

West Virginia Center for the Book

Letters About Literature 2005

West Virginia Center for the Book
West Virginia Library Commission
Cultural Center
1900 Kanawha Boulevard, East
Charleston, WV 25305
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April 2005

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Edited 4-15-05

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Closing Remarks

Karen Goff, Coordinator
2005 WV Judges

Special Notice

The response to this project is so great that, this year, the West Virginia Center for the Book will publish only the essays receiving First Place, Runner-Up, and Honorable Mention Awards. The letters appearing in this publication depict the students' writing as it was submitted for judging. All attempts were made to keep the grammar and spelling true to the students' submissions, with the exception of necessary corrections to titles and authors. The order of appearance does not reflect students' scoring.

Level One

First-Place

Ian Lovern

Animal Farm by George Orwell

Like animals on a farm, I used to think someone would always be there to take care of me. I knew my parents would be there to make sure I was okay. However, after I read Animal Farm I realized I would have to be responsible for my actions.

The animals of Manor Farm gave up all of their choices and depended on the pigs. When you do something like that in real life, those in power are not always fair. You hear about this everyday in the news. To keep my rights, I must be responsible for myself and not always depend on others to make choices for me.

After reading the words, "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others", it took me a few minutes to discover their true meaning. It is that in a fair society people are supposed to be equal, but as some get greedy, they start to believe that they are better or "more equal" than others. To prevent this, I along with everyone else must take responsibility to be fair and not let one person become too powerful.

Your book caught my attention because I really like animals. I was surprised there was more to the story than just a wacky barnyard. It was cool to learn about history and government through such a comical story. Animal Farm taught me that I have to be responsible and contribute in our society. Realistically, I can help make people more aware of problems in the world, keep an open mind, educate myself, and always be fair to everyone.

Sincerely,

Ian Lovern

Runner-up

Olivia Greenberg

Mercer Elementary School

Number the Stars by Lois Lowry

Dear Ms. Lowry,

Your book, Number the Stars, made me happy, sad, and scared. It has changed the way I think and act. I learned everyone has courage bottled up just waiting to come out at the right time.

I am Jewish like Ellen. I can practice my religion freely. When Ellen and her family were living in Denmark during World War II, they were not free to attend temple. It made me sad and frightened to know people were dying because of their religion. However, it made happy to know Ellen had a friend who would risk her life to protect her. Annemarie is like my friends. I am almost certain my friends would do anything to help me if I were in danger of dying.

After reading your book Number the Stars. I started to think being able to practice your own religion is not just a right but also a great privilege. I am now part of a charity called W.H.O. Cares that was started at my temple. I also go to temple almost every Sunday.

Annemarie demonstrated courage when she helped Ellen escape. Everyday people show the same fearlessness. When the World Trade Center was attacked and collapsed, many people exhibited great bravery to help rescue victims.

Thank you for helping me realize I should not take freedoms I have for granted. Also, I appreciate learning about World War II and being a Jew during that time. Number the Stars has made a good and lasting impression on me.

Sincerely,

Olivia Greenberg

Runner-up

Alexis Randolph

Wheeling Catholic School

Ghosts Don't Eat Potato Chips by Marcia T. Jones & Debbie Dadey

Dear Marcia and Debbie,

Dumb! Stupid! Failure! These are the names that I called myself in the Fourth grade. I just couldn't get reading. My mom is a teacher and she tutors other kids but I stunk at reading. She sent me to see a special reading teacher and I think that helped. The only problem was I hated to read. I went to tutoring during year and things got a little better. I still didn't want to read.

My mom loves to read. She reads all the time. That is when something happened. She was at the library picking books out in the summer. There it was! I found Ghosts Don't Eat Potato Chips lying on the table in the library. I asked if my mom would check it out for me and she said. "YES!"

I started reading your book on my way home in the car. Man was my mom excited! She told Daddy and everybody how proud she was of me. I asked for another one of your books.

