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presents *the* INDIANA competition *of...*

# LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE

2019 Letters About Literature Anthology

## 2019 Winning Letters

*by* **Indiana Students**

**APRIL 13, 2019**



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# Letters About Literature

*2019 Winning Letters by Indiana Students*

**Indiana Center for the Book Director**

*Suzanne Walker*

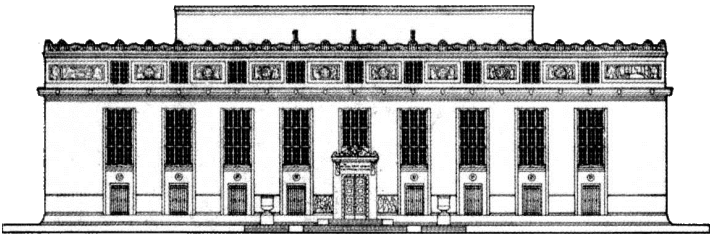
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LettersAboutLiterature



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## Letters About Literature

The Indiana Letters About Literature program is part of a national reading/writing contest for students in grades 4 through 12 sponsored by the Library of Congress, the Indiana Center for the Book in the Indiana State Library and The James & Madeleine McMullan Family Foundation. The Library of Congress concluded its 27th and final year of the contest with this, the 2018-2019 program. However, the Library of Congress gave permission to all state Centers for the Book to continue the program on their own if they so desired. Indiana is proud to be able to keep offering this contest for Indiana students. While there will be no national winners, our winners will continue to be honored with cash prizes, publication in this annual anthology and an annual event. Indiana is particularly proud of our two students who took national awards in the Library of Congress program. Yael Epstein won the National Award for Level II this year, the last year of the Library of Congress's involvement in the program, and Paw Soe won a National Honorable Mention for Level III in 2012. Letters About Literature will continue to be a program of the Indiana Center for the Book, an affiliate of the Library of Congress.

## What is a Center for the Book?

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



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

We are excited to honor your work in our 2019 book.

We offer a special thanks to the James and Madeleine McMullan Family Foundation for supporting our Youth Literary Day and Letters About Literature Award Ceremony that was held on April 13, 2019 at the Indiana State Library. Our Youth Literary Day was a great event that included writing workshops; a visit from Indianapolis native A'Lelia Bundles, the great-great-granddaughter of Madam C. J. Walker; and readings of several of the award-winning letters. We also offer a special thanks to the Indiana State Library Foundation. We are constantly thankful for their support.

Every year we do our best to keep the works in this book true to what the student submitted. Sometimes there are grammatical errors, but we like to think that these errors remind us of the youthfulness of our writers. It should also be noted that several letters won prizes and are not included in this book due to lack of permission by the parent at the time of printing. Several letters were lightly edited for length.

The letters in this collection are heartfelt interpretations from young writers that touch on a variety of difficult themes including adoption, anxiety, bullying, death, disabilities, faith, fitting in, illness, immigration, poverty, race, refugee issues, religion, social media, success, survival, and other serious topics that our Indiana youth struggle with daily. There are lots of feelings in these letters and some language that might not be appropriate for all students.

The Letters About Literature contest is changing. This is the last year that the contest will be supported by the Library of Congress. That being said, the Indiana Center for the Book will continue supporting the contest for our state. We feel that this contest and what it stands for is too important to let it fade away.

Literature has the power to change people. It can teach. It can develop understanding and empathy. It can give courage where once there was none. It can befriend the lonely and even help the friendless find a friend. It can help us see others more clearly, and (maybe more importantly) help us to better understand the facets in ourselves. It's good to learn this young so that later in life we humans know that we can turn to literature to help us continue to grow and change. That's what this contest is all about.

Suzanne Walker – Director, Indiana Center for the Book

# Contents

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## Level I Finalists

PAGE 1

---

1 <sup>st</sup> Place	Miguel Sebastian — <i>Blair Pointe Upper Elementary, Peru / 1</i>
2 <sup>nd</sup> Place	Sanjana Malineni — <i>Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers / 2</i>
3 <sup>rd</sup> Place	Zara Ahmed — <i>Castle North Middle School, Newburgh / 4</i>

---

## Level I Semifinalists

PAGE 6

---

Bethany Blachly — <i>New Palestine Intermediate, New Palestine / 6</i>
Briar Campbell — <i>Kankakee Valley Middle School, Wheatfield / 8</i>
Charlotte Miksha — <i>Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers / 10</i>
Viola Putnam — <i>Blair Pointe Upper Elementary, Peru / 12</i>
Olivia Sommerville — <i>Castle North Middle School, Newburgh / 14</i>

---

## Level I Honorable Mentions

PAGE 16

---

Claudia Antcliff — <i>Zionsville Middle School / 16</i>
Grace Arbogast — <i>Northview Elementary / 17</i>
Salma Arnett — <i>Blair Pointe Upper Elementary / 18</i>
Delaney Blankenbuelher-Lee — <i>Castle North Middle School / 20</i>
Darcy Brady — <i>Park Tudor School / 21</i>
Isabella Bocker — <i>Waverly Elementary School / 22</i>
Ehrin Browning — <i>Northview Elementary / 23</i>
Ella Dixon — <i>Kankakee Valley Intermediate School / 24</i>
Kyler Effner — <i>Clayton, Indiana / 26</i>
Iris Epstein — <i>Hasten Hebrew Academy / 28</i>
Jack Fisher — <i>Fall Creek Intermediate / 30</i>
Chava Gluck — <i>Hasten Hebrew Academy / 31</i>
Samantha Gornto — <i>Blair Pointe Upper Elementary / 33</i>
Amari Johnson — <i>Crestview Elementary / 34</i>
Jihoon Jung — <i>Fall Creek Intermediate / 35</i>
KylieAnn Keller — <i>North Madison Elementary / 37</i>
Cadence Land — <i>North Madison Elementary / 38</i>
Patrick Mardis — <i>Castle North Middle School / 40</i>
Ethan McKinney — <i>Fall Creek Intermediate / 41</i>
Aviya Melrose — <i>Hasten Hebrew Academy / 43</i>
Leah Murray — <i>Zionsville Middle School / 45</i>
Isabel Pearson — <i>Dillsboro Elementary School / 47</i>
Lilly Quirey — <i>Park Tudor School / 48</i>
Elle Rainwater — <i>Brown County Intermediate / 50</i>
Jack Stark — <i>Zionsville Middle School / 52</i>
Aiden Taylor — <i>Crestview Elementary / 54</i>
Dalton Westfall — <i>Castle North Middle School / 55</i>

**Level II Finalists****PAGE 57**

---

- 1<sup>st</sup> Place                    Yael Epstein — *Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis* / 57  
**National Winner at the Library of Congress for Level II**
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Place                    Reagan Fortwendel — *Jasper Middle School, Jasper* / 59
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Place                    Abby Kidwell — *Jasper Middle School, Jasper* / 61

**Level II Semifinalists****PAGE 63**

---

- Josh Bruns — *Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis* / 63
- Braxtyn Cooper — *Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg* / 64
- Madison Cox — *Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate, Fishers* / 66
- Paula Ramos — *Central Middle School, Columbus* / 68
- Rachel Roberts — *Northwood Middle School, Nappanee* / 70
- Abbi Schiefer — *Saint Peter's Lutheran, Columbus* / 72
- \* Kenna Sondhelm — *Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis* / 74

**Level II Honorable Mentions****PAGE 76**

---

- Tahlia Alkobi — *Hasten Hebrew Academy* / 76
- Leo Alvis — *Forest Park Jr. / Sr. High School* / 78
- Deeksha Badugu — *Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate* / 80
- Yael Ehrlich — *Hasten Hebrew Academy* / 82
- Yoav Ehrlich — *Hasten Hebrew Academy* / 84
- Brooke Fridell — *Hasten Hebrew Academy* / 86
- Jayne Ganz — *Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate* / 88
- Eva Glazier — *Hasten Hebrew Academy* / 89
- Terryn Green — *Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate* / 91
- Anna Hatchett — *Central Middle School* / 93
- Hunter Heckman — *Immanuel Lutheran School* / 95
- Faith Helton — *Decatur Middle School* / 97
- Braden Hinton — *Immanuel Lutheran School* / 99
- Grace Hurzeler — *Central Middle School* / 101
- Ellie Kim — *Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate* / 103
- Ana Landeros — *West Noble Middle School* / 105
- Zeynep Law — *Central Middle School* / 107
- Jacob Lee — *Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate* / 109
- Karleigh LeMond — *Jasper Middle School* / 111
- Marielle McConnell — *Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate* / 113
- Chelsea Murdock — *Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate* / 114
- Ananya Ramanujapuram — *Central Middle School* / 116
- Nicole Rebber — *Immanuel Lutheran School* / 117
- Brianna Ruscoe — *Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate* / 119
- Gabriela Schmitt — *Jasper Middle School* / 120
- Emily Setser — *Salem Middle School* / 122
- Lidya Solomon — *Hasten Hebrew Academy* / 124
- Graham Tatman — *Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate* / 126
- Gabriel Vasquez-Jaffe — *Hasten Hebrew Academy* / 128
- Brailyn Whaley — *Jasper Middle School* / 130

**Level III Finalists****PAGE 133**

---

1 <sup>st</sup> Place	Andrew Roets — <i>Illiana Christian High School, Dyer</i> / 133
2 <sup>nd</sup> Place	Isabelle Neibert — <i>Illiana Christian High School, Dyer</i> / 135
3 <sup>rd</sup> Place	Catherine George — <i>Culver Academies, Culver</i> / 137

**Level III Semifinalists****PAGE 139**

---

Abbigayl Eldridge	— <i>Oldenburg Academy, Oldenburg</i> / 139
Chloe Graham	— <i>Northwestern High School, Kokomo</i> / 141
Madilyn Holesinger	— <i>Illiana Christian High School, Dyer</i> / 143
Jasmine Hsu	— <i>Carmel High School, Carmel</i> / 145
Emma Slings	— <i>Illiana Christian High School, Dyer</i> / 147
Angel Vasquez	— <i>Arsenal Technical High School, Indianapolis</i> / 148
Megan York	— <i>Northwestern High School, Kokomo</i> / 150

**Level III Honorable Mentions****PAGE 152**

---

Brittany Benson	— <i>Illiana Christian High School</i> / 152
Sam Boonstra	— <i>Illiana Christian High School</i> / 154
Heidi Bultema	— <i>Illiana Christian High School</i> / 156
Delaney Church	— <i>New Tech Academy at Wayne High School</i> / 158
Lauren Courtney	— <i>Illiana Christian High School</i> / 160
Chloe Cowen	— <i>Franklin County High School</i> / 161
Elizabeth De Young	— <i>Illiana Christian High School</i> / 163
Ella Deck	— <i>Northwestern High School</i> / 165
Caleighsta Edmonds	— <i>New Tech Academy at Wayne High School</i> / 167
Eli Edwards	— <i>Northwestern High School</i> / 169
Justin Foust	— <i>Illiana Christian High School</i> / 171
Matthew Fulton	— <i>Illiana Christian High School</i> / 173
Grant Gibson	— <i>Illiana Christian High School</i> / 175
Katarina Grube	— <i>Northwestern High School</i> / 177
Sean Kelly	— <i>Castle High School</i> / 179
Kaylin Knapp	— <i>Franklin County High School</i> / 181
Marie Kuehn	— <i>Franklin County High School</i> / 183
Rachel Labi	— <i>West Lafayette Junior-Senior High School</i> / 185
Victor Lemus	— <i>New Tech Academy at Wayne High School</i> / 187
Zoe McGee	— <i>New Tech Academy at Wayne High School</i> / 189
Emma Miedema	— <i>Illiana Christian High School</i> / 191
Wesley Miller	— <i>Northwestern High School</i> / 193
Cheyenne Moss	— <i>New Tech Academy at Wayne High School</i> / 195
Haleigh Olthof	— <i>Illiana Christian High School</i> / 197
Julia Oostema	— <i>Illiana Christian High School</i> / 199
Abby Powers	— <i>Northwestern High School</i> / 200
Adrianna Rhines	— <i>New Tech Academy at Wayne High School</i> / 202
Taylor Stewart	— <i>Franklin County High School</i> / 204
Sydney Whiteley	— <i>Centerville High School</i> / 206
Sarina Wills	— <i>Columbus Signature Academy New Tech</i> / 208



Awarded to the highest placing letter written to an Indiana Author

Kenna Sondhelm — *Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis*

Letter to John Green, Indiana Author of *An Abundance of Katherines*

**Level I**  
**Award Winning**  
**Letters**

**Level I**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Place Winner**

**Miguel Sebastian**  
Blair Pointe Upper Elementary, Peru  
Letter to Jennifer Nielsen  
Author of ***A Night Divided***

Dear Jennifer Nielsen,

I read your book a few years ago. A little while ago my dad was deported. The whole experience reminded me of ***A Night Divided***. While my brother wasn't deported and it wasn't a wall that separates us, I now know what it feels like to be so close but to feel worlds apart. It's miserable, but your book helped to relieve those awful thoughts and feelings.

The way that so many families were separated due to the rising of the Berlin Wall opened my eyes. I realized that this was something that happened so much, leaving people with so little. I realized that I was not the only one who had to deal with this. In some weird way, seeing a family be reunited, even if they were fictional characters, made me happy. The way that Gerta knew that it was wrong and escaped the situation helped me to realize that it wasn't right to destroy families like that and I could mentally escape the treacherous existence and escape the cage, the way that Gerta escaped the cage of concrete and barbed wire.

The day that the judge reached a verdict, I vowed to make things change. I promised myself that I would do something when nobody else would, that I would stop families from being torn apart. I intend to keep that vow and to make a difference, I will bring people back together and I will mend the broken bonds of families. I will do everything in my power to make sure that nothing like this happens ever again, to anyone, the way that the people on the west side of Germany protested the wall and did what they could to have it torn down.

In ***A Night Divided***, Gerta was able to escape; however, I can't. So, I will do everything I can to do the opposite. I will stop the terrible act of splitting up families once and for all. I will breach the wall, I will get past the death strip, and I will get to my father. I will make sure that everyone will be reunited with their family, and we will defeat the wall. We will spread hope throughout every soul, and we will beat society's rules. I owe all this hope to you. Because you inspired every word in this letter by writing ***A Night Divided***.

Miguel Sebastian

**Level I**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Place Winner**

**Sanjana Malineni**  
Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Sharon Huss Roat  
Author of *How to Disappear*

Dear Sharon Huss Roat,

Everyone wants to disappear at some point in their life. Everyone gets embarrassed, and they deal with it in different ways. There are millions of people around the world who are well liked and admired, but are scared of embarrassing themselves. Instead of opening up, they tell themselves that they aren't important, and unknowingly push away people who want to be their friend. Vicky Decker, the main character from your book, *How to Disappear* is a perfect example. Some kids want to be popular. Other kids, like Vicky, try to blend into the background, or as you put it, "disappear." I'll be honest with you, sometimes I find myself trying to disappear, just like Vicky.

In the past, like Vicky, when I talked to other people, I found myself growing extremely self-conscious. Then, scared of saying something stupid and being judged, my mind went blank. I found myself empathizing with Vicky as I started to get to know her. I felt her fear as if it was my own, and I felt the sting of betrayal when she heard her only friend talking behind her back. When Vicky made up a girl named Vicurious and posted photoshopped pictures of herself in a disguise, doing the things she dreamed of doing, I felt happy for her. When her anonymous account went viral, my heart pounded with excitement.

As I got deeper in the book, Vicurious became extremely famous, and Vicky started to realize that some of the people she admired were secretly admiring her. However, she continued to push them away by refusing to open up to them, and was in danger of losing their friendship forever. I remember reading the book and thinking, "She shouldn't be scared! She has no reason to care what they think! If she would just be herself everyone would be happier, including herself!" Now I realize that I should have taken my own advice. When people who were lonely and scared like her started liking her photoshopped Instagram posts, Vicky realized that she was not alone, and that there were others sharing her pain. She tried to help them, leaving them comments saying things like, "You're not alone," and "I'm here for you."

As Vicurious became famous among her classmates, Vicky still tried to disappear, seeing Vicurious and herself as two separate personalities. She refused to see that Vicurious was in her and that she could be Vicurious in real life if only she could get over her fear of embarrassing herself and if she could stop worrying about what other people thought. I found it frustrating that she couldn't see that there were people who liked her for who she was. As I was about to give up on her, Vicky started opening up to the world, revealing to everyone the beautiful person she was. By the end of the story, Vicky was no longer just a character in a book to me. She felt close. She was someone whose feelings I could identify with. We shared our problem, and I wondered if we could share more than that. I wondered, if I opened up like Vicky, would I find happiness like she did? Would people like me for who I was?

I won't tell you that all of a sudden everything was perfect and all my problems disappeared, because we know life doesn't work that way. My fear of what other people thought and of being judged didn't just disappear into thin air. But, every time I feel like hiding, and every time I get the "I suck" feeling, I think of Vicky. I remember how she thought she was alone, but then realized that there were millions of kids sharing her pain. I imagine her sitting next to me and telling me, "You're not alone." With this, my self-confidence comes back to me.

Around the world people are scared of being laughed at or the sting of someone else's judgement. They miss many good things in life because they are too busy avoiding the bad. Vicky taught me that some people are going to judge you unfairly in life, but you shouldn't let their words bring you down. Instead, have confidence in yourself, and help other people find their confidence. Open up and let people see the real you, and you might be surprised to see that people have been admiring you. *How to Disappear* taught me the valuable life lesson of having self-confidence, a lesson that will stay with me throughout my life. Vicky thought she was invisible, but she has changed me in ways that are nowhere near invisible.

Sincerely,  
Sanjana Malineni

**Level I**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Place Winner**

**Zara Ahmed**  
Castle North Middle School, Newburgh  
Letter to R. J. Palacio  
Author of *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

I stood back and watched my friend bully the other girl. It was mid-October in third grade. We had stayed inside for recess since it was muddy outside from the previous night's rain. My friend and I had gone up to get a game to play and someone came and sat in our seats. She didn't know we were sitting there so she thought it would be fine. When we came back with our game, my friend saw the girl sitting in our seat. She walked right up to the girl and yelled at her to move and told her she was a loser. The girl got up and went to another chair, crying. I didn't say a word or try to help the girl because I was afraid my friend would get mad at me. I wish I could go back to that day and stop my friend or defend the girl.

When I read your book *Wonder*, it angered me how everyone was afraid to stand up for Auggie just because of their pride. In the cafeteria, Auggie sat alone because kids didn't want to get the "plague." Everyone was afraid they would lose their friends by being friends with Auggie.

While I was reading, a realization hit me. I had never tried to be friends with someone that was different or stand up for someone that everyone bullied. I didn't want to lose my friends by helping someone else. I avoided talking to people that were different. I was selfish. All I cared about were my friends who didn't care about anybody else. I was a powerless bystander just like the kids at Beecher Prep.

I thought that if I went to Beecher Prep, I would sit with Auggie and be his friend no matter what anyone thought. I didn't understand why people were making such a big deal that he was different. I knew that I would feel sad and alone if everyone ignored me or talked about me. I didn't want it to happen to me so why did it have to happen to Auggie?

Auggie was upset and didn't want to go to school because he had no friends. I thought about how Auggie had felt when he sat alone and how happy he was when Jack Will and Summer sat with him. When Jack Will and Summer sat by him, he had friends; he loved school. I vowed to myself that if I ever saw someone who looked upset or lonely, I would sit by or comfort them. I didn't want to be a helpless bystander anymore.

At school, my friends were confused when I started talking to people who I hardly knew. I told them that I was going to make others happy no matter what. I promised myself that I would never let people get bullied or sit alone right in front of me again. It was a hard task to fulfill, but I knew I had to do it.

Reading *Wonder* changed my life forever. Now, whenever I see someone looking sad or sitting by themselves, I think about how Auggie felt and what he went through. I always try to talk to them or make them feel better. Thank you for inspiring me to always be kind and to stand up for others. I think if everyone read your book, the world would be a much better place. Thank you.

Your captivated reader,  
Zara Ahmed

Level I  
Semifinalist

Bethany Blachly  
New Palestine Intermediate, New Palestine  
Letter to Marsha Skrypuch  
Author of ***Making Bombs for Hitler***

Dear Marsha Skrypuch,

Your book, ***Making Bombs for Hitler***, has changed me and my perspective on how we should treat other people in this world. It has helped me to get an understanding of the importance of World War II and why we shouldn't ever repeat the history that went on during the Holocaust. Also, we shouldn't ever disrespect any humans in any particular race or religion. It also taught me some important lessons that we can all learn from.

***Making Bombs for Hitler*** also makes me appreciate the life we live in now. We have religious freedom and can go to church freely and practice whatever religion we want. Today, we don't have to be ashamed or scared of our religion and we can feel safe. Sometimes, we don't take our freedom seriously. But this book made me really acknowledge and enjoy the freedoms we have today.

Sometimes, we take our family for granted, but reading this book helped me to understand the importance of my family. Lida's main motivation in this book was to get back to Larissa, her little sister. The sisters' parents both died and they lived with their Grandma for a while. A lot of Jewish families were torn apart during the Holocaust. As a young child, it is important to grow up with a family and home, but during the Holocaust, many children grew up in concentration camps or in a harsh environment with little food and without the support of a family. This helps me acknowledge the presence of my family and all the help and encouragement they have given me, and to be grateful for them.

Your book was not only teaching me some life lessons, but it was also educational. It taught me a lot about World War II and the Holocaust. I learned a lot about the history, but I also learned about what life was like for a prisoner in one of the concentration camps, and how we should never repeat the things that Hitler and his army did.

Another lesson that ***Making Bombs for Hitler*** taught me was bravery, courage, and intelligence. Lida, Zenia, Bibi, Kataryna, Natalia, and Mary were all put to work to make bombs. They all had to make sure that their measurements were exact. This took a lot of intelligence. But when they



had an idea to put dirt in the bombs instead of gunpowder, everything changed. It was a brave and bold move, but they all agreed that it was worth it. By making this decision, the bombs would no longer explode. I value the girls' quick thinking and that they could save some lives in unexpected ways, even in the worst conditions.

Something that I really liked about your book was the characters. All of the characters helped each other, and from that, they were able to survive longer. They made friends even in the darkest of times. I can appreciate that, as my friends are a very important part of my life. Friendship plays an important role in this book, and I respect what a significant part friends play, not only your story but in real life too.

Another thing that your book did to me was that it inspired me. If someone like Lida can survive the Holocaust, then I am sure that I can live through my normal life and make it through anything. I can also learn a lesson from Lida. Her mother told her that she could find beauty anywhere, and she managed to find beauty and friendship in a horrible place. Personally, I find that really inspirational.

In conclusion, I think that we all can learn some valuable life lessons from your book, ***Making Bombs for Hitler***. It was an educational book, but it also had important lessons of friendship, inspiration, and appreciation. Thank you for writing this book, as it has helped me learn new things and be grateful for everything we have today.

Sincerely,  
Bethany Blachly

**Level I  
Semifinalist**

**Briar Campbell**  
Kankakee Valley Middle School, Wheatfield  
Letter to Michael Losier  
Author of the ***Law of Attraction***

Dear Michael Losier,

I normally just read books for fun, but I read your book to try to change myself and my way of thinking for the better. As you have taught, people must want to change and change the way they think if they want to succeed. Change the way they talk, act, and even think. After reading your book ***Law of Attraction***, I learned how I can change the way I think so I can succeed. Your book might not be that long, but it still has merit. Your very descriptive and somewhat scientific explanations in conjunction with the examples you provide give a superb explanation of how to attract good things to you and to reach your goals.

I have read your book twice as of writing this. The first time was quite some time ago, and I didn't really absorb the information from your book. Because of this, I decided to read it again and really got engrossed in the information. At the time I was trying to learn Russian and was pretty discouraged at the difficulty of the language, but after reading your book I looked at how much progress I have achieved and that encouraged me to keep striving to get better.

I still apply your teachings whenever I try to do a long-term task or am struggling to learn a concept. Instead of thinking, "I am struggling to learn this," or "this concept is too difficult to learn," instead I think, "I will be happy when I learn this concept," or "look at how much progress I've made so far!"

Right now I am learning the coding language Python. At first, I was overwhelmed by the complexity of the language and was discouraged. I tried to be hopeful like you explain, and kept working at learning Python. After a while, it started to make a bit more sense. Instead of being discouraged at the difficulty of the language, I looked at how much progress I have made since I started learning it a relatively short time ago. This has helped me from being discouraged and having the ***Law of Attraction*** help me to reach my goals.

I think everyone under the sun would benefit from reading ***Law of Attraction***. It's human nature to strive to *become* better, and the way of

thinking you promote would undoubtedly help people do so. Taking time out of your day to try to keep thinking about what you want and to stop thinking about what you don't want will unquestionably help your mindset and, by extension, help you achieve your goal.

I would like to thank you for teaching not only me but possibly millions of other ordinary people how to change the way they think to help them reach their goals, however huge or mundane they are.

Sincerely,  
Briar Campbell

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Charlotte Miksha**  
Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Roald Dahl  
Author of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*

Dear Roald Dahl,

I am writing to you about your book, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, a fantastical page-turner full of witty remarks and magic stuffed into the suit of reality, fooling all who come across it. I read your book when I was in second grade, and it has influenced my life, and many others, since then. Charlie was a poor boy who lived in a lonely house with his four grandparents and parents. Next to this lonely house was the largest chocolate factory in the world, which not only provided delicious treats, but all Charlie's hopes and dreams. So when an opportunity to enter the chocolate factory, which had not been done for many years, leapt at him, Charlie accepted. Little did he know this chance would change his life forever.

*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was published in 1964, and has been inspiring young people like me since then. It teaches how far being simply good can get you. Your playfulness and silliness has inspired me and many other children, I am sure, to read more books. Charlie's persistence and goodness has showed many generations that you can overcome anything with just a bit of luck.

Although I have never starved, or gone through what Charlie has been through, your book showed me what life is like for other people who may have. It made me feel sympathetic and want to help people in these situations, because not everyone receives a Golden Ticket. There are kids out there who don't have enough food, and your book made me aware of that. Sometimes you need a window out of your own little world, and my window just happened to be made out of words.

In addition to lessons such as not to be greedy or attention-seeking, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* taught me to *read books*. This is something many overlook, saying that reading is boring or that books are more useful as paperweights or to kill spiders, but I do not agree. Books are great sources of information, even when they are not non-fiction books. When you read a book, you enter a new world, and I'm so glad you let kids like me know this.

Although I have read your book several times, every time I read it I find something new, or finally get a joke included in Willy Wonka's glorious chocolate factory. How you came up with such absurd things, I have no idea. I think your crazy characters and sweets inspired me to become a more creative person, to think that I could do something like this with a bit of imagination. You showed me that from the dark can emerge light, that one dollar can make all the difference in the world. You showed me that all things happen for a reason, that everything matters, even the tiniest smile, or a helping hand reached out toward a stranger. Through your yellowing pages and old-fashioned yet oddly contemporary words, you taught me kindness, to not judge a book by its cover, and to believe in the good of people.

To close off this letter, I will state a quote from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, phrased by Willy Wonka himself: "We are the music makers, and we are the dreamers of the dreams." When I first heard this quote, I thought it meant actual music makers, but then I guided myself to the assumption that it meant all artists; painters, authors, musicians, singers; basically any type of job that requires at least a bit of creativity. They are the dreamers of the dreams; they shape this world, just like your book shaped me.

Sincerely,  
Charlotte Miksha

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Viola Putnam**

Blair Pointe Upper Elementary, Peru

Letter to Adeline Yen Mah

Author of *Chinese Cinderella*

Dear Adeline Yen Mah,

Thankfulness. It's a simple word but some of us forget about it. Sometimes we throw fits if we don't get what we want or get the wrong thing. I will think about everything that's wrong in my life that's going on. I have bad days (we all do) and it makes me melancholy or even angry because something went wrong. Your book *Chinese Cinderella* helps me to be thankful for what I have and look for the good things in life.

Your family was cruel to you, so you looked for a light in all the darkness. Your light was writing and that's how you dealt with the bad days and the cruelty going on. You took the anger and sadness and channeled it through your writing. You inspired me to find something that I love and channel my feelings through it. Your life story inspired me to start writing too. I take what happens that I dislike and make a new world through writing. I sit at my typewriter and just write. I use writing as a way to jump into a new world that I've created.

Another way I am reminded to be thankful is when you were put in the school for girls. There are days when I might get angry at just the little stuff in life like not getting what I wanted for dinner but then I remember when you never got any new clothes like you step-siblings or never got an egg from your parents. You remind me that every little thing is a reason to be happy because there are kids that might never get a chance to do what I do and have a family that loves them as much as my family loves me and as much as I love them. These are things that I'm accustomed to and some people might never get to experience. These things, like my family's love, are things I used to not think much about but after reading your book you changed my whole view on it.

When I wake up in the morning, I might complain about not wanting to go to school or complain about a test I have to take. After reading your book it made me realize that I should be thankful for being able to learn about my culture, like how your grandfather made you learn about your culture. You made me realize that I should hold on to my knowledge and my culture because your knowledge and culture take up a huge part of your life and you should want to learn it and be thankful for it. I'm sure

you are thankful for your grandfather teaching you your culture and teaching you how to write and speak Chinese. I'm thankful for having the opportunity to learn about my county and just be able to learn in general.

Thank you for showing me how you grew up and for opening my eyes. You and your book have taught me lots of things and I'm very thankful that you made this wonderful book even though it must have been tough. Your book has taught me to see the light in everything and to be thankful for everything I have and not to complain when something goes wrong. You never complained when something went wrong. You just stuck it out and did it and I thank you for teaching me to just take it. It will happen but you just have to take it.

Sincerely,  
Viola Putnam

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Olivia Sommerville**  
Castle North Middle School, Newburgh  
Letter to Corrie ten Boom  
Author of *The Hiding Place*

Dear Corrie ten Boom,

I have never experienced a war, never been to a concentration camp, never had my siblings or father die. I have never illegally hidden Jews in my house or been arrested. At first I thought we didn't have a lot in common, but somehow I felt connected to you. Your autobiography, *The Hiding Place*, strengthened my relationship with God and made it easier to forgive others.

Two years ago my cat was hit by a car and killed. My whole family was devastated. A few days later, I remembered *The Hiding Place*. I thought about the way you prayed about all your difficulties. I thought about how you said God has a plan for each one of us and how we can use our difficulties for good. And so, I prayed that I could use my cat's death to help someone who was struggling. Less than a week later, I heard that my classmate's pet had died. I prayed for her, and I comforted her. I realized that your book helped me become closer to God and see that prayers can be answered.

Another way *The Hiding Place* changed me was by teaching me to forgive others. After I read your book, I sat thinking about your sister, Betsie. She forgave the concentration camp guards who were cold-hearted and cruel. She prayed for the enemies who eventually caused her death. Betsie gave thanks in all circumstances, and was close to God. I admired her throughout the book. Not everyone is the same as Betsie. It's hard to pray for those we hate the most.

In the middle of your story, I thought about what you said. You said you could kill the Germans if they were in front of you, that you'd never forgive the Nazi Party, and I agreed. But then I kept reading. I saw how you could not forgive the German officer, not even shake his hand, but you prayed to God. The special part in the book was your prayer. "Jesus I cannot forgive him. Give him Your forgiveness." After I read *The Hiding Place*, I was able to pray for the bullies in elementary school and those now in middle school. I thank God for your book that helped me learn to forgive.



When I finished *The Hiding Place*, I realized we do have things in common. We're both Christians. Sometimes we find it hard to forgive others. We both live in a world where people need Jesus, but they need someone to teach them about Him too. Thank you, Corrie, for writing your book about World War II and sharing your love for Jesus.

Sincerely,  
Olivia Sommerville

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Claudia Antcliff**  
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville  
Letter to Jon Gordon  
Author of *Energy Bus for Kids*

Dear Jon Gordon,

“The goal in life is to live young, have fun, and arrive at your final destination as late as possible with a smile on your face, because this would mean that you truly enjoyed the ride.” This quote by you made me think if my positive attitude affected how my day was going to be. I started thinking about this after I read the *Energy Bus for Kids*.

This book showed me that you always can make your day better and that you should always be positive. This helped me in many ways. Such as sports and personally. I play three different sports. Reading this book for sure helped me with that. This is because, especially, in sports you need to stay positive. If I missed a basket in basketball, I knew I had to stay positive and believe. I got this from learning in the end, that now George always stays positive no matter what. At first, he was being so negative if he had a bad day, but soon learned to only let nice people on his energy bus. Also reading this, it helped me with my parents’ divorce. Although I read this after that happened, I learned to stay positive even though it can be hard. Now when I tell people that my parents are divorced, they never knew before because I was so positive.

This book was also a special time for my dad and me. He was the only one who ever read this to me, and it was so special. This memory is so vivid even though I was only six or seven. Every single night I was with him, I asked him to read it to just me. Only me; not to my brother and I, just me. My dad also always uses all your quotes and always tells me to drive my own bus on the positive road. This also helped my brother and me. I argue a lot with him because he tries to annoy me. Instead I don’t focus on him, I focus on how my day went. I love thinking of what my success of the day was and thinking through how I can make the next day even better.

From now on, I will drive my own bus down a positive road, and only will let positive energy in. Your book was so inspirational that I told all my friends about your book, and even made my teacher read it to the class. Now I know that positive attitude should be an everyday thing. *The Energy Bus* will forever be in my heart.

Sincerely,  
Claudia Antcliff

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Grace Arbogast**  
Northview Elementary, Gas City  
Letter to Rick Riordan  
Author of *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*

Dear Rick Riordan,

I have always been the shy person and the person who didn't like Greek mythology. Your book taught me to be bold and brave. When I started to read your books I was immediately hooked. I was so interested! I have read the Percy Jackson series but I have not read the others yet.

When I first started reading your books I knew nothing about Greek mythology. Page by page, book by book I learned mythology through Percy's exciting life. I not only learned about mythology, but now my friends are coming to me for help writing books based on mythology. I learned about Pandora's Box in the fifth book. In the other books I learned about The River Styx, the underworld, Greek gods, satyrs, centaurs, river nymphs, tree nymphs, Typhon, minor gods, and The Labyrinth.

Your books changed me so much as a reader and a person. Through your books I noticed Percy's braveness, and envied it. You helped me develop and grow as a person by inspiring me to be braver. Percy was scared in many battles but went into them anyway. He needed to. He could have backed out and let Kronos overthrow them but he gathered himself together and fought the best he could. When I am in a mental battle I remember Percy and his bravery and I gather my courage, take a deep breath, and I come through in the end.

When I wanted to play a game at recess I was scared to go ask. I was debating in my head, would I be good at a game I never played before? If I was good, would they fight about whose team I was on? Would I embarrass myself? Will they refuse me? Would I have fun? Will I not have fun and not be able to quit because of the other people playing? In the end I walked up there and asked to play. They didn't refuse me. I had faith that I would be good and I was! Your books gave me bravery and confidence in myself because of all that Percy went through.

Your books opened my eyes as a reader because I learned Greek mythology and now when I read it elsewhere I can make connections to your books. They changed me so much.

Your reader,  
Grace Arbogast

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Salma Arnett**  
Blair Pointe Upper Elementary, Peru  
Letter to Sharon Draper  
Author of *Out of My Mind*

Dear Sharon M. Draper,

I had been lying in my bed wide-awake. I clenched your book tightly reminiscing about the old me. The old me that would stare sympathetically at the children like Melody. The old me that could only pick away their flaws from hiding. I had been like every human before reading your book, *Out of My Mind*. I only treated them as a strange substance that was different from me. After reading your book, I no longer let myself do that. They don't want sympathy, they want acceptance, and now, I see the world in a new color.

