination. This imagination would set fire to May Belle's and brighten Jesse's heart. Imagination will spread like fire on a haystack or ice in a stone. Picasso said, "Imagination will often get us places without words, but without it we are nowhere."

The new imagination was Jesse's imagination. It helped him let go of Leslie and remember her at the same time. I have had experience with letting go but somehow remembering. I have found so many relationships in Jesse and Leslie, so much so that Jesse and Leslie are no longer written on paper but are now like family and friends. As I drank up the pages, they took sips of the words too. I sincerely thank you for giving me my first friends on paper, as they are my other more exciting self. Jesse especially touched me because I knew what he was going through when Leslie died. They have touched me in many ways that paper does not normally do. This is no longer a book but a dream you can hold in both hands.

"For the first time in his life he got up every morning with something to look forward to. Leslie was more than his friend. She was his other, more exciting self — his way to Terabithia and all the worlds beyond."

It is true that the only limit to imagination is fear. Jesse's fear of the water could have stopped him from the magical world of Terabithia. In this way he did not let the fear stop his imagination. I think imagination can be passed on. Imagination can also be developed. I think Jesse, as well as me, realized that Terabithia was not merely a place to develop imagination. Leslie brought him there to get him out of his misery, while making herself in more misery losing her life in the rushing river. Leslie died courageously just like I hope to do. I am the most like Leslie. I think we could have been best friends if no death had come.

Terabithia set steel in my body after finding it with Jesse and Leslie. In the same way it sets steel in their bodies as well. Swinging across the rope gave me the feeling of greatest joy to be there, then, and with those kids. Terabithia is not only ours, but it is a place where nothing can hurt us.

When the closing page came it brought great fear that Terabithia would die, but you had engraved it so deep that it did not leave. For a single moment I thought another hurricane would happen, but it did not come. I really should blame this all on my teacher Mrs. Balderas, but instead I thank her. She is the one who got me hooked on ***Bridge to Terabithia***. I also thank you for writing this book. I never read a sad book before this one, but it has touched me greatly. ***Bridge to Terabithia*** has changed me in many ways that no other book has. I hope that my bite out of this book is not too big. I also hope I can get a bite of more of your books, and I hope they are as scrumptiously delicious as this one.

Sincerely,
Anna Pagliarini.

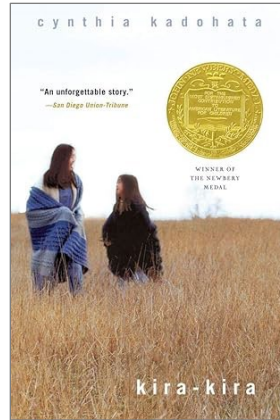
Dear Cynthia Kadohata,

The first time I was introduced to the book *Kira-Kira*, I wasn't very interested in it because I was a girl who read a lot of fantasy and classic books. A while later, my teacher recommended that I read this book so I decided to give it a try, and I really liked the book in the end. *Kira-Kira* helped me look at many more things in a positive way and has reminded me never to give up in the hardest of times.

Kira-Kira is the story of a young girl named Katie Takeshima growing up in Georgia in the 1950s. Lynn, Katie's sister, teaches Katie about her special way of viewing the world - the kira-kira way of seeing things in a positive light. In Georgia, Katie's family is one of the only Japanese American families. The girls endure racism when they go to school. As Lynn is diagnosed with lymphoma, the family starts to fall apart. It's up to Katie to remind her family that there's always something shimmering in the future. After Lynn's death, the family grieves for months. Katie's father proposes that the family go on a trip to help stop them from grieving, and Katie says that they should go to the sea, where Lynn had always dreamed of going. The family finds peace looking at the world through Lynn's eyes, as she saw magic in everything.

Ms. Kadohata, given that the book parallels your life, I'd be interested in learning which parts of the story are fact and fiction, as well as the most challenging part of writing this sort of memoir.

There were many characters in the book *Kira-Kira*, but the characters that stood out to me the most were Katie and Lynn, the two main characters. Katie is a lively and mischievous kid who does not do well in school. Some challenges Katie faces are taking care of the family when Lynn is ill and helping the family not fall apart. Katie has a very special bond with her older sister Lynn, who is bright, creative, and excels in school. Lynn struggles to fight her illness and take care of her siblings. Lynn teaches Katie everything and tries to impart her zest for learning and life to Katie while also protecting her from the negativity of the outside world.



I felt like Katie while reading the book and could almost picture myself being her. I just lost my grandfather who was close to me, and it was kind of surreal at first because I couldn't believe he passed, but when I had to write this, it helped me think about the wonderful time I spent with him when I visited him last Christmas. That made me feel much better. Knowing that I spent as much time as I could was comforting.

In the book the word "kira-kira" means glittering or shining, but to me, "kira-kira" means to look at things positively and to never give up. I moved during the summer of 2022 to Carmel, Indiana and I had no friends except my dog, so I had to think positively and try to make new friends. I used to get lonely sometimes and hated not having any friends. However, I didn't give up, and now I have some amazing friends I would have never met if I hadn't moved to Carmel.

Ms. Kadohata, I wonder how you found the word "kira-kira," and how you applied the lesson that Katie's family learned in your own life. A scene that stood out to me was in Chapter Ten, when Katie, Lynn, and their brother Sammy decide to have a picnic in the woods after they buy Lynn's starter home. This was one of the last times the siblings had fun before Lynn passed away. It was so beautiful to see the siblings bonding and having fun, and the scene gave me a better understanding of the importance of enjoying the small moments in life.

When I was reading the book, I felt many emotions in different scenes. Ms. Kadohata, the way you described Lynn's death brought tears to my eyes. And in the scene where Katie and Lynn were playing and bonding with each other, the diction you used made me feel happy.

I had a question about the scenes where Katie faces racism. Ms. Kadohata, what discussions do you hope these scenes bring up?

Thank you, Ms. Kadohata, for writing *Kira-Kira*, and helping middle-grade readers develop optimism and resilience. I think it's especially necessary in the times in which we live.

Sincerely,
Anika Arun

Stella Sullivan
New Palestine Intermediate, New Palestine
Letter to Nora Raleigh Baskin
Author of ***Nine, Ten: A September 11 Story***

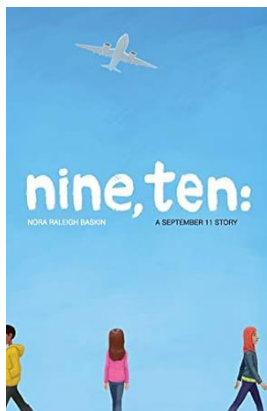
Dear Nora Raleigh Baskin,

Your book ***Nine, Ten*** evoked a strong connection with two of the central characters, Will and Sergio. I connected with Sergio when he worried that he might lose Gideon. Even though Sergio only knew Gideon for one day, Sergio felt like he found someone that treated him like he was his dad.

When 9/11 happened, he worried that something would happen to him. I empathize with Sergio. When my dad goes to work as a firefighter it makes me worry about him. I think, "What if?" Like Will, I suffered from a big loss in 2019. I was only in 2nd grade when I lost my brother to suicide. We aren't really sure why he did it. Like Will's dad, they didn't know why he did what he did either. Why did his dad make a decision that cost him his life?

Whenever my dad goes to work, I think about what if. What if something happens to him? I think, "I know that he's saving lives but at what cost?" I couldn't imagine my life without my dad. My dad is my hero. He is one of the funniest people I know. He hurt his back in 2016 and when this happened, I was only in kindergarten. I worried about taking care of him. I took care of him even when I was struggling.

My brother and I got along well when we were younger. As we got older, we drifted apart. I remember the night he died. It was Mother's Day, and we were out to eat at Tour of Italy. When I woke up in the middle of the night, I saw through the window red and blue flashing lights. I didn't know what happened. I thought maybe it was for the neighbor's house. I went downstairs and when I first opened the door there were two police officers standing in the doorway of my brother's room. When I got to my mom's room, I saw my brother's clothes on the drying rack. I didn't think much of it. I just laid down and went to sleep. I woke up many times in the middle of the night to my mom getting phone calls and her coming back crying. When I woke up the next morning, I saw my dad sleeping on the ground and when I walked out to our living room, I saw people crying. My dad and my mom took me upstairs to my



brother's room where our pastor was. He told me my brother had passed away. In May, it will have been 4 years since this happened.

Thank you, Nora Raleigh Baskin. Thank you for writing this book and inspiring me to write this letter. Thank you for showing me that after a big loss you as a person can change. You helped me realize that others also worry about their loved ones in dangerous occupations. Also, you showed me how others have gotten through a loss.

Sincerely,
Stella Sullivan

Indiana Author Letter Prize

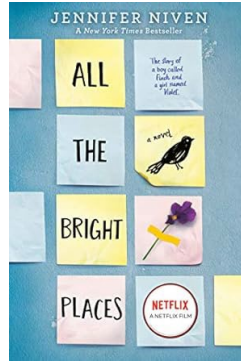
Mya Neighbors

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Jennifer Niven / Indiana Author of **All the Bright Places**

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 towards 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 a while, 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 a while for me to be able to understand all 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 Neighbors

Let's Talk About...

MENTAL HEALTH

Reaching Out for Help

Anxiety

Working Through Panic

Honorable Mention – Level One

Kiley Clements

Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Sarah Moon / Author of *Sparrow*

Dear Sarah Moon,

Back in the summer, I was at the library searching for an enjoyable book to read on vacation. I was going through each book in the realistic fiction section, hoping for a book that I could read on vacation. I'm a very picky reader. It took me a while, until I found it. **Sparrow**. Just by the cover, I could tell this was a keeper. They say, "Don't judge a book by its cover," so I flipped to the first chapter. It took a few chapters, but I knew there was something I could relate to. She's just like me: I have trouble making friends, I'm quiet, I'm a straight A student, and most importantly, I struggle asking for help. You, Sarah, have helped me understand that I matter. That I can ask for help. I do not need to struggle on my OWN. I want to thank you, Sarah Moon, for writing **Sparrow**.



On my summer vacation this was my first and favorite book that I read. When we got to our cabin up in Michigan, every day I read **Sparrow**. This was the first time I preferred reading rather than playing with my siblings or playing games on my phone. **Sparrow** expanded my perspective with a world of options that can improve my mental health and well-being. The book showed me that I do not need to fight my battles alone anymore. There will always be someone that can help, even if it is just a school counselor, or a therapist.

Your book helped me understand that you cannot ever tell what is going on with someone by just looking at them. You cannot just assume everything is fine. Your book changed me a little inside. Now, after reading your book, I always help someone if I can, even if it's just asking how someone's day is going. When someone needs help, I always try to comfort them and if I can, get a counselor or someone they can talk to. Your book has changed me in so many positive ways. Again, thank you so much, Sarah Moon.

I may not share the love of birds with Sparrow or have been through the horrible things that she has been through, such as being accused of

attempting suicide, but I can relate to not having many friends, having anxiety, and so much more. You have covered the “scary” topic of mental illness perfectly, and I want to thank you.

Sparrow has never fit in in school, and she keeps to herself no matter the situation. Instead of telling people, and expressing her emotions, she imagines herself flying away with birds, away from the world of discomfort. That made me think of Sparrow flying, or running away from her problems, which I often do. It is a horrible habit that you should not do because the problems keep building until it is too hard to control. Instead of flying away with birds like Sparrow, I sketch. Drawing takes me into this sort of fantasy world. I imagine myself in another reality with my characters, and it makes me feel better about whatever issue is going on at that time. But after reading **Sparrow**, I realized this was a terrible thing to do; not drawing in general but bubbling my emotions up into a false reality. Sparrow stops being able to have these “Flights” and I think that represents Sparrow finally being able to express her emotions in a healthy manner. I have learned from Sparrow that it is not healthy to keep your emotions to yourself, and you need to speak up about what is going on in your life.

Sparrow’s therapist suggests that music could help her feel better about what was going on. Her therapist suggested that she listen to the artist called the Pixies. I got curious. If songs like the Pixies could help Sparrow so much, they could help me. I put down the book and searched on Spotify for “Where Is My Mind?” by the Pixies. That day I found a new genre of music I listen to daily.

Sparrow has made a massive impact on the way I think about things. Thank you, Sarah Moon, for writing this outstanding novel. I dedicate my decent mental health to you. You, Sarah, have shown that I am not alone in this confusing, frustrating, uncomfortable world. You have guided me to the light in the darkest of times. You have spread awareness about the struggles of mental health, and most importantly to me, you made me understand that I cannot hide from my emotions. Ms. Moon, I want you to know that you have changed how I act, talk, think, and feel. I want to thank you (again) for all your help.

Sincerely,
Kiley Clements

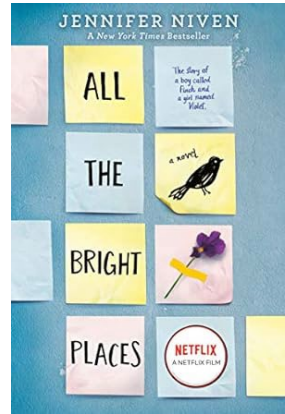
Olivia Dreblow

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Jennifer Niven / Indiana Author of **All the Bright Places**

Dear Jennifer Niven,

As my eyes glided across the words on the page I could feel my eyes stinging. I could feel the hurt of Violet, but I could relate to Theo. I could tell she was hurting and the words hurt me more, but I could understand and relate to Theo's pain. I have never lost a significant other due to death, but I have watched someone I love stop loving me, and that makes you lose yourself. Just like in the book **All the Bright Places** Theodore Finch said, "I was alive. I burned brightly. And then I died, but not really."



It was late November of 2021, fall break. My step-siblings were at their other parent's house, my parents were at work, and my brother was at daycare. So, there I was all alone in the house, with just the people over the phone to talk to. I was never the most popular girl in school. People knew my name and they knew my face but nobody was ever interested enough to get to know me. My 'best friend' always had another best friend, and my other friends always had another friend group that was better than me. I mean, I never thought I was that scary of a human being. Although, it is quite humbling when my siblings invite their friends over and I have no one.

I was alone. But there was this one guy. He had helped me through a lot, but he was also the reason I was like this. When we are young we always fall for the wrong people. But Jennifer, I do really believe that Violet and Theo were meant to be together. This boy in my life at this time was my best friend. He was always there for me when I needed someone to talk to. Although, one day he changed. He decided he didn't want to show me love anymore. And let me tell you, that is the worst thing that could happen to a person.

After this boy left nothing was the same. I was young, dumb, and I guess you could say I was in love. But I still felt like I was nothing. I went through my days either not wanting to eat or eating too much. I spent my days locked in my room until my parents got home from work. I didn't want them to know anything was wrong with me, I didn't have the courage to open up. I felt as though I lost myself. I felt gone. I felt

empty. I had to do something to make myself able to feel emotions again.

I have always been a religious person, which I guess says a lot about what I did. I thought maybe it was normal. I had heard lots of people say they harmed themselves before, so I hadn't thought of it as a big deal. The first time I harmed myself I didn't feel as though it would shape the rest of my life. But after every minor inconvenience for the next week, I did it again.

Now, before you go telling everyone that I'm some crazy person with mental issues I want to tell you this. I got better. I realized what I was doing was just becoming a bigger problem every time I did it.

This past school year I got a really great eighth-grade English teacher, Mrs. Ahlbrand. Thanks to her, almost a year later after harming myself I found your book. I fell in love with the chemistry between Violet and Theo. But after reading it I could relate it to my own life. First of all, I live in Indiana which makes the setting incredibly realistic; next, it made me open my eyes and realize I was never alone even when I felt it most of the time. I knew that I would always have someone there for me, even if it was the person I least expected it to be.

But, through my pain and through my hurt, I found peace. I started focusing on the positive more than the negative. I started focusing on my own needs and my own wants, as opposed to giving everyone everything they want all the time. But through all that, I made new friends and met new people. I also met a new guy. But don't worry, I've learned from my past mistakes. But in this case, I was Theo. I was the one thinking about death. He was Violet. The one who caught my eye and made me realize I am worth living. He showed me that love is something you rise into and not fall in. I had finally found the Violet to my Finch.

May you remember the moments,
Olivia Dreblow

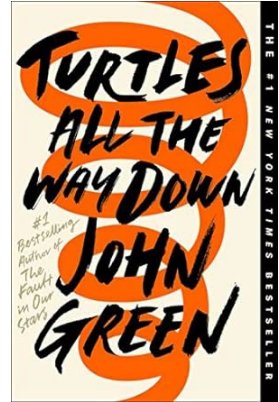
Addi Bandstra

Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

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

Dear John Green,

As a young, susceptible girl who had chances upon chances to be influenced by a number of things, I am forever grateful one of these influences was your novel *Turtles All the Way Down*. I will admit when my mom first brought this book to me in 8th grade, my plan was to throw it on my bookshelf and leave it there to collect dust. I don't remember why or how I eventually picked it up to start reading, but when I did, I finished it in less than a week.



I had never read a book for any other reason than finding its plot captivating. However, with *Turtles All the Way Down* I was drawn to keep reading because of the character, Aza. The way her anxiety was portrayed in such a raw manner was comforting to me. As I continued to read and her anxiety was depicted further, I felt less and less like an outcast.