About five days later my mom told me that there was a surprise coming in the mail. I couldn't wait! Sure enough there was a big box on our front porch and it was full of Bailey School Kids books. They teach a very important lesson. You should get all of your facts straight before you jump to conclusions.

But most of all, thanks for making me know I can read and I really am not dumb, stupid, or a failure. I am a girl who needed to find something she liked. Thank you being the one to give it to me.

Sincerely,

Alexis Randolph



Honorable Mention

Katelyn Bennett
 Busi Intermediate School
 All books by Dr. Suess

Dear Dr. Suess,

1 book,
 2 books,
 3 books...four,
 I Love your books even more!
 (Rebekah Louis)

Your books make me laugh. They are very goofy and just what I like! I love your book because I'm very goofy like the books!

When I read your books, I have a tingly feeling in my stomach from all the laughter!

Your books are very exciting and very fun to read. When I'm sad I read your books and I forget what I was sad about and become happy again.

You have an awesome talent in the writing section. Your writing has made me a writer, and now I am writing many poems and stories.

Your characters that are in your stories are fantastically described: My favorite character is the Cat in the Hat. He is my favorite character because he is very mischievous just like me! I thought it was very interesting how you did the things, (Things A to Z) they were so cute!

Thank you, for interesting me in writing and reading. My dream is because of you. Once again I love your books and never will stop reading them!

Your fan,
Katelyn Bennett

Honorable Mention

Allison Culicerto
 Mercer Elementary School
Six Months to Live by Lurlene McDaniel

Dear Ms. McDaniel,

When I read your book, Six Months to Live, I was motivated because it had so many things to teach me. Additionally, it inspired me to help people with cancer.

While I was reading your book, I really thought about what it would be like if I were to have cancer. I would try to fight it because I want to live. If I had a friend who had cancer, I would help my friend by cheering her up, visiting her, and praying for her. If my friend died, I would want to be strong like the character Dawn. Six Months to Live showed me how to be a good friend and the importance of being strong.

This year, I will work harder than ever when I participate in St. Jude's Mathathon, which raises money for cancer patients at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Survival rates at St. Jude's for children with cancers have gone from less than 20 percent to over 70 percent. I will try to get many sponsors by telling them we are raising money to benefit a hospital that helps kids fight cancer and that does research to find a cure.

Finally, every night before I go to bed I say a prayer for cancer patients. I ask God to help scientists find a cure and help all the people with cancer to get better.

Six Months to Live had a wonderful influence on me. I hope and pray all cancer patients get better.

Sincerely,
Allison Culicerto

Honorable Mention

Brooke Dillon
 Mercer Elementary School
Because of Winn Dixie by Kate DiCamillo

Dear Ms. DiCamillo,

Your book, Because of Winn Dixie, changed me through examples. It showed me you never judge people by their looks, not everybody who has been in jail is a bad person, and if you do not have a mom does not mean there is no one there for you.

The character Gloria is called a witch because of how she looks. But when she was met, they learn she is a very nice person. I thought it was very cruel of them to call her that without ever meeting her.

Next, it showed me not everybody who has been in jail is a bad person. It showed me that because Otis has been in jail he was still a very nice person. I never really thought people who had been in jail were bad people, but I still did not feel comfortable around them.

Finally, it changed me because Opal was almost in the same situation as me because she did not have a mom. I have a mom and dad but I cannot live with them. Now I know that no matter what, there will always be someone there to love me.

Without a doubt, Because of Winn Dixie helped me to understand not to judge people by the way they look. It also helped show even though a person has served time, that person can be a good person. Most important, it helped me realize I have people who love me even though they are not my parents.

Sincerely,
Brooke Dillon

Honorable Mention

Brian Leonard
 Peyton Elementary
My Side of the Mountain by Jean Craighead George

Dear Jean Craighead George,

Your book My Side of the Mountain inspired me to look at wildlife and wilderness survival in a different way. I liked reading the story through a boy's point of view. Since I'm a boy, it helped me understand what Sam felt and what his adventures were like. With the descriptions Sam gave of the animals through his observations, I felt like I was personally interacting with the animals. As Sam was learning to gather and hunt food, I learned what you could eat in the wilderness. When Sam was faced with a new situation, I would experience so much excitement that I could hardly wait until I found out how he would solve it. I often felt like I was cheering him to on to overcome his obstacles. After reading about his pet falcon and their relationship, I wanted a falcon of my own.

