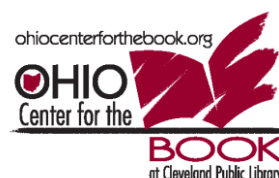




COMMEMORATIVE BOOKLET

Letters About Literature
2016/2017

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Center for the Book in the Library of Congress and
Ohio Center for the Book at
Cleveland Public Library



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Letters About Literature 2016/2017

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks goes to **Letters About Literature Judges 2016/2017**

- **Linda Feagler**

Ohio Magazine, Senior Editor

Linda Feagler is the senior editor of Great Lakes Publishing's Ohio Magazine, a publication covering the best in travel, arts, history and life in the Buckeye State. She served as senior editor of *Cleveland Magazine* for four years before joining the staff of *Ohio Magazine* in 2002. Her favorite stories involve the Ohio arts community, which she covers monthly in Ohio Magazine and online for the publication's website. Linda also works closely with Playhouse Square — the second-largest performing arts center in the country — editing playbills and creating sections promoting Cleveland's theater district. Through the years, she has won awards for her work from the Society of Professional Journalists and The Press Club of Cleveland, including the 2012 first-place awards for arts reporting from both organizations. She is a member of Cleveland State University's Alumni Association Board of Directors and a member of the Board of Directors of the Friends of the Cleveland Public Library.

- **Shayna Muckerheide**

Cleveland Public Library, Lorain Branch – Manager

A returning judge for Letters About Literature, Shayna Muckerheide is currently the Manager of the Lorain Branch of the Cleveland Public Library. Previously, she worked as a Manager of the Bellevue Public Library in Ohio, and as a consultant at the State Library of Arizona, helping to coordinate that state's Letters About Literature campaigns and ceremonies in 2010 and 2011. She also has experience in medical writing and editing for VerusMed, an Intellerus company, and she contributed to Arizona State University's *The State Press* newspaper and Ask a Biologist website. Passionate about history and archives, Ms. Muckerheide is also a skilled genealogist and has contributed to Avotaynu Online: Jewish History and Family History.

- **William Spencer**

Cleveland Public Library – Librarian, docent, and concierge

Promoted to the rank of captain following his Marine Corps service in Vietnam, Mr. Spencer is a librarian, docent, and concierge with the Cleveland Public Library. Before joining the library, Mr. Spencer was a sales Representative for Scott Paper Company; a Corporate Recruiter for Electronic Data Systems Corporation, and a Human Resource Manager for Motorola, Incorporated. A Eucharistic Minister and Lay Reader in the Episcopal Church, he is a skilled player of both the flute and the soprano recorder, and volunteers at the Medical Library, Patient Education Resource Center, of the Veterans Administration Medical Center at Wade Park.

FORWARD

ROTFL. YMMD. TYVM. ='). Rather than being daffy, senseless gibberish, these letter combinations are actually three mundane examples of SMS language—"chatspeak"—that teenagers across the country text to each other. Simple, concise, and intuitive, SMS language and the use of emoticons and emoji's have become the shorthand for millennials. Rather than relying on scribbles, curlicues, and wobbly lines (or grammatical sentences), "chatspeak" enables teens—with lightning speed—to communicate in acronyms and symbols what normally would have required words (why should I struggle to find just the right words when "chatspeak" has done it all for me?). Strange as it may seem, "chatspeak" is nonetheless a form of language, and according to Pew Research Center's study *Teen and Mobile Phones* (April, 2010) has become the preferred means of communication for Americans ages 12-17. With the help of the 800 teens who participated in its survey, Pew determined that:

- Around 72% of all teens, or 88% of teens who own mobile phones, use text messages to communicate. This marks a big jump from 2006 when only 51% of teens texted on their phones.
- Teens send 50 or more text messages a day, while 15% tap out more than 200 instant messages every day.
- 54% of teens use their phones strictly for texting; only 35% routinely use it for talking, and only 33% opt to talk face-to-face—even when the person they need to communicate with is in the same home.

These statistics demonstrate that with each passing year, face-to-face conversation becomes an increasingly endangered species. A form of communication that has, alas, been driven nearly to extinction by texting (and the already outdated email) is letter writing.

With each passing generation, letter writing has popularly been regarded in an increasingly technological world as an antique practice, an ancient, lost (or perhaps, even dead?) art. Handwriting; paper; letters: they are fast drifting from our lives (not junk mail or bills, of course, as they will *always* find us, but the variety of letter that you wouldn't *mind* receiving). According to New York *Times* op. ed. contributor Catherine Field ("The Fading Art of Letter Writing," February 3, 2011),

A good handwritten letter is a creative act, and not just because it is a visual and tactile pleasure. It is a deliberate act of exposure, a form of vulnerability, because handwriting opens a window on the soul in a way that cyber communication can never do. You savor their arrival and later take care to place them in a box for safe keeping.

“Chatspeak” lacks the emotional depth, the intimacy that letter writing can provide. An exquisitely lyrical, poignant turn of phrase: the outpouring of emotion: the baring of one’s soul—letters are imbued with the life force of their writers, and through them, tangible reminders of that person remain with us across the centuries. Texts are fleeting, cold, and barren. Imagine, if instead of having written “My angel, my all, my own self ... Love demands *everything* ... so it is for me with you, and for you with me ... remain my true and only treasure, my all, as I [remain true] to you,” Ludwig van Beethoven, in his 1812 letter to his (still) unidentified “Immortal Beloved,” would have texted (if he could have) “ILYSM. OOTD? LMK. WBS. SWAK. LvB,” would we, over 200 years later, have been able to feel his anguish, to sympathize with the depth of his love and yearning? Would we have even cared? One thing is indisputably beyond conjecture: no one would have mistaken his letter for daffy, senseless gibberish.

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Sincerely,

Timothy Phillips

Timothy Phillips
Subject Department Librarian
Literature Department
Ohio Center for the Book
Cleveland Public Library

CONTEST REPORT

The 1,340 Ohio students in Grades 4-12 that participated in the Letters About Literature 2016/2017 contest resided in twelve counties: Allen, Cuyahoga, Delaware, Franklin, Hamilton, Medina, Mahoning, Portage, Pickaway, Summit, and Stark. Of the 1,340 students, 422 were from Level I (grade 4-6); 494 from Level II (grades 7 & 8), and 424 from Level III (grades 9-12).

Out of the 422 letters submitted by Ohio students in grades 4-6 were selected by the staff of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress for judging at the state level. Thirty one of those 55 students were sponsored by the following five teachers:

- Jill Cecutti (St. Brigid of Kildare Elementary School in Dublin)
- Anne Hurtuk (Normandy Elementary in Bay Village)
- Sandi Mueller (Central Intermediate School in Wadsworth)
- Kerilyn O'Brien (A. I. Root Middle School in Medina)
- Lorraine Tzeng (Birchwood School in Cleveland)

Sixty-five out of the 494 letters submitted by Ohio 7th and 8th graders were advanced for state judging by the staff of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. Out of those 494 students, 456 were sponsored by the following nine teachers:

- Nick Droughton (Hasting Middle School in Upper Arlington)
- Amy Horsley (Teays Valley Middle School in Ashville)
- Thimi Kemock (Olmsted Falls Middle School Olmsted Falls)
- Amy Krajeck (St. Michael the Archangel School in Canton)
- Sara Latkowski (Lee Burneson Middle School in Westlake)
- Kerilyn O'Brien (A. I. Root Middle School in Medina)
- Megan Schiff (Teays Valley Middle School in Ashville)
- Debra Schrembeck (Lee Burneson Middle School in Westlake)
- Karen Sunderhaft (Kenston Middle School in Chagrin Falls)

Fifty-five out of the 424 letters submitted by Ohio students in grades 9 through 12 were advanced for state judging by the staff of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. Of the 424 students, 311 were sponsored by the following eight teachers:

- Amy Dunmire (Marion Harding Middle School in Marion)
- Maryann Hines (Westerville North High School in Westerville)
- Sandra Hoover (Turpin High School in Cincinnati)
- Kent Krogman (Lima Central Catholic in Lima)
- Dawn Mericle (Liberty Center High School in Liberty Center)
- Lauren Olsen (Deer Park Jr./Sr. High School in Cincinnati)
- Julie Vacca (Madison High School in Madison)
- Julie Whalen (Ursuline Academy in Cincinnati)

Our deepest thanks are extended to each and every teacher and parent who sponsored a student.

Ohio's

Letters About Literature

2016/2017

Winners & Honorable Finalists

Level I (Grades 4, 5 & 6)

First Place Winner

Qiwen Wu, 5th grade

Birchwood School, Cleveland. Sponsor: Karen Kufahl

Second Place Winner

Malak Mamoun, 6th grade

Birchwood School, Cleveland. Sponsor: Lorraine Tzeng

Third Place Winner

Samuel Geelhood, 5th grade

Self-entered, Beavercreek

Honorable Finalist

Colin Barberic, 6th grade

Amos Ives Root Middle School, Medina. Sponsor: Kerilyn O' Brien

Honorable Finalist

Arman Berard, 6th grade

Birchwood School, Cleveland. Sponsor: Lorraine Tzeng

Honorable Finalist

Morgan Way, 6th grade

Rocky River Middle School, Rocky River. Sponsor: Therese Konrad.

Honorable Finalist

Eliana Yang, 6th grade

Birchwood School, Cleveland. Sponsor: Lorraine Tzeng

Level II (Grades 7 & 8)

First Place Winner

Alexander (“Xander”) Shaffer, 7th grade

St. Michael the Archangel School, Canton. Sponsor: Amy Krajeck

Second Place Winner

Rhea Pathak, 7th grade

Hastings Middle School, Upper Arlington. Sponsor: Renee Stevenson

Third Place Winner

Margaret Taylor, 7th grade

Lee Burneson Middle School, Westlake. Sponsor: Sara Latkowski

Honorable Finalist

Isabella Adams

St. Michael the Archangel School, Canton. Sponsor: Amy Krajeck

Honorable Finalist

M. E. Hargett

Lee Burneson Middle School, Westlake. Sponsor: Sara Latkowski

Honorable Finalist

Samantha Mumper

St. Nicholas Academy, Reading. Sponsor: Carol Graler

Honorable Finalist

Jacob Rintamaki

Lee Burneson Middle School, Westlake. Sponsor: Deborah Schrembeck

Level III (Grades 9-12)

First Place Winner

Sandy Shen, 10th grade
Self-entered, Solon.

Second Place Winner

Sai Rayala, 9th grade
Self-entered, Powell.

