

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