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Level II Second Place Winner

Letter to author Rainbow Rowell concerning her book, *Eleanor and Park*

Dear Rainbow Rowell:

Accepting people who are different can be hard, and being different can be even harder. Guidance counselors drone on and on about accepting everyone, parents lecture about being yourself and not changing for anyone. But before reading your book, as much as I tried not to, I viewed uniqueness as weakness. After reading *Eleanor and Park*, however, I decided that the best person to be *is* myself, and that difference is good.

In today's world, being different is extremely hard when it feels like everyone else is the same. You need to be smart, but not too smart. Not lazy, but not overly athletic. There are so many standards that we create, standards that shield our real personalities because we are afraid of being original. Those were the standards that controlled my life, limiting my actions as well as my view of others. When I started reading your book, I wasn't expecting to change. I was just ready for a good book. *Eleanor and Park* was far more than that.

I realized that the limitations I felt when doing things were created by *me*. I was the only one stopping myself from being myself. I was in awe of how Eleanor, a person so different from the many perfect girls I had read about in other books, could still be happy *and* herself at the same time. When Eleanor tried makeup, and didn't feel like herself, she said: "Like I'm trying to be something that I'm not." She doesn't want to feel like anyone but herself. This is the way I wanted to feel, the person that I wanted to be. Eleanor was herself through everything, awkward, smart, and unique, refusing to conform to standards, and forever maintaining her identity. Park challenged gender stereotypes, went against the norms, and accepted Eleanor for who she was. If he hadn't, their short, albeit beautiful love would never have existed. I now want to be friends with people based on their character, not by the labels society puts on them.

I was so scared to do, say or *be* the wrong thing. But through *Eleanor and Park* I learned that the only wrong thing I can be is someone who isn't me. I am clumsy, awkward, extremely problematic, and that's okay. *Eleanor and Park* were by no means perfect, but that is what really stuck with me. There is no such thing as perfect. I know that now. By being yourself, however, you are good enough. Accepting myself and others is something that I have taken away from your wonderful book, and for that I am grateful.

Sincerely,

Emma Bhatt