

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016

Massachusetts Center for the Book

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Level III Honors Award

Dear Connor Franta,

After reading [A Work In Progress](#), the way I think about life has been altered beyond the simplicity of mere words. Your mother would say such supportive and reassuring things like “If you like you, that’s all that matters. If you don’t then maybe you could work out why that is” (p. 114). These words imitate those of my own mother and how accepting she is of me and all of my family members. Your experience, finding yourself and validating your identity, is so beautifully written and heartening that your words of advice penned in your memoir will stay with me forever. As a fan of your videos on YouTube for quite some time, reading [A Work In Progress](#) exposed a new side of your individuality not shown in any video before, and revealed many similarities between you and me.

As described in your memoir, high school is a transitional and developmental period in one’s life. For me, each day I learn more and more about myself; who I am as a person, and the person I am still becoming. High school is a time of maturing and truly becoming a young adult, one who is almost eighteen years of age with the right to vote for the President within the next year. “This is what happens in high school. We’re exposed to what’s not familiar while trying to work out who we are. We explore, make bad decisions, and learn from them” (p. 67). Your words really stuck with me because I have surely made my fair share of mistakes throughout the last couple of years. However, I feel like these unfortunate events not only happened for a reason, but also taught me some useful tools to apply to my future. I feel like everything happens for a reason, the good and the bad. In regards to your original photography featured throughout the book, the fact that you stopped to capture specific images within such crisp, beautiful pictures reflects your unique creativity and passion to inspire others with true authenticity.

The twenty-first century has brought upon amazing technological advances like smartphones and apps and even video sharing websites like YouTube. However, it was mentioned in your memoir that when you first started YouTube, it was all about the numbers; the numbers of viewers and likes on your videos was defining how you valued your art, and even yourself. You said in the book, “It’s okay to seek likes. But it’s not okay if you allow those likes to become the foundation of your self-worth, because other people might not be putting a whole lot of thought into the process of liking – or not liking – your photos or posts” (p. 121). As you declare it, being “numb to numbers,” really captures how you have to be confident in yourself, and not allow someone else to define your self-worth.

Although your book is a compilation of memories from your life, I feel so connected to your story because of its similarities to mine. When I was in middle school, coming to terms with my sexuality was the hardest thing I had ever done. Your struggles to overcome the opposition you held within yourself about your own sexuality is not only impressive but a definite source of inspiration for me and many others. Your strong words, “start living today, not tomorrow,” (p. 161) forced me to realize that no one is promised the next five years or even the next five seconds. As a result of learning your story, my motto has become “live each day as it comes and do whatever results in happiness, whether it be going for a simple walk in the park or spending all of your money”. Connor, thank you for sharing your life with me and millions of others through your revealing memoir. Reading [A Work In Progress](#) helped me come to terms with the fact that no one is complete, that we are all works in progress, and have much to learn along the way. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Sincerely,

*Aidan*

Aidan  
Oxford  
Grade 11

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Dear Victoria Forester,

Piper's story stuck with me for many years, leading to me read it over and over again. As I grew, I felt Piper growing alongside me, and she became something akin to a sister.

When I first picked up your book, I had been young and impressionable. I was about seven or eight at the time, still discovering chapter books that didn't contain at least one picture. The title is what originally drew me in. I was filled with a childish wonder and the thought of a girl who could fly fascinated me. As soon as I opened it, I could not seem to put the book down. I finished it in one sitting, then read it over again. Piper's struggles impressed me in a way I could not even begin to describe. The fact that she could remain so hopeful despite the doubt of her family, and those constantly trying to bring her back to Earth. But my still developing mind did not comprehend many of her victories.

I put the book down, and did not see it again for years. My family moved, and during it the book was lost. Your book introduced me to a new genre that combined fantasy with science and that stuck with me for years, and diverted my attention away from the novel. With so many new works in front of me, Piper soon became a distant memory as I moved onto bigger and more advanced texts.

I remember the day I was unpacking, the book long forgotten. I was home alone and had climbed into the dusty attic to see what else lay in untouched boxes, when staring me right in the face was that beloved book. I dared to take a peek at the story that had so drastically changed my view of the world. As soon as I opened the book I was drawn back in, and it taught me new things I hadn't been able to understand before.

My second discovery of your book was during a darker time of my life, during eighth grade. I was struggling to understand myself, who I really was, and where I fit in with everything around me. I constantly had this weight on my shoulder, a tiny voice whispering in my ear that I wasn't good enough. That I was a failure who could never reach anyone's standards, including my own. It led to me doing many things I regret today, just to feel something. Simply put, I hated myself. However, as soon as I re-read that story, Piper's journey had a new meaning to me.

When I was younger, I didn't understand why her happiness had suddenly been taken from her as she lost the ability to fly. This girl that I resonated with so well before became a stranger to me, as she no longer smiled so bright, and stopped being a beacon of hope for the other children. This time, though, I understood. Piper's most notable trait at first was her ability to fly. After that was suddenly taken away from her, along with her ability to walk, she became an empty shell of herself. Her true strength, I realized, was how she recovered. After being so hollow and treated so cruelly, she pulled herself from that dark place. Piper took her recovery so far as to forgive the woman who caused her to suffer and asked her to join her, for the sky was a big lonely thing when you're the only one to enjoy it. She accepted her demons and attempted to co-exist with the people who caused her harm. This was something I needed to comprehend, in order to save myself from... well... me.

