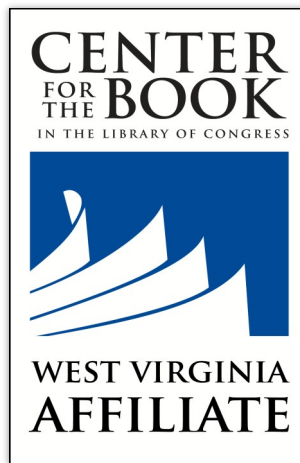


# LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE 2018



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

A program of the  
West Virginia Library Commission



1900 Kanawha Boulevard, East  
Culture Center, Building 9  
Charleston, West Virginia 25305  
(304)-558-2041  
[www.librarycommission.wv.gov](http://www.librarycommission.wv.gov)

# 25TH 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 2017-2018 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: PAISLEY TABOR**

**HONORS: BRYNNA PRICE, ALEXA PERRY**

**HONORABLE MENTION:**

**TAYLOR BAXTER, GRAYSON MADDOX, PARKER DOTSON, ISAIAH COLLINS,  
SHARON BROWNING, EMMA MUSLIN, JORDAN KIRTLEY**

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

**TOP HONORS: MARLEE JOHNS**

**HONORS: GRACE LANDINI, MARLEY KEPPLER**

**HONORABLE MENTION:**

**KARA MUNCY, ZANDER PINSON, EMILY BENCH, DEVLIN DAUGHERTY,  
JULIA PRESEVATI, NOLAN WEISS, MIA CAMPS**

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

**TOP HONORS: KAYLA STRICKLAND**

**HONORS: MORGAN SHERWOOD, LINDSAY GARRISON**

**HONORABLE MENTION:**

**SHELBY KENT, LOGAN FOLEY, TAYLOR CHILDERS, MAKAYLA LILLY,  
DEIANARA BALCK, EMMA STRICKLAND, GABRIELLE HESS, LUCAS SMITH**

**NOTABLE MENTION -- PAGES: 39 - 41**



*Jim Justice*  
*Governor of West Virginia*

## GREETINGS FROM GOVERNOR JUSTICE

As Governor, it is my privilege to welcome you to the 2018 Letters About Literature awards ceremony at the West Virginia Culture Center.

Letters About Literature is a wonderful program that showcases the state's talented young writers. I applaud the hard work, determination, and tenacity, which brings these extraordinary students here today.

These letters are wonderful to read, as they convey the significant role literature plays in the lives of Mountain State youth. Both reading and writing provide endless chances to meet captivating characters and travel to faraway lands. Books give us endless opportunities to do anything, go anywhere and be anyone.

I applaud the Library Commission and its West Virginia Center of the Book for sponsoring this very special contest. Your perseverance and effort have brought this wonderful contest to life.

Again, congratulations to all of our 2018 finalists and winners! Keep up the excellent work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jim Justice".

Jim Justice  
Governor



WEST VIRGINIA JOURNALIST  
**Brad McElhinny**  
FEATURED SPEAKER

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Brad McElhinny is the statewide correspondent for MetroNews, the radio network heard on radio stations across West Virginia. Previously, Brad was co-editor of The Charleston Gazette-Mail. Before that, he was editor and publisher of The Charleston Daily Mail.

Brad is a Parkersburg native who spent more than 20 years at the Daily Mail, first as a reporter and writer and then in a succession of leadership roles, including managing editor and city editor. One of his responsibilities that continued with the consolidated Gazette-Mail was oversight of the Daily Mail editorial page. Brad was awarded best columnist awards in 2014, 2015 and 2016 from the West Virginia Press Association.

Brad also was part of a Daily Mail leadership team that consistently took home top honors in the West Virginia Press Association's Better Newspaper Contest. Under his guidance, Daily Mail staffers were regularly honored by the newspaper company Digital First Media for innovative approaches to journalism.

He is a 1994 graduate of Marshall University's W. Page Pitt School of Journalism and a 1990 graduate of Parkersburg South High School.

Brad lives in Charleston with his wife, Karen, a local attorney, and children Isabelle and Kate.

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# **JUDGES**

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**BONNIE DWIRE**

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

**TIMOTHY HUGUENIN**

**WEST VIRGINIA AUTHOR  
ELKINS, WV**

**EVA MCGUIRE**

**LIBRARY DIRECTOR  
CRAFT MEMORIAL LIBRARY  
BLUEFIELD, WV**

**DR. SYLVIA SHURBUTT**

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

## **Paisley Tabor**

### ***I am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai**

Hurricane Middle School

Hurricane, WV

Teacher—Rachelle Ochoa

Dear Malala Yousafzae,

Your book *I Am Malala* has inspired me and truly changed my life for the better. I have always been into biographies, especially autobiographies. So, as you can imagine that when I saw your book, I didn't hesitate to pick it up. As I started reading the book, my mind was set into a different perspective. How I saw the world. This book had been my wake-up call. I started appreciating things that I have taken for granted for as long as I can remember. You showed me a new path in life.

As a girl who loves school, I could not imagine not being able to go. Despite what you were told, you fought hard and made a difference. Even when things brought you down, you never gave up, and have inspired me to do the same. When you think about it, almost every kid who goes to school would choose to stay home if given a choice. But then there are the children who can't go to school. They would do anything just for a simple education. They would give everything to know how to read, write, and count. This shows just how much we take for granted. Thank you for inspiring me and teaching me these lessons.

I am on a Lego Robotics team. The research project this year is Hydro Dynamics. Since we are an all-girl team, we decided to study women in third-world countries. During our research, we saw how women are usually responsible for collecting water. This includes a 6-mile (or more) trip to a well. Here they will collect contaminated water and take it back to their villages. They will walk another 6 miles back. Now they have spent the whole days' time, so cannot attend school.

Not to mention they are drinking dirty water and will soon become very ill. All of this will result in a never-ending poverty cycle. This gave me a more personal connection to your book and your experience.

Your book showed me how incredibly lucky and fortunate I am. This book showed me a new way of life. You showed me that girls really can change the world. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Paisley Tabor



**Brynna Price**  
***When Nobody Was Watching***  
**by Carli Lloyd**

Hurricane Middle School  
Hurricane, WV  
Teacher—Rachelle Ochoa

Dear Carli Lloyd,

Your book, *When Nobody Was Watching*, changed me in many ways nobody can explain. Before I read your book, I would hang my head when I missed a shot or lost the ball. I was unable to focus on the game because I was too busy beating myself up from the mistake I made earlier in the game. Your book also made me become more thankful for what my parents do to allow me to play soccer. I didn't think about the money or them having to leave work early to take me to a tournament or even just a practice. This book has taught me to become a better person on and off the field. I now think about other's feelings and realize that I make mistakes also. Therefore, your book has changed me in many ways.

Confidence was something I had very little of. Before I read your book, I would always pass to a teammate even when I had an open shot or space to dribble because I was scared of missing the shot or losing the ball. My coach and parents always told me to be more positive, but I was too scared of making a mistake. I was always relying on a teammate to dribble up the field and score. Your book has shown me that even the greatest players make mistakes. Now, I realize that it is not the mistakes that define you, it is how you deal with them. Becoming more confident has helped me be a better player, and therefore I thank you for writing this book. I am more confident and can see a huge difference.

I can make a couple other connections with you. When people told you that you were not good enough, you let those harmful words turn to motivation to work and train harder. Now, I turn hurtful words that my teammates and parents on the sideline say into energy to continue the game and to become even better. You always encouraged your teammates when the team was losing. I do that also, and it brings the confidence up and we

have a chance to make a comeback. When your coach took you out of the game, you did not pout. Instead you figured out why. Now, I do the same. I am now a better soccer player and person and I want to thank you for that.

Your biggest fan,  
Brynna Price

**Alexa Perry**  
***Daniel's Story* by Carol Matas**  
St. Joseph Catholic School  
Huntington, WV  
Teacher—Stephanie Hill

Dear Carol Matas,

I was greatly moved by your book, *Daniel's Story*. The book reveals the harsh reality many Jewish people faced. The story truly changed my life. I feel inspired to go help people that are in similar situations.

This book was so well written and gives the reader a feeling like you're actually talking to the characters. My favorite character was probably Rosa because she seemed confident and always put others first. I also liked Erika because she always seemed to have hope except for that one time after she lost her mom. The characters all had amazing backstories and all seemed like great people.

I am now inspired to help people by raising money for charities that support children who are victims of war. So many people deserve to have a good life and not have to suffer. The Holocaust was truly an awful thing, and it should never happen again. The torture these innocent people experienced wasn't okay. I believe all people should be treated equally no matter what gender, race, or religion. Never should an entire race try be exterminated.

In conclusion, I learned from this book that the torture methods the Nazis used were awful, between starvation and the gas chambers. It was unbelievable that all these people had to suffer because of one person. Therefore, this book was great, and I think everyone should read it.

Sincerely  
Alexa Perry





## Marlee Johns

### *The Devil's Arithmetic* by Jane Yolen

The Linsly School

Wheeling, WV

Teacher—Maggie Allison

Dear Jane Yolen,

When I was about ten or eleven, I loved to read. I particularly enjoyed reading historical fiction novels because there was something so fascinating to me about how authors could use real history and create an intriguing, amazing story. Then when I was in sixth grade, I had the honor of having an amazing math teacher. A close friend and I asked our math teacher for some good book recommendations, and she told us that she loved *The Devil's Arithmetic*. I went to the library with my friend and we each got a copy of the book. Back in sixth grade, I would just read book for fun or to read a good story. It wasn't until I went to the Holocaust museum this November and realized that your book made me understand the tragedy of the holocaust with a deeper perspective.

While I was reading your book, of course I got sad and thought about the holocaust, but I didn't really connect. I had a bad habit of reading things just to memorize facts, rather than reading to understand emotion and connect with the characters. The story was great and overall I enjoyed the book, but I just thought of it as another book about the holocaust. But it is key to remember that I read your book two years ago. In the past year and a half, in my English classes I began to learn how to really understand and experience books in a new way. I learned how to annotate and find the deeper meaning of stories, as well as how to understand how characters feel. Before that, I really didn't think as characters in a book as real people with real life experiences, vulnerability, and emotion. So, when the main character in your book, Hannah Stern, went into history and experienced what concentration camps were

like, I just looked at it like a regular story about the holocaust, a topic that everyone knows about and is taught about multiple times that the facts started to become superfluous. In some ways, it almost seemed like the holocaust was dehumanized.

Then in November, my class took a trip to Washington DC, and on our second day of the trip we visited the holocaust museum. I expected this visit to be pessimistic, so I tried my best to prepare myself and not show too much emotion. You should also know that I am the kind of person who really takes their time in places like museums, so I read every single piece of information that I could at the holocaust museum. At the beginning of this experience,

my habit of reading to learn facts came back, but then I told myself to put myself in these people's shoes, and try to understand how they felt. While I was walking through the museum, your book came back to me. I couldn't remember the title of the book, but I remembered the plot and the events that Hannah went through, and in this museum I began to really understand what it was like for these people, and the awful things that they had to endure. When I read your book, I don't think that I really grasped the horrendous reality of what was happening. But when I saw real images of the holocaust and read about it more, I truly began to understand how Hannah felt, along with 17 million people who died in the holocaust, 6 million of them being Jews. Of course it is still a challenge to grasp that shocking number of deaths, because it is simply impossible to imagine 17 million individuals with a separate personality, every human with their



own unique traits, names and hobbies. But I'm proud to say that now, I can imagine it so much better. Everyone involved in the holocaust had family, or someone they loved. Can you imagine if not only your family, but everyone in your neighborhood was taken away and killed? Everyone you knew growing up? Your friends, your barber, your grocer, the person you wave to when you walk down the street? I couldn't for a long time. When I remembered how Hannah felt while I was at the museum, I tried to imagine how I would feel, and that's when I could connect with all of the pictures of people, the stories, and the memories that were presented to me. For the first time, I could envision a character from a book as a real person, and that changed me. And I have your book to thank for that.

