

# LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE

2019



Read. Be Inspired. Write Back.

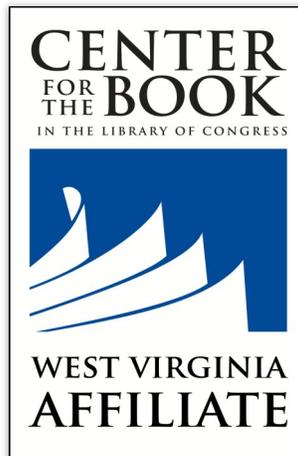




# **Letters About Literature:** Read. Be Inspired. Write Back.

A Library of Congress National Reading-Writing Promotion Program

## **2019**



## **West Virginia Center for the Book**

A program of the  
**West Virginia Library Commission**

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# 26TH ANNUAL WRITING CONTEST

## READ. BE INSPIRED. WRITE BACK.

LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE IS A READING AND WRITING CONTEST FOR STUDENTS IN GRADES 4-12. STUDENTS ARE ASKED TO SELECT A BOOK, POEM OR PLAY AND WRITE TO THAT AUTHOR (LIVING OR DEAD) ABOUT HOW THE BOOK AFFECTED THEM PERSONALLY.

LETTERS ARE JUDGED ON STATE AND NATIONAL LEVELS. THE CENTER FOR THE BOOK IN THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS SELECTS A PANEL OF JUDGES TO AWARD NATIONAL WINNERS AND NATIONAL HONOR WINNERS. TENS OF THOUSANDS OF STUDENTS FROM ACROSS THE UNITED STATES ENTER LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE EACH YEAR.

### LEVEL 1: GRADES 4-6, LEVEL 2: GRADES 7-8, LEVEL 3: GRADES 9-12

THE 2018-2019 LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE CONTEST FOR YOUNG READERS IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A GENEROUS GRANT FROM THE DOLLAR GENERAL LITERACY FOUNDATION, WITH ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FROM GIFTS TO THE CENTER FOR THE BOOK IN THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, WHICH PROMOTES THE CONTEST THROUGH ITS AFFILIATE CENTERS FOR THE BOOK, STATE LIBRARIES AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS.

LETTERS THAT MEET THESE CRITERIA ADVANCE TO STATE LEVEL JUDGING. JUDGES SELECTED BY AFFILIATE CENTERS FOR THE BOOK CHOOSE THE TOP LETTERS IN EACH COMPETITION LEVEL FOR THEIR STATE AND COORDINATE RECOGNITION CEREMONIES AND AWARDS.  
THE FIRST-PLACE STATE-LEVEL WINNERS ADVANCE TO THE NATIONAL LEVEL JUDGING.

#### ROUND 1:

**AUDIENCE:** IS THE ESSAY WRITTEN IN LETTER FORMAT AND WRITTEN TO THE AUTHOR?

**PURPOSE:** IS THE CONTEST THEME ADDRESSED AND DOES IT INCLUDE PERSONAL REFLECTION?

#### ROUND: 2

**GRAMMATICAL CONVENTIONS:** IS THE ESSAY WRITTEN IN A CLEAR, ORGANIZED MANNER WITH SPECIFIC DETAILS TO SUPPORT THE ESSAY'S MAIN IDEA?

**ORIGINALITY:** IS THE ESSAY CREATIVE, UNIQUE, AND HAVE A POWERFUL POINT OF VIEW?

#### AWARDS

TOP HONORS, HONORS, HONORABLE MENTION, AND NOTABLE MENTION AWARDS ARE AWARDED IN EACH COMPETITION LEVEL.

TOP HONOR AND HONOR RECIPIENTS RECEIVE CASH PRIZES FROM THE WEST VIRGINIA HUMANITIES COUNCIL.

TOP HONOR RECIPIENTS IN EACH LEVEL ADVANCE TO NATIONAL LEVEL JUDGING.

The Library of Congress announces all national and national honor winners and awards and lists all state-level winners on its website. National Winners in each competition level will receive a \$1,000 cash award. National Honor Winners in each competition level receive a \$200 cash award. Visit [www.read.gov/letters](http://www.read.gov/letters) for details on state awards and ceremonies.

*The response to this project is so great that the West Virginia Center for the Book is able to publish only the essays receiving Top Honors, Honors, and Honorable Mention Awards. Names are withheld by request, or in the event that documentation permitting the release of a student's name is unavailable.*

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# **DIRECTORY**

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## **LEVEL 1: GRADES 4 - 6**

**TOP HONORS: TESSA MOORE**

**HONORS: BRIDGET ZIMMERMAN, ELLA LANDINI**

**PAGES: 6 - 8**

**HONORABLE MENTION:**

**RACHEL RUTHERFORD, CAROLINE HIGGINBOTTOM**

**PAGES: 16 - 17**

## **LEVEL 2: GRADES 7 - 8**

**TOP HONORS: CLARE SEIBERT**

**HONORS: JOHN MICHAEL ZIMMERMAN, CALEB OTTE**

**PAGES: 9 - 11**

**HONORABLE MENTION:**

**AMANDA HERNDON, SARA CAMPSEY, LUKE MCGHEE**

**PAGES: 18 - 20**

## **LEVEL 3: GRADES 9 - 12**

**TOP HONORS: BETHANY NUTTER**

**HONORS: SARAH HASHMAN, GAGE HUFFMAN, ALEX VANCE**

**PAGES: 12 - 15**

**HONORABLE MENTION:**

**CECILY DRYER, NACHELLE PROBST, KASSANDRA BERG, CREED AMMONS,  
MADISYN ELLER, AVA KILMER, KAYDEN UPTON**

**PAGES: 21 - 27**

**NOTABLE MENTION -- PAGES: 28 - 33**

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# **JUDGES**

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**BONNIE DWIRE**

**LIBRARY SPECIALIST  
MORGANTOWN PUBLIC LIBRARY  
MORGANTOWN, WV**

**ERIC FRITZIUS**

**WEST VIRGINIA AUTHOR  
LEWISBURG, WV**

**HEATHER LAUER**

**LIBRARIAN  
MARSHALL UNIVERSITY  
SOUTH CHARLESTON, WV**

**JIM PAJARILLO**

**ATTORNEY  
CHARLESTON, WV**

**DR. SYLVIA SHURBUTT**

**PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH  
SHEPHERD UNIVERSITY  
SHEPHERDSTOWN, WV**



WEST VIRGINIA AUTHOR  
**Meredith Sue Willis**  
FEATURED SPEAKER

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**Meredith Sue Willis** is a writer and teacher and enthusiastic reader. Born and raised in West Virginia, she is a proud member of the Appalachian Renaissance with deep roots in West Virginia and the far western mountain counties of Virginia. She now lives in an inner ring suburb of New York City.

Her books have been published by Charles Scribner's Sons, HarperCollins, Ohio University Press, Mercury House, West Virginia University Press, Monteymayor Press, Teachers & Writers Press, Hamilton Stone Editions, and others.

She teaches at New York University's School of Professional Studies and also does writer-in-the-school residencies and workshops for writers, as well as readings and visits to libraries, book groups, and universities.

Her husband Andrew B. Weinberger is a rheumatologist, and their son Joel Weinberger is a software engineer in Los Angeles, California. He lives with his wife Sarah Weinberger, who works at Kaiser Permanente, and their daughter Shira, who is two and a half years old and deeply involved in exploration of the universe.

Meredith does small scale organic gardening in her back yard and is active in her local Ethical Culture Society and in the integration organization, South Orange/Maplewood Community Coalition on Race.

**Tessa Moore**  
***A Series of Unfortunate Events***  
**by Lemony Snicket**  
The Linsly School  
Wheeling, WV

Dear Lemony Snicket,

I never thought I would pick up your books, but I am glad I did. Your books don't just inspire me as I read them. Your books inspire me to do much more than read and write. They inspire me to do much more than think about how I can change myself the slightest way. Like doing chores or just saying hi to people. *The Series of Unfortunate Events* inspired me to help people in need and to change my attitude about life.

When I see people like the Baudelaire orphans, I feel sad, and I really want to help. So I started to give away my things and really be thankful for what I have. I now donate clothes and toys to little kids in need. I feel happy when I get to help kids and even adults too! I now think about what I can do to help anything and everyone.

When people are not thankful for what they get or have, I feel really sad. The orphans have no family or any help when they are on their own. Lots of kids and adults are like the Baudelaire orphans. Some people aren't as fortunate as other people. So, when I get something I make sure to thank my parents. People need to realize that someone out there is struggling and is there any way that I can help.