I began to understand that if my childhood hero could pull herself from those dark times, that depression, I could do it, too. One quote still stays marked in my copy of your work, for it struck so deep within me that I could never bear to part with it.

"There is a place deep, deep inside every person that is hidden and hard to find. If things get bad enough and life gets too hard, though, some people will go to that place and never come back from it. Certainly, all outward appearances would suggest otherwise. They will look as they always did. They may even act somewhat like their old selves, but the truth is, the *real truth* is that they are hiding in this place deep inside where no one can touch or hurt them anymore" (p. 275).

After reading this, I found myself filled with new found strength. The way you described it so vividly made me realize that I had indeed been hiding inside myself. I wasn't sure what I was protecting myself from, but if Piper could escape this place, so could I.

At first I took on the battle alone. I tried to force myself to notice every good thing, anything that could make me feel any better. And it worked, for small amounts of time. However, there was no drastic change. So I went back and read it over again and understood what I had to do. I realized Piper had not fought alone. She never would have been able to recover if not for Jasper's newly discovered ability to heal. I reached out to my friends, made new ones, and even spoke with trusted adults. I found their help was something akin to Jasper's healing. Suddenly, I found myself with a growing support system that was always there right behind me. I hadn't even recognized the problem until Piper practically shoved it in my face. With their help I am in a much better place now. I certainly do still have days where I struggle with self-loathing, but I have a family to turn to. Similar to Piper's, they are not all related to me by blood. But they are family none the less.

Her journey, though different from mine, led me on and empowered me. I can truly say that Piper is the only character I've ever felt such a connection with. Her strength gave me hope, and that hope allowed me to realize I was more than the dark thoughts telling me I was never good enough. I've grown a lot since I was that curious little girl, and I've grown even more from being the self-pitying girl I once was.

And all I really have left to say is, thank you.

With best regards,

*Charlotte*

Charlotte  
Abington  
Grade 9

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Dear Ayn Rand,

How does a sports team perform well? I used to think the answer was absolute unity. After all, from a distance, a team looks like a simultaneous unit, even wearing the same uniforms. But when the game begins, the team diverges into individuals, each expressing themselves with different plays. I used to wonder at the individuality portrayed. However, *Anthem* helped me realize: without this sort of uniqueness, society cannot function.

As long as I have known, I have been obsessed with soccer. Once I enter a game, I enter a new world: the fresh grass crunching under my feet, the sun blinding my eyes, until I overheard from the sidelines: "Why is HE playing soccer? He's ASIAN". As an Asian soccer player, my ethnicity has often hindered my genuine love of the sport. Society expects Asians to veer away from athletics and focus on studying. I began to lose my passion for playing soccer, until one day, it was all gone. I surrendered to the stereotypes others expected of me, putting away my soccer ball and drawing out textbooks. Finally, nobody criticized me, since I blended into the crowd. However, it didn't take me long to realize I felt no fun from my activities, even if nobody bothered me for doing them. And so my dilemma began: was I doing the right thing?

Your novel *Anthem* provided me with a solution to this dilemma. I felt Prometheus and I were one as we discovered the word "Ego" for the first time. My previous knowledge of this word had been limited to narcissism and selfishness. *Anthem* introduced me to a whole new perspective of "Ego". It is the word for expressing one's thoughts, feelings, and desires, and grants uniqueness to humanity. Ultimately, it is an authentic personality. By giving up one of the most important parts of my identity, I had forgotten about individual meaning. Fortunately, Prometheus' fight to regain his identity from the conformity dictated by the Council demonstrated that no "Ego" can ever be taken away. I realized I could similarly regain my own "Ego" – my love of soccer. Thus, I returned to the soccer pitch once more, and found that I could finally ignore those obstructive spectators. After all, I knew that no matter how hard they tried, my personality, my "Ego", cannot be taken away. Reassured, I redeemed my joy of soccer thanks to *Anthem*.

Still reflecting on *Anthem*, I absorbed the full shock of the Paris attacks. In the aftermath, leading politicians opposed the entry of Syrian refugees. I discovered that these refugees were in a similar situation as myself. The politicians were the spectators who discouraged me from playing soccer because of my race. They collectively defined the Syrian refugees as "terrorists" instead of seeing them as individuals with their own hopes and dreams. These politicians had to recognize each refugee's "Ego" for these refugees to have the chance at a personality, individuality, and life.

Thank you for teaching me the necessity of an "Ego". Without *Anthem*, I may have become just another spectator on the sidelines, futilely attempting to do away with one's identity. But more importantly, I may never have realized the dire situation of the Syrian refugees. Thank you once more, and now I know: the sports team that wins is the one that allows the most uniqueness among its members.

Sincerely,

*Ethan*

Ethan  
Needham  
Grade 9

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Level III Honors Award

Dear Harper Lee,

“A black male was shot.” “ISIS beheaded another man”

Growing up as a Black Muslim male in America, you'd be surprised how often you hear one of these statements. You don't only hear them and move on with your life, you hear them and fear more for your life. As I was growing up, I personally thought that racism was a problem I was never going to have to face. Months and years passed, and time proved me wrong on several occasions. As I'm sure you know, it's a disturbing time in the world right now for both black people, racially, and Muslims, religiously. Being both, I am currently witnessing one of the most racial discrimination eras in the U.S. after slavery. People are becoming more and more educated, but the racism just keeps getting worse. Blacks and Muslims have been going through the pain of dealing with a problem that many thought was expelled from society. *To Kill a Mockingbird* talks about racism in Maycomb, Alabama in 1962, and you'd think 50 years later it wouldn't be a problem, but I stand to be corrected, and only time will prove it.

