

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016

Massachusetts Center for the Book

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Level II Honors Award

Dear Joanne Rowling,

On the 22nd day of September in the year of 2009, my grandfather passed away unexpectedly ... it was a tragic loss to our family, and I was devastated then and for a long time after. I lost a mentor and my guide in the dark; I lost my grandfather. I lost him, like the sky loses the sun after every day, slowly, yet shockingly fast. I lost a person that I loved with all my heart. Years passed and the death of my grandfather still weighed upon me, but I returned to normality and started reading a book, which was the first book of a series. Many people had recommended it to me. It was your book: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

If you look past all the witchcraft and wizardry that is introduced in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, you can see that a major theme beneath all the magic is love, love that is so powerful it is able to conquer death itself. This shook me: love being stronger than death. I had never thought about it that way. For me, my grandfather died, and I was miserable. For a couple of months, I was not even able to see the colours in life, and I noticed myself saying, "I had loved my grandfather". After reading the first book of the Harry Potter series, I recognized that I had been wrong all those years. When a person passes away, it does not mean you can't keep on loving him, whether it's a friend, a child, a parent, or a grandparent. They were all important and caring people in your life and still are, even if they are not physically with you anymore. Just because the sun was not shining on your face at the moment, that does not mean it disappeared. In the book, Harry notices this especially when looking into the 'Mirror of Erised' and seeing his parents and family. Physically, he is not able to touch them; however, he sees them, remembers their memory, and that makes him stronger. Harry might not have known his parents as long as I had known my grandfather, but we both learned that it is possible to say, "I love my grandfather/parents", even if they are not standing right behind us and looking over our shoulders.

For many people, death is darkness, depression, and devastation, basically a shadow falls over them and their lives after the person they loved passes away. I had my own experiences with this feeling after my grandfather's death and I started carrying a little, brown teddy bear around with me wherever I went. My grandfather gave this little stuffed bear to me on the day I was born, and I have kept it close to me ever since. Naturally, this object carries more memories and a stronger connection to my grandfather than any picture will ever do. I think it is important that you have not only the knowledge that the ones that have gone are still mentally with you, but also an object that you can touch, feel and cry into, that has a special connection to the person that has died. I noticed this after reading the passage in your book in which Harry finds out that the 'Cloak of Invisibility' is from his father and when Hagrid gives him the photo album with all the pictures of his parents in it. Through my teddy bear, I can still feel the connection that I continue to have with my grandfather, the same way Harry can feel his parents close by him, even if they are physically not there, and this, only because love is stronger than death.

At one point in the book, Albus Dumbledore says: "death is but the next great adventure" (p. 297). This sentence, just this one small sentence, made me realize that death doesn't really have negative sides. I always thought, and this haunted me long after my grandfather's death, that he would have wanted to live longer, would have wanted to see his fifth grandchild, whom he never met, would have wanted to see me grow up. When I thought of all the things my grandfather would have wanted to do, but how death got in the way of his plans, I started to cry. However, this was before I read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the book that changed my views about love and death. When I came upon the sentence, "Death is but the next great adventure", I thought about how my grandfather might have felt before his life ended, and I noticed that he used to say that he doesn't want to turn old, that he'd rather die young and happy than become old and sick. He died with his children at his side, and I have come to peace with his death, for I know he is still watching over me and maybe fulfilling all his unfinished plans in heaven.

Another example of love being stronger than death in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* occurs when Lily dies to save Harry. Her love for her son is so deep that Voldemort can't kill Harry with a curse. It made me realize that even if my grandfather's death can't keep me from dying, I still feel protected. This protection is with me every day, yet it only became clear to me after I read the first Harry Potter book. Actually, the sentence that struck me was: "...to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loves us is gone, will give us some protection forever" (p. 299). This sentence affected me only as it can affect a child that has lost a loved person to the hands of death. It made me shed tears once more, but I knew my grandfather would protect me until I die and then welcome me wherever he was. In that moment, even though he was gone, I felt him taking me into his arms and saying, "I love you", and I knew he was still able to love me, and I was still able to love him because love is strong; love can conquer death.

Yours sincerely,

Anna

Anna
Chestnut Hill
Grade 8

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Dear Mindy Kaling,

Thank you for unlocking the deepest, darkest secrets of life and sharing them with me. Not only have you changed the way I view the world, but the way I view myself. I greatly appreciate you and everything you do.

I am going to let you in on a little secret, Mindy. I am ordinary. Undeniably, absolutely ordinary. I live in a small town that people do not usually travel far from. Usually a couple comes here, has kids, and lives here for the rest of their lives only for their kids to do the same. I am not against the people who live here, they live happy lives doing ordinary things, good for them. But the thing is, I am not one of them, I always seem to have this uneasy feeling that I do not belong. But my greatest fear is that once I (hopefully) leave this town, if there is a way out (haha, no seriously), I will just be a sad, delusional girl with unrealistic dreams. Sometimes people become so accustomed to life around them, they stay isolated in a small town, with no real big dreams of the future. It is so incredibly common for people in my town to think, "My parents grew up here, they were happy, it's a good place to raise kids, we might as well stay". Not many people think about the future of themselves, or of the person they want to become, or what goals they would like to achieve. So many people are fine with just living an "okay" or "good" life, but here's the thing, I want to live a great life. I want to make a difference, but I have always struggled with how I'm going to make that difference. I am constantly questioning, "What is going to get me to the place I need to be in order to be happy?", and I am often pulled back by the people around me, they believe they do not have an eventful future, why should I?