The orphans are very creative and like to come up with the new ideas to help themselves. Like the orphans, we should be more creative in ways to give back to the community. There are many soup kitchens that you can volunteer at. I did

volunteer and it was a great experience. The experience is way different than any other.

As I was handing out the food in the soup kitchen, the people always smiled. No matter how hard their life was, they always smiled. When we don't get what we want, we usually get mad, but this is different with the people at the soup kitchen. When I clean up around the place I always have a quick chat. The chats are very special. They make me laugh and put a smile on the person's face. That is when I realized I need to change my attitude, and rethink my choices..

*The Series of Unfortunate Events* could help people and really turn their life around too. Your books will have a strong impact on somebody in a good way. I hope that everyone will start to help people in need, start to rethink choices, volunteer at places, and really enjoy what they have.

Thank you,

Tessa Moore



# **Bridget Zimmerman**

## ***Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt**

The Linsly School  
Wheeling, WV

Dear Natalie Babbitt,

I am very shy. It takes me a while before I feel comfortable talking to someone new. In *Tuck Everlasting*, Winnie is very brave. I often wish I could be more like her. As you know, she is courageous, independent, and has lots of will power. Those are the characteristics I want to have. Your book helped me to flip out of my comfort zone and be brave.

When Winnie meets Jesse Tuck for the first time, she is not afraid to be bold and talk to him. I couldn't imagine having to go through what she went through: meeting all those new people and living with them, running away from home, and escaping in the night to help save Mae Tuck. This summer I tried to be very brave. I went to a six-week sleepaway camp in Indiana. Similar to when Winnie runs away and doesn't see her parents for a while, I couldn't see my parents for that whole time. I met many new people and tried many new things, such as water skiing, sign language, and sailing. My days at summer camp were very successful. I got many leadership opportunities. This summer will be my third year going to this camp, and I am more than excited.

Your book has not just made me emotionally brave but also physically. When Winnie escapes at night with Miles and Jesse, I realized I would never do that. But I wanted to be able to step out of my comfort zone. I wanted to break out of my shell. So I decided to join a gymnastics team with seventeen other girls. I have been competing for almost two years. I am a level five and love to compete. I recently had two major mental blocks with skills I needed to do to compete at level five. I became afraid to do my flyaway on the bars and back walk-over on the balance beam. I wanted to quit. Then, one night I thought, "is this the girl I want to be?"

Do I want to be the girl who gave up because she was too afraid? Finally I asked myself, "Why did I start doing gymnastics in the first place?" The next day I went to practice, and I did it! I had confidence and believed in my abilities! My bravery was similar to Winnie's.

I now have broken out of my shell thanks to you. I don't know if I would ever have the courage to to away for six weeks and do gymnastics without your book. Would I still be sitting alone at parties?

I don't know, but I do know that your book has forever changed me. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Bridget Zimmerman



**Ella Landini**  
***Little Bigfoot, Big City***  
**by Jennifer Weiner**  
Wheeling Country Day School  
Wheeling, WV

Dear Jennifer Weiner,

After reading *Little Bigfoot, Big City*, it changed the way I looked at life. I never thought I really belonged with my friends, until I read your book. I always had to explain to friends and strangers why I didn't look the same as or wasn't as sorts as my family. This is because I was adopted from the lone star state (Texas). Being adopted does not bother me. Having to answer people's questions and explain it is what bothered me. Most of all some people couldn't accept me as part of my family. For example, a man I met at a Christmas party said to me, "You don't look much like your sister." My mom told him I was adopted. It was awkward. Even his husband thought so as he said, "She is still beautiful." Kids at school think I'm different even though I tell them I am not. They would ask, "You mean she isn't your mom?" Others would ask, "So why do you live with her?" They also want to know about my birth mom and wonder if I ever met her. Their questions made me feel sad because it hurts that they don't understand that my mom is my mommy.

Your book taught me that no matter what, my family will always love me even if other people don't understand the magic of adoption. Alice thought she was really Bigfoot and from elsewhere. This made her feel different just like me. Alice's mother gave her a book of the pictures from her birth. This made her feel like she belonged. My mom didn't show me a book about my birth, but she has shared notes from my birthmom and tells me stories. Reading that changed how I felt about being adopted. I feel good about being right where I am. After all, I basically have three birthdays—the day I was born, my gotcha day and the court date that made it all official even on my birth certificate.

Your book also taught me to persevere through difficult times. For example, when my parents got divorced it left some rough patches, but we are

working through them. It has been hard on the whole family. Even though Alice probably wasn't feeling the same way as me, your book helped me a lot. In the beginning of the book Alice had to go to her grandparents' house because her parents tried to stay away from her as much as possible. It made me feel sad when I read that she had to stay at her grandparent's house. It is hard to not be at your house all the time. Sometimes I stay at my dad's place. I like it there but I like the place where I have lived most of my life better, so I felt sorry for Alice to not be with both of her parents all of the time.

Through all the hard times, your book was a book that makes me feel good. In class my teacher said to bring in a book during our state testing. I said to myself, "I know what book I'm bring in." Your book was the first book that came to mind. I could say that your book is my safe place.

Now that I have read your book I know that no matter where I come from, family is family, and I can do nothing to stop that. By the way I wouldn't want to.

Sincerely your reader,

Ella Landini



**Clare Seibert**  
***The Giving Tree***  
**by Shel Silverstein**

The Linsly School  
Wheeling, WV  
Teacher—Maggie Allison

Dear Shel Silverstein,

One of the first books I ever read was *The Giving Tree*. I had read it to myself so many times, I knew the story by heart. It wasn't until a couple of years ago I knew there were connections between the tree and I. I felt the tree's sorrow and disguised happiness. In your story, the tree keeps giving and giving to a little boy, who gives nothing in return. The tree would do anything for the boys they can remain friends, but the boy doesn't care as long as he gets what he wants.

In the story, the tree gives away all of her apples, twigs, and her entire trunk so the boy could be happy and spend time with them. The boy left time and time again and left the tree on their own. It wasn't until the boy came for the very last time she had him all she had—a stump to sit on.

Like the tree and the boy, I used to have a toxic relationship with a girl in my class. Since I was so shy, almost nobody talked to me and I was on my own. That was, until the girl appeared like an angel in the sky. She showed me kindness and asked if we could be friends. We had sleepovers, hung out at school, and made sure to sit by each other during classes.

Unfortunately, I didn't see her true form until later. Every day she would call me names, play mean pranks on me, and talk about me behind my back to our peers. I would hear her vicious remarks from the classmates she told, and asked her every time why she would do that to me. Every time she apologized and said it was a joke and didn't mean any harm. I got into a deep funk and didn't know how to come out. I didn't tell my parents, and I certainly didn't tell my

teachers. How could I? She was my best friend, wasn't she?

When I was looking through a bookshelf at my school, I saw your book and decided to read it again. After all, it had been so long. I got to the end and I thought to myself "Wow, I can't believe the tree still wanted to be friends with a boy who was so awful to her." Then it hit me like a piano in a Looney Tunes episode. I was the giving tree and this girl was the greedy boy! It was hard for me to imagine because I thought we were best friends! But I came to the conclusion she was only using me for compliments.

There was one quote that I thought was important—"And the tree was happy...but not really." I really felt like there was a click when I read that quote. It described exactly how I

felt. Maybe I thought I was happy at the time, but all along, I knew this wasn't what friendship was like. Friends don't lie and stab each other in the back.

Your book helped me with getting out of a horrible relationship and letting me know when enough was enough. Thank you for helping me see the poison in my life. Thank you for helping me lift my spirits and become the outgoing extrovert I now am. You probably intended for the book to have the impression of friendship lasts forever, but I got a different theme: don't let anyone take away your happiness. You brought back the light in my life. From now until the end of time, I will always remember how this changed my life for the better.

Sincerely,

Clare Seibert



# John Michael Zimmerman

## *Eleven Seconds*

by Travis Roy

The Linsly School

Wheeling, WV

Teacher—Maggie Allison

Dear Mr. Roy,

“New Year, new me.” Most people don’t believe their friends or family members can change. After I read your book I was a completely different person. So thank you for sharing your personal journey in your book *Eleven Seconds*. As a 14-year-old boy who has played hockey as long as I can remember, I connected with your story. It is also my dream to be a college athlete, and I know you must have worked very hard to earn a scholarship to Boston University. As I read the vivid description of you crashing into the boards and lying motionless on the ice, I started to cry. Your description of your dad’s reaction was chilling, and I felt so much pain for you and your family. You worked so hard to achieve your dream, and to see it vanish in 11 seconds was indescribable. In fact, after I finished reading that chapter, I went to my parents and gave them both big hugs.