I related to Aza not on a level where I could empathize with her but a level where I relate to her to an extent. I've never struggled with OCD, but anxiety and intrusive thoughts have been very prevalent in my life. I never knew how to deal with these struggles. I never knew how to explain them. So, I just lived with them in private. I had no clue as to why I would stay up until 3 am with the fear of dying in my sleep, no clue as to why these gross, scary thoughts would creep into the front of my mind and linger there. I can honestly say I thought I was crazy. I had decided that I was a danger and had some sick side to me I didn't even know. Aza's character was someone I could look at and think, "even if I am crazy, at least I'm not the only one." That's why this novel impacted me so much. The raw, real depiction of mental illness made me feel normal. At times it was almost uncomfortable to read how Aza suffered from her illness; that's how real it was.

In today's age mental health is a widely talked about topic, and its stigma is being erased. I, however, read this novel as a 14-year-old struggling with mental health who didn't even know she was struggling with it because in my world, nobody talked about these types of struggles. This novel opened the doors to a new conversation for me.

Knowing that I was not the only one dealing with these types of issues brought so much relief. All it took to have a load of bricks lifted off my shoulders was knowing that one person would be able to theoretically sit down with me, understand how I felt, and say I'm not crazy.

This reassurance opened my eyes. I began to see my mother's behavior in a different light, and I noticed she also showed signs of dealing with anxiety. My 14-year-old self now had answers to why she was thinking and acting the way she was. I now know that anxiety is a trait passed to me through my mom. Seeing this occur in my own home brought more comfort than any character could ever bring me.

So, thank you, John Green. Thank you for being vulnerable enough to use your experiences with OCD to make a difference in so many people's lives, including mine. Without Aza's character I would still be stuck in a place where I was struggling with identity as someone with anxiety. I can now feel confident in myself knowing my feelings are valid. You truly have developed my perspective on what it means to have mental health, and I am so appreciative that it was through your novel.

With sincere thanks,
Addi Bandstra

Let's Talk About...

GOVERNMENTS AND POWER

Corruption

Exploitation

Censorship

Honorable Mention – Level Two

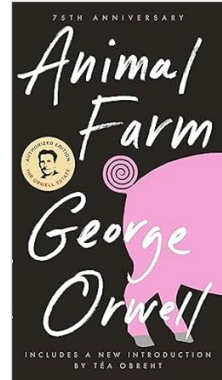
Aryav Das

Sidener Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to George Orwell / Author of *Animal Farm*

Dear George Orwell,

I recently had the pleasure of reading your novel *Animal Farm* and it has left a deep and lasting impression on me. The story of the animals on the farm and their rebellion against their human oppressors is a powerful allegory for the corrupting influence of power and the dangers of blindly following those in authority. As I read about the events on the farm, I couldn't help but feel a sense of familiarity with the world we live in today.



One of the most striking aspects of your novel for me was the way in which you portrayed the corrupting influence of power. The idea that those in power will do whatever it takes to maintain that power, even if it means betraying their own morals and beliefs, is a haunting reminder of the dangers of unchecked authority. The pigs, who represent the bourgeoisie in your allegory, are a prime example of this. They start off with the noblest of intentions, leading the rebellion against their human oppressors and creating a society run by animals for animals. But as they gain more power, they begin to betray their own principles and exploit the other animals for their own gain.

This betrayal is particularly evident in the way that the pigs use propaganda to manipulate and deceive the other animals. The clever use of slogans and the rewriting of history by the pigs in order to maintain their control over the other animals was a chilling reminder of the dangers of blindly following those in power. The way that the pigs were able to convince the other animals that they were working towards a common goal, while secretly working towards their own interests, was a stark reminder of the ways in which those in power can manipulate and deceive those beneath them.

Your portrayal of class struggle was also particularly striking to me. The way that the pigs, who represented the bourgeoisie, exploited and oppressed the other animals, who represented the proletariat, was a powerful reminder of the ways in which those in power can maintain

their position of privilege at the expense of those beneath them. The exploitation of the working class by the ruling class is a theme that has played out throughout history and your portrayal of it through the animals on the farm really brought it to life for me.

But despite all the darkness and corruption present in your novel, there were also moments of hope and resistance. The rebellion of the animals against their human oppressors and the creation of a society run by animals for animals was a powerful message about the potential for change and the importance of standing up against injustice. The character of Boxer, who tirelessly worked towards the cause of the rebellion and remained loyal to the end, was a touching reminder of the power of faith and determination. The rebellion may not have resulted in the utopia that the animals had hoped for, but it was still a moment of hope and a reminder that even in the darkest of times, there is always the possibility for change.

Your novel was a thought-provoking and poignant reminder of the ways in which power and corruption can corrupt even the noblest of intentions. It has left a lasting impact on me, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to read it. Thank you for sharing your talent and your message with the world.

I would also like to extend my appreciation for the way you used animal characters to portray human actions and emotions. The use of allegory in your novel allowed for a deeper understanding of the themes and messages present, and it made the story all the more impactful. It was truly a masterful piece of literature.

Your novel has not only entertained and educated me, but it has also inspired me to be more vigilant and aware of the ways in which power can be abused. It has encouraged me to stand up for what I believe in and to never blindly follow those in authority. Your words have stayed with me long after I finished reading and I will always be grateful for the impact they have had on my life.

Sincerely,
Aryav Das

Honorable Mention – Level One

Eliot Noble

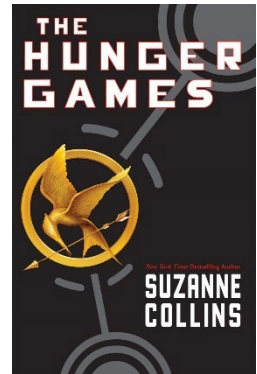
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Suzanne Collins / Author of *The Hunger Games*

Dear Suzanne Collins,

Thank you for writing such an amazing book! I loved reading *The Hunger Games*, and I am excited to share some of my thoughts on it.

How would you feel if you were dropped into an arena and forced to fight to the death with a group of 12 to 18 year olds in the Hunger Games? I can't imagine being in her shoes, but I was captured by the story of Katniss Everdeen, a girl who at age 16 bravely took her younger sister's place and entered the arena, all for the entertainment of the Capitol, their society's most privileged District. Katniss lived with her widowed mom and sister, providing for the whole family by hunting illegally, like her father had taught her. Their family, like many in District 12, lived without the money to have basic needs like running water and food. Katniss' life at home and her journey to the Capitol for the Games were eye-opening for me as I think about my life in Zionsville, and the ways our society works.



Similar to the world of *The Hunger Games*, we live in a society where people are not treated the same, and we exploit people for resources just like how the Capitol takes resources away from the Districts. It should not be illegal or very difficult to survive. Not caring about people is bad; greediness is bad. People should not have to go without food or other necessities. I was shocked with Katniss when she witnessed the citizens of the Capitol swallow pills to cause vomiting so that they could eat more, while the people in her District were starving. A few people should not have a lot while most people (who work hard for the resources) have none. I think there are a lot of connections for our society to pay attention to here and ways we can do better.

Another important take-away from *The Hunger Games* for me was the idea of hope and being an upstander. I connected with Peeta and the way he gave Katniss hope when he gave her bread when they were 11 years old after her dad had died. He knew she was starving, so he burned bread from his bakery to give to her, even though he knew he

would be beaten by his mother for it. That bread gave a hopeless Katniss the motivation to keep living, and helped her family survive. It reminds me to help others that need things more than me, and to pay attention to what others are going through. I'm 11 years old now, and my choices can have a big impact on those around me.

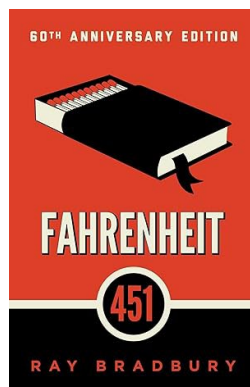
Reading this book made me grateful for what I have, like water, electricity, heat, food, and shelter. It is hard to take those things for granted when we are seeing Katniss struggle so much and seeing the circumstances of everyone in the Districts. Seeing the Capitol's luxury and abundance makes me lean further towards the ideal of equality and equity for all people. I think there needs to be shared ownership and power, not one small group having everything. The book helped me to see why exploitation and dehumanizing people are so bad and dangerous.

I am thankful for this awesome book. It was hard to stop reading it; the story and characters were so good. I couldn't wait to keep reading about Katniss and rooting for her.

Sincerely,
Eliot Noble

Dear Ray Bradbury,

Books have always been present in my life. Even from when I was a baby, Mom would read books to me. She even gave me a book when I was a year old: *Chicky Love*, it was called. I am an only child, and as you probably know, as a kid gets older, parents have less and less time for them, until at some point, they don't have time for them at all. That's where books come in for me. Because I have no siblings, books are my company. I have 134 books on my shelf (I've counted) and all of them have taught me so much in my 12 years on planet Earth. They never let me become lonely, and I depend on them for company. That is why *Fahrenheit 451* has influenced me so much. It has not only made me want to read more, but it has also shown me how important books are.



Even when I read the very first page of your book, "In the Beginning," I knew this would be an incredible book. I could relate to Montag as he read the first line of the book that fell into his hand. I could totally get the feeling he had when he was seized with the sudden desire to read the book. I knew the feeling of madness and beginning he had when he took the opportunity that literally fell in his hand. It means a world of knowledge is just waiting at your fingertips, and the fact that he had to feel so guilty to access it really struck me. I know that lots of information censorship has occurred but reading this really made the fact that this happened sink in.

Another thing that I can totally understand (and tend to worry about) is how imperfect the world is in Montag's story, because as time goes on, people care more about speed and less about real knowledge that takes time to acquire and share. It reflects the modern world, except with slightly more advanced technology. For example, Mildred does not remember (or care to remember) the place where she and Montag met, and Captain Beatty does not want to live because (in my opinion) their world whizzes past at such a high speed, and books are not present to fill them with nostalgia about the past. People try to make the world perfect and try to make thinking terribly simple by burning books, which

give people information on world problems and make them think. Instead, people watch “Parlor” and don’t think about anything and then they forget everything. It is exactly what the modern world seems to be coming to. People are zombies in front of screens, forgetting the true reason we live: for memories about each other. They lose faith, hope, and their dreams because they blindly believe all they have heard.

I want to tell you about one last, very important thing. I’m still reeling from the shock of reading the part about the woman who loved her books to the point where she died for them. She truly loved them and could not bear to be parted from them. I can get that. Both she and I love books like members of our family. It was her sacrifice (as I think of it) that got Montag thinking and stopped him from destroying more books. She set Montag’s whole plan in motion and might have saved many people (I hope). She is truly a heroine, and she shows readers the impact books can have on people. She has given me a new perspective on books: books are so important, because they can shake a society to its foundations with the turn of a page.

Thank you for writing **Fahrenheit 451**. It has strengthened my love and belief in books and made me realize the power that books have over people and society in general. Your book tells me, “Never stop reading,” just like ALL my teachers do, but it gives me a reason to do so. It explains why the world needs people who read, because their take on the world is incredibly important to keep a society intact. You have destroyed my view of the world, but I thank you for it. You have forced me to see the flaws and truths in this modern world and have made me think about the things that everybody does blindly, not really thinking about what we are doing, and make me ashamed. You have lit a fire in me that maybe nobody will ever understand but will never be able to extinguish. Thanks again.

Regards,
Rhea Singh

Second Place – Level Two

Rena Rutstein
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis
Letter to Ray Bradbury / Author of *Fahrenheit 451*

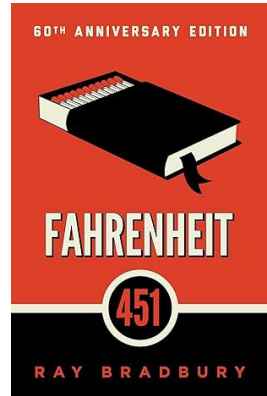
Dear Ray Bradbury,

Although *Fahrenheit 451* was written long before televisions and social media engulfed our society, it is as accurate as if it was written today. The harsh reality is that it is 2023, and we are tumbling into a bottomless pit of ignorance. You shook me awake and told me to get up and do something.

“You think too many things.” Clarisse represents curiosity. She asks questions in a world where questioning is a crime. She sees the reality of her situation and tries to show others what is happening to them. She is like the Greek myth of Cassandra. She tries to convince people of the truth, but she is called crazy. Anti-social. She is the ultimate contradictor of all her society’s beliefs. She talks about what others are too afraid to admit. When Beatty talks to Montag, he explains that it is because of people like her that they keep lowering the age of kindergarten. They need to extract the kids from their homes as soon as possible. Home is where opinions are formed, because children look to their parents for their beliefs and opinions. The government is stepping into the role of parents in order to brainwash children.

When I began reading your book, it was shocking how bad their society was. However, the more I read, the more I realized how relevant your book is today. Our world is becoming addicted to screens. People have started loving the TV more than their own family and friends. Who even stops and thinks for more than a few seconds? Mildred is the perfect example of this. She is addicted to the screens. It causes her to suppress her emotions, because she isn’t actually talking to anyone, just her “family.” When she overdoses, she denies it because she can’t express her emotions. She is so brainwashed that she doesn’t want to think for herself. Our world is becoming a bunch of Mildreds. Your book is a warning that few take seriously.

Another form of brainwashing is book banning. Books are often banned because people are scared. Beatty says that books were banned to



make people happy. But I think that the real reason was to suppress the thoughts and opinions of those who don't conform to the government's corset of thoughts that keeps getting tighter and tighter. People hate facing the truth. Just like in **Fahrenheit 451**, we are scared, we don't want to think about things. We don't like emotion. We don't want to show that we are weak. If it's too graphic, it's banned. If it's inappropriate (which is a very broad term, if you ask me), banned. If it doesn't agree with your political view, banned. **Fahrenheit 451** is among these books that have been banned, for being "graphic," among other things, such as mentioning abortion and having a few bad words. Either the parents and teachers who challenged it haven't read it or just don't care how ironic banning it is. They don't want their kids to read how Montag killed Beatty. Well, there is an easier way to do that: don't let your kid read the book. Your kid, not everyone's. People want to think of their child as an angel who should never be exposed to anything more scary than Santa not being real. Children should be able to form their own opinions using the resources that they want.

We have to fight the people who want books to be banned. I have to fulfill the legacy of Guy Montag. I need to keep the world from going up in flames. Thank you for showing me this. Thank you for teaching me to always ask why, not just how.

My deepest appreciation,
Rena Rutstein

Let's Talk About...

HISTORY

World War II

Slavery

**Understanding How History
Affects Us Today**

Tyler Gwinnup
Shelbyville Middle School, Shelbyville
Letter to Susan Campbell Bartoletti / Author of *The Boy Who Dared*

Dear Susan Bartoletti,

Your work has affected how I see myself and the world around me in many ways. The historical fiction novel *The Boy Who Dared* hits my heart a little harder than your other books.

This novel changed my entire perspective of what was happening in World War II. Learning about the Hitler Youth was totally new to me and very interesting. I also learned about life in Germany during the war. This made me appreciate my grandparents and all the hardships they endured. There were very strict rules that if you didn't follow, you would be punished. This made me rethink all the rules that I have broken. The theme of this novel is, don't take what you have for granted. After reading about how the prisoners were treated, I was left with a bad feeling in my stomach. My great grandfather was a prisoner of war. This made me appreciate his sacrifice he made to our country.

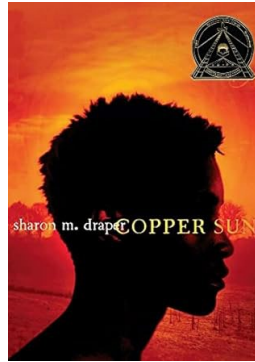
This novel caught my attention at the Shelbyville Middle School Library as soon as I laid eyes on it. I am drawn to more historical fiction books. War books have always caught my eye because of the history behind them. I really recommend this book to kids who are interested in the Nazis and the background to World War II. Thank you for taking time out of your day to read this letter.

Sincerely,
Tyler Gwinnup



Dear Sharon M. Draper,

Before I read **Copper Sun**, I never really thought about what it would be like to be taken from my home and auctioned off to people I don't know. I never thought about what it would be like knowing you could be taken to a man's room any night. I never thought about the back breaking pain of being struck with a whip. And I never thought about what it would feel like to be free after months of fighting for survival in the middle of nowhere. Your book really opened my eyes to the struggles of slaves in early America.



While reading the book, I really started thinking-when would I feel like I shouldn't live anymore? When would the world just become unbearable? Amari helped me realize that every day a new weight would be put on my shoulders, but I would have to find the good around me. That, for every bad person in the world, there are ten more good people. It makes me feel better to know that there will always be someone to help me when I need it the most, even if it isn't right away.

As a white girl living in the modern-day United States, I have always had freedom served to me on a silver platter. I never had to question having a meal every night. And most of all, I always felt protected. I knew there were people out there that didn't feel comfortable in their environment, but I never knew there could be so many in the world at one time. **Copper Sun** helped me realize the difference in peoples' comfort here in the United States of America.

Putting myself into Polly's shoes, I would definitely not want to work as a slave. I would lose a little bit of my heart every time the master brought out the whip, every time a slave was scolded, and every time a slave woman was called to the master's room. Thanks to **Copper Sun**, my view of slavery has been forever changed. I will no longer look upon other people with disgust because I don't know at all what they have been through. Thank you, Sharon Draper, for your truly amazing book.

