

Honorable Finalist, Level III

Sylvia Nica

Letter to author Margaret Mitchell concerning her novel *Gone with the Wind*

Dear Margaret Mitchell,

I never quite understood why I read your book. I was a tired, angry child, and picking up a 1,000-page book even now seems unlikely. Sometimes, I think *Gone with the Wind* just appeared in my life. Poof. I'm lucky it landed on my bed and not on me.

Southern dames, balls...please. Wizards and mysterious islands interested me. Books had been like popcorn—a cheap treat to devour, not something to savor and analyze. Like Scarlett, younger me was dissatisfied and craved excitement. Sometimes, I created drama when stories would not satisfy me.

In the end, it seemed both Scarlett and I suffered when life became too interesting. Your book first appeared when I was thirteen. By this time, old friends had melted away. Worries about drugs and worse calamities sprouted as those around me fell prey. On one hand, I wanted to stay a child, but wanting to be a child only gave others an excuse to trample me. I plastered a smile onto my face and kept my head down, pretending I belonged in my throng of misfits. Really, I was alone and confused.

I think the final shock came when my friend committed suicide. I can't say we were close, because I had no close friends at the time—I had a talent for discouraging deep relationships. However, this friend was closer than most. His suicide shattered the rosy, plastic haze smeared over my eyes and made me go face to face with the confusing, complicated world I lived in. I spoke to death often those next few months. In this turmoil, books became a mirror rather than a distraction. I couldn't bear to see my horrible, distorted reflection leering up from the pages, and so I discarded them. That is, until I found your book.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Those were my thoughts while reading the first few pages.

Initially, all I saw in Scarlett was a shallow girl trying to grow up too fast. I almost abandoned your novel, but something about Scarlett resonated with me. We share no similarities on the surface. She is a charming, fiery dame from a wealthy family. She twists men around her finger with her quick wit and porcelain skin. She is vain, spoiled, and never takes no for an answer. I, on the other hand, could rarely say no. Shy, timid, and easily passed over, it was like comparing a weak trickle to a roaring Niagara. However, shredding through the pages, I gradually saw our similarities. Echoed in Scarlett was my own undercurrent of steel, the same determination to fight for what we believe in no matter how hopeless the cause. We also tend to alienate people. Half-way through the book, I realized I could easily become Scarlett if I wasn't careful.

The thought terrified me. Scarlett is hard-working and clever and seductive, but she is also vain, jealous, and burns bridges like they are made of paper. She loses the only man who understands her while chasing an unattainable mirage. At my core, I am all these things, though I

never reached rock-bottom. Scarlett did that for me, and I alongside her, in *Gone with the Wind*. I fought with her when the raiders came, persisted in running a business as a woman, and struggled through bitter starvation. Because of that, your book was the first to make me sob. I sobbed as if I was the one being left by the one man that loved me, as if I was the one with no friends, no family, and no respect. I sobbed because, for the first time, I understood how one person could ruin their own life.

I can't say the same for Scarlett, but within the following year my life turned around. I worked hard to overcome my grief and regret and tried to make myself a better person. Though I denounced Scarlett, I kept some of her best qualities: her persistence, her intelligence, and her unfalteringly strong opinions.

Gone with the Wind has many flaws. It bends history, shows racism in a tame light, and masks the true horrors of slavery. This ignorance taught me to examine the cracks both around and inside me. From that, I now understand that tomorrow is another day. Because of Scarlett, that tomorrow is one I am ready to face.

Sincerely,
Sylvia Nica