A few summers ago I broke two bones in my leg playing soccer. Because of my cast, I was unable to attend a 6-week summer camp. I waited three years to become old enough to go. So when I broke my leg, I was devastated. I didn’t know what to do with myself. After a little while though, I realized that I need to make the best of the situation, I used you as inspiration. I knew that my leg was going to heal and that I would need to work to regain strength in my leg if I wanted to continue to play soccer and hockey in the fall. Even though your situation was far worse, you didn’t give up on life. I admire how you reset your goals and found new ways to positively influence others.

I’ve heard the expression, “When life hands you lemons, make lemonade.” Even though you went through a difficult time after the accident, it is incredible how you found a new passion in life. Your work to help other spinal cord injury survivors is remarkable. Turning a horrible situation into one where you’ve impacted thousands of others is something I greatly admire. You are trying to make a difference in the world so you can help others.



After reading your story, I realized that attitude is everything. For example, if I go into a class with negative attitude, the class will be no fun and I won’t pay attention to the teacher; however, if I go in to it positively, I will be eager to learn and listen to the teacher. It’s so important to face life’s challenges with a positive outlook. Have courage and look for solutions rather than just problems. Mr. Roy, you taught me that setback in life are inevitable, but learn from them and move forward.

Respectfully,

John Michael Zimmerman

#14

## **Caleb Otte**

### ***The Origin of Species***

**by Charles Darwin**

Beckley Stratton Middle School

Beckley, WV

Teacher—Mona Floyd

Dear Jeff Garvin,

I just want to say thank you. Thank you so much for opening me up to a new world of beliefs and possibilities in life. Your book “The Origin of Species” really changed my life, and I believe it was for the better. I had always been a Presbyterian Christian until I found out about this book, but it changed my beliefs on life and it was very well written as well. While I may have skimmed through parts of the book, I definitely never was lost and always could understand the points being made. However, this isn’t a book report and I don’t want to bore you (as it is your book) so I will just tell you what spiritual journey your book took me on.

As I told you before, I was always a Christian through the early days of my life. I went to church on Sundays as any Christian does, but I never felt like I was actually part of the faith and the religion. My sister was exploring her faith around the time I started to look at this book. It intrigued me, and while I understood it, sometimes I had to look up certain things about it to figure out more about the theory. For a tiny bit there I found myself really trying to find my faith just like my sister, and I know that those moments have really shaped the past few months of my life. I didn’t want to center my life completely around the theory and learning about it, but recently it really has been a part of it. And like I said, your book really changed my faith.

As I started to learn about the theory, I considered becoming an atheist as a lot of the thought patterns of atheists really matched up with mine. While I didn’t want to completely reject the idea

of faith, I just felt strongly about the lack of a higher power in the universe. It made sense to me, and it clicked with me unlike any other religion could. I’ve always

been a person who is open to new thoughts and ideas, but this was the biggest change maybe ever in my young life.

And I think your book really just made me think about everything in life. It truly has made me a different person, and while I am still reading anything about your theory (and still some of your actual book itself) I can, I feel changed. So, thank you, Mr. Charles Darwin,

thank you for changing my life for the better.

Sincerely,

Caleb Otte



## **Bethany Nutter**

### ***Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe***

**by Benjamin Alire Sáenz**

Nicholas County High School  
Summersville, WV

Dear Benjamin Alire Sáenz,

Transforming from a timid girl the confines of a church, into a publicly gay woman was an extremely tumultuous transition. I cannot remember a time that I went to any other church, despite it being an on and off process throughout the years. In your book, "Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe," seeing the main character, Ari, go through that process contributed to melding my nuanced perspective into the acceptance of myself. When I read that quote that you wrote on the first page, "The problem with my life was that it was someone else's idea," it deeply struck at my core because I realized that my life was not my own when I came out. I realized that my close family had an image of me getting married to a man and leading a strict religious life; however, this was not the vision I ascertained for myself. You see, I repressed who I was so much that it felt I was looking in a foggy mirror trying to see my reflection, yet as I was struggling to wipe away the blurred image, the small bit of clarity, I possessed was then again fogged by the steam of someone else's expectations.

As I read of Ari's turbulence in accepting himself, it made it easier for me to accept myself. At many points, I observed Ari's ambiguously deep-rooted anger and realized it was a stark comparison to myself. Ari says he's a boy that belongs to the rain, in reference to his emotions and refusal to acknowledge himself and his love for Dante. I recalled all the nights I spent with an uncomfortable rage and emotionality and not knowing the cause as to why I felt so much anguish. Ari's sometimes hostile and cold interactions with those around him display the disconnect within himself. The anger I also expressed externally was a direct result of what I felt internally. I was angry with myself for failing to fit into the mold

that the people I loved created for me, simply for the sake of not rocking the boat. Although gathering the courage to tell people in my life was difficult, it was not the most challenging part of it. The hardest aspect of my coming out process was not the night that my mother got drunk when she found out I was with a woman. It was not facing my Christian mentors and friends that

had always told me I was an abomination. Nor was it hearing the hurtful comments behind me in the hallways of a crowded high school. The hardest part to confront was my own self. With that, there came the matter that I was in love with someone of the same sex. Seeing Ari's struggle with his sexual orientation and his love for Dante, helped me to see my reflection clearly for the first time, without the clouded illusion that I had to tailor myself to fit others' ideas of who I should be.

Given time, I began to see that love wasn't adorned in the greys of religious rigidity, but that there

was an entire rainbow between the fullness of color and the absence thereof. I put that same rainbow on my backpack that I proudly wore on my shoulder, while holding hands with my girlfriend. Similarly, Ari proclaimed how wonderful it would be to discover the secrets of the universe in someone else's hand and eventually found them in the hands of Dante. Ari helped me to discover the secrets of the universe within my own hands, and then allowed me to share them with the hands of another. For that, I couldn't thank him enough.

Sincerely,

Bethany G. Nutter



## Sarah Hashman

### *I am the Messenger*

by Markus Zusak

Tyler Consolidated High School

Sistersville, WV

Teacher—Patricia Thomas

Dear Mr. Markus Zusak,

*I am the Messenger* has deeply resonated within my being. I read the book over summer and initially, the pacing of the scenes was droning and exhaustive, but I realized something about thirty pages in. It wasn't about the adventure— this wasn't a fast-paced fantasy; this book had underlying themes it was begging to convey. Themes, I am thankful to say, that shook me to the core.

These themes allowed me to better comprehend the fact that your background doesn't have to cripple you. There are amazing opportunities you can create for yourself if you just stop to look around at the world. Nothing is black and white; life is an explosive fireworks show constantly flashing you thousands of stories and various personalities— stories and personalities that impact you whether you realize it or not.

Ed Kennedy really stayed with me after I finished your book, which surprised me. I didn't expect to read a book about a guy living in a dingy apartment and working for a taxi service to become one of the most memorable characters I have met, but Ed is the greatest character I've met in my seventeen years. He taught me that it isn't where you come from or how much money you have to your name. You don't have to change someone's entire life by carrying out an elaborate feat; you can give someone a new pair of shoes or replace broken Christmas lights.

I come from a dead-end town where people get stuck working nine-to-five jobs and barely scrape by. People graduate from high school and never go to college, and we find them forty years

later hooked on drugs or alcohol. I have never wanted to end up stuck in a small town doing nothing with my life. I want to change the world. I want to be a good role model that children look up to, and Ed makes me believe that's possible. Me changing the world doesn't have to start with a bang; it can start with a whisper. It can start with me holding a door open and ensuring little kids don't get their dreams shattered by pessimistic people who've already lost their dreams to society.

Ed has also given me a sense of comfort with my life. I'm a junior in high school and everywhere I turn, juniors are supposed to be focusing on graduating and going to college. I have to take the SAT and the ACT. I should be planning which colleges I want to apply to and I need to find a practical job. For the longest time, I was terrified of what I decided I wanted to do with my life. Pursuing a career in theatre isn't going to pay the bills, and whenever I bring up what I want to do, everyone tells me I need a backup plan. To them, it's making sure I'll be financially stable, but it's destructive. You take what someone loves more than their entire life and diminish that by saying they need to be ready for failure. But Ed's worries and relationships

have made me realize that I will be okay. Failure allows me to grow, and maybe I won't have a nest egg for emergencies, but I'll be able to say that my life was enough, I did enough, and I changed lives.