Sincerely,
Vivian Pumphrey

Vivian Smith

Homeschool, Lebanon

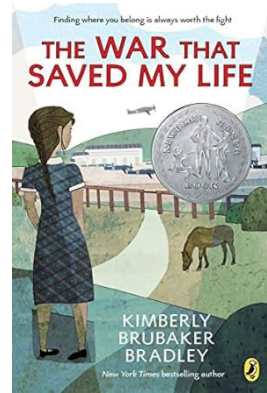
Letter to Kimberly Brubaker Bradley

Indiana Author of *The War that Saved My Life*

Dear Kimberly Brubaker Bradley,

I loved your book, *The War that Saved My Life*. It has changed my view on the life of refugee and handicapped children in World War II.

Before I read your book, I thought that all the refugee children went to stay with relatives in the country, but they didn't. Most of them went with complete strangers. I had envisioned them living an idyllic life in the country while the rest of the world was at war. But your book explained how that may have been an inaccurate picture. Your book helped explain how the refugees actually got to the country, and how they lived there.



While they did have a better life in the country, they were still in war time and it was not all fun and games. For instance, Susan (Miss Smith) had to stand in a queue for sometimes an hour just to get a pound of meat. They could only purchase food for the ration cards that were in their ration books. Many other hardships were endured by the children, but the city was bombed more than the country, which was why most of the children left to go to the country.

When Ada and Jamie went to the country, their lives changed for the better. And in the end, Susan's life was improved also. You wrote from the perspective of a good life once they got to the country. But your book made me think that some of the children probably ended up with terrible caretakers or caretakers who already had children, and who would have a hard time keeping up with them. The character, Stephen White went to live with a colonel who was mostly blind and, before Stephen got there, he was eating rotten food. So in that instance it was extremely good for the colonel, and it was good for Stephen too.

In the very beginning of the book, you talked about the life of Ada with her mother. Her mother was very cruel and wouldn't let her out of the apartment because of her clubfoot. If Ada hadn't been crippled, she would have been like Jamie; she would have gone to school and ran around the streets. She would have done everything that a normal kid

would have done. Her mother could have fixed all that, by having Ada's foot fixed when she was a baby.

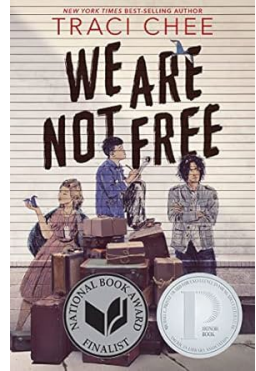
I liked how Ada had a clubfoot. It made her different from everyone else. Later in the book when Ada catches a spy, she goes and reports what she saw but the officer doesn't trust her because of her foot. This scene taught me that in World War II handicapped people were looked down on because even if it was just a clubfoot, they thought that their brains were bad too. I had thought that they had mostly normal lives.

I enjoyed your book so much I have read it twice, read the sequel and have recommended it to friends. I look forward to reading more of your books.

Sincerely,
Vivian Smith

Dear Traci Chee,

I am a historical fiction fanatic. From reading stories about D-Day to classic 1800 murder mysteries. I love it all. I especially love reading about events that no one writes about enough. That's where **We Are Not Free** comes in. Your book opened a whole new world of curiosity for me.



Before I read your book, I knew nothing about Japanese Incarceration Camps. I had never heard that term in my life. When I finished your book, I did not know how to feel. I felt empty, hurt, and sorrowful. But I also felt wondering, curious, and interested. I wanted to know everything there was to learn about these camps. I wanted to know why I had never heard of these camps.

Before I go into too much detail about how much your book impacted me, maybe I should start where I found it. I was begging my mom to take me to the public library because I ran out of books to read. Once we got there, I ran to the YA section for the first time. I saw your book on the Featured Author's shelf and was immediately intrigued by the mugshot of teenagers surrounded by suitcases. I read the summary on the inside flap and immediately asked myself what are Japanese Incarceration Camps? I felt unsettled because how did this happen in America? The country that was fighting so hard for the liberation of Jews in Europe. How did we let this happen? Yes, America has never been perfect, but I didn't expect such a high level of hypocrisy during a time of war.

Once I got home, I picked that book up and did not put it down till I was done with all 400 pages. I fell in love with all 14 characters (especially Twitchy). As a POC (Person of Color) I never thought I could relate more with a set of characters. I have never gone through the same struggles they did of course, but the casual racism they go through every day reminds me of my own experiences.

Going back to how much this story impacted me, I think I should talk about the effects it had on me after I read it. I read this book in 5th

grade, so I was quite young. Some would even say too young to be reading a YA book. At the time I didn't fully understand what exactly happened, because I was still in so much shock that the America that is glorified every day could let something like this happen.

I was thinking about this book over winter break last year and decided I wanted to reread it, so I could get a better understanding of what exactly happened. I reread the book and went through the same emotions I went through the first time. I love reading, but it's hard for me to reread a story and enjoy it the same way I did the first time. This time I felt obliged to do my research. So, I spent my winter break learning as much as I could about these camps. With all this fresh information in my brain, I didn't know what to do with it.

When I went back to school my social studies teacher told us that our social studies final project would be researching a topic of our choice and presenting it to our class. I knew that Japanese Incarnation Camps would be my topic. I wanted more people to learn about these camps and even if it was just my fifth-period social studies class I would be satisfied that at least one person learned about what the 100,000 innocent Japanese-Americans had to go through in our exalted country.

I thank you for writing a story that has stuck with me for so long, something no other book has done. Thank you for showing me the doors to a whole new world. I thank you.

Sincerely,
Jasreet Kaur

Let's Talk About...

RACISM

Prejudice

Antiracism

Black Lives Matter

Third Place – Level Two

Lauren Herman

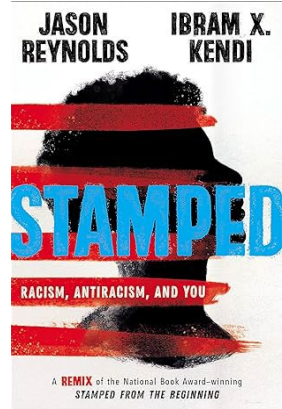
Castle South Middle School, Newburgh

Letter to Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi

Authors of *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*

Dear Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi,

I would like to first begin my letter with a thank you. The incorporation of past and present history in this writing is eye-opening. I appreciate the guidance given to make people understand how racism and prejudice can affect people's daily life. After reading the book, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, my view on myself and the world changed by showing me that it is not okay for people to make racial comments about someone and you don't have to accept that.



In, *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*, you shine light on many insidious forms of racist ideas, allowing every type of person to understand what Black men and women go through day-to-day in their lifetime. The two of you reveal forms of injustice prejudice that are experienced by people of all cultures, not just Blacks, giving everyone perspectives of how all races and genders may feel. I was struck when you wrote about women being left out of the racial conversation. They were imagined to be in the kitchen, cooking, cleaning, and preparing everything for men. This made me angry because why do women have to be made out like that? Angela Davis made sure to break this stereotype. She defied the odds and made everyone listen to her. She is an activist and I see her a lot like myself. She is someone I look up to. She was proud of the person she was and never let anyone tell her differently. She made sure everything was equal for both genders and didn't believe in segregation. She is a perfect example of an antiracist.

The word antiracism was used a lot throughout the book. This was the first time I had ever heard of a word like that. I used to always think that you were either racist or you weren't. I never got to dig deep and find the true meaning of racism, but this book helped me understand what it means to be an antiracist, the history of slavery, and the Jim Crow Laws. Black excellence killed Jim Crow, acknowledging Black talent. Whites wanted to find every excuse so they wouldn't have to

accept the fact that Blacks had potential, which is another reason I like reading this book. You have allowed me to see the hidden possibilities Blacks have. I always had a feeling that just because I was Black or just because I was a woman, that I would never get the dream job, dream car, or dream career I had planned for myself. Reading this book alone, made my dreams come alive. I quickly realized that no matter what race, ethnicity, or gender you are, you are never limited. Being Black is an honor and that is something I appreciate every day.

Both of you wrote, “Black people used Black fighters as a way to symbolically beat White America’s racism.” I have had multiple challenges within my life, and I think one way I have coped with it is with boxing. Boxing helped me discover my struggles. I have always struggled with telling my story and my familiarity with racism. Boxing helped me realize that I am capable of great things, and I should never be ashamed of the experiences I have witnessed and came in contact with. For example, a student came up to me and told me, “Have you heard about what’s going on with George Floyd?” During this time George Floyd’s murderer was just arrested. I replied with, “Yes, I’m glad justice was finally served for him.” The student told me, “When I grow up, I want to be a cop.” When I proceeded to ask why, they said, “So, I can shoot people like you.” They then proceeded to laugh and continue speaking to me saying, “Matter of fact, I would shoot you.” This was humiliating and mortifying because I felt ashamed, like I didn’t belong. I felt like stopping my fight with ending racism. I felt like giving up. Boxing helped me focus my thoughts and showed me that I am capable of amazing things and don’t need negative remarks to stop me from being outstanding.

This book astonished me. I never knew much about America’s history with racism. I love to express the way I feel about racial contrast and this book has furthered my knowledge. The examples in this book make me proud of the African American girl I am starting to become.

With appreciation,
Lauren Herman

Ava Wilson

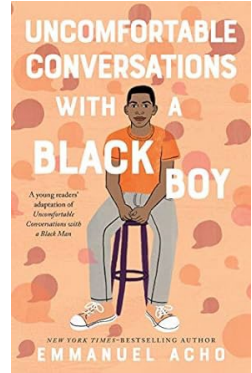
Central Middle School, Columbus

Letter to Emmanuel Acho

Author of ***Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Boy***

Dear Emmanuel Acho,

Sometimes kids don't think about the 1 billion other kids in the world. Sometimes, adults don't think about the 7 billion other adults in the world. Sometimes, you find yourself not even knowing your own neighbor. Your book, ***Uncomfortable Conversations With a Black Boy***, helps any reader to know a culture that much better. As people, we need to have conversations - some that are uncomfortable - to learn about each other. So, not only is your book eye-opening, it also inspires people to learn more.



Uncomfortable Conversations With a Black Boy talks about race and race-related issues in America. Talking about these issues can be uncomfortable, but we need to understand that the difficulties Black people in America face today are best understood through US history. It is a book for children to learn about systemic racism and racist behavior.

I've noticed that humans have a certain level of discomfort when not everything is the same. When we don't know something about something different, we fear, and we run. We all come from different places, have different backgrounds, have had different experiences. We all look different, act different, talk different. It's hard to say there is a "right way" of being human when there are 8 billion different ways. Your book helped me realize that.

More specifically, your book teaches those outside of your culture the ways, the hardships, and the joys of your own. Difficult or uncomfortable conversations are always avoided! Your book felt like a real conversation. It felt like I just sat, listened, and learned about so many things I probably could have sooner. Those kinds of conversations are what open doors in life. If every person just listened, and just learned, the world would be a different place. It would be a place where all our strengths would be put to one, all our hardships would be respected and sympathized, all our greatnesses would be celebrated, and all of us would be loved.

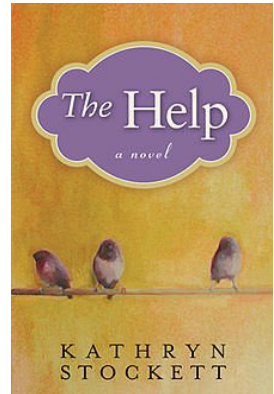
Thank you for being the cause of so many people making the same realization. After reading your book I have realized the importance of listening to people's lives, their problems, their experiences, their way of life, and their thoughts. I've learned to appreciate diversity within my school and my community. I love having conversations, even the most uncomfortable ones. As your book taught me, in order to respect, you have to learn.

Sincerely,
Ava Wilson

Dear Kathryn Stockett,

One of the most asked philosophical questions is if it is innate or learned to treat a different race as inferior. After reading your book, I was able to appreciate the importance the upbringing a child has because that is what determines whether a person becomes racist or not.

I deeply admire how Aibileen cared about encouraging and building Mae Mobley up to become a confident and kind adult. This shows me how love and positivity is effective. Positive reinforcement and love has always been a primary rule in my own upbringing. My grandmother always used this philosophy to raise her children. She taught my mother what she learned from her mother, to always use positive reinforcement.



Every time I visit my grandparents' house, I walk through every hall and ponder these ideas. Each wall is lined with pictures that seem to jump off the walls with life. From hyper realistic framed works to board games illustrated by my grandmother, they are all radiant with devotion, perseverance, and immense attention to detail. You can see the time, effort and practiced skill that went into each one. When asked how she did it, my grandmother responds with firm accreditation to her mother. As a child, she was always praised and encouraged in her art. This kept her passion for drawing strong. She kept practicing and her mother continued to support her. She became a famous and prominent artist in the Jewish world. This shows how important positivity and love for a child and what they do makes them continue to grow and become a better person.

I strongly feel that children do not naturally treat people differently based on the color of their skin until they are taught to do so. Mae Mobley proves this, Skeeter proves this, and Hilly proves this. They each have separate and different childhood experiences that make them the way they are. Constantine made sure that racism was never instilled in Skeeter's pure heart as a child. Aibileen made sure that Mae Mobley

was never taught that she was bad or more important. Hilly taught her kids to be racist through her example and backward beliefs about Black people.

I can't stop thinking about how Skeeter used her talents, strengths, and compassion to bring their darkness of racism out into the light. As Dr. Martin Luther King profoundly said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that." She gave the maids the opportunity to tell their story. She was able to help the help because she didn't treat them any differently than she treated white people. They were able to trust her because she was different. She never judged them based on the color of their skin like every other white person they knew. She spoke up against the segregation that was inflicted upon these maids because that is how she was raised. Children are a blank canvas waiting to be painted on. Parents are the painters. Their experiences are the paint. Constantine filled Skeeter's canvas with love and compassion.

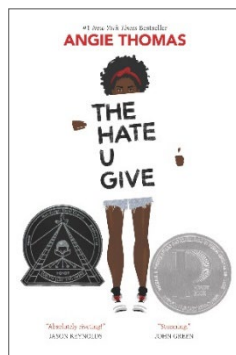
As a Jew, the Holocaust is a very strong piece in the puzzle that is my history. The Nazis took German children from their homes to form the Hitler Youth, giving the government a lot of power. Taking the place of a parent, just as Aibileen did, can be a great or a terrible thing for a child. These children were brainwashed into the regime easily because they were open and easily swayed into different opinions. Once the Nazi government had total control of the kids, they had complete power over the future of their country. The Hitler Youth was taught that Pure Germans are superior to foreigners and especially Jews almost exactly like how the children in the south were taught racism from their parents who owned slaves.

Your book helped me to understand that not only are all people created equal, but all people are created to treat everyone equally. Skeeter taught me to be independent, passionate, and to speak up for what I believe. Constantine taught me to be compassionate to all people no matter where they come from. Aibileen taught me that there is a need to give kids encouragement and love. Thank you for these characters. Thank you for these life lessons. Thank you for bringing dark ideas like racism and hatred out into the light so that not only me, but everyone can understand how significant they are.

With much appreciation,
Tehilla Rutstein

Dear Angie Thomas,

I moved to America from China in 2015 when I was five years old. I started learning English and went to my elementary school. After second or third grade, I stopped speaking Mandarin in public. I was afraid someone would come up to me and start the “Go back to where you came from!” thing. I was even embarrassed about my English name. After reading this book, I realized that it’s no big deal. I should be able to express myself.



I like how *The Hate U Give* is easy to follow and still demonstrates what the average household looks like. It shows what most Black teenagers go through. When I saw the rules that Starr and the characters were following, I was outraged. Why does someone have to live their life in a specific way to not get killed in public?

Forty-one percent (41%) of death row prisoners are Black. Thirty-four percent (34%) of prisoners are Black. That information is publicly available. Yes, most of the other percentage is White, but I thought that the percentages would be more spread out.

I reread the scene with One-Fifteen. I despise the officer for it. If the officer had heard the door open and looked at Khalil, one extra second could have told him that he was going to ask Starr if she was okay. Apparently, the racism is so bad that One-Fifteen is too good to look for an extra second and POW! POW! POW! The worst part of this is that after Khalil dies, he points to the same gun that killed Khalil at Starr. The nerve!

Drug trafficking is a large problem. One-Fifteen could possibly have based the rumors of drug trafficking on the killing, or he could’ve done it out of hate. The selling of drugs is as addictive as using the actual drugs. Whether the money is used for the good or for the worse, it’s still a terrible act to do.

The only way I feel that this problem can be solved in the future is to raise awareness today, and pray that future generations will see these books, and finally solve this problem. Another terrible thing about

racism is the fact that it has lasted hundreds of years. It has lasted longer than people's lives, longer than stories, and longer than ideas. I thank you for writing this masterpiece and raising awareness about brutality, drug trafficking, and racism. If I hadn't read this book, I would not know truly how terrible these problems are. I hope future generations read this book and have the same feeling about it.

Sincerely,
Adam Wu

First Place Winner – Level Three

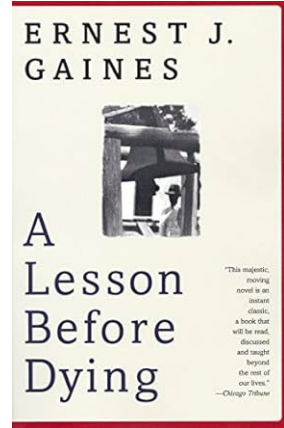
Anika Lewis

Oldenburg Academy, Oldenburg

Letter to Ernest J. Gaines / Author of **A Lesson Before Dying**

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 contented 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 Lewis

Let's Talk About...