Finally, I wanted to thank you for writing such a great novel that I'm sure has had the same impact on many other people as it did me. If I wouldn't have read this as leisure reading, I don't think that I would've had the same experience at the holocaust museum that I did. Instead, I would've just reading everything without any emotion, preventing myself from actually learning on a new level that I had never experienced before. Just like every history teacher says, "history happens so we can prevent what happened in the past," and now I understand. If people like you didn't write novels about the holocaust, if history teachers didn't tell you about all the awful things that have happened in the world, if people don't try to understand and learn about our world's past, every human would be ignorant, and creating the same problems that have already happened in the past. We would never learn from our mistakes. I hope that after such an awful event, everyone knows the importance of learning about history

and tries to connect with stories as I did, even if it takes some time, or in my case, two years.

Sincerely,

Marlee Johns



**Grace Landini**  
***Bridge to Terabithia***  
**by Katherine Paterson**

The Linsly School  
Wheeling, WV  
Teacher—Maggie Allison

Dear Katherine Paterson,

When I was in fifth grade my friend, Josiah, died unexpectedly. I then somehow ended up reading your book, *Bridge to Terabithia*. I didn't even know what it was about, and I definitely did not think that I would relate to your book in any major way. I just thought it would be a good thing to read to get my mind off of everything going on around me. I was wrong.

I remember sitting on the white chaise, in the corner of the living room, reading the end of your story. When I read what happened to Leslie, my heart just sank to the floor. I truly felt emotionally attached to your writing, and that wasn't necessarily a normal feeling for me. I realized that in some way my friend and I were Leslie and Jesse. Two friends that came together through their imagination and creativity. Leslie taught Jesse a lot throughout their many adventures, and helped him to be comfortable with who he was. I can't even count the number of things JoJo taught me. He had an incredible mind that worked in the most peculiar ways, and because of this I was able to learn so much from him.

Not only did I feel like I could relate to your book, it has also taught me many lessons. When Leslie passed away, Josh didn't know how he could live without her. He blamed her death on himself, and he felt like he should have been there for her. He almost had a sense of survivor guilt. Instead of getting bogged down in his emotions, he learned to celebrate the life of his friend. Letting her live in his memories, yet allowing himself to continue his own life. This idea that instead of hanging your head and constantly

grieving over a loved one or friend, you should celebrate the person they were, and continue to let them live happily in your memories, really helped me through this tough time.

As a fifth grader, I didn't know how to react or respond when hearing about the death of my friend. I immediately started replaying over and over again the many memories I had with him. Although there were many, there was one that distinctly stood out from the others. Just like Jesse, I began to have regrets, thinking what could I

have done differently. I remember the last day of school before JoJo died. We were having snack, and I had one of those little bite size chocolate bars. JoJo asked for it, but I didn't give it to him. I know it sounds crazy to stress over a little chocolate bar, but I wish that I would have just stopped thinking about myself for a moment and given him that piece of chocolate.



Thanks to the lessons that *Bridge to Terabithia* taught me, I was able to redirect my focus. Instead of obsessing over what I didn't do, I started to focus on the pleasant, funny, and happy memories I had. For instance the many times we sat in after care, and I got to watch JoJo invent these really incredible things. I decided that I didn't want to focus on the bad, and instead focus on the good. I don't think I would have been able to do this without your book, but I'm so glad I did. Since I made this decision, I wasn't carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders and I was able to continue living my life while celebrating the life of others around me. The best way we celebrated his life, as a class, was launching a weather balloon in his honor, the JoJo 1.

We all truly believed that he would change the world one day with his inventions. When the time came, we jumped on the opportunity to celebrate his life. Not only did we decide to name the class project after him. We filled the weather balloon with tiny blue pieces of paper. Each piece of paper had a note that we had written, so when

the balloon burst in the sky, all the notes would spread around the globe.

I don't think I could have read your book at a more perfect time. Not only did your book teach me a lesson that I will hold onto forever, it gave me something to relate to in a time of despair. So I would like to thank you for writing this book. Not only did you touch my heart with your impeccable writing, but you helped me through a very rough time. I will continue to carry your lessons and stories with me forever. I hope that you continue writing, and touching more lives of children and adults all around you.

Sincerely,

Grace Landini

**Marley Kepple**  
***Symptoms of Being Human***

**by Jeff Garvin**

John Adams Middle School

Charleston, WV

Teacher—Bridget Ward

Dear Jeff Garvin,

I don't know if you know this, but your book changed a lot of people's lives. It gave a name to what they felt, or a feeling to the name. *Symptoms of Being Human* was the first book I read about being gender fluid. I don't know what you identify as, but I'm glad that you did a lot of research, because you got it right-on. Your book helped me identify myself as gender fluid, and it even helped me deal with being that way.

While I was reading *Symptoms of Being Human*, I connected with Riley more than I'd ever really connected with a book character. I understood their struggles, and they understood mine. I identified with feeling lonely because of the way that I am. Their sarcasm stood out to me, as well, not only because it was funny. It was a defense against their real feelings. We both build walls around ourselves to prevent being hurt.

At first I only read *Symptoms of Being Human* because I wanted to know more about the LGBTQIA+ community. I wanted to support my friends that were LGBT, and help them go through the process. While reading your book, however, I felt like I could understand Riley's feelings-towards their family, towards their school, towards their self.

When dysphoria first came up, I didn't understand it. I was sorry that they went through it, but I had never felt it myself. Thinking back, though, I can remember many times where I was uncomfortable with myself, to the extent of being nauseous of my body and clothing. I was happy that I finally knew what was wrong, but I wanted to fix it. Your book even provided tips to feel more feminine or masculine, and I really appreciate it.

I'm also closeted. My family probably suspects a questionable sexuality (I identify as pansexual) but they would never guess that I'm gender fluid in a million years. My father, in particular, is the one I'm scared to come out to. My father is a straight, white man, who voted for Donald Trump in the most recent election. He runs a tire shop with a bunch of other dudes exactly like him. His parents are old-fashioned people-his father golfs, his mother dyes her hair blonde. Sometimes he is casually sexist without realizing it, but me and my mother try to correct him when we can. I'm scared to tell him anything about myself that doesn't conform to society's standards, because there's no telling how he'd react.

Sincerely,

Marley (Cam) Kepple



**Kayla Strickland**  
***The Fault in Our Stars***  
**by John Green**

Roane County High School  
Spencer, WV  
Teacher—Sati Maharaj-Boggs

Dear John Green,

One of the first memories I can recall is of my grandmother. She was asleep on her favorite couch, but no matter how hard I tried I couldn't wake her up. My mother was in a panic and dialed 911 while I just simply stood beside her, shocked. My grandmother had always been two things. She had always been sick and she had always been my best friend. Thankfully, my grandmother ended up being okay that day, but that was just a brief taste of what it would be like to lose her. It in no way prepared me for how I would feel when that day actually arrived.

She had always tried to conceal the fact that she didn't feel well by distracting us with new games or different activities. I never truly knew or understood what she was going through. Your book *The Fault in Our Stars* opened my eyes to the daily thoughts and struggles that people face while battling an illness. Hazel allowed me to tag along on her journey and explained to me the different ways people deal with their conditions.

The love story you created not only involves love, but also heartbreak. Throughout the earlier years of my life, I easily considered my grandmother to be my best friend. I spent every free minute I possibly could with her. Among other things, she taught me how to sew, paint, and cook. I remember spending whole afternoons sitting out on her back porch while she tried teaching me how to identify all the different types of local birds. When my grandmother passed away I not only lost her, but I felt like I had lost a piece of myself too. My most interesting, loving friend was gone and I couldn't find a

way to cope. My mother tried to help me by stepping in and doing the things my grandmother did with me. As sweet as the gesture was, it unfortunately just wasn't the same and only depressed me.

A couple months later, a girl in my English class recommended your book to me. When I agreed to read it she eagerly shoved her copy into my hands and told me just to return it whenever I was finished. That night before bed I slipped under the blanket my mother made for me and opened your book. Immediately I was hooked. When I reach the part where Augustus passed away, it really pulled at my heartstrings. I knew exactly what Hazel was going through.

When Hazel finally found the letter Augustus had written, it reminded me of a similar situation I had gone through. While my family was cleaning out my grandmother's house, I found two little packages that were wrapped in Christmas paper. They were addressed to my younger sister and me. They turned out to be gifts that she had bought ahead of time for us. I immediately felt the urge to rip off the festive paper and uncover what was inside. Before I could do so my mother walked in and stopped me. She convinced me to wait and open it on Christmas, which was almost two months away. I knew the gift would silently call to me until Christmas arrived, but I agreed to wait because she told me that it would be more special that way. My mother turned out to be right.



On Christmas morning, that was the first gift my anxious little fingers reach for. I slowly and carefully removed the paper that seemed to sparkle as if it were wrapped in diamonds. I was then faced with a small white box. I held my breath as I removed the delicate lid. The tears started to fall as my eyes landed on the set of earrings sitting beautifully in their box.

To this day I still have never worn those earrings. I keep them in a safe place and get them out every once in awhile, when my grandmother comes to mind. I would almost bet that Hazel does the same with her letter.

You might assume that I have already told you my favorite part of your book, and, if so, your assumption is incorrect. My favorite part of your book was the ending. Most people probably thought that the ending was too sad, and they might have preferred a happier ending. I also tend to be a fan of happy endings, but in this case, I thought your ending was far more suitable. Of course, I would have loved for Hazel and Augustus to have lived happily ever after together, but I think Augustus death portrayed the reality of life.



but that's life and life is not fair. It's like you said in your book, "You die in the middle of your life, in the middle of a sentence."

Sincerely,

Kayla Strickland

Don't get me wrong, I wish everyone could defy the odds and live long happy lives. Unfortunately, that doesn't usually end up being the case. By ending your story this way, you shocked me yet helped me accept the actual workings of the world. I was able to look beyond my grief and realize that everyone's time on earth has to come to an end. Everyone is not guaranteed the same amount of time, but if you use your time wisely that won't matter. It may not be considered fair,

**Morgan Sherwood**  
***The Fault in Our Stars***  
**by John Green**  
Hedgesville High School  
Hedgesville, WV  
Teacher—Julie Oldfield

Dear John Green,

Your book *The Fault in Our Stars* was extremely inspiring to me. I first got sick when the book came out. I immediately fell in love with the book like anyone else who read the book. I got diagnosed two years later. I found out I have been battling several chronic illnesses. I have POTS, EDS, MCAS, Neurally Mediated Hypotension, Neurocardiogenic Seizures, and many more. None of them have cures, so the doctors just put me on and take me off of a lot of meds every time I get worse ... which is so often. Which basically just means that I feel horrible every day, but I go to school every day and try to make every day better than the last.

When I got diagnosed I went through a long phase of testing and several long nights in the hospital. I found *The Fault in Our Stars* again and decided to reread the book. Just a few pages in I grew connections to the characters. I finally felt as if someone knew what I was going through. I was pulled out of school because I got even sicker from the testing. I lost all of my friends when I became homebound ... well more like hospital bound (lol good joke). All of my "friends" moved on and forgot about me like I never even knew them. The characters grew to be my friends. They were sick too, and I related to them so much.