Mr. Zusak, your book gutted me, but the most excruciating moment in the book was Ed confronting his mother. I saw myself in Ed. I've felt the confusion of being a disappointment to my mother. I understand what Ed went through, and I had to set the book down because of it.

I have always felt like everything I've attempted has been subpar, even when given my all. There's a constant worry that I am not good enough and I'm letting everyone down. I am not a track star. My writing isn't monumental. I quit projects I hate. I am not my sister. I am not my sister, and that's the problem. I've been compared to my sibling since I was born, and it's taken its toll on



my self-esteem. I do not feel like an individual; I'm half a person, which is the most infuriating thing I have ever experienced.

I am here to thank you, Mr. Zusak. Ed Kennedy inspired me to be the best person I can be, even if I don't live up to others' standards. I am going to change the world. I am going to do great things, and I owe that awakening to you.

With the utmost gratitude,

Sarah Hashman

## **Gage Huffman**

### ***The Game of Life***

**by William "King" Hollis**

Tyler Consolidated High School

Sistersville, WV

Teacher—Patricia

Thomas

Dear William "King" Hollis,

It all began, pregame of one of the biggest games of the year. I look at the brother beside me and he asks, "How do you want to be remembered?" It stuck with me. It had me questioning what kind of athlete and teammate I was.

That weekend after the game I was feeling a little cheesy and began my search for motivational speeches. "The Game of Life" was one of the first videos I viewed. I had to see what it was about...

It's all grit. Strength of character, and just how hard you are willing to work. Too many people nowadays take sports for granted. There are plenty of athletes out there who bleed the same blood as I do and work as hard if not harder than I do. Heart is the deciding factor.

My name is Gage Huffman, and I am an athlete from a high school in West Virginia. I enjoy every moment I have during sports. All the experiences of meeting new players, and just grinding with the brothers on my team. We are all family. Some of us may not be from the same cloth, but when we are on the court or on the field,

your speech helped me learn that did not matter. You have to give the brother beside you everything you've got.

I didn't come this far to just come this far. After your speech, I quickly learned that effort is pain, and it's your choice whether you're going to close the deal or are you going to fold. I base a lot of my effort I put in on one simple quote. "How do you want to be remembered?" You must make the most of the time you have right now while times are easy. Sports are not forever.

I've become a leader. Part of it makes me want to be able to say I did it alone. I must give you credit. You made me have the "want to" attitude. Sports revolve around having that attitude such as "nobody can stop me", AKA the "killer mindset."

We are all playing a game, "The Game of Life". Are you going to close the deal or are you going to fold? I often ask myself that, whether it be during sprints, or a rep, or even a game. I am a king, but I had to earn it. I have had to earn everything, and honestly, I wouldn't want it any other way. Thank you, King, for helping me in my "Game of Life."

Sincerely,

Gage Huffman



**Alex Vance**  
***Some Assembly Required***  
**by Arin Andrews**  
Washington High School  
Charles Town, WV

Dear Arin,

When I read *Some Assembly Required*, it was because of someone's recommendation. I was hesitant at first because I thought autobiographies were for school and learning and were always about old people, but then, I started relating to it. I read the book my freshman year of high school. I had come out as female to male transgender in seventh grade. I live in a small town in West Virginia, I have genuinely never seen anything in the media about transgender people growing up in small towns. It scares me to never know if people will be accepting. I however, have luckily never had an experience like yours in dance class.

There were multiple times where had to put the book down only because it was too relatable. I've had issues with depression since sixth grade. The fact that your attempted suicide is what brought being transgender to your mother's attention is what scared me. My parents are loving and accepting, but they will never be able to truly understand how being transgender affects my daily life. I was told I was not allowed to have a chest binder for years. I desperately wanted one so I ordered one online once in secret, and I never saw it again after my parents had discovered it. Years later, I was given a GC2B binder, and I cried.

My transition has been difficult and confusing, much like other transgender people's journey, I assume. When I got a short hair cut my grandparents said they liked it better long and that I would regret it. When I told my schoolmates that I wanted to be referred to as "Alex," they said

that it is a boy name, and I should not change it. When I came out to my family fully at a family dinner one year later, my parents said they loved me, and my grandmother told me I would always be her little girl. Two years after being "out" at school, one of my best friends at the time said that they liked me better before I came out. Those instances have stuck with me since.

There are things that cis-gendered people will never understand, but I guarantee that your book will help whoever reads

it. The way you are able to write about serious situations without making the entire book depressing is amazing. Even the title jokes at the reality of going under the knife in order to be comfortable in your own skin. You transitioning in high school gives me hope, and I am glad you were able to share your brutally honest story with your readers.

Wishing you the best from here on out,

Alex Vance



# LEVEL 1: HONORABLE MENTION

**Rachel Rutherford**

*Out of My Mind*

by Sharon Draper

The Linsly School

Wheeling, WV

Dear Ms. Draper,

When I think back to all of the books I have read, there is one that stands out as making an impact on my life. It was your book *Out of My Mind* that made me think about people differently. Prior to reading your book, I took walking and talking for granted. Your book has inspired me not to judge people by their abilities or lack thereof. *Out of My Mind* has helped me gain a better perspective on what is truly important in my life.

Many of the things I do everyday and would consider to be easy are actually very difficult and in some cases impossible for others. Your book opened my eyes to see that other people have huge struggles that I have been fortunate not to worry about. The main character Melody has to deal with these struggles every day of her life. After I read your book, I thought of how I take things for granted. But now I realize that I shouldn't take all of my gifts for granted because some people don't have everything that I do, like Melody.

Your book has inspired me not to judge people by what abilities they may or may not possess because it's not their fault that they can't help that they were born this way. It also taught me not to think that they aren't smart, because in your book Melody is the smartest one on their whiz kidz team. The other kids and adults in her life do not know or believe that she is smart because she cannot talk to them. This made me look at things in a different way. I saw a person in a wheelchair at the grocery store and I didn't think that she has thoughts or she wasn't smart because she can't move on her own or talk. But your book made me see that people with disabilities have thoughts and feelings as much as we do. Mrs. V always knew what Melody was capable of and pushed her keep accomplishing more.

She saw though Melody's disabilities and knew how smart she was. *Out of My Mind* has helped me gain a better perspective on what is truly important in my life. For example, when I am stressed about projects and studying for exams, I have to remember that is nothing compared to what Melody has to go through everyday. Whenever I get upset at something that is small, I just think about Melody and I instantly know that people like her are going through so much more than me. That includes her parents and everyone who takes care of her.

Your book has changed the way I think of these things, like not taking walking or talking for granted, and not judging people by what they can and can't do. It also changed my perspective on what matters in life and not to get stressed out over stupid grades or exams. Thank you, Ms. Draper for changing my views about people with disabilities and allowing me to have a different perspective on what truly matters most in life.

Sincerely,

Rachel Rutherford

# LEVEL 1: HONORABLE MENTION

**Caroline Higginbottom**

*The Lunar Chronicles*

by Marissa Meyer

The Linsly School

Wheeling, WV

Dear Marissa Meyer,

I had absolutely no idea when I picked up one of your books that my way of thinking would never be the same. It took work to stretch my mind around the plot. I have never before had even the slightest bit of trouble imagining a story's setting, at least since I learned how to read; usually it is easy. Your books, though, presented more of a challenge, and that means I grew my capabilities. I learned to imagine things more complex than ever, such as being cyborg, living on a satellite, or becoming queen of the moon. It is impossible for me to go back to when I didn't think in such vivid detail. My mind has more depth to it than it has ever had in my entire life.

When I finished *Heartless*, I looked on the back to see what else you had written. When I saw *The Lunar Chronicles*, I decided to check them out of my local library because I had nothing better to do over the summer than read, and I'd read practically all the books I owned. I didn't know even in the slightest how much that decision would affect me. I completely underestimated what I was about to read.

I had no idea I'd be inspired to make it happen like I am now. By that, I don't mean I want to find a person to be a tyrannical queen, develop letumosis, and discover mind control, of course, but rather I want to be one of the scientists who make it possible to live on the moon. I want to make androids like Iko and ID chips like all Earthens have in the books. You quite possibly changed my career path with your books. The moon is my destination, and I hope to contribute to the process of turning Luna into a country or city, a permanent home or a tourist destination or both.

Previously, I didn't want to be involved with space at all. I especially didn't want to leave earth. I could program robots for the ships, or calculate dimensions, or engineer the biodomes or a podship or a satellite. I could even just develop one thing for the trip and be content. It would have to actually help, of course. I wouldn't be considered a big part of the process for a notebook. I would probably, though, if I developed the space rovers or a ship like the Rampion.