Your book has changed my perspective on what it means to be ordinary. You have made me recognize that everyone starts out ordinary. Almost everyone has grown up in a small town living an ordinary life with no real feeling of what the "big bad world" is really like, a.k.a the city. Everyone is accustomed to believe that famous people grew up in mansions or had this wonderful life that destined them to be famous. But practically every famous person was once ordinary, just a common person living a common life. However, they were the ones who had big dreams and were willing to work hard to accomplish them. Now I'm not telling you I want to grow up to be ridiculously famous, believe me I don't. I just want to be happy, I want to have the feeling that I am constantly making a difference in people's lives, that I am doing something to benefit other people. You grew up in a small town, studied hard, are not sporty whatsoever, kind of socially awkward, and had big dreams that you desperately wanted to achieve. All those characteristics could be used to describe me, so basically we are the same person (haha), but my goal is not to be the next Mindy Kaling (although no one could ever pull that off, even if they tried), it is just to get somewhere, to do something that will make me happy. It was so refreshing to hear about your past, because it is very similar to my present. You have given me this hope that someday I can actually make it in the real world, that I can do something that will make a difference in people's lives around me. You have reminded me I can do anything if I'm willing to work for it, and it doesn't matter where you come from, it matters where you're going. Except you are not like most famous people, Mindy, because you make an effort to not forget about who you really are. So thank you, for teaching me just how far dreams can take you, and to work hard when I want to achieve my goals, and to never lose sight of myself. Also thanks for wording your entire book in a really cool way so it does not make you sound like a parent or a cliché. Stay amazing.

Sincerely,

Charlotte

Charlotte
Marblehead
Grade 8

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Level II Honors Award

Dear Mr. Bloor,

One rainy day, in late 2011, I stumbled across a book in our hallway bookcase. It was a tattered paperback with a black spine, bearing the appropriately orange title of *Tangerine*. I pulled it out.

I read *Tangerine* in a single weekend. It was eerie and funny and comforting and destructive. I cried with Paul when Luis died. I cringed with Paul when Erik strode in the room. I cheered with Paul for the War Eagles, his new friends and family. I wished desperately to leave my own Lake Windsor Downs and bike to Tangerine. I wanted to smell the Golden Dawn.

And then I put *Tangerine* on my own bedroom shelf and moved on with my 4th grade life.

When I discovered a study of *Tangerine* was part of the 7th grade English curriculum, I smiled. I thought way back to the 4th grade, and although I remembered little of the plot and the characters, the simultaneous feelings of warmth and coolness that accompanied the book lingered. I went home and dusted off the old paperback.

This second reading was different. Now, at 13-years-old, when reading about the issues *Tangerine* stares down like extreme consumerism, grief, and mental illness, I could see the plot and themes more clearly than I could in the 4th grade. *Tangerine* especially highlighted for me how extremes in economic status can exist so close together. This is the piece that resounded for me, a middle-class, white girl who lives in one of the wealthiest towns in America.

Growing up in such a wealthy town is tough. Your classmates come to school in \$50 shirts and \$80 jeans. Your neighbors are always off in Bermuda or Disneyworld. Your friends give you birthday presents that you can't match for their birthdays. My family isn't by any means poor; we have everything we need and live comfortably with little concern about finance. Yet, my parents have always been uncomfortable when my brothers or I ask, "Why can't we have our own iPads?" or "Why do the Jones' get to have a new car every year?". We didn't understand when we were younger that such things weren't normal. It's hard for us now to wrap our heads around the poverty in our country when we have so much. *Tangerine* opened new doors for me, especially in the contrast between Tangerine and Lake Windsor Downs.

The fact that Paul can come from an upper middle class family and befriend kids from a lower class is important. The fact that the "holier than thou" discrimination the Cruz family and War Eagles face from the rich kids of Lake Windsor Downs is not erased or skimmed over is important. The fact that the War Eagles have to skip school in order to fight for the crops that feed and clothe their family is important for kids of privilege to see. We need to acknowledge that these issues are something kids all over America and the world put up with. I needed *Tangerine* to show me these issues from the perspective of a kid like me. Paul lives in a new, gorgeous community as fake as the happiness of the people who live in it. Lake Windsor Downs is much like my hometown, where we cover up all signs of disorganization and distress with a brand new high school and stupid laws for stupid topics. If "*Tangerine*" had not reached out into Tangerine, Paul would have just seen a fake, yet neat, collection of "first-world problem"-burdened families. When Paul reaches out into a less fortunate town where everything is a little more real, I feel as if that's something I can do, too. I see the outside world for what it is: a little scary, but not any less scary than the "rich towns", less lying and designer clothing. When I step out of a college I could afford, and leave my apartment in the center of town to see the world, I won't be afraid. I'll see the truth, the way Paul sees the truth through the fog.

Thank you, Mr. Bloor.

Ellen

Ellen
Concord
Grade 8

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Level II Honors Award

Dear R.J. Palacio,

Your book *Wonder* put an explosive stick of reality in my mind and blew it up, and then reconstructed my brain with a different perspective about life. This book opened my eyes to the world and its problems. It showed me that when someone has a birth defect they will most likely be judged by what they look like, not by what is inside. This book truly is a wonder.

Before I read *Wonder*, I was really interested in other types of fiction but not realistic as much. It got to the point where I needed new books and badly. I couldn't think of which book I hadn't read in my room. But as usual my dad saved me. Every time there's a book sale, he buys at least five books. He showed me which books he had bought for me. The books were *Wonder* and a few others. I decided to read some of the others first. *Wonder* just didn't seem that interesting at first glance, and boy was I wrong. When I got to *Wonder*, from the beginning, I knew I would connect with August a.k.a Auggie. I knew this because he had birth deformations and I might not have something quite as bad as him, but I had something: minor and partial epilepsy.