If I ever had to survive in a wilderness situation, I feel like I would be able to survive using the knowledge that I obtained from your book. I hope that someday I could live some of Sam's experiences.

Sincerely,

Brian Leonard

Honorable Mention

Kiley Murray
 Westwood Middle School
Amber Brown is Green with Envy by Paula Danziger

Dear Paula Danziger,

I just read your book Amber Brown is Green with Envy and I loved it because it relates to my real life. I live in a small town in West Virginia and my parents too are divorced. Also my mom has a new boyfriend and he's like Max. He is nice, kind, and thinks of me like his daughter like Max.

Your book helped me understand that bad things can happen to anybody. It affected me by helping me understand why my mom and dad got divorced. It was hard for me at first but after I read your book it helped me understand that people have obstacles to go through in life and they just have to jump over those obstacles and move on in there life. This book has really helped me understand my life and how to jump over the obstacles in my life.

As you can see this book helps me to understand that I'm not the only person in this situation. As I read the book it felt good to now somebody else is going through the same things I'm going through. Especially the part of the book that talks about Ambers feelings. Sometimes I have those same feelings. I hope that you continue to write Amber Brown books that show some peoples true feelings.

Your fan,

Kiley Murray

Honorable Mention

Kayla Wimmer
 Mercer Elementary School
The Cheetah Girls by Deborah Gregory

Dear Ms. Gregory,

Your series, The Cheetah Girls, made me think about a lot of things. I felt lucky, loved, and sad. They also gave me hope.

Dorinda was deserted as a baby. This made me think about how much I love my mom and my sister and how lucky I am to have them. Second, I felt sad when one sister was adopted and the other was not adopted because of her race. I would feel the same sadness if my sister was adopted and I was not.

When I read Anginette and Aquanette's stories, I thought about their living with their dad and their mother living somewhere else. When I moved, I felt the same way they did when they missed their family. Now that my dad lives in my same town, I get to see him a lot.

Chanel's actions made me think about my mommy and how she loves me even when it seems like she does not. When I make a mistake and my mom grounds me, I know she still loves me. She wants to make me a better person so I learn from my mistakes. Chanel's mom also corrected her.

Galleria's stories have taught me if I believe in my dreams and work hard to accomplish them, they will come true. Now, I believe that with faith and hard work I can do anything. These books also have taught me to be, thankful for my mother and to be thankful to be loved in general.

Sincerely,

Kayla Wimmer

Level Two**First-Place**

Alison Lester
 Princeton Middle School
The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien

Dear J.R.R. Tolkien:

I have just finished reading your book The Hobbit, and I enjoyed it very much. The book drew me into each setting as if I were a partner with Bilbo fighting evil and avoiding the dangers awaiting around each turn. Like Bilbo, many of us are happy to be left alone in our quiet, comfortable world but excitement, adventure, and rewards await those who step out of their routine daily activities and venture into a world of challenge and the unknown.



Through Bilbo's adventures, I learned that it is important to have friends who stand with me no matter what happens. Also, I learned that a person that I might not think is significant could rise to the occasion through determination. No matter what book I am reading, it is always important to recognize good and evil. This is no exception for The Hobbit, and it is no exception in life. I learned to evaluate each circumstance and choose a course that is good, and by following through with hard work and determination, I will succeed.

Many times Bilbo wished he could be back at home in his cozy burrow, enjoying a meal where it was safe, but instead he pressed on with the task at hand. Often times, because of the many things that I must get done, homework, soccer, and band practice, I feel the same way, longing for the familiar, safe comforts of home. However, like Bilbo I find strength from friends, family members, and deep within myself to continue working until the tasks are finished.