Third Place Winner

Campbell Budzar, 12th grade
Roosevelt High School, Kent. Sponsor: Pamela Harr

Honorable Finalist

Cassidy ("Cassie") Cox, 9th grade
Ursuline Academy, Cincinnati. Sponsor: Dr. Anne Hinkle

Honorable Finalist

Jack Fredette, 11th grade
Turpin High School, Cincinnati. Sponsor: Sandra Dunston Hoover

Honorable Finalist

Benjamin Lee O'Daniel, 12th grade
Roosevelt High School, Kent. Sponsor: Pamela Harr

Honorable Finalist

Lauren Watts, 12th grade
Westerville Central High School, Westerville. Sponsor: James Grannis

Letters About Literature

2016/2017

Letters of Level I Winners and Honorable Finalists

First Place Winner

Qíwen Wu, 5th grade

Birchwood School, Cleveland. Sponsor: Karen Kufahl

Second Place Winner

Malak Mamoun, 6th grade

Birchwood School, Cleveland. Sponsor: Lorraine Tzeng

Third Place Winner

Samuel Geelhood, 5th grade

Self-entered, Beavercreek

Honorable Finalist

Colin Barberic, 6th grade

Amos Ives Root Middle School, Medina. Sponsor: Kerilyn O' Brien

Honorable Finalist

Aidan Arman Razvi Berard, 6th grade

Birchwood School, Cleveland. Sponsor: Lorraine Tzeng

Honorable Finalist

Morgan Way, 6th grade

Rocky River Middle School, Rocky River. Sponsor: Therese Konrad.

Honorable Finalist

Eliana Yang, 6th grade

Birchwood School, Cleveland. Sponsor: Lorraine Tzeng

Level I

First Place Winner

Qiwen Wu

(Grade 5: Birchwood School, Cleveland. Sponsor: Karen Kufahl)

Letter to author Thanhha Lai concerning her book, *Inside Out and Back Again*

Dear Thanhha Lai,

I spent my first six years of childhood in China. Almost every day my family and I would drive to a huge park, one that took about two hours to walk through. We would pick star fruit from the low branches and marvel at the wonders of nature. Besides enjoying the beautiful scenery, my extended family lived nearby, and I saw them almost every day. I recall during Chinese New Year we would watch the televised gala together while feasting on traditional hot pot. These moments are precious to me.

Then one day, my dad announced that our family would emigrate to the United States so I could attend school there and join his parents, who had already immigrated. I was startled and filled with anxiety, while at the same time, half-looking forward to this adventure. I decided to treasure the days I had left in my homeland until the day of my voyage to the U. S. However, upon arriving in America, I suffered from realizing my Chinese childhood consisted of mere memories I would never again experience. This was very upsetting.

After reading your book *Inside Out and Back Again*, I suddenly realized that I was not the only child who has had to adapt to a new country. In the story, Hà departed from her home unwillingly, just like I left my friends and the place I had known my entire life. When I reached America, I didn't know anyone except for my loving family. Many people told me, "The past is past; forgive and forget," but somehow I just couldn't forget China. The moment I read your book I felt like someone finally understood my struggle. I knew what Hà experienced when she arrived and had to learn a new way of living in a foreign country.

Hà's family was adopted by a cowboy who helped them settle, similar to the way my aunt helped my family by renting a house for us. I also had to go to school and learn a new language. I had no friends and didn't know what to do, but I am more fortunate than Hà. I don't get bullied like she was by the boy who pulled her hair and poked her. I also had more background about America than she did. Still, we were very similar. We had to get used to new teachers and students. Hà eventually learned how to speak English, make friends, and celebrate holidays, just as I did. Reading about her trials made me feel less alone, as if I could confide in her.

Like Hà, I left memories, friends, and my extended family. Hà missed her papaya tree, the place she loved, and the sense of unity and togetherness before her father left. I also realized when a family is together, they always have hope. I now recognize that in the future, what I am waiting for will come, like friends, and the loneliness will go away. On the golden river Kim, near which Hà had once lived, life flows like this. The river washes pollution away and replenishes and revives it with fresh water. Your book taught me to wait patiently for blessings to come into my life. Thank you for showing me that many other people suffer as Hà and I did, yet have learned to face the future with anticipation.

Sincerely,

Qiwen Wu, age 11

Level I

Second Place Winner

Malak Mamoun

(Grade 6: Birchwood School, Cleveland. Sponsor: Lorraine Tzeng)

Letter to author Cynthia Lord concerning her book, *Rules*

Dear Cynthia Lord,

Your book is the reason I am who I am today, why my heart is full of kindness instead of unfair judgement. *Rules* teaches a valuable lesson: never judge someone without knowing the whole story. We may think we understand a person, but we often don't. I thought I understood why my uncle acted like he did, but I didn't. Not until I found out the whole story.

I watched my uncle rocking back and forth, finishing the painting of a vase of flowers he had been working on for the past hour, its colors vibrant and bright. He painted it, however, not knowing he had completed his sixth copy of the vase, all six looking quite similar. As I complimented him on his drawing, he quietly mumbled something about the dull red cushions we were sitting on, although it had absolutely nothing to do with my comment. Perplexed, I replied that they're nice, but then he repeated what I had just said, looking at me as if he were waiting for an answer. As the conversation continued, I became more confused.

Not so long ago, I did not know why he was acting so strangely, but after I read your book, I realize now that he couldn't help himself because of his autism. *Rules* helped me to understand my uncle. In the past, I couldn't comprehend his behavior, and hardly communicated with him. I would politely nod my head as he spoke, acting like I knew what he was saying, but in truth, I was just trying to escape the moment. But after I read your book and visited him, we could talk with each other, and I was no longer surprised or offended by the odd things he said or did. My uncle acts strangely, and I once didn't see him as I would see anyone else. Seeing how well Catherine treated Jason, I began to treat my uncle as if he didn't have autism, as if he were just like me. As a result, he turned into a completely different person! Instead of fidgeting and frowning, a wide smile would spread across his face whenever we met and talked.

Many people dislike disabled people or are even scared of them, not understanding that they are already suffering. In truth, they're just like everyone else, except that they're not ordinary, they're extraordinary. I hope that everyone else can understand that it doesn't matter what disability or mental issue one may have. What matters is who someone really is.

My uncle once told me that he wishes he could give me his pain for just a minute, not to hurt me, but to make me understand how hard it is for him. This made me feel unhappy, knowing that he couldn't enjoy himself. Suddenly, I thought back to when Jason thought that Catherine was embarrassed by his disability and considered him abnormal, like he didn't fit in.

I'm glad I'm now able to understand my uncle in a whole new light. People often judge others by the way they look, act, talk, or even how they dress. To be honest, I used to be like that too. But after *Rules*, I realize that one shouldn't care about such trivial matters. What matters is who they are. As Dr. Colin Zimbleman said, "Autism offers us a chance to glimpse an awe-filled vision of the world that might otherwise pass us by." My uncle is my best friend, and I'm not going to give that up just because he's autistic.

Sincerely,

Malak Mamoun, age 11

Level I

Third Place Winner

Samuel Geelhood

(Grade 5: Self-entered, Beaver Creek. Sponsor: Tara Geelhood)

Letter to author Esther Forbes (1891-1967) concerning her novel, *Johnny Tremain*

Dear Ms. Forbes,

Your book, *Johnny Tremain*, stood out from all of the other books I have read and made me stop to think about myself. Few books have done that before. I struggle with bitterness when people hurt me. When I read your book, I started to notice a similarity between myself and Johnny from the very first chapters. After Johnny was injured by Dove and Dusty, he became bitter and decided not to forgive them, continuing to treat them unkindly and harshly.

Continuing to stay bitter after people have hurt me, I have tried to find ways to get revenge. Once, my younger sister hit me for no apparent reason. Furiously, without thinking, I hit her back. She asked me to leave her room and slammed the door after I was out. Another time, one of my friends called me “horrible” but in a playful way. Offended, I changed seats to move away from him. Even though he apologized, I refused to forgive him or even talk with him for a long time after that. I struggle to forgive people for what they have done to me even though no one has hurt me as badly as Dove hurt Johnny when he intentionally caused him to burn his hand and ruin his opportunity to continue his apprenticeship as a silversmith.

As I continued reading your book, I observed that Johnny began to realize that life didn’t revolve around his past because people eventually forgot about it or stopped paying attention to his wounded hand. For example, Rab didn’t think Johnny’s hand would hinder him from chopping wood when he assigned him the task, and Johnny discovered that with practice, he was able to cut wood. I also realized that I needed to move past the unpleasant memories I was storing up like treasure. The problem was that the treasure I was choosing to hold onto ate away at my relationships with the people I care about the most.

Usually, people don’t change their outlooks in an instant, but gradually, Johnny changed his way of thinking—slowly. Right after he was injured, he felt hatred and repugnance towards Dove. After a year’s time, he showed that he understood Dove and regarded him with more kindness than before by assisting him with his job in the stables. It was the same with me. Slowly, over time, I decided to change my mind-set and my actions regarding my sour attitude. I decided that staying bitter wasn’t going to do anything constructive for me because it wouldn’t change the past. Staying bitter would injure present relationships and unquestionably hinder future relationships.

So I forgave the people who hurt my feelings and I deliberately chose to change my outlook and give others grace. Although I still struggle to forget times when I have been offended, remembering Johnny Tremain’s story has helped me to forgive and move forward. Your book has made a huge difference in my life: instead of being a slave to bitterness, I am free to show love, and fully enjoy the relationships in my life.

Sincerely,

Samuel Geelhood, age 11

Level I

Honorable Finalist

Colin Barberic

(Grade 6, A. I. Root Middle School, Medina. Sponsor: Kerilyn O'Brien)

Letter to author Raquel Jaramillo Palacio (aka P. J. Palacio) concerning her book, *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

Different, as Merriam Webster puts it, means: “unusual.” There are some people in life, like August from *Wonder*, who are different. In your book, I learned how it can feel to be different, bullied, and how to look from another’s perspective. To go back to the beginning, something that we often replace different with is unique, which means: “Being without a like or equal.” So, Mrs. Palacio, are those kids “different,” or are they unique?

After I read your book, I was able to look through the perspectives of other people. Hurtful things happen a lot at school, especially at recess. Even just a simple, “Oh, sorry, we can’t let anyone else play,” can seem harmless, but it can make you pretty unhappy if it happens frequently, even if you act like it’s not a big deal. For example, a few years ago in elementary school, my friends and I played a game at recess that only involved a certain number of players. Almost every day, the same two kids would come over and ask us if they could play, too. We told them that we already had the maximum amount of people, but looking back on that, I realize that maybe they felt like we were lying, and deliberately didn’t let them participate, even though we could have. Your book helped me to reexamine experiences like those and also to view what’s going on around me in a whole new way—looking from other people’s perspectives instead of mine.