The old me would always seem to whine continuously about nothing and everything all at once. I didn't thank the Lord very much for making me the way I am, how I am able to eat independently, or even sit without trying. For Melody, everything was a new puzzle impossible to solve. I never thought how difficult it could be to never be able to utter a word, to not be able to speak my mind, express myself, run around and frolic in wildflower fields, I never seemed to appreciate what gift I was given until I absorbed your story. My life suddenly changed. The smallest cloud was extraordinary and beautiful to me; the way snowflakes fluttered on my eyelashes, and the smell of cookies in the oven. Every little thing was beautiful. I became more grateful to be able to be in this body where I can excel and pursue my dreams, without being held back by society or the cruel sympathy of the people who stare. I was put in Melody's shoes and I felt the pain she felt and the warmth she felt. I was able to see everything as a new challenge in a new perspective, and the feeling of not being accepted. Just imagine if you were underestimated only based on your appearance, the way you smiled or moved, the way you lived life. Imagine, if you were in Melody's place, where you had to work extra hard to even take a bite of food! We all judge those around us, the way their body is built to how frizzy their hair is. It seems to define their intelligence or importance. I was like that, I laughed if someone was different than me or not the "perfected" look. I no longer do.

This book has made me live in a new perspective, learn to accept those around me, and to be so very thankful that I have the freedom to move and speak the way I please, without a struggle. Melody was so very intelligent, yet she was underestimated. She couldn't express what she knew, and I

understood her so deeply. Sometimes I am not taken seriously by my very own friends. This book made me not want to give up and prove wrong those who underestimate me, and it made me want to fulfill my dreams and be my very best 24/7. I am so grateful to be able to have the ability to speak my mind without having to live through pain. This book has transformed my entire “set image” of life. I accept people as they are, I am more thankful for my abilities, and I am grateful for the small things. The most important thing is, I was able to connect with Melody for the better, and change my perspective, forever.

Thank you,  
Salma Arnett

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Delaney Blankenbuehler-Lee**  
Castle North Middle School, Newburgh  
Letter to Wendy Spinale  
Author of *Everland*

Dear Wendy Spinale,

Everyone has the ability to make the right decisions under the right circumstances; I just wasn't sure that I could. Before reading your book, *Everland*, I couldn't do anything to help anyone. If I saw someone in a tough situation, I couldn't help them, especially if it was to determine life or death. I was afraid that if I tried, I would fail and let them down. But if Gwen wouldn't help anyone, where would little Mikey and his sister be? Luckily, she didn't have to make that choice to live or die. Before she knew that though, she was completely willing to sacrifice herself and a happy life for the other kids. Her courage and willingness to help people is what inspired me to help more people.

Ever since I read your book, I have felt more obligated to help people with whatever they need anytime, anywhere. If someone's hands are full, I'll open the door. Forgot your fork at lunch? I'll go get one for you! Someone once said, "It's the little things that count." Even though I just do little things, I hope that they'll help someone's day become just a little bit brighter. I realize that the choices Gwen had to choose from were both terrible, and a lot bigger than opening someone's door or getting them a fork at lunch, but I like to think that I am working my way up to something much larger than what I'm currently doing.

I don't think I could have made the choice that Gwen almost had to: to die for everyone or for everyone to die because of my selfish decision. If I did have to make the choice that Gwen had to, I know I very possibly could have made the selfish choice. But after reading your book, and with my new found confidence, I believe that I would make the right choice without hesitation. I don't think I could die for someone yet. Maybe in the years to come I'll find more courage and be able to do something much more unreserved. Maybe once I read your next book, *Umberland*, I will be more courageous, outgoing, indomitable, and unrestrained like your character Gwen. But for now...

Your intrigued reader,  
Delaney Blankenbuehler-Lee

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Darcy Brady**  
Park Tudor School, Indianapolis  
Letter to Sharon Draper  
Author of *Out of My Mind*

Dear Mrs. Draper,

Your book, *Out of My Mind*, inspired me in many ways that I didn't even know were possible. The moment I heard about this book, I immediately ran to the library. I flipped through the pages and checked the novel out instantly. That night, I couldn't stop reading.

In *Out of My Mind*, Melody Brooks is a child with cerebral palsy. When I first started reading this book, it felt like I transformed into Melody. I felt her sadness and depression, when she struggled to accomplish something. But I also felt the happiness and joy when she was able to get the mediator and make the geography team. It broke my heart when the kids made fun of Melody, just because she was different. It was so hurtful because people get teased all of the time for something that they cannot do or change. I loved how Catherine stood up to the bullies. The book made me ask myself if I would have done the same thing. I might have been strong like Catherine, or I might have just been too afraid to stand up for my friend. Every night when I went to bed, my eyes would be puffy and red, with tears. Some parts were so emotional to me. For an example, if I were Melody, I would have cried in front of everyone in the class, when she asked why the team had left her behind.

This book was not only emotional to me, but it was also moving. It changed and helped me. I felt more aware of things that were happening around me. I was kinder to my friends. More respectful to my teachers and adults. More helpful to my parents. But most importantly, I was more caring towards the world around me and the people living in it. I invite more people to play with me at recess. I talk and listen to people when they're having a tough time. I stand up for people who are getting made fun of.

Melody made me more grateful and thankful for what I have: my health, my family, and my amazing friends.

Sincerely,  
Darcy Brady

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Isabella Brocker**  
Waverly Elementary School, Martinsville  
Letter to Suzanne Collins  
Author of *The Hunger Games*

Dear Ms. Collins,

I have read your novel *The Hunger Games*, and I adored it from the very first page. I laughed, cried and smiled a lot as I read it. I was kept in suspense throughout the entire book. It was action packed! The novel made me rethink my vision of what I imagine the future will look like. I used to think the future would have lots of robots and fun technology. Now, after reading your book, I wonder if the future will be similar to your book where the government is cruel and cold and where people are starving and struggling to survive.

When reading the book, I found myself wondering if I would survive the games. I am not a fast runner and this story made me think of how important it is to stay active and alert of my surroundings. In fact, I found myself feeling lucky I didn't have to play in the Hunger Games or be held in the captivity of the Capitol's power.

The book certainly had ups and downs. Two parts that were particularly gory were how Cato met his end by the mutts and when Thresh smashed Clove's skull with an enormous rock. I still get chills up my spine when I think about those pages. These descriptive parts frightened me at times as I imagined living through those experiences. My favorite part of the book was a conversation between Rue and Katniss where they were talking about the differences between their lives in their districts. These two people seemed to be from different planets but their struggle to survive brought them together as people. This made me think about my own friendships and how I need to be more accepting of others' differences because someone is always on my team. When Rue died I was very upset, I didn't even consider the possibility that she would die because she was just a kid. She and I are close to the same age.

The book made me think about the future and the value of family and friendships even when faced with terrible circumstances. It also made me realize that life is pretty good here in Indiana. No one is forcing any 5th graders to go out and kill our own food or risk starving to death. The book changed my perspective on what it means to be tough and live through tough times.

Sincerely,  
Izzy Brocker



**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Ehrin Browning**  
Northview Elementary  
Letter to Anne Frank  
Author of *The Diary of Anne Frank*

Dear Anne Frank,

I love your book *The Diary of Anne Frank*. You were astonishingly brave throughout the war, and I'm surprised at how you improvised with what you had up in the attic apartment. You could get through any challenge. Also it seemed as if you had depression during the war. That's hard, isn't it? I used to have depression, and I knew what you felt like. It's as if you're nothing and worthless and just sad all the time. I used to feel as if I wasn't supposed to live, and that I was just there for the ride.

But seeing you there, in the book, talking about it, where I have never heard another author mention it before, moved me. It made me think, and I didn't feel so alone any more. When you mentioned your thoughts that you had about your own depression, I kept thinking, "You shouldn't think that about yourself," and "You're so much better than you think!"

I had finally realized something. I thought you were wonderful even though you didn't, but I didn't ever realize that about myself. I didn't see the better side of me, and it was like I had crawled out of the darkness that consumed me and that had held me back. So thank you. You made me realize that I was so much more than just nothing.

Sincerely,  
Ehrin Brocker

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Ella Dixon**  
Kankakee Valley Intermediate School  
Letter to Jean Craighead George  
Author of ***On the Far Side of the Mountain***

Dear Ms. Jean Craighead George,

After reading your book it made me think about how differently the world is being treated now that many people are too caught up in anything but nature. However when you created the characters Sam and Alice Gribley in ***On the Far Side of the Mountain*** it came to my attention how when you go away to be with nature out of choice it can change everything. These are some reasons why I really took this to heart.

When I started the book Sam explained how his parents moved up to the mountain but left after finding out that the soil was not good for planting. This was shocking to me because they judged the land on the soil not the other resources like the trees, water, and food, and just by looking at one resource they left. Most of them at least. However, Alice stayed back.

I was inspired by this because Alice knew that her family didn't think that she would stay out there longer than a day. That just motivated her even more. I was also inspired by her bravery to stay back in the mountain. I have a great respect of animals and nature more that I used to because of your words. I always believed that girls could do great things but I wasn't sure I could do things like that until I read this book and was introduced to Alice.

In your book you stated that "When a man shot a gun he lost his touch with nature and all of a sudden the animals avoid them." So, it must have been hard for Sam when Frightful got taken away because Sam now had to find a food source that didn't require shooting and that he could use to feed two people. I pondered profoundly after reading the statement about how fortunate I am now that we just simply go the store and get what we need. Frightful wasn't just Sam's company, but also how he got food.

As the end came into view for this book, Sam was still on the search for Alice and Frightful. Sam had a choice to make that every person will have to make at some point in their life. This choice is very hard to make because you have to balance out what you need to do and what you want to do. I've had to make this choice before, but it wasn't as precarious of a situation and I didn't have to make my decision right at that second. For

me it is hard to balance out needs and wants in general, but in a life or death situation I would be clueless.

After reading your book I felt many different emotions. I have more things to be thankful for, and I'm extremely fortunate. I was also inspired by the bravery, cleverness and passion for nature, and not just by one character. As a person, I suddenly felt spoiled that I have such easy access to resources without worrying about having enough food for winter and having a very strong roof over my head that was built by professionals. Once this book was finished I looked at everything differently.

Sincerely,  
Ella Dixon

Level I  
Honorable Mention

Kyler Effner  
Clayton, Indiana  
Letter to J. K. Rowling  
Author of *The Harry Potter Series*

Dear J. K. Rowling,

The first time I picked up a *Harry Potter* book was in third grade. I started in the middle of the series at *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. I don't know what possessed me to do this, but I did. Afterwards, I started to read *Goblet of Fire*. Since this book includes Lord Voldemort coming back, the series started to grab the attention of older audiences and I decided maybe these books were just not for me.

The next year, in fourth grade, I was homeschooled. During this new turn on the path of life, I never thought about Harry Potter. I instead read books that at the time were piquing my interest, most of them being realistic fiction. You know, like *The Friendship Bracelet* by Arlene Stewart and *Anne of Green Gables* by L.M. Montgomery.

The year after that, fifth grade, I began to acquire a taste for adventure books, with the occasional fantasy. *The Emily Windsnap* series by Liz Kessler and the books by E.D. Baker were never passed up. *Harry Potter* still hadn't made its way onto my reading list. The year brought more adventures. We started a home school co-op at church, and my little brother, half a decade younger, started his schooling as a kindergartner. My life couldn't have been any better.

When I entered sixth grade I was excited with the prospect and idea of being in middle school (acne and attitude flairs not including). Finally, out of my long literary journey, I picked up *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Maybe it was peer pressure with everyone raving about it, or maybe I just wanted to give it a second chance. As soon as I was done I was thirsty for more. I had found my book. I blew through the rest of the series. Finally *Deathly Hallows* lay before me. The cover was opened and almost never closed. When I finished, with my bated breath finally released, I became obsessed. When Christmas came around, my whole wish list was Harry Potter (well except for that Bob Ross paint set). I redecorated my room and talked about the books nonstop. I had a decent chunk of the actors from the films memorized, and I even got most of my friends obsessed.

However, not until writing this letter do I realize what I've learned. I've learned that it's important for you to stand up for what you believe in or what you see (like Harry against Umbridge in *Order of the Phoenix*), to protect your friends always, and to be brave even when you can't find it inside you. (Go, Neville!) The *Harry Potter* books taught me about standing up, not for the glory, but because it's right. Now I have these things treasured in my heart, to be remembered always. Each character had a different lesson to give.

Harry taught me I need to do what's right, even if it's hard. Ron taught me that if I leave or go away that coming back is always the right choice. Hermione showed me that being smart doesn't make you weird because it's beneficial. Neville teaches the lesson of being brave when it counts and that everyone's a hero. Ginny teaches the lesson to fight, always for what's fair and just, and Luna tells us that being different and unique is okay, and finally, the one who always must be named: Severus Snape for the loyalty he showed to Dumbledore and Harry's mother.

The books also showed me a new way to view myself, especially in how I relate to Luna Lovegood. I've always kind of had a quirky nature and personality, but I've always had trouble letting it shine through. After reading the books and seeing how Luna didn't care what people thought of her it has made me view myself differently and be able to actually be myself around other people.

All these lessons and more are packed into this series, and I've learned and grown, and all of this happened because I read the first book. So, what lessons have other people learned, I wonder? Hopefully, as much as I have.

Sincerely,  
Kylar Effner

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

Iris Epstein  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to Marilyn Hilton  
Author of *Full Cicada Moon*

Dear Marilyn Hilton,

I always thought life would be easy. I always believed that everything would be perfect for me. However, the world does not work that way. Through *Full Cicada Moon*, Mimi taught me that. She taught me that bad things will happen. She whispered in my ear that I had to be brave and strong when something mean or bad happened. She taught me how to fight, how to live, and most importantly how to have hope.

In my eyes, hope means a better world. Some days, I have struggled, thinking about how to make a better world. Until I read your book, my idea was not fully formed. Mimi started with hope, belief and courage, so I choose to start there. She began by having the courage to stand up when someone tells her that she cannot do something because of her gender or ethnicity. I am going to start by standing up. I am going to start with the gender discrimination in my religion. I am going to ask the most important question in my religious world, *why*.

In Judaism there are certain people who question and others who just follow blindly. After I read your book, I chose to ask *why*. I ask myself "Why are girls not allowed to sing just because some orthodox men and boys over 9 are not allowed to hear them?" The answer, to me, makes no sense whatsoever. It is because, according to the Torah, these men might "stray from their wives" if they hear the females singing. I also ask: "Why are men and women separated at the Western Wall (a sacred place for Jews)?" Men and women are supposed to be separated while they pray, because the women may distract the men with their beauty. This makes no sense whatsoever. To show the world how I feel about these answers, I have to have hope, courage, spirit, compassion, love and belief.

Just like Mimi, I have my own things to fight for. While Mimi fights for shop class, I fight for my voice in song (literally), my right to make the best memories I can and many other things. Fighting is not easy either. Fighting is like a journey, complete with mountains and valleys. You can never see the end no matter how close you are. My fight did not truly start until I read your book. I began with the little things, like standing up for someone. I am trying to prepare myself for the big things.

In the face of discrimination, people have fought with love, hope, compassion, courage and spirit. All of these start with belief. The belief that if we come together, the world will become a better place. This is not only a belief. It is reality. Just like belief, hope is a complicated word. It is one that we all try to understand. I did not truly understand the meaning until I read your book. I strive to have hope and belief. Along with help and support, I want the whole world to have hope, courage and inspiration. Looking towards the sky, I see every person who ever had hope and who ever fought watching in approval, smiling and nodding.

In the future, I do not want to be part of a world where everyone has golden circles over their heads, and angels sing in the streets, because that is a world where people are perfect. I do not want that because that means a world where no one can learn and no one can fight for their beliefs. I do want to be part of a world where people believe and people fight for their beliefs. Unfortunately, that is not the world today. Slowly, people have made achievements to a better world. Even with these achievements, this world needs people to make a difference. Mimi, through her fight, became one of those people, and I want to be one of those people.

Thank you,  
Iris Epstein

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

Jack Fisher  
Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Lois Lowry  
Author of *The Giver*

Dear Lois Lowry,

Your book *The Giver* is one of the best books out there in my opinion. *The Giver* is a meaningful and emotional story about a boy in a dystopian world. The main character Jonas is brave, kind and so selfless. Jonas's bravery was something I could not relate to. I can relate in the inverse way. I am shy and definitely not brave when it comes to meeting strangers or being around people I don't know that well. I was so nervous the first time I had to go to a small group event. I tried to think about how Jonas was so brave and I went and had a great time. Jonas has made an impact by wiggling his way into my brain and slightly shifting it to be more open and courageous when it comes to the public. I have been holding back most of my emotions when I speak. Jonas has helped me to get out from hiding and to open up to the world.

His kindness is one thing I can relate to. I always *try* to be kind but am I a perfect person? No. Nobody in this current day is or will be perfect. Jonas is not perfect, but he was kind and tried to help Gabriel, even if it meant running away and hiding from the community. If he got caught he would be in extreme trouble with the elders. His kindness ties so well into his bravery and courage. He wanted to save his community and was so nice to go on a dangerous mission to do it.

Finally, selflessness. I am pretty much selfish and self-centered. I usually want things my way and never any other way. When I was younger, I would cry and protest until I was able to watch the movie I wanted to even though no one else wanted to watch it. All of my family would end up leaving the room and I would be alone to watch my movie. Now that I have read *The Giver* I am more aware and I want to be less selfish.

I want to thank you for writing a book that influenced my life and most likely many others. Jonas is an amazing person that impacted me. In some ways I feel like I am the opposite of Jonas. After I read *The Giver*, I realized that there is so much I can work on in my life and personality. Your book will stay in my brain as a "brain shifter" and has altered my life in a very good way. Please keep on writing these good books!

Sincerely,  
Jack Fisher



**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Chava Gluck**  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to Yael Mermelstein  
Author of *The Face in the Mirror*

Mrs. Mermelstein,

On the first day of the school year, I usually have mixed emotions. But on the first day of middle school, I was super worried, because I knew that first impressions matter for many people. I was nervous about what the other middle schoolers would think of me. But ever since I read your book, I realize that it is perfectly okay to be different and it is fine to be independent and be myself. After I received your book for a gift, I read a few chapters every time I had a spare minute. When my mother called me for dinner, I answered her with an “I’m coming in a minute, can I just finish the chapter I’m on?” Now, every time I read your book, *The Face in the Mirror*, I feel a war raging within my mind, asking me what kind of a person I am.

I remember what I used to be like. When I was younger, I did not care about how I looked or what people thought of me. As I grow older, I realize that sometimes it does matter because if you do not care, then other people may think badly of you. It doesn’t matter how popular you are. People will judge you by your appearance. Your book taught me to not judge people and jump to conclusions based on the way they look.

I used to wish that I could switch places with someone. I thought my life was horrible, and my friends’ lives were perfect. As I grew older, I found out that that is not true. You cannot judge someone by how they look until you really get to know them and see things from their perspective. You need to step in their shoes, and understand what their life is like. Even then, you should judge them in a positive way.

Once, I went to visit my grandmother. There was a family who lived near her with whom she was friendly. My grandmother wanted me to become friendly with a girl in the family. At first, I judged her. I thought, “She looks pretty short. She must be younger than me. She wears glasses. She probably reads too much.” She was probably judging me too. After all, it is an instinct. I am very shy, especially when meeting new people. We were introduced to each other, and then her mother and my grandmother let us be by ourselves to start breaking the ice. After about 30 minutes, we were happily talking about our lives: our schools, our families, and our hobbies.

I cannot even believe the way I judged her before I even knew her. She is a great friend. Almost every time I go to my grandmother's house for a few days, I always try to arrange to meet with her. We talk on the phone a lot and send letters to each other because we both like writing. Whenever the mail is deposited in our mailbox, I race like the wind to see if I have received a letter. When I get one, I open it excitedly and then reply super quickly so that I can get a letter back sooner.

Your book changed the way I view our beautiful world. Now, instead of assuming that people are judging me, I see people with open hearts who want to be kind and be my friend. I don't jump to conclusions that often anymore. Thank you so much for changing my perspective, teaching me the truth, strengthening my love of reading, and making me realize that friendship is a very important part of life. Most of all, thank you for telling me who I am.

Keep writing!  
Chava Gluck

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Samantha Gornto**  
Blair Pointe Upper Elementary  
Letter to Holly Goldberg Sloan  
Author of *Counting by 7s*

Dear Holly Goldberg Sloan,

Last year a girl from my school named Amanda died in a wreck. A semi-truck did not stop at a red light and hit the car that she was in while she was on the way to school. I did not know her personally, but several of my friends did from school and extracurricular activities that she was in. Whenever I told somebody that I understood how they felt about her death, it felt like I was lying because I did not understand the way they felt. I had not lost someone that I cared about in the same way that they cared about Amanda or even in the same way that they lost her. I also could not comfort them very well because I did not understand what they were going through or the emotions that were inside of them.

When I read *Counting by 7s* I felt like I was Willow Chance. I was in her body. I felt like I was going through everything that she was going through; when she went to a new school and when she went to the counselor and many more. When she lost her parents in the crash, I felt like I had a loss and a gain. It felt like I had lost someone important like parents or close friends as Willow did, but I also gained from the “experience.” I gained understanding. I felt like I needed to “rewind” just as Willow did. I finally understood how my friends felt and I could say “I understand,” without feeling like it was a lie. I could comfort them in better ways because I knew most of their emotions. It was just serendipitous and helpful that Willow lost her parents in a similar way to how my friends, and eventually I, lost Amanda.

*Counting by 7s* also made me think about the people I see in the hallway at school or pass by at dance class. I wonder about what would happen to my life and how would my life be affected if something bad happened to that person, so that they were no longer somebody I saw in the hallway or at dance. Your book has also inspired me to make new friends outside of class and be more careful about what I say to my friends and how I say it. I have disagreed with a friend, but it does not turn into a fight because I think about *Counting by 7s* and whether or not I would regret what I was about to say, if something bad happened to them and they were no longer in my life. Thank you for having such an impact on my life.

Yours in reading,  
Samantha Gornto

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Amari Johnson**  
Crestview Elementary, Indianapolis  
Letter to Mary Claire Helldorfer  
Author of *Kissed by an Angel*

Dear Mary Claire Helldorfer,

I never really thought about what you become when you die. Do you turn into energy or a spirit? Growing up, my mom had a collection of beautiful angels on her bookshelves. I always thought that angels were God's gifts with wings; nothing else. Angels never were important to me until now. I always thought that when you die it's over and you're left in a dark place. I thought death was just this whole depressing process. Reading your book *Kissed by an Angel* changed the way I think about death and the afterlife.

Reading your book brought me comfort and a confirmation that I never knew I needed. When I was 10 my brother died and it left me heartbroken. In the book, Ivy loses Tristan which leaves her heartbroken as well. I could relate to Ivy's pain. In the book, Tristan became an angel and helped Ivy see the negative things around her. Tristan reminds me of my brother; this book makes me think my brother is an angel. It makes me think my brother is up above guarding me and keeping me in a positive light. Your book doesn't make death seem like a bad thing, in fact, it makes death seem natural and peaceful.

In the end, Ivy had to let go of Tristan. Even though she didn't want to, she did and it wasn't bad after all. This helped me let go of my brother too. Even though he isn't here physically I know he is here spiritually. When I let go of my brother I finally reached the stage of acceptance. Your book finally helped me let go of my brother and move on.

I'm not scared of death anymore. I'm not scared of the afterlife anymore. Your book helps me see all my late loved ones in a better light. I thank you Mary Helldorfer for helping me with something that's been weighing me down for a while.

Sincerely,  
Amari Johnson

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Jihoon Jung**  
Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Veronica Roth  
Author of *Divergent*

Dear Veronica Roth,

Before your book, I was just a normal 11 year old kid that loathed reading. My teacher told us that we needed to get a book, so I looked in my house library, and saw in a case, the *Divergent* series. Since I finished the book, I have branched out into more books and found that reading can be really exciting and takes you into an adventure. Your book was truly one of the only books I actually liked. I've always struggled with finding a book that I actually like, or a book that I can get through 5 pages without having to reread because I don't remember what was actually happening.

Your book is relatable, but also takes you into a world that is so different than ours. Your book is the first book that I actually wanted to read at home. What this book showed me is that, no matter how small you are, you can make a difference in this world. Tris and Four take down Erudite mind controlling serum all by themselves. I feel like, in the book, the whole city pretended that everything was ok, even though the whole city was near war. This book has almost everything for everyone, they have romance, action, suspense, mystery and much more.

I think the reason I loved this book so much is because I can relate to this book the most. Although I did not go through what Tris went through, I can indirectly relate to Tris. I was born in South Korea and moved to the US when I was 2. Ever since I moved to the US, and could understand English, I never felt like I belonged in the US. I always felt like I was made for South Korea. During Spring Break 2018, I went back to Korea on vacation. I can barely speak in Korean but can kind of understand it. For example, when I went on a Monorail in Korea, I was sitting down and a Korean man called me an oegugin, which means foreigner in Korean. The Korean man didn't even hear me speak Korean, and he already knew I was a foreigner. I felt like I didn't belong in Korea either. Tris also faced these problems, after getting the aptitude test. Tris's test was inconclusive, meaning she didn't belong in any faction. She was divergent. People don't like divergents and usually end up killing the divergent because they can beat the system. So Tris chose Dauntless (The Brave). She didn't belong anywhere in her city, and struggled with fitting in, things that most people struggle with in life.

I also related Tris to me and my family. We left Korea on a plane with no one that we knew in the US. We had to start out fresh. We had no family there and often got homesick. My parents tried not to cry because they had to stay strong for me and my older sister. Much like my family, Tris knew no one in her new faction, and became home sick many times. She couldn't cry about it because her competitors and her faction leaders would see this and kick her out. I use the lessons in *Divergent* every day, and I hope to use it more. If someone asks me what book to read, I always say *Divergent* because you can learn astonishing amounts of lessons and you learn to be a better person as a whole.

Sincerely,  
Jihoon Jung

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**KylieAnn Keller**  
North Madison Elementary, Camby  
Letter to Kristin Hannah  
Author of *The Nightingale*

Dear Mrs. Kristin Hannah,

At my age there are a lot of difficulties. I know that everyone has difficulties in their life, but I can't help but think that perhaps my life is made to be like that. I am in sixth grade now, but when I was in the fourth grade I was told that a spot on my back had caused me to have skin cancer. I was terrified. I have recently read your book, *The Nightingale* and it brought me back to the feelings I had when I was told that I had cancer, and when I was told that I was free from it.

When I was reading the part where Vivian was hiding her feelings from everyone, I felt a connection to it in a way. I realized that was how I felt when I had skin cancer. I haven't realized until reading this book that the characters went through the war much longer than I went through cancer. It was only a few weeks until I had surgery to remove the spot on my back causing the cancer. This book made me feel at peace at the end, but, while reading the book, I felt all of the emotions the characters did. How they felt scared, lonely, then happy.

The narrator of the story, Vivian, I feel like I can relate to in a way. She would always try to be focusing on others instead of herself. While I had skin cancer, I wanted nothing more than to focus on everyone else so I could avoid what was wrong with me. Towards the part of the book when the war had gotten bigger and the Nazis were taking over, I couldn't stop thinking of how that once joyful and happy place, had become sorrowful and dark. Perhaps I thought about it so much because it bothered me, or because I could feel the emotions of the characters, or because something just didn't feel right about it to me. It could be all of that, or it could just be one of those reasons.

Writing about this and getting it off of my chest, feels surprisingly good to do. I am glad that I read that book. It helped me become so much more grateful to have the life that I do, and it made me understand what other people go through in their lives. I do not know every hardship people go through in their lives, but I know now that they DO go through them, and it's not just something to shrug off. It's something that you can help them get through, just like the characters in this book.

Sincerely,  
KylieAnn E. Keller

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Cadence Land**

North Madison Elementary, Camby

Letter to R. J. Palacio

Author of *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

Throughout time, a major setback in my life has been bullying. I've heard it all: "You're stupid," "you're ugly," "you don't belong." These are all words that August Pullman has heard in the book *Wonder*. Some might begin reading without knowing what Auggie faces, but I know. I know the feelings of doubt, regret, and unassurance. I know questions he might have asked himself. I know it all, because I've lived it.

After reading the summary, some sad lonely times from the fourth grade came flooding back to me. Kids can be so cruel without truly understanding the power of simple words. While I knew this book might spark tears, I continued to read. As I started, a fire began to spark. Then, that spark became a flame. Then, the flame ignited. I was beginning to understand. I was inspired to hear this story and know each and every character. Despite all possible odds, Auggie managed to overcome his fear. At times, I have my doubts, fears, and burdens, but no matter what, I will make it through each challenge life brings. No matter if I fall, I will get back up again. Though I struggle, I will find joy in the situation, just like Auggie. Auggie's journey has helped me understand my own.

It's tough competing in today's world. It's all a race for popularity. Everything must be perfect. Perfect hair, perfect shoes, perfect makeup, perfect clothes, etc. Auggie was not perfect and neither am I, but Auggie's outstanding personality and kind heart are what really were truly perfect.

The characters that Auggie interacted with throughout the story were molded by genuine friendship. The gift they received from Auggie multiplied rapidly. It spread like wildfire through a thick forest. As the book reads, "Be kinder than is necessary. Because it's not enough to be kind. One should be kinder than needed." This has given me hope and a new mindset.

I was refreshed to read a book that addressed such a bold topic that was so relevant to my life. I find it difficult to believe that anyone could not be inspired by *Wonder*. If someone could go through everything imaginable, and still manage to overcome it, imagine what I could do. Imagine what society could become.



What if people were like some of the characters in *Wonder*? No more hatred. The world would be so different. Perhaps flames of great kindness could ignite all around us. I hope many people get the experience to read this roller coaster of a book. I am glad that I got the opportunity to read this inspiring story. Auggie truly is a wonder. Thank you for this inspirational gift.

Sincerely,  
Cadence Land

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Patrick Mardis**  
Castle North Middle School, Newburgh  
Letter to James Dashner  
Author of *The Maze Runner*

Dear James Dashner,

At the age of seven, my grandfather died. I felt like it was the end, I felt like I hit a wall. I felt like I was in the box that all of the Gladers went in to get to the glade. I never read a lot of books when I was younger, only enough to get through school. But then I found *The Maze Runner*.

The most important part of your book was when Minho told Thomas that there was no way out of the maze. When Thomas found a way out, it taught me that there is always a way out even when it seems like there is not. He showed courage, strength, and intelligence because not only did he survive a night in the maze (which had never been done before), but he also killed a Griever.

Thomas proved that doing the right thing is most important even if you have to break some rules to do it. When Thomas saved Minho, he had to break the rules to get to the maze. He used his survival instincts to save not just Minho, but Alby as well. Afterwards, he got punished, but he also became a runner. Another example was when Thomas led everyone to the maze if they were a runner or not.

When my grandfather died, I decided not to go to school for a few days to mourn and grieve. When I returned, I had a mountain of school work. I held off doing it for a while until I realized I had to do it sometime or another. I didn't give much thought into it until I read your book. When Thomas saved Minho, it showed what he had to do. For me, that was doing my homework. After that, I finished all of my homework in depth instead of just skimming through it.

Now, I'm using that knowledge to live life by going through all of the dark times and thinking of the good ones. Everyone has bad times, but it is how we get through rough times that truly matter. Like Thomas, every time I feel like I'm stuck, I find a way to get through it.

Every time I hit another block I find a way around it, just like how I did with the death of my grandfather. I hit almost every roadblock there is, and I keep asking myself, what's next?

Sincerely,  
Patrick Mardis

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Ethan McKinney**  
Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to James Dashner  
Author of *The Maze Runner*

Dear James Dashner,

I have just recently read the first two of your books in *The Maze Runner* series and it has already had a huge impact on my life. Through Thomas's struggles and achievements, I've learned many different ways to interpret what others are feeling, to stay positive, and more. I have changed my ways of thinking when I read your books in *The Maze Runner* series. Thomas has been through more than I can think of. Throughout his tough and challenging journey, he has helped his friends in so many ways. This makes me want to help others even more. I have truly connected to this book and am happy I read it.

Before I read your book, I kept thinking, "What if I can't do this?" or "What if I can't get that?" When I read your book I was more concerned about if others are content or if others need some extra help. Thomas, after getting used to his new lifestyle, had been thinking of others. He wanted to help everyone get out of the glade. This helped me understand that I can help others, whether they have just had the worst day or just need a simple favor done, and they may pass the good deed to another. When focusing on the positives, you will have a greater chance of doing something positive which spreads the positivity to others such as helping someone out. If everyone in the world is more positive, then the world wouldn't have an excuse for being worried a majority of the time. In your book *The Maze Runner*, Thomas focused on the positives such as: he can get out and he'll help his friends. The entire time he could have been doing nothing and having no hope. He had hope in himself and in his friends. This has made me realize that with teamwork I can do a lot more than when I am independent. When I use teamwork like Thomas, I can spread positivity and endure the hard times with others to teach and learn from friends.

Thomas endured and continued to help others throughout challenging times no matter the cost. He wanted to be with his friends. I picked up a feeling that having friends is the most important thing to have during a hard time. Also, having friends to lean on when needing help can be very useful. When in the glade, Thomas faced challenging times, some days were harder than others. When I read the book, I realized that that others could be having a terrible day or had lost something important to them like when Thomas had lost a friend or even his memories. I can understand

now that life isn't all about me or what I care about, but how others feel outside of myself. I have more empathy for others because now I can comprehend that the person I am talking to may have been through a hard time recently, had earlier lost an important item or a friend that they care about. The best I can do for them is give them my full attention to help with a task they need help with. After reading *The Maze Runner*, I will now try to give a little extra to make someone who is feeling down feel better and maybe put a smile on their face.

After finishing your book, I feel more of a need to just enjoy the present as much as I can. I got this feeling when I read your book, understanding the struggles Thomas had. Now I've learned that no matter what is bound to happen, I should enjoy the most of what I can right now. This has made me be a little bit more enthusiastic to face what life has for me next. I also realize that I might sometime soon get very sad, so if I value that time when I am happy, then if I get into a tough time, I can keep the warm memory close to me so I can feel better. Thomas going through tough times also made him more relaxed when the action and trouble was over.

So when I go through trouble, I can keep happy with my memories, then I am relieved to have the rough time over. After I read this book, it felt like my conscience had been more about helping others and finding ways to make them happy. When I read your book and finished, I was so exulted to read the rest of the series. The words you put in the book will forever be with me and with those I share it with.

Sincerely,  
Ethan McKinney

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Aviya Melrose**  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to Terri Libenson  
Author of *Invisible Emmie*

Dear Terri Libenson,

You don't always need to stick out or be popular. If you be yourself everything will go smoothly. Your book *Invisible Emmie* showed me how important it is to have self-confidence, and how having it has changed my life. Right when I started reading your book I felt connections between the character Emmie and myself. She was shy and not very confident like I used to be. I also felt a connection between Katie and me. Katie, on the other hand, was popular, kind, and way more confident, like I am now.

When I was younger I was very shy, just like Emmie. Every time I had to talk to an adult, it felt like all eyes were on me and everyone was creeping closer and closer to me. I would get nervous and try to go somewhere quiet, not around many people. My heart would start pounding. It felt like it was going to burst out every time I had to go up on stage and sing for events. All around me were kids. They were playing with other children and talking. They looked so joyful and happy. My friends were like that. I would go home and cry to my mother. I felt sad because all my friends made new friends so quickly. I just wanted to be like them!

When I was younger I wasn't so confident. I would let people take over me, and be easily pushed around. I remember one day I went to Skyzone, a trampoline park. I was in line to go on the ninja course. I was probably nine or ten, but I was all alone. There were some kids behind me that were probably a year older. I heard them laughing and tried to stay quiet. All of a sudden they walk right in front of me and pushed me back. I wanted to say something but I thought to myself that it wasn't a big deal, and let them pass. Now that I think of it, I really could have stood up for myself. Even though it wasn't such a big deal, I could have made a change.

That was when things started to change. It could have been either that I was growing up or just because I made a change in my life. I started to become more confident. It first started by just talking to new people, and putting myself out there. It was like I came out of my shell and realized who I really was. Before I knew it, I was a new me, a more confident me and less shy. I am able to go to anyone and say whatever's on my mind and not be embarrassed.

The book made me realize the importance of becoming more confident, and how I did not become like Emmie. Emmie didn't stick up for herself. She let people push her around. If I had not realized what I was like, I would still be shy and not outgoing. It would be harder to make friends and interact with other people. I have gone to a small private school all my life. I've never really been in big groups. When I go into high school, which is soon, I will not feel nervous. The high school I will most likely be going to will be huge, but because of my change in personality, I am confident that I will succeed.