For a short period of time, I was Cinder. I was Scarlet. I was Cress, and Ze'ev Kesley, and Levana, and Kai. It showed me how cruelly people can be treated just because they're different. Now I can understand better when a friend is being bullied. I can also understand my own situation better. Because I like school and homework, I don't fit in with most kids my age. I've been called strange, unnatural, and crazy. I've even been labeled as an alien, when Cinder actually was. It shows me that I may be different, but at least I'm (probably) human.

I will never forget what the future may look like or the world I've been introduced to. I can be more sympathetic, imagine more vividly, and maybe even change the world around me. Thanks to scientists' work, maybe me included, regular people may be able to live on the moon and have ID chips in the future. My work will not stop until either I'm gone or there are people on the moon. My world is now brighter thanks to you.

Sincerely,

Caroline Isabelle Higginbottom

## LEVEL 2: HONORABLE MENTION

**Amanda Herndon**

*Wonder*

by **R.J. Palacio**

The Linsly School

Wheeling, WV

Teacher—Maggie Allison

Dear R. J. Palacio,

Each year since 5th grade I always try to make time to read your book *Wonder*, and every year I read it my view of the book changes. When I read it the first time I had no idea what was going on, I just read it because it was a requirement for school. I never had any interest in what the actual meaning was behind the book, but since last year when I decided to read it again I realized what I was actually missing when I first read *Wonder*.

When the 5th grade teacher first announced to the class that we were reading this hefty chapter book I could already tell that I wasn't going to like it. My parents tried and tried to convince me that I would like this book, and how it will leave a positive impact on me. After reading the book, I didn't feel any different. I couldn't tell what I was missing. After a year has gone by it was 7th grade, a new year a new me, right? In a way yes, but now that I look back it was most definitely the worst year of my life. The reason 7th grade was so unpleasant was because my grandmother died. It hurt me so much and still greatly affects me today. In a way my world changed.

I became more standoffish, unlike my normal positive self. If people asked me a question I would answer them like they were below me, it hurt seeing that I was being disrespectful to the people who care about me the most. I didn't intend to be unkind, but my emotions were all over the place and I didn't know how else to control them. My mom could tell that I was acting differently so she recommended that I read a book. When I was looking through my books I found my wonder book from 5th grade, and chose to reread it. That was the moment that I started to understand the real reason behind the book.

One thing that really stood out to me in the book was that I could relate more to Julian, the bully or antagonist in the book. The reason I could relate to him was because as it turns out, Julian was freaked out by a scary face on a movie when he was five, and then several more times over the course of the five years leading him up to ten. As a result of the trauma, Julian has recurring nightmares. Because of the experience Auggie's face now makes him scared and reminds him of this nightmares. Obviously that is not a reason to be hateful, but it shows that Julian had problems that he hid and he expressed the traumatic feelings into mean words. Julian didn't know better as well as me too, we both poured our emotions into something evil that made others feel bad.

*Wonder* has taught me so many valuable lessons that I will carry with me and think about every day. One of those lessons is to always treat people the way you would want to be treated, it doesn't matter who you are or what you do, words will always hurt. We are all humans and we feel the same as others, regardless in what you believe in or your appearance. Thank you very much R. J. Palacio for writing this incredible novel, as well as helping me through tough times and showing me that it's not always bad to relate to the bully. Because in my case it made me a better person.

Sincerely,

Amanda Herndon

## LEVEL 2: HONORABLE MENTION

**Sara Campsey**

*Wonder*

by **R.J. Palacio**

The Linsly School

Wheeling, WV

Teacher—Maggie Allison

Dear R.J. Palacio,

Everyone is working on something. Ever since I was little my aunt has told me that. This has come to mean a lot to me. Of course, like anything else when you're younger, I didn't believe that one little sentence because I hadn't experienced it yet. I thought there is no way everyone is struggling with something, especially those people who are so perfect and have it all together. I wasn't mentally capable of understanding other people's pain and struggles until I read *Wonder*. As I grew older, I started to see more and more often just how true my aunt's words of wisdom were. Everyone is working on something. But I think putting yourself in someone else's shoes and showing empathy is till one of the hardest things to do today for everyone. This is why people bully, right? Because they can't experience life in someone else's shoes?

In the beginning of the book, Auggie was bullied for the way he looked. Some people were nice to him and became his friends. And a few even realized that although they looked different that Auggie, at heart, they were very similar. If Auggie had come to my school before I read *Wonder*, I probably would have been a part of the group that smiled at him and was kind. But I still wouldn't have been close friends with him. Mostly because I was shy and too afraid I would be picked on if I stood up for people being bullied. But after I finished this book, I realized that if Auggie came to my school I'd do things differently. I would make friends with him and make sure no one bullied him just for the way he looked. I wish everyone was able to read your book and come to my same realization. But that's highly unlikely.

Auggie is not the only person who made me realize how similar everyone is even if they look or act a little different. My cousin has autism. I remember going to a baseball game to support him

when I was younger. We all wore shirts supporting him and were so excited for him. He was going to pitch at an Orioles game to raise awareness for autism. Everyone in the crowd thought he was adorable and sweet, and he is. I don't see any difference between him and I, but I do know other people do. And still with as many supporters as he has, I highly doubt everyone has been as supportive as the rest of us.

People make fun of others with autism for the same reason they make fun of kids like Auggie or anyone else. And I know that people supposedly make fun of kids because they are different from them, but I don't think that's really why they make fun of other people. I think it's because they are too caught up in their own lives to really look at the person they're being unkind to. To put themselves in the other person's shoes and empathize how they are feeling. But to know a person up close, helps you realize how similar you are to them even if they look or act a little different. And how ignorant people are to make fun of people who are merely their acquaintances, and mostly your book taught me to always try and understand what others are working on.

So, thank you for teaching me what it's like from another person's point of view. Thank you for teaching me how empathize and experience life in someone else's shoes. Thank you for teaching me the true meaning of my aunt's words of wisdom. And most importantly, thank you for your book that affected my outlook not only on the world, but people in general.

Sincerely,

Sara

## LEVEL 2: HONORABLE MENTION

**Luke McGhee**

*It*

**by Stephen King**

John Adams Middle School

Charleston, WV

Dear Stephen King,

In November of last year I finished reading your novel, *It*. Before that, I had read *Carrie*, *Salem's Lot*, and *Misery*, so I was well versed in your early writing style. Due to the novel's biblical size, it took me three weeks to complete. Still, after a full year of reading even more of your work (*The Shining*, *Doctor Sleep*, *The Long Walk*, *The Bill Hodges Trilogy*, *The Dead Zone*, the first four books of the *Dark Tower* series, and many of your short stories), *It* is still my favorite novel that you have written. The way you wrote how the adults were useless and could not help the *Loser's Club* because they didn't believe in monsters is very creative and unique. This also puts the kids in the situation where they are on their own to fight *Pennywise*, which adds to the theme of growing up by forcing them to be independent. The way you described the *Barrens* and how it is viewed in the adolescent mind is very accurate.

As a citizen of West Virginia, I have been exploring the forest beyond my house for years. The atmosphere that you described is exactly how I feel whenever I walk through the woods. The characters are developed through their different experiences both all together and alone. Even now, sixty years after the novel takes place, the way you wrote the *Loser's Club* is visible in kids my age. As you have said in dozens of interviews, *It* symbolizes the transition from childhood to adulthood. This connects me with as I am currently starting to enter that stage of my life. I am not sure if this was intended by you, but I gathered another message from the novel: the real monsters aren't under our beds, in our closets, or even the sewers under the city. The truth is that they are right outside our door. They are murderers, politicians, drug dealers. They are the people that beg for money on the streets then get in a fancy car and drive to their middle-class homes. They are the police officers that shoot African Americans because of their race, or

let themselves be bribed by mob bosses and other criminals. Like *Pennywise*, they take on forms that seem friendly to lure us into believing them, trusting them, but their true form is what they don't want you to see.

Sincerely,

Luke McGhee

## LEVEL 3: HONORABLE MENTION

**Cecily Dyer**

***Ranger's Apprentice***

**by John Flanagan**

Washington High School

Charles Town, WV

Dear Mr. Flanagan,

Your book *Rangers Apprentice* first captivated my interest when my mother introduced it to me in the eighth grade. Up until the eighth grade, I was homeschooled my entire life and being thrown into the mix with a bunch of kids whose conversation consisted of middle school-esque sexuality and vocabulary that would make a sailor blush was a bit of a culture shock. One way I used to escape this reality was through recreational reading. The book started to really impact my life when I noticed that Will and I, and the themes throughout your novel, shared similar traits.