Wonder helped me to understand what it is like to be different. It can be difficult to imagine what it is like to not look or think like everyone else, and how it can affect you. If you are always looked at as “that kid” or something like that by your peers, it can be extremely hard to make friends. Even if they are normal, some kids just have trouble socially. You never know what’s going on in someone’s life, and maybe they could use a friend, but are struggling to make one. Now that I’ve read *Wonder*, I try to look around and see if any kids are sitting alone at lunch or have no one to hang out with at recess. If I saw this happening, I would simply say to my friends, “Hey, let’s see what they’re doing.” When we went over, sometimes I could see their face light up with joy, even if they tried to hide it and act cool. In *Wonder*, Auggie could always use a friend, whether he had one at a time or not. This taught me that sometimes people just need to know that someone cares about them.

Bullying. It can seem trite to some kids, overused, like it’s something that used to happen, but now it doesn’t. This is completely untrue. Bullying can destroy kids, making them afraid to go to school or making them feel unhappy with themselves. I am lucky in the fact that I have never had to experience this, but *Wonder* helped me to understand what it can be like. August had to go through many episodes of bullying, with people insulting him, putting notes in his locker, and even physically hurting him. Not all kids are as lucky as me. Some kids have school experiences like August’s, but without the same happy ending. They go through their entire academic career without confidence or pride in themselves. Your book gave me a new perspective on this issue. I used to think of it as how I first put it at the beginning of this paragraph: overused. But now, I know it is something else: corrosive. It can eat away at someone unless it is stopped.

So, now that I see bullying in a new light, know how it feels to be different, and can see from other's eyes, I feel empowered to make a difference, change how people think about this terrible issue. Let's make a difference in someone's life, whether it's just a "Hey, want to hang out with us?," or standing up for them.

Sincerely,

Colin Barberic, age 12

Level I

Honorable Finalist

Aidan Arman Razvi Berard (Grade 6: Birchwood School, Cleveland.

Sponsor: Lorraine Tzeng)

Letter to author Holy Goldberg Sloan concerning her novel, *Counting by 7's*

Dear Ms. Sloan,

One December morning, a father gave his son a bag. Inside was a festive card wishing him a Merry Christmas. Underneath was a book. That book later helped the son through hardship. Although the father did not realize it at the time, this became the best present the boy could have received, for only months later, the parents told the son that they had divorced. The following weeks were very difficult for the son. He turned back to the book for inspiration, hope, and encouragement. I was the son. You wrote the book.

Having read *Counting by 7's*, where Willow's foster parents tragically die, I am touched by how you portray her feelings throughout the painful ordeal. Willow Chance doesn't give up on life; she perseveres through the hardship and tragedy. At first, she feels grief, so much that she wishes she would perish from an electrical overload. She wishes this, however, when nobody else is in the garage. Even though she wants to die, she reacts openly to others and is not proud and arrogant. She allows Mai to help her and asks the social worker for her belongings from home. These acts help her through the dark tunnel of grief until she steps into the light again.

When my parents divorced in third grade, my dad moved to another part of town. I had to live with my mother half the week and my father the other half. This was extremely difficult because I missed my mother when I was with my father and vice-versa. Moreover, whenever I was in the car traveling from one parent's house to another, my sister cried, making me feel like crying, too. It was like living two different lives where we had to adapt every week, which was painful. Remembering and rereading Willow Chance's story made me feel better, however. I kept your book in the back seat of my father's car, so I could read it when traveling from one house to the other. Willow was hammered with the fact that her parents had died; similarly, I was hit with the realization that mine had divorced. I was able to go through my tunnel by acting normally at school. I didn't even tell any of my friends until weeks later. Even now not all of my classmates know. Your book has helped me stay aboard that train and made me a stronger, more determined person.

Many children worldwide have one or more parents who die from guns, disease, or accidents; it must be such a calamitous experience. From your book, I have learned the important lesson that whatever tragedy may occur, the train of life will continue and we must not disembark. We must learn how to continue and persevere through whatever fate throws at us.

That book was my father's gift to me. However, it was also your gift, not only to me but to many other children as well, I'm sure. I hope it has helped others as much as it has helped me. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Aidan Arman Razvi Berard, age 11

Level I

Honorable Finalist

Morgan Way

(Grade 6: Rocky River Middle School, Rocky River. Sponsor: Therese Konrad)

Letter to Donna Gephart concerning her book, *Lily and Dunkin*

Dear Donna Gephart,

Why is it that the word ‘boy’ belongs to people who have short hair and are athletic? Why is it that girls are people who care only about looks, have long hair and wear makeup? Why is it that we make people feel as if they are one or the other, expecting them to conform to stereotypes, so much that they start believing it? So much that they feel that being themselves, is a mistake?

It’s a problem so many of us face, yet so little of us acknowledge. This makes these people, transgenders, feel so much more alone in this world than they really are. They are people too, people just the same as any of us, yet we see the need to give them a title that will forever change their life, both in bad and good ways—one that they don’t even want. We see the need to make them feel out of place.

But these seem to be the rules: A person is a girl or a boy, determined by other people at birth. Sadly, I know every person in this country has looked or will look at a person and based on their looks, will decide if that person is worth their time or not. So when they look at a girl who looks like a boy, they’ll walk around them, not offer to sit with them at lunch.

It seems that in this world, we are ruled by words, simple words that limit our life to one path.

Some people can’t even afford a dress, while we just stand around contemplating who has the rights to wear a dress and who must wear a suit. People are dying around us, and we just wave it off, because, hey, they are girls or they are boys, and they played by the rules. We are spending our time on words when we could just accept people as they are, because that acceptance makes them strong, makes them feel the love of family.

Some people just want to choose. They want to determine what life they have and who they are. So they switch genders. And most people have no problem with that, in fact, some even admire transgender people. But some just don’t see it right to want to change who you are. Even if your own skin feels like a cage.

This goes way beyond transgender. It also has to do with the stereotypes we put on people, for example: sports. Take sports, for example. When people think of football players, they probably conjure images of men or boys wearing shoulder pads and jerseys tackling each other; when they think of cheerleading, they probably imagine girls in short skirts shaking pompoms. But can a girl play football is she wants to? Can a boy be one of the cheerleaders in the squad? So long as people are capable of doing something, like a girl who is strong, fast, with excellent hand-eye coordination, or a boy who can dance and move a crowd to its feet, are there any real reasons for stopping them from doing what comes naturally?

I know that by writing this letter I will probably not make a difference in the world, but I will try to open the eyes of our community by raising its awareness to this issue. A favorite quote of mine: ‘I was human, I am human now, being transgender doesn’t make me any less human.’

(Anonymous) We are people, they are people, we are resolute, they are brave, and that's all that matters.

Lily Jo McGrother is stronger than all of us combined. She is the main character in '*Lily and Dunkin*'. Even though her father does not accept her true self, she does not let that get her down. This book travels through the 8th grade life of Lily. When she stands up to people, she is standing for those who can't, for those who are bound to their chairs by words, pelting them and hitting them until they are too weak to ride against the current. Lily, born Timothy, stands up for what she wants and persists until she is heard. This is a feat in itself, but she also listens. She gives everyone their say and opens her mind, even though so often she must be silent. But even in silence, Lily Jo McGrother shouts a message just by being: we cannot be controlled by mere words and ideas, and by being controlled by ideas and words, life tells us that we aren't doing things right, because everyone has a place.

Sincerely,
Morgan Way, age 11

Level I

Honorable Finalist

Eliana Yang

(Grade 6: Birchwood School, Cleveland. Sponsor: Lorraine Tzeng)

Letter to author Jacqueline Kimball concerning her book, *Lindy on the Oregon Trail*

Dear Jacqueline Kimball,

A friend once asked me, “What are you most afraid of?” Shrugging off the question, I didn’t respond. She took it as a sign of fearlessness, but the reason I don’t admit to my fears is because I want to be perceived as bold and daring, one who was afraid of nothing. At home and at school, I cover my angst with joy and laughter, but that is not me. Always, I hide from the truth because of my inability to be honest.

In your book, *Lindy on the Oregon Trail*, Lindy’s family decides to move to Oregon with many other families. Her heart is broken, for she must leave her dear family members Paw Paw, Grandma, and Uncle Dan. Lindy must have been scared of change in leaving her safe home in search of a new life somewhere far away. But during the journey, Lindy becomes more positive and less afraid because she learned her family would always be there.

Reading your book made me ponder how I react in different situations. When I talk to my parents, I fear that whatever I say to them might change the way they feel about me, even though they always say, “No matter what you do or say, we’ll always love and forgive you.” In my mind I do not give them the benefit of a doubt. What if they began hating me because of how unappreciative I am towards them?

I might tell a white lie when I am in trouble, having done something that I was not supposed to do. But there are times I lose my cool and scream at them, and the words I say deeply wound them.

Once I was in real hot water when I came home from camp. During that long week, I never called my parents. Upon arriving home, my parents, instead of being happy to see me again, were extremely disappointed that I had not called them. They questioned me repeatedly. Annoyed and tired of their voices, I simply replied that the phone had run out of batteries on the first day! I couldn’t charge it because I had forgotten the charger. But that was not the real reason. The truth is, they are always yelling at me because they want to change me to someone I don’t want to be, and I just want to break away from them.

Possessing a strong mind and a stubborn personality, I hate to admit my faults; this makes it hard for me to talk to people about my feelings. Reading your book made me realize what type of person I should be. Lindy is so responsible, so loving toward her family, and so honest. She learns to love her family by talking and admitting her fears and faults, finding out that no matter what happens or what she says, her family forgives and loves. When I read this passage of the book, I was so touched because of how true this story was compared to my life. I wanted to be just like her because she was able to open up to her parents, overcome her stubbornness, and change. I wished to learn from her so that I could change, to be the best person I could be. The first step I took in becoming more like Lindy was conferring with my parents. It seems small and I still have a long way to go, but there is time; and if I continue believing and my parents keep on supporting me, someday I will be just like Lindy.

