

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

HONORS  
LEVEL III

Dear Mr. Hosseini,

When I first read your book, I was in sixth grade in Swaziland, Africa, and already a self-proclaimed feminist who was convinced she knew everything there was to know about anything, and to be honest, not much has changed since then. So when I read your book, all I took from it was that Muslim and Afghani men were no good. I assumed that they all treated women like property, the way most of the men in your book do. Every time I'd pass a Muslim or Afghani man, I would frown in disapproval and disgust. When I'd pass a Muslim woman, my eyes would soften because I felt sorry for them. I assumed they all had men in their lives that were abusive like your male protagonist.

When I was in eighth grade, I befriended a Muslim girl named Abida. I assumed I knew everything about her life as a Muslim girl because I'd read your book, but as Abida and I got to know each other, I became more and more skeptical of the conclusion I'd made. Abida was the eldest child in her family and had four younger brothers who practically worshipped the ground she walked on. Her father is to this day, one of the nicest men I've ever met. He adored Abida and treated her with nothing but love and kindness. This obviously confused me, so I read your book again, determined to fully understand it.

When I read it the second time, I paid more attention to Laila's story. I thought of what I would do if I were placed in her shoes. Laila lost her parents and had to marry a cruel old man just to ensure her safety and that of her child. I thought of how hard it must've been for her to come from such a loving family and end up in the hands of a man like Rasheed. Although your book is solely based on gender-based violence during the rule of the Taliban, to me it brought about the question of what being a feminist meant. It was then that I realized that not everyone is the same. In your book, you depict men like Rasheed, men like Hakim and men like Tariq and for a long time I focused on just Rasheed and that's why I had an inaccurate perspective.

Gender-based violence has nothing to do with religion or origin but everything to do with the individual human being and the choices that they make. I was surrounded by friends and family who had abusive men in their lives, but I never really noticed because to me, only Muslim or Afghani men could be abusive. When I realized that wasn't true, it was as if a whole new world opened up to me, a world where I didn't have to read about gender-based violence or hear about it on the news. At this time, I made a link between your book and my early life. I had forgotten how I had seen it up close when my mother was with my biological father. He was a verbally abusive drunk and probably still is, but I wouldn't know. I haven't seen him in years. My mom left him a long time ago and has been happily married to my stepdad for nine years now. My mother's story is a bit similar to that of Mariam and Laila, don't you think?

So, when my mother begs me to "Stop wearing boy's clothes! You are not a boy. I don't like that boyfriend of yours; his father is a crude man." I listen. When she tries to get me to "date a smart Christian boy who comes from a decent family, just like the people in my family." I understand why she might be afraid and although I disagree, she speaks from experience so who am I to disagree. My mother's words echo in my head every day and it was only after I read your book that I realized I was so much like my mother; jumping to conclusions before analyzing the entire story and assuming that everyone who wasn't like me was clearly wrong for me. We all often dismiss or judge people based on one bad experience that either we or someone we know has gone through. We do

this because we are afraid of what will happen to us if we dare to venture into things that are foreign to us. Forgetting that in a comfort zone, one can only grow so much. To be honest, my journey to discovering what kind of a feminist I am is still ongoing but I've managed to find the root of what made me a feminist and it is that I strongly believe that women and men are equals; whether or not I wear "boy's clothes" is irrelevant. As simple as that sounds, it took me a long time to get there. To be able stand up for what I believe in and be unapologetic for it is hard. "Apologize for what you've done but never apologize for who you are" says Beckham in her Ted Talk "coming out of your closet" and it has stuck with me. I'd been judging people for having different views. When I tried to accept them, I ended up apologizing for simply being myself because for some reason I thought that being different was somehow wrong. When I stopped apologizing for being me and stopped judging other people, I became a much happier person.

Every now and then I catch myself trying to be something or someone I'm not just to fit in, but when I do that I am reminded of Laila, Mariam and my mother, women who were strong enough to be themselves and then walk away from ideas or people that stole their joy and their confidence. I try to do the same, and though many times I fail to do so, the few times I've been successful, it has changed my life for the better. I have you to thank for that.

Sincerely,

*Ellen*

Grade 11

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HONORS  
LEVEL III

Dear Sir Arthur Conan Doyle,

Nearly everyone had a hero when they were a child, a role model whether it was their parents, an athlete, or a celebrity, every kid had someone they aspired to be like. I never had a figure in my life quite in the same way those other kids did. My parents were as far from a positive influence as it's possible to get; my mother was a criminal, and my father was abusive, filled with a violent rage from his time in the military. It left me with a heavy heart. Unlike the other boys and girls, I didn't idolize prevalent figures in society; I saw famous athletes and celebrities as overpaid entertainers, distractions from the monotony of everyday life, and a waste of valuable human attention. Deep thoughts for an elementary-schooler, I know, but I was a pretty smart kid. I only ever found truly good people, ones I could earnestly look up to, in books; reading was my escape.