When I would read, other kids wouldn't bother to talk to me, and I was transported into a world that you created with knights, fair ladies, and chivalry. I guess you could say it was beneficial for all of us. I could avoid people, and they wouldn't feel the need to acknowledge the "new kid". In the same way that Will was rejected from being a knight and felt indifferent is how I looked among the eyes of my peers at school. It wasn't until later when I actually got to know my peers, that we became friends with one another, similar to the relationship Will and Halt shared. When I saw the way Halt and Will's relationship grew, it taught me that even the most unlikely people, no matter their age, gender, or class, could establish a sincere relationship.

Will's courage throughout the book, whether it was battling bandits, or even worse, facing Halt, showed me that the smallest amount of effort goes a long way in achieving your goals. It allowed me to muster up my own courage to talk to other kids and to reach out to people who felt the same way I did.

In your book, one of the biggest elements that affected me was your use of humor. After being bombarded by the cruel actions or remarks of kids, it was nice just to sit back and laugh a little at no one's expense. With the use of humor, you

created a sense of camaraderie with Will, Halt, and Gilan, which helped me look past the exterior of a person's demeanor and focus on who they really were. By sharing a quick joke with someone, I could bond over what seemed like meaningless chit-chat and maybe even make their day. At the end of the day, it made me happy to see others smile, giving me a more optimistic view at school.

Through reading your book, I gained a new perspective on school, and the kids around me. Courage and disarming humor helped me to pinpoint the traits I wish to value, along with objectivity viewing others.

Sincerely,

Cecily Dyer

## LEVEL 3: HONORABLE MENTION

**Nachelle Probst**

*Lessons from a Third Grade Dropout*

by Rick Rigsby

Tyler Consolidated High School

Sistersville, WV

Teacher—Patricia Thomas

Dear Rick Rigsby,

I was introduced to your speech "*Lessons from A Third Grade Dropout*" about a year ago. My parents kept talking about this speech that they watched on Facebook that was so powerful it moved them to tears. My father is an extremely emotionally strong man and if a speech made him out of all people cry, I knew that it held a meaning that was incredibly powerful. As I listened to this speech I was awestruck. The life lessons that were discussed aligned perfectly with what my parents had taught me up to this point in my life. Although hearing those life lessons through another individual's perspective allowed me to rethink how I was utilizing these lessons in my everyday life.

The first lesson that really stood out to me was, "I won't have a problem if you aim high and miss, but I'm gonna have a real issue if you aim low and hit." I always have set extremely high standards for myself whether it was for band, leadership positions, or academics. I believe the explanation for setting such immense goals for myself stems from my parents. With their support and guidance, I have been able to achieve a tremendous amount of the goals that I have set for myself. Although after watching your speech, I felt a boost of confidence that I hadn't felt before. For example, I have been my school's jazz band trumpet soloist, the marching band trumpet soloist, and I have received a superior rating at a solo and ensemble competition. Along with everything I had also been asked to audition for the West Virginia All State Band, and although I did not achieve my goal of making the All State Band, I still was able to place thirty-first out of ninety trumpet players that auditioned. At one point in time I was hesitant to even play a melody on my own in front of the band that I was a part of, and

without hearing this particular part of your speech and having my family's support, I would have never stepped outside of my shell and accomplished the goals that I have from aiming high and taking risks.

Another lesson that really struck a chord inside of me was "Son, make sure your servant's towel is bigger than your ego." I have always enjoyed completing volunteer work and helping others. Seeing the joy that a helping hand can bring has always warmed my heart. In school I am involved in several leadership groups. These groups mainly focus on various community service projects. I once heard that a leader is only a servant to the people and that has stuck with me. To be a leader is not only to be a boss, you must act when others won't, provide support for those you are leading, and be a servant to your followers. I have found that by serving I feel that I am a better leader and that I also make others happy by my service. After listening to your speech, being helpful and giving guidance to people that need it most is one of the most impactful lessons that I have applied to my life.

The final lesson that I learned was the one that had the most meaning to me personally. "Son, just stand. You keep standing. You keep stand ... No matter how rough the sea, you keep standing, and I'm not talking about just water. You keep standing. No matter what. You don't give up." Everyone has a time in their life where things get grim and I am no exception. I've been through my fair share of being bullied, and some of that has stuck with me even to this day. I was also given the life-changing diagnosis of having type one diabetes, which caused me to go through

## LEVEL 3: HONORABLE MENTION

some tough adjustments in my life. Although these things may have caused me pain, I keep

standing because I know I am stronger than those people who want to bring me down and I am in control of my diabetes. This was one lesson that I apply to my life daily and it is extremely important to me.

Your speech has taught me so many lessons that I've applied to my life and that have made me a better person. I can accomplish substantial goals all by aiming higher. I've discovered my passion for helping people by making my servant's towel large and full. I've learned how to become a stronger person and know I have more power to control difficult situations that come into my life by standing and never giving up. Without listening to your speech, I might've never learned some of these lessons, and for that I am eternally grateful.

With appreciation,

Nachelle Probst

## LEVEL 3: HONORABLE MENTION

### **Creed Ammons**

#### ***So God Made a Farmer***

**by Paul Harvey**

Tyler Consolidated High School

Sistersville, WV

Teacher—Patricia Thomas

Dear Paul Harvey,

I'm a junior at a school in rural West Virginia. I am president of my local FFA Chapter and 4-H club. I live on a 40-acre farm where I work with my animals, plant crops, and do other chores as necessary. Often, I can find the work to be long and tedious. Sometimes I feel that my work may go unnoticed to others who don't appreciate the agricultural industry. When I was eleven and was starting to take on more responsibility, I heard your speech for the first time. In my living room I sat on the couch with my family watching Super Bowl XLVII. During a commercial break I saw an open, desolate field with a bovine, standing all alone. Then I heard a scratchy audio say the words, "And on the 8th day, God looked down on his planned paradise and said, 'I need a caretaker.' So God made a farmer." This intrigued me as it did a million other viewers. As the commercial kept going, it explained the true and honest living of the American farmer.

For two minutes the commercial played with the original audio of you speaking at the National FFA Convention in 1978. The sound through the television was a modulated voice that hit the hearts of everyone watching. His voice and words reflected the true meaning of hard work and earning an honest living. I felt a deep connection with the words as I could relate to all the hard tasks you described. It felt like for two minutes the Superbowl was on the bench and agriculture was the focal point for the nation. In those minutes after the commercial, the nation took to social media about your speech in that commercial. The Ram trucks commercial dedicated to your legacy was an immense complete success.

The words in your speech helped me realize that even with the hardships we face as farmers, we must persevere and keep going. Doing tasks such as planting corn in the hot sun or fixing frozen

water pipes so your cattle can drink in the winter don't seem very rewarding, but with your speech, I learned that people are depending on me. The joys of the work can be plentiful, but sometimes they may seep away, and you are left with great discomfort. I now appreciate more tasks, such as breaking my calves to lead. It is a long process to accomplish, but with great persistence and after a few bruises, physically and mentally, it is worth the time. The final reward is showing the calves at the local and state fairs. Memories made on the farm will travel with me as I move on to my own career and farm and chase the farming dream that so many who have come before me have chased. Thank you for putting a passion for a life of agriculture in the mind of a future agriculturist.

Sincerely,

Creed Ammons

## LEVEL 3: HONORABLE MENTION

**Madisyn Eller**

*Milk and Honey*

by **Rupi Kaur**

Washington High School

Charles Town, WV

Dear Rupri Kaur,

I want to write to you about your book, *Milk and Honey*, and how it's touched me in so many ways. I really hate reading, but for some reason, when I saw your book on Amazon, I bought it instantly. All of your poems were amazing, but these three touched me the most.

Growing up, I never had a lot. My father left my mother and I when she was pregnant with my brother. We lived with my grandparents for most of my childhood. My mom, ended up turning to drugs and alcohol. My brother, was always with my grandparents, but I was a mommy's girl so I stayed with her. She would go out somewhere with me and eventually take me back to my grandparents house. My mom had a lot of boy-friends when we were growing up too. One of them, threw me into a wall when I was six and choked my brother out when he was five. When we told my mom, she left him. A few years later, she ended up meeting another guy, who is my little sister's father. He was by far the worse. Although he never hit me, he beat my mom constantly. One night, they were fighting worse than ever. My brother, walked downstairs and said, "stop hitting my mom" and he ended up chasing my brother up the stairs with a knife. Your poem, "Our backs tell stories no book has the spine to tell" really hit home for me because of everything I went through when I was younger, and made me who I am today. If I wouldn't have went through what I did, I wouldn't be half as strong as I am today.

