

the James & Madeleine *McMullan* FAMILY FOUNDATION  
LettersAboutLiterature

## 2020 Winning Letters

*by* Indiana Students



# Letters About Literature

*Winning Letters by Indiana Students - 2020*

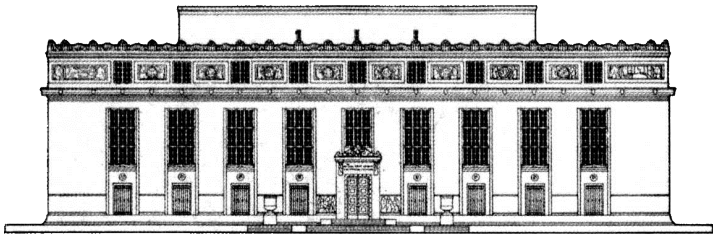
**Indiana Center for the Book Director**  
*Suzanne Walker*

**Indiana State Librarian**  
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the James & Madeleine *McMullan* FAMILY FOUNDATION  
LettersAboutLiterature



 INDIANA STATE  
LIBRARY  
FOUNDATION

The graphic element is a stylized, black and white representation of the Indiana State Library building's facade, showing a series of columns and windows.

Published 2020

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

## Letters About Literature

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

## What is a Center for the Book?

Are there any books in the Indiana Center for the Book? Not really... Starting in 1984, the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress began to establish affiliate centers in the 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands. These Center for the Book affiliates carry out the National Center's mission in their local areas. Programs like this one highlight their area's 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**

The deadline for this year's contest was in January of 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic became a reality in the United States. Because of this, the letters in this book do not touch on the pandemic at all. Instead, students tackle the topics that we see in many of our Letters About Literature Anthologies; adoption, anxiety, bullying, death, disabilities, faith, fitting in, illness, immigration, poverty, race, social media, and other serious topics that Indiana youth struggle with daily. The students express a lot of emotions in these letters and some language might not be appropriate for all readers. We fully anticipate that our letters for next year's contest will talk about the pandemic and that books will provide relief to some students in a world where so much changed so quickly.

That being said, the 2019-2020 contest was not immune from the pandemic. We typically hold an in-person celebration in April of each year to honor our winners. In 2020, this was not a possibility. Instead of an event, each winning student received a prize pack including books, a certificate, and other swag. We want to thank the people who helped make our prize packs possible including the Kids Ink book store, who donated dozens of books, and Indiana Author, Skila Brown, who met me in a parking lot (masked) to deliver boxes of books that she had signed and personalized for each of our winners. Not a small feat when you are talking about over 90 books. Thank you, Skila!

We offer a special thanks to the James and Madeleine McMullan Family Foundation for their sustained support of our program. We also offer a special thanks to the Indiana State Library Foundation. We are constantly thankful for their help.

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 some 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.

We are excited to honor our student winners in our 2020 book and offer our sincere congratulations for their achievements.

Suzanne Walker – Director, Indiana Center for the Book

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### The Indiana Author Letter Prize

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Awarded to the highest placing letter written to an Indiana Author

Kristin Evers — *Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville*

Letter to John David Anderson, Indiana Author of *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*





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



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

**Maria Sostre**  
New Palestine Intermediate, New Palestine  
Letter to Jerry Craft  
Author of ***New Kid***

Dear Jerry Craft,

Your graphic novel, ***New Kid***, really touched my heart. When the central character, Jordan Banks, experienced difficulties because of his race, I immediately connected with his situation. Jordan wanted to go to art school, but his mother insisted he go to Riverdale Academy Day School, a school for high-achieving students who were mostly white. At that school, he didn't face direct bullying, but felt different because of his race.

I can relate to Jordan. I go to a school with mostly white students, and I have Hispanic heritage. I don't exactly get bullied, but a lot of kids at school come up to me and say things like, "Wow, you look like the character in this book!" or "Are you Mexican and do you speak Spanish?" Because of the show *Dora the Explorer*, kids at school have been calling me Dora because they say I look like her. They aren't necessarily trying to be mean. They don't know it, but I do not like being labeled as something I'm not. There are many situations in your book that also involve unintentional racism. I love reading books that I can relate to in some way. It helps me understand the book more. It also helps me enjoy it more than if I didn't relate to the main character. But I don't think only kids in my situation should read it. I think it would help open the eyes of all kids if they read your book.

I know what it feels like to get called names or to be bullied. It is never a good feeling, and nobody should be treated that way. Jordan Banks was a new student at Riverdale Academy Day School. I too moved to a new school in second grade. I was sad to leave my old friends behind, just like Jordan. At the new school, I didn't know anyone. It took me a while to make friends. Everybody in my class had been together since kindergarten, so I felt like I didn't fit in. It helped me to read about a character who went through the same thing.

One thing I learned from this book is that you should not judge people until you understand their situations. In ***New Kid***, a girl named Alexandra was considered weird because she always had a puppet on her hand. Everybody just assumed that she was weird because she acted differently than everyone else. Later in the book, it is revealed

that when Alexandra was little, she and her younger brother were playing around a stove which had a hot pan on it. They heard the doorbell and ran to get the door. Alexandra's little brother accidentally knocked the pan over. To save her brother, Alexandra reached to stop the pan from hurting him. She was burned badly, and to hide her scar, she wore a puppet on her hand. This really made me think about times I also might have been too quick to judge.

After some time in the story, Jordan became friends with Alexandra, so she decided to tell Jordan about the incident and why she wore the doll everywhere. She agreed that Jordan could tell one person. In what turned out to be a good plan, Jordan decided to tell the biggest blabbermouth in the school. This girl told everybody and soon Alexandra, who was once considered the weirdest girl in school, became accepted by others. It makes the reader really stop and think.

I have learned a lot from reading this book. I now know that people will judge and treat you differently, but you should just ignore them because, later they will appreciate who you are. You don't have to change and be like others to fit in. Jordan didn't have to change to make the great friends he got because they appreciated him for who he was. Once other students figured out how Alexandra saved her brother, they started to accept her for who she was. Alexandra didn't have to change to be appreciated.

Your book ***New Kid*** helped me realize and understand the struggle that some kids go through trying to fit in with others at school, and that I am not the only one that has felt this way. I have read many books about bullying, but yours was the first that let me see the bad situations from all points of view. It wasn't just about kids being mean; it helped me see that there are also people who can be unintentionally hurt by words we don't realize are hurtful. I really enjoyed reading ***New Kid***. Thank you for writing it.

Sincerely,  
Maria Sostre

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

**Kendall Theobald**  
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville  
Letter to Cece Bell  
Author of ***El Deafo***

Dear Cece Bell,

A few years ago, I was walking through school, when I noticed a girl walking out of a room. She had something in her ear, and she was making hand gestures at the teacher who was with her. I didn't think about this situation again until I read your book, ***El Deafo***. When I started reading it, I couldn't stop. I thought it was so interesting how no one wanted to be friends with her and how she was alone most of the time. I remembered the girl walking out of the classroom. I understood that she had a hearing aid and was communicating in sign language. Your book completely changed not only my view on people who couldn't hear but also how I live my life.

There are many times when I believe that I can't do something. I want to give up, but then I remember Cece and how she overcame any obstacle in her way. When I couldn't seem to get my math skills right, I remembered Cece learning how to communicate in sign language. When I can't seem to learn that new trick in soccer, I remember Cece making friends. Reading this book has helped me learn how to get out of my comfort zone and try something new. It also taught me that I need to embrace my disadvantages. When Cece created her superhero name, "El Deafo," I was really inspired by how courageous and powerful she made herself.

There is a moment in the book where Cece is in gym class and the teacher drops her microphone. The next day in class, Cece shows him what she can do by holding her pull-up for sixty-four seconds. She shows the teacher she is strong and can do anything, even if he underestimates her. I relate to this because I have had people underestimate me. Most of the time, that person is me. I often think that I am just not good enough. This moment in the book has shown me I can do whatever I put my mind towards.

When I think about the girl that I saw years ago, I think about how she persevered and how I can persevere. I think about how I can do everything I want to do. I see the world in a completely new way after I read your book. Your book showed me to embrace my differences and embrace others' differences. Thank you.

Sincerely,  
Kendall Theobald

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

**Reid Cahalan**  
Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Alan Gratz  
Author of ***Prisoner B-3087***

Dear Alan Gratz,

Your book, ***Prisoner B-3087***, has changed my life. All throughout school, I have learned about the atrocities of World War II. I learned about Hitler, the Nazis, concentration camps, terror, and even sparks of hope. I knew that the Axis Powers' vision for the world was completely wrong, and that Adolf Hitler was the exact definition of sadistic – taking pride and pleasure in the pain and suffering of others. However, I could never understand the pure size and scale of what went down during those six long years, and I still can't. Despite this, I can say without a doubt that ***Prisoner B-3087*** has made it so much more vivid to me.

The concentration camps weren't just awful, they were pure evil. Watching Yanek Gruener go through it made it that much more real. Also, having the knowledge that Jack was a real person took it up yet another notch. Nobody deserves the treatment that the Nazis gave to people; not your worst enemy, and not even the worst person on Earth. I can't imagine ever facing these challenges, and I sincerely hope I don't have to. That's where it impacts me the most.

I love my family and friends, and it would be heart-wrenching to see any of them taken away to face something like the concentration camps. As much as I hate to say it, history tends to repeat itself, and it could be the case here. With tensions between countries rising, we must step up and do something. Nothing will ever justify killing innocent people, no matter what you think or are told. We only have one Earth, and if nations can't learn to share it, our precious planet will have gone to waste.

Part of the reason why this book is so vivid is simply because Yanek Gruener is relatable. He is a normal kid who suddenly has his life turned upside down by the Axis Powers. This is seriously one of the scariest books I've ever read, but not for obvious reasons. Unlike horror stories that scare you with monsters and creeps, ***Prisoner B-3087*** is frightening from the reality of it all. It is scary because the events have happened, and the monsters causing it once existed. It is scary because those people believed what they were doing was righteous, and nobody knows when a worldwide war like this will happen again. It is extremely sad that at this time we must be on our toes for when violence randomly appears.

Thank you so much for providing kids all around the world with an in-depth point of view of World War II, because it probably changed their lives just like it has changed mine. Most of all, thank you for providing me with this magnificent book. I will end with my favorite quote from World War II, found on The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow: “Your name is unknown, your deed is immortal.” Except, we do know *your* name, and it’s the one that changed my life: *Alan Gratz*.

Keep calm and carry on,  
Reid Cahalan



**Level I**  
**Semifinalist and**  
**Winner of the Indiana Author Letter Prize**

**Kristin Evers**  
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville  
Letter to Indiana Author, John David Anderson  
Author of *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*

Dear John David Anderson,

Last year, I was given the news. It was around dinner time, and my mom was the one who told us. My mom told me and my sister that my Aunt Toni had stage three cancer. I was shocked, sad, and scared. I wasn't sure what was going to happen. I was up all night, worried and stressed. Was I going to grow up without an aunt? Will I be in this same scenario when I am older? Will this occur with another important person in my life? How will this affect my future? My aunt means the world to me, and I really hoped she would be able to get cured quickly. About the beginning of the school year, I decided to read your book *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*.

When I finished reading your book, I found a connection with Topher, Brand, and Steve. They were going through the same thing I was, having someone that is very close going through something tough. I feel like I have really connected with Brand. In *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*, Ms. Bixby and Brand go to the grocery store every Friday, and it was something very special to Brand. I think of it as a bond that they have. My Aunt Toni is very special and means the world to me because she lives in New York, so every time we see her, we always do something special. We play *Clue*, do makeovers, and hang out with each other. When we lived in Tennessee, we would come up to Indiana for a visit every so often, and we would have a contest to see who woke up the latest. It was always so much fun (even though I lost).

This book has showed me to keep moments close and enjoy time with family and friends. When Ms. Bixby went away, Topher, Brand, and Steve all felt like they needed to give her something more than a get well soon construction paper card, something special to show how much they care for her. When my aunt is over, I feel like I need to give her something special, too. I like to show appreciation for my aunt by making cool things for her and doing some of her favorite things with her, just like how Topher, Brand, and Steve showed appreciation for Ms. Bixby by giving her the things she mentioned she wanted on her last day (her cheesecake, wine, fries, the picnic, and music). Now, my aunt is almost cured, and I am thrilled about that.

Because of your book, I now know I am not alone in the world and that I am not the only person dealing with a loved one with cancer. This book has also taught me to be thankful for all the memories I have made with my aunt and to enjoy the good parts in life. I want to thank you for creating this book because it has lots of emotion that I can connect to. I hope that others will have hope like me that people that they love with cancer will win the battle. I also hope that the people with cancer can stay positive and continue on. Thank you for *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*, and for showing me that even though there are ups and downs in life, you should remember the good ones and enjoy them. Thank you.

Sincerely,  
Kristin Evers

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Sophia Bender**  
West Newton Elementary School, West Newton  
Letter to Denzel Washington  
Author of **“Fall Forward”**

Dear Denzel Washington,

I discovered your speech, **“Fall Forward.”** It taught me that you’re going to hit the bottom and embarrass yourself, but that will bring new attempts and achievements. That will bring you victory.

**“Fall Forward,”** to me, means to keep trying and not to abandon your goals. If you keep working, you will obtain your goals. Your speech really revealed how much potential we have as children. Failure is closer to triumph than individuals think. If you fail, you know where you’re going. When you say take risks, it really motivates me to pursue my dreams.

It’s inevitable that we as humans will fail. You mention that and it’s true. We don’t always stick to the path of perfection; we go on diverse paths because that’s the way life works. As a young person, your words inspire me to act on those goals. While I may get help along the way, it’s up to me to make my dreams come true.

People don’t take risks because they fear the consequences. They think if they do this, they will fail and humiliate themselves. In reality, people are avoiding their dreams and potential. As you say, they fall backwards. Successful people didn’t fall backwards; they fall forward because they didn’t care if they failed. Not caring about failing is what lead them to their goals and dreams.

If people would see that they have potential, they wouldn’t give up. Instead of looking at the opportunities, they stick with the crowd, not taking the risks to be who they want to be. If you keep working, you will reach your goal and learn many great things along the way. Early on in life, you have many chances and attempts to explore the unknown, but as you get older, those chances become limited.

I feel as though your speech is incredible because it really does express that everyone can have victory at some point in their life if they work hard from the beginning and build up. You inspire people every day to do their best at everything they do, even if they fail. Failing is learning; when you fail, you know something new. To reach those goals, you have to fail, even if you don’t want to.

If you stay in your comfort zone, you may miss out on some life-changing opportunities. It's okay to challenge yourself. Next time I have the chance, I will take that risk, and if I fail, I will use it as a learning experience. Your speech inspired me to be more confident and to take every chance I have, even if I fail.

Sincerely,  
Sophia Bender

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Kaitlyn Burdick**

Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to J. K. Rowling  
Author of the *Harry Potter* series

Dear J. K. Rowling,

Hard work and perseverance. Finding myself. Kindness. Being bold and brave. Your series *Harry Potter* taught me those qualities and a new way of viewing the world. Your in-depth writing made me cry my heart out and smile so widely my cheeks hurt. I felt as if I, myself were a wizard learning the art of magic along with everyone else at Hogwarts. It made me question myself. How good of a person am I? That's when I realized I was on a quest to find the real me.

Hermione was my favorite character because she was a bit of a teacher's pet, but she didn't act differently around her friends. Hermione might have been a little doubtful of Harry's crazy ideas, but she always helped. She was a kind and helpful person. This made me think of all the times I may have upset someone or may not have helped when I was told to. As I read each book more and more, I wanted to change and be nice and friendly like Hermione. She showed me the positives of helping and being more approachable.

Luna Lovegood. She was so crazy and mysterious. She never doubted herself even in the slightest way. Her crazy looks made me think about how people today only worry about what other people like, not what they like. Luna could care less about what people think, and that makes me wish that everyone knew about Luna. She has taught me how to believe in myself and to not care what other people think about me.

Like Harry, I have gone through some rough times myself. I have been made fun of for the past two years and I felt like I didn't know the real me. When Hagrid said, "You're a wizard, Harry," my heart skipped a beat. Harry was not his real self before getting the letter addressed to him. I related to him and I knew I just had to wait for my letter to come. I wanted to ignore all the people that didn't like me for me and to be who I want to be. I imagined Harry, Ron, and Hermione helping clear a path to finding myself. Now I try not to care what others think and remember who I am.

Once I found out who I really was, I knew I needed to work on some other traits: boldness and being brave. My whole life, I had no guts. I couldn't do dares and it was hard to make friends. When Ron saved Harry and

retrieved the Sword of Gryffindor, I was excited and shocked. Now looking back, I realize how brave and how good of a friend he had to be. I was scared while Ron was bold and bright. From the moment I started reading, I wanted to be exactly like him. He was and still is my role model. Now I can talk to people, keep a conversation, and I have many close friends.

Harry Potter never really had it easy. Problems were always finding him. He had to try and find a solution. Of course, he had help, but he had his own battle with each problem. I get frustrated just by getting stumped on a math problem while he is trying to save the world from Voldemort. He showed me hard work and perseverance. Now, I have different ways to work my way out of tough situations.

Dumbledore once said, "You fail to recognize that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be!" Since reading your series, I've learned so much more about myself and the world. You showed me how I can become a better person in life.

Sincerely,  
Kaitlyn Burdick

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Katie Caldwell**  
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville  
Letter to Alan Gratz  
Author of *Prisoner B-3087*

Dear Mr. Gratz,

As Yanek carried the weight of his bony body on the many death walks, I felt a chill go down my spine. Imagining the pain Yanek must have been feeling while his shoes were barely on his feet and if he ever tried to fix them, he would be beaten? I realize how my life is nothing compared to Yanek, but I feel a connection I have never felt to a book before. I have never loved to read but reading *Prisoner B-3087* held me on at the end of every chapter.

When you came to visit my school and asked who had read your books, I felt like an outsider for not reading any of them. Since you came to our school *and* you were an award-winning author, it gave me the motivation to give them a try. After the first sentence of *Prisoner*, I felt like I was there with him and his family. My mom asked me one day how the book was going, and I burst into tears because I felt so bad for all those people who had to go through that.

I always recommend this book to my friends because it gave me an emotion I have never felt before as well as my new favorite book to read over and over. I like how you give the characters a personality like a lot of people today are like, and they are completely accurate. It is easier to connect with Yanek because we are the same age and I feel for how he deals with his family getting taken away from him because I have experienced that. I feel like I can relate to him and understand the inside of how Yanek's emotions are because *I know!* My family's close friends were victims of a double murder-suicide. I immediately connected with Yanek when he felt like he would never see his family again. I have this feeling daily. When this loss happened, I felt like the whole world was against me and the family that was involved. When Yanek's mom and dad were taken from him, I could tell in his heart that he knew it was impossible to get over, but he knew that he would be able to see them one day. This is the same with me! I thought my life was over, but I power through every day knowing that I will see them again.

I was sad when I finished the book because I wanted it to go on forever. In a way, it does. Yanek's story continues today. It made my heart melt for how much empathy he had when times were rough, especially during the

death marches when he carried people twice his weight. He had an enormous heart for a teenager helping the ones who were about to fall. That's hard to do when you are in the same boat.

*Prisoner B-3087* gave me a different look at the world that I never would have known. I wish the world had more Yaneks in our lives because that would make everything brighter and more enjoyable. Thank you for giving me this book that I can relate to, and for giving me another look on the world. I look forward to reading all of your other books that might inspire me even more!

Sincerely,  
Katie Caldwell



Level I  
Semifinalist

Naomi Cohen  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to Esther Florans  
Author of *Conquer the Darkness*

Dear Esther Florans,

From the first moment that I opened your inspiring book, *Conquer the Darkness*, your words jumped off the pages, gripped me and pulled me into the lives of Renie and Nechama. I began evaluating my own personal friendships. I slowly started to understand the power of these important relationships, especially the role that honesty and trust play in them. While reading your book, I entered a new world overflowing with friendship, morality, and perseverance.

From the beginning of the book, the friendship between Nechama and Renie struck me in a personal way. It reminded me of a relationship that I have with my close friend Rachel. While reading *Conquer the Darkness*, I could really feel the deep connection between Renie and Nechama. I began connecting more deeply with the characters and the way that they embody so many aspects of my friendship with Rachel. All the whispering secrets and sleepovers, late nights baking cupcakes, makeup experiments, tears, tantrums, and many giggles are only a fraction of what makes our friendship so meaningful to me.

The story of Nechama and Renie taught me that along with friendships come many obstacles. No friendship is a perfect one. It takes a lot of work and effort on both sides for the relationship to become real and lasting. Throughout the journey of Nechama and Renie, they were faced with many challenges, the worst of which was Nechama becoming blind. Nechama had to be there for Renie when her mother passed away and Renie had to be there for Nechama when she became blind at only 14 years old. Our friendship faced a similar struggle when Rachel's father passed away very suddenly at such a young age. I found it extremely difficult, always afraid to say the wrong thing at the wrong time and to properly express how much I cared without Rachel feeling that I felt sorry for her because I knew that it would make her feel even worse. Over the years, I have also had occasional fights with my friends. We fight about the stupidest things, like whose house we're going to or who is going to sit on the other side of the cafeteria lunch table. I found that communicating my feelings in an open and honest way and knowing how to apologize sincerely goes a long way in maintaining a strong friendship.

Nechama and Renie kept their friendship strong and alive throughout the happy times and the painful ones. After reading *Conquer the Darkness*, I have a new appreciation for my friends. You will never know what God has planned for you. It's up to me to use my abilities and strengths to overcome even the darkest of times. Nechama and Renie showed me the importance of having friends as your support system. Thank you for helping me realize the everlasting power of friendship and for giving me hope that out of darkness always comes light. Watching the sunset and the sky darken into the night, I am comforted by the knowledge that the sun will come up and the light will return soon. I am confident that, regardless of what comes my way, I too can conquer the darkness.

My deepest thanks and appreciation,  
Naomi Cohen

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Charleston Cox**

Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Anne Holm

Author of *I Am David*

Dear Anne Holm,

Freedom. I never thought about freedom as being able to go outside to play, being able to play soccer in my yard, the ability to get a snack to eat or water to drink whenever I wanted to. I can brush my teeth and take a shower every single day. Your book, *I Am David*, made me stop and think about how I took for granted my freedoms. David, a boy my age, had none of my freedoms. He was locked in a concentration camp with adults and had never even brushed his teeth before. Then he risked his life to try and gain freedom. Would I be that brave to risk my life for freedom? This book made me think.

Within the first few pages of the book, I was anxious to see if David could really escape through the fence and gain his freedom without getting shot by a guard. I had never read a book before that drew me into the character like this book did. I felt my heart begin to beat faster as I read about David's escape. Would he be shot by "them?" Would the spotlight graze his head and then "they" see him escaping and catch him? I was thrilled when David got his freedom from the concentration camp, but then he was in constant fear of being caught by "them" and was all alone. David's loneliness in the rocks, in the fields, locked in the barn, all made me relate to a time I felt all alone. It was a day in school when my two best friends were out sick. No one talked to me. The worst part of the day was when I went out to recess and I didn't have anyone to play with. I was filled with loneliness even though there were lots of kids running around. I was so sad and miserable and all I wished was that it would be over. I walked around the outside of the playground praying. I started praying to my God so I didn't feel so alone, just like David. All I wanted was to feel like I belonged, just like David. I prayed to my God, the "God of green pastures and still waters" to help me, just like David. Praying helped me to not feel all alone.

As I continued to go on the nail-biting adventure with David, I couldn't believe that he had never smiled in his entire life until he rescued Maria from the burning shed. I smile a lot. I was very shy when I was younger, and my mom would always tell me to smile if I was too shy to talk and that would let people know that I was friendly. When David smiled for the first time when he looked at Maria, I was filled with excitement for him. I

wanted to yell at him and say, "Smile now when you see people and they may be nicer to you and offer to take you to Denmark faster!"

I also truly understood David's happiness when he talked with Maria or even when he was just sitting beside her. I have a friend who makes me smile and laugh and I can be myself. David had this relationship with Maria, and it filled me with anger to hear her mother say that she wanted David to leave because she saw how Maria looked at him and didn't like her around him. I was scared when David knew he had to leave Maria's house in the middle of the night because of her mother. I knew he would be all alone again. Thankfully, David's friendship with Maria helped him continue his journey to Denmark and made him happy and smile when he saw the flowers blooming on the trees.

I now have a new perspective on what freedom means after reading your story, ***I Am David***. I am very appreciative of knowing that I was born in a free country and can move freely wherever I want. Reading David's story has made me grateful for having a family and knowing where I belong, because not everyone has a place to call their home. I have found myself looking around at school and smiling a little more to people that look lonely. I have even tried to invite new kids to play with me and my friends at recess. I'm thankful for your story about David.

Sincerely,  
Charleston Cox

Level I  
Semifinalist

Micah Day  
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville  
Letter to Gordon Korman  
Author of *Restart*

Dear Mr. Korman,

When I picked up the orange book with glasses on the cover, I thought nothing of the transformation I was about to have in my life. After I read your book, *Restart*, everything in my life was different. When I was 6, my brother Isaac died from suicide. He was 14, and I was forever changed. My dreams mostly died along with Isaac. I never believed that I could live without my brother. My dreams were to be a happy united family, but that would never happen with him gone.

After my brother died, I not only had to live without him, but I also had to listen to people say they knew how I felt when they didn't. It was the worst thing that has ever happened in my life. Because of this, I never had the guts to tell people about my past. I used to be scared, but now I'm not. If people like Chase Ambrose have experienced lifechanging events and have overcome them, why can't I?

I was in a stage of sadness 24/7 when he died, but I learned from your book that pouting about things won't help you in life, it will just make it worse and get you more riled up and annoyed. I also learned from your book that people who don't know you might judge you wrongly, but you shouldn't let that stop you or your dreams. People judged Chase on who he had been and not who he had become, but he ignored them and persevered.

When I read *Restart*, I felt a strong connection to the story. I had been searching for a book like this. *Restart* taught me to be grateful for the things that I have in my life. Like Chase, I had to relearn some things such as how to share about my family and how to live without my brother.

Thank you for writing your wonderful book, *Restart*. It really did change my perspective in life. I learned to be a person that accepts all people, even if they weren't nice to me. *Restart* was basically my second chance, like the chance that Chase Ambrose was given to restart his life. Everyone that sees me knows something has changed in my heart, and that thing was your wonderful book. *Thank you*.

