

Paris Hudson (Cleveland, Ohio: 8th Grade)
Level II Second Place Winner
Letter to Sharon Draper concerning her *Hazelwood High* trilogy

Dear Mrs. Draper,

You have inspired and influenced my life. I say this because I have always been a voracious reader. I became so infatuated with reading I decided to start writing my own books at eight or nine years old.

When I got to the seventh grade, I started reading *Romiette and Julio* and the *Hazelwood High* trilogy. At the time I was reading your books, my close friend was having suicidal thoughts and your books helped me to help her. In *Tears of a Tiger*, Andy Jackson commits suicide from guilt, and he needed help but no one reached out to him. I knew I needed to reach out to my friend to prevent a tragedy from happening. I was so taken away with your books that I decided to write to you.

I was ecstatic when you wrote back. I had so many questions for you like how and why you decided to write young adult books. Not only did you write back and answer all of my questions, you also gave advice. You said, “Don’t ever stop your writing, and don’t get discouraged, hand around the right crowd, and write!” and so much more.

I took these words to the heart because you, a complete stranger, care so much about teens. You took the time out of your life to write books with toll-free numbers on the back for troubled teens to call when times get rough. You also mentioned in the letter that several teens wrote you telling you that the *Hazelwood High* trilogy books saved their lives.

You told me:

When I write I try to be upfront with my readers. I try to deal with topics that are both current and topical. I also hope by reading it young people can perhaps apply some of the messages to their own lives...They are not pleasant, but by talking about the difficult realities of life, perhaps someone can be made stronger. I write about suicide and depression and death and abuse because, unfortunately, those are the realities of life for many teenagers today. I hope to do something that’ll change their lives for the better.

In these words I just quoted, I see how your experience of being an English teacher and working closely with teens you were able to take that connection with them and translate it into your books.

I have this letter hanging above my bed because not only do I love reading and writing but also I love helping others, and I someday hope to become an author or a psychiatrist—maybe both. When I do I would like to thank you, Mrs. Draper, for having such a big impact on me with your work and words of advice. I appreciate it!

Sincerely,

Paris Hudson