Another poem that really hit home for me was, "Loosing you was the becoming of myself". For the last three and a half years, I was in a really mental abusive relationship. I think that's why I bought your book. He was constantly putting me down, telling me I was ugly, clingy, annoying, and anything else you could think of. He would tell me that he was only kidding, and I would believe him because I loved him. When I started reading your book, I started to see how much he

truly put me down and how badly it was affecting my self-esteem. I could barely get through your book without crying, because of how much I related. Once I realized how bad it had gotten, I left and never went back.

The last poem, that I think got to me the hardest would be, "A daughter should not have to beg her father for a relationship." Growing up, like I said before, I never had my father. Growing up fatherless was really hard, I was the girl without her father. At school, they would have "Daddy daughter dances" and I would be devastated because I couldn't go. The older I got, the more it affected me, I never said anything though. When I hit about 13, I started drinking and smoking really bad because of it. I always thought it was my fault. That I did something wrong for him not to want me. That I wasn't good enough. I tried reaching out to him, and he would answer once every few months, if I was lucky. After, six months, I gave up trying. I finally realized it's not my fault he's not in my life, it's his. Your poem helped me realize this, that I shouldn't have to beg him for a relationship, if he wanted to be a part of my life in the last sixteen years, he would have been.

Every single one of your poems made me feel a certain way to the point where I could relate to some of them. These three, made me really think about a lot of things. Thank you for helping me realize that what I went through doesn't define who I am, and that I am good enough for anyone, and that I cannot blame myself for my father's mistakes.

Your thankful reader,

Madisyn Eller

## LEVEL 3: HONORABLE MENTION

**Ava Kilmer**

***Girl, Wash Your Face***

**by Rachel Hollis**

Washington High School

Charles Town, WV

Dear Rachel Hollis,

Most people probably pick up your book, *Girl, Wash Your Face*, looking for an answer. For me, I didn't know I had a question yet. My grandma had handed me the book and told me I needed to read it. Little did I know it was about to change my outlook on everything.

From a young age I had always known my transition from middle school to high school would be different than most. I would have to go to a different school with new peers, new teachers, new everything. I had known this would be the case since my mom had a teaching job in a different district than my own. I had known this since second grade. Even though I knew this from a young age, when it came time to leave the friends I had gone to school with since preschool, it hit me like a truck. I panicked the entire summer not knowing what would occur in August.

After a few weeks of school, I continued to struggle to find my place. I was still afraid to answer a question in math or ask for the bell ringer in history. I didn't know where I was. I was terrified to talk to anyone or say anything, and still felt like I didn't belong.

About halfway through the school year things had gotten worse. I had lost myself entirely. I believed I wasn't good enough for the world. I started to hate every decision I made, and then began to hate myself. Some part of me started to hate my parents for sending me there, for not letting me go to school with the kids I had known, where I thought I belonged. This was when my grandma started talking about the book. She brought it up every time I visited for about a month. The next time I saw her, she handed me the book, and I took it not knowing the good it would bring to me.

I had an urge to read it, even though I had no idea what it was even about. Reading the first

chapters, I got nowhere. All I had learned about was how to stay on task, and how to not break promises to myself. I figured it was useless. The book had seemed impractical to me at the time, yet I picked it up for a second time about a week later. Even though I began the book despising it, I ended it loving it.

Your book had helped me find myself, not only as a person, but as a woman. You made me realize things I had never even thought about. You let me find who I was in a short time of darkness. You showed me how to be confident within my own body. Your book not only helped me, but it changed me. It changed me into who I wanted to be. The girl that can talk to people without fearing they will hate her. The girl who can walk without her head down. The girl who can speak up if need be. The girl who does not let others define her. The girl who knows who she is. The girl who knows where she belongs. The girl who stopped believing the lies the world told me.

I usually read books to escape reality, but this one brought my reality into the book. I never knew I needed to read *Girl, Wash Your Face* but finished it knowing entirely more about myself than when I started it. Your book changed how I look at myself, and how I feel about myself. It empowered me to be who I am, the girl who knows herself.

Sincerely,

Ava Kilmer

## LEVEL 3: HONORABLE MENTION

**Kayden Upton**

*“Love is Love” Sonnet*

by **Lin-Manuel Miranda**

South Charleston High School

South Charleston, WV

Teacher—Linda Long

Dear Lin-Manuel Miranda,

I still remember watching the 70th annual Tony awards on June 12th, 2016. Emotions coursed through me and my interest desperately clung to each and every song, moment, and speech. I chased after each word, I yearned for each little note, and I cheered for every talented person who cried as they gratefully relayed their speeches. However, one specific moment wrapped itself around my heart and squeezed so tightly that my tears painted a picture in its honor. It became my mantra, a sonnet that I whispered to myself every few days to keep myself going in the toughest of times. It was your speech: your amazingly beautiful sonnet to your wife and the victims of a death too soon. On a rainy Monday evening in the middle of June, sitting with my dad on our newly cleaned brown couch, I sobbed as your words flowed through me. You touched me with your speech. You changed me.

In the midst of the summer of '16, I was still reeling from the recent death of my grandmother, Gammy, as I called her, after a battle with complications because of her smoking habit. Gammy and I had been inseparable. Most of my Wednesdays were spent with her in her little apartment, reading stories, cooking food, and enjoying each other's company. She encouraged my interests and adored by talents. She was my hero. Her death sent me into a downward spiral. My best friend had passed and the amazing memories she left with me were tainted in a gray hue. The music we listened to together sounded sour. My hands no longer wrote as fast. I didn't sing as much. My world darkened. Despite the depression that infiltrated my thoughts and confined my head in thick cotton, I kept going. However, nothing was the same. When I heard your speech, memories came rushing back to me. Everything felt brighter, more intense, just on the right side of sharp. “Now fill the world with music, love, and pride” stayed with me for months after. I heard my grandmother in your words. I could hear her voice in every rhyme, every stanza, every line.

I listened to your speech for hours on end, repeating and repeating until I would fall asleep to your chant of “love is love is love is love is love.” I went to bed each night feeling that her arms were back around me. In a time where everything in my life had dulled, the light of your speech, the change, the determination, the love, fueled me. My world grew brighter. “You sing Vanessa’s symphony, Eliza tells her story,” and I remember my best friend. Even in times when every aspect of life seemed to push against her, my grandmother raised her head strong and continued on with a smile. I strive to be her. Even when the world strikes me down, when “senseless acts of tragedy” shake the foundation of life, I will carry on. I sing for her. I write for her. But most importantly, I love for her. Acceptance is weaved into strands of my hair because of her. Kindness is embedded under my finger nails. I trust in my talents because of her. I love myself because she loved me.

Your speech changed my life for the better. In a time of terror, tragedy, hate, and loss, you brought me back. You repainted the memories I had long since erased. You held my hand and led me back to the one I had lost. You showed me how much she loved me. You showed me things I had forgotten. I can never thank you enough for being my hidden support when she was gone. She lives in your words. Someday, I am going to be in your shoes. I strive every day to better myself. The limelight calls me. Someday, I'll get there. It's only a matter of time. Each step of the way, you are with me. Each step of the way, she is with me. It's my turn to speak. I won't let my voice be silenced like those before me, including her. She told my story, now I must tell hers.