Last summer I was given the opportunity to take part in a teen summer program, where I was employed to take care of adolescents. Every two weeks my supervisor would call all teen workers into a room so they could sign their timesheets, in order to receive their paychecks. On Thursday afternoon, my supervisor called all the workers into the room to sign their timesheets, and I expected it to be the same as the previous weeks; sign your sheets, and get back to work. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case this time. As all the workers lined up, the Athan (call to prayer) app went off on my phone, but as soon as I heard it, I turned it off. I thought that no one heard it and everything would continue to go as is, but I was wrong (I'm wrong a lot of the time). About five seconds later, my supervisor said, “Oh, that's how you roll”. At first I didn't take it seriously, but after a room of about twenty people started to shake with laughter; it was hard to not be offended. But in every racist society, there's an Atticus Finch, a person who goes against the belief of the majority, in order to follow what's morally correct. I like to think that a boy named Welinski was my Atticus. Instead of following the rest of the crowd, Welinski spoke up against everyone's actions. He reminded everyone that they were laughing at something sacred, religion. He stressed the fact that what everyone was doing was xenophobic. Despite being serious, there was a group of kids that continued to laugh. When the kids asked why he was defending me, he replied “He's different, I'm different, but my love and respect is for everyone”.

Writing a letter to you isn't an easy task, I wanted to make it personal but related. When Welinski stood up for me, it reminded me of when Atticus said “*I do my best to love everybody... I'm hard put, sometimes – baby, it's never an insult to be called what somebody thinks is a bad name. It just shows you how poor that person is, it doesn't hurt you*”. You taught me that in every setting there is an Atticus, and if there isn't an Atticus, then I must take the initiative to be him.

We're living in a world today where it's normal to be racist, and in fact it's encouraged. In the current Presidential race in the year 2015, Islam is becoming an increasingly significant topic. Candidates on the other hand are undiplomatically showing clear signs of Islamophobia and generalization on the entire Muslim population. It even reached the extent of forcing Muslims to have special ID's to identify them. The opinion of hundreds of people doesn't matter much when the population is around three hundred million, but the fact that people are supporting and encouraging what they are doing is disgusting and disrespectful to the religion of Islam.

America is built on the principle of freedom; freedom of speech and freedom of religion (unless, of course, you're Muslim). In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus took it upon himself to defend a Black man, even though it was unheard of for a white man to do such a thing. Atticus was a normal man but he broke racial barriers because he believed in what's right. I want to be Atticus. I want to show the world that I'm not just a regular teenage Black Muslim. I want to live my life without the fear that I will be the next victim of racism. I want people to understand that my beliefs and traditions don't give people the right to decide my worth. I lived in this country for fourteen years; I am as American as anyone else is and my religion doesn't change that.

So thank you, Harper Lee. Thank you for helping me realize that being different isn't a bad thing and now all that's left is to convince the rest of the world.

Sincerely,

*Hassan*

Hassan  
Hyde Park  
Grade 10

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Dear Robert Frost,

I read your poem, "Nothing Gold Can Stay" in *The Outsiders* several years ago in sixth grade and was not affected at all by it, or so I thought. I went on living, not acknowledging the meaning behind your words contributing to the theme of the story – that no matter how much bad there is in the world, there will always be something to appreciate. In September of 2013, my mother was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia. My world turned upside down, not knowing what my future would look like. My mother lost her short battle, and I said goodbye. Confusion, anger, and sadness engulfed my life and took over. Now a freshman at the time, I vaguely remembered a poem I had read years before about how "nothing gold can stay" and appreciating things while they are here. After pondering and searching for this poem left and right, just as I was about to give up, your words were displayed on my Google search screen, and a smile grew across my face. I came across your poem once again, but was affected in a deeper and more thoughtful way because of the exact connection to what I had been going through. Your poem within the context of the novel using symbolism and dynamic characters connected me to the thought that there will always be evil and loss, but appreciating the good will make it all worth it.

There were months and months of little socialization, going through the motions, and depression connecting to my loss until I read your words again. Reading the lines "So dawn goes down to day. Nothing gold can stay", filled my eyes with tears. Gold, in this case, is not symbolizing the solid jewelry material, but happiness or good in a situation, like my mother. Even though it was a tragic event changing my life seemingly for the worse, I gained empowerment over time. Appreciating the time I had with my mom made the grievance of loss somewhat bittersweet. I chose to look for the better and focus on what she had taught me and how I could live on and share my experience. Your beautifully articulated words were the light at the end of a dark tunnel. It opened my heart to the idea of no matter how much bad there is, there is always something to be grateful for. You taught me another lesson with the lines, "But only so an hour". Setting a theoretical time limit spreads the message of how nothing, no matter how horrible the feelings are, will stay forever. Thus, you must appreciate the good while it is still there. This provided different perspective and has helped me cope tremendously with the death, for I knew that it would get better eventually. Viewing the world like this has helped me realize the better in all bad situations. I now can share my new knowledge of gratification with others that take simple things for granted. These symbols helped me look at the still standing good of my situation, even if it was significantly sad.

