

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2017
State House Awards Ceremony
May 16, 2017

HONORS
LEVEL I

Dear Chen Jiang Hong,

Ever since I read your book, *Mao and Me*, I've looked at the world differently. I've never imagined a world without freedom, and rights. I was heartbroken when I read about people who had such little freedom.

When I read *Mao and Me* in my 4th grade class this year, I was having a hard time myself. I'm Muslim, and with Donald Trump screaming false things about Muslims, I was afraid he would take away my freedom. He stated that "No Muslim should be allowed to come into America," and that would make it hard for my family who live out of the USA to visit us. I am scared I won't see them for a long time. I'm worried that Trump will take away my home, my school, and my freedom.

I think that everyone should be free and have the right to say what's on their mind, and follow whatever religion they want to follow. I don't want to live in a world where the country's leader can order for someone to disappear if the person doesn't agree with the leader (or be killed and tortured like your neighbors whom you described in your book). I can now imagine how your life used to be. How families barely get enough food for one day and how you lived with many other relatives in a little apartment that was cramped and dirty. How the Red Guards came into your house by Mao's orders, to smash or ruin all your family's belongings. Where people can't choose their own jobs, even if they studied hard for them. How people you knew or loved were taken and killed. How no one was allowed to have their own thoughts or dreams.

I'm really surprised that you, even though you were very little at the time, remained very brave. You never knew of a different world at that time, so you probably thought it was normal. But I know what's normal, and I know for a fact that your childhood was not normal. I cannot imagine myself remaining as brave as you were in your time, but your story inspired me to stay brave no matter what happens.

Sincerely,

Sarra

Grade 4

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HONORS
LEVEL I

Dear Lauren Tarshis,

If I could go back in time it would be to save my family from the Nazi invasion. Sadly, I can't save them. I feel very fortunate, and my Dad tells me to be thankful since 90% of my family sacrificed their life just to keep my family alive. Your book *I Survived the Nazi Invasion* made me visualize the events between 1938 to 1944. I saw myself as Max: roaming, hiding, pleading for help, and seeking shelter in his neighborhood (the Warsaw ghetto). Life in the ghetto is a contrast to my neighborhood. I live in a predominantly Jewish area near two temples and a Jewish community center. There are no walls, no barbed wire, no curfews, or anti-Semitism. I live in a community where cultural diversity is celebrated. After reading your book, I realize that I am alive and able to celebrate my heritage because of my family members who escaped the Nazi persecution. I wonder: What if the invasion never happened? If I never heard my family stories or read books about the Holocaust, would I really understand the meaning of being fortunate? Does someone need to experience misfortune to know good fortune?

While I was reading your book, I started to think about that one word. *Fortunate*. Where I live people appear to be fortunate. There is little crime, and people feel safe. It's not a town with a walled-off area for people who are stereotyped as inferior. However, I notice that many neighborhood areas are populated by specific ethnic groups, specifically Jewish. Even without walls, are people still feeling restricted, or are groups being formed because of common culture and religions?

Walled ghettos seem like prisons. With all the horrors such as lack of food, hygiene issues, fears, and poverty, could a ghetto still be a fortunate place to live? Could a ghetto also be a little town where people have a common heritage or common religion? I did some research on ghettos hoping to find some positive results. Unfortunately, there was only negative descriptions of ghettos: segregation, isolated, strictly controlled, isolated, resource deprived, restrictions, slums, racial colony, and poverty. I realized that it's not a fortunate place to live.

Additionally, your book made me dig even deeper to see if a ghetto environment could produce people who feel fortunate. Between the stories passed down from my great uncle, great grandfather, grandfather, and my parents, I saw how characters like Max competed for survival in the most unfortunate setting. My great uncle witnessed and experienced similar circumstances and escaped six concentration camps. I would call that fortunate, although, he went through unfortunate and sometimes tragic situations.

The stories made me see how people could become stronger because of their near death escapes. I learned that resistance fighters came from Warsaw's ghettos. Even Harlem New York was a ghetto where beauty, the arts, and great literature emerged from poverty and segregation. Even though good people and ideas can come from these settings, the difference between a neighborhood and ghetto is choice. There is no wall in my neighborhood, but I think that invisible walls or borders are all around us. People build these walls all the time. It can be between groups of friends, neighborhoods, sports, and towns. Just because we don't see the wall doesn't mean the wall doesn't exist. Your book and my unfortunate family stories have made me realize how fortunate I am, the differences between ghettos

and neighborhoods, and how walls can be visible and invisible.