This connection made me enjoy and understand the book even more than it would have if I had nothing in common with the character. My experience was really something minor compared to his, but mine was unexpected. When I first learned that I had epilepsy, I was afraid because I didn't know what it was at that time. I thought (which was typical of me) of the worst case scenario. But then I found out that it was minor. When I read *Wonder*, that changed my perspective completely. I learned that my epilepsy paled completely compared to his problems. I learned while you have to deal with your self-confidence, you also have to worry about how other people think about you.

The part that really impacted me was when Julien and the two other kids are giving August a tour of the school and Julien says "So were you in a fire?". The other two kids defend him. That made me ask myself, do I really have friends who would stick up for me? I realized that I do, and they continue to be my friends, and then I realized those are the type of friends that always stay with you.

This book affected the way I looked at the world and myself. It changed the way I looked at myself because I realized that there are people out there that have more severe problems than me. This made me realize that my own struggles were minor compared to some other problems. It made me realize something about myself, that my problem is just another drop in the ocean. That my problem was not unusual, it is in fact something that runs in my mom's side of the family. This book opened up my eyes to the other fish in the ocean. Thank you R.J. Palacio.

"Everyone in the world should get a standing ovation at least once in their life because we all overcometh the world. – Auggie".

Sincerely,

Emilio

Your good friend Emilio
Cambridge
Grade 7

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Level II Honors Award

Dear Louisa May Alcott,

Time and time again I've opened your book and reveled in the ever exciting world of *Little Women*. My heart has broken again and again, for poor Laurie, who hoped to win the heart of his best friend, only to find it locked up, waiting for another. I've shed many tears for sweet Beth, who lived her life only for others, and saw the goodness in everyone. I've sympathized with gentle Meg and all her trials as a new wife and mother. I've laughed with Amy whose "vocabulary" has much improved. And I've felt the "genius burn" with Jo and her wild tales. *Little Women* has given me comfort during sad times and quenched my thirst for excitement when dry boredom set in.

Little Women has really changed the way I think about the world. In chapter eleven Mrs. March says, "Then let me advise you to take up your little burdens again, for they seem heavy sometimes, they are good for us, and lighten as we learn to carry them...". I've read *Little Women* many times, but after reading Mrs. March's hopes for her girls, I saw the book in a new light. The girls talk about their burdens as bundles that they carry through life. As they began to grow and change I saw each of the girl's bundles "lighten". After each girl shared their burdens, I began to think about what might be in my bundle. Soon I had found a full pack to carry.

Over time my load of worries had slowly formed, so I sat down and began to sort through them. The first few things in my pack were from school: homework, organization, grades, tests, report cards, friends. Next came activities, like dance, theater, singing, memorizing lines, remembering steps, and a pile of musical notes. Along came a stack of schedules full of times, dates, and places. Finally after sorting through a mess of concerns new and old, I threw out a few old ones I didn't need to carry anymore.

As I gathered up my problems and hoisted them onto my shoulder it occurred to me that other people might have much heavier bundles to bear. In the beginning of the book the girls are celebrating Christmas. On Christmas morning they give their breakfast to a poor family, with three children and only one parent, no food and practically no shelter. Throughout the rest of the book the girls happily share their kindness. Now when I see someone whose bundle is too heavy for them to lift, I try to help them carry it or make it lighter, so that soon they can easily hold it on their own.

Over the years, the words of *Little Women* have stayed with me, and each time I read it a new thought is thrown into the whirlwind of ideas swirling around in my head. I've learned that as you grow older the world changes and you change too. Like the girls my bundle of problems and worries has "grown up with me" and changed. I've learned the importance of thinking of others and being able to put down your own bundle for a while to help someone carry theirs. And when you need help later on people will be there ready to put down their bundle to help carry yours.

Sincerely,

Emma

Emma
Brookline
Grade 8

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Dear J.K. Rowling,

Are the thoughts you think original? Are they put there by you, and you alone? Do you imagine what could be, or what is? For all of your characters (and me as well) the Harry Potter series is a touching and deeply woven coming of age story. At the end of the series, Harry understood himself, Ron found himself content with being a part of his family, Hermione was as loyal as she was smart, Neville believed in himself, and I? I had all of the latter, and much more. By reading the entire Harry Potter collection, I gathered lessons and teachings not just about magic and spells, but also important things regarding the world we live in today. **Probably the most important was that we see only what we want to see.**

Before I read Harry's story, and before I started to really enjoy books, that's what I saw, every day. I saw my toys and I saw my bedroom and my school. I saw chairs and tables and white boards and dress up clothes – it was what I wanted to see. When I was younger, my imagination was limited to things I could see, touch. I was only a princess when I wore Cinderella's dress. I was only an architect when I built with Legos. I only saw colors when I visited an art museum.

Then, one rather fortunate Saturday in third grade, I went to a fair, and came home with a shiny copy of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. At the time, I was starting to read chapter books, and although my father pleaded with me to read it, your book intimidated me to a point where I downright refused to ever give it a chance. However, my dad persisted, and I had begun to get sourly annoyed by his requests. So, I took the book off my bedside and brushed the dust away. I read the first page. And the next. And the next. After long, I couldn't stop.

At first, all I thought I had taken from the book was an obsession. But I realized – now I was seeing what I wanted to see, and not in the way I was before. Now, instead of white boards I saw canvases, and instead of pencils, I saw instruments. Now, my thoughts were completely original, and not given to me by a physical presence. I saw beyond what I could touch. In my head I imagined improvements, combinations, and colors everywhere. My creativity began flowing. I started reading more and more, and even tried my hand at writing, only to discover that it brought me the same happiness that reading did. Then came drawing, and constructing, and singing. I grew so much, and I now have so many better qualities within myself.