The people contributed to the story I first encountered it in, and has a comparison with my life, looking at the positive good side of change when there is evil. In *The Outsiders*, Johnny and Pony Boy are representing gold in terms of your poem. Within the story's progression, they became more aggressive, and lose their innocence, contributing to the message of nothing gold can stay. Although they lost something, the character change was not all for the worse, for they interacted in a better way with characters by the end of story. I have similarly changed, as these characters, with the same sense of losing innocence and the end of childhood. Even though ending childhood at thirteen, when I lost my mother, was detrimental, it has helped me gain maturity and become independent. No matter how bad the situation or change, there is always something to be thankful for, sometimes an even better gain of knowledge.

Your poem created a realization of mine as to how there is always something of which to be appreciative, no matter the evil circumstances. There is a tremendous amount of evil and sorrow in the world, but using poems like yours brings hope and the brighter side becomes easier to focus on. Before reading your poem, I was lost and full of sadness. After reading and analyzing, the thought became clear and I began to appreciate the good aspects in life. Even if Eden sank to grief, as I did, there is still the memory of the beautiful garden, like my mother. I am now confident to express that no matter how bad or evil a situation may be, there is something to be thankful for. Thank you for changing me for the better and showing me the good of the world.

From,

*Kelsey*

Kelsey  
Hingham  
Grade 10

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Dear Mr. Kurt Vonnegut,

I struggle with the concept of death. Whether it was when I was six and my goldfish died, when I was twelve and my grandmother passed away, or even now, when the lives of people, strangers to me, are being taken mercilessly in terrorist attacks and wars. With each transition in my life, from childhood to adolescence, and from adolescence to young adulthood, the severity of what I noticed death to be increased. My observance of the death around me increased, but my understanding of the intellection continued to plummet. It was not until this past year that I learned of the name for my disconnect with inevitable death: existentialism.

I'm currently a senior at a small high school, in a town no one has ever heard of. I've found myself, primarily in the last two years of high school, worrying more about the life ahead of me than the life I'm currently living. Being a stressed and apprehensive teenager has guided most of my thoughts regarding the future to have something to do with making a name for myself. I don't want to be just another face in the crowd.

I read your novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, this past summer, as I filled out college applications and thought about what I wanted to do with my life. Obviously, this novel attacks a serious issue of war and the effects it has on the soldiers who partake in it, but, while reading it, I was able to make connections with many of the philosophical ideas and statements used to show the asperity of war. I now apply many of the statements made in the book to my everyday thinking. The most simple and most common example of this would be your use of the phrase "so it goes". In the novel, this phrase is used when addressing an instance of death. As I flipped through the pages of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I was immediately intrigued by the amount of times this phrase is used. Its overuse is tied to the fact that death is inevitable, and although not mentioned in the novel, I personally interpreted this phrase as stating not only that death is inevitable, but life as well.

We are all born into this world without consent, and we are all taken out of this world without consent. Now, everything that happens in between, that's up to us, and we need to do what makes us happy. Because eventually, we'll be sitting in a hospital, making dinner at our house, or driving our car down the highway, and everything will just end. We won't compare grade point averages with our classmates anymore. We won't bring our children to school again. We won't worry about our retirement fund. All of the little things we once thought were vital to living, won't be. So it goes.

So in conclusion, thank you, Mr. Vonnegut. Thank you for writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*, for unintentionally changing the way I plan to live the rest of my life, and thank you for including the phrase "so it goes" in the novel 106 times.

Sincerely,

*Madelyn*

Madelyn  
Pittsfield  
Grade 12

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Dear Malala,

"I am Martin" and like you, I'm a teenager. In addition to the fact that we share the first letter of our first names, we also share the same dream to grow through learning to prepare for a promising future. My mother, who is coincidentally a teacher like your father, has taught me that the future success of a people lies in quality education.

I had always wanted to read your book, but I never had the opportunity to obtain it until two months ago when I moved from Venezuela to the United States. In the school library, fate presented me with your book and I did not miss the chance to read it. Your actions and message have unequivocally changed the lives of millions. I now include myself in this group of inspired individuals and hope to become part of the change that you have started.

As I mentioned above, I'm from Venezuela, where I had the joy of studying in a private Marist Catholic school called The Champagnat School. The level of education was extraordinary and my time there was enriched by my fellow classmates, many of whom I call my brothers and sisters. They, along with my dedicated teachers, provided me with a tremendous amount of support in a time of political and social turmoil.

At Champagnat, I participated in Model United Nations (MUN), which was the first time I heard about you and became inspired by your cause. The MUN taught me about human rights, the lack of basic needs faced by people around the world and the need to solve crises through dialogue: "fight for the dreamers' voices so that they may never be silenced" (this was our motto). On the other hand, our school founder, San Marcelino Champagnat, always said "To educate, one must love" ... then, our mission became to spread, through love, education so that the voices of those who dream will never be silenced.

I had to leave all of this behind because of the terrible situation that now exists in my country. In Venezuela, today, the future is a matter of luck. You don't know what will happen tomorrow or if you will be alive to see another day. The current government's inability to govern efficiently and democratically has been "a thorn in the side" of any Venezuelan who wants to follow his or her dreams. Personal insecurity with random kidnappings and killings, shortages of basic goods, and the decline of quality and freedom within universities are just some of the reasons for my moving to the United States. I had to leave friends, family, and, worst of all, my dad, who stayed behind working so that my mom, my sister and I could begin a journey in search of a future full of opportunities and dreams.