How Hazel tried her stay positive when she was sick inspired me to become the person I am today. She taught me not to dwell on the fact that I

am sick. The characters helped show me that I am so much more than my illness. I am a fighter. The book reminds me so much of my life.



Before I read *The Fault in Our Stars* I was sad and lay in my room with the pain of being sick filling me. I would do nothing to better myself. After I read the book, I learned to enjoy the good times and the bad times. I learned to enjoy the people who I have in my life and all they do for me. I began living my life to the fullest and appreciating things because I never know which could be my last. I al-

ways try to find the good in everyone and everything.

Thank you for writing this book. Thanks for helping me find hope and encouraged me to keep fighting.

Forever thankful for this book,

Morgan Sherwood

**Lindsay Garrison**  
***To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee**  
Poca High School  
Poca, WV  
Teacher—Ashley Ellison

Dear Harper Lee,

I've started and stopped writing this letter more times than I can count while trying to fully capture the essence of what I want to say. In short, I've experienced a multitude of situations over my brief existence here on Earth where I was not quite sure which direction to go. Whether or not I made the right decisions is still up for debate in some of those cases. All I know for sure is that being able to put yourself into someone else's shoes is a valuable skill to learn.

When I talk of situations that I did not know how to overcome, I do not refer to mere awkwardly long pauses in conversations or saying, "You too," when a waiter gives you your food and tells you to enjoy your meal. I speak more of the times in my life, and really anyone's life, where I must help counsel and console those who are having a hard time in life.

As someone who has depression, anxiety, and is an introvert, I find it rather easy to relate to those who are shy, awkward, and generally shut-ins. I think that's why I felt such a connection with your character Boo Radley in your book "To Kill a Mockingbird". When I encounter people like that, I'm able to forget my own problems for a little bit just so I can boost their mood and encourage them to put themselves out there. However, it is when I encounter those types of people which I cannot see myself in that I have trouble comforting them.

One such example would be really talkative, loud, extroverted people who complain a lot and

take their anger out on others. It's people like this that I have a hard time connecting to, if at all.



I've known a few people like this in my lifetime, and I'm sure I'm bound to meet a lot more as my life goes on, but there is one person who perplexes and annoys me to no end. Her name is Haley, and even the psychology course I took couldn't give me the answer to all of the questions I had about why she acts the way she does. That's when I decided I should put myself in her place

and try and understand her thinking process.

It is when I looked at her from a new perspective that I began to understand her. She, and those like her, are just people who need attention desperately. They have a whole whirlwind of things happening in their lives that they feel they have no control over, so they project that negativity onto others. It is when I stepped back and looked at it from a different angle that I began to understand what it's like to be that type of person.

When next we meet, I shall go over it with more detail, but for now, you should know that through putting myself into someone else's shoes, I was able to form a closer relationship with one of my fellow classmates and learn a valuable, new life skill.

Sincerely,

Lindsay Garrison



# LEVEL 1: HONORABLE MENTION

**Taylor Baxter**

***Wonder* by R.J. Palacio**

Hurricane Middle School

Hurricane, WV

Teacher—Rachelle Ochoa

Dear R.J. Palacio,

Your book *Wonder* has taught me a lot. Auggie is a strong boy. His issues must have been hard. I know I could never be so strong as him. He helped me by showing that life can be difficult, but you have to live it to the fullest. Your book is my favorite of all time. When Auggie got to go to public school I knew how he felt. I was the new kid once too.

What made my connection even more to the story was when you wrote a chapter about Via and their grandmother. When my great-grandmother died it was very hard. I loved her more than anything. Then I read that chapter and it made me feel like I could relate to her and her grandmother. When I finished *Wonder*, I put my life in a different perspective. I was happy and cheerful all the time. Your book is amazing. *Wonder* got me through lots of bad times.

Soon after I finished the book I went to middle school. I am in sixth grade. I love it a lot. It's fun, exciting, and I get to see my friends. There is a lot of work though. I go through the same routine at school every day. One day I saw a girl that looked like she had no one to play with so I asked her to play and today we are the best of friends.

I never thought that I would have a connection with this book like I do. When I first open up this book it looked long and hard to read. The second I finished the first chapter I knew that this book was one of the best. I have never read a book since then that was so good. I really felt touched to read about Auggie's story. Auggie is I strong kid. He was my favorite person in the story. I just saw the movie and it was awesome.

Thank you,  
Taylor Baxter

**Grayson Maddox**

***Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen**

Hurricane Middle School

Hurricane, WV

Teacher—Rachelle Ochoa

Dear Gary Paulsen,

Thank you for writing *Hatchet*. *Hatchet* was the book that led me to read more. Your book also helped me through a tough time. From the spring of 2016 to now has lasted a lifetime. During that spring, my parents told my siblings and I that my dad has cancer. My dad fought so hard. My dad eventually beat cancer. Now cancer wants round two.

My dad's cancer came back, but my dad will still win. I read *Hatchet* and it made me want to read more. All of the reading distracted me from all of my pain. *Hatchet* helped me because it made me like reading. The more I read, the less I worry. Reading was like a shield from all the bad things in life. All the reading I was doing was because of *Hatchet*. I thank you greatly for writing *Hatchet*.

I have had lots of friends to help me along the way, but the reading was really helping with all the bad things happening around me. I believe someone must get ugly before you can get beautiful. Since my dad has had cancer, this was the ugly part in my life. When someone is at the "ugly" part in their life, look for someone or something to help you. All the things I've said is the sad part. But just like every good story, there's a good ending. Well, my dad's cancer isn't gone but I have people to talk and fix everything I've been through. My dad is getting better but it will take time. I thank you for writing *Hatchet*, and I thank you for helping.

Sincerely Yours,

Grayson Maddox

# LEVEL 1: HONORABLE MENTION

## **Parker Dotson**

### ***The Fire Within* by Chris D'Lacey**

Hurricane Middle School

Hurricane, WV

Teacher—Rachelle Ochoa

Dear Chris D'Lacey,

Your book, *The Fire Within*, has had an incredible impact on me. When I get home, I used to just sit inside. Nowadays, I enjoy the beauty of nature. I was on a trip to a place that was about five hours from here. I was reading a different book. My mom asked me if I wanted to read your book, I said no thanks. Three days later, I was on the last chapter of your book. We got home, and I thought of how lucky I am to be able to enjoy nature with few worries. This has inspired me to start to help wildlife. Now, I will go out and feed animals and water plants. I needed that push of inspiration that your book gave me.

When I was about halfway through your book, I saw how lonely Lucy was. This reminded me of myself. Just two summers ago, I was an only child, just like Lucy. I started fifth grade with two brothers and a sister. Lucy had a similar experience when David came. This is another way your book has changed me. Now I can see what having a large family is like. Your book showed me how lucky I am to have a family. I will now say yes when my little brothers ask to play. I wish that I read your book earlier, so I would see how important family is. This filled me with joy, knowing that I would grow up with a large family. I am now through your second book. Please write some more inspiring books. You have made me a better brother and ultimately, a better person. Thank you for that.

Later on, I feel this story will help me be a better person. I want to be a part time writer, and your book has helped me. In this way I can see myself like David. Also, David witnessed what could happen to you when you help someone. I was a volunteer at a hurricane shelter place. I am glad I did so. Everybody was so nice and I felt so good. This book has really made me who I am today. Most of the time I go outside. When I stay inside I play with my family. Your book is really moving.

I know now that there is more to life.

I hope more kids will read this story and be inspired just as I have. I have started writing short stories, even though your stories are way better. Thank you for helping me find my way.

Your biggest fan,

Parker Dotson

## **Isaiah Collins**

### ***Maze Runner* by James Dasher**

Crum PK-8

Crum, WV

Teacher—Jenta Cheung

Dear James Dasher,

I use to try once, then stand in shock before walking away in fear of failing again. That all changed when I found a book in the library called the "Maze Runner". I wondered what it was about, so, I checked it out and read it day and night. Page after page, it got more and more exciting. I found myself unable to put it down. In fact, this was the first book I have even been intrigued by. Like a typical boy, reading was not something I enjoyed. In fact, I would say I had great disdain for reading. After finishing your book, I have discovered a love of reading. Now, I am pleased to say that I have read all of your books in the "Maze Runner" series.

After reading the book series, I began to change. I learned to keep moving no matter what happens and to not give up. It encouraged me more and more. Not only did it help me with my bravery, but also heartened me to help my brother out and to not leave him behind.

There was one problem with me and my life. I kept on hitting dead ends. Your book taught me how to think on my feet and how to solve problems. I realized that I could think through any circumstance. I finished your book and discovered that there were multiple books. So, I got to work and started to read the rest of them. Once I

# LEVEL 1: HONORABLE MENTION

did, my life changed forever. I found out my brother had ADHD, it reminded me of when chuck got shot. I won't let that happen to my brother and I stuck with him.

One day I got home from school and I didn't see my brother that day. I found him on the couch sitting down. I asked why I didn't see him that day. He got suspended because he poured hand-sanitizer in his Gatorade and drunk it. I thought that maybe he was joking, but mom said that he wanted to kill himself because he thought no one loved him. I was not spending enough time with him. I read your books for a second time and my perspective changed I thought of my brother and how he needed some attention so I gave it to him. He tries harder in school, and improving in sports. I am pleased to say that he has made many new friends and no longer feels like he is not important.

Now reflecting back on the book, I realize that I am now the one that needs help. I feel invisible. My brother now has his friends and I feel left out. I am stuck in a situation that the answer isn't easy, but I know that if I just keep moving change will come.

Respectively yours,

Isaiah Collins

**Sharon Browning**  
***Because of Winn-Dixie***  
**by Kate DiCamillo**

Crum PK-8

Crum, WV

Teacher—Jenta Cheung

Dear Kate DiCamillo,

I have read your book "Because Of Winn Dixie" and I loved it. The book really helped me when I lost my parents when I was 6. I am 11 now. So, that was 5 years ago. Anyways, reading how Opal was little and her mom moved away reminded me of how my mom and dad tell to heaven. I like to think of Opal, the brown eyed short red hair girl. Even though I have blue eyes and long red hair, we both have freckles. I think of her as me be-

cause and I dealt with similar circumstances.

I liked the part where her Dad "the preacher" was telling Opal 10 things about her Mom since she was 10. Your book has also thought me that it's is easier to make friends then you think. What I used to think that you had to be cool and smart and talented to make friends, but really you just have to meet them and get to know them and real soon they will become your friend. The reason I chose this story was because, I really like this story and I can relate to it. When I was little I had to move from Florida to West Virginia and I was not used to it either. Then I got used to it and then I thought of it as home.

Really when you are little and you find out that your parents just passed away it is hard and it is hard to make you feel better. This book made me feel much, much better. This book was the best book that I have ever read in my lifetime so far. I am saying so far because, I am only 11 and I have more of a lifetime getting older. This book really helped me with me losing my parents. I can be having the worst day ever and I will read this story and it would brighten my day. That is how good this story is. When someone reads this story, it would brighten there day. Even when they have just suffered a loss. They would read this story and it would make there day.

I loved this story because, I have suffered a loss and I read it and it cheered me up it made me feel confident. Before I read this book and after my parents died, I felt like the world was a battlefield. Now, I feel like the world is candy. This book is what it made the world feel like after I read it. To me, this book is what started to build the candy world the I feel now. That is how magical this book is to me. To me this book rebuilt my happiness. It rebuilt my happiness because, when I lost my parents I read this book and It made me happy. It made me happy because, it is a really good story. It is a good mix of funny sad and anger. That is why this book rebuilt my happiness.

