

Clara Walker (Grade 9, Madison High School, Madison, OH)
Level III Second Place Winner
Letter to author Amy Reed concerning her novel, *Clean*

Dear Amy Reed:

When I stay at home sick instead of going to school, I'm banned from using my phone or any other sort of electronic device because, according to my mom, if I'm too sick to go to school I'm also too sick to play *Angry Birds*. So, a sore throat and a runny nose was always my motivation to start reading. My interest in books faded once I started high school, so I haven't read many unless they were required for a class. Being sick and having nothing to do, I picked up your book in hopes that it would entertain me for the time being. However, I soon realized that *Clean* was doing a lot more than just entertaining me. I read your book within a matter of hours, eating up the words like candy. I myself have never been admitted into a rehabilitation center, but I connected with your book in ways I've never connected with anything before.

I grew up in a household with an alcoholic father. My mom went to bed around five or six o'clock at night, so she wasn't able to stay up long enough to see my father drinking nine glasses of wine with his dinner. Consequently, I had to live through his late night temper tantrums and his "Oops, I broke another glass" moments alone. To me, my father was scarier than any monster under the bed. He'd yell and throw things in his drunken state. Then, when I woke up the next morning, he was back the way he usually was. He'd make me breakfast and laugh whenever I tried to be silly. I wasn't sure whether I should love him or hate him. Whatever I felt, though, I knew we never had a normal relationship like my friends had with their fathers.

Throughout the book, I could identify with many of the characters. I understand Olivia's desire to be perfect and the way she felt like she was never good enough because, compared to some of my friends that are involved in sports and extracurricular activities, I feel athletically deficient. I also felt connected to Christopher and his inability to stand up for himself because I tend to let people make fun of me without ever doing anything about it. Even though I could relate to many of the characters, Jason was the one I identified with the most. Jason's disdain for his father was something I could easily comprehend. His father's insensitivity and abusive behavior was easy for me to recognize.

I can strongly relate to the relationship between Jason and his father, especially since they share a similar physical appearance. "You look just like your dad," is a phrase that I hear almost daily and I completely resent it. I am constantly annoyed by the fact that I got stuck with my father's features instead of my mother's. Growing up, I've always hated my blonde hair and blue eyes because I lived with an angry alcoholic who possessed the same traits. I was always afraid that, because I looked like him, I'd end up making the same poor decisions that he made. It scared me to think that one day I'd be just as temperamental and out of control. Now that I've gotten to experience a story such as Jason's, I no longer have this fear.

While reading this book, I realized something very important: I don't have to be like my dad. Though Jason became addicted to alcohol, he wasn't really a bad person. He stood up for Christopher when he was being bullied, which shows his good heartedness. I think the weight of abuse that Jason had to endure from his father motivated him to be a better person. This inspired me. For the first time, I understood that I can make my own choices in life and I don't have to follow in my father's footsteps. I am not doomed to an adulthood of AA meetings and insobriety. I am not my father.

Sincerely,
Clara Walker