What if the invasion never happened? I think about how fortunate I am to be alive. Discrimination is a big word. Hitler used it as a way to blame problems on Jews. Your book gave me an understanding of the word fortunate, I now listen to the word "fortunate" as a blessing to be alive.

Sincerely,

Andrew

Grade 5

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HONORS
LEVEL I

Dear Audrey Penn,

It all started when I first began kindergarten and I had a really hard time separating from my mom. And I know what you're thinking, every kid has trouble when they first start kindergarten. For me though, I could barely get through a day without crying because I missed my mom so much. We had a close bond that I didn't want to break. It became a problem that we tried many solutions to fix, but nothing seemed to work. Until my mom read me your book, *The Kissing Hand*.

I have always been really close with my mom. Before I started kindergarten we did something fun every day, and for me I would go back to that time any day. Whether we were baking, doing a craft, finding a trail to explore, or even something as simple as watching the Bernstein Bears together on the couch, doing those things with my mom meant the world to me. I never wanted that to end, and when it did I was devastated. Just like Chester raccoon was. I remember my first day of kindergarten. I was excited to finally be like my older siblings and go to school, but I soon realized that I really missed my mom and all the fun stuff we did together. That's when I started to cry sometimes in school. In the morning I would ask my mom if I could stay home and do something with her. Anything at all. As much as my mom loved me and wanted to do something fun with me, she knew she couldn't just let me stay home and skip school. It got to the point where sometimes I would even fake being sick just to be with my mom. However, my mom soon realized this and tried some ways to make it better, but barely anything worked! That's when my mom found and read me your book *The Kissing Hand*.

All of the sudden, everything changed. It was like magic or something. I don't know if it was the way my mom read it to me, or the way she kissed my hand before I went to school, but after that I barely ever cried at school again. Whenever I missed my mom I would look down at my hand and try to listen to my mom reading *The Kissing Hand* to me. And it worked. I would still think of my mom and what we could do over the weekend or in the afternoon every day, but not nearly as much crying. It made for a much more fun year of kindergarten and even the beginning of first grade. The book had this power over me like I was not going to cry and be brave, and I thought to myself I can do those things because I have my kissing hand with me everywhere I go.

I am in 6th grade now, and I still think of your book and my mom when I am feeling down. I remember the quote from your book when Mrs. Raccoon said to Chester raccoon, "Sometimes we all have to do things we don't want to, even if they seem strange and scary at first." As I've gotten older I realize that this is very true. Remembering this not only makes me feel better, but makes me think of how great my mom is for finding your book and reading it to me when I was little.

As my mom and I talk about it now looking back on all the fun things we did together and how much I missed her, my mom always says that the process we went through was even harder and sadder for her than it was for me. She loved doing all those fun things with me, my sister, and my brother when we were little, and I was the last one she had to do those things with. Without a doubt when I went to kindergarten she was just as sad as I was. In the end of *The Kissing Hand* when the mother raccoon put her kissing hand on her heart when Chester raccoon runs off to school, my mom felt and did the same

thing as mother raccoon when I started kindergarten. Just without the owl talking to her, of course.

When I read this letter to my mom she started to tear up and said it was the sweetest thing she has ever read and that those fun things we did together meant the world to her too. This made me almost cry myself because my mom really is the best mom ever. My mom is also one of my best friends, and *The Kissing Hand* made me realize that she will always be with me and be there for me wherever I go. And I thank you for that because that thought will never leave my mind.

Sincerely,

Chloe

Grade 6

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HONORS
LEVEL I

Dear Kristin Levine,

My name is Frida and I am 10 years old. I am half German, half African-American. I know what a treat it is that my parents are allowed to be together even though they have different colored skin. However, when I think about the fact that not everyone in this world has the privilege to be together with whomever they love or share a friendship with, I feel sad and remember how lucky I am to have the privilege of being free.

When I picked up your book *The Lions of Little Rock* in 4th grade, I thought I was about to read a book that would fall into the stack of forgotten books in my head. But it did not! It stuck in my head like a piece of watermelon flavored gum, full of questions and answers. For example, why do people find racism so funny and make jokes about it, even when they know how terrible and frightening racism is or can be for people?

As I read your book, I felt different in each chapter. There were parts in the book where I would smile, like when Liz and Marlee got together again after their separation. There were also parts where I could feel the tears trying to pop out of my eyes and escape down my checks, like when the white people would bomb colored people's houses! Sometimes it felt like a cloud darkened up my bedroom where I read. Another time I felt different is in the part where Liz was sent out of the white school because she was colored. When I read that section, I became furious. On the other hand, in the parts where Liz and Marlee would stick together and help each other even though they did not have the same skin color and really were not allowed to be together it felt like a beautiful day at the beach on Cape Cod. Their friendship was so strong that they stayed together no matter what was going to happen or how dangerous things were.