Sincerely,

Sharon Browning

# LEVEL 1: HONORABLE MENTION

**Emma Muslin**

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

Hurricane Middle School

Hurricane, WV

Teacher—Rachelle Ochoa

Dear E.B. White,

*Charlotte's Web* was my best friend in first grade. *Charlotte's Web* helped me make friends. It helped me with that by teaching me how to treat friends. Your book taught me to help others. When one character helped another character, that character got something in return. Your book taught me to trust your friends. You won't trust them when you need them if you don't. My best friend in first grade was *Charlotte's Web*.

*Charlotte's Web* taught me that when one door closes, another door opens. Sometime in April of this year, my cousin passed away. I was so sad and I still am. A few months later, I got a new dog. I was super happy. I tried to teach her how to play fetch and to roll over but I was never able to.

I hope you see now that when one door closes, another door opens. When one thing leaves, another thing comes. Next is where I found this in *Charlotte's Web*. Charlotte passed away. A little while after her babies were born. When one door closes, another door opens.

Your s sincerely,

Emma Muslin

**Jordan Kirtley**

***Split Second* by Sophie McKenzie**

Hurricane Middle School

Hurricane, WV

Teacher—Rachelle Ochoa

Dear Sophie McKenzie,

I am currently reading your book, *Split Second*. I find it interesting that you chose to write about two different peoples perspective and life story, rather than just one and leaving it at that. I also find it interesting that the story is written in the past and in England. I am surprised at how much details you use in your story, and you use two characters and the chapters go back and forth between them. Your book shows people what England looked like and was like in the past and shows the tragedies. Your book has taught me a lot on how to get over stuff like that and to always be happy no matter what. I did not think I was going to like your book because it sounded a lot like a history book, but I soon figured out that it wasn't. I like that it is not a history book because I personally find history really boring, I mean it does talk about a bomb blowing up in London in the beginning but that's all really.

I feel like I can relate to one of your characters, Nat, because he lost his parents. First his dad then his mom and that ruined his life. He then had to go to his aunt's house then had to move again because she couldn't afford rent. He had to go to his dad's brothers house which is somewhere new he didn't particularly want to go in the first place. I too have lost both my parents, I can still see my dad, but my mom has left me and I have no clue where she is. Unlike Nat I have no clue what happened to my mom or why she left. As for Charlie I don't think I have anything in common with her other than she lost her brother. I too once again have lost my family but this is my little brother Jackson and little sister Carmon.

# LEVEL 1: HONORABLE MENTION

This book interests me a whole bunch and I think you should make more books. Maybe you could make a book that is before the bomb. Or maybe it turns out Nat's mom is alive somehow. What I'm trying to do is give you ideas for your next book if you write another.

Sincerely,

Jordan

## LEVEL 2: HONORABLE MENTION

**Kara Muncy**

***Eragon* by Christopher Paolini**

Crum PK-8

Crum, WV

Teacher—Rachel Doss

Dear Christopher Paolini,

Books are what I call my "escape". I have anxiety and depression. I'm not very social in school and I feel sad all the time. When I read, it makes my problems disappear. A couple summers ago, things got really hard at home. I would go to the library and spend hours reading. One day I found your book, *Eragon*, and started reading it.

I took it home and my parents were fighting again, so I went to my room and I read it. Soon their voices slowly disappeared, like shadows when the sun sets. I was there, in the book, with Eragon when he was hunting in the spine and found Saphira's egg. I was there when Roran left to fight in the war. I wasn't in my broken home anymore, I was in the kingdom of Alagaesia, right beside Eragon.

I felt a connection to Eragon while I was reading. He was raised by his uncle, I was raised by my aunt. I mean I lived with my parents, but when they fought I would go to my aunts. They fought all the time, so I basically grew up at my aunts. He was an orphan, and truly so was I. My parents didn't care if I came home from my aunts or not. Sometimes for months, I would stay at my aunt's house and read to keep from wondering about my parents. I still worried though even when they didn't worry about me. Eragon wanted to know about his parents, I didn't even want to see my parents. Sometimes when my parents were fighting, I would go outside for a walk. I pretended that I was walking along side Eragon and Brom. That might sound pathetic I know, but it gave me hope. Eragon and I are different, yet the same. His cousin Roran, was my cousin Andy. They were both whisked away when we needed them the most. I felt that I was him in a sort of way.

I want to tell you something about my cousin Andy. He wasn't exactly whisked away, he was handcuffed and forcibly taken to jail. I thought my world ended. He was my big brother, my protector, my rock. I can't tell you what he did, because it would tell you something about me nobody needs to know. I felt like Eragon knew that Roran would be taken away sooner or later, and honestly. I knew that Andy would too. I wanted to get on Saphira and fly away, I wanted to fly like Eragon did when his uncle was killed. Just go and never look back, even when you wanted to.

Your book helped through some bad times. When I hit middle school, things got really bad. Just between us I wanted to die more than once. The only thing that kept me from killing myself was books. I read yours more than any other. It made me laugh, it made me cry, and of course it made me think.

In my eyes, Eragon was going through the same thing I was. Adjusting to being different, to being the underdog, and no one believing in us. We both have to face tremendous battles, and so far we've won each one. I still read it to this day. Right now, I'm going through something I never thought that would happen to me. Just writing this letter helps me.

I also like to write books. They may not be award winners, but I write what I feel. You, yourself, inspired me. You were only nineteen when you wrote *Eragon*, and that's a thick book. I'm thirteen and writing so many short stories, I could probably make a book. Not only did the book, itself make me a better person, but you as an author did as well.

You, Christopher Paolini, helped me through life, inspired me to write, and to imagine things that no one has ever imagined. Previously, all of my creativity was locked into a box in the corner of my mind. When I read your book, it unlocked it. You held the key to my creativity. I used to color in black and white, now they are the most colorful things in my house.

## LEVEL 2: HONORABLE MENTION

You may not have written *Eragon* to mean this much to people, and in my eye's, it's a life-saver. I can't say thank you enough. Not only have you saved my life more than once, you've inspired me to become a writer. One day, I hope that my work will mean as much to someone else as your book has meant to me. You've helped me express feelings that I've kept locked up in the corner of my mind, that I wanted to forget. Now I talk to people. I don't look at their shoes anymore. I used to see the world in black and white, now I see it in color. I used to not be able to fly, now I spread my wings and I soar through the sky like Saphira and Eragon.

Thank you,

Kara Muncy

**Zander Pinson**  
***Wonder* by R.J. Palacio**  
St. Joseph Catholic School  
Huntington, WV  
Teacher—Stephanie Hill

Dear R.J. Palacio,

Originally, I thought people with facial deformities also had mental issues. Then, I read *Wonder*. The way he felt walking around scared me. I would hate to live a life where I was afraid to look up anywhere I would go. Everybody would stare at me and whisper about me. The notes Julian sent Auggie were really, really mean. I didn't know people could be that mean. Reading *Wonder* changed the way I think of people who have facial deformities.

While I read the book, I wondered what I would do in that type of situation. I figured I would be neutral and not be nice or mean to him. Each year, I go to a 5k run for cancer, there is a kid with facial deformities who is always at my tent. I always have thought he had major mental issues. This year though, when I finished *Wonder*, I asked my mom if she knew anyone like Auggie. She said her friend's son had facial deformities, and, it turns out, I knew him too. She said he was

always at the 5k run. I asked her if he had mental issues, and she said he was a normal teenager. I couldn't believe it. He must feel a lot like Auggie.

If I was scared to even look up, I would not live a very good life. I would be afraid to do anything. I don't think anyone should have to live like that. I really wish everyone would read *Wonder*. It might change how some people treat others, especially those with facial deformities. It would change people who treat people with different skin colors, disabilities, less money, and different looks. I am not saying I am not guilty of all those things, I just wish everybody, including myself, would treat "different people" better.

*Wonder* moved me in many different ways. It made me sad as well as happy, and left me shocked after reading it. My favorite character was Jack Will, because he was very tough to leave his group and be friends with Auggie. I certainly wouldn't of done what Jack did, but maybe the world and I will someday. If I ever meet a kid with facial deformities, and anyone picks on them, I will defend him. Before reading *Wonder*, I probably wouldn't have.

Sincerely,

Zander Pinson

**Emily Bench**  
***Red Queen***  
**by Victoria Aveyard**  
The Linsly School  
Wheeling, WV  
Teacher—M. Allison

Dear Madame Aveyard,

There are places in the world that are ruled by a higher class. A higher class that flaunts their power and position by the way they dress, the way they speak and the way they rule. In *Red Queen*, you told the story of a poor girl, with no royal blood, who rose up from the constraints of poverty into a lifestyle of wealth and glamour. I've read other stories about ruthless kings and

## LEVEL 2: HONORABLE MENTION

queens in fantasy kingdoms, and stories about real life rulers. But none of them have captured my attention like this masterfully crafted story of yours.

Mare Barrow showed me that raw ambition resides within us all, but that ambition does not come without a hefty price. I have learned that ambition is only the spark that sets the fire of our dreams and helps us to overcome those obstacles that would stop us. Mare Barrow was that thunderclap that awoke my ambition to succeed in life. I read about her obstacles, her loss, betrayal, heart ache and her pain. The more and more I read, I began to look for her moment of triumph, like waiting for lightning. Though she had a brief moment of royalty, her happiness flickered and dimmed at Maven's betrayal at the end of your spectacular book. This was another low point in her storm of tragedies. It was then when I realized this completely fictional character reflected my own journey.

I was a loud mouthed kid, without a filter of self control, with a bad temper to boot. Ultimately, I began to realize just how quick harsh words can boomerang on you. I was cast out, and abandoned by those I thought were my best friends. Not because I was mean, but because another person threw my bad tempered words back to me in a fit of rage. That experience made me rethink not just the way I spoke, but the way I thought and the way I acted. So I changed. I still struggle with it, but I try everyday. Simply put, just like Mare, when I changed, the way people viewed me changed. I mended my broken friendships, and used my boldness and confidence as a tool, not a weapon and my eyes were opened and I began to see others being bullied like myself. It made me want to protect others, just like Mare! I adore Mare Burrow not because of what she has done, but because I see so much of myself in her.

The Red Queen has taught me so much about myself and how to value and help others. You are an amazing writer that inspire so many young children like me to become whatever we choose. Your book has enlightened me to so many aspects of myself and others. I have learned to define myself on my own actions, instead of listen-

ing to others to define myself, for I am like lightning: I shine so bright and fierce that people are in awe by me. Madame Aveyard, thank you. Thank you for your dynamic characters, inspirational themes, thrilling tales, and your dedication of making truly wonderful works of literature.

Sincerely,

Emily Bench

**Devlin Daugherty**  
***Welcome to Holland***  
**by Emily Kingsley**  
John Adams Middle School  
Charleston, WV  
Teacher—Mary Frances Williams

Dear Emily Kingsley,

A certain poem you wrote has a very deep meaning in my life and the life of my family. Though its message rings true in many walks of life, it pertains especially to us because of Aidan, my brother. Twelve years ago he was born with Down syndrome, a condition that I believe you know well. When he was born, my parents were shocked to learn that their new baby wasn't what others consider 'normal'. After coming home from the hospital, my mother had to contemplate how to convey to her office that her child had been born with a genetic defect. She knew she didn't want people to pity the fact that Aidan was born with Down syndrome, but she didn't know how to communicate that to her peers. A couple days after coming home, a family friend dropped by with a packet of information concerning Down syndrome. Within the package, there was a poem that changed my mother's outlook on the situation, and inspired her to write a heartfelt letter to her coworkers. That poem was *Welcome to Holland*.