Reading *Invisible Emmie* reminded me of those days and made me feel proud of those accomplishments. If not for your book, I wouldn't have been able to realize the importance of achieving self-confidence in my life. Because of Emmie, I realized the fact that I have become a better person and survived all the hardships I have been through. It changed me into the person I am today and made me think about the real me.

Thank you,  
Aviya Melrose

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Leah Murray**  
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville  
Letter to Sharon Draper  
Author of ***Out of My Mind***

Dear Ms. Draper,

“A person is so much more than the name of a diagnosis on a chart.” This quote was like a shooting star when I first read it, flashing bright before my eyes. I have many people in my life that are just like Melody, the main character in your book, ***Out of My Mind***.

One of these people is my best friend’s brother, Ben. Ben has both muscular dystrophy and autism. He cannot speak using words, read or write, and as he gets older, he will not be able to walk. I have been around Ben for years as our families are close friends, and until I read your book, I never really thought about how Ben might feel inside. Your book really made me think about him in a different way, especially when you wrote, “Words have always swirled around me like snowflakes each one delicate and different, each one melting untouched in my hands.” Your words opened my eyes and gave me such a great visual of what Ben might feel like, since he probably has words swirling around his head all the time and he cannot speak one single word.

Reading ***Out of My Mind*** also reminded me of the saying, “You can’t judge a book by its cover.” Melody may look different with the wheelchair and the drool sliding uncontrollably out of her mouth. But Melody is so much more than that girl in the pink wheelchair who cannot talk, walk, or write. Melody is like a single flame that is surrounded by water with no way out. She is so smart, but no one would think that when they see her. Therefore, I think that it is so important to get to know someone before you judge them, because they might be going through things that you do not even know about or understand.

My big brother Brendan, who is sixteen, likes to play with Disney figurines, loves ice cream, gives the best hugs, and will never be able to go to college or drive a car. He doesn’t have Cerebral Palsy, but he does have autism. Even though he has autism, I could not imagine having a better brother. I am so grateful that my brother can communicate with people, run, play basketball, and write his own name. ***Out of My Mind*** has made me think about the little things that go wrong in my life that are not nearly as bad as other people’s problems. Some people have a small

problem and they make such a big deal about it, when others are facing difficult challenges every day.

“A person is so much more than the name of a diagnosis on a chart.” My brother is not just a teenager with autism, he is a brother, a friend, a clown, and one of the best people in the world to me. Melody is not just a girl with cerebral palsy. She is smart, kind, and funny. Ben is not just a boy with muscular dystrophy. He is hilarious and sweet. Each sentence in your book made me explode with different emotions such as sadness, anger, laughter, and joy. People are like stars in a galaxy, each one bright. Every star, special and unique. Thank you so much for bringing me into Melody’s world by giving me a different perspective. Your book has made me better understand my own world and has a place in my heart forever. For that, I thank you.

Sincerely,  
Leah K. Murray



**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Isabel Pearson**  
Dillsboro Elementary School, Dillsboro  
Letter to S. E. Hinton  
Author of *The Outsiders*

Dear S. E. Hinton,

*The Outsiders* taught me that everybody has a breaking point and once in a while you have to let it all out or something bad could happen. My grandma died over the summer and she was a big part of my life. I tried to keep my feelings to myself, but I couldn't. It just made everything harder and I couldn't focus on anything. Not my school work, not sports. My mind was just out of it. When I read *The Outsiders* it made me realize that sometimes it's okay to cry or get angry.

It also taught me that there are certain kinds of friends that you need in your life especially in times of need. You need a friend who can make you laugh and give you a hard time, like Two-Bit. You need a friend that listens, like Sodapop. You need a friend that understands, like Johnny. You need a friend that keeps you in line, like Darry. Lastly, you need a friend that's a little reckless and has a good time no matter what they're doing, like Dally. If you have friends like this, then you have a pretty good life. Even if sometimes it doesn't feel like it.

Ponyboy Curtis and Darry Curtis taught me that no matter where you come from you can do something great if you set your mind to it and if there is nothing holding you back. Ponyboy and Sodapop were the only things holding Darry back from becoming a Soc. I come from a little town in Indiana. I didn't used to think that I could become a great lawyer like I want to because I come from such a tiny town even if I have the grades to do it, but thanks to *The Outsiders* I now believe that maybe it is possible. Maybe I shouldn't give up.

There is one other thing that *The Outsiders* taught me: it is okay to always have a little bit of your kid-self inside of you. My dad tells me to have a little fun and I used to tell him he was crazy and that he was a kid, but now I understand that I need to remember I'm still a kid. Sometimes you need to forget all of your problems and just have fun. Or even just go outside and look at the different colors of the sunrise or the sunset.

Sincerely,  
Isabel Pearson

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

Lilly Quirey  
Park Tudor School, Indianapolis  
Letter to R. J. Palacio  
Author of *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

When I read your book, I found that I had many things in common with August, and I found a different way to look at life. I read *Wonder* not too long ago. It was beautifully written and had a very powerful meaning. In the summer, Auggie met three kids who would be in his classes: Julian, Jack Will, and Charlotte. Charlotte was bragging about “Her perfect life as a movie star,” and I have a lot of kids at my school who won’t stop talking about themselves and their “perfect lives.” Julian wasn’t nice and insulted Auggie about his face and bullied him throughout the year. There are people at my school who love to get a rise out of other people who they think are “stupid and weird.” Jack Will was kind to Auggie and acted as his friend for a while, until Halloween when he went behind his back. I had a friend, who called me her “best friend,” then treated me like dirt a little after Halloween. When Auggie started school, everyone would stare at him, and people stare at me. EVERYONE stared at him because of his face, but I don’t have a disease like him.

People sometimes think I am “weird.” Just like Auggie, I put up my hood and avoid looking at other people. I picture where I would want to be; at home, watching *Wonder* on my TV. I have a theme of my room just like Auggie. Figure skating and pink, even though my favorite color is blue (aqua). Auggie has a theme of Star Wars and astronauts. Auggie had a very wise sister, and I am an only child, yet I feel that I am like Via because I am very wise and feel like I am in my own world, and there are very few people in it. When Summer comes into the picture and forgets about “The Plague,” she becomes friends with the weirdest person in the grade, the person that people don’t like. That is like my friend, Caroline. She has become my friend when I felt like an outcast, thinking that I was weird, just like Auggie. I also learned that even if you have one big thing that is different about you, you can still do normal things. Auggie likes Star Wars, and I love puppets. Auggie has two character traits; he is brave and good at science. I am good at ice skating and ventriloquism. But, I learned from reading the book, that everyone is unique.

Everyone can make a difference. Everyone is here on this earth for a reason. Everyone has a purpose in life. Everyone is unique. Everyone is perfect. Everyone is a WONDER. It made me look at life a different way.

When I was young, I used to think that something that I didn't know about or someone who looked different than me was weird. I always used to think that way. When I got older and read your book, I saw that if you have a unique face or if you don't have an arm or leg, that's okay. No one is like you. You are the only person in the world who is R. J. Palacio. There is only one Lilly Quirey. There is only one Auggie Pullman. Thank you for making a wonderful book and thank you for deciding to put the message in your book that everyone is different and everyone is perfect, because they are themselves.

Sincerely,  
Lilly Quirey

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Elle Rainwater**  
Brown County Intermediate School, Nashville  
Letter to Jacqueline Woodson  
Author of *The Other Side*

Dear Jacqueline Woodson,

Your story, *The Other Side*, has really made me think more deeply about how segregation and racism impacts today's society. I realize that this took place in the past, but I also know that it is currently still relevant and a big issue in our nation and around the world. Some problems that our nation faces today are people getting called horrible names, people being treated differently because of their race, and violence towards people of different races. I read a recent article that stated, "A white woman in North Carolina is out of a \$125,000-a-year job after being caught on camera berating a black neighbor, telling the woman, 'I'm white and I'm hot, so what are you doing here?'" (New York Post, October 29, 2018).

Another article I read stated, "Two black senior citizens were murdered... in Louisville, Kentucky. Maurice Stallard, 69, was at a Kroger supermarket when Gregory Bush, a 51-year-old white man, walked in and shot him multiple times... Any doubt of a racial motive seemed quelled when surveillance footage showed the shooter forcibly tried to enter a black church minutes before moving on to the supermarket." (Intelligencer October 28, 2018). Both of these crimes were based solely on hatred for those of color. It almost makes you wonder what would have happened if it was the other way around.

Something else I have acquired from your story is that segregation can't only push us apart, but also pull us together. Some may believe that people of color do not deserve to live, but from what I've read in your story is that blacks and whites all have red blood, and it doesn't matter about your skin color.

I feel as though your story kind of tells us that the children will be the future of our world, and won't be as judgmental to people about their race, ethnicity, or heritage. "Someday somebody's going to come along and knock this old fence down," Annie said. And I nodded "yeah," I said. "Someday." - *The Other Side*. I feel as though the children in today's society can be a huge influence on the next generation. Being more open to things or people that are different whether it's sexuality, race, or religion, we can all accept each other for who we are and what we believe.

Thank you for this wonderful story. It helped me to think more deeply about a subject that still exists in our world. It helped me also realize that it is through the younger generations, these prejudices might finally meet their end.

Sincerely,  
Elle Rainwater

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Jack Stark**  
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville  
Letter to Alan Gratz  
Author of *Refugee*

Dear Alan Gratz,

Most kids at my school treat books like words typed on paper, a useless resource they use to distract themselves while they consume time. A last resort to avoid another one of the teacher's lessons. Some of those kids may even read *Refugee* and fail to realize it is what they had been trying to avoid, a lesson. *Refugee* is a lesson that showed me the significance of history's corrupt leaders and their influence upon the modern and past society. It has shown me what would've been there if those events hadn't happened; equality.

Before I read this book I had very little self-confidence and longed for a companion, a friend or partner, because I didn't think I was good enough to do things on my own. I've always thought I was just one insignificant leaf in a huge oak tree. Your book changed that. Isabel, Josef and Muhmad were also facing similar issues. The three kids, like me, were facing issues of self-acceptance, and self-confidence. Muhmad and Josef were forced to believe that they were just outsiders. An acceptance that made them think they were freaks that were of no importance to society or anyone different from them. They were being forced to change, but they couldn't, and for that they were punished.

Josef, Muhmad and Isabel all were constantly in and out of bad situations but when the winds of fate tried to push them off the oak, they didn't give in. When Josef was forced to leave his broken father behind, when Isabel sold her trumpet, one of her few joyful memories, when Muhmad had given Hannah to a stranger, they all kept going. I've always thought I knew the definition of perseverance, but I was wrong. To know the true meaning of perseverance you have to feel it; in your heart, in yourself.

Millions of refugees died because of the selfishness and carelessness of more fortunate humans. The refugees were forced to power through a fight to survive and keep their race alive, a fight they were losing. This made me think about my lack of generosity, and I realized how much my attention was centered toward myself. I was too focused on other issues when I should have realized what was going on around me. I had learned my lesson, a lesson that should have been taught to me years ago. A lesson that taught me courage. Courage is important because courage can give you the power to present yourself in front of the world. Courage can make

you dive into the black sea, ready to face awaiting dangers. Courage can give you the strength to risk your life or freedom to try and fix a corrupt, broken and unfair system that you have no control over.

People hate or are scared of things that aren't like them. Though the skin pigment, morals, or religion has never really defined someone, it didn't matter because some people are too set on an opinion to be changed. In this instance it was an opinion that resulted in a division of unity. A pre-conceived stereotype of inequality. People have always thought kids like Isabel or Josef or Muhmad could always change and give up everything they've ever lived for, without a single thought of sympathy. Constantly throughout *Refugee* I wondered if those events would have happened if the refugees were white or if they practiced the same religion as the terrible leaders mentioned in this book. I willed myself to believe it wasn't true but deep down I knew it was.

After reading *Refugee*, I thought a lot about the corruptions of humanity. About the war and sexism and racism. About how everyone was bound to come to a point where they wondered if they were really of any importance to anything. If their future was like they've always perceived it to be, successful and happy. I realized soon that everyone had a depression. Some people were just more open about it. Some people showed it in their face. Some people hide it through fake smiles and laughs. Some people you could see it in their eyes, the yearning for love, for joy. The only remedy for that is hope.

In the end, each of them was holding on by a strand of hope, the most valuable thing in the world. Hope is something that can change the future, hope is a new start, and hope is what I saw in your book and in the world. When Isabel received her encore in America, when Muhmad finally stood up for his freedom, even when Josef's sacrifice kept Ruthie alive. Hope was in all of those, I could see it and I knew how it felt right there and then, different, spectacular. We may all be connected by the same roots, but we have yet to realize that we should become one for the life of new generations.

Jack Stark

**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Aiden Taylor**  
Crestview Elementary, Indianapolis  
Letter to Kristin Sims Levine  
Author of *The Lions of Little Rock*

Dear Kristen Sims Levine,

Some books go in one ear and out the other. Rarely a book comes around that makes you think, one that really turns your gears, a book that introduces new topics, and actually teaches you something. For me, your book *Lions of Little Rock* did just that.

Before I read your book, if you asked me what segregation really was, I would draw a blank. I had no idea that people weren't being treated equally. My second-grade mind thought the world was a peaceful place that assured things would be safe and equal. I was wrong. But now, after reading your book, I understand the troubles of segregation. I believe that all things should be equal for everyone and everything.

Your book affected me by teaching me that things under the surface are important. We don't always know what everyone is going through and that's a reason we should always be kind. You taught me that with your well-developed characters and fluent sentences. It is important that I learned that at a young age because those are things I need to know throughout my life.

Since second grade, I've read and reread your book because of the message it gives. Your book has made me think about my words and actions. I would like to thank you for that.

Sincerely,  
Aiden Taylor



**Level I**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Dalton Westfall**  
Castle North Middle School, Newburgh  
Letter to Catherine Lloyd Burns  
Author of *The Good, the Bad, and the Beagle*

Dear Ms. Catherine Lloyd Burns,

Though the past one or two years of my life have been very strange at certain times, I have learned that it can either be a good kind of strange, or it can be a bad kind of strange. For the past two years, I have been living in denial. But your book, *The Good, the Bad, and the Beagle* helped make me realize that nobody can stop what is already coming, and that death is just a normal part of life. Your book has taught me that I should move on from my grandma's death, and that I should be at peace with her death.

In the latter part of 2016, my grandma, Marilyn Kennedy, was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer. The disease had gone unnoticed for so long that, much like Cadbury's death, all the hospital was able to do was delay it. After that, much like Veronica, I tried to avoid human contact other than with my family. I even got slightly behind on my school work. Months ago, almost two years later, I felt I was almost over my grandma's death, but the thought of how I could have done more with her before it was her time kept creeping into my head. When I saw your book, I bought it for the cute beagle on the cover. But the precious pup was merely nothing but a facade for a book with a main character that had the same feelings I had locked up inside of me for multiple years.

As a seasoned reader, I expected that the dog would die at some point in the story. But in the way that Veronica's relationship with Cadbury was similar to mine with my grandma, I found myself being more attached to the dog than usual. Your book has taught me that the doctors were doing what they could and that nobody could have known what was happening. Sometimes life can have a strange way of working out, whether it be good or merely disguised as bad. So again, I thank you Ms. Burns. I greatly thank you for helping me lift the metaphorical weight that used to be firmly rested on my shoulders.

With newfound peace,  
Dalton Westfall

**Level II**  
**Award Winning**  
**Letters**

**Level II**  
**1st Place Winner and**  
**National Winner at the Library of Congress**

**Yael Epstein**  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to Ayaan Hirsi Ali  
Author of ***Infidel***

Dear Ayaan Hirsi Ali,

For most of my life, I have blindly accepted what I have been told. Whether it be by teachers, ancient scholars, or the rest of society, I always accepted what I “must” believe in as a Jew. When your book, ***Infidel***, brought to light the wrongdoings of your religion, Islam, I began to question my own religion.

I have always lived in an environment rich with Jewish experiences and been given many opportunities to shape my beliefs and view of the world. My orthodox school tended to not have the same ideas about the roles of men and women as my home and conservative and reform synagogues, but I usually sided with the orthodox approach. As a child, I was unable to see any wrong in my religion, but after reading your book, I finally thought that I did not need to simply accept all of the values of my religion. You obviously were very religious when you were growing up, even to the point that you were mutilated. You were literally branded by the past. When you still decided to reject your religion, I knew that I needed to reexamine my beliefs.

When you wrote about how your religion tries to render women powerless through keeping them in the house, I began to see the same patterns in a branch of my religion, orthodoxy. Some Muslim women have to serve their husbands and do whatever they want. Some Orthodox Jewish women are treated as lesser individuals, confined to housework and taking care of the children. When I read your book, I began to wonder if all of this is right. Should women always be in this position? Of course not.

Some people who are religious try to follow every single commandment in the Torah unwaveringly. “Our purpose on earth is to become as close to God as we can,” is what I have been repeatedly taught. So, some Jews follow each and every mitzvah (commandment) to become “close to God.” Some mitzvot contradict contemporary ideals and are irrelevant to the modern world. In addition, religious commandments are manipulated to reinforce traditional gender roles. For example, women cannot participate in religious services with men and cannot be counted towards a minyan (ten adults required to hold a religious service). In my own life, I have been

told that I cannot sing because it might distract grown men. I believe that the point where someone's everyday life and views are completely shaped by their religion is where religion can cross into fanaticism. You grew up in a life that was fully shaped by religious fanaticism. For part of your life, you fully embraced all of the parts of your religion that restricted women's choices and full participation in society. You blindly went through life trying to spread fanatic ideals. I would not quite consider myself a fanatic, but I was fully submerged in religious beliefs, and came up for air when I read your book.

The Torah was written thousands of years ago, and I don't believe that we should continue to follow rules that contradict modern ideals. I went to the Western Wall last year, the last remaining wall from the second temple and the holiest place for Jews. Instead of being an amazing experience, it was deeply disappointing. When we first got there, my sister and I were separated from our father, because men and women cannot pray together at the Western Wall. While he witnessed the joyous welcoming of Shabbat through song and dance, we sat in silence because women's voices are not supposed to be heard, even there. I had anticipated singing and dancing with my fellow Jews from around the world, but even our greatest attempts for a song group were silenced by the loud singing from the men's side. We women were confined to a small corner of the Wall, both physically and mentally. Since I was unable to enjoy the same Jewish experience as men were, I felt like a second class citizen. Because of this experience, I felt more empathetic towards the inequality that you experienced in your religion. You have inspired me to stop being tolerant of injustices that women suffer in my religion and in others, and to question the role that religion plays in reinforcing inequality in society.

Sincerely,  
Yael Epstein

Level II  
2nd Place Winner

Reagan Fortwendel  
Jasper Middle School, Jasper  
Letter to Ruta Sepetys  
Author of *Salt to the Sea*

Dear Ruta Sepetys,

I read your book *Salt to the Sea* this past year, and it has changed my perspective on the happenings of WWII. In the past, I have usually chosen to read fiction, and very rarely read historical fiction. However, when we got to read snippets of all of the Young Hoosier books this year at school, *Salt to the Sea* immediately drew me in, and I couldn't wait to read it.

When I read your book, it changed my outlook on life in many ways. For one, the *Wilhelm Gustloff* and its perilous sinking is not an event that I was aware of before. How an event this catastrophic could have evaded the eyes of many is something we may never know. Over 9,000 people died during the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, yet it was not covered in a single news story. On the contrary, only 1,503 people died in the sinking of the Titanic, a difference of 7,500 people, but there are countless documentaries, news stories, and articles about it. Was this because the people of the Titanic were high class, wealthy citizens who were well known, and the passengers of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* were poor refugees fleeing a war ridden country with few or no family to remember them? The story of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* could also have been suppressed by people in positions of power during the time of the war in order to keep the rest of the world in the dark about this awful war crime. Is it possible that the leaders didn't want any other countries to know what was really happening during the war? The victims of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* tragedy were silenced and forgotten, and their stories were disregarded. You gave the faceless faces and the nameless names, and that is a major reason that your book impacted me. It taught me that sometimes the silenced can have the most powerful stories.

Through the different perspectives of each character, it felt as if I had come to know the backstories of the four main characters, and when the ship started sinking I found myself silently rooting for each of them to survive, because they all had so much to live for. I felt the pain of everyone on board the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, because they were just innocent bystanders caught in a heinous war fought between two unforgiving forces. I live in a country that is safe, secure, and prosperous, and I have never had to fight to survive. While reading the book it felt as if I was truly there, in the middle of WWII, fighting alongside Florian, Joana, Emilia, and Klaus. *Salt to the*

*Sea* showed me how many civilians were pulled into the war and forced to use any means possible to survive the battles.

One final part of the book that really touched me was when Emilia was separated from Halinka. I can only imagine how many times mothers were separated from their children, more specifically their newborns, during the war, and can't even fathom how heartbreaking that was for both the child and the mother. Emilia ended up freezing to death on a raft after handing Halinka to Florian. Halinka had to grow up without a mother, and that makes me all the more appreciative for mine and all she does for me. Emilia was hardly a mother herself, she was just a teen who didn't ask for a child, but got one anyway. She made the best of her situation and fought for both her life and her child. That shows that sometimes awful things can turn out to be blessings in disguise. There must have been thousands of true stories similar to Emilia and Halinka's, yet those were suppressed along with the story of the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*. So much history is lying just below the surface, untouched, waiting to be found. So many people's stories are buried, waiting to be told.

Your book changed my outlook on life in many ways, and I thank you for being the reason I fell in love with historical fiction. You took a story that the rest of the world discarded and you gave it importance. Stories are going to continue to be suppressed and thought unimportant, but you showed me that those are the stories most worth telling.

Keep telling untold stories,  
Reagan Fortwendel

**Level II**  
**3rd Place Winner**

**Abby Kidwell**  
Jasper Middle School, Jasper  
Letter to Angie Thomas  
Author of *The Hate U Give*

Dear Angie Thomas,

I feel as if every single time I turn on the news or scroll through Instagram, there are reports of yet another person of color that was killed for seemingly no reason. The stories always go similarly: a black person is moving through the world the same way a white person would, but somehow they end up dead from a gunshot wound. A fourteen-year-old boy, my age, missed the bus and knocked on his neighbor's door to ask for directions to school. His neighbors thought he was breaking in, and they attempted to shoot him. A forty-year-old man's SUV was found stalled in the middle of the street, and he ended up being killed by a police officer. Cases like these occur too frequently. The media paints victims negatively and essentially blames them for their own deaths by emphasizing any mistakes they made in the situation, while elevating the person or officer that murdered them by showing pictures of their family and airing stories of their good deeds.

Your book, *The Hate U Give*, brings implicit biases, or internalized attitudes, and racial prejudices to light. In my opinion, our society chooses to ignore these prejudices instead of working to correct them. The story of Starr and Khalil was one that affected me in many ways, some that I don't even know yet. Khalil's death was so tragic and real and powerful – something that has happened before and will happen again unless the people committing these crimes face repercussions. Your book connected me to a victim in a way I've never been connected to a victim of police brutality. Khalil was tangible to me, although he was fictional. I imagined what he looked like inside my head. Through Starr, I learned his life story. He was a good kid faced with impossible choices. He was funny, charming, and overall just likable. However, those were taken away from him because of a hairbrush and racial prejudices.

Another thing I found particularly poignant about your book was how realistic the ending was. Officer One-Fifteen wasn't convicted. He walked free. That is the sad reality of how most police brutality cases end. Some attorneys argue that the defendant shouldn't have their whole life ruined just because of a mistake. Maybe that's true, but why should the defendant get off with a slap on the wrist when they're responsible for ending

someone else's life? Victims of police brutality, whether they were a "thug" or not, had a future, a purpose, and a right to their own life.

I will never fully understand the struggles of being black in America. If I get pulled over while driving, I won't fear for my life. My parents never had to sit me down and explain how to behave during a confrontation with police. If I wear all black out at night, the worst I'll receive is some funny looks. Nobody will automatically assume that if my hands are in my pockets it means that I have a gun. That's one of the many problems with this society. My skin color, my white privilege, protects me from these situations. *The Hate U Give*, however, took me one step closer to understanding. Your book has made me, and many others, determined to raise awareness of white privilege and correct our own internalized prejudices.

Be roses that grow on the concrete,  
Abby Kidwell



**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Josh Bruns**  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to Lois Lowry  
Author of *Gathering Blue*

Dear Lois Lowry,

Isolation. Does it hurt? How does it feel? Your book, *Gathering Blue*, made me think about how sometimes I isolate myself. Without your book I would not have known how I felt and that I could do something about it. Thank you, Lois Lowry, for changing my life.

This year has been very tough for me. I usually was not talking to anyone and had a blank expression on my face. This was because of one reason—my ADD pills. My pills have very bad side effects, for example, depression and not enjoying anything like other kids do. Sometimes I am like a zombie, alone and depressed, feeling like I am in an enclosure and people are staring at me. For the first few months, I was like this all the time. It was like my pills controlled my every move.

When I read your book, it changed my way of thinking and acting. In the *Gathering Blue* society, people only cared about themselves. Kira is about the same age as me and in my opinion, at first, she acted like me a little. For example, when Kira's mother died she was on her own. She had no help from anyone, no one to talk to. That is how I felt sometimes during school. Then when she came to live in the Council of Edifice, she was not actually alone, she could talk to Thomas and Jo. Kira had people she could actually talk to about her problems and other important stuff.

Kira inspired me to be more confident. Now, when I am at school I am more outgoing, leading me to have a better time. Now that I think of it, I feel like I could have taken the risk to actually socialize with people sooner. Yes, my pills make me have depression sometimes, but look at Kira. Her parents died and if she could pull through the pain and sadness, I bet I could start trying to “put myself out there a little more.” After I read this book, I felt the most social and cheerful I have felt in years. Now I feel better and less lonely than before. Isolation is very painful and hard to deal with without someone to talk to.

Isolation is what I had to deal with before I read this book. Thanks to your book I am having a better time at school. You made me feel the best I have ever felt in years. Thank you Lois Lowry for making me “human” again.

Sincerely,  
Josh Bruns

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Braxtyn Cooper**  
Southridge Middle School, Huntingburg  
Letter to W. Bruce Cameron  
Author of *A Dog's Journey*

Dear W. Bruce Cameron,

When I first decided to read *A Dog's Journey*, I never thought that it would have the impact on me that it had. At first glance, I would assume that it was just another sad dog book, but it was much more than that. Your book gave me something that was a lot more valuable than people think: strength. In your book, there is a quote at the end of the novel that left more of an impact on me than any other: "Now I would get to be with the people I loved. I turned, whimpering with joy, and swam toward those golden gates." This quote gave me the strength to overcome a difficult time in my life.

While reading your book instead of feeling sad, like most dog novels make you feel, I felt full of life. I felt that this story was more of a celebration of life than a sad story where Buddy passes away multiple times. I felt that it was about finding your purpose in life and how everyone has a purpose. *A Dog's Journey* is very light-hearted and was enjoyable to read. While reading, I made a personal connection with my dog at the time. My dog had a type of nerve cancer that required her to have multiple surgeries. She had about nine surgeries in her six years of life. One of the surgeries that we thought would solve the problems was amputation. It worked for a while, but then the cancer started to come back. Your book gave me the knowledge to know that everything happens for a reason.

As her health was slowly declining I knew what was coming, and your book helped me realize that all dogs go to a better place after they pass. This is why the quote at the end of the book gave me strength, it showed me that when she would pass she would be with all of the people she loved as she swam to those golden gates. As I continued reading, it was like a roller coaster of emotions. It taught me many life lessons, and also taught me to think of different circumstances in other people's perspective. Your book has also taught many other life lessons to many other readers and gave them strength, such as if they feel like they don't fit in, your book can give them the knowledge to know that everyone has a purpose in life.

Throughout your book, I made a connection with CJ. She was unsure about her life, and why all these bad things were happening to her. A quote by Joyce Meyer says, "A positive attitude gives you power over your

circumstances instead of your circumstances having power over you.” By the end of the book, she found how to look at the positive side of life, and I also learned how to be positive during difficult times. I have learned that finding your purpose isn’t always easy, but once you finally find what your true purpose is, you will be satisfied and full of life.

Your work has also helped me to know that friendship can fill a gap that you might have felt could never have been filled. When Trenton helped CJ in a time of struggle in her life, it made her realize that sometimes you need something so badly, like friendship, you don’t even realize that you needed it. Friendship can help someone in a very tough time in their life, and know that you always have someone there to back you up when you need help. Your book gave many examples of friendship that helped me fill my gap of loss that I thought could never be filled.

I have not only learned a lot, but I have gained strength as well. When reading your book I was able to make multiple connections with many characters like CJ and Buddy. I gained life lessons, like how I learned to be positive, and not let my circumstances have power over me and my attitude. Thank you for giving me strength, something that is more powerful than people think, over my circumstances. Thank you for making me change my perspective over difficult times, by thinking more positively about them. Finally, thank you for giving me the opportunity to read a book like this. I’m sure it had an impact on many other readers.

Sincerely,  
Braxtyn Cooper

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Madison Cox**  
Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to J. K. Rowling  
Author of *Harry Potter Series*

Dear J. K. Rowling,

I'm sitting in my 3rd grade classroom, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* lying on the desk in front of me. I had picked it out from our small library for silent reading time in class. I was skeptical that I wouldn't like it, and sure that I wouldn't make it to the end. Books were boring. They were just layers of paper to teach children about George Washington and the scientific method. I was only compelled to withdraw it from the shelves because of its cover and the bold letters reading *Harry Potter*. I flipped open the book to page one and began to read. From that moment on, my view of books changed forever.

I wasn't able to put it down in the weeks following. By 6th grade, I had finished the entire *Harry Potter* series. I fell in love with every character, and soaked in each detail. My family and I watched all of the movies, and we even went to Universal Studios to experience the magical "Wizarding World of Harry Potter." My nickname soon became Hermione. I became an avid reader and a lover of books. I couldn't help but scour the shelves for new books to launch into. My favorite genre became, as you might guess, fantasy. I've broadened my horizons to realistic, historical, and science fiction.

I used to view books as a learning instrument to teach something. I always thought that all books were boring. I was never able to find the deeper meaning or connect with characters. Your books showed me how reading can actually be enjoyable. Books unleash the imagination and deep thinking. They can inspire people to achieve great things, or can warn you of dangers and conflicts you may experience later in life. I often find myself comparing real-life situations to parts of books I've read. Getting lost in a good book is a feeling that everyone deserves.

Books have definitely helped me grow as a person and become a better student, friend, daughter, and sister. I read every night, and sometimes I've even been known to read for hours past my bedtime! My love for books has also compelled me to pursue my passion for writing. I love being inspired by other amazing writers and their works. Alright, I don't want this to sound cheesy, but I will never forget you or your books.

Second grade me would have never believed any of what I'm saying now, but thank you for writing the *Harry Potter* series and dreaming up the magical world that changed me for the better.

Sincerely,  
Madison Cox

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Paula Ramos**  
Central Middle School, Columbus  
Letter to John Green  
Author of *Turtles All the Way Down*

Dear Mr. Green,

The day my hands wrapped themselves around the weight of your book, it was a minor thing. A decision made right there and then, my mind idly saying, "Why the heck not?" I do not think my hands fully held the weight of your words then. *Turtles All the Way Down* was unexpected. A pleasant surprise that my mind hummed and churned to. Of course, I soon found myself carrying the book along with me everywhere. The weight of it tucked beneath my palm was comforting, and my palm felt strikingly barren in the times when it wasn't. I didn't have to concoct anything special. I slipped so easily into her world. I found myself enthralled with the realness of everybody. How Daisy seemed like the type of friend I could double over with, shrieks of laughter escaping our lips over very, very silly things, indeed.

My brain was pleased with all the little facts slipped between the crevices. And of course, I would tell them proudly to my parents and friends alike, spouting about how cows can't really live without the bacteria in their stomachs. I would receive the occasional eye roll and the smile that feigned interest, but it didn't matter. It didn't matter if their eyes were unable to reflect the same amount of fascination mine did. Because my eyes were the ones alit, and that was all that mattered.

As the pages were coming to an end, I wanted to savor more of it. It wasn't about devouring all the words anymore, but I wanted my eyes to roll over every word. Every space, every little nook and cranny they laid upon. Unfortunately, things did not necessarily work out. Too soon, my fingers flipped to the last page. I was almost afraid to read the last word. Afraid for all of it to be over. Would this mean my time with Aza and Daisy would come to an end? Would this mean no more Davis and his astronomical ramblings? I found that, as my eyes read the last word and halted at the last period, the world did not avalanche as I thought it would. Earthquakes and fault lines laid at ease.

I was reluctant to release the world I had become a part of. Letting go of Daisy's Star Wars fan fictions, letting go of Aza's faults and rifts. However broken she may have been, she always portrayed an aura of strength that I found to admire. Through Aza, I was given a pair of new eyes. The world

was lopsided. Hazy. But I was seeing the world as she had seen it. Saw the darkness she spoke of. Almost tasted the fear she had. How it was impossible to feel like you were inside of *you*. How your body was an entirely different entity, and your soul another.

The ending was almost bittersweet. Under the comfort of layers of sheets laid a girl with a book between her two palms. The world did not shake. The heavens did not roar. But if you listened close, the roaring was her heart. The roar of feelings she could not begin to comprehend. The roar of something bigger than her. Your words were more than words, Mr. Green. This book, was more than one book. I thank you for bringing this story to life. For bringing life not to avalanches or geological disasters. But for giving life to so many roaring hearts. Each one beating. The hums of our chests creating a harmony. And amongst all those, I'm sure you'll find my own.

With love,  
Paula Ramos

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Rachel Roberts**  
Northwood Middle School, Nappanee  
Letter to Rick Riordan  
Author of *The Heroes of Olympus*

Dear Rick Riordan,

Your undying imagination and determination to include small details of mythology along with humor in your stories have inspired me ever since I picked up your first book and read it. Since I was old enough to learn your name, I've read your books over and over again; savoring each word, paragraph, chapter, story, and series you've ever written. Many people that I know say I'm obsessed. When I'm not reading your books, I'm correcting my friends and telling them I'm not obsessed, I'm *hands-down* obsessed. Your books have inspired me in so many ways and they've changed my outlook on learning mythology, writing books, reading books, and even using my imagination to see your characters around the places you've described.

In March 2016, I had the opportunity to visit Italy with my family. Then in 2017, we traveled to Greece. Seeing those beautiful sites with your book *Mark of Athena* in my hands, everywhere I went I could easily imagine Annabeth Chase, Percy Jackson, and the rest of the group fighting and wandering the streets. Every day my eyes would wander away from the current day tours, into the world of words that I wished so hard that I could be a part of. Recently I discovered a hand-written copy of certain parts of your books that I copied and added in my own character to the plot. I've also learned from not only your books but from life experiences, that it's okay to have an obsession with something. Thus the reason that Percy Jackson is one of my favorite characters. Not only does he seem humorous, but he also can have a repeating obsession with something. This excerpt is from *Mark of Athena*: He kept coming back to one point: "They didn't want to meet me?"

One of my favorite times that I could relate to *Mark of Athena* was when Annabeth and Percy are walking around Rome and they encounter a language barrier. "Percy hadn't considered that – duh – people in Italy spoke Italian, while he did not. As it turned out, though, that wasn't much of a problem. The few times someone approached them on the street and asked a question, Percy just looked at them in confusion, and they switched to English." I loved this part of the plot because I found my experiences in Italy practically identical to Percy's experiences. In fact, that was one of my favorite parts of going to Italy. If someone spoke to you in



Italian, all you had to do was look confused –which wasn’t hard– and they simply switched to practically perfect English.

On my trip, one of my favorite flashbacks was in *The House of Hades* when Frank Zhang single-handedly takes down all of the katoblepones in Venice, Italy. I still remember visualizing the scene when Frank sees an enclosed bridge too tight for him to go through, and sees a bridge too crowded for him to go through. The bridge that was “too tight for Frank to go through” was the Bridge of Sighs, which I went in. Also, the bridge that was “Too crowded for Frank to go through” was the Rialto Bridge, which I also went over. I recall running a hand over the bridge railing and looking out over Venice and thinking, “If I see a dolphin in the water, I am going to start looking for Jason, Piper, Leo and everyone else so I can join them on their quest.”