The topic of racism has always been hard for me to hear or talk about because so many people at school and outside of school talk badly or make jokes about it, and when they do that I feel helpless and sad because first of all my dad's side of the family is colored and second of all I don't have the courage yet to tell people or my friends that it's not good what they are saying or doing.

I see racism as a part of history no one can erase, like a bit of hot glue from a hot glue gun, that can't shake itself from the world because it's stuck and can't remove itself! But maybe one day everyone will be treated equally, and people will think differently about racism and understand how terrible racism is.

Sincerely,

Frida

Grade 5

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HONORS
LEVEL I

Dear Rick Riordan,

I've always been a fan of your books; I read the Percy Jackson series even before the Harry Potter books. I loved your books because they were funny and the mythology fascinated me. Last summer, I read your book, *Magnus Chase and the Sword of Summer*, for the first time. It was funny and taught me a lot of new mythology just like your other books I've read. But this one was different because one of the main characters was a Muslim girl, named Samirah al-Abbas. I liked that even though she was a daughter of Loki, the God of mischief and evil, she was not considered a bad person in the book. She was shown as a powerful character, both physically and mentally. This is very different from other portrayals of Muslim or colored people that I have seen.

Many of the popular books and movie series that I read, like Harry Potter and the Hunger Games, showed kids my age, but none of the main characters were ever people of color. In Harry Potter, all six of the young main characters were white and in the Hunger Games, the three main kids were white too. I barely saw kids that looked like me on TV and when I did see Indian characters, I couldn't relate to them. The Indian kid named Baljeet on Disney's *Phineas & Ferb* spoke with a heavy accent and only talked about math. He was shown as a nerd and harassed by the bully named Buford. Another Disney TV show called *Jessie* has an Indian main character named Ravi. Ravi also speaks with an exaggerated Indian accent and is shown as a weak nerd, while his white brother is shown as stronger and more popular. Ravi wears Indian clothes all the time, owns a pet lizard and constantly says things like "Great Ganesh!" It felt like these characters were making fun of what Indian people are like.

In *Magnus Chase and The Sword of Summer*, Samirah was shown as a normal girl. I can relate to what she felt. This book finally represented a person of color in a way that was normal and didn't make fun of their culture. Even when Samirah was insulted for wearing a hijab, she wasn't shown as weak. I liked this book because it showed diversity and represented a colored person as a strong main character.

Sincerely,

Karan

Grade 5

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HONORS
LEVEL I

Dear J. K. Rowling,

Your book *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* seems like just a book. But is it? Technically, yes. But not to the person who has the power to see through this world and into the Wizarding World. For me, your book did not just tell me stories of wizards and spells; instead it gave me hope when I was facing my very own Killing Curse.

Your book taught me that you never really know what's coming to you in life. I am a fan of all your books, but *The Sorcerer's Stone* is my favorite because of the way Harry went from zero to hero. Harry was a kid who survived something that no one else did: The Killing Curse. When Harry was a year old, his parents were murdered by the dark wizard Voldemort whose intention was to kill him. But miraculously Harry survived! Just like me! When I was five I was diagnosed with Leukemia. At the age of eight, my cancer had reached a life threatening point. I was in Dubai at the time and the doctors there couldn't handle it. So, for the sake of my treatment my father and I had to migrate to the US.

When Harry was 11, he was chosen to study at Hogwarts, a wizarding school. From that day on, his world turned upside down and his journey to fit in started. He had to step into a whole new world, the Wizarding World! Similarly, after my diagnosis I had to step into a whole new world. When I arrived in the United States for treatment, I knew no one here. Soon I had to go to school and my struggle to fit in started. I had no friends, nor any relatives here. We didn't have a car. So my father had to push me in a wheelchair for miles while following a GPS to an unknown store through inches of snow to get food. If I were a real wizard, I could have conjured up a flying car, but somehow we managed to get by without one.

Even though your novels are fiction, the characters resemble average people. That's the best part about your books. Who knows, you might even have a Weasley family down your street, or a Draco Malfoy at your school, or even a Dumbledore watching out for you! I, too, find myself in your books. While I may not have a lightning scar, I do feel fortunate to have battled a deadly disease and won. In a way, I am "The Boy Who Lived!"

Sincerely,

A stylized, cursive signature of the name "Ali" in black ink.