Bilbo experienced many great things by having the courage to go into the unknown, to work hard, and make difficult choices, even saving the world from darkness. I learned from The Hobbit that we all fear going into the unknown and would rather stay in our comfort zone but true rewards are in one's accomplishments. The reward of a game well played, being selected for Honors Band, and an "A" report card feel as good to me as Bilbo must have felt saving the world from darkness. Just as we all seek rewards, we must also remember to rise to the occasion to help others who are in need and always be diligent to make our community, school, and hopefully the world a better place by our deeds.

Yours in adventure,
Alison Lester

Runner-Up

Emily Boggs
John Adams Middle School
Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes

Dear Daniel Keyes,

If someone asked me to name one thing that makes a story really come alive for me and deeply affect me, I'd have to say that it's a realistic human touch. The author must make the characters seem real and make me feel like I know them. While reading Flowers for Algernon this September, I got to know Charlie so well that he actually seemed like a neighbor.

After I read your story, I thought about how it applied to my own life. I have always had to study hard and take my classes seriously in order to maintain high grades, but I have a high IQ and learning has never been difficult for me. This is something that I generally take for granted. Flowers for Algernon has helped me to see that intelligence is a gift that should never be underestimated. I saw that there are some people who would give their lives for just a glimpse of the world of knowledge that is open to me without condition.

Most people who read a story want to see a happy ending, and look for the same outcome in real life. Life is seldom like this though, so it does help to read stories with less than perfect resolutions. Less than two months before I read Flowers for Algernon my father was diagnosed with cancer. Watching him grow weaker and weaker over the past few months has been unbelievably painful. In ways it has mirrored Charlie's recession. Within the past week, he has become increasingly forgetful and confused. Knowing that this happens to other people, even in books, makes it slightly easier to bear.

I really want to thank you for this wonderful story and let you know how deeply it has affected me. Flowers for Algernon is an extraordinary story that is unlike anything else that I have ever read. You must have a vivid imagination and a true gift for bringing characters to life.

A faithful reader,
Emily Boggs

P.S. "Please if you get a chance put some flowers on Algernon's grave in the back yard..." I am a huge animal lover and I actually had a pet mouse named Mo several years ago, so I grew very attached to Algernon as I read your story.

Runner-Up

Robyn Verba
Moundsville Junior High School
There's a Wocket in My Pocket by Dr. Seuss

Dear Dr. Seuss,

Your silly rhymes were like a seed in getting me to want to read. Even when I was really little and couldn't tell an "m" from an "n", I knew each one of your books by heart because they were read to me again and again.

When I was little, I was always scared of something living in my closet, but when I would tell a grown up of this fear, they would laugh and say, "You're being silly, trust me, there is nothing there." This, of course, didn't help, which obviously you knew, because when I read There's a Wocket in My Pocket, my imagination only grew. When I read of the Zink that lived in the sink, I nodded my head to agree, and quite frankly, the Nupboards in the cupboard made perfect sense to me. So when you showed me the Woset in the closet, I had to pause a minute. "Oh, I thought! So that's what lives in my closet." So instead of just saying that I was wrong and acting like a kid, you helped me not to be so scared.

While my friends had to sleep with a night light, I went to bed with all lights off (except for the one in the closet). I knew that deep in my closet there lurked a Woset, and who knew if he was scared of the closet?

I still always have an eye open for that Zlock behind the clock and that Jertain who I am certain is behind the curtain. I still look out for that Yottle in the bottle and the Nooth Grush on my tooth brush.

But the one thing that I am always sure to do, is leave the light on in my closet (you never know) and you should too.

Dr. Seuss, I'd like to thank you. You've inspired me to use my imagination. And, ummm...achoo.

Sincerely,

Robyn Verba

Honorable Mention

Kailey Imlay
Beverly Hills Middle School
The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein

Dear Mr. Silverstein,

I love reading your book The Giving Tree. Every time I read the story it reminds me of how much a person can love and care for another person. The tree loved the little boy so much that she gave him everything she had, starting with her apples, ending with her stump. I found it amazing that just giving to the boy made her happy. I've come to realize that everyone has a giving tree. It could be a parent, grandparent, Mend, teacher, sibling, or other family member. For me, my parents are my giving trees. When I feel alone, reading The Giving Tree is always a great reminder that a lot of people really care for me.

