

*the James & Madeleine McMillan* FAMILY FOUNDATION

LettersAboutLiterature

# LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE

## 2024

Award Winning  
Letters to Authors  
Written by Indiana  
Students

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

**CENTER FOR THE BOOK**

INDIANA AFFILIATE



# Letters About Literature

*2024 Winning Letters by Indiana Students*

**Indiana Center for the Book Director**

*Suzanne Walker*

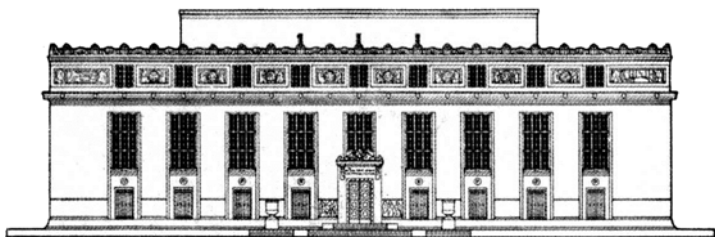
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the James & Madeleine *McMullan* FAMILY FOUNDATION  
LettersAboutLiterature



Published 2024

Indiana State Library  
315 W. Ohio Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46202

## **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 US territories. 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 in Washington D. C. for the National Book Festival.



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## **- Congratulations from the Indiana Center for the Book -**

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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 Rob Harrell, Indiana Author -

April 18, 2024 – Indiana Letters About Literature Online Ceremony

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Thank you for that introduction. First off, I want to thank you so much for having me. This is such a cool event, and huge congratulations to all the winners. I think some of those letters were just amazing. I had the opportunity to read a few of the winners ahead of time, and I was honestly stunned. I think this whole event just speaks well for the future of Hoosier literacy but also just reading, and you know, I think there's some writers, clearly, we've found here.

Yeah, I was blown away by the letters. They were so personal and so eloquent and just really well written. I don't want to be the one to break it to you, but I think you're writers, so keep that in mind. I think those letters also sort of point to the magic of books, and the bond that you have between reader and writer, and it's pretty amazing to hear these people reaching out to the people who have moved them.

Just taking the four videos that we saw of the winning letters, when you think about the scope or the breadth, the array of subjects, it's pretty incredible. Books have that magic in them where you can pick up a book about some subject that you know nothing about, and suddenly it can change your life, and it can change the way you look at the world.

For example, it's like Megan finding this book and reading all about prejudice and injustice and now having sort of a burning passion inside her for that, and Audrey finding this deeply meaningful book that helped frame and inspire her relationship with her sister. I just think it's incredible. Kayla, that's one of the ones that impressed me so much just because whoever thinks about picking up a book about tomatoes and how tomatoes are produced, but, you know, that can happen... you read that book and suddenly you're outraged, or you're invested in this thing that you had no idea about.

One of my favorite books I read in the last few years was a book called ***The Death of the Great Lakes***, and it's all about fish life and how the Great Lakes are changing. You wouldn't think that would be a thrilling read, but it really was. Finally, Lincoln, reading a book about anxiety and feeling seen and maybe feeling less alone with those feelings... I'm someone who's dealt with anxiety since I was a kid. I still deal with it, and I understand the power of a book and how it can affect you. Think about the crazy number of books that are out there in the world, and I encourage you to continue to pick up books where maybe it doesn't first look like it's for you, but you might find something in there that inspires you.

I'm asked a lot of times what makes someone a good writer, and I think the first answer, the number one answer, that always comes to me is be a good

reader, and part of that is something I've talked quite a bit about in some of my school talks. I think your brain is sort of like a lifelong stew that you're boiling, and the more ingredients and ideas you throw in there, and the more you read about different cultures and read about different points of view and just different facts and things like that, the more you put in there, the better that's going to make you as a writer. You'll be writing a book at some point, and things will pop out of you that you didn't even remember, but they've just been stewing away in there because you've been reading.

I'll go further than that. I think reading and filling up your Brain Stew makes you a better person. I think it enables you with empathy and understanding, and it helps you navigate people who have different points of view. You always look at things from both sides, and you just learn to be a better person that way.

As far as me being a writer, I just wanted to talk about the fact that there are a lot of ways to become a writer, and I think I sort of snuck in the back door of becoming a writer. I started out as a kid who liked to draw, and then I started to draw cartoons, and eventually it led me to doing illustrations, and then for a while I was a painter. I always thought of myself as an artist, but then eventually I started doing comic strips, and there was some writing involved there obviously, and then I did my first graphic novel and was like "Wow! I really enjoy writing stories and developing characters and sharing experiences, and maybe trying to help in writing those stories as well."

I moved on then to a series of hybrid novels, *Life of Zarf* and then novels like *Wink* and my upcoming book, *Popcorn*. It's weird how there's been sort of a slow sea change over my life. I think I went from thinking about myself as an artist who could kind of write to now thinking about myself kind of as a writer who can kind of draw, which may not sound like a big distinction, but it's gotten me to where I am.

Another thing I just wanted to talk about briefly is how I choose what book I want to write next. I'm kind of in that process right now because *Popcorn* is coming out in September, and I'm sort of on the hook to come up with what my next book idea is. This may sound weird, but I spend a lot of time thinking about myself at 12 years old in 1980 in Bloomington, Indiana. I live in Zionsville now. At the time, I was struggling with things. I was struggling with wanting to be popular, or trouble at home, or trouble with friends, or larger problems. What I like to do when I come up with the next book I want to write is I think, "What is a book that I wish somebody could have put in my hands at that point when I was 12 years old? What book would have helped me to read and would have helped me cope with my anxiety and with things that came later in life?"

For example, 20 years ago I went through a pretty horrible ordeal with cancer, and I ended up writing the book *Wink*. Hopefully people who read that book... I mean, it sounds pretty heavy, but it's actually a funny book, and

I hope it's enjoyable to read. My hope is that it helps someone who's going through something like that or someone who has a friend who's going through something like that.

That's kind of how I choose what to write and that's how I chose to write the book that I have coming out soon here called **Popcorn**. It is all about anxiety and a little bit about OCD. The kid's grandmother also has Alzheimer's, which is something a lot of people are dealing with. But anxiety really felt to me like we could all use some help with that right now, myself included. Sometimes when you write a book, they say you're not writing it to *tell* what you think about it, you're writing it to find out what *you* think about it, or kind of solve some of those things for yourself.

**Popcorn** is about this kid Andrew who's having sort of the worst day ever, and he's a kid who deals with some pretty bad anxiety. It all takes place in one day at school. It's picture day, and numerous things go wrong...some of them funny, some of them really scary. I didn't just want to deal with anxiety. Sometimes, I have sort of this free-floating anxiety where I just feel anxious all the time, but I've also had anxiety attacks and even panic attacks, and I didn't want to shy away from that. I wanted to show that panic attacks are real, and they can be really scary and very intense but that they can be survived.

Andrew is in seventh grade, and he's dealing with some stuff that day. I feel bad that in both **Wink** and this book, I really dump some stuff on my characters, but I do know that at times, life dumps on you, and I've had times where it's done that to me. Hopefully I can share a lesson with humor in an entertaining way that you want to keep reading the book, and you want to know what happens. I hope that, just like with John Green and Lincoln, you respond to that. I'm hoping that it will register with some people, and it would have registered with me when I was in seventh grade.

Thank you so much for having me.



**LETTERS**  
**ARRANGED**  
**BY TOPIC**

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**Let's Talk About...**

## **THE POWER OF BOOKS**

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**Reading, Writing, and Art**

**Seeing Yourself in Books**

**Censorship**

Dear Kiera Cass,

When I first read your book, it was for a class assignment where we had to choose a book to read from a list our teacher provided. This took place in 7th grade 2023, and I enjoyed reading the book but skipped it until 8th grade when we had to pick a book of choice, and I chose to read *The Selection*. I had already read it, so I decided to read it again and thought it would be an easy read so that I could get the project over with. Then I started to read it and fell in love with the book and started reading the series. They were so good that I ended up reading all six books in two weeks, which changed my life forever.



I started reading them when my mom took my phone away and then that inspired me to start reading. When I started to read it helped me do something productive with my time and learn different ways to structure my writing. It helped me develop a new way of thinking and processing situations. It also helped me fall in love with reading and books. By the end of the week when I got my phone back, I didn't start scrolling endlessly for hours. I put my phone down and started reading.

Reading helped me think of different ways to think and approach subjects. I analyzed the books that I read and realized that when authors write a book, the first page of the book is everything because it is the first impression that we get on the characters, and it reflects how we see them throughout the book.

This book inspired me to read more books and expand my knowledge of reading. Just because I chose to read that book one day inspired me to read ten books in one month. This book expanded my horizons to so many different tropes and writing styles. It also inspired me to think about what I want to be when I grow up and what I want to accomplish. I've always wanted to be a marine biologist and horseback rider because that is my sport, and I have always loved animals. But when I started reading, it changed my perspective on things, and I started to consider the option to be a professional reviewer or author.

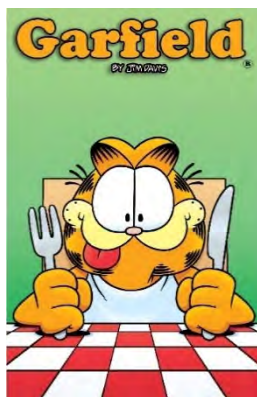
I always wanted to ride horses. That was my life until I broke my back from a fall and started to think about what else I wanted to do. Then when my back healed after four months, I started to ride again, and it brought back the thrill of riding, and I was in love with the sport again. I got back into my normal routine, but something was missing until I started reading your book. It helped me get into healthy habits and helped me enjoy reading. I enjoy riding and reading because of this book.

Thank you, Kiera Cass.

Sincerely,  
Emma Wust Head

Dear Mr. Davis,

On May 15, 1980, not just a terrific book was born but also a legend. When I was a kid, I loved your books. They felt like magic. The characters would not only be on the page but would also pop off the page like one of those birthday cards that has a 3D thing in them when you open them. After reading my first **Garfield** book, I could not stop reading them. I thought as I read them, "How could one book make this all happen?" Your book made my childhood and made my way for a love of drawing.



After reading my twelfth **Garfield** book, I decided I wanted to start drawing cartoony things like Garfield. Your books would inspire me to draw my art. This was when I was about six, so you can imagine I was not that good at art, but over time I got a lot better. In fourth grade, I started spending all my free time using Google to find pictures and draw them on paper. Sometimes I ended up using multiple pieces of paper. I remember once I used nine pieces of paper to draw a megalodon. Now I am eleven and I like a VR video game called *Gorilla Tag*. Within two to three days of drawing cartoony *Gorilla Tag* characters, I became particularly good at it, and it was all inspired by your books. In art, I had to do a project where I combined two cartoon characters, and I chose Spooderman, which is a disoriented version of the Marvel character Spiderman, and Garfield, and it turned out great.

The joy Garfield brings is like an escape from reality. It made me happy to see him, and he also had humor which I think is a good touch for him. He is like the comedian of cats! Every time I read the book, he would make me laugh.

You also made the characters feel like they were real. For example, Garfield and Nermal are enemies, but John loves Nermal. The dogs are very real too, since most dogs go ballistic if they see a cat. I also like that in every book, you put in the past lives of Garfield and Odie. My cats act like Garfield because they torment my dog named Joey.

On May 15, 1980, not just a terrific book was born but also a legend. When I was a kid, I loved your books. They felt like magic. I always wondered who could create such a terrific book, but now I realize who could...a legend beyond compare, someone no one could compete with, and a life changer. Well, your book certainly changed mine. Without your book **Garfield**, I would not be where I am today with my passion for drawing things. Thank you for having such a positive impact on my life.

Sincerely,  
Gabriel Horine

Abraham Rigg  
St. James, Haubstadt

Letter to John Grisham/ Author of *The Theodore Boone Series*

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Dear John Grisham,

I love your **Theodore Boone** books. Now, I have not read the entire series. I only read three of the books. I am not quite sure which one is my favorite. The books really changed my perspective of reading. I never liked reading and always felt forced to read. In fifth grade my teacher suggested the books and she said, "Abe, maybe you should try this book." I thought it was too big and that I would never finish it. I ended up reading the book, and it changed my life.



I started to enjoy reading. As the books got more interesting, I got pulled into them, and I was motivated to read. In fact, I asked for the entire book series for Christmas. I read two more of the books then got interested in some other books. In a good way, your books didn't help me go to bed; it did the opposite. They kept me up, and I wanted to keep reading them to see what happened next.

I felt like the books were pulling me into them. I was motivated to read. Your books were intense and full of mysteries. When I read your books, I was always trying to guess what would happen next. I liked learning about someone else's life. What I mean is what Theodore ate for dinner or what he thought about other people. I like how Theodore has his own office, and his dog sounds awesome. My favorite book was probably **The Abduction**. To me, it was the most interesting. Although in **Kid Lawyer** when I was introduced to Pete Dufy or the murderer, that was very fun to imagine and think about. In fact, at the beginning of the story, I was very bored and talked to my teacher. She said, "It's just introducing all the characters," and so I kept reading the book. I am very glad I did keep reading your book or else I probably would not have enjoyed reading.

I feel like Theo and I could be friends or I can relate to him; I love riding my bike around town, and I overhear my parents talking, so I know some stuff a kid should not hear. Or if they are planning a surprise, I normally find out pretty fast. I guess that relates to how much Theo knows or all the cases and trials. I also know almost everyone who lives in town, and I like to pretend to be an adult and hang out with them more than I do with



kids. What I mean by that is he has his own office and knows all the judges, police, and lawyers.

One character that I really think was a good idea was Theo's uncle. I think you did well adding him into your story. I do not really imagine most books, but your books are easy to imagine, and it is fun to visualize. So, what made you want to write books? How did you come up with the idea of **Theodore Boone**? Which book is your favorite, or do you like them all the same? Did you like to read when you were a kid? Did it take a long time to brainstorm your books?

Overall, your stories are amazing. I love mystery and sometimes intense books, but your books are very good. I really need to finish the series. I think your books are really good summer break books. I really only like to read at night and during the summer because you can stay up as late as you want reading.

Sincerely,  
Abe Rigg

**Jocie Kenjorski**

The Nature School of Central Indiana, Lawrence  
Letter to William Shakespeare/ Author of **Speech from Macbeth**

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Dear William Shakespeare,

My name is Jocie Kenjorski and I go to The Nature School of Central Indiana. Macbeth's "Is This a Dagger Which I See Before Me?" soliloquy is very powerful. Even just reading it, you can feel the emotion. The line, "Art thou not, fatal vision sensible to feeling as to sight? Or art thou but a dagger to the mind, a false creation, proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?" is very moving and makes me want to go perform onstage and act! You are an incredible writer. I will be honest with you, I do not always understand what your writing means, but that's what makes it interesting!

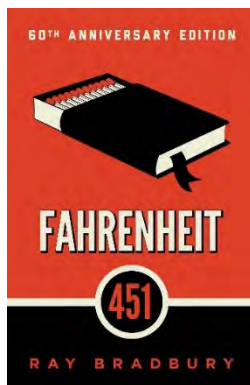
My dad was recently in an adaptation of **Titus Andronicus**, but I did not understand what was going on, so I saw it twice, and that helped me have a greater understanding of the show! Every time I read your writing, I have a better idea of what it means. Your characters are so interesting, and I wonder how you have so many ideas! I mean, you were the building blocks of modern-day theater! You have accomplished so much! I wonder how you did it all. I absolutely adore this monologue of yours. I would really love to go and see **Macbeth** right now. My goal is probably to see every one of your shows. I just love them, especially the violent ones. The violent ones are honestly kind of funny. I really want my dad to audition for another one of your shows. He really loves doing them, and I love seeing them. I wish to do one of your shows when I'm older.

I would really love to meet you! Why did you have to die in the 1600s? Time can be really irritating like that. I also love all the names in your shows, such as Lavinia, because they are so very beautiful! I always wonder things like, "What you did in your free time besides writing?" and, "Who you might have been without theater?" All your monologues and soliloquies are so very interesting and really make me think about life and all sorts of things. "Is This a Dagger Which I See Before Me?" is a breathtaking and incredible speech. When I first read it, I was quite confused, but then I looked at the whole backstory of what's happening. I was just like, "Wow, that's powerful." You are probably one of the best writers to ever live, and you have left such a legacy.

Sincerely,  
Jocie Kenjorski

Dear Ray Bradbury,

**Fahrenheit 451** is a great book. I thought it was moving, especially since our world is starting to become like that one. I had to read it for an assignment in my English class, and I thought "Why a book from the 50s?" I thought low of it, so I kind of took it for granted. Then I read it, and I was like, "Wow. This is like our world today." Now, you may be asking yourself, why? Why would I think that? Well, today, books that authors pour their time and devotion into to make an amazing piece of literature can be banned. Not all are. But some. And why? Some person with a complaint decides to ban the book because of some idea they don't like.



Maybe they think their sheltered child is too innocent to read a "bad" idea. Maybe they are scared of words on a page. No matter what, these idiots think banning an author's work of art helps. It doesn't. That's not even half of it. In the US, most of the time, ideas aren't banned. But some people say that the government is spying on us with our technology, and when they find evidence, that person doesn't talk about it again. I wonder why.

In China, if you say something about their "president" that isn't speaking of him all high and mighty, you disappear. Never to be seen again. Now, I won't give you a summary of your book. You wrote it. But in the book, ideas are thought to be like weapons. So, many people were willing to burn them to ashes. Sad. Even your book was banned at one time, to censor it. How horrible, sir. Horrible indeed.

My state tried to ban a few books that were related to sex, drugs, and other things from being in 8th-grade libraries. I know that it makes sense to some people, but sheltered children must grow up. Some people are mature enough to read them. Some aren't. Just because your child is an immature, sheltered child doesn't mean you have to ruin it for the people who have experienced the real world; not some made-up world told by your parents, like most do to make their children feel like they have nothing to worry about in the real world. That's wrong. Bombs, poverty, and crime. Disease, pain, and war. Money, power, and greed.

All these things are real. Some books portray them as they are, and they get banned for violating the rules of this matrix that the insecure and sheltered create. I don't like it, and honestly, I wish these sheltered people would swallow a big cup of shut the heck up. So, do you agree? You wrote a book showing the future where banning books is everything, from jobs to the art of burning. It reminds me of Nazi Germany. If these people that ban books are neo-Nazis, then I want nothing to do with them. Good day, Mr. Bradbury. Good day indeed.

Goodbye,  
Christopher Holmes

## Honorable Mention – Level Three

Derek Reasor

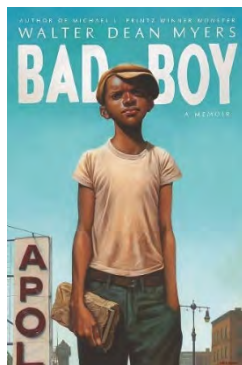
Impact Academy One, Indianapolis

Letter to Walter Dean Myers/ Author of **Bad Boy: A Memoir**

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Dear Mr. Myers

I have always been fascinated with reading. Like you, I have preferred reading over other activities that interest kids of my age. When I watch a movie, everything is set in stone; I take a step into someone else's imagination. I can visualize a book according to my own perceptions. **Bad Boy: A Memoir** has made an immense impact on my life. I can relate to many of your experiences growing up in Harlem, New York.



My mother is an educated woman from an upper-class neighborhood. She has a college degree and works in finance. My father dropped out of high school and grew up in a lower-class neighborhood. You write of being “given away.” I was born to a 16-year-old. You write of learning to read with your mom. My mom and I lived with my grandmother who passed away when I was six years old. I had two mothers as teachers.

I am “engraved” by two vastly different worlds. You write about using your size and your fists to overcome your difficulties in school. Your speech impediment caused you difficulty. I used to act as if I could not comprehend classroom materials and would occasionally make slanderous remarks against students who excelled. I was just as advanced as my classmates, but I did not have the courage to show it. I was ashamed of my intelligence. I purposely flunked my tests. My reading scores were significantly low. The librarians would refer me to more childish books like *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. This is where I developed a new interest in writing and reading. I felt the books were predictable. So, I came up with a way to improve the books by rewriting certain parts and adding shocking additions, like Greg who seemed like a normal kid, but was a schizophrenic with split personalities and homicidal ideation. I liked to add a splash of Stephen King's horror to the plots to help the flow of the novel. You were reading and writing, living a secret life, despite your difficulties at school. I was doing the same.

I also relate to your relationship with your father. You could not share your love of reading and writing with him. Until adulthood, you did not know that he could not read and write. I cannot share my love of ideas, of reading and writing with my pops either. Like you and your father, we have a good relationship. However, we can only talk about “manly” things-like construction. Love of literature, of reading, of books are things that women have-they are “girlie.” Fortunately, I can share everything with my mother.

Also, like you, I fell victim to environmental challenges. It was not “normal” to speak standard English where I was raised. I developed tendencies that made me fit in. Speaking proper English was not among behaviors that made someone acceptable. I felt like I had to become like my peers. Reading or carrying around a book did not help anyone get or keep friends. Your book, ***Bad Boy: A Memoir***, introduced me to an entirely new way of thinking. The book made me understand that being placed in Child Protection Services Homes, being housed in Juvenile Detention Centers, and living in lower-income urban communities, does not have to represent a setback. I read about your choice of friends and both bad and good decisions you made as you struggled to find your footing. I read and appreciated that books became your spiritual inspiration. They became a guide for you. Your book helped me in situations that did not provide good counsel. I felt your passion as you pursued your story. A person’s struggle should be used as a motivator to build up and not to tear down. This is your message, at least to me, in ***Bad Boy: A Memoir***.

I am proud of myself and every person who reaches his own vision of happiness, instead of attempting to please others at the expense of his own emotions. I want to thank you, Walter Dean Myers, for giving me the encouragement to move forward and not succumb to my many negative situations. You never gave up on your passion, despite all the challenges you faced. And, most importantly, I want to thank you for showing me, and kids everywhere, that it does not matter where you are from, or what skin color you are, or what people think of you. If you are determined, you can achieve whatever you need to achieve. Thank you, Mr. Myers, for the gift of words. There is nothing as beautiful as words! It is the only thing you can truly own!

Sincerely,  
Derek T. Reasor

**Let's Talk About...**

## **SELF GROWTH**

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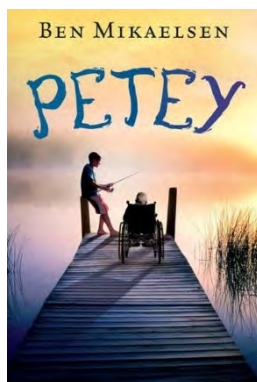
**Gratitude**

**Becoming a Better Person**

**Expanding Your Perspective  
of the World**

Dear Ben Mikaelson,

Gratefulness was the first word I thought of after I read your book **Petey**. I know the word, and I bet many other people do too, but it took me 13 years to figure out what it really meant. In my life, I have been taught to be grateful and told it would help me, but I never thought it could help me to the extent it has. In your book, Petey never stops being grateful. Petey is abandoned by his family, he's left in an insane asylum at the age of two, his best and only friend has to leave him, everyone he has ever loved at one point leaves him, and yet he stays grateful. He stays grateful until finally he meets a friend that never gives up on him and is with him until he dies.



Petey taught me to be grateful your whole life, and if you are, then sooner rather than later, you'll find a friend. Petey had many friends throughout his life, but his friend Trevor made the biggest impact in his life. When Trevor first met Petey, he saw Petey being harassed by kids from his school. Trevor was the only one who helped him. The 8th grader was the only person to help this old man. At that moment, Petey knew he had found a true friend. It took a little bit for Trevor to get used to Petey, but after some time, they became great friends. Their bond was unbreakable. Everywhere Petey was, Trevor was there too. They were inseparable. Trevor had no friends, and Petey had no friends, and they were grateful for each other.

When I was first introduced to Petey, my mind immediately thought of my cousin, Larkin. She has autism, and she can only grunt. She can't form real words. I have always felt bad for Larkin, almost as if I thought she hated her life. Although I have thought that almost all my life, she has never shown any sign of being sad or depressed. I never took the time to realize that she loved her life because I was too busy judging her. Until I read your book, I always looked down on Larkin, but now I realize that just like Petey, she is grateful for her life, and she is grateful for everyone who loves her and her friends.



Your book showed me that I should be grateful throughout all my life, no matter what happens to me. Petey taught me that no matter how bad of a situation I am in, if I stay grateful then everything will get better. It proved to me that my cousin, Larkin, is grateful for her life and loves her life, and I shouldn't judge her on her disability. I now don't jump to conclusions or judge people by their disabilities, and I know that I should always stay grateful.

Sincerely,  
Luke McGrath

Dear Louisa May Alcott,

Your book, **Little Women**, influenced my life a lot. The way you wrote Beth warms my heart and makes me see the world in a different way. She taught me how to be grateful for everything I have. I learned how to be sensible and comforting to others. Even though I read it at a young age, I became best friends with Beth and Jo. Reading this book changed my childhood and how I decided to see the world. I am a lot like Jo (an excited soul with a short temper and a loving heart) and a little like Beth (sweet, grateful, and willing to give anyone a chance). I show many emotions and my mood changes quickly, but I have learned to be supportive and have a tender heart for everyone around me. I have started to think of others as well as myself. I now know that it is okay to be selfish every once and awhile, but it is good to know that what I have is a lot and the people who provide it work hard to get it. Instead of asking for stuff all the time, I have a journal to give thanks for all I have.



The way you wrote Jo also changed how I thought. I learned that it does not matter what other people think of you, but it matters how you think of yourself. I now can hold my temper better because of the way you wrote Jo to be. I always worried about what other people thought of me, but Jo showed me that I can be myself and turn out with true, good friends. **Little Women** helped me through a lot of hard times. Whenever something bad happened, I read **Little Women**. I cried and laughed along with the characters as I let them change me into a better, mature person.

Meg changed me as well. I learned not to let jealousy get in the way of fun. I also learned that it is okay to grow up. Amy taught me that it is okay if you are not serious all the time. I learned that you can be funny and childish sometimes.

The way this book was written changed me in a good way. I believe that I am a better person after reading your book.

Sincerely,  
Emery Joest

Kyla Harroff

New Tech Academy at Wayne, Fort Wayne  
Letter to James Dashner/ Author of *The Maze Runner*

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Dear James Dasher,

Life isn't black and white. There isn't always a right and wrong side to the story. After reading *The Maze Runner*, my opinions and outlook on controversial issues changed. The first time I read *The Maze Runner*, I flew through it, loving every second. I lived, struggled, connected with the Gladers, and devoted myself to their fight. I hated WICKD like everyone else; I thought of them as some evil, selfish group. They were the "bad guys" of the book. It wasn't until the second and third book that my opinions started to change. You start to see the world outside the Gladers' little reality. You see the destruction and hardship the entire world was facing. I started to understand what WICKD was trying to do. They are looking out for the greater good. While they were lacking in heart, their intentions were honorable. They weren't the evil, selfish group that I thought of before. This caused me to realize that it wasn't good vs. bad anymore. Before, I didn't understand where WICKD was coming from, but now I do, causing me to realize that both sides had good core values.



The reason I loved this book so much was because I started with only one point of view on an issue. I didn't understand all the facts, and this caused me to create an ignorant opinion on an issue I knew very little about. Then, as I worked my way through the second and third books, they showed the bigger picture of the story, causing me to question my previous point of view and reconsider who was in the right and the wrong, showing the importance of looking at both sides of a story. After reading this book, I have changed how I think about issues. It showed me I won't truly understand an issue until I look at both sides of the story and put myself in another person's shoes. I find this message especially meaningful today. Nowadays I find it easy to look at a real-world issue and form a quick, ignorant opinion, especially with all the fake and skewed news around, but this book has caused me to get the full story of an issue before forming an opinion and labeling something as good vs. bad. I will always be grateful for the insight that this book has provided my life.

Sincerely,  
Kyla Harroff

Angel Martinez

Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Rick Riordan/ Author of *The Percy Jackson Series*

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Dear Rick Riordan,

I would like to thank you for writing *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* and subsequently changing my life. For starters, it gave me a love of mythology, Greek and otherwise. Reading your book also showed me I shouldn't worry about what others think. Finally, it taught me how to find humor in difficult situations. *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* changed my life and helped make me who I am.



*Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* sparked my interest in Greek mythology. From kindergarten to sixth grade, I went to a Christian charter school, and the only god I had ever heard about was the one from the Bible. My family isn't religious to any extent, and I only went there because one of my mom's friends had kids that went there, meaning someone could pick me up from school on the days she couldn't. In seventh grade, I went to a public middle school where I found your book in the school's library. From there, I learned about other religions and pantheons, and I was enthralled. I devoured each retelling of the more famous Greek myths. My personal favorites were stories of the Underworld: Hades kidnapping Persephone and Orpheus following Eurydice. I fell in love with grand myths and stories of old, fantasizing about adventures I'd never have. Before I knew it, Greek mythology had become a part of my personality and who I am.

Your book made me realize I'm more than people's perceptions of me. In elementary school, I had earned a reputation for being quiet and awkward, spending most of my time reading by myself instead of developing social skills or lasting relationships like the rest of my classmates. When I finally decided I wanted more than solitude, it seemed I was too late. While I had grown and changed, the way others perceived me had not. Upon reading your book, I quickly realized that Percy had the same problem as me. This idea is even clearer in the musical adaptation of the book, where he has an entire song number about being a good kid despite what others think of him. I related heavily to this, sick of being underestimated and infantilized for having a quiet disposition. The more I read, the less Percy seemed to care what others thought of him. It was like the fact that he was technically on the run from the law

didn't matter to him. Granted, his circumstances were very different from my own, but it got me thinking. Why should I care if everyone within a five mile radius is convinced I'm going to be a librarian with fifty cats? I've got bigger problems, and as long as I'm happy and comfortable with myself, the rest is irrelevant. Anyway, reading ***Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*** allowed me to see myself clearly and realize it doesn't matter what others think of me as long as I'm happy.

***Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*** taught me how to find humor in difficult situations. When I first found the book, I was at a new school where I didn't know anyone, and I already struggled with anxiety and depression. Seventh grade was a difficult year, but finding your book turned that around. In my eyes, if Percy could go through stressful situations like most people go through toilet paper and still be able to joke about it, then there was no reason I couldn't do the same. I started using humor as a way of blocking out the bad until I had the energy to deal with it, and believe it or not, it worked. Witticisms and puns became my weapon of choice in the ongoing war that was my life, a defense against the things beyond my control. It made the world around me less daunting, and I felt braver, like as long as I could laugh, I could do anything.

In my life, I've read a lot of books that have impacted me, but ***Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*** left the most prominent mark. It helped me adjust to a new environment, find strength where I had previously seen weakness, and develop healthier coping mechanisms. Not many people can say that about a book, but that makes this even more meaningful. Your book helped shape who I am. Without it, I wouldn't be the person I am today. So, thank you, Rick Riordan, for writing one of my favorite books.

Sincerely,  
Angel Martinez

**Indigo Regier**  
Leo Jr/Sr High, Fort Wayne  
Letter to R. J. Palacio/ Author of **Wonder**

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Dear R. J. Palacio,

I walked into school on a Monday, and I could feel the stares of the other kids burning into the back of my head. I had just experienced a second degree burn and was recovering. There was white, bulky, gauze dressing on my leg to help it heal, and I looked a bit out of place because I was wearing a dress. I think back to that moment and realize that was what August Pullman probably would have felt like every single day of his entire life. Your book opened my eyes and made me think about what people with deformities and disabilities feel like. For this reason, I want to thank you, R. J. Palacio, for writing such an inspiring book.



“When given the choice between being right and being kind...choose kind.” Mr. Browne’s precept was quite accurate in saying that you should always choose kind. We should look past people’s outward appearances, and instead try to learn their personalities. Summer Dawson showed great kindness to Auggie when she sat at his table for lunch. She didn’t focus on his appearance, she just made conversation with him. My cousin has Down syndrome, a condition that makes his limbs shorter than the average person and includes somewhat of a facial deformity. Whenever we have gone out as a family together, some people stare at him weirdly, but he doesn’t let those people stop him. He dresses in his own cowboy style, engages others in conversation, writes songs and plays them on his guitar, and now has a job at a stable.

My favorite character was Summer. She struck up a friendship with Auggie of her own volition. Nobody coached her into doing it. I found that Auggie’s family would describe him differently than some of his classmates. While his family would describe him as smart, sometimes stubborn, funny, and endearing, his classmates might describe him as ugly, weird, and geeky. There is a huge power in a family’s love and support, but they pay a price as well, as I learned from his sister’s perspectives. One kid especially made fun of him, Julian Albans. Julian treated Auggie in horrible ways, for instance calling him “the freak,” and saying, “no one wants you here, Auggie.” On page 77, Julian and Jack said degrading things about Auggie. It was a good reminder to me not to say nasty things

about others in public. Truthfully, I should not be saying unkind comments about others at all. Although some people said things like that, Auggie overcame the challenges, and I was thrilled that he was awarded the Beecher medal. Auggie showed great courage, because he knew that if he accepted the challenge to go to school, he would get ridicule and cruelty. Sometimes I am too preoccupied with how other people look, but this book has taught me to be inclusive and be friendly to anyone and everyone.

In conclusion, your book was wonderful. I have read it multiple times! You combined emotion, action, and love in an amazing way. Your book has taught me empathy, the ability to put oneself in the other person's shoes, and how to understand another's feelings and a situation from another person's viewpoint. You've also taught me to actually get to know someone's personality and not to judge harshly for outward things they have no control over. After reading the first paragraph, you had me hooked and excited to turn the page. Thank you so much!

Your faithful reader,  
Indigo Regier





**Let's Talk About...**

## **LIFE LESSONS**

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**Trying New Things**

**Not Judging Others**

**Resilience**

**Eliana Freed**

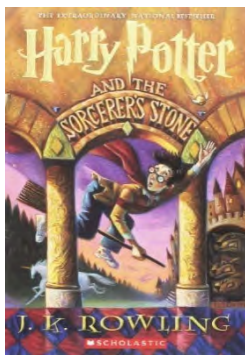
Ray Crowe Elementary, Greenwood

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

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Dear J. K. Rowling,

I really admired your **Harry Potter** series. It made me feel excited and curious, and it made me laugh. I really enjoyed the excitement, the adventures, the friendship, and the bravery. I enjoyed reading all about your characters and how their personalities develop throughout the story. I enjoyed reading through your stories because they represented a lifelong adventure. It was fun seeing how even through tough times your characters stuck together and how you added problems throughout the story and your characters had to think up a solution on the spot. Your book was so exciting. The series had mythical creatures, epic battles, developing friendships, many adventures, and mysteries.



Also, your **Harry Potter** series was very inspiring. It inspired me to step outside my comfort zone and try new things. In your books, your characters had to step outside of their comfort zone to succeed; they had to try new things to get what they wanted. Your book also helped me to understand that thinking outside of the box can get you way further. In your books, your characters had to think outside of the box when solving problems, in life-or-death situations, on adventures, and even in class. It helped me see that sometimes you need to think of a different way to find the answer. Throughout your books, your characters showed bravery, compassion, intelligence, and some were strong-willed. They never gave up. That inspired me to never give up and to believe in myself and my friends.

After reading your books, I changed the way I saw people and the world around me. It helped me to realize that the world isn't split into good and bad people. It's split into people who have made good decisions and some who haven't. After reading the books, the world seemed like you could do anything you put your mind to. I see the world now as a bright colorful place I haven't explored yet. To wrap it up, your book inspired me to see the world as a much better place than I did before.

In addition, your book made me feel as though I was living your story, as though I was a character in your book. It was like I lived through all the

tragic moments, the success, the schemes, the classes, and the battles. Your book made me feel as if I was right there with the characters also living their story. When I was reading your book, I felt excited, happy, sad, stressed, upset and your book made me laugh. When I was reading your books, I might as well have been the ones in the duel or the ones in danger or in class. Your books made me feel so many emotions at once, and they made me feel as if I was in the story.

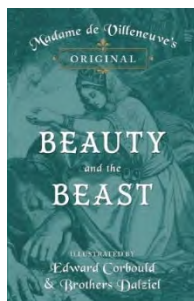
It inspired me to think that you wrote all your books in a coffee shop, dreaming up your characters, places, and the entire wizarding world. When I thought about your story, it inspired me to believe that my imagination can come to life on a page.

Finally, thank you for writing your **Harry Potter** books. They changed me, they made me feel so many emotions, and they changed how I saw the world. I loved reading them. Thank you for that.

Sincerely,  
Eliana Freed

Dear Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve

***Beauty and the Beast*** really changed my life. Before reading it, I thought fairy tales were kind of boring. I used to think that they were just for younger kids, and love stories were just about love at first sight. Belle and the Beast showed me that real love takes time, and it's more about getting to know someone for who they really are, not just how they look. I used to think love was all mushy and easy, but your book showed me that it's about accepting them for who they are, flaws and all.



Another big change was how I saw the characters. Before reading, I thought the Beast was just some scary dude, but as I read more, I thought he was actually super lonely and had a big heart. He was just misunderstood, and no one would look past his scary appearance. And Belle, she wasn't just another princess waiting for a prince to rescue her, she was smart, brave, and stood up for what she believed in. Your characters made me realize that people aren't always what they seem on the surface, and it's important to give them a chance.

Your book also made me think about how we treat others. I used to judge people based on how they looked or acted, but after reading about Gaston being mean and selfish, I saw that being popular or good-looking doesn't make someone awesome. It's about how you treat others and being kind that really matters. Now, I try to be more understanding and not judge people before I get to know them. I have learned a lot through your book.

Overall, your book changed the way I see stories. I used to think they were just for entertainment, but now I see they can teach us important things about life and how to treat others. I like the way it takes me into another world. I could see and feel the way Belle felt about the Beast, and how she felt when Gaston tried to take over everything. Thank you for writing such an awesome book that made me see things in a whole new way!

Sincerely,  
Aubrey Faber

Dear Amanda Gorman,

I received a copy of your poem, "The Hill We Climb," in May of 2021, the summer before I started middle school, and to be honest, I'd never heard of you or your poem. I was ten during the presidential inauguration, so you can imagine I wasn't paying attention as much as my parents. After reading your poem and watching a video of you reciting it to the country, I was impressed, not only because you were the youngest poet to read at a political inauguration, but also because your poem was truly inspirational and well-written. It speaks a painful truth to the whole country, including me. Your poem describes not a perfect country, but a country that has the determination to face all the challenges it may face. It's about a country that has a dark past, yet it is still young and has room for improvement. It's a poem about hope, equality, and unity. Some challenges may be unbearable, but each citizen has the hope and dedication to "climb the hill."



In addition, I can relate this poem to myself. For example, your first few lines, "When the day comes, we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade?" describe a new beginning, which applies to me as a former incoming 6<sup>th</sup> grader. I used your poem to base my strive and motivation for the new school year.

Therefore, your poem inspired me to always persevere and have resilience, whether that be in the classroom, or outside of the school. With this in mind, I applied this to my sport. I am a distance runner who started running in fourth grade, and from that point on, I truly realized that hard work will positively change your life. For instance, so far in middle school, I have accomplished so much! I have participated in many clubs, such as student government, winter run club, writer's club, jazz band, and NJHS. I have also improved my running times! For example, I went from an 18:57 (3k: 6<sup>th</sup> grade), to an 11:42 (3k: 8<sup>th</sup> grade).

In short, your poem changed my view on everything in life. Your poem inspired me to accomplish great things, but to achieve those goals, you have to "climb the hill." It may be a slow and difficult journey, challenging

you and testing your limits. The US is not “perfect,” and neither am I. But if we have patience, stay humble, and work hard, then our goals become a reality. Overall, thank you, Amanda, for shining light and inspiring the country, but ultimately, thank you for inspiring me to work towards a better and brighter future!

Sincerely,  
Sophie Frey

Dear Veronica Roth,

I have been reading ever since I can remember. I love escaping to these magical places where anything possible could happen. I would sprint to the bookshelf, pick up as many books as I could hold. I read them all, twice, three times, then four. I would think about these stories I read for days, weeks, and sometimes months. I could find things to relate to in these books, and it made me feel close to the characters, the story, and even the author. But these relations I made weren't big. Yes, I've had friend problems. Of course, I've had trouble in school. But these vague comparisons didn't compete with what I felt reading *Divergent*. Even though this is a dystopian book with made up characters, setting, and story, I felt I could relate to it so much deeper than I could with any other book. *Divergent* is more than a book. It changed how I felt about problems, and overall was there for me when I needed it.



In December of 2022, I was told that I had an auto-immune disease that did not make me sick but made me lose a part of my physical appearance that also made me feel like I lost a part of myself. I was healthy, and I tried to keep that in mind as I thought about it, but I felt alone, like an outsider. I felt so different from everybody else that I didn't want to go to school or show myself in public anymore. Then, my best friend got me *Divergent* for my birthday. I immediately dove into this escape. I thought about Tris and how being told she was divergent changed her life. I started to think of myself as Tris because she and I shared so many things. She felt different from everyone else, alone. I could not put this book down, because I needed to see what happened to Tris, to me. She feared what people would think about her because she was divergent, and I felt the same. Then I realized something.

Tris has Christina, Four, her mom, and all these people that love her. As I thought about all the good things in Tris' life, I realized that even though she was different from most people by being divergent, she had so many extraordinary people in her life. She had friends and family that loved her, and she realized she wasn't alone in being divergent. This started to make me think about all these good things in my life. I am surrounded by

friends and family that love me too, but I wasn't thinking clearly enough to notice them before. Then I realized, I am not alone. So many people in this world share what I have, and then I knew I could get through it. Tris is me, and I am Tris. This made me feel safe, and I felt happier than I had been in a while. I couldn't believe that a book had done all of this for me, but at the same time I did. Books can do wonders, but this was a wonder that I could never think could happen.

I kept reading the **Divergent** trilogy, then the sequel about the life of Four. I continued with your stories because they can't be put down. They are wonderfully written, have the right amount of love and action, but overall, they mean something to me. Every time I think about Tris, I know that she got through what made her different, and I can too. As well as helping me with change, Tris made me think about what other people could be going through. Most people would never guess Tris was divergent. They would also never guess Four came from an abusive childhood. This made me think that everyone has something going on that makes them different. They're going through the same things I felt, like being alone. You taught me to say to someone, "You're not alone."

**Divergent** taught me to deal with substantial changes, appreciate the good things in life, and learn that everyone is going through something. This changed me in ways I didn't think strokes on a piece of paper could ever do. After reading **Divergent** I became a more compassionate, tough, and smart person. Without your book, I would still feel alone. An outsider. I would still think I was different. But the truth is, everyone is different. Everyone has something going on. Because if everyone was the same, how boring would life be? Tris and all the characters in your book helped me learn this. So, I thank you Ms. Roth. Thank you for creating the world of **Divergent**. Thank you.

Sincerely,  
Claire Fleming



Dear Barbara O'Connor,

During my fourth-grade year, I stumbled upon your book ***Wish*** at the Scholastic Book Fair. As I perused the various titles, my eyes were drawn to the back cover of your book, and I couldn't help but be intrigued by the story it promised. It seemed to hold a certain allure that captivated my young mind. Every year, my aunt would generously purchase a book for me from the Scholastic Book Fair as a Christmas gift. As the holiday season approached, I couldn't help but secretly hope that the book that had caught my attention months ago would be the one nestled beneath the Christmas tree. The anticipation grew with each passing day.



Finally, Christmas morning arrived, and as I unwrapped my presents, my heart raced with excitement. When I laid my eyes upon the familiar cover of ***Wish*** peeking out from the wrapping paper, sheer joy washed over me. I couldn't contain my enthusiasm as I held the book in my hands, eager to delve into its pages. From the moment I started reading, I was completely engrossed in the world you had created. The story resonated with me on a profound level, and I found myself forming an inexplicable connection with the protagonist, Charlie. It was as if her experiences mirrored my own, and I felt a deep sense of empathy and understanding that I had never experienced before. Your words had the power to transport me to a place where I could truly immerse myself in the story, and I couldn't get enough of it.

In the third grade, I experienced a life-changing event when I was adopted. However, prior to that moment, I constantly yearned for someone to accept me and love me as their own. Unfortunately, children my age couldn't comprehend my situation or understand where I came from. It was a lonely and isolating experience. Everything changed when I stumbled upon Charlie's story while reading. It was as if she had a deep understanding of who I truly was and the background I came from. Our experiences were strikingly similar. My father had been incarcerated due to his involvement with drugs and fighting, while my mother's sole focus was on drugs and herself. As an elementary student, Charlie became my hero as I navigated through a whirlwind of emotions

and memories. Her story provided me with a profound sense of understanding and tranquility.

One of the challenges I faced was struggling to form friendships. I had a tendency to push people away, making it difficult for me to connect with others. However, as I delved deeper into Charlie's narrative, I discovered that she, too, had encountered immense difficulties in making friends. It was through her experiences that I saw a reflection of myself. I realized how fragile and shattered I felt, and it became evident that my fear of being let down was the reason behind my reluctance to let people into my life. Charlie's journey allowed me to recognize my own fears and insecurities, ultimately leading me towards personal growth and the willingness to open up to others.

Before that point, I had a habit of putting up my walls. By doing this, I made it harder on myself. I watched Charlie grow and finally let people in and accept the fact that she was finally wanted and would not be tossed around anymore. It really opened my eyes to see that it was alright to let people get close. I look back now on that time in my life, and I see how Charlie really helped me grow and start to understand all the uncertainty I felt. I realize now how huge of an impact **Wish** had on me. Your book changed the way I viewed life, and for that I am grateful.

With gratitude,  
Marynn Gilsinger

**Let's Talk About...**

## **EMBRACING DIFFERENCES**

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**Embracing Imperfections**

**Disability**

**Breaking from the Mold**

Dear Gordan Korman,

Something you should know about me before you read this letter is that I am a person who has trouble letting things I feel I did wrong go. I will think back over a day and kick myself for everything I did wrong, or said wrong, or wrong decisions I made. If there is something I feel I did very poorly, my mind has no choice but to remember it and keep me awake at night years later, pondering how I could have handled the situation better. In some ways, this is good, because it makes it so that I don't say the same wrong thing twice. However, most of the time it just lowers my self-esteem and causes me to not speak my opinion.

When I first read your book, *The Double Life of Danny Day*, I didn't think much of it. I had been looking for an audiobook to entertain me as I painted, and the book fulfilled that, nothing more. However, weeks later, when I was kicking myself because of something, I found myself thinking back to how, if I had a double day, I would have done things differently. It may not seem like much to you, but to me, it was the steppingstone I needed to see my minor mistakes as just that, and not these huge things that everybody must be judging me for.

When that change of mindset occurred, it caused me to stop lingering on small things I couldn't change. This also improved my mental image of that part of myself. As I moved forward, whenever I reflected on an imperfect moment, instead of replaying it over and over, telling myself how bad I did, I tell myself that, "if you had a double day, you would do things differently." Because of this, I can now feel safer approaching things I am anxious about, such as public speaking or performing.

Learning to forgive myself caused my character to grow in many different ways. It galvanized me to approach challenges with a new perspective. I finally realized that not everyone is judging every word you say or every action you make. The concept of having a "do-over day" allowed me to accept that I wouldn't always achieve perfection. Nonetheless, I could still let it go.

I have often wondered why and how that small thought affected me so much. As of today, I truly don't know. I appreciate both you and Danny for showing the sunlight through the clouds in that patch of the sky.

Sincerely,  
Lillian M. Demeulenaere

Dear R. J. Palacio,

Reading can help you understand and relate to people who are different from you or similar. However, it overall helps you see things in a different perspective. After reading your book, **Wonder**, I felt understood about my situation. I was born with hearing loss. My parents were told that I would not be able to hear 100% and that there was no surgery or cure. My parents didn't give up and tried to look everywhere and towards everyone until they came up with the best solution. They came across GiveHear, where I would get my first hearing aids.



In this book, I feel connected to August, "Auggie." Auggie was born with a genetic syndrome that gives him tiny ears, low eyes, and a misshapen mouth and jaw. I may not have the same effect as Auggie has, but his actions or thoughts were similar to mine. Auggie has been homeschooled, but his mom decides she wants him to attend middle school. Auggie's dad feels hesitant and worried the other students will be cruel. On the first day of school, Auggie gets a lot of different reactions and looks as people see his appearance for the first time. A kid named Julian teases and provokes him. However, he does make a friend named Jack who at first denies him but at the end he defends him like no one else.

When I was growing up, I had the unfortunate situation of getting bullied by others. At times, like Auggie, I would not want to go back to school. I remember one time I came home crying because I didn't want to go back, and my parents went to the school to see the principal, and he didn't do anything about it. Unlike Auggie, I had a couple friends that got along with me, but I was a very shy girl who was worried about her appearance. The last situation that happened led my parents to move me out to a different school. It was a school day in the afternoon, and I was on my way home on the bus, when suddenly a girl grabbed my hearing aid out of my ear and started to swing it back and forth in front of me. Just like Jack stood up for Auggie at last, my brother stood up for me no matter if they were older or tougher kids than him.

**Wonder** has given me the lesson that sometimes my situation wasn't as bad as others have it. Empathy, friendship, and acceptance was shown in this

book, and I think that's the most important thing. A lot of the time I feel like I don't see people around me make sacrifices to help me, but seeing the different perspectives in the book changed my idea. His sister was going through a tough time as it was, but she decided to still cheer up Auggie and protect him. **Wonder** has told me that it is important to be kind. We also can affect other people with our behaviors. We should never judge anyone in life without taking the time to get to know who they are, before knowing their whole story. We need to be able to respect someone enough to learn their story.

After reading and watching the movie **Wonder**, I felt like I saw a difference in many things. I feel like this book is something that should be shown to everyone as they grow up, especially children. Children are growing up, and they should notice that everyone around us is different. Many people have disabilities, and I think we should learn that helping them and treating them like normal people or with the attention they need would make a huge difference. Finishing the book, I think the most important lesson is to be kind and that family is needed. Thank you, R. J. Palacio, for teaching me how to understand others, deal with judgment, and know I'm not alone.

Sincerely,  
Emely Quintana

Dear Mr. Korman,

When I was 11, something I had dreaded happened. When my teacher was passing out our math test scores, I had gotten a 1.5 out of 4. It doesn't seem so bad looking back now, but it felt like the end of the world to me. I thought that my future was destroyed simply because of a test score. As the days progressed, my mother discovered and was not happy with me about my result. She had a serious talk with me, and it ended as an argument. I was upset that she only cared about my test score and didn't ask if I needed help.



After the test results and argument, I was at one of the lowest levels of my life. I was questioning my own academic abilities, which caused a drastic decrease in my self-worth, as well as my self-esteem. I stopped sharing out in class, having the constant fear of getting called on just to get the problem wrong. I remember thinking I wasn't going to get anywhere in life from my dull intelligence.

One night, I was bored and decided to grab a book to cure my boredom. Your book, *The Unteachables*, was the one I decided to pick. It belonged to my sister, but I assumed she had already read it and decided to place it on the bookshelf. When I read the first page of your book, I was totally engrossed. The plot was different from any book I have read before. It was about a group of academic misfits that possess horrid behavior. Kiana, the main character, is accidentally placed with the SCS-8 class (the unteachables) and stays. The unteachables are Parker, who cannot read; Rahim, who can't seem to stay awake; Elaine, who is known for her gruesome reputation; and Aldo, who struggles with anger. Sometimes, I found myself laughing out loud from how hilarious the book was. I finished *The Unteachables* in under two days and was disappointed when I discovered there was no sequel. As I reflected on the book, I realized how much I could relate to the story.

At the resolution of *The Unteachables*, even though the SCS-8 children were considered incompetent and not intelligent, they all had their own smarts. This book taught me that everyone is smart in their own way and that you should not give up on yourself. After this realization, I felt

motivated to participate in school again. Overtime, I participated more by raising my hand and studying for upcoming tests more. I embraced my mistakes and did my best to learn from them.

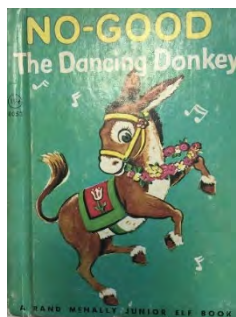
I am so glad I decided to pick up your book that day. Thank you for writing this amazing novel. It has truly changed my life for the best. You are influencing children's lives in this world in a positive way.

Sincerely,  
Addison White



Dear Dorothea Snow,

I first had the pleasure of reading your picture book, *No Good the Dancing Donkey*, at the age of three. This had always been my dad's favorite book throughout his childhood, and he passed that on to me. I got my dad's original copy, and when I had read it so often that it fell apart, he got me a brand new one. One, I too, plan to pass onto my kids. From the basic view, this small, short picture book is just a simple and fun piece of writing for kids! Although this was definitely the case when I was small, my parents always used it as a foundation for my self-confidence.



As a teenager, and even as a kid, I always was timid and very much a people pleaser. I wanted to be everything that everyone else wanted me to be, but my parents always encouraged me to be just like the main character, "No Good." No Good was constantly told to be something else. He loved dancing, and that was all he wanted to do. Unfortunately for him, it was not "normal" to be a dancing donkey. The farmer, his owner, wanted him to be a working donkey, just like all the other donkeys were. Even though No Good was constantly told to be something he was not, he never gave up.

As I got older and began to meet new people, try new things, and go through different experiences, I realized that everyone, and I mean everyone, wanted to be like all the other "donkeys." No one was different – all were the same. When you try to be different, people will look at you strangely. For the longest time, I believed that. I believed that being different was wrong. Liking different clothes and playing a different sport was weird, wrong even. I was just like No Good before he went to the market. He, too, believed he was wrong for wanting to dance, all because of the way other people made him feel. But after No Good met new people and experienced a new place, he found that his purpose for living was not wrong. Nothing about dancing was wrong. I, too, began to understand this concept later in my teenage years. Nothing about the things I chose to do or people I chose to surround myself with were wrong, even if it may not be the "popular" choice.

Therefore, Dorothea Snow, thank you. Thank you for showing me that being “No good” is much more fun! Being your own version of yourself is always better than being someone else’s version, even if that version may be “no good” to others.

Sincerely,  
Gracie Ripperger

**Let's Talk About...**

## **COURAGE**

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**Being True to Yourself**

**Trusting Yourself**

**Speaking Up for Yourself**

Dear Veronica Roth,

The only reason I picked up that book the first time was because I thought the cover was cool. Let me start this letter by saying thank you to whoever designed the cover, because if they didn't make it look that cool, I never would've been able to read your book, *Divergent*, that made me a much different person than I am now. I also would like to thank your parents, who named you Veronica. That's the second reason I chose that book to read, because I could say one of my middle names is the same as a popular author, but I never would've imagined I would get to meet people that would be some of the most important people in my life, that I would strive to be like. Even if they don't exist in real life, they will always exist in my mind, telling me what the smarter thing would be. Then, I cut my hair.



I didn't cut my hair short just because Tris did. I mean, I sort of did, but it was mostly because of what Tobias said in *Allegiant*: "I was happy when she cut it, because it was hair for a warrior and not a girl, and I knew that was what she needed." Obviously, that wasn't the only reason I did, but that was a very important part of why. I want to be, and be looked at, as strong or brave, and I think I accomplished that. I also got to find hair that worked for me. I will never ever forget the day I walked into school with short hair for the very first time, last year. It really did feel like I was a new person, even if it was just hair. I felt like I was braver and stronger. That's why that day is so symbolic for me. I get to finally be looked at just how I want to, and I can and will never forget that feeling.

Seeing my hair fall onto the ground was interesting to watch. It fell like snow and piled up like leaves falling from the trees in the autumn's cold wind. I remember thinking of how much I was losing. I had grown all my hair out for a couple years and still wanted to grow it longer, and here I was, just chopping it all off. It hurt knowing I could never go back. Obviously, it would grow back, but that would take a long time, just like in *Allegiant* when Tris' life was lost. It would take a lot of time for everyone's hearts to heal, but it would happen. They would all miss her and remember everything that their memories could grasp onto about

her. I know it's a stretch to compare cutting some insignificant hair to a tragic death, but its real and important to me.

When I finished reading the whole trilogy for the first time, I didn't feel as normal as I should've. Losing Tris felt weird, and even though she wasn't real in this world, it felt like I just lost someone special. I know that you could've ended it differently, happier at least, but you didn't. You ended it in a way that you knew some people weren't going to like, but it was necessary to get what you wanted from the book across. I'll admit, I hated that you ended the book like that, and I was sure you could've ended it in a way that the reader wouldn't feel as upset as they would've, but after combing through ideas that could've had a meaningful way to end the story just like yours where nothing awful would happen in the ending, I realized that none of those ideas could make the book as purposeful as how you did make it end. Tris dying in place of her brother (even though he betrayed her) just made it so much more special because it showed an important key part of the entire trilogy one last time: sacrificing anyone (including yourself) out of love over spite is the rawest and best way to do it. No other ending could make these novels more special, and I couldn't be prouder telling people a middle name of mine is the same as an amazing author who writes breathtaking books.

Yours truly,  
Kaitlyn Bellinger

### Third Place – Level One

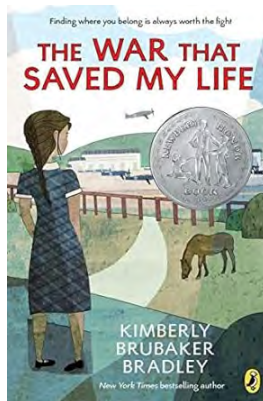
Addie Pyle

Whispering Meadows Elementary, Fort Wayne  
Letter to Kimberly Brubaker Bradley/ Indiana Author of  
*The War That Saved My Life*

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Dear Kimberly Brubaker Bradley:

When I read *The War That Saved My Life*, my heart broke in two. It was so emotional and interesting. As I was reading it, I felt a sudden wish to be like Ada. She just seemed so perfect, but her reaction to things and the way she felt about herself made me question, “Why?” She seemed nice, brave, smart, and terrific with horses. She also seemed responsible and adventurous. Why would she hate herself? That made me realize what I thought about myself. I thought I wasn’t a good person and didn’t deserve what I had. But that’s what Ada thought about herself. I really, truly thought she was amazing.



So, maybe my thoughts about myself weren’t as true as I thought. Maybe I should listen to what other people thought about me. When Ada thought she saw a spy, she had to be confident in herself, remember, and trust what Susan had said: “The foot is a long way from the brain.” Believing in the good things that people had said about Ada might have saved millions of people. So, maybe when people compliment me or say nice things about me, I should listen and take it to heart. I never know when it might come in handy.

This Christmas, I had sewn some purses for my cousins. I didn’t like the way they looked, and I didn’t think my cousins would like them, but there was this ringing inside me. “They’re beautiful!” my grandma had told me. So, I listened to and trusted what my grandma had said. I gave my cousins the purses, and they loved them. I was so glad I had listened to that ringing and gave them the purses.