Now, the more I look back, the more I find. I can read the map backwards, to my starting point: Harry Potter. I grew up with Harry, and unlocked things about myself that even I didn't know. Thank you so very much for handing me the key. And thanks to my father as well, for insisting I use it. I now see whatever I want to see and I now walk about my daily life with colors bursting around me, and imaginary ribbons dancing through my vision.

Characters pulled from the depths of your imagination have taught me that even though it may be happening inside my head, that doesn't mean it isn't real.

Sincerely,

Grace

Grace
Cambridge
Grade 7

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Level II Honors Award

Dear Mr. Ben Carson,

I would first like to thank you for writing your autobiography *Gifted Hands*, for it has inspired me greatly. Because all of my family members have read your book and have thoroughly enjoyed it, I decided to read your book as well. Through reading your book, I have learned the significance of working hard in order to achieve greatness. Little did I know that my mindset and my character would be greatly influenced by your book *Gifted Hands*.

I have always been one of the smart students in school; however, I have often been made fun of because of my capabilities. Although being smart is an excellent trait, I used to find myself trying to hide it from my peers for fear that they would mock me. My parents always told me to simply ignore the other kids' comments because they were only jealous of me. I found it incredibly hard to believe that they were jealous because who wants to be a person who gets made fun of all the time?

Throughout my elementary school years, this thought used to haunt me. I just wanted to be an average student and not get such high grades. Therefore, I tried to be cautious that I did not show the other kids my graded papers because I did not want to seem like I was bragging. I also made sure to limit the amount of times that I went up to the front of the class to read my writing pieces, because I did not want everybody to think that my intentions were to show off my work. Even though my actions were exaggerated, I still could not help but think that being smart was "nerdy".

Blending in has always been a priority of mine since I was young. I never wanted to be in the spotlight, even if I deserved it. Some of my classmates would groan when they saw that I had gotten a good grade on a test. I kept feeling constant pressure on me to fulfill the role of being that kid who got good grades no matter what. I would feel like I was letting my classmates down if I ever received a grade that I was not used to getting. I knew that I had to stop putting so much pressure and stress on myself, but it was hard to put down the weight and move on.

Later, in middle school, I eventually grasped the concept that being smart is helpful. Even though I knew it deep down in my heart all along, I had the nagging feeling that being smart is dumb, but in reality, being smart is knowing what one is dumb about. There is always something new to learn about in our world. Therefore, one has to realize that the definition of "smart" is being aware of what one does not know, and taking the next step to learn about it.

This year in eighth grade, I read your book, *Gifted Hands*. Immediately after reading the first few chapters, I could genuinely relate to the situations that you experienced in school as a child. I have always had a dream of becoming an astronaut or an engineer ever since I was little, which is similar to your dream of becoming a doctor. Plus, I had similar eyesight issues as well!

Your book has influenced my way of thinking in many different ways. I no longer think of being smart as a burden, but rather as a gift from God. I thank God that he has given me my gifts and talents, and I pray that I will be able to use them to glorify Him to the best of my ability. Instead of trying to hide and burden myself with pressure, I enjoy being a leader when it comes to working in groups. I also like having the ability to help people when they are having trouble, which is similar to the time when you surged ahead of your peers in academics, ultimately leading to other kids asking for your help in math.

After I finished your book, I couldn't stop thinking about the many ways that I can continue to work hard in school and in other areas of my life. I strongly believe that other people my age will be greatly influenced by your book as well, and I do hope that others will take the time to read it. Your lessons on being a leader, working hard, and achieving success are very valuable, and I want to let you know that you have changed my life by writing this book.

Sincerely,

Julia K.

Julia K.
Upton
Grade 8

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Level II Honors Award

Dear Philip Pullman,

On the whole, I don't cry a lot while reading or watching movies, not because they are not sad or good, but just because I can't seem to make myself cry. Your book The Amber Spyglass, however, made me silently sob in the back of my car as I finished the last pages of it. Hot tears ran down my face as I read about Lyra and Will being separated forever. I could not stop thinking about your book even weeks after I finished it. Normally once I finish a book a week later I could not tell someone who the main character was, or how it ended, but months after reading your book I still remember every part of it. How I read it as much as possible: in class, in the car, on the bus, as I walked from the bus stop to my house, whenever I had a spare moment. The ending of The Amber Spyglass and its host of amazing characters will make me never forget your book. Your book was not just a great book it also changed me, and made me think much more deeply about power and what it means to be a kid or an adult.

As I read the first two books of the *His Dark Materials* series, I was reading them just for pleasure, but when I got to your third book in the series, The Amber Spyglass, I started to see the messages in the book. The biggest message to me was that just because something is powerful does not mean they are always right or good. In the beginning of the book, Lord Asriel states his plan to attack the authority or God, this surprised me because you can't really attack God. It showed me I can attack people in power who are unjust like people in my life who abuse their power. Your book taught me that even people in the highest of power can be corrupt or bad, so we have to make sure that whoever is in power is good and fair. If they are not good then we should try to change or replace them like Lord Asriel's rebellion did.

The Amber Spyglass has also shown me that if you really want to change something and make the world a better place then you have to be willing to sacrifice something. In your book Will and Lyra are forced to leave each other forever to save the dead souls and to make sure the dust does not drain from the world and make creativity and goodness to cease indefinitely. When I was reading that part of the book I started silently crying because they had just realized how much they truly loved each other when they give up their love for the greater good. At the time I did not get the message behind them sacrificing their love just so the dead would be happy, but as I lay in my bed later that night thinking about your book I realized that they gave up their love because they believed the dead needed an escape from their prison more than Will and Lyra needed each other. They were willing to sacrifice anything for a cause, making me realize that in any cause you really care about you have to be willing to sacrifice something.