The precise detail that you use in all of your books makes me feel like I’m right along with you in those countries. I also find it inspiring how you’ve convinced me that it’s actually possible for authors to express their love, knowledge, and heart into words and spread it with so many people. I’ve shared your books and your love with as many people as I possibly can – and then I plan to share some more. If I could meet you in person I would say that you’ve changed me, you’ve inspired me, so please, if I can ask anything of you, Rick Riordan, continue pouring your heart, soul, and love into your words so people like me can soak it up when they need it most.

Thank you for being exactly who you were meant to be,  
Rachel Roberts

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Abbi Schiefer**  
Saint Peter's Lutheran, Columbus  
Letter to Patricia McCormick  
Author of *Never Fall Down*

Dear Miss Patricia McCormick,

I recently read your book *Never Fall Down*, and I loved it very much. I must say it took me a bit to get used to the heaviness of the story, one that I had never experienced before. I had not been familiar with the genocide that took place in Cambodia before I read the book. I feel that more people should know about this horrible and awful thing that took place, so thank you for writing this book to show us more about an important event in our world's history.

Your book caused me to have a different mindset about immigration. When you put yourself in their shoes, it can certainly change your opinion, as it did mine. Arn's story caused me to think that when you are in a war or crisis situation, you most likely don't have the correct papers or items necessary to get somewhere safely. However, if it is a life or death situation, and you need to escape the place you are in to reach safety, you can't enter. This could cause you to die because you can't get to that safe place. I had never really thought about that aspect or put myself in their shoes before I read your book. This makes me feel sad and helpless, as I am not sure what I can do to help people in this situation. I know we still deal with people seeking safety today, and it hurts me to think that their life could be on the line if that safe place isn't available.

I love that you chose Arn as your main character, even though there were other survivors you could have chosen. I found myself able to relate and sympathize with Arn because, at the time that all of this was happening to him, he was my age. But just because we were the same age, we also have so many differences. I have no idea how I could have made the decisions that he made under the circumstances that he was in. I honestly don't think that I could have done it. He was undergoing starvation, hallucination, and was completely removed from all he had known. He experienced so much trauma in his life. It is inspiring to me that he is still alive today. He made it through all of those obstacles and was able to tell the world about it. It gives me a sense of hope and determination knowing that someone can survive through all of that.

Meeting and knowing Arn through your book has opened my eyes and heart to different perspectives and views of our world and the people in it. I

love and appreciate this book so much and would recommend it to anyone that is looking for a good and inspiring book to read. I would be eager and ready to read another book written by you because this one was so thought-provoking. I hope that more people like me will come to know more about Cambodia and the genocide that took place through your book. Thank you for being a part of changing my life by challenging and growing me. Thank you, Arn.

Sincerely,  
Abbi Schiefer

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**  
**Winner of the Indiana Author Letter Prize**

**Kenna Sondhelm**  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to John Green  
Author of *An Abundance of Katherines*

Dear John Green,

When I read your book *An Abundance of Katherines*, I learned to turn my wounds into wisdom. Experiences will shape you, make you and break you.

Colin Singleton is broken after he's dumped by Katherine XIX. Lying face down and vomiting on the carpet, he feels worthless and alone. He believes he'll be left again and again by Katherines, yet he continues to pursue them. He's stuck in a rut from this experience. That's exactly how I felt when my parents separated; heartbroken, misunderstood and confused. I felt a gaping hole in my chest. Following that experience, I isolated myself from my peers, was apathetic to my studies, and felt worthless. I viewed myself as broken.

What's the point of loving, if life is always throwing curveballs? I began to think that love was not everlasting and basically, a joke. I didn't want to try in friendships or relationships any longer because of the example shown to me. I was a loner, feeling unloved and depressed. Colin was dumped so many times and the trauma affects his interactions. When he "catches feelings" for a girl, he becomes so anxious because of being traumatized before, so he pushes her away. That shows how experiences can deceive and shape your mind.

One of my biggest setbacks from my parents' separation was realizing that everything won't be the same, but I can control my own life for the better. After my dad moved out, a schedule was made to decide which parent I would be with each day. The routine was difficult to get used to, but I realized that this is my lifestyle now. I don't have the same home situation as everyone else, but who cares, really? My parents fell out of love and that's just life. I can't control everything that happens in my life, but I can control my reaction to it. My grades rose, I was surrounded by loving people and felt whole again. In *An Abundance of Katherines*, Colin realized that he was holding himself back. He went for the girl, and learned to break free from himself. He couldn't pursue Katherines any longer but sometimes change is better. Colin and I have both changed for the better.

We are no longer getting in our own way, have faced adversity and fought through.

Experiences only toughen you. When I read *An Abundance of Katherines*, I pushed back my misunderstandings and decided to think clearly. The book has shaped my understanding of how experiences will break you, shape you, and make you. This year has been difficult, but reading your book taught me to keep my chin up because my wounds only make me stronger. So, thank you, John Green.

Best regards,  
Kenna Sondhelm

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Tahlia Alkobi**

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Sarah Darer Littman

Author of *Confessions of a Closet Catholic*

Dear Sarah Darer Littman,

While I was reading your book, *Confessions of a Closet Catholic*, I saw myself in the pages. Justine seemed to be portraying my life and I can relate to her a lot because we are both unsatisfied Jews. We want our religion to change. I am an orthodox Jew, which means I have specific rules and beliefs that I follow on a daily basis. Because my parents have chosen to be so religious, I have to follow their rules. I am not satisfied with the level of religion that my family practices. Justine feels the same way and wants to make adjustments to her religious identity.

I am a religious twelve-year-old girl and I have to follow the rules of being modest. That means I can't wear pants and I can't wear clothes that are too revealing. I want to be able to wear pants whenever I want, especially when I hang out with my friends and I have to either wear skirts or dresses to my knees. When I see them in pants, I feel sad because I feel like I don't fit in. As a shy twelve-year-old, I want to just blend in and look like a normal American girl. These past few months I started to go to a volleyball club and I have to wear a black flowy skirt. If you would come to the club, you would probably recognize me because I am the only one wearing a skirt.

Living in a small Jewish community in Indiana, it's really hard to keep kosher. I can't eat most of the food I find in the grocery store. My family and I can't go to restaurants or buy anything we want in the store. Both Justine and I have to wait six hours after eating meat to have dairy. That's a lot for a young girl! Justine wants chocolate, so she doesn't really eat very much meat. I have mostly stopped eating meat also. Justine loves chocolate so much that she stops eating Shabbat dinner, the special Friday night meal. Both of our parents are concerned that Justine and I aren't eating the meat served at dinner. When I respond to my mom, "I don't like it. I am not in the mood to eat meat," my mom is concerned that I won't get enough protein. It's hard to have your friends be able to eat whatever they want when I can only eat certain types of food that are kosher. When I hang out with my friends, sometimes they take me to restaurants and I can't eat the food, but have to watch them enjoy their meal while I sit clouded with jealousy.

When Justine's grandma died, she realized that she needed to come back to who she is and where she belongs. Justine started a whole new chapter in her life. All of her ideas that she wanted to change were crumpled up and thrown away. When I finished reading your book, it made me rethink what I want for myself. It made me more accepting of who I am, instead of wanting to change everything. I realize that I am on a path that will change as I get older. There is always going to be a bumps on the road but that doesn't mean I can't get over them.

Yours truly,  
Tahlia Alkobi

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Leo Alvis**  
Forest Park Jr. / Sr. High School, Ferdinand  
Letter to John Kennedy Toole  
Author of *A Confederacy of Dunces*

Dear Mr. John Kennedy Toole,

I am writing this letter to you because I would like to share with you why I loved your book *A Confederacy of Dunces*. I read your book with my family on a vacation to New Orleans. My Dad wanted to read a book that was set in New Orleans and he chose yours. From the very beginning of the story we all loved it, and we were captured in the world of Ignatius Reilly, the main character of your book. Ignatius is a lazy man in his thirties who still lives with his mother, who is constantly pestering him to get a job. Ignatius despises the thought of getting a job, and instead documents his day to day experiences in a notebook, which he hopes to publish. The book is full of interesting, funny characters like Jones, a frustrated janitor, Myrna Minkoff, a young student radical, and Miss Trixie, a senile senior citizen who works at a trousers factory. *A Confederacy of Dunces* is funny, well-written, and one the best books I've ever read.

My family and I started reading your book a couple of weeks before we left for New Orleans, and we were well into the book when we arrived. The colorful characters in the book illustrate the nature of New Orleans, embodies what the city is famous for, and helps show how New Orleans is unlike any other city. One thing that was really cool was that we often walked by places or on roads that you mentioned in *A Confederacy of Dunces*, and there was even a statue of Ignatius in front of a department store where the first part of the book takes place. This helped us imagine the scenes unfolding on the pages of your story.

Apart from being a hilarious and fun book to read, *A Confederacy of Dunces* also gave my family and I insight as to what life was like in New Orleans for different people and groups in the early 1960's. For example, part of the story is told from the perspective of Jones, the African-American janitor at a bar who is working below minimum wage. He tries to escape his job, but the owner of the bar threatens to have him arrested for vagrancy if he does. This allowed us to better understand the struggle that African-Americans faced in the South back then. Another example is Myrna Minkoff, Ignatius's arch-nemesis, who is always trying to get Ignatius to reengage and break out of his shell. Myrna is a progressive



student radical who is unhappy with the state of society. Student activism was common in the 1960's. Myrna protested and campaigned against sexual repression and injustice.

Reading your book also taught me the importance of hard work and responsibility. In *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Ignatius is very lazy, and he thinks he has various health problems, including his malfunctioning "valve." He goes to great lengths to avoid work, and when he does get a job he can't keep it, and spends most of what little he earns on things like movies. Although he is well educated, he doesn't try at all to get a better job, and his only ambition seems to be documenting the various "travesties" and "abortions" in his day-to-day life. He idealizes the Middle Ages, and he thinks his own time lacks "theology and geometry." His life ultimately falls apart, and his mother even tries to get him locked up in a medical institution. If Ignatius had taken some responsibility and held a job, his life wouldn't have fallen apart, but improved.

There is more to your book than what meets the eye, and the backstory is a big part of that. In life you were an aspiring writer and were trying to get *A Confederacy of Dunces* published. You tried for years and years before you finally lost hope and took your own life. After your death your mother found the manuscript for your book underneath your bed and got someone to publish it. Once published, your book became a hit and won a Pulitzer Prize. Millions of copies were sold and over the years your book became a classic. Even though you were not alive, you entertained millions of people. It is tragic that you were so close to achieving your dream, but lost hope in the home stretch. This taught me a valuable lesson in perseverance: that even though it may seem that hope is lost, and that your life is worthless, there is still hope. Thank you so much for all the entertainment and inspiration you gave me.

Sincerely,  
Leo Alvis

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Deeksha Badugu**

Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Marieke Nijkamp

Author of *This is Where it Ends*

Dear Marike Nijkamp,

Your book, *This is Where it Ends*, has drastically changed and influenced my view points on school shootings. Before, I had always heard about them on the news. They were so often, that I almost became used to it. I deeply regret thinking of these sensitive topics as normal. But I think our society has basically denied to acknowledge them as important. On May 25th there was a school shooting in my neighboring district of Westfield, Indiana. It was our last day of school, and I remember the happiness on everyone's face in the morning. But by the afternoon, as news had spread, people were walking through the halls crying. We weren't allowed to have our phones out, but people used them to find out more information. Not knowing how many victims, and not having all the information, everyone's minds went to the worst possible situation. And then it hit me. That same situation could have happened in any school. The following year when we came back to school, things had changed. Students were no longer allowed to open the doors to the classrooms, teachers had to open the doors. If the fire alarm rang, and we didn't physically see the fire, we are to wait for the principle to come over on the PA. Other security precautions were taken as well. I was recommended your book by my English teacher, and it was so eye opening. Yet, I felt like I had heard the same story before.

The way you described the events, truly made me scared. The sheer terror of the situation made me think of what I would do in that situation. Sylvia was my favorite character. I really enjoyed reading her view points. She was targeted by Tyler, as were most of the main characters. When her twin brother, Tomás, was shot, I feared that Tyler would kill her too. Fortunately, she made it out safely. Yet, she won't ever be the same person she was when she walked into school that morning. I realized that I took a lot of our school precautions for granted. Being able to own a gun is a born right in America. I believe that they can be beneficial when used in the correct circumstances, and a proper way. It's when they fall into the wrong hands that they end up causing destruction. People who suffer from mental health issues, should have restricted access to guns. Not only can they hurt others, but possibly themselves as well. Tyler was going through a lot. He was depressed and felt betrayed. His abusive father and mothers death, combined with his already apparent loneliness, was a recipe for disaster. He wanted revenge on those who did him wrong. But we see similar stories

in real life too. We as society exclude the outcasts. We make them feel unwanted and unworthy. A mean comment said, a middle school bully, something seemingly so little, could potentially throw someone off the edge. You never know how it will affect a person. Tyler even shot his sister. He took what meant the most to her. By shooting her knee cap, he destroyed Autumn's passion, dance. By all means their actions cannot be justified, but we are partially to blame for the creation of society's monsters.

School shootings have become a joke, people laugh about them. The lack of seriousness from students and adults, is part of the reason that there hasn't been much change. Students shouldn't have to deal with situations like this. They should be able to learn freely, without the thought of being in danger. I know people just like Chris and Claire. I know people like Autumn too. Maybe their stories aren't as interesting, but I can picture those kids fitting right in at my school. Your book described that situation in such detail. It really made me think. It made me question the society we live in. School shootings should not be ignored, and our society cannot accept them as the new normal. Schools are considered to be one of the safest places. It's sad that we live in a world where we can suffer extreme trauma and lose some of the best people, all within 54 minutes.

Thank you,  
Deeksha Badugu

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Yael Ehrlich**  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to Kwame Alexander  
Author of *Crossover*

Dear Kwame Alexander,

I have always appreciated how poems and songs can tell stories in such a compelling way, so I was excited when I found your book in the library. I started to flick through the pages of *Crossover* and immediately checked it out. I especially identified with how Josh's dad always hid his sickness and his weaknesses from the rest of the family. It made me really think about how I too hide my weaknesses and am insecure, just like many other middle schoolers my age. There are different reasons for hiding our emotions and vulnerabilities. We do it to protect our image and reputation, and, to protect family.

Josh's dad wanted to preserve his status as a respected basketball player and at the same time not worry his kids with his illness so he could continue to be that strong, invincible dad to them. In the end this didn't benefit the family. Family is very important to me just as it is to Josh. Josh is very strongly connected to his family. His brother, mother, and father are all very loving and caring towards each other, just as a family should be. I can't help wondering if maybe Josh's dad kept the secret of his illness to himself for fear of disrupting the family dynamic and ruining that perfect family portrait. I don't see my parents cry very often at all. In fact, I have never seen my father cry, not even when my grandmother died earlier this year. Perhaps it is a good thing because he is supposed to be the strong one in the family, and always comforts me when I cry and reassures me that everything will be just fine? But what if he needs us to comfort him when he is weak? It makes me sad to know that he could sometimes be suffering silently and alone rather than letting us be there for him when he is down. In Josh's dad's case, he belittled his sickness and hid his fear of death and weakness from Josh and his twin brother to protect them, but by not dealing with his illness and pretending it was never there, he didn't get the help he needed. In trying so hard to protect everyone, he met his death and this loss harmed his family even more.

Teenagers are very insecure and like to put on a tough and cool front. By hiding our weaknesses we portray a stronger image to those around us, or so we think. As we grow older we hide our emotions more and more and become less spontaneous and more controlled. We try to be what others expect us to be and we care more about what people will think of us. We stop showing others who we really are inside and little by little we lose

sight of who we really are. Everyone walks around wearing a happy mask when they are sad and a strong mask when they are weak.

As a teenager in middle school I experience insecurities myself and I see them in others. Everybody is hiding their weakness or something they think might be looked down upon. We are all holding something back. We end up trying to look 'perfect' to others who don't really care about who we really are. People who are big influencers of teenagers like me are the Kardashians. They all try to look perfect and undergo plastic surgery and are perfectly made up and live in perfect homes and drive perfect cars. They set unrealistic standards for girls who think that they should all live that kind of life.

Sometimes it is good to show your weakness and emotion. It helps you be your natural self and it brings you closer to your family and peers. Our weaknesses are a part of what makes us all human. Being able to show your weaknesses and to live your life as your true and imperfect self takes a lot of courage. I hope I have that courage.

Sincerely,  
Yael Ehrlich

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Yoav Ehrlich**  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to Dr. Seuss  
Author of *The Sneetches*

Dear Dr. Seuss,

Life is not always fair. I may not have the same privileges as everyone else just because of my family, neighborhood, or the religion I happen to be born into. But that is the way of the world. I guess I just have to find a way to deal with it. When I read *The Sneetches* it really spoke to my heart in the simplest way.

I have always wondered why people are discriminated against based on their physical appearance. Why was life so unfair in the past when black people were segregated from white people and considered inferior? It's hard to imagine how it must feel to be excluded and looked down on for being different or considered not "normal." Middle school can sometimes be a cruel place and kids can be immature and mean and don't think twice before picking on a kid who is different.

In your book *The Sneetches*, two types of Sneetches live on the beach: those who wear a star and those who don't. The star-wearing Sneetches have special privileges that include a yearly picnic, yummy hotdogs and toasted marshmallows prepared over a bonfire. The starless Sneetches are left to sit on the beach, in the cold, hungry and sad, watching the other Sneetches playing games and having fun. This reminds me of how during the Holocaust the Jews had fewer privileges and freedom than the non-Jews in Europe. The Jews were forced to wear a yellow Star of David with the word Jude written on it so that everyone would know who they were and to make sure they knew they were not like everyone else. They were different! They were forced to live in enclosed ghettos and were singled out and discriminated against.

My grandfather, Saba Yakov, is a Holocaust survivor who was bullied and beaten up by the non-Jewish kids in the village where he lived, from a very early age. He was called a filthy Jew. He thought things couldn't get any worse until World War II began. His father was taken away to a labor camp and Saba, who was my age, was left to take care of his mother and two sisters. He would sneak into the neighboring village to get bread for his family. Many times he was not lucky and would come home with a black eye and bruises. The family was restricted to a ghetto and the

children were not allowed to continue their schooling. They were the starless Sneetches. They felt antisemitism every hour of every day.

After reading your book, I know I am lucky. I go to a Jewish school where I do not feel excluded but I am still very sensitive to people getting treated unfairly because they are different. I know the world isn't always fair and people will not always be treated equally but I think we have to deal with it by making a difference. Thank you, Dr. Seuss!

Sincerely,  
Yoav Ehrlich

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Brooke Fridell**  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis, IN  
Letter to John Green  
Author of *The Fault in Our Stars*

Dear John Green,

In a way, I see myself in Hazel. As Augustus points out, she lets her cancer control her. It's important to mention that I do not have cancer, but I do have something else. I have anxiety disorder and ADHD/ADD. That controls me. It has taken over and started driving me off a cliff. Your book, *The Fault in Our Stars*, changed me, scarred me, made me smile, and made me cry.

Hazel has her cannula that she uses daily to help her breathe. She also needs her BiPap to breathe. I also have things I need daily, such as two pills for my attention, two pills for my anxiety, and one gummy at night to help me sleep. My medical problems get in the way of things that I want to do. When I go somewhere and someone does not feel good or gets sick, I have a panic attack. I start shaking, crying, and I'm basically immobile. Those are side effects to my condition.

Anxiety makes you feel like you are all alone. You have nobody to go to and nowhere to go. You can try to prevent it all you want but a little bit of it is still going to be there. I go to a therapist weekly because of my anxiety. She helps me deal with things that go on throughout the week and helps me come up with solutions on how to not get anxious or how to not get mad at everyone. There have been times where I couldn't breathe, like Hazel. I did not have liquid in my lungs but it was like there was a blockage in my airway. The blockage was my anxiety. All I ever wanted was to be "normal" and be my same old self again like I was when I was younger.

My family and I went on a group trip to the West and Canada. It would be about 12:00 or 1:00 when my anxiety showed up. I would start crying, shaking, and I had all of the side effects. The worst part was that I was missing out on so many experiences, including Mount Rushmore. I ended up not eating dinner nightly because I didn't feel well. It was awful. Now that my anxiety is in a good place, this does not happen. It can get better and progress is definitely being made.



My anxiety takes me wherever it wants me to go. It is the reason that I have panic attacks, and it is the reason that I am not the *me* I used to be. When I look in the mirror, I see a person who is scared of the world and a person who is afraid to help others because she is constantly worrying about keeping herself under control. I see a person who is always terrified of going near someone who needs help. I see an imperfect girl who is very shy but also independent. I look around when I am in public and it seems to me that everyone else is perfect, and then I look at myself in the mirror-flawed, yet beautiful in my own way. Hazel, Augustus and Van Houten have showed me that I am not perfect. I make mistakes, I have my flaws, but I also know that I am the best *me* that I can be. Thank you for showing me that.

Sincerely,  
Brooke Fridell

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Jayne Ganz**  
Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Becky Albertalli  
Author of *Simon vs. the Homosapien Agenda*

Dear Ms. Becky Albertalli,

I have been so inspired by you and your writing since I read *Simon vs. the Homosapien Agenda*. Your writing has helped me understand so much about myself and the world we live in. I received the book as a gift from my parents two years ago and it helped me learn more about the LGBT+ community and why it is such a great thing to have supportive friends.

I found Simon an interesting and amazing character. He is so easy to relate to because he is just a normal teen and yet he's so much more. Simon and Blue helped me start to figure out my sexuality. I had no knowledge of LGBT+ before this book and it encouraged me to read into my own sexuality and I soon found that I am Panromantic.

Simon also helped me come out. I have great parents who have accepted me since I came out. I was so afraid of coming out and I worked it up inside my head. Simon made me realize that it doesn't have to be such a big thing. Simon hadn't made it huge, he just told them and that is what made me realize that I didn't have to make a big deal of it.

My last realization of self that your book helped me believe is that just because you are a part of the community does not mean that you have to fill the stereotypes. I had only ever read LGBT characters that fit the proper stereotypes of flamboyant, loud, popular for their sexualities, etc. I understand that you can be different without being stereotypical. I understand that coming out is a choice and that many people have their sexuality used to force them to do things as Martin does to Simon. I have grown to understand that many people have the choice taken away after the recently forced outing of one of my good friends.

Thank you so much for teaching me so much about the community and what it's like. I have finished this book with changed opinions on how people are viewed.

Thank you once more,  
Jayme Ganz

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Eva Glazier**  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to Ray Bradbury  
Author of *The Veldt*

Dear Ray Bradbury,

Henry David Thoreau wrote, “The savage in man is never quite eradicated.” Yet, humanity throughout the ages has tried to find the good in all. We want to believe that we are naturally good and the things we make are good as well. Your short story, *The Veldt*, offers a different perspective – that man, in his quest for civilization, actually ends up in savagery. Every day is a fight to overcome our negative or savage instincts. For example, I have to fight the urge to waste time on technology instead of being productive. On a more serious note, a consequence of well-intended technology has been online bullying. Technology has created a forum for groups with evil intentions or hateful views to gather under the cloak of online anonymity. We have to fight the savage within us and the savage world that we have created.

When the parents in your story realize the consequences of their addiction to technology, it is too late. The parents threaten the children to take away the nursery, so the children dream of murdering them. A question that the parents ask one another is how did the children become this violent at such a young age? I think that you are telling your reader that man is born with a savage side and technology enhances that instinct. I can relate to Wendy and Peter because I become angry when my parents take away my phone. I become very defensive and get mad at them. While I do not dream of killing them, I understand Wendy and Peter’s frustration.

Even the parents are addicted to technology. George and Lydia use technology for a multitude of parenting responsibilities such as making dinner, doing laundry, and cleaning the home. We might feel that technology is good for us, but in reality it isn’t always. Children look up to their parents and when the parents overuse technology, it inspires the children to do as well. Always being distracted makes adults miss out on their children’s opportunities. You are telling your reader that technology cannot replace humanity. The psychologist in your story determines that the children have no connection to their parents. We need to stay connected to others. In order for us to feel united, we must have empathy for each other and technology, as it’s currently being used, strains that.

Technology is not the problem in itself. The problem is the way that some people use technology to divide and control others. Technology that encourages our most savage instincts is negative. Unfortunately, antisemitism is on the rise. In the past when someone had these prejudices they would not find someone who shares their views. Now with the internet they can find groups that support these beliefs and sometimes encourage violence. Technology can be used in a good way, such as the #MeToo movement that encourages survivors to share their stories. Another example is online fundraisers that allow money to go where it is needed. It is our responsibility to use technology for good to create a world worth living in.

Every day we have to try and overcome the negative impact of technology. That might be holding yourself back from writing mean comments online or limiting your time on social media. We cannot let technology replace our connections with people. While reading *The Veldt*, I developed a new appreciation for my parents. I now realize that when my parents take away my phone they are trying to help me develop a healthy restraint when it comes to technology.

Thank you for making me think about how technology affects my life,  
Eva Glazier

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Terryn Green**  
Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Sharon Draper  
Author of *Out of My Mind*

Dear Sharon Draper,

I must say that I am a huge fan of all your books but the one that touched me near and dear to my heart was *Out of My Mind*.

I believe that you wrote this book for pessimistic people. This book strongly focuses on all of the reasons why Melody feels as if she is a mistake or an issue she wished she could fix. The amount of negative pressure that Melody was berating herself with made me realize that this was slowly going to become a problem for me and my friends. When I first read this book, I was in the fourth grade. My friends and I were nothing but naive, little girls who thought that someone using a swing before us was the worst thing in the world. Then one day, I woke up and looked at myself in the mirror. Suddenly I was recognizing my 'ugly' sharp teeth and my 'big, fat and ugly' hair. It upset me because I didn't know how to deal with it. I felt that if I went to my parents, they would completely ignore my feelings, not because they wanted to but I felt as if they wouldn't realize or connect with my feelings. I felt that if I went to my friends they would just laugh. Because of these reasons, this book served as a culture shock to me. I was excited to see that someone else was experiencing the same things that I did and continued to grow and talk about those feelings since they became an adolescent and I've become more comfortable to address these feelings as I've become an adolescent.

*Out of My Mind* is a book where you participate in this journey through Melody's eyes. Since we have to become her, our abilities to talk, feed ourselves, walk and write had been taken away. At first, Melody's reality might not seem real to us however, the book takes us through a test. The book is displaying the importance of empathy, but it's also trying to explain that none of us are different from the next. We as humans have the terrible habit of stereotyping one another. Looks, actions, speech, and the way we present ourselves all play into action. Though Melody looks as if all hope is lost for her, in her mind she is just a young teenage girl who thinks and participates in everything else we do. Judging gets us nowhere. In fact, when you used that example through the academic team who chose to leave Melody behind when it came time for the national competition, it

shows perfectly how stereotypes just set us back further. I hope that you continue to write books like ***Out of My Mind*** in the future. They are an inspiration to the young and the old.

With thanks,  
Terryn Green

PS: My friends eventually began to have the same feelings as I did and because of that our friendship grew!

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Anna Hatchett**  
Central Middle School, Columbus  
Letter to Cecilia Ahern  
Author of *Flawed* and *Perfect*

Dear Mrs. Ahern,

Recently I read your book, *Flawed*, and its sequel, *Perfect*. First off I would like to say that you have a very unique style of writing, which I love. The reason I am writing you this letter is to tell you how much your books made an impact on my life and the world around me.

As a teenager, I have had many struggles finding myself and who I want to be in life. As a child, I pushed myself to be perfect, to get good grades, to dress nice, to be kind to everyone, to have amazing friends, and to never, ever fail. But that's not possible. It never has been or will be possible. So in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I realized that and it broke me. I stopped caring about grades, only wore T-shirts, was rude to anyone I felt like, didn't care who I was friends with, and most of all I set myself up... to fail.

This attitude continued for a couple months before I saw that to be accepted in this world I had to appear smart, pretty, kind, social, and perfect. I had to set up this wall that made everyone else see color when I saw grey. No matter what, this dam could not break and the water, the tears, could not leave my eyes. This became my world and, somehow, I was completely fine with it.

Finally your book came into play. I read it at the beginning of 8th grade because of what the back said, "I am not flawed, I am not flawed, I am perfect." Two months after looking at the book I can still quote the back cover because I related to it so much. After I finished reading *Perfect*, I cried for over an hour. I cried and cried and cried. I never thought the tears would stop and honestly, I didn't want them too. I wanted to cry, I wanted to let it out, and I did.

Since that day I have worked so hard not to become perfect, not to hide myself, but the exact opposite. I have worked so hard every single day to break down that wall and let my true self shine. I have worked every hour to meet myself in the middle, to care without caring so much that I lose myself again. I have worked every minute to start seeing those beautiful, vibrant colors again. I want to see red roses instead of grey petals. I want to see blue skies instead dark grey storms. I want to see shimmering stars instead of the black, inky darkness of a cloudy, night sky.

I have worked every second to be myself, all because of you and your books *Flawed* and *Perfect*. So thank you. Thank you so much for writing those books and showing me it truly is okay to be flawed.

By the way, my phone lock screen is actually a quote from your book *Perfect* to remind myself every day that I am not perfect and that that's okay. "There's the person you think you should be and there's the person you are. I'm not sure who I should be, but I now know who I am. And that, I say, is the perfect place to start."

Sincerely,  
Anna Hatchett



**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Hunter Heckman**  
Immanuel Lutheran School, Seymour  
Letter to Cynthia Kadohata  
Author of *Cracker*

Dear Cynthia Kadohata,

I really enjoyed your book, *Cracker*. The picture of the dog on the cover of the book intrigued me to read this book. My grandma had a dog just like Cracker, and I mean she looked just like Cracker. She always used to run between my legs when I arrived at her house. Her name was Terra and she was a mutt dog. Terra lived for 14 long years and we buried her underneath one of our pine trees in our backyard. I have read two of your books and *Cracker* is my favorite one. Before I read *Cracker*, I used to think that things come easy in life. After reading the book I changed my ways and actually been studying to make 100's instead of 95's. I have also started doing more work around the house and spending more time with the people I love. I started spending more time especially with my grandma. She was recently diagnosed with stage four colon cancer. She has started chemo and hasn't gone to work in about a month now. Some days she feels great and happy and other days, the bad days, she is puking and in pain the whole day. I love my grandma so much and don't want to lose her. My other grandma died of leukemia when I was 8, and I am just so happy that I get to visit my grandma just about every day. I realize that everyone I know and love will not be here forever. I have changed my whole mindset to a more mature and responsible personality.

I used to never study for quizzes and tests and got good grades, all A's. Once eighth grade started, I started getting two or three B's and realized that I needed to work a little harder. I remember my first time studying for a science test. The subject we were studying at the time was chemistry and the periodic table of elements. That is probably the most challenging lesson in science I have taken so far. I absolutely hated it, and wanted to quit. I started studying at 7 o'clock and ended around 12 a.m. I fell asleep on my books. It was kind of funny. The next day when I took the test, I got an A, and I was surprised. I have realized that studying actually helped me in getting better grades. When there are hard questions on an assignment, I would previously ask one of my friends if they understood. Now, I try my hardest to understand and memorize that specific concept.

When Rick and Cracker are in training, they were almost the worst dogs. They were afraid they will not be accepted and fail if placed in the war. They start working harder each day and build bonds between each other.

Day by day, they work to the top and pass their training. They put so much time in training just to get accepted. This shows that it is necessary to work and try for the things I want to accomplish. Nothing comes easy in life and more people in the world need to realize this.

Ultimately out of this exciting novel I have learned two lessons. Never to give up on the things I love, which means to put more effort and time into certain activities or goals in life. Another lesson is to cherish the things I love. People and other living things will not live forever. So we all need to respect people and cherish the little things in life. Family and friends mean a lot to me.

Sincerely,  
Hunter Heckman

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Faith Helton**  
Decatur Middle School, Camby  
Letter to Michael P. Spradlin  
Author of *Prisoner of War*

Dear Mr. Michael P. Spradlin,

The World War II era fascinates me. I was thrilled when I saw your book *Prisoner of War* on the shelf. I immediately immersed myself into the pages which told Henry's story.

This story impacted my life because Henry demonstrated acts of courage. His desire to aid in the War by lying about his age made me ponder if I could be brave enough to do the same. My Great Uncle Henry Gustafson was brave enough. With the help of my Great-great-grandmother forging his birth certificate, he joined the US Army at the age of sixteen. Sadly, my Great Uncle never made it out of the POW camp alive. Rereading Henry's experiences brought back the memories of when my family was given the details in my Great Uncle's untimely death. The heinous acts military personnel experienced by the actions of the Imperial Japanese Army leave me speechless. How does one come to the point of inflicting harsh pain on another soul? That I will never understand. Yet Henry chose to enlist knowing there would be possible consequences.

The perseverance Henry exhibited while living as a Prisoner of War made me realize that the difficulties I face in my life are beatable. As a runner, I face physical pain that can often challenge me to give up. I too, have realized I must "dig deep" as Henry does in order to finish the race. Henry's strength while being tortured left me in awe. He was determined to not show weakness, even when he watched in horror as his comrade was killed by the hands of a Japanese soldier. Despite the unknown, Henry jumped at the chance to make an impact; he made his best attempt, but was unsuccessful. This kind of tenacity helped me during my first half-marathon race. I thought the distance would force me to give up, but I persisted with each step. It was a grueling finish, but I did it. The feeling of accomplishment left me smiling even though it was not my best performance.

Henry's compassionate heart and thoughtfulness never wavered, even in the worst of times. He was selfless, putting the needs of others first while imprisoned. Imagine living in a world where we treated everyone this way. I would like to reflect this same heart-felt attitude.

My takeaway from reading Henry's journey is that you should always show kindness and humility, even when it is undeserved. I will take Henry's words with me and "dig deep."

Thank you for shedding a glimpse into the life of one brave and unforgettable American Marine.

Sincerely,  
Faith Helton

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Braden Hinton**  
Immanuel Lutheran School, Seymour  
Letter to Holly Sloan  
Author of *Counting by 7s*

Dear Holly Sloan,

I am a good student, but not always enthused about reading. It takes just the right book to capture my interest enough to want to read it. Your novel *Counting by 7s* is just that kind of book. Thank you for writing such an amazing novel. This book is not only entertaining, but it has helped me to reflect and understand life. One thing that I have learned from reading your novel *Counting by 7s* is that anything can change when least expected. Sometimes changes are exciting and bring adventure, but often change brings heartache and grief. You write so the reader feels the grief that Willow endures when her family suddenly dies. People can die any minute, and it can hurt a person really badly. When my grandpa died, we had planned on going deer hunting that day. This was going to be my first time deer hunting and he was going to teach me how. When I found out he died, I was really upset. I didn't want to do anything that day. My family and I mourned the unexpected and heartbreaking loss of my grandpa like Willow mourned the unexpected loss of her parents.

Just like Willow avoided anything that reminded her of her parents, when my grandpa died, I couldn't even go near his belongings because it reminded me so much of him. While we will never really get over the death of my grandpa, time does help ease the pain that a person feels when he loses someone he loves. Like Willow, I now focus on the good times that I have had with my grandpa.

I have also learned from your book that friends can help through those difficult times. Willow learned a lot of lessons from her friend Mai and Mai's family. They comforted her through the hard times and even made her a garden in the apartment complex. When my grandpa died, a lot of people helped my family and me. My friends mourned my grandpa's death with me and my family. My aunts and uncles brought me some of my grandpa's stuff and gave it to me to remind me of my grandpa. Friends can help through challenging times.

Your outstanding novel, *Counting by 7s*, has impacted my life because Willow and I have lived through similar situations. As I read about Willow and her struggles with grief, I know I am not alone in feeling such terrible sadness over my grandpa's death. Willow's garden takes her mind

off of her tragic situations. When her parents die, she thinks her situation could not ever get better. I had thought the same way about my grandpa's death. Willow meets a lot of new friends, and they give her a garden and lots of love. Your book means so much to me that I have read some of the parts to my family, and we can relate to Willow a lot. This book has given me joy because I have learned that my situation will get better.

*Counting by 7s* has taught me a lot of important lessons. I have learned that people can help me get through those tough times. I have also learned to focus on the positive moments that I have had with loved ones that I have lost. One thing that we all learned from reading this book is that things will get better no matter how bad the situation or loss is. This book has impacted lives of many readers because all people eventually lose someone that they love. Thank you for writing such an amazing novel and impacting my life and many other lives around the world.