Bad thoughts are like a wall of Jello blocking your way...hard to get through but not impossible. Once you get past the Jello wall, your possibilities are endless. It sounds like a piece of cake, but it’s not. The Jello is thick, and the thoughts are glued to your brain, but whenever you remember the good things other people say about you, the Jello becomes

lighter. However, you don't just have to remember those things, you have to trust them. Trust is a strong word, but a needed one.

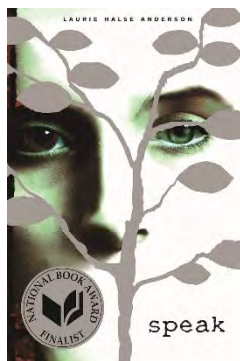
Mrs. Brubaker Bradley, ***The War That Saved My Life*** is a strong story that gave me courage and confidence. This novel really meant a lot to me and affected me in many positive ways. I believe all kids would be better off having read your novel. Thank you for writing this novel and setting me (and all the kids out there who need it) free.

Sincerely,  
Adeline Pyle

Dear Laurie Halse Anderson,

Scared, hurting, judged...emotions Melinda and I shared and both felt. **Speak** has had such a personal impact on me. The context this book goes over and the sensitive topics all hit so close to me because I was in Melinda's shoes and didn't speak about it for years. When I had the courage to speak about it and my family found out, there were some comments that were made on that person's behalf like how the school hated Melinda for calling the police at the party where she was raped at. People will never know the full story, so they will only judge you for what they know which in this case and multiple cases

isn't the way to go. This only makes the victim scared to speak out and judged for something that was never bound to happen to them. The reoccurred thought that it was something you didn't leave but it's never that. Society often makes it seem it's always what the victim is wearing or the way they act that is the reason why sexual violence happens, which is never the case. Sexual abuse is such a sensitive topic to not only to read but especially to write, but the way this book is written makes it in a way easier to understand how Melinda feels.



As mentioned in the book, facing that person feels so much like how Melinda describes it, and it feels like the whole world just stops spinning, and you can't move. That was such a recurring feeling for me since the person that did it was family, so there was no way out of seeing that person. Self-harm was a frequently brought up topic, and Melinda had used it as a way to cope which I related to a lot as well. I read this book during my freshman year, but I feel like if I had read this earlier on, it would've had an even bigger impact on me. I spoke up on my assault in 7th grade, and that was the year I truly felt like Melinda. I didn't have many friends and only trusted one person like how Melinda trusted Ivy. I had also self-harmed in similar ways to Melinda and before avoided ever talking about the incident. **Speak** made me feel like I wasn't alone in the way I was feeling and gave me more courage to talk about it in my upcoming court.

When Melinda tried warning Rachael about Andy, and Rachael just thinks Melinda is jealous of their relationship, I feel like it is such a common



response from the former partner of an abuser. They will always choose to believe their partner because they don't want to face the reality that that's who the person truly is. Melinda's parents didn't pay much attention to her and how drastically she was changing when she was missing school and isolating herself from everyone. I can say I can somewhat relate to this as my mom never paid attention to how it was affecting me. I choose not to blame her for not noticing it earlier since I was young, but I do wish it would've been brought up sooner. Sexual assault is something that does change you in a lot of ways, and ever since I spoke up about it, my parents have definitely been paying more attention to how I react and act around certain people. My dad also in general pays attention to everything, and when he brings up how we are acting differently or that something is going on in our personal life, my sister and I have an inside joke that he's a mind reader, but he always says that his job as a parent is to protect his kids, meaning he pays attention to our difference in how we act and notices the small changes.

**Speak** has helped me speak more openly and helped those around me in similar situations since I know what it feels like. Your book has opened my eyes to how society acts when an accusation like sexual violence comes out about a person and how different people act towards you. I'm grateful that this book has not only helped me but others in hard situations to speak up. I truly enjoyed reading your book.

Sincerely,  
Lesly Vargas



**Let's Talk About...**

## **ATHLETICS**

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**Perseverance**

**Dedication**

**Discovering Your Passion**

Dear Laurie Morrison,

The book *Up for Air* made me feel great about myself and even more appreciated. I have never been able to find a book about competitive swimming in my life, until this one. Swimming is a very underappreciated sport, even though it is one of the hardest to do, and it changed everything for me.

In *Up for Air*, Annabelle is an unstoppable swimmer and great at butterfly. She is so good that she gets moved up to the High School swim team in seventh grade. When I moved up swimming groups, it was hard for me to leave my friends and get used to the new challenge. It also may lead to losing some of your old friends, which happened to me and to Annabelle.

After she starts attending High School practices, she seems to be losing her friend, Mia. Mia and Annabelle have been best friends forever, until now. I can relate to this because it has happened to me personally. Losing a friend just adds to the pressure of everything else going on in your life and I've felt how Annabelle feels during this part in *Up for Air*. It takes a while to get used to it, but you make more friends, just like how Annabelle and I both did.

At her first meet, Annabelle gets her relay team disqualified. She struggles with this and wonders if she should have been moved up in the first place. Annabelle has herself believing that she let people down just because she had one bad performance. I've thought this before, and it really does not make you feel good. I understand what she is going through during this because it has happened to me before, and I can relate to how she is feeling. Getting disqualified is one of the worst things that can happen to a swimmer, especially during an important swim meet. It ruins your chance of winning and getting a better time.

*Up for Air* made me realize to not doubt myself just because one bad thing happened, or I let someone down. While reading, I thought about if I was in some of these situations and what I would do differently or the same. This is by far my favorite book I have ever read and the one that made me think about the details and myself more than any others.

Sincerely,  
Adda Schmidt

Dear Chad Varga,

I have sincerely enjoyed reading your book, **Bounce**. At first, it was just another book we had to read in class. However, this book grew into a part of me. I started working for everything I wanted at 100% intensity. I wanted to take advantage of every opportunity. I would not give up. During my late nights at practices, I was working harder than everyone. The coaches noticed how much effort I was putting into my craft. I was becoming a better player. I started playing more and more. I always seemed to be one of the best at every sport I played. I could hit the baseball the farthest, I had the best three-point percentage, and I was the best blocker on my team. I did all of this while playing three sports. The relentless mentality inspired me to be my best.

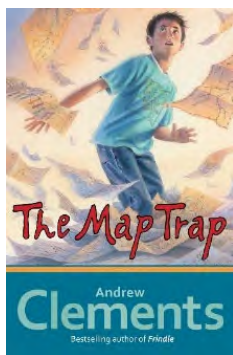
Most kids would have given up if their mom was a drug addict and their dad was out of their life; however, this was not the case for you. It pushed you to work harder. You wanted to prove everyone wrong and be a professional basketball player. You wanted to be bigger than your mom and not let her hold you back. A quote that stuck with me from the book is, "Down is inevitable, Up is a choice." No matter how many times I fail, I need to choose to try harder next time and to succeed. You building muscle so that you were able to beat up your mom's abusive boyfriends shows me that I can fight for whatever I want. I do not have as many struggles as you did as a kid, so it is a lot easier to do what I want. I do not have to worry about moving schools every year or only having one pair of socks.

You then came to our school to give a presentation. This reinforced how important it is to keep going and work hard. In the assembly you showed us that even when things do not go our way, we must stand up and keep going. I respected how you learned from your past to make your present better for yourself and others. You could have continued to be an outstanding basketball player, but you realized it was not what you needed to do. You knew that becoming a motivational speaker would help inspire a lot more people than continuing to play basketball. I should learn from this and do something I love in my life.

Sincerely,  
Owen Baker

Dear Andrew Clements,

I used to play for my school's volleyball team. Usually during a game, the players from each side shake hands under the net before and after the game. Doing this activity shows good sportsmanship because people say things like "Good luck," "Good game," or even "You guys did great!" I thought that no matter what I said under that net, nobody would hear me. Once, after a marvelous win for my school, I said something very insulting to the other team members because I thought that I was the only one who could hear what I said; just like how Alton Ziegler thought nobody would ever see his maps, in your book *The Map Trap*.



I did not say any curse words, but they were words that could hurt someone's feelings. I said these words because they were what I thought in my head. The other team played worse than mine, and I thought they played badly. I was so happy about my win that I did not realize what was coming out of my mouth. A girl from the other team heard what I said and told her coach, who told our coach, and so on. The game of telephone went on and on until the principals of both schools were notified. Each message everyone told was the same, "It was number five who said, 'You suck.'" When Alton wrote about other people's personal information on his maps, and the maps were stolen, soon enough everybody in his school was offended by Alton, but then felt better after he apologized to them.

Our entire team was brought together into a meeting with our principal and volleyball coach a few days later. The principal said that she was very disappointed in the player who spoke the words. She also told us that the culprit should reveal themselves or send an email by the end of the day to her, our coach, or the school counselor unless the player wanted that night's game to be canceled. Instead of sending an email, I went over to the school counselor, talked to her about what I said, and apologized. Then, I went over to my principal and apologized to her, as well. Alton also went over to his principal and said "sorry" and admitted what he wrote on his maps. After telling other people what I said during that volleyball game, I immediately felt better because I admitted the truth

and was not holding on to the guilt anymore. Alton felt like a weight had been lifted after he apologized to others.

Later that day, the principal made my whole volleyball team write an apology letter to the school that I had insulted. We all signed the letter and sent it off. Each player was in disbelief at whoever would say such a thing and none of the players ever discovered that I was the one who let down the entire team.

I learned from my experience and Alton's to never talk or write about someone behind their back. Alton and I both felt really bad about what we did, so we thought that apologizing was the best thing to do. Seeing how Alton resolved his situation made me realize that everybody makes mistakes. This was just a very big one, and I deeply regret it. Turns out, words can really hurt.

Sincerely,  
Dina Fridman

Dear Cynthia Kadohata,

I hope this letter finds you in good health and spirit. First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude for writing the book **Checked**. It has touched my heart in a way that no other book has done before. As I read through the pages, I couldn't help but feel a strong connection to the story and the characters, especially the main character, Conor.



I am writing this letter to you to tell you about my experience with your book and how much it has impacted my life. You see, just like Conor, I am also a young boy who loves hockey. I have been watching it since I was six years old, and it has become my passion. When I came across your book, I was instantly drawn to it because of the cover that had a picture of a hockey player. Little did I know that this book would make such a profound impact on me.

As I read through the story, I could relate to Conor in so many ways. His love for hockey, his close bond with his teammates, and most importantly, his determination to succeed despite facing challenges. I could see a reflection of myself in Conor's character, and it made me feel like I was a part of the story. Your impeccable writing skills have brought the characters to life, and I could almost feel their emotions as I read through the pages.

One of the things that struck me the most was how you portrayed the relationship between Conor and his father. Like Conor, my dad and I share a special bond through hockey. Your portrayal of their relationship was so accurate, and it made me appreciate my father's support even more. I could see myself having the same conversations with my dad that Conor had with his, and it made me realize the importance of family and the role they play in our lives.

Moreover, the way you have shed light on important issues such as concussions in sports and the pressure to succeed at a young age was eye-opening. As a young athlete, I have faced these challenges and reading about how Conor dealt with them gave me the courage to face my own challenges.



Your book has not only entertained me, but it has also taught me valuable life lessons. It has taught me to never give up, to always have a positive attitude, and to cherish the relationships in my life. I cannot thank you enough for writing such a beautiful and impactful book.

I am sure that there are many other young readers out there just like me, who have been deeply affected by your book. I cannot wait to recommend it to all my friends and fellow hockey lovers because I believe everyone should read this book. It has the power to inspire and touch the hearts of many.

In conclusion, I would like to once again express my gratitude for writing **Checked**. It has become one of my all-time favorite books, and I will cherish it forever. Your book has made a lasting impact on me, and I am sure it will continue to do so for many others. Thank you for being such an amazing writer, and I look forward to reading more of your works in the future.

Sincerely,  
Oliver May

Dear Mike Lupica,

I've always liked your books, but *Triple Threat* was one that really spoke to me. As a female athlete myself I've been in the same situations as Alex where I've wanted to play a sport that I'm good at or enjoyed at recess or at home and talked about it to people. Your main character, Alex, wanted to be the quarterback on her middle school team, but all that the boys did was make it harder. I felt an instant connection. Every time I'm in these situations I try to remember how Alex didn't let them get to her, even when the boys on the team were angry and jealous that she had made the team as quarterback. She didn't let that stop her: she just pushed harder to be her best and be the player she knew she could be. Remembering all her hard work helps me keep working harder to be amazing at the sports I love and pushes me to be great at whatever I set my mind to.

Alex is a big role model to me and other little female athletes. I've always been into sports pretty much since I was born. I've enjoyed watching softball, football, and running, just like Alex. I've always been pushed harder than others to be great and amazing and people always expect me to live up to my sister's name. My coaches and parents keep pushing me to be great, and it gets hard when you're constantly working way harder than most, but Alex gives me light. She proves to me that it's possible to be outstanding even when that's expected. I get this light from reading this book because she is pushed around, and people make things unfair just because of her gender or because they don't like her. She feels the stress and things get hard on her, but she rarely lets it get to her, and she finds a way out. Her team didn't win the championship football game just like I've lost before. This made her stop believing in herself, but her teammates began to appreciate her and see the amazing player that she is. There were a couple of characters that picked her up from her down points which reminded me of when my sister did the same for me.

Most importantly your book *Triple Threat* helped me discover how Alex finds her way out of her struggles and gave me the knowledge that I can too. Thank you for writing a powerful book that really helps me to understand that doing your personal best is what is most important in life.

Sincerely,  
Claire Blum

### Third Place – Level Three

Sami Aselage

Bishop Dwenger High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Wendelin Van Draanen/ Author of *The Running Dream*

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Dear Wendelin Van Draanen,

When I was in second grade, I ran my first one-mile race. I got third place going against all third graders. This was where my obsession started. My mom had signed me up because both my older sisters did it when they were young. From that race, I never stopped trying to be the fastest. I ran and won many more races since that first race. I kept pushing myself in practice. I set several school records and won races against eighth graders. I kept getting better until my seventh-grade year in cross country. I was starting to lose my passion. I didn't feel the need to push as hard anymore. This all changed when I read your book *The Running Dream*.



I had picked up the book because my coach, who was also my mom, told me I should read it. I decided to listen to her not because it interested me but because it was enough AR points to complete my assignment. I began to read the book and immediately related to Jessica. After the crash, she is very angry and feels very sorry for herself. She has support from her friends and family, but she looks past that. After a bad race, I got so frustrated with myself. I blocked out any support or kind words from those around me. I brooded in the corner like I was on a one-person crusade. This is very similar to how Jessica was. She barricaded herself away from others just like I did.

Me and Jessica were both going through a rough patch in life. Jessica did not know what to do with her life without running. I was failing to see the reason why I ever ran. Jessica was able to get to running again through the help of her friends and family. They raised money so that she could get a running prosthesis. Since it worked so well for Jessica, I decided to try it too. I talked to my coach about how I lacked motivation to run anymore and how I felt that there was so much pressure riding on if I did well or not. She told me that I needed to find out why I chose to run in the first place.

As I lay in bed that night reading my book, I thought about that. I got to the part where she was learning how to run again. When she began to run, she heard the sound of her stride. *Wing, wosh* – it went over and over steadily. In that moment, she rediscovers her passion. The joy and excitement she had helped me to discover my why. When I was younger, it didn't matter what place I got. I was having fun, and that's what mattered. Running was never about being the fastest; it was my outlet. The place where I could run away from all my troubles. It was the thing that kept me sane. I also realized running was not something to take for granted. I should feel blessed to be able to run. I thought of people like Rosa who would never be able to run. Before I went to bed, I thanked God for the ability to run.

I kept this in my mind during practice for the week coming up to the Cardegle meet. This was the last meet of the season, and all the rivals were going to be there. I was stressed the morning of, but I reminded myself to have fun and be grateful for the ability to run. As I placed my foot on the starting line, I thought to myself to have fun and enjoy the run. I began the race well and finished it even better. I saw the finish line in sight. I forged up the hill until I crossed the line. I had gotten first and a new school record. I remembered Rosa's joyfulness, and I felt the same way. At that moment, I knew that I would never run the same again.

Thank you, Wendelin Van Draanen, for writing ***The Running Dream***. Thank you for helping me find my passion once more. Thank you for helping me to stay grateful when I didn't want to run anymore. Most of all, thank you for leaving an everlasting effect on my running career. From now on, I will never be able to forget about the joy of running. Your book has touched me on a deep level. Every time I feel discouraged and troubled, I will remember Jessica and Rosa, and it will keep me pushing to be greater. I will have no limits because of you and your book.

With utmost gratitude,  
Samantha Aselage

**Let's Talk About...**

# **BULLYING**

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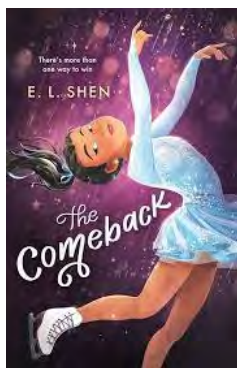
**Being Bullied**

**Standing Up for Yourself**

**Facing Hardships**

Dear E. L. Shen,

Before I read *The Comeback*, I never realized people could relate so much to me. Maxine and I have so much in common. We are both Asian, we do a hard sport, we have bullies, and we want to change how we look. The one thing we don't have in common is our different sports; she does skating and I do cheer. Both of our sports are still hard. We also both have rough days and good days.



Maxine and I both have a bully. I have a bully out of school. Maxine has a bully in school. Maxine and I both have bullies that put us down sometimes. Their awful words get in our head, and we start to fall, but all we need is to push on and not let their horrible words get stuck in our head. We both try and try to stop thinking about it, but those words quickly come back and are stuck there forever. Sometimes she wants to give up because of a bully, like I do, and we both fall because of that bully. This is something we have alike. Maxine and I both feel like we're being chased. We tumble down and think about breaking our bones and not being able to compete. She wants to go to Regionals but thinks she's not good enough for it because the new girl, Allie, moved there for the competition. I feel like I'm always being blamed for all the falls and can't do anything right.

Maxine always gets judged for her Chinese heritage, and I get teased for my height. My friend's neighbor made me feel horrible. I always get called short, and I mostly go along with it. But sometimes it gets out of hand. One time my friend's neighbor called me short and said that I probably had Down syndrome and instead of talking back, I let her words get to me and just went back in the house.

The next day at cheer practice, I kept falling because of those awful words she said. Maxine and I both have trouble dealing with these problems, but we start to get back up. I love *The Comeback* because it helped me figure out that people go through the same thing as me, and I'm not alone.

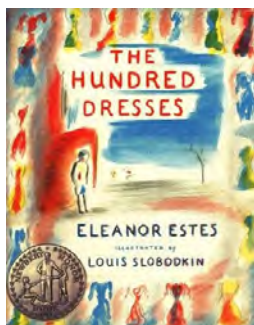
My favorite quote from this book is, "If you're persistent, you can overcome anything." This quote really inspired me and told me to keep going.

This book helped me realize that I can't let people push me down. It also helped me know that no matter what people say, I still need to keep going. I need to keep pushing. Maxine also keeps pushing and doing her very best. We both realize we can't let bullies get to our head.

Sincerely,  
Isabel Azcuy

Dear Eleanor Estes,

"I think you can learn from pretty much everybody if you just open your eyes." -Cesaro  
Your book, *The Hundred Dresses*, has affected the way I see the world in many ways. It has opened my eyes and heart in a way that a normal book doesn't always do. Your novel has helped me to see the world in a different way. It has made things more colorful and beautiful in a way.



There have been moments in life when I was happy, and a light inside of me shined bright. There have also been darker moments when I was sad, mad, or even embarrassed. I have been in each of the characters' shoes, but the one that I can connect to the most is Wanda. For example, people used to talk behind my back saying that they didn't like me. When I heard why, I thought it was dumb. They said they didn't like me because I was smart and that I was a bookworm. It made me feel like I didn't belong anywhere, until recently.

This year I didn't have much hope, but then the light shined as bright as the sun. I found the best friends a girl could ever wish for. That is another thing that your book has taught me. It's that you need to be grateful for the friends you have because others don't have that gift. These three girls completely changed my life and my attitude. They made me more cheerful and more confident. I have grown to not care what others think of me, because I know that I am beautiful just the way I am. Your book has helped me to recognize and help those who felt lost as I once did.

One last lesson that your book has taught me is to never follow the crowd. Many people are mean to others, trying to look cool if it is a person who is considered "weird." Many people follow and listen to that person, but your book has taught me otherwise. It has shown me that everyone is equal, even though it doesn't look like that on the outside. Just because you are different, doesn't mean you aren't special. You're just special in a better way.

When I read your book, it made something click inside. It showed me that when people are themselves it makes them even cooler, not when they try



to fit in. Your book has taught me many lessons and changed my life. Thank you for the book that has impacted my life so much. As a wise person once said, "We are all different. We are not the same. But that's beautiful. And that's okay. In the quest for unity and peace, we cannot blind ourselves and expect to be all the same." -Unknown

Sincerely,  
Anna Hartings

## Honorable Mention – Level One

Eliana Eenigenburg

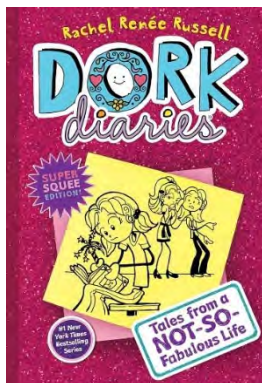
Kankakee Valley Intermediate School, Wheatfield  
Letter to Rachel Renee Russel/ Author of *The Dork Diaries Series*

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Dear Rachel Renee Russel,

Have you ever felt like a dork? For quite a while, I felt like a dork, especially because of the fact that once a month I go to Comer Children's Hospital in Chicago for stomach issues. I was sure no one could ever understand how I felt. Then there was a day when I was browsing around in my school library, and I found the *Dork Diaries* series sitting on the shelf.

I have stomach issues, knee problems, and asthma, and sometimes with all those things going on I feel like a real dork. I thought that I was so different from all the other kids. I thought that maybe because of those issues kids would judge me and would not want to be my friend. I pondered a lot of these horrible things until one day when I was in the library and picked up your book.



When I started reading book one, I just couldn't put it down. It was like I was reading about all the characters in my life. I even have the sister to match! This book helped me feel that I was not alone and that being a dork isn't such a bad thing after all. Now I know that when I feel alone and weird and that no one understands, I can relate to the first *Dork Diaries* book. This book helped me open up to be myself around other people.

Your book has also helped me get over self-esteem issues, especially related to bullies. I would get bullied a lot, and I believed what they said. I thought that maybe I really was the weird dork people called me. I did not realize that maybe they were just saying that because they were jealous or because that was who they were, but then while reading this series, I realized that there will always be some person who is like that or, a.k.a. Mackenzies, and that it is my mindset that lets them control what I say about myself. Your book helped me realize that I was one of my own biggest bullies and that to change that I had to realize the good things about myself and not just what other people say I am. Thank you

for helping me get over that and realize that I am the one who can change how I feel about myself.

Your book showed me that instead of hanging out with the cool, popular kids, stay with the people who make you feel good about yourself, no matter who those people are. This series has even helped me realize who some of my true friends are and people who aren't. Your books have just been a real help throughout my life. I really appreciate the ***Dork Diaries*** series. This series has been something that has really changed my perspective on some things. It has given me an ability to laugh at some of my hardest times. It lets me have a bright side when I feel like I can be a dork. Thank you, Rachel Renee Russel.

Sincerely,  
Eliana Eenigenburg

**Nicholas Fleming**

International School of Indiana, Indianapolis  
Letter to Mitch Albom/ Author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*

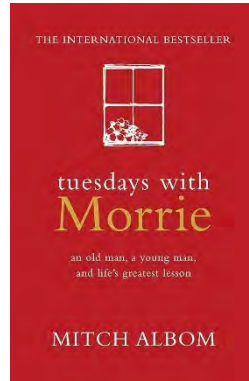
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Dear Mr. Albom,

Only a year ago, I heard about your book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*. My mother had recommended it to me, and she said it was not only eye-opening, but it made her cry. I found this quite peculiar, as my mother is the strongest person I know, and she almost never cries. Intrigued, I pulled the book off the shelf and began to read. What I found within its pages changed my life.

In order to properly explain the effect your book had I must go back in time. From early 2022 to mid-2023, I was in a very bad place. Depressive episodes would last for days, and I would have paralyzing panic attacks about the smallest things. Unfortunately, this was the culmination of multiple unfortunate experiences. The first of them began after my fifth-grade year. During fifth grade, my brother and I had been completely virtual learners due to our vulnerable immune systems. While this was happening, our in-person counterparts were making connections and forming groups. So, when we returned in sixth grade, now in-person like everyone else, nobody was there to greet us. Every single elementary school tie had been undone, and with the now massive grade sizes, we were invisible. We were so unknown that due to my long hair, people were constantly mistaking me for a girl. I was lunged at in the bathrooms, publicly humiliated by substitute teachers, and was the butt of gay jokes in the pickup line. I became irritable, anxiety-ridden, and a hole formed within me. I was so fearful that I eventually couldn't even muster up the courage to enter the building. I went to the St. Vincent Stress Center for help, and after multiple months, I left feeling a bit better. Unfortunately, though, I didn't feel as well as I'd hoped. I was still irritable, and practically every night, I'd find some reason to yell at my brother. I still had anxiety, and panic attacks were commonplace. That is when I found your book, Mr. Albom.

The first thing I could relate to was you, Mr. Albom. I understood why you stayed in your car when you saw Morrie, and I found some of that same



feeling within myself. Confronting the past is a very difficult thing to do, and I have trouble doing it to this day. Furthermore, bathing yourself in work was your way of protecting yourself and squeezing as much as you could out of life. I, on the other hand, cocooned myself with YouTube and isolation out of desperation. Both of our strategies proved to be flawed.

The first thing I found relatable in Morrie was his reaction to the ALS diagnosis. He thought, "Shouldn't the world stop? Don't they know what has happened to me?" I felt that same thing as I trudged through the school halls. *Can someone please just ask me if I'm okay? Won't the teachers sit me down and see what I need?* They did not. Secondly, he had to grapple with death from a young age, and though I did not lose any family members myself, I had my fair share of hardships. In 2014, an 18-wheeler going fifty-five miles an hour slammed into the back of our family's van, sending us nine car lengths into a ditch. The only reason we weren't thrown into the traffic in front of us was because our mom was driving, and she had developed the farm-based habit of turning the front wheels slightly towards the shoulder of the road, lest something happen. Our sister received a brain injury, and our mom received one as well, except for the extra "traumatic." She developed aphasia, and my brother and I had to help her speak. Furthermore, our mother also had a variety of other health problems, and at times I was worried she would pass away. She would have surgery complications or get hauled away in an ambulance, and it killed me. Because Simon and I needed to help our mom, we lost our childhood. I mourn that loss, just like Morrie mourned for his declining health.

In summary, I was able to find myself within you and Morrie and saw how to heal through that, along with the many "aphorisms" that Morrie Schwartz produced. I could finally move on with my life, and I was happy because of it. Thank you, Mr. Albom.

Sincerely,  
Nicholas Fleming



**Let's Talk About...**

# **THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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**Spreading Kindness**

**Online School**

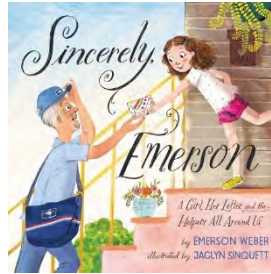
**Quarantine**

**Emerson Shoup**  
Prairie Trace Elementary, Carmel  
Letter to Emerson Weber/ Author of *Sincerely, Emerson*

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Dear Emerson Weber,

This book really made an impact on my life and many others. It teaches you that something little can turn into something big. Reading this book gives you something to wonder about, like, "Oh, I can do that!" or, "How does a letter make a difference?"



I liked how it was based around COVID-19 and how they were learning from home, and of course, I read it around that time. Also because of this book, I started sending letters out to my mailwomen. I relate to the book a lot because my name is also Emerson, and the Emerson in the story had a lot of the same traits, and we even had most of the same personality.

Emerson loved decorating cards and saw that the mailman works every day to deliver mail and almost never gets thanked for it. So, Emerson knew what she had to do. She started drawing, designing cards, and writing a letter to give to the mailman. Now when she gives it to him, it makes his day!

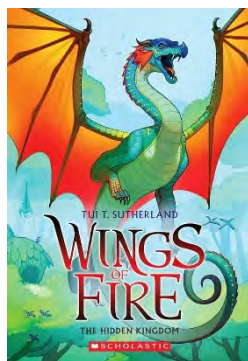
Overall, this book is amazing. So glad you made it! Without this book, I would never be this confident. Thank you again, Emerson!

Sincerely,  
Emerson Shoup



Dear Tui T. Sutherland,

I'm a quieter and more closed off person. When I was growing up, I was really social and easily talked to people, and that was all until 5th grade when I had to do virtual classes. I didn't enjoy doing virtual classes, and I found it hard to stay focused and on task. I got quiet, stopped staying on task, stopped asking for help with anything, and pretty much stopped talking to people in general. This ultimately got me terrible grades in most assignments I did. Then when we got to go back to school in 6th grade, I barely had any friends and stayed away from people and refused to ask for help from anyone or talk to anyone.



It wasn't great, and I stayed quiet and wouldn't ask for help until I got into seventh grade. It all changed for me really after we watched the book trailer for *Wings of Fire*. I thought it seemed really cool and decided to look into it. The next time we went to the library, which was a couple weeks later, I came across the *Wings of Fire* book series. I started with the first book of the series, and I really liked it. I got into the series, and I found one book in particular that was really similar to me.