Years later, when I was old enough to understand the message of your poem, my parents told me to read it. At first I took it at face value, and did not glean much from its words, but soon I began to realize its true meaning. Though I've never had a child with a disability, or any child



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at that, I do have a bother who is challenged because of a genetic disease. Life with Aidan is anything but mundane, and a lot of it is hard, but your poem has made me look at my situation in a different way. I'm never going to be a typical brother, and I understand that now. I can't fill any stereotypes, and I am going to have to help him with a lot more than most brothers would. I will never be the sibling that everyone else is, but that opened up a world of possibilities for me that I would never have come to otherwise.

Through the gift, as I have come to realize it is, of Aidan being born with Down syndrome, I have been able to learn life lessons well beyond my years. I have learned the true meaning of not judging a book by its cover, by seeing into Aidan's struggles and knowing him for more than just a child sitting in the special education classes. In 'Holland' I have met many who are challenged as my brother is, each in their own various ways. When in one life, I may have looked at them and saw only their low intellect, or their wheelchairs and sickly physical appearance, now I see a living human being with their own strengths and weaknesses and amazing personalities. I have had to learn patience, or as much as I can handle, working with my brother. And I have learned very early that you have to accept people for who they are.

In The Bible, Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, and to love them unconditionally no matter who they are and what they have done. In Italy, those who hear this may try, but almost always fall short when it comes to murderers and rapists and the lowest rungs of our society. In Holland things are different, not for all but for many. I have experienced this true, unconditional love with Aidan, and many like him in Holland. Aidan has his fits and his bad moods, but most of the time he is one of the most cheerful kids you will ever meet. Whenever you're feeling down, no matter how angry you are, he's there to comfort you and tell you everything's going to be alright. It doesn't matter if you were just being mean to him or leaving him out, he's always there for you. I wish that I could be as loving and forgiving as he is, and he makes me strive for that every day. I

may have never experienced this love if we hadn't been gifted with Aidan, and taken my own trip to Holland.

In reading your poem, I have understood all of this. It is nothing to be ashamed of, having a brother with Down syndrome. Though it can be harder, and less flashy than Italy, Holland works its own magic. If Aidan had been born without any genetic conditions, sure he may be easier to deal with at times, sure he may be cognitively smarter and I could treat him as any other younger sibling, but an entire chunk of my life, my time spent in Holland, would never have existed. Some of the most amazing and caring people I've ever met, the life lessons I've picked up over the years would have all gone to the normalities of main stream life. And when I want to yell and punch and kick, and wonder why my brother was born with such a condition, I think back to everything that has happened. Everything that has made me who I am. If I hadn't landed in Holland, I would not be the person I am today, and that would be my loss.

As I read your poem, again and again I realize the truth hidden within. Every time I look to it, I find something new to apply to my life with Aidan. Through your poem, my perspective on life has been formed in a profound way. My values have been shaped by your poem, and I believe this has created a better version of me. My time in Holland has taught me a lot about life and its struggles, and the caring people who I have met there have helped me through it. Though Italy may have been what was planned, Holland is where I ended up, and that is where I will stay. Thank you for helping me to see the good things in my situation with Aidan. Thank you for helping me understand life with a Down syndrome brother. And thank you for showing me how to love life in Holland.

Sincerely,

Devlin Daugherty

## LEVEL 2: HONORABLE MENTION

**Julia Presevati**

***To Kill a Mockingbird***

**by Harper Lee**

John Adams Middle School

Charleston, WV

Teacher—Mary Frances Williams

Dear Harper Lee,

When I was informed by my teacher to write a letter to an author whose writing spoke to me, I immediately knew who I was writing to. Your Novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*, has opened my eyes to problems in our society and ways of life, in a way I had never seen them before. I will always have a place in my heart for your book.

I read the novel in my fifth grade talented and gifted class (TAG). The story was instantly brought to life by my teacher, who's voice matched each character perfectly. She made me love your novel. We would have discussions about the conflicts in your novel, such as racism.

I can relate to this topic, since I have an adopted Haitian brother. Some of the things he has been called truly makes me sick to my stomach, but I know some of the African American characters in your novel had it way worse. I admire their strength and self control, and that's exactly what I tell my brother to do.

In your novel, Atticus quotes, "when it's a white man's word against a black man's, the white man always wins." And although racism isn't as intense in our day and age we still have racial conflicts throughout the whole world. We have our own police officers shooting citizens just because of the color of their skin. How are we supposed to accomplish successful things in this world when we haven't even learned to love each other yet?

But enough about the lessons in the book. My favorite part of your novel is your storytelling and writing itself. The plot of your book was phenomenal, and while reading it,

I felt as if I knew the characters personally. I felt like another neighborhood kid on South Alabama Avenue going on adventures with Jem and Scout. I, personally, do not favor reading. It's not that I don't like it, but I'm just not motivated to do so. But your book made me eager for class each day. I wanted to hear about Atticus' case, and about Boo Radley. I wanted to hear about my next adventure with Jem and Scout. I wanted to see how each chapter would unfold. So thank you, for not only writing this breathtaking novel, but for giving me two hundred and eighty-one pages to get away from the cruel world.

Sincerely yours,

Julia Preservati

**Nolan Weiss**

***Dream Again***

**by Isaiah Austin**

The Linsly School

Wheeling, WV

Teacher—Maggie Allison

Dear Mr. Austin,

*Dream Again* was a book that motivated me to not give up. I'm not only talking about the sport that I love, which is basketball I'm talking about the hard challenges that come upon me each and every day.

I now look at myself with embarrassment because there are days where I wonder if basketball is even the sport for me and I want to give up because I simply can't make a shot. Then I look at you as a role model, and see that you lost an eye. I can only imagine the obstacles you had to overcome and the adjustments you had to make. The odds were stacked against you but you kept going and didn't stop. You taught me in this part of your life that no matter what the challenge is, keep going.

## LEVEL 2: HONORABLE MENTION

The next thing you taught me is to not only recover from an injury but to come back stronger than before. Every time you had troubles with your eye and you had to take time off, you came back knowing you had something to prove to yourself and everyone else. This incident also showed me that anything can happen in sports and you can't control that. I didn't only notice you for your story, I recognized you simply because of your day to day work ethic. I noticed you because of your talent and for the great person that you are. When I talk about you being a great person, a fantastic example is this book. Many people who are constantly surrounded with fans and social media don't find a need to reach out to them because they're satisfied with their position. You used your platform to motivate others.

May 15, 2014 was a challenge for me. The day where I was called to go immediately to the hospital. After a month I was diagnosed with Auto Immune Hepatitis which is a liver disease. Months after this I felt terrible, I couldn't go outside and play basketball without feeling like passing out. I wondered many times if I should even be playing and if I should just give up. I knew that I would have this disease for my whole life and it would not go away. I then found your book and saw the challenges you overcame and I started to think that my condition isn't that bad. From that day on, you changed my whole mindset on my condition and how hard I wanted to work.

Later on, you were diagnosed with Marfan Syndrome. This challenge taught me that anything can happen at any time no matter how healthy you are. You were diagnosed with this at the NBA combine, just a few days before the draft. Knowing how close you were to reaching your dream and knowing the obstacles that you overcame, I could only imagine how frustrating it was for you. The outcome was the same as every other challenge and it was that you came back better than ever and you are now back to playing basketball overseas.

I wanna say thank you, you have taught me so many lessons that I will carry forever and things that I think about everyday when I want to give up.

Sincerely,

Nolan Weiss

**Mia Camps**  
***Tease* by Amanda Maciel**  
The Linsly School  
Wheeling, WV  
Teacher—Maggie Allison

Dear Amanda Maciel,

I have read several books in my life, but I've never had such an impactful one like yours. *Tease* is such a great book and I think every teenager should read it because bullying goes on everywhere and all the time.

I read your book *Tease* over the summer as a summer reading book. Before I read your book I never realized how bully can affect someone's life. After reading your book it really changed my perspective on bullying. I normally see bullying in my everyday life at school, but I never really thought about what it can do to others.

Your book, Amanda Maciel will forever change me. After reading about Sara bullying Emma until she committed suicide was terrible, and such an emotional book, and will make me now stand up for bullying. I will also be slower with my words and actions. And what I mean by that is I will think about my actions before I act.

This book has touched me in so many ways. I, myself have been bullied. My friends and also family have been bullied. I always think to myself why are people like that. Till this day I'm not really sure why people call you names, and "tease"

## LEVEL 2: HONORABLE MENTION

you, I just don't get it. Maybe people are just jealous of you. Maybe people are bullied too, and bully you to take out their emotions. Maybe people are straight out mean. They just don't realize what they're doing, and their effect on someone's life.

Bullying has affected so many people in the world, especially teenagers, and it continues to get worst. Bullying has affected me too in so many ways. There has been a big portion of my life when people have bullied me. It started off as name calling, then it continued to get worst. The bully would make fun of those who I love most, my family, which is not ok. Maybe if it were just me it would be ok, but that's my family, whom I love so dear. Okay wait, it's not ok whatsoever.

So there was this girl, who was my best friend. We did everything together, growing up. Until she started to be a bully. At first I didn't realize it was even happening, I just thought that was normal and suppose to happen, but I was wrong. She began with name calling, then blaming me for things I did not do. Things started to get bad and out of hand, her parents never really realized that she was suffering from depression. My friend was being bullied too. She told her parents that she was getting bullied at school, and things were being put to an end. Now neither her or I were being bullied, and I'm so thankful that she never made the choice to commit suicide, like Emma In your book, *Tease*. That is such big and personal connection I have with your book. So I appreciate that this book was written to people, to read, and realize what bullying can really do.

I guess before I read your book I was afraid to stand up to bullying. I was afraid I would get bullied for standing up for someone. Now when I think about it, who cares what someone thinks of me for standing up to bullying because it's wrong and I don't want to lose a friend like Emma in the book *Tease*.

Your book will forever impact me, it's life changing. I hope that more and more people like me

will read your book. It will for sure change each and every person who reads it, in their own ways. This book will continue to impact people, and make a change to bullying. We will put a stop to bullying.

Sincerely,

Mia Camps

## LEVEL 3: HONORABLE MENTION

**Shelby Kent**

***A Dog's Purpose* by Bruce Cameron**

Ravenswood High School

Ravenswood, WV

Teacher—Sarah Brown

Dear Bruce Cameron,

When I was in elementary school, I had a hard time learning, making friends, even just trying to speak gave me stress and anxiety. Everything changed when my mom brought home a little curly blonde-haired puppy. Originally when I found out I was getting a dog, I wanted a Chihuahua. My mom knew that it would not be a good fit for me, so she got Cookie instead. This dog she brought into our lives became my best friend, my therapy dog, my companion for over eight years. She gave me the confidence to talk to people, to be out in public. She comforted me when I didn't have any friends; she made it all better because she was my best friend.

Sadness, pain, and anger are all things that I felt when I lost my beloved, Cookie. Anyone who has lost a pet knows the pain you feel when your longtime friend passes. I didn't even have time to prepare for the inevitable. I just know that one day, she got sick and there was nothing I could do about it. We tried medication, even though the doctor said that she couldn't guarantee it would make her any better. I tried everything, I really did, but nothing can stop life. Life seems to have its own set of rules, even if it's not the ones we want.

I remember one day, I was watching TV, and I saw an ad for a movie about a dog. It seemed so happy and joyful that it made me instantly want to see it. Anyone that knows me, knows that I'm passionate about dogs more than most. So, of course, I dragged my family along with me to go watch it on the opening week. Little did I know, that I was unprepared for all the emotions that would ensue. I laughed, I cried, I had every emotion that a human is able to feel. I loved it more than I could ever imagine. After watching the film, I knew I had to read *A Dog's Purpose*. Let me just say, books are always better than the movies. Though I enjoyed both, your book goes more into detail about Bailey and his adventures throughout his many lives.