Your book inspired me to try and change, to become the best person I can be. I thank you for writing *Lindy on the Oregon Trail*, the most heart-warming story I have ever read because of how true it is. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Eliana Yang, age 12

Letters About Literature

2016/2017

Letters of Level II Winners and Honorable Finalists

First Place Winner

Alexander (“Xander”) Shaffer, 7th grade

St. Michael the Archangel School, Canton. Sponsor: Amy Krajeck

Second Place Winner

Rhea Pathak, 7th grade

Hastings Middle School, Upper Arlington. Sponsor: Renee Stevenson

Third Place Winner

Margaret Taylor, 7th grade

Lee Burneson Middle School, Westlake. Sponsor: Sara Latkowski

Honorable Finalist

Isabella Adams

St. Michael the Archangel School, Canton. Sponsor: Amy Krajeck

Honorable Finalist

M. E. Hargett

Lee Burneson Middle School, Westlake. Sponsor: Sara Latkowski

Honorable Finalist

Samantha Mumper

St. Nicholas Academy, Reading. Sponsor: Carol Graler

Honorable Finalist

Jacob Rintamaki

Lee Burneson Middle School, Westlake. Sponsor: Deborah Schrembeck

Level II

First Place Winner

Alexander (“Xander”) Shaffer

(Grade 7: St. Michael School, Canton. Sponsor: Amy Krajeck)

Letter to author Rick Riordan concerning his book, *The Lightning Thief*

Dear Rick Riordan,

I have often dreamed of having demigod powers, like Percy Jackson, that would give me the ability to be the hero of every basketball game I play in. However, in reality, to win every basketball game requires that I put in a tremendous amount of hard work and training to even come close. Like Percy, I, too, have Attention Deficit Disorder and can relate to his inability to focus. During 3rd grade, I was a very reluctant reader and never thought I could read an entire novel. Then one evening, my mother introduced *The Lightning Thief* to me. This book was full of adventure, terror, mystery, and humor. The story about Percy’s adventure into Hades to rescue the lightning bolt easily kept me on the edge of my seat the entire time. I immediately fell in love with this book, and could hardly put it down. Afterwards, I begged my mom for the rest of the series and devoured each and every book. Because of *The Lightning Thief*, I now love reading and consider myself a strong and avid reader. One important lesson I have learned from reading your book is that having a flaw is *not* necessarily a bad thing.

I used to think that something was wrong with me because I sometimes had a hard time focusing in school just like your main character, Percy Jackson. Having ADD used to sometimes make me feel like a failure. After reading *The Lightning Thief*, I realized that having ADD is not necessarily a weakness, but something that can be turned into a strength. Your story made me realize that I am not any less intelligent, it is just how my brain chooses to function. Percy is flawed just like me, and has to learn how to control his flaws all while fighting monsters and saving the world. Through hard work, I have also been able to turn my focusing issues into a strength, and I continue to do really well in school. Percy attends a special camp called Camp Half-Blood, where he is trained to use his fighting skills and learns that his flaws have actually been a gift all along. I, too, attend special classes, where I consistently train in karate, kickboxing, and basketball. It is at the dojo or on the basketball court where I have learned that I can truly shine, and show my strengths doing what I love to do. All this training has also helped to control my ADD and I, too, like Percy, realize that I can turn my flaws into a strength. After reading *The Lightning Thief*, I have also realized that no one is perfect. Everyone has flaws and everyone has their own unique strengths. What matters in life is what we choose to do with the strengths and abilities that have been given to us. It is up to us to take responsibility for our own flaws. Training and working hard, just like Percy, gives me the confidence to strive for excellence, not only for myself, but for the good of the community.

Reading your book, *The Lightning Thief*, brought me to the realization that while I may not be able to save the whole world, I am capable, however, of making a difference in my community. I really identified with how Percy felt at the beginning of the story. He felt lost and powerless. However, once he entered Camp Half-Blood and started training, he realized his importance and destiny. I, too, used to feel powerless and wonder how I could possibly do anything important on this Earth. Reading your book has helped me to discover that I am not powerless. I am important and just as capable as Percy of doing significant things in the world. I often stay at the dojo and help teach young kids karate. I love it when a kid finally learns

something that took them a while to understand and his or her face lights up. It makes me feel good to give back and pass on my knowledge even if it is to just one person at a time. During the summer months, I also enjoy helping my dad coach my little sister's Challenger baseball team. Helping them develop their baseball skills gives me great satisfaction. Like Percy, I also love the water and plan to be a lifeguard as soon as I am 16 years-old. I take lifeguard level lessons every summer and because of these lessons I was able to save someone from drowning this past summer. While I may not be saving the universe from evil monsters, I am able to help people one at a time. Doing these things makes me feel good about myself, and in turn, helps spread happiness and goodwill throughout my community.

Reading your book has taught me many life lessons, but most importantly, it has taught me that we all have the ability to make a difference in the world. I want to thank you for writing *The Lightning Thief* because if I had not read your book, my life could have taken a very different path. Your book made me realize that I and I alone had to take responsibility for my own future. Through your story, I discovered that I, too, have a purpose in this world. Knowing my purpose in life has made me a much better person. I still love and read all of your books and can't wait for Percy's next adventure. Thank you for teaching me that I have the power to make a difference. Because of your book, I am now on the right path.

Sincerely,

Alexander Shaffer, age 13

Level II

Second Place Winner

Rhea Pathak

(Grade 7: Hastings Middle School, Upper Arlington. Sponsor: Renee Stevenson)
Letter to Dr. Maya Angelou (1928-2014) concerning her poem, "Human Family"

Dear Maya Angelou,

Poetry is one of the most beautiful forms of writing. I've read countless poems. Different styles, rhyme schemes, tones, moods, and lengths. But none of them were as beautiful as your poem, "Human Family." The poem was beautiful, not because it used fancy words that no one uses anymore (like most poems), but that it greatly influenced me, and changed the way I see the world.

I am ethnically different from most people I know. My parents emigrated from India about 20 years ago. I feel like part of me is Indian and part of me is American. I don't belong to either of the two. When I visit India, I feel out of place and when I live here, I sometimes feel out of place, too.

"We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike," you wrote. Your poem told me that no matter how different I might be, I'm still the same as everyone else. I feel the same feelings, love the same way, share the same laughter, and cry the same tears.

I've been exposed to many different cultures, places, and ideas. I've been to festivals, celebrated different holidays, and sang different songs from across the world. Whenever I do these things, I feel connected to everyone. I've learned, by following these different cultures, that the world is a very diverse place.

But after reading your poem, I realized something. No matter where you are from, no matter what you believe in, everyone is similar. We all feel emotions. We've all experienced joy, guilt, sadness, humor, envy, fear, anger, the list goes on and on. But the most important similarity we all share is how we all care about people. We care about our friends, our family, and our neighbors. We all care. We all have good hearts.

Your poem helped me recognize this, and it is beautiful. Despite how different we all might be, we all are one. "In minor ways we differ, in major ways we're the same." Again, repeating the message that we all are so similar, even if we don't realize it. We are all part of the human family.

But of course, your poem also told me that as similar as we are, our small differences are very special.

I've sailed upon the seven seas
and stopped in every land
I've seen the wonders of the world,
yet not one common man.

I used to be ashamed of my differences. Whenever we would have to make a small project about ourselves, I wouldn't mention my heritage. I wouldn't mention it at all, even if asked about it. I was afraid people would think I was weird. Now, I wear my differences with pride, thanks to your poem. Knowing that people love to hear about differences, I share all the

fun things I do, like celebrating Diwali, wearing Indian dresses, and doodling patterns that originated from India all over my notes.

As you can see, this poem has helped me in so many ways. It taught me something about the world, helped me see others in a different light, and most importantly, it helped me value myself for who I am. Thank you for writing “Human Family.”

With love,

Rhea Pathak, age 12

Level II

Third Place Winner

Margaret Taylor

(Grade 7: Lee Burneson Middle School, Westlake. Sponsor: Sara Latkowski)

Letter to author Rick Yancey concerning his book, *The Fifth Wave*

Dear Rick Yancey,

Up until the 6th grade, I was a very happy child. I would go along with the flow of things, staying away from anything that could possibly get me looked at funny or judged. I stayed put with my small group of friends, and I was always very content and looked at the positive side of things. The small group of friends that I had quickly grew into a respectable amount of people who truly cared about me. They helped me to come out of my shell, to not care about what other people thought. I truly loved each and every one of my friends, and would have done anything for them. That was up until the last semester of my 6th grade year, when things with my friends went a little sour. One of my best friends started bullying me. I would have been able to deal with it if it was just one friend. I had lots of friends that I completely trusted and loved. At least, that's what I thought. Over the period of a week, each one of my friends found some way to avoid me, or just stop talking to me all together.

I dealt with around a week of being completely alone, like I had a dark cloud surrounding me, and that cloud repelled all of the people I thought I loved. After that week, things just got worse. My old friends went from just ignoring me to whispering snarky insults every time I walked by, or staring at me with the most judgmental of looks. I had nobody. The dark cloud that had repelled all of my friends was starting to engulf my brain and fill my thoughts with self-deprecation and hatred. I had gone from being completely happy to spending all of my time crying under my covers or talking to the school counselor—all in the matter of just a week.

Over the summer, I came across your book. I had avoided reading it for the longest time because my old friend had loved the book, and I didn't want to think of her and remember how alone I was. After I had read just about everything else I could find, I picked up your book and started reading it. Reading your book was like jumping into a new world, somewhere where bullies didn't exist, where I wasn't spending all of my time with a dark cloud in my thoughts. I related to how Cassie felt, as if everyone had abandoned her and she had no one left to rely on. Reading your book actually made me feel happy for once, as if when I read your book I was escaping to a new life where I wasn't being bullied, a life where little things like what someone said about you didn't matter. I would find myself going to sit down and read for an hour, and glancing at the clock only to find out that I had been reading for three. I would completely forget about the countless hours I spent with the guidance counselor, all the tears I shed thinking about all of my old friends.

I still have panic attacks from the bullying to this day, and someone suggested I keep some things that calm me down on my nightstand for when I have a panic attack. One of the things I like to keep on that nightstand is a copy of your book, and whether I read it on my phone or look at a hard copy, flipping through the pages of the book and seeing the beautifully composed words always calms me down.

This year, the nearly unbearable feeling of loneliness has finally begun to creep away, since I have a new group of friends. The depressing thoughts have completely diminished, and I can spend my time with my amazing new friends instead of crying under the covers. Thank you

for writing *The Fifth Wave*, it truly kept me from going to some dark places I know I would regret.

Sincerely,

Margaret Taylor, age 13

Level II

Honorable Finalist

Isabella Adams

(Grade 7: St. Michael the Archangel School, Canton. Sponsor: Amy Krajeck)

Letter to author Chantele Sedgwick concerning her novel, *Love, Lucas*

Dear Chantele Sedgwick,

When I was about seven maybe eight years-old, my grandma was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was a very scary thing for my family. When my grandma is over from her part-time home in Florida, she does everything for us. She's always at our sporting events, running us around, and most importantly, preparing and cooking us food. Unfortunately, when she was diagnosed with cancer, she was in Florida so it was even harder because we couldn't see her. But unlike Lucas, Oakley's brother who was also diagnosed with cancer, my grandma beat it. Which still had me thinking because in the book, *Love, Lucas* everyone was so sad seeing the person they love in the hospital fighting for his life, especially Oakley, and all I could think about was how scared my whole family was for my grandma, especially my mom.