My favorite part of your book was definitely the characters' demons or soul mates in animal form. I have always wanted something that is always there for me and knows my every thought. The demons however were not just cool they showed me the power of being a kid. In your book as you got older your demon would go from being able to change form to settling in one shape for the rest of your life. When your demon stops changing you become an adult, but to me it seemed that your demon stops changing because you stop changing and settle into what you are going to be as an adult. As a kid, though you are free, you have not settled into your final form, and you can still be whatever you want. Being a kid makes you free to be whatever you want.

Philip Pullman, because of your book I have learned many life lessons so thank you very much. I loved reading The Amber Spyglass and the others in the series at all times of day and night. The characters and the plot are some of the best I have ever read about. The Amber Spyglass was not just one of the best books I have ever read, but it also taught me many important life lessons.

Sincerely,

Keegan

Keegan
Cambridge
Grade 7

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Level II Honors Award

Dear John Green,

I really had a huge thing in common with *The Fault in Our Stars*, I think that's one reason why I really enjoyed it! I really connected with the whole cancer aspect of it. I also learned a lot from your writing that honestly changed my life. Yes, I know I did not meet the love of my life like Hazel did, I haven't gone to Amsterdam, I haven't had cancer. However, I have lost someone I truly loved and that person was my sister. It was so therapeutic for me while I read this as I was coping with the death of my sister. Your writing sped up the process, so thanks.

My view on the world and my past was changed after I read *The Fault in Our Stars*. Eight years ago my sister died of stage four neuroblastoma which is a type of cancer commonly found in children. It was a rough time for my family and I, especially me. I lost my role model that I adored and looked up to. I was only four when she died. I didn't understand why she was gone but I knew she was gone and wasn't coming back. I was heartbroken. Now, I am twelve I am still sad and I miss her but it will always be that way. I have started to learn a lot from your book. Before, I was furious and constantly wondering why this happened to my family. However, after I read your book I started to understand that cancer is all around us. It's affected so many people. I'm really grateful for this gift of you writing this book, it honestly changed my life. It was very therapeutic reading. *The Fault in Our Stars* helped me in many more ways, too.

Your book didn't just help me learn, I also reminisced. It brought back so many memories because like Augustus my sister Maddy always wanted to have fun. She didn't dwell on the fact that she had cancer, Maddy lived in the moment. Reading about Augustus's activities to do with Hazel brought back memories of things me and my sister had done. One special moment was my sister was going to be in the hospital for six weeks getting a bone marrow transplant and I remember her saying the rooms were too dull and not bright and fun enough for her. So, we went to the party store and got her a disco ball, colorful wall decals, posters, and so much more. However, this also brought back some sad memories that did still make me feel happy and enlightened my heart. I remember a few days before she died I wasn't allowed in the room because of germs and I put my hands up against the glass and she put hers up against the glass and that was the last time I saw her alive.

The Fault in Our Stars also opened me up. My mom always tried to get me to go to therapy or a support group. I was like Hazel not wanting to go. I thought I didn't need it, I didn't want help, I thought I was fine. I always cover up my sadness with a smile. I never really showed anyone my true feelings. I ended up going to see my current therapist so my mom would be happy, just like Hazel did. The first time I went to therapy was before I read your book and I didn't really want to open up to her so it was kind of awkward. However, she recommended your book to me because when we chatted about ourselves she asked me if I liked to read and told me to get your book. I'm really glad I did! When Hazel first went to the support group there were so many other kids fighting cancer like her or who had cancer before. This really opened my eyes because all of those kids had families going through some of the same problems my family did.

Thanks for a gift that changed my life around. I needed to be at peace and understand the death of my sister. I never wanted to talk to anyone, I didn't want help. However, your book cracked me out of my shell. I don't know why but I thought I had to be strong and could never cry. But, I've realized sometimes you need to let out a cry to be at peace with something and put all your emotions out on the table. I've begun to really cope with the death of my sister and I'm not dwelling on it every single day. I'm never going to not miss her and I'll always love her, that will never ever change. I know that's normal to still love them after they've left us. Thank you so much for this amazing gift that has brought me to peace with the death of my sister.

Sincerely,

Laci

Laci
Methuen
Grade 7

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016

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Level II Honors Award

Dear Jason Fong,

I've lost the words belonging and home months ago. Just like that, they vanished from my vocabulary ... poof! Abracadabra! I've been searching for them ever since. I've searched for them constantly, suddenly having questions popping in my head – What does belonging feel like? What is the meaning of home? I've searched and searched until your voice, Jason, arises from the pages of a magazine one day, reading a poem, "Go Back to Asia", a poem containing so many answers to my questions.

You see, I was not born in the United States where I now live. I was born in Asia, China to be more specific. I've been told I spent some time in China becoming slightly accustomed with the language and food. At age two, I left. I was picked out of the masses of other infants and babies at the nursing center and was set up with a new home and new family. When my adoptive mother and I united, we boarded a plane and flew halfway around the world to meet the rest of my family. I don't remember anything at all about these events – not the nannies that took care of me, the color crib I may have been placed in, the leather airplane seats, or the view from 35,000 feet above the ground. All I remember is growing up in the U.S.