Sincerely,  
Micah Day (弥迦天)

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Lydia Douglas**  
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville  
Letter to Erin Hunter  
Author of the **Warriors** series

Dear Erin Hunter,

I was staring with wide eyes, peeking up from a book I had read millions of times. *His* eyes were locked to the pages of his book, the words that had him so hooked. No doubt there were many in the series, as he was always reading a different one. Then the bell rang, and students rushed in like a tsunami, under the pressure of the rule that *you must be in your seats when the bell rings*. It was an ordinary Tuesday in Humanities, so of course we went up to the library. We flowed into the world of books just behind the glass doors. I shuffled off to my usual chair and sat there glancing around at the colorful library. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him return his book and greedily pull out two more from the shelf. I stalked up to him and asked with a brave voice, “Would you mind showing me where those books are?” As soon as he told me, I bolted over and checked one out immediately. Plopping down on the sofa, I opened it up and started to read. There was no doubt about it; after the first word, I was suddenly sucked into the world of **Warriors**.

I’ve always been on the short side. Short in general, short attention span, small voice (but they never listened to me anyway). I’ve always felt lonely, if I’m being honest. Friends, to me, are like a balloon. You must tie them to your heart, or they escape and never come back. I’ve lost many balloons over the years. They end up escaping me no matter how tight I tie the knot. Or betraying me or hurting me in some way. I’m kind of like a balloon, too. Rude comments pop me like that.

When I started reading your books, I couldn’t stop. I ended up reading one book a day I loved them so much. I was that girl who was so picky she ended up rereading books ‘til she knew it word-for-word. I can’t even tell you how *boring* it was! Your books were a breath of fresh air.

Dustpelt, Darkstripe, and Longtail reminded me of those rude-comment people. Your books told me not to smush myself into a corner or to get beat up by those foul words. Instead, you showed me to be like Firestar. Firestar didn’t let Dustpelt and Darkstripe’s words hurt him. He didn’t let Longtail hurt him. The *kittypet* taunts only

gave Firestar more power to prove himself. Firestar stands up for himself and for what's right, even when that meant breaking the warrior code. He tries his best to help others when they are in need. Firestar is strong, brave, and makes peace wherever he goes. I realized that I needed to be brave and stand up for myself. Your books taught me that.

Honestly, your books taught me a LOT more than that! Your books taught me to be grateful for what I have. In *Into the Wild*, it talks about how scarce prey is in winter, and it taught me to be grateful for what I have. I don't have to catch my food; I just prepare it and eat it.

Your books have taught me, "The Clan must be fed first!" Be kind. Put others first. Be loyal to my friends and other people. "You must be loyal to your Clan!" And I learned not to judge people just because of where they came from. Firestar used to be a kittypet, but he saved ThunderClan! Brambleclaw and Tawnypelt are loyal warriors, even though Tigerstar was their father! Your books mean so much to me and I have learned so much.

I was staring with wide eyes, peeking up from the book I had read millions of times. His eyes were locked to the page, the words that had him so hooked. No doubt there were many in the series, as he was always reading a different one. Instead of sitting in my usual chair, I ran to the shelf and grabbed two books. As I went to check out, there was no doubt about it: I was reading *Warriors*.

Thank you for writing *Into the Wild*. You changed my perspective forever. And forever I thank you, Erin Hunter.

With thanks,  
Lydia Douglas

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Lila French**  
Laurel Elementary School  
Letter to Carl Hiaasen  
Author of ***Hoot***

Dear Carl Hiaasen,

The book ***Hoot*** changed my life in so many ways. One thing I look at differently is the way I look at bullies. This book made me change the way I look at family, the environment, and friendship.

I look at family differently. I'm thankful to have a family that cares and loves me. I like how in the book you said that Dana Matherson has a family but her mom fights with her a lot, to show kids that life isn't fair all the time. I have a home where I can feel safe. I don't have to worry about anything. Family are people that will support you forever. They are the most wonderful thing that could ever happen to a child. I am thankful for my family that has always been there for me and that I don't live in a situation like Dana's.

The environment is another thing that I look at differently. I care more about the animals' habitats. I think people should care more about the environment. People shouldn't throw trash all over. I like how you wrote that Napoleon Bridger, or as they called him, "*Mullet Fingers*" helped save the animals and their environment. I think the environment is important because animals help keep our earth clean. Also, I think that everyone should have the chance to see wildlife. I would help save the animals too.

It changed the way I look at friendship. You need someone there for you through the ups and downs. Your friend is someone to keep with you forever. I like how Roy and Napoleon helped each other through the rough times. I have a best friend that has always been there for me. I am thankful to have a good friend that I can trust and rely on.

Overall, I think this book has changed many things that are important in life. Little things make a big difference in how you think and treat others. I think that you have taught me great things that I needed to know. I think everyone should read ***Hoot!*** It gives out good messages and makes people think about things a little differently.

Sincerely,  
Lila French



**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Arron Habecker**  
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville  
Letter to Leslie Connor  
Author of *The Truth as Told by Mason Buttle*

Dear Mrs. Connor,

Before reading this book, before all the trouble, I was playing with my friends at soccer practice. I remember my friends, sweaty and running around like maniacs after the ball. I remember them in those dark green and white stripe jerseys with the ZYSA logo on it. Everything was great. We all had good chemistry passing around and beating teams. In 2019, we were the best team in the state. After that, my team fell apart. My heart broke. I broke. I didn't realize how much they meant to me until I lost them. All my friends moved away like baby birds flying out of the nest, except one. I felt that the bird left in the nest was me. One friend moved to Florida. Most of my friends, though, went to a D.A. soccer club while I went to Hoosier soccer club. The different soccer clubs' level of play took up all their time. I had a friend that I met when I was two who went to D.A. and now seemed like a robot. They all do. None of them were who I thought they were anymore. I lost them. I lost what I thought were my only friends in the world. It was hard without a friend group for 3 years of my life. I was falling apart. I didn't get any more friends. Then I read *The Truth as Told by Mason Buttle* and everything changed.

I found that Mason was like me: lost, helpless, depressed, lonely, and in a fixed mindset to not be able to reach his potential. He was as lost as I was. We didn't see the light in the darkness, the moon in the night. There is always enough light in the darkness for you to see; it is whether you step into it or not. He was too caught up in his friend's death just like I was too caught up about being separated from all the friends that I thought were the only friends I would have in the world. That led to both me and Mason being depressed and with a fixed mindset which led to loneliness. Things lead to another just like that, but only you can make your tree grow instead of die. Which path you take leads on to your future, whether it is a good or bad decision.

When seeing how Mason recovered, I was inspired seeing his freedom with moving on through another room in the house of life, a different way in the maze. I wanted that and I changed myself. Instead of staying in the quicksand, I reached out for the hand trying to pull me out. I was finally able to fly out of the nest. Mason's situation in the book has a lifechanging conclusion. Mason changed my life at a young age. Think of what I could

have been if it wasn't for Mason. Mason showed me the light, opened my door, and led me out of the maze. Mason's situation and result made my future what it is. Thank you for creating Mason in this book. It is the best feeling in the world to now look on old pictures and say that I am now a better version of myself. I am me again and can never thank you enough.

You changed this reader's life,  
Arron Habecker

Level I  
Semifinalist

Emma Hayes

Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Indiana Author, John Green  
Author of *The Fault in our Stars*

Dear Mr. Green,

*The Fault in our Stars* made me think and question things I had never thought about before. I started your book one morning and had finished it by that afternoon. I just could not put it down.

I loved Hazel and Gus's journey and how they both fought their own battles, but that's what brought them together. I loved Hazel's perspective on life and seeing the world through her eyes. That helped open my eyes to the world around me. Her sarcastic personality was like my own, so I was able to truly understand her.

When I read it the first time, I didn't understand Gus's fixation about being remembered. After I read it the second time, I realized that I had the same fixation. Like Gus, I want to be remembered. Almost all of us are searching to leave our mark on the world. Now, because of your book I will remember to make sure not to leave a scar.

Your book also made me think about things I had never even thought about. Something seemingly as random as Hazel complaining about eggs being classified as a breakfast food made me think about something deeper. I don't know if this was accidental or on purpose, but that made me think. What else do we classify into categories without a second thought? I know classifying eggs into breakfast food and only breakfast food isn't that important, but I am now more conscious about other things that I'm putting in a category without a second thought.

I realized things about myself that I never knew. Your book also helped me become a better person. I am even more aware of the suffering in the world around me. Hazel and Gus's story helped me in that way. I usually read fantasy books with magic and adventure, Greek gods and wizards, but your book was magical in its own way. It was set in real life, but it was just as magical as one of the fantasy books I read so often.

Part of the magic is what I realized about myself. I remember to be aware about the mark I am leaving on this world. Gus is right, the mark we leave is too often a scar. I'm determined now more than ever to leave a positive mark. I know now it is better to be loved deeply than widely. I am now

conscious about what I am grouping into categories without thinking. This book is a great book not just because the storyline or the writing but how it changed me. I am more conscious to the world around me. This book has made its mark on me, but I promise you, it is not a scar.

Sincerely,  
Emma Hayes

Level I  
Semifinalist

Caroline Kemp  
Salem Middle School, Salem  
Letter to Chris Colfer  
Author of *The Land of Stories* series

Dear Chris Colfer,

After my mom died, I didn't think my life could get any worse. I thought the time had stopped and I didn't know if I could ever go on with life. All I wanted to do was to be by myself and never have to face any more challenges that could affect my life. Reading your book, *The Land of Stories: The Wishing Spell*, inspired me to continue to be the girl I was before my mother died and be ready to face any challenges that would come my way in the future.

When I started to read the book, I didn't think a book about fairy tales would change my life so much, but I was very wrong. I thought it would be another book that I would read to pass time. I read further, to the part where Alex and Connor's dad died, and they were just getting over losing him. Their grandmother gave them a fairytale book for their birthday, and it was magical and so unexpected. After I read that part in the book, I realized that you must be ready for the unexpected to happen. No matter what has happened in the past, you must move on and tell yourself that everything will be all right. As you go through your life, something bad will always happen, but you must get back up and be ready to face whatever happens to you in the rest of your life.

As I read through the book, I wondered what feelings were going through Alex's head when all this was happening. She was still so young and wasn't quite ready for what would happen in her future, but Alex stayed strong through all she was going through and she knew that whatever would happen in the future, she would stay strong and be ready.

As I get older and go through my life, I realize everything happens for a reason and you must be ready for whatever will happen even if you don't expect it. Unexpected things will happen in your life, things that you could not even dream of happening, but you must be ready because those things could happen because you can never predict the future. Your book has changed my life for the better and now I have moved on with my life. I am ready to face anything that comes my way in the future.

Sincerely,  
Caroline Kemp

**Level I  
Semifinalist**

**Reagan Kurcinka**

Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Indiana Author, John David Anderson

Author of *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*

Dear John David Anderson,

Cancer. Those six letters alone are strong enough to strike fear into any heart. These letters struck the hearts of Brand, Topher and Steve in your book *Ms. Bixby's Last Day*. I have also been hit by these words. I lost my dad to stage four neuroendocrine tumor cancer on July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2018. After that happened, my life completely flipped. It was as if someone had put me and my emotions in a dark room and locked the door. I didn't know how to go about daily life with such a large part of me suddenly gone. I felt extremely confused and it was as if I was running in circles. At some point, I felt almost numb to the day-to-day joys and pains.

It was about three months after my dad's passing that I was fortunate enough to pick up your book. From the moment I opened the front cover, I connected to it. It became a part of me. Every time I turned the page and neared the end, I felt more and more a part of the story. I felt as if I was there walking down the hospital hallway, nearing hospital room number 428. Towards the end of your book, as the boys and Ms. Bixby were at the park, I could smell the carnations, could hear the wind gently blowing through the trees, and could almost taste the raspberry cheesecake.

As I finished the last chapter of your book, everything clicked. The locked door to my dark room was thrown open, and the light flooded into the room, bathing me and my emotions in its glorious radiance. The circle that I had been running in suddenly became a straight path, the end unknown but surely worthwhile. That numbness that I had felt for the last three months lifted and everything came flooding back, not in a trickle but in a wave. It became as clear as ever that the most important moments in life aren't the big extravagant ones but the little ones. The little moments are the ones that make sure every day is great because it's those days, the carnation days, we will forever look back on. As I was reading the last words that you had typed in your book, I was on the floor sobbing. As I look back on that now, I realize they weren't sad tears or remorseful tears or angry tears. I cried joyful tears. Optimistic tears. Memory filled tears. Because you never forget the good ones.

Forever grateful,  
Reagan Kurcinka

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Isabella Leurck**  
Crown Point, Indiana  
Letter to Valerie Tripp  
Author of *Samantha Saves the Day*

Dear Ms. Valerie Tripp,

I trust that this letter finds you well! My name is Isabella Rose Leurck and I am a fourth-grade student. I have been reading the American Girls Collection books since second grade, and I like those books because I am an avid reader always searching for new books that have great and new adventures and experiences. They always provide exciting stories that keep me interested and wanting more.

I love reading the American Girls Collection books. In second grade, I had a little trouble trying to find books to read so my teacher, Ms. Beth Flynn, suggested that I read American Girls books. I clearly remember that the first book that I read from the collection was *Meet Samantha*, and I loved it so much that I decided to read all the American Girls books that Ms. Flynn had in her amazing library. And I did! May I share a little piece of extra information? Samantha was my first American Girl doll! When the school year was over, I started reading the American Girls books from the Crown Point Library that I had not read. Once I read all the Library's collection, I found myself without American Girls books to read. That is when, during Summer Reading at school organized by none other than Ms. Flynn, my mom mentioned to the parent of another classmate my love for the American Girls Collection. The very next day, this parent showed up at Summer Reading with two large boxes filled with her daughter's pristine (and I repeat - *pristine*) American Girls book collection! That made my day and was the beginning of how the American Girls Collection impacted me and touched my heart in a very special way. I saw kindness and unselfishness from this parent and her desire for me to get even more familiar with this amazing collection.

Like I said at the beginning of my letter, I am now in fourth grade and still read and reread the American Girls Collection. Out of all the books, my favorite book is yours, *Samantha Saves the Day*. These books have helped me realize how beautiful the world is, how wonderful people are, and at the same time, the dangers that we all face. For example, your story about Samantha saving the day at Piney Point taught me to always be careful about the waters, especially the ocean, because one minute the sky can be bright and the waters can be calm but the next minute it can be raining hard and the waters can be rough and have high waves. One thing

in that book that made me anxious to finish it was that Admiral Archibald Beemis tried to save Samantha and her friends, but he became hurt in doing so. I liked how Samantha helped the admiral return to shore. I kept wondering whether he was going to be okay. Samantha showed kindness and she was not selfish when she tried to save the admiral's life. She put herself in danger. I learned from Samantha's actions that if we all try to be kind and protect each other, the world would be a better place. That is what I love about these books. There is action, sometimes drama, humor, suspense, surprises, lots of history and tales about our past, as well as great life lessons.

I have been taken all over the world, from Mexico to Piney Point in Maryland. I have expanded my knowledge of the world, and every time I sit down to read one of the American Girls books, I know I will be taken to another amazing place. I hope that you will write new books for me to read, but in the meantime, I have many more places to learn about! I hope you enjoyed reading this letter because I enjoyed writing it. I admire all the work you do, and I hope you never stop writing your amazing works of art.

Your reader,  
Isabella Leurck



**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Emma Lindeman**  
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville  
Letter to Bob Goff and Lindsey Goff Viducich  
Author of *Love Does for Kids*

Dear Mr. Goff and Ms. Goff Viducich,

As a 6<sup>th</sup> grade girl, I wondered how I could tell people about Jesus. I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and I want my friends to be able to know Jesus too. I am not the most outgoing person, so talking is not my favorite thing to do, and then telling people about Jesus seemed so hard to do. After reading your book *Love Does for Kids*, I realized I do not have to necessarily tell people about Jesus. I can just show people Jesus' love in the way that I treat them.

One story in your book that I particularly loved is "**Three Minutes at a Time.**" The joy Adrian showed you each time you would go through security caught your attention, which then led to 3-minute conversations that led to a deeper relationship in which you describe that "Adrian continued to be a part of our family for many years." You explained that it doesn't take years, weeks, or even days to become friends with someone. I was challenged to look for those around me and use three minutes to make a new friend, especially for someone who may need a new friend.

Another story I loved in your book was "**The Letters.**" It helped me realize that even though I am a child, I too can make a big difference in the world. It was so awesome that your kids wrote to all the world leaders and then got to meet many of them. Your kids were such a great example of believing in something and implementing what they believed. Their example helps me to believe that even though I am a child, I can make a big difference in this world.

I love surprises and ice cream, so the story "**Ice Cream Drop**" was another favorite story of mine. I want to be that friend to my friends and even people I don't know. I want to be the girl who encourages people when they are down or surprise them with something like ice cream or baked goodies to lift their spirits. I have found in my own life that if I surprise someone who is having a bad day with a smile or just something little, that simple act can make them feel better. I pray that I can be the surprise that God has planned for me to be, and for me to be looking for that person who needs a surprise.

As I read all the stories in your book, I kept thinking of a time in my life that I lived in China. It was so hard to live so far away from all my friends and family and be in a totally different culture. However, we made the most of it and found ways to show Jesus to others all throughout our days. We would visit babies and kids in orphanages to give their caregivers a break. We would do special things for our driver, Xio. We would surprise him and take him out to dinner, or just say 'take the day off to spend with your family.' After reading your book, I realize that we were loving on people and showing them Jesus by the way we treated them. I was only 8 years old at that time and never thought I could make a difference in someone's life and show them Jesus, but I did just by being loving to them.

Thank you for writing your book *Love Does for Kids*. It has really helped me to see what a difference I can make in a friend's life or someone I do not even know. I may be a little quiet and not that old, but I can show Jesus just by loving on others. I am thankful for your book. It has given me a new confidence to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Thank you and God bless you and your family.

Love Does,  
Emma Lindeman

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Kahaan Modi**

Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Lois Lowry

Author of *The Giver*

Dear Lois Lowry,

Your book *The Giver* changed me. It gave me a larger outlook on life. It shows that memory is important to life and that individuality and freedom of choice are needed in life. In class, we did a project where we read your book and did a lap book. After I was done, I was amazed by how profound it was. The book had so much suspense. I was captivated. We had assigned pages, but I felt like I had to keep reading.

The dystopia of the city that was trying to be a utopia gave me shivers at times, as the characters in your book except for The Giver or Jonas don't experience any real emotions. What makes life rich is experiencing real emotions like pain or enjoyment. Enjoyment is the sole thing in life that, in my opinion, is so important, like watching a funny movie and laughing 'til your sides hurt. If you don't feel an emotion like happiness, then what is the point of life?

In your book, the citizens are brainwashed to the point where they don't have freedom of choice or individuality. Individuality is what makes everyone unique. Without uniqueness, everything would be so drab. Everyone doing the same thing, looking the same way and then looking at someone else and seeing yourself is a scary thought. We need individuality; it's what makes you stand out and be different. If you lose your individuality, you have basically lost yourself.

Freedom of choice is what makes life different. If you don't have freedom of choice, your life becomes very restricted because someone else is always making a choice for you. Having excessive options of choice can be good or bad, but you still need that because you also need to learn from your mistakes. From what I wear to what I eat is a decision for me to make. I can't imagine that right being taken away from me. I wouldn't be able to survive without choices. If someone is always instructing you, then you lose the ability to think for yourself.

Memory is so important. No one in the community had a single memory of the good times. All they had was the memories of their drab lives. Your memory contains the ups and downs of your life. I have seen this firsthand with my friend's grandmother going through Alzheimer's. I saw how she

couldn't recognize her own daughter at times. She got all her beautiful memories taken away from her. I could see everyone around her getting even more sad. The effect of losing your memory is catastrophic to you and everyone around you. The thought of losing your memory is very scary.

Ms. Lowry, your book was thought-provoking, and it made me ponder over the aforementioned concepts of life. Thank you for writing this work of literature which taught me important life lessons.

Sincerely,  
Kahaan Modi

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Maya Patel**  
Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Harold Keith  
Author of *Rifles for Watie*

Dear Mr. Keith,

Whenever I discuss a conflict, I am so sure I know which side the “good” side was versus the “bad” side. The line between the two was so clear, until I read your book. *Rifles for Watie* really made me question if that line even existed. Is there such a thing as a good side and a bad side to each conflict, or is it just a matter of what lens you are looking through?

In your novel, Jefferson Davis Bussey wants nothing more than to enlist in the Union Army; however, a recent drought has settled over Linn County, Kansas. These are hard times, and Jeff’s aging father can no longer do all the work required to support the family. However, a recent raid lead by Missouri bushwhackers had fueled Jefferson’s determination to fight for his country. His perseverance to fight for what he believes in no matter the risk has inspired me to stand up for what I believe in. Soon, after much persuading, he is a Kansas Union volunteer soldier.

Life as a soldier wasn’t easy. There were bloody, violent battles and endless marches that would forever be engraved in his memory. Through all the horrible things, Jeff found light at the end of the tunnel. He always tried to find the positive in a situation and he inspires me to do the same. While trying to get a message to another Union base, Jeff falls gravely ill with malaria. He falls off his horse and gets swept downstream. Jeff wakes up in a nice house with people nursing him back to health. His fever has broken, but he is still quite sick. Jeff learns he is staying in the home of the Jackmans, who had been tending to him for the past few days. Mr. and Mrs. Jackman and their four daughters were a kind and caring family who treated Jeff well. They also happened to be a Confederate family. He was baffled to find this out. The way people had talked about the Confederates made them seem like evil and cruel people, yet he was staying in the house of Confederate people who were the exact opposite.

Jeff comes to realize that the Jackmans are a family just like any other. They only believed in different things. Chances are, I will never be a soldier who must go through what Jeff has gone through, but I can still try to understand another person’s point of view. This can help me with my own conflicts. I admit, I tend to accuse people of doing things they didn’t

do. After reading your book front-to-back, I have learned to appreciate what people have to say and how they might be feeling.

When your story finished, instead of feeling sad or disappointed, I felt like I had taken something very important away with me: it is one thing to say you are understanding someone else's feelings, and another thing to truly understand what they are saying and feeling inside. Sometimes we paint a picture in our mind before we know what something or someone is really like. If everyone could simply listen to each other and try to understand one another, imagine how much we could accomplish.

Best regards,  
Maya Patel

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Haley Shields**  
New Palestine Intermediate, New Palestine  
Letter to Cynthia Kadohata  
Author of *Checked*

Dear Cynthia Kadohata,

Thank you for your book, *Checked*. While reading this book, I felt several connections with the main character, Conor, an elite athlete that plays AAA hockey. Hockey is his entire world. Conor's father, a former NHL player, worked for years to fulfill his dream of playing in the NHL. I don't play hockey, but it was the way Connor and his dad dealt with life's ups and downs that changed my thinking.

After playing in his first NHL game, Conor's dad grasped the reality that he just wasn't good enough. He gave up on hockey and decided to help the world in some way, becoming a police officer. He meets his future wife and Conor is born several months later. Two years later, Conor's mother dies in a car crash. Conor's grieving father falls in love with another woman named Jenny. Since Conor developed his father's passion for hockey, Conor soon starts playing travel hockey, which costs massive amounts of greenback and doesn't leave time for much else. Jenny and Conor's father soon start squabbling, and as Conor gets older, squabbling turns into arguing and arguing turns into a melee of yelling. Jenny and Conor's father eventually divorce, leaving just Conor, his dad, and their beloved Doberman, Sinbad. This is where my connection to *Checked* takes hold.

Conor and his dad take Sinbad to the vet and find out that Sinbad is sick. He has a tumor in his thigh, and when a sample of his blood is tested, it is discovered that Sinbad has cancer. Sinbad's chemotherapy is expensive, but it's the only way to prolong Sinbad's life. If they pay for Sinbad's chemotherapy, Connor can't continue playing the game he loves. Connor realizes that even though the doctors say that chemotherapy can prolong his life, Sinbad isn't going to live long. Conor decides to maintain Sinbad's "quality of life" for as long as possible. This part of *Checked* really hit home.

I feel really connected to Conor in the way that he accepts that someone he loves is going to pass soon, so he tries to make the most of what little time they have left. My great-grandfather is currently in a nursing home. He has stage three dementia, so he doesn't have any idea who I am when I go to see him. The only person he remembers is Carol, my great-grandmother. He can't do normal things like brush his teeth, shower, or go

to the bathroom, so one of the nurses helps him. When we go to see him, the only thing he talks about is golf. I've never played any sort of golf except putt-putt, so I don't know anything about it, but I pretend that I do because he likes to talk about it. People with dementia normally live about 4-8 years after they're diagnosed. My great-grandfather has been diagnosed for about three years. Last year, he had a stroke and lost basically all the tiny fragments of his memory that he had still held onto. He has good days and bad days, but the bad days outweigh the good days. Many people have great memories of their great-grandparents. I only hope that my great-grandpa remembers my name. To him, I'm probably just some random little blond girl. I'm not even sure if he remembers me visiting, because each time I visit him, he just talks about the same things over and over. He has a picture of my great-grandmother on his bedside table. "Carol, my wife," he says in his rough voice. The greatest moment that I've ever shared with him was about two years ago, before he had his stroke and lost everything. I walked up to him and gave him a hug. He didn't say anything at first. He just smiled. But while I sat beside him, he suddenly reached over and squeezed my hand, and said, "You're getting so tall." Even then, I knew that his words would forever echo in the depths of my mind.

After reading this book, I really felt like I understood that my grandfather would pass in the near future, and although I know that his passing will be a great loss and will affect my entire family, I also know that I will always cherish the few memories I have of him. So thank you, Cynthia Kadohata, for helping me understand that some things must happen but we can always make the best of a bad situation, because even though the ice on the hockey rink of life can sometimes get rough, there is always a saucer pass to help get the puck above the ice and into the net to score.

Sincerely,  
Haley Shields



**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Oliver Smith**

Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers

Letter to Trenton Lee Stewart

Author of *The Mysterious Benedict Society*

Dear Trenton Lee Stewart,

Reading your book was like an emotional roller coaster for me. I was scared when Reynie was scared, as well as encouraged when Reynie was encouraged. I was anxious to find out what happened next every time I flipped the page.