To be honest, on my first day at my new school, I was afraid... afraid to start from scratch. But, after reading your book, I realized that it is ok to feel fear, but it would be a big mistake to fear education. Today, thanks to you, I know that "The future is in a classroom" and that the pursuit of "Gulcada", place of flowers, does not primarily occur in the first garden you stand in. I am committed, more than ever, that I want to achieve my goals: to continue to grow as a person, go to a good college, and become a professional.

When you won the Nobel Peace Prize, you continued to inspire me and others, just as your dad did for you when he gave you the chance to learn. I have a role model in you and I will continue to use education to help myself and others as you are doing around the world. Hopefully, someday, I will earn the right to say "I AM MALALA".

Sincerely,

*Martin*

Martin  
Brookline  
Grade 11

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Level III Honors Award

Dear Ray Bradbury,

My name is Nick. I live in a nice house and have a great family. We are not poor so I have been blessed to have many different types of technology to choose from when at home. There are plenty of TV's, one for everyone if we wanted. We all have phones, tablets, and laptops to go on when the television gets boring. This is how my family was spending our time. We would watch TV and not talk to each other very much.

This track of constant immersion into technology was getting worse year after year. Each year we would get a bigger TV or the better iPhone or some new piece of technology that would continue to distract us from interacting with the person sitting right next to us. It was Thanksgiving Day at my house this year, dinner wasn't ready yet. All of my cousins were there. Looking around the living room you would expect everyone to be talking because no one has seen each other in months but, every person in the room was looking down at their phones. Fifteen people in one room, with no one talking! What happened to us? Just the year before we had fun playing games and interacting with one another.

This was my sophomore year of high school. I didn't realize it at the time, but we were going down a dark path of diminishing interactions with our own family members. Then my English teacher told me we would be reading *Fahrenheit 451*. I thought it was just another one of those school books that bore you to death. But it wasn't, your book opened my eyes to what I couldn't see before. Society was engulfed in technology, there were absolutely no human interactions between normal citizens. In the novel, Guy Montag has a wife who he barely communicates with, she never leaves her house, and doesn't have any real friends. This radical society seemed so plausible to me given enough time. Every time I would go to BestBuy or another television selling store I would see the TV's getting bigger and bigger. I directly related the interactive TV's the size of walls from the books to this. Anyone who has an iPhone knows just with a simple command to your phone you can pull up anything from the Internet.

*Fahrenheit 451* made me realize that the society shown was where we were headed, maybe not in the near future, but in the future it is a possibility. This hit me hard, I knew there was nothing I could do about the technological side. Technological advances make life easier which is not a bad thing. Lack of human interactions, face to face connections however, are what is plaguing our society. . After finishing the book I came to realize I can do something about it. I stopped watching so much TV. When my family comes home after school or work, I put down my phone to talk to them about what is going on. These types of connections cannot be made through the Internet. The emotion, facial expressions, and mood given off when you ask someone how their day was is lost in technology.

Although I still may have the latest iPhones and other pieces of technology that can distract me from everything else in the world, I have come to appreciate face to face interactions. The connections that I have made from putting down my phone to just say a few words to anyone I can has made the whole way I think about technology change. Reading your book has changed me in that I use technology only to a certain extent and value the things computers cannot do.

Sincerely,

*Nick*

Nick  
North Easton  
Grade 12

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Level III Honors Award

Dear Yann Martel,

They say that a leopard cannot change its spots. I politely disagree with that idiom. If we are self-aware in our effort to be better, then we can adjust and consciously change our old ways. I have learned that first hand. Ever since I was a child, I have been stubborn in my beliefs. I struck down others' arguments promptly with wit and tenacity. I like to think that I have come a long way in my tolerance. Your book, *The Life of Pi*, broadened my opinions and caused me to look at my stubbornness in a new light.

One of my strongest convictions had to do with religion and my certainty that there was no God. Growing up, I was shuffled from church to church and denomination to denomination by my parents. The first church we went to, a Catholic church, did not accept that my father was divorced to his ex-wife, and so we left on his accord. The next church, a Baptist church, asked for large sums of money often and so we left for financial reasons. I have never truly felt a connection to religion in my life. Since I was ten, I have declared myself as an atheist.

Although I have had many friends who have practiced religions, to me it made no sense. In my mind, one could either believe in God or science and there was no in-between. Everything I was taught in school refuted religion and caused my atheism to grow even stronger. I whole-heartedly did not believe in God and it baffled me that anyone would. However, when I read your book, I began to understand.

The main character in *The Life of Pi* was a Christian, a Muslim, and a Hindu. When I first started reading the book, I had prepared myself to dislike it. I figured a book about religion would mean absolutely nothing to an atheist. But I found that I had a very strong connection with Pi Patel and the story in general.

Similar to me, Pi did not follow the herd when it came to his strong beliefs. He was constantly told that he could not practice all three religions, yet he continued. In a completely different way, I have been told that my beliefs are incorrect as well. There have always been people who try to convince me that there is no sense in being atheist. Both Pi and I never conformed to fit in with everyone else. I was surprised by how similar Pi and I were. Perhaps if I did not learn to hate religion at a young age, I, too, would practice multiple religions.

