

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016
Massachusetts Center for the Book
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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
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