It was the third book in the series, *Wings of Fire: The Hidden Kingdom*. The main character's name was Glory, and she was really smart and would figure things out quickly, but she was stubborn and often refused to let her friends help her and wanted to do everything on her own. I thought that she was kind of like me with the thought process she had and how she did everything alone. Near the end of the book, Glory thought that she would go alone and use herself as bait and that ended up with her getting trapped in a dungeon which her friends had to help her out of.

I thought that was like how I faced problems with schoolwork and how I thought I could do everything alone and not ask questions or ask for help when that led to me getting a bad grade. Whenever I got bad grades on things, I thought I was really dumb and got upset because I wanted to make my parents proud and bring home a good report card. I couldn't help but also would get furious at myself for not talking to people and asking for help but whenever I was going to, I backed down because the

idea of talking to someone asking for help made me uneasy. I was always embarrassed to ask questions because I didn't want people to think I was dumb.

Eventually, I got to the part in the book where Glory had to accept help from her friends to be able to attempt to become queen. In the end, with the help of her friends, Glory became queen. I put some thought into it, and I thought that if Glory can ask for help even though she doesn't like to, I can too. The next day when I was struggling with a problem doing my work, I went up and asked the teacher, despite being embarrassed and feeling uneasy. The teacher gave me a smile and helped me, and I was shocked. I thought they would criticize me, but it turns out I was wrong. Now to this day I'm not afraid to ask questions because I know that in the end, it helps me and that there is no need to be embarrassed. If it weren't for reading that book, I would never have had the courage to speak up, and I wouldn't have improved my grades to what they are now. I couldn't be content, and I am grateful for you writing ***Wings of Fire***. So, truly, I mean it. Thank you, Tui T. Sutherland.

Sincerely,  
Misha Bowers

## Honorable Mention – Level One

**Sophie Parker**

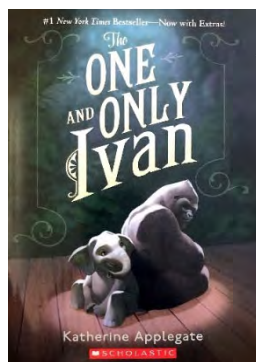
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

Letter to Katherine Applegate/ Author of *The One and Only Ivan*

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Dear Katherine Applegate,

On March 13, 2020, I came home from school crying. It was the worst bus ride home. All the older kids were sobbing, and my young brain had no clue what everyone was so worried about. Wasn't it just a normal afternoon? The second I walked through the door I asked my dad what was wrong. He explained to me that there was a life-changing disease called COVID-19. Meanwhile, I was convinced that I would never see my friends again. My dad said that my lack of playdates would only be a fraction of the problems. Devastated, I went to my room, cried some more, and started reading *The One and Only Ivan*.



This book was connected to almost every part of my life at the time. At the start of quarantine, I felt just like Ivan. I was stuck at home, limited to my house and family, and dreaming about when I would finally be free. Just when I thought my life could not be scrambled like an egg anymore, my parents told me that my grandmother was facing cancer for the third time. She had barely beaten it the past two times. Only then I knew how horrible Ivan must have felt when Stella died. Like a million pins stuck in every inch of my heart. You don't know how much you need someone until you cannot see them and care for them when they need you. After reading your book, losing someone sounded heart-breaking and hard, but I then understood what it really felt like.

After the long road of processing, the things I discovered at the red light were that I may never go outside of my house again, and my beloved grandmother might not survive. I never realized that death would happen to everyone, that it was just a part of life. A couple days later, my family told me that my grandma was going to do a thing called chemotherapy. They said it would save her if it worked correctly. For my grandma, chemo was like Ruby coming into Ivan's life: a new hope. Without Stella, Ivan would have had to take care of Ruby like I wanted to take care of grandma. Chemo would help, but it would not be easy. She would need my support, and I would be her Ivan.

Two long years went by, although it felt like twenty-seven years. I eventually escaped my house and saw my friends again, but it still wasn't normal. We had to wear masks and stay six feet away from each other. We had to find new ways to connect with others, which was something I was not used to. Going into the new normal was like the dark box that took Ivan and Ruby to the zoo. You want to go, but at the same time you fear the past and worry about the unknown outcome. But maybe, just maybe, that outcome would lead you to glory and peace, like it did for me.

In the end, the chemotherapy worked its magic, and my grandmother still lives today, cancer free. COVID became like another flu. Sometimes you must face your fears in order to make your dreams come true. ***The One and Only Ivan*** made me so grateful for what I have and taught me to never give up on my dreams. This book gave me hope, a sense of connection, and helped me persevere through challenging times.

Sincerely,  
Sophie Parker

**Let's Talk About...**

## **DEATH AND LOSS**

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**Death of a Family Member**

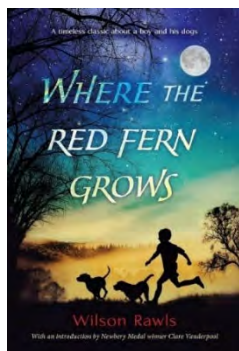
**Death of a Pet**

**Surviving Grief**

Dear Wilson Rawls,

Your book **Where the Red Fern Grows** is like a breath of fresh air to me, a way to see into the soul, and it is hard to write such an enjoyable book when you do not know who your audience will be.

This book helped me though when my aunt died and made me realize that death is not such a horrid thing. It comforted me when I felt as if my world had ended, and I cannot get that feeling from just any old book, you know? Sometimes I just think about the plot and what it means to me.



Now it may seem as if I am lying since this book is, well, about dogs, but if you truly have experienced the loss of a loved one, I think we may see eye to eye. I would just like to thank you for the help you gave me during such a tough time.

It was around the middle of fourth grade when I first read this, and to be completely honest, I did not really understand it much, but as I get older, I start to understand the meaning and how utterly horrific it must have been.

As I am writing this, I realize that it is not my best work, but I would like you to know it is truly from the heart.

Now back to what I was saying, I wish I could just put this book in a glass box, protecting it from everything and everyone. It is just that important to me.

You know that warm fuzzy feeling that you get from comfort, when someone who loves you, warm cookies, or per say, an enjoyable book? That's the sort of feeling that you just cannot get from most books, but this book was different. It stood out, and it is that sort of deal where we think, why did they have to leave? Why couldn't death wait just a bit longer? As we heal and grow, we realize the time that they were here was happy, wasn't it? And wouldn't they want me to be happy and move on? Wouldn't they want the best for me?

That is what I wanted to address from the being, to say that this book reminded me that I deserve happiness, don't I? Wouldn't they want that for me? Wouldn't they want me to move on? For that, I would like to say thank you.

Your fan,  
Emma Swallow

**Garett Losh**

New Palestine Intermediate, New Palestine

Letter to Wilson Rawls/ Author of ***Where the Red Fern Grows***

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Dear Wilson Rawls,

It was December 17, 2021 when I last saw my dog's loving face, with a cold nose, but a warm heart. His name was Luke, and we were born on the same day. I'd known him for my entire life...until, about two years ago, when cancer grappled his soul and took it away from me. The book that you wrote, the book that I had read, had shown me that the soul of a deceased dog never is truly gone.



My dog Luke was a Doberman, so he already had lung problems. And when I was ten and experienced his death, it was the first one that I really, really cared about. Unlike when my cat died when I was six. Back then I didn't fully understand death. But when Luke's time came, I was devastated. I had just lost my best friend.

But, thankfully, a few months later my 5th grade teacher (Thank you Mrs. Rush!) had us read your book in class. When we got to the end, where Little Ann and Old Dan die, I hear most of my fellow classmates crying (mainly the girls), but I sit there and think, "Old Dan really gave his life for Billy," and I have got to admit I was crying too, not because of the bad thing that happened, but because of the good times that Billy had with Old Dan.

When I read this book, I think of Luke and how when I was three or four years old, he wouldn't let anyone even touch me because he didn't want me to be harmed. Old Dan reminded me of the good times and not the bad.

I think death is an illusion...an illusion that tries to distract us from the good times we had with our loved ones before they died. This book just helps me prove that because Billy doesn't cry when he moves away from his home, when he has to say goodbye to his dog's graves, actually his friend's graves. All he does is remember the good times they had.

When I think of Luke, I think of when he would run up and down the fence, and I would chase him. I think of the time when I spilt my M&M's, and Luke ate one single M&M, and I thought he would die because he ate a tiny



piece of chocolate. I think of the times when he would let me ride from place to place on his back.

Now when I think of Luke, I'm not sad, I'm not thinking of his death...I'm thinking of him. When I do cry...I cry happy tears.

Your friend,  
Garett Losh



**Let's Talk About...**

## **MENTAL HEALTH**

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**Pressures from School**

**Eating Disorders**

**Depression**

Dear Mindy McGinnis,

Every day I feel tremendous pressure to impress and prove myself to those around me, hoping nobody can see how much pressure I put on myself. I can't, and I won't, let anyone be disappointed in me. Going around in circles, checking, practicing, inspecting every aspect of my life until there's nothing left to give. I put so much pressure on myself, and yet I could never ever imagine turning to drugs to feel good. I felt like if you had to do drugs to feel good about yourself, there was something wrong with you. How in the world could heroin take the pain away?



I grew up in a safe and loving home where we were always told we had a bright future. Never being exposed to world issues gave me a naive and arrogant outlook on the world. When I read **Heroine**, my world shifted, and my thoughts changed. It is an issue that so many could say that it would never happen to them, but how do you know? Mickey just wanted to be okay and play for her team. She thought about everyone and everything, without thinking of herself and her health. I found myself thinking that Mickey needed to be okay and keep doing it, even while knowing how damaging and awful it would be for her. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that it wasn't about Mickey taking the drugs. It was about the fact that I was trying to defend myself for working past my limits and doing things just for other people, even if it hurt me. I kept saying, well she has to play for her team, she's doing it for her team, not herself, so it's okay. You have to put your health and well-being over others.

This book gave me time to think about how I was treating myself. I felt overworked and stressed, but who cares. You have to keep going so nobody gets mad at you. People need you to be okay, so there is no need to take a break because you will let people down. I pushed myself so hard to make sure that nobody had anything bad to say about me. I realized I needed to stop caring so much about others because it hurts me more in the long run. So, I started to care more about my mental and physical health, even if I had let my coach down once or twice because I couldn't practice.

I used to think drugs were just an escape from a horrible life, and they just wanted to have fun and didn't care about anyone else. I felt hatred toward people who could ruin their lives to feel good for a little bit. Did they think it only affected them? Mindy, your book made my heart soften a little bit more for those who struggle with addiction. Sometimes people aren't even thinking of themselves when they start doing drugs. I know that isn't the case for all, but some just wanted to make others think that they were okay. Thank you for opening my eyes to a problem I wasn't truly educated or aware of.

Sincerely,  
Campbell Lichlyter

Korina Johnson

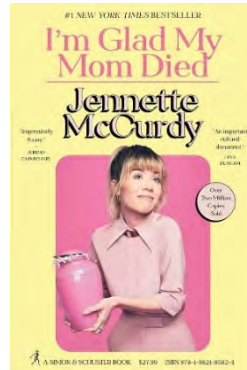
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to Jennette McCurdy/ Author of *I'm Glad My Mom Died*

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Dear Jennette McCurdy,

I'm on TikTok a lot, way more than I should be. However, I'm also a consistent reader, so I like thinking that cancels out my horrid screen time. The combination of these two things has led me onto one of the many categories of Tik Tok called "BookTok." I get a lot of my book recommendations from BookTok, and one day my feed was flooded with people recommending your memoir, *I'm Glad My Mom Died*. I remembered growing up watching you on Nickelodeon in a variety of shows such as *Sam and Cat* and *iCarly*, and the title definitely caught my eye. I shot up out of bed and sped down to Target to hunt for your book. Fast forward to me getting home. I began to page through your book taking in your life story. When I finished your memoir, I began to cry. It wasn't a pretty cry either. It was the ugliest cry in the history of cries. I bawled like a baby.



Now I have been told I'm a sensitive person, and being told that even makes me cry, but I have never cried over a book. So, what made yours any different? Well, I related to your story. No, I wasn't a child actor with an abusive mother who forced her into the acting industry. Rather, I was a child growing up with a variety of eating disorders and extreme anxiety. Hearing someone who I looked up to my entire childhood who suffered with the same things opened a wound I had stapled shut. It gave me the opportunity to reflect on my life by reading yours.

Your experiences with bulimia, anorexia, unhealthy relationships, anxiety, shame, and so much more opened my eyes to the world. Someone I had put on this pedestal and binge watched on TV had dealt with the same things I did. Your book made me feel less alone. For a while, I dealt with anorexia and very bad anxiety. I never wanted to talk about it with anyone because I was taught that I was over exaggerating. I mean, there are people out there who have it worse than me, right? This is exactly what you talked about in your book: Living a life where while you have problems, someone else has bigger problems that outshine your own, and you become guilty into ignoring your addictions. You discuss how your mother, who had cancer, would feed into your addiction and encourage you, complimenting you at your lowest. It is a bittersweet experience when

you are starving yourself and that's when you get the most compliments. I would get compliments from people when I was at my lowest mentally, and I survived and sought those compliments and that validation from others. If I wasn't complimented the next day, I'd think something was wrong with me, and I needed to change to fit into what they saw as perfect. Your discussion on falling into addiction was so real and so brutally honest. I had never read something like that before. It is a raw and vulnerable experience that people don't enjoy sharing. Until I read ***I'm Glad My Mom Died***, I would have never talked about my experiences because of how I thought people would look at me.

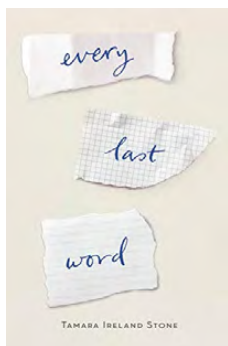
When I finished ***I'm Glad My Mom Died***, I was completely inconsolable, sobbing on my bedroom floor. Your book opened up everything that I had gone through the past few years and allowed me to reflect on myself. It made me realize how much I had grown as a person mentally. By reading your book, I got to relive what I had shut out, and I cried and cried until I couldn't cry anymore. Afterwards, I had never felt so at peace and so freed before. All the weight I didn't even know I was carrying had been lifted off me. Your memoir allowed me closure on my past. If I had not read your book, I would have continued to suppress and ignore what I had gone through. You gave me what I needed: someone to relate to. I felt as if we were friends on FaceTime talking about all our issues together. So, thank you for providing me with a book that I can read whenever feel alone, and for showing the reality of what life can be. I now make it a goal of mine to be there for others who have gone through similar things. Thank you for being the person I could relate to, and thank you for allowing me to be that person for others.

Sincerely,  
Korina Johnson

Dear Tamara Ireland Stone,

Wear this, act like her, be quieter, speak up, smile bigger, cover your face, hide your insecurities, bury your differences: these are the things society tells us, but why should I conceal my uniqueness? We are all special, and our variations from the set standards are what makes each of us important. Imagine a world with everyone being the exact same; life would be bland. Society is always telling us to fit in and be like everyone else. In your book, *Every Last Word*,

Sam is struggling to keep hiding her differences just to belong. Sam is constantly concealing herself behind a face of makeup and her “perfect” friends. As she discovers new friends and finds out more about herself, she begins to question whether or not she wants to keep hiding her mental illness and stick with the friends she has.



According to an article from John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, a study showed that “21.8% of US children ages 3 to 17 have one or more of the common mental, emotional, and behavioral health conditions assessed.” Taking the ages between 6 to 17 in the US that is 50 million kids which means that 10.9 million children may have mental illnesses. Among those children, I find myself in the mix. I struggle with severe anxiety. I used to try to hide it and pretend that I was just like every other kid in my school. I didn’t understand that my anxiety didn’t define me as a person and that I didn’t need to pretend like I was doing fine all the time.

My freshman year I found myself struggling to keep up with concealing my anxiety from my friends who seemed to have no issues. I felt isolated by my friends due to being the only one with anxiety, and not telling them was stressful for me. I was constantly at war with myself between whether or not these people I called friends were truly friends and if they’d be appalled by the fact that I struggled with anxiety. Are these the people I really want to be surrounded by? Do I really need to conceal my true self just to fit in with everyone else? I read to help me get through things I couldn’t talk about with my “friends.”



After reading this book, I discovered so many new things about myself and was able to be more open about my anxiety and relate to a character in a way I never thought possible. In your book, Sam finds herself wrestling with herself over whether or not to keep hiding her Obsessional OCD. Her “friends” also made her feel as if they wouldn’t be able to be friends with her anymore and that she couldn’t tell them about her illness.

After Sam meets a girl named Caroline, who is a classmate she’d never noticed before, she is introduced to the Poet’s Corner, a place for misfits who write out their struggles. Sam begins to realize that she’s been missing this sense of belonging and the ability to be honest. She helped me realize that I wasn’t alone with my mental illness and that finding a group of others who you can relate with is important. The Poet’s Corner is similar to my group of friends now; they remind me that God is there for me and that they’re also there to help me calm down and talk through things. When I thought it would be best to hide my anxiety to fit in with everyone else, I was shown that the best thing was to be true to myself instead of trying to be just like everyone else. Sam discovered this, and through her, I was able to discover this too.

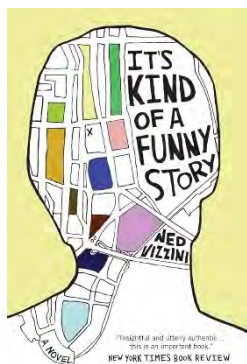
In your novel, Sam is an inspiring character who reminds me to be real with myself and nothing less. Her struggles in finding a place of belonging were a path I took with her. She helped me to find a passageway, writing, to help sort through my anxiety. She was someone who related with me in ways my old “friends” never could. Sam empowered me to keep pushing through and find where I wanted to belong.

Society is always going to try and tell us who we should be, but being yourself and finding people who understand you is important. You helped me realize the importance of showing the world my uniqueness. I am now unafraid of being myself and found a passageway to help express my anxiety. Thank you for showing me that I’m not alone and for giving me someone to relate to. My life is forever changed for the better because of you.

Sincerely,  
Kyliana Drew

Dear Ned Vizzini,

I remember the hum of fluorescent lights, the itchy discomfort of hospital scrubs, and the dread of uncertainty I now associate with psychiatric wards. It gave me some comfort knowing that I wasn't the only person who's been through this. In your novel, *It's Kind of a Funny Story*, Craig, the main character, was in the same situation as me. I'm all too familiar with the feeling of being alone and in pain, but your book told me I could survive. You told me life isn't something to fix or overcome, but something to manage.



I finished your book exactly a month before I was sent to a mental hospital. Back then, things weren't going very well for me. All I could think about was how much of a failure I was, in both school and my personal life. That's one of the reasons I relate to your novel so much. Craig studied intensely to get into his school. He was proud of himself for making it in, but his depression and anxiety continued to get worse as he went through school. His confidence in himself is nearly none. Just like him, I felt like a fraud. People kept telling me I was smart, but I could never perform to their standards.

I've felt the same for most of my life. I went from getting perfect test scores to getting F's every other day. My grades and confidence were dropping, and I had no idea how I was going to get out of my situation. Thoughts of suicide filled every waking moment I had. It seemed like just being happy was an impossible feat I'd never have a chance to accomplish. I felt so much worse after leaving the hospital. Family and school problems plagued my life. I was struggling just to get to sleep or even keep my food down. Neglecting my personal needs in favor of what others wanted from me was a daily occurrence, and I didn't have nearly enough courage even to tell anyone what I was going through.

Craig didn't either, at least he didn't at first. He tried for years to find something to cling on to, like the missing piece to a broken puzzle, a change that would somehow put him back together. Something that would complete him. This made me realize that I can't keep sitting idly by while

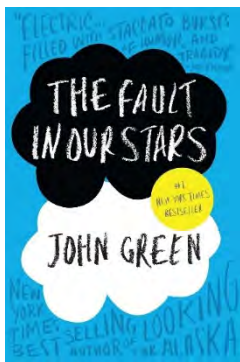
life kept going. Craig sought to become his own beacon of hope. He persevered despite the doubt, mistakes, and fear weighing him down.

Your book made me want to make something of myself, to rise above my situation and pursue what I truly wanted. My happiness is still a work in progress, but I'm taking small steps. I'm trying my best for the sake of myself and everyone who cares about me.

Sincerely,  
Charlie Carter

Dear John Green,

Throughout the school year, we are required to read a book of our choice as part of our American Literature class. For my second-choice book, I came across your book *The Fault in Our Stars* while looking for an interesting romantic read. At the time, I was completely oblivious as to how the book would permanently alter my view on life. Before I read your book, I believed that it was pointless to focus on the bright side of life. I spent my life looking down and often dreading the future. However, as I spent the next few weeks becoming more and more intrigued by the story of Hazel Grace and her battle through cancer, as well as her unfolding relationship with Augustus Waters, my eyes began to open to the reality of a better tomorrow. Before I knew it, my depressive mindset had turned into nothing more than a former lifestyle.



During my freshman year, I underwent a dismal development of stress, anxiety and depression. I found it trivial to acknowledge my own achievements, and I spent less time with friends and family. In the beginning, Hazel Grace had a similar mindset, rarely ever stepping foot outside her home with no willful intention of doing so. She spent most of her time thinking about death and avoiding support groups. In this instance, I felt a connection to Hazel. Depression would often manipulate my rash and hasty decisions, landing me in situations I had no desire to be in. I would evade those trying to help; thus, I found myself alone most of the time.

Hazel falls in love with Augustus Waters, a fellow cancer patient. He brings Hazel to life and enables her to see the joys in life. He becomes her own personal support, her shoulder to cry on. Augustus uses his own wish to fulfill Hazel's desire of meeting the author of *An Imperial Affliction*, a book Hazel reads over and over, unsatisfied by its abrupt ending. I often find myself in similar situations, unhappy with the outcome of certain things, however rarely looking to others for help.

While they grow closer together, Augustus' time in the world gradually ticks away. Realizing this, Hazel spends most of her time she once spent

contemplating death with him. They make sure to do everything they've ever wanted to do together. When Augustus dies, he's left a long-lasting impact on Hazel's once depressive lifestyle and transformed it into a hopeful perspective on the world. At this point in the book, I found myself in tears, as I had also grown a connection to Augustus Waters, a comfort that I failed to find in the world.

As I flipped through the pages of their story together, I came to realize that attempting to overcome depression alone would be fruitless. Before I read *The Fault in Our Stars*, I held onto a pessimistic view of life. While it seemed everyone else was running through this race we call life, I would just walk and keep to myself. After I turned the final leaf of your book, I broke into a run. Now, months after reading, I still hold strong with no intention to stop.

As a response to my depression, I began to seek help. I adopted an optimistic view on life, smiling at those I would once turn my back to. I established friendships with those I could relate to, becoming an Augustus Waters for those with the mindset of an early-book Hazel Grace. Breaking free from the chains of depression, I began to let more people into my once empty life. I abandoned habits that brought me down and started to look forward to a better tomorrow.

In today's world, mental health struggles can seem almost inevitable. However, you helped me to realize that I can look to others for help. I now live life looking up, eagerly waiting for the possibilities of tomorrow. Your book has had a life-changing impact on me. I thank you from the very bottom of my heart for opening my eyes to the true beauty of the world and its wonderful people.

Sincerely,  
Rafael Cucueco



**Let's Talk About...**

# **ANXIETY**

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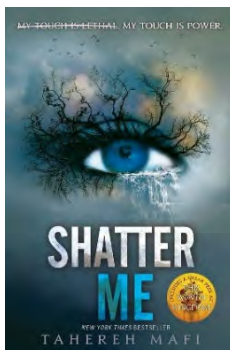
**Understanding Anxiety**

**Living with Anxiety**

**Conquering Anxiety**

Dear Tahereh Mafi,

It used to be when I would meet new people that my mouth would dry out, and I couldn't speak. My hands would shake, my heart would race, and all I could think about was if they were judging me or hated me. My anxiety was so consistent and unrelenting that even something as simple as meeting new people caused me immense stress. Juliette from the *Shatter Me* series inspired me to conquer my fears just as she had.



When Adam came into the cell with Juliette, she was scared to meet him in case she hurt him. This scene reminded me of how I get scared when meeting someone new. Though there was no real danger for me as there was for her, my anxiety made me feel as though there was real danger. As Juliette met more people, she became less scared of meeting them, eventually making friends with most people she came across. This motivated me to meet new people and face my fear. Like Adam helped Juliette, one of my friends, Tori, helped me become more confident and less skittish. Tori helped me understand that meeting new people does not have to be scary. Now I have so many friends that meeting new people is no big deal, and if I can tell they are scared to meet me, I help them and show them not to be afraid.

As the books go on, Juliette continues to conquer fears and get new ones and repeat that pattern. Reading about her encouraged me to conquer my fears even as I developed new fears. If Juliette can have the courage to take over the world and fight those who hurt her, then I can have the courage to talk in class, introduce myself to new people, and ask for a fork when I drop mine on the floor. Though I still have fear, I have learned that no fear is insurmountable, and I can face my fears.

I'm grateful for these books and how they taught me to be courageous. I must continue to learn, experience, and conquer fears. Juliette has been a great example for me to follow as I continue my journey to be courageous. Thank you for creating a story that has deeply impacted me.

Sincerely,  
Trinity Wills



Dear Raina Telgemeier,

I have read all your books, and I have loved all of them so far! Out of all of them, I can most relate to **Guts**. The main character, Raina, struggles with horrible stomach aches because of her anxiety. I love this book because I can relate to Raina. I can make this connection because I have struggled with similar issues in the past. Raina's perseverance shows that anyone can overcome their anxiety! Something I also enjoyed in this book is that this is a true story about you! This book has helped me to realize that everyone has anxiety, and it's okay to be anxious!



I can most connect to this one part in the book where Raina does a LDJ or Lecture, Demonstration, and Instruction with her friend, Jane. Jane does most of the speaking part during their presentation, while Raina draws the demonstration on the chalk board. When it's finally Raina's turn to speak, she freezes up and runs out of the classroom to the bathroom. Her friend Jane eventually went to check to see if she was okay. I can especially relate to this situation. Like Raina, I have always been worried about something. It could've been school, a new sport, a birthday party, or anything! What I'm trying to say is I always find something to be worried, anxious, or nervous about.

My constant worrying started in kindergarten. The first day of kindergarten was one of the worst days of my life because I was so nervous to start school. After that day, I would constantly have a stomachache before and during school. Over the years, it got worse, mostly in 2nd and 3rd grade. It had gotten to the point where I would beg my parents to stay home, and I would have panic attacks right before school or sometimes at school. Sometimes I would come home sobbing to my mom because of how nervous I was. I wasn't getting bullied or anything. It's just talking about it made me cry, and I couldn't control it either. I don't know why I was so scared. I just was.

Of course, my parents still thought I was being bullied, and still to this day they think I was. Even after telling my parents 100 times, I wasn't. A week

later they decided to take me to see my pediatrician. She gave me a referral to get tested by a psychologist, a mental health professional. The next week I visited her three times each for 30 minutes. After my visits, we waited for a few weeks until they had gotten my results back. Eventually, a couple of weeks later, my parents went to have a meeting with the psychologist, while I stayed at home with my sisters and grandparents. An hour later, my parents came home and told me, my sisters, and my grandparents that I had ADHD.

Weirdly enough, I thought it wasn't true at first. I thought I was faking or something, but I wasn't. I didn't even know what it was! Like Raina, I didn't just give up throughout my anxiety. Instead, I showed perseverance. After hearing this life-changing information, I felt relieved. Just like Raina, I struggled with constant anxiety and nervousness, panic attacks, and so much more. Your book helped me feel like I'm not alone! This book helped me understand that you can't control your feelings all the time. Instead, I learned there are ways to cope with them! **Guts** taught me that I will be okay.

Sincerely,  
Olivia Miller

## Indiana Author Letter Prize

Lincoln Heddleston

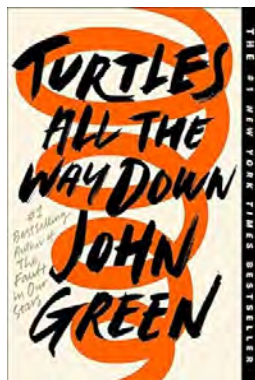
Homeschooled, Westfield

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

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Dear Mr. Green,

I recently read a bunch of your books, including *Paper Towns*, *An Abundance of Katherines*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, and *Turtles All the Way Down*. My mom says I have to wait a few more years before I can read *Looking for Alaska*, but I'm excited to read more of your writing.



The most notable book for me was definitely *Turtles all the Way Down*. I have read it four times and know I'll read it again in the future. The anxiety spiral you depicted made me feel seen. I used to and still do have a bit of anxiety. The analogy you used with the spiral made sense to me: that sometimes feelings seem so tightly wound that you can't control them or yourself. I've experienced this personally, where my mind won't think normally, emotions keep building up, and I feel like a shaken soda can waiting to explode.

It felt nice reading about a character with anxiety, because I understand them. It felt like I wasn't alone. Many people don't talk about their struggles out loud, but when you read a story from a character's perspective dealing with emotions you also experience, you not only understand yourself more, but understand other people more too.

I've been trying to talk about my anxiety struggles more lately as well. I have a therapist named Ms. Lindsea. She knows I read your books a lot. It feels good to share my experiences with her. She knows what *Turtles All the Way Down* means to me and that it is my favorite book to read over and over. Everyone should have a trusted person in their life that they can talk to about stuff like this. If you don't, reading books with characters that are dealing with things you are dealing with can help.

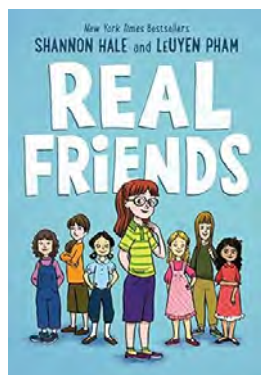
In the future, I want to be more like you and write articles that can help people get through problems they are going through.