JUSTICE

Injustice

Inequality

Unfair Systems

Danielle Rancifer

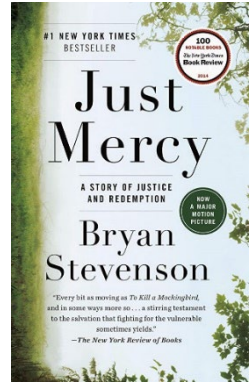
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to Bryan Stevenson

Author of *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*

Dear Bryan Stevenson

While I read about your experience with the justice system, and how much heartache, inequality, and suffering you had seen, I was inspired by your perseverance despite the constant darkness that surrounded you. The extreme amount of highs, lows and difficulties you endured while working each case is incredibly interesting, and your never ending search for justice and the truth is something to be admired. This book gave me a glimpse into your life, and the lives of all the people affected by what you do.



This book caused me to feel so many different things, I felt anger at the constant injustices, I felt despair as you talked about defendants of yours who would never be free not because they were truly guilty, or because their crime was so unforgivable, but because they were not seen by the justice system as “worthy” of the benefit of the doubt. I was filled with disappointment as I constantly read about mistreatment, unfairness, and everything else that went against the fundamentals of this great nation, where liberty and justice are claimed to be “for all.” Out of all these feelings though, more than anything I felt guilt.

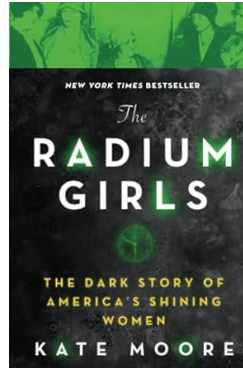
As an African American woman, I am no stranger to the inequality and injustice that plague this nation, but after reading this I realized just how severe my willful ignorance was. I was blinded by some of the great privileges of my lifestyle that I failed to remember all those that have not been so lucky.

For me, your book acted as a pair of glasses, a magnifying glass, and a mirror. So many aspects of your book caused me to see things clearly, examine them closer, and even caused me to look at myself. While doing these things were so far from easy, I will take the stories this book told me to heart, and use them to better myself, and hopefully one day, better this country so it may be all that it is meant to be.

Yours truly,
Danielle Rancifer

Dear Kate Moore,

This story made me feel sorrow yet also a feeling of empowerment. The sad aspect came from the many lives that were lost during their fight for the justice of factory workers. The empowerment feeling was for all the young ladies that fought back against the people that were cruel and unchanging. It was amazing to see how long these women fought for justice against cruelty. None of them gave up even when they went into debt, and everyone turned on them. They fought for days, weeks, months and years, every ounce of their strength went into fighting for this case. They were truly role models for everyone. They were women in the 1920's standing up against misogynistic men who didn't care about human decency. These people were killing all the radium girls and sending out fake doctors while committing fraud and the government looked the other way. But the radium wasn't just affecting the girls, it was affecting everyone.



Radium was marketed for the wealthy and for people struggling with their health. Little did these people know that in the long term this was terrible. Some people did know, like Marie Curie, her husband, and a close friend and student of Marie's. The close friend and student started a radium dial company that started all this even though he knew that it could harm all the girls working there. It was terrible what people did and still do for money.

It was also an amazingly happy book. In the end they ended up getting the justice they deserved. These women worked insanely hard and ended up changing factory health code forever. It was so sweet for people to stand up and help all these people when the court didn't want to help them. Also, another heartwarming moment was the fact that, when they first sued for compensation, no lawyer would take them and finally one lawyer did. They ended up winning that case and got the compensation they deserved. The doctors in this book were also truly angels, they helped the girls the best they could even though they had no idea about the disease. The radium girls themselves were optimistic considering what was happening to them. They didn't care about the

fact that they were dying. They were determined to live the last moments of their life in peace. They spent time with their family and went on vacations. They were happy, and they didn't even let their friends' deaths stop them from being happy. Sure, there was some sorrow, but not too much...just the perfect amount.

This book was amazing, and I would recommend this book to anyone. It will make you cry, but it's so amazing. It's the perfect mix of emotions, sad and happy. The justice that they got in the end is heartwarming, and I teared up. It changed me as a person by showing me that you can get justice by working together. And that not everyone has it super easy even when they look happy. They went through so much; it was the perfect ending.

Sincerely,
Julia Peterson

Let's Talk About...

LGBTQ AND IDENTITY

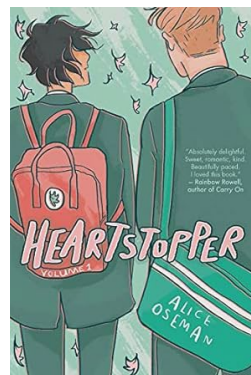
You Are Not Alone

Coming Out

Gender Identity

Dear Alice Oseman,

I'd like to thank you for writing the book, *Heartstopper*. I am a part of the LGBTQ+ community. I was outed when I was thirteen by a close friend of mine. I was scared and anxious of what everyone thought of me. I felt like an outcast. I didn't believe things were going to get better. Soon after that I stopped putting myself out there. I didn't talk to my friends much. I stayed alone in my room with nothing but my phone and some books. I didn't think I could trust anyone. I thought that if I didn't talk to anyone, I wouldn't get betrayed like I did, that I wouldn't have to go through something like that again.



I don't blame my friends for not being there as much as I needed them to be. They didn't know what I was going through. I didn't talk to them about it. I felt truly alone, they all seemed to have everything worked out and put together. Then there was me, I mean, I didn't even know what my favorite color was.

But when I read *Heartstopper* it was like a lightbulb turned on. This book made me feel like I wasn't so alone. I realized that it was ok to not know who you are. I learned that not everyone is like that. This book made me understand that even though things are tough right now, if I persevere, things will get better. I started talking to my friends and family again. I started to open up and get to know them more, as well as myself. I don't think I'd be in the place I am now without *Heartstopper*. I am glad that this book exists for all the people who don't know themselves yet. Hopefully this book will restore hope for their futures.

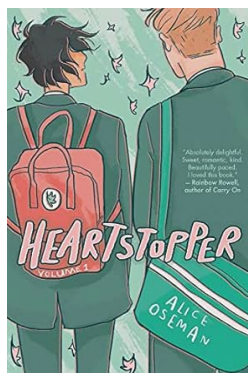
Even though I wish that my friend hadn't outed me, I'm thankful that I read *Heartstopper* and that influence is in my life. So, thank you Alice Oseman, for giving me hope to move forward. And showing me that it's ok to not know who I am, that things will get better, and that I am not alone. You have inspired me to one day write a book of my own. Maybe mine will help someone like yours helped me.

Sincerely,
Bailee McPherson

Dear Alice Oseman,

I am not a man that is one to open up about their feelings. Rarely will one see me expressing how I feel. But your series of graphic novels, **Heartstopper**, has literally changed my life.

It was in 8th grade that I discovered your book. I had never heard of it before, nor even browsed the LGBTQ+ genre of books. You see, I was in a hard denial of my own sexuality. Even though I had known since 4th grade, I was scared of telling people. My entire household used the term “gay” in a slandering way towards something they disliked. And when my sister, who is bisexual, felt comfortable telling us she had a girlfriend, they slandered her. My mom said she was too young to understand.



When I found **Heartstopper** in 8th grade, I instantly fell in love. I started learning to accept myself, but I was still scared. People at school were bullying me for the way I looked, and even bullying me for being gay when I wasn't even sure if I was. They kept attempting to force me into saying I was gay when I was not ready. I was starving myself and forcing myself to work out even when my legs couldn't move, just to change my body.

Then the TV series came out, and I couldn't stop watching it. All that summer, **Heartstopper** was my life.

When it hit the last month before school started, I was tall, skinny, and had a different hairstyle. I actually felt confident in myself. Then I felt lonely, and decided to tell my close friends and people on my Snapchat that I was gay. **Heartstopper** helped me to feel ready to tell at least my friends I was gay. But when I told my best friend since preschool, he blocked me. It made me cry. I had gone through so much with him, and he just decided to block me?

School starts and I'm asked, "You're gay?" plenty enough to make me scared. Everyone settled down, and eventually I felt happy. Of course, at home, I still was pestered by my family asking me if I was gay, but I

just denied it. Whenever I got into arguments with my sister, she used slandering words towards gay people to hurt me, and I just had to act like it didn't affect me.

Charlie Spring and Nick Nelson sat as my comfort characters. Whenever I felt down, I just watched interviews with the actors who played them to feel close to the characters themselves. But then the worst happened. Somehow, my sisters were able to view my story online and saw a post I made about being gay. Before I could even tell my mom, my sister had already reached out and told her. They stole my moment and made it their own. I felt at that moment that I wished my life could just end. I decided to take a shower in the dark to help escape, but I still had to talk about it. Talking about my feelings was never something I looked forward to. It was hard for me to even tell someone I was gay, let alone sit down and talk to them.

At that moment I felt as close towards **Heartstopper** as I could. **Heartstopper's** main character, Charlie Spring, was me, I was Charlie Spring, outed against my will. Why did Charlie have to come out to the entire school? Why did I have to come out to my own family when none of us were ready? How was it fair for any of us to have that right taken away from us?

It has been over a month since I've come out. It may not have been my choice, but it still happened. I am just happy that I'm not hiding from myself anymore. It's easier to accept myself when I hear it myself, rather than in the comfort of my head.

Alice Oseman, you and your stories helped me to accept my own self. Your story helped comfort me when I had no family and no friends to be there for me. Charlie Spring and Nick Nelson were my friends, and I feel that's why these characters were made – to help other members of the LGBTQ+ community to feel alright with their own feelings, and that it is normal. It's lovely how your writing has affected me, and how your writing is the embodiment of how we feel.

Thank you,
Blake Anglin

Honorable Mention – Level Two

Ali Brown

Central Middle School, Columbus

Letter to Kristin Elizabeth Clark / Author of *Freakboy*

Dear Kristin E. Clark,

Occasionally I like to go to the library after school. Most of the time I just scan the book and if the spine or the cover interests me then I'll see what it's about. The book *Freakboy* caught my eye one day. Whenever I'm interested, I'll read the brief description to make sure that I want to check it out. As soon as I finished the summary, I knew I was going to enjoy the book.

My whole life I was exposed to the LGBTQ+ community. My mom wanted to make sure that I understood what it was and that nothing's wrong with it because they're human too. That was the primary principle that I was always taught. That as long as someone is human, they need to be treated with respect no matter what. Since I was more exposed to the community, I was very accepting of people who identify as LGBTQ+. As I grew up, people in school would talk more and more about it. There were three major groups of people. People who identified as LGBTQ+, people who weren't necessarily a part of it but didn't really care, and the people who would make fun of queer people. At first, I didn't think I was in it. I had always liked girly things like makeup and dresses and kept my hair super long. Later, things would change.

Around the age of ten, I questioned if I was really straight. Eventually, I decided I wasn't. Even though I knew this in my head, telling people out loud was much scarier. I never really knew who would react how. The first people I told were my friends. They weren't necessarily against it, but it seemed to make them somewhat uncomfortable. Over time, I tried to fit into different labels, but I could never really fall into one. One day I came across a post on social media about a trans person who was talking about signs that they saw in their childhood that helped them discover they were trans. I noticed that at the time I had related to a lot of those things more frequently. The questioning of my gender identity



began. After a long time of thinking, I eventually realized that I am trans.

The book **Freakboy** was very helpful in letting me know I wasn't alone. In books that I read previously with trans people in them, the character had always known that they were trans since they were very young. Usually after I would read that, it would make me question myself more because I never really liked 'boy things' more than 'girl things' during childhood. In fact, sometimes I still like to wear dresses and skirts or do my makeup. I still see myself as a guy even though I do those things. Brendan's thought process was a lot more relatable to how I felt when I first questioned what my gender identity is. I took a very long time to think about if I really was trans or I was just thinking that because of the posts I saw.

I was a lot like Brendan in many moments during **Freakboy**. The hours of research, the questioning of gender attraction vs. gender envy, the dressing up in clothes to make me feel better about myself. I really do not know how to put into words how much comfort it brought to me. I realized that someone out there recognizes that people like Brendan and I exist, and they see us as 'normal' people. As a trans guy, I never felt like a 'normal' person. **Freakboy** helped me realize I should be treated just as everyone else. This book was so realistic, relatable, and overall amazing that I read it multiple times even though I hate to read books more than once. Thank you so much for writing **Freakboy**!

Sincerely,
Ali Brown

Let's Talk About...

WOMEN'S STUDIES

Girl Power

Feminism

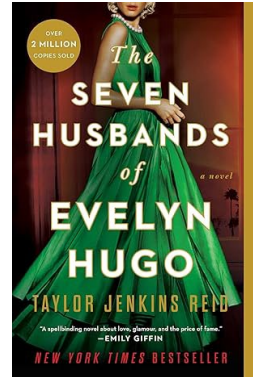
Women's Rights

Serena Silas
Franklin County High School, Brookville
Letter to Taylor Jenkins Reid
Author of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*

Dear Taylor Jenkins Reid,

When women are treated differently than men it is a sore subject of mine. Women noticeably are paid less and feel forced to do as men say just because men think they have more authority. Reading your book, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* gave me a look at the world in 1950 and how women were treated.

I thought I would give your book a try after it started getting popular through BookTok. I felt sympathy for Evelyn that she had to lie about who she truly was to please people. I felt that it related to a lot of women trying to please other people even though it is not good for them. Your book showed me how much women's rights have changed and developed.



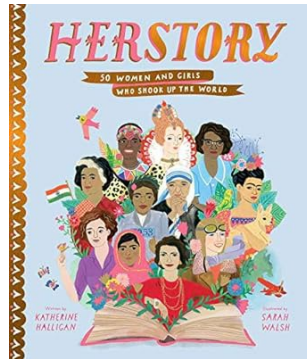
Your book made me question how many other women at the time were hiding. This book showed me you shouldn't hide what you like or love to do just because it pleases someone else. People might think Evelyn is crazy for doing what she did for her career, but I see a strong woman that wouldn't let any man control her. The novel brings in a lot of critical points that I still think about. She gave up her body, looks, and heritage to her husbands just to move up in her career. This shows me that in 1950 that she wouldn't have made it if she hadn't manipulated her husbands. This shouldn't be something that she had to do. It made me angry because no woman should have to. It makes me happy that girls of this generation don't have to give as much to accomplish their goals.

Your book makes me think every day about how I can empower other women and make them feel heard. Other people may not obtain the same information from this book that I do, but I will never stop trying to spread empowerment to other women and will strive to make a difference in how women are perceived. The novel has had such a huge impact on how I look at powerful women today. I hope you continue to write more novels.

Sincerely,
Serena Silas

Dear Katherine Halligan,

When I was 8, I read about Susan B. Anthony. I loved how she made voting a right for women. Since then, I've been looking for girl power books. First, I read *Rebel Girls*. It was good but not great. I couldn't picture them next to me because there wasn't enough content. Then when I was 9, I found *Herstory*. Reading that book made me feel like I was seeing women influence the world. Some are more popular than others, but it's fun learning about new people. I loved that you included women of all races and



cultures. When I saw you included an Indian woman, I was ecstatic. I wanted to learn about a girl of my own race. No other nonfiction book I've read was about an Indian leader. Indira Gandhi was such an inspirational woman who made India into a more modern and powerful country.

When I need inspiration, I come to your book because it has some powerful quotes and stories about women who overcame obstacles. I can connect with them because in my life, I've also overcome obstacles. Just not as big like trying to make varsity for eight to ten year olds in my swim club (it's called Sharks). I had to work hard in the water and out of the water to make it. It was hard, but I pushed through it. When times got tough, your book gave me confidence in myself. Your book also made me want to make a difference in the world so I've been donating to a charity in Indiana. I know it's not a lot but everyone has to start somewhere, right?

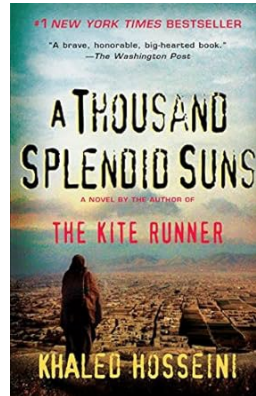
When I read the section about Frida Kahlo, I thought I knew everything about her. Turns out I was wrong. I didn't know she swam to stay fit. I love swimming and art so I couldn't help thinking, "Frida Kahlo is a little bit like me!" She also loved animals, like dogs and deer, like me too. I also didn't know that she was in a bus that crashed into a tram when she got hurt. I thought she got hit by a train. Frida Kahlo was a woman of miracles and inspiration. I saw how she lived her life like it was her last day to live. That's what I want to do now.

Your book helped me see the world through different eyes. I learned from this book that anything women set their minds to, they can do. Thank you for writing this amazing girl power book.

Sincerely,
Grace Gowdamarajan

Dear Khaled Hosseini,

I initially began reading your stories because we were forced to in World Literature. My journey began with *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. I thought to myself, how interesting could a tale about two Afghan women truly be? But as I dove deeper and deeper, the book grasped my attention by the throat and never let it go. My eyes traveled through the pages and by the end of it, I was in tears, shocked at the horrific tragedies they were forced to go through. Each girl had such a dynamic story, and it was terrible to witness yet also eye-opening. I never considered the tragedies of those living in Afghanistan, and the experiences of Laila and Mariam made me realize how grateful I am for what I have now. It was a beautiful story, with every part demonstrating how cruel yet beautiful the world can be. I am so grateful to this story for showing me a deeper dive into the lives of those who live in less fortunate circumstances and helping me understand what life in Afghanistan, both the good and bad, truly feels to experience.