I was in the third grade if memory serves when I first picked up "Silver Blaze." I was hooked almost instantly. It revealed to me a world riddled with crime and corruption, and a man, Mr. Holmes, trying to do his part in cleansing it. The tale of this brilliant detective and his astounding abilities of deduction was entirely enthralling, even though he was flawed by addiction. I didn't know it at the time, but later on, I would become quite familiar with addiction; your stories aided me in comprehending the experience. Sherlock Holmes became the role model that I had lacked for the better part of my childhood and drove me to become an intellectual and a man of the law.

I spent possibly concerning amounts of time at my local library as I read through various titles in the series: "The Adventure of the Speckled Band", "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches", "The Red-Headed League", and more of Holmes' tales, each more exciting than the last. I found it especially entertaining when the criminals' own actions led to their failure; like how in "Silver Blaze," Straker was killed by the horse he had maimed. Similarly, in "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" Roylott was poisoned by the same snake he had used to commit murder. It showed me that "crime never pays," a time-tested cliché that is indeed quite true. I found myself with an overwhelming desire to be like Sherlock. I wanted so very intensely to solve crimes and bring justice, all while relying solely on my wit. This yearning of mine led me down a path in life that I continue to travel down to this day. I studied frivolously, seeking out any and all knowledge that I could acquire. I excelled in my academics and helped others whenever possible. I am content in my character as a result of this, and sincerely thank you, as your writing has shaped me into a better person.

"The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" has also determined my career path. During the course of my schooling, I was devoted to becoming a detective, wanting nothing more but to be presented strange, enticing cases and solve them. I also became strongly interested in the sciences, chemistry, in particular. Now I know Holmes wasn't quite a chemist, but he did solve crimes; that remained my ultimate goal. I discovered the field of forensic science, and immediately, I knew it was the perfect career for me. Just like Holmes, I would use my wealth of knowledge to piece together the events of a crime and bring justice into the world. Currently, I still strive to meet this goal and plan to attend college to do so. Truly, it's mind-boggling how your work managed to shape essentially my entire future.

Not only did Holmes mold me into who I am as a person, but his battle with addiction helped me cope with the personal turmoil that I had the misfortune of being subject to. Reading about Sherlock's history with substance abuse helped me understand when my eldest brothers went down a similar path. The rest of my family practically disowned them, but not me. I supported them

when no one else did. I figured that if a great man such as Sherlock Holmes could be susceptible to the allure of mind-altering substances, then surely anyone could suffer the same fate. I also realized that he had overcome his addiction and had gone forward to do great things. Surely, my brothers could do the same. Your books had shown me that they could get better, and they did. They entered a rehabilitation program and have been sober ever since.

Sir Arthur, your books have shaped my childhood, my personality, my future, and they have saved some of the few close relatives that I still have left. I cannot adequately express my gratitude within the confines of the English language, or any language for that matter.

With great admiration and respect,

*Sean*

Grade 10

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HONORS  
LEVEL III

Dear Marina,

Your words took my breath away. How did you articulate, so clearly and with so much insight, the name of the feeling that remained mysterious for so long in my life? Your essay "The Opposite of Loneliness" ingrained itself in my mind for days, weeks, months after I first read it. I reread the opening lines three times, letting the beauty and truth of the words sink in. "We don't have a word for the opposite of loneliness," you wrote. "But if we did, I could say that's what I want in life."

The first time I remember pinpointing the feeling was back in eighth grade. I was at Christmas Choir rehearsal, standing with the other eighth graders on the top step of metal bleachers. Our voices vibrated off the high ceilings and filtered through the stained-glass windows of the church. Green music folders in hand, we began singing "Somewhere in My Memory." As the first notes swelled, the feeling washed over me. I felt it so strongly as the piano perfectly blended with our voices that I nearly stopped singing. I wasn't sure what to call it. It felt like the feelings of Christmas: warmth, love, community, togetherness. But not quite any one of those.

I'm sure I felt that nameless emotion again over the next few months and years, but not as strongly—just flare-ups every now and then. A moment shared with my little siblings, Jack and Danielle, as we cocoon ourselves in blankets on the couch to watch some movie or show; their unstoppable giggles and smiling faces that light up the room call the feeling back out—if only for a moment. Or at family dinners when everyone's home, and all ten kids and my parents gather around our two black, rectangular tables in the dining room to share a meal together. The chaos of dinner ensues as we shout for the bread or the salt and connect in lively conversation; yet, amidst the flurry of activity, there is an underlying calm: my mom's soft smile, the pause for grace before eating, all twelve of us in our seats. The feeling emerges again, unexpected and warm: a sense of security, peace, and belonging.