Thank you,  
Braden Hinton

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Grace Hurzeler**  
Central Middle School, Columbus  
Letter to Rupi Kaur  
Author of *The Sun and Her Flowers*

Dear Rupi Kaur,

Your book, *The Sun and Her Flowers*, has to be one of my favorite books. I've always enjoyed poetry. It reaches down into your soul and brings out your brokenness and your tiredness that has built up for many years. It pulls you out of your negative state and envelopes you in a warm hug, putting a new perspective of love and sunshine on your face. Poetry puts things into words that cannot be worded easily, things that are better expressed through the writing of poetry.

This book puts into perspective how you do not have to live for others and live to impress them, but rather live to please yourself and to value yourself as a human being rather than an object to be used by others. It helps put into light how you are valued and loved and that sad and emotional states are valid, along with the rest of you. All the things you hate about yourself; your arms, legs, weight, face, how your nose is shaped, the color of your hair or eyes, etc. is all beautiful and others can't tell you otherwise.

I never truly finished this book, for my parents haven't bought it for me, but I found myself scrolling through the pages at high speed in the middle of a Target, completely in love with the wording and the story it was telling. I felt myself being coaxed into the story and being comforted by the writing, which gave a true view that we all can find self-love even in our hatred of ourselves. No matter what happens, how many people use you, whether you were raped or molested in your childhood, how your family treated you, you can define for yourself that you are beautiful without having to have someone else tell you or having someone else put you down and reduce your worth to that of a grain of salt.

You discussed how real each situation was, and how someone else had claimed the main character at some point. How she had dedicated her love to someone else, love that was now not being reciprocated back. How she had to deal with being paid for by other men for their enjoyment, for them to feel what they wished while she endured self-hate and everything she wished couldn't happen to her. Each situation was put how it truly was, no sugar-coating the situation. It told a story that felt so real you could almost share the pain and thoughts of the main character.

It told a story so real that others may be able to relate to it as if they had someone to sympathize with. It told a story that many should hear.

This book made me view myself more positively. It made me realize that I should at least get out of bed to help myself or to just be in a better state. It made me realize how much time I dedicated to hating myself; hating all the acne, the fingers that were just slightly too chubby, the eyes that constantly were never the same, the hair the color of dirt and mud, and the personality that was just too anxious and could be walked over. The kind of personality that let others step on me and do harm to me because I didn't want to hurt them. After reading this, I started to find the beauty in myself; the acne that made my face more unique, the fingers that were cute and sweet, the eyes that show forests and deserts and the deepest oceans in the world, the hair that was a slight gold color that reminded me of my mother, and the personality that was loving and caring and sweet, worrying just enough to help me get things done.

And with this letter, I have realized how much I have grown. How positivity has taken my hand and placed a gentle kiss upon my head, making me feel loved for myself and not needing the approval of others. I can now live in happiness, a smile plastered to my beautiful face and a laugh escaping my lips almost so often my stomach rolls in twists and turns. This book has changed my views for the better, and my hope for many other readers is that they feel the same impact.

Sincerely,  
Grace Hurzeler



**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Ellie Kim**

Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Ray Bradbury

Author of *Fahrenheit 451*

Dear Ray Bradbury,

Your novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, opened my thinking up to a new perspective on life and how we live it. Montag was specifically relatable. He questions his own beliefs and the way society functions. He chooses to change and pursue what he believes is right, even though he could face harsh punishments. This is what resounded in me. Montag contradicts his society and he does not care what others think about him. He only tries to make people listen and realize that there is more to life than television or radio. That there is nature and deep human communication. I want to be the change in my community. Whatever the issue, I want to be able to stand up for my own opinions or beliefs. Your character truly inspires me and shows me that making an impact is possible.

In Montag's society, living life is completely taken for granted. They don't cherish life. Millie's overdose is a prime example. You made evident the effects of mental health issues. You showed through the diverse set of characters that people handle their emotions differently. Beatty couldn't handle the guilt of his actions, so he gave up on life. He didn't have an outlet or person to talk with about his internal struggles. Also, I learned that it's important to be happy. Montag realizes that he isn't happy, so he begins to rethink how he receives his happiness. This is definitely an important lesson. If I'm not content in doing something, then I need to question why I'm doing it. Additionally, I need to persevere through my worst days. Montag carries on even though he feels overcome.

Before I read *Fahrenheit 451*, I controlled my emotions and never told anyone about my feelings. Within your novel, the theme of showing human emotion and having deep connection is what changed me. I realized that to be happy and have good relationships, communicating is necessary. This is another form of giving love. I have had many conversations with my mom that I've never had before, because of your book. It has changed the way I feel and portray my emotions. My mom has seen that I have a new insight and now she is curious about the novel. I'm glad that your book can influence and teach so many people.

It sure has made an impact on my life. I hope others will be able to take the underlying and evident knowledge from your story and apply that to their life, just like I have done.

Sincerely,  
Ellie Kim

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Ana Landeros**  
West Noble Middle School, Ligonier  
Letter to Susane Colasanti  
Author of *Waiting for You*

Dear Susane Colasanti,

When you wrote this book, it felt like the book was written just for me. This quote from *Waiting for You* is really powerful to me: “You’ve got one year to make it. This is the opportunity you’ve been waiting for. You only got one chance. Only one try. Only you can make it happen. Nobody else. Can you move mountains? Can you aim that high? The answer is simple. YES. Do not screw up.” When I read this quote, it stood out to me because it made me realize that I shouldn’t care what other people think about me. I should just live life freely without having the thought that I am always going to be judged no matter what I do.

One choice can make or break you. You don’t have time in life to make stupid mistakes that you know you are going to regret in life later. The one choice in my life that was life-altering is deciding whether or not to actually try in life. Most of the time, I am just the shy short girl who people don’t really talk to. But, when I am in front of people I don’t talk to, I get really nervous, and I start to talk really quietly. If you saw me in class, you wouldn’t even know who I was. You would probably talk to your friends and everyone around you and leave me out of the conversation. You would probably only talk to me if the teacher made you work with me. I always wished that I was more brave and outgoing all the time.

Now, I don’t really care what people think about me anymore. I don’t know why, but I guess I realized that life is too short to care about what others think about me. I have been in fights with a lot of friends, or so I thought they were my friends. I realized that I don’t need them to be happy or satisfied with life. I just need to find people that will like me for me and not judge me for the way that I am. I am still a little shy around people that I don’t know, but I guess I just realized that there is no reason to be when it is an opportunity to make a new friend. And, if they didn’t like me for who I am, then it isn’t worth the time trying to be the person that they want me to be. I have had people use me just to get to someone else. True friends are people who truly care about you and don’t care about the way that you talk or dress; they accept you for the way that you are. They don’t care if you have had problems in the past; all they care about is making sure that you are happy when you are around them. Sometimes I can be mean to them, but in the end, they always forgive me, and things will go back to the way they used to be.

I always thought that I was never pretty enough to get a boyfriend. But when the time is right, the right guy will come along, and we will both be happy with each other. Sure, my friends and family have told me that I am pretty enough, but, on the inside, I always feel the same way. I guess that your book make me realize that we don't have to go around dating guys at a young age just because everyone else is doing it. Sure, I have had crushes, but crushes are never worth changing who you are on the inside. A lot of people these days are dating someone just because everyone else is doing it, but what your book has taught me is that you don't have to follow what everyone else is doing. You should do your own thing— no matter what other people say you should do. I used to believe anyone about anything, but after a while, I learned that not everyone can be trusted.

I have read almost all of your books, and in the end they all have a lesson to learn. Your book has made a big impact on my life.

Sincerely,  
Ana Landeros

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Zeynep Law**  
Central Middle School, Columbus  
Letter to Jenn Bishop  
Author of *The Distance to Home*

Dear Jenn Bishop,

I read your book, *A Distance to Home*, and I loved it. I felt like I was able to relate to the characters because I have a younger sister of my own, and your book's description of Quinnen reminded me of my sister. Also, your book's description of Haley reminded me of myself.

Until I read your book, I didn't realize that I should live every day to its fullest because you never know which one is your last. The older sister, Haley, hit her teenage years and began to hang out more with her friends, rather than hanging out with her sister. She ended up getting in a car accident and passing away. The younger sister, Quinnen, wanted to spend time with her older sister, but never again got a chance to because she had passed away.

I feel like there were so many things that Quinnen wanted to do with Haley, but she couldn't because Haley was off with her friends. This inspired me to spend more time with my sister. Reading about Quinnen's feelings saying how sad she was to lose her sister, how she wished she could spend more time with her, how she wished she wasn't always only with her friends, etc. made me feel guilty on the inside. My own sister has told me that I spend too much time perfecting my homework assignments, hanging out with friends, or watching TV than being with her. She is always telling me not to be one of those typical teens that are always on their phones. After reading this book, I felt so guilty for letting my sister feel that way, so I started to have fun with her like we used to.

This book made me feel as if it were written for me. It was like a sign telling me to have fun with my sister, so I did. It gave me a whole new take on life that I was blind to before. I don't look at my phone as much as I used to, I watch less TV, I try to include my sister in most of my day-to-day activities, I do what my sister wants sometimes (even if I don't want to), and I just feel better. After reading this book, I thought: what a sad life these girls had so far. I wouldn't wish for anything like what happened in this book to happen to my family or anyone else's.

I could probably think of a few examples of how I have been hanging out with my sister more. For one thing, last Friday, even though I really just

wanted to go home and relax, I went with my sister to the playground because she wanted to go. I actually feel better. Doing nice things for people and my family makes me feel good on the inside and that's how I want to be remembered in life. I don't want to be remembered as someone that chose their friends over their family, or someone that ignored their little sister. This is how your book, *A Distance to Home*, has influenced my life and the some of the choices I've made.

Sincerely,  
Zeynep Law

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Jacob Lee**  
Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Fred Gipson  
Author of *Old Yeller*

Dear Mr. Fred Gipson,

I have been a long fan of your book, *Old Yeller*. I first read your book, *Old Yeller* when I was in second grade. At that time, I honestly did not enjoy reading books because no particular genre of literature really interested me because I had always thought books were boring and useless. When I had the chance, I would do anything to avoid reading books. One day my father asked me to read your book, *Old Yeller*. At first, I was very much annoyed. I asked my father why I had to read such an old and boring book even though I never actually read the novel. I thought to myself, "Why do I have to read this book?" However, seeing that I didn't have a choice, I sat down and began reading. When I began reading, I immediately knew I was in for something special as the introduction quickly grabbed my attention. In the beginning of the novel, you write about a Texan boy living on a ranch who has to take care of his little brother and mother. Suddenly, the moment that the boy finds a stray dog eating their meat was the moment that officially got me hooked to the story. I couldn't put down the book because I had to continue the story and see where it went. By the time I finished reading, I was completely swept by the adventure that I went on.

The story and characters were all written incredibly well in the book. What makes the story and characters so interesting are how the book describes the progressing relationship between Travis and Old Yeller. At first, Travis hated Old Yeller and wanted to kill him due to the dog being a nuisance to him. However, as the story progressed, Travis begins to have sympathy for Old Yeller learning that he is not a bad dog. In fact, Travis comes to realize that Old Yeller was trustworthy, brave, kind, and loyal. Travis and Old Yeller had a very organic and strong relationship that I could invest in, and when Old Yeller eventually dies, I became very emotional because I cared so much about their relationship.

Reading *Old Yeller* completely changed how I viewed literature. Your book showed me that there are potential stories out there that can hook me the way *Old Yeller* did. Thanks to you, I now have the motivation to go out to find and read these potential stories. For example, in the past, I would have avoided reading long novels like *Harry Potter and the*

*Sorcerer's Stone*. However, due to the amazing experience I had reading *Old Yeller*, *Harry Potter* became my favorite book series of all time. Not only has *Old Yeller* impacted my view of literature, but it also is beginning to affect how I write as well. For example, this year my eighth-grade English teacher told the class to write their introductions to their own creative stories. Later that evening, I was sitting in my desk coming up with ideas of what to write. I needed a main character who was willing to take care of his family, be responsible, and courageous. That was when I thought of Travis. Travis became the inspiration for my main character, Tom. Like Travis, Tom is an Alaskan country boy who needs to take care of his mother and little sister by providing them food, labor, and protection. Since I was also influenced by the detailed description of Texas in your novel, I also included descriptive details of the wilderness of Alaska. Even though my story introduction did not receive the most praise I wanted during English class the next day, I was still proud of what I wrote because I could call it my own.

Overall, I am thankful for your life-changing book, *Old Yeller*. Without *Old Yeller*, I would still be incredibly unenthusiastic about novels, not caring one bit about them. Thanks to you, reading and writing has become a new passion of mine that I will continue pursuing forever.

Sincerely,  
Jacob Lee



**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Karleigh LeMond**  
Jasper Middle School, Jasper  
Letter to Marina Gessner  
Author of *The Distance from Me to You*

Dear Marina Gessner,

My eyelids were getting heavy and weak. It was a challenge to keep them open. It was a long day of hours of practice, and the only thing I wanted to do was sleep. I certainly didn't want to be in that theater any longer. I was watching an uninteresting performance that was three hours long. There was no way I was going to stay awake. The worst part was that the hotel was just across the street. Thoughts ran through my mind of me sleeping to my heart's desire within the sanctuary of my bed. Although we weren't allowed to leave, it was tempting to not trudge out of the theater, yet that is exactly what I did. My friend and I scurried out of the theater like mice, but we never told the adult that we left. And this is where I started to relate to your book, *The Distance from Me to You*.

When McKenna never told her parents she was going to hike the Appalachian Trail alone, I predicted that it was going to turn into a bad situation. And, I knew that walking out of the theater on that cold, January night, without any permission, was going to turn into a bad situation, but I still did it anyway. The roads were icy, slick, and dangerous, and we had to walk across the street in heels. I stumbled over my own two feet, and I knew it could only get worse.

After taking our time crossing the street, my friend and I quickly strode up to our hotel room. Our other roommates weren't in the room since they were still at the performance. A quick hour had passed, and our other roommates still hadn't made an appearance. The show was done, and the others should've been back by then. And now, after reading your book, this reminded me of when Sam left McKenna in the woods, but he wasn't back yet. Even though you can't feel the fictional characters' feelings, I could tell McKenna was becoming anxious. And since my roommates weren't back yet, I was also slowing becoming more and more anxious.

Leaving my sleeping friend back on her bed, I trotted out of the room and traveled up and down the elevator searching the hotel for my friends. I stopped, collected my thoughts, and began to wonder where they could've been. This reminded me of when McKenna and Sam could not find the trail after the frightful storm that morning. They made marks about where they had been, but the mud kept messing them up. They put all of their

effort in finding the trail, but it was useless. They came to the unwanted realization that they were lost. After spending a total of 15 minutes trying to find my roommates in a 500 room hotel, it showed the consequences of walking out of the performance without permission.

After my roommates finally found us, I related to your book even more. Sam was found by the park rangers in the shelter. He didn't think anyone was going to come back for him, let alone save him. When my roommates stumbled across me in one of the hotel hallways, I felt like I was Sam in the situation. I never thought they were going to find me so quickly without the help of an adult.

Even though my situation wasn't life or death, I related to your book in many ways. Sam and McKenna's story impacted my life by showing me the ups, downs, and the possible consequences of freedom. With the amount of freedom given to you, there is an equal or higher amount of responsibility. This was shown throughout your book and proven to me within my own experience. It was one of the first times I was given a large amount of freedom, and I took advantage of it in an ignoble way. Going through the hotel that night seemed to be one of the longest hours of my life, but the distance from me to my roommates wasn't as far as I imagined.

Thanks for the short trip,  
Karleigh LeMond

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Marielle McConnell**  
Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Dave Pelzer  
Author of *A Child Called It*

Dear Dave Pelzer,

Your book, *A Child Called It* has changed my life. This book made me more grateful and have more empathy for kids that are in the position you were in. Before I read your book I never understood why kids in that position never just told someone. After reading it I realized how they really feel. Your book also made me very grateful. I never realized how hard some people have it. It taught me that when I get in a fight with my parents to not stay mad at them and to appreciate them. This also helped me understand what my mom has been going through. When she was younger she had an abusive dad. He left after her parents got a divorce. She still occasionally saw him but she hasn't seen him in years. When he died a few months ago I didn't understand why she was so upset. But seeing how you forgave your mom after all the terrible things she did helped me understand why my mom would forgive her dad.

Your book also made me want to adopt and foster kids when I am older. Ever since I was younger, I loved kids and wanted to have lots of them. Your book helped me realize that kids, like you, need good, loving homes. I want to provide those homes. I started to research more into it and found out some really sad things. I found out that some people who foster kids are abusive and keep the money and use it on themselves. After finding this out I felt so bad for the kids who have to live in a home where they don't feel safe. I couldn't imagine living a life like that.

One of the most important lessons I learned from your book is that if you see something, say something. If your dad would have intervened, it would have stopped a lot sooner. You had to suffer because he was too scared to say anything. It made me realize that I would never want to be the reason someone suffers from abuse. In a way, not saying something about it is just as bad as doing it. But, if I never read your book I would have never learned that.

This is my favorite book and it has taught me so many things. There are so many things I would have never known without reading your book.

Sincerely,  
Marielle McConnell

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Chelsea Murdock**

Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Angie Thomas

Author of *The Hate U Give*

Dear Ms. Angie Thomas,

I would like to personally thank you for being such an inspiration, and a vessel for awareness through *The Hate U Give*. This novel is such a powerful reference for anyone trying to learn the trials and tribulations of modern-day America. After the string of police brutality situations involving mainly Caucasian officers, T.H.U.G. was a beautiful interpretation of what is happening.

As an African-American teen living in America, this novel was a breath of fresh air concerning my life personally, and the life of some of my fellow African-American peers. Reading Starr's struggles of teen life, mixed with the trauma of Khalil's death is such a dynamic contrast, which is needed at this time in our world. Personally, I have two older siblings that I consistently worry about because of the current happenings of the United States. Having a novel that could verbalize those worries better than I could was such a relief, as I felt someone finally understood what I was going through outside of school every day.

With the increasing amounts of deaths because of police brutality, I was more than excited to read the way in which Starr was able to care so much for Khalil, and keep his name alive, even after his unnecessary death. Being able to read a face portrayed, and provide reference to all of these innocent lives taken was truly amazing. The way in which it is evident that family is the strongest support system in many people's lives was a catalyst for me to look back on my own life and my own family, and appreciate them even more.

Reading through Starr's endeavors as a black teen in America, as well as just a black American were so accurate, yet still tastefully done that it was not harsh. The way in which various scenarios, like when she is called out of her name by a Caucasian friend of hers, provided everyone who read it a detailed look into how words have an impact, and can hurt. Not only was this educational, but it was also very intriguing to see how Starr would react. The use of words to convey such difficult topics is ingenious.

So, Ms. Thomas, I would sincerely like to express my gratitude for your novel, it truly impacted my life. From Starr's stress to Maverick's past life

with gangs, you addressed many tough issues with an admirable ease. Thank you for the laughs, many tears, and a multitude of reflective moments. You truly are an inspiration to all who read your novels, and come in contact with you.

Yours truly,  
Chelsea Murdock

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

Ananya Ramanujapuram  
Central Middle School, Columbus  
Letter to R. J. Palacio  
Author of *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

Your book, *Wonder*, is one of my absolute favorite books. The way you wrote the book, using different points of view, really gave me a sense of understanding of what it meant for a kid to have a facial deformity and how other people choose to perceive it. However, it has given me a new perspective on how I really am. When I started to read *Wonder*, I read it like I would any other book. I got attached to the characters and I felt whatever the character was feeling. But, it wasn't until right after I finished the book that I realized something about myself.

I always thought of myself as the kind of person who would be kind to people with deformities or with disabilities. However, I realized that I would have acted like the majority of the kids towards Auggie. I would've been wary of him, I would've talked about him behind his back, and I would've stared. I wouldn't have talked to him, I wouldn't have been around him, and I would've left him alone. I hated the fact that I would have done the very things that I didn't want other kids to do to Auggie.

This book changed my perspective of myself. After reading this book, I wanted to change the way I acted around people with disabilities or deformities. I wanted to try to make an effort to talk to them and to make them feel happy. I wanted them to feel better about themselves and make them feel loved. I wanted to be more like Summer.

This reminds of the time when I went shopping with my mom. I was looking at some clothes and a kid with Down syndrome walked by. I waved at her and said hi. All of a sudden, she came up and hugged me. She got her mom's attention and her mom laughed, with a big smile. It made me really happy inside when she hugged me, knowing that I didn't wave to her out of sympathy, but just because I wanted to say hi. That may sound really selfish, but I felt like it was a step in the right direction.

Overall, I really want to say thank you. Not only for writing this book but for being a huge inspiration to many, many people, including me. I wouldn't have realized how I really was if it wasn't for this book. You have become one of my favorite authors and I can't stop saying thank you for writing this book that really changed me.

Sincerely,  
Ananya Ramanujapuram

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Nicole Rebber**  
Immanuel Lutheran School, Seymour  
Letter to Veronica Roth  
Author of *Divergent*

Dear Veronica Roth,

I used to dread reading. My teachers would almost have to force me to read. Reading had no meaning to me at all. I forgot every single book I had ever read because nothing about reading interested me. The people in my class that liked reading would anger me. I never understood why people would take time out of their day to read a book when it just seems so pointless to me. These were my thoughts until I discovered *Divergent* in sixth grade. I found it at the bookstore my school was having; I recognized it as a book one of my sister's classmates had been reading. When I read the first page, I immediately fell in love with it. I discovered very soon that everyone has something to hide, being different is okay, and how we carry ourselves defines who we are.

Tris hiding is a common theme in your novel. She has to hide her divergence to survive. She transfers to Dauntless to hide. Her instructor, Four, also hides something about himself from the world. He takes Tris through his fear landscape, and she discovers why he hides himself. Al, an initiate in Tris's initiation class, committed suicide. No one would have guessed he would do that because he hid his depression from everyone. Every single person has their own demons to hide, and they have their reasons for hiding them. I have my own demons that possess me, and I hide them for certain reasons. I always thought that people who seem to have their life together might not actually. Since reading *Divergent* I've come to the conclusion that every single person has something to hide.

Your book shows being different is okay. The society Tris lives in doesn't welcome people that are different from what they are supposed to be. I believe this is wrong. I know that everyone is different, but I believe that is what makes everyone so special. The things that are different from everyone else are the most valuable things about us. I'm very grateful that my society welcomes the qualities that makes people different. I treasure most the qualities that make me stand out from people. I don't judge people for the qualities that make them different; I cherish them. My anger boils inside of me when I see a person making fun of someone for being themselves. *Divergent* helps me see that being different is more than okay because everyone is different in their own way.

Even though we all have our own demons that possess us, they don't define who we are. We present ourselves by how we decide to carry ourselves. Even though Tobias was beaten by his father in the past and is haunted by it, no one would've known that happened to him. The reason no one ever knows is because he carries himself as if that never happened to him. *Divergent* has taught me that even though we come from a certain place and may have different experiences in the past, we can choose. Tris and Tobias came from Abnegation, which is almost the exact opposite from Dauntless; they both came first in Dauntless initiation class. I used to be kind of dumb and not good at school, and now I'm one of the top students in my class and considered intelligent because I work hard to become better.

I value all the lessons I have learned from the *Divergent* series. In one part of *Divergent*, Tobias says he wants to be selfless, intelligent, brave, honest, and kind. From the moment I read that I wanted to also try and value those character traits for myself. Every single part I read in *Divergent*, *Insurgent*, *Allegiant*, and *Four* has a special place in my heart. I took me a while to read *Divergent* because I never wanted it to end. I dreaded the ending. Once I found out there were more books in the series, I was ecstatic. The beginning of *Insurgent* bored me out a little so it took me awhile. Once I got through 50 pages, I flew through the rest of the book. I started *Allegiant* immediately after *Insurgent*, and it took me a day to finish. The book *Four*, an installment to the series, also took me a day to finish. My thoughts toward reading have taken a complete turn. I am now one of the people that used to anger me. My classmates now get mad at me when they find out how much I read, and they are struggling to read one book. I'm very thankful this series was created, and what it taught me. Thank you for giving me this amazing series that completely changed my thoughts on literature and books.

Your loving fan,  
Nicole Rebber



**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Brianna Ruscoe**  
Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to John Green  
Author of *The Fault in Our Stars*

Dear John Green,

I have read your book *The Fault in Our Stars*. Also, I have seen the movie and it is one of my favorites. The way you brought the characters to life with such great detail in the book fascinates me and I would gladly read it again. I usually hate reading, but Hazel Grace and her messed up life kept me on the edge of my seat. The story was phenomenal overall and I enjoyed the ending.

The book's storyline taught me to open my eyes to the reality of a cancer patient's lifestyle. Between Hazel's reoccurring hospital visits, I was able to get a feel for what she was going through. Both my grandmas have had cancer and beat it. My parents did a good job of keeping me sheltered from their new lifestyle by limiting visits with them until they were better. Reading about Hazel gave me a better understanding and appreciation for my grandmas' fight against cancer. Since I have never lost anyone to cancer, I cannot imagine how Hazel felt after Augustus' death. But, reading your book taught me that cancer is in fact a fatal illness and it is a miracle to survive it. Also, you taught me that life is not always fair. Hazel surviving cancer and Augustus dying made me realize the reality of the disease. The reader may have predicted Hazel dying, but I would have never thought Augustus would. The fact that his reoccurring cancer was so sudden made it feel as if I was losing him too.

Reading *The Fault in Our Stars* allowed me to learn the valuable lesson that pain and death are inevitable. When Hazel made the metaphor of calling herself a grenade, she was afraid of hurting the people close to her when she dies. That same truth is true for everyone on this planet. My parents, sister, friends, coaches, mentors, and grandparents all mean something to me. My death would affect all of them. Yet, my death is only as significant as my life. This book taught me that. At the end of the book, Hazel says that she does not regret knowing Augustus Waters, even though she was heartbroken. His life changed her, but so did his death. The book helped me learn that death is simply not avoidable, but the people you spend your life with make it worth it in the end. Thank you for changing my view of others and of myself.

Thanks for everything,  
Brianna Ruscoe

P.S. The book was better than the movie.

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Gabriela Schmitt**  
Jasper Middle School, Jasper  
Letter to Angie Thomas  
Author of *The Hate U Give*

Dear Angie Thomas,

I know you must be inundated with teenagers and kids writing to you because of your incredible book called *The Hate U Give*, or they might be writing you because of your other amazing book called *On the Come Up*. Nevertheless, your book *The Hate U Give* changed my life forever. I wrote to you last year and I chose to write to you again this year.

Nowadays, there is so much hate and negativity in our world. From wars to politics to drugs/alcohol, and most importantly, stereotyping. I am ashamed, embarrassed, and sad of what we have become. There are some examples in *The Hate U Give* that I see in our society today by just going out in public or watching the news.

The main conflicts in this book are discrimination and racial profiling. Starr isn't like her other friends; she goes to an all-white school. She has two versions of herself. Garden Heights Starr and Williamson Prep Starr. Williamson Prep Starr wears the latest released shoes and doesn't care what other people think about her. NOBODY knows that Williamson Prep Starr lives in Garden Heights. If anybody found out, they wouldn't treat her like Williamson Prep Starr. They'd treat her like she was different, like an alien or a cyclops with three eyes. No one wants to admit it, but people judge other people by the way they look, how they smell, or where they live. I'm not going to lie. I've done it too.

If you could turn on the news right now, you would either see politics, mass shootings, or black people dying from a lead chunk through the chest shot by authorities we thought we could trust to protect us, but instead kill innocent people. In *The Hate U Give*, Starr is in the passenger seat of a car with Khalil when he gets pulled over by a cop. It happens, right? Maybe you weren't paying attention and you accidentally go over the speed limit a little, or you run a stop sign or red light. But something that doesn't happen to everybody is dying from who we are supposed to put our trust in. After reading this book, I have looked differently on life and I thank you for that. I have taken more interest in what is going on in this crazy world of ours.

Like Starr said in your book, “What’s the point of having a voice if you’re gonna be silent in those moments you shouldn’t be?” Reading that line made me think about how I act when I disagree with something. In ***The Hate U Give***, citizens rioted after Officer One-Fifteen was judged not guilty of the crime of shooting Khalil. Starr also took part in these riots because she spoke up for what she thought was unfair and gruesome. Ever since I have read that line, I have spoken up for what I believe in, even if it can be annoying sometimes.

The moment my fingertips lingered over the dented letters of the title, to the H to the U to the G, I wouldn’t have ever thought my life would be changed so drastically by reading your novel. You and your beautifully crafted words gave me a new perspective on life and how I think and handle things. You don’t understand how thankful I am for literally just thinking of the idea of this book. I love you forever.

Find your voice,  
Gabriela Schmitt

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Emily Setser**  
Salem Middle School, Salem  
Letter to Sharon Draper  
Author of *Out of My Mind*

Dear Sharon Draper,

My mind thought in a very simple way. The brain in my head never really wondered what life could have been like if I have been born a different way, or in a different place, or even during a different time! Then I read *Out of My Mind*. After that my thoughts, life, and just my overall view of the world changed completely! Now, I wonder about everything. I'm constantly thinking about new scenarios, new outcomes, new problems, new solutions, new everything! I'm not thinking so simply anymore. But because of that, my life isn't so simple either.

I was one like your average everyday kids. I would wake up, go to school, come home, eat, and repeat. Rarely anything interesting happened to me and I used to be okay with that. Please do keep in mind that I did have an imagination, I just simply wasn't the greatest at using it. That hurt me a lot because I want to be an artist and in order to do that I really needed an enormous and bright imagination. Last year I went to a writers' workshop so I could learn how to properly write books. There I received your novel. At the time I didn't think much of the book. It was just another book to collect dust on my bookshelf, but I decided to read the first few pages, which to this day I'm very happy I did. I couldn't stop at those first few pages. I had to read more of it. It was hard to put it down just for a second. I was always wanting to find out how things played out for Melody. But within those few moments I was away from the book, I would always find myself picturing what would happen next. That's where it started for me. As though construction workers rebuilt my entire thought process, it changed completely. I was now thinking in great detail of almost everything I was presented with. I was able to look at the simplest of stories and be able to talk about this in-depth description about what I think it really means.

Not only did it help me with my thinking, but *Out of My Mind* also helped me with my imagination. I'm able now to make these crazy universes that involve dozens of different characters, none like the one before! I can now imagine myself in different places, different times, and different scenarios! The comic that I've been trying to make for the last three years is at the closest to completion that it's ever been because your

book was able to help me imagine more things and keep my mind open to many different things!

But one of the most important things *Out of My Mind* has changed about me is how I act. I used to avoid people like Melody. I just didn't think I would really be good friends with them. Then your book gave me a glimpse of how they feel. That made me realize that what I was doing was wrong. I should try and be friends with them, not avoid them. Not only that, but now I approach everyone! I try my best to be friends with everyone so no one feels just how Melody did.

*Out of My Mind* has changed so much about me. Your story let me walk in the shoes of someone who I'd never be able to at least get a glimpse of how they feel if I haven't read your book. My thinking has changed from this average-Joe thinking to overthinking every detail. My personality would not have changed if your book had never entered my life. I'm so glad I had the chance to read *Out of My Mind*. So, with all of my heart, I hope that your book will continue to change people's lives for the better. May you always be able to speak your mind.

Sincerely,  
Emily Setser

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Lidya Solomon**  
Hasten Hasten Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to Angie Thomas  
Author of *The Hate U Give*

Dear Angie Thomas,

I have felt the eyes of others judging me. They judge me as if they know me, as if they have been there every second of the 13 years I have lived. They make assumptions that I have to be a certain way. They set unrealistically high expectations for me when they themselves cannot reach them.

*The Hate U Give* made me realize how people naturally categorize you or place you in their mind as someone who acts like this, or talks like that. Throughout *The Hate U Give*, Starr witnesses her loved ones getting judged and hurt by random strangers' assumptions. I am disappointed to say that this is not news for me.

Even though *The Hate U Give* is a fictional book, I see stories in the news recounting the same events that happened in your book. I used to keep scrolling and ignore these stories. I was taught not to talk about racial prejudice or address it at all. No one in my family wants to acknowledge the fact that one of us could easily be the subject of one of these stories in the news.

When I was younger my friends used to make comments about me. One comment that was made was saying that when I was older I would only be with other people like me. The same thing happened in many indirect ways. Because of that, whenever I was around my friends I tried to hide my race and ethnicity to fit in. In the end it worked. But, then I grew less comfortable learning about my race.

Some people refuse to believe the fact that racism exists in America today. Assumption is the key in the ignition of the car of judgement. The mistaken assumptions turn on the engine of prejudice. The prejudice gets the wheels which symbolize racism, sexism, ableism and others moving. This car only goes down one road to which the destination is insecurity.

We are the drivers of this car. We are in control of it. We are in control of what we say. At times we may think that rude or judgmental thoughts only hurt your conscience. Once those thoughts are said out loud, they harm others, which is worse. You can't take back the thought once you say

it, because although you might forget, it will be engraved in another person's mind.

*The Hate U Give* helped me feel more comfortable with my race. It made me want to know more of my heritage and my race. Because of your book, I have become more open to talking about the problems of our world, of our society, of myself. Thank you.

Sincerely,  
Lidya Solomon

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Graham Tatman**  
Hamilton Southeastern Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Mariano Rivera  
Author of *The Closer*

Dear Mariano Rivera,

I've read your autobiography *The Closer* and by doing that, it has changed the way I play the game and the way I think about the game. Reading *The Closer* was the most entertaining and moving book I have read for the simple reason that anything can happen to anyone.

One of the ways your book has influenced me is my view on the world around us. In your book you described the way you grew up was to work hard and never really think about being famous or being recognized by anyone. You worked on your father's fishing boat throughout your childhood, dropped out of high school, and dreamed of becoming a mechanic in your small hometown. Describing this in your book has made me realize that no matter where anyone is from, everyone has a chance to become successful on an international stage. I never really thought that I could amount to anything in the MLB, and I'm pretty sure many other young players feel the same, because no one knows my name or has heard of me, but after reading your book, my opinion of how the world works has changed. So I thank you for that.

Another way *The Closer* has influenced me was the way I see myself. *The Closer* taught me that you don't need everything in the world to become an amazing baseball player. You can come from a small town, small country, or a place no one has even heard of, and can still become successful. All you really need in order to become successful is to stay humble because when you make it to a high level team you can't afford to become cocky. If you become cocky, then you lose sight of your goals. And the second thing your book taught me was to work hard no matter how hard the challenge becomes. When you tore your ACL in batting practice in 2012, you never once said that you were giving up. Even though you planned to retire after the 2012 season, you went through surgery, therapy and moved back your retirement another year because you weren't about to let an injury end your career.

Lastly, in your book you preached the phrase, "Keep it simple." This is the quote that keeps me controlled when I am on the mound because the best way to do anything is to make it as simple as possible. If you over



complicate something, you will lose sight of what you are working towards.

Your book has really affected the way I play the game of baseball and how I think about it. I no longer have a hopeless feeling because I know if I remain humble and work hard, I can become the greatest just like you are.

Sincerely,  
Graham Tatman

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Gabriel Vasquez-Jaffe**  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to Alan Gratz  
Author of *Prisoner B-3087*

Dear Alan Gratz,

Yanek Gruener from *Prisoner-B3087* was one of the millions of children who lost their parents and relatives during the Holocaust. He had to survive with little food and no one to help him. Besides making me appreciate how comfortable my life is, he helped me to realize how much I take my parents for granted. I now understand how they give me opportunities and choices that will help my future and positively shape the kind of person I will become.

As a kid during the war, Yanek did not have any parents to provide basic necessities. It is sad that Yanek had to grow up early, work to survive by finding a job in the concentration camp, and scavenge for food. Yanek just barely survived living in cold barracks. In contrast, my parents make sure all of my needs are met so I can just focus on studying and not worry about whether I will have food for dinner. My parents provide me with a warm house and my own cozy bedroom. They also give me luxuries like movie nights and traveling. Being a lot less privileged than me, Yanek managed to survive independently without any help. I should not complain so much to my parents about little things like having an old phone or a small television.