I can relate to Oakley because even though my grandma is still here today, it was frightening having someone you love so much, who does everything for you, go through so much pain. Like Oakley said in the book, "It's hard to forget someone who gave you so much to remember." She said this when she was having a hard time getting over her brother's death because they had so many memories. So all I could think about was all the good memories like playing catch in the backyard or trying to get to one of my sporting events but getting lost. All we would do is laugh. Thinking about those memories helped a lot because I knew that when she would get better, we would all be able to make more fun memories. Although having my grandma in the hospital was a scary feeling, I think it was scarier not knowing what was going to happen or how she was going to feel the next day. I had a lot of hope because I knew my grandma could beat it because she's one of the strongest people I know. Like Lucas' parents, having someone you love in the hospital was terrifying for my mom because she's her daughter. Like, can you imagine the mother who loved you and cared for you your whole life fighting for her life? I definitely couldn't. My mom means everything to me, especially because it's usually the three of us and if something were to happen to her, I would probably lose it.

Just like Oakley's parents, my parents fought, too ... like, a lot. Even though my parents weren't married and didn't lose one of their children to cancer, my parents had their share of problems. Although I was young, I still knew what was going on and I knew what was going to happen, just like Oakley did. Since I was young when my parents decided to separate and I didn't have an aunt in California like Oakley, my older sister (who I am very close with because she's all I have besides my mom) would take me out of the house to hang out with me or sometimes she took me along to one of her friends' houses or to our cousins. Also, because I was young, I didn't fall in love with someone that I could talk to, but I did have my sister who I love more than anything. She helped so much. She would always make me laugh and take my mind off things—not just my mom and dad fighting—but with other stuff that would make me upset or hurt my feelings.

Even though I can't relate to everything that happened to Oakley in this book, it helped me think more about life and how fragile it is and to also not be afraid to try new things. It really got me thinking about how hard it is losing someone you love to cancer, especially a sibling. I

couldn't imagine. I know it's hard having parents break up or go through a divorce because everyone gets so used to two parents always being there loving you. Even though my mom is a boss at being a single mom, she makes sure everyone is loved and cared for all the time, which sometimes is suffocating, but I love her. I don't know what it is about the book *Love, Lucas* but I keep coming back to it to read because I have read it four times now. Each time I read it, I am still surprised and excited and even confused as to why Oakley does the things she does. My favorite part of is definitely when Oakley and Carson kissed after having an emotional day at the beach, and even though I know what's going to happen, I still get scared when Carson gets attacked by the shark. I love it all—even the romance in the book. So thank you for the wonderful book *Love, Lucas* that I still can't stop reading! Well, if you don't mind, I have to go start reading *Love, Lucas* again for the fifth time!

Sincerely,
Isabella Adams, age 12

Level II

Honorable Finalist

Mary Elizabeth (“M.E.”) Hargett

(Grade 7: Lee Burneson Middle School, Westlake. Sponsor: Sara Latkowski)

Letter to author Chris Grabenstein concerning her book, *Escape from Mr. Lemoncello’s Library*

Dear Chris Grabenstein,

“The game is never over till it’s over.” In my life, if something wasn’t going the way I planned I would want to give up. If someone was beating me in a race, I would think, “it’s fine they can beat me,” and then stop trying. The kids I was playing with would make fun of me and call me a quitter. They assumed that I didn’t care when they talked about me because I didn’t have the guts to stand up for myself. Then, I read your book. *Escape from Mr. Lemoncello’s Library* showed me that life is going to be challenging and things may not go the way I want them to, but that I should never give up.

At first I was very aggravated with Kyle’s attitude towards the extra credit assignment. The fact that Kyle only wrote the essay to get something out of it annoyed me. Then I realized that I had this very same attitude to some things in my life. If I was in a race I wouldn’t want to try my best unless there was a good chance I could win. I needed to get something I wanted—the satisfaction of being able to beat someone. I started to think about what would happen in my life if I always acted like Kyle did towards the extra credit. I would miss many opportunities and chances to try new things. I learned that you can’t always live your life scared. You should always go for it, even if you aren’t going to win or have the best outcome. I admired how Kyle had the guts to keep trying and doing what was best for him. You taught me, that it is so much better to put yourself out into the world and take a risk than stay at home and settle for being good. I want to have the guts to say “no” to things I don’t want to do and be able to stand up for myself and my decisions.

In World Studies class, my teacher thought that it would be fun to have a contest between my friend and I to see who wrote the best answer for our homework. We both read our answers and hers were obviously better. The teacher, however, thought it would be cool to have the students vote on which one they liked better. The class voted, and of course my friend won, but only one person voted for me. I was upset and wanted to give up. Then, I remembered your book. You inspired me. I went home and we had a similar question for homework. Instead of writing an O.K. answer because I didn’t want to do it, I put all of my effort into the extended response and wrote it with as many details as I could. During class the next day, I turned in my homework and everything was the same but I showed myself and my teacher that I have the ability to be great and never give up.

I started to take it all in and realize the quote, “The game is never over till it’s over,” really impacted my life. I have learned that in life you should never give up and always strive for your best. As a reader, I know that you need to be able to stand up for yourself. In the classroom, on the soccer field, at home, you have the ability to be the best person you can be and you should always strive to be that person. Your book taught me just how important that proverb really is.

Sincerely,

M. E. Hargett, age 12

Level II

Honorable Finalist

Samantha Mumper

(Grade 8: St. Nicholas Academy, Reading. Sponsor: Carol Graler)

Letter to author Robert Cormier (1925-2000) concerning his novel, *Tunes for Bears to Dance To*

Dear Mr. Cormier,

The world is looked at as many different things. To some people it is home, to others it is just the planet we live on. Some people even look at our world as a big science experiment in which they are constantly asking questions. The Earth is made up of 96.5% water. That means that only 3.5% of the Earth's surface is made of land. My teachers taught me this, and I believed them. To a degree, this proportion of land to water is reflective of the proportion between Good against Evil: 96.5% of the world's population is evil, placing the remaining 3.5% in a really tough spot. This is not the most accurate proportion of Good to Evil, but Evil is so powerful that it sometimes *feels* to be that widespread. Society has told me this, but I have not always believed it. I, personally, have to see it to believe it. Mr. Cormier, your book, *Tunes for Bears to Dance To*, can open the eyes of many readers, just as it has for me, to the world of hate in which we live. It is hard for young children to think and be aware of harmful things, just as it is difficult to understand that the world holds so little land but so much water. But just how much water *can* our Earth hold?

I was never fully aware of how much water made up the Earth until I was about 10 years old. To be honest, I never really paid much attention to how much water and land made up the planet I live on. I can say the same thing about my innocent knowledge of Evil in the world. It was unfathomable to me that the world could be something other than good and happy. As I mature, though, I have become more and more conscious of the world around me. I learned that Evil is all around me; and most of the time, I don't even know it's there. I wonder when you realized what the world is and why you wrote your book about it, Mr. Cormier. In *Tunes for Bears to Dance To*, Henry, like me, realizes how much evil is in the world. I never realized how evil people can be so involved in my life without my awareness until I read Henry's situation with his own boss. Being aware is something that can either happen naturally, through learning about it, or through an occurrence that takes place and opens your eyes.

Change is a hard thing to understand and to adjust to. I don't know of many people who enjoy change, either. But, sometimes change is necessary. Henry's life has been all about change. Ever since his brother died, Henry's whole family has had to adjust. They moved to a new town, Henry's parents have acted completely different, and Henry has to make new friends. When Henry started to understand who and what Mr. Hairston was, he realized that he would have to prepare for change, because Henry would not work for somebody like Mr. Hairston. For me, change is very hard, and to be honest with you, Mr. Cormier, I am sometimes afraid of it. I feel the most comfortable when everything is normal in my life. When I learned that the world was not everything that I thought it was, I was scared. This was a new feeling for me and it changed me. I am now more mindful of trusting people and associating myself with people. Your book changed me and my view of the world, because it made me understand just how evil people can be in my life. I wonder how much change you experienced, Mr. Cormier. You seem to know a lot about it. Maybe this book was about an experience in your life. Could Henry have represented you? Or, did you base him on a friend of yours? Maybe the change in your life

affected you, just as much as change affected Henry. The change in my life was necessary for me to mature and understand more; the change in Henry's life was necessary for him to protect himself and get away from evil.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder affects people after they have gone through a traumatic experience. The most common case is found in soldiers after they've fought in war. Wars can change people for worse or for better. It can make people appreciate what they have been given, or it can carry over into their personal lives and make them anxious and on-guard about *everything*. Mr. Cormier, your book has changed me by helping me realize how people, most of whom are in my everyday life, can be so different than what they can appear to be. They might seem nice and caring, but they could also be hiding who they truly are. This is somewhat disappointing to understand as a child, because kids learn to trust the people that are involved in their lives. They comprehend how evil people can seem very innocent; this could be very upsetting to a child. This could be a child's version of PTSD. I realized when you wrote about Henry's boss physically hurting his own daughter and mentally abusing his wife that some people know more than others concerning the extent that Evil can go. Evil people are tempting. I am wary of all people because I do not want to be tempted to do things that I know are wrong, and I also do not want to be hurt by those kind of people. I, along with many other people who have read your book, now look at people differently. The idiom "Don't judge a book by its cover" is a good one to keep in mind. Although, when you have knowledge about who and what a person has the potential to be, this is a hard way to think about others. People get one glimpse of a person and, automatically, possibilities of what kind of character that person could be run through their minds. PTSD makes soldiers wary of people in general because during wartime they encountered countless of people who wanted to kill them; they don't feel safe and are unable to trust others because in the field trusting the wrong person could mean death. When a child is lied to by somebody they trusted, they become wary about all people. In this sense, words and bullets have the same effect. Physical wars and mental wars are both traumatizing, and change anybody everyone in them.

My home, Earth, is filled with all kinds of different people. Good people, bad people, and people who are a mix of both. Mr. Cormier, your book has opened my eyes, and it has made me realize that all people have the potential to be good and also the potential to be evil. The exaggerated percentage of Evil, 96.5%, could be changed to the accurate percentage of Good in the world if people always tried to do the right thing. There will always be temptation in the world, but Evil *can* be overcome with Good. Whichever path a person chooses to follow is up to them. I believe that all people can be good and I don't have to see it to believe it.

Sincerely,

Samantha Mumper, age 14

Level II

Honorable Finalist

Jacob Rintamaki

(Grade 7: Lee Burneson Middle School, Westlake. Sponsor: Deborah Schrembeck)

Letter to author Raquel Jaramillo Palacio (aka P. J. Palacio) concerning her book, *Wonder*

Dear R. J. Palacio,

Yeah, I'm pretty sure that I know what you are thinking. Seriously, hasn't literally everyone used this book for Letters About Literature by now? I mean, come on people, choose something at a least a little different. Yes, I am talking about the book *Wonder*, by R. J. Palacio. You!