I never understood the importance of religion, as I have made clear by now. I thought of it as more of a way to give a moral compass to lost souls than to bond a community. I saw the divergences in religions as divisive. The differences of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hindu, and other religions made me believe that peaceful coexistence between multiple separate religions was nearly impossible. In my academic career, I have learned about the Holocaust in which a Christian population committed genocide to a Jewish population. I have learned about the Armenian genocide in which Muslims killed Christians for their faith. I have learned about so many separate events in which religion was the cause of the divide. So, in my mind, I had no hope for religions peacefully existing alongside each other.

Pi was the catalyst that caused me to alter my opinion. His character constantly insisted that every God is the same no matter the religion. He spoke of the peace in religion's beliefs and the positivity in the word of their scripture. Whereas I had always suspected that scripture was an excuse to justify antiquated views such as homophobia and sexism, Pi preached of the love in the scripture. He spoke of how God loves everyone and we must always try to be our best for Him. I had never seen religion portrayed in that way and I suddenly saw the good in it.

To this day I still doubt God. But I am not willing to completely say that he does not exist. Before reading *The Life of Pi*, I was an atheist. Now, I am an agnostic. That, in simple terms, means that I do not believe nor disbelieve in God. I have always known that there is no conclusive evidence of God. Now, I also know that there is no conclusive evidence that there is *no* God. *The Life of Pi* opened me up to a whole new world in which religion is not the enemy.

*The Life of Pi* had a large effect on my life. I have been introduced to an entirely different way of thinking. I know now that it is not best to be stubborn in your beliefs because they are subject to change. Unlike Pi, I am not a Christian, a Muslim, and a Hindu. But I do believe that it is a possibility for me to be so. I have learned not to discount any certain set of ideas until I have completely educated myself. *The Life of Pi* taught me to be open to hearing about opinions that are different from mine. And it also taught me that perhaps there really is a God.

Sincerely,

*Rachel*

Rachel  
Southborough  
Grade 12

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Level III Top Honors Award

Dear Sylvia Plath,

I am sorry I ever doubted your words – I know now the truth that they hold.

During the start of my sophomore year of high school, my reading group in English class chose to read your book, *The Bell Jar*. I felt immediately the intensity held in your prose, and I must admit that I was deterred. Esther's descent into depression was so vividly captured that the pain she felt would leap from the pages and into my gut, where it would fester while I read on. If this sounds like I did not enjoy reading your book, it is because I truthfully did not. I was unnerved by Esther's inability to find purpose and the general malaise that surrounded her. The people that she came into contact with all seemed misunderstanding or cold, causing me to feel a deep sadness for Esther's loneliness in the world. Your words are honest and pierce the veil of comfort, Ms. Plath. At the time, I could not appreciate the candidness and clarity with which you delved into Esther's hazardous life.

In the February of the following year, I had a skiing accident and hit my head. The next day when my head was pounding and I could not focus, I naively assumed that if I had a concussion, it would soon clear itself up. During the following month, I began my unconscious decline. I cried a lot during that time, for every reason and no reason at all. I began to move through life under a haze that permeated every feeling that I had, until all of my thoughts were sticky with tears and the confusion brought on by this wave of sullen emotion that had hit me out of nowhere. There was a glass bell jar lowered over my life, trapping my melancholy thoughts with me and threatening to take my sanity. I became unrecognizable to myself. Once a happy and energetic person, I had become constantly anxious and sapped of energy. I was not aware at the time that I was experiencing depression, just as Esther was unaware of her condition and the stem of her endless troubles. That's the thing about depression; it will slowly creep up on you and start to squeeze the life out of you, milking you bit by bit of your happiness so that it takes you some time to realize that there is a leech feeding on your mind.

Esther's journey with depression culminated with her attempted suicide, while mine was – thankfully – a much easier realization. On my mother's birthday that March, we had a conversation in which we traced the start of my problems – which she had noticed – to that day on the slopes the month before. I went to see a specialist and was diagnosed with a concussion as well as post-concussion syndrome, which has symptoms such as depression and anxiety. My depression was exposed, like turning on a light in a room and finding someone hiding in the dark. From there, I began to put myself back together.

My appreciation of your book largely stems from my understanding of Esther's feelings that I acquired after first reading it. I can sympathize with Esther and grasp how she felt the walls closing in on her and the presence of the bell jar over her head and thoughts. Depression, for me, is not something that can be overcome. It can be calmed, its appetite quelled with little blue pills and constant vigilance. I carry it around deep inside of me, a little seed that cannot be dislodged. The difference is, now I am in control. I decide how I will feel. I kick back the covers and I get up. I open the shades, I go outside, I continue – with scars, just as Esther had, but with a new clarity and strength that we both discovered inside of ourselves when faced with a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. Just as Esther describes it, "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am".

For this and much more, I would like to thank you for your beautiful novel.

Best,

*Sabrina*

Sabrina  
Northborough  
Grade 12

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Level III Honors Award

Dear Hermann Hesse,

I can remember at the age of four my mother instructed me in the grand theory of “The Golden Rule”: treat others the way you want to be treated. Ever since I have strove to align my moral compass to this proverb, for even to my young mind it made perfect sense. Being nice to others will make others nice to you and the whole world will be a better place. Simple.