Your book was so inspiring. I love the message you gave about how kids have power, too, and that sometimes kids are the only way to keep the world safe with our young minds and new ideas. Before reading your book, I knew there were kids stepping up and making a difference in their community and in the world with issues like climate change and bullying. But after reading your book *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, I did not just stand there and let the people around me make a difference. Instead, I went out and made a difference on my own by doing more service projects with Boy Scouts and school, like when we go and help out at a food pantry for Boy Scouts to get more service hours. I believe that because of your book I have become an overall better person and that I am more prepared for when our generation must step in and save the world.

I love how you show exactly what the characters are thinking and feeling. It helps bring the story to life and helps me see how hard it really is for Reynie when he is trying to help his friends, and how none of them are listening or taking any of his suggestions. It reminds me of times when I have had trouble getting my friends to listen to me. I feel that everyone from time to time has conflicts with friends, but your book has shown me that if you find ways to resolve the conflict, then your group of friends will be stronger than before you had the conflict.

I believe that because of your book, *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, I am a better person who is going to make a difference in the world someday. I will be there for friends and will always get through conflicts with friends. I believe that many kids will make a difference in this world because they have read your book and have learned from it. Someday, we will have to take a stand and save our world in whatever way we choose.

Sincerely,  
Oliver Smith

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Gabriel Snider**

Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to George Takei  
Author of *They Called Us Enemy*

Dear George Takei,

Your book changed my life. I have never really thought about how bad internment was for Japanese Americans. *They Called Us Enemy* left me speechless when the president decided to place a group of people who were Japanese or were of Japanese descent into camps. After reading your book, I often find myself asking what it means to be an American, which I am sure your mom and dad were wondering while taking the loyalty pledge. They were to forget about all the memories, ancestors, and family members they had in Japan just to fight for a country who rejected and disposed of them in a swamp in Arkansas. What cost do they truly pay to be an American, dying in a war for their adopted homeland? The Japanese who dared to stand up to the army drafters were sent to a federal penitentiary, where they spent the rest of the days of the Second World War. Japanese Americans, unfairly labeled as disloyal, were sent to a prison surrounded by armed guards, tanks, and guard towers all because they were not willing to fight for a country who rejected them. As a child younger than me, you thought this was normal, and for that I am sorry. As an American, I would have never let this happen. I am sorry for what America did to you and your family.

I am very concerned about the ways illegal immigrants are being held at the border and how the government is separating families and putting children in prison camps designed for adults. Sadly, five children have already died in the poorly designed camps. It's horrible to see history repeating itself, and I think that you of all people will understand. It is terrible to put desperate immigrants from a country with fewer freedoms than us into camps when they just want to be Americans, like your family. This is an issue of human rights that must be addressed.

Thank you for writing *They Called Us Enemy* and letting me experience life in internment camps as you did. Also, thank you for opening my eyes to the current problems immigrants face. Your book was extraordinary and allowed me to create a new definition of what it means to be an American.

Gratefully,  
Gabe Snider

Level I  
Semifinalist

Nadire Tuoheti  
Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Marissa Meyers  
Author of *Fairest*

Dear Marissa Meyers,

It's strange how some words on a page can make you feel so many emotions at the same time that you don't even know how to name them anymore; how a mix of emotions can pull at your heart so hard that you can barely think; how these emotions can haunt you to the point where you lay awake at night sorting through them. That's how your book *Fairest* made me feel. Nothing could have prepared me for Levanna's story, which came with frustration, grief, and smugness, things that I pull from my mind like I felt them yesterday. And I remember all of it because of you.

Your book kept me up at night, with me imagining what would happen next. My eyes sped across the pages, sinking deeper and deeper into the book. I could see all the glorious images that you described; the setting, the characters, and all of it played in my mind like a movie. I saw the gorgeous castle and Solstice's cozy shop. I swallowed every last word, let them craft themselves into a movie with more details added to the image in my head. I never wanted it to stop. I was entranced, thrown into your book with your words. I wanted to be stranded in the book forever, but all good things must come to an end. I finished the book and found myself going insane, tearing through the pages, trying to find something I could have missed, trying to continue on a road that had already ended. I wanted to relive all the crazy, all the anger, every little detail. But there was nothing additional. So, I just reread it.

I sympathized with Levanna because in a way, I related to her. She tried her very hardest just to get the approval of her selfish family and peers. I could relate to her need for approval, the need to impress people that were close to her, except that hers was a more intense feeling. It was just more and more heartbreaking as I read each page because I could almost understand why she did all those terrible things. I never forgot that she was a bad person, but I could just begin to understand why she did become one. Now that I'm thinking about it, it's kind of creepy how easily I could see some of myself in a person who was literally created to be terrible. She was a bad person, but your book helped me understand her. There was a new humanity I could see in her, and it helped me understand not only her, but the whole story.

The reason why it was so easy to sympathize with Levanna is because, as I said, I related to her. Since I was 7 years old, I always thought I needed to be something else just for people to accept me. I switched schools in second grade, and I moved to a school I didn't like at all. Everyone there was already latched on tight to someone else, and it made me feel like I didn't belong. I felt the constant need to give people space, and to just try to impress people when they were even paying a little attention to me. My self-esteem hit rock-bottom, and I became incredibly shy. I began to avoid socializing. Now, I'm in sixth grade and I still sit back, blend into the crowd, and just wait my way through life. I try my hardest to gain the courage to talk more and impress people, but no matter how great I'm feeling, the smallest thing takes me back to where I started. Levanna has influenced me in a great way. She has taught me that even if trying your hardest doesn't work, it's about being able to focus on the things you want - but not in an evil way. That's an important lesson, and I'm glad that you were able to teach me that.

Isn't it strange, how someone can shove so much emotion into a few words? How someone can pour out all their emotions into an essay, a book, or a letter? It's strange how someone can tell someone else that their book made them feel more empathy towards others, that their book had made them be more aware of how others were thinking, that their book was the best thing they had ever read. Now that I've read this book, I'm ready to try to understand other people's point of view and to give people the appreciation they deserve. I love every word that was said in *Fairest*. I love all the emotions and thoughtfulness that came with it. Thank you. Thank you for everything.

Sincerely,  
Nadire Tuoheti

Level I  
Semifinalist

Hayden Turner  
Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Holly Goldberg Sloan  
Author of *Counting by 7s*

Dear Holly Goldberg Sloan,

Before reading *Counting by 7s* it never occurred to me that books could change your perspective on life or change the way you go about daily things. I always thought that they were just used to entertain us, to amuse us when we are feeling down, or to be our refuge when we just want to take a step away from the world. After reading *Counting By 7s*, I now understand that books offer more than just entertainment. They offer advice, whether it be how to get over breaking up with your boyfriend to finding the good in bad situations! In *Counting By 7s*, every chapter, page, paragraph, sentence, and word had some deep meaning in it and I just don't know where you found the inspiration.

Your book has also changed my way of thinking on my whole life and everyone else's too. When I read the page about Willow thinking all that any living thing is doing in life is reproducing and preparing the next generation, I had to take a moment, put the book down, and just think about my life and what it's come to. Now a month later, I still cannot come to terms with the fact that every living thing is doing the same thing in life. I've just never thought about life that way, and now I kind of feel a little hopeless like there is no point in life. I still get up every day and go to school, socialize, and learn, but life isn't quite the same anymore. I catch myself at times asking myself, *why go to school or why learn the solution to this math problem when all I'm doing is preparing the next generation?* Even so, your book has made me want to push even harder to make a lasting difference in the world to help the next generation in some big way.

When Willow realized that the clothing people wore in school was either too tight or too loose, it made me catch on to a lot of things about our society. As we get older, we start to dress for others to impress them rather than stay true to ourselves and dress how we want to. I find it quite sad that we've twisted each other's minds into thinking we have to be enough for someone else rather than just being enough for ourselves. Maybe you have to be wearing what's in style, or you can't be caught wearing the same jacket every day, or else you'll get commented on or judged. We judge each other way too much, including me. When you take a first glance at someone, you can make a lot of assumptions, but you never know until you ask. We all should learn to accept ourselves and others

and to make a conscious effort to not judge others before really knowing who they are. Since reading your book, I've realized that my own mind has been twisted into thinking that I have to be enough for others and that I do judge others way too much. I am now trying to break those habits and become a better person. I don't think I would have ever realized that we judge each other so much on what we wear had I not read your book.

You've really shined a light on books and their amazing capability to heal readers. I now know you can take away so much from a book and use them not just to pass time but to find yourself and come to a true understanding about the life around you. Your book has inspired me to lead a better life and make a lasting difference in the world for the next generation by helping stop climate change so future generations can live on a healthy, clean planet. From now on, I will watch how much I judge others and strive to be the me I want to be and not be influenced as much by the people around me. I can't express how much *Counting By 7s* has touched me like no other book has. Thank you.

From your loving reader,  
Hayden Turner

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Kennedy Ulmer**  
Fall Creek Intermediate, Fishers  
Letter to Val Emmich  
Author of *Dear Evan Hansen*

Dear Mr. Emmich,

When I began reading your novel, *Dear Evan Hansen*, I was under the impression that it would just be another book, something that I could read quickly on a summer road trip, easily forgotten after turning the last page. Little did I know that your novel was going to change my view of the world forever.

I learned an important lesson after reading your novel: no one deserves to be forgotten. Even if someone doesn't do something extravagant in their lifetime, they still should be remembered. That lesson helped me through a hard time in my life. When my great-uncle died and I was very sad, it made me feel better knowing that my family left the hospital carrying happy memories of my him in our hearts, like his 'spark' was still present in our lives. Although my great-uncle never negotiated world peace or became President, he still made an impact in my life. I could relate to how Cynthia Murphy felt after Connor died. She remembered the little things about Connor that brought joy to her life after he was gone, just like my family and I did after the death of my great-uncle.

Another thing that *Dear Evan Hansen* taught me was that everyone is fighting their own battle. In the book, Zoe Murphy was made fun of for being upset and moody. She isolated herself from her peers and did not talk to anyone. Zoe, however, wasn't trying to be rude. This was just her response to the stress she felt from her troubled relationship with her older brother Connor. Also, people feared Connor Murphy because he acted violently and crudely towards them. Connor was not deliberately trying to be mean. Connor felt a lot of pressure from his parents to be perfect. When he was not able to live up to their expectations, he would act out violently or with animosity toward his peers. After Connor died, none of the students at Evan's high school wanted to help Evan or Alana with the Connor Project because of the way Connor had treated them prior to his death. None of the other students took time to question how Connor felt or wondered why he acted harshly towards them. The students acted like his death meant nothing and moved on with their lives. Now if someone isn't kind to me, instead of getting upset, I try to put myself in the other person's shoes. I think about what hardships that that person could be going through, and I try to be more empathetic and selfless. This way of

thinking has helped me make new friends and learn more about other people.

I also learned a lot about mental health from *Dear Evan Hansen*. Evan had to take medicine to control his anxiety. His anxiety made him worry about everyday tasks like driving a car or going to school. It made me wonder about what my life would be like if I went through those troubles like Evan did. Today, I am very thankful that I do not have to balance anxiety with my daily life. I used to take my health for granted, not giving it a second thought. Now, I know that being healthy is a blessing, something I should be grateful for at all times.

Thank you, Mr. Emmich, for making such a powerful and moving story. Because of it, I try to be more empathetic and caring. *Dear Evan Hansen* has helped me become a more observant, thoughtful, and kind individual.

Sincerely,  
Kennedy Ulmer



**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Dawson Ward**  
Northview Elementary, Gas City  
Letter to Brandon Mull  
Author of *Grip of the Shadow Plague*

Dear Brandon Mull,

Your book, *Grip of the Shadow Plague*, has helped me realize how important it is to act, but to act patiently. Seth Sorenson showed me it is important to act by confronting Graulas, the demon who helped Seth realize his powers as a shadow charmer. He learned about his powers and instantly rushed into the centaur's territory, used his shadow charmer abilities, and went through a maze to get a unicorn horn that purifies objects if it gets close enough. Seth's actions help preserve Fablehaven because they touched the horn against a nail that contained the source of the dark creatures. I read this book hoping to find messages that would help me feel secure and that is exactly what this book helped me feel.

Kendra Sorenson helped me discern situations because she showed patience while waiting and thinking of plans to turn dark magical creatures back. If she didn't wait, she would've thought desperate times call for desperate measures and gone out searching for solutions like Seth, but without his powers, she would've failed. This helped me recognize that sometimes it's better to get a plan, because Kendra got to jump in and help save Fablehaven and change the dark animals back to their normal state only because she was ready to reinforce the effects of the horn.

When I was in second grade, I switched from a private school to a public school, and I didn't know how to approach people I wanted to befriend. I took my time kind of spectating from a corner, but I still couldn't put myself out there. That's when I started reading your books. I finally got to *Grip of the Shadow Plague* and it was the last thing I needed to convince myself to be brave. I tried out for a baseball team and made it, and I got comfortable with them and we got closer. I now have multiple close friends from my school.

Overall, your book has revealed to me that acting and waiting patiently both have benefits. Through my experiences, I have learned how to think before I act. I wasn't sure what to do with my free time, and then a lot of school clubs popped up, but I couldn't decide which to take so I thought about what would affect me the best. I came back to this book and remembered Seth and Kendra and how their choices turned out. I learned

from your characters and I got to learn other things like engineering skills from robotics.

I am continuing to use your book as an example of how to stay calm during difficult situations, like how Kendra and Seth lead an assault trying to change the dark creatures back to normal. I know I will need the skills your book has taught me going into the sixth grade because I will be going into a new school with multiple classes. I hope I'll always remember this book and take these messages with me throughout my life.

Sincerely,  
Dawson Ward

**Level I**  
**Semifinalist**

**Sydney Youran**  
Zionsville Middle School, Zionsville  
Letter to Fanya Gottesfeld Heller  
Author of *Hidden*

Dear Fanya Gottesfeld Heller,

Seven years ago, around the holiday season, my preschool teacher said we were going to make Christmas ornaments that we could take home and put on our Christmas trees. I am Jewish and I didn't know if my teacher knew that, so I reminded her. Her response was to go sit on the carpet and practice my cursive. It may have been 7 years ago, but I still remember it very clearly.

I always hated being different. I am Jewish and celebrate Hanukkah, while everyone else celebrates Christmas. Sometimes even my closest friends would forget and say things that made me upset, like I would say that I wanted something, and they would say to put it on my Christmas list. After reading *Hidden*, I realized that some people had it 100 times worse just because they had different beliefs, practices, holidays, and celebrations. It made me mad, but also thankful that I don't have it as bad as the people in the book.

We have a tree in my backyard that me and my friends like to climb in and one of my friends said that they were going to peel off the bark on the trunk and paint the tree. I told her that she could not do that cause the tree was already dying, and it was my family's tree and that we would not let her do that. She said it was not my tree, it was Jesus' tree, and my other friend said, no, it's Santa's tree. It's really just small things like that, but it happens a lot. I could name over 15 times that small things like that have happened in just the last week. Some people would say, well that's not a big deal, but when I just start going through the small things, they build up. As the small things build up, I keep feeling more and more different.

Another thing that *Hidden* has taught me is to be grateful for what I have and the time I live in and the life have. For example, If I were living in the 1930's or 1940's then I would have to hide in an attic or behind a chicken coop like Fanya and her family. Since I live in 2019, I may be treated a little differently but it's much better than what some people went through. I also am more grateful about life in general. I used to get upset when I didn't get things I wanted, but now I am grateful that I have such a great life. I mean, some people don't even have a roof over their heads.

A big thing that the book *Hidden* taught me was that I am so fortunate to have the great life that I do. I am now so much more grateful, not just with Jewish aspects but also in life in general. So, every time I get frustrated with my friends for not thinking before they say something, I think about the fact that others, like the people in *Hidden*, had to go through things way worse just because they were Jewish. I can't imagine having to hide, starve, and be absolutely silent for years just to live. Thank you, Fanya Gottesfeld Heller, for writing *Hidden*.

Sincerely,  
Syd Youran

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

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

**Lidya Solomon**  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald  
Author of *The Great Gatsby*

Dear F. Scott Fitzgerald,

America is viewed as the land of new beginnings and second chances. Your book, *The Great Gatsby*, sheds a whole new light on how I picture the “American Dream.”

When I think of the American dream I think of my parents. They immigrated from Africa to America. They made the decision to come here and give me the best life I could get. I always took for granted what they had given me. The advice that Nick Carraway’s father gave to him at the beginning of the first chapter is what really got me thinking. His father taught him to never judge others because not everybody had the same advantages that he had. I started to realize how many advantages I have, and how I need to be grateful for it.

Jay Gatsby was the one who really reminded me of this. With his magnificent mansion and servants, he had everyone under the illusion that he was “living his best life.” While he was busy fooling others, he was also subconsciously fooling himself into thinking that it was in his best interest to base his world around Daisy Buchanan. He risked everything for her, he waited years for her, he sold illegal alcohol to get a mansion to impress her, and he took the blame for the murder of Myrtle Wilson for her. I don’t even think she was worth it. Gatsby never appreciated his hard work and success. At his extravagant parties, he never enjoyed himself because he was too occupied with Daisy. He focused on what he couldn’t have instead of enjoying what he did have. I had the same problem.

Living in America and having access to social media, I knew what was stacked against me as a black girl. Social media convinced me that because I’m not a white male, I would automatically struggle. Because of this, I denied the fact that I had privilege. I just wouldn’t accept it. I’m constantly comparing myself to others and wanting what they have. Before, I wouldn’t have given a second thought to how I had been raised in a nice house in a good neighborhood while being surrounded by a safe environment. I took for granted that I had access to an academically challenging private school, and how lucky I am to have my family with me.

Those who pursue the “American Dream” are always left wanting more. I find that to be a sad life. I would rather not live a life wondering if I could be more than I am now. That’s why I use *Gatsby* as a reminder of what to avoid. Because of ***The Great Gatsby***, I face reality now by focusing on what really matters. I am now accepting my advantages and disadvantages and using them to better myself, so I can enjoy my life without any regrets.

Sincerely,  
Lidya Solomon

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

**Isabella Pate**  
South Vermillion Middle School, Clinton  
Letter to Sara J. Maas  
Author of the *Throne of Glass* series

Dear Ms. Sara J. Maas,

Your books have changed my life more drastically than anything I have ever read. I haven't thought about anything the same since I found *Throne of Glass* at the library. Your books are some of the best I have ever read, and I read often. You and your books are so inspirational and have affected every part of my life.

In the act of getting through the day, I use these books as a crutch. Any time I am scared or anxious, I tell myself, "My name is Isabella Pate, and I will not be afraid." It really helps me. Anytime I think I can't do it or consider giving up, I remind myself of all the people who didn't break and that did not yield. When I get yelled at for daydreaming, reading, or writing, I remind myself "the world will be saved and remade by the dreamers." When I feel alone, I remind myself that Rhys made it fifty years without his court. These books are the reason I make it through the day.

I really struggle to care about myself sometimes. I struggle to keep going. These books make such a huge difference in this. I remind myself of all the characters that made it through when they had depression or were broken. I'm full of flaws and I am well aware of every single one of them. Any time I'm paying too close attention to them, I remind myself of how fondly I think about the characters who aren't perfect. The broken ones are the ones I love most. When I get upset about people not liking me, I remember Lysandra, and how no one knew what lurked within her. I often feel like a fake based on how other people respond to me. Instead of bashing myself and sinking deeper into the pit within me, I remember Alein's swagger, Dorian's flirting, Rhysand's confidence, and all of the other strong characters who fought even though they weren't whole.

The thing that makes you most inspirational to me is the rawness. I'm also a writer, and I will forever be in awe of how beautifully these books are written. I love the way the words flow and stick to the heart. I have never read another book that is so beautifully honest. The things that most people avoid writing about are things you make sure to highlight. The changes Lysandra makes to herself as soon as she gets her gifts back and Alein curled up on the couch unable to move are a few of the things that



made the characters immensely relatable. Another thing that was absolutely breathtaking was that they weren't all immortal. This only goes to show that life isn't always fair, and not everything will have a perfect solution just waiting to be found. Besides these, the thing I related to most was the willingness to self-sacrifice. I'm so thankful that you didn't just make your characters perfect unchanging teams. I'm glad that all of the problems aren't solved in the end. As a writer, these books changed the way I reflect on what I do every day of my life.

You are also super inspirational to me. The fact that you are so young and have already written two absolutely amazing series inspires me so much. You are exactly what I want to be when I get older. You are a truly amazing writer and a confident, kind person. I know that writing isn't always easy and that your mind is likely a dark place sometimes. I'm amazed with the way you act. I've seen interviews, and the way you go out of your way to make your fans feel good about themselves is something I hope to be able to accomplish as well. You remind me that even if I enjoy just staying up in my room to write, I have to have social skills. You have given me someone to look up to as I move on in life. It's people like you that remind me that I can, in fact, "rattle the stars."

Thank you so much for sharing your amazing skill with the world. You have truly changed my life for the better. I will constantly be looking for ways to be more like you in both my writing and as a person in general. My views will be forever changed, and I thank you for making me a better person. Thank you so, so much for everything you do.

Sincerely,  
Isabella Pate

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

**Emily Wysong**  
Northeastern Middle School, Fountain City  
Letter to Dalton Trumbo  
Author of *Johnny Got His Gun*

Dear Dalton Trumbo,

You have ruined my life. There is no clearer way to say it than that. Of course, I didn't read your novel *Johnny Got His Gun* blindly. I was warned it would ruin my life, and that's the exact reason I decided to read it. At first, I had no idea your book even existed. My stepmother actually recommended it to me after I picked up Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. To me, your novel was just one of many that were hiding in our basement, which is where I find most of my reading material.

I have no one to blame but myself for reading this book. Still, it has destroyed me and my perception of life, and I don't know whether to hate or praise you for that. It baffles me that someone can write something so powerful and still make it terrifying beyond all reason.

Before reading your novel I admittedly romanticized the idea of war. And after reading it I look back and I am disgusted by my former, naive self. I became physically nauseated by the things you brought to light with this book. While and after reading it, I continuously asked myself the same question, why is it that the poor always must fight the war? We have all these high-class politicians who order wars and then lure in poor, unsuspecting men, promising things like honor, democracy, and freedom for their country. But what is it freedom from? What is real democracy? What is honor? They put men against each other and lead them to die. And like you said, there is nothing honorable in being dead. There is nothing honorable about having your life stolen from you.

You can't carelessly throw away lives like that and in the end, have it all be for nothing. I don't want to believe that all those deaths were for nothing. No one does. But your book is one of those things I find constantly shoved in my face when I try to convince myself otherwise. I am constantly fighting with myself, and I hate myself for questioning the vitality of war. I am desperate to believe those deaths meant something, anything, but I can't. War is unnecessary and ungodly. The lives lost were lives wasted. And there is not one thing noble about that.

Your entire book was psychologically horrifying and just thinking about it can bring tears to my eyes. I have spent countless, sleepless nights where

the only thing I could do was think about your book. And it seems there is not one moment of the day where I don't think about it. I will never be ashamed to admit I cried when Joe realized both his arms had been amputated. This scene will always be important to me, as it taught me appreciation. Reading it made me feel utterly helpless and lost. And I was so torn that Joe had been robbed of first his arms and later his entire body because of the war. It wasn't fair.

Through this book I have learned the evils of war and the darkness of man's heart. I can't comprehend how a single book managed to change my perspective on war and the military so drastically, but with a book as powerful and as painstaking as this, how could I be surprised? Since reading your book, I've done deep reflections and had emotionally difficult conversations with my father, a military veteran, where we civilly discussed different perspectives on war. *Johnny Got his Gun* is actually his favorite book, and he claimed it made him cry. Kudos to you, since my father isn't an emotional man.

I now indulge myself in anti-war books and media, something I have never done before and previously had no interest in. I feel enterally grateful for the enlightenment this book has given me, though I partly despise it for ruining my life. Thank you for writing this book, thank you for providing me with a reading experience I will never forget, but most importantly, thank you for teaching me everything I know now.

Yours,  
Emily Wysong

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Tahlia Alkobi**

Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis

Letter to Angie Thomas

Author of *The Hate U Give*

Dear Angie Thomas,

This year, a stranger came into my Jewish day school and hung anti-Semitic pictures. Those pictures were meant to send the message that all Jews should die. This experience terrified me. I read your book, *The Hate U Give*, and I learned that people from all backgrounds still experience discrimination. Even though Starr and I are different, I felt her fear.

Starr lives in the primarily black, lower-class neighborhood of Garden Heights but attends Williamson Prep, a wealthy, predominantly white school in another town. She has to navigate being a black person in a white school. Going back and forth from living in an all-black neighborhood to changing her personality completely just to fit into her school's environment was very hard and draining for Starr. Whenever she is at Williamson, she calls herself "Starr version 2.0." In the book, everyone was against black people. They judged black people like Starr because of their race.

I can relate to how Starr feels. Shootings have been going on lately attacking Jews. There was a shooting last year in Pittsburgh. Jews were going to synagogue on Saturday and a shooter came in and murdered 11 innocent people. Since then, there have been police every week at my synagogue. I can't forget these events and they make me feel unsafe.

I, at thirteen years old, have experienced anti-Semitism just because of how I look. This happened when a random stranger said to me, "You're Jewish!" I was confused by this statement because I didn't know how he knew my religion. So, I asked, "How do you know that I am a Jew?" He answered, "Because of your big nose!" This made me feel really scared and bad about myself. Is that really what people think of me when they see me? Because of Starr's blackness, she is known to be that one "ghetto" black girl. These details are things that we both can't hide and we both feel like we need to change. I feel like there is a "Tahlia version 2.0" where I need to change myself around people who aren't like me. I don't want them to think of me as that one Jewish girl and remember me from my looks or religion.

Starr and I both feel like there is no end to this discrimination. We always need to act differently around other people and can't show who we really

are because we are scared of judgement from others. I get scared in public and try to hide myself and hope that strangers don't only see me as a Jew. Starr changes herself in school because she is surrounded by white people who are different from her and judge her based on their own racist ideas.

This book made me angry. *The Hate U Give* showed me who people really are. People are scared to say what they really want to say. We always try harder than we need to just to fit in. You showed me that many people are just like Starr: they can't be who they want to be, and they always must change themselves to feel better and impress others. Why do people have to change themselves to feel included? I just want to be myself and not have others judge me for my religion.