Grade 6

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HONORS
LEVEL I

Dear Ms. Wolk,

I have cleaned toys for Cradles to Crayons, packaged food for Outreach, and donated my time to care for children in our church basement. I am an altar server on Sundays, and I help my grandmother get from her wheelchair into the bed we share each night. I thought I was the nicest girl I could be before I read *Wolf Hollow*.

Annabelle did not spend any time volunteering - she was not even looking for ways to be helpful, but she helped Toby more than I have ever been able to help anyone. I applaud her for telling the truth about Betty's bullying her even though Betty might hurt her even more. I admire her for finding the strength, not to help herself so much as to help Toby. And I admire Annabelle for being so selfless as to save Betty's life even after Betty was so mean to her.

I loved Toby. He reminded me of my grandfather who was very quiet, but always seemed to know just what I needed and had it ready for me. Like the time I was watching *Beauty and the Beast* and he walked in and gave me a hug just when the Beast was sad and I started to cry. He was a war veteran too and, like Toby, never talked about how he felt or what he saw in battle. Some people even thought my grandfather was odd, like Toby. After his heart attack, the doctor told my grandfather to go for a walk every day. He was a mechanic, not an athlete, so he set out at 5:00A.M. in the dark before work in his steel-toed shoes, Dickies, and baseball cap. One lady in the neighborhood called the police on him because she thought he was a burglar. He could not have been a nicer man and I thought the same about Toby as he walked the woods and valleys in his long, black oilcloth coat and his black boots. I was happy that Annabelle saw past the clothing and befriended Toby.

After reading *Wolf Hollow* I realized that being a good person is not easy. It is not enough to do kind things when it is convenient as I had always done. To be truly good is very difficult. Annabelle had to admit that she lied. She had been physically hurt and bullied by Betty. Then she had to save her abuser. I will try to be more aware of situations that require me to be truly good. Instead of helping only in places made for the needy, I will look around in the not-so-obvious places at the not-so-noticeable people and try to be compassionate, even if it is not comfortable.

Annabelle said, "The year I turned twelve I learned that what I say and what I do matters." This May I will turn twelve. I hope that what I say and what I do will matter too.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth

Grade 6

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HONORS
LEVEL I

Dear Heather Vogel Frederick,

Let me tell you something about my family. We love reading. Ever since I was little, I have been surrounded by books. Mama read the Little House series aloud to my siblings and I when I was only in preschool. Papa read Roald Dahl books to us in the evenings, making up different voices for each of the characters. My brother and I read the Harry Potter series at the age of 7. There has barely been a time when I didn't have a book on hand. Even at the dinner table, my siblings and I would be reading. So imagine my surprise when, shortly after I began 6th grade, I stopped reading. It wasn't that I started to hate it; I just lost interest. I'm still not completely sure why this happened. The stress of school? Homework? Maybe I was simply going through a phase? I'm sure all of these contributed to it, but perhaps most of all was my obsession with screen time. Now, instead of reading, I would be watching YouTube videos. It was like a piece of me was missing, replaced by a screen. Your book changed all that.

The day I picked up *Wish You Were Eyre*, I had no desire to look at a screen. The lives and adventures of the mother-daughter book club pulled me in and didn't release me. It was the first time in months that I had felt that way. I felt like I could connect with the characters-- Jess, with her smarts and love of singing, Megan, with her interest in drawing, Cassidy, with her love of sports, Becca, with her unsureness about the future, and Emma, with her love of books and writing. Reading about how the characters had such a deep connection with books helped re-establish my own connection with reading. For the first time in months that important piece of me had been returned to its rightful place. For the first time in months I saw myself as everything that I could be -- a writer, learner, creator-- instead of an empty shell of a person, always on a computer, never satisfied with myself.

Your book helped and changed me in a multitude of other ways as well. Reading about Jane Eyre's "backbone" and how the girls of the mother-daughter book club used their own "backbones" to overcome hardships helped me push forward in situations that I, as a shy person with anxiety, was nervous about. For example, the other day I wore Princess Leia buns to school as tribute to Carrie Fisher. I am not a fan of being the center of attention, and I was worried that as I was walking through the hall, people would stare at me. But, like the mother-daughter book club girls would do if they were in an uncomfortable situation, I kept repeating the word "backbone" to myself, and so, with help from Jane Eyre, Emma, Jess, Cassidy, Becca, and Megan, I was able to push through. I realized that the world can be scary, but I am not weak. If life was a battlefield, people would be the soldiers. I don't have to be the cowardly soldier, cowering in a trench, waiting for their fate. I can be the soldier that's out on the front lines, hurling grenades and shooting guns, in control of his own life. I realized that with confidence, you can get through even the toughest situation.