Then at the age of five I walked into my first class at Solomon Schechter Day School. There I was taught the names of the Jewish holidays and their accompanying traditions, the meaning of the Star of David, and the hallowed name of God, “Adonai”, but ultimately no religion. As I faithfully chanted the Hebrew prayers, my eyes strayed to the English translations, and there I did not find the empathy for my fellow human beings my mother had taught me. Instead, I found words that praised a God who smites those that dare oppose Him, and ritualistic adherence to outdated practices that just didn’t mean anything to me. I struggled for years, tearing through the volumes of the Torah, trying to find what I knew to be true – divinity is in kindness to others but at the end of nine years I left Solomon Schechter with nothing but the tenants of latkes, dreidels, and Purim festivals. I felt utterly lost and confused. I felt my life had no meaning.

That was when I picked up *Siddhartha* (May I say that you have truly crafted a masterpiece). Despite the miles of ocean and centuries of time between me and Siddhartha, I had never seen my struggles reflected so perfectly as they were in that restless Brahmin. His pursuits, failures, and perpetual inner turmoil mimicked my own and I idolized him for it. I drank in every word of your novel like holy wine, hoping the universe would unfold before me – that Siddhartha’s journey would culminate in some massive existential revelation that I would read and suddenly be enlightened with. As you probably can guess, I did not find this, (I’ve been told your quest for instant enlightenment bore no fruit either), but nonetheless I encountered something that rocked my perspective to its core: “When someone seeks,’ said Siddhartha, ‘then it easily happens that his eyes see only the thing that he seeks, and he is able to find nothing, to take in nothing because he always thinks only about the thing he is seeking, because he has one goal, because he is obsessed with his goal. Seeking means: having a goal. But finding means: being free, being open, having no goal” (Hesse 107). My entire childhood I had searched for a prescribed religious panacea to my need for wisdom, but you told me this was all wrong. Morality does not come from without but within, and no ancient compendium of rites and rules can hold a candle to one’s own intuition. This is not to say tradition holds no value, for just as Siddhartha garnered wisdom from the Hinduism of his youth, I too find guidance in the laws of Judaism. But sanctity lies within each of us in a unique form and is therefore a discovery each of us has to make. It will not be revealed through purposeful effort, however; the uncovering of truth stems from experience. We must listen to the world around us.

I don’t know why I’m going on about these insights, clearly you already understand them. I guess I just wanted to say that you have truly changed my life. *Siddhartha* did not present me with the answers I sought, which would have contradicted the message of the book, but it gave me a new outlook. The lessons one can learn from your novel are universal, yet beg to be interpreted on an individual level to foster personal appreciation. Finding balance between greed and abnegation, allowing those we love most to slip away, and discovering from whom we should accept guidance are extremely difficult undertakings we all must face. You, however, have armed me with a powerful weapon with which I can now confront these challenges: confidence in myself. I may not always know what is right and what is wrong, and I will most certainly make some mistakes, but I will learn, and I will grow, and those mistakes will grant me the experience to form my own beliefs and create my own wisdom. As you once said, “The truth is lived, not taught”.

I am eager to see where my new disposition will take me. What better way to learn could there possibly be than having an open mind and the world as your teacher? I have no more plans for how find my own religion, but I hold on to my fundamental ideals. I now walk through life unsure yet unperturbed, treating others the way I want to be treated.

So thank you for giving my life meaning and teaching me the wisdom of indirection.

My best to you,

*Sarah*

Sarah  
Sharon  
Grade 11

P.S. The plot twist with the son was complete craziness.

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Level III Honors Award

Dear Shel Silverstein,

I feel like you're my best friend, like you know me better than anyone. All my life I depended on you, on your poems. It wasn't until recently that I truly realized what they meant for me. *Where the Sidewalk Ends* was a book that meant love and happiness, then it meant pain and loss, finally, it became a symbol of hope for me.

You see my parents are divorced and my mother was a drug addict. Being so young when it started I had no idea what was going on. Things were good for a while. I was happy, she was happy. Every night I was with her she'd come into my room and play with me. She'd read me a few poems from *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, always ending with my favorite, "Where the Sidewalk Ends", and lay with me until I fell asleep. Once the addiction started, I didn't see my mom much. I only saw her every other Friday night and although we didn't have much time together, she would always make sure to come into my room and read me a few poems always ending with my favorite. Her addiction grew worse and eventually I read the poems to myself every Friday night while she was busy doing other things.

After a few years of this going on I was no longer seeing my mom. I would just lay in bed with the book by my nightstand wishing my mom was around. Occasionally I'd pick up the book and read a few poems but it wasn't the same without her. When I was 15, nine years after my mother's addiction began, I picked up the book and read it cover to cover, the first time in years. I skipped "Where the Sidewalk Ends" and saved it for last. This time when I read it, it meant something different. It was no longer a memory of what I had but became hope for what is to come. It was hope that you can "leave this place where the smoke blows black" and go somewhere where "the sun burns crimson bright". It became a symbol of the darkness that my mother was struggling with and the light I hope she finds. It was the first time I saw something deeper in the words. I called my mom later that night and I told her I loved her and that she will find the place where the sun burns crimson bright. She knew exactly where that came from.

Not long after that phone call my mother checked into rehab. She was in and out for about a year and a half. Finally she stuck to it and after about four months she came home clean. The first thing she did was gather me and all of my siblings on the couch, told us she loved us and read us all *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, cover to cover.