You understood this feeling, Marina. You captured it, gave it a name, and revealed it for the world to see. You unmasked that mystery which had drifted within and around me since it first filled me at that rehearsal. The "opposite of loneliness." I'll never see those beautiful moments in the same way again.

Your words infused new life into my own writing. Your other nonfiction works in *The Opposite of Loneliness* showed me the forms of writing I love, but better. Better narrative. Better journalism. Better description, word choice, voice. "Stability in Motion" showed me how to take an object (like a car, as you did) and make it an expression of myself—simply reading this essay was a better lesson in personification than any English class example.

You infused hope and inspiration into your words, which, in turn, filled me with inspiration and hope. Your words take ordinary people and reveal their extraordinary stories, exposing the beauty of humanity for the world to see. I dove into your story, enchanted as you took Tommy Hart, a lighthearted and hardworking exterminator, and revealed that social stereotypes are just that: stereotypes. That piece, "I Kill for Money," reminded me to look beyond the surface whenever I meet someone new.

In their dedication, your parents reminded me of your life philosophy: "Our hope is that Marina's message of love will inspire readers to imagine the possibilities and make a difference in the world."

Believe me -- it certainly did.

Through your writing, I got to know you, Marina -- the person you showed the world in your short 22 years on this planet---and in the process, I got to know myself. I finished *The Opposite of Loneliness* and picked up a pen and my journal. I started writing almost daily, and I haven't stopped.

Thank you, Marina, for giving me the hope, inspiration, and determination to become the writer I one day hope to be.

*Gabrielle*

Grade 11

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HONORS  
LEVEL III

Dear Vince Papale,

Growing up in different towns, always being the odd one out seemed to be a recurring situation in my life. Sticking out of the crowd, being pointed and whispered about. Blending in seemed to be a fading wish that would never be granted. Reading your story, I recognized the similarities in our childhood.

Your book *Invincible* helped me realize how my growing maturity has changed my life. Relating to a random sports figure had never been my objective, I read, "I wanted to be invisible"(9). Immediately, similarities surfaced such as your distant father/son relationship and our inability to make him proud, to get him to say I love you, or get him to spend time with us. It is clear to me that now life is so much better without that type of negativity displayed. However, as a child, blaming his actions on myself was an everyday routine, always feeling inferior. Constantly trying to figure out what was wrong with me, trying to figure out how I could change to fit his expectations.

My mother was not quite as emotionally unstable as yours; however, being exposed to her extreme bi-polar disorder and heroin addiction caused me to grow up at a very young age. Another similarity is us both growing up in small apartments in bad towns, those days were the hardest. Walking through town alone, afraid of passing strangers, hearing gunshots and witnessing robberies left and right. Look where we are now! All we have gone through has made us so much stronger than the average person, this is only another distant wish to someday be as successful as you and prove that it doesn't matter where you are from or what you have done. If you have passion and drive, turning around your whole life is very possible, even on your own.

While growing up and gaining confidence you mentioned how you still felt inferior because you were so poor, which I can relate to. Confidence did not begin to build up until high school, clearly in my mind I can remember how self-conscious I was about living in poverty. There were weeks in elementary school when wearing the same thing each week would grab the attention of others, peers influenced negative feelings toward myself. Laughing when they passed, hearing them say things like, "She must not shower." "Do her parents even do laundry?" "She is so gross!" Not wanting anybody to look at me was an everyday thing, never wanting to go to school and feeling more alone than ever, it was certain to me that nobody understood.

Reading your story, it was apparent that if we knew each other back then, you would have understood. Learning about your past experiences caused me to relive my own, except without the overwhelming feeling of loneliness. You were there with me. For me, this is impossible to express my thankfulness that fills me, to have come across your autobiography; it is inspiring to see how far you have come. How far I have come, and how much farther I have to go, planning to prosper along the whole way. I have learned to not pay any mind to what people think of me because they do not know what I have experienced in my life. They do not know the half of what we have made it through, I know for a fact if any other person had to run from the cops most of their childhood life so their parents were not taken away, they would have fallen apart. But I am strong, stronger than my past self.

The poverty, low self-esteem, limited parental guidance all led me to become the person I am today. An honors student, overly confident, happier than ever, and I know what I am capable of. Until I read your story I never realized how far I have truly come. We beat the odds and I just want

to thank you from the bottom of my heart for writing about your inspirational life. I will continue to better myself because of you.

Sincerely,

*McKayla*

Grade 11