With appreciation,  
Tahlia Alkobi

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Kennedy Brown**  
Triton Central Middle School, Fairland  
Letter to Watt Key  
Author of *Alabama Moon*

Dear Watt Key,

Ever since I can remember, I have always been one to be reserved and rely on myself along with few other people. This has often caused issues in my life, such as becoming attached to one person at a time or struggling to reach out and interact with others. I have always been aware of the issue but have never seen a way or reason to work towards becoming a more socially involved person. In your book *Alabama Moon*, ten-year-old Moon Blake has never had association with people outside of the forest he lived in and has relied solely on the only person he has gotten to know his whole life, his father. After losing the person he relied on for everything, he was put in an institution with new people and had to adjust to the change and learn to get along with people, despite how difficult this was for him.

Moon's situation has made me feel a similar need to change my way of thinking and open up to more people. Much like Moon, there are times that it is hard for me to commit to this change, but Moon always found a reason. He felt upset after the loss of his father and had thought he would never be able to stop thinking about it. After forming friendships with new faces, he realized that there's more to life than being so absorbed in very few people. This part of the story has caused me to shift my view on not only the importance of friendships and bonding, but has made me realize how strong of a person I am and how I can grow to meet my goals as well.

In conclusion, I would like to thank you for including such a touching and subtle aspect in your story. It has brought to my attention problems and flaws in my own character that could use fixing, and it has offered a similar view and issue in a very different story. Despite the story being different, it still has the ability to allow me to have realizations about myself and has given me more of a motivation to work. With a character struggling with the same problems, I have felt more comfortable and now use it as a constant drive for change.

Your book has noticeably impacted my life, and day to day I notice more and more interactions occurring for the better.

Sincerely,  
Kennedy Brown

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Pace Clark**  
Jasper Middle School, Jasper  
Letter to Nic Stone  
Author of *Dear Martin*

Dear Nic Stone,

Your book *Dear Martin* has changed my views in so many ways. I used to think that racial segregation was over and that everyone viewed everybody as equal, but that just isn't true. I used to think that there could be no racism in the world or in America because we were all created equal by God. Apparently, some people don't think so. There will always be segregation and discrimination around the globe, and no matter what we say or do, people still won't change their minds. And it's sad.

When Manny was shot in the car with Justyce, I wasn't shocked. All they were doing was listening to loud music, and yet they were shot at. African American citizens are being shot around the U.S. because of officers assuming or thinking they are up to no good. When people like Trey or Martel react the way they do, by starting fires and killing the officers, they only make matters worse. Ever since I read this book, my viewpoint of racism changed immensely.

Some nights I pray that people will just stop, that people will treat each other like everyone is the same because that is what we are – the same. You, Nic Stone, made me feel this way. You gave me a new insight on this world, and I thank you for that. Your book made me realize that some people in the world aren't up to date. They don't realize that the world has changed in so many ways, and equality is one of them. There are so many problems in the world that I have just now noticed. Your book has made me look more into the world and the big problems that I've missed. Your book made me question a lot of things.

I just wanted to thank you for the new viewpoints I have gained because of you. Your book, which is the first book about racism that I have ever read, is powerful, modern, and moving. My whole mindset has changed because of it in so many good ways that I can't even count. I love the book and I love everything you have helped me to see. I don't think I would've come to these ideas without you.

Thanks for hearing me out,  
Pace Clark

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Madelyn Day**  
Jasper Middle School, Jasper  
Letter to Ray Bradbury  
Author of *Fahrenheit 451*

Dear Ray Bradbury,

I have to say, I'm not a particularly optimistic person. I tend to see the glass as half-empty, something that used to be filled to the brim, and is now slowly, inevitably, becoming an empty husk of its former glory. This glass is what I feel about this book and what it has to say in society. The future grows ever dimmer, and yet nothing has been done about it. Everyone is hoping someone else will stop it, someone will tell us that something is wrong, and yet do we ever listen? One of your books perfectly exemplifies this idea, the book being called *Fahrenheit 451*. This book is a masterpiece in its own right, but what it has to say makes it all the more valuable.

I have watched the swift rise of people's dependence on electronics, easily filling their own lives with someone else's so that they can feel full. We can become so engrossed in the fake that we forget about the real. Mildred, instead of worrying or thinking, decides to fill herself with someone else, all so that she doesn't have to think or feel. Yet Mildred feels just enough, perhaps unknowingly, that she overdoses on sleeping pills to the point where she's on the brink of death. I know I have seen this filling of nothing because I have done it, too. I have filled myself with nonsensical videos and the equivalent of nothing so that I can feel something, anything, without actually having to do it.

Opinions – they are the things that make us who we are. If we do not have our opinions, then what do we have? Our own sense of individualism is taken away, and we become a blank slate, easily influenced by society's standards. However, opinions can make people uncomfortable. Two people may argue over politics or decisions, however trivial or great. Opinions have caused rebellions and wars, outcries and protests, and many other things that can bother a person. So, of course, the simplest solution would be to remove all subjects of debate and thought. Why experience such trivialities, wasting time arguing and debating, when everyone can think the same? I dread to think of a world where this principle is enforced as if critical thinking is a crime or sin to be avoided at all costs. If there is nothing to think, then there is nothing to feel, and if there is nothing to feel, then are we really human?



Now, Mr. Bradbury, I did not enjoy this book. I am certain that this is perhaps one of the least enjoyable books I have ever read, yet I could not put it down. I could not stop watching the inevitable discovery of Montag's books. I could not stop watching Mildred as she sped away in her beetle. I could not stop watching the end of civilization and the long, drawn-out destruction of Mildred. Never before has a book made me think more than this one has, and I think that never after I shall find one that mimics this level of thought and attention. It should forever be my only hope that our world doesn't become this atrocity, this horrible dystopia that has been built upon in *Fahrenheit 451*.

In appreciation,  
Madelyn Day

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Levi Gayso**  
Jasper Middle School, Jasper  
Letter to Sharon M. Draper  
Author of the *Jericho* series

Dear Sharon M. Draper,

Every day, I wake up to the same boring schedule. I have to get up, go to school, go to basketball practice, then go to sleep. But throughout the day, I would always have hours of doing nothing. I would spend my time staring at a mindless screen to fill my day up, until I picked up your book.

At first, your book was a project that I needed to do in class for an assignment. I moaned and groaned about getting this homework to do until I read your first page. I was captivated in your book and after every page, I would dig myself deeper and deeper into this reading frenzy inside me. Some nights, I would read more than I was assigned so the next day I would know more than my classmates. Our teacher told us that we shouldn't read on, but I could not help myself.

Your books helped me from being held back by an electronic life and lead me to an imaginative world. I have grown closer to my family, friends, neighbors, classmates, and especially *your books*. My favorite of your books is the *Jericho* series. All the characters that you write in those books have so much passion and emotion in them: Jericho, a footballer/musician who cares very deeply for his friends and family, and Kofi, a kid who is not supported by his parents and has to learn about growing up on his own. Every reader that reads your books can find a character that fits his or her personality.

Also, in every single book, there is always such a dramatic climax. In *The Battle of Jericho*, Josh dies by falling from a window. In *November Blues*, November has a child whom she must figure out how to support. Finally, in *Just Another Hero*, Jack starts a school shooting so he would get more attention for himself. Without these books, I would have never looked away from a screen. I would have just kept to myself, enclosed, to be fulfilled. I would have never thought to myself to spend time with my family or with any of my friends. I would shut people out from my life and live in my own loneliness. Luckily, you were here to save me and I'm deeply grateful to you for making these spectacular books.

Your admirer,  
Levi Gayso

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Spencer Glover**  
Salem Middle School, Salem  
Letter to James Patterson  
Author of the *Middle School* series

Dear James Patterson,

Creativity is the key to success and happiness. When I was little, I always loved trying to impress people with my imagination and with my smarts. As I grew older, my mind grew less colorful. It grew bland with knowledge about things, most of which I never needed. In sixth grade, I came across the *Middle School* series, and being someone with no interest I started reading it. I am very happy I did. It gave me the perspective of another side of someone similar to me in ways I didn't realize.

I always knew that I had the desire or motive for certain things that interest me, but this series brought me back to when I really wanted to create and explore. Rafe's life had shown me what it's like to be on the other side of behavior as well. Being a better-behaved kid showed me what mindset different people have. I loved the idea of being an architect when I was smaller, until my imagination faded, and I didn't know what I wanted. But today, I can think of simple blueprints in my mind just from reading this series, which had motivated me to have a smile and stay creative.

Just recently, I had a school project in which I had to create something I could market and sell. My mind wanted to explode with the simple but awesome ideas I had. I wanted to get creative with my hands and make it worth it. Like Rafe, I thought of different ways and items to make money. I thought of making furniture, unlike Rafe had, but because people are always looking for something like this. Then, in a matter of about five hours, I had made my first coffee table. I was so happy with it because I had done everything to assemble it, from screws to polyurethane. I almost guarantee that if I didn't pick up the first book, I would have never motivated myself enough to create and enjoy making items like that.

I may have never sold the table, as my dad refused to let it go, but I have ideas for the future in manufacturing furniture and items that make a place look better. And with that, I thank you for bringing me back to my mind. I hope that in the future, more of these books will come out for people with no initiative.

Sincerely,  
Spencer Glover

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Chava Gluck**  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to Kelly Yang  
Author of *Front Desk*

Dear Kelly Yang,

My entire life, I always wanted to be “normal.” Every time I brought up the subject with my parents, they couldn’t understand my need to feel “normal.” “What is the definition of normal?” they asked me. I, of course, became frustrated with them and told them, “You never understand me!” All of that changed after I bought your amazing book, *Front Desk*, at my school’s book fair.

When I got home from school the day, I bought it, I dashed up the stairs and to my room, eager to begin reading. I found a comfortable position on my bed, and then proceeded to read the entire book straight through. When I finally finished, I sat for a few minutes, thinking about the book.

I was still thinking while the dinner table was cleared. The action that usually takes place in my house during the day began to wind down. Finally, I went to bed for the night. My sleep was restless. I was still thinking. The more I thought, the more I began to notice similarities between the life of Mia Tang and my own.

Mia is looked down upon at her school because she is of Chinese nationality. I am an Orthodox Jew. I feel looked down upon at my school because there are only a few Orthodox kids at my school. I feel like the majority look down upon the things I do and believe in, and the way I feel, think, and dress. I feel like I don’t belong. I just don’t fit in with the others because I am not like them.

I don’t have social media, nor do I really want to. Everyone else in my middle school is obsessed with it. I feel disconnected from my classmates because they act like I don’t know anything, just because I don’t know much about what they do. In other words, I’m different than the majority, and that makes me feel looked down upon by my classmates.

Mia still remains a loyal Chinese girl. She does not care what others might think about what she looks like or believes in. She helps stop the racism in her area by writing letters and protesting. I will always, G-d willing, remain an Orthodox Jewish woman, despite all of the ways I feel different and despite all of the attacks that are targeted towards my religion. The

world is a cruel place, and, like Mia, we can all do something to change the world for the better.

Your book, with its diverse characters and ideas, has really inspired me to do something to help make the world a better place. I realize now that there is no such thing as “normal.” There never was and there never will be. I realize now that I have the ability to help and, despite all of the attacks targeted towards us, my religion will always grow stronger. I can be independent of others. I will be different, but now, I will be proud of it. Next time I need inspiration, I’ll pull out *Front Desk* and think about what I have done to help, and what I can still accomplish. Most of all, thank you for teaching me that there is no such thing as “normal.” I am unique in my own way, and that will never change.

With gratitude,  
Chava Gluck

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Marissa Gray**  
Salem Middle School, Salem  
Letter to Jennifer E. Smith  
Author of *Windfall*

Dear Jennifer E. Smith,

I've never imagined life without my parents. I've never imagined losing either one of them, especially not within one year of each other. I have certainly never thought of winning the lottery as having negative consequences. After reading your book *Windfall*, my perspective of many things has changed, I would say, for the better. I now know how fortunate I am to have both of my parents together and healthy. I also stop and think before saying, "Man, I wish I was that lucky!"

While reading the book, I started to realize how good my life is. I have a roof over my head, a loving family, clothes on my back, and never have to worry about not having food on the table. In the book, Alice volunteers at several places to help those in need. She could even be described as selfless. She's always kicking herself for not taking the money and giving it to a charity, when she could definitely use it herself. I've never even stopped to think about how many people could really use all the clothes in my closet that have never been worn. How many people could have benefited by the money that I spend on useless items? How many starving people are there, while I never have to worry about not having enough food? After reading *Windfall*, I've realized how quickly all of that can be taken away and my life can be turned upside down.

Before reading *Windfall*, I've always thought of lottery winners as lucky people, but I never thought about all of the bad things that come with so much fortune. After being able to virtually see the struggles Teddy goes through after winning all this money, I've realized that winning the lottery is not at all what it is cracked up to be. In the book, Teddy struggles with his identity because of this pure coincidence. Not only does Teddy have to deal with interviews, spam calls, and people asking for handouts, I believe Teddy begins to lose sight of what is important to him the most: Alice.

After reading *Windfall*, I realized how lucky I am to have a good education, close friends and family, a roof over my head, and food on the table. Thank you for writing this book that has forever changed my life.

Sincerely,  
Marissa Gray

Level II  
Semifinalist

Audrey Heavin  
Salem Middle School, Salem  
Letter to M. L. Stedman  
Author of *The Light Between Oceans*

Dear M. L. Stedman,

Sometimes, when my heart gets in front of my brain, I don't think about what is right from what is wrong. Before I finished *The Light Between Oceans*, I wanted Lucy to stay with Isabel, and thought that it was very wrong for Hannah to keep her. I just assumed that since Isabel had raised her, she deserved to have her, but afterwards I understood that you can't just go and take something that wasn't yours in the beginning. Now, I think deeply about how others feel when they have lost something, the way Hannah felt when she thought she had lost her baby. Some small actions can lead to a permanent dent in someone, even when you think that they will be just fine.

Not too long ago, a young cat showed up at my house. I named it and quickly became attached to the cat, just as Isabel became attached to Lucy. After having her for almost a year, I figured I could just call her my own, not knowing she had a loving owner who missed her the way Hannah missed Lucy. One day, a family showed up and took her away, claiming she was theirs. Without her, I felt so angered that the family had taken away the cat that I had once been calling my own. I didn't accept that the cat was theirs before it was mine. Like Isabel, all I wanted was the cat, who I thought deserved to be mine. Eventually, I accepted that the cat was never coming back, and I would never see her again. *The Light Between Oceans* helped me realize that taking something close to someone's heart can hurt someone just as badly as giving it up.

*The Light Between Oceans* opened my eyes to other points of view, telling how each person felt, making it difficult to take a side. When you've taken something from someone, or you don't know it belongs to someone, all you think about is yourself and you don't think about how the other person feels. Your book made me think more about how the person on the other side feels, if they are hurting just as bad as I am and so on. I now think about how others feel more often and don't worry just about myself. Thank you for showing me the importance of thinking about how others feel, accepting the past, and moving on with the future.

Sincerely,  
Audrey Heavin

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Nick Ingram**  
Salem Middle School, Salem  
Letter to Caroline B. Cooney  
Author of *Code Orange*

Dear Caroline B. Cooney,

Before I read *Code Orange*, I didn't know much at all about diseases or epidemics. After reading your book, I was inspired to learn more about health, specifically health diseases. Before reading your book, I was never exposed to the health field other than doctor visits and the time I went to the hospital. *Code Orange* really inspired me to want to become a doctor or surgeon.

I found a connection with Mitty in the story which helped me to have a drive to read more. Just like Mitty not wanting to do his project in the beginning, I was the same way with reading. Because of *Code Orange*, I was inspired to read more for pleasure instead of reading just to get my reading quiz points. I read more books that are good and interesting and out of my comfort zone. Previously, the only books that I read were sports books, specifically books about baseball. Now, I have the courage to step out of my comfort zone and read books about other topics.

While I was reading your book, it got me thinking about what would happen if an epidemic like that happened today. Just like Mitty Blake, I had to do a project over conflict and compromise in history. I researched polio for the National History Day competition. I learned more about what the disease actually was and how an outbreak today would be very minimal and have hardly any effect on society because of the advancement of modern medicine and the extensive study that doctors have to do to get their degrees. Like Mitty in the end of the story, after doing a lot of research over polio, I learned a lot about it and enjoyed learning about it.

*Code Orange* really inspired me to want to become a doctor or someone in the medical field. Without reading your book, I also would have never read the *Spirit Bear* books either, especially not in the detail that I did. If it wasn't for *Code Orange*, then I would have never gotten invested in good books, I would have never found my inspiration for my NHD project, and I would have never thought about wanting to have a profession in the medical field.

Sincerely,  
Nick Ingram



**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Samantha Keene**  
West Noble Middle School, Ligonier  
Letter to Indiana Author, Jennifer Niven  
Author of *All the Bright Places*

Dear Jennifer Niven,

I cannot describe to you the amount of gratitude I have towards you for writing *All the Bright Places*. I went into the book knowing that it was amazing because so many of my friends had recommended it to me, but I didn't truly understand how impactful it was until I read it. Even from the very first chapter I was engulfed into the story, hoping they would have a happy ending. There are many teenagers that deal with not only the same sadness within themselves but also the love they feel for each other. Reading this book felt a lot like listening to someone right in front of you telling a story about love and loss.

When I read this book, it made me realize that if you love someone it can either make you feel alive or you could still want to die. I think that is an important thing to understand, especially as a teenager. As we start to get older, we seem to think that a relationship will make us happy and will solve all of our sadness, but that's not reality. If you look at Finch, you see how happy Violet makes him in the moment, though she can't do that long term. Nobody can do that for you. I think that anyone struggling with relationships needs to read this book to help them realize that a relationship is not what makes you happy in life.

I also love to see how strong Violet is. She made it through her sister dying, and now through Finch's death. To lose your sister and the boy that you love would be pretty much unbearable. In most books, the strong woman character usually is unbreakable. She's the one who usually keeps everyone else going. Violet showed that sometimes being strong may mean just keeping yourself going and alive. That's one of the hardest things to do. It was for me through my first breakup, and I can't imagine if it was death that had taken him. She showed me that you don't have to be the stereotypical image of strong to be strong.

I relate to Violet in having to be strong for someone who struggles with depression and anxiety. Finch's battles within his own mind and emotions felt very real, even though it is a fictional book. That weight of depression on your chest is something you feel but people can't see. It makes you feel alone. You don't tell anyone because you don't want to be a burden. Reading Finch's story is like reading a journal of a boy who really deals

with those things. It made me look at people who deal with mental struggles very differently. It made me look at them as people who may need more love than others. It made me realize they need constant reassurance. And that's okay. That's who they are. We need to love them in spite of those battles, help them through those battles. My dad has dealt with depression for as long as I can remember. Even though I have had experience with it because of that, the book still changed how I look at it. I used to feel intimidated by my dad's struggles because I felt like I couldn't help him. After reading *All the Bright Places*, it showed me that I just need to be there for him, love him, and reassure him as much as I can. A few summers ago, he had a pretty bad episode for few months, and it was a really rough time for my entire family. This book helped me understand what my dad goes through a little bit more.

Sometimes though, like in the book, we unfortunately can't save them from their own demons, and we can't blame ourselves for that because it's not your fault. Sometimes in life, we lose people, and we need to understand that's a part of life. We need to be like Violet – love them in all of their imperfections, be there for them when they need us, help them through all we can. This book taught me that we need to just understand that sometimes people lose to their demons and we can't blame them for that, but we also can't blame ourselves for that.

After I read *All the Bright Places*, I thought about it for days afterward. I still go back to it and think through everything it taught me and showed me about love, depression, suicide, and being strong in your own way. I'm so thankful that I got to read this book and that it taught me so much. Even though the book was fictional, it felt so real in so many different ways. That's what good books do; they help you understand difficult things in life.

Sincerely,  
Samantha Keene

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Jaden Kinney**  
Salem Middle School, Salem  
Letter to Terry Pratchett & Neil Gaiman  
Author of *Good Omens: The Nice and*  
*Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*

Dear Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman,

I used to think in a very straightforward manner. I believed that life was dependent on every single step you were to make, and that everything in your past and your future could be explained down to the smallest of words or interactions. When it came to logic, I did not think broadly. I believed that the future is already set in stone, and there was no way to change the roots from which you had grown. Reading *Good Omens* made me begin questioning why my fate had to be predetermined and could not be changed.

I have always been a creative kid. I love to draw and write, but this has always been counteracted by my nearly robotic thought process mostly seen in my academics. Because of this process, I always had a strict distinction between fiction and reality. When put under restraints, I would use logic to come to a conclusion instead of allowing several out-of-the-box ideas to come in. This was a big obstacle for me until I read *Good Omens*. Once I read this book, my thought process changed drastically.

The part that really made me start thinking was when Adam and the rest of the “Them” revolted against the horsemen of the apocalypse. With Adam being the Antichrist, he was designated to destroy the earth and begin the war between angels and demons, but he revolted despite his purpose, which really began to get me thinking. I realized that the passage of time does not have to be seen as already set, but it can be seen as an uncertain line that can change at any moment based on your actions. And this separation from the previous thought process made me realize that I was not necessarily doomed to be stuck in the same loop of my childhood, but I could later grow and change based on what I wanted to do with my life. *Good Omens* made me realize that our existence is, as Aziraphale says, *ineffable*, and that the future can hold many unexplainable events and changes that can shape me and every individual in the way they want to be shaped. Fate is not predetermined, but is flexible, and can be what you want it to be no matter where and how your life begins.

I'm extremely glad that I decided to read *Good Omens*. Without it, my creativity and the way I look at life would not have evolved as it did. I have

since been considering how I can carry out the path of my future, instead of allowing time to carry me like a husk in the breeze. Thank you for writing ***Good Omens***. I hope it continues to open people's eyes across the world.

Sincerely,  
Jaden Kinney

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Olivia Klein**

Hagerstown Junior/Senior High School, Hagerstown

Letter to Victoria Aveyard

Author of the *Red Queen* series

Dear Victoria Aveyard,

I am currently reading the second book in the *Red Queen* series, and it has really changed my outlook on life. I am loving the books, but it has changed how I see life in general and how I see my life. I now see how divided our world could be, and how lucky I am to have what I have. Right now, I have everything I could ever need and more, and I am so thankful for that. Seeing how Mare's family has nothing, and how the Silvers refuse to share what they have, has made me realize that there are people out in the world experiencing the same thing. They might never get the chance to live a good life, and they might have done nothing wrong, which makes it even more horrible.

The books have also showed me how certain people react to something new or different. The Silvers do not want the Newbloods to live because they are different and that is what people do in the real world with people who are different. The world can be a very happy and positive place, but there are people out there who think that there has to be something negative and that can ruin things for so many people. That has shown me how cruel our world really can be, and how much worse it could be for me and my family.

The Newbloods are fighting for equality, and so are people in the real world. It has really made me think about how there are so many people in the world fighting for equality in so many different areas which I find so tragic. I find it interesting that you are able to replicate the world we live in, but are able to make it fantastical, too. There are so many life lessons in the books, yet there are magical powers, too, and it just shows how many lessons you can use in the book without writing them directly. I find that to be a true gift and I love that you use that to your fullest extent.

The fact that you have Cal working with the Newbloods sends a great message in my opinion. It just goes to show how even with the class that a person is in, they may not think the same thing as everyone else, and it has made me realize that I should not judge people as much as I do before I meet them because most of the time I am wrong. I have not finished the series yet so I do not know how it all ends and if any of the Newbloods will be alive in the end, but the fact that you are telling people to keep trying

even when things do not go your way is amazing. You use your words to say things that are not being said, and that is such a great skill when writing books. I wish that I had as much talent as you do when it comes to writing.

I hope you will keep writing books and keep sending important messages into our world. You are such an inspiration to me, and I hope I can be just as successful as you when I am older.

Sincerely,  
Olivia Klein

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Aviya Melrose**  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to Jennifer A. Nielsen  
Author of *A Night Divided*

Dear Jennifer A. Nielson,

Taking risks is a factor in everyone's life. You can't live your life without stepping out of your comfort zone, from the time that you are first born to your last days. By taking your first step you are taking the risk that if you start to get up, you might fall. But you must take that first step in order to learn to walk. Your book, *A Night Divided*, brought back memories of the risks that I have taken, and made me really think profoundly about them.

In your book, as Gerta tries to fight for her and her family's freedom and become reunited with her father and brother, she takes a lot of risks. The courage that Gerta had to follow through on getting to the rest of her family, and not giving up, really reminds me of my father. My dad has been through a lot in his life, but recently he began a recovery program. My father had an alcohol problem that he originally didn't know was a problem. He thought that it was no big deal and that he wasn't harming anyone.

After he had been drinking, his company realized he was not performing at his best. My dad lost his job. He immediately realized that he made a mistake and wanted to fix it, so he went to an addiction recovery center. My father took the risk to go to the recovery center, even though he had no idea what would happen. Fortunately, there was a good outcome. He was able to stop drinking, which helped his health, his personality, and his perspective on life. Also, because he became sober, he didn't miss out on the special things in his life. If my dad wouldn't have stuck with the program and become sober, he wouldn't be where he is today. Just like when Gerta took her risk and was able to be reunited with her brother and father, my dad took the risk to put aside all his pride and go to the recovery center, and the outcome was greater than he could ever imagine.

People who aren't daring won't get anywhere in life. Gerta took a risk to tunnel under the Berlin Wall. If she would have gotten caught, who knows what would have happened to her? I feel like your book showed me the importance of stepping out of my comfort zone to live my life to the fullest, and to be successful in what I want to accomplish.

Because I have taken risks, I have learned to overcome almost every obstacle leading to where I am today. For example, when I was younger, I was shy and didn't like to talk to many people. But I took a risk to go alone to a summer camp, and by doing that, I stood face-to-face with my fears and learned to overcome them. Before camp, I was feeling very anxious and nervous. I was already telling myself, "It's not going to be fun and no one will like me." My mother realized that I was nervous about going, so she talked to me and reassured me that I had nothing to worry about. In the end, I went to the camp. When I got there, I found a chair next to a girl. I started talking and instantly made a connection with all the kids there, including that girl. Today, I am still friends with those individuals. Just like when Gerta took a risk, I was nervous at first, and didn't know the outcome, but I took the risk to go to summer camp. I conquered my fears, made new friends, and acquired a new experience in life.