Your story also reminds me that sometimes we can be ungrateful. It seems as the boy grew older, he took the tree for granted. As children grow and need their parents less, they often forget how much their parents do and have done for them. Even if we are grateful, sometimes we forget to show it. The boy used everything the tree gave him without showing a sign of thanks or giving the tree something in return. The boy wasn't aware that he was hurting the tree by leaving her alone and not being considerate of her feelings. This book makes me realize that we need to remember not to take our giving trees for granted and make sure they know that we love them and are thankful for everything they do.

Even though the boy made the mistake of not showing gratitude and love for the tree, she still loved the boy and never let him down. I find this real comforting to know that no matter what, my giving tree loves me unconditionally. Reading this story makes me realize that there is a time to be the giving tree and a time to be the boy. I can't just be the boy and take, take, take; I need to give something back.

Thank you for writing The Giving Tree. It teaches me a new lesson every time I read it. When I'm alone, it cheers me up, and when I forget to show my gratitude, reading it helps me remember not to take my giving tree for granted.

Sincerely,

Kailey Imlay

Honorable Mention

Amy Joseph
St. Francis Central School
Jahanara: Princess of Princesses by Kathryn Lasky

Dear Ms. Kathryn Lasky,

My name is Amy Joseph, and I am an Indian girl, just like Begum Sahib Jahanara in Jahanara: Princess of Princesses. Even though I am not an Indian princess, I think I can understand some of what Jahanara may have been thinking.

I have been to India many times to visit my family, and I have always been amazed at how little power women seem to have. Most women and girls do not wear pants unless wearing churridars. Whenever I go to India, my grandmothers are always telling me not to wear jeans because jeans look: "disrespectful and/or not neat". I think they say this because it is not an orthodox way.

Jahanara: Princess of Princesses affected me because it made me think of how hard it was to live during the Moghul Dynasty, especially for women. Right now my generation takes it for granted that we have computers and that we can ride around in cars (though, personally, I would rather ride on an elephant!). So now I think about how we do have cars and computers. I think that those are great inventions, and it was a pity that there were none of these inventions during Jahanara's time.

This story also touched me because it showed me how strict it was for Muslim women during that time period. In this era, the Muslim ladies do not have to keep purdah as strictly, which means that they don't have to be in a jalis. Yet, some still have to wear veils over their faces. This made me thankful because it shows how thankful we should be that the laws are not so strict in this country. Also, we do not have laws like they did during the Moghul Dynasty. I could also relate to some of the foods in the story because I have eaten them before. Some of those foods are gulab jamun, barfi, halwa, and raita. Also, I have worn most of the dresses that Jahanara wore, such as churridars, cholis, and lengas.

These are some of the reasons that Jahanara: Princess of Princesses affected me. I hope that you will write more books about the princesses from India and/or the east. I really enjoy reading your books. Thank you for giving me that enjoyment.

Sincerely,

Amy Joseph



Honorable Mention

Sara Kurian
St. Francis Central School
Homeless Bird by Gloria Whelan

Dear Gloria Whelan:

From the moment I read your book, Homeless Bird, to this moment now, I felt a deep connection to the character Koly. She and I are alike in countless ways. Her talent, perseverance, and strength of mind are so inspiring to me. I too come from an Indian background and I too have talents, if not in stitching, in academics. Though I cannot completely relate to this character Koly, her story attracted me with the will only a gifted writer could produce.

Homeless Bird was an epic novel about a girl, and who, through hard work, faced the difficult challenges in her life. The name of this astonishing character was Koly. Koly's journey to the family of her in-laws was one of sorrow and grief. Her next journey from her cruel mother-in-law to a new life in the holy city of Vrindan was a new phase in her life. Even though she had to struggle in the new environment, her strong will to survive helped her to tap into her hidden talents and come out as a winner.