As a woman, I have felt the pressures that these two have gone through. Society has always been imposing the same rules on women. They want us to marry good men, to be beautiful, to never crack or break, and to be obedient. This is especially true with Mariam's story, who was sold off so young to be with a grown man she had never met before. When I read her part of the story, I was so sad for her. I couldn't even think about how painful it was for her to be abandoned by her family and married off to bring her family "honor." The representation of this tragic event in the story was more than I ever could have asked for, and I thank you greatly for this representation. Women have been oppressed for so long and events like this occurred often because we are seen as no less than pawns to be used in a simulation.

I also harbor a deep connection with your novel, *The Kite Runner*, and its representation of minority groups. As an Asian American who has lived in America for my entire life, there are still times I feel scared to be Asian or the hate crimes that may occur to me simply because of my

biological features. I felt seen through Hassan, who had to suffer over and over for things he could not control. My heart ached for him every time something happened and throughout the entire novel, I cheered for him. This hope was crushed when he was murdered by the Taliban simply for being a Hazara. The depictions of Hassan were spot on, and it shows how, both consciously and subconsciously, majority groups tend to take advantage of minorities. This character was made specifically for the representation of minorities, and I am ecstatic that someone took the risk of writing about controversial topics to make people like me heard.

A Thousand Splendid Suns and *The Kite Runner* were outstanding novels and broadened not only my view on controversial topics but also how other people's lives may be like in these places that I have never explored previously. Both books put me to tears, both books had me kicking and giggling when something good happened, and both books left me with an incredible experience that I will never forget. They had an everlasting impact that forever changed how I view the world. Thank you so much for representing people like me, for showing the darker sides of the world, and for presenting a more realistic view into life in Afghanistan.

Sincerely,
Joyce Li

Honorable Mention – Level One

Isabella Abraham

Sycamore School, Carmel

Letter to Amanda Gorman / Author of **“The Way Forward”**

Dear Amanda Gorman,

Feminism and women’s rights have been a part of my life ever since I can remember - whether it was defying female athletic stereotypes during P.E. or ensuring that the world recognized that women are just as human as men, I always defended the rights, accomplishments, and characteristics of womanhood when necessary. After listening to your poem, **“The Way Forward”** that you recited at Karen Bass’ inauguration, I quickly developed an even stronger sense of hope and pride in the capabilities of females, and I grew more confident about the paths I can take in life.



I often have a tendency to get stuck when faced with a roadblock, and it takes rather a long time for me to move on. Your speech helped me discern that there is always a way forward, and that change starts with me. You also assisted me in recognizing that sometimes we are so absorbed in our own conflicts that we forget that it is still our responsibility to attend to the predicaments and complications of others.

There is a line in your poem that I can really relate to, which is, “The way forward isn’t a road we take, the way forward is a road we make.” I know that many youngsters in the world myself included, have big dreams for the future. We have hopes and wishes that we yearn will one day become a reality. However, so many of us with such prodigious aspirations just sit around and wait for something to happen that pushes us onto that road. In this line, you explain that we can’t necessarily take the road to the future, but rather pave the road ourselves, in order to reach our dreams. This inspired me to finally open up to my loved ones about wishes I had for the future and gave me the courage to ask permission to perform the steps to achieve them.

My whole life, I have faced gender barriers in various places. There have been and still are many female stereotypes circulating through the web of rumors. Most common are those associated with athleticism,

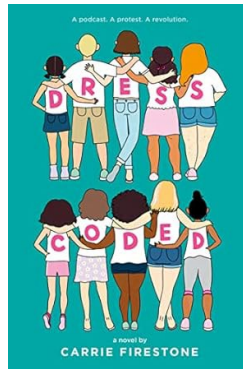
women's participation in political affairs, and emotion. These stereotypes often make females form a "perfect image" of what they should be. They then believe that the stereotypes, even if unfactual, define who they are, their appearances, and their behavior. This has been a barrier in several female journeys, including those in today's modern world, and it can prevent any woman from speaking up or pursuing a dream. In your poem, you describe and restate that it is our responsibility to speak up and bring attention to those who have been silenced and allow them to be heard. You explain that it is up to us to speak out and highlight these setbacks so that the world may address them in a manner that affects change.

I believe that your poem serves as a representation of ideas that defy the stereotypes and gender barriers of womanhood that will pave the road to equality. I also recognize that your poem and its meaning serve as an inspiration to all women, young or old, who have big dreams. It is a guide and encouragement to females to use their voice to make change. I believe that your message is a step to embracing change and confidence, and it is another brick on the road to women's equality.

Sincerely,
Izzy Abraham

Dear Carrie Firestone,

Middle school is extremely rough. Everyone is going through several changes mentally, emotionally, and physically. Rules are stricter, teachers expect more, and sometimes it feels like school staff expect you and your peers to behave like adults. There is so much stress in middle school and having to worry about what you can wear so you won't get in trouble should not be one of them.



In school I always paid more attention to women's contributions throughout the lesson in history class. In every topic and lesson, it was the same: women were overlooked and not given enough credit for their role. Coming to middle school was a huge roller coaster. One of my first ever memories of middle school was walking into my classes and learning about the dress code. Now as 8th grader, I look back on that and question it. Who was the teacher focused on while reading the dress code out to me and my peers? Was it the boys or the girls?

Something about the dress code for my school stuck out to me. To me, it sounded like a lot of those rule were focused towards girls. No tank tops. No showing your shoulders. Shorts past fingertip length. No rips in your pant on your thigh. No crop tops. This felt unfair. I'm not saying there should not be a dress code and girls should be allowed to show a lot of skin. I am saying that the dress code should be more fair. Last year one of my best friends got dress coded for wearing a tank top. The tank top was a finger wide and was long enough. The minute she tried to defend herself the teacher gave her detention.

Your book *Dressed Coded* explains the everyday life as a middle schooler. The ups, the downs. Fair, not fair. For me, your book was like my life in words. Teachers in middle school are more strict than elementary. You're expected to do the best. It is really hard and unfortunately, not everything will break your way. Sometimes you can't take any more and you need to fight back. Girl power!

Sincerely,
Savannah Depew

Dear Louisa May Alcott,

I wanted to write to you, because I wanted to let you know how much your book, *Little Women*, has meant to me. I have loved reading for as long as I can remember. I rarely go anywhere without a book close by. I love getting lost in the pages and meeting new characters.

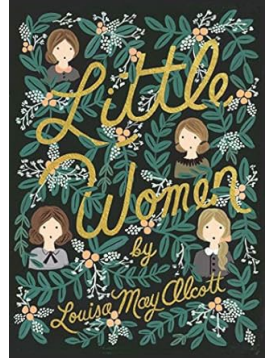
My life was changed the day I met Jo.

Never before have I related to a character so much. I love her spirit. I love how she manages to be equal parts tom-boy and artistic writer, how she is fearless and brave, but also a woman who feels deeply. She is fierce on the outside and has a soft tender nature on the inside. Jo made me feel like it is ok to be me.

And then, this summer, on a trip to Concord with my family, I met you. Or rather, I visited your family home.

I can still remember walking by the flowers in the garden in front of your home. Different flowers for your different sisters. When I found out that you used to change out your flowers every season because you were constantly trying “new experiments” and just couldn’t decide on your favorite, and well, I couldn’t imagine a more perfect garden. I learned more about you as a person, with your own similarities to Jo. I learned that it had actually been you, not your father, who had come home from serving as a nurse in the military. It was you who had gotten sick and needed to recover.

I learned about your determination and work ethic. I couldn’t believe that when you were writing *Little Women*, if you made a mistake you had to rewrite the entire page. I thought it was incredible that you learned to write with both hands in order to get the book done in time. At a time when women were not expected to have careers and sometimes didn’t get a good education, you were not only able to accomplish these things yourself, but you were also able to create, in Jo, a protagonist who would inspire young women for generations to come.



I loved seeing how much you truly loved your family. Your home was full of so much love, from your sister's wedding dress, to Beth's little piano which was left at the base of the stairs for years after her death. You honored her by changing the timeline of your story just to make sure that she would be remembered and loved.

Your book ***Little Women*** truly touched my heart. I thought it was amazing that the story is about your real life, and that your characters were real people. Thank you so much for sharing your story and inspiring me to be me.

Sincerely,
Gwyneth Provost

Let's Talk About...

SEEING YOURSELF IN BOOKS

Representation

Relating to Books

Belonging

Honorable Mention – Level Three

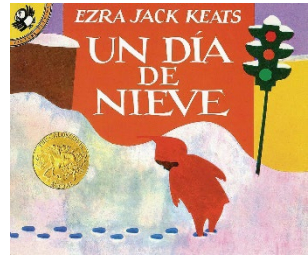
Jahdai Sanchez

Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to Ezra Jack Keats / Author of *Un día de nieve* (*The Snowy Day*)

Dear Ezra Jack Keats,

My mother used to read your book, *The Snowy Day*, to me and my older sister. Except, I didn't know your book as *The Snowy Day*, I knew it as *Un día de nieve*. And the main character, Pablo, is actually Peter in the English version. Though, why he couldn't be called Pedro in the Spanish translation is a mystery to me.



I remember reading your book in November, anticipating the snow. I remember reading your book in December, after playing in the snow the whole afternoon. *Un día de nieve* made me so excited to chase adventures just as Pablo did. It connected me and my mother, as we both still remember fondly the cold winter nights when she would read me this book. I remember wanting the exact same red outfit that Pablo had. I loved his cute little hat. I loved the onomatopoeia, though as a kid, I did not know that it was onomatopoeia. I just knew that it was fun to say “crac, crac, crac,” when describing Pablo stepping on the snow or saying, “plaf!” when describing the snow plopping on Pablos’ head.

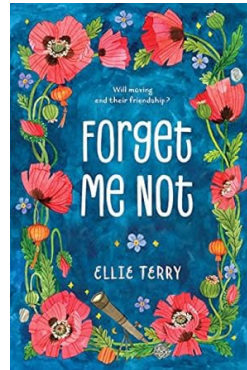
Your book was the first time I remember seeing a person of color as a main character. I didn't think much of it as a kid, but looking back at it now, I think that representation is important and impactful. As I did more research on you, I realized that this was no accident. You purposefully wrote of minority children, and you purposefully pioneered bilingual picture books. You centered them because you knew what it was like to be discriminated against. For that, I thank you. Thank you for having your books available in my native language. Thank you for choosing Pablo. And thank you for helping me develop my love for reading.

Today, I read your book not only to myself, but also to my five-year-old brother. He loves your book for the exact reasons I do. I have memories of my mom reading it to me, and now, he will have memories of me reading to him. I think that your book will live on forever.

Sincerely,
Jahdai Sanchez

Dear Ellie Terry,

A few years ago, I read your book, **Forget Me Not**. I finished the entire book in a single day. Ever since then, I have reread that book multiple times, and each time it's as fun and enjoyable as the first time. It was one of the first few books I read that had parts written in verse and poetry. Poetry can be a beautiful thing, and the way you did it was perfect. It felt exactly like feelings and thoughts. For me, discovering and reading a book like that was a real eye-opening experience. It introduced me to a completely different style of writing.



Looking back at it now, it was probably one of the things that helped me discover my passion for writing (and poetry, if we're being specific). I just loved the way it flowed so naturally in your book, and it made the whole story seem more personal. Your book was also one of the first realistic fiction books I genuinely enjoyed, and it made me more interested in the genre and helped me discover more amazing novels.

The way you wrote your book also made me able to empathize with Calliope. Even though our lives are different from each other, I was able to understand her struggles and even relate to her in some ways. It also helped me learn about Tourette's syndrome, which was something I wasn't really educated on. Jinsong's perspective was also refreshing to see, as I normally don't read many books that involve characters who I can see a little bit of myself in. Seeing my own culture in your book in things like the moon festival made me really excited during my first read. Reading window books can be really cool, and I love learning about experiences that may differ from my own, but reading mirror books was just something that never really happened to me much. I didn't think that I would enjoy it as much as I did when I read your book.

I have you to thank for starting my interest in writing poetry, and my passion for writing in general. Your book was, to put it simply, a door into an entire new world, though that does sound a little cheesy. I will continue to read it over and over again.

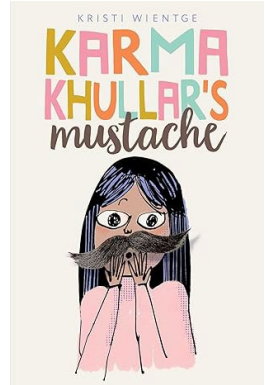
Kind regards,
Catherine Guo

Honorable Mention – Level Two

Vedika Vyas
Creekside Middle School, Carmel
Letter to Kristi Wientge / Author of *Karma Khullar's Mustache*

Dear Kristi Wientge,

Your book, *Karma Khullar's Mustache* was one of the most monumental books in my life. I remember in 4th grade, picking up your book remembering that I finally had a book character that I could relate to. As I am growing up and still growing up, I haven't had access to books that embrace the struggles of being a Brown girl in the western world and the discrimination and Otherness that you feel. Your book was one of the first books that I could actually relate to.



Karma faces similar challenges such as her notorious mustache, and her friendship with Sarah slipping away from her fingertips. Although Karma and I have our differences we have common similarities. I know that as fellow Brown girls we have a LOT of body hair and in some cases that's great but not so much in the other cases. Towards the end of the book in the scene where Karma takes a razor and decides to shave her legs, I recognized that as something I could relate to. Especially in Indian culture, we don't really talk about body hair, menstruation, or any other feminine things. This book sparked something inside me because for the first time in my life I was able to physically and emotionally relate to a character and it was and still is a new experience for me to read about fellow Brown girls and read about their experiences. Although I haven't truly experienced the feeling of a friend slowly slipping away from you this was a book that I felt was a mirror into my own life.

Like me, Karma Khullar is an overthinker. She constantly worries about her physical appearance and what other people think of her. Even though she thinks those 17 hairs on her upper lip make a huge difference, nobody truly notices them and your book has taught me to let go because most people do not care.

Your book reminds me so much of elementary school because even the small issues that she faced like her leaking tiffin filled with Indian food are experiences that I vividly remember. Everyone judging me and

asking me, “What’s that?” acting as if my food wasn’t food, it all brings back memories which is what makes Karma’s story touch my heart. This book allows me to connect with characters like me who face the same experiences. The importance of this book was significant. Your book is a realistic and humorous representation of all the South Asian girls. Karma knows all the beauty standards and the struggle and sensitivity of body hair.

Karma doesn’t have the best communication skills when it comes to her parents. If we go back to the bathroom scene, I bet Karma would’ve wished that she had talked to her mom before picking up the razor. This scene made me feel grateful that my mom was comfortable talking about body hair removal.

I have so much gratitude for how you captured what it’s like to be South Asian and how you crafted it into Karma’s life. So, THANK YOU SO MUCH from the bottom of my heart and all the other Brown girls.

Thank You,
Vedika Vyas

Gianna Williamson
Logansport High School, Logansport
Letter to Kathleen Glasgow
Author of *How to Make Friends with the Dark*

Dear Kathleen Glasgow,

My sister's car was broken that morning, so we rode with my aunt. After school, my aunt took us to the public library because she was working with one of her clients. I was told to be quiet and get a book. When my older sister and I were walking around, I saw it. I saw a dark blue cover, with tiny stars all over. It was on top of a shelf that was too high and as I got closer, I could see *How to Make Friends with the Dark*. Then I read the back cover. I knew that I needed to read this. I needed to know Tiger's story. One thing I didn't know was that this book would change me.



As I began to read this book, I started to wonder why this average girl has a whole book about her. She had nothing special, she reminded me of myself. Someone in the background, unnoticed, just there. No one would even realize if she just stopped talking. Her mom is all she had. Her horrible father is in prison, and she has no other family. It was just her mom and herself. That was all she had. She had Cake as her friend but even if she was her best friend, she would never truly be her sister. When she lost her mother and found out about her half-sister everything got flipped back upside down.

I relate to Tiger and this book so much because I know what it is like to lose your mother at a young age. To not know how to feel or what to say. Nevertheless, what do you tell a child who lost both parents? No one knew what to say to Tiger or me, but in reality, I do not think either of us knew what we wanted them to say. I know what it is like to have a bad guy like the father. I know what it is like to live in a wreck of a house. I get how no matter how close you are with someone they can never really be your sister no matter how many times you say it, the same blood will never flow through them as it does you.

I just want to say thank you, Kathleen. This book has touched me to my core. Thank you, really. You wrote a book about someone like me.

Sincerely,
Gianna Williamson

Let's Talk About...

**PERSONAL EXPRESSION:
WRITING**

Becoming an Author

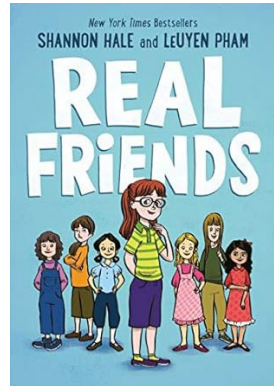
Writing Novels

Writing Short Stories

Maya Burgess
Shelbyville Middle School, Shelbyville
Letter to Shannon Hale, Author of *Real Friends*

Dear Shannon Hale,

Real Friends really impacted how I made friends and having friendships for me. I got the book in second grade. I remember how I unwrapped this present, full of excitement, only to see it was a book. My parents noticed how I didn't read much so I think that is why I received this book. I was honestly disappointed. I didn't enjoy books at all. This book changed that.