This book made me think much about Cookie. For just a little while, I could pretend that it was her. That I was reading the book from her point of view instead of Bailey's. It especially made me think of her each time Bailey's life ended. It made me think much about our last days together. I knew how hard it was for me, but I never even thought how hard it probably was for her. I often hear a quote that says, "A dog is part of your life, but you are a dog's whole life." This book really put into perspective for me what that those words actually mean. Just by reading this book, we can see how much Bailey depended on Ethan and the true love that he had for his boy.

"Every dog happens for a reason." This quote is on the front of your book, and I feel this is one of the truest things I have ever read. I believe that when it was Cookie's time to go, it was because her purpose with me had been fulfilled. I'd like to think that maybe, somehow in some way, she came back just as Bailey had. She is serving a new purpose for someone else that needed her more than I. After Cookie left us, my heart let in a new soul. His name is Anakin. Personally, I think Anakin is one of the best things to ever happen to me. In my sadness, he lifted my spirits, brought joy back into my life, and I think he, just as Cookie had, has helped shaped me into the person I am today. He makes me a better person and want to be better, though I know he's not Cookie returning to me like Bailey did with Ethan.

Just as Bailey is to Ethan, Anakin is my "doodle dog". He makes me laugh with all his crazy antics. There's never a dull moment when he's around. Your book not only reminded me of my time with Cookie, but it made me think of Anakin. Your book made me view him differently; It made me stop and put into perspective how my actions could affect him. I would never want him to view his life as Bear did. It makes me wonder if he truly loves his life and what he thinks about. I think he does, but these questions circle around in my head because you created this book from a dog's perspective on life.

"The job of a good dog was ultimately to be with them, remaining by their sides no matter what

## LEVEL 3: HONORABLE MENTION

course their lives might take". Your book shows the true companionship between a dog and his love for his master. We know that even in real life, dogs have an unbreakable bond with their masters. For instance, Hachiko. Hachi was a dog that would accompany his master to Shibuya Station every day. At the end of the day, when his master got off of work, he would still be waiting. One day, his master never returned. Little did Hachi know, his master had passed away while he was at work. Hachi continued his wait for his master at the station for over nine years. He never gave up hope that one day they would be reunited again. This is just one real life example of how much dogs love their owners. Your story perfectly depicts this love as well. Even though Bailey left Ethan, he still remembered him as his one and only boy. Though he loved his other masters, Bailey knew Ethan was his one and only. After many years of being separated, he still found his way back to Ethan's side, even though Ethan never knew.

The only question I'm left with after finishing the book is, what is the meaning of life? What is our purpose? I pondered this for quite some time. I think the meaning of life is what we want it to be. Our meaning is to find something that truly makes us feel fulfilled, whether that be in our work or our personal lives. For me, I would like to think that my meaning in life is to help animals whether it be through a job or just volunteer work. Whatever I can do to help any species, big or small, would make me truly feel like I've made a difference. Your book put into perspective how, like Bear, many animals are mistreated. Animals do not have a voice to defend themselves. So, I would like to be that voice. I think that is my purpose.

Your book touched me in a way the others have not been able to. I know what it's like to lose a beloved pet. Though I didn't read this book until two years after my sweet dog passed away, it still impacted me so much. It gave me comfort to think that she could have returned and been given a new purpose, help someone through life just as she had me. I will never be able to express the gratitude I feel towards you for writing such a wonderful book, Mr. Cameron. Thank you.

Sincerely

Shelby Kent

**Logan Foley**  
***Animal Farm* by George Orwell**  
Greenbrier West High School  
Charmco, WV  
Teacher—Juanita Spinks

Dear George Orwell,

When I was young I believed everything my politicians said. The President was a good guy and my elected officials were an irrefutable source of wisdom and guidance that I believed would never lead me astray. Then I read your book "Animal Farm" and I started to see politics and government in a different light. I began to realize largely due to writing, that it is all just a show put on to distract us from the pig moving into the house and taking our freedoms.

When I began looking at government officials I started to see the similarities between them and the "pigs" in your story. I see now that the politics you wrote about were not just a history lesson, they were a reoccurring trend. I feel like if everyone in America read your book, the citizens in our country would clearly see the similarities between what happened in Animal Farm and our current times. Then we could finally start changing the problems that are destroying our country.

I will be honest in saying I don't like to read, and your book was forced on me as an assignment. However, reading your book changed my thoughts on reading as a whole. If I was missing out on what the leaders of our country were doing what else was I missing out on? You single handedly sparked my interest in reading nonfiction, realistic fiction, articles, essays, and books. I will forever be grateful to you for showing me how much I can learn from a book.

Reading Animal Form also sparked my interest in Current Events. I appreciate the lessons and endless knowledge one can receive from a book, but you also taught me to pay attention to the things that are going on around me. When I sit

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and watch the news or read the headlines for political information, I can't help but see what's happening all across the globe. Reading these things and having an understanding of current events has helped me on tests, aided me in speeches, and given me countless conversation topics.

Along with all of the other things you and your book did for me, you helped me into adulthood. I believe every adult should have a voice, and a political opinion. You gave me mine. Your tragic scenes and brutal truths showed me that not everything in life is bright and happy. Boxer was my favorite character, and seeing him sent to be turned into glue after working himself to death was heart breaking. I related this scene to my grandfather. He was a great man, he worked extremely hard throughout his life to make sure his wife and four kids never went hungry and had their necessities. He came from a rough childhood, but did his very best to change his families lives for the better, and he did. My grandparents started a business selling knick-knacks on a flea market table and turned it into an impressive business.

When things were finally great for my grandfather, he found out he had stage 4 pancreatic cancer. There was no saving him, the chemotherapy did not help, the cancer spread, and he died 5 months later. We had him cremated, now he sits in a little black box on my grandmother's fireplace, not much different than being turned into glue. Having this scene to relate to helped me through the time in my life when I lost my grandfather, one of my best friends. I knew that if you could write about something so similar that someone out there was someone going through the same thing, or something even worse.

I will never forget the many things you and your book taught me. Thank you for opening my eyes. Thank you for showing me the power of reading. Thank you for sparking ideas and interests, and thank you for helping me through a hard part in life. You and your book will forever be an important part of my life.

Sincerely,  
Logan Foley

**Taylor Childers**  
***13 Reasons Why* by Jay Asher**  
Roane County High School  
Spencer, WV  
Teacher—Sati Maharaj-Boggs

Dear Jay Asher,

Growing up I was a happy and soft-hearted young girl, innocent and mostly quiet. Life was joyous and easy, until my mind darkened as I got older and became aware I was frightened by everything. Having a difficult time talking to people, answering phones, or even just asking for extra napkins at a restaurant. Going through school and not understanding subjects, but not being able to raise your hand to ask a question because the fear of asking it wrong, stuttering, or feeling less intelligent than the other students for not understanding was a challenge. So keeping things to myself is what I became good at, who else better but yourself to keep your own secrets?

A few years ago, when I had just started high school, I was super anxious. Not only because it was a whole new school, but for me, it was a whole new county as well. Starting school was frustrating. As the year went on, my stress levels were skyrocketing, and I began to develop anxiety problems. Worrying about everything except for the things that were actually important. I started failing classes and getting behind in school. I started to space out and when I would get home I would be so worried and overwhelmed that I would go straight to my room and sleep or just think things out.

Pulling away from my family was the last thing I wanted to do, but it was happening. I began becoming really tired and overall sad and very irritable. One-night I sat down and started thinking about my childhood memories, and how happy my family was. My mom, dad, and my little brother are my whole world. That thought broke me. I went into a dark stage of sadness, and my mind and thoughts were hurting to the point where I was shaking, physically hurting. I just wanted it to stop. I dried my tears and made it look like I was fine. I went to the bathroom and I took one of my dad's razor blades and a wet washcloth. I went to my room and before I reach

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the top of the stairs, tears had already started streaming back down my cheeks.

I'm going to let you assume what happened then. I still have scars on my arms and legs from that night and much more. School went on, my spacing out continued, and the sadness followed me everywhere, like a lioness stalking her innocent prey. It was nearly every night I would sit and ponder about things that would break me down brick by brick. At this point, I knew something needed to change.

I wanted to tell someone about how I had been feeling but I was scared. Scared that they wouldn't understand and scared about how they would react. I knew I couldn't tell them in person because I wouldn't be able to get it out. I also didn't want anyone to feel sorry for me or think that I was a weak person. I wouldn't be able to talk from all the crying. I would completely go mute and not a word would be able to be made of what I was attempting to say. I went to school the next day and I was thinking about how I would tell someone. I decided to log onto my school computer and email my mom and tell her what had been going on. I typed and retyped and tried putting in into a more settling way so it didn't hurt her as much. I unnervingly hit send. I knew it would be a while before she got it, as it was only eight in the morning but it was nerve-racking all the way up to the point when she messaged me back.

When she messaged me back she asked why I hadn't told her sooner and that she would make me a doctor's appointment. I was relieved that she had understood and wasn't upset with me. When I got home she sat me down and even though she knew what had been happening I was still lost for words. She didn't make me talk; she just comforted me and told me everything would be alright.

When I went to the doctor's office I answered a lot of questions and I was told that I had been dealing with depression and anxiety. I received medicine to help calm my nerves and ease my depression, and I was referred to a therapist who could help me be able to talk about what I been going through. She had been in the same building so they went on an sent me over to her. She was

very confidential and had asked my mom to say outside in the waiting room. She walked me in and instead of sitting down in the doctor's seat she sat beside me. She could sense what I had just explained to the other doctors and she didn't want to overwhelm me even more. She sat down and hugged me, and told me it takes someone with a great amount of courage to come forth and tell someone about that. She asked me simple little questions that gave me some relief. She told me that we would work in small portions over a longer period of time.

I continued to see her and she helped me understand and know how to explain my depression to my mom and friends. To this day I still see her regularly and she helps me cope. Reading the book *13 Reasons Why* helped me to understand that people care about my well being and life. It made me realize that if I were to have let the sadness continue, to the point of where I made a decision that I would not be able to take back by taking my own life. I would not only take away my pain, but it would hurt my loving family much worse. My depression was stealing my happiness and energy. It was slowly drowning me, and I could feel it every breath I took. Seeking help was the best possible choice could have made, not only for myself but for my family and friends as well. Opening up and letting people who cared in, helped me succeed and achieve greatness and prolong my future. Thank you for making me realize there is always a positive side to everything.

Overcoming difficult tasks is a struggle, but it is possible. Facing your fears takes a lot of guts and perseverance. Taking your insecurities and putting them out to the world and letting people see the real you for who you are is an important step. All of these were things I knew I didn't want to do, maybe because I was frightened to ask for help, or let people in. Reading *13 Reasons Why* made me realize that having a helping hand isn't a bad thing. Not all battles are easy to fight alone, but you don't have to. Reaching out for help was one of the most thoughtful choices not only for myself but for my family as well.

Sincerely,  
Taylor N. Childers



## LEVEL 3: HONORABLE MENTION

**Makayla Lilly**  
***Divergent* by Veronica Roth**  
Greenbrier West High School  
Charmco, WV  
Teacher—Juanita Spinks

Dear Veronica Roth,

I have patiently waited for a human being, such as you, to open the minds of the intelligent, rather curious society that settle among us. You have stated this idea, an idea that trembles the way our Nation has been put together. A significant civilization, destroyed by its own people. We are forced to make choices, that should not be mandatory nor used against us. Yet, making choices and being placed in a category of not just one, but many people with similar interest is our Country's way of living.