Now, how this book has influenced me is a little bit confusing, but stay with me for a little bit, and I'm sure that this will all work out in the end. It was about three years ago, when I was a little tiny fourth grader. My mom had sat both me and my brother (who was, at the time, about eight), and said to both of us, "Now, listen here, boys, Mrs. Robinson, our friend, recommended this book for our family, so what do you think about reading it together?" I agreed, and we started to read your book. At first, this seemed like the incredibly stereotypical bullying story. There was a weird misfit kid who went to a new school, and the rich popular kid and his posse would bully him for the entire year, basically becoming his enemies. He would make friends with them at the end, because of the "friendship is magic" cliché and stuff. Oh, and there would be a huge award at the end.

But as the book started to progress, I realized more and more that *Wonder* really wasn't about that. Sure, at the surface, it pretty much was what I described earlier. However, if you looked a little bit deeper, you'd start to see something that was a little bit more heartfelt. I have a friend, who I'm going to call Mr. P. Mostly this is because I didn't get permission to use his actual name, but it also sounds like a spin on the 80's TV show *Mr. T*. (let's see how many people get that reference). Mr. P has the same kind of facial disfigurement as Auggie, and he's had to have surgery multiple times in order to get his jaw fixed. Even after tons of surgery, his face looks different than a "normal" kid's face. When I was about in first grade, I saw Mr. P. getting a big Lego set for going into surgery. Now, when I was seven, I was so into Legos, and was jealous about the fact that he got toys while I didn't. Now, back then, I might not have realized it, but the reward of a couple plastic bricks probably would not be anything close to what Mr. P would have to go on for the rest of his life. People have teased him about being different, people haven't accepted him at times. Mr. P has a twin brother, about the same height and everything, and some people accept him more, just because his face is "normal."

Now, Mr. P and I are good friends, even if we go to different schools. But after reading your book, it gave me a whole new perspective on being physically different. I've been bullied before for being a "nerd" or a "geek," but no one has ever said "Hey, troll face, get out of our school!" I've never had anyone send me death threats, or having friends say that they would kill themselves if they were me. Sure, I've been hassled by my fair share of jerks, but Auggie and Mr. P haven't done anything in order to deserve it. Sure, at times I can be snappish and rude, but both Mr. P and Auggie are incredibly nice, funny, bright kids that don't really deserve to be put down because of their appearance;

Now, I've started to try and reach out to kids who seem a bit different. For example, my friend's brother has severe autism, and I know plenty of kids with ADHD. However, those are

mental, generally, and Mr. P's is physical. Both physical and mental "abnormalities" can cause people to distance themselves from you, but more often than not, people will make fun of the kid who looks a little bit different than the slightly shy new kid. That's the way the world works, but not the way that it should work.

I hope that this letter changes a least one person's mind to think a little bit wider, and to accept someone that they've been teasing or ignoring lately. In *Wonder*, there's a quote that I think explains this letter: "Kinder than is necessary. Because it's not enough to be kind. One should be kinder than needed." That's what I hope that you'll think about the next time that you encounter someone who is socially awkward, or when someone who looks a little bit different needs help.

Sincerely,

Jacob Rinamaki, age 12

Letters About Literature

2016/2017

Letters of Level III Winners and Honorable Finalists

First Place Winner

Sandy Shen, 10th grade

Self-entered, Solon.

Second Place Winner

Sai Rayala, 9th grade

Self-entered, Powell.

Third Place Winner

Campbell Budzar, 12th grade

Roosevelt High School, Kent. Sponsor: Pamela Harr

Honorable Finalist

Cassie Cox, 9th grade

Ursuline Academy, Cincinnati. Sponsor: Dr. Anne Hinkle

Honorable Finalist

Jack Fredette, 11th grade

Turpin High School, Cincinnati. Sponsor: Sandra Dunston Hoover

Honorable Finalist

Benjamin Lee O'Daniel, 12th grade

Roosevelt High School, Kent. Sponsor: Pamela Harr

Honorable Finalist

Lauren Watts, 12th grade

Westerville Central High School, Westerville. Sponsor: James Grannis

Level III

First Place Winner

Sandy Shen

(Grade 10: Self-entered, Solon. Sponsor: Lai Mee Shen)

Letter to playwright Arthur Miller (1915-2005) concerning his play, *Death of a Salesman*, winner of the 1949 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and Tony Award for Best Play

Dear Arthur Miller,

Wedged between two pleather bus seats atop a blasting heater, I was both comfortable and confined. Having gotten up at 4:15 am, the day had dragged on with the weight of work and sleep-deprivation. All I wanted was to unwind for the rest of the three-hour-long bus ride with a light read. That was how I intended to relax, until you arrived and reduced me to a bundle of silent tears and snuffles. Until that moment, I had never truly realized the distances words could travel to relate fiction with reality.

When I first picked up *Death of a Salesman*, I already knew how it ended. I assumed it would be a quick play that would improve my understanding of what it was like being in a line of work that valued your efforts as much as you liked your job -- not much in this case. Instead, I received a story so compelling that it rewrote my prejudiced understanding of what a father and a job meant. You introduced me to the tragedy of helplessness, regret, and faded glory.

There is nothing sadder than witnessing the defeat of a man who used to hold up the world. Willy Loman, a failing salesman long past his prime, had been beaten, undermined, and eventually defeated, by the cold, apathetic nature of a materialistic and capitalistic society. Being as old as he was, he could no longer adapt to the fast-paced machinations of a modern salesman while supporting his family. Pushed to humiliating desperation, Willy pathetically relied on the help of people he envied for pity. Even more saddening, his own son, Biff, continued to lose the dwindling respect he had for his father. The passage of time, coupled with the failure to meet his beloved son's expectations, marks the strength Willy Loman must have possessed in order to continue plowing forward.

Willy continued to try redeeming himself for his family, his career, and his dreams. By appealing to the help of others multiple times, he sacrificed his dignity and self-esteem in the name of his family. Like an earnest fool, he simply wanted the best for his family and to fulfill his dream of a meaningful life. In too many dangerous ways, Willy is the man I have begun to fear my father might become.

When I think of my dad, my first thought is of him in a suit: pressed, professional, and punctual. I remember the days when, like Biff, I idolized my father. Whenever my father came home from a long day of work, I would race excitedly to the door and ambush him with a hug. My little brother would also try to latch onto him, but I remember fighting to be the one to play with our dad. Whether it was pretending I was Cinderella and ballroom dancing (even though I was always stepping on my dad's socks) or asking him to quiz us on an endless stream of topics, there was never an end to the amount of respect I had for him.

But in an event almost identical to Biff's, the seasons abruptly changed. We weren't as close as before. I distanced myself, placing cold distrust and frustration in place of respect and acceptance. Biff and I both experienced the monumental realization that parents, no matter how amazing they can be, are still human. We both saw what had been done. Not only did our fathers

turn away from their roots, but they denounced their nobility. All those years of unlimited compassion were gone the instant I discovered what he had done.

Yet what Biff and I had failed to realize was that the men in our lives were very good fathers. They were both talented dreamers but chose their children over their personal wishes. My father could have moved to multiple countries had he not loved and about our well-being. Willy, too, insisted on securing his sons a comfortable life through any means necessary, including a possible business venture. Had I not read the point of view you offered on fathers and devotion, I do not know how much longer I would have held my misplaced grudge. It had festered inside of me for years, refusing to be dealt with or forgiven. For Biff, it had remained stagnant for decades and faded too late for him to properly reconcile with his father.

For Biff and Willy, the precious opportunity for forgiveness and growth was lost to death and tragedy. Given the power of perspective you have installed throughout *Death of a Salesman*, I have learned to recognize and respect the role my father plays in my life as well as all that he has sacrificed for me and my siblings. While he is my father, he is first a human with shortcomings and weaknesses. I can only stress how glad I am for not having to wait until my father disappeared from my life to grasp all of this. Maybe one day I will be his little daughter again, riding atop his shoulders.

Thank you,
Sandy Shen, 10th Grade

Level III

Second Place Winner

Sai Rayala

(Grade 9: Self-entered, Powell)

Letter to author Markus Zusak concerning his novel, *The Book Thief*

Dear Markus Zusak,

When I was in middle school, I made a grave mistake. I actually made many mistakes at that age, but this one was probably the worst. My best friend and I had gotten into a serious fight. Looking back, the cause was trivial but the fight was brutal. I let my emotions take over, and some harsh words came out of my mouth that never should have been there in the first place. At that time, I didn't know my mistake would have so much weight behind it. Only after my friend burst into tears and after I got called to the principal's office did I realize how much of an effect my words had.

When I read *The Book Thief* the next year, it helped me to understand what I had done and changed my whole perspective on words. You have helped me realize the power of words and how they can have a monumental effect. They are greater than mere letters on a paper. Words have the power to bring a shining light or bring total darkness.

You have shown me that words, when used wrongly, can have disastrous effects. In your book, Max writes a story for Liesel in which he shows how words caused one of the most evil people in the world to come to power—Hitler.

Growing up, I was under the impression that Hitler came to power with force and violence like most dictators. When I read your book, I shockingly found out that such was not the case. He came to power by gaining the support of the German people; he did so through the power of words, with which he was determined to rule the world. Your book completely changed my perception on the events that took place in Nazi Germany. It was frightening to me that Hitler was able to persuade and seduce an entire country just through the power of speech.

When I read about Liesel's own experience with the dark side, I immediately connected with her because we had done the same thing. In one of the parts, she harshly speaks to the mayor's wife out of anger. Afterwards, she realizes what she has done after seeing the pain on the woman's face. I had done the same thing by calling my friend hurtful words. Both Liesel and I have caused other people to suffer due to our rash words. Although I regretted them deeply, later I thought that my friend would have gotten over it. They were just words, right? She would probably forget about them. However, to this day, we still have a tense relationship and we have never gotten back to the closeness that we once had. By reading your book, I was able to understand why. You have shown me that words will stick with someone. They are able to bury themselves deep into a person and mess with their minds. The saying "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" is completely wrong. Sticks and stones may be able to hurt you on the surface, but words will go much deeper.

Yet, amidst of all the darkness, you have shown me that there is always light. Harmful words can cause irrevocable damage but words coated in wisdom and love can do feats far greater than one can imagine. Max and Liesel were brought together through their common love for words. It was an unlikely friendship with Max being a Jewish hideaway and Liesel being a German girl. If they had set one foot outside their home, they would have found the world trying

to tear them apart. However, they had a bond far stronger than any normal one because of their similar passion.