Thank you for showing me the importance of taking a leap of faith. I have learned that taking the right risks can be beneficial for me. From now on, I will try to be wise and determine if risks are worth taking in the future. I will always remember that taking certain risks will help me grow as an individual, and by stepping out of my comfort zone, I will be able to fulfill my purpose in life.

Always grateful,  
Aviya Melrose



**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Madelyn Moore**  
Salem Middle School, Salem  
Letter to Angie Thomas  
Author of *The Hate U Give*

Dear Angie Thomas,

I have been misunderstood. I have felt lost. I have stood up for someone or something and my words were disregarded. Although I have had to overcome these things, my battles felt small after I read what Starr endured. *The Hate U Give* showed me that people have to fight more than battles. They fight wars. The instant Khalil was shot, realization “shot” me. African American people really are often treated with an incredible amount of hatred. But why? Now I can answer that. Any person who is not the stereotypical American is treated differently.

I have always been more mature than my peers and it causes tension, hate, and fear. My brain connects colors to things and personalities to numbers, but when I try to explain this, people don’t understand. There is tension due to the fact I don’t think in the same way. Hate and fear are there as well because I am not normal. I don’t find being rude funny, I stay on task and find my education important. After reading *The Hate U Give*, I found I am not the only one. Starr becomes “Starr 2.0” at school because others would find her as a threat if she didn’t. Sometimes I look at myself and see my own 2.0. When Starr found her voice, I found mine. I decided I would speak for those who don’t have a voice.

*The Hate U Give* encouraged me to consider civil law as a career path. I feel the importance of giving others a voice, even if it is my own. Despite the fact that I have not been in as extreme of a situation as Starr’s, I understand that horrible feeling of not having a voice. I understand not being this world’s “normal.” If I were to take this path, I would be able to represent those in situations similar to Kahlil and Starr’s in court.

Your book has shown me people really have challenges of which others need to be compassionate. We all have battles that others wouldn’t quite understand. So, maybe someday I will stand up in a courtroom and represent someone who really needs it. Maybe not. But wherever I go, your book will always be with me. Next time you have the opportunity to voice your opinion, I hope you take it.

Sincerely,  
Madelyn Moore

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Sreepadaarchana Munjuluri**  
Central Middle School, Columbus  
Letter to Marieke Nijkamp  
Author of *This Is Where It Ends*

Dear Marieke Nijkamp,

A part of my mind that I try desperately to ignore always wonders during our active shooter drills what it would be like for a kid my age to walk in through those familiar school doors with a gun in his/her hand. What would it be like to actually have to run from, hide from, or fight someone? What would it be like to have to live a few hours in constant fear that I might turn the wrong corner and come face-to-face with death, or even worse, discover all the people that I had lost?

Your book, Ms. Nijkamp, not only gave me insight into this type of horrific crime, but it was a fresh drench in reality. I've always lived in safe neighborhoods and communities. I work hard at school, and I have great teachers and friends there. So far, I've had a pretty calm and happy life. Because of this, school shootings amongst other crimes have always been something I've seen through a glass. It wasn't something I understood and connected with. Although I've listened to many news coverages of school shootings, learning about all the lives lost or the shooter did nothing to really make me understand the depth of these events. I always fully accused the shooter, thinking of them as cruel and heartless. I blamed them and never even considered taking a moment to think through their perspective or the incentives that caused them to commit this crime and usually take their life along the way.

After experiencing those horrific 54 minutes of a school shooting through your book, I was just stunned. I was shocked. I had gone through an emotional rollercoaster. I really lived through every minute of the school shooting that you described, sitting on my sofa. At times in the book, I was brought to tears, because I felt the losses that the characters went through. I felt the love that your characters had. I felt the desperation and hopelessness that your characters felt. At the end, I realized how I'd always seen school shootings from a safe distance, as just another common empathetic bystander hearing about all these innocent people getting hurt. I realized that after reading your book, I understood. I knew what it was like to start off a casual day, only to discover that an individual you know was armed and ready to hurt you. I understood what it was like for Autumn, through her perspective, being threatened by her very own brother. I found that Tyler had multiple aspects to his person as a whole:

he was a protecting brother, a comforting boyfriend, a rapist, a killer, and most of all, a very lonely boy who was struggling to cope with his own hurricanes of emotions.

Reading this thriller has also changed my perspective on life and how I act. It taught me that every day, every moment of life is important and that it must be savored, because you never know when your life may end. This book taught me to not always plan for the future but also enjoy the present. In elementary school, I had friends, but I also had lots of fights and disagreements with lots of people. I had so-called “enemies” and people that I stubbornly would not interact with just because I judged them based on insignificant things. After reading your book, I realized that there is no point in fighting and holding grudges. I realized that, in the end, the only thing that determines whether you had a good life is how many people you helped and how many smiles and laughs you shared.

Therefore, I started to become more friendly and amiable to people. I started greeting people as I walked down middle school hallways, which made me more confident. I now have a lot more friends. I have stopped judging people based on how they look or act, and I really try to talk to everyone. I personally feel that I am more outspoken (in a good way), and I am easy to talk to. I now look forward to each day at school, despite the immense workload that we get. Overall, this book has made me a significantly happier person.

Thank you, Ms. Nijkamp. Thank you for showing me that life isn't a burden to be carried, but it is a collection of precious memories.

Sincerely,  
Sreepadaarchana Munjuluri

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Barry Ostrom**  
Triton Central Middle School, Fairland  
Letter to John Feinstein  
Author of *Cover-up: Mystery at the Super Bowl*

Dear Mr. Feinstein,

A while back, I read a book of yours that would inspire me to take on a career in journalism. See, I write for a news outlet that presents sports news to the public. I couldn't ask for a better opportunity to show my newly found passion for sports journalism than this network giving me a chance to really prove to myself I was worthy, even at the age of 13.

I didn't just wake up one day and say, "You know what? I should be a journalist." I read *Cover-up*, which ended up inspiring me to create a career for myself. You obviously know about the kids who ended up becoming journalists in the series, which I read every page of, but when I saw how young but impactful their voice was through journalism, I knew this was my calling.

I made my own sports page on social media, and I started off making tiny posts that had some kind of news about some sport and would get maybe five people to actually notice my underwhelming page. But, I kept at it and saw the number of people interested in my page keep rising and rising until I eventually had more than one-thousand people who used me as a source for their athletics news. But that's not the end of my story.

One day, I was contacted by a man who was a journalist himself. He asked me if I was interested in potentially working for his network. This was my chance! As a 13-year-old boy growing up in the farmlands, I finally had a chance to show my talent which I discovered while reading your series. Around this time, a new football league was emerging. It was called the Alliance of American Football and was a developmental league. When I was hired, I began to cover teams from this league. Since it was small, a young journalist like me could pretty easily reach out to a player from this league and talk with them over social media platforms.

Unfortunately, this league's story came to an end, but mine was just starting. I moved on to college football, the National Football League, and recently, another developmental league called the XFL. I have written many articles on many different topics including breaking news, predictions, backgrounds, timelines, and more!

See, my story isn't exactly the most devastating story you might've heard. I live a pretty good life to be honest. I have a great family that loves me and will do anything for me. I'm incredibly thankful for that. My story is a story of a true passion that I received from your book – and how I used that passion to turn myself into a journalist at the age of 13.

Sincerely,  
Barry Ostrom

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Kenzie Pendleton**  
Central Middle School, Columbus  
Letter to Indiana Author, Paige Rawl  
Author of *Positive: A Memoir*

Dear Paige Rawl,

As I read your work, *Positive: A Memoir*, I immediately connected with the characters – and you! I understood from past experiences some of the feelings and questions you had. Your book helped open my eyes to the outside world.

Just like you, Indiana is my home. To read your story and to see that connection, just as you had when you learned about Ryan White, was quite phenomenal. Your experiences written about in your book helped show me how large of an impact one person's small decision can have. I couldn't stop wondering a few things after reading it.

To start, I constantly wondered how different the story would be if your best friend hadn't told everyone your HIV status at that sixth-grade lock-in. How things would've been different! For one, I probably wouldn't be writing this letter to you and you might not be in this same situation as you are now. Then again, speaking from experience, when you're so young a secret doesn't stay that way for long. Who knows how everyone's lives were impacted in that one second that it took for Yasmine to tell just one person that you were HIV positive? Then they told another. Soon, everyone knew and there was no going back.

Now you have written a book, given speeches, and impacted so many people all because of the events that were caused by one middle school girl. That exposed me to the power and responsibility of just one little choice. Yasmine's action, and the choices of everyone from that middle school, have affected the entire country if not the world. They also were the cause of stress-induced pseudo-seizures and even prompted your experiences with self-harm and attempted suicide. In the end, though, Yasmine didn't make people bully you, that was their choice and theirs alone. I doubt anyone truly knew the full effect that one particular secret could have on everyone.

Next, I always wonder who I would've been at Clarkstown Middle School. Would I have been like Yasmine – friends at first, but distancing myself when the truth spread? Would I have been one in the crowd calling you "PAIDS," or would I have stood by, not participating yet not standing up?

Would I have been one of the people who wrote on the bathroom wall, too afraid to say it to your face but too hateful to let it be? Would I be like Ethan, who tried to go to an adult for help, but in the end asked if you could be friends just “in private?” Or maybe I was one of the few, like Amber and Erin, who truly cared enough to ignore the criticism and befriend you.

The amount of characters that played their part in your life truly fascinates me, as it’s real. I sincerely hope I would have the courage and kindness to ignore my peers and do what I knew was right, even if some of the adults were just as bad. Even just a little kindness and strength can go a long way – yet another lesson that was truly emphasized in your story.

Finally, your story helped explain to me why some people would do things that would harm themselves. For instance, how you cut yourself. I had no idea why someone would even think about harming themselves or why it was even a thing. Your personal narration during the dark times of your life helped me be more sympathetic and understanding to those who have attempted suicide, participated in self-harm, or suffered from stress-induced medical conditions. It opened my eyes to a world in which we are seeing more and more of these things.

***Positive: A Memoir***; your book about how you *survived your bullies, found hope, and changed the world*, truly impacted me. It taught me how the small things have the greatest impact and how much power one little action holds. You helped me find some understanding to some personal topics that affect many teens and, sadly, many of my peers. Finally, you showed me that if you can get through a hard time, there’s always a break in the storm at the end. It’s just like you said, “I didn’t plan this journey, and I certainly wouldn’t have chosen it. But the things that happened made me who I am.”

Sincerely,  
Kenzie Pendleton

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Darius Porter**  
Salem Middle School, Salem  
Letter to Jay Asher  
Author of *Thirteen Reasons Why*

Dear Jay Asher,

Your book *Thirteen Reasons Why* is a very important book that I believe all teenagers should read. I read this book when my best friend was getting bullied so bad that he had thought about hurting himself and worse. Through Hannah and my best friends' stories, I have learned how important it is to treat others with kindness. I am also more aware of how to help a friend or loved one who is suicidal. This book has led me and many teens around the world to make wiser decisions on how to treat people.

Before reading this book, I wouldn't get involved by helping someone who was being bullied. I just stayed out of the situation. I also didn't understand how important it is to never assume that someone's mental health is okay. When adults would tell kids to be kind, I never really understood the importance of how words and actions could affect other people so badly.

After reading this book, I am always very conscious on how I talk to people and make sure that I am always polite to everyone. When I see someone, who looks sad or upset, I always make sure to ask them if they want to talk or if they are ok. I also always let the counselor know every time a friend tells me that they have been depressed or suicidal.

Your book *Thirteen Reasons Why* also relates to millions of people all around the world. This book relates so heavily to the world because a lot of teenagers aren't treating their peers nicely. Sadly, this disrespect among teens has led to suicidal thoughts and actions. Even though teenagers' disrespect has become an issue, adults also deal with the same problem of disrespect. This book has taught me the importance of words and how it can affect others

Mr. Asher, I wrote this letter to you because I wanted to let you know the importance of your book. This book was introduced to me during a difficult time for one of my best friends. Through books like these, I was able to understand some ways I could help my best friend.

Sincerely,  
Darius Porter



**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Anna Sermersheim**  
Jasper Middle School, Jasper  
Letter to Sharon M. Draper  
Author of *Out of My Mind*

Dear Sharon M. Draper,

In my life, I have never been one to obsess about books. I read like most kids my age, but I've never truly been impacted by words on a page. That is, until I read *Out of My Mind*.

Although my family is very diverse, there is one person who stands out to me: my cousin Adam. Adam has special needs, and it very much impacts his everyday life. Although I share a quick conversation with him every so often, I could never truly understand what's going on inside his head. Adam has his own world going on inside, and I never would have realized it without you.

After reading Melody's story, it truly changed the way I look at people with special needs or disabilities. Even the goldfish jumping out of its bowl on the cover speaks to me. I know that Adam, just like Melody, feels just like that goldfish. Maybe he feels like an outsider, out of his bowl, but now I know how to make those feelings of isolation disappear.

Words are either your worst nightmare or your best friend. They are so complicated and tangled and seem to fly every which way yet are so simple in the big scheme of things. For me, words are something I cling to and worship as a way to express my inner thoughts and ideas. For Melody, her mind seems to be thinking the same things as me, but her body is saying otherwise. Through reading about Melody's battle with not being able to speak, it gave me a new appreciation for my capability to talk. I catch myself taking for granted simple conversations with my friends or asking a question in class, humbling myself after because I realize that not everyone has this luxury.

When Melody gets to be on the Whiz Kids team, her excitement really impacted me. She was absolutely ecstatic that people finally believed in her. During that moment, I remember feeling a sense of pride. Not only had I grown to know the ways of Melody's mind, I felt as if she was truly my friend. So, when my friend accomplished such a huge ordeal, I was as just as excited as her. Her obstinate mindset of never giving up gave me a new ideal of this same perspective. This also reminded me of Adam. I know how

excited Adam gets when something goes his way, so I could really see him through those pages.

I believe that everyone should find the joy in reading this book. You may find yourself learning to be grateful for the simple luxuries that we rely on every day. It also taught me that no matter how a person acts or looks, they still have ideas and values worth fighting for. Without this book in my life, I might have gone out of my mind.

Sincerely,  
Anna Sermersheim

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Ellie Spaulding**  
Salem Middle School, Salem  
Letter to Jerry Spinelli  
Author of *Stargirl*

Dear Jerry Spinelli,

All throughout elementary school, I felt confused about who I was. I never really fit in with the athletic kids, but not the artistic kids either. When our teacher suggested *Stargirl* in class, many kids thought it was stupid, but I related to the book unlike any that I had ever read. Stargirl was different, yes, but she didn't care what anybody else thought of her. She knew she was different, and she owned up to it.

She taught me that life is too short. There is no excuse not to be kind to the people you cross from day to day. Even one small act of kindness can mean the world to someone. That act of kindness could be to a person or to the earth. Something as simple as picking up a piece of trash on your way to school or throwing your water bottle in a recycling bin instead of a trash can. Or to tell someone that you like their outfit or new hairstyle. Life is too short to change who you are for others. If they don't accept you for who you are, that's ok. Not everyone has to like who you are as a person. Instead of bringing people down, you should make it a goal to tell people what you like most about them.

If I had never read *Stargirl*, I don't know how I would even think or act. This book has changed my everyday life from the way I act to the way I see other people. Whenever you say something, you don't always realize how much it can affect others. She acted like everything was fine and that the things people were saying about her didn't bother her, but in reality, it was making her super depressed. It is hard to stay yourself when everyone is telling you to change.

Honestly, this book just described the person I wanted to be. The person who did what they always knew was right. The person that never listened to what others said. The person who knew who they were and didn't let anyone change that. The book created a goal for me, a goal to become the better version of myself. I may never achieve this goal, but I can at least try.

Sincerely,  
Ellie Spaulding

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Katelyn Stetter**  
Central Middle School, Columbus  
Letter to R. J. Palacio  
Author of ***Wonder***

Dear R. J. Palacio,

I would like to say thank you for helping guide me through my wild, crazy life. Your books have been very inspiring to me and my family. About a month ago, my family experienced a house fire and lost everything. Well, everything except for each other (and my dog, of course). Amazingly, the community all around us – friends, family, and strangers – has been so kind and giving, which I am so thankful and grateful for. Before this catastrophic disaster, everyone in my family had read your book, ***Wonder***, had seen the movie, and had also been reading the quotes from your ***365 Days of Wonder: Mr. Browne's Precepts*** daily. The quotes and the book were very encouraging, and we thought about them each and every day.

A couple days after the fire, on a family trip to Target, my father spotted the book of quotes and decided to buy it. The quotes give us the power we need to get through each day as well as something to think about and keep in mind. One of my all-time favorite quotes from the book says, *A single sunbeam is enough to drive away many shadows.* - St. Francis of Assisi This quote is my favorite because it relates to my present life. There has been so much good that has been overpowering the bad. It encourages me to be the sunbeam to someone who needs it in their days of dark shadows. My father is a very kind and generous person who reminds me a lot of Mr. Browne from ***Wonder***. He is always all about giving back to the community and being kind. He is one of my biggest role models that I look up to.

I am very inspired by Summer. She helps remind me to be kind, generous, and to go out of my way to make someone else's day better. Summer is an example of who I try to be. My favorite scene in the book/movie is when Summer is sitting at a table with her friends who are whispering and glancing over at Auggie, who is sitting alone, and Summer decides to move over and sit with him. Summer then shakes Auggie's hand. Auggie then says, "But aren't you going to get the plague?" Summer then replies, "Good." I always do my best to try and make everyone feel included and feel as happy as a clam. This scene also inspires me to be around people that make me happy, and when I'm not with people that make me happy, to make them happy because everyone deserves to receive kindness.

I also read your book, ***White Bird***, about a week ago and it was fantastic. I usually wouldn't pick out a historical book to read. However, after reading your book, I may have changed my mind. I loved how you incorporated both kindness and history in one amazing book. Thanks for changing me into a better person and helping guide me through my crazy, eventful life!

Sincerely,  
Katelyn Stetter

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Mya Taylor**  
South Vermillion Middle School, Clinton  
Letter to Indiana Author, John Green  
Author of *Looking for Alaska*

Dear Mr. John Green,

I am writing to you today to thank you for the truth you have taught me with your writing. You are not afraid to tell people how it is. You have shown me a real world that has often been shadowed to cover the truth, changing my life. Your writing has really influenced how I view not only the world but people and experiences.

Your work has taught me so much. After reading your books, specifically *Looking for Alaska*, I have been more observant when it comes to my blessings. I appreciate what I have more than ever before. I have always noticed what I have been given. However, after reading your books, I also took notice of the privilege that is given to people based completely on looks. I am thankful for my privileges but try to share as much as possible with others less fortunate. Your work has taught me that I don't have to compare myself to other people and that jealousy is a waste of time because you could spend it more productively. Lastly, I learned to appreciate the people in my life and the understanding I share with the adults in my family. To emphasize, you have taught me so much that I couldn't learn any other way.

First of all, with your book *Looking for Alaska*, you have taught me that not every story has a happy ending. When we are younger, everything ends similarly, giving us the satisfaction of the fairy-tale ending where the good guys win, or the princess gets her prince. And don't get me wrong, as a child I loved those types of stories, but as we get older, we start to see more of reality. In my opinion, the books written for our age are a little desensitized so they couldn't scare us with the real world. Your book, however, was the first book I read where it didn't feel like something was being held back. I felt the whole experience. There is no question that your writing helped me realize that happy endings take work and dedication.

With your writing, I have also learned that loss is a normal thing as we get older, and not always in death. When I was reading your books, I noticed that I was no longer shielded from the world. I had lost some of my adolescence. For instance, one quote from the book *Looking for Alaska* states, "At some point, you just pull off the Band-Aid, and it hurts, but then it's over and you're relieved." This quote represents my emotions while

reading. When the character Alaska died, I felt betrayed. Why would you make someone feel so destroyed? But then I realized that this is the reality. I related this death to the loss of childhood and innocence. That was the first time I actually felt what reality was truly like, and it was scary but necessary. Without question, I now am more appreciative of my life and the people in it.

Lastly, you have ingrained that life goes on. I have incredibly bad anxiety when it comes to testing or doing anything that can affect my future or grades. In some cases, that is useful because I take things seriously, but sometimes it can consume my thoughts. In reading your books, I have learned that it is important to realize when things are serious, but it is just as important to relax and enjoy what I am doing. In your book, *Turtles All the Way Down*, there is a quote that states, “Your now is not your forever.” This was a very monumental moment for me because I realized that what is going on now is not going to determine my entire life. Not every bad thing has to be so detrimental to my mood. This is a lesson that can be told over and over, but I didn’t really understand the importance of not being so uptight. I have learned to relax and enjoy my time, and that one bad grade or an embarrassing moment is not the end of the world.

To summarize, you have taught me to live my life to the fullest. I have realized that failure can teach me just as much as any success and sometimes even more. I would like to thank you for being true in your writing and letting the characters be themselves unapologetically, and I will continue to work on seeing myself in the same way. Your writing is still influencing my decisions and view of humanity today. You should be appreciated and acknowledged for the impact you have had on me and many others. I want to express my gratitude for your work and dedication to your readers.

Sincerely,  
Mya Taylor

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Gabriel Vasquez-Jaffe**  
Hasten Hebrew Academy, Indianapolis  
Letter to Ruta Sepetys  
Author of *Between Shades of Gray*

Dear Ms. Sepetys,

Your book, *Between Shades of Grey*, taught me a lesson about giving help through the perspective of a Gulag survivor. It showed me that people do not help unless they are directly impacted by the danger. People are selfish, so it is hard for them to take a risk if they are living a comfortable life. Many times, people would only help if they are bribed or have an incentive. They would only help at the last minute or when it's too late.

When Lina was in the camps, the officer helped the prisoners only if they bribed him. Lina's friend's mom slept with the officer as the bribe. This proves that the officer could help the prisoners, but that he didn't want to because it would make his life harder. This can be compared to climate change. Many people who are economically privileged, like me, don't do enough to combat climate change because we don't want to disrupt our comfortable lives. For example, I could cut down on my red meat consumption, but that would mean completely changing my diet. It is too hard because it would make my life less tasty. Also, big houses are very damaging to the environment. We don't need the big houses that we live in. For example, when I lived abroad in Spain and China, my family of four lived in an apartment. People like me don't live like that because it is hard to shift to a less comfortable life.

When Lina's family was not yet directly impacted by Stalin, they didn't help as much as they could. People like me don't help to fix climate change because they don't directly experience the effects of climate change. For example, I don't have to worry about forest fires or major hurricanes. Because of that, I don't see why there is a need to help and would only help at the last minute when I directly experience the horrors of climate change.

Lina's family was not in danger when Stalin began sending people to the camps. The NKVD had not yet targeted their city. Lina's family knew of the horrors of the Gulag and camps but could only talk about it. They weren't in any position to help, as their lives would've been at risk. They could've helped, but it was very hard to get past the NKVD. Your book taught me to help when I can to stop climate change. I have everything I need, there is no excuse for people like me not to help. We don't have to face the fear of being hunted down for speaking out. Unlike Lina, we have



freedom of speech, so we have no reason not to fix climate change. Your book taught me to help even when it means leaving my comfort zone because eventually, the danger will come back to haunt me.

Sincerely,  
Gabriel Vasquez-Jaffe

**Level II**  
**Semifinalist**

**Kaitlyn Wilson**  
Hagerstown Junior/Senior High School, Hagerstown  
Letter to Indiana Author, Margaret Peterson Haddix  
Author of *The Strangers*

Dear Margaret Peterson Haddix,

You are the author of one of my favorite books, *The Strangers*. I just recently read this book, and I immediately fell in love with it. It taught me so much while I was reading it. I am so glad that you wrote such an amazing book for young teenagers like me to read.

One of the things this book taught me was that you should always be aware of your surroundings. This book talks about how these three siblings thought that their mom had just left on a business trip, but she actually went into an alternate world. The craziest part about this was that the entrance to the alternate world was in the basement of their home. This really inspired me to explore and find out more about the world we live in. Without the Greystones exploring, they would have never been able to find their mother and try to save her.

Another thing this book taught me was that we need to stick close and work together with the people we are comfortable around. In this book, the Greystones have to work together to try and save their mom from getting killed. I think that without reading this book, I would not have realized how important it is to stick together to figure out challenges you and your friends or family might face in the future.

I also learned how important it is to not take things for granted. When the Greystones lost their mom after their father had died a few years ago, they realized that you have to spend time and appreciate your loved ones while you can. Even if there is something you might not like about a certain person, you still need to spend time with them because once they are gone, you will not see them again. You cannot take anything for granted and this book really shows the importance of that lesson.

The last lesson that I learned in this book was to be kind and to help everyone no matter what. If someone needs help, you need to help them. The Greystones' mother had lied to the children about a lot of things. She lied about how their father died, the alternate world, and her "business trip." Even then, Greystones still thought it was important to save their mother after she had lied to them. That was very inspirational to me because sometimes I do not want to help people that have been mean

or that have lied to me, but if someone needs help, I should always help them.

Overall, this book has really helped me become a better person. I thank you so much for writing this amazing story that will help so many people learn more about themselves. It definitely has helped me, and I have never learned so many lessons from a book. You are a truly outstanding author, and I cannot wait to read the second book in this series!

Sincerely,  
Kaitlyn Wilson

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

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

**Maria Bass**  
Harlan, Indiana  
Letter to C. S. Lewis  
Author of *The Chronicles of Narnia* series

Dear Mr. Lewis,

I enjoy reading today because of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. By the end of 4th grade, reading had become a chore for me. In desperation, I asked my father to suggest a book that I might like. He handed me *The Magician's Nephew* and I became a loyal citizen of Narnia.

The first time I read your stories, I became one of the characters. I jumped into the pool with Diggory and Polly and watched in wonder as Narnia was created. I wept by Aslan's body at the Stone Table. I rode over the misty mountain pass beside Shasta. I stood by Caspian as High King Peter knighted him. I felt the pain of Eustace's transformation when the Lion ripped away the old dragon-skin. I was Jill struggling to obey. And I stood at the stable door beside the kings and queens of Narnia as they watched its destruction.

I don't know how much of that first whirlwind journey my 4th grade mind comprehended, but I vividly remember the moment I recognized whom Aslan represented. My father and I watched the movie version of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and he asked me, "Whom does Aslan represent?" As I mulled over my response, I realized there was only one person like Aslan who had sacrificed himself for the guilty: Jesus of Nazareth.

Recently, I read the books again, and I grasped so much more. The allegorical nature of your stories helps me see better...no, they help me see *me* better. For example, my *mind* enjoyed the account of Narnia's creation and corruption in *The Magician's Nephew*, but my *heart* resonated with Diggory as he resisted the witch's temptation. His example gave me strength and inspired me to walk away from evil.

In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, I was deeply moved when the Stone Table cracked, and Aslan came back to life. I realized that Jesus did the same thing, and I *experienced* why everyone who saw him couldn't keep quiet!

*The Horse and His Boy* is probably my favorite story. I resonate with the characters, especially their obsession with others' stories. Aslan's

admonition that he was telling them their story (not another's) felt like you wrote it to me!

I look forward to so many gems in the story arc of *Prince Caspian*, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and *The Silver Chair*. I listen for the desperate but hopeful winding of Susan's horn! I cherish every scene with Reepicheep, but especially his unwavering loyalty and love. He inspires me! When I'm afraid or angry or sad, I fear heaven may not be real and that we are just making it up. But then I remember the brilliant, spunky rebuttal of the evil enchantress that you wrote for Puddleglum: "I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia!"

Your book *The Last Battle* is my second favorite. I treasure the picture of heaven that you created inside the stable! What inspired the idea of something bigger on the inside than on the outside? Whenever I contemplate heaven now, I hear Jewel's voice: "Come further up! Come further in!" I want you to know that whenever I want to give up, I remember that Aslan will return!

I know that as I mature, what you wrote will make more sense to me - the best stories are always like that. But even now, I see myself and the world more clearly because of what you've written. I feel like Lucy when Aslan says, "...every year you grow, you will find me bigger!" I feel like my faith truly is *bigger*. In the face of evil thoughts, the strength of Aslan helps me to do good. When I hear bad news, I know Aslan has a plan, and I can choose to follow him! I hope I can be as brave and loyal as Reepicheep.

Mr. Lewis, your stories introduced me to a world I will never forget. You taught me to love to read, to be brave, and to imagine a better world. I hope I never grow too old to read "fairy tales." Thank you for every adventure I've taken in Narnia. I eagerly await my next journey through the door of the wardrobe.

Your devoted and grateful fan,  
Maria Bass

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

**Taylor Benes**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Jenny Lawson  
Author of *Furiously Happy*

Dear Jenny Lawson,

Since second grade, I have wrestled with Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Then, in seventh grade, I was sexually assaulted. Because of that event, in tenth grade, I was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. By twelfth grade, I was prescribed antidepressants and going to therapy every week. My world morphed from a beautiful, breathtaking place to one I no longer wanted to live in; however, in the midst of my pain, your book *Furiously Happy* was recommended to me. I finished it in one day. Your stories of hope and humor through your battle with mental illness challenge me every day to find joy through my struggles and my pain.

One of my English teachers and I both struggle with mental illness. She and I stand beside each other, comforting each other in times of pain. She knew I was battling anxiety during my sophomore year more than ever before. I was unable to sit still in class, so I left the classroom often. I woke up before five in the morning most days, doubled over in pain, powerless. I missed school for weeks at a time. My teacher knew all these things, so she searched for a book that I could read while at home. She came across *Furiously Happy* in a list of books for people struggling with mental illness. After reading it herself, she handed it to me.

You caught my attention on page one.

I relate deeply to many of your vignettes; they show me that I am not alone. I am a part of an amazing bunch of people who carry burdens with them every day that no one can see. But you show me that there is value in my suffering. By hurting, I can empathize with others who are too. I can band together with people who are in pain and give them a glimpse of hope. Your writing teaches me to embrace the things that make me who I am – both the lovely and the flawed – and to use those things to seek joy in remarkable and peculiar ways. As your mother says, “Maybe ‘crazy’ isn’t so bad after all.” You teach me that, sometimes, crazy is just right.

You gave me valuable advice when I was sinking in an ocean of pain. Your surviving mental illness is a testament to your saying: “Because quitting might be easier, but it wouldn’t be *better*.” You teach me not to quit, even when it seems like the best way out.

You conclude with the most meaningful quote to me in the entire book: “We live in the negatives so often that we begin to understand that life when the sun shines should be lived full throttle, soaring. The invisible tether that binds normal people on their steady course doesn’t hold us in the same way. Sometimes we walk in sunlight with everyone else. Sometimes we live underwater and fight and grow. And sometimes...sometimes we fly.” *Furiously Happy* gave me my wings to soar.

Your vulnerability in sharing every detail about your struggles with mental illness inspires me to share mine. You give me pride in my successes, both big and small. You prove to me that I am as much a survivor of my secret battles as one who beat cancer. You help me to laugh at the crazy moments in my life rather than to be numb to them. Your words spoke directly to me when I needed to hear them most.

Because of *Furiously Happy*, I am challenged to seek out joy in my life even through the horrendous moments. Thank you for teaching me that I am not alone in my struggles and that crazy makes me who I am. Normal is boring, anyways.

Sincerely,  
Taylor Benes



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

**MaKayla Taylor**  
Brookville, Indiana  
Letter to Jay Asher  
Author of ***Thirteen Reasons Why***

Dear Jay Asher,

I found peace by shifting my focus to stories that I read, and ***Thirteen Reasons Why*** was one of the first novels that I read with themes geared towards high schoolers. Surprisingly, I connected a lot with Hannah's character.

The main plot point that resonated with me was how the aftermath of Hannah's suicide was shown. As a new teen who struggled with suicidal thoughts for a long time, even before high school, it brought around a new perspective that I had not thought about before: parents, friends, other students who I may not have known personally who would be affected by my own choice. Even though Hannah believed that suicide was the answer, there were so many repercussions that she could not have planned for, even with her tapes. ***Thirteen Reasons Why*** also prepared me for the worst of high school, even when I believed that the experiences that occurred in the book could never happen to myself or my friends. This book taught me to better myself mentally in a time where I was keeping my thoughts and feelings locked away and wearing a mask every day.

Hannah used her tapes to personally call out every person who brought her to suicide. This "suicide note" of sorts that Hannah left targeted people by name, including the high school counselor who ignored Hannah's cry for help. After reading this novel, I decided that I would never become someone's reason why. I have a good feeling that that was your goal, Mr. Asher. The goal is to spread awareness that suicide is not always a response to a serotonin deficiency, but the only way people believe they can escape from those around them. Even after Hannah was defeated by rumors, rape, and ruined love, she put on a happy face that no one could see through until she came to the point of suicide.

After reading ***Thirteen Reasons Why*** twice, I decided that my whole attitude needed to change. I promised myself that I would never resort to suicide like Hannah did because there is a second half to that story that I would never get to see: my family and friends suffering. I was more kind to others, constantly smiling in the hallways and saying hello to people who I was never really close to. I talked to my parents about how I felt and asked them for help, and I finally got the therapy I needed for so long. I learned

how to express the way people made me feel when they hurt my feelings, which led to a change in the attitude people had towards me. Now, nearly four years after reading *Thirteen Reasons Why*, I feel like an entirely new person with a positive and happy outlook on everything even when the going gets tough. Thank you.

Sincerely,  
MaKayla Taylor

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Alea Alvi**  
Fishers, Indiana  
Letter to Ayn Rand  
Author of *Anthem*

Dear Ms. Ayn Rand,

Your novella *Anthem* was, at first, difficult for me to look deeply into. I had to read it for my freshman year English class, so I initially didn't pay much attention to it. The concept and the plot, however, stuck with me even after my coursework regarding the novella had been finished. I decided to revisit it in my junior year of high school, as I could read and analyze it at my own pace and on my own terms. This unrestricted reading of *Anthem* deeply affected me and the way I view the world. The second reading of this novella revealed to me the dangers of extreme collectivist societies, but more importantly, it reinforced the importance of individuality. Equality 7-2521 never really figured himself out until he was forced to leave his society for his own safety. His name seems significant or maybe even heroic at first glance but progressing through the plot reveals that your clever naming choice is deceptively and ruefully ironic. The Council's forced control of every aspect of people's lives masqueraded as a stepping stone to a population of harmony; the reality of the situation, however, was that everyone was forced into a system of generic names and assigned roles, stripping everyone of any trace of power. This had no effect on me during my freshman year of high school, but the overarching themes of this novella spoke to me much more this year. I realized that, even though I'm lucky to live in a society that values individuality, I would blend in with the masses and make no impact if I sat back and didn't speak about the issues of the world around me.

I am lucky to be able to sit here and write this letter. Others around the world, meanwhile, are under the same amount of pressure as Equality 7-2521, and rereading *Anthem* has made me reconsider my quietness. I have since been significantly more vocal about the issues I hear and read about, regardless of whether they have any relation to me personally or not. My heart broke for the members of the society crafted in *Anthem*, as they were forced into remaining docile while Equality 7-2521 was hunted and persecuted for wanting to dabble in something that should be a basic human right – expressing your opinion and remaining true to yourself. Unfortunately, civilians of dictatorships and innocent persons in warring countries are subjected to similar suffering, sometimes with little to no input at all from their governments. Equality 7-2521's determination to free himself from restriction and be true to himself has impacted me in a

great way – I’ve stopped being shy about what I think of the world’s current events, and I now frequently use the platforms I am a part of to share news that mainstream media tends not to cover. I’ve noticed that this change in my behavior has not only caused a positive change in my own circle of friends, but friends of those friends as well. Many people I know and those they know have been actively trying to raise awareness about those in the world who don’t have a voice, who *can’t* have a voice because of the turmoil they are caught in the middle of. My efforts have garnered the recognition of new friends and allies as well as the recognition of my teachers. This switch of mine from quietude to being more and more vocal made me feel much like Equality 7-2521 did during his escapes into the tunnel to write and create – I felt odd, like what I was doing wasn’t right or correct according to society. However, the more I participated and internally reinforced this new behavior, the more I became comfortable with the discussion of these topics and myself. This, in turn, allowed me to better understand Equality 7-2521’s euphoria at freeing himself from his society and being able to live without limits.

Every time I share a post regarding conflicts and issues around the world, I think back to this story. Every time I answer a question from someone who didn’t know about something I shared, I think back to this story. Every time I read a message from someone who’s experiencing a conflict I talk about online and every time they let me share their input, I think back to this story. Every time I see someone else share something I had shared myself, I thank them for their help and think back to this story. ***Anthem*** has shaped me in ways I didn’t know it could, and I am endlessly grateful for it.

Regards,  
Alea Alvi

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Lindsey Day**

Franklin County High School, Brookville

Letter to Khaled Hosseini

Author of *The Kite Runner*

Dear Khaled Hosseini,

I vividly recall groaning and hurling complaints at my teacher during my freshman year when she announced we would be assigned a summer novel for the following school year. I refused to open *The Kite Runner* until I had simply no other option but to do so. As my eyes poured over the pages, I was filled with annoyance and reluctance— why would I read a book over my summer break? I was puzzled by the language and time frames of the book initially. However, through time and notetaking, I was able to unveil and interpret the themes woven within *The Kite Runner* that would shift my view of the world abruptly.

The lessons printed upon the pages of your work provided me with clarity and morals that have proved to be invaluable in my life. If you were to glance at the book that I read so many years ago, you may notice tear-stained pages, where I was pained by the correlation between Amir and Baba's relationship to that of my mother and I. Amir ceaselessly pursued his father's love but failed to receive it, feeling overshadowed by his secret half-brother Hassan. The relationship between Amir and Baba resonated with me because for the majority of my life I have craved a strong relationship with my mother but have failed to create a bond with her, falling lowest on her priority list to other family members. Your narrative also taught me that "there is a way to be good again" and even the most ultimate and damaging betrayal, such as Amir neglecting to protect Hassan during his assault, can be forgiven. The prominent subject of redemption despite all odds provided me with an inspiration that it is truly never too late to forgive others and be forgiven.

Furthermore, *The Kite Runner* displays that you cannot outrun your past; rather, you have to face it. Although it may be a daunting and intimidating confrontation, attempting to encounter the demons of your past allows for mental freedom. The removal of emotional chains and bondage allows one to forgive themselves for past decisions, just as Amir was able to. While reading *The Kite Runner* was an emotionally awakening experience, it prompted me to face trauma in my past and forgive those

who have hurt me. *The Kite Runner* granted me with the capacity to set myself free of my past and determine the direction of my future. Thank you for creating such an impactful piece.

Sincerely,  
Lindsey Day

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Ashlee Delph**  
Crown Point, Indiana  
Letter to Indiana Author, John Green  
Author of *The Fault in Our Stars*

Dear John Green,

I am afraid that I am incapable of expressing the extent to which your novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, has impacted my outlook on life. However, I will try. My first interaction with your novel was almost six years ago. During this time, a large chunk of my friends were engulfed in the text as though they would starve without it. I, however, was not allowed to read it. I was just beginning to explore the world as a teenager and my parents were persistent on keeping me away from anything that may even remotely provoke ideas considered to be PG-13. This, however, I am not resentful of. For your novel fell into my hands at the exact moment I needed it.

One year ago, I was diagnosed with Hypothyroidism. Although this condition is not at all life threatening, it still came as a shock for me as I had always been relatively healthy. Leading up to my diagnosis, I was filled with anxiety and worry. The condition had caused my hair to thin and my energy was lacking. Your novel, however, gave me strength.

Shortly before my diagnosis I decided, on a whim, to purchase *The Fault in our Stars* and see for myself what had ensnared my classmates years before. Needless to say, it did not take many pages before I was laughing and crying along with all of your wonderful characters. It also did not take much time before I realized that this was a novel about so much more than illness and cancer. The strength that Hazel, Isaac, and Augustus show, even when it seems like the entire world is against them, is a strength that I attempt to achieve every day and a strength that I carried with me throughout my own experience with illness.

Your novel, however, did not only teach me about strength, it also taught me about the importance of friendship. I am the type of person who is often guilty of not telling my friends about everything that is going on in my life. Therefore, when I was diagnosed with Hypothyroidism, I was hesitant to tell them about it. I wasn't going to die, and there was a piece of me that wanted to pretend that everything that I had gone through hadn't happened. After reading about how Hazel, Isaac, and Augustus all supported each other in their darkest moments, however, I realized that I also needed support. I needed my friends.

Opening up to my friends was one of the best decisions of my life. To this day, we still work on being open and honest with each other and we've become more like family than friends. This, however, may not have been possible without ***The Fault in Our Stars*** showing me that friendship is about supporting each other, no matter what.

So, John Green, I would like to thank you. Thank you for inspiring me and being there when I needed you most. Thank you for ***The Fault in our Stars***, a novel that will continue to affect my life for years to come. Finally, thank you for showing me how to have strength in the face of adversity, and for demonstrating the necessity of friendship.

With great admiration,  
Ashlee Delph



**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Steven Dennie**  
New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne  
Letter to Philip Zimbardo  
Author of *The Lucifer Effect*

Dear Mr. Philip Zimbardo,

I'd love to thank you for altering my personal views on morality and the human mind through your book, *The Lucifer Effect*. Your book turned my world upside down when I first began to read it. It erased and helped reshape my thoughts on the good and evil forces in this world. In other words, your book inspired me to study morality more intensely. *The Lucifer Effect* has served as a tool for enlightenment of some sort. Your thoughts on human morality have impacted me so much that after burying my head in *The Lucifer Effect*, I now do not believe that humans are naturally good or evil. Every single human being on this planet has a capacity to do things both considered morally correct and morally unjust by the rest of society. Humans are molded like clay by numerous factors in their lives. I now can almost easily connect to even the most battered criminals and sympathize with them. I now am able to trust that some criminals are remorseful for their previous actions. It's regrettably disgusting how society paints even the pettiest criminals as horrific monsters whisked away for good reason.

"Good people" are able to commit extraordinary atrocities without a second thought. "Bad people" are able to become heroes and behave wonderfully. *The Lucifer Effect* has reminded me of the age-old saying, "don't judge a book by its cover." I've certainly been guilty of doing just that. In the past, I've taken passing glances at ordinary people uninvolved in my life and have damned them, ridiculed them, and most importantly, judged them. I am remorseful and regret acting on my impulses. I have actually been described by my closest friends and peers as impulsive in the past and would also like to additionally remove that negative characteristic of me from the minds of everyone. To sum this up, I'd say that your work in *The Lucifer Effect* has taught me to be more considerate and compassionate with others. Even those deemed the lowest of low by society deserve care. Over the course of reading *The Lucifer Effect*, I've determined that human morality is subjective. What I may consider a terrible example of human nature is way different from what my neighbor or my associate may think.

Everyone has a fall from grace. Much like Lucifer in the Bible and "Paradise Lost," humans experience lapses in judgement. We have to live

up to the pressures that society bestows upon us every single bizarre day in our lives. It's frustrating that more people in positions of authority don't take these interferences into account. Everyone is so willing to point fingers and blame others. No one wants to understand basic human problems. Everyone just wants to chalk it all up to, "That certain person is a disturbed and/or unwell individual, and that's why they act poorly toward others." Frankly, that unnerves me. Because of the great impact that *The Lucifer Effect* has had on my life, I'd now like to pick the brains of others and analyze human morality on a day-to-day basis. I appreciate everything that you've done to help me reach my moral nirvana. I promise to view everything from a different/foreign perspective and prepare myself for the difficulties of life that make humans question their own personal morals.

With admiration,  
Steven Dennie

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Gabrielle Goodfellow**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Lois Lowry  
Author of *The Giver*

Dear Lois Lowry,

Before reading your book, *The Giver*, I had only a mild understanding of what it meant to live in a society where everyone lives under very strict rules and regulations. I didn't really understand what was so bad about being different. As a child growing up in the United States of America, being unique and creative has always been something easily afforded me. I didn't have to worry about suffering harsh consequences for being different. *The Giver* has opened my eyes to what life can be like for people who live in places where uniqueness and creativity are prohibited; a place where everything is in black and gray, and never in color.

I read your book in 6th grade. I distinctly remember reading about how no one saw things in color, but instead saw everything in black, gray, and white. Only the Giver and his apprentice the Seer could see things in color. This struck me, and I had to wrestle with it. I couldn't wrap my head around not being able to see life in color. I struggled to understand what my own life would look like without creativity or color.

It was difficult for me to understand the concepts that you addressed in your novel, and I am grateful for that. *The Giver* showed me that not everyone has the privilege of seeing life in color or being able to live without strict rules. It opened my eyes to the fact that there are people around the world who don't have the same privileges and freedoms that are afforded to me.

You wrote one character in particular that really resonated with me. It is Jonas. He is willing to risk everything that he has to give the tiny baby Gabriel a taste of what life is really like. He understands how cruel the world is and is willing to do anything so that this baby doesn't have to grow up like that. I think that Jonas really struck me because he stood out. You wrote a character that went against what he was taught, but for a good cause. You beautifully showcased that morality does not always equal legality. What Jonas did was completely illegal, but it was by all means the right thing to do. We live in a world where doing the right thing in the face of consequence is not always admired.

I want to say thank you for writing a book that made me think. Thank you for writing a book that made me struggle with how I perceived the world. Without *The Giver*, I might never have learned to think about how other people see life. Thank you for writing a character like Jonas, who is willing to break the rules to help other people see the world as he does. You have forced me to think about always doing the right thing, even when everyone else is going to tell me I'm wrong; when I could be facing serious consequences among people I call "friends." Thank you for opening my eyes to the world we live in.

Sincerely,  
Gabrielle Goodfellow

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Elisabeth Knot**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Anthony Doerr  
Author of *All the Light We Cannot See*

Dear Mr. Anthony Doerr,

This past summer, I read your novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*. Although I read it as an assignment, it quickly became my favorite book I have ever read. The characters in this book reminded me of my own family and the importance they have in my life. Growing up, my dad would tell me and my siblings many stories about our heritage and where our family came from, and this book reminded me of my family's journey to America.

When my dad's mom was just a baby, she, her parents, and her older siblings had to leave their home in the Netherlands to escape World War II. After risking their lives to hide people from Nazis, my great-grandparents decided it was enough; they needed to leave. My grandma and her family left their friends, family, and home to flee the dangers of the war. They started a new life in a new country all on their own. Because I had heard this story so many times, I never fully understood how difficult this change was for my grandma and her family. After reading your book, I have a better understanding of how anxious and terrified my family was leaving their home.

While I was reading *All the Light We Cannot See*, I imagined my grandma as Marie-Laure and her family as Marie's family. This made the story real for me. Although their situations were different, the idea of leaving your family and friends was the same. Once I replaced the characters with my family, I got much more emotionally involved in the story. When Marie-Laure and her father were separated from each other, I couldn't help but cry. I couldn't believe that real people, including my family, experienced this and continue to experience this today.

When I started reading *All the Light We Cannot See*, I didn't expect the impact it would have on me. I always knew the story of my heritage, but I didn't know its significance until I read this book. After I put my family in the book, the story became reality. Characters were real people with real stories, and my grandma became my hero. This story, however, didn't end on the last page. This story continues every day when millions of people leave their homes seeking safety in America, but most are turned away. This book also brought to life the sad reality in which we live.

Refugees leave their homes that have been destroyed and are turned down at American borders with nowhere to go. Families like these are similar to families in your book, fleeing their dangerous homeland to live freely in the “Land of the Free,” but turned away from safety because of the dangers they’re escaping. Marie-Laure and her father are not only characters in your book, but they are everyday people who are brave enough to risk everything in hopes of a better life.

With gratitude,  
Elisabeth Knot

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Rachel Labi**

West Lafayette Junior/Senior High School, West Lafayette  
Letter to Gordon Korman  
Author of *Restart*

Dear Gordon Korman,

Patience is a golden characteristic. Like courage and wisdom, everyone wants to possess it innately. However, people are not always willing to practice patience. I had always known I lacked the trait, but I never did anything about it. I remained passive, instead of aggressively fighting my flaws head on. Then I picked up your book *Restart* from my sister's bedroom floor. She had been reading it for school and told me a bit about it. She promised it was more interesting than your typical amnesia story, so I decided to give it a shot.

Soon, I became engrossed in Chase's story. Waking up in an unknown world, he was unable to recount his supposed passion for football, his friends, or even his own mother. When he left the hospital, he started to realize that the old Chase had a controversial reputation. He observed his "best friends," Aaron and Bear, bully the smaller kids. When Chase befriended the vidiots, members of the video club, the football players were mortified that he was hanging out with people they had deemed "losers." Many of the vidiots were past victims of Chase and his friends.

As I read your novel, I noticed how much the new Chase detested the old him. The old him had planted cherry bombs in a piano during a kid's performance, forcing the pianist to move schools. The old him had inexplicably ripped the head off of his four-year-old stepsister's teddy bear. The old him had stolen a war medal from an elderly man whom the new Chase had begun to admire. And finally, the old Chase had treated the vidiots like they were nothing and made them feel like nothing.

I myself had never done anything that extreme. I am quiet and reserved, never one to partake in violence. Yet this book encouraged me to reflect upon my own life. If I, like Chase, had fallen off my roof and lost my memory, would I be proud of the old me?

I would be proud of my awards and accomplishments, but not so much of how I treated the people I care about. I treat my friends well, but I am ashamed of the way I treat my family, the people who have always been there for me. The people who love me unconditionally and have been

most patient with me through my trials and shortcomings. How could I not reflect the patience they give me?

Many people are unkind to their families because they know the bond will never break. While this is true, our families are the people with whom we should be most patient and kind towards. I have always struggled with patience towards my family. I remember the part when Chase has a flashback: his brother is nervous about going to college and instead of harboring support, Chase felt embarrassed forever looking up to a “wimp” like him. He was extremely critical of someone so close to him. That is a fault Chase and I share. My closest friends and family are subject to my evaluations and criticisms, while I remain bound by my own flaws.

If I lost my memory and became a new Rachel, what would I improve about myself? I would say the way I treat my little sister at times. The old Chase had terrorized his stepsister so badly that the first time he met her after leaving the hospital, she greeted him with genuine fear in her eyes. I can make small steps to be kinder. Simple things like letting my sister take her time on tasks and listening to her perspectives are not difficult. I can also be more conscious of my parents’ schedules and be more receptive to my older sister’s advice.

After the accident, Chase was told by his principal that this would be a good opportunity to reinvent himself. I realized we can do that every day. We can aim to be a better version of ourselves tomorrow, and we can restart and reflect on our actions. My New Year’s Resolution is to be kind to others, work on patience, and improve my overall character. After reading *Restart*, I marked a new era: the era of a new Rachel, the restart and kindling of a more patient, kind girl.

Thank you for writing a novel that has inspired me to be a better person. If we want to change ourselves and our reputations, we cannot wait for tomorrow, next week, or even next year to reinvent ourselves. The time is now, and my personal restart is well underway.

Sincerely,  
Rachel Labi



**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Anthony Maurello**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Harper Lee  
Author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Dear Harper Lee,

Back in my freshman year, I don't think I had ever enjoyed a book. That's a lie. I enjoyed plenty of books like the ones that had cool facts and pictures of space in them or that taught me cool origami tricks. I enjoyed books that didn't make me think. I used to think that the best ways to learn were out of books like those, containing only clear-cut answers, but your book taught me otherwise. Reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* was about more than just soaking up information. Your book made me think. I had to form my own opinions. I had to figure out the right from wrong. In this way, your book taught me better than any of those other books could've.

Through your story, I embarked on a journey where the destination was my own understanding. It was more than just numbers to be memorized. It changed my perspective. Down to my core, it influenced me. And guess what? I didn't like it. Ignorance is bliss, and your book took that away from me. Not to say I was entirely ignorant about social injustice; I just chose to ignore it up until that time because I was young, and I thought it didn't really matter to me in my small world. Your book shoved it in my nose, made me confront things I had managed to avoid.

I don't think any other character has changed my perspective of the world like Boo Radley has. I was raised with good parents. I was told time and time again never to judge someone based on the color of their skin, so I didn't, but that doesn't mean I wasn't judgmental. It was the people like Boo Radley, people with developmental disabilities or mental illnesses, whom I judged. I used to think of people like Boo Radley as weird or creepy. I figured they chose to be that way, so they deserved the criticism. I would judge people without getting to know them first, and then I had the audacity to blame them for my judgment. I learned through *To Kill a Mockingbird* something that can't be learned in a school textbook. I learned that people are different, different in color and ethnicity and ability, but still people first. I should not subscribe to an "us vs. them" attitude. We are all human, and we should live this life together, not ostracizing and oppressing each other. Thank you, Harper Lee, for opening my eyes.

Sincerely,  
Anthony Maurello

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Marissa Meador**

Mooreville, Indiana

Letter to Indiana Author, Pete Buttigieg

Author of *Shortest Way Home*

Dear Pete Buttigieg,

As a junior in high school, my life is mostly undecided. But in that indecision, there is the looming threat of an ambiguous “future” that determines if I can achieve my dreams. I wonder a lot about how much control I have over this “future,” and whether or not I have reached my fullest potential. I’d like to believe that I still have much to contribute. What I want to contribute is not clear, but I am certain of one thing – whatever I do, I want it to have a purpose. In your book, *Shortest Way Home*, you constantly redefine your potential, from Harvard to McKinsey to the Navy. At the end of it all, you find a purpose in the place you grew up and commit to reviving South Bend. In my relentless search for learning and experience, your book truly emphasizes that purpose can be found in the simplest of places.

The world feels like a vast, important place. Trillions of actions occur at once, and some have global consequences. Still, much of my understanding of the world is confined to the small bubble in which I live. In my quest to widen my knowledge of the lives outside of my community, I have learned of a war-torn Liberia, where children smoke heroin in the streets to cope with life as an orphan. I have learned about the fear of North Korean defectors who have to decide between risking their lives to escape or living life without liberty. I have learned that the clothes I wear on my back may have been sewn by adolescents whose own backs ache and sweat from long hours in a cramped space. It is hard to continue living as normal when such hardships exist. I am distanced physically and mentally from their anguish. I am a single person in a sea of indifference. How can I make an impact?

Your book answers simply: purpose and drive. If I cannot help out overseas, I can devote my life to the ultimate cause of integrity and truth helping people wherever I can. For you, it is the contribution of a public servant to the functioning of the government and by extension, the wellbeing of the people. Redefining such a role through the lens of a mayor, I am reminded that it is local politics that truly pieces together the great American puzzle.

My town is even smaller than South Bend, such that we do not even have a mayor. But the devotion of the community is clear, from the colorful town

council campaign signs outside the voting center to a host of charity and activism clubs run by students and adults. Outside of politics, elements of my small town are irreplaceable. In the bustle of the town, a homey restaurant with live music draws young and old to share a sandwich. Among the backroads that wind through golden stalks of corn, a sign reads, "Fresh Eggs for Sale." There are no bright lights and skyscrapers; there is not even a bowling alley. In the context of the world, these small joys aren't significant. But they are special because they are all pieces of life in my small town, each working to preserve the legacy of the town's founding by a kind and tolerant Quaker family.

Reading your descriptions of Indiana, it is strange to think that as I was coming home from elementary school, drinking powdered lemonade and reading chapter books, you were campaigning all over the state to become treasurer. In 2012, when you were inaugurated as mayor of South Bend a few hours north of me, I was making microwaved cake in a mug as an experiment in my fourth-grade class. While I was stunned at the expansive nature of my small world, you were rediscovering the importance of small things in the context of the entire world. It took you years but hearing the account of your journey makes me realize once again that it isn't always the big things that matter the most. My town isn't big by any means, but as dusk falls on the Earth, I go to sleep knowing that regardless of my future, this town will always be my home.

Sincerely,  
Marissa Meador

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Allison Meyer**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Lucy Maud Montgomery  
Author of *Anne of Green Gables*

Dear Lucy Maud Montgomery,

You created a book that captured my heart. You created a book that I read over and over. You created a book that I read late into the night. You created a book I could relate to. You created a character that I wanted to be friends with, who I wanted to be like, and who reminded me that small things drastically matter. You created the character Anne, who I dressed as for Halloween. You created *Anne of Green Gables*.

Anne's vision for kindred spirits pulled me in. I wanted a kindred spirit. I wanted a best friend like that. I thought I had a best friend in grade school, but that all changed when she became friends with someone else. I was left feeling lonely and out of place. When high school began, I wanted to make a best friend, a kindred spirit. On the first day of school, I knew who I wanted to be friends with, and I was determined to be her friend. Thankfully, she was a kindred spirit. We have been best friends throughout our four years of high school. I have many loving friends now who love and support me. As Anne once said, "Kindred spirits are not so scarce as I used to think. It's splendid to find out there are so many of them in the world." Anne was right; there are many kindred spirits. I have found a bunch of them. I value my friendships. This world might feel lonely, but I'm never alone because I have a whole bunch of kindred spirits standing behind me, loving me, and caring for me. I learned from you never to underestimate the power of a kindred spirit.

I also learned not to underestimate the small things in life. For example, Anne says, "I'm so glad I live in a world where there are Octobers." She taught me to value the little things like the month of October. Too often we don't find joy in life. We try to find joy in material things instead of the blessings in life. The month of October has many lovely things like the beginning of fall, pumpkins, and the changing of the leaves. We just have to look around and see all the beauty around us. I love how Anne sees more than just the black and white. I love how she renames the avenue to "The White Way of Delight," and the pond to "The Lake of Shining Waters." I want to be able to be imaginative. I love how she sees more than the ordinary eye.

Anne is so imaginative throughout the book. She dreams and doesn't give up. She is very determined to study hard and learn. She wants to beat Gilbert in school. She says, "Oh, it's delightful to have ambitions. I'm so glad I have such a lot. And there never seems to be any end to them—that's the best of it. Just as soon as you attain to one ambition you see another one glittering higher up still. It does make life so interesting." There is always another step, always another place you can stand. I want to go to college to be a veterinarian. People always ask me if I'm sure or ask if I know that's a lot of school. I have ambitions like Anne, and that is exciting. I'm excited to see if I can reach my ambitions. I don't just want to settle in life, I want to push myself. To use Anne's words, it is *delightful* to have goals. You can never run out of goals *or* ambitions.

Another reason why Anne with an e shaped my life is because she isn't perfect. She held grudges, and sometimes for long periods of time. She accidentally got Diana drunk. She didn't always like to pray. But Anne did many good things, too. She helped Matthew with everything, she helped Diana's sister get better, and she made many people smile. She brought energy. I want to bring people energy. I want to do good in this world. I want to have kindred spirits help me, I want to be thankful for small things, and I want to strive for a goal. *Anne of Green Gables* helped me grow up to be a determined and imaginative and loving person. I do make mistakes, but I learn from them. Anne learns from her mistakes as well. Thank you for writing this book. It helped me to grow up and value the things that really matter.

Sincerely,  
Allison Meyer

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Cheyenne Moss**  
New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne  
Letter to Maya Angelou  
Author of “**Still I Rise**”

Dear Maya Angelou,

I never wanted to silence myself to insulate the feelings of other individuals. I was always strong, and I am still strong, but because of you, I turned my dire strength into something beautiful. Although the poem “**Still I Rise**” is about the struggle of overcoming injustice and prejudice, this piece has set forth a path of empowerment, confidence and strength for my soul.

Those closest to me would probably describe my younger self as loud mouthed, brutal, fiery and inexorable. While these are not completely grim traits for a young woman to have, I was using these traits of mine in the wrong way. I was cocky, and I was plain presumptuous. At this time, though, I did not realize that my attitude was negative instead of empowering. I remember being introduced to this poem when I was thirteen years old, in the sixth grade. This poem was read to me in a club at school called “Black Girls Rock.” Four years ago, your poem moved me, and today at the age of sixteen years old your poem still moves me, and it helps me to keep pushing. I am at a time in my life where I am politically aware, and I am finding my voice. In America today, we are still facing racial discrimination and injustice. I feel the fire that was distributed into every line of “**Still I Rise,**” I feel the anger and I feel the hurt. Every day, I am fearful of what could happen when I set foot out of my door. The sound of sirens is alarming because I know that I am one “traffic stop” away from being the next Sandra Bland. Before reading the poem “**Still I Rise,**” I was substantially silenced about the issues that my brothers and sister are facing today. The repetition of the line “but still I rise” constantly replays in the back of my mind and has had a huge impact on the advocate for equality and fair justice that I am today.

A strong-minded woman has always and will always be feared. A woman who has the strength to handle heinous acts with serenity and grace is one who is unstoppable. If I was to interview myself four years ago and ask myself the question, “What would you do if someone hit you for having the nerve to exist and be black?” I would probably answer, “I would hit them back, ten times harder.” Compared to myself now, after reading “**Still I Rise,**” I would simply answer the question with, “*You may shoot me*

*with your words, You may cut me with your eyes, You may kill me with your hatefulness, But still, like air, I'll rise.*" I'm not sure if this poem is the only motive for the changes I've seen within myself, but I am positive that the words of power, dignity, pride, and empowerment have resulted in me finding my voice and using it for something bigger than myself. Ms. Angelou, one of your most famous quotes is, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Your poem made me feel strong and your poem made me feel powerful, and because of you I will continue to stand up for what I know is right and always, I will rise.

Thank you,  
Cheyenne Moss

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Katelyn Mulder**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Shel Silverstein  
Author of *The Giving Tree*

Dear Shel Silverstein,

When I was young, my dad read books to me all of the time. It was a routine for him and my family to all crowd around him on our couch for a nighttime story before we would go to sleep. I always enjoyed this because my dad wasn't home that often, so whenever I would get the chance to spend time with him, I would. Every night he would pick out a story to read and one of these stories was your book, *The Giving Tree*.

As someone who was naïve and simple as a child, I never truly understood how much the book had meant to me. It was just another one of my favorite books that my dad would read over and over again. But as I've gotten older and begin to look back on my childhood as something far away in the past, I realize how important my childhood books are and that a lot of times, those books have more meaning than any three hundred page book that I've read since growing older.

In your book, *The Giving Tree*, I noticed the deep meaning inside the simplicity of the poetry. The tree has more symbolism to me now than ever. The reason I brought up my dad is because of how much I compare the tree to my dad. And I compare myself to the boy, who always wanted something from the tree but never gave in return.

As I continue to grow up, I can understand how much my dad does for me. Like the Giving Tree, he is always giving me the opportunity to have a place in this world. And like the boy, I continue to want more from this life and oftentimes can find myself complaining about the things that I want. But no matter what happens, even after I take as much as I can to benefit myself, I always end up going back to my dad *and* my family, realizing how really I need them more than anything in this world, and like the tree, my dad and my family always take me back because they love me.

I want to thank you for using a short story to help me see my own life. I recognize my dad and others in my family for the influence they've had on me and how they continue to help me grow to be a better person.

Sincerely,  
Katelyn Mulder



**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Autumn Olthoff**

Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to Dr. Kevin Lemman and Kevin Lemman II

Author of *My Adopted Child, There's No One Like You*

Dear Dr. Kevin Lemman and Kevin Lemman II,

My whole life, I have known that my family is different. My family is composed of both biological and adopted children, which is normal for me but for other people, it is out of the ordinary. Not everyone “understands” why my parents wanted to adopt and then had biological kids, or why both me and my brother were placed for adoption in the first place, which of the kids in my family are the “real” children of my parents, and other not-so-nice things. The list goes on and on, each question ruder than the last. Even though it isn't their place to ask or wonder these things, they have caused me to wonder, too.

School projects having to do with my family were sometimes hard for me, but there was one project in particular that I struggled with: the family tree. In my class, each student had to make a poster filled with pictures of his/her parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. I was very distraught since the project wasn't something I thought I could do at first; it was supposed to be a lineage of people to whom we were biologically related. Of course, I was biologically related to someone, but the problem was that I didn't know or have any pictures of any of them.

When I told my mom all of this, she brought out your book, *My Adopted Child, There's No One Like You*. Your book explained feelings that I didn't know how to put into words. I saw myself in the panda, because I was in the same situation. Your book helped me realize that there are other kids who have the same feelings and experience the same situations I did.

I made my family tree, and I was proud to share it with my class and show how my family was unique. On my tree were my parents, and my grandparents, and my great-grandparents, and even though they didn't quite look like me, I thought my tree was perfect. Your book taught me that it is okay to acknowledge that you might have a unique family situation. The man and woman that adopted me are my real family no matter what DNA tests say, and your book helped me better understand that and, in turn, help others understand that as well.

Sincerely,  
Autumn Olthoff

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Grace Peterson**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald  
Author of *The Great Gatsby*

Dear F. Scott Fitzgerald,

To be quite honest with you, I have never been keen on reading novels for my English classes. Considering the mathematical/scientific fields I am hoping to excel in, I believe other activities are much more worth my time such as solving calculus-based problems and figuring out how the cell performs cellular respiration. Upon hearing the requirement to read your book *The Great Gatsby*, I wasn't jumping out of my seat proclaiming my excitement. I do not wish to offend you personally. I happen to have the same reaction every time we must begin a new novel. Because I am very busy working 24-hour weeks as a cashier, serving my church youth group, participating in clubs, and balancing my Honors and A.P. courses, it is challenging to find time to sit down and read for an hour.

Your book, however, was different. I began reading this book just as any other. Panicking about all the other homework I had, I tried to read at a fast pace skimming through the pages. In my effort to get the first chapter finished, I realized something. The narrator of this book, Nick, claimed to live his life trying not to be judgmental. Trying not to be judgmental? I have grown up in a Christian community, attending private Christian schools, and going to church on Sundays, yet the only type of person I have ever met is a judge on some level. So, when I read that Nick tries to keep his opinions enclosed, I laughed. Fitzgerald, I laughed.

I continued to read your book, and when my English teacher began to explain a certain theme, my perspective started to shift. The theme was that no matter how hard you try, you cannot gain back the past. Another point he made was that putting all your effort into one dream is gigantic risk because if you lose that dream, you lose everything. I started to make connections to the non-judgmental characteristic of Nick and this theme. I was utterly taken away. Let me explain to you why.

Growing up in grade school, I was never considered the "popular" kid. I was the "nice" and "nerdy" girl. I was content with this judgement from my peers as I did not care too much about what they thought, at least not until I hit eighth grade. A few months before it was time to graduate and move on with my life as a high schooler, I wanted to achieve the ultimate goal of a high schooler, the goal that every sane person strives for: popularity. I

began to think of ways to change myself so others would accept me. I began to run so that I would be in better shape, wear fashionable clothing, and spend forty-five minutes a day on my hairstyles. You're probably waiting for me to say, "None of those things truly matter, and people love me for me!" Well, I'm not going to say that because when I changed, I indeed did gain popularity. Going into my freshman year, I was in my prime. I had many girlfriends, and even guys began seeking my attention. I wanted to live the rest of my life just like this. Oh, how I was terribly wrong. By my second semester, I was in the hospital because I was no longer providing my body with enough nutrition to function. I began to lose interest in everything. All of my "friends" didn't want anything to do with me anymore. Was it because I was gaining weight? Maybe it was because I wasn't answering text messages quickly enough. The possibilities were endless in my mind, and I wanted my past back. My entire sophomore and junior year consisted of me chasing my past around the halls, through the chapel, across the gym, in the parking lot, and just as I was about to reach it...

So here I am lying in bed writing to you, Fitzgerald, wherever you might be. After reading your book, I am changed. I have begun to come to my senses and realized that I cannot gain my past back. Although I strived for popularity and the appearance of happiness, that dream shall cease to exist now. I will always be surrounded by people who are unlike Nick, people who are constantly judging others based on outer appearance. Like Gatsby, I spent too many hours wasting time on a dream that was worthless. Because of that, I need to take all of my focus out of that dream and focus on who I am made to be: a girl who loves to learn, a girl who likes to be a friend to everyone, a girl who doesn't mind treating herself. Thank you, Fitzgerald.

Sincerely,  
Grace Peterson

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Lydia Ranger**  
Indianapolis, Indiana  
Letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe  
Author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

Dear Harriet Beecher Stowe,

I was born in Ethiopia and lived there for ten years. Ethiopia was very different from America. When I came to America, the food, the clothes, the dances, the music, and the culture were extravagantly different. One distinctive difference that I would have not known about was slavery.

When I came to America, I was unaware that slavery existed. I did not even know what slavery was. When I watched movies or read books related to slavery, I was unsure what to think of it. One of the books that I read that truly helped me understand slavery was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which you so eloquently penned.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, some slaves were treated very cruelly while some lived a somewhat decent life. When I lived in Ethiopia, I did have poor living conditions and that is the reason why I was put up for adoption. During the Civil War, the slaves lived a very lowly life so I can somewhat relate to living poorly and am able to empathize more with them.

As I read the book, I was very emotional. Some slaves were separated from their families which brought back memories of the day I was separated from my mom, older brother, and little sister before I came to America. This section of the story aided me to better understand what the slaves were going through. Some slaves were beaten brutally by their masters; Uncle Tom was beaten by Simone Legree until he bled to death, because he stood up for his faith.

Thankfully, some slave owners were Christians, but that did not mean they saw slaves as equal to Americans. Some slave owners would read the Bible and believed that you should love your neighbors and your enemies, but some still treated the slaves poorly and believed beating them would teach them lessons. When I saw the way the slaves were treated, it encouraged me to treat others with kindness and respect.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I unquestionably saw the cruelty of humanity. In the story, Simon Legree represented a man of destruction and hatred. As I read the book, I could not believe the hate this man had for slaves.

Throughout the story he made me see that hatred gets people nothing but depression and emptiness.

Mrs. Stowe, I am so pleased that I read your book. If it weren't for you, I would not have the perspective I have about slavery. I know that you were opposed to the idea of slavery, and you saw it as a sin; I completely agree with you.

This story encourages me to want to count my blessings more. Thank you, Mrs. Stowe, for teaching me to have gratitude. The slaves were parted from their families and some were beaten to death. If they could continue living in this world, I should be able to as well. The bravery of the slaves was unforgettable.

I know God puts trials in our lives so that we become stronger and more like Him. Uncle Tom surely faced his trials and became a stronger man in his faith. If I ever face trials like Tom, I hope someday I can be able to defend my faith as he did. Thank you, Mrs. Stowe, for writing this book and teaching others what slavery is like and helping us understand what the Civil War was really about.

Respectfully,  
Lydia Ranger

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Karina Rebb**

Illiana Christian High School, Dyer

Letter to Yann Martel

Author of *Life of Pi*

Dear Yann Martel,

During high school, I read your book, *Life of Pi*. I had to choose an independent novel for my AP English class. *Life of Pi* has opened my eyes and has taught me not to take things for granted. In *Life of Pi*, I have learned about how independence is a necessity of life, how being able to connect to animals and the world is such an amazing thing to do, and how being able to push yourself to the highest limit and believing in yourself can be thrilling and yet so frightening. This book is a true masterpiece. Your book has helped me discover that when all the odds are against me, I need to push through, and I will end up victorious.

Since 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I've attended a school called Glenwood Academy. It is a boarding school, which means I've had to stay there until I graduate from high school. All my life, I had lived with my mom and I did not want to be without her. Now, not seeing her for five days out of the week was a rough time. I felt alone and I felt I had no one to talk or relate to. During my sophomore year of high school, I was feeling really low – a sadness that I couldn't explain. I was lonely and scared. I had no idea how to deal with it. I couldn't do or say what I was going through because even I didn't know the answer. But your words about fear explained exactly how I felt: "For fear, real fear, such as shakes you to your foundation, such as you feel when you are brought face to face with your mortal end, nestles in your memory like a gangrene: it seeks to rot everything, even the words with which to speak of it. So, you must fight hard to express it. You must fight hard to shine the light of words upon it. Because if you don't, if your fear becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid, perhaps even manage to forget, you open yourself to further attacks of fear because you never truly fought the opponent who defeated you."

I couldn't let this feeling overpower me and I knew I needed someone to talk to and guide me through it. I turned to God and asked him for guidance and help. As time went on, I realized that having a relationship with God was the best decision of my life. Your words about religion were truly inspiring, uplifting, and encouraging. I feel like I can relate to Pi because since he was young, he wanted to have a relationship with God. His love for God was unconditional and so is mine. Thank you for creating

Pi because even though he is a fictional character, I can relate to him in many ways.

Your book is something that I have never read before in my entire life. Your words, characters, and love for the world was an unexplainable beauty. Your words were soft yet strong, powerful yet delicate. I am grateful that your book has been brought into my life. I no longer feel deep fear about being alone and instead, I embrace it. I am not the same girl I was two years ago, and I am proud to say that I have become a young independent woman. Your book was a part of my transformation. Thank you for your words; this book will always and forever be close to my heart.

Sincerely,  
Karina Rebb

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Elidia Reyes**

New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to Osamu Dazai

Author of *No Longer Human*

Dear Osamu Dazai,

Acceptance, companionship, a sense of belonging – man has always been a prisoner to loneliness when connections are essential in human nature. In *No Longer Human*, for Yōzō, interacting, understanding, and relating to fellow humans was always a daunting task. I could not grasp the concept of why a man would succumb to such intense emotions. Is there any point in feeling extreme anger, or the opposite and being overwhelmed with joy? In my adolescence, I could not wrap my mind around what my peers felt, but oh, how I longed to feel a sense of fellowship with them. Similar to Yōzō, I learned how to act. If the class was amused, I would join in on their laughter even if I could not fathom their reasons. This false sense of unity is what led Yōzō to feign the jovial demeanor of a class clown. Unlike Yōzō though, I tried to become helpful; when someone was in need, I would be the first to offer my assistance.

By the time I entered junior high, I had become completely drained. I hadn't helped out of the goodness of my heart; my reasons were much more cynical. I wanted to feel needed. I realized that all those years were wasted. My understanding of humans became less as my sense of alienation grew. Like Yōzō, I was able to gain solace from art. As I progressed through junior high, I became more of a recluse. No longer seeking approval, I spent my days in isolation. From home to school, my interactions with humans decreased. One day, two days, even a week would pass without me speaking to anyone. Mentally and physically I was unaware of the path of self-destruction I was on. I became an addict to food, amassing a total of 250 pounds on my frame by the end of my 8th-grade year.

Many see high school as a new chapter of life, but I did not believe it would be any different than any year of my life that I had experienced. But one day, I discovered your book, *No Longer Human*. I almost felt as though it was written about me under an alias. As Yōzō entered young adulthood, I saw it as a premonition of what my life could become. He continued to feel like an outcast, as though he was disqualified from being a human. Both of us were not understanding humans, worn out by the feelings of alienation



from the world, and addicted to any substance that could make us feel slightly better. Yōzō ultimately attempted double suicide. When that failed, he lived as a shut-in and soon turned to drugs and alcohol. **No Longer Human** is like reading through the diary of one of the most damaged people to exist, a person with whom I could sympathize. I've never wanted anything more in my life than to change myself from that point on. I began trying to branch out, and improve myself as a person - diet, exercise, and finding comfort in talking to my family. My unperturbed self soon became mild-mannered, and I was able to successfully drop more than 100 lbs. My life was looking up.

I still do not fully understand others, but now I can genuinely show my happiness or anger and share these feelings with others. I no longer feel as though I am acting and hiding from others. These small steps led me to find my purpose of gaining lifelong friendships. And nothing pleases me more than learning and understanding more about others. I often reflect on my changes in demeanor, and how all of this would not be possible if I did not discover your book. By showing me a life that I would dread for myself, one of eternal loneliness, it has truly changed the way I live as a human.

Sincerely,  
Elidia Reyes

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Logan Ross**

New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne

Letter to J. K. Rowling

Author of the *Harry Potter* series

Dear J. K. Rowling,

“Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one remembers to turn on the light.” My life in the past could have easily been described as a series of never-ending emotional staircases only leading to doubt and depression. However, the Wizarding World has aided in my journey across the vast stretches of my own subconsciousness and made me realize that life only has meaning if I believe there is. I discovered that happiness is a luxury too sweet to take for granted, too rare to let go, too craved to let die. That the light I have been searching for disguised itself as a passion for fiction and magic which I came to find in the form of your books. Even as a child, I found it hard to cope with the complexities of life and struggled with many social aspects of my childhood including controlling my social anxiety and realizing that I don’t have to conform to social norms to be myself.

In my experience, nothing is worse than hiding my personality under a metaphorical invisibility cloak. It only suppressed my emotions to a breaking point, damaging my confidence and in turn making it nearly impossible to maintain true friendships. The Golden Trio have exhibited tenacious social prowess, despite the numerous physical and mental obstacles, and have demonstrated how the forces of friendship is the only power strong enough to combat the hardships that I have and will face in life. Their overall dynamic is fueled by trust and acceptance for one another, which is why I appreciate my friends, knowing that the only way that I can survive life is by building close relationships with the people who share my passions and provide me with the strength to succeed. Without Ron and Hermione, Harry wouldn’t have been able to have the strength to face Lord Voldemort. Knowing that I have friends and peers who admire me for who I am intensifies my motivation to learn.

There have been countless moments where I find myself deep into a conversation regarding *Harry Potter* with my school friends for hours on end, and I feel that they lead to a deeper emotional connection. Specifically, developing a bond between myself and Hailey, who is now one of my closest friends. This directly associates the books with the vitality that I now possess. I don’t necessarily have a strong relationship with my parents, much like Harry’s relationship with the Dursleys. Likewise, I feel

that my parents don't appreciate me in the sense that I am evolving as a teenager and the books are aiding in my transition to adulthood.

In particular, I have found that simply reading a chapter or two makes any residual anxiety and stress from mentally depriving school days just melt out of existence. The intense mythical imagery transports me into a whole other dimension, a safe space to enjoy imagining what it would be like if the laws of physics were stripped away to let magic become part of reality. I have always yearned for the ability to conjure up my own creations by the power of my mind to truly test my creative abilities. Ever since I laid my eyes on a *Harry Potter* book, I have been inspired to become my own writer and express my own fictional worlds that I hope to share with the rest of the universe. Although I sometimes find it hard to express my feelings, I am passionate about characters that I can personify my emotions through. *Harry Potter* books are an inspiration to improve my writing skills and serve as a way to free others from the creative shackles of society.

I'd have to say, if it wasn't for the entire *Harry Potter* series, I feel that my childhood could have easily turned for the worst. I had finally found books that satisfied my hunger for the unimaginable and gave me a sense of euphoria that saved me from the cruel effects of reality. I wasn't necessarily a positive person per se, however, realizing that I could be a part of something greater than myself really put my life into perspective. Harry didn't even know just how significant he was in saving the entire *Wizarding World*, which goes to show how the magical world relates to people like me who are prospected to protect the world from its own evils. With friends on my side and this new outlook on my life, I feel that I have the potential to do anything that I set my mind to.

With admiration,  
Logan Ross

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

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

Dear R. J. Palacio,

Your novel, *Wonder*, will always be an impactful book on my life because I can relate to the main character, Auggie, so much. He is as brave as a firefighter going into a burning house, which caught my attention throughout the book. *Wonder* taught me to be nice to everyone, not to judge people especially for their looks, and to be helpful to new people.