At a younger age, I was bullied. I was different, the other children did not accept that. They didn't accept me, for the young innocent child I was. These children took my generosity into mind, as an opportunity. They began to substitute my kindness for weakness. They took advantage of me, they cursed me, they tried to change my name once as well. They didn't agree with my love for books, or my big nerdy glasses, that I was forced to wear. They picked and pulled at my hair until I would scream, mercy! I was the girl, the girl that everyone knew what was a pushover, and I could do absolutely nothing to change that.

I grieved as the days went on, for a friend, just one. Someone to share a game of four square with or even just throw a ball to. Football, basketball, softball anything at all. Someone to practice my reading with or to share my drawings with. I loved art, It was a way for me to spill my emotions out onto a canvas, even at a young age, but all the other kids seemed to despise the idea of painting with their fingers. Mostly the girls, they hated using paint, especially when it spilt onto their clothing when they wouldn't be paying attention to what they were doing. Sometimes they would spill the paint on the floor to distract the teacher, or for their amusement, blame it on me.

Lonely, sitting in the library with all the teachers. They accompanied me while I ate my lunch. I could hear the other children in the background, the taunting echoing of children's laughter blaring through the vents in the walls. I wished for that. Other kids had dreams, big dreams of being rich and flying, becoming superheroes. I dreamt of one day just being accepted, being a simple child living in a simple world, but the world wasn't effortless at all. I remember eavesdropping behind my bedroom wall as my parents watched the news. They never allowed me to watch it with them because they said the world was a harsh place, but I did anyways. I needed to understand why this was happening to me, and then I realized I wasn't the only child suffering. I thought that changing my personality completely, would be my only way I could obtain friends.

Who am I? I didn't recognize myself when I looked in the mirror. I hid my glasses in my bookbag, I changed into a dress, I even stole my mother's "special" lipstick, snuck it to school in my pocket, and smeared it across my lips before my teacher rushed us out of the gymnasium for class. This would be the first time I had stepped into the cafeteria since the beginning of the year. I was nervous, hands shaking and dripping of sweat, I walked up to the "popular" table. As I sat down everyone stared at me as if I was a new student. The sad thing was, they had forgotten my name. They questioned me, asking for my name, where I live. Out of nowhere, a girl stood up. She had bleach blonde hair and blue eyes. His nose was a little crooked, it shifted to the right just a smidge. She had a high pitched voice and spoke as if everything was urgent, it was like the entire world stopped turning and revolved around her. She looked at me directly, pointing her index finger as if she was a teacher or a leader of some sort. She looked back and smirked at the other girls, laughed, turned back to me and said "you're in."

I was apart of something. I was involved in a group of girls that were my age and possibly, hopefully shared the same interest as I, now did. It was exhilarating, my heart began to pump out of my chest. Months passed, and I was bored. These girls wanted nothing do with reading or art. They were boy crazed, it's all they talked

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about. I missed reading books and being able to see with my glasses. My legs were constantly freezing and the lipstick just chapped my lips leaving sores from me biting the dead skin off. This was not me, it wasn't who I wanted to be either. I realized that If I had to become someone completely different, then these girls weren't worth it. I was better off as myself, friends or not.

Once I read *Divergent*, my past experiences were thought upon thoroughly. I knew I had made the right decision, after truly connecting with the book. Tris, a character from the novel shocked me. She was different, she was forced to make a choice and she did. She was different, she was unlike the other people who stood forth in their groups. All she wanted to do was understand what was going on and why she was different than the others. We wanted to know why we were forced into such cruelty of speech. Why were we chosen to take that position. We both showed bravery in being ourselves in the end and going with what our hearts wanted. So thank you, Veronica Roth, for giving the world something they most dearly needed to hear.

Sincerely,

Makayla Lilly

**Deianara Black**  
***Battlefield of the Mind for Teens***  
**by Joyce Meyer**  
Petersburg High School  
Petersburg, WV  
Teacher—Kristie Stump

Dear Joyce Meyer,

Your book, *Battlefield of the Mind for Teens*, changed my life. I have never read another published piece of literature more useful to me than this. By extracting sensible words of advice, knowledge, and lessons from the experiences of others, I have drastically modified the way I think with this book. I approach situations differently. It's like my eyes have been opened to a whole new world.

To be honest with you, books have never really been my cup of tea. You see, I have attention def-

icit disorder, so I find it difficult to pay attention long enough to read one. It stresses me out trying to peruse a book until I can understand it. However, I was very excited to read this one. That's one major thing that *Battlefield of the Mind for Teens* has helped me with- my negative thoughts regarding my ADD. I used to feel like I had to push myself harder to get to the same place as other people. Once I got into high school, I began doubting that I would be able to succeed in college. I was overwhelmed because the work was hard enough and was only to get harder. I figured college might be too stressful for me and that they would not allow me extra time to finish assignments. Without additional time, I was afraid I would fail because I wouldn't be able to complete things.

After being persuaded by your book to think about the positive side of life, I have come to great realizations. I thought about how high my GPA was currently and all the accomplishments that I had achieved throughout high school. I realized that I have done quite well despite my hindrance. Through your book, I was reminded how Jesus went through very difficult times, yet remained positive and always gave hope to others. Before reading this book, I would always focus on the challenges that came with school work. Not anymore, thanks to you, Joyce. Now I think of myself as being able to take hold of my future and make it a success.

Joyce, you have made me want to strive to think like Jesus through this book. You have taught me that to think like Jesus I need to "resist the negativity and despair that robs me of life". This new way of thinking has not only affected my school life, but also my body image. After reading your book, I can look at myself in the mirror and focus on my positive traits. I have eliminated the negativity of body image; therefore, I can now live my life happily and be content with how I look.

*Battlefield of the Mind for Teens* has also shown me that to think like Jesus I must "be thankful". So, I thank God for how beautiful he has made me anytime I have a negative thought about myself. I also thank him for the littlest of things, such as helping me to catch my phone before it falls, or for helping me not to be late for events.

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Expressing appreciation releases joy in me as I exhibit the "mind of Christ".

Overall, reading this book has positively changed the way I view things. I have improved how I feel about myself. I am more content with who I am and happy with my performance. I can't thank you enough for the difference your book has made in my life. You have given me confidence that I have never been able to obtain before. I am now at peace with myself. I didn't expect to get all that I did from your book, but I am surely gratified by the impact. I can gladly say that I have a more optimistic perception of myself. Your book *Battlefield of the Mind for Teens* is life changing!

With gratitude,

Deianara Black

### **Emma Strickland**

#### ***Falling Into Place* by Amy Zhang**

Roane County High School

Spencer, WV

Teacher—Sati Maharaj-Boggs

Dear Amy Zhang,

Edward P. Morgan once said, "A book is the only place in which you can examine a fragile thought without breaking it, or explore an explosive idea without fear it will go off in your face. It is one of the few havens remaining where a man's mind can get both provocation and privacy." I never had the privilege to experience this feeling until I read your book, *Falling Into Place*. When I was growing up, I hated reading. Eventually, I tried to read more, I wanted an escape from reality that television would not satisfy. Although, I could never find a book to grasp my attention until this one. One that made me see a little bit of myself in everyone. It lit something up inside me, turned the gears in my head, touched my heart. It was more than just a relatable character; the lyrical quality of your book was like a bow making music with the strings of my emotions.

The way that the characters experienced life, especially Liz and her ability to push themselves through their pain, has taught me so much. Everyone deals with similar things in their heads, but the characters in your story seemed to believe that it was better to keep their problems to themselves while reaching out through changes in their behavior. I understand; I do not open up very easily. People I "know" seem to want to believe what they want to believe about others, based on appearance, or whatever, so it is not often that when I do share that they even hear what I am trying to say. After reading your book, I cannot help but wonder how many of my peers feel the same way; as if no one is listening, no one cares. There are many things that people wish for; everyone has something that others can never have, like expression. It may not be the absence of others, or even love; it could be the absence of communication. Loneliness is believing that you are insignificant, meaningless. Loneliness is sinking in a sea of people. Loneliness is ice, but it is also unbearable heat, a terrible paradox.

My parents divorced when I was younger. I was already aware it was happening. Unfortunately, I was still not ready for the news. I was afraid of the shame of going to school and being the kid from a single-parent home. Everyone else seemed to have two parents watching them at the holiday school play or a family to go camping with. Not to mention the financial loss; a lost home, a lost neighborhood, lost friends. For me, I lost contact with my extended family, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. I also lost contact with my father, even though he was never really there for me in the first place; I now know how he truly felt.

I connected with every aspect of your book, but Liz Emerson really struck a chord. She shares my same loneliness. After the divorce, my mother and I spent six years trying to find a place to settle, and I hated every place she chose. At the time, I was too young to understand, so I believe a part of me blamed her for what was happening, but of course, I put the most of the blame on myself. For that reason, I had an antisocial sort of behavior. My grades suffered. I lost my motivation in school. I guess

## LEVEL 3: HONORABLE MENTION

you could say not studying was a form of rebellion, and apathy. I really didn't care what became of me. For the longest time, I stayed isolated to my bedroom, drowning in my sorrow; all I wanted was to go home.

At last, my mother and I settled, things were looking up for us as a family. Although, with every positive in life, there always comes a negative. I unexpectedly lost my father, just as Liz did. Granted, Liz was a lot younger than I, but that's why it hurts the most. As I said before, we were never really that close, at least I thought we weren't. There were so many memories, yet not enough. I finally understand why; I understand his reasoning for abandoning me. I wish I could've spent more time with him while he was still here; I wish I could've helped him through this complicated thing called life; but instead, I chose to ignore him.

This book has helped me learn that human beings aren't very good at helping each other. Most would find it easier to fix a computer problem than assist a friend in the midst of a crisis. In a way, I am one of those people. I listen as much as I can, but I feel as though it is not enough. I try to hard to improve situations that simply are not improvable. When it comes to these psychological crises, the harder you try, the further you get from accomplishing your goal. No matter what, a person can never understand exactly how another one feels.

*Falling Into Place* allowed my brain to explore ideas and memories that I had not thought about much. It introduced an orchestra to my simple mind. I want to thank you for writing a book that gave me that feeling, the feeling of realization. It inspired me to pay attention to my surroundings, rather than escape them through reading. There have been the books that just made me feel grateful. There have been books that made me laugh out loud, but never one that made me cry the way yours did. Your book, Ms. Zhang, has left a mark. I am glad that I made the time to read your book, and that it touched me so deeply.

Sincerely,

Emma Strickland

**Gabrielle Hess**  
***Dreamland* by Sarah Dessen**  
Roane County High School  
Spencer, WV  
Teacher—Sati Maharaj-Boggs

Dear Sarah Dessen,

Sometimes we feel like no one understands us. After suffering a tragedy, we tend to believe that our pain and hurt is indescribable. The reiteration of "I'm so sorry," and "it'll get better," just stirs up that pain in our hearts because we believe that no matter how much we're told that it will get better, it really won't. To us, the ones hurt by loss or pain, those words seem to mean as little as a crack in the pavement. They're there, but they don't push us forward or stop us from wanting to destroy ourselves. How could someone possibly empathize with the pain we hold in our heart?

I thought that a lot. The day that I got the message that I had lost him, my whole world crumbled around me; everything had been shattered. I had loved him so much and held him so dearly to my heart I didn't think that he could ever slip away. We held a bond that was indescribable. I was in actual physical pain. I wanted nothing more than to disappear along with him.