Mr. Green, please keep writing and publishing books with characters like Aza Holmes in ***Turtles All the Way Down***. At the end of the book, Aza realizes she will never be completely well, but that's okay. I like that it's realistic. You can never be perfect or completely fine. Everyone has insecurities and imperfections. Being able to understand that is what makes you okay.

Sincerely,  
Lincoln Heddleston

Dear Shannon Hale,

Your graphic novel, **Real Friends**, taught me so much about myself and helped me realize I was not alone. Your memories gave my mind a picture frame, something to display my anxiety. I used your book as a resource for communication and as a way to better understand myself. I couldn't be more thankful for it. I felt the same way as the main character, Shannon, in my elementary school days. She felt alone, confused, and never felt accepted by her peers. She had anxiety that adults and doctors would dismiss by saying "Just stop worrying," or "There is nothing to worry about," when you don't even know



what you're worrying about. The worst is when adults say it to you in an empathetic manner, like they understand the feeling of your stomach twisting in knots, or spiders crawling up your legs and fingers. Shannon's anxiety wasn't recognized by anyone, unlike myself, who had a close relationship with my parents and helped me get a diagnosis with Generalized Anxiety Disorder when I was nine. I remember when my therapist told my parents and I about my diagnosis and feeling an emotion (that I can't recognize now) that was too big for my body. When I was that little, I thought it was a problem that nobody else had. For instance, it was like a disease that only I could contract. It made me feel isolated from my friends. As I got older, I realized that so many people had anxiety disorders. They had anxiety and didn't get a name for it. That was Shannon. This girl didn't have a label put on her.

I constantly wonder if getting the diagnosis was a good decision on my parents' part. The label made me feel smaller than others. The label itself, 'disorder,' told me that since I was not in 'order,' I must be unconventional. My therapist and parents told me plenty of times that a lot of adults and children have Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and therefore, I wasn't abnormal. I still felt lonesome, though.

Once I read **Real Friends**, I now acknowledge that everyone has that thing. That thing that makes them want to be absorbed in a dark hole. The thing that nags on your consciousness. It surprised me how much I related to **Real Friends**. That overwhelming sensation was so strong that I felt it through

the pages. I remember feeling like I had recalled that premonition and the aggressiveness of that thing...anxiety. I wasn't aware that my anxiety could have been less than others. My worry was the worst of all in my mind. Never did I think I was lucky not to have anxiety, what it seems to be for others, all the time.

What Shannon and I have in common is that we both have the flaw of anxiety. Or maybe we don't, I'm not sure. I don't think that many could tell me it's a positive thing in my life. It brought me closer to my family and helped me realize who my friends were and who weren't though. Which is the realization that Shannon had. Who is accepting her, and who is trying to change her?

I also had a group of popular girls. I was in the group, but I was treated lower than everybody else. Every day was something new. Figuring out the rules of what was allowed and what wasn't, well, it was the most difficult part. There was a "Jen" in my group as well. Some days I was her equal, others I wasn't. She also always had a best friend, who never faltered out of line like the rest of us. It was difficult for me mentally. That's when I started having body image issues and fell behind in school. I was trying so hard to be something I would never be...perfect. Now I have a secure group of friends who love me for who I am. **Real Friends** helped me learn how to identify who my real friends were. It also taught me to hold on to them, but not too tight. Through Shannon's overbearingness to her friends, she learned that you have to let them grow and change. Even if that means your friends might become distant. I had to learn that too.

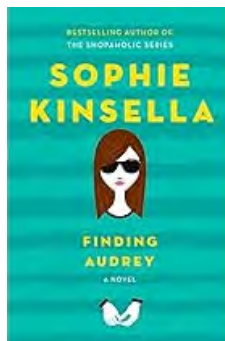
**Real Friends** conveyed to me I was not inadequate or below my peers, and that these feelings I was having weren't a disposition, nor a superpower, either. But that part of me is still valid and deserves to be cared for just as much as the rest.

Sincerely,  
Sali Guest

Dear Sophie Kinsella,

Anxiety. What is it? Why does it make me feel like this? How do I deal with it? These were all questions I asked myself the summer of my freshman year. I never thought anxiety was something I would have to learn how to cope with.

My eighth-grade year I noticed a change in myself. My head was always going a million miles an hour, and I could never seem to think straight. I started to get shaky hands and couldn't seem to sit still. A lingering feeling of uneasiness was always breathing down my neck. Things that seemed easy for the average person started to become difficult for me. I couldn't focus during a test without thinking of all the outcomes, stand in a group of people without feeling suffocated, or even have some conversations without overthinking everything I was saying. I didn't know what to do or where to turn.



It was my mom's idea to purchase the book *Finding Audrey*. I'm going to be honest; I didn't like the idea of reading a book about a girl with anxiety. It had been a few months since I had been diagnosed, and all I had heard since were people's opinions about what it felt like and how I should feel. I was so sick of people telling me how I should feel when truly, it's different for everyone. I remember sitting in the car and staring at the front cover laughing and thinking *I'm going to put this on my shelf and never pull it out*. Except, I did just the opposite. Every day that I walked past my shelf I could feel something nagging at me. I knew I needed to read that book.

This book changed me and the way I perceive anxiety. Audrey made me feel like I wasn't alone. Her character put into words what I never had been able to. I found myself crying, taking picture after picture of quotes throughout the book. These weren't tears of despair or sadness, they were tears of joy. Someone understood what I was going through.

When talking with Linus, Audrey says, "I feel a blinding shaft of terror, which I tell myself to ignore, as my brain will often try to send me messages that are untrue." This for me is what a panic attack is like. My brain goes into overdrive, sending messages to my body telling it that

things are wrong. What I struggled with the most in these situations was that the things I was panicking about were not rational. Even though they weren't rational, they felt like a threat. Audrey helped me to understand that this is true for other people, not just myself. She couldn't make eye contact with people or have a regular conversation. Although these aren't the things I struggle with, it felt good to realize that it's ok to feel anxiety and fear in an irrational situation. She changed my perspective to realize that I'm not acting irrationally, and I can work through situations even when they feel impossible.

***Finding Audrey*** helped me to change how I looked at myself after having extreme levels of anxiety. Instead of telling myself, *you're overreacting, snap out of it, or you should be fine*, I try to look back at the situation and see what I can do in the future to help myself. Audrey's therapist talked about how having anxiety can be like living on a graph. One moment you may be doing great, and you see yourself moving up, but the next you could be dropping even lower than where you started. I taught myself to change the way I looked at my graph. At first, I thought my graph needed to always go up. I didn't like bumps in the road or anything that was going to alter my path. I wanted it to climb up continuously. Now, I see that that isn't possible. I need these moments where my graph drops and things aren't perfect. These are the moments that help me grow. They help me to learn more about how I can help myself deal with anxiety.

To this day, I still look back at Audrey and find myself in her. In moments when I feel alone or need someone to get me through a hard time, I can look to your book. I can flip through the pages of ***Finding Audrey*** and know that there will be light in the dark. I know that even through my ups and downs, I will get through it. There may be moments where I falter or fail, but I can always try and grow. Thanks to you, I was able to learn that through Audrey.

Sincerely,  
Mackenzie Nees



**Let's Talk About...**

# **NEURODIVERSITY**

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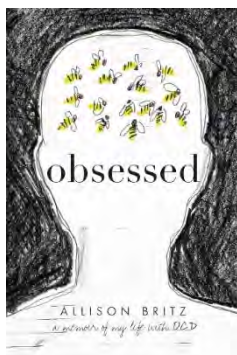
**OCD**

**Autism**

**Identity**

Dear Allison Britz,

Your book, **Obsessed** has inspired and has taught me so much. It taught me that no matter what I'm going through in life, even with OCD, everything will turn out fine. I also struggle with OCD, and once I started reading this book, I felt like I wasn't alone, and I felt more comfortable. The story tells about a teen who struggles with OCD throughout high school and who has very rough days, but she realizes that she can do it, and she finds her way to the other side. I'm only in middle school but I feel connected with Allison. I have days where my OCD is bad and it gives me struggles, but I don't let that affect me because if Allison can do it, I can do it.



I struggle throughout the school days because of the OCD, but I don't show it. I told my old teacher about it, and she introduced me to this book, which is **Obsessed**. I don't struggle with OCD as much as Allison did but reading about Allison's story and how she got more comfortable with her OCD, I knew that this book would inspire me so much. And it did. Allison went to a therapist about all her troubles and problems with her OCD, and I realized maybe I need one too. But no, this book is my therapist. In the beginning of the book, I thought this book would do nothing and just make everything so much worse, but I was so wrong. It showed me ways to overcome my fears with OCD just like how Allison did.

By the end of the book, I realized that I connect with Allison, and there is no need to have any fears about my OCD. Whenever my OCD is really kicking in, and I'm having a hard day because of it, I think back to this book because it has taught and inspired me in so many ways. Knowing that Allison also struggled with some of the same things I do, I feel more confident with my troubles and how I treat myself with OCD. I feel calmer and happier because I'm not alone. So many other people struggle with OCD, and I guarantee that this book has shown them so many different ways to feel comfortable and happy even if they have fears or struggles with it. I've realized that OCD is just a special way of how my brain functions and how I live my life ever since I read this book. The main thing I've learned from this book is that it is important to fight against OCD, but never let it bring you down because if Allison could do it, so could you.

I'm so happy that you have made this book and how much it has affected me in so many good ways. You've made me feel so much more confident, comfortable, and happy with OCD. I couldn't thank you enough for showing me that I'm not alone and that I can do it.

Sincerely,  
Maria Carothers

**Alice Smidebush**  
Franklin Central High School, Indianapolis  
Letter to Francesca Zappia/ Indiana Author of **Made You Up**

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Dear Francesca Zappia,

I first decided to read **Made You Up** because I heard you were going to be visiting my school for a book club meeting, and I thought it was really cool that there was an author who graduated from the same high school as me. What I didn't realize at the time was that this book would forever change my life. For the longest time, I always thought that there was something wrong with me. I'd always been a quiet kid, and I had quirks and qualities that others would make fun of me for. I didn't understand why change was so hard for me or why it was so difficult for me to get my points across in conversations or why I hated it when people touched me. Then I read **Made You Up**, and everything clicked.



At first, I didn't think anything about the fact that I related so much to Miles Richter. I thought it was just a coincidence that there was a character out there who shared a lot of the same struggles as me. Then I watched an interview of you talking about this book and how Miles was autistic, and my brain just went *oh*. I immediately began researching autism, and the more I read, the more I realized that this was me. I had been autistic my whole life and would never have figured it out if it wasn't for you and Miles Richter. If it weren't for you, I would still feel like I was broken in some way. I probably wouldn't have figured out I was autistic until much later in my life and would have continued to struggle through life without understanding why my brain doesn't work like everyone else's.

I am an aspiring author, and I want to do for others what you did for me. I want to help others to feel not so alone and help guide them on their own path of self-discovery. I've never read another book that has touched me in the way **Made You Up** has. It's now one of my favorite books, and each time I reread it, I see another part of myself reflected back at me from the pages. I even used parts of the book to help describe what I was feeling when I went to get my diagnosis. I love everything about the book, from the suspenseful plot to the complicated and relatable characters. Most of all, I love Miles Richter and how he is able to learn to love himself, even though the world around him doesn't seem to understand him. He goes through so much throughout the course of the book, and so many of

his pains are things that I can relate to. By seeing him get the happy ending he deserves, it gives me hope for my future as well. Even though I've experienced hardships in my life due to my disability, reading **Made You Up** reminds me that things won't always stay bleak. There is a light at the end of the tunnel, and you helped me to see it.

With the deepest gratitude,  
Alice Smidebush

## Second Place – Level Two

Izzy Abraham

Sycamore School, Carmel

Letter to Tamara Ireland Stone/ Author of *Every Last Word*

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Dear Tamara Ireland Stone,

Why are words so influential? How do a few letters make you cry and laugh at the same time? These are the questions that I found myself asking after reading your book, *Every Last Word*.

For most of my life, poetry and other varieties of writing have been a huge aspect of my life. Like Sam, I was often questioned for my motives and sometimes even ridiculed for liking something so “nerdy.” Slowly, I built up my walls, just beginning to learn how many parts of myself I thought I had to hide. Early in your book, Sam discusses how her Purely Obsessional OCD is a major roadblock every day and how she feels that she needs to conceal such a significant part of herself through popularity, toxic friends, and makeup. To her, living up to the stereotypical ideals of society was a necessity in order to atone for the part of her that was distinct. My story is similar to Sam’s in this way.



When I first experienced symptoms of OCD and anxiety, I didn’t think too much of it. I thought that maybe it was how everybody felt: plagued by a constant fear of the future. It wasn’t until my middle school years that I really started to notice something was amiss. Like Sam, I was lost in a state of utter hopelessness for a period of time. My obsessive habits seemed uncontrollable, and anxiety became inevitable. So, gradually, I started channeling all my hurt, tears, and outbursts into arrays of poetry. However, the intellectual invasions still marched on, and both Sam and I feared that these poetic aspects of us were weird and unaccepted, so we morphed into things we weren’t. We doused ourselves in makeup when possible, bought new clothes, and attempted to always stay well inside the lines of the social circle, altering our physical and emotional appearance to feel like enough when we thought that the real parts of us never would be.

Enter Caroline and Poet's Corner. In the book, you wrote about a character named Caroline who showed Sam to a special place under the school called Poet's Corner, a place filled with outcasts who emptied their burdens into poetry. Towards the end, we find out that Caroline was a figment of Sam's imagination the entire time, and Sam questions her sanity. However, I don't think that Sam is insane at all. She created a fantasy version of herself for a friend, a compilation of all her hidden imperfections mashed into one in contrast to the toxic popular friends she had established a close friend group with. Recently, I went through a devastating breakup with five of my closest friends. For a while, I was stuck in a seemingly abrasive abyss of self-pity. However, you inspired me to venture for my own Carolines, people who understood me, who accepted me for me with all my impurities rather than asking me to change them. And through the entire ordeal, poetry was my main coping tactic - an entanglement of emotions converted into a jumble of alphabet.

If there is anything I learned from your work, it's that the stories we form from our own innovation are powerful. This ties in to the first question: why are the words we create so influential? Well, the answer is simple: to some they might be plain letters, clusters of slithering ink or diffused graphite; to others, they are a body of emotions flooding cozy under a blanket of pencil lead. Words create poetry, and poetry tells a story that mouths could never explain.

So, Tamara, I owe you a prodigious thanks for assisting me during the inexpedient times in my life through Samantha's journey. For allowing me to discern that OCD isn't a weakness, but rather a roadblock. For helping me withstand the struggles of toxic friends, and for leading both Sam and I to cope with these hardships through poetry. For opening the road to finding my own Carolines and helping me ascertain that I'm not alone. You taught me to embrace the power I exert in my writing and start taking steps to overcome my OCD instead of just waiting around miserably. You aided me in finding my own Poet's Corner, an emotional refuge that I possessed all along: myself. Most of all, you inspired me to wait and see where life takes me. Through Sam's relatable journey of sharp twists and turns, I began to learn that my life's unanticipated journey will write its own poems, occupying every expanse and interstice, making up my story. I will make sure to treasure every last word.

Sincerely,  
Izzy Abraham





**Let's Talk About...**

# **RACISM**

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**Coming to America**

**Civil Rights Movement**

**Antiracism**

Dear Alan Gratz,

Your book *Refugee* changed me. After I read that book, all I could think about is what people go through when they need help. When people's countries go to war, they have to leave their place and have a hard time leaving. It hurts to think about people dying and people getting hurt really bad. They get hurt because people want more land for their country. That hurt me a lot because I feel grateful for having a family and having a lot of things that people don't. I felt bad for people that had a tough time moving to a different country.



There are some people who don't care what people are going through. Some people don't have a family, and some people don't have a lot of money. Just because you have more things than them doesn't mean that you can be mean and think you're better than them. When I was reading this book, I felt bad about what other people need to do to find safety. They have to go to a different place that they don't even know anything about. People go to America to find a better life. Some people don't know what they had to do just to get here. It's even harder to think about how when you go to a different country you have to learn a different language and make new friends.

The one character that stuck out to me the most is Mahmoud because he is from a different country and so is my family. My parents were born in El Salvador, a country in central America. He stuck out to me the most because he didn't know anything when he got to a new country and neither did my parents and I. I was born in the US, but I only knew Spanish because my parents only knew Spanish when I was a little kid. When I went to school, I had to learn English. People thought I was weird because I only knew Spanish. I had no friends for a while and was lonely. As time went on, I knew English, and people were friends with me. I feel like me and Mahmoud have a lot in common because we had some problems speaking a different language and being different from others.

The book *Refugee* changed me a lot because it taught me some things about what people go through when their country is being attacked. It

made me think about how other people do after they move to a new country. I had some similarities with some characters in the book which made me like it more. I really liked it because there were many cliffhangers and a lot of action.

Sincerely,  
Adrian Herrera

Lucy Abel

The Nature School of Central Indiana, Lawrence

Letter to Martin Luther King, Jr./ Author of the **"I Have a Dream"** Speech

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Dear Martin Luther King Jr,

When I read your **"I Have a Dream"** speech it made me think of times others and I have been treated differently. It made me feel upset and annoyed about the way that people have been treated in the past, and it made me wonder how things will be in the future and if humans will ever stop being racist.

Everyone has been treated unequally. I think everyone should be treated equally no matter how different they are. It is a good thing being different. I agree about not judging people by their skin color but judging people by the content of their character.

Your speech makes me feel upset that you had to write this speech. I think that people should have just treated people with respect in the past. Your mother and your teachers and older people in your life most likely taught you to treat others the way you want to be treated. I feel upset that innocent black people have to go through hard work and stress because of one silly difference.

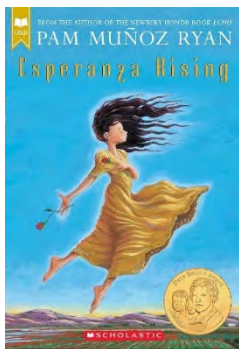
I wonder about the future. Will people still be unfair, or will racism stop? My favorite part is, "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood." I'm never going to stop wondering why having more melanin in your skin is such a big difference. I wonder if a new person who wants world peace just like you will write a speech like you and read it in front of thousands of people. I dream that everyone in the world can be peacefully different. We are all different, and it's not bad!

You put a lot of effort into your speech, and it's very impressive to me because it's hard for me to sit still and write a long speech. Your speech inspires me to want to write a speech myself and make it about a topic that I have experienced and not enjoyed. I want to inspire other people to be more respectful. If I could go back to Washington D.C. I would want to see the Lincoln Memorial again because now I know you gave the **"I Have a Dream"** speech there. Thank you for changing America.

Your friend,  
Lucy Abel

Dear Pam Muñoz Ryan,

I would like to start by sending my warmest regards along with the hope that everything has been going well for you and your family. I would now like to thank you for all that I have experienced with your book *Esperanza Rising*.



Your book has really helped me have more of an appreciation for reading. I remember the first time I read your book. I was in 5th grade, with my teacher Mrs. Hoffman. She read the book to us for a lesson, or module, in class. Well, she didn't read the whole book, but she did read most of it. During this time, she would call on someone to read a page or two out loud to class which surprisingly wasn't that bad. We also did a lot of writing over *Esperanza Rising*. We did mainly descriptive, persuasive, and compare and contrast writing.

Another reason why your book also gave me such an impact was that it gave me an understanding about other races. I didn't really understand that growing up even though I'm mixed. Life was easy for me in the race department. I truly didn't understand, until now. I just moved, and it is very different when it comes to race here. I just got my first job, and all my coworkers look at me differently, and I can hear them say stuff related to what Esperanza has to deal with. So, I understand how Esperanza feels when the Americans talk to her in that type of way saying she won't do as much work as the other worker because she's Mexican or female.

*Esperanza Rising* also gave me some intel about Mexican history such as the migration-sweep. I mean Esperanza decided to even help Matra because migration was taking pretty much everyone from camp. The book also introduced me to the great depression, which was one of the reasons why Esperanza, her family, and her friends were struggling so much to get money and also why they got paid very little along with the voluntary deportation which is being able to leave the US at your own expense and you can avoid deportation orders. I hadn't heard of any of these historical events until this book.

I also thank you for showing a more relatable character like Esperanza. What I mean is Esperanza's thoughts. Throughout the story you give a lot

of details of what is going on, and you show what she is thinking during those moments. You really explain everything well, like the carriage Esperanza, her mom, and her servant friend used to hide in. You described it very vividly with the color, how it looks and all the sounds they were hearing.

The flashbacks are also something else that really brings your book to life. A flashback I love is when Miguel and Esperanza go on the train ride together. You show how different the experiences were when Esperanza went with her papa versus how she went to get away from Tio Luis. The cart her and Miguel were in was so different compared to the one they had to use to get to California. The one Esperanza and Miguel used with papa was really nice. It was a five-star restaurant kind of nice. As for the one she used to get away from Tio Luis, it was really, really dirty. There was also wood sticking out everywhere, and it was very cramped.

Something else I've also come to realize while reading your book is how you show the growth Esperanza has throughout the story. In the beginning, she is this little rich girl, but while she is dealing with everything she has to deal with she becomes a nice, helpful and understanding person. Something that shows that Esperanza was changing was you showing how Isabel helped Esperanza with cleaning and changing diapers. To me it really shows that she was changing, because in the beginning she was a real brat. Telling everybody what to do with one of the worst attitudes I have ever heard.

To be honest I love everything you put into your book. The style and the voice you have really deserves to be heard. I really enjoyed absolutely everything. It was a real page turner especially when Miguel left and took all of Esperanza's money. I really thought he just took it, ran off and just wasn't coming back, but thank God he didn't and brought Abuelita to her as well.

So, thank you so much for everything you let me experience with ***Esperanza Rising***. All the good and the bad in the story. As I said in the beginning, I hope everything is going well for you and your family.

Sincerely,  
Kendra Harris

Dear Emmanuel Acho,

I went to my local bookstore to pick up a book, hoping for a little bit of extra credit to bump up my social studies grade. Little did I know how much I could relate to a book. My whole life, I have been put in a box because of my race. Assumptions are made, and lines are crossed, but no one does anything about it. There isn't a way to say it without making people uncomfortable, but this book helped me change my perspective. Maybe uncomfortable conversations are good.

When I began reading, I didn't quite understand the format of the book. But then I realized it was a conversation. I nestled in and read it in one sitting, in utter awe of how easily racism can be mistaken for normal conversation. How easily one could be victimized. The whole idea about uncomfortable conversations was a unique yet necessary one. Many people get uncomfortable on the topic of race, unknowing of what to say or do. This guide helps us navigate on how to talk about these things. To make sure we are aware of things we say, and the way we act. To help others understand where to draw the line, and when it is being crossed. This book sets a goal, making sure that we help others, so the world is a better place.

As a POC (person of color), this book wasn't just one of those normal stories, for the first time I felt heard. ***Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Boy*** was the first book I could relate to in a while. Finally, I found something that explained my emotions word for word. Every story written was one I could connect to my own personal stories. I was finally able to understand that I was not the only one. That I was not overreacting! That my emotions were justified too. It was a full circle moment for me as I both started and ended in disbelief.

Now without that little bit of extra credit, I would not have ever felt so justified to raise my voice and call others out for their behavior. To have these uncomfortable conversations, to make sure those kids understand what they are doing wrong. To feel comfortable in my own skin. I am a little stronger now, a little tougher, just enough to have felt the internal shift. Thanks for that. I appreciate it.

Write on,  
Idhika Shetty





**Let's Talk About...**

## **IDENTITY**

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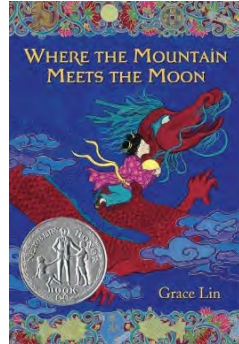
**Immigration**

**Embracing Cultural  
Differences**

**Heritage and Family**

Dear Grace Lin,

When I found this book, *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*, it was one of the best decisions I made in middle school because it caught my attention so much, and I loved it. It was so fun and different from any other books I read. I couldn't put it down, and all I could think was, "What will happen next?" because it was that good. The way your story caught my attention at first glance with the beautiful art on the cover, and the way you started your story made me think of myself when I was younger. The storyline and the characters were so good. You made loveable characters and plot twists that I didn't see coming. I felt like I was the main character in this story because I related to her so much.



In this story, I loved your main character, Minli, because she made me think of my younger self who I forgot about. She was humble and had good morals from the beginning to the end, even though she was young. We both loved adventures and had great ideas, most of the time. She lived by a mountain where it was hard to grow food, and her family was poor. She wanted to change her family's fortune so she went to look for the Old Man of the Moon, who could change people's future. On her way to him, she meets so many characters whom she will later meet again. I just love the idea of this because it shows that if you do good to others, good will come back to you.

When I was younger, I lived in a small village called "Phai-Tu" in Myanmar. I lived with my grandma, my aunt, my uncle, and my older brother. My parents went to a different country trying to make money to send me back to Myanmar to support the family. I was surrounded by cousins and family all the time, so I had good relationships. I would wake up every day for work, going out to the fields to help plant and coming back with wood for fire to cook. It was hard because I was still very young, but it was just the way we had to live. I went to school, but not most days. I would go out a lot and I remember coming back home late at night.

I remember those days when I would get to go to the cities with my grandma. I would get to eat new foods and see different places. These were times I will remember forever. But it wasn't always like this. This only happened once a few years because we were struggling, and because of this, I grew up wanting to change my future for my family. I wanted to make my family rich but didn't understand how everything worked back then. One day we found out my dad was coming back to pick me up and my brother. So, a few weeks later we moved to Malaysia, but this was a slow process because we took one small trip at a time to get to the next country.

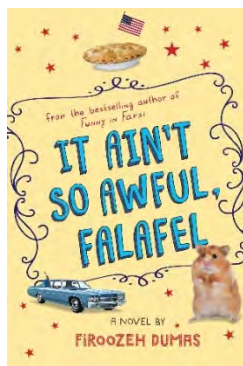
Just like Minli, we both faced poverty, and there was the idea to change our family's wealth. Her journey to the Old Man was like my journey to getting here in the US. On our way, we both met new people. We both saw the struggles of others and our own, and I think I can also relate to her by her courage. Even though I'm a teen now and have changed a lot, when I remember Minli, I wish I had the courage to go out, to look for answers, and to have that much patience. But even if I change now, because of Minli, I am still going to try to be as outgoing as I was back then. I will work hard to change my family's wealth.

Where I lived was the countryside of Myanmar, and it was a small village of Zo people. Even though I faced poverty, it wasn't extreme like Minli's. There were times we would struggle more than ever like when the weather was bad during summer, and we had no food to grow. With the help of the money that comes from my mom and dad, we were able to get out of this. I also relate to this book and the story of how Minli lives in a village, and on her way, she goes to many places including the city where she meets the king who pretends to be a homeless person. Thank you for making this book.

Sincerely,  
No Deih, Huai

Dear Firoozeh Dumas,

Before this marvelous book arrived at my front door, I used to feel ashamed of being from Iran. I felt as if I was the only Persian kid struggling in America, y'know? I used to genuinely believe Iran was all the bad stuff you see in the news (as Carolyn's mom said, "If it bleeds, it leads."). It kinda hurts sometimes, to be honest. I've dealt with a lot of disrespectful teachers and peers in the past. I started to fall into a rabbit hole of believing Iran is a horrible, rotten place. Your story, *It Ain't So Awful, Falafel*, changed my view and sparked my interest to dig deeper, learn more (the truth!), and learn how to be proud of my culture.



The very first thing I immediately connected with was Zomorod's reasoning for changing her name. I, myself, was given a name difficult for others to pronounce, and find it embarrassing to be singled out from a group of people for something so small, yet so "different." I always hate it so, so, so, so, so much when we have a new teacher or substitute, and they take attendance out loud. They always go "U-um...S-Sa-" and then I have to jump in and attempt to teach them how to pronounce my name.

Second, I instantly understood Zomorod throwing away the stuffed grape leaves Zomorod's mom made for "Eskeep." Oh, the disgusted looks on people's faces when I bring stuffed grape leaves for lunch! They're definitely missing out! Sometimes, it really is awkward though, especially when a friend comes over. Iranian cuisine is very different from American cuisine, but delightful!

To put it simply, this book just triggered something inside me to realize we all have a voice and where we are from does not make us fall into a stereotype of a certain type of person. *It Ain't So Awful, Falafel*, was the root of my journey to change my mindset to one that is more positive. We are allowed to freely be who we want to be. Our cultures are all beautiful, exotic, and wonderful. I choose to view mine as some[thing] precious, delicate, and special to me. I believe differences do not divide us but allow each and every individual person to be unique.

You laid out the struggles of being Iranian in America directly on paper for everyone to open their eyes and truly see. You have stated our difficulties loud and clear. And now? I feel proud. I love my Persian roots, my physical Persian features, my Persian attitude, my Persian family, my Persian *life*.

Firoozeh joon, thank you for all your effort and your amazing book, ***It Ain't So Awful, Falafel***. I appreciate your work very much. You have changed my perspective on my home country, drastically changing my mindset to one more positive. Thank you a million times.