Yanek was thirteen when his parents were taken away, before he finished developing into a mature adult. He did not have anyone who could guide him to make the right choices. I admire how Yanek knew how to survive on his own and almost never chose the wrong path. My parents are the ones who train me to become a responsible adult. They put boundaries on many things that my friends are able to do. For example, I am not allowed to play video games during the week. This rule made me upset until I read your book. Now I appreciate that my parents put limits on me for my own good. If I stay up late playing video games, I would not have slept enough, which affects my learning. Yanek never had this type of guidance after the age of thirteen, yet he still made right choices. In contrast, without any parental guidance, I most likely would be spoiled and would not take good care of myself.

Yanek had no one to provide him emotional support at a moment of extreme hardship and antisemitism. He was in a concentration camp surrounded by cruel guards who did not care if he and other Jews lived or died. Any fellow prisoner he became emotionally close to always died. I am lucky to receive a lot of emotional help from my parents, but for issues not nearly as stressful as Yanek's. For example, when I am feeling academic pressure, my parents give me a motivation to go to school by saying that I can attend any university if I do well. Also, my parents spread positivity about being Jewish and help me stand up to renewed antisemitism today. They teach me how important it is to be Jewish and what to say if someone says an antisemitic comment.

Being Jewish of Eastern European descent, I would have had a similar story to Yanek if I had been born when he was. In fact, many of my relatives died in concentration camps. Reading *Prisoner-B3087* showed me how fortunate I am to have plenty of food, a comfortable home, and parents that love and care enough to put boundaries. With all of my needs being taken care of, I can focus on becoming a responsible adult with the guidance of my parents.

Sincerely,  
Gabriel Vasquez-Jaffe

**Level II**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Brailyn Whaley**  
Jasper Middle School, Jasper  
Letter to Alyssa Sheinmel  
Author of *Faceless*

Dear Alyssa Sheinmel,

I picture myself running in the arid, foggy morning while looking up at the mischievous evils starting to form in the sky above. I had noticed these storm clouds before leaving the house, ignoring the potential wrath they could unleash before me. I was in a state of reverie when a flash of lightning broke my trance. Fire started to scheme on the power lines, a bare tree standing before it. Suddenly, my feet felt like concrete, my head felt like a balloon, then all I saw was an explosion of yellow and blue. Fortunately, I wasn't the person being toppled down by the flaming tree. That position belongs to Maisie Winters.

*Faceless* is an extraordinary book full of meaning, purpose, and power. It has inspired many people, including myself, to push through the hard times; it will get better as life goes on. Prior to reading this book I was struggling with an immense amount of stress and anxiety come the new school year. I overthink everything including the slightest movements from sunrise to sundown. I could maintain an anxious demeanor the whole day just because my shoes don't match my outfit.

After reading this book, I realized I let my own thoughts overtake me and prevent me from being comfortable with who I am. Following Maisie's accident, she despised looking in a mirror. She couldn't bare the looks of people and their opinions. She gathered many fake impressions of herself in her mind and she didn't think about the positive sides of things at all. Instead, she let people get to her. In my opinion, that's the issue in today's society. It runs from getting bullied, to drowning in the hatred of your own insecurities. A lesson to learn from Maisie's experience is to love yourself no matter the situation and appreciate each other's differences.

Post to her accident, Maisie couldn't partake in track like she was accustomed to. She had to pay the piper and encounter new experiences. One of which was joining a therapy group. Those group members helped her undergo the toughest parts of her life. I will praise you endlessly for the message you have sent to me inside of these wonderfully filled pages. You made me realize I needed a change, and due to that I now have the most loyal, amazing, trustworthy friends anyone could wish for. They will forever be sitting by my heart, just like Maisie's new found friends.

If I had to name the main takeaway from this book, I would say to take opportunities and make a great outcome out of it. If a girl can bounce back from having half a face then I too can overcome any obstacle that comes my way.

Always make the best of the worst,  
Brailyn Whaley

**Level III**  
**Award Winning**  
**Letters**

**Level III**  
**1st Place Winner**

**Andrew Roets**

Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to Jennifer Cook O'Toole

Author of *The Asperkid's (Secret) Book of Social Rules: The Handbook of Not-So-Obvious Social Guidelines for Tweens and Teens with Asperger Syndrome*

Dear Jennifer Cook O'Toole,

Before reading your book, *The Asperkid's (Secret) Book of Social Rules: The Handbook of Not-So-Obvious Social Guidelines for Tweens and Teens with Asperger Syndrome*, I was struggling with social interactions and I was struggling with peer relations. I had the worst school year of my life with little understanding of social cues that come so naturally for those around me. I didn't have anyone that could explain to me why I was acting strangely in social settings. I also didn't have anyone that could explain to me what was going on in certain social settings. Your book helped me discover who I am; it has allowed me to understand myself in a way that I didn't think was possible.

I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome in 2010 after my Occupational Therapist told my parents that I might have something more than Sensory Processing Disorder. The diagnosis made sense as I fit the definition perfectly. I was finally able to give my parents an answer to their questions about why I acted different than most children. I was able to get the help that I needed academically and get the help that I needed with my sensory issues. While Occupational Therapy helped with many of my sensory struggles and my school helped me with many of my academic struggles, neither helped me at all with social interactions.

I was very socially awkward, and this caused me to get frustrated with myself. I would do and say things that made sense to me but would completely irritate those around me. My freshman year of high school was the worst school year ever. For example, I had a need to always be right and that need caused tension when I would argue with others; this caused many broken relationships. I tried to make friends, but each and every time I would say things that would push them away. I was rejected over and over again. I didn't understand why my actions kept on turning people away, so I looked for answers. I found *The Asperkid's (Secret) Book of Social Rules: The Handbook of Not-So-Obvious Social Guidelines for Tweens and Teens with Asperger Syndrome* after a Google search. I read the description and knew instantly that the book was for me because

it is written by you, someone who also has Asperger's Syndrome. I had finally found someone that could give me the advice and the answers that I was looking for.

The book arrived in the mail and I could instantly relate with what you had to say about the social struggles that those of us with Asperger's have. Your ability to simply explain the social struggles of those with Asperger's has helped me understand exactly what I must do in social settings. I appreciate the personal, clear illustrations given in the book. These illustrations help me realize that I'm not the only one in the world that struggles with social interactions like I had thought. I relate to much of what you have to say and it has helped me understand myself. It has allowed me to see why I act the way that I do and to see how others view my actions. I was able to use your advice to gain new friends because of your story. I was able to overcome the social challenges that I had struggled with in the past. I learned that being right all the time only comes across as being conceited and it only causes more problems. I know now to keep my need to be right in check with those I come in contact with. I now have a sense of belonging, knowing that I am not the only one that struggled with social rules. I can make friends and live a normal life without being worried that I am going to scare someone away.

Your book is a true lifesaver for those like me who struggled with social interactions. Because of ***The Asperkid's (Secret) Book of Social Rules: The Handbook of Not-So-Obvious Social Guidelines for Tweens and Teens with Asperger Syndrome***, I have friends and I am extremely grateful for the help that you have given me through this book.

Sincerely,  
Andrew Roets



Level III  
2nd Place Winner

Isabelle Neibert  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Graham Greene  
Author of *The Power and the Glory*

Dear Graham Greene,

I didn't want to write to you. I wanted to write to someone who wrote things that made me all warm and fuzzy. Cute stories about magical lands that end happily ever after. But I can't; I have to write to you. Your words infected my brain like a virus. They're like parasites, causing discomfort and inflammation whenever I get too comfortable. I wish I never read your book. It ruined me, dragging me out of my warm life and into cold, unknown waters. Even the name, *The Power and the Glory*, mocks me, reminding me of my faults. What makes me the most frustrated, however, is that I really enjoyed reading it.

It started as an assignment. That's it. Just another thing to read and take a test on so I can get good grades to get into a good college for a chance to get a good job and, eventually, a good life. Before I even started reading *The Power and the Glory*, I heard people complain about how dull and confusing the book was. I believed them until I read it. Every bit of the story, from setting to symbols, immediately drew me in. It frightened me that I could relate so easily with so many of the characters. *I'm not like any of them*, I protested, *they all are terrible people*. Oh, how I was wrong.

The Lieutenant was supposed to be the villain – a bad person with bad ideals who is nothing like me. Of course you wouldn't make it that easy, Mr. Greene. He was the most upstanding, righteous character in the book, but that's not why I relate to him. When my sister was sick with cancer, most of the community surrounding us failed. Not many people tried to understand our pain. They would give Hallmark card remarks and move on with their lives, happy that they weren't us. They twisted God's words into lies to keep away the uncomfortable reality of life. They said things like "Your sister is so strong" and "God would never give you what you can't handle!" Last time I checked, God doesn't give people cancer. I felt the Lieutenant's hatred for the church during this period. I understood why he turned his back on it, even though I would not. So many pious women told me it was all going to be ok.

Then there's the whiskey priest, a man who constantly failed and yet still did his duty. I was fine that I felt like him, until he crossed the border to

freedom. He was getting better, drinking less, relying on God more, but the second he was put into comfort, he fell. It scared me. If my life gets easier, will I do the same thing? Little did I know that your book, this book, would be the thing to keep me from getting comfortable like the whiskey priest.

The pious woman, oh the pious woman. You must think you're so clever, creating a character that everyone knows and hates, but then in the end, reveal that we are all her. Well you are clever; it is genius. It's what changed me, what made me wish I never picked up the book. I looked at my own life, how I thought about myself and others, and realized that you were right. You are so right and it frustrates me that you're right. I am prideful. I think I can bribe God, that I have something over his head. I think his work cannot be completed without me. I think I don't require His sacrifice. Your book woke me up. Whenever I am thinking pridefully, I remember the whiskey priest, Padre José, little Juan, and of course the pious woman. I remember who the glory goes to, and it sure isn't me.

The sinful, prideful part of me would rather stay in a comfortable mindset and die than be uncomfortable and thrive. I will not let myself do that. ***The Power and the Glory*** exposed my sinful ways. Because ultimately, to God is the "kingdom and the power and the glory forever." Thank you, Mr. Greene, for writing something I need, for giving me characters that I was uncomfortable relating with, and for keeping me from getting too comfortable. Thank you for ruining my life for the better.

Sincerely,  
Issy Neibert

**Level III**  
**3rd Place Winner**

**Catherine George**  
Culver Academies, Culver  
Letter to Alfred, Lord Tennyson  
Author of “**The Charge of the Light Brigade**”

Dear Alfred, Lord Tennyson,

I received the most rigorous and least functional education from my father. Day after day, on the drive to school, he would play an assortment of cassette tapes. Recitations of “Persephone” and “The Scorpion and the Toad” would inundate our dingy blue station wagon, and I would listen intently.

One day, my father purchased a new cassette for \$2.99. It was a dramatic reading of your poem “**The Charge of the Light Brigade.**” In an instant, I was fascinated. The authority in the narrator’s voice made a lasting impression on me, but the words themselves swept me into another life, a dream of sorts. It was wonderful, uplifting, and poignant. There was a sense of humility, an understanding of the beauty of genuine self-sacrifice and dignified service. Moreover, the resolve of the Light Brigade resonated with me. I had needed a hero, and you gave me six hundred.

You see, I was ten years old at the time, and I didn’t know how to read. No one noticed, and I even felt bitter over it. I isolated myself more and more from my surroundings. I felt incapable and hopeless, as though I had lost my heart somewhere along the way. Yet, as I listened to your account of cannons, horses, and heroes, I realized that I wanted to be like the six hundred. They were courageous even when everything was against them. They inspired a devotion and steadfastness in me, and I was able to accomplish what I had thought was impossible; I taught myself to read.

Your poem was the first piece of literature I read in its entirety. In that moment, I felt as though I had stumbled my way out of darkness, out of the valley in which I had been existing.

I often contemplate what it would be like to meet you. You have had such a deep impact on my life that I feel as though I know you already. I imagine that there would be no pretense between us, and we would be able to converse with a genuine interest in one another. I’d ask you a question, and you would respond with something so profound I could never have thought of it myself.

If your poem were taken away from me, I would be utterly devastated. I've learned from it; I've sympathized with it; I've made it a part of my life. "**The Charge of the Light Brigade**" is often viewed as simply a tribute to the British cavalymen of the Crimean War, but to me, it represents hope and overcoming all forms of adversity. It gave me strength when I needed it the most and showed me that I could achieve something worthwhile. All I had to do was open my eyes and forge ahead.

With gratitude and appreciation,  
Catherine Sophia George

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Abbigayl Eldridge**  
Oldenburg Academy, Oldenburg  
Letter to Malala Yousafzai  
Author of *I Am Malala*

Dear Malala Yousafzai,

Growing up in rural Indiana has given me many admirable qualities. My hands have been calloused and dirty from years of hard work on a farm, I can tell you the route to any destination by taking gravel country roads, and I truly know the value of a good piece of apple pie. But the Midwest has also granted me with a quality that may never disappear. I am completely and utterly ignorant of the world around me. I discovered this trait after reading your biography, *I Am Malala*, during the summer of my junior year. When I read the stories, hardships, and successes of your life, I realize how small I really am in such a big world.

I have been very fortunate to live the life I live today. My parents have always been able to give and support me in anything I have ever wanted. Every sport, club, or project I have wanted to pursue, my parents have funded or given assistance. When I decided to attend a private high school after nine years of public school, my parents did not hesitate to say yes, sign the check, and provide me with any resources I may need. My independent persona mixed with my unwavering “go-getter” attitude has developed me into the active and driven person I am today.

This is what life has always been for me, and I genuinely do not know any other way. However, this sheltered and safe life has made any minor inconvenience I have seem like a large obstacle. While reading about your day to day life in Pakistan, I cringe to think how I would cower in fear or snap from anger at the societal norms if I were in that position. I become irritated when I have to do the dishes at night, when there are girls who are forced to take on all domestic duties of the household at a young age. I get impatient when I cannot speak my opinion as soon as it pops into my mind, while there are violent consequences to sharing your perspective in the Middle East. I lay in bed every morning repeatedly pressing snooze to hold off from my school day ahead, when there are girls repeatedly fighting for their right to education. This is what made me realize my ignorance of the worldly problems around me. I take for granted the life I live, while others face consequences trying to earn just a fraction of it. You, Malala, were literally shot in the head trying to fight for education, while I fight my alarm clock so I don't have to participate in such a sought-after

privilege. But this realization of my ignorance was not to make me feel guilty, but to help me learn what is going on outside of my own Midwestern bubble. It has given me a drive to raise awareness of the tragedies that many face around the world, and use the privilege and platform I have to make a difference for others. Growing is what I choose to focus on, just as you did after every obstacle that tried to bring you and your passion down.

For all that you have done for this world, I say thank you. You probably hear it a lot, but it takes serious guts to take on such a large and controversial problem. Thank you for carrying the burden and showing me what courage really is. You fought and persisted to give underprivileged girls their much deserved rights, but little did you know, you helped the privileged girl appreciate hers, too.

Sincerely,  
Abbi Eldridge

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Chloe Graham**  
Northwestern High School, Kokomo  
Letter to Victoria Aveyard  
Author of *Red Queen*

Dear Victoria Aveyard,

An African American man is being pursued by the police for a petty crime. He's running. Then suddenly he's shot up to ten times. The police give out a pathetic excuse. They say it appeared that he was pulling out a gun. All that was found on and around this young man's body were bullets and an iPhone. The officers say that he was a threat to their safety without acknowledging that every officer is a threat to all people of color, whether they admit it or not. In reality, the officers only saw the color of his skin and exaggerated his every move. This is a common occurrence and a brutal example of the prejudicial treatment that many people experience every day. It is an example of the steel wall we have built up every time we ignore clear examples of injustice and fuel hatred.

Stephon Clark. I remember seeing his name all over social media. The twenty-two year old that was shot because he had a cellphone. The image of him smiling into the camera made my eyes well up. He was a human. He was a father, a brother, a grandson, and he was murdered. Watching his grandmother plead and cry for justice made my gut wrench in sorrow. Seeing her cry out that they didn't have to kill him like that, that they didn't have to shoot him that many times, filled my soul with anger. Our country is extremely divided like in your book *Red Queen*. Even though our world isn't separated by the color of our blood, it is separated by the color of our skin, our sexual orientation, and our differing opinions as well as trivial ideas like gender. Every time I see a story like Stephon Clark's, I'm disappointed, but not surprised. I have come to expect such tragic events. People have become so used to this that it is starting to become a normalized catastrophe. This is not okay. This will never be okay.

I find myself extremely affected by these events. They feel personal to me, but I have white privilege. I have never experienced issues involving my race but I am not ignorant. Every single person who does not believe in things like white privilege is fooling themselves and being ignorant. It has kept me up many nights thinking about how guilty I feel for not having to be ridiculed or even having my life at risk every day just because of my skin. Humanity is not shown to everyone and I feel disgusted by it. People who are not privileged have to earn their right for humanity and humanity is not something that they should have to strive to earn. In your book, Mare is given no opportunities from the second she was born. In her

world, she was destined to fail from the start. This was determined not based on her character or attributes, but solely because she had red blood. The silver blooded people had a similar case except they were given respect and the ability to succeed. Although the situation that Mare was presented with was highly exaggerated, the same principles of privilege is shown in our world today.

When I was eleven I discovered that social media could be used for good. That's the age when I started following news reports and activist accounts. My family was never political, never mentioned the horrors that were happening right outside. I recall being appalled by such events. As I watched videos and read for hours on end about these topics that I struggled to grasp, I gradually became extremely empathetic. Racism and sexism seemed like something you just read in history books. Many people of this generation want to believe that very misconception. Reading your book made me stand even firmer in my beliefs. When I became of the age to be opinionated, I think I can say that I caused many of my friends and family to take a step back and think about equality. I could go on and on about the topic. I just wish other people could also be empathetic for the people who are being hurt based on things they cannot control. This frustrates me as inequality is as obviously revolting as grinding your teeth on tinfoil. Your character Mare feels the same discontent for her country as I do. Only she seemed to change the world and I wish I could do the same.

Our world is so obviously divided. There is always going to be another Stephon Clark, another person to be subjected to cruel punishments as long as we keep making the same devastating mistakes based on the color of someone's skin or other natural things. I can only hope that my generation is the generation that tears down the wall that has kept people divided. All people deserve the same chance in life no matter race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. Hate has caused a lot of problems but has yet to solve one. I think Mare started to realize the same truth that I have. Our salvation is not going to come through hatred, it is going to come in the form of kindness, understanding, and acceptance.

Sincerely,  
Chloe Graham



**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Madilyn Holesinger**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Joy Rembert  
Author of “**I Understand**”

Dear Joy Rembert,

My grandmother is this five foot tall, white-haired, rock of a woman, whose pride lies solely in her deep Dutch roots. Growing up in Rinsumageast, Friesland, she came to the United States to be with my grandpa, leaving behind her family and everything familiar to her. She was an alien in a new country with never-ending possibilities. Though very stubborn, she made this country her home and started a family.

Fast forward to today. When I look at her, all I see is an alien. Not a foreigner in a new country anymore, but a foreigner to her own family because of a disease, Alzheimer's. The disease first made an appearance in little ways, like making her forget the name of the utensil she was using to eat her cereal, but then snowballed into her thinking that I was stealing from her because she didn't know who I was anymore. There were days when my grandma would tell me that she hated me, and then she would continue to tell me that she wanted to die. But those days don't compare to the bruises and scrapes I'd have from the nights that I'd have to restrain her or keep her from hurting my mom, or the sleepless nights I'd spend crying in bed because of the countless fights. The perception I had of my grandma twisted, and I grew to hate her. I never thought about what it must feel like for her. When I came across your poem, “**I Understand,**” I found myself in the midst of a world familiar and yet a world about which I knew so little. The ground shifted beneath my feet, and with it so did the image I had of my grandma.

My grandma lived with our family for two and a half years. A long two and a half years, where I found myself saying goodbye to her every day. When she first moved in, Alzheimer's had only taken a small part of her. She could not comprehend where she was, yet she was happy for the most part and could take care of herself. Then, like the way a fire spreads and consumes an entire forest, the disease consumed her, and America, the country with never ending possibilities, could not offer the possibility of a cure. The fire didn't only consume her though. It consumed my mom. It consumed me.

I grew to hate my grandma with each hurtful moment. Letting her into our home opened a Pandora's box of issues. She soon forgot how to go to the bathroom independently and how to eat normally. I hated her for straining the relationship between my mom and me. I hated her for making everything revolve around her during those two years. I hated her for taking my life and for flipping it upside down. But, most of all, I hated her for the things she made me feel and do. On bad days, my grandma would tell me that she hated me, and slowly I started hating me too. I would have to pin her to the ground to keep her from hurting me or my mom. I took punches and slaps from her, unable to ever hit back or yell at her. By the end, I distanced myself so much that it was hard for me to feel anything at all.

But, your poem shed light on a dark relationship in my life. It reminded me that her mind wasn't here with us, and that she didn't ask for this disease to slowly devour her brain, memory by memory, like a parasite feeding on its host. The whole time that I was blaming her, I should have been blaming the disease. **"I Understand"** reminded me that the couple of awful years don't compare to the many years of love. They don't compare to the memories of watching her knit baby blankets for our family or of spoiling us with cookies and pink lemonade. Your work softened my heart that had hardened over the place where my grandma's name was etched. Your poem started the healing process for me because I finally, truly understand that this isn't forever. That one day, I will get to see my grandma fully restored, no longer a foreigner in her own body. Thank you for that unbelievable gift.

Sincerely,  
Madilyn Holesinger

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Jasmine Hsu**  
Carmel High School, Carmel  
Letter to Rachel Hauck  
Author of *The Wedding Dress*

Dear Rachel Hauck,

I have to admit it. I usually hate romances. That's why I was completely taken back with my own romance-averse self when I fell in love with your book, *The Wedding Dress*. This letter would take an entire package of paper to print if I were to list out all the reasons why I adore your novel, so I'll settle on my top two. Faith is a hard topic to tackle, especially while writing for a secular audience, but you addressed it with such skillfulness. Your take on friendship also stirred me and has instilled even more respect in me towards you.

We live in a society that passionately advocates for unfiltered individual expression while ironically marginalizing perspectives that don't align with the prevailing secular mindset. As a young 21st century teenager who identifies as Christian, I often feel pressured to downplay this aspect of my identity. I had started to develop nervous palpitations whenever a conversation turned to a moral issue, knowing that once I expressed my views my Christian identity would likely be awkwardly exposed.

Your protagonist Charlotte's unabashed love and respect for God caught me off guard. The way she would voluntarily bring Him into conversations, publically sing praises to Him, and wholeheartedly trust Him even in seemingly hopeless situations really made me reflect on something she had that I lacked: an apparent comfort with integrating her Christian identity with her public persona. Though her personal life was crumbling around her, she still faithfully prayed to God. Unlike Charlotte, my personal life has not crumbled around me (yet) and I consider myself to be very blessed. Even so, I realized that I still dread openly engaging in conversations that risk exposing my Christian self. Reading your book injected a newfound confidence into my veins allowing me to integrate my Christian identity into my public-facing conversations.

Everyone has a different personal value system and I enjoy learning and listening from others about their diverse beliefs, but somehow as of late Christianity seems to have a gotten a bad rap, at least in the public eye. Usually authors who identify as Christian and who integrate characters with similar worldviews in their stories either do one of two things: severely undermine it or overly highlight it. I completely understand why

many people have reservations about Christianity, since some authors have come off as too pretentious and preacher-like, but your ability to make Charlotte's beliefs naturally known while not coming off as too "in-your-face" inspired me to not be ashamed of what I believe.

The other way my perspective changed was caused by your take on friendship. Even though everyone around Emily disapproved of her friendship with Taffy, she continued to strengthen it because she knew it was good and that the only reason why their friendship was looked down upon was due to the dark hue of Taffy's skin. I am of both Indian and Chinese descent. Growing up in Virginia, a Southern state known for its trademark blue eyes and blonde hair, I was one of the few girls with a brunette head and the only one with almond shaped eyes. I've been on the receiving end of side-eye glances, judgmental stares, and bullying due to my physical appearance. The undignified and stinging remarks regarding my Asian heritage have long been a painful part in my life.

In elementary school I didn't have many friends. My peers laughed about football and the Disney channel, but I just couldn't relate to them and eventually got used to being on the sidelines. That changed one day when a girl came up to me and asked if I wanted to swing with her. Her willingness to play with me despite the fact that I didn't fit in made me empathize with Taffy and the fondness she shared with Emily. I've learned to grow from such incidents, and reading your novel has pushed me to want to be the person who reaches out even more so, to break society's mold of acceptable relationships, and to never discriminate against a person just because the public doesn't necessarily approve.

*The Wedding Dress* sparked a new bravery in me to not conform to societal norms: to believe what I want to believe even if it might not be culturally couth and to base my relationships off of more than just what the world deems acceptable. I'm grateful for the self-reflection opportunity that your story provided me, and will always remember to not mask my opinions on life and not bend to the desire to measure up to society's standards.

Sincerely,  
Jasmine Hsu

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Emma Slings**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Pablo Neruda  
Author of **"If You Forget Me"**

Dear Pablo Neruda,

Hats off to you: you've done it. You've done what I've been struggling to do, or maybe refusing to do, because I don't want to accept the reality. You took the feelings that've been compressed and swirling around in my body and expressed them with your poem **"If You Forget Me."** Why did you do that? Why did you force me to face the truth?

It was the summer going into my senior year when I found out we were moving. After graduation my family would pack everything up and ship ourselves three hours north to start a new life in a small farming community where the majority of the population was made up of the inmates at the county jail. I wasn't ready to give up the fast-paced, Chicago-suburb lifestyle for one that included sharing the roads with combines, milk trucks, and cattle trailers.

Throughout my senior year, I struggled with the idea of moving. Yes, everyone would be leaving for college, but I would be the only one that wouldn't come home. Summers and Christmas breaks would fly by and soon I would be forgotten; my lifelong friends would soon forget me.

As I was struggling with the idea of becoming a nobody to my best friends, I stumbled upon your poem. Although **"If You Forget Me"** is about longing between lovers, I find that it applies to my situation. Just as you began, so to my friends: "I want you to know one thing." I want them to know that I have loved the time we've spent together, whether on the playground at our grade school, kicking the ball in a herd on the pee-wee soccer fields, or grown up sipping overpriced coffee or wandering down backroads to find a river to swim in. I treasure the time we've had, but I also want them to know this: "If little by little you stop loving me I shall stop loving you little by little."

It hurts to think that I might soon mean nothing to those I currently love, but you have helped me realize that relationships are a thing that cannot be forced. They are a two-way street. Both parties need to show effort. I hope, as you have said in your work, that my friends return to me; that our memories and bonds carry them back, but hope is all I can do.

Sincerely,  
Emma Slings

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Angel Vasquez**  
Arsenal Technical High School, Indianapolis  
Letter to Porsha Olayiwola  
Author of **“Angry Black Woman”**

Dear Porsha Olayiwola,

**“Angry Black Woman”** was the first time I ever heard your powerful voice. This was the first of various poems I heard you perform. **“Angry Black Woman”** was the catalyst towards the liberation of my melanin, towards the liberation of my voice.

“I am pissed the fuck off,” a statement that reverberated within my mind. As I sit in my room and hear your words for the first time, everything stops. I come to a standstill with time and existence, and finally, after a long pause, I breathe. I listen intently as your voice echoes within my room ricocheting off the four walls, and somehow becoming amplified. The room is static, almost as if a natural order had become unbalanced, and the silence that filled my room was on the verge of breaking, but was appalled. The silence that filled my room was in a state of shock. The air seemed to carry a new energy.

As I hear your words, I begin to realize that I too am pissed the fuck off, I am MAD. I have a lifetime’s worth of anger. I am bound to a system of statistics. I am bound to the white God’s hand, and his blond, blue-eyed son. I am repressed by the straight white male patriarchy and live in what my suppressor would consider a broken home. I have slowly become marginalized within the world and have become a statistic. I am nothing but a statistic in a history book.

I am the statistics they read to white kids about broken homes, divorced parents, teen pregnancies, and absent fathers. I am nothing in the world without statistics. I am nothing but the white man’s constant reminder of his failed reparations. I am the reminder of his illegitimate children, conceived from the raping of my people. I am the physical manifestation of the white man’s biggest fear, I am a minority.

And as I sit and listened to your words, I begin to make a checklist. It’s almost as if I was filling out paperwork that had a set of prerequisites, and these prerequisites would answer the question “Are you, or are you not oppressed?” The answer, though obvious, left me baffled. As I continuously checked yes on the checklist, I began to realize the life of conformity within white standards I had been programmed to live in.

I have gained a certain type of freedom through your poetry, a new sense of awareness. Through your powerful voice, I found mine. I am not a victim, nor will I conform. I am entitled to my anger.

Kindest regards,  
Angel Vazquez

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Megan York**  
Northwestern High School, Kokomo  
Letter to Sally Warner  
Author of *Sort of Forever*

Dear Sally Warner,

It was a horrible experience watching someone that had been with me for my whole life pass away. Seeing the heartbeat on the monitor flat line and realizing that person would never be in my life again. A pain boiled inside of my chest, my throat tightened, and I felt as if I was going to faint. Time froze. Then, the guilt hit me. All the arguments, fights, and hurtful words that person and I had exchanged over the years are the only things I could remember about them. It was as if all the good times had been forgotten completely, but those times were the ones that I needed to remember most.

I was ten years old when my grandpa died. I had never truly experienced the death of someone close to me before. I thought I was the only person in the world who had experienced the pain I felt while watching him take his last breath. His death was peaceful just like Nana's in your book *Sort of Forever*. The slow breaths turned into even slower breaths, until there was no breath at all.

It all happened rather quickly. One moment everyone was excited that Grandpa would get to come home from the hospital soon. He had been in there for months due to several illnesses. The next moment, he had a stroke and died a few days later. My grandpa had always been in my life. He used to drive me to school and tell me old stories of himself when he was a pilot in the Air Force. When he passed away, all those memories I had with him had faded. When I read *Sort of Forever* I realized Cady and I both had a hard time dealing with the mood swings our loved ones had experienced towards the end of their lives. I only remembered when he was grumpy due to his medications, when he could not get out of bed due to his horrible nausea, or when he found out he could not walk by himself anymore.

When I read *Sort of Forever* I was able to understand what Cady was going through when Nana was dying of cancer. Cady couldn't really understand why Nana's attitude was so dismal all the time. She was less active, she was depressed, and pessimistic about almost every aspect of the world. My grandpa went through this same mindset towards the end of his life as well. It was as if he was not the same grandpa I had loved and grown up with. Cady and I both felt like we had already lost the person we loved before they truly passed away.



When my grandpa died I wasn't necessarily sad for him because he passed away. I felt relieved that his struggle was finally over, but I was sadder for myself because I could no longer experience the joys of life with him. I knew he was not there for me to talk to anymore, but I did not want to talk to anyone else either. I completely understood why Cady felt so introverted after Nana's death. She went through a phase of self-loathing just as I did. Why couldn't he just stay in my life forever?

After finally accepting the fact that my grandpa was gone, I began to regret not spending quality time with him during his last months of life. I kept telling myself that I could have gone to the nursing home more, or came and visited him more often when he was sick in the hospital. When I read about Cady visiting Nana as often as she could, even when Nana was in the hospital in a coma, I began to feel guiltier than before. I wished that I could have had that one, last, happy moment I could cherish in my heart forever with him. I began to envy Cady. She got to experience one of those final heartwarming moments with Nana when they decided to TP the house that ruined their favorite hill.

When I read about this final moment between these two best friends, I realized I could not envy Cady because no two lives are the same. I realized I had many of those heartwarming moments. I just hadn't realized those would be the final ones. If I had not read about one of Cady and Nana's final conversations, I may have never truly been able to remember and cherish my grandfather's life.

Your book helped me deeply connect with my own emotions while inspiring me to overcome my struggles. The pressure I felt that caused me anger, frustration, and sadness had finally been lifted after I read *Sort of Forever*. Now when I think of my grandpa, I do not feel the guilt that I had before. Instead, I feel happy for the time I got to spend with him, the laughs, the fun trips, and the love he had for me. I may not have had that perfect, last, heartwarming moment with him, but I had many, many others. Just as Cady and Nana had observed, "They were the good old days. Only we just didn't know it yet."

Sincerely,  
Megan York

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Brittany Benson**

Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to Anne Sexton

Author of “**Cinderella**”

Dear Anne Sexton,

Your poem “**Cinderella**” really left my head swirling not only because I saw the story from a new perspective, but because I am a living example of the concept of this story. Two loving parents, a large and safe home, Christian education, church every Sunday. I am not living “that story.” Instead, I am a story of a sheltered teenage girl living the life that my grandma has lived before me. My life has become predictable; nothing new, nothing spontaneous, nothing unusual.

Anne Sexton, you have challenged me to look at my life from another perspective and do something about it to make it my own. I am going to make my story a story that is new and different than all my ancestors, something that challenges me to make a name for myself. I want to be that person in that story that gets people talking. A small town girl with plans and goals makes a name for herself in a predictable society.

Society has changed. Years ago there was so much ambition and so many hard workers. To make a name for yourself, you worked hard and earned it. They turned their lives into “that story.” Stories like my grandma’s. My grandma grew up with her eight siblings on a farm. Day in and day out she was in the field from sunrise to sunset to help support her extremely poor family. Some nights, they had so little money and food that they could only eat a piece of bread with ketchup on it. Finding my grandpa was her escape to make a better life for herself. My grandpa was drafted to fight in Vietnam. While he was gone, my grandma worked non-stop to earn money for them and their future family. When he returned, they opened their own business and now have tons of money, a great reputation, and a name for themselves. They are “that story.”

Today, the only people making names for themselves are celebrities buying themselves fame and making scandals for popularity. I do not want to live the way Cinderella did. Despite the fairy tale, the truth is that Cinderella married a shallow man but everyone assumed they lived happily ever after. Cinderella was expected to marry and settle for what her husband wanted. She did not have a life of her own and that’s the way I felt while reading this poem. I am following in the exact steps of my mother. She’s great, but I don’t want to live the same predictable life as she did.

Thank you, Anne Sexton for helping me realize that I need a life of my own to be “that story.” Your poem will continue to challenge me to do the unpredictable and make my own story.

Sincerely,  
Brittany Benson

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Sam Boonstra**

Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to Robert Herrick

Author of **“To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”**

Dear Robert Herrick,

I was walking down the hallway the other day, hearing only fragments of conversation, and I heard, or at least I thought I heard—what does it matter, really?—someone use *introvert* as a playful insult. That struck me as both odd and rude. *It’s not okay to mock him for being an introvert*, I thought. *He can’t help it. . .* But then I thought of your poem **“To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”** and how it changed me: from an introvert to an extrovert, from a secluded boy to an involved (young) man, and from one ashamed of himself to one who can face each day proud of his own identity.

I often break up my life—though not exactly in these terms—into three sections: before I encountered your poem, while I struggled through the meaning and implementations of your poem, and life post-poem. Such a sectioning of this letter will, I think, help you understand why I admire **“To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time.”**

Soon before I encountered your poem, I was in my last year of middle school, preparing and nervous for high school. Only a few kids were going to the same high school, and I didn’t know them; I was the introvert. I was quiet, reserved, and timid. I admired my classmates who could yell and goof off—I could never do that. I wasn’t like them. *And I can’t help it*, I thought.

Then I read **“To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time.”** I forget exactly how it came before me. Perhaps it was my brother, who was my best friend at the time; why make friends when you can talk to the brother you already know? Or maybe it was in one of my poetry books; I loved books, as many introverts do. Either way, I was confused. After all, Robert Herrick, we are separated by a great many years in age and in time. But I am so thankful for that confusion. If I had understood that poem initially, I would not have spent so long trying to determine what it meant.

After deciphering the poetic 17th century language of your poem, I was suddenly faced with an interesting proposition: I have control over my identity. Today, I chuckle at that statement, but to 8th-grade-me, that was a confusing and revolutionary concept. *If I admire the extroverts, but am not*

*one, I can somehow . . . become one?* I began to test your message in little ways: running with my classmates at recess instead of sitting and reading or talking, finding new friends to spend my whole day with instead of being solely with one other student, even throwing playful jabs and jokes around at lunch instead of sitting quietly in the middle of conversation.