I started reading *Real Friends* and I was instantly sucked in, I loved it. This novel makes you feel every emotion Shannon feels, and really connects you to the book. I read *Real Friends* every day and every night before bed. I was devastated when I reached the last page. Not even a week later I read the whole book again. I don't know how many times I've read this book. This novel helped show me who my real friends are and what a good friend is. I was bullied at the time, so I related a lot to Shannon. It was nice to finally feel understood and I realized that I'm not the only girl in the world who got bullied for my appearance and personality.

In the book, Shannon got betrayed by her best friend the same way I had been betrayed by mine. I didn't even notice that I'd been betrayed until I read the chapter, "Jen." This book inspired me to let go of my fake friends and make some real ones.

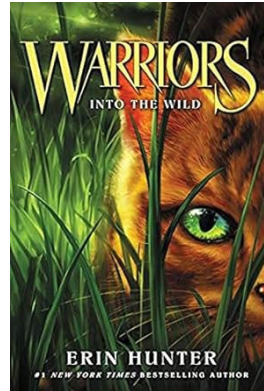
Real Friends also brought out my love for writing. I really looked up to Shannon and she wanted to be a writer and constantly wrote little stories. I started writing my own stories and books to show my friends and relatives. Now I love writing and I have enjoyed my ELA classes ever since, thanks to this book.

Shannon showed me that it's okay to be weird, to have hand-me-down clothes, and to only have one real friend. This book made me feel normal and understood. I definitely recommend this book to young girls who are struggling with friendships. It definitely helped me a lot.

Sincerely,
Maya Burgess

Dear Erin Hunter,

I have been reading your *Warriors* series since I was in second grade. I was obsessed with cats as a kid, and so my mom bought me the first three books after noticing that I kept watching fan-made videos about them online. Ever since then I have held the series close to my heart, and though I have not quite finished reading it, it is still one of my favorite series to this day. I would recommend it to anyone, because even if they don't like cats, the lessons it teaches are important and have shaped me to be the person I am today.



Into the Wild was one of the first books I ever read as a kid that wasn't a picture book. It helped me discover how much excitement you can get from a book without pictures. It leaves everything up to your imagination, and you get to interpret and imagine the world the way you desire, and not the way the illustrator wanted you to interpret it. The books even inspired me to create my own stories when I got older. I remember writing about my own *Warriors* characters in free writing during school, and I scared my teacher so badly with a bunch of fighting cats that I don't recall having free writing ever again! Ever since then, I have loved writing stories and wish to become an author in the future to share all my ideas and stories that are floating around in my brain.

The characters in the book have impacted me just as much as the books themselves. I remember crying or laughing over things that characters did, or screaming whenever my favorite characters died in the heat of battle. I even began to relate to some of the characters in the book, such as Bluestar. I relate to her dedication to her clan, which is very similar to my dedication to theater. When I'm with the cast, even if they are my friends, I seem to get really upset whenever they don't put their full effort into something I love, just as Bluestar was whenever she found out that Firepaw had visited Smudge, stating "We don't have room for anyone who isn't sure whether their heart lies in the past or the present." I related to this because, though it is nice to have a lot of people in our cast for our shows, what matters is how willing they are to go all out and do the best they possibly can. Bluestar was clouded by the need

for more warriors in her clan, and didn't think about how willing Firepaw would be to become a warrior. Luckily for her, he was determined to be the blazing fire he was destined to be. I also relate to the overall theme of the book, which I believe is, "No matter your background, you can achieve great things." This ties into Firepaw's story, and his desire to be a warrior of Thunderclan despite being born as a kittypet.

I really related to the characters in the book, and also learned how much I loved to write and create my own stories from them too. I have kept reading all these years because of how much these books have changed my life, how much I have learned to love these characters with my whole heart and soul, and how many good memories I have had reading the books you have written. Thank you for writing the books that have brought me so much joy.

Sincerely,
Fraya Wasson

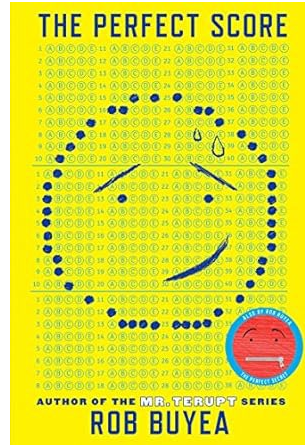
Eliza Sandberg

Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Rob Buyea / Author of *The Perfect Score*

Dear Rob Buyea,

I should start with a big thank you. *The Perfect Score* impacted me so much. Prior to reading your novel, I had no idea what it was like to be a Trevor, whose older sibling bullied them nonstop, or Randi, whose mother pressured her into being perfect. It opened my eyes to how different each of our lives are. It made me feel more empathetic towards others, and to try not to be quick to judge people by first impressions. I could feel myself represented clearly in Natalie, and it was fascinating to watch the plot unfold through each character's perspective. There must be dozens of reasons why I love your book, but I'll only be listing three in this letter.



One way *The Perfect Score* impacted me was by introducing me to characters whose lives were nothing at all like mine. Randi's life probably affected me the most; it's just terrible to think that a mother would put that much pressure on her daughter to be perfect at gymnastics and expect her to still get good grades even though she misses lessons for practice and tournaments. For a girl like me who has parents that put education and my best interests first, it's difficult to imagine and makes me sad to think about. Or like Gavin, to be passionate about something but never get to enjoy it, because they're too busy babysitting their younger sibling. As an only child, I had no idea what that must be like. These characters changed my way of thinking and have made me more empathetic towards my classmates.

The second reason I love *The Perfect Score* is that I relate so much to Natalie. From her indignation at the other students' behaviors to the way she "conversed with her conscience" at recess, I knew she was a lot like me. I loved reading the story through her perspective, and it was cool to see that as I learned more about what other people's lives are like, so did Natalie. You could see it in the way her attitude changed, and when she found out about Gavin's dad, it absolutely shocked us

both. Natalie was a role model to me personally from the way she accepted change and a turnabout in events.

The third and final reason I love your book is that it has taught me a lot about writing a good novel. Before I read ***The Perfect Score***, I had no idea how to write a multi-perspective book, or to build such an exciting and gripping plot. After reading your novel, I've had so many ideas for stories that were so much better than what I'd written before. ***The Perfect Score*** also taught me how to slip in hints and clues just one at a time, so that it keeps the reader interested and wanting to know more. Thanks to your incredible novel, I'm a much better author.

To summarize, I love ***The Perfect Score*** because it taught me to be empathetic, I related closely to Natalie, and I've learned better ways to write. Thank you again for influencing me!

Kindest regards,
Eliza Sandberg

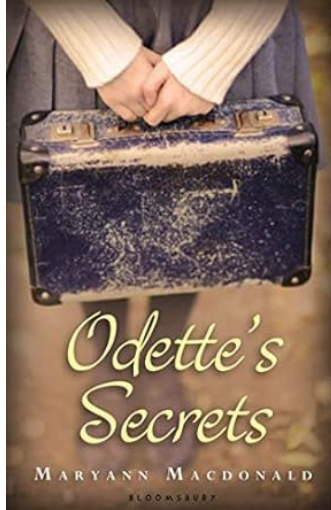
Allison Arambula

Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Maryann Macdonald / Author of *Odette's Secrets*

Dear Maryann Macdonald,

The book you wrote called *Odette's Secrets*, moved me in an impactful way. It helped to open my eyes by showing me how grateful I am to have my family to come home to every single day, and that I can eat, sleep, and live beneath a roof where I feel protected. This book also helped deepen my understanding about those who are having a hard time and to have empathy for their tough situations. Because no matter your skin color, religion, or race, no matter who you are or what you have, everyone deserves equal rights as a human being. I learned this lesson because the book states that Odette is a Jew, and she is getting hunted down because of that. This book even introduced me to a foreign country, one I have never been to before, yet the book was so descriptive that I felt as if I had been to France a million times. And I've learned so much from your beautiful book.



This book inspired me to put all of me into my writing because someday, if I become an author, I would want to write a story like this. I love writing, but I never thought I was any good at it, because after every book I read, when I would write about it, I would compare my writing to other people's writing and think I was bad at it. But after I read this book, I suddenly became hopeful, because I believe that one of this book's themes is to never give up. For example, when Odette was running away, she didn't give up. So, I started practicing writing more, because your book gave me the confidence to open my eyes and see how much potential I have. To this day, I love writing because I get to use my creativity, and I love watching other people read my writing. This wouldn't have been possible if your book hadn't given me the confidence to try.

As I finished your novel, I realized how important family is. I took everyone for granted until I started imagining what life would be like without them. For example, my baby sister. I can't imagine coming home

every day and not seeing her. I love to see her face light up and run to me saying, "Sissy!" And when I am scared, the only time I can feel truly safe and protected is when I'm with my parents. Finally, my middle sister even though we don't always get along, I still love her. And if I didn't have her coming in my room every 10 minutes asking if I will watch the dance that she made or to play Barbie dolls with her, things just wouldn't be the same. This book showed me the people that I need most in this world.

Lastly, I had never put into perspective how lucky I am to not be living on the streets, trying to find food and clean water. Or how I have a roof to live underneath and to go to sleep every night in a warm bed where I am loved and safe. I am also not trying to fetch my own food; instead, I just go downstairs, and there is food. I don't have to worry if I will eat tonight. I don't have to worry if there is a storm tonight, whether I will stay dry and comfortable.

While this book has taught me a lot of things, it taught me mostly about empathy and perspective. Now instead of comparing myself and thinking how I have it rough, I focus on what I have and how things could be so much worse. I like to think on the positive side, not the negative. In conclusion, I have learned a lot from this book, which is why this is one of my favorite books, and it has impacted my life for the better. I will carry these lessons with me forever. Thank you for writing this outstanding book.

Sincerely,
Allison Arambula

Let's Talk About...

PERSONAL EXPRESSION: ART

Drawing

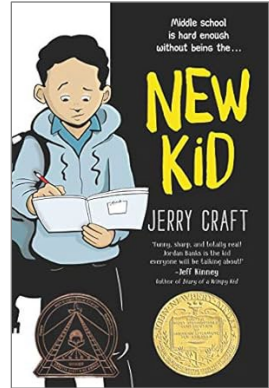
Abstract Art

Art as Coping Mechanism

Comics

Dear Jerry Craft,

I really liked your book *New Kid*. It showed me even more that even though some people are of a different skin tone it does not matter because even though Jordan Banks had a darker skin tone Liam still did not care and was really nice to him. *New Kid* also taught me that you should never give up because in his first soccer game he did not give up and persevered and so he actually scored a goal, and in some parts of the story even though there were some hard obstacles he still powered through it and did not give up.



Something else that the book showed me is that friends can come from anywhere because when Liam toured him around the school, he still respected Jordan even though he had a darker skin tone than him. Also, when Jordan met Drew, he never knew he was going to become a very good friend later on. Some other book inspired me to draw more because Jordan's drawings are really good and someday I want to learn how to draw as good as him.

This book also made me look at the world differently because if I were in a new school I would also not like that my friends were gone, but I would make lots of friends in the new place and I would still remember my old friends. I also learned that you can't always think you're the best because Andy always thinks he is the best and teases people, but he does not know the bullied victims point of view. Some bullies do not know what it would be like to be a person that is being bullied. All the other people are really nice to the new kid. Even if some people are from a different culture, you should not judge a book by its cover.

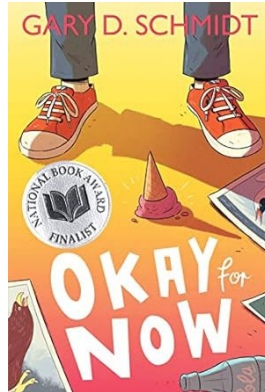
Something else that I learned is that you should always try new things because when he tried some new art in the art class, he tried just some easy abstract art, so he did not really like it, but he tried something new. I think I would try to do abstract art just like him because I love to draw and paint looks very good. I loved reading your book!

Sincerely,
Camden Burns

Dear Gary D. Schmidt,

At the age 11, I lived in a world surrounded by sunshine, knowing no sorrow or hardship. Ignoring the tragic news of the day, I lived life with ease and ignorance. I felt sorry when hearing about grim stories that people experienced, but at that time, I didn't give them the true sympathy they deserved. Making no strong emotional connection, I could only muster up superficial sorrow as a naive young child.

Then one day, I asked a friend for a book recommendation, and she urged me to read *Okay for Now*. Told that I would like the artistic aspect of the book, I wasn't prepared to mature with Doug and spill an incessant flow of tears.



Surrounded by a loving family my entire life, Doug's abusive household completely threw me off. What was even more astonishing to my young self was Doug's resilience. His narration, as if he was personally telling me his story, immersed me into his world and position. Only then did I take the common saying, "Put yourself in someone else's shoes," as genuine advice to follow. I joined Doug living in a world against him, and I could not sit down to read without a box of tissues next to me. His coming-of-age story helped develop my own process of maturing. He never gave up and fought against the unfair world, from restoring John James Audubon's *The Birds of America* to just continuing after having a tattoo forced upon him by his own father and revealed to his peers. As a shy child, his courage to stand up against authority and abusive figures inspired me to go out of my comfort zone. If he could endure so much for his stance in the world, then I could try new things that seem miniscule in comparison, like making new friends. The book threw me off kilter and then put my world into perspective.

Doug's passion for art and restoring *The Birds of America* was another aspect of admiration to my younger self. I had no passions. At most, I dabbled in art and was labeled as the artist by peers for my ability. I realized later on that I drew not for myself but to get praise from others, until Doug introduced me to his perspective about art. When he

described the Arctic Tern and traced the artwork, I was glued to that painting as well. Like a spark, I wanted to draw not for class or for a friend but for myself. That passion has not died to this day as I continue to improve my skills and learn more.

If I was being honest, I wouldn't have tried to be friends with Doug if he was in my class. As young as I was, prejudice strongly dictated my actions. Then I got to know him and his struggles in life and his challenges against prejudice. I felt so frustrated at the principal and certain teachers for being so biased against him because of their impressions of Doug and his brother. Then I realized that I have acted exactly like them before against peers and strangers based on their appearance, never once considering their own situations and struggles. While school taught not to have prejudice, your book instilled that in me. Truly, the messages conveyed through this book left an indelible impression.

I could go on and on about your book on how it unknowingly changed me. The emotions imbued upon me while reading have never left even as the details become fuzzy. Even while writing this, I get teary eyed at Doug's suffering through that abuse because now I truly am able to sympathize on a deep emotional level. **Okay for Now** was a very difficult read to me because of the tough subjects explored, however, it has truly taught me valuable lessons in life. Now I try not to stray away from tough subjects that people want to ignore on the news. Learning is a privilege that should be appreciated, especially when people like Doug aren't given the same opportunities.

To this day, the scene of Doug holding hands with Lil surrounded by hospital machinery, not knowing how long she has to live while watching the first moon landing pops up in my head when I'm demotivated. They have hope despite what they have endured, so why shouldn't I have a little hope and work through my own struggles.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for writing **Okay for Now** and teaching me so much.

Sincerely,
Jessica Jiang

Bo Yaari

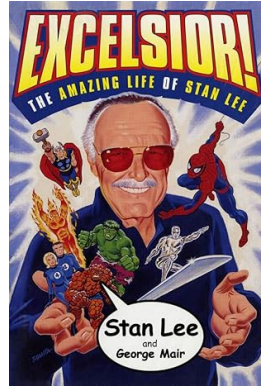
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Stan Lee and George Mair

Authors of *Excelsior! The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*

Dear Stan Lee,

I read your book *Excelsior! The Amazing Life of Stan Lee* and I was extremely inspired. The summer before my eighth-grade year, I had to choose an autobiography to read for school. I immediately thought of your book because I know every single Marvel character that you created. I appreciate all the hard work and effort you put into everything Marvel that we all know and love. Not only did it inspire and teach me valuable life lessons, it gave me the inspiration to follow your lead. I learned that the Marvel we know today wasn't created so easily. This only makes me appreciate everything even more. I learned that there were hard times, roadblocks, and struggles. You and your story taught me to keep pushing through these hard times in order to leave my creative legacy on this earth forever.



There is a common theme throughout your book: Whenever one door closes another door opens. You were writing comics for forty years and you wanted to quit. You were ready to tell your boss that you were done writing comics. You were closing a door and a chapter in your life. But as you went to approach your boss, he asked you to make a team of superheroes. That instantly opened a door to your future. Because of the new door you opened, you became extremely successful and created *The Fantastic 4*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Spider-Man*, *Thor*, and *The Avengers*.

Ever since I was little, I've loved to draw. I would draw things from imaginary movies in my head or games I played at recess. Eventually, I started to draw comics, so I could share the entire story instead of just a picture. I was always inspired by your success in art, comics, and movies. All your creations impacted my worldview so much. When I want an escape from my reality, I can always count on one of Marvel's comics. I use them to immerse myself in a world where good wins over evil and, even when there are sad events, the endings are always satisfying. Even today, when I'm not reading your comics, I watch the movies inspired by

them and they transport me to the same universe that was created only to make us happy.