From the bottom of my heart,  
Sana Haqiqi

### Third Place – Level Two

**Vidita Keskar**

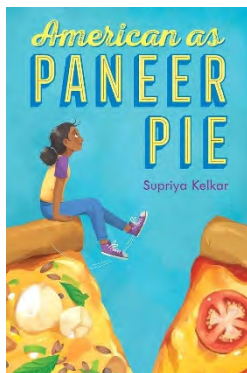
Central Middle School, Columbus

Letter to Supriya Kelkar/ Author of ***American as Paneer Pie***

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Dear Supriya Kelkar,

I always thought that life for all Indian immigrants in the US would be easy. Mostly because my small town has a large Indian community. But what I didn't realize was how much racism and bullying Indian people face in even more remote areas that don't have as much of an Indian population. After reading ***American as Paneer Pie***, I understood what Lekha was feeling being the only Indian girl in her town.



I could relate to Lekha because she is also an awkward Indian girl with two versions of herself. There is home-Lekha who loves her culture and school-Lekha who has nothing to do with her culture. The moments when her mom put oil on Lekha's hair. The moments when Lekha used to pin her hair in front of her bindi birthmark. The moments when Lekha was dancing to Bollywood songs with her best friend. I knew what those moments felt like.

Being asked questions all the time about her culture really annoyed Lekha, and it annoyed me too. I pierced my nose in 2nd grade, and people constantly asked me questions that I got tired of answering. Having a dot on your forehead, eating "weird" smelling food with your hands, putting "bad" smelling oil on your hair, having darker skin, worshiping cows, wearing kurtas, and speaking "Indian" doesn't mean that Indians are less human than any other person. And that is what I realized after reading this book.

In kindergarten, we had assigned seats for lunch. The people I sat next to would make fun of me for the food I brought. While reading ***American as Paneer Pie***, I was brought back to those memories. Those memories when I had started hating my own culture just because of what other people said to me. Lekha was exactly like that. Avantika, though, was different. I was inspired by her because she never quit letting her actual Indian personality shine through. She never felt sad when someone insulted her about her culture. Instead, she took their sarcastic questions and explained the answers to them.

At that time, I wasn't sure about how to react to questions like these. I was born here, so when I was young, I thought I was no different than anybody that lived here. However, kids in my kindergarten class made me realize that I was different compared to them. Like Lekha, I ignored whenever kids used to make fun of me, and I never actually stood up for myself. But when I read ***American as Paneer Pie*** in 5th grade, I realized that I was actually making the questions grow bigger, instead of smaller. That is when I started to eat my lunch freely and tell people about my culture without being afraid of what they were going to say. In fact, my best friend and I organized a Diwali celebration for our class in 6th grade.

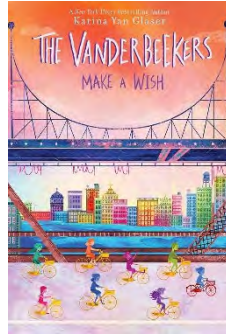
It was probably very difficult for Lekha to live in a town where a soon-to-be senator was blaming immigrants for taking jobs from everyone. Having to see "Winters for Congress" and "Don't Like It? Leave" signs every day, reading the words "GO BACK TO YOUR COUNTRY" dripping in black paint on her garage door, hearing that her uncle had been a part of a racism attack, not knowing what was going to happen to them next, and living in fear. Although faced with all of this, Lekha stood up for herself in the end. She fought for her culture against Winters and made a point. This country is ours as much as it is yours. This action of hers made me think of the world differently.

I appreciate you writing this book immensely because as Lekha was finding her true voice, I was starting to too. This book really helped me see that beyond all the differences, no human is less no matter what they are. You helped me unlock a different love for my culture with this book. Thank you.

With sincere appreciation,  
Vidita Keskar

Dear Karina Yan Glaser,

The first time I read a book from your series *The Vanderbeekers* I was around the age of ten, but at 13 I still find solace in the Vanderbeekers' comedic and uplifting adventures. The book from the series that truly stood out to me was *The Vanderbeekers: Make a Wish*, which is the fifth book out of the seven books in the series. Unlike most of the books that are consistently cheerful and don't always touch on incredibly sensitive topics, this book did, and I truly loved it because of that. The way you peered into the world of balancing assimilation with heritage/family life and also the various expectations placed upon immigrants and racial-ethnic minorities in America, especially by family, was so relatable to me and reminded me of multiple experiences that were connected to my family's religion and ethnicity. Before I read the book, I never took the Vanderbeekers' heritage into account for anything they experience. That reflected in my own life. As a tween, I slowly began to attempt to understand how my Pakistani American identity intersects with what I experience in my life living in a white-Christian majority state. *Make a Wish* seemed so similar to my life that it gave me characters to relate to and also positive associations with my culture and roots.



At the point in the story where the Vanderbeekers' grandparents show up at their brownstone, I realized the growing similarities between me and the Vanderbeekers. The element that really struck me was the way that the Vanderbeekers felt alienated from their grandparents, an experience identical to how I felt whenever my Pakistani grandparents visited. It's a mix of shame and embarrassment out in public, and then affection and kindness at home. I still remember when I was in first grade, I needed something dropped off at school and instead of my mom dropping off the item, it was my grandma (or Nano, the Urdu word for maternal grandma) who dropped it off, and when she entered the classroom in her salwar kameez and embroidered shawl, I felt so embarrassed and almost cried because the subconscious barrier I'd made between my American self and my Pakistani self had been broken, revealing my heritage that I didn't even know I'd kept hidden. I remember introducing her to my teacher as my "Pakistani Grandmother" and I remember her speaking to me in Urdu and me responding in English. I also remember how she



brought me a kameez that I wore once at an Eid party, and then left it in my closet till it was too small to wear again, a symbol of my abandoned heritage. That experience was from one of the two times my Nano and Nana (maternal grandfather) were able to visit.

Another element of the plot that I related to was the fact that grandparents of second generation immigrants can be very critical to their children's and their grandchildren's choices and actions, even though it comes from a place of love and care. That criticism is an occurrence that I've never understood the cause of, but always assumed had something to do with their hopes that future generations could achieve the "American Dream," a foreign concept that I also never completely understood, that is until I read *The Vanderbeekers: Make a Wish*. Directly after reading this, I began acknowledging the weight of expectations placed upon all racial and ethnic minorities, but especially Asians. Soon enough I'd began an evolution into mixing my American and Pakistani identities. Originally divided, I formed a new identity where I became more comfortable sharing my culture with friends and my stories with my grandparents.

Like the Vanderbeeker children, my identity is still in progress, and I'm still learning about my roots and where I want to be in the future, but I also admire and enjoy your books because they are a source of comfort comparable to a sip of freshly brewed warm coffee or a worn but still lovely cashmere sweater. Your weaving of characters is so full of depth, relatable, and heartwarmingly real that it's impossible for anyone not to see themselves reflected in the family and friends you wrote into existence. Thank you for creating this series, from which I have found years worth of comfort and a deeper understanding of where I belong in the world

Sincerely,  
Haroon Iqtidar

PS. Your acknowledgements sections are the funniest and kindest I've ever seen. I could and would read a whole new book built solely from those sections.



**Let's Talk About...**

# **WOMEN'S STUDIES**

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**Girl Power**

**Feminism**

**Women's Rights**

**Morgan Holt**

Fall Creek Junior High, Fishers

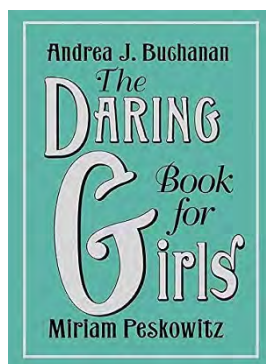
Letter to Andrea J. Buchanan and Miriam Peskowitz/ Authors of

***The Daring Book for Girls***

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Dear Andrea Buchanan and Miriam Peskowitz,

My mom first gave me your book, ***The Daring Book for Girls***, when I was in 5th grade. At first, I wasn't very interested in it because I am not a big fan of non-fiction. I was disappointed when I got it for Christmas, but it turned out to be a great gift. I cracked the book open and found a wonderful world of interesting stories of real women, fun guides for an entertaining sleepover, and lots more advice to be a daring girl. Thank you so much for writing your book. This book was especially helpful while navigating through middle school. It has inspired me to be strong and brave as I'm growing up.



In 7th grade, all the boys were either getting girlfriends that wouldn't last a week or messing with the girls, pulling their hair or tripping them. I couldn't figure out why and I did not have the confidence in myself to say something. My teacher had us do a project on who inspired us. I chose a man. I tried and tried to find a woman who was brave and daring but I couldn't find the perfect one. When I talked to my mom about it, she told me to "go look in that big blue book in your room." I started flipping through the pages and fell upon the chapter about Joan of Arc. I saw it and immediately started reading. Once I had read it, I emailed my teacher to see if I could change who I was going to do the project on. I did my project on Joan of Arc, a brave woman who fought in a huge battle and helped save her country. Reading her story helped me realize that I am not less than the boys. I can be greater than them!

I also had fun with all the games you included in your book. I pull your book out every sleepover I have with my friends. We spend hours together, trying all the 14 different ways to play tag (and a couple of our own ways), trying to whistle with two fingers (we're not great at it), coming up with spooky stories, and making codes. My favorite thing to try was the time warp tag. It was really funny to watch my friends run in slow motion. It's so much fun having your book to guide us. If we didn't, we would probably be stuck on our phones, texting each other instead of actually talking.

My overall favorite thing that I learned from your book is how to use my Swiss Army knife. I use it all the time. So far, I have made a willow whistle, a boat that actually floats, a fish, and I'm currently working on a secret project for my parents. I also use my knife when I explore in the woods by my house. My knife has come in handy so many times, like when I am trying to cut sticks for a fort, or I need to screw something together. Thank you for encouraging girls to use tools like these.

Your book has taught me that I don't need to be a pretty princess to be a girl. I can be a strong, adventurous girl! I gained so much confidence after reading your book, and it has really helped me through the first part of middle school. I am so grateful that you wrote this book. Thank you so much for sharing your ideas on how to beat the fancy technology of the world and just have some good old-fashioned fun!

Sincerely,  
Morgan Holt

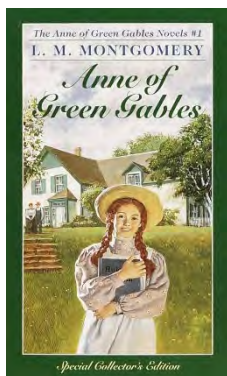
**Mary Segyde**  
Bishop Dwenger High School, Fort Wayne  
Letter to Lucy Maud Montgomery/ Author of  
***The Anne of Green Gables Series***

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Dear L. M. Montgomery,

Your ***Anne of Green Gables*** series has become an influence in my life. When I first read it a few years ago, I was captivated by the words Anne used; words like “tragical” and “enraptured.” Her diction seemed so profound to me, though we both had the same hobby of reading. I was motivated to expand my own vocabulary by reading ponderous works I thought Anne would enjoy, like ***Jane Eyre*** and ***Pride and Prejudice***.

Recently, I decided to reread the series. I started to appreciate something that had eluded me the first time. Anne became a different role model for me. I noticed how she becomes dynamic as she grows and matures into a young woman. Anne pursues her passion of cultivating her intelligence, and she works hard to earn college scholarships, but she also teaches and nurtures in line with her strong Christian morals. I feel that she helped me find a common ground between feminism, femininity, and faith.



Though Anne starts her schooling later than her peers, she quickly climbs to the top of her class with her cleverness and work ethic. She then earns a two-year teaching degree at Queens College alongside a few of her classmates. When Anne returns to Avonlea, her hometown, she begins her long-anticipated plan of becoming a teacher. I noticed her kindness and softness toward her students; she prepares them for the real world and further education, but she also teaches them how to use their imaginations. After two years of inspiring and preparing sagacious young pupils, Anne uses a scholarship she'd earned at Queens College to fund her education at Redmond College. Though it wasn't completely unorthodox for young women to receive higher education in late nineteenth century Canada, Anne is one of the few women in Avonlea to pursue a four-year degree. Her educational journey defies standards that most women conformed to in the nineteenth century. In lieu of hastening to become a wife, she uses her capabilities and opportunities. I strive to have the perseverance Anne does throughout her schooling.

Anne doesn't spend her teenage years doting on beaux, like most of her friends do. In fact, she's rather indifferent to romance; that is, until she's

mature enough to understand it. Though she does eventually marry her long-time devotee and friend, Gilbert Blythe, she waits until she's absolutely certain of her feelings. In fact, she rejects his first proposal. I like that she does this; she knows that she isn't ready for marriage, and she stays obstinate in her choice. However, after she's had time to contemplate, she has an epiphany. Once she realizes that she really loves Gilbert, she makes haste to tell him. What I take from the whole situation is that it's okay not to understand romance. A lot of young girls nowadays rush into relationships that they're not mature enough to handle. Anne doesn't feel the need to renounce her girlishness; she lets herself stay a girl until she's ready to be a woman. What I also took from it is that a feminist can still want to be a wife. Though Anne is independent and could make a living on her own, once she's ready to be a wife and a mother, it comes so naturally to her.

A prominent influence in my life has always been Christianity. Anne helps me to be proud of my faith and embody it in my daily life. I feel that Anne becomes more devout after being adopted into a Christian family; when she starts praying and attending Sunday school, it seems to get easier for her to stay out of mischief. I see Anne as a paragon of goodness and righteousness. She is so undeniably selfless in everything she does, especially in her teaching, and it becomes evident throughout the series that she truly cares for the well-being of each person she meets. Anne's kind, pure demeanor makes her a delight to everyone she encounters. Though I often struggle to embody the virtues that are integral to my faith, Anne makes me want to grow as a Christian.

I would not be an aspiring wordsmith without Anne's witty replies; nor would I be ambitious and independent without reading about her collegiate resilience. Had I not pondered her love story, I probably wouldn't have known the value of maturity in relationships. Devoid of her virtuous example, I may not be striving for righteousness. Thank you, L. M. Montgomery for changing my life by creating such a strong woman that I will always emulate.

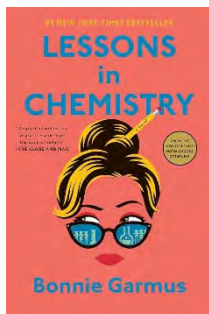
Sincerely,  
Mary Segyde

**Malia Pischel**  
Bloomfield High School, Bloomfield  
Letter to Bonnie Garmus/ Author of *Lessons in Chemistry*

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Dear Bonnie Garmus,

I first came across your book, *Lessons in Chemistry*, when I was looking to escape reality during finals week. I must say that it truly intrigued me from the beginning, and I found myself indulging in each word at the turn of every page. It became ever-present that I was beguiled by the main character and how you perfectly captured the story of many young women across America in the 1950s. Upon reading your book, I felt a change within myself and for the first time ever started to believe in what I am capable of.



*Lessons in Chemistry* quite frankly changed my perception of me, which I understand is a complex statement. What I mean is that before I opened your book, I saw myself as a product of the world and had little faith in myself. I conformed to societal ideals and doubted myself constantly in every environment. I believed that my ideas in education were insignificant compared to my peers as a female. This all changed as I progressed through your book and realized my true potential. The protagonist, Elizabeth Zott, faced many trials to have her voice heard in a patriarchal society and was consistently the epitome of inequality in the scientific field, which in turn furthered my connection to Miss Zott.

In your book, Elizabeth Zott is a no-nonsense character who instills confidence in any young woman that comes across her. Zott faces many challenges including growing up in a dysfunctional household, the premature death of her lover, and her scientific contributions being seen as nothing more than laughable. Nevertheless, Elizabeth Zott defied societal norms all while raising her daughter as a single mother and achieving her dreams as a chemist. This was very inspiring, and one passage in particular changed my entire mindset. The following read, "Courage is the root of change—and change is what we're chemically designed to do. So, when you wake up tomorrow, make this pledge. No more holding yourself back. No more subscribing to others' opinions of what you can and cannot achieve," which took my breath away for the few moments I pondered those sentences. At that moment, I felt that anything was possible, and my future aspirations could be taken seriously.



Your book combined my love for chemistry while encompassing life lessons, which forthright, is the title, ***Lessons in Chemistry***. By the turn of the final page, I have grown tremendously and found it incredible that Elizabeth Zott's character was able to impact the lives of so many from the pages of a book. I feel that because of your words, I have realized that I can do whatever I set my mind to, which you have probably realized. I owe you the biggest ode of gratitude for inspiring the next generation of all female intellects in every field as well as yours truly.

Best regards,  
Malia Pischel



**Let's Talk About...**

## **RELIGION**

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**Prayer**

**Faith**

**Going to Church**

**Lauren Herman**

Castle High School, Newburgh

Letter to Renée Watson/ Author of ***What Momma Left Me***

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Dear Renée Watson,

To start my letter, I would first like to share my gratitude with you. Your hard work and dedication on ***What Momma Left Me*** not only left me surprised but honestly astonished. You included tons of creativity and talent, as well as descriptive language to explain shocking, yet interesting topics. Your book not only taught me that you are more than what you are presented as but also that you can overcome great tragedies.



As I began reading ***What Momma Left Me***, I saw a lot of myself in Serenity. In one of her journal entries, she was spelling out her name, and that entry touched my heart. She was spelling her name and using words that correspond with that letter to describe herself. The words she uses are “S-Silly E-Empty R-Red E-Excellent N-Neat I-Impatient T-Trustworthy, and Y-Young.” These words mean a lot to her because she got these traits from her mom. She is a very talented individual, and she got that way only because her mother was right by her side. My mom is constantly telling me to believe in myself, see the good in every situation, and embrace my talent. She encourages me to keep pushing and stay strong when I don’t get something right away. My mom gives me the strength I have today. She has shown me the path and has made sure any mistake I make will never hold me back. I am courageous, excellent, brave, and many other things because of her.

Throughout your book, I saw Serenity grow and develop while still dealing with her many setbacks. Serenity kept her courage and didn’t lose sight of her capability to fight for what was right. I continued to notice that Serenity would surprise herself with the things she would do. Serenity believed in herself, which allowed her to keep going when times got rough. Consider me, for example. For a long time, I always thought I wouldn’t be able to do certain things because I didn’t fit the criteria or standards expected for that group. Serenity and I share this same struggle due to our intelligence, which will never be accurate enough to fit in. I continue to exceed the expectations and assumptions people put on me. When I first ever entered the Letters About Literature Writing Contest, I didn’t expect myself to get recognized the way I did. The recognition from the first entry I made ignited the flame for my curiosity

to go wild. Stepping outside the box for me can be hard. I have felt for a long time that just because I was an African American girl, I had to stick to the stereotype that was put on me. I, to this day, continue to break down boundaries and create stepping stones for others to allow them to see that success is possible, you just have to believe.

Towards the end of your book, Serenity kept asking herself and God, "Why do all the bad things happen to me? Why am I waiting for peace?" Serenity has lost all hope because she's lost all the important things that mattered the most to her. I've felt similar to Serenity for most of my life. When I would always be called things that hurt my feelings and racial slurs, I would ask God, "*Why me? Why is this happening to me?*" I was given resources to find out about my history and soon realized that my skin color is one of a kind and powerful. I also learned that God put me on this earth to lead on my ancestors' legacy. My many connections with your book, and Serenity made me love your book so much. I have never had a better connection with a novel as well as I did with ***What Momma Left Me***.

One of the many things I have learned and taken into consideration from your writing is to always persevere and stand strong when times get hard. I enjoyed this book because it touched on so many different topics and that is something I know as a writer can be hard in a short amount of text. I think, Renée, you did an excellent job writing this novel, and I can't wait to read another one of your books.

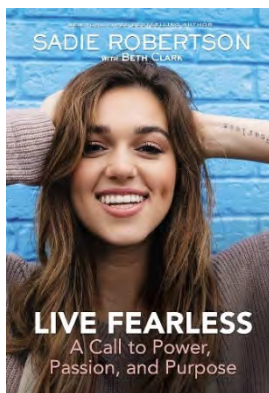
Wishing you all the best,  
Lauren Herman

**Sydney Jordan**  
Columbia City High School, Columbia City  
Letter to Sadie Robertson Huff/ Author of ***Live Fearless***

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Dear Sadie Robertson Huff,

My name is Sydney Jordan, and I'm currently a junior at Columbia City High School. I have always been a part of the church, so when it comes to small groups, mission trips, retreats, I've basically been there and done that. Don't get me wrong, I love those experiences and will forever cherish those memories but didn't really understand the purpose of them. Why do I need to go to another state and do these assigned tasks for random strangers? Why should I talk about my personal faith to people I see every day at school on Sunday nights? There were so many questions that always seemed to remain unanswered.



In middle school, I took part in a small group with my best friends. It was called our “Core Group.” We would meet after school and have some kind of Christian book that we would read together, and then discuss the intentions of it. The book that stuck with me the most and influenced my life in so many remarkable ways was your book called ***Live Fearless: A Call to Power, Passion, and Purpose***. To be completely honest, I didn't know exactly who you were at that time and was NOT a big bookworm but was willing to take on the challenge. Our “homework assignment” was to read the first two chapters of the book and then note what stood out to us, individually, the most, and why. I remember before opening the book I prayed over what was going to be taken away from my reading. Little did I know that this book, this beautiful work of art, would change my life by showing me what it means to live life purposefully, and how to go to God for anything, and everything.

As mentioned before, I am a part of the church and believe Jesus Christ is my savior, but there were still so many unanswered questions and fear that lingered. I put so much pressure on myself at such a young age to be “popular” at school, and youth group, so people would like me based on what my personal beliefs were, what my day-to-day actions looked like, and even how I presented myself on the outside based on appearance.

Continuing on with the reading, I learned what the real purpose of God's doings is from your personal instances that were mentioned. Whether it

came from your *Dancing with the Stars* event, dealing with reality TV show misconceptions, or even just being a normal average human in a not so average world. For example, I would continue to wonder why God put certain situations in my life that brought me fear when He wanted me to be fearless; But if God didn't think I could overcome fear, why would He put me through that fearful situation in the first place? He KNEW I was strong enough to fight through it with Him by my side through it all.

Once we finished the two chapters, my Core Group came back together after school to discuss our takeaways. As the conversation went on, I discovered that each one of us girls had a different takeaway, and I trust that was from the works of God. This book gave me a whole new perspective on His love through providing community, comfort, and grace. Another observation was towards the end of each chapter you provided some kind of challenge. One that caught my eye was when you gave out specific verses for readers to memorize. Of course, it was optional and seemed fairly easy to accomplish, but it seemed more of a challenge to put the effort into memorizing them with so many different distractions around.

As my high school years start to come to an end, I begin to appreciate your heart more and more for publishing this book even if it was years ago. For supplying a source that has saved many, including myself, from depression, loneliness, and fear. I hope through my actions in 2024, and the years to come, that I will continue to reflect Christ's love through the encouragement of your work. The intention of this letter to you is to express gratitude! I can't thank you enough, Sadie! (Hebrews 13:15)

Sincerely,  
Sydney Jordan





**Let's Talk About...**

# **JUSTICE**

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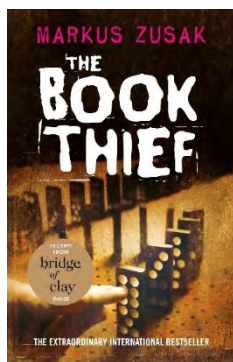
**The Holocaust**

**Sexual Assault**

**Injustices in Agriculture**

Dear Markus Zusak,

When I read your book *The Book Thief*, my view of my own life and the world as a whole was transformed. *The Book Thief* shows the value of nonconformity, or avoiding following any particular crowd, which I feel is very important.



People have taken sides in the current Israeli-Hamas conflict in the Middle East. If there is someone who hasn't formed their own opinion, it will soon be shaped and molded by outside forces. This is the same in *The Book Thief*. The German Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler, was a compelling person. In fact, many don't realize that he was democratically elected. The Nazi policy of *lebensraum*, which is the belief that the German people had a right to all the territory they wanted for the country's natural development, only increased Hitler's popularity. In Max Vandenburg's mind, he wrestles with the Fuhrer. After wrestling for a bit, Hitler tells the audience, "Will you simply stand there and let him [Max Vandenburg, the Jew] do this? Will you stand by as your leaders did in the past, when they gave your land to everybody else, when they sold your country for the price of a few signatures? Will you stand out there, powerless?" This was very convincing to the German people because of their recent struggles and high hopes for their future. This is still true in current times. People with specific opinions on many social media platforms try to convince others to follow them. They may use convincing, persuading words that will work for the group they are targeting. People tend to conform and stay with the crowd. Impartial individuals need to educate themselves about conflicts from unbiased sources, as both sides may see themselves as the "good guys" and act in defense of their beliefs. This has been evident throughout history, where persuasive speeches and the killings of millions have convinced millions more to conform. From *The Book Thief*, I learned that people should form their own opinions of what is right and wrong.

In the story, Hans Huberman, Liesel's foster father, does not follow the Nazis. He keeps a Jew, Max Vandenburg, in his basement. As Death, the narrator, says, "Some Crunched Numbers: In 1933, 90 percent of Germans showed unflinching support for Adolf Hitler. That leaves 10 percent who didn't. Hans Huberman belonged to the 10 percent. There

was a reason for that.” The reason was that he had strong morals, values, and ethics that made him not conform and act like everyone else.

Hans felt he was in debt to Erik, Max’s father. Most other Germans, in debt or not, would have turned any Jew away the moment they saw him on their doorstep. I consider myself more of a follower than a leader. This was true for most Germans. I may follow many of the other students in my school. Sometimes this is good, but usually, it is not, such as the many times when I was envious of their possessions, but later realized that I didn’t need those products. There have also been events where students in the school were denigrating another student, and I stood by or even joined in. If civilians, in the 1940s and now speak up and do not follow the crowd, we can make a big difference. I may follow others because I do not want to stand out. This could bring bad consequences in the future, like the German Nazis were put on trial and found guilty. ***The Book Thief*** shows that I, and others, should not follow the crowd and we should stand out. Standing up to the norm can make the world a better place.

***The Book Thief*** shows that I should be a nonconformist. Because of the current situation in the Middle East, even more than ever, people should find their own unbiased information. It is important to be a nonconformist because following everyone else may bring bad consequences. Being a strong leader and having strong morals is essential for a strong world.

Sincerely,  
Yosef Yitzchok Schusterman

## Honorable Mention – Level Three

Addison Whittle

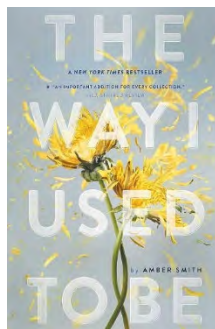
Homestead High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Amber Smith/ Author of *The Way I Used to Be*

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Dear Amber Smith,

The first time I saw your book, it was on the buy-one-get-one fifty percent off table at Barnes & Noble. My first thought was, “Wow, that cover looks really pretty.” I already had a book in hand that qualified for the bargain, Holly Black’s *The Cruel Prince*, but I needed another to fulfill the sale, and the yellow dandelions set against a gray background was the factor that inevitably led me to pick up *The Way I Used to Be*. I honestly expected to pick up the book, quickly skim the summary, and just as quickly place it back down on the table, as was the norm for almost all the realistic fiction books I’ve read the summaries of. But then I read, “I want to get as far away from the past as possible, be as different from that girl as I can,” and my interest was instantly piqued.



I had never encountered a book about rape before. I’ve never encountered a person who admitted to having an experience with such a traumatic event. It was hardly mentioned in school, at home, or ever. The most I had heard people talking about it was when a girl at school or a surrounding school had come into contact with the experience, but the girl had always managed to stop the offender and seek sufficient help. For some reason, I assumed that was how most experiences went with rape: it was stopped, and the victim received help. My parents had talked to me concerning how rape happened, why it happened, how to attempt to stop it, and to always tell a trusted adult if such a thing ever happened to me or anyone I knew, but it always seemed distant. What were the chances that I or someone I knew would be raped in a city amid cornfields in northeastern Indiana? My brain did not truly comprehend that people had to deal with such a horrible thing in their lives: that people, even in my own county, were violated in such a way.

But when I started reading about Eden, I realized that it didn’t matter if you were in a small city in a midwestern state, your familiar hangout, or even at your own house with a trusted person. Rape can occur anywhere, anytime, to anyone. *The Way I Used to Be* caused my eyes to be opened to just how many people get raped a year: around 460,000 in the US

alone. This event was no longer distant or fuzzy in my mind: it was clearer that these awful things do happen in our world increasingly often, unfortunately. One in six American women is a victim of either an attempted or a completed rape assault: one in six. Not ten, or twenty, or thirty, but six. I started to take note of all the women I passed on the street and sorted them into groups of six, wondering whether they had gone through such an awful experience: I wondered if they, like Eden, felt for the longest time that they could not tell anyone what they went through, or if they even told anyone at all.

The first time I read ***The Way I Used to Be***, I started at six p.m. on a Wednesday. I finished around 2 a.m. Thursday morning, sitting in my bed, clutching the book to my chest, staring at the wall, trying to comprehend what I had just devoured. I shed my first tear over a book as I did so, thinking of Eden's story and the hardships she had to endure over something that she didn't ask for, didn't want, and definitely didn't deserve. No one deserves to go through something like that. I often think back to Eden whenever I'm bored or sitting in class or even talking in a large group; she has turned into one of my favorite stories, especially after I read ***The Way I Am Now***. She stands as a symbol of hope, and I think that if she ended up being ok with not being ok, then maybe the rest of us can too. Thank you for writing a book that forced the mist over my eyes to clear so that I could see what a problem rape is in our world today. Thank you for having the bravery to write this devastating, beautiful book.

