

Third Place Winner, Level II

Lillie Forbes

Letter to author Shelley Pearsall concerning her book Crooked River

Dear Shelley Pearsall:

One of the greatest issues in the world today is prejudice. Everyone judges everybody else. How do I know this? It has happened right before my eyes—not to me personally but to someone I love. On April 17, 2012, my brother Glenn was born. I held him for the first time in the hospital and he fell asleep in my arms. From that moment on, I vowed to always protect him. After he turned one-year-old, things went downhill. Glenn started losing his speech. He stopped eating, would cry in public, and would even hit himself. Strangers would look at him with disgust. Their eyes would shoot daggers at him as if to say “What is wrong with that child?” While our mother was focused on soothing him, I watched. I listened. I knew what people thought. It was a hard time for my family. After months of screaming, turning down food, and crying, my parents took him to a specialist who diagnosed him with Autism. We started changing the way we lived. He opened up my eyes to the world around me, too. I never knew actually how prejudiced people were towards children like my brother. I still needed comfort, though, comfort beyond human ability. So, in fourth grade, I decided to find a book to share my emotions with. I had loved reading since the age of three, so I figured a book would be the perfect solution. I was, however, disappointed with the selection. I couldn’t personally connect to any of the books. Then I picked up your book Crooked River.

When I first read Crooked River, the book had been assigned to my language arts class for guided reading. The moment I read the first sentence, I was intrigued. The more I read, the more I connected myself to the book and the character of Rebecca. Before my brother was born, I had been like Rebecca before she knew Indian John. I had thought people with special needs could sometimes be dangerous—just as Rebecca had. I am not proud of what I thought before my brother was born; he opened my eyes. I thought kids like my brother were the only ones that had to suffer judgment and prejudice, but your book helped me realize that was not the case. People are judged because of race, gender, disabilities, and more. It’s unfair, but that’s the world we live in. I didn’t really take the time to look around me until I read Crooked River. I realize now that everyone has to suffer one way or another and I wasn’t alone. My connection with Rebecca helped me out in so many ways. Crooked River was like a blanket that I could burrow into when I felt sad and hopeless. It made me want to do more about Autism, to be more vocal about the unfairness that children like my brother encounter. My family makes donations to Autism Speaks and one time we even participated, as a family, in a walk for a cure.

My brother has also found help from a group of therapists. He can talk now and be in public. Sometimes, though, whenever he is frightened or sad, I still catch a glimpse of the shy, scared little boy who couldn’t talk. He knows that he can look to me for help, that I will make a difference. Crooked River taught me to be there for him. Always.

Sincerely,
Lilliana Forbes