

**Maddie Gentzel (Grade 6, Dover Intermediate School, Westlake, OH)**

**Level I Third Place Winner**

**Letter to author Sharon Draper concerning her book, *Out of My Mind***

Dear Sharon Draper:

I have two siblings, one with autism, and one with arthrogryposis. Everybody thinks that it is “so” different, having [siblings with] special needs. I mean, yeah, it is a little different, you have to stand up for them a little more than normal, but that’s what makes us a close, loving family. I always thought that their lives were the same as mine, but they’re not. Listen, I don’t need a device to communicate. I don’t even need a wheelchair to get myself around. I can walk, talk, move, and SO much more. I am so lucky to be who I am, but I never realized it until I read your book.

When I saw the cover of your book (and the title), I was like, “Cool, I love goldfish,” but when I read the back of your book, I was tempted to put it back on the shelf. I love action books, not the heart melting, soft, fuzzy kinds of books. The truth is, I only picked it out because I had nothing to read. When I got it to class, I read the first page, and I thought to myself, I wouldn’t want to read anything else.

After I read your book, my relationship with my sister became closer than now. I now understand her. I admit, I was mean to her sometimes, but that’s just what sisters do. She is the nicest sister a girl could ever ask for. Even though I talked to her sometimes, but she wouldn’t say a whole lot. I always got mad at her because she would not talk to me. I would always cry to my mom saying how I wish that I had a normal sister to talk and share stories with. Time passed, and I just gave up talking to her. That was the way it was for a long period of time. But one day, I climbed onto the bunk bed that my sister and I share (I sleep on the top bunk), and suddenly heard a whisper: “So, how was your day?” It was my sister. I calmly said, “Ok.” At that very moment, I started to think about your book. I don’t know why, but I did. I thought about what it would be like to be in her shoes, about how hard it would be to make friends. I also wondered, do kids bully her at school? Do kids understand her? I always have heard my mom talk about the bullying that goes on at her school, but never contemplated that my sister would be among its targets. All this time, I realized, I never truly understood her: all she wanted was someone to talk and laugh with. She wanted the same thing as I did: a caring, loving sister. That night, I must have talked to her for over an hour about school, family, life, friendships, and more. That night was the best night of my life, and it will always remain that way.

Many books can touch your heart, but not your soul. This book has not only changed me, it has changed my view of myself, the world, and other people. Before I read your book, I hung around kids like Melody, but never really felt comfortable around them. I always felt awkward, like I wasn’t being myself. A lot of people think that it is “so” different, having siblings with special needs, but your book showed me that everybody wants to be “accepted” and “liked” for who they are. It is sad to see children hurting and killing themselves because of kids that are judging them. Everywhere I look, there is hatred in this world because of people hating themselves or other people. I even walk down the halls of my very own school and see people being put down for just being themselves. Pulling someone down won’t ever help you read the top. As Tim Fields said, “Never be bullied into silence. Never allow yourself to be a victim. Accept no one’s definition of your life, but define yourself.” It takes a lot of courage to be true to yourself. We all have to be like Melody in some sort of way. She always sees the good in people. I now see that we all need to be ourselves, not someone else. Who cares about what people think of you? It’s not people’s outsides that are important but their hearts inside. Remember, your words have power, so use them wisely! We humans tend to judge people and classify them into categories like “not attractive” or “not good enough.” But really, we should be judging ourselves. At the end of the day, ask yourself, was I good today? Was I nice, helpful, kind, and honest? Never judge a book by its cover. And if anyone judges you, look them in the eye and say, “You are out of your mind!”

Sincerely,

**Maddie Gentzel**