

# Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016

Massachusetts Center for the Book

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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 4<sup>th</sup> grade life.

When I discovered a study of *Tangerine* was part of the 7<sup>th</sup> grade English curriculum, I smiled. I thought way back to the 4<sup>th</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> 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*

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