After fifty years of making comics for Marvel, you wanted to have a fresh start and experience something new and exciting. You decided to move to Hollywood, closing a door and as expected, another door opened. You instantly loved Hollywood and you started to make Marvel cartoons and films rather than comics. When creating comics became boring and stale, you continued creating Marvel stories, just in the form of movies instead. You closed the door on something that wasn't working and opened a door to the future of superhero movies and the start of the Marvel Cinematic Universe that everyone knows today.

The Marvel movies especially inspired my drawings, the short movies I make on my iPad, and even the way my mind works. I hope to make movies and draw comics for a living, and I know that it might not be the most practical future career path. It seems too good to be true, a "dream job." The fact that you were a successful comic and movie writer that impacted the entire world taught me the importance of continuing to draw my comics and dream up my make-believe movies, because whenever there are obstacles, and whenever there are roadblocks, I can close that door and close that chapter. I can open a new door and it will lead me in the direction I want. The direction that you were led into to achieve your dreams, because whenever one door closes another door opens, and that way you can work around your obstacles and get to where you really want to be.

Sincerely,
Bo Yaari

Third Place – Level Three

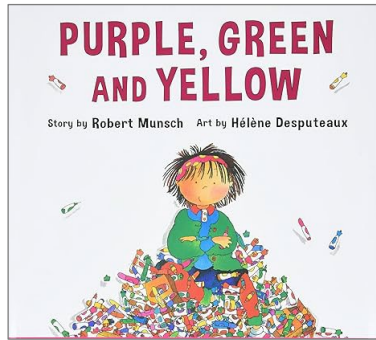
Aliza Nelson

Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to Robert Munsch / Author of *Purple, Green, and Yellow*

Dear Robert Munsch,

Growing up there was nothing more I enjoyed than a piece of paper and a box of markers. Art was on my mind, always. The first memory I have of drawing was at Sunday night church. All I needed was a pen and the back of the church program and I was drawing like never before. So, it's safe to say, my parents have been well aware of my passion



for art since the beginning. I lived and breathed art, and even somehow always smelled like it too. Whether it be the strong smell of paints or hot glue fumes, it didn't take long for someone to acknowledge that I was in the room. I was obsessed with creating. And at a young age I knew exactly what I wanted to be, an artist. But no one really understood how strong of an urge to create I had. It just wasn't plausible for me to ever not have art in my life.

My parents supported my passion and that's how I discovered your book, *Purple, Green and Yellow*. They read it to me almost every night, and I found the concept of your book ridiculous. I mean, a girl who colors herself with markers that will never come off until she dies? That's a bit dramatic. But the thing that had mesmerized me the most was when Brigid washed off the markers from her skin and accidentally washed away all of herself and became invisible. To resolve her dilemma, she just colored herself back on, appearing better than before. I didn't think much of this as a child other than worrying that when it rained, her skin would wash off. But because it was just a story about a girl with magical markers, it wasn't supposed to make sense after all. Now that I'm older, I'm starting to realize just how real your story really is.

The summer before my freshman year of high school, my father informed me that we were moving. This phrase was not abnormal considering my father's vocation; in fact, I had experienced it four times before. Growing up as a pastor's kid, I was used to moving around. But that summer, I was more burnt out than usual. I didn't want to leave. I

had already planted new roots, and I was expected to be fine with digging them up and replanting them somewhere else, again. I was just so tired of being the new kid.

After we made the move, a lot changed, and it felt different than the earlier moves. What I thought was just a phase wasn't. I became lazy. I wasn't motivated to make new friends, I was constantly tired, and I lost my urge to create. My mental health was taking a toll on me to the point where I physically couldn't get myself to pick up a pencil and draw. It felt like every part of me was being stripped away and all I could do was sit there and watch.

Art soon became something I avoided. I was starting to adjust to my new town, and I wanted people to like me. I figured that I needed to change in order to fit in. So, I joined other activities and kept art out of the picture. I convinced myself that I was happy, but deep down I knew I wasn't being true to myself. I was a fake. I hadn't drawn in four months. I became the one covered in the magical markers. I colored myself for others, making myself appealing from the outside, yet on the inside, I was an empty canvas.

Entering my senior year, things had finally changed for the better. I gained a new sense of self and confidence that I hadn't had before. I started to surround myself with others who would just beam light. They helped me grow in my faith and come to terms with my mental health struggles.

And then it happened.

I had finally experienced what felt so foreign for such a long time, the urge to create. I have never bought a sketchbook so fast in my life. And just like that I started drawing again, and slowly bits of myself came flooding back. My view on the world changed back to its artistic lens, and I started seeing the world as a beautiful canvas.

And that's where you come in. Just recently did I discover a comment you made about your book. You stated that you wrote this book about your take on depression. And wow what a great job you did. Mental health is something not only I struggle with, but something many more in our world deal with daily. You depicted a book that put into words exactly how I felt, the need to color myself for this world.

Today, I'm 18 years old and I'm entering adulthood. I plan on studying psychology in hopes of becoming a therapist for those who struggle with mental health. Your book not only showed me the effects of mental

illness, but the demanding need for a light for those who are struggling in the darkness.

So, thank you for not only being one of those lights for me, but for children all around the world. You've shown me that even in the midst of darkness, you can still be a light to this world.

Sincerely,
Aliza Nelson

Let's Talk About...

NATURE

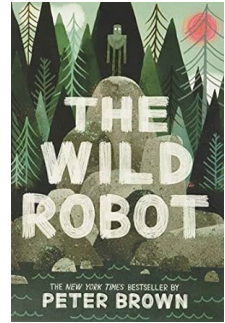
Appreciating the Earth

Conservation

Hiking and Survival

Dear Peter Brown,

My mom is a teacher, and she loves your books. She has them all and reads them over and over. ***The Wild Robot*** is our favorite. There is something magical about ***The Wild Robot***, the relationships, the realistic story (even though it's about a robot surviving in the wilderness raising a goose) that hits home. Our copy of your book is worn, the cover is missing, there are nature doodles drawn on the cover as well as coffee stains. It is well loved!



My mom cries when she reads it. I think it's because the love between the characters is real. You got those intense and endearing feelings right. You also got the way it feels to be in a new situation right. That's the part I identify with. I am Roz.

I moved to a new state with practically no warning because of my dad's job. I was Roz, waking up out of a moving box having been dropped off on a wild island called Indiana. I had to observe and adapt and become wild to fit in, find my new people and eventually call this place home. It was scary at first, and I felt "something like loneliness" but as I opened my eyes to the adventures and possibilities, I found I was home.

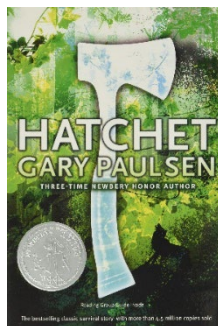
I have always loved A. I. and robots and nature, which to most people is a strange mix, but you blended them perfectly! In the mornings, when I drive to school with my mom, there are all kinds of animals out that can be observed just like on the island during the dawn truce. I learned from Roz if you are quiet and patient there is a whole world to see. Most people miss out because they rush around, or simply don't open their eyes. Every time I read ***The Wild Robot***, I notice that it is mostly about love and relationships and less about a robot. I think that's one of the most important things in life: to love hard and make connections with the people around you and help each other out.

Mr. Brown, thank you for your stories and life lessons! I will always take ***The Wild Robot*** with me in life and remember its messages.

Sincerely,
Julius Keller

Dear Mr. Gary Paulsen,

I was in 5th grade when I was introduced to *Hatchet*. I was hooked. I fell into the abyss of swirling words that I could reread over and over. I loved how gripping and intense the story of Brian's adventures was. I was soon assigned a project about *Hatchet*. I didn't miss a beat. Before I knew it, I was out in my woods with a hatchet acting how I thought Brian would be stranded in the woods. When I was out there, I felt different, like a million bucks!



I'm connected to the story *Hatchet* in many ways. I love to be out in the woods. It is my sanctuary! Like Brian, I stay out there all day (it isn't like he has a choice). When I'm out there I feel alone. Alone in a good way. I feel warm and pleasant and ready for anything. The woods fuel me and my body. The energy I get fuels me to make forts, to hang out in them and play. Brian inspires me to do things in the woods that I normally wouldn't think of doing. I love the way that Brian survives. It helps me feel better about being in the woods alone by reading this book and making me feel comfortable out there.

Hatchet makes people feel different about the scary things that linger in the deep, dark, woods. It opened a new chamber to my brain that lets me think about how I can make myself feel pity for the people stranded who do not know how to escape the never-ending tree jungle. Those people would starve and die with no resting place. I am very grateful for you to write this book for entertainment and for survival. I know I repeat myself, but this book makes me rip parts of my heart out over this book. I want for my friends, classmates, family members, and those around to read this great award-winning book.

In conclusion, I wish that everyone that reads this book becomes immediately hooked to this book that has won my heart. You changed me in many ways, making this wonderful and awesome book that changed how I view part of the world. Thank you for making this book.

Sincerely,
Pierce Olson

First Place – Level Two

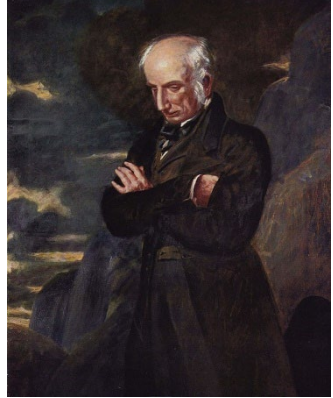
Elizabeth Jo Gast

Trinton Central Middle School, Fairland

William Wordsworth, Author of “**I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud**”

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 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 even. And if we don't get outside and enjoy the brisk chill of the wind coming off 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,
Ellie Jo Gast

Let's Talk About...

SCIENCE

Technology

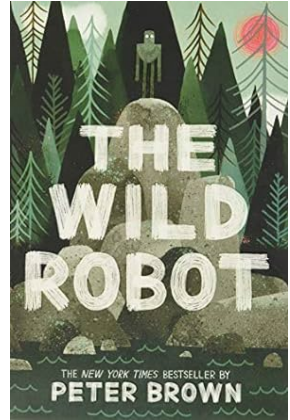
Nutrition

Biology

Dear Peter Brown,

For years I saw nature as simply nature. Deer were deer, birds were birds, bees and butterflies were bees and butterflies. Just that. As soon as I read your book *The Wild Robot* my perspective of nature changed.

I saw the world from behind Roz's eyes and discovered something that had always surrounded me but was completely hidden from view. I went from seeing a few dull deer walking around and eating some grass to seeing a loving family living life. Some crazy squirrels running around and climbing up trees became best friends, having fun and enjoying themselves as much as they could. I found myself with more empathy for animals than before, always imagining them as creatures from the island, and me as Roz. When you know they have thoughts, feelings, friends and family, animals in nature are much more than simply animals.



Thinking about Roz's life changed my view on technology much like it changed my view on nature. To me, meaningless code in a meaningless computer became a beautiful brain that was just as real as an actual human being. I realized that if we like humans because of their thoughts, feelings and ideas, a robot with all of those and more should be treated the same way. You could easily call me farfetched, but maybe, just maybe, robots and animals (including humans) could all peacefully coexist.

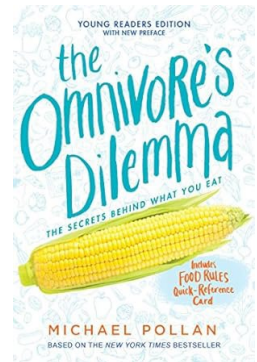
The book later helped me in an unexpected way. When I moved across the country, I felt like Roz washing up on the island. Adapting to where I was, slowly finding my way around my location, and finally, fitting in and making friends. While Roz's journey was certainly much more dangerous and interesting than mine, I was comforted having something to connect to during that. It was like going through a never-ending tunnel, but having a friend to guide you, to comfort you, and to protect you. My quick adjustment is in huge part thanks to Roz's adventures with friends on the island.

The book I found on a shelf all those years ago changed me. It helped me through a tough time. Thinking about robotics and nature made me want to be a biomedical engineer to work with both of those, and to make a difference in the world. Your book made me a better person. For that, I thank you very, very much.

Sincerely,
James Dillon

Dear Michael Pollan,

Your book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: Young Readers Edition* has really shaped my view on the food industry. Although some of the information was scary, it has helped me realize what I am eating, and the health benefits and harms within the food I eat.



First of all, I didn't realize just how much corn was in all our products. It made me realize how much *nothing* is in all our food. Most fast-food Americans eat is really just corn, which I imagine is not good for us. It also shocked me what was allowed to be in our food, and one of these was TBHQ (tert-Butylhydroquinone). You only had one column of it, but that information really impacted me. The fact that TBHQ was allowed in our food, even though it was super toxic, shocked me and really made me try to avoid foods with it in it. Before I read your book, I knew that things like fast-food were bad, but I didn't really know how bad they were, so I thank you for letting me know what was in my food.

It also shocked me how brutally cows and other animals are murdered. It's like they aren't even alive – just food. It made me think about the meat that I eat, and made me feel bad about the animals, in turn helping me eat less meat. The things that they feed the cows sometimes and how they get killed just shocks me. Again, the fact they're treated just like food, not living things I found crazy. It doesn't seem like something so terrible should be allowed.

It also was crazy to me how much nicer true farms were, ones that were run by a farmer who cared about his animals. This impacted me, and before I didn't really like organic and healthy food, but after learning about this I realized just how much better it was, even if it was a bit more expensive. The food was so much better than other food, in taste and nutrition.

Before I would take any treat I could and just eat it without thinking, but after your book I realized that treats are really terrible for you, and it made me rethink getting sweet things whenever I can. It also made me rethink even things that aren't sweet per say, but just have a bunch of

terrible toxins in it, like fast-food, and I have changed to stop eating those as much.

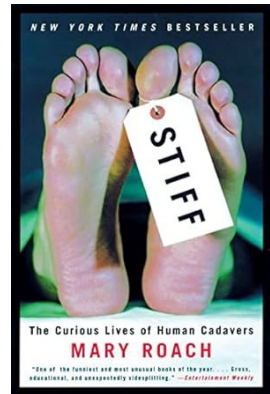
Mr. Pollan, thank you for telling me, and all the other readers of ***The Omnivore's Dilemma***, and for reshaping my thoughts and habits about food forever. Your book will shape the rest of my life and help me to have a much healthier life.

With appreciation,
Benjamin Blake

Kyrin Baker
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer
Letter to Mary Roach
Author of *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*

Dear Mary Roach,

Sophomore year of high school I had the opportunity to pick a book to read out of several different options: one option was your book, *Stiff*. Before selecting the book, I had already had a slight interest in the subject of biology. That sparse interest had compelled me to choose your book. I picked up the book and began reading.



The idea of research on cadavers being used to further knowledge about the human body fascinated me, and I enjoyed following the former living beings through their many adventures, trials, and experiments, ranging from simply laying on the ground and decaying to being shot at with rifles for weapons testing. I enjoyed it all; however, what drew me in the most were the descriptions of the cadavers themselves.

One section that really caught my eye was in Chapter Three. The portrayal of each cadaver in the process of decay was at the same time shocking and intriguing. Freaky as it was to learn about what happens after a body dies, (the very bacteria that have been living in the body through the entire duration of a person's life eat the body from the inside out), reading that those very same bacteria are responsible for the releasing of gas from cadavers was rather funny. It also made me wonder if the bacteria in the body is the culprit for the release of gas in living people.

While Chapter Three was quite fascinating to read, a different section also posed a question. How many fewer people would be opting for a face lift if they knew that the surgeon's skill came from practicing on the decapitated head of a human being? That is what I wondered the entire time I was reading about the heads in Chapter One. I was able to picture each head described and it left a churning feeling in my stomach, and it left me wondering how much more would a person wanting a face lift feel if they knew how the surgeons learned. I found this question rather amusing while going through the text.

Whether it was just a head, or the entire cadaver, I became engrossed in the depictions of the human body and how its structures allowed it to function, as well as what would happen if it stopped functioning, but at the same time, because the cadavers were real people who had lived real lives, I felt a deep respect for them as one should for a human being.

Upon completing the book, I had developed what was once a minor interest into a much stronger and narrower passion. Reading your book made me realize that it wasn't just biology that I was interested in, but the anatomy and physiology of the human body. This new precise view of what I truly enjoyed allowed me to more closely pursue my interest in the world of science.

Many thanks for the enlightening book.

Sincerely,
Kyrin Baker

Let's Talk About...

GROWING UP

Learning New Things

Practice

Developing Confidence

Palmer Snape
Prairie Trace Elementary, Carmel
Letter to Renée Watson/ Author of *Ways to Make Sunshine*

Dear Renée Watson,

I have read a lot of books in my lifetime and I'm only 9! That just proves that I love reading! I was surprised how much this book ended up impacting my life so much more than others.

Ways to Make Sunshine impacted my life after seeing how well she handled moving to a new environment. I know nobody is perfect and so she did the thing that probably a lot of kids would do ... she COMPLAINED! She said things like, "Why do we have to move?", and, "I DON'T WANT TO MOVE!!!!" In the end she realized that moving isn't all that bad.

For instance, when she found the hairpin that led to a mystery...and in my opinion solving mysteries is fun! They can make you curious and excited to wake up every morning to keep finding clues!