Your book has made me understand that words can do good, and that is what I have been trying to do ever since I read it. I've already experienced the harm; now, I've been trying to find the light. Through speeches and debate, I've used my words to speak out on issues that are important in society. Through my writing, I've expressed my own ideas and perspectives. Issues like women's equality, discrimination, and individual freedom are just a few of the topics that I have focused on. You have given me strength to talk about these issues by reassuring me that my words will be heard and they have the power to make even a little difference.

Before reading your book, if I had been asked whether there was any power in me, I would have answered with a distinct no. Why would I have any power? However, now I know better. Because of you, I know that we all have the power of words in us. It's only a matter of how we use them. You have shown me that words come with a darkness and light. Thank you for making me realize that I must choose my words wisely and not make another mistake like I had done in the past. Thank you for showing me how to use the power of words for good and helping me to follow the light. Lastly, thank you for writing the incredible masterpiece that is *The Book Thief*.

Sincerely,
Sai Rayala, age 14

Level III

Third Place Winner

Campbell Budzar

(Grade 12: Roosevelt High School, Kent. Sponsor: Pamela Harr)

Letter to poet Andrea Gibson concerning her poem, “I Sing the Body Electric, Especially When My Power’s Out,” from her album *Flower Boy*

Dear Andrea Gibson,

There was a time when I felt like a stranger to my own body. Like I was not the inhabitant and rightful owner of it, but rather an outside observer with a front row seat and a big buttery bucket of popcorn, anticipating the moment that my skin would split and a monster of a cicada would crawl out from it and wreak havoc on all my friends and family—making that awful screeching noise that cicadas make and then devouring them all alive. I’d be cursed to spend the rest of my life as this giant ugly cicada, and as if that wasn’t already bad enough, I’d be alone too, because when you eat all your friends, you don’t exactly have anyone to hang with.

Well, needless to say, that scenario was a very vivid nightmare I had when I was thirteen, and throughout the next couple of years that same nightmare would take many different forms, each time jolting me awake in the dead of night with my heart pounding and my palms sweating. I was insecure, I was troubled, and I couldn’t really pinpoint the root of it all. Now, I’m no dream analyzer or whatever, but I’m really sure those nightmares were some sort of sick metaphor that my subconscious made up to tell the other parts of my brain that the concept of me growing into myself struck it with the literal fear of God. Growing into myself only had one possible outcome, which was the absolute end of the world. No one would ever accept this cicada for who she was, and therefore something would snap in the fragile balance of the universe and life would cease to exist—especially if that specific cicada just happened to like girls a whole lot.

The point of everything was that I was so tightly wrapped up in my anxiety that it was a struggle to breathe. I was a queer kid in a cruel world, and it hurt me to have to hide who I was from all my friends and family because the fear of rejection manipulated me like it was the puppeteer and I was its marionette: it determined my every move and completely took control of my life. I had internalized homophobia, because my friends at the time were toxic influences. The only reason they woke up every morning was for the sole purpose of making gay jokes. It was like they couldn’t function without throwing a slur in at least every other sentence. For some reason (still unknown to me), hurting me each day became as vital to their survival as air itself. These “friends” acted as a slow poison, and being exposed to them day after day made me hate myself; it happened so gradually that I barely even noticed that the little house built inside my heart was being burned down by the very same people I had let live in it! On top of this, I was just starting to face the symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Poetry is an outlet for me. Reading and writing has become a coping mechanism for me and it’s been a big part of my life for nearly as long as I can remember. I’ve always had an instinctive attraction to it. I was reading Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath in elementary school, and attending poetry readings on a pretty regular basis by Fifth grade. I think I might have been a poet in a previous life, because I feel like I came out of the womb with a pen and the desire to get in touch with my emotions through language. Poetry has always helped me to understand that I am not alone, and that I can confront my fears by turning them into works of art.

The first time I had heard someone read your poem “I Sing the Body Electric, Especially When My Power’s Out” was shortly after I had dealt with a major episode of depression due to having to hide myself for who I really was, and wishing that I was anyone BUT me. The first time I heard it, there were fat, globby tears rolling down my cheeks. Your poem made me understand that: beautiful things can spring out of unpleasant experiences, no one has the right to dictate to me who I am (that right belongs to me, alone), and that I AM lovely. I realized that one cannot fly by simply jumping off the ground— a person must be lighthearted, free of heavy, emotional weights and gather the wind beneath their wings and soar. There is a bright light burning deep inside of me, and though its hue might be different from others, it is nonetheless warm, illuminating, and beautiful. Though my inner light is different, there is so much, much more to me than that: it should not, must not be all that people see in me.

After first hearing your poem, I wished that I could’ve read it sooner—I would’ve benefited from its message so many years ago. I’m thankful now, though. Your words are able to reach others whose situation is similar to mine and equally inspire them to use their pain and hurt to become stronger.

I am now proud to say that I am comfortable and unapologetic about who I am. I’ve been alone, I’ve been mistreated, I’ve hit every high, and I’ve hit conceivable every low, even to the point when I thought I couldn’t sink any deeper. I’ve experienced heartbreak and loss within my time in the public school system. But, I am still tender, I am compassionate, I am bigger than the downfalls. I want to help others and teach them to understand that they are worthy of so much more love than they could ever even imagine, exactly what you have done in your writing.

I’m the exponentially gay kid in their senior year of high school, and I want them all to know it. And in the springtime, I’m going to throw my graduation cap high into the air and scream at the top of my lungs

Hallelujah to the ache
To the pull
To the fall
To the pain
Hallelujah To the grace
And the body
and every cell of us all.

Sincerely,
Your favorite cicada,
Campbell Budzar, age 17

Level III

Honorable Finalist

Cassidy (“Cassie”) Cox

(Grade 9: Ursuline Academy, Cincinnati. Sponsor: Dr. Anne Hinkle)

Letter to Pakistani activist and Nobel Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai concerning her autobiography, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*

Dear Malala,

As a young lady living in the year 2016, the words I read from your hands were the words that I hope throb in the heartbeats of every single girl alive on this Earth. Your constant fight for the right of all children, especially girls, to have an education still sparks up a fire in my soul, even though it has been months since I read your story. As girls, we are told to know our place, where exactly *is* “our” place. Some have said a kitchen, some have said sitting at home and raising children, and others have said being submissive to and dependent upon a man. I’d say that mine is nowhere near any of those. Being a girl in society, even today, brings up challenges and hardships that we have been told cannot be changed and are quite simply “the way things are.” Reading your book has ignited in me the thought that nothing is set in stone. Things are never “just the way they are”—they are only that way if we *let* them become that way. Whether we, as women, are fighting for the right to vote or the right to an education, we must never stop fighting.

When I was born, there was a silent acknowledgement that I was in fact not a boy. Immediately, there was the expectation that my beloved family name was destined to die as I would one day take my future husband’s last name. When I was two, I was told that blue was a boy’s color: therefore, it was simply preposterous for it to be my favorite. Later, when I was five, I wanted short hair: I was told no, that wasn’t for me because short hair was a fashion strictly reserved for the opposite sex. When I was seven, I was told to shut up and sit down; I was after all a young lady and must behave like one. When I was nine, my cousin struck me with the palm of his hand and I hit him back in return. I was punished and forced to apologize while he was rewarded with a new racecar toy. When I was eleven, I was whistled at from someone passing in a black pick-up truck. When I was thirteen, I was expected to want a flawless family in the future. I was told to be a perfect housewife. While there is nothing wrong with that, it simply isn’t what I aspire to. It was when I turned fourteen that I found my voice.

Malala, even when your world changed, your views did not. While the Taliban took away your day-to-day life, you kept true to who you were as a person, and your beliefs. You knew very well what you were, but even more important you know *who* you were, and that was far more than a scared little girl. In the harshest of times, when you found yourself a victim of authority, you stood up and used the voice that many tried to suppress. You used the voice that at first only resonated with your loved ones, but soon, your loved ones became every student and teacher in your school, then everyone in your town, then your fellow countrymen, and ultimately your country turned into the world. It was that very voice that resonated within me. Every girl, whether she is five-years-old or a hundred-and-five, has that voice within her. But it is whether or not we choose to use it that makes a difference. You have taught me that by ignoring that voice, we are actively doing nothing to achieve our goals of equality; we are actively rolling over in submission.

Malala, you have told me that whether I'm fighting for basic human rights or standing up for something I believe in, my voice is my strongest weapon. You have taught me that words are swords, sentences are cannons, and paragraphs are bombs. Staying silent does nothing, but raising our voices can start a revolution, and all it takes is one word. When we are oppressed, and starving for social, economic, and educational equality, one word can ignite a fire not unlike the depths of hell. You have taught me that that word is "NO."

No, I will not be judged. No, I will not be oppressed. No, I will not be denied an education, nor will I be denied respect. No, I am not less worthy simply because I am a girl. NO!

Malala, I know now that I am worth every opportunity that crosses my path. I am worth every word that runs through my head. I am a girl, yes, but I am a hurricane. We call warships "she" for a reason. We are strong, but the only way to exercise that strength is if we speak. Even a whisper can be heard if the night is silent enough. A dormant voice is simply a dormant volcano. All you need to do is erupt.

I know now that equality should see no gender, class, or race, for we are all part of one race—the human race—no matter if we are female, male, or anything in-between or outside of that. We are all people, and as people we each deserve the right to learn, grow, love, and be respected in very possible way. Malala, I am a girl, and for the first time in my life, I'm proud to be so. You have proven that a strong girl can grow into an unstoppable woman. You have taught me that no matter what I wish to pursue, I should respect and be respected. We are girls, and if we want to be a writer, chef, stay-at-home mom, teacher, doctor, scientist, or even a president, we should be able to do so. Because of you, I know that I can change the world with just a few words.

Somebody once told me that someday I'll fit into a glass slipper, but I know now that someday I'll demolish a glass ceiling. Women are weapons. We are guns, bombs, and grenades, but we have to use our ammunition to hit the target.

Malala, it's been quite the journey, reading your book and walking through your life in your shoes. You have been persistent in telling us girls that we are important, that we are strong, that we are pure power, and that we are worth every opportunity of an education, a career, and an equal life. If you are strong enough to take a bullet to the head and still use your voice, then we are strong enough to join you and fight together. We are united, not divided. We are one race, the human race. We are one voice in a million, and no one can take that away from us. Thank you, Malala.