Your book has also gotten me more interested in classical literature. Just the other day I told my mom I wanted to read Jane Eyre. Your book has completely changed the way I see classical literature, and so, opened up a whole new world of books and reading for me.

The last thing your book has done for me is be a safe haven. Because there's something else you should know about my family. There are a lot of arguments and other conflicts that go on. With three kids, two of which are pre-teens, and two working adults, I suppose that's a given. Add that to the anxiety of schoolwork, getting ready and out the door on time, and social tensions, and my house can get pretty stressful. It was really helpful for me to have a place where I could escape, where I could crawl inside and stay for a while with Emma, Jess, Becca, Megan, and Cassidy. The book pulled me in, making me forget my own troubles for a moment and instead catching me up in the interesting, vibrant lives of the characters. I saw myself in them, which connected me to the book. Yet their lives were so different than mine. This blend of attributes made for a perfect story- real enough for me to connect and be drawn to the book, different enough to create a place where I could hide away and forget my own troubles.

Since reading your book, I have felt less dependent on screen time to entertain me. I have become more confident. I have spent more time outside. I have become more involved in my writing, and started to continue working on a writing piece that I haven't even looked at in months. And, of course, I have been reading. As I write this, *The Daring Book for Girls* is open next to me. An old copy of *Writer's Digest* lies, half-finished, next to my bed. The past few evenings I have spent reading *Hamilton: The Revolution*. And so I continue my reading journey, day to day, book to book, adventure to adventure.

Books help me overcome adversities and give me confidence. They introduce me to new literature and new experiences. They offer a place to hide away for a moment, a place to forget my own troubles and be caught up in someone else's life, troubles, and adventures. Books will always be an important part of me. *Wish You Were Eyre* helped me realize that. For that I thank you.

Sincerely,

Maren

Grade 6

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2017
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HONORS
LEVEL I

Dear Harper Lee,

Few books I have encountered changed my life. A book that I will forever keep close to my heart; a book that helps me with the problems in my life; a book that can change my view of the world: Yours is this book, one of those few. Your book *To Kill a Mockingbird* is relevant to people of all times. True, it was set in the 1930's, but the racism and prejudice prominent then, are just as prominent now, decades later.

As a Muslim in America, I know how people can have misconceptions about you, just because you're different. I know how it feels to pass people on the streets and have them stare at you. I have felt people's glances on my back, an uncomfortable sensation, almost like an itch that I can't reach and won't go away. With the help of your book, I began to look at the world differently. I imagined it years from now; what if we continued to let prejudices grow? I realized how dangerous the world could become.

Through your novel, I explored with Scout and her older brother Jem how society divides people up into races and religion. Scout lives in the narrow-minded town of Maycomb, where the majority of people carry about their lives with a division between blacks and whites, a sort of defined separation that allowed whites to stand on top and blacks at the bottom. This division was like a great oak, so deeply rooted that people seemed to forget it was there: it simply was their way of life. I'm not saying that the division between Muslims and other people is as defined or drastic as this one, and maybe it will never be. No, I'm saying that right now there are wisps of a line, a small sampling of an idea that is steadily growing. In your novel whites hated blacks because they thought they should still be their slaves. Who started slave trade? Who supported the idea of going into somebody's home and stealing the people in it? Did people consider the option to do manual labor themselves or at least pay other willing people to do the work? To not steal men, women, and children from their home? Sadly, we will never have the chance to reverse what was already done. But today, we might have a chance of preventing more prejudice and injustice, not only against Muslims, but against any human. WE should live our lives strong and unconcerned about what others think of us. WE should be kind to our fellow humans, regardless of who they are or what others say about them. WE, together, must work at tearing down all the divisions that have been built over time by society whether they be as feeble as a new grown sapling or as strong as a mighty oak.

Mr. Atticus Finch inspired me to be strong. He stayed strong when his family was ridiculed, when his morals were questioned, and even when his life was on the line. He was strong enough to stand up for the life of a black man. He inspired me to put aside what others thought about me and to stand up for what I thought was right.

I've decided, thanks to your book, that I'll be more like Mr. Finch and live my life with my head held high, no matter what others say. If people think bad about me because of ideas formulated by prejudices and

stereotypes, even when they haven't met me, I won't try to prove them wrong through talking. I'll learn to hold my tongue like Scout eventually learned from her father and show people they're wrong by going out of my way to be extra nice to them. I will show people who I am through my actions.

Thank you for writing a book that I most certainly will keep close to my heart.

Sincerely yours,

Mariam

Grade 6