Ways to Make Sunshine also impacted my life because it encourages me to problem solve more on my own. When Ryan wanted to participate in the talent show, she didn't know what to do. She was good at cooking but how was she going to bring an oven, microwave, stove, crock pot, or any stuff like that to demonstrate on stage. She couldn't think of anything else until...her friend KiKi told her that she should do something to incorporate kindness because she said it suited her. She then decided to do the greeting job. That just proves everybody's good at something... you just have to find it inside yourself.

I'm so glad you included this next little part in the book. It's when Ryan's mom kept reminding her why they named her Ryan. She was reminded by her name that she is a king and a leader. It gave real meaning to her name. My given name is also unique and I'm named after my dad Paul, a great leader and strong man, even though I am a girl, ha-ha!

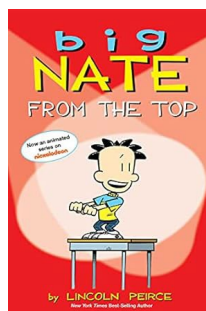
This book is such a fun children's book and I'm sure I'm not the only one who loves this amazing book! I just want to thank you for writing it and inspiring me to look within myself for greatness.

Thank you for reading my letter,
Palmer Snape



Dear, Lincoln Peirce

Your series **Big Nate** changed the way I look at life. It inspired me to be confident like Nate. I learned a lot of responsibilities in my role as a student athlete. It also paved the way of how I look at middle school. In a way, you motivated me not to be Nate and get good grades. When my parents got divorced, I knew it was going to be ok, because it's just like **Big Nate**.



Big Nate inspired me to be confident. But not in a bad way. It taught me to believe in myself. It showed me not be cocky. I saw Nate being cocky and he got in trouble. Kids didn't want to be around him, and they thought that he wasn't very good at what he was bragging about. He wanted people to think he was amazing, but he was doing the opposite.

Nate's point of view of middle school changed mine, both in good and bad ways. There is a lot of stereotypes about middle school like how "there's a bully," and "that one teacher you hate," and "there's a big nerd." Like any kid, I believed everything I saw. I prepared and did those moments happen? No, but it taught me how middle school was going to be like, how class was going to look like, the bells, and lockers. I guess you could say **Big Nate** taught me my social life.

My parents got divorced in late 2019; it was hard but reading helped me through it. One day, I was reading **Big Nate**. In one of the books Nate brings up to his friends that his parents are divorced. I knew that if Big Nate could do it, so can I. Nate didn't seem worried about it too much, so I wasn't. **Big Nate** helped me through tough times.

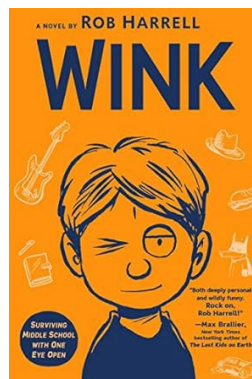
In conclusion, you helped me grow into who I am, a young confident 6th grader. **Big Nate** helped me through tough times, inspired me, changed me, helped me, and showed the light when darkness was upon me, and made those times better. Without this book, I wouldn't be the same. Thank you for changing me in a positive way. Please keep writing to change other people's thoughts for the better.

Sincerely,
Dylan Wise

Dear Rob Harrell,

When I get ready in the morning, I go to pick out clothes. I always think about how other people think about the clothes I wear. Or when I do my hair, I think about how other people think about it, not how I think about it. Or what other people think about the shoes I wear. Then I read the book *Wink*. When Ross took off his hat to reveal his mohawk and said he didn't care what other people thought of how he looked, that really got me thinking.

Why do I care how other people think I look? I should be wearing and doing my hair how I want it. I should be ME. When I normally read books, I read the book then move on and usually forget about it. When I read *Wink*, I read it and did not forget about it. It stuck with me. Now I am wearing the clothes I want and am doing my hair the way I want. The book *Wink* also helped me practice my instrument more. This book also helped me realize that even though you don't want to do something, something better than you thought comes out of it. I recently finished the book *Wink*, and I loved it.



Ross is similar to me and different from me. Ross is a middle school kid trying to fit in. Ross plays an instrument (guitar). I play the violin. Ross's commitment to the guitar inspired me to have a higher commitment to the violin and practice it more. I have never heard a story about how an instrument helps stress. After hearing Ross's story, I tried playing my instrument when I was stressed and in hard times and it really helped me! It also hooked me onto the book more because it talked about something I liked.

Ross had to go into the doctor's office every day to look at the red X and get a scan. I remembered back when I had to do something I did not want to do. I had to get ear tubes in my ear so I could hear better. I really didn't want to do that. But after I was done, I could hear better, and I was glad that I did it. When I read *Wink*, I felt even better about the decision I made. I also realized that what I had to do was not as bad as what Ross had to do.

This is how the book **Wink** helped me through my life and showed me to not care about what other people think I look, how to practice my instrument more, and learn that if you don't want to do something, something good comes out of it. Thank you, Rob Harrell!

Sincerely,
Beckham Biddle

Dear J. M. Barrie,

Of all the movie adaptations and references to your book, **Peter Pan**, I never once came across one exactly like it. I read your book at the end of last school year. I started reading **Peter Pan** because I wanted to read some classic literature. **Peter Pan** seemed like a good book to start with.



In the book, Wendy didn't want to become a lady, but to stay in the Neverland was in her dreams. I wish that I could escape from reality and into the fantasy world that is in my mind that no one but me can understand. Because no matter how hard you try, reality is reality and you have to come back to it. Some may not like it, but it is the truth.

When the Lost Boys and Peter wanted Wendy as a mom, I can understand her shock and surprise. I have helped kids of many ages. But it is one thing to help kids with art projects, it is another to be their "mother." To feed them, make them take their medicine, fix their socks, tuck them into bed, and read bedtime stories. I probably will not understand until I am in my late twenties or early thirties at least.

Like Peter, I don't want to grow up. To clarify, I don't want to move forward. Life only gets harder. In less than a year, I will be going to high school. When you are little, you don't think about high school and college. Sometimes I wish I could go to Neverland and not have to worry about any of my problems.

If you don't grow, you don't learn. Peter is an example of this, he never learned. He always made the same mistakes. He lived in a world of make-believe. This shows the bad side of never growing up. That made me think about what would happen if I never grew up. It makes me question if I would want to never grow up.

Peter Pan made me realize that growing up is a good thing. I'm still nervous about high school and all that comes with it, but it is only four years. I just hope I am ready for high school and whatever comes next.

Sincerely,
Abigail Ruschau

Dear Ichigo Takano,

I, like millions of others, am a fan of **Orange**. While I may not stand out among all your fans, I wanted to personally thank you. Your book has permanently affected me and made me a better person. I am happy to say that I was blown away by **Orange**. Not only by how amazing of a book it is, but also by how much my life changed after reading it.

I started reading **Orange** when I had free moments at school. I quickly realized how relatable the protagonist Naho was. I

feel as though Naho's personality is like my own. She puts everyone's happiness before her own, which results in her neglecting herself. I really related to this, and it made me feel like Naho and I were old friends. I started recognizing things I do that remind me of her. And as I kept reading, I was more patient with myself. I think it was because Naho made me realize that it's okay to feel the way I do.

I have noticed improvements in myself. I have started to think more about myself when I have choices, much like Naho had to start doing. Now, I'm able to speak up for myself more. And I do more of what I want regardless of if I'm scared. Naho's character development is much like this. I began to think, "If Naho can do it, so can I."

Kakeru has also taught me something very important: to forgive myself. You created the main conflict in the story around Kakeru blaming himself. He thinks he is the one responsible for his mother's death, bringing up the topic of regret. Specifically, it is the regret of not taking chances. The regret of the characters' future selves. And most importantly, the regret of Kakeru not saving his mother. Kakeru is so certain he's a terrible person. His regret is so strong, it stops him from doing things he wants to do. And like Kakeru, there are a few things I regret. It's something I really struggle with, especially when it comes to how I could have done things differently with other people.

But, with the support of his friends, he begins to forgive himself. That's something that Kakeru needed to learn to do, and so did I. Yet again, I



tried to take this character's development to heart. I started trying to move forward, and forgive myself as well. Just like the characters, I'm starting to learn to live in the present. When regret takes over, I now have some positivity, thanks to **Orange**. The beautiful characters you created were able to overcome their hardships, inspiring me and many others to do the same. When things get tough, I have Kakeru to remember. Even though he struggled, eventually he was able to smile. Not a smile with sadness hidden behind it, but a genuine smile.

Something else **Orange** has taught me about is friendship. It's often easier to not tell people about your hardships. It's easy to ignore your regret, and deal with it yourself. However, **Orange** showed me that it's okay to ask for help. When you share the things that you struggle with, it's easier to deal with them. The group of friends would never have been able to save Kakeru if they didn't work together. It can be hard to save yourself if you don't have help.

Your story inspired me to open up to my friends. It taught me that when you have regret, you can do something about it. In the story, they wrote letters to their past selves to guide them. But in my life, I can start by being more present, and not letting fear stop me.

The story of **Orange** is simply beautiful. The topics of growing up and dealing with hardships are something we can all relate to. That, mixed in with wholesome moments between the friends, creates the perfect representation of life. They were able to all work together and overcome. Those characters have shown me how to love myself. Likewise, how in the most desperate of times, we can help each other and find a way through it. Life isn't perfect, and it can be full of regret. But those imperfect moments are what make life beautiful. **Orange**, to me, is a representation of that. It has shown me that it's never too late to fix things, and that it's never too late to save those you love. So, I would like to thank you for creating a story that helped me, and that will help many people to come.

Sincerely,
Rory Kopp

Let's Talk About...

FAMILY

Family Members

Quality Time with Family

**Coming Together
Through Reading**

Second Place – Level Three

Julia Vamos

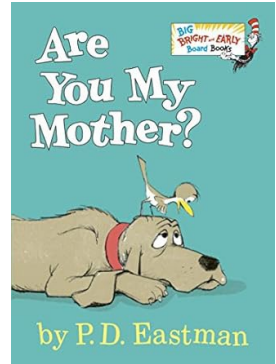
Valparaiso High School, Valparaiso

Letter to P. D. Eastman / Author of *Are You My Mother?*

Dear P. D. Eastman,

Your book *Are You My Mother?* takes me back to my younger days and makes me reflect on my life as a whole. Growing up, I loved your book because I related to it. Your book encompasses the connection I had and still have with my mother. This I am thankful for. Additionally, your book helped me to discover something that I am passionate about, helping children.

My story begins at the very beginning just like your book, birth. I was born seven years after my sister and almost nine years after my brother. Growing up surrounded by older siblings, I was forced to mature fairly quickly. However, I kept some sort of curiosity just like the bird in the book. I find that I carry this curiosity with me wherever I go. I have this yearning to find out more about not only myself but the world around me. Whenever I feel down or discouraged, I think back to the bird and remember that I have this spark that makes me want to learn.



Furthermore, growing up with such a vast age gap between my siblings and me caused me to have to look for someone else who could be there for me. This person was my mother. At some points in my childhood we were attached at the hip. She advocated for me to go to school half day allowing us to spend more time together so she could share important life moments with me. During that year, she taught me things that I couldn't learn in school. She taught me to show kindness, empathy, and honesty to those around me. Through the years she has taught me important lessons like how to write, how to run a vacuum cleaner, and how to drive. However, she has also taught me intangible values like how it's okay to take your own path to venture out and try new things. She taught me that it was okay to fail at times, just as long as you got right back up again. Combined, all these things have created the person that is writing to you today.

Additionally, when I saw the young bird content in the wings of his mother, I saw myself feeling comforted by my mother in key moments.

At gymnastics meets, I would bubble over with nerves until I saw my mom in the crowd. At school, I would get upset because I would miss her company and laughter. In public places I found myself clinging to her side in order to feel a sense of security and safety. Your book not only made me realize how important mothers are but also all that mothers stand for. They are the warmth and love that is dispersed throughout a family. They are the support that motivates the family to achieve their goals. They are the security that alleviates all worries and apprehensiveness.

Also, seeing and sharing the connection that the bird had with his mother made me want to help children around the world. I want children all around the world to have the type of connection I have with my mother. I want children's mornings to be filled with their mothers' cheerful whistles and their evenings to be filled with their mothers' cooing lullabies. I want children around the world to feel comforted, safe, and most of all loved by their mothers. I believe that it is possible for all children to feel loved by their mother the way that the bird and his mother loved each other.

In the end, all I have to say is thank you. Thank you for reawakening my curiosity with your literature. Thank you for reminding me of the important life lessons I have learned. Thank you for inspiring me to help children. Most of all, thank you for reminding me of the relationship that I share with my mother.

Sincerely,
Julia Vamos

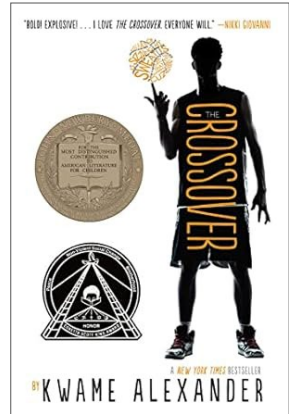
Dear Kwame Alexander,

When I decided to read *The Crossover*, I was excited to read about a kid playing basketball. That's all I was really expecting. However, when I read the very first page everything changed. I felt myself pounding the ball in a perpendicular position while droplets of sweat came pouring down my snout. I could feel Josh inside. Especially when he went through tragedy. When I read about this tragedy something changed inside of me.

I realized that my family is the most important. I recognized that someday you could just lose them. I noticed how valuable they really are. Before I read this book, I would say some pretty mean things to them. This book led me to becoming nicer to them and loving them the best I could. You never know what could happen. It's like swimming out in the ocean and playing on a shallow sand bar and then a wave hits and changes the tide or current that comes out of nowhere. Then, the water becomes 20 feet deep.

Next, when I read your book, a passage caught my attention. "In this 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." This passage told me to always love your family even when they are acting annoying. Josh struggled with that. He got super jealous of his brother, and he became unloving. I didn't want to be like Josh. We all make mistakes. However, I need to apologize for them. I need to stop always saying, "He did this or that, or he started it," but to own up to my actions. When I make excuses for something, it just means that I'm too scared to own up to my own mistakes.

Lastly, when I read this book, I realized that my free time has taken over my family time. I mostly play some silly video games instead of having fun with my family. I need to focus on them more. I need to laugh and giggle and have fun with my family. I think there have been way too many distractions from my family. We need to get out and spend more time together. So, after I read this book, I've tried to spend more



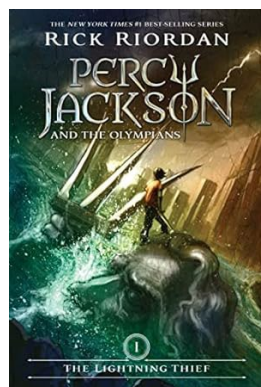
time with my family. I assign days where we have nothing planned and I decide that that day is with our family.

So, Mr. Alexander, thank you for teaching me these things in your book. You really changed my life.

Sincerely,
Tate McKinnis

Dear Rick Riordan,

It was time to read again. I slowly walked over to the back corner where the bookshelf stood. I rummaged through the books. Mystery, biographies, sports, magic, realistic fiction, war, scary, and all that jazz. I stood there staring right at one shelf. One book was misplaced. I grabbed it to put it back but then the shiny words on the cover found a place in my heart. I had found the book. I kept it neatly in my little hands as I walked back to my seat. I studied the book: **Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief**. I knew this was the book. As soon as I picked it up, I fell in love. I knew my sister had said something about it, but I couldn't quite think about it. I wanted to try it. I flipped it to the first page ready to give up. Words of joy filled the page. I fell in love with a book. I had entered a whole new world of magic. I escaped the world when I set it down.



I was finally reading a book that I had loved. My world felt like it couldn't be more perfect. I impatiently waited for my sister to get home. As I heard a crack at the door I ran to my sister. I told her how magical the book was. I was super proud of myself, and she was too. I started to read more. I was told when I finished, we would watch the movies. I was determined to complete this book for my sister. On the last page my sister came up to me. She told me how proud and excited she was that I liked a book. When I finally finished the magical book, I wanted to feel the fun again. I was proud like Percy when he defeated a monster. I grew a connection with my sister while we watched the movie together. We had grown closer through this book.

My sister is a senior and about to leave for college. As much as I will miss her, **Percy Jackson** will always be a connection between us. We are completely different people but when it comes to books, **Percy Jackson** sums it up. It always gives me something to talk about with her. We could talk about the book for hours. I cannot wait to visit my sister and watch the movies together. It will always be in my memories with her.

When it is time to read, I always think about the day that brought me joy while reading. The day I picked up **Percy Jackson** and thought I was going to give up. I did not give up and I gave the book a chance. Before that, I would always be timid going into a book. Now, I am not afraid of a challenge. I like to pick up a new book and try it. I understood **Percy Jackson**. It brought me closer to my sister. Ever since then we would always spend time together more often and play games. Now, I am always looking for a challenge. Thank you for giving me a challenge and bringing me closer to my sister.

Sincerely,
Claire Gurley

First Place – Level One

Daniel Glazier

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis
Letter to Esther Forbes / Author of *Johnny Tremain*

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 accustomed to.

After the accident, I couldn't see my mom for a few weeks anywhere besides the hospital, but when she came home right before my birthday, it was an amazing feeling. It was very unnatural for me to spend time without my mom in our home together with our family. Though 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 towards 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 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 if I was patient and waited another day to go with my friends? This thought made me feel 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 Forbes, for teaching me how to grow up, deal with adversity, and to be a "Johnny Tremain."

Sincerely,
Daniel Glazier