Sincerely,

Cassidy Cox, age 14

Level III

Honorable Finalist

Jack Fredette

(Grade 11: Turpin High School, Cincinnati. Sponsor: Sandra Dunston Hoover)

Letter to author Emma Forrest concerning her memoir *Your Voice in My Head*

Dear Ms. Forrest,

This past summer, I was volunteering at the local hospital and I ran into many different people that lived many different lives. Some of them seemed really happy and others seemed sad and lonely. I was surprised to see the people who should be happy were in fact not, and that the people that I thought most likely to be lonely and sad were surprisingly very happy. I was curious why this was so as I walked around helping out where it was needed; I kept careful watch on all the people. As I was rounding on some of the patients, one of them stopped me to talk. As we began to talk I asked him some questions about how he was doing. Through our conversation, he told me what he does for a living and why he was in the hospital. Curious, I asked him why he seemed so happy. He told me that he finds great happiness in small things, like a card that was sent to him wishing him a quick recovery, the medical staff helping him to get better, and ME. He appreciated that I was in the hospital taking care of others on my own time, during my own summer break, not for any school requirement, but just because I love helping others and because I would like to work in the medical field after college. Our conversation sparked a new perspective on the world. I have a great understanding of how the lavish, expensive, and big monetary things in life do not really matter in the larger scheme; it is the small, kind gestures that resonate and have a longer, greater impact on our lives.

Similar to my experiences at the hospital, your brilliantly written book, *Your Voice in My Head*, parallels the belief that happiness can be found anywhere and that “[time] heals all wounds. And if it doesn’t, you name them something other than wounds and agree to let them stay.” As time goes on, the battle scars that are endured begin to heal but as they begin to heal they stay obsessed and committed to the wounds of yesterday, and the memories to come of tomorrow. This resembles a strong person who is willing to fight through the challenges of life and to not let anyone or anything slow him or her down. Reading your book, I learned that you were trapped in a world full of loneliness, engulfed and encompassed by damaging relationships that tore apart your life, and behavior that put yourself and others that got too close in harm’s way. By seeing a psychiatrist, you were able to turn your life around and learn how to find happiness in the surrounding world. Life with mental illness is rough and unforbearing

After my experience this past summer, I had the privilege to also work with some patients who had a mental illness. My prior beliefs or people with mental illness did not change after the summer. I still believe that a person with mental illness is no different from any other person; in fact, people who face mental illness are even more special. In such a fast-paced and chaotic world, happiness can be found in even the smallest cracks and crevices. This book taught me that happiness is achievable and even if someone has a mental illness impairing their quality of life, happiness can still be found. As a matter of fact, the happiest people in life tend to have a mental illness because they have learned to cherish even the smallest of things. Throughout this book, I was taught the importance of providing help when and whenever it is needed the most.

If troubled, no matter the circumstances, go to someone that can help you. A psychiatrist can help one find happiness and normalcy. Fear should not stand in anyone’s way. Recognizing

that help is needed, asking for it, accepting it, and finding support and comfort can positively change your life for the better. Ms. Forrest, you wrote that before you sought help that there was an ominous cloud that followed you, and that you “saw the pain and sadness in everything, and swirled it around [your] mouth like a fine wine.” After a couple of months of meeting with a psychiatrist once a week, life took a spin and the realization came that “you truly find yourself not in travel, but in other human souls.” After calling the office of the psychiatrist one day, you learned that he had died. Having realized that you were now alone and had to be your own teacher, you forged ahead, on your own terms, and survived.

Your book taught me the importance of finding help and talking to others. By learning what others can teach, and applying it to what we already know, happiness can be obtained. The book also helped me realize that knowledge is hard to come by, so when someone is given the opportunity to talk to others who care or who are willing to listen and help, seize that opportunity.

Sincerely,

Jack Fredette, age 17

Level III

Honorable Finalist

Benjamin Lee O'Daniel

(Grade 12: Roosevelt High School, Kent. Sponsor: Pamela Harr)

Letter to author Benjamin Alire Sáenz concerning his novel *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*

Dear Benjamin Sáenz,

Growing up, I denied my sexuality for a long time. Even in middle school I remembered isolating myself from the other boys because I was afraid of having feelings for them and what they would think of me if they knew I had those feelings. I kept telling myself that it wasn't O.K., that I needed to change and wasn't trying hard enough. I think this relates to the character of Dante Quintana in your book because he also denied his sexuality for a long time, and this is one of the reasons how this book has helped me come to terms with my sexuality. However, in middle school, I ended up being extremely socially withdrawn and these fears started playing on my self-conscious about my body because I was a pretty chubby kid in middle school.

Then, at the end of my seventh grade year, I was diagnosed with Leukemia and because of it I stopped paying attention to the real world. I tried to zone out everything by constantly binge watching Netflix and YouTube. I tried to forget about my sexuality and the feelings that plagued me for years. My conscious mind told me I could be straight while my subconscious mind was screaming the opposite at me. When I finally got to high school, I pretty much spent my first semester talking to no one except the occasional teacher. I knew what I was doing wasn't healthy, and I knew I wasn't happy. So, I tried to start pushing myself to go outside my comfort zone because I knew I needed to discover what I was like for myself. So, I started talking to people more and even tried to have a date with a girl (never again). This was the start of me coming out of my shell. In my sophomore year, I started to become more comfortable with my sexuality and I decided I needed to tell someone because I couldn't be closeted anymore. So, after a lot of procrastinating, I finally worked up the courage to tell this super sassy and ornery English teacher I had at the time for public speaking that I was gay, and I felt so much better after that. Over time, I started the process of coming out to more and more people and it gradually became easier and easier. It was during this period of time in my life that I read *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*.

Because I was able to relate to Dante repressing his sexuality and having the courage to come out, his story helped me to come to terms with my own sexuality and I started to gain confidence in my everyday life. Your book helped me see how I was not the only one struggling with my sexuality and how other people were also overcoming social pressures.

By now I was in my junior year and my immediate family all knew that I was gay, but I was still very closeted at school and in general life. Reading your book helped me to come to terms with my sexuality because it helped me to see that there are a lot of other people who are also going through the same things that I am and also trying to find peace with themselves. With this knowledge, I came out to some people at my school and gradually told more and more people. I became more confident and was able to make close friends some of which I am still extremely close with today. I found out that the more I tell people I'm gay, the easier and easier it becomes for me to share that.

I think this book carries a great story that shows young LGBT+ youth that there are other people who are struggling with their sexuality as well as you, and that it's okay to ask for help. I also think this book can help closeted gay people because in the book the main character Dante is closeted and seeing how he comes to terms with his sexuality helps others be comfortable with their sexuality, too.

Sincerely,
Ben O'Daniel, age 17

Level III

Honorable Finalist

Lauren Watts

(Grade 12: Westerville Central High School, Westerville. Sponsor: James Grannis)

Letter to author Paula Danziger concerning her novel *P.S. Longer Letter Later*

Dear Paula Danziger,

The day my best friend moved away was the most devastating day of my life. Lily and I had been inseparable from kindergarten to 4th grade. We had planned to go to middle school together then high school. Heck, we even planned to room together in college. I know that was a longshot considering we were only in the 4th grade at the time. The first time she moved, she was only 20 minutes away. We made sure we saw each other every single weekend. The second time she moved, she was two hours away. At that time we were in the 6th grade. We only saw each other once or twice a month.

Since neither of us had cell phones to communicate, we wrote good old fashioned letters just like Elizabeth and Tara*Starr. Your book cut into me like a knife and gave me all the right feelings, good and bad. Elizabeth was just like me: quiet, sweet, and lost without her best friend. She easily makes friends, unlike me. Her mother had a baby almost right after she moved the first time. Her parents are very easy going and acted like teenagers. My parents are very cautious about everything I do—just like Elizabeth’s parents. Lily and I wrote each other about everything. Crushes, school, friends, and problems we were having. There was never a dull moment in our letters. Every single detail about our lives were included in every letter.

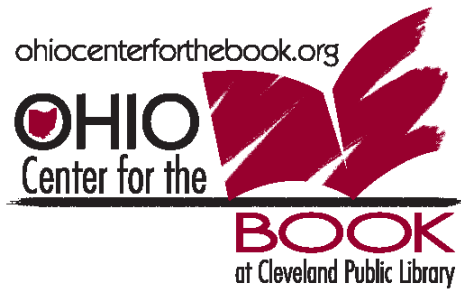
Lily and I had never exactly fought through our letters. We were the type to wait until we were together to start up an argument. At least when we argued in person it was easier to talk things out and make up. Elizabeth and Tara*Starr had no way of talking things out except through letters that only came every couple of days. They were also states away whereas Lily and I were at least still in the same state. There’s no way to avoid fighting with your best friend: even when you are states away. They will always be there for you no matter what the dilemma is.

As time went on, I felt as if Lily was moving on and forgetting I was her best friend. She made many other friends—some of which she called her best friends. That hurt terribly. I knew I needed her more than she needed me. She was my crutch and held me up. I was quiet, while she was outgoing. She was usually the one making friends for us while I tagged along like a little puppy. Today, I realize how stupid it was for me to only stick with her and not branch out to make other friends. I knew things were falling apart between us as her life was getting better and mine was falling apart without her. I couldn’t seem to make friends. I was too shy and was scared that I would get shut down if I tried. I cried knowing she was out there making friends while I was in a painful mess. She was all I knew from kindergarten to 4th grade. I missed her and couldn’t seem to let that pain go. We grew up together playing dolls and house. No one could ever replace her. Thinking back now, I’m pretty sure Lily played a huge part in making me who I am today. My personality revolved around her for so long. She helped shape my personality and the decisions I made. You never realize how important friends are in your life until they move away. It is sad Lily moved away, but I eventually found ways to love myself and be happy with my life.

Elizabeth and Tara*Starr showed me that best friends are there for you no matter what. Best friends have their bad moments, but in the end no one could replace them. To this day, Lily

and I still keep in touch. Maybe not as much as we used to, but we still make sure we are there for each other. Maybe we can go to college together and fulfill at least one of our childhood dreams. Eventually I grew up, and realized that I can make friends, too. But no one can ever compare to Lily. I fill my life with books, ideas, and writing along with the few close friends I have. All the others can leave when they want, but Lily won't. We will love each other forever.

Sincerely,
Lauren Watts, age 17



Letters About Literature Program 2016/2017

The Ohio Center for the Book at Cleveland Public Library promotes and celebrates books, reading, literacy and libraries to Ohio's citizens and the book community at large and is affiliated with the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress.

The Center for the Book was established in 1977 to use the resources and prestige of the Library of Congress to promote books, reading, libraries, and literacy. In 1997, the Ohio center was established at the State Library of Ohio to promote Ohio's book culture and literary heritage. On November 14, 2003, the Ohio center for the Book was relocated to the Cleveland Public Library.

For further information concerning the Letters About Literature contest, please visit:

www.read.gov/letters

or

www.ohiocenterforthebook.org