Sincerely,  
Addison Whittle

## First Place – Level Three

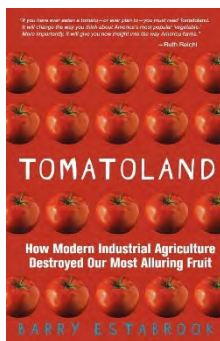
Kayla Xu

West Lafayette Jr/Sr High School, West Lafayette  
Letter to Barry Estabrook/ Author of *Tomatoland*

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Dear Barry Estabrook,

I read *Tomatoland* recently, and now every time I go to the supermarket, I can't help but think about how my tomatoes reached me. Before reading your book, agriculture wasn't something in which I was previously interested in. I don't think that I have ever really thought about worker exploitation in the agricultural industry, much less specifically in the tomato picking industry. Since I don't live in a rural area, farming has never been at the forefront of my mind. However, reading this book made me rethink my consumerist choices. Reading about the worker exploitation needed to grow a winter tomato while eating a tomato stir fry during the winter made me think twice about the food on my plate and in my refrigerator. I was so incredibly moved by Edar's story and how the Coalition of Immokalee Workers got its start, yet I had to confront my own capital-H-Hypocrisy as I continued to eat tomatoes in the middle of January.



You also enlightened me about chemicals. I definitely knew that my food contained pesticides, but I had no idea how much and to what extent farmers were applying them to their crops. What would compel Floridian farmers to spray 8 MILLION POUNDS of insecticide? Reading about the consequences of such reckless endangerment for not just me as the consumer but the pickers was terrifying; I've thought about it every time that I wash a fruit, vegetable, or tomato. Even my parents were largely unaware of the process from the start of the growing season in July to the supermarket for winter tomatoes.

When I was little, my grandma tended a vegetable garden. I remember that when I harvested our garden, I felt that our misshapen tomatoes and cucumbers were defective or rotten. I was so used to the perfect Pantone red tomatoes from the supermarket that I had no idea what actual homegrown food looked like. I reflected on this often while I was reading.

I highlighted a lot of my favorite quotes from your book, quotes like, "Workers who pick the food we eat cannot afford to feed themselves," or, "Any American who has eaten a winter tomato...has eaten a fruit

picked by the hand of a slave.” My blithe ignorance for the lives of the people who picked the food I was eating needed to be addressed, and I needed to make a change.

My favorite part of your book was near the conclusion. The section on Lady Moon Farms was really interesting because after being uncomfortable for the majority of the reading, I was glad to see that there is a way forward. While reading, I often had uncomfortable thoughts of “Why does the industry have to be this way, and what can be done about it?” Discovering all the farms that were supporting their workers and the health of their consumers felt uplifting and helped me feel less out-of-control.

My grandma always had me help her in her garden, and while it's been a while since I've tried my hand at gardening, this book has made me reevaluate that decision. I've made plans to create my own small garden, and I have already gotten a head start by propagating some green onions for myself. I am looking forward to enjoying my ethical, healthy, and tasty tomatoes next summer. Thank you for sparking an awareness about this looked over yet critical issue and reintroducing me to a nostalgic and healthful hobby.

Sincerely,  
Kayla Xu





**Let's Talk About...**

## **OVERCOMING ADVERSITY**

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**Health and Sickness**

**Discrimination**

**Advocating for Literacy**

**Kendall McComb**

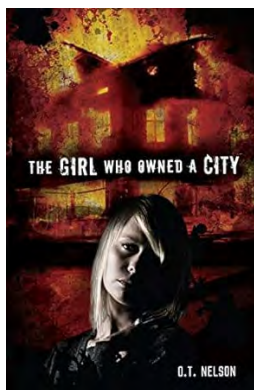
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

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

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Dear O. T. Nelson,

In my life, I have had a lot of challenging problems. I have vocal cord dysfunction, asthma, and many other problems. Before I read your book, I thought that I would be like this forever. I thought I was the only one with this problem but now I realize that everyone has big problems. Some are even worse than mine. Even though your book is fictional, I can relate to Lisa. She struggled with various problems throughout the book just like me.



At first, I was not thrilled about having to read this book because it was a school assignment. As you can imagine, I did not like reading or even school. I had read many books before this, and I did not like many of them. The only books that I only kind of liked were horror books and murder mysteries, so you can imagine that I was dreading this. My teacher said that she had read it, and she loved it, but then again, a lot of teachers and even parents say that when they want you to do something, so I figured she was lying. When I started reading your book, *The Girl Who Owned a City*, I loved it! I was honestly incredibly happy that it was an assignment, and I would always read ahead because I could not help it. I was hooked!

In your book, *The Girl Who Owned a City*, Lisa struggles with finding enough food and shelter, but she eventually finds it. She overcame one problem in her life. I loved the book already, but I never imagined that I would be able to overcome the challenges that I have, like Lisa does. I was incredibly sad that this was all happening because I could do almost nothing. My favorite sport was basketball, so I was really struggling because that was almost the only thing that kept me entertained. I kept working on it, but it was really bad. I loved it though, so I didn't give up.

A few months later, I gained the challenge of having to be gluten-free, dairy-free, and egg-free. Lisa also gained new challenges in the book. I eventually made the connection that me and Lisa are remarkably similar. I figured that if Lisa and many other people could overcome their challenges in life, then so could I.

I am now twelve and I can eat eggs and cheese! We are working on the rest of the dairy and gluten, but I think that it is going very well! My vocal cord dysfunction and asthma are also getting better, but we still haven't found an inhaler that has worked yet. "Happiness is quite simple, you know. There's nothing in the world that you cannot face. Do not fear! Fear is the ugliest thing because it alone equals unhappiness." - O.T. Nelson, ***The Girl Who Owned a City***. This is the quote I now live by because of you. This is what changed everything! It is incredible what a book can do, and how it can even change lives! I am so thankful for your book ***The Girl Who Owned a City*** because it helped me through my life. It taught me to never give up and be determined in my life. It will help me set goals in my life and have a better life too! It tells everyone that there is nothing in the world that you cannot face and that you can accomplish anything you put your mind to! Again, thank you so much, O. T. Nelson!

Sincerely,  
Kendall McComb

Veda Mueller

New Palestine Intermediate, New Palestine

Letter to Jennette McCurdy/ Author of *I'm Glad My Mom Died*

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Dear Jennette McCurdy,

I really related to your book *I'm Glad My Mom Died*. When you talked about wanting to always make people happy, also called a people pleaser, I recognized myself. You also discuss eating disorders, which include not eating for a long period of time or eating too much for a long period of time. I still struggle with both. Your book also talks about the trauma your family members put you through. I also have dealt with the same thing with my dad. My dad did things he shouldn't have been doing to me. My family and I also went to therapy to help with the trauma he caused us. I could relate when you wrote about your mom, who was both mentally abusive and physically abusive.



Your mom caused you to have an eating disorder, and my dad did the same thing to me by calling me fat and overweight. Your mother also called you those things and made you weigh yourself every week or day to see if you had lost weight. Your mom made you do interviews so often that you got tired of acting, but you wanted to please your mom, so you kept doing what your mother told you to do. When your mother got mad, she would kick your dad out. My dad did something similar to my sisters and brothers. Reading about your experiences and knowing others have gone through things like I have was a comfort to me.

In your book, you discussed that you had bulimia, a disorder that whenever you eat you throw it back up because you feel guilty for eating. In the past, I starved myself because I thought I weighed too much, resulting in me feeling very sick and having no energy and getting in trouble for not eating. Your book reinforced that starving yourself is not healthy and there are so many other ways to maintain your health.

I related so much to your book that I feel better about myself. It helps knowing that I'm not the only one who has gone through something like this. I saw *I'm Glad My Mom Died* on TikTok, and people had mixed opinions about it, so I decided to buy it and read it. I procrastinated reading it since it does have quite a lot of pages, but when I had a power outage for two days, I decided to start reading it, and I couldn't set it

down! Whenever I saw people on TikTok making fun of you for your book, I felt bad for you because you were explaining what happened during your childhood, and you were unable to control anything that happened.

You mentioned that you had been very jealous of your co-star, Ariana Grande, because she got to have way more absence days and could basically do whatever she wanted on the set of *Sam and Cat* because of her popularity. Ariana (Cat) got to go to the red-carpet events, while you (Sam) had to work around her absence. I once had the same jealousy of people's height, weight, and their looks. Although I had worked through many of these issues, your book helped reinforce the importance of loving yourself for who you are.

Thank you, Jennette McCurdy, for writing this book that was honest and open. It helped me on my journey to be the best version of myself.

Sincerely yours,  
Veda Mueller

**Gracie Navarro**

Delta High School, Muncie

Letter to John Green/ Indiana Author of *Looking for Alaska*

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Dear John Green,

How do you speak casually to someone who has altered your state of mind by words alone? I don't think there is an appropriate way to start this letter that I would be completely satisfied with and that I wouldn't look back on with some regret. In short, I recently picked up a novel that reignited some previously lost zest for life and reminded me to continue my search for the "Great Perhaps." Maybe you recognize the title, it's called *Looking for Alaska*.



Born and raised in Noblesville, Indiana, I always dreamt about moving and creating a grand life for myself. My brother, Sam, has high-functioning autism. Understanding him and his disability, and maturing fast enough to truly comprehend it, created what can only be described as a small adult in me. I vied for the "big kid table" at all our family events, I knew they sugar coated things to the little kids, which I had never truly been a part of, and at every turn I tried to prove myself worthy of a seat at the table before I hit double digits.

Around 5th grade, my old man (and I say old but he's only 53) decided to go back to school. This resulted in my family moving to beautiful, luxurious Muncie, Indiana. Wide eyed, I moved with hopes for a fresh start, only to be greeted largely unconventionally. The years since I moved to Muncie proved to be some of the most difficult years of my short life thus far. For the first time, I experienced what it's like to be on the receiving end of misogyny, homophobia and racism. I was one of three Asian kids in the school and one of only four girls who also liked girls, and in true conformist nature, my only few defining traits in middle school became K-pop and bisexuality. I've since moved schools four times. Perhaps it's for the best, though I lie awake at night knowing there are real people who only remember me that way.

Seventh grade came, and after a spontaneous collapse, we learned my father was in end stage kidney failure and had developed sepsis. My dad is one of my favorite people, so watching him shift from this jovial, larger than life guy to an old man who struggles to walk with a tube hanging out of his stomach was inimical. These last four years, going on

five, have felt like some cruel trial to see how long I can get up, survive, and do it again tomorrow - as though I, Daedalus, am calling back to the Icarus of my sanity, asking where in the world I can search to find him.

Just under two weeks ago, I went on winter break, and my mother had gone to donate her kidney to another family, understanding their struggle with more sympathy in her left thumb than most contain in their entire body. Between doing a teenager's job of tidying the house and going to work, I found myself with free time and picked up ***Looking for Alaska***.

Immediately I found so much of myself in Miles and his search for the "great perhaps," taking chances, shooting at something beyond yourself, and I recalled a time that, like Alaska, I felt stuck in this "labyrinth of suffering," to this day wondering if maybe "straight and fast" is the most efficient escape. I realized that years before I stopped searching, the pursuit of my joy had been placed on some mental back burner. Upon closing the novel and placing the borrowed library book at the foot of my bed I remembered I am "in the most important search in history; the search for meaning."

Since returning to school, I've pledged to myself, even on my worst days, I will throw myself 1000% into everything I do. That I am beyond this moment, and that I am a greater sum of my parts. I will continue to search for purpose, whatever that leads me to.

Thank you for sharing the wisdom and incredible journey woven into this story. Not only has the book entertained me, but it has altered the way I walk through life. I'm beyond grateful for the profound impact it has had on my personal growth. I found solace and inspiration in your book's pages. I hope others will find your work just as valuable and meaningful.

Sincerely,  
Gracie Navarro

## Honorable Mention – Level Two

Lila Hawkes

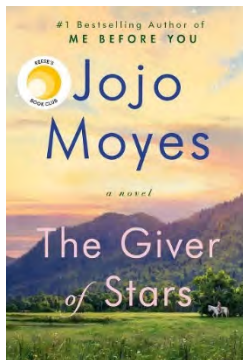
Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Jojo Moyes/ Author of *The Giver of Stars*

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Dear Jojo Moyes,

On Christmas Day a few weeks ago, I was gifted *The Giver of Stars*. Flipping to the first page, I had no idea the impact this book would have on me. By the time I reached the last page, I had pondered many tough subjects such as women's rights, racial injustices, and illiteracy. Before reading your book, I had never heard of The Packhorse Library Project, much less how strong of an impact it had on so many people's lives. Without the tireless work of the traveling librarians, I struggle to imagine how many underprivileged children in Kentucky would have missed out on the knowledge and opportunities that books granted them. Even today, there are children all over the world who don't have access to basic educational materials. I believe it is the responsibility of those with financial means to help improve access to books for underprivileged children. After all, the level of privilege a child is born into shouldn't define their future.



*The Giver of Stars* made me realize that I take for granted the accessibility I have to books. I can check out a book at the school library, read an e-book, or order a book on Amazon and almost instantly have the knowledge or entertainment I am seeking at my fingertips. I have always loved to read and can't imagine my life without the knowledge and empathy books have provided me. Books allow me to escape from the confinements of my life and learn about people and places that I would otherwise never know existed. They have been my comfort in times of uncertainty and disappointment.

The hard work and sacrifices that Alice and the rest of the packhorse librarians made to deliver books to the far reaches of the Kentucky wilderness left me in awe. People are constantly being judged based on factors such as how they look, how they speak, their family's background, and their occupation. The ability to look past all of that and give people a chance to better their lives through access to books is one of many reasons that I greatly admire the packhorse librarians.



The unlikeliness of a group of diverse librarians developing such a strong bond affirmed the idea that a common goal can bring people together. The librarians were selfless enough to put themselves in danger in order to better the lives of others - something that many people would avoid. The brave women who inspired these characters deserve more recognition, and your book has played an important role in bringing more awareness about the inspiring work they did.

Out of all the amazing characters in your book, Margery was the biggest inspiration to me. She taught me that sometimes we must ignore societal rules and expectations and live life by our own rules in order to accomplish our goals and find happiness. I'm a fairly shy person, and Margery's boldness and self-confidence are traits that I strive to achieve. Margery taught me that we should never limit ourselves or let the criticism of others (especially men) stop us from living our lives.

Not only are books important assets in children's lives, but I believe they are equally important in the lives of women. Throughout history, the lack of equal access to education has caused women to struggle to support themselves financially. Often their only option is to depend on a man who may take advantage of their vulnerability. Education is pivotal in providing the tools to allow women to be independent. Alice's job as a librarian not only provided her with a stable income, but it also allowed her to escape the abuses of her father-in-law and the neglect of her husband. Benefitting from her job, Alice was then able to provide a means for education to the people of Appalachia. It is my hope that I can use my love for books to have a positive impact on others too. ***The Giver of Stars*** has definitely inspired me to use my passion for reading to one day benefit others.

Your fellow book lover,  
Lila Hawkes

## First Place – Level One

**Megan McBee**

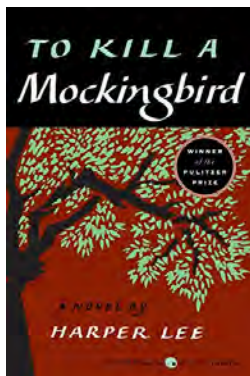
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville

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

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Dear Harper Lee,

There are some lessons in life that can be impossible to learn, or that you never fully understand until it feels real. Your book made it feel real. Before I read your book, I never imagined that someone could be wrongly convicted of a horrible crime and still be proven guilty, just because of what they look like. With each turn of a page, I became aware of the horrible social inequalities and darker aspects of humanity, and I am grateful for that. Without your novel I never would have fully understood what it was like for people to be outcasted not because of who they were, but the color of their skin.



I chose your book because your book impacted me deeply. I found myself still thinking about it months after I read it. Pondering the jury's decision, trying to look at it from every angle. Why wasn't Tom Robinson believed when he was obviously innocent? How could the jury not be aware of Bob Ewell's malice, and pin it on Tom Robinson? I was confused, but then I realized people are being judged based on appearances or rumors, and this was just one of the many injustices in our society. Your book brought me out of my unawareness of the world around me and the many injustices in our society, and I believe this has made me a better and more mature person.

I started to think about how your characters felt being judged based on lies. Then I realized this is a part of my life I had never noticed. I started to wonder if this was happening to me or people around me. Or ... could I be the person judging someone? What could I do to change this? I thought about every negative opinion I had of someone, and if it was backed up by facts and *their* actions and words. I reset my opinions on everyone and tried to continue with an open mind like Scout and Jem did after they discovered Boo Radley was a good person. Before I read your book, I would judge people on first impressions and pay no attention to who *they* were as a person. Your book taught me to break free of these opinions.

Your book made me think about the consequences of hateful prejudice in the world. Like what is going on with all the hate swirling around the world. I then began to become angry. If someone would just stand up for them, people would change their minds, right? But deep down I still knew that minds were not easily changed, and what can a 12-year-old girl from Indiana do? With that revelation I connected with your character more than ever. In a way, I became the characters and felt their hopelessness.

I learned from your book not to destroy what is beautiful. I now understand that the mockingbird is a reference for beauty and kindness, but killing a mockingbird represents destroying beauty. The mockingbird does not harm us but grants us with their beautiful song. Like how a person can have good and beauty in them and still be persecuted and viewed as an outcast. After reading your pages, I began to think for a long time. I thought about how much beautiful life is being taken advantage of. I read articles and stories about children abandoned by their parents, and I felt horrible for them. I felt horrible each time I asked for a Christmas present knowing full well that those kids would not get any. Then I remembered how Scout and Jem felt so helpless not being able to do anything for Tom Robinson. That inspired me to talk to my family, and we decided to donate Christmas presents to homeless children and children in child protective services. I knew it was not going to make an enormous difference in the world, but it would make a difference in their world.

While your book was beautifully written and an amazing story, that is not what I value from it. I value the lessons it taught me, about how not to judge people based on preconceived notions or what they look like and not to take advantage of the beauty of life in the world. And I thank you for teaching me some of the most important lessons one can learn. There is so much hate and prejudice in the world right now. Our society needs more people like Atticus who will stand up for what is right and go against what others think. Your book has inspired me to be one of those people, and to hold true to what I believe, even when it gets hard.

Sincerely,  
Megan McBee



**Let's Talk About...**

## **FRIENDSHIP**

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**Teamwork**

**Making New Friends**

**Empathy**

Dear S.E. Hinton,

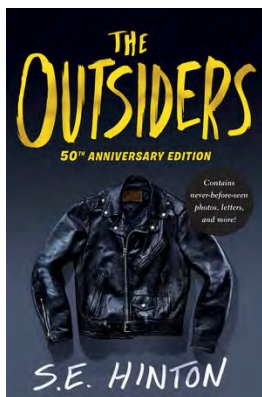
If someone were to ask me what I think is the thing I couldn't survive without, I wouldn't know what to say, and it would probably take me a while to think of something. I would probably come up with something almost meaningless, like a phone, but after reading your book *The Outsiders* last year in my sixth grade ELA class, I realized it was good, true friends that I probably couldn't live without.

While reading your book I started noticing how much everyone helped each other. I started to wonder what they would do if they didn't have each other. For example, if Johnny never helped Ponyboy when the Socs group attacked them, Ponyboy probably wouldn't have survived. If Dally never helped Johnny and Ponyboy get away, they would have been in a lot of trouble. They all helped each other in so many ways.

It made me start to think about where I would be if it weren't for my good friends. Sure, they have not helped me in serious situations like in *The Outsiders*, but they've helped in ways that mean almost as much to me. Like making me laugh when I'm sad and cheering me up, being honest when something looks bad on me, so I don't embarrass myself, always giving me compliments and helping me with anything, and even tying my shoelaces when my hands are too full. All of these are not that big of a task, but they still mean a lot to me.

When Johnny and Ponyboy ran away with Dally's help and lived alone together for a while, it helped me think that it's ok to just have a few really good friends. Also, like how Ponyboy was living with his two brothers, it was just the three of them, but they kept each other happy. That's another reason that made me realize you don't need a lot of "best friends," just a few ones who truly are your best friend.

Another thing I definitely couldn't live without is my family. Even though in *The Outsiders* most of them didn't have very good families, they still took care of each other like they were family. Ponyboy couldn't survive without



the help of his older brothers taking care of him, just like I probably couldn't survive without my family.

That's one of the reasons why I love ***The Outsiders***. It made me think about the things I need most in life. It also made me realize how much I should appreciate my good friends and family.

Sincerely,  
Alicia Marin

Dear Mr. Rodman Philbrick,

BOOM! The craft raced along the river. Hearts beating fast, lungs aching. I did not think about it at the time, but now I have thought about how hard some people's lives are and the disasters that are happening all around me that I do not know about. I can only imagine how the characters in your story, Deke, Daniel, Imani, Tony, and Mia must have been feeling walking around without a caretaker. I do not know how I would survive without my parents.



Your book **Wild River** opened my eyes to think about how some people live such hard lives and live every day worrying about something happening to them while I do not. I feel bad about how some people cannot go about their day normally because they live in fear. I have seen people on the sides of the streets asking people for money. I walked right past them, not thinking about how miserable they must be. They do not have a home or someone to take care of them. I live my life normally, going about my day not thinking about people who need help and who cannot go to school.

Thinking about wars that are happening right now, I am trying to put myself in other people's shoes. The children who are younger than me are living through something that has changed their whole lives. They are worried and do not have a lot. They need someone to care for them. For some children, all they have ever known is war. The news is scattered with moms, children, and dads trying to go about their usual day and being attacked by terrorists. They are worried about if they are even going to make it one more day in places like Israel and Gaza. I want to help people in need, but I do not know how. I feel like one single ant in a whole ant hill. I cannot change the way things are by myself.

Deke, Imani, Daniel, Tony, and Mia get into a fight and separate from each other. They split in half and try to find their way without each other. I have gotten into fights with my friends, and we took some time apart, but I soon realized that I need them. I need them so I can be happy. I need them when I am feeling down. I need them. Among the five children in your book who split up, they soon realized they need each other just



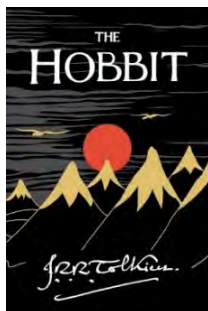
like I need my friends. They may not always get along, but deep inside them they know they must be together, or they will not make their journey.

People take their friends for granted. They do not realize how much they need each other until they are gone. People are struggling all over the world and people do not realize it. I would love to be able to help people, but I do not understand how. I now realize though, that I CAN help people. It may be indirect, but I can still help. Your book showed me that even when times are hard and I want to be alone, I should always be with someone and have someone to talk to. Thank you for showing me through your book that I am not just an ant by myself, but an ant with hundreds of others on my side willing to help.

Sincerely,  
Ruby Knight

Dear J. R. R. Tolkien,

When I first started reading *The Hobbit*, it was because my dad told me to. He said it would be a good experience and open me to a new genre of books. I wasn't too excited about that theory. But when I started reading, I got lost in the story, and I couldn't stop reading it. It was a really good experience, and it was the first time I really deeply enjoyed reading a book.



For a long time, I was scared of reading because I have dyslexia, and I have some traumatic early experiences with reading. But while reading your work, I discovered that reading doesn't have to be stressful. It can be calming and a way to wind down after a stressful day.

In the beginning chapters of the book, I was mainly just trying to learn the characters. But once I got to know them, reading for the first time became fun. I think it's really cool how each character has very different personalities. For example, Thorin, the head dwarf, is the boss of everyone. And then there's Bomber, who is afraid of making plans and having them fail and is very much not a leader. I think it's really interesting how all the characters change completely by the end of the book. For example, Bilbo, the main character, at the beginning is timid and has never gone on an adventure before, but towards the end of the book, he felt very confident and turned into one of the leaders of the party.

*The Hobbit* has helped me throughout my life by encouraging me to try new things. Because I really liked this book, it made me feel that I might like other books in the same genre, and that I could explore new reading opportunities. It has really widened my reading palate, and I've discovered many more books after reading this one.

This book is also one of the only reasons I have friends at this school because *The Hobbit* led me to discover Dungeons and Dragons, which is a role-playing game where you can pretend to be anything you want. D&D is mainly based off *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*, and having read them and been inspired by them, I wondered who else has been inspired by your work. I invited some people I did not know very well to play D&D, and we started to meet once a week at my house. Reading *The*

**Hobbit** really helped me picture what was going on in the game in my head and helped me think of new ideas and how I could help my friends while playing the game. Because of your books, I have made really close friendships with people I didn't know I could be friends with.

Thank you so much for writing **The Hobbit**. It is one of the most amazing books I've ever read and has led to so many new discoveries.

Sincerely,  
Henry Green

## Second Place – Level One

Callie Smith

New Palestine Intermediate, New Palestine  
Letter to Gordon Korman/ Author of **Restart**

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Dear Gordan Korman,

You can have a best friend for years and never understand how bad they have been to you until you find a group of friends that treats you so much better. In your book, **Restart**, Chase loses his memory and forgets who he is. He discovers that he was mean to everyone before the accident, but he doesn't hang out with the same group of friends anymore. He makes a nice group of friends that change him and help him stay nice.



Although I never lost my memory and never bullied anyone, in fourth grade, I found that making new friends can greatly improve your life, just like Chase's new friendship did. Ever since kindergarten, I had been best friends with a certain girl and never felt confident in myself. She would always say things that would put me down. At the time, I thought it was just a very honest friendship, but little did I know, I was so wrong. In fourth grade, she decided she didn't want to hang out with me, but I didn't have any other close friends. This made the beginning of the year very difficult and full of drama.

When Chase comes back to school after the accident, he helps a nice kid make a video for the school. I believe that making this new friend made him nicer and maybe even feel better about himself. If he had stayed friends with the same people from before the accident, the whole story would have changed. If I had tried to become friends with the girl again, I would have never discovered how encouraging a friendship can be.

After my best friend had decided to become popular instead of sticking with me like she said she would, I found an amazing, nicer group of friends. Like Chase, this helped me realize that a different group of friends helped me improve my life. These people have been encouraging and supporting ever since the day we met.

Your novel reminds me that I made a good decision, and though the times were hard, I thought about what good could come out of it. When Chase made a new friend, his life changed, and so did mine. Even though the

beginning of fourth grade was hard, the rest of the year I was feeling more confident than I ever had before. Your book helps remind me how much of an impact just one person can make on someone's life.

Even though sometimes I look back at our friendship, I'm never sad or angry. I'm thankful for my best friend who chose popularity over friendship. Without her decision, I would have never realized how toxic our friendship had been. And now I have a very confident, supportive group of friends I can't live without.

Your novel demonstrates how much one action can affect your life. It also demonstrates how great a friendship can be. Chase ends up making new friends, and I believe this improved his life. After reading your book, I now notice other people going through the same situation and am able to encourage them. Chase changed by going from a bully to one of the nicest kids in the school, just because of his friend. My level of confidence changed because of my friends, too.

Like Chase, I realize how beneficial friends can be. Even though Chase and I don't have the exact same experiences, your book helped me realize that many people are going through the same thing I did, but all experiences may be different. Chase's reputation at school changed from negative to positive, while I went from a girl who never spoke up for herself to someone who was confident in every situation. Thank you for helping me realize that supportive friends are an important ingredient in the recipe for a successful life. You never fully understand how amazing friendship is until you've had a friend that treated you like dirt.

Sincerely,  
Callie Smith



**Let's Talk About...**

## **FAMILY**

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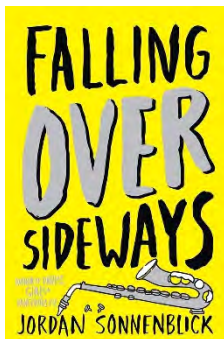
**The Importance of Family**

**Coming Together Through  
Reading**

**Disability and Sickness**

Dear Mr. Sonnenblick,

It was a normal rainy October day for my family. My dad was going to work, and I was going to school. Everything and everyone was normal until I walked through the door that day. I was very confused because my sister was crying. She was on the phone with my mom, and I didn't know what was going on.



When I found out what happened, my heart sank. My dad had a heart attack and a stroke. I didn't get to see my dad after that for 56 whole days. He missed my birthday, Halloween, and Thanksgiving too. I related to your book, *Falling Over Sideways*, because it's about this girl named Claire who is a 14-year-old and her dad who had a stroke one morning at breakfast. Similar to Claire, my school year started off hard, too.

It was my first year in middle school, and I barely knew anyone. All my other friends went to the other middle school because I got redistricted. Fortunately, I wasn't bullied like Claire was, but I didn't really have any friends at that school.

Even though I wasn't at home like Claire when my dad had his stroke, I still had a lot of the same feelings when it happened. Claire's dad was in his forties just like my dad. I didn't expect my dad in his forties to have a stroke.

Another way I relate to Claire is when people feel sorry for her because her dad was sick, like in the beginning of the book when she's sad because her dad can't do the dance recital with her, and her friends tried to comfort her. She was embarrassed and felt awkward.

Something like that happened to me at school last year in the lunchroom. I felt very sad one day, and I started crying at lunch. Everyone was staring and judging me, and it wasn't a good feeling. I just felt very low, and I felt like I was trapped in a dark place, and I couldn't get out. That feeling didn't go away for a very long time. Once my dad got out of the hospital, I didn't know what to do to help him.



Then I saw how hard he was working and how he had a positive mindset. His perseverance was inspiring because it showed me that even through his struggles, he had an amazing attitude.

This made it less scary, and it made me want to help him more. When Claire thinks about how she used to swim with her dad, this made me think of when I used to swim with my dad, and he can't do that anymore. I'm still sad about that, but I can still practice volleyball with him and play games with him. It makes me remember that my dad is still my same dad.