But for the most part, I was still the introvert, still who I'd always been. Soon I graduated from grade school. That summer, I read again "**To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time**" and made a decision. I *would* be an extrovert. I *would* "use my time" when my "youth and blood are warmer." I *would not tarry*.

And I struggled. I didn't know how to "gather my rosebuds" yet. The outcome of my freshman year was not much different from the grade school experience: no friends and little activity. But my motivation was different. Even if I was struggling, I was still making much of my time. And your poem has brought me today to many friends, a true enjoyment of my prime, and the ability to encourage others, as you did for me, to live with the vigor and joy that we can while we have the time.

Your poem was a new way of thinking in a time when I needed it. Your poem was a spark lighting the fire of my new life. "**To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time**" shaped me into not only an extrovert, but a man proud of his face, his name, his character, and his life.

Sincerely,  
Sam Boonstra

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Heidi Bultema**

Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to Anthony Doerr

Author of *All the Light We Cannot See*

Dear Anthony Doerr,

By today's standards, the more possessions a person has; the more successful the person is. If the person has a big house, name brand clothes, the newest technology, or the sleekest car, immediately all eyes are drawn to the material possessions. Others covet what they don't have and think only of how to gain these things for themselves. Greed, one simple word, is something that so many people, including myself, fall into every day.

Your novel, *All the Light We Cannot See* helped reveal to me that I was doing exactly what Major von Rumpel was doing with the Sea of Flames. Von Rumpel did anything to get the Sea of Flames to save himself from dying, only one small example of greed in your novel. I read your novel during the summer, the time of the year when my friends' families go on exotic vacations, go to cottages with Mastercraft boats, or swim in their in-ground swimming pools. Now, I've gone on some great vacations, been to many cottages, and swam in in-ground pools, but as my friends left, I found myself being jealous of them. I wanted more of these experiences. I would never hurt anyone, like von Rumpel, to get these things, but I did want the same number of vacations my friends received. It is so easy to fall into the trap of greed and comparing myself in order to gain material possessions, but then I met Marie-Laure.

Marie-Laure spoke to me. She was the opposite of von Rumpel. You created a character to become the light in the world of darkness that was World War II, and ironically she was blind. Blindness is not something I take lightly. At a summer retreat, I met a boy named Tommy who was blind. He went blind as an infant, and now as a teenager he is extremely successful. His success doesn't come from his material possessions, but from his intelligence. Tommy is one of the smartest people I have ever met, just like Marie-Laure. She used her intelligence to save herself during the war. Tommy could be greedy and wish for his eyesight back so that he can see what everyone else sees and exclaims over, but instead he is grateful for what he has been given. Without meeting Marie-Laure, I would not have realized what a blessing it was to meet Tommy.

*All the Light We Cannot See*, through its many twists, gave me an attitude check. I thought through things I never would have before. It gave

me the light to see the things that I wouldn't have been able to see without the novel. Answers may not be clear at times, but what is unseen is sometimes more powerful. Sometimes it takes wrong turns to get back on the right path. Marie-Laure exemplifies this through her character in *All the Light We Cannot See*. She could have given up when von Rumpel was in her house, but she didn't. In a way, her blindness gave her strength. In the same way, trials can build character and strength in a person. A greedy person might wish for fewer trials to have a better life, but Marie-Laure endured her trials and became a fighter. She set an example for me to endure my trials. I should learn to be grateful and become a better person through them.

Thank you for giving me a book that put my life into perspective. I hope to use *All the Light We Cannot See* to check myself. This way I can become more grateful for everything I have been given.

Sincerely,  
Heidi Bultema

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Delaney Church**  
New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne  
Letter to David Levithan  
Author of *Every Day*

Dear David Levithan,

I believe that people are more alike than they think. Supposedly, there are endless differences that distinguish you and me, and us from other people. I have observed so many people, and noticed that appearances can get in the way of the connections, and can generate so many false assumptions. Why is it that sexuality, race, and gender are viewed as so important, but personality comes second? As I turned your book over in my hands, that was the question that probed my brain. I was intrigued to see how life would be for someone who prioritizes personality and the heart over anything else.

As a young girl, I would say I was similar to A. When I saw people, I searched their eyes for kindness, honesty, and loyalty. People's actions revealed so much more to me, more than a pretty face. It was all so simple. Looking back at it now, I envy my younger self. Overtime, the world proved itself to lack fairness, and what was once most important to me, became what was least important to me. Suddenly, what kind of clothes you wore, whether or not your body had curves in the right places, and how many dollars your brand new pair of shoes was worth, now defined you, or at least I thought it did. It was almost as if my brain was gradually rewiring itself, training itself to notice the outer layer of people upon first impression. I wondered what it would be like to look past the skin that coats your being, and see what is much deeper within.

This particular day wasn't seemingly different from any other book scavenge. As I entered Barnes and Nobles, the mental image of the section I love immediately popped into my thoughts, urging me to it. Knowing exactly where this location was, I made a beeline to the young adult section towards the back of the store. Before I could get there, my eyes grazed a smaller book display somewhat in the center of the larger aisle between the shelves. I decided to stop and examine it, observing that bestselling young adult books were stacked here. I was intrigued, needless to say. I examined the front covers of the first few books, picking them up one by one and reading the first few pages. None had piqued my interest, and I am exceptionally impatient, so I figured I would pick up one more and then head to the young adult section.



Something about the book cover caught my attention. The fairly simple font of the title, and the image of what seemed to be floating bodies on the cover, roused my curiosity. I turned the book over in my hands, and instantaneously became fascinated. The idea of someone who switches bodies everyday raised so many wonders and questions in my head. Before I knew it, I was exiting Barnes and Noble with a single book in my crinkled plastic bag.

As I sat in my bed for the next couple nights, I experienced a life that wasn't mine, but felt so similar. I lived as a person who never, ever simply judged a person by their appearance. I lived as A, a person with no sexuality, gender, or race. I became engrossed in his thoughts, so much so that I believed my own thoughts became entangled with his. Over a span of less than a week I was educated on who a person truly is, and what makes a person worth loving. Reading this book helped me see people the way they were meant to be seen. I was able to distinguish loyal, kind, smart, funny, and dependable people, from cruel, dishonest, and condescending people. Unlike other times I have tried to identify people, I discerned people by their character, rather than the outside. As I turned the last page over, I was left with a sense of gratefulness; gratefulness for what this book has taught me about the value of personality and perceiving.

I never knew how much a fictional being could teach me about viewing the world. I discovered answers to questions I have always had since I was a young girl. I have been encouraged to search for more than what just presents itself on the surface. As I learned about A, I began to imagine myself as someone who doesn't have an appearance. Underneath it all, we are just people with traits and characteristics that make you, you. As my viewpoint continues to redefine itself, I have you, and A, to thank. Perhaps I can begin to look at the world as A does, and how I once did.

Sincerely,  
Delaney Church

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Lauren Courtney**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Walter Farley  
Author of *The Black Stallion*

Dear Walter Farley,

My relationship with my mother had been tense for as long as I could remember. We never quite saw eye to eye regarding most issues and seemingly pointless arguments would leave us giving each other the silent treatment. Things began to escalate during my middle school years, when I began homeschooling with her. With me being home nearly every moment of the day our problems skyrocketed. I soon got into trouble for nearly everything I did. When it seemed as though nothing could offer solace, I had to do a report on a book of yours.

My mother tried reading to me on several occasions and it never seemed to go quite the way it was supposed to, but upon finding your *Black Stallion* series, these reading sessions set off a spark that would ultimately lead to a quiet and stable relationship for both of us. What started out as a story about a boy trying to gain the trust of a wild pitch-black racehorse; a story that seems almost like a parable for how my mother and I approached each other; began to morph into the bonding and eventual understanding between a girl and her mother. While I cannot say the series solved all of our problems, it gave us a lengthy period of time where we were both on the same page, both mentally and literally. Our time spent together shifted our relationship onto a healthier path and I could finally have a relationship with someone I never thought I could win over.

While you never got to see the completion of the series, I could never repay you for the impact your works had on my life and family. The first book gave my relationship with my mother the jumpstart it so desperately needed, and the books that followed continued to support our efforts until we no longer needed to read a book to understand the other's point of view. By the time we had finished the story of a boy who became a professional jockey just to spend time with his horse, we had learned to work through our differences and settle our issues efficiently. We had tamed our Black. While neither of us are perfect and we still often butt heads, your books were the gateway to a relationship and the key to an understanding I never knew was possible.

Thank you,  
Lauren Courtney

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Chloe Cowen**  
Franklin County High School, Brookville  
Letter to R. J. Palacio  
Author of *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

When I was 13 months old my mom flew all the way to China and brought me to my home, America. To clarify, my home is a small town. Ninety-nine percent of it is probably white people. In that small town, I went to a private school from kindergarten to eighth grade, so I basically had the same friends my whole elementary, middle school, and junior high life. Growing up during elementary school I never paid attention to the fact that I looked different, and none of my friends did either. I started to grow up, and yes I knew I was adopted from China, but I never realized how different I looked from my friends. All my friends were so kind, and because we basically grew up together, it never really came up that I looked different.

I can connect to Auggie because we both stand out. At my school you could put me in a line with my friends and you could pick me out to be the most different looking. You could do the same with Auggie's facial deformities. I was lucky enough to be placed in a school where it didn't matter what I looked like. My friends loved me the same; Auggie, not so much. People would call him ugly or talk about him in front of him. Being that Auggie and I look different than most, I can understand the pain he must've felt when people made fun of him or talked about him.

My oldest brother was at the high school. He played football, and of course it was a Friday, meaning it was time for Friday night football. Usually I would take my best friend, and we would go to the game, and of course run around with our friends. I vividly remember we were running and then another boy (who was only a little older than me) called me a mean name then ran away. I was absolutely hurt, and started to cry. I asked myself what I did to deserve this. I never did anything to him. I didn't even know him. That comment made me feel ugly. It made me feel worthless. I had my friends who were there to comfort me, and so did my parents. They are a lot like Auggie's. They are always there when I need them and are extremely comforting.

As I have gotten older I have started to embrace my ethnicity. I have learned not to care so much that I look different. I used to not like pictures

because I always felt ugly just because I didn't think I was pretty like my "normal" white friends. As I have grown up I realized everyone is beautiful no matter our ethnicity. I am just like any other teenage girl who takes selfies and I finally have given myself self-love. I like me the way I am. Auggie finally sees, like I did, that he should embrace who he is. He finally realizes that it doesn't matter what others think. I love that he ends up taking off his astronaut helmet, so people could see his face. Like they say "What matters most is on the inside." Yes, I may look different, but I have been told that I have a pretty great personality. Reading your book I see Auggie's amazing personality, and so does everyone else when Auggie wins the "Henry Ward Beecher Medal."

Reading your book has made me a whole new person. We need to embrace who you are, and that's including your looks. Through your book we see Auggie's kindness, and he is soon rewarded with a medal and his new friends. Auggie was put through physical and verbal abuse, but no matter what he always showed kindness. One of the biggest things that your book has made me see is that your kindness will be rewarded. I realized that I needed to show kindness. For example I wanted to watch what I say to people. I realized if I didn't like being called something mean, then I shouldn't call others mean things. I know the pain of getting pushed down, but I don't want to look back on my life and regret me being the cause of someone hurting. I feel like I would rather get pushed down, then push others down. I want to help be a difference in this world, by showing kindness, and I have your book for helping to make a difference.

Sincerely,  
Chloe Cowen

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Elizabeth De Young**  
Illiana Christian High School, Crown Point  
Letter to Dr. Seuss  
Author of *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*

Dear Dr. Seuss,

Sometimes words are just words on a page. Words are black and white, but seem oh, so grey. Words are straight and curved, flat two dimensional orbs on a dry paper. But when I read your words, they become three dimensional, flowing art. They take on a special meaning to me. Your words changed me, made me who I am, shaped me from when I was a shapeless piece of clay in my mother's loving embrace. Your words shape me today. They dance off the page in their simple short phrases, translating into scrolls of meaning, shedding new light on my life. *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* changed the way that I view myself and others. I now see everyone for who they are, not for what they belong to. I now see that I am not the same as anyone else, I am not what my parents want me to be, and that's okay. I now see that I can be anything that I want to be, especially with college choices looming on the horizon, threatening to close in on me.

I was (and still am) a person who blends in, likes to go with the flow, morph into the typical student mold. Looking around, I see varsity athletes, technology geeks, drama folk, shop guys, petty populars, and try-hards. After one of these long days of seeing stereotypes, I went to a babysitting job. When it was time for bed, the kids asked for me to read *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*. When I read the line about no one thing being the same, I was struck by how my everyday worldview was filtered by society's lens, and not by the lens that I learned growing up. After the kids were snuggled up in their beds, I sat, and I thought. And I thought some more. Your words were a slap to the face. I opened my eyes and saw real people for what they truly were. The varsity athletes were also mathletes, volunteers, or even musicians; geeks were athletic, talented, and social; drama folk were sisters and brothers, employees, and soccer players; shop guys were hard workers, family supporters, and dancers; populars were chemists, pianists, and artists; try-hards were administrators, influencers, and inventors. Every person is their own person, not their group's stereotype.

Not one creature in your book had the same job or interests. From the Wumps to the Yangs, the occupations keep rolling. The creatures pick what they want to be. Some are loud, and some have eleven fingers. I want

to be a structural engineer and pursue music on the side. I love math and science, but I also love music. Thanks to your book, I realize that I don't have to fit a certain mold, predestined by my family or friends. I am making my own mold that keeps changing each new day.

I want to thank you for making me think. I've realized all the things that I can think. I have started to count the fish, to see their colors. You helped me to realize that others are all different sorts of fish, and that I am my very own special type of fish. "Today is gone. Today was fun. Tomorrow is another one. Every day, from here to there, funny things are everywhere." I can be whatever I want to be, and every new dawn brings new excitement for my unmolded life. Thank you, Dr. Seuss, for opening my eyes with your words, so simple, yet so meaningful.

Sincerely,  
Elizabeth De Young

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Ella Deck**  
Northwestern High School, Kokomo  
Letter to R. J. Palacio  
Author of *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

How can a child handle spending his life feeling like the world is against him? Or that he has to hide who he is because he looks different than what society says is “normal?” How can something that is completely out of a person’s control make others treat him differently than they do everyone else? These are all reasons why people who are classified as the outcast, the oddball, or the weird one need someone to fight for them.

The first time I read *Wonder*, I was in the fifth grade. I remember walking through Books-A-Million at the mall in my town and seeing it sitting on the shelf. The title of the book and the boy’s face on the cover, staring at me with his one eye, seemed like it was calling out to me. *Wonder* looked at me in a longing way, like it was meant for me to read. I bought it immediately, and to this day it is still the book that has made the greatest impact on my life.

I was born with a congenital nevus which contained precancerous melanoma cells on the back of my skull. The cells were especially dangerous because they were underneath my hair and could not be easily monitored for other types of cancer as I grew. My parents were told that if the nevus was not removed, it could become deadly over time. The first three years of my life were spent in and out of the hospital. My parents had to drive me an hour away to Riley Hospital in Indianapolis where I had my first surgery, which consisted of having balloons put underneath the skin on my scalp to stretch it out. I continued to go to Riley once every week for procedures to have the balloons inflated. This left my head looking deformed, like giant balls were sticking out all over. It was a head that you would think should belong to a monster in a horror movie rather than to a little one-year-old girl.

When reading *Wonder*, I really felt for Auggie. I know what it is like to have people stare at you everywhere you go. I remember a time when I was running through the hallway of my grandma’s house, my aunt’s friend yelled in surprise as I passed him, “Woah! What the hell was that?” I was young so it did not hurt much at the time, but thinking about the way it made my mom cry, and how my dad got so angry, hurts worse than the

fact that the guy even said it. It was not my fault I looked the way I did, yet people still treated me like I should not be here, and it was the exact same way for Auggie. Reading about all of the taunting Auggie had to go through made me want to scream. Why are people the way they are? What if it was their brother or sister, or even themselves who were looked at and treated differently? How would they feel then?

Auggie wearing an astronaut helmet when he went out in public is a part of the book that I can really relate to. After my first surgery, family and friends started buying me hats to wear when I went out. I ended up with a hat in about every color, and I loved them so much. Hats were my escape just like Auggie's astronaut helmet was his escape. I believe no child should ever have to walk around in fear of being made fun of because of the way they look, but sadly, not everyone has the same mindset as I do. Society has a twisted way of telling us what the standards of the world are. If anyone is found below these standards, he or she is looked at as lesser than. Maybe if everyone knew what it felt like to be singled out, the way we treated others would be different.

I started preschool a few months after my fourth and last surgery. The balloons had been taken out, and I was left with a shaved head covered with scars. I remember being so nervous to go to school because I did not want the kids to make fun of me. My dad told me if anyone asked about it to say I was swimming in the ocean and was bit by a shark. He was like my Via. He was my protector and always stood up for me when people looked at me weird or made rude comments towards me.

Reading *Wonder* showed me that there are people in this world who know what I have been through, and have even been through worse. August Pullman had his parents, Via, and his friend Jack Will to help him overcome the challenges he faced and let him know that he had a purpose in this world. He showed me that even when it feels like the world is against me, I am capable of things bigger than what anyone can imagine. Now when someone sees and asks about one of my scars, I can proudly say, "I am a survivor. I am just like you," because Auggie's precept is true, "Everyone in the world should get a standing ovation at least once in their life because we all overcometh the world."

Sincerely,  
Ella Deck



**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Caleighsta Edmonds**

New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Angie Thomas

Author of *The Hate U Give*

Dear Angie Thomas,

When you reside in a small city – so unheard of that when brought up in conversation you're often asked just where exactly it is – it's easy to ignore the controversial topics, or at least *pretend* to ignore them. Police brutality is discussed in a hushed tone, if even discussed at all. News coverage on the shooting of an unarmed black man is quickly switched to something more upbeat, or turned off altogether. Even though the population consists of a fair amount of African American citizens, and you can identify skin tones similar to yours in a classroom, a more dominant race is always present. The effect of this being that talking about unfair treatment, injustice, and matters alike is simply not acceptable; an unspoken rule to remain oblivious. Living in a place like this might seem unusual at first, but as humans we are taught to adapt to our surroundings. I had successfully done just that, until I read *The Hate U Give*.

On a seemingly unremarkable day in early August of last year, my English teacher announced that every Tuesday and Friday, a portion of class would be spent reading. Not in the best of moods, I stood up grudgingly and scoured the room for a novel to pass the time. Among a heap of books that were close to toppling over, something caught my eye. A girl with dark skin, darker than mine, and a large afro stood out against a white background. She even seemed to be wearing Jordans. Compelled to investigate further, I grabbed the book and went back to my seat. After quickly scanning the summary on the inside cover, I thought to myself “Okay, this will do.”

Two weeks after that, on a Friday afternoon, my tears were splattered on the page I had stopped at, temporarily altering the black ink. “What are you doing?” I yelled to my inner conscious, “You read the summary, you knew it was bound to happen,” I continued to question myself. Yet still, the killing of Khalil shook me to my core. I realized then, that it was easy to turn off your emotions, effortless to be exempt from pain or sadness, when you didn't know the victim that appeared on the television screen. I wondered about the mother, father, sister, cousins, and other family members that were left behind. How did Sandra Bland's parents cope? What was the last thing Tamir Rice's mother said to her 12 year old son?

Feelings, of strife and grief and everything in between, overcame me. I tried to step away from *The Hate U Give*, to go back to state of unabashed ignorance, but it was too late, I was already too invested to stop. With deep breaths, and a tissue every now and then, I finished the novel. I sympathized with Starr, and her split personalities at Garden Heights and Williamson Prep. I didn't want to be that girl who made everything about race, who turned every conversation into a political discussion, and how could I when I had never faced discrimination or racism myself? Still, just like Starr felt a duty to keep Khalil's memory alive, I felt that I had to do something, *anything*, to advocate for myself and other African Americans.

*The Hate U Give* taught me to be the change I want to see in the world. I don't stand on top of cars and shout protest chants into bullhorns (my mom would kill me), but I do believe I'm making a difference in my community. I started a Black History Club at my high school, a safe space to talk about issues the black community face today, and reminisce on our past. I believe that in order to improve our future, we must look to what has already happened. I want to say thank you, for pulling me from the ignorance that clouded my vision, and tugging on heart strings I thought were too fragile to touch.

Sincerely,  
Caleighsta Edmonds

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Eli Edwards**

Northwestern High School, Kokomo

Letter to James Dashner

Author of *The Eye of Minds*

Dear James Dashner,

US soldiers are constantly putting their lives on the line for our safety and freedom, being kidnapped, tortured, and killed all for the people of their country. In World War I 116,708 US troops were killed, 416,800 in World War II, and another 58,220 in Vietnam. These huge numbers were terrifying to hear when I had recently been informed that my dad was going to be deployed. My dad being deployed meant that my whole life would need to be rearranged. Now I would have to be the man of the house, I wouldn't have anybody to talk to about my anxieties, and I wouldn't have a father to give me advice and help me with the daily problems of life. Now who would give me tips during football season and go to all of my games? The stress was starting to take over my life, I was breaking down daily and had no outlet for my fear of the months to come, until I found your book, *The Eye of Minds*.

My dad is a psychologist in the Army National Guard. He has been in the military since I was in first grade, and I've always been on the edge when he was gone. He has been traveling since he joined, going to Washington, D.C. almost every month and having occasional month-long trips. The trips that lasted a month or more always gave me the most trouble. The longest he was ever gone was for a little over a month, and I struggled daily toward the end of that trip. In the past he had told us about possibly being deployed but had always reassured us that he would more than likely not have to. Until one day, my dad came home and sat my whole family down in the living room to tell us that he was going to be deployed to Kuwait the following April for a six month period. We discussed how the months would go and what some of our plans would be without him. It was hard to talk about a whole summer and football season without my dad that had always been there for me since I was little, he was even going to miss my own birthday.

I had no outlet for the constant anxiety of my dad leaving, but when I found *The Eye of Minds*, I finally had an escape from the reality of a time without my dad. Michael entering the VirtNet in your book made me imagine myself in his situation, in another world, away from all of my struggles and worries. I traveled along with Michael and left all of my problems behind. I imagined myself being in a separate world where I

could do anything I wanted and go on any adventure that I choose. I would stay up late at night reading your book just to experience a sense of relaxation and comfort. I would spend more time reading than anything else and whenever I started to become anxious or think about my dad leaving, I would open my book and start reading.

At the beginning of your book when Michael is trying to convince Tanya not to jump off of the Golden Gate Bridge, it made me think of my dad. My dad, being a psychologist in the army, has been on call with suicidal soldiers and has saved multiple lives. When Michael is in the VirtNet, meeting new people, coding in food, and constantly having the time of his life, it gave me some hope of a better future for myself. Michael always had the confidence and intelligence to overcome the obstacles he faced, which reminded me of a saying my dad always used, "If you think you can, you probably will, and if you think you can't you probably won't." I had the confidence to overcome the anxiety of being without a dad, I believed in myself, always remembering my father's words. I could finally relax and picture a better life. I was no longer focusing on the reality of my dad leaving. The virtual reality of the VirtNet proved to me that when I flipped the perspective, I saw a completely different reality. I saw a better viewpoint than my previous image. The VirtNet not only gave Michael an escape, it gave me an escape, a sense of shelter and comfort.

After I found your book, I was no longer terrified about my dad being deployed. I knew, with your book being part of a series, I would be able to continue reading your books and have an escape from reality. After a few months of reading *The Eye of Minds* and the rest of *The Mortality Doctrine* series, my dad came home from work to tell us that he would no longer have to be deployed. Your book made me realize that everything isn't as bad as it seems, and there is always an escape, whether it is reading a book or going to an alternate reality where anything is possible.

A thankful reader,  
Eli Edwards

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Justin Foust**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Kohei Horikoshi  
Author of *My Hero Academia*

Dear Kohei Horikoshi,

In order to achieve a dream, you must first pursue it. When there are many other easier options around, it's so easy to give up the chase. For someone like me, indecisive and full of doubts, the chase can seem even more intimidating. But your books showed me how to pursue a dream relentlessly. *My Hero Academia* pushes me to chase the dreams that I doubted. Thanks to your books, I won't let doubt stop me in my pursuits.

I have always been indecisive and doubtful. When I was younger, I would stand in the store and debate about which toy to pick. I would doubt which one was truly better, and I could stand there for hours if my parents would let me. Right after making the decision, I would still have those doubts, but later on my child self would be pleased with the toy he picked, and he would have forgotten all about his dilemma. I now find myself faced with even bigger choices, of colleges, majors, and careers, and still find my indecision and doubt interfering in what I may want to pursue.

These doubts built my connection to Izuku Midoriya, as he was doubting the dream he wanted to pursue in high school. Izuku inspired me when he turned his doubt into a relentless pursuit of his dream, by believing he could achieve it. I wanted to try and pursue a path like him, where I could keep going strong even if I or the people around me doubted that I could reach that dream.

Many times, dreams can feel impossible, especially before the first step is taken in pursuing that dream. With numbers all around me about acceptance rates, tuition rates, and careers, it is difficult for me to even make that first step in that pursuit. Sometimes all someone needs to take that first step, however, is a word. In Izuku I saw an inspiring decisiveness at the moment someone told him he could achieve his dream. This moment where he shed his doubts helped push me to seriously pursue my own dreams.

I admit that I am still not sure what path I want to choose in college and the career afterwards. With so many options, it remains difficult to choose where to pursue my own dreams. *My Hero Academia*, however, has inspired me to pursue whatever dream I choose without giving up. It has

shown me how I need to cling to the hope and words that push me along and not let myself be stopped by my doubts. But when I am tripped by doubts and fall, I need to get back up again. You have given me the push I need to start pursuing my dreams and overcoming my doubt along the way. Thank you.

Sincerely,  
Justin Foust

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Matthew Fulton**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Victor Hugo  
Author of *Les Misérables*

Dear Victor Hugo,

Years ago, I went with my family to downtown Chicago to visit the museums and get lunch. It was my first time ever visiting a metropolitan area of that scale, and I was excited. My excitement, however, quickly changed into fear and despair as we got off the train. It was the first time I had ever seen a homeless man in my life. I tried to question my mother, but she yanked my arm hard, pulling me away as quickly as she could. Later as we were walking down the streets, I saw another man holding a sign and asking for money. My mom once again tugged me away from him. I asked her why we did not help him. She simply told me that we could do nothing for him. She explained to me that many men like him end up in poverty because of their own past choices.

I, like my mother, have looked down on people who are in different and more difficult circumstances than I am. I ventured back to Chicago on my own, deciding to drive the hour trip instead of taking a train, and I saw more struggling people. I even began to notice them closer to my home. In both instances, I looked down on them with disdain, thinking that it was something that they had done that must have put them in that place. However, last summer I began to read your book *Les Misérables*, and my view was forever changed.

As I watched the story of Jean Valjean unfold before my eyes, I could not stop thinking about the people on the streets in Chicago. I began to have a better understanding of them, and I began to feel anger towards myself for my ways of thinking. Watching Jean Valjean and others like Fantine being pushed down and cast out by society broke my heart. I continued to see how society and the way it was set up destroyed their lives, and they could do nothing about it.

The destruction of their lives because of society destroyed me because I realized what side I was on in our world today. I was on the side that looked down on people like them and pushed them down to the dirt. I was a part of the society that threw them to the ground, refused to let them stand up, and then pointed at them with contempt for living in the filth. I was a part of the problem.

Your novel has opened my eyes. I now realize the horrible things I was taught to believe while growing up. I do not blame my mother for teaching it to me because she was taught that way too. Many people are taught to look down on the homeless and struggling. *Les Misérables* has shown me that I cannot look down on them because of their situations. I may not understand how or why they are where they are, but now I understand that I must not shove them down. The Fantines and Valjeans of the world need help to get out of the hole that they have been thrown in. Society must not look down on them because of their horrid situations. Society must help them out of the hole instead of pushing them further into it.

Thank you for opening my eyes and showing me that everyone deserves love and compassion and that people should not be treated as less based on their social status.

Sincerely,  
Matthew Fulton



**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Grant Gibson**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Ray Bradbury  
Author of *Fahrenheit 451*

Dear Ray Bradbury,

*Fahrenheit 451* is not a book for the faint of heart, for the happy-go-luckies; for the “ignorant” if you will. They are unlikely to react to it, kind of like a corpse is unlikely to react to being slapped. What I’m trying to say is that if your target audience were those people, good luck convincing them to read a book, let alone be moved by yours.

Jokes aside, I would rather not live in bliss. Thank you for opening my eyes to that.

Nor would I want to remain complacent, especially in an age of tension where you’ll get swept away by a tide of intolerance and ignored.

And – oh – what I would sacrifice for my freedoms! To pursue that happiness which accompanies seemingly mundane tasks like learning, to liberate myself from all that ties me down and keeps me from resurfacing, to –

*I have changed my mind. Bliss is golden. Complacency is key. As for my freedoms? Well, my pursuit of happiness, which includes driving as fast as I please whenever and wherever I please, will always trump your pursuit of happiness, which is... I could care less. If you get in my way, then –*

No. Don’t listen to him. That’s my inner ignorance. He’s been on my mind ever since I read your novel. But he’s been more noticeable and I’ve fought his urges all the more. For instance, I used to think of sleep as an escape from the threats that plague our community, but now it’s just a tool that helps me stay healthy so I can fight said threats. I’ve learned that once you recognize how your ignorance is imbedded in your lifestyle, dealing with him –

*Is a piece of cake that you and I don’t have to worry about ever in your lifetime. My ignorance will leave as I grow older. But even that’s not a problem right now! Guy Montag was 30 years old when he starting reading, and reading is the ultimate chemotherapy for even the most dormant ignorance. Trust me, if you even read a billboard on your way to work, you’ll –*

It's a funny thing that my ignorance would bring up chemotherapy, because he's a cancer, actually. Leave him alone and he grows. Exponentially. I can see the same thing in Mildred Montag. Her immune system eventually caved in to allow the cancer free reign over mind and body. That's how vegetables like her could survive happily. (I don't want to say "she could live" because... is she really living?) –

*I'm sorry, but I really shouldn't write anymore to you. I'm not feeling well and I'm too tired and I've got a sore throat and I'm sore from writing in this stooped position and I'm still not –*

I'm tired of his interruptions, so I'll try to make this brief. Excuses are the coals that feed ignorance. "I fell asleep in that class, but it's not like we learn anything important there." Baloney! It's so easy to make an excuse like that, but I can guarantee –

*You know what? I think I'm done with this. I've said enough. What else is there to say? –*

The one thing I hate about ignorance is that he's persistent. He'll always be there to comfort you when your father dies, when someone tyrannical is elected into office, or when your opinions are actually challenged. It's so easy to refuse any and every one of those outcomes and submit to his embrace. But that's where you come in, Mr. Bradbury. The high of ignorance is addicting, but after reading Guy's success story, it's like a rude awakening. Like somebody slapped me, waking me up from my sleep... in a casket. How did I get here? That's a question I'm going to have to ask ignorance, honestly. He's had too much reign in my life.

Thank you, Mr. Bradbury,  
Grant Gibson

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Katarina Grube**  
Northwestern High School, Kokomo  
Letter to S.E. Hinton  
Author of *The Outsiders*

Dear S.E. Hinton,

Before I read your book *The Outsiders*, I was depressed and my own family relationship was weakening. I believed there was no good in the world and everything and everyone had no good intentions. After reading your book, I was transformed. The idea of optimism flooded inside my brain. I was amazed by the amount of good in the world I could find and even more bewildered to find the good in the things I thought I couldn't find good in. I found my family relationship extremely strengthened after reading your book. Reading your book was truly a life-changing experience.

When I was entering the 5th grade, it seemed like my life was just going downhill. It seemed as if my problems started as a little snowball and rolled to form a massive snow boulder. My dad was undergoing chemotherapy treatments for his stage four non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. My dad was my role-model in my life and I just couldn't lose him, even though my relationship was strained while he was undergoing his treatments. In addition to my dad's cancer treatments, I also had to deal with issues and arguments with my friends, therefore making life a true mental struggle.

The characters in your book each had their own obstacles that they overcame. The Greasers had to deal with the death of Johnny. Ponyboy had to endure running away from his brothers. When these memorable characters were conquering their disadvantages, I suddenly thought I could overcome my own obstacle; my own obstacle of enduring the time of my dad's cancer treatments. Just like Johnny coming back home to his brothers and the rest of the Greasers from running away, I overcame my own obstacle by being present to my family. The idea of pessimism from the massive obstacle I faced suddenly turned into optimism because I knew that I could overcome the hindrance I had to deal with by simply being with my family.

To this day, *The Outsiders* has changed my life. Today, my dad is now cancer-free. I could not have made it through without your book. I realize now that life is short and I have to be grateful for what I have, especially

family. My relationship with the rest of my family has been immensely strengthened since I read ***The Outsiders***. Thank you for your incredible novel that altered my life forever.

Sincerely,  
Kat Grube

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

Sean Kelly  
Castle High School, Newburgh  
Letter to Matt Besler  
Author of *No Other Home: Living, Leading,  
and Learning What Matters Most*

Dear Matt Besler,

After reading your book, *No Other Home: Living, Leading, and Learning What Matters Most*, I have completely changed my perspective of life and how to take advantage of my opportunities. Right now I am a young soccer player trying to accomplish my goals of playing professional soccer and I think that was one reason why I connected so well with your book. I learned many lessons while reading your book, but to me the most important one was to do things as quickly and proficiently as possible and to not procrastinate.

I applied this lesson to soccer and my life outside of soccer. Before I read the book, I would never do any work outside of soccer practice and I only worked on my skills while I was at practice. After reading the book, I started to apply this principle and started to go out to my local field to practice in my free time. This has further developed my skills and confidence. When I get in a game there are often kids older than me, but I am quicker, stronger, and mentally tougher than them, which boosts my confidence and makes me play better.

I also applied this to my school work and things in my daily life. We have all been in a situation where we didn't want to do an assignment or essay for school and we put it off until the night before. Well, I was that kid that put off every single assignment until the night before. After reading your book, I started to get my assignments done earlier, while still having quality work. I noticed that I was happier when it got done early, instead of being stressed out the night before. The best feeling I have ever had was when I was in 8th grade and had my science fair project done in November and all of my friends were coming up to me in February saying that hadn't even started on their projects.

Even if a person does not play soccer or a sport, they are still able to connect with your book and learn important life lessons. It also doesn't tell us how to live our life but lets us choose what principles we want to apply in our own life. You give us a wide variety of principles and ideas to choose from but you never tell us that this is the direction that you should take. As for me I chose the ideas of hard work and proficiency. I have never read

anything that has motivated and encouraged me as much as your book. Everyone should take the time to read this book because it will inspire them and make them a better person. Thank you for writing such a great book for the world to read.

Sincerely,  
Sean Kelly

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Kaylin Knapp**  
Franklin County High School, Brookville  
Letter to Marcus Pfister  
Author of *The Rainbow Fish*

Dear Marcus Pfister:

Inherently, as humans we are not born with an eager desire to share. It is a learned trait developed over time through the patience of our forlorn parents and our own free will. For me, I learned the lesson of sharing through *The Rainbow Fish*.

Close your eyes and imagine a toddler. One with a head full of red curly hair and a face kissed with freckles. She lays in a wooden bed with her mother holding a book. The mother's lips make out the words, "His most prized possessions had been given away, yet he was very happy." The child's face filled with bewilderment. Through her brain ran the thought, how can you be happy without what you value most? To no surprise this child was me. As a little girl I couldn't grasp the idea of giving up what you love to be happy. Little did I know how it saved my life.

After a few more weeks the toddler heard the most terrifying news of her life. Her parents were getting a divorce. At such a young age she didn't think much of it, but, after just several weeks the change was difficult to adapt to. One day while tidying her room, she came across a book with a shiny fish on the cover. A grin spread across her face. It was her favorite book. She requested to her mom that they read it that night. She immediately agreed to the idea. That night when she heard the words, "His most prized possessions had been given away, yet he was very happy," come out of her mother's mouth she knew what she had to do. She had to share with others to receive joy. Although as a little girl she didn't have much to give, she did so anyways. Any chance she had to give someone love or help she did so automatically. One day the girl shared her time to help another student get an A on a project. Another time she gave her sister her favorite toy so she would be happy. Eventually, it turned into a habit. Once she saw the happiness that others received when she gave her too filled with joy. Her struggles of feeling depressed soon went away all thanks to the fish who gave away his scales.