Koly had a spirit of great courage and deep motivation, whose troubles did not repress her optimism. Her mind was like a homeless wanderer whose path was unrelenting as she searched for a place to call her own. Koly did not linger in self-pity; instead, she lived every day with an optimistic heart, hoping for a brighter future. She strived for excellence in the face of calamities. This character, Koly, inspired me to look beyond the problems that I face in daily life; she showed me that there was much more.

This story taught me that education is the best investment for one's future. It unlocks the door to many different opportunities in life. If you strive to reach a goal, education will make a significant difference between reaching your goal and just dreaming about it. Koly did not want to just dream; she wanted a real future. Even though she did not have the opportunity to attain a formal education, her skills helped her to succeed in spite of overwhelming odds. Your story also emphasizes that when one gains self-sufficiency and believes in one's inner potential, the future becomes more promising.

I was very touched by this story because it parallels true-life situations. In the beginning of the story, selfish and uncaring people affected Koly's life, but later others supported and nurtured her to her new life. Her true friends gave her the strength she needed to persevere. This taught me the importance of supporting each other during difficult situations.

Your depiction of Koly's life was truly magical, like one of her own magnificent quilts. The story of her life came together one stitch at a time to create a brilliant masterpiece. The title aptly describes her as a homeless bird that found its wings and soared to a better future. Her story taught me that with determination we could reach new heights,

Sincerely,

Sara Kurian

Honorable Mention

Brittany Lavenski
Fairmont Catholic School
The Giver by Lois Lowry

Dear Lois Lowry,

Your book The Giver has changed the way that I think more than any book that I have ever read in my whole entire life.

This book took me from my chair into a world with no color, no pain, no love, and no choices. It makes me wonder that if Jonas, his family, and all of his community were to experience our world full of choices, what they would do. Would they be joyful to see love, choice, holidays, and rights? Or maybe they would be sad to see starving children, people on the streets, the need of security in all places, and people who see loved ones dying fighting for their own land.

Your book gave me a wake-up call. It made me realize that not getting what you wanted for Christmas, or having too much homework is a much smaller problem than no choice, no freedom, and especially no love.

People take for granted too many things in life. All of us do. Some people may not think so, but we all do it, including me. We have Play Station, DVD players, television and many more material things, but we still want more.

Freedom is something that we all definitely take for granted. Our country, the United States of America, is free. But what does freedom really mean? Freedom means we have differences that are respected, we have rights to speak our mind freely, we get to vote so that our voice is heard. We have troops fighting for our freedom, at war dying for one thing, freedom.

Another thing that Jonas taught me about was bravery. Jonas was so brave. I'm sure that he probably thought twice about leaving his community, but he did what he had to do. That is why Jonas can be compared to a hero. He made such a big sacrifice.

These are a few reasons, Lois Lowry, why your book has changed the way that I think more than any other book that I have ever read in my whole entire life.

big fan,

Brittany Lavenski

Honorable Mention

Eva Marshall
Shepherdstown Middle School
"The Poor Voter on Election Day" by John Greenleaf Whittier

Dear John Greenleaf Whittier,

I know that you are an abolitionist and are concerned with individual rights. Within those rights, there is the right to vote, and that right

is celebrated in your poem, The Poor Voter on Election Day. Before I heard your poem, I didn't have much of an opinion about voting. I never thought about what it must mean to the less fortunate, or poor, to vote. The poem has made me really think about the importance of voting.

"The proudest now is but my peer, the highest, not more high," is a line from your poem that had an effect on me. It made me think about the empowering sense voting must give to those less fortunate. To be poor yet to have your vote be counted to the same degree as someone who is rich and powerful must be very satisfying and enriching. I think the poor would feel this way because Election Day is one of the only days of the year that, "The rich is level with the poor, the weak is strong today." This means that people who have trouble providing for their basic needs are equal to people who have plenty. Also, it means that the poor have a say in government and their voices can be heard.

When I first heard this poem another topic came to my mind. What if the poor didn't exercise their right to vