

JACKSON DeVAULT (8th Grade: Berlin Heights, Edison Middle School)

Level II Second Place Winner

Letter to Wilson Rawls concerning his book, Where the Red Fern Grows

Dear Wilson Rawls:

A couple of years back, I first read your novel, *Where the Red fern Grows*, but, back then, I couldn't understand the meaning behind it. Yes, I understood that with determination, anything can be accomplished, but really, I couldn't relate to that until recently. When searching for a book, a torn, beaten-up copy of your novel sat there on a wooden shelf in my teacher's classroom. I thought, why not read it again? Flipping through the pages, I found that I just simply could not put it down.

Billy is a child full of determination, and, to me, it just seemed similar to any other main character in a book. However, I then took a look at myself. Just like Billy, I spent a lot of my free time to work and inch closer to achieving my goals. Even though our desires were completely different, we both did every little thing that we could to turn dream into reality. He wanted to acquire two hunting dogs: I wanted to increase my athletic ability. As each folded page flew by, I kept getting closer and closer to him, like we were friends. Eventually, it got to the point that I felt like I knew every little detail about him, and that we really could relate. Never have I had an experience like this with a book; books have always seemed monotonous and more like a chore than a pastime to me. Yet, this novel was totally different from all others.

I have a few problems holding me back from accomplishing my goals. In my early years of life, I had a fairly bad case of asthma. It has gotten much better since then, but its affects still linger in my body, affecting my athletic ability. Late last year, I decided to run distance in track. Ever since then, I had a burning fire inside of me pushing me forward; making me put every ounce of effort into my body to keep up with the more athletic kids. This year, I ran cross country. From the beginning, I was far behind the others, but I refused to let that hold me back. My average two mile races around then ranged anywhere between 15 minutes and high 13'. However, that powerful desire to be one of the best was still inside me. Mile after mile, meter after meter, I would run my heart out when at practice. I wanted to impress my friends, I wanted to impress my family and I wanted to feel like I accomplished something. Then after what seemed like ages of preparation and condition, the conference finals were here. The starting gun sent energy coursing through my body, I pushed, and I pushed and I pushed myself. I placed 14th. Fourteenth in conference, with a time of 12:37, that was amazing for me. I finally felt like I fit in and accomplish my goals.

When Little Ann lost the will to live, it almost seemed like I lost mine. The book's end was near, and like when I read it a couple years ago, the ending made a dark cloud form above my head, leaving a depressing gloom below. I've lost everything before, for I have moved several times; usually, it seems so sudden, like the gory death of Old Dan. However, a red fern did grow between the little mounds marking their burial site. Those two little hunting dogs had a lot of glory for a size so small and they lived a complete life. And once again, the connection was apparent between me and the book.

Moving six years ago certainly wasn't a jolly time, but it was hopeful as well. When in the car, leaving Syracuse, New York, heading to a small village called Milan in Ohio, there was a spark of hope. Maybe, just maybe, my new home would be better than the last, I thought, and, in all honesty, it is. Yes, I do miss trying to catch two giant goldfish that lived in the nearby

marina, and building a tree house in the woods at my old home, but I had a complete time there, like how Dan and Ann had a complete life. That short last chapter of the book had an impact much greater than all the others combined. Suddenly, I wasn't so sad about the two dog's deaths, and just smiled as I closed the beaten up, heartwarming book of adventure and friendship that I could relate to so well.

Sincerely,

Jackson DeVault