

Morgan Minze (11th Grade: Huron, Ohio)
Level III Semifinalist
Letter to Sarah Gruen concerning her novel, *Water for Elephants*

Dear Sara Gruen:

Your novel, *Water for Elephants*, was beautifully written, mesmerizing, and thrilling. Once I began reading, I couldn't put it down! I'm sure you receive a plethora of comments such as that, but believe me when I say that no story has touched me on such a personal level as your exhilarating book.

As a young woman, I had never truly understood animal cruelty till I read *Water for Elephants*. The novel opened my eyes to the effects of animal abuse and how we, as human, don't view animals in the same way as we view ourselves. For instance, whenever I see a commercial advertising a zoo attraction, I wonder if the animals there are treated poorly behind the scenes. On a more personal level, around Christmastime 2004, my family and I adopted a young black lab, Big Guy, from the animal shelter in our town. The volunteers at the shelter called him a "rescue dog." They and my parents believed that he had previously belonged to an abusive couple. Whenever someone shut the door or dropped something on the floor, he would sprint away from everyone and go into an empty room. Also, whenever we tried to play or wrestle with him, he would become very upset and agitated. After I read your novel, I finally understood what an animal would have to go through to behave like that. I don't believe that my dog was abused in the same way Rosie was in your novel, but any form of neglect or abuse is intolerable. Moreover, your novel has helped me to adopt a new view on promoters of animal protection laws. I have always considered myself to be sympathetic with animal right activists, but after reading how August and the other circus workers treated Rosie and the various performing animals, I now hope to help their causes through donations and volunteering. While I made a very strong connection with this theme in your novel, I feel that I made an even stronger connection with the issue of spousal abuse that was prevalent throughout the novel.

I have always been horrified with stories I have read in the newspaper about a man threatening to kill his wife or one spouse attacking the other. While this may happen often to strangers or even classmates, I myself have never been abused in any of my relationships. My previous relationships have been fantastic, and I regret that they didn't last longer. I cannot tell you that I have been a victim, but I can tell you that I have a very, very close relationship with someone that was in your novel, when Marlena finally left August to be with Jacob, I was ecstatic. At that moment, I realize that Marlena's situation mirrored my mother's when she was in her 20s. When my mother was younger, she was engaged to an abusive man. He controlled what she did, where she went, and who her friends were. Eventually, it got to the point where he restricted her from seeing her family, as August isolated Marlena. If my mother hadn't left him, well, I wouldn't be writing you this letter.

Because of your novel, *Water for Elephants*, I have a completely different view of the worlds of animal and spousal abuse. I can relate to the themes in your novel in numerous ways, but if I wrote about each and every one this letter would never end! I thank you for enriching my view of the world and making me want to make a difference in the lives of people or animals in situations such as Marlene or Rosie's.

Sincerely,
Morgan Mize