Much love,

Kayden Upton

## LEVEL ONE—NOTABLE MENTIONS

**Shannen Adkins**

*Land of Stories: The Enchantress Returns*  
by Chris Colfer

**Savannah Allen**

*Divergent* by Veronica Roth

**Analise Baker**

*Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry

**Braden Beckett**

*Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*  
by Mildred D. Taylor

**Isaac Bedway**

*Green Eggs and Ham* by Dr. Seuss

**Darian Bertram**

*Oh, the Places You'll Go* by Dr. Seuss

**Nathan Bettem**

*Revenge of the Whale* by Nathaniel Philbrick

**Jules Burke**

*A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle

**Claire Carson**

*Things Hoped For* by Andrew Clements

**Olivia Creely**

*Soft Rain* by Connelia Connelissen

**Rocco D'Aquila**

*Percy Jackson* by Rick Riordan

**Kate Dempsey**

*Miracles from Heaven* by Kristy Beam

**Alliyah Dionne**

*Bedtime Prayers* by Bonnie Rickner Jenson

**Caleb Dodd**

*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*  
by J.K. Rowling

**Siddharth Doupaty**

*Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli

**Levi Ekanem**

*Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli

**Caden Fisher**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Carson Gessler**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Sydney Gilman**

*School Days According to Humphrey*  
by Betty G. Birney

**Joshua Gooden**

*Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen

**Matthew Goodish**

*Brian's Return* by Gary Paulsen

**Braden Greenwood**

*The 39 Clues: Into the Gauntlet*  
by Margaret Peterson Haddix

**Addison Grubler**

*Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson

**Zachary Haddock**

*Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White

**Makenzi Hamilton**

*Shoot for the Hoop* by Matt Christopher

**Sawyer Henderson**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Spencer Hill**

*News for Dogs* by Lois Duncan

**Aubrei Joanou**

*The Chocolate Touch*  
by Patrick Skene Cattling

**Bryanna Jude**

*Riding Freedom* by Pam Muñoz Ryan

**Micah Kramer**

*Drums, Girls and Dangerous Pie*  
by Jordan Sonnenblick

LEVEL ONE—NOTABLE MENTIONS

**Miriah Lane**

*Crenshaw* by Katherine Applegate

**Addison Lucas**

*The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*  
by C. S. Lewis

**Hajjianni Marin**

*Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli

**Reese Maroney**

*Who is Dolly Parton?* by True Kelley

**Erin Maxwell**

*The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo

**Grace McLeod**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Serenity McNeely**

*Three Billy Goats Gruff*  
by Stephen Carpenter

**Timothy Mehlman**

*The Green Book* by Jill Paton Walsh

**Gavin Mick**

*Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen

**Sophia Murray**

*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*  
by J.K. Rowling

**Ilayna Murray**

*I am Malala*  
by Malala Yousafzai

**Isabelle Nelson**

*Warriors: The Fourth Apprentice*  
by Erin Hunter

**Jessica Nissley**

*Auggie & Me* by R. J. Palacio

**Rocco Paolina**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Nolan Piepiora**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Anna Reed**

*To All the Boys I've Loved Before*  
by Jenny Han

**Marinda Riddle**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Devon Robinette**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Waylon Rose**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Oliva Rosenthal**

*Shadow Tyrants* by Clive Cussler

**Max Seibert**

*Live in Infamy* by Caroline Richmond

**Ian Sincavich**

*The Tiger Rising* by Kate DiCamillo

**Olivia Smith**

*Ghosts* by Raina Telgemeier

**Marlee Smith**

*Kristy's Great Idea (The Babysitters Club)*  
by Ann Martin

**Rose Torreyson**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Lucca Troullos**

*Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen

**Blake Walker**

*Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli

**Ethan White**

*Mick Harte Was Here* by Barbara Park

**Katherine Williams**

*Daniel's Story* by Carol Matas

**Claire Yetter**

*Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper

## LEVEL TWO—NOTABLE MENTIONS

**Abbey Barack**

*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne

**Madeline Behm**

*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* by John Boyne

**Hadlee Berkley**

*Phantom of the Opera* by Gaston Leroux

**Alexandra Biddle**

*Animal Farm* by George Orwell

**Erick Brothers**

*Ellen Foster* by Kay Gibbons

**Braden Burnside**

*The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien

**Brenna Chapman**

*The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton

**Gabrielle Clark**

*Gwendy's Button Box*  
by Stephen King and Richard Chizmar

**Nathan Coleman**

*The Guardian* by Julius Lester

**Eli Dawson**

*The Devil's Arithmetic* by Jane Yolen

**Celia Demarchi**

*Ellen Foster* by Kay Gibbons

**Natalie Elgin**

*Oh, the Places You'll Go* by Dr. Seuss

**Nicolas Frazier**

*Night* by Elie Wiesel

**Zachary Giertz**

*The Family Under the Bridge*  
by Natalie Carlson

**Ayden Griffith**

*My Side of the Mountain*  
by George Jean Craighead

**Aiden Hale**

*The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien

**Reagan Haughey**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Landon Haynes**

*Big Nate* by Lincoln Pierce

**Noah Jenewein**

*Divergent* by Veronica Roth

**Jack Kelley**

*Night* by Elie Wiesel

**Morgan Kincaid**

*Stanford Commencement Address*  
by Steve Jobs

**Ashtyn Krueger**

*A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens

**Sohan Kukkillaya**

*Animal Farm* by George Orwell

**Ella Lancaster**

*Symptoms of Being Human* by Jeff Garvin

**Jacob Litton**

*Daniel X* by James Patterson

**Bridget Lofstead**

*Flipped* by Windelin Van Draanen

**Paige Lovejoy**

*Did I Ever Wake Up* by Mod Sun

**Anthony Marchal**

*One Second After* by William R. Forstchen

**Megan Maroney**

*Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper

**Morgan Maynard**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Kamryn McDowell**

*Abby Carnelia's One and Only Magical Power*  
by David Pogue

**LEVEL TWO—NOTABLE MENTIONS**

**David Meddings**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Elexis Pack**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Ethan Perkins**

*Daniel's Story* by Carol Matas

**Kyle Phillips**

*The Tale of Despereaux* by Kate DiCamillo

**Zander Pinson**

*Restart* by Gordon Korman

**Taylor Remp**

*Tease* by Amanda Maciel

**Marshall Reynolds**

*Full Court Press* by Mike Lupica

**Kerigan Salmons**

*Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly

**Kate Skeens**

*A Creed to Live By* by Nancy Simms

**Raegan Smith**

*Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher

**Madison Smith**

*The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green

**Elexis Spurlock**

*The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton

**Zoe Stewart**

*The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins

**Audrey Street**

*Finding Serendipity* by Angelica Banks

**Ava Trethewey**

*Everything, Everything* by Nicola Yoon

**Sophie Wheeler**

*Backlash* by Sarah Darer Littman

LEVEL THREE—NOTABLE MENTIONS

**Rachel Bosley**

*Miracle for Jen* by Linda Barrick

**Carly Cooper**

*Throw Like a Girl* by Jennie Finch

**Allison Coy**

*October Sky* by Homer Hickam

**Kristen Crites**

*Pain Ends* by Katy Brown

**Sarah Franz**

*Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch

**Taylor Grago**

*Song of Myself* by Walt Whitman

**Tevin Hart**

*Before I Fall* by Lauren Oliver

**Kelly Hayes**

*Born a Crime* by Trevor Noah

**Harlee Kimble**

*Life is But a Dream* by Brian James

**Alexis Helmick**

*Desiderata* by Max Ehrmann

**Stori Ketterman**

*The Giver* by Lois Lowry

**Zachary Kile**

*A Country Road* by Theresa Ann Moore

**Madison Kimble**

*Harry Potter Series* by J.K. Rowling

**Samuel King**

*The Wolf of Wall Street* by Jordan Belfort

**Jeb Kuykendall**

*Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius

**Stephen Lewis**

*Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck

**Charis Mace**

*The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins

**Duncan McMaster**

*The Ranger's Apprentice* by John Flanagan

**Cheyenne Miley**

*Cracked, Not Broken* by Kevin Hines

**Hannah Moyers**

*To All the Boys I've Loved Before*  
by Jenny Han

**Satori Paoli**

*To My Mother* by Edgar Allen Poe

**Tiffany Paugh**

*The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas

**Joselyn Raines**

*Self Love* by Leav

**Kyrah Redman**

*Symptoms of Being Human* by Jeff Garvin

**Amie Robinson**

*Oh, the Places You'll Go* by Dr. Seuss

**Elizabeth Shaf**

*Believe What You Can: Poems*  
by Marc Harshman

**Americus Shanholtz**

*A Child Called It* by Dave Pelzer

**Jackson Snyder**

*The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien

**Cassell Stewart**

*Ella Enchanted* by Gail Carson Levine

**Rachel Thomas**

*Inferno* by Dante Alighieri

**Clare Tupta**

*Junie B. Jones* by Barbara Park

**LEVEL THREE—NOTABLE MENTIONS**

**Judah Turner**

*Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein

**Destiny Twigg**

*He Cheated* by Kaitland Price

**Zackary Walker**

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio

**Clay Williams**

*Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch

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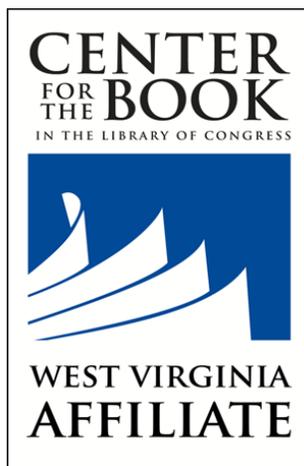
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