For as long as I can remember your books have been a part of who I am. Whenever I am asked to choose a favorite author I will always choose you. Your poems inspired something great in my life. Your poems gave me my mom back. I wish I could thank you but no language in the world has the words to truly express my gratitude. I shall end with this "How much good inside a day? Depends how good you live 'em. How much love inside a friend? Depends how much you give 'em", and you gave me enough love to last a lifetime.

Thank you friend,

*Taylor*

Taylor  
Pittsfield  
Grade 12

# Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016

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Level III Honors Award

To the wonderful author of *Weedflower*, Cynthia Kadohata,

The floorboards creaked slightly as the carpet parted beneath my sneakers. My eyes scanned the shelves of the library cart. I stopped before a book titled *Weedflower*. What a strange name, I thought at the time; why not rose? Why not water lily? Why not something extravagantly beautiful? Why *Weedflower*? Picking up the book, expecting the story of a high school social outcast who lives the classic rags to riches story, I checked it out.

Contrary to my previous assumptions, *Weedflower* is a book about a young Japanese-American girl living through World War II. It indeed was a story of an outcast; except she was never quite to the “rags” nor did she ever achieve “riches”. She simply became accepting. *Weedflower* from the beginning and *Weedflower* till the end, all that really changed was the light she saw herself and her world in.

I thought about it for some time, and it rose a nostalgic feeling in me; an emotion that I couldn't really pinpoint. Over a quarter of the book was about waiting for the inevitable doom of being taken from their home and precious flower farm. Like being glued to a chair that's in a room, being constantly filled with water. Then Bam! The day came. A day that almost seemed to be a dream; the kind that you would wake up from and only remember being frightened. Was she ever able to wake up from that dream? Has she ever stepped out of the camp even though her body has? The cliffhanger brought on these rhetorical questions.

Flip the pages of my own life story. On July, 22, 2008, at the age of seven, I took my first step on American soil. With absolutely no knowledge of the language other than the “head, shoulders, knees and toes” song, my father and I journeyed from a country on the opposite side of the globe to join my dear mother.

I expected so much out of this country. I expected so *much* yet I didn't know exactly what I was expecting; all I thought about was reuniting with my mother who left China when I was an infant. The excitement was slapped right in the face with reality when I realized on the second day that I could hardly talk to anyone. No one really talked to me; no one tried to get close, and I sympathize with Sumiko for that. I knew how it felt to be lonely. I know how it is when “everyone was looking at you” and when, “*nobody* was looking at you”. I know the feeling when, “you didn't care about anything at all”, and when “you were *just* about to cry over every little thing”. I really went through some of the exact same situations Sumiko did.

I even remember in my first year of life in America, a neighbor's daughter was having a birthday party, and to my pleasant surprise I was invited. This was my first time! I was thrilled, putting on a nice dress and taking my favorite stuffed *Mashimaro* as a present, I rushed over, a smile from ear to ear pasted across my face. Just like Sumiko did. Knocking on the door, the girl's mother opened and kindly invited me in.

Not even a minute into walking in the house, the “birthday girl” spotted me. Of course, I knew how to say happy birthday; it was one of the first terms I learnt. My mouth opened to greet her when she cut me off. Right in front of me, in a clearly audible voice, she complained, “why did you invite her?!”. At first I was dumbstruck, then I realized that *she* didn't invite me at all, her *mother* did. I went home after that, dejected, with the stuffed rabbit still in my hand. And I cried. Just like Sumiko did.

These small connections, like little stepping stones, really help me walk in the shoes of Sumiko. I saw her troubles; I saw her joy; I saw her pain. However, what this book really changed about me was the way I see myself. I'm a strong-willed person; the one friend that you have who seems like nothing can really discourage their self-confidence; the one that says “I'm comfortable in my own shoes”. I am that friend. However, at the same time, I am also a liar. Spewing lies, non-stop, to my parents, to my friends, to all that I love and care about, without batting a lash – it's already become a natural response. I was such a truthful child but the sudden smack of reality that hit me since 7<sup>th</sup> grade changed me. I'm no longer the happy, girly, bubble of a person I used to be, because I lie to myself. I am that friend, but I am a liar.

They don't see it, but I *do* care about my appearance. I *do* care about what other people think; I *do* care about the way I act. I lie so much, that sometimes I forget that I'm living that lie I trapped myself in.

But this book, this work of art suddenly made something snap. “*Weedflower*”, why “*Weedflower*”? Its' so simple yet beautiful. The small beautiful things in life, like making friends and escaping “ultimate boredom”. This is what makes humans so unique. Reading this story made me question, “Who am I lying *for*?”. If I didn't want to live it, I don't have to; if I didn't want to pretend, I don't have to; such a simple resolution that took me so grueling long to come to. If I wanted to be cautious why pretend? If Sumiko could act the way she wanted in a camp that holds her hostage, why couldn't I stop pretending to be stronger than I really am in the “Land of the Free”? This is what this book revealed to me.

Being centerpiece of a wedding  
Is not what defines a successful life  
Be the quiet little life of a weed flower  
Thriving in the middle of a barren land  
It's *your* life  
You get only one of them  
Live it your way

Thank you for teaching me that.

Sincerely,

*Yanrui (Rena)*

Yanrui (Rena)  
Brookline  
Grade 9