When I was six, I underwent an atrial septal defect repair which left me with a scar down my chest that sticks out with most shirts and bathing suits. My scar is not as noticeable as Auggie's because it is on my chest, but it affected me daily. After reading *Wonder*, though, I learned to be proud of my scar because it makes me unique from everyone else, just like Auggie's differences do. Auggie is a great role model for many readers, including me, because he tries to keep a normal life even though he possesses many differences from the other kids. I was always afraid as a kid that I would be made fun of because I bear a line down my chest and stomach. After reading *Wonder*, I realized that even if people do make fun of me, I will have people that will stick up for me as Auggie did.

In middle school, a new girl came to my school, and no one welcomed her the way she would have liked to be welcomed. I remembered how Auggie was treated at his new school in the book, so I helped her throughout the day, and we became profoundly close throughout the year. Anytime someone is being bullied, I always try to stop it because I know how Auggie felt while being tormented by a group of boys at the camp. I try to be like Auggie's friend, Jack Will, that came to stop the boys and ask them why they thought it was okay to torture him the way they were. Jack Will was as loyal as a swan at the camp, which also inspired me. He was the most welcoming to Auggie at his new school, which is how I strive to be for any new people.

When Auggie received a standing ovation at the end of the story, it impacted me because it symbolized that no matter how much he was bullied, in the end, everyone was there for him. He realized that just because he was born with deformities and is different than other kids, he is still capable of just as much as his other peers.

In conclusion, I am incredibly thankful that I gained the opportunity to read *Wonder* because it opened my eyes to a lot of ideas I had not discovered yet. I learned not to be ashamed of myself because of something that helped me and learned to be nice to everyone because you never know what someone is going through that you cannot see. *Wonder* changed my perspective on how everyone should be treated and how I should treat others.

Sincerely,  
Audrey Sacksteder

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Ashley Sarrazin**  
New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne  
Letter to Ishmael Beah  
Author of *A Long Way Gone*

Dear Ishmael Beah,

Although I have not been in a war, I have experienced some of the same experiences you have endured. Your book has allowed me to connect to the main character and realize that others have some of the same struggles. When I was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, my father passed away. I spent a week outside of school with family before I had to return to my normal routine. Being separated from my dad was earth-shattering. I can somewhat relate to your loss of your parents.

When your father died, you had to rely on your brother and friends to get through it all. When my father passed, I went back to school and relied on my friends to make me feel better. I also had the strenuous task of trying to find a new “normal,” which was difficult to say the least. I felt the need to stay strong for my family and not show them how I felt about my father passing. After my father passed, I also tried to mask my feelings and move on without being sad. This was challenging because I felt the need to hold back tears and put a smile on my face even though I didn’t even understand how I felt. Nothing felt real. I couldn’t really believe that I would never see my father again. I remember finding out just like you did; my heart sank, and I felt sick. My sleep was uneasy just as yours.

You faced other barriers like getting separated from your brother, drug abuse, and being a boy soldier. I have never experienced these problems or barriers. In Chapter 11, you talked about how enraged you felt when you were about to see your parents but couldn’t. I flew to Florida to see my father when he was sick. Once I got to Florida, I was ready to visit and embrace him. Before I arrived, I found out that he had already passed away. I was furious. I hated that I couldn’t be with him one more time or say goodbye, just like you didn’t get to say goodbye to your parents. I wanted to blame my other family members for not keeping him on life support, even though I knew in the end that it was no one’s fault that I didn’t get to see him one last time. When you said, “If we hadn’t stopped to rest... I would have seen my family,” I thought, this is how I felt when I was told my dad had passed a couple hours earlier. It’s easy to think about the what-ifs that build guilt and anger.

Even though this book didn't personally help me get through my struggles, I was able to realize that others go through far worse. I was also able to relate to your heart break. We both lost our dads at a young age and had to rely on who we had left to make us feel better without showing anyone how we truly felt about the death of our relatives. My heart still is mending and I'm guessing yours is too.

Your book influenced me to be able to face the fact that this event happened, and I should be able to move on just like you did, especially because your case was way more traumatic than mine. You have showed me that you can take your struggles and make them into strengths. With those struggles you can teach others valuable lessons to inspire the future and not dwell on the past.

Sincerely,  
Ashley Sarrazin

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Elise Taylor**  
Indianapolis, Indiana  
Letter to Mary Shelley  
Author of *Frankenstein*

Dear Mary Shelley,

When I first read *Frankenstein*, I was immediately captivated by its twisted and dark themes of loss, terror, and judgment. The second time I read *Frankenstein*, I remember contemplating the immense depth that you entwined throughout the book at only eighteen years old. The third time I read this book, I thought to myself, “Surely I cannot learn anything more from this book. I’ve analyzed it so many times already,” yet your writing surprised me once more. As I flipped through the highly annotated and ripped pages from so many readings, I realized yet another in-depth theme of yours! Your writing never ceases to catch me by surprise. Every time I read this magnificent book, I walk away with yet another realization.

I first read *Frankenstein* three years ago. Once I finished the book, I felt as if I looked at everyone differently. I found myself not judging others as harshly, assuming as quickly, and criticizing as often. I recall taking away a rather simple theme: judgment is detrimental and has many repercussions.

When Frankenstein first creates the monster and is immediately terrified, he says, “The monster might have spoken, but I did not hear.” I remember getting chills. This quote caused me to stop and think, *who in my life am I not hearing while they speak?* Towards the end of the book, the monster says, “Still I desired love and friendship and I was still spurned.” After reading that quote, I sat back and reflected. Have I spurned anyone who wanted friendship?

Two years ago, in the atrocious heat of the summer, I found myself cooped up in the air conditioning and picked up your book once again. I reread it in a matter of days, and in those four days, I did nothing else but dive into the ocean of your words. Instead of reflecting on the theme of your book, I dove into the history of it. I wanted to know the “why” of *Frankenstein*.

After reading a biography of your life, I was fascinated by your ability to intertwine aspects of your life into the novel. Before studying this, I always wondered how an eighteen-year-old could write such a deep and dreadful book. After studying your life, I realized it was a reflection of your own life. I was fascinated by the history and making of *Frankenstein*. It is thrilling



to know that my favorite novel was written on a dare on a rainy day. Your deep history and background caused me to contemplate that whatever we have experienced, we tend to project that into our future doings. It helped me throughout my senior year to remember, “You don’t know anyone’s background story, so act accordingly.”

Instead of focusing on the book and its themes as I previously did, I selected a rather melancholy passage in the book to analyze. On the last dreadful page, the creature and Victor are at war once again. It was almost shocking when I read that Victor was still fighting until he passed. I was on the edge of my seat when the monster “died.” It says, “He was borne away by the waves and lost in the darkness and distance.” There is no guarantee or promise that the monster is dead. This caused me to identify stubbornness and its true repercussions. I never saw nor realized how deep it truly runs. The ending also revealed the true villain in a way I had not seen before. The villain was recognized. This caused me to contemplate the “true” villain in other stories and even my own experiences. I thought back to times in my life where I blamed everyone but myself and times where I was blamed. Based on the events in the last pages of your book, I now take accusations and picking antagonists heavily.

I truly cannot describe how much impact your book has on me. Not only is it a great summer read, but it has so many themes, questions, and theories to unpack. Your book taught me how to judge slower, find the “why” more often, identify stubbornness easier, and take accusations heavier.

Sincerely,  
Elise Taylor

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**M. E. Taylor**  
New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne  
Letter to Connor Franta  
Author of *Note to Self*

Dear Connor Franta,

Throughout life, it is the duty of ourselves to discover how we truly fit into the world around us. While some individuals may build the strength to start their self-discovery path on their own, I received a push by reading your book *Note to Self*. Before reading your book, I suffered from severe anxiety and insecurity, often unaware of who I was and how I was a necessary piece in the puzzle that is society. The collection of short stories, poetry, and photography captivated me from the beginning as I opened the light pink cover to the end. The words helped me tremendously through the ever-growing trials and tribulations of the teenage years.

Unfortunately, I was stuck in a never-ending dark period of life before opening the book, being continuously circled by the 8-mile wide tornado that swirled my depressing thoughts. Confusion continued to arise until a spark of hope appeared when reading the chapter "To My Dearest Past." A loop of insecurity and confusion tormented me night and day, causing my once nonexistent emotions to exit at full force. Even without willpower and motivation for any activity, the book was able to capture me in its' aesthetically pleasing pages and took me on a roller coaster of emotions. I felt alone within the world around me, lacking a trustworthy person to turn towards. Mental illness, especially in adolescents, is a taboo topic. Using the words of your personal letter, I was given hope that everything would be alright. I built up the courage to slowly accept my struggles, in turn speaking out to different individuals in my life. Personal stories mixed with heart-wrenching poetry pulled at my heartstrings with such intensity, helping me realize I was not alone in my pain.

Struggles with self-identity are not uncommon for those in my age group. I was in the same boat as other teenagers when I first bought *Note to Self*. Attempts to decipher the ever-diverse world of sexuality was a common occurrence for me throughout the entirety of middle school, with these speculations continuing to this day. Nonetheless, the fear of labels caused me to hide "in the closet," even after discovering my true feelings. When reading the pages of your book, I began to slowly open the doors and step out with my true identity. Non-straight males from a midwestern small-town are few and far between, but you offered a role model that I did not previously possess. Fear had controlled me for years, but after gaining

assuredness and courage from your novel, I am finally able to say these words... I am attracted to men. These seemingly insignificant words have never been muttered to another person. Your book helped me become self-accepting and spurred the strength to speak these words in the mirror.

Often YouTubers flaunt their extravagant lifestyles, trying to 1-up those around them; however, you are not often grouped with this majority. After reading gut-wrenching stories of struggles and heartbreak, it allowed me to connect to someone on the opposite side of the country. Ever since I was a small child, dreams of moving to a big city like New York and Los Angeles were continuously growing. Adults in my life often shut down these wild dreams with claims of loneliness and money issues, eventually causing me to reconsider if the dreams should remain dormant. In my knowledge, there has not been one individual in my city to “make it big,” causing the once enthusiastic child to drift into a deep state of depression. As I finished *Note to Self*, I began to hope again as you were able to defy the odds of a small-town child. I felt with certainty the need to dream and aspire again, as I now knew my ambitions were not as far-fetched as many believed. Without your book, I predict I would have continued to spiral down the never-ending road of not being good enough, until it was all too late.

Your book *Note to Self* truly saved me from the horrors of society and the norms it possesses. The lessons of self-acceptance and light in the midst of a dark situation will allow me to become one with myself and stimulate my growth in both aspirations and self-identity among peers. Even with the alarming actions of our world hindering individuals from expressing their thoughts, I will never again look into the mirror and deny the person being reflected back at me. I possess the confidence to live as who I was born to be.

Sincerely,  
M. E. Taylor

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

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

Dear Graham Greene,

Before I read your book, I thought it was just going to be another AP English book to read with many assignments to follow, but little did I know it was going to be the most relatable book I've ever read. As I was reading your book, *The Power and the Glory*, I was in complete denial the entire time and kept telling myself that I was nothing like the pious woman that the priest encountered in jail. I had these thoughts running through my mind: "How could the pious woman judge the whiskey priest like that?" and "Why would she say those things to him?" But as I took a step back, I was a lot more like the pious woman than I thought. Every page I turned in your book, the words seemed to jump off the page and slap me right in the face. Throughout the majority of the book, I was oblivious to how applicable this book was to my family situation, but once I realized how similar the stories were, your insights changed my life.

My uncle was a strong, God-fearing man who raised six amazing children with my beautiful aunt. He was a preacher at a Reformed Church in his local town and loved his job very much. His family was not only close with each other, but also with the church. Many church members looked up to my uncle and trusted him for advice and guidance. Everything was ordinary and it seemed like nothing was in his way. He was thankful for the life that he had, and he seemed to be very content, but in reality, he was pretending to have it all together and was putting on a front for his family and congregation.

When I was about eight years old, I started catching on that my uncle was living two lives: the intelligent, caring preacher and the stumbling, angry alcoholic. After catching on to my uncle's problem, it was only a few months later when the church elders released him of his responsibility as a pastor. I watched him refuse my family's help, become even more angry and bitter than he already was, and alienate himself from the ones who loved him the most. I was completely shocked at what I was watching and couldn't believe that my uncle would ever do this to our family. My uncle resembled the whiskey priest not only for being an alcoholic, but for knowing and recognizing his own sin but still never changing.

Because he left my family with so much pain and brokenness, I began to judge him. I refused to extend him any grace. Any time my uncle's name was brought up, I would immediately roll my eyes and criticize everything about him. I put myself on a pedestal, thinking I was better than he could ever possibly be again. At this point, I thought I was far better than he was and continued to judge him much like the pious woman in jail. And, of course, the pious woman is the worst sinner in the book: she is so full of hypocrisy and unkindness.

Your book made me come to a realization. I was the pious woman. I was so busy judging my uncle's shortcomings that I failed to see my own, and my own lack of charity toward him was easily as bad as any sin of his. Your book was a wakeup call to me and opened my eyes to my own sin. Thank you, Graham Greene, for writing something that I needed to hear, and for turning one of my AP English assignments into a lifechanging experience.

Sincerely,  
Lexi Terpstra

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Yuri Torres Herrera**  
Arsenal Technical High School, Indianapolis  
Letter to J. K. Rowling  
Author of the *Harry Potter* series

Dear J. K. Rowling,

I wanted to say that I read your book series *Harry Potter* so many times. It was an almost supernatural sensation, that of suddenly seeing the life of Harry Potter as a movie or more than that. It was as if I was the one in that cupboard with those abominable relatives. It was an absorption that scared me, yet I cannot believe how it was that I had long-lost sensations like that. I want you to know, that day I was reading all night.

Thank you very much for giving me a passion for devouring books. Thank you for giving me such a fantastic childhood with Harry Potter. Thank you for giving me a reminder of those long hours of reading. Every so often I want to remember, and I read them again. Suddenly, I'm not only traveling through Potter's adventures, but they also make me travel to my childhood; the one that was full of that magic, lights, and sorcery. I even remember fighting with my brother because we were both delighted with the books. We argued over who got to read it first since we only had enough money to buy one book. As soon as we found out that there was a new title of the saga, we both ran like crazy in search of the book.

Not only do I want to thank you for those long hours, but also to tell you that I would like to forget them in their entirety, only to have the pleasure of reading them with fresh eyes and a new mind. I still remember that after reading all your books, I wanted to watch the movies to see and relive every part of the stories. The bad thing was that I had to wait a long time to continue watching the next volume of *Harry Potter*: I couldn't wait for the time to continue since they were so very interesting and fun.

Thanks for everything. Thanks to the inspiration that gave me your books so I could express myself and say what I think about your writings.

Sincerely,  
Yuri Torres

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Lauren Woo**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to Michael Crichton  
Author of *Jurassic Park*

Dear Michael Crichton,

I always loved dinosaurs. When I was in preschool, my mom took me to the library every week, and every week I would run to the children's nonfiction, down the aisle, directly to the dinosaur books.

I would check out the same books over and over, pouring over the brightly illustrated pictures of triceratops, spinosaurus, and pterodactyl. I knew the names of dinosaurs and, yes, at age five I would read about what they ate, how they lived, and why they went extinct.

But dinosaurs weren't my only passion. At seven years old, my parents gave me an encyclopedia of science for children. I read it so often that by the time I was ten, the spine was cracked and pages had fallen out. Along with it, they gave me a human anatomy and physiology book, another that I read tirelessly.

I was desperate for scientific knowledge at an early age, but I lost that during my years in middle school until I read your book, *Jurassic Park*, and suddenly science fascinated me again.

I'll admit, I watched the movie version of *Jurassic Park* before I read it, but your novel includes an incredible amount of depth that the movie lacks, particularly in the area of scientific facts and the ethics of science, an area of particular interest to me now and something I had never considered before reading your novel.

Your ability to craft an engrossing story intertwined with detailed and accurate scientific research and theory is a joy to read, and I have read quite a few of your other novels. *Jurassic Park*, however, has remained my favorite.

Not only has *Jurassic Park* revived my childhood adoration of dinosaurs – since reading it the first time, I've read it more times than I can remember, and I've begun watching numerous documentaries about dinosaurs and archeology – but it has also helped me delve further into the ethics of science.

When we talked about the ethics of science in my biology class, I feel like your book has already given me a leg-up on considering some of these issues. We are advancing rapidly in science, and things that were once medical or military are being used for entertainment or by the common people.

We need to be careful about how we use the scientific power we've so rapidly gained. I like the way you put it in the novel, "Science has attained so much power that its practical limits begin to be apparent. Largely through science, billions of us live in one small world, densely packed and intercommunicating. But science cannot help us decide what to do with that world, or how to live. Science can make a nuclear reactor, but it cannot tell us not to build it. Science can make pesticide but cannot tell us not to use it."

I have found myself applying this way of thinking to many situations when considering the use of power. Just because we can do something, doesn't mean we should do it.

Thank you for reviving my love of science (particularly dinosaurs) and for helping me to think more deeply about ethics in science and all other areas.

Sincerely,  
Lauren Woo



**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Makaylee Woods**  
Franklin County High School, Brookville  
Letter to Jay Asher  
Author of *Thirteen Reasons Why*

Dear Jay Asher,

I will never forget the day I began reading *Thirteen Reasons Why*. A friend of mine had bought it while she was staying with her dad in Michigan and she told me I had to read it. I remember I got the book from her the day she got back home and once I started reading it, I just could not stop. I clearly recall sitting up in my bed reading until three in the morning. The entire time, tears rolled down my cheeks and I gasped with every turn of events. I was only in the eighth grade at the time. I was just beginning to see the harshness that occurs in the world every day, and *Thirteen Reasons Why* opened my eyes tremendously.

As I read, I anxiously awaited Clay's tape because I could not figure out what he did to hurt Hannah. When I finally reached Clay's tape, I was relieved and shocked all at the same time. Clay put Hannah's suicide on himself because he did not love her enough. That statement hit me like a freight train. I realized that people should overuse "I love you" and that you can never love someone too much. Another thing that really stopped me in my tracks as I read *Thirteen Reasons Why* was the part where Mr. Porter made Hannah's problems seem small and unimportant. This really stuck with me because it made me realize that, in today's society, people compare tragedies and push others' problems to the side when, in reality, we need to be encouraging others because someone can drown in three inches of water or three feet of water. Mr. Asher, I love the quote from *Thirteen Reasons Why* that says, "You don't know what goes on in anyone's life but your own. And when you mess with one part of a person's life, you're not messing with just that part. Unfortunately, you can't be that precise and selective. When you mess with one part of a person's life, you're messing with their entire life." This quote speaks volumes to me because a person may not think their actions have that large of an effect on someone when really it is affecting every part of them. After reading that quote, I understood that my actions could be the reason someone keeps going or the reason someone ends it all.

*Thirteen Reasons Why* changed my life in so many ways. As soon as I read the last sentence and closed the book with tears pouring from my eyes, I realized that the person I was had to change. I understood that I had to begin being nicer to the people around me because I don't know

what they are experiencing in their life. I realized that I never wanted to be the reason someone took their own life. I started being better by making it a personal goal to compliment at least three different people in a day, whether it is someone random or someone I am close with. I always try to make everyone feel they are important in the world. I also started keeping the ringer on my phone turned up at night, because I know that if someone is at their breaking point and they call me I will never miss it. I never want to wake up to a missed phone call from someone I could have saved.

Finally, after I finished *Thirteen Reasons Why*, I realized that depression, anxiety, and suicide needed to be talked about more. The first thing I did was give a book report to my class on *Thirteen Reasons Why* so that I could explain to them just how important kindness is. I also decided to stop hiding my anxiety. I began talking about my own personal anxiety and the depression that followed it. I understand now that I helped so many people accept their own anxious feelings and depression just by talking about mine. To this day, I always provide my input during any discussion that pertains to depression, anxiety, and suicide. These problems tend to be overlooked yet understanding them is so important for healing. Mr. Asher, I cannot thank you enough for writing a story that changed my life and my view of the world.

Sincerely,  
Makaylee Woods

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Aurora Young**  
New Tech Academy at Wayne High School, Fort Wayne  
Letter to Elizabeth Acevedo  
Author of *The Poet X*

Dear Elizabeth Acevedo,

All my life I've struggled with communicating face to face. Anytime I have to present or talk publicly, my heart beats fast, my face gets red, and sometimes I even get dizzy. When we have a substitute in class, I nearly have a panic attack waiting for my name to get called for attendance. I'll whisper "here" under my breath for practice. It takes a while for me to get comfortable with new people, new settings, and basically anything at all. Writing has always been my escape from reality.

*The Poet X* was a gift to me from my mother. I usually get two books every year for Christmas. Most of the time, it's one that I ask for and another that my parents chose. It wasn't until that New Year's Eve that I began to read the book. Xiomara became a reality check for me. There are not many characters that I relate to, but Xiomara is basically like an alternate version of me. It opened my eyes how much we related. This was one of the first times that I felt like I fully understood the emotions a character was feeling.

Although writing is my outlet, I have a difficult time sharing the words I put on paper. I've been writing since middle school and there's only been three people that I've personally shared my poetry with. I remember having to look away as I let my best friend read one of my poems. It's always been a touchy subject for me. I want my friends and family to understand me. I don't mean to shut people out; I just don't know how to make sense of my emotions verbally. I want to tell them that I need them, or that I love them, but it's almost like I can't bear the sound of my own voice. My poetry is one of the only talents I have. I would love for my writing to be my job, not just a hobby. But the thought of people reading what I write is terrifying to me. Seeing Xiomara find the confidence to share her words made me feel like I could do it too, it just takes time.

Xiomara's struggle with her faith in Catholicism also hit pretty close to home for me. My mother and her side of the family are all Catholic. Religion is a hard topic to fully understand and grasp, and as I get older, it doesn't get any easier. Reading about Xiomara's reluctance of confirmation classes was really relatable for me. I actually haven't been confirmed yet at 15, but my family talks about it occasionally. Confirmation is intimidating

because it's supposed to be your own decision. Most of the times, it ends up being your parents' choice instead of your own. I didn't grow up with the same amount of pressure as Xiomara did, thankfully, but I totally understand how nerve-wracking that whole process is. Sometimes I wish I would just talk about it with my parents, or my brother, but it feels like it's not my place to have an opinion on it. I like to think that your faith comes in mysterious and surprising ways. You'll never truly have faith if you're only taught, it must also be felt. If it's meant to be, I'll feel it one day.

This book was like a hug. You never really know you need one until you get one. I never really knew that I needed to read a book like this and I'm forever grateful that I got the chance to. This book brought me to my senses. It both comforted me and challenged me. Thank you for creating a friend within a story and a lesson worth learning. Thank you for letting me know that I'm not alone and encouraging me to find my own voice.

Sincerely,  
Aurora Young

**Level III**  
**Semifinalist**

**Madeline Zandstra**  
Illiana Christian High School, Dyer  
Letter to David Arnold  
Author of *Kids of Appetite*

Dear David Arnold,

I'm quite sure that there are events in the world that are meant to happen. Some call them coincidences, some call them "bumps;" either way, I know for certain I was meant to read *Kids of Appetite*. The pages called my name, literally. I haven't met many *Mad-short-for-Madelines* in my brief lifetime, and something about a main character with my name seemed like a pretty significant bump. But it wasn't Mad who made the biggest mark on me.

Bruno Victor Benucci III, or Vic, is a Super Racehorse of a character if I ever saw one. He makes opera seem cool, he likes Matisse and the Mets, and he can see beauty where others don't. And he's a little too into Walt Whitman, but hey, no one's perfect. Vic also has Moebius, a rare neurological disorder that causes facial paralysis. In other words, his face doesn't move and show expression the way most people's do. Vic looks different.

For most of the story and generally Vic's entire life, he dealt with people with staring problems and mean teen gangs and rude children. The horrible teasing and relentless abuse Vic undertook was hard enough to read, but what really broke my heart was the fast glances and slow look-aways. I know I have slow look-away'd in my life. I know I have been the ignorant passerby who tries to pretend I don't notice someone who looks different, and through Vic I've seen what's it's like for those who don't look the way people expect them to. I usually consider myself an empathetic person and being called out like this hit me hard. Vic widened my eyes to the experiences of people I've seen all throughout my life but never understood what they must deal with every day.

I am happy to say, however, that this was neither Vic's nor the *Kids of Appetite's* only impact. Part of what makes Vic amazing is his asymmetry, the exact thing that others think drags him down. I'm someone who's struggled a lot with self-esteem and self-image, and although I don't have a disorder like Vic, a lot of his thoughts about not being good enough voiced my own thoughts. I've never felt like I was good enough the way I am, and at the time when I read *Kids of Appetite*, I was especially frustrated because I couldn't control the way I looked. Self-

esteem issues often don't seem like a big deal, but if left unaddressed they can tear people apart, and I could feel it. Towards the end of the book, when every goal is in sight and the gang has nearly made it through, Vic talks to a young boy who has asked about Vic's face. His words made a big impact on me: "Some people have blue eyes and red hair, some have green eyes and no hair... Different skin colors, eye colors... different families and histories and ways to love. It's better that way. We get Joey Ramone *and* Miles Davis." If someone believes in bumps, I'd say this one made the most difference. I'm glad Vic was there to show me that Matisse beauty is a kind of beauty too.

I owe a lot to the *Kids of Appetite*. Baz taught me to value honesty and kindness above all the messy stuff in between, and that helping people is always worth it. Zuz taught me that you don't need words to speak, and to live for moments when you're dancing to your favorite song without a care. Coco, sweet, spunky Coco, taught me to be bold and to stand up for myself, even if I'm small. Mad gave me my favorite song. Mad gave me someone to aspire to be like, until I realized she really taught me to be myself, no one else. And Vic taught me that there's beauty in asymmetry, and that those who truly love you, your real family and friends, don't care what you look like outside. These characters brought into my life more "momentous multitudes" than I could have imagined.

And you, Mr. Arnold, reignited my love of reading. You reminded me how much feeling there could be between the pages of a book. You taught me to learn about who people are, because sometimes a tattoo artist is also an avid *Battlestar Galactica* fan, and sometimes an eighty-year-old priest has refined opinions on Iron Maiden's musicology. You taught me to live, to laugh, and to see everything out there that's good. And for that, I cannot thank you enough.

Sincerely,  
Madeline Zandstra