You always hear about tragedies like car wrecks claiming the lives of family and friends but you never realize that it could happen to someone you love. That gut-wrenching, heart-stopping feeling I got when I saw that message ached. It was as if I, too, had my life taken away, only instead it thrust me into my own little hell in my mind.

Before that incident, I was obsessed with reading. It was impossible for my parents to get me to put down a book and I took them everywhere with me. I read thousands of stories. There was something so beautiful in getting lost in pages of pages of fairy tales and high school romance. I put myself in the main character's shoes and it was as if I was then sucked into their world. Then the incident with Ricky happened.

A few months before I got the news, we had lost everything due to a horrendous flood that took our house and, almost, our lives. The only thing that

## LEVEL 3: HONORABLE MENTION

seemed to calm down the swarming thoughts in my head was reading. The PTSD was hard to get over, but when I read, I was no longer having flashbacks or anxiousness whenever it stormed. I picked up as many books as I could. I even had to resort to online books as we couldn't get to a library and I had ran out of things to read--and with that I was able to escape it all. I remember being curled up on that little inflatable mattress on our Papaw's living room floor in my own little world with a book. I'd stay up all night letting myself get carried away in the stories, escaping my troubles and trading them in for dragons and dangerous daredevils. I was addicted to reading.

However, not long after that was when I got the news. I was so dispirited that reading and writing was now a chore for me. I tried. I still picked up books or a pen, but nothing came to me. I was stuck reading the same paragraph again and again, the constant repetition droning on just like my life had seemed to. I would write a good portion of a page only to scrap it and wait for more inspiration. Everything I wrote just seemed too dull. All I wanted to do was sleep just to see him in my dreams. As unhealthy as it was, I wanted nothing more than to see his face and hear his voice, even if that meant sleeping my life away and creating my own escape. My life came to a halt for more than a year.

Eventually, I started to try to read again, but I was unable to find that same escape. I let myself drag on through the same, monotonous motions in the hopes that maybe somewhere down the road I'd start to piece myself back together again. I started to get better, but I still wasn't me. I wanted nothing more than to disappear.

When I first saw *Dreamland* I was expecting the same thing. All of your books are wonderful, but I figured it'd be hard to attach myself to these characters, also. I was wrong. In fact, with every turn of the page I found myself getting more and more attached. I was finally finding myself and it was as if the book itself was pulling all of my broken parts back together. It brought comfort back to me when I didn't think it was possible. The book seemed to speak to me, whispering sweetly, "You're not

alone," and suddenly I could breathe again.

After the flood and losing Ricky, I felt entirely alone. I wanted to make myself better without any help; to wanted to be strong and independent. So, I started pushing others away, and in their place I filled the void with self-harm. I settled to do what others wanted in an attempt to please them in the hopes that I will gain my own gratification from their praises. I started falling deeper and deeper into the hole until suicide was on my mind daily. It was like a sweet lie in my ear saying that I'd be better off that way. I wanted it all to end.

I feel like Caitlyn and I are similar in those ways. While her sister didn't die, she ran away, and that in itself is hard to deal with, as if she had disappeared just like my Ricky did. She filled herself with sorrow and turned to whatever she could find to get over her sister leaving. Like me, she wanted to be strong, refusing help from others and pushing them away. However, she couldn't do it all on her own. Reading this book helped me realize that I couldn't either. Asking for help doesn't make me weak. In fact, it takes a lot of bravery to do so. I decided to stand up and push through the pain. The quote, "all I could think about was that girl, tom into tiny fragments, with nothing to do but sit and wait to be made whole again," seemed to be speaking right to me. I was that girl, sitting there and waiting to finally be myself again; to be put back together.

Thank you for giving me a new perspective and helping me finally find myself. Your stories give girls like me the voice to speak out and the bravery to push past any obstacle, even if we do need help along the way.

Sincerely,

Gabrielle Hess

## LEVEL 3: HONORABLE MENTION

**Lucas Smith**

***Call Me By My Name***

**by John Ed Bradley**

Greenbrier West High School

Charmco, WV

Teacher—Juanita Spinks

Dear John Ed Bradley,

I was 11 years old when an African-American boy, whom I now consider a brother, named Andre moved in with my family. His mother had died from cancer, and my mother was his music teacher all throughout his childhood. I had known Andre since I was very little, but I never could have imagined he would one day be so close to me.

At the time, I was too young to fully grasp the concept of racism. My family had always raised me to be open minded and accepting of others, despite the area I lived in. When Andre first moved in he was 17 years old, and had gone through many difficult issues in his life. While facing prejudice people in our town, he also fought through cancer and lived to tell the tale. As I grew closer to Andre, I began to notice that he faced issues white people never really had to deal with. This always confused me until about a year ago. I was in English class and we had to read books in our free time, so I picked up a novel I would soon fall in love with titled *Call Me By My Name*. The book immediately sparked my interest when it began to talk about boys playing baseball. At the time, that was all I seemed to care about. The book then picked up and began to discuss Tater Henry's struggles. I immediately connected with the story, and more specifically with Rodney. I felt as though we were alike in many ways because we both became friends with an African-American.

Throughout the novel, Rodney and Tater grew closer and Rodney began to witness first hand what life was like for a black high school student. As I read further, I began to see similarities in the lives of both Tater and Andre. When Tater is discriminated in the story, I looked back to specific events I had with Andre and they became more clear to me. For example, Andre and I got pulled

over by a cop one night and without probable cause, the cop asked Andre to take a sobriety test.

Andre is a very nice person so he complied, but the cop was way too aggressive and hostile for the circumstances. After he realized Andre had done nothing wrong, he rudely told Andre to get home and drove away. After reading your book, situations like this became clear to me and I understood why things like that happen.

Today, I am now 17 years old and Andre is 23. I have come a long way since reading your book, and I would not share the connection with Andre that I do today without the knowledge that your book provided me. Most of all, I learned that friendships of all kinds can be very difficult, but it is how you handle the tough parts that make them so great. I am now closer to Andre than ever, and I owe a great deal of that companionship to you and your wonderful book.

Sincerely,

Lucas Smith

## LEVEL ONE—NOTABLE MENTIONS

### **Madeline Linn**

*A Dog's Purpose* by **W. Bruce Cameron**  
Hurricane Middle School, Hurricane, WV  
Teacher - Sandy Turley

### **Savannah McCracken**

*Dork Diaries* by **Rachel Renee Russell**  
Hurricane Middle School, Hurricane, WV  
Teacher - Rachele Ochoa

### **Adhisht Reddy**

*Daniel's Story* by **Carol Matas**  
St. Joseph Catholic Middle School, Huntington, WV  
Teacher - Stephanie Hill

### **Emma Masey**

*07-Ghost* by **Yuki Ameiya & Yukino Ichihara**  
Hurricane Middle School, Hurricane, WV  
Teacher - Olivia Wilton

### **Lexy Beaver**

*Finding My Voice* by **Laura Paulus**  
Hurricane Middle School, Hurricane, WV  
Teacher - Rachele Ochoa

### **Connie Gunnoe**

*The Harry Potter Series* by **J.K. Rowling**  
Hurricane Middle School, Hurricane, WV  
Teacher - Rachele Ochoa

### **Pierce Dillard**

*The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by **Jeff Kinney**  
Hurricane Middle School, Hurricane, WV  
Teacher - Sandy Turley

### **Raegan Smith**

*Stone Fox* by **John Reynolds Gardiner**  
Hurricane Middle School, Hurricane, WV  
Teacher - Olivia Wilton

## LEVEL TWO—NOTABLE MENTIONS

### **Lola Davis**

*The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

by **Stephen Chbosky**

Hurricane Middle School, Hurricane WV

Teacher - Caroline Davis

### **Rachel Ekanem**

*Wonder* by **R.J. Palacio**

The Linsly School, Wheeling, WV

Teacher - Maggie Allison

### **Kerigan Salmons**

*Smile* by **Raina Telgemeier**

Crum PK-8, Crum, WV

Teacher - Rachel Doss

### **Maddie Hennen**

*Favorite Memories of a Country Vet*

by **James Herriot**

The Linsly School, Wheeling, WV

Teacher - Maggie Allison

### **Jessica Bennett**

*I Hate Myselfie* by **Shane Dawson**

Beckley Stratton Middle School, Beckley, WV

Teacher - Rachel Doss

### **Hadlee Berkley**

*The Phantom of the Opera* by **Gaston Leroux**

Crum PK-8, Crum, WV

Teacher - Rachel Doss

### **Elexis Spurlock**

*Almost Home* by **Joan Bauer**

St. Joseph Catholic School, Huntington, WV

Teacher - Stephanie Hill

### **Reagan Haughey**

*Everything, Everything* by **Nicola Yoon**

St. Joseph Catholic School, Huntington, WV

Teacher - Stephanie Hill

### **Ashiya Brandon**

*Poems* by **Maya Angelou**

John Adams Middle School, Charleston, WV

Teacher - Bridget Ward

### **Grace Blatt**

*Eight Keys* by **Suzanne Lafleur**

St. Joseph Catholic School, Huntington, WV

Teacher - Stephanie Hill

### **Daisy Snyder**

*Land of Stories* by **Chris Colfer**

Gilmer County High School, Glenville, WV

Teacher - Michelle Raines



## LEVEL THREE—NOTABLE MENTIONS

### **Tiffany Copen**

*The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan  
Roane County High School, Spencer, WV  
Teacher - Sati Maharaj-Boggs

### **Tyler Copley**

*Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck  
Roane County High School, Spencer, WV  
Teacher - Sati Maharaj-Boggs

### **Rebecca Parsons**

*Milk and Honey* by Rupi Kaur  
Roane County High School, Spencer, WV  
Teacher - Sati Maharaj-Boggs

### **Stephanie Fleck**

*Invisibility* by Andrea Cremer  
& David Levithan  
Roane County High School, Spencer, WV  
Teacher - Sati Maharaj-Boggs

### **Mackenzie Miller**

*Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher  
Roane County High School, Spencer, WV  
Teacher - Sati Maharaj-Boggs

### **Ashlea Huffman**

*The Lucky One* by Nicholas Sparks  
Roane County High School, Spencer, WV  
Teacher - Sati Maharaj-Boggs

### **Kara Pyle**

*Milk and Honey* by Rupi Kaur  
Petersburg High School, Petersburg, WV  
Teacher - Kristie Stump

### **Lucia Casdorff**

*Stuff I've Been Feeling Lately* by Alicia Cook  
Roane County High School, Spencer, WV  
Teacher - Sati Maharaj-Boggs

### **Harlee Kimble**

*Life is But a Dream* by Brian James  
Petersburg High School, Petersburg, WV  
Teacher - Kristie Stump

### **Cameron Hedrick**

*The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green  
Petersburg High School, Petersburg, WV  
Teacher - Kristie Stump

### **Maggie Kerns**

*Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White  
Hedgesville High School, Hedgesville, WV  
Teacher - Julie Oldfield

### **Mikayla Tincher**

*Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*  
by Jesse Andrews  
Greenbrier West High School, Charmco, WV  
Teacher - Juanita Spinks

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# THANK YOU

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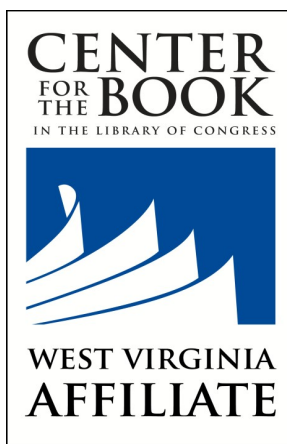
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