

**Cole Beathler (Grade 6, Hastings Middle School, Columbus, OH)**  
**Level I Honorable Finalist**  
**Letter to author Cynthia Rylant concerning her novel, *Dog Heaven***

Dear Cynthia Rylant:

I had her as a pet (a dog named Leah) since I was two years old. She was a beautiful golden retriever. Leah wasn't any kind of dog: she was the kind that understood your emotions. Who knew that such [a] dilemma could engulf her?

It was towards the end of October, 2015 when I learned that my Leah had been diagnosed with lung cancer. A few days later, I observed that Leah was having difficulty breathing. I soon realized that this foreshadowed the end of her life. My sister warned me that Leah was likely to die that day, but I just didn't want to believe her. I fought and fought against the thought of losing Leah as it sent pain throughout my body. I urged her not to die. But it was time.

A few hours later, we decided to take Leah to the vet because she was having such a hard time breathing. The doctor said that we should probably let her die in peace by putting her to sleep so that's what we did. The sound waves hit my ear with a burst. I ran over to my dog and hugged her for the very last time. It was almost as if I could hear her speaking to me through her troubled breathing. That was the last time I ever saw her.

My mother handed me a picture book the very next day. It said *Dog Heaven* on the front of it and looked wonderfully illustrated. Its pages made me feel better about my loss. Spiritually, your book taught me a whole lot and gave me a whole new understanding of what it's like in *Dog Heaven*. After reading it, I realized that my Leah was in a good place where she was cured and young again, running freely through grassy fields. This taught me to stay positive and deny any negative thoughts. This made me willing to inspire others. It brought me to a whole new level of inspiration and courage.

I started being more aware. Whenever I walked past or rode by a missing dog sign I paid more attention to it. I actually took more time to try and find that person's dog because I knew it probably meant a lot to that person. Who knows, I asked myself, who the owner could be? It might be a lonely elder, a family, or even an autistic person who needs the dog's support.

Thank you for the lesson you taught me.

Sincerely,  
**Cole Beathler**