As I grow older, I've become more aware about what is happening around me. I have begun to notice the cultural differences between others and myself. I notice I have a wider, flatter nose and dark, almond-shaped eyes with one double eyelid. Not only that, but I've begun to notice people staring at me a second too long, maybe because of this appearance. This has all led me to confusion. Confusion about belonging. Confusion as to where my home is. Because I look Asian in an American society, do I not belong here?

I do. I belong here. You told me in "Go Back to Asia", a poem on a flat piece of paper in Times New Roman font with a sharp emotional edge to it. It was nothing like John Milton's long, epic poems or Emily Dickinson's precise rhyming stanzas. When I read those classic poems, they are merely good reads. Yours, well, yours was refreshing. It was filled with answers to my relentless questions, clarifying the meaning of my lost words, home and belonging. Your poem reasons with yourself why you belong. It mimics first the malice in the voices of the people who call your appearance out. *"Go back to Asia! He says and sneers and snarls"*. You were oh so angry when you wrote this, weren't you? I too have felt this bitter anger, Jason. I have felt the confusion and unsureness you felt after these words and accompanying stares were hurled at me. It made me wonder like you did. It made me question and think, if I went back like they say, then where would I go? Where would I go if I left the United States? And you shouted, nowhere. You said that you were born and raised here. I wasn't born here as you were but none the less, I was raised here. I realize now, here is all I know. Here is all I remember. Here is where most of my past lies. Here is where everybody I know lives. I can't very well hop on a plane and abandon everything I know – the styles of clothing I've grown up wearing, the foods I've acquired a taste for, and English, the language that helps me learn and express who I am. If I leave all this behind, then I will have nothing. I would have *no* home.

You close by saying, *"I'm staying right here with you"*. And I am too. I, Jason, am staying here. I realize I truly belong right here.

So, thank you so much, Jason, for this poem. Thank you for reasoning with me where my home was and where I belonged. Woven within the five stanzas of your poem, you gave me an understanding. I now can answer my questions. Belonging is a feeling of comfort. It is a word that is used to describe somebody who is comfortable as who they are and comfortable in their own skin. Home to me is the place that I've been raised all my life, the place that is familiar, and the place where I have the most memories. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Leah

Leah
Hull
Grade 7

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016

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Level II Honors Award

Dear Maggie Stiefvater:

Often people refer to me as a person with many layers, like an onion (yes, I am comparing myself to an onion). Before you genuinely get to know me, I may seem quiet, shy, and ever rational. But, once you look underneath the skin of the onion, you will find that I can also be pretty close to the opposite – loud, stubborn, and reckless, just like the tang of an onion when cut. Imagine my surprise when I opened up *The Scorpio Races* and observed that the two main characters reflected the two sides of my personality. One is persistently stubborn and loud, often making slightly reckless decisions without fully considering. The other is eloquent and wise, carefully analyzing and observing everything. These two main characters in *The Scorpio Races* may seem radically different, yet I saw myself in both of them.

The character I can relate to the most is Puck, the wild one. She can incorporate herself into slightly reckless situations, but once she has made her decision, she makes a commitment. I'm like this sometimes – I don't usually consider too well before making slightly reckless choices, but once I'm on a path, it's really hard to deter me. If I had been in Puck's place with one of my siblings leaving the island, I would have done exactly what she did – ride in the races. Whenever I have a strong opinion, no matter how trivial, I will go to great lengths to defend my ideas. Seeing this part of myself in Puck helped me realize that being fiercely opinionated isn't necessarily a bad thing. Sean, the wise, well-spoken one, is the hushed, calmer side of my personality. Using few words, he conveys a lot of meaning and observation. When I am thrust into new environments with people I don't know too well, this side of me comes out. The character of Sean taught me that it can be advantageous to be the quieter, observational one – after all, humans have two ears and one mouth.

Another aspect of reading *The Scorpio Races* that certainly made me contemplate my own skills as a writer was the immersion. As I read about Sean and Puck racing, I could actually taste the spray of the sea. I could feel the salt crystals grinding against my skin as gulls squawked overhead. I could hear the waves pounding against the jagged shoreline. I could see every moment of the race just as if I was there watching it myself. I forgot that I was sitting on my couch staring at ink on paper. I was somewhere else. The vivid descriptive language and the masterful use of the sensory imagery woven into the fabric of the story had me captivated. Through only a few words, countless thoughts and sensations were provoked from the reader. Afterwards, I began to wonder about my own writing skills. Did people who read my writing experience the kind of immersion that I experienced when reading *The Scorpio Races*? Your writing has changed my views on my own writing.

Along with relating to both the characters and becoming fully immersed, this book also provided me with "girl power" inspiration. When Puck makes it clear that she will compete in the Scorpio Races, locals don't believe in her, discriminating against her because of her gender. My favorite part of the entire book is when Puck lifts her chin and says "I have my own reasons for riding, just like every man who climbed onto this rock. Just because I'm a girl doesn't make those reasons any less". I felt like jumping out of my seat and yelling "You go girl!". Puck's "stand tough" persistence to put-downs and ability to remain unchanged by the thoughts of others has inspired me, as a girl, that I should not be affected by stereotypes. One of the careers I hope to pursue later in life is engineering, a prominently male-dominated field. I know I will face some stereotypes against women. Puck's persistent attitude is inspiration for me to stand strong against stereotypes and show what girls and women are capable of.

When you think about it, a book is only a couple sheets of paper bound together, printed with a bunch of symbols arranged in a specific way. But a book is so much more than just that. *The Scorpio Races* showed me that my two different personalities can work together and be successful. The powerful language and imagery of those specifically arranged letters enthralled me and made me take a second look at my own writing. In its bound together pages I found inspiration for my goals later in life. Whenever I think of an onion, I will always reflect on the path into my layered personality that I found in your book. Thank you.

Your reader,

Maria

Maria
Beverly
Grade 8

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016

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Level II Honors Award

Dear Ms. Margaret Mitchell,

There are books that hide your problems and books that make them more clear to you. The latter are usually harder to uncover – they hide behind the cover of simpler, more innocent stories, with the sole intention of leaving you entertained. You don't notice them at first glance, but look a little deeper and you'll see...

That was the lesson I learned after reading your book, *Gone with the Wind*. My older sister handed me this book in the summer after fifth grade, and at that point in my learning career, I wasn't remotely interested in reading a 1,024 page story, much less, a *love* story. I was going through a 'phase', the phase where I thought everything was someone else's problem. I had nothing to do with the problem, why should I be part of the solution? It's not my world, it's theirs, and I don't want any part of it. These were things I told myself when faced with a problem. And this book was the same thing; I'll read it, but I will do it just because you tell me to.

I very reluctantly turned to the first page of *Gone with the Wind*, and the very first words I saw were the main character's name: Scarlett O'Hara, a name that I would soon recognize as that of my new heroine. Your book really changed the way I choose a piece of literature, and mostly in its perspective.

This was the first time that I had read a book that was based on the Southern view of the Civil War, and I thought that was really interesting. I got a look into a new cultural perspective and way of thinking that almost made me question who should have won the war, who was right in their thinking. When choosing a book, I now look for the narration, who or what tells the story, whether the characters are ones that I would respect in their thoughts and actions. Scarlett was never the kindest of characters, but she knew what was right, and generally, her motives had some sense in them. She definitely set a template for future characters that I would come to love. I also look for evidence that the book is different from others that I've read. The story of the Southern belle during the "War of Northern Aggression" really forced me to think about our society – during the 19th and 21st centuries, the way we act, and how we think of everyone around us, and their needs.

Scarlett O'Hara also helped to introduce me to the idea of a strong female character; she amazed me with the way that she lived. At a time when women were supposed to disappear into the framework when their husbands died, she didn't. In fact, she married two more times, each time to get something she wanted, whether it be money or her sister's jealousy. A woman was supposed to stay at home and mind the house and children. God forbid she actually had a backbone; she was there to *please* the man, not question his word. But under her sweet, innocent expression, Scarlett was a girl of temper, who didn't plan on living the way someone else wanted her to.

In this mass of cultural 'do's and don'ts', Scarlett stood out. I found myself drawn into her race for life, holding my breath as she put one of her daring plans for identity into action and laughing when she dismissed a problem with her famous "Fiddle-Dee-Dee". She didn't care what other people thought of her – society was wrong, in her eyes. Someone was needed to stand up to it, and she never hesitated to make herself heard. Scarlett gave me a model of someone who could and did fight back.

Behind the simple, innocent cover of a love story, I found the story of a young woman coming of age. I found the story that all people can relate to, one of courage, survival, and the will to live through the greatest hardships. The theme was hidden, behind the flirty little girl, who was devastated throughout the entire story that her 'true love' had married another. Scarlett is an archetype for the southern belle, and then veers away from it completely, becoming the female superhero who puts her life on the line to help those she holds most dear.

This epic helped me see the things in me that, before, I had never noticed. I have a passion for living in the way that I choose, the way I think is most wonderful. Instead of avoiding problems, where I could help, I find myself drawn to them. This story set a template for me, Scarlett has a spirit that no adversity could dampen, and before reading *Gone with the Wind*, I never really saw that in myself. The urge to never give up, and never surrender to the rules of our modern day society, the rules that dictate how you should live your life in the *proper* way, the *right* way, following society's unspoken rules that are sometimes more powerful than written ones. To me, the way Scarlett stood up for herself and her dignity, even in times of great stress and fear, was so inspiring.

My problem before I read this book, was that I was waiting – waiting for someone or something to start giving me the meaning in my life. I didn't know where to start. Now I recognize the feelings I was waiting for. I want to defend those who can't stand up for themselves. I want to protect the ones I love from all fear and hurt. Most of all, I want to live with the never-ending fire that burned so brightly, in that green-eyed brunette.

All the best,

Miya

Miya
Salem
Grade 7

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Level II Top Honors Award

Dear Malala Yousafzai,

I must confess that I was quite skeptical when I heard that you won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 at the age of seventeen – just five years older than me. The image of a Nobel Prize laureate in my head was of a white-haired old man who has spent his entire life in a lab inventing something, not a teenage girl who spoke up about education rights for girls. After I read your book, I changed my mind. You definitely deserve the Nobel Peace Prize. Your book sheds new light on how I view many things.

While I was reading your book, I suddenly understood why my great-grandma always told me to study hard. I also realized I should not take for granted that every girl has the right to receive an education. In fact, my great-grandma had similar experiences as the girls in Pakistan. My great-grandma grew up in Taiwan, a society that highly preferred boys to girls. One week after she was born, her parents gave her to a relative without children because they were poor and, more importantly, because she was a girl. When my great-grandma was around seven-years-old, she wanted to go to school. Sadly, because she was a girl, her foster parents did not want to invest in her. They kept her home to do house chores. As a religious Buddhist, my great-grandma went to a temple to learn how to read Buddhist texts, which were the only things she could read. Before I read your book, I could not imagine what kind of life my great-grandma had when she was a kid. Now I know why my great-grandma looks so joyful when she is reading her Buddhist texts and when she is able to recognize some Chinese characters in a newspaper. Actually, after I finished your memoir, I began to imagine what my life would be like if I were living in Pakistan without rights to go to school. I think my life would be boring and less meaningful.