Claire had some people to support her such as her dance coach and a couple of her friends. Just like Claire's dance coach helped her, I had Mrs. Gordon who was the assistant principal. I really felt like she cared about me and wanted to support me however she could. This made me feel loved and cared for when other people didn't do the same.

***Falling Over Sideways*** made me see that I was not alone. I had so many different feelings about my dad's heart attack and stroke last year, and it made me feel better reading about Claire because she had so many of the same feelings and experiences. Going through something like what Claire and I experienced makes us appreciate our dads more, and we will never take them for granted again.

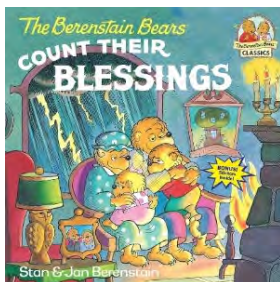
Sincerely,  
Avery Gilbert

Lilah Rasche  
Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg  
Letter to Stan and Jan Berenstain/ Authors of  
***The Berenstain Bears Count Their Blessings***

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Dear Stan & Jan Berenstain,

I have always had difficulty with anxiety. I was always worried about what might happen. It got really bad in May of 2020 when my mom went back to work after COVID. I felt alone all the time. I thought something was just wrong with me. I never felt really happy and was always anxious. I was always a people person, so it was hard for me to not go to school. I felt like your book ***The Berenstain Bears Count Their Blessings*** was a way to control my anxiety when it was horrible. It got me through rough times like Brother Bear and Sister Bear when they faced their fear of storms.



I have always wanted the things my friends have. I want a new phone, a new pair of shoes, and new clothes. Sister Bear wanted items her friend Lizzy had, like the newest Equestrian Barbie doll, and Brother Bear wanted the newest video games like his cousin Freddy. I always thought people would like you better if you had better clothes and nicer toys. I never really counted my blessings. I did not notice how important my blessings were until COVID began. I started to feel nervous and the only thing that would help me feel better was not one item. It was the people in my life. My mom was the most important figure in my life. She was the only person that would help my nervousness. Without her, I do not know what I would do. My mom's support in my life is so important to me. My mom always told me to think about all the blessings I had when I was anxious. It always helped me to think about your books.

When the storm hit the cub's treehouse, it reminds me of when my anxiety hits me. Mama Cub and Papa Cub's main priority is to make sure Sister and Brother Bear are safe. This reminds me that my mom and dad's main priority is to make sure my sisters and I are as safe as possible. My mom sits on the couch every night until I fall asleep. She could go to sleep in her room, but she waits until I am asleep because she cares so much about me. This reminds me of the second blessing in the book which is that they have each other. When the storm got worse, they saw a lightning strike close to their house. Mama and Papa Bear cared about them and took the cubs' mind off the storm by counting. When my anxiety worsens, my

mom always has me take my mind off the storm of my anxiety. I always feel better after I take my mind off my anxiety.

Even now as a 6th grader, I continue to read ***Berenstain Bears Count Their Blessings***. Every time I read it, I feel a wave of anxiety disappear. I feel this because I count all my blessings while I read the book. The first time I read this book I saw a common theme: even though you do not have everything, you have the most important thing - family. Thank you, Stan & Jan Berenstain, for helping me through my hardest times with anxiety and teaching me how to count my blessings.

Sincerely,  
Lilah Rasche

Layla Mack

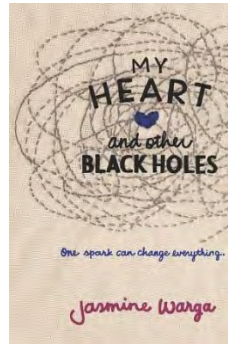
Fall Creek Junior High, Fishers

Letter to Jasmine Warga/ Author of ***My Heart and Other Black Holes***

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Dear Jasmine Warga,

I found your book by accident, out of the way in the back of the library. It was called ***My Heart and Other Black Holes***. I didn't think anything of it when I first stuck it into my bag, but it changed me. It was the most beautiful book I had ever read, so moving and powerful. This book made me realize how thankful I am for my family, as well as how thankful I am for my therapists, counselors, and other support. This book also helped me gain a new perspective on myself and others. I loved this book, and it has helped me see a lot of things in a new light. So, thank you so much for writing it!



When I was in 5th grade, I got very sick. I started getting sick with headaches, upset stomach, and a sore throat, then one day my eyes stopped opening at all. I was sick for over 5 months, and I couldn't do anything other than lay in bed, I didn't even go to school. The hardest part was we didn't know why I was sick. I was hospitalized in February with terrible headaches. The doctors did lots of tests and scans; then they found out what it was: Functional Neurological Disorder, otherwise known as FND. It meant that my brain had so much anxiety that it was making me sick, but I didn't have a real bacterial sickness. That's called psychosomatic symptoms, pain from a sickness that isn't real. My brain still does that, it tries to fight off sicknesses that aren't there which ends up making me sick anyways. This book really helped me gain a new perspective on myself and my condition. It helped me see how different people process their anxiety, and how I was only on one end of the spectrum. It showed me how while I may not have it good, some people have it much worse, and I'm lucky to be where I am.

This book also helped me realize how thankful I am for my family. When I was working through my sickness, my family was with me every step of the way, and for a long time, I didn't realize how lucky I was to have the family I have. After reading Aysel's story though and seeing her and Roman's family, it made me that much more thankful for my own. My parents were always looking out for me and doing everything they could to help me get better. I don't know how I would have worked through that time without them, and this book helped me realize that. It really opened

my eyes to see how grateful I am for my family, and how much they mean to me.

This book helped me realize how thankful I am for my counselors and therapists too. I have been going to a counselor since I was 5 years old, because right after I started kindergarten, I was diagnosed with Panic Disorder and Generalized Anxiety Disorder. This was very difficult for me and my family as we learned how to function and work through this. I am very thankful that I have my counselor and other supports now because in this book, I saw how tough it can be when you are going through hard things without that support. Neither Roman nor Aysel had a solid support system in the book, and that made it difficult for both to process their grief, depression, and anxiety. It helped me realize how lucky I am for my own support system, and how unfortunate it can be when others don't have their own support system. This book showed me how lucky I am for all the people working to help me, including my counselor and therapists.

The book ***My Heart and Other Black Holes*** changed the way I see a lot of things, and it helped me gain a sense of gratitude. While reading this book, I saw other kids with anxiety and depression, which I don't see too often. After reading this novel, I realized how thankful I am for my family, counselor, therapists, and other support, and it also helped me gain a new perspective on myself and my mental health. I loved this book, and I am always recommending that others read it, because it changed me. So, thank you for writing this book. I will always be excited to read whatever comes next from you.

Kindest regards,  
Layla Mack

Dear Kathleen Glasgow,

For as long as I remember, I was always a really curious kid, especially when it came to things that I didn't understand. Now, obviously as a ten-year-old, I didn't understand a lot of things like why I had to make my bed every day or why I couldn't wear pajamas to school. But there were also things that I didn't understand, and I felt like I couldn't reach out to anyone because it seemed too unnatural to talk about. I wondered why my dad would have to leave all the time for days at end. I wondered why my mom always told me he was sick when I never saw what she called "sick."

This is why the setting and plot of *Girl in Pieces* stuck with me so heavily. *Girl in Pieces* follows a girl who spent time in a mental hospital. She had spent time trying to recover from traumatic events in her life, which we understand throughout the book. After being released from the hospital, she has to try to find herself and heal. There is a large part of the book where the only place she can be at is the mental hospital because of her mental health. This part of the book almost immediately had me engrossed in reading because it was a situation that felt so similar to home. I couldn't directly relate to the girl, but she, in some ways, helped me understand my dad better.



My dad has always been one of the most important people in my life. Ever since I was younger, he was the only person who had really been there for me, even before I was old enough to make solid friendships. So, I remember being really confused when my mom claimed he had to go to the hospital because he was having trouble breathing. I was young, but I wasn't stupid. I knew his cough had been gone for days, and I had heard the fights he had with my mom. A part of me didn't want to understand what was happening, but as I got older, I became more curious about mental health and suicide. Partly because of my dad, and partly because I saw more and more of it happening to different people. I never directly went out of my way to find it, I just took note about things that I would see sometimes, or in this case, read. I paid a lot of attention to the setting because it was a place that was so directly impactful to my life, yet I had never seen it. I didn't really understand where my dad had been, but this

book helped me. I would remember parts of what my dad told me and compare it to parts of the book. Surprisingly, often the situations would be similar. At the end of the chapters where she was in the hospital, I felt like I understood my dad better in a way, which was something so crucial to me.

Still, even after two years of being out of the mental hospital, my dad still has to go to therapy almost every day. To me, this was just one huge adjustment of having to spend time away from my dad. I would complain a lot about it. I didn't quite understand that the mental hospital wasn't the healing process of whatever happened, it was just the start of it. Seeing in the book that the main character, Casey, had to go through so many hard obstacles after leaving the mental hospital helped me understand how hard it is not to go back to old habits. I can see Casey struggling to stay clean or trying not to revert back to the things that would hurt her. This reminded me of how hard it is to recover, even if you've gotten help you needed, like my dad.

Overall, this book deeply impacted me because the situation connected with mine. Despite the main character not directly relating to me, she reminded me of my dad. I learnt how to try to understand what he's going through and that he's still healing. The book also helped me understand things that had happened, almost like it gave me a sense of closure over a topic I feel like I can't talk to people about. I will never forget how much this book deeply touched me and made me feel more understanding of things that happened behind closed doors.

Sincerely,  
Bella Lamb

Lainee Blome

Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Shel Silverstein/ Author of *Where the Sidewalk Ends*

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Hello Shel Silverstein,

You were my childhood. No matter what book, it was always "By Shel Silverstein." One of your books in particular touches really close to home. *Where the Sidewalk Ends* was a family book for me. My family would read it every night. We would go in turns to read each other's favorite poems. With *Where the Sidewalk Ends* being your first book, it turned out to be amazing. The other night we brought it out to read, and an old family tradition suddenly awoke from its long slumber. As the imaginary characters pranced through my living room, I caught the scent of childhood. When we opened the book, all the memories flooded in.

The days we giggled about "Jimmy Jet and his TV set." Every night bringing up "Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout," because of course that was our favorite one. Never talking about the dentist who was "swallowed" by the alligator, never to be seen again. My mom, Emily, always laughing about how the little girl could suddenly get out of bed once she heard it was Saturday. My dad always picking to read "Boa Constrictor." (I just think it was because he wanted to do the silly voices.) Then to me telling my brother he looked like "The Dirtiest Man in the World," and if he argued with me, I threatened to use "The Magical Eraser" on him. Also, to us knowing "Captain Hook" is the last person we would want to be.

As I brought up Sarah Cynthia being our favorite, something special happened with that poem in particular. My dad, who works at a college, had a poem-reading day. People brought in a poem or poem book to read out loud to a crowd. My dad then asked me if I wanted to read something. I said of course, but I wondered, *what would I read?* He then pulled out the book. The book I had grown up with, where I had practically memorized half the poems. At that point, I knew exactly what I was going to read. The day finally arrived, and I walked up to that podium with confidence. Then I recited what I had read maybe 1,000 times. While trying to use many expressions, I hoped they could feel the way I felt when first reading it. When the poem was over, I stepped off the podium as happy as ever. I will forever remember that day and the happiness in my body after reading that.

I don't have a lot of confidence when it comes to public speaking. For some reason, I just don't like it when all eyes are on me. Being in front of



a crowd doesn't scare me, because I can be in the center of attention and be fine. So, when I was so confident in reading that poem that day, it changed something in me. Your book gave me confidence. I was able to do something I never could have done without *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. I read so smoothly, not one ounce of hesitation behind my voice. I guess it is possible that books can be magical.

Going back to the recent night when we picked up the book, my eyes started to fall earlier than expected. I have to stay awake; I just have to. Then the book starts closing. All the creatures running back to their pages. The boa constrictor slithering back in, Sarah Cynthia running from the trash, the lumberjack going back to his resting place. The invisible boy might be back on his page. Who would know? Then my family disperses back to their normal lives. Everything is different now that we are older. There are rarely poem nights, but the book is still with us. Sometimes I bring it out to relive those old memories. As I open the book, a slight scent of childhood comes out once again. The characters all come out tired, yet still enthusiastic. In the end, all the characters weren't fictional to me. They were what made me Lainee. The funny, sad, confusing, eventful, and unexpected poems shaped me. Looking back to those nights, I become grateful for you. I am not just grateful for your book; I am grateful for you bringing my family together.

Thank you for everything,  
Lainee Blome

## First Place – Level Two

**Audrey Schroeder**

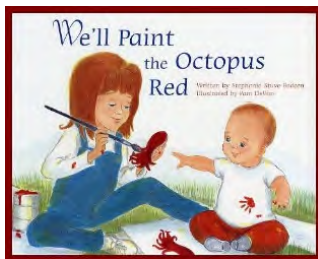
Jasper Middle School, Jasper

Letter to Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen/ Author of ***We'll Paint the Octopus Red***

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Dear Stephanie Stuve-Boden,

On February 10th, 2016, my life was forever changed. Like Emma, my new sibling would be born with Down syndrome. I discovered I would have a new baby brother or sister around a month before my 5<sup>th</sup> birthday. Soon after my parents got pregnant, the doctors told them that their baby would have Down syndrome. They told me as soon as they found out, but not in the way you would expect.



My parents sat me down and said they had some news to share. They read me your story, ***We'll Paint the Octopus Red***. After, they said, "Audrey, your new baby brother or sister will be like Isaac. They will have Down syndrome." I asked similar questions as Emma regarding what my new sibling would be able to do. The one that my parents remember the most is, "Will she be okay?"

Well, 7 years later I can definitely say that my sister is more than okay, she's astounding.

My first memory of Elynn, my sister, was the exact day she was born. My grandparents drove me to the hospital to see her. At this time, I didn't know what gender she was. My parents told me to look in her crib. I went on my tiptoes and saw the illustrations in your book come to life. My new baby sibling was bundled in pink. "Her name is Elynn Jean," my parents said. "Hi Elynn, it's your big sister, Audrey," I whispered into the crib. The corners of her brand-new cheeks curled into a smile. It was like she already had my voice memorized. This memory is forever engraved in my mind. Without your story, I would have never realized how important my role as Elynn's sister would be. Thanks to you, I now have an everlasting relationship with my little sister.

As Emma's dad said, having a sibling with Down syndrome will require patience. My sister does lots of things that irritate me. Being her big sister,

I've learned that she really looks up to me. Emma's father paved the path for me to think that no matter what little thing she does, I have to be the shining light in her life. The role model she can always rely on. Elynn and Isaac handed me new lenses to look at life through. I now know that just because people are different, it doesn't mean I should think they're out for the count. Like Emma, I have to work extremely hard with my sibling. Emma and her dad have helped me understand that if I put aside time for Elynn, the possibilities of what she can do are endless.

Emma's dad and mine are quite alike. They both remind me that as long as we give our siblings time and attention, they will thrive at anything they want to do. When Emma and her dad were brainstorming ideas for what Isaac could do, they thought of millions of things. I adamantly think this is true. Elynn is now in 2nd grade and is one of the most intelligent kids I know. We work nonstop with her at home on her math and reading assignments. It takes time, but it's so worth it to see that gleaming smile on her face when she gets the answer correct.

Emma was worried about Isaac being able to play kickball with her. I was also concerned if my sister would be interested in sports. I can safely say I have nothing to be worried about. Some of her favorite things to do are swimming, basketball, and soccer. She's superb at all these activities. Elynn can swim at my grandparents' for hours, and every summer day, she asks to go to a pool. She got a basketball goal for Christmas one year and is still obsessed with it. My dad and I train at least three days a week during soccer season. She always wants to attend and keeps right up with me. She especially loves doing push-ups and going on runs. I can't help but smile when she tells me how hard she worked after training.

I'm sure Isaac has taught Emma many lessons, and Elynn has surely taught me some. I want to thank you for being the one to give me the news that my sister will have Down syndrome. It is without a doubt the best news of my life. You have inspired me to be the shoulder that my sister can lean on. A lesson that I will never forget that Elynn has taught me is that you shouldn't judge someone by the score on their test but by the size of their heart.

Sincerely,  
Audrey Schroeder



**Let's Talk About...**

## **GROWING UP**

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**Nostalgia**

**Moving**

**Maturing**

Dear Mr. Claude McKay,

I was first introduced to your work through your poem, **"I Shall Return."** Since then, I have gone through the other recorded poems you wrote. They all interest me to an extent, and I recognize them as unique individual works all with varied messages, but **"I Shall Return"** in particular amazes me still. I've read it many times, and each reading only gives me more to think about. I still wonder how your first poem I read could captivate me so easily, but I believe I know the answer already.

*I shall return to hear the fiddle and fife  
Of village dances, dear delicious tunes  
That stir the hidden depths of native life,  
Stray melodies of dim remembered runes.  
I shall return, I shall return again,  
To ease my mind of long, long years of pain.*

The last stanza or so piques my interest the most. It portrays a wonderful sense of nostalgia. Nostalgia is a peculiar thing. I enjoy nostalgia as much as it pains me to experience it. These lines perfectly describe how that feeling of nostalgia can be wonderful, yet make you feel so far and left behind. The last line, however, is what helped me. I realize now fully why I feel this way about nostalgia (and how others may feel about it, too).

I used to think (and I was told) that I should stay in the moment, in the present, and that reminiscing wouldn't do anything good for me because I liked to reflect so much. I started to believe that, but I couldn't remember more about the past than I would've hoped. As I made new memories, I forgot about other things I normally would have wanted to keep in my mind. Sometimes they were big things, others were small.

This poem helped me to recall the reasons I had for looking back on the past in a fond way. As it turns out, nostalgia helped me improve my memory, especially the times I thought about so much, and come to terms with the issues I had back then, as I could consider what options I had and accept that things went the way they did. Additionally, it (nostalgia) also reminded me of how mortal it is to experience it, to want for simpler times and mourn what could have been, though to also see it for how it was and know what to do better, provided it happens again.

*I shall return to loiter by the streams  
That bathe the brown blades of the bending grasses,  
And realize once more my thousand dreams  
Of waters rushing down the mountain passes.*

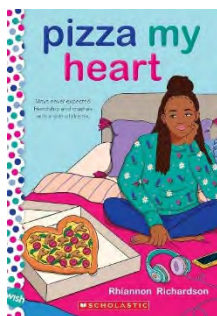
Nostalgia is so human, so simple and sweet, yet so grounding at the same time. Although it's regarded negatively, it shouldn't be so. It should be something we view as natural, as natural as happiness, sadness, grief, and anger. Because it is natural, and it is something we should allow ourselves to feel more often. People forget that the beauty in memories is much more than that of the present, though the future is as mysterious as the mind that holds them. And as the saying goes: "Don't cry because it's over: Smile because it happened." You can't cry because it's over or smile because it happened, if you don't reminisce about it at all.

That is the value of nostalgia, and this poem helped me understand that it's okay to feel it. To understand that it's okay to be human, and to appreciate the fact that I am human.

Sincerely,  
Bryna Hargreaves

Dear Rhiannon Richardson,

Three years ago, I had to say goodbye to my best friends forever, and it changed my life. I had to move from Michigan to Indiana, away from where I was born and raised my whole life, just like Maya. When I first read **Pizza My Heart**, I realized that I should not be embarrassed by moving from one state to another. I should be proud to get to experience new environments to live in.



On my first day of a new school, I got a buddy to show me around just like Maya did, and soon after she became my best friend. Unlike the book, I had the best third grade teacher ever! Her name was Miss Stein. After I made one new friend, I met her other friends, so I became close friends with them too, just like how Maya met Deven's other friend Mikayla and became close friends with her.

Once I got about halfway through the book and read that she wants to be an architect just like me, I thought, "I want to be an architect too," which made me want to learn what else me and Maya have in common. I would love to be an architect, to design the interior and exterior of houses, just like Maya does. I want to be an architect because I love making new design ideas for rooms of houses. Even though Maya's parents own a pizza shop, her favorite food is not pizza - her favorite food is crayfish, and my favorite food is BK (burger king).

Before reading your book, I thought I was the only person in the world that has had to move from their hometown. Now I have realized I am not the only one that moved to a new place, a new town, with new neighbors, not knowing where to go or how to make new friends. It's especially hard at a new school because everyone knows you as "The new girl." No other book has made me feel as seen as **Pizza My Heart**. Since I was only in second grade, I cannot even imagine being in middle school and having to move to a new school, especially since I know what it is like now to be in middle school.

Thank you for creating a book that so many people can relate to. A book that I can come back to every day and always love. I know people love



and understand this book and that they are not the only ones who went through this. Thank you for creating a book that people who might not have moved can still relate to and enjoy your book. This book is not just about moving, it is about a girl just like me living her life and going through tough times just like how I did. People may have gone from elementary to middle school and would understand your book, and that's why I love your book and any time I spot it across the room I will walk over and start reading.

Sincerely,  
Gemma Diebolt

Dear Mark Twain,

I read your amazing book called ***The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*** during summer vacation when I was eleven. This novel changed me as a person and made me think differently about myself and other people around me. Initially in the book, Tom Sawyer was a trouble-making child who never thought about other people and stayed with his Aunt Polly. I loved his journey how he grew from a boy to a matured young man. He was an adventurous kid, and with his friend Huck Finn, they accomplished many things and even saved a person's life in court! Your book teaches the readers that you should always try new things and never give up in life.



*He was not the model boy of the village. He knew the model boy very well, though - and loathed him. Within two minutes, or even less, he had forgotten all his troubles. Not because his troubles were one whit less heavy and bitter to him than a man's are to a man, but because a new and powerful interest bore them down and drove them out of his mind for the time...*

The above sentences were very powerful to me because I often strive to be the model kid in my family and cannot forgive my bad luck. Tom's perspective about life intrigued me to look on the bright side of life. I imagined myself in Tom's place when the Superintendent rewarded him with the prize for learning to do right and be good with the verses as it can motivate any kid to excel in their lives. The below few lines from the story were encouraging to a kid like Tom who always troubled others but learnt his skill set:

*Fine boy. Fine, manly little fellow. Two thousand verses are a great many-very, very great many. And you never can be sorry for the trouble you took to learn them; for knowledge is worth more than anything there is in the world; it's what makes great men and good men; you'll be a great man and a good man yourself someday.*

The book was full of interesting stories and adventures. I loved the idea and concept of the story and the characters. Each character has different

personalities and carries the story from multiple directions. I always like to spend my time on electronic devices instead of doing any physical activities. After I read this book, I started to realize my mistake and decided to change. I created a schedule to play outside and spend some time with my family in the evenings. I can relate to the story and characters as I used to be very clumsy and irresponsible, but throughout my life I learned to be more careful, patient, and become responsible. Not many books can capture that feeling that you created, and I'm truly amazed with the portrayal of the story.

After reading your book, I understood that life is an evolutionary process. No one is perfect, and people will grow from their responsibilities throughout their life, and we all must enjoy our lives to the fullest with spreading love for others. I want to thank you for teaching me about being mature, respecting my elders, and enduring the opportunity we have in our lives. Life lessons that have shaped me.

Sincerely,  
Aarush Boini



**Let's Talk About...**

## **NATURE**

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### **Animals**

**Finding Tranquility in Nature**

**Global Warming**

**Malaby Burns**

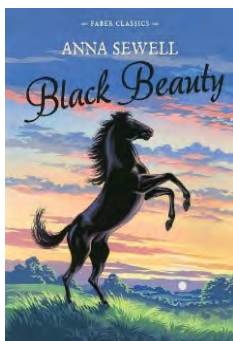
East Central Middle School, St. Leon

Letter to Anna Sewell/ Author of *Black Beauty*

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Dear Miss Anna Swell,

As I planned to write a letter to the most influential writer of my childhood, I couldn't help but pick *Black Beauty*. I immediately felt a connection between Beauty and me. By the time I had reached the end of *Black Beauty*, I had fully acknowledged all the important values packed inside. Being a responsible equestrian owner requires confidence, mutual respect, and most importantly trust. While *Black Beauty* emphasizes many moral values, I believe that respect for all horses, as well as understanding how they view their environment, may be the most important of all.



*Black Beauty* brought to light how enduring and resilient horses can be. Chapter thirteen, "Devils Trade Mark," kept me thinking for weeks about how cruel children can be to horses. For instance, some will whip their ponies to pick up the pace or force the ponies to take a jump too large for them. Being a horse camp counselor, this chapter called my heart to educate my campers to respect horses. However, this behavior can be stopped quite easily by an educated mentor and a willing heart to learn. She-Go is the resident miniature pony at my barn. She is extremely stubborn, only picking up her feet when it's convenient for her. As a result, when campers attempt to pick her feet, she acts as if they are glued to the floor. From here on out, we try to educate our campers on the correct way to urge a horse's foot up.

I felt that the relationship between Beauty and James Howard was extremely similar to my father and me. My father commands a lot of respect and obedience. However, in return he is nurturing, loving, and a strong mentor for me. I remember (last summer) my cousin and I were searching for geodes in the creek bed on our property. I had done this time and time again over the years, but this time was different. We had just had an intense downpour. As a result, the rain had unearthed an arrowhead which we had luckily stumbled upon. I sprinted up the hill, my cousin trailing behind me, and immediately showed our find to my father. He was so proud, and I will never forget as long as I live the warmth that coursed through my body. James has the same high expectations for Black

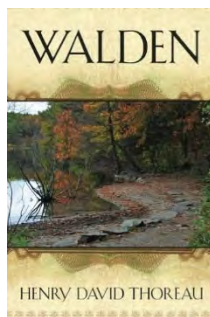
Beauty, but like my father, James returns Black Beauty's hard work with coaching and reward.

Overall, I have a new gratitude and appreciation towards the love and care of horses. It is no wonder that **Black Beauty** has a permanent place on most equestrian lovers' bookcases.

Admirably,  
Malaby Burns

Dear Henry David Thoreau,

I hope this letter finds you in the tranquility of Walden Pond. I am writing to express my deep gratitude for the inspiration I have derived from your extraordinary work, **Walden**. As I delved into the pages of your book, I encountered a kindred spirit in your pursuit of simple living and purposeful existence. Your eloquent descriptions painted a vivid illustration of the cabin by Walden Pond. Through them, I felt the soothing embrace of nature and the liberating essence of a life distilled to its core elements.



The concept of simplifying one's life struck a resonant chord with me. In a world often consumed by material pursuits and superficial concerns, your goal of embracing a more straightforward, intentional lifestyle served as a stark reminder. Your experiences at Walden Pond acted as a gentle prompt to recognize that true richness resides not in possessions but in a profound connection with the natural world and a purposeful engagement with the present. Within my own life, I am often distracted by the day-to-day tasks of school, work, etc. But your book allowed me to simply let go of many of the stresses in my life and to enjoy nature with deep reverence and tranquility. Simplicity can, more often than not, become extraordinary. In your own words, "for my greatest skill has been to want but little," and I could not agree more. I have since found solace and inspiration in the inherent beauty of the world around me, seeking moments of transcendence in the unassuming wonders that frequently escape notice. Like you, I also find comfort in the calm of nature. From the quiet little chirps of birds to the trickle of water in a stream, to the sound of wind rustling through the leaves, I have come to appreciate all the little wonders of the natural world.

Furthermore, your championing of individualism and nonconformity has encouraged me to carve my path, resisting societal pressures that might lead to a life of quiet desperation. I have already valued individuality throughout my life, but to find a similar way of thinking within **Walden** is truly a blessing. Your words have become a guiding beacon, encouraging me to trust my instincts, embrace my uniqueness, and foster a sense of self-reliance. To be my own man and to think freely is a process that I fully subscribe to.



In essence, **Walden** has proven to be a great inspiration, continuously shaping my perspective on life. Your wisdom has ignited a desire for a more meaningful existence, prompting reflection on my choices, values, and the impact of my presence on this planet. I extend my heartfelt thanks for the gift of your words and the enduring influence of your philosophy. Your legacy persists, not solely within the confines of **Walden** but also within the hearts of those, like myself, who have been touched by the simplicity and profound wisdom encapsulated within its pages.

Sincerely,  
Noah Schenk

Dear Hannah Gold,

Every year pollution and the climate get worse. Though this never really affected me, I didn't know how horribly it was affecting the animals and living things around me. Until I read *The Last Bear*, I realized that these problems affect far more than just a place, they affect animals and people and their wellbeing. I admire April because for some people animals aren't just there to provide for us. Sometimes animals can be a friend. They accompany us and are there for us when we need them the most.



When I finished the book, I truly saw how sad it is that climate change is getting worse each year. It made me think of all the girls like April Woods that suffer because of our actions. Global warming has formed big consequences for polar bears. I love my family, and I love having them to support me. Which is why imagining all the poor bears who have lost their families whether due to death or separation dejects me incredulously.

Her father never really gave her the attention she needed, but Bear did, and that's why sometimes you don't need your best friend to be a person. It could also be an animal, like Bear. It's just also sad that polar bears have to deal with the outcome of our actions. By using an insane amount of electricity, and things such as burning coal, we are killing our planet. Little by little, day by day, the consequences get worse. It's just that for me, it took reading *The Last Bear* to realize it.

Now more than ever, I care more about the planet. Especially about global warming, and about how it has affected animals and environments. I care because of how they feel and how they hurt. Just because they are animals doesn't mean we can just let them face our horrible turn-outs because they aren't humans. Polar bears may not seem like a big part of our community, but they are. All animals are, and we should start treating them like it. At the end of the day, we all matter equally and should help each other thrive in an environment that we can build together.

Sincerely,  
Valeria Cortes