*The Rainbow Fish* was a book that helped me through the journey of my parents' divorce but also another traumatic event that changed the rest of

my existence. At just eleven years old my dad called me and my sisters into the kitchen. He proceeded to say that my mother's house had burned down. Nothing had shocked me more in my life. In fact, I thought he was joking until my step-mom said it was true. Thankfully, everyone was safe, but all of our possessions were lost in the fire. That night I shed many tears worrying what would happen to my life. As soon as I reconnected with my mom, I told her that we needed to have faith that good things would happen. Again, to help me through the struggles of losing everything, I shared my time, love and help with others whether they needed it more than me or not.

After reading *The Rainbow Fish* as a child, I learned that giving a little can result in receiving much more. I also learned that when you act selfishly and don't share, you can lose something more valuable. The fish lost all of his friends because he didn't share his scales. The book helped me learn that the best thing to have is no tangible object, in fact, it is happiness and friends.

To all who give,  
Kaylin Knapp



**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Marie Kuehn**  
Franklin County High School, Brookville  
Letter to Rebecca Rupp  
Author of *After Eli*

Dear Rebecca Rupp,

One day in 5th or 6th grade I went to the library to return my old book and check out a new one, I was looking at the books that were new to our library and I saw *After Eli* sitting on the shelf. I read the inside cover and decided to check it out. I began reading it that day, and I was amazed to see how similar I am to Danny. Like Danny, my brother was in the military, which I didn't really think too heavily about. It's not super rare for someone to be in the military. But when I read that Danny's brother, Eli, hit an I.E.D overseas, my mind was blown. My brother also hit an I.E.D overseas, but fortunately, he survived, unlike Eli. I was extremely young when this happened so I didn't really know the significance of it. Now that I'm older, I understand the damage it could've done. My brother could've lost his life and everything would be different from how it is now. I can relate to Danny again because he often states that he wonders what it would be like if Eli wouldn't have died that day. Like Danny, I look up to my brother and he is a big part of my life. Without him I would be completely lost. From this, I've learned to value everyone around me and never take anything for granted because it can all be gone in an instant.

I've reread this book many times since elementary or middle school and every time I feel like I understand some things a little more. When Danny talks about everyone's behavior after Eli dies, I relate so deeply to the way he describes his mother's behavior. Danny says that his mother was like a zombie after Eli passed. This makes me think of the way my brother acted when his wife committed suicide. He didn't talk to anyone or eat anything for a few days after her death, much like a zombie. I used to think that my brother was the strongest person on Earth up until this moment. I had never seen him cry or be so upset before. He seemed broken, almost. This impacted me heavily and made me realize that even the strongest people hurt sometimes and it's completely okay.

Though I have quite a few favorite parts of this book, one part really stood out to me. In one of the chapters, Danny articulates his wonder of why God isn't in the places he needs to be sometimes. I didn't grow up exactly religious but as I got older I thought that going to church was something that I needed to do. I began attending church every Wednesday and Sunday that I could. As I learned more and more about Christianity and

faith in God, I began wondering the same things Danny wondered. If God is real, where is He when people need Him the most?

Where was God when 9/11 happened? Where was God when my sister-in-law committed suicide? Where is God when people are killed in cold blood? Why wasn't he there when these people were in trouble? When Danny voiced his thoughts, I felt understood and connected to him. I've spent so many years pondering these things and feeling alone but finally, someone understands. Through many years of struggling with this re-occurring thought, I've figured out that God works in mysterious ways sometimes. I've also learned that you're never really alone. No matter what you are going through in your life, there's someone out there struggling just the same.

Sincerely,  
Marie Kuehn

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Rachel Labi**  
West Lafayette Junior-Senior HS, West Lafayette  
Letter to Malala Yousafzai  
Author of ***I Am Malala***

Dear Malala Yousafzai,

I know the feeling of the recurring fire in your heart; the complementary feelings of anger and passion that fuels you to scream. I know what it's like to scream about an existence, a pain, or even an issue not of yourself. That fire smoldered in my heart for years. Then I saw your fire's smoke erupt into speech, which sparked responses in the blinded eyes surrounding you, myself among those enlightened.

I have always been afraid of failure. In seventh grade, I discovered human trafficking and how global slavery impacts my food, technology, and clothing. I learned about passport theft and indentured slavery that victimizes the impoverished in major industries. This was the first time I had felt compelled to take action against a world issue. In my quest for advocacy, I refused to buy goods from unethical retailers. I wanted my mission to be much grander, but I allowed my fear of failure to suppress the fire inside my heart for years.

When I read ***I Am Malala***, I was proud. Proud that you did not let your fear stop you from doing what was just. You rebelled against the Taliban and stood up for your basic right to an education. If you could create change, even in such danger, why couldn't I? Born into a privileged and supportive family, you remembered to share what you had with those in need. You did not let your age or fear of failure interrupt your ambition. Your book was the aid to my trembling fire.

Even though your book served as my call to action, I did not know where to begin. First, I created an anti-trafficking organization with my friend, but that later turned into an off-topic side project. I had asked several people if they wanted to aid me in the eradication of human trafficking, but many did not care to join me. One responded, "I do not want to be associated with such a sensitive topic." I will never forget the callousness of that statement. In your book, I read about the alienation and embarrassment you dealt with because you chose to speak about such a "sensitive" topic. I was ready to endure the same treatment if it meant I could end trafficking. The most impactful people deal with the most "sensitive topics," and I did not care if anyone disagreed with my advocacy pursuits.

I admired your radio interviews, which took advantage of your oratory skills on a wide platform. I decided to use my passion for writing with human-trafficking advocacy. Now in tenth grade, I have drafted letters to companies such as Adidas, Nike, and H&M. These letters question their active efforts to uphold their labor regulations, and the consequences of such violations. Furthermore, I have written to the US government about the implementation of strict labor laws and company transparency, but so far I have received only generic replies. If my letters do not elicit responses, I will send more. I will spread the news of companies' illegal labor conditions and force them to answer, whether it is to myself, their workers, the media, or to their governments. I will not be silenced. As long as fire smolders in my heart, fear will never again reign. Thank you for fighting my fire's suppression, and for fueling the kindling hearts of my generation, plentiful smoke erupting from our mouths. Thank you.

With love,  
Rachel Labi

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Victor Lemus**

New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Walter Dean Myers

Author of *Monster*

Dear Walter Dean Myers,

When I was in 6th grade the teachers refused to let me advance in classes because of my ethnic background. I was treated like a five-year-old. While others learned how to find the radius of a circle, I was learning how to find the area of a cube. I was missing out on what others were learning. I lost interest at school and I was always getting in arguments with others in and outside of school. I would often brawl with kids outside of school for talking nonsense about how I was a “retard” for not being on the levels of the others. It was the way we handled problems in my area. There were no rules. It felt like a living hell. Everyday walking from school, rocks were tossed at me and I had to fight in response to keep my image of not being weak or I would open myself up to being jumped by others. I was always stressed and didn’t have anything to look at for hope. If I told my parents that I wanted to go to Guatemala, I would probably be killed by gangs over there with their level of violence. And if I let this escalate I knew there would be nothing good waiting for me in my future.

When I read your novel *Monster*, I related to the men and while most people can see some of the convicted as “Monsters” without morals or reason, you managed to depict these men as human. They are shown to have their own fears and own damage that traps them into the scenario they are in. I felt like I understood everyone and they all felt like me in a way. I understood them and I knew why they were acting in the way they were. It made me feel glad that someone could create an understandable image for people who would normally be seen as nothing but criminals to the rest of the world. I felt like I could show I could justify my actions after reading the novel.

I created a character sheet for most characters in the novel. I listed what was driving them towards their actions and what “broke” them. Then I wrote my own character sheet. I listed everything that brought me to this point. It wasn’t a class assignment. I just felt as if I needed a reason for me to justify my actions before I fell into madness. I wrote something along the lines of, “Victor Lemus. Hispanic. 14. Wants to be successful and admired by his family. Fears death, failure, and being trapped in this place. Commits acts of violence to avoid growing as a person.” I wrote these as an outsider looking in and was brutally honest with myself. I knew why these

characters were this way but I always wondered what if? Because I knew everyone from Oswald Cruz to Richard Evans could have had a chance at redemption. They were bad people but they weren't evil. Oswald Cruz had fear of losing control of the situation. He had authority issues which lead him to become hardened and eventually this evolved into an abusive relationship. But during trial he starts to peel back his layers. And in the center was nothing but a scared man broken by his sounding and attempting to blend in. He was a sheep pretending to be with the wolves.

Oswaldo Cruz could have been seen by many others as nothing but just a little punk trying to be tough, he wasn't even a major character but he felt the most human and I saw myself in him. Having to grow up in a violent area and mask yourself like everyone else to "make it," but unlike him, I felt like I was going to find my redemption. Your books showed me that no one is a monster in life and that everyone is human and that I, Victor Manuel Lemus am still human.

Sincerely,  
Victor Lemus

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Zoe McGee**

New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Suzanne Collins

Author of *The Hunger Games*

Dear Suzanne Collins,

I absolutely hate to read. Or I used to, anyway. Not because I think I'm "too cool" to read or because I'm seriously impatient, either. I hate the silence, the boredom, the lack of emotion, all of it. Reading does not interest me. I have read a countless number of books, each one driving my mind closer to hating it even more. Everyone I have ever brought this opinion up to says exactly the same thing. "You just haven't found the right book!" How could this possibly be true? Out of all the books I have read, none are right for me? I found this utterly ridiculous, but I now know that the common response lacks no truth. Your book, *The Hunger Games*, entirely altered my perspective on reading, and recently assisted me in thinking through a hard part of my life.

A few years ago, when the second part of *Mockingjay* was released in the movie theaters, I remember being so excited. I love dystopian movies. Up until this year, I never realized that I might feel the same way about dystopian literature. In my English class, it was brought to my attention that we read fairly often, so I would need to decide on a piece of writing I would submerge my mind into. As I was skimming through the multiple shelves of books, a few stood out. Although, once I saw *The Hunger Games*, I snatched it up from the seemingly endless array of stories without a second thought.

I suppose I did this because it was a familiar title, and I could have never imagined what this book would do for me. After the first couple of pages, I realized that I probably wouldn't be able to relate to the characters or to any part of the story. I was wrong...again. Once I developed a sense of the characters' personalities, specifically Katniss's, I saw myself in so many parts of her. Mainly, her strong hidden love for her family hit so close to home for me. Though it was not under the same circumstances, my father left my life too. He isn't dead, but he left me for the most part. This caused my mom, my sister, and I, to fend for ourselves. Of course, like any divorce story, this could have impacted us in one of two ways. My family could either grew closer together or farther apart.

In my case, there was a touch of both. My sister, Luca, and I, became closer than ever, sharing secrets and tears, but my mom and I went on to write a

totally different story. She became so distant, causing me to feel isolated and alone. All of this happened very recently, only less than a year ago from now. Having read your book this month, I easily connected with Katniss and her life, even if it is under different circumstances. Katniss's relationship with Prim does not only touch my heart, it makes me think directly of Luca. Luca and I always talk about how much we love my mom, and wish we could do so much good for her one day. My relationship with my mom may seem close at first glance, but deep down we are far apart.

After reading *The Hunger Games*, I perceived our relationship in an entirely antithetic way than I originally did. I realized that my mom is going through just as hard of a time as I am, and she needs just as much love as I do, if not more. After making this realization, I made an effort to talk to her and to get involved in her life as much as she was involved in mine. I saw an instant improvement in our relationship and it only continues to grow from here. My family is slowly, but surely, being glued back together, piece by piece. Hopefully my changed settings at home can positively impact the other aspects of my life.

Thank you for unintentionally pushing me to make a life changing realization.

With gratitude,  
Zoe McGee



**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Emma Miedema**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Lynda Mullaly Hunt  
Author of *One for the Murphys*

Dear Lynda Mullaly Hunt,

I would just like to thank you for sharing your book *One for the Murphys* with the public and myself. When I first read this book, I was in eighth grade and completely unaware of anything having to do with the foster system. Naively, I thought most children had loving families and safe places to stay, but your story opened my eyes to the suffering that goes on every day in the lives of many children. Your story sparked a curiosity in me about the foster system and the different responsibilities and feelings behind it.

The beginning of your story has a setting that I have never been exposed to: an unsafe and unstable home. Your main character, Carley, showed me that sometimes the child must take responsibility in the family if the parents are unable or unwilling to provide. Despite her mother's mistakes and carelessness, Carley is devastated to be ripped from her home and placed with the stable Murphy family. At first I didn't understand why Carley, now a foster child in an unfamiliar family, was numb to the loving environment she was placed into, but I now understand. This book showed me it's difficult adapting to a new environment and family. Many foster children do not know what it is like to live in a stable and safe home, and this novel let me experience a life that I fortunately have never had to live.

This story came alive to me again three years ago when my aunt and uncle signed up to be foster parents. They received a call from the hospital one night that a baby was just born and his parents were unable to care for him. This baby boy was constantly uncomfortable and in pain because of the many drug withdrawal symptoms he experienced because of his mother's mistakes while she was pregnant. My large family welcomed this new member of our family with love despite his struggles. Although the first few months of his life were physically difficult for his small body, our family was able to make it more bearable by holding him and caring for him. One year later another baby, a girl who was about the same age as my first foster cousin, had been abandoned at a bus stop and placed with my aunt and uncle temporarily until her grandmother came forward and took her back. Her transition into and out of our home was very difficult for my family. As difficult as it was to give her up, I thought about your story and how much the mother fought and wanted her child back in her arms. It

helped me learn to let go. Your story reminded me that foster care should be primarily about what's best for children and biological families, not what is easiest for those who provide foster care. Two months ago this story became even more relatable. A teenage girl about the same age as Carley in *One for the Murphys* came to live with my family. She was split from her younger brother whom she had taken care of on her own before she entered the foster system. Like Carley in your book, my foster cousin was shy at first but now her bubbly, sweet personality fits right into our crazy family. Her situation is quite similar to that of Carley's and this story allowed me to put myself in her shoes.

Your novel helped me open up and relate better to the family dynamics changing around me. It prepared me to understand how foster children might be feeling in certain situations and why they might be acting a certain way. I might not always know what someone's life is like at home, so it also taught me to make the best of every relationship and live a life that uplifts and encourages others.

Sincerely,  
Emma Miedema

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

Wesley Miller  
Northwestern High School, Kokomo  
Letter to Paul The Apostle  
Author of the *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians*

Dear Paul the Apostle,

My stomach hurt every day. It was getting harder to be active and social, as I was scared that I wouldn't feel well when I went out with friends. I could not even make it through a basketball practice without feeling sick inside. I was losing confidence more and more, day by day. *Why should I expect to feel better when I haven't for the past two months? What if that food causes my stomach to hurt? Should I take the risk of feeling sick? I just want to skip school. I know I won't feel well, so what's the point of even going?* These were constant thoughts in my head. The pain I was feeling in my stomach was taking over my family life, my social life, and my physical life and activities. The feelings were controlling what I did, what I ate, and how much I ate. I felt like I had no control over my own body, and I would act depending on how I felt instead of doing what I wanted to do. I needed something and I needed it quick. Thankfully, I came across your book, *2 Thessalonians*.

The stomach problems I was facing were extremely tough on my mind. I had always been a follower of Christ, but I felt like I really needed something to stick out to me. I started reading *2 Thessalonians* and my mindset began to change. The book gave me a sense of hope and comfort, knowing that the Lord will be there to protect me through the hard times.

The main verse that stuck out to me was *2 Thessalonians* 3:3. It says, "But the Lord can be trusted to keep you safe and protect you from harm." This verse has helped me through a lot. I feel like it is the perfect verse for me because at times I felt like I could not do anything, and I believed that I was never going to get better. Anxiety was a huge cause in making me feel worse when I thought I could not get any worse. Knowing this verse helped me feel more in control of the situation, because I could trust that I was going to be safe from all harm that came my way. I did not have to worry anymore, because I knew I would always be protected.

At times, I wondered why God was doing this to me. I have always known God and I have always gone to church, so why did I deserve this? The verse that helped me further understand this was *2 Thessalonians* 1:4. This verse says, "Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring."

This verse helped by opening my mind. The problems I was facing were not a punishment, they were a test of my faith. God was seeing how I would respond to the troubles he placed in my life. It was critical to remember this, because it reminded me that I will persevere and get through this. All I needed was to stay strong in my faith even when times were tough.

After several tests and a few more months of dealing with these problems, I received a diagnosis. My doctor told me I have Ulcerative Colitis (UC). This is a lifelong battle I will have to face, as UC is a chronic disease. I am going to have to learn to deal with the stomach pain and anxiety I have from this disease. At times, it is really hard for me to have hope that I will feel better. It becomes hard for me to focus in school because all I can think about is how I feel. I also have to deal with the embarrassment of going to the bathroom more than normal. Sometimes I choose not to go even when I know I should, just to avoid people noticing that I've been gone from class for a while.

I can sympathize with how you felt in *2 Corinthians* 12. You begged the Lord to take your problem away from you, and that's how I feel. I just wish the Lord would take the UC away from me so that I would never have to deal with it again. I want to thank you for speaking about your troubles. Reading about you being obedient and still having hope gives me more confidence and hope. You said, "So I am very happy to brag about my weaknesses. Then Christ's power can live in me." This verse helps me understand why I face the problems I am having. God doesn't want to take my UC away, because he wants his power to live in me.

I still face these stomach problems daily. It's not my physical health that has changed, but I have a whole new mindset, and it makes a big difference. Every time I start to worry about my stomach, I remember that I am protected by the Lord and I will persevere. I remember that the trials I am facing are a test of faith, and I will stay true to the Lord even through the hardest times. Jesus will always be there for me. Your book helped me remember that.

Sincerely,  
Wesley Miller

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Cheyenne Moss**

New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Sharon G. Flake

Author of *The Skin I'm In*

Dear Ms. Flake,

Sometimes I wonder, what must it be like to be dark and lovely? I am a woman of color, but some would say that being a light skinned gal, I “got lucky.” I couldn’t disagree more. Your literature is truly life impacting. I have never before read a book that made me place myself in someone else’s shoes, and love it! Upon completion of your book, I learned to love myself more, although I almost have no relation to Maleeka. As a matter of fact, I believe that every male or woman can in some way, relate to Maleeka. As a human being, we struggle to just love the skin that we’re in.

Due to my past struggles with loving myself, your book *The Skin I'm In* caught my eye, just by the cover. I felt something when I read the title. I had never seen a book that had a girl black as night, with big chapped lips on the cover. This was new. I liked new and I couldn’t wait to read it. Finally, a book where the main character is a black girl. Uniquely, a realistic black girl. A black girl that had the outside qualities of a stereotypical black girl. Yet, she is the opposite of what I expected. On the inside, she was just an educated black girl. A black girl who couldn’t love herself because she wasn’t taught to.

Growing up, I have always struggled with my weight, although now, I wish I could be the same size that I was in the 7th grade. I thought that I was supposed to be “beautiful,” you know? Because I’m mixed, and I have loose, long curly hair that looks good with little to no effort. Unlike other black girls, with tight nappy curls, in which most didn’t go past their shoulders. Still, I thought I was nothing shy of ugly. I felt fat. I didn’t know what I could do different so that I could be skinny like other girls my age. My mom told me that it was “baby weight” and that it would eventually melt off like candle wax. My aunt told me that I was “big boned” like the rest of my family, and I would never be skinny. My uncles told me that I was getting bigger, every time they saw me. Just like Maleeka, there were cute boys that I wished would like me, the same way that I crushed on them. But, if my own uncles didn’t think I was beautiful, how would any other little boy?

As I got older, I turned into a new girl. By the 7th grade, I was more popular than ever. I started to wake up two hours before I had to catch

the bus every morning so that I could try to be the flyest thing in school. My mom started letting me pick out my own clothes and I learned to have a sense of style, on my own. I brushed my curls every day and let them hang down my back. Or, I'd slick my hair into tight ponytails, hoping for no fly aways. I was still what I considered to be fat, but I learned to flaunt it. I wore tight jeans that complimented my butt, and loose shirts to hide my rolls. Now, I felt "beautiful." I became a selfie queen, and all the little boys had crushes on me! Finally, I felt like Maleeka, but I felt like Maleeka in Chapter 31 for a change. I earned my respect. I knew now, that this was the skin I am in. I can't change the skin I'm in, and I sure won't change it for people who don't even love theirs, so they judge mine. I spoke up for once in my life. I had built a confidence about myself like no other.

Thank you, Ms. Flake. Thank you for loving the skin that you are in, so you could teach other gals to do the same. You empower others through your words. You are a beautiful and intelligent black woman! Continue to be everything that any hater of yours doubted you to be. I felt like I needed to empower you with my words, you deserve it. Just like you, birds chirping in the morning make me happy. Simply because this symbolizes the start of a new day, and every day we should learn to not fix what God already painted.

Sincerely,  
Cheyenne Moss

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Haleigh Olthof**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Leigh Bardugo  
Author of *The Language of Thorns*

Dear Leigh Bardugo,

I grew up in a fairly homogeneous Christian community. Although I frequently thank God for my family, my friends, and the Biblical truths I learned from childhood, this community has an inherent tendency to echo ideas back and forth until they are far from their source and distorted from their original form. Most everyone in this community would comfortably talk about concepts like sin and grace, but many would struggle to explain those concepts to someone from outside the community. Our community also tends to hide unsightly truths behind pretty facades.

In your short story “**Ayama and the Thorn Wood**,” the wood demands truth. So does our world, as your anthology *The Language of Thorns* helped me to learn. Reading the first story in this book, I was surprised and delighted by each new ending Ayama added to the stories she told the beast. I was surprised again when Ayama willingly became a monster, and again in the next story when a small girl turned out to be the villain, and again in the next when the main character discovered her beloved father was a cannibal and her stepmother had been trying to save her life, and so on until I came to look forward to unexpected endings. Some of these endings satisfied me, some horrified me, and some shocked me so much that I had to set the book down for a few minutes before continuing.

Like Ayama, I had grown up hearing fables and fairytales. I knew that brave young men married princesses and that stepmothers were evil. I also knew that God created the world, that the Bible was His message to us, and that I was going to Heaven. But the more I learned about the world, the more questions I had about these concepts: Did God create the world in seven days, or did he create it over millions of years? How should I interpret books like Job, in which God allows an innocent man to suffer, or Leviticus, in which God gives the Israelites a lot of rules Christians no longer follow? Do Christians miss out on God’s goodness in this life by focusing so much on the next one? In the midst of such questions, your stories made sense. They taught me to question easy answers and predictable plots. They taught me to pursue the answers to those questions, even if those answers can be more frightening than a red-eyed beast. That pursuit of truth has refined my faith even though I still don’t have all the answers.

One way I've found to seek and promote truth is through my school's student-run newspaper. As a reporter and editor, I have written articles that tell hard truths rather than pretty lies. From a feature on students' drinking illegally to a column on regrets, these stories were not easy to write, but they were important. As I continue to write, I hope to tell truths with every word I put on a page.

Thank you for your stories,  
Haleigh Olthof



**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Julia Oostema**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to J. K. Rowling  
Author of *Harry Potter*

Dear J. K. Rowling,

When I was in grade school, I was the smartest kid in my class. Nobody hated me, but nobody really liked me either. It's not like I didn't have friends or got bullied or spent my spare time hiding in the bathroom; I did have friends, though they were almost constantly changing, and for the most part, life was good. But I could never shake the feeling that I was alone, that I was different, that I was misunderstood. And then, in third grade, I started reading the *Harry Potter* books.

Hermione stood out to me right away. She had uncontrollable curly hair, loved learning, and was almost always reading a book. She was like a more outgoing version of me, and I couldn't resist. I fell in love with her character and her friends and her world. I think I read all seven books in less than a month.

During that time, Hermione became my role model, my hero, my greatest friend. She wasn't perfect, don't get me wrong; she could be bossy and sassy and sometimes rude, but she was real. She was unapologetically herself, and I needed to see that; I still need to see that. There isn't one "right kind" of person. I'm not a freak for loving to learn; I'm not a nerd for loving to read; I'm not a loser for preferring to stay at home with a good book and a cup of coffee instead of going to a party. I'm just different; I'm just me.

Your books taught me that it was okay to be who I was, and I can genuinely say that your books gave me hope: hope that one day I would have real friends, hope that one day I would be loved and accepted and appreciated and understood, hope that one day I would come to terms with myself. Now, almost ten years later, I'm a senior in high school. I'm an introvert and a bibliophile and a writer and a survivor, and although I'm still lacking in the friends department, and I'm still trying to sort through all my fears, insecurities, and flaws, I'm okay with being me. Because of you, I know I'm not alone, and I'll never forget that.

Sincerely,  
Julia Oostema

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Abby Powers**  
Northwestern High School, Kokomo  
Letter to Audrey Penn  
Author of *The Kissing Hand*

Dear Audrey Penn,

I didn't attend preschool, so when I finally started kindergarten it was an enormous step into unmapped territory. The school had bright white lights, borders of color at the top of the white walls, and what seemed like thousands of classrooms, but most importantly it was full of strangers. Ever since I was a baby I was very nervous, uncomfortable and extremely wary of strangers, so what seemed like a huge building full of unknown people and unexplored terrain was terrifying to me. When I finally stepped foot into the classroom, there was a bright circle rug for story time, a play kitchen full of miniature foods with matching shopping carts, miniature tables and chairs perfect for the class to sit in, and the bigger, purple tables for crafts and group activities. I absolutely hated it. I would have meltdowns, crying about how I missed playing outside with my parents, and the tame, fun activities before school. But the day my mom read *The Kissing Hand* to me, everything changed.

My teacher Mrs. Smith, with her trademark deep, shiny, curls and welcoming smile, noticed that I was having a difficult time adjusting to school and that I wasn't enjoying it at all. She cooked up an idea to help me become comfortable away from home. Mrs. Smith met with my mom and told her about a book and how I was in a similar situation as the main character. The little raccoon in the book, Chester, was also very nervous about starting school, so his mom would give him kisses on his palms and have him rub them against his cheeks when he missed home. My mom gave me kissing hands every day before school just like Chester's mom and she told me how to use them if I became upset.

At first I was slightly dubious about the kissing hands actually working, but I still decided to give them a shot. I went to school and the day started off on a bright note. I was having a great morning and everything was smooth sailing until I started becoming upset and craving the comfort of being at my own home. I decided it would be a perfect opportunity to try out these kissing hands my mom gave me. When it felt like the floodgates were about to open, I rubbed my palms against my cheeks and, to my surprise, I felt better.

Kissing hands started becoming a part of my daily school routine until I eventually grew used to being away at school. I would still keep them with me just in case I was having a particularly hard, challenging day. On one hard day Mrs. Smith saw me with my palms pressed against my cheeks, keeping it together and she felt amazed and proud that a book could help me so much.

Without *The Kissing Hand* I don't think I would have the same attitude about school that I have now. I was once a child extremely fearful of the unknown and new experiences but now I feel as if I'm always ready for a new challenge. The characters helped shape who I am now and how I now enjoy new experiences, like school and meeting new people.

Sincerely,  
Abby Powers

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Adrianna Rhines**

New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Virginia Euwer Wolff

Author of ***Make Lemonade***

Dear Virginia Euwer Wolff,

I am writing this letter to you because your story affected me personally. ***Make Lemonade*** is a very interesting book and I am glad I got to read it when I did. I also found it interesting how you came up with the plot. It is just so realistic, so much that my mother, and I could relate to it. I felt that I time traveled in this book and transformed! It literally is so crazy to me how this book made me feel.

Jolly reminds me of my mom, while I see myself in LaVaughn. Lately she has been getting fed up with cleaning up after 16, 11, and 10-year-old boys with an additional 3 dogs. I have taken up her work in keeping our household stable and clean. I used to babysit 3 children all under the age of five, so I know struggles of cleaning up living spaces and messy babies. I was a baby once and I know that I liked to eat and not clean, so I could only imagine how my once young mother tried keeping her four babies clean.

Reading the book, I felt that I instantly was LaVaughn. LaVaughn is respectful and soft spoken. In her narration she reminds me of myself: "These are things that I would do, things I would think and say." LaVaugh's personal life is somewhat similar to mine and the relationships I have. She saw that a babysitter was needed, and no one seemed to want to help so she did (something that I would do.) Just like her mom, my mom keeps me on top of my schoolwork, so I have a lot of responsibilities. Babysitting and keeping houses clean are not big responsibilities but we (LaVaughn and I) care and we make them big responsibilities.

Young single mothers struggle so much. After reflecting, I was thinking about how living in poverty could influence young children and their development. Some babies are not living in good conditions and it really made me think about how that happens or how I can help or prevent that in some ways. I knew about that kind of struggle before I realized it, I was the child of a young single mother! My mom went through struggles just like Jolly did! When I was little, I did not take baths or brush my teeth when my mom told me to. All I wanted to do was play and eat! Thank God I care about my hygiene now! Jeremy and Jilly brought back a lot of my childhood memories.

This story was so meaningful because it was so realistic. I had been in her shoes before and so has my mother who has told me many stories of her young parenthood. It meant a lot to me to know how helpful people can be and the experiences they take from it. The struggles people go through strengthen them as a person. I am glad I got the chance to experience a book like yours and learn new things from it. Thank you for making that possible for me.

Sincerely,  
Adrianna Rhines

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Taylor Stewart**  
Franklin County High School, Brookville  
Letter to Rick Riordan:  
Author of *The Lightning Thief*

Dear Rick Riordan,

I first read the Percy Jackson series in 4th grade, at a time when my reading abilities were weak, to say the least. Before discovering your books I was always too squirrely to read, much to my grandmother's dismay as she was a librarian at the time. I was extremely hyperactive, not enough to require ADHD medication, but enough to make my energetic tendencies difficult to tolerate at times. When my grandmother first coaxed *The Lightning Thief* into my hands, I was skeptical but willing try it to please my grandmother. After several prolonged attempts, I eventually read past the first chapter and was immediately sucked into the world of Percy Jackson.

Reading the books, I was amazed at the characters wit and ability to conquer impossible odds. Percy Jackson seemed to perfectly reflect me. He was hyper, got into trouble unintentionally, and wanted everyone to be friends. His ability to look on the bright side in every situation inspired me to do the same. As I read the Percy Jackson series I was taught valuable lessons about being a leader, making hard decisions, and overcoming impossible challenges. Even though Percy Jackson was a character in a book, he became my model. I wanted to be a leader who brightened days, protected the weak, and inspired many. Not only was I struck by Percy's ability to lead, but I was also impressed with his humility. Even though he was a hero, he never felt like one. He always took the blame and strived to be better. I felt, and often still feel, that even if I had done something well, it could always be done better.

The adventure and hope in *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* sparked my interest in books, an interest that has transformed my life. After reading your series, I couldn't get enough so I began to read more: different books, different authors, and different genres. Books helped me calm down, to look at things from a different perspective, and further developed my English skills. As I mentioned before, I was not a strong reader when I began the Percy Jackson series. I read the first book slowly; in fact, I read it so slowly during the 20 minute reading period my teacher allotted each day that I read *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* for nearly half a year. By the end of the series, I could read faster and better than most in my grade, most noticeably in middle school when I was reading

classics like *The Help* and *The Last of the Mohicans*. As I continued to read other books, I expanded my vocabulary and English skills until English became one of my easiest classes.

Reading has transformed my life. I have grown to love literature and how it enables readers to look through others perspectives, sparks a desire to learn and gives readers the tools to grow. I'd like to thank you for your work in children's literature not only because you have touched my life, but because your work is the base that inspires and transforms many others like me.

Sincerely,  
Taylor Stewart

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

Sydney Whiteley  
Centerville High School, Centerville  
Letter to Shel Silverstein  
Author of *The Giving Tree*

Dear Shel Silverstein,

In my early years, my mom would read me your stories at bedtime or when I would become restless and needed to take a nap. I remember *The Giving Tree* the most vividly, as it became more personal and relatable the older I became. When I was younger, I viewed and understood the story through the eyes of a young child, as to be expected. I did not understand the symbolism hidden behind your words. As I grew older, however, and reread your story on my own although it was an alternate narrative entirely, I was able to realize the true meaning within your story.

*The Giving Tree*, through its telling of the tree and the boy that grows older and never stops asking for things from the tree, reminds me of my own mother and me. When I was younger and my mom would read the book to me, I always thought it was silly. The tree always gave up whatever it had for the boy. I never understood the underlying meaning and symbolism that was included with the tree. As I have reread the story recently, I figured this would be the best time to write you about the effect it had on me.

The boy and the tree represent the giving spirit of parents towards their children. It tells the story of a tree that loved a boy very much, so much, in fact, that it did whatever it could to make the boy happy. This reminds me of my own relationship with my mother, because I know that although it may not always be obvious to me right at that minute, that she is always doing her best by me and my siblings and trying her best to make sure we have the best and most successful lives possible. The tree sacrifices her entire being, by the end of the story, in order to ensure the boy's happiness. Although I like to hope my mother may just happen to be immortal, I know that this is not the case. However, I know that when it is her time to go, she will have provided me with everything she could while she was here, which is exactly what the giving tree in your book did for the boy.

Your piece also shows that I may not be the only child that will always need their parents, no matter how old we grow ourselves. The boy needed the tree until the tree had nothing left to give, and the tree needed the boy just as much. I like to think that perhaps my mom needs me just as much as I need her as well.



Overall, Shel, I would like to use this letter to thank you. Thank you for showing me the unconditional love of parents. Thank you for allowing me to appreciate my own parents more than I ever thought possible. Thank you for writing this book, and therefore showing me and so many other children that their parents are so much more important than we could ever imagine. Thank you, Shel.

Sincerely,  
Sydney Whiteley

**Level III**  
**Honorable Mention**

**Sarina Wills**

Columbus Signature Academy New Tech Campus, Columbus

Letter to Johanna Reiss

Author of *The Upstairs Room*

Dear Johanna Reiss,

I am a sophomore student in high school who has loved your book, *The Upstairs Room* since 4th grade. When I first read *The Upstairs Room*, I was deeply invested in learning about history, and reading diaries about people near my age. Since your book slightly fit that genre, I decided to read it. I sat down and read it in about two hours.

Reading it opened up a whole new world for me. I had barely ever heard of the Holocaust, and I definitely had no idea how horrible and destructive it really was. I was able to relate to the simple characteristics and personality of the main character, Annie. I loved her curiosity and strong-willedness. As a result, once her life began to be threatened by the Nazi Party, I began to really realize how horrible the Holocaust was.

I believe that many people should read your book, *The Upstairs Room* because it is extremely eye opening. So many children were highly affected by and killed by the Holocaust, and none of them deserved any of the treatment that they were given.

Since I was able to relate to some of the personality characteristics of Annie, it was hard even just for me to read about some of the things that she was forced to go through by the horrible perpetrators, the Nazi Party. I cannot even imagine what Annie herself would have had to struggle with, and mentally go through while attempting to simply live her life. Especially as a young child, Annie would suffer from a huge amount of psychological damage as a result of her experiences as a Jew during the Holocaust, even when she was in the Netherlands.

After reading *The Upstairs Room* I was extremely interested in my own heritage, so that I could learn more about the atrocities that my own family members may have endured. With some research, I discovered that some of my ancestors were Jews in Europe. Even as a fourth grader, this new-found information made me go into deep thought. I began to contemplate how lucky I had been to be born in this time and in the United States. I easily could have been in Annie's place, and had to go through all of the psychological pain and loneliness that she had endured. This was extremely eye-opening for me, and overall made me realize how horrible

the Holocaust was. Millions of people were brutally murdered, tortured, mistreated and shamed simply because of their religion.

As a result of reading this book, I have developed a deep interest in the Holocaust itself, and all other mistreatments of large groups of people simply because of their beliefs, ethnicity, and orientation. This has led me to become as accepting and understanding of all other people as possible. Thank you very much for writing *The Upstairs Room*. It has affected me even more than I ever believed a book could, and it has made me a better person overall.

Sincerely,  
Sarina Wills