Your book also reminds me that rights are not given but asserted and earned. Nowadays, girls have the right to receive an education in Taiwan. Of course, such equal rights to education in Taiwan were made possible by many courageous people who fought for gender equality. Similarly, in the early years of American history, women were discouraged from going to college. It was only after activists initiated the women's movement that more women were able to receive higher education. Your book helped me to remember that not all girls on this planet have the basic right to receive education. More importantly, we have to speak up and take action in order to make things happen. Your effort and action has convinced me that even kids can use their voices to talk about problems in society and take action to change the world.

While I was reading your book, I also thought more about Islam, a totally unfamiliar religion to me. The year I moved from Ann Arbor, Michigan to Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is across a river from Boston, there was a bombing at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. As you can probably guess, people in the United States felt sorrowful, fearful, and just mad. After the bombing, a lot of media reported that the bombers were Islamic extremists and they also connected this to 9/11. I remembered that after the bombing, there were a lot of police cars swirling around mosques. Before I moved to Cambridge, I had never had any Muslim classmates. In my school in Ann Arbor, I was one of the few people who was not Christian. In Cambridge, almost half of my class were Muslims. I had never seen anyone with religious headscarves in the past. Even though I knew that I needed to be kind and respectful to people with different religions, sometimes I still did not know how to judge media reports that connected Islam to terrorism. But your book has shown me a very different version of Islam that does not treat others with cruelty. This strand of Islam aims to improve people's lives through peace, dialogue, and education.

Your attitude towards the Taliban who shot you also surprised me and changed the way I thought about fear, hatred, and love. When you were interviewed by Ellen DeGeneres, you said that if you hit a Talib, then there would be no difference between you and the Talib. You also said that you had no fear and hatred towards the Taliban because of the love you got from your family, doctors, friends, and even people you have never met before. You completely convinced me that love is so powerful and able to defeat fear and hatred. I think that the purpose of terrorist attacks around the world is to provoke violence and arouse hatred and fear. A large number of people who participate in such attacks are people who feel marginalized in their societies. If everyone could just give more love to the people around him or her, then probably fewer people would join extremist groups.

The moment I closed your book, the image of the old, male Nobel Prize laureate vanished from my head. Instead, your brave, compassionate face and my great-grandma's beaming smile appeared in my mind. Cheers to love, inclusion, and mutual understanding.

Sincerely,

Ning-Er

Ning-Er
Cambridge
Grade 7

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016

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Level II Honors Award

Dear Jennifer Coburn,

I, too, am a self-proclaimed worrier. To put myself at ease, I attempt to make the world a little safer, securing my dog's collar as she romps in our backyard, and reminding fellow passengers to buckle up. However, despite the responsibility and compassion hiding behind my attempts at safety, adults always discourage my fears. 'You're too young to worry!' they'll exclaim, and in turn, I'll attempt to push my fretfulness to the side and live a whimsical childhood. However, your book didn't scold me about the matter of worrying, but rather helped me see the bright side of fear.

As you regaled me of your many adventures abroad in your memoir, We'll Always Have Paris, I couldn't help but notice that fear always played a supporting role in your stories. I began to see fear less warily than before, and could even welcome fear as a friend. Your fear of dying and leaving behind an abyss, void of memories for your daughter, prompted you to travel the world with little Katie. In a culture where fear is portrayed as a monster, it was enlightening to think that fear could push you forward rather than knock you down. I am beginning to understand the full consequences of fear, both good and bad. I've come to realize that some of society's greatest accomplishments have been propelled by fear. Revolution is driven by fear; fear of injustice, fear of suffering, fear of never being heard. The American Revolution originated from a fear of forever tyranny, the thought of continued British rule motivated the colonists to seek change in whatever way they had to. Fear can also paralyze forward progress. Scaring change into nothingness, and silencing motion. Every day, students watch classmates be harassed, but nothing is done to stop the bullying for fear of taunting towards the bystander who speaks up. You have educated me on fear, more so than I thought possible as I picked up your memoir.

Not only did you help me find light in worrying, but you taught me to live more freely. As you encountered many challenges throughout your travels, you persevered, despite your fear. You tackled each obstacle with a certain confidence uncommon in an anxious person such as yourself. You have taught me to face the unknown with the philosophy of the 'euro shrug,' why not? As you strolled through Italy, you would automatically throw a euro into an amateur musician's cup. This amazed me, how despite your strict budget, you could always spare a few coins. And when Katie wanted to rearrange the minute to minute schedule just so that she could visit an interesting museum a few days early, you immediately stood somewhat aghast. This is where, despite our somewhat similar paranoia, I began to notice our differences. This would have been such an easy switch for me, nothing more than a quick slash in red pen on a crinkled itinerary. Whereas, in the case of donating to struggling musicians, I would have just walked past without a second thought.

Despite what I had begun to believe as I turned page after page of a memoir borrowed from my mom, it soon hit me that no one's fears are alike. I think it all has to do with perspective. Our past experiences shape what is important to us and what is not. A long time ago, my dog Ellie escaped from our porch, and for a day spent racing through our neighborhood we thought she was lost. We soon found her, thank goodness, but ever since, I simply can't let Ellie out on the porch without making sure her collar is clicked on tight. But in this tiny little motion, I'm controlling my fear. After all, it is all up to us on what we choose to be frightened by, we possess the power to override every fear.

So thank you, Jennifer Coburn, for completely and utterly confusing me on a topic I thought I knew very well. You have empowered me to continue the quest towards finding answers to the question pressed in my brain throughout your book. Is fear good? Well, I'm off to find out.

Sincerely,

Sophie

Sophie
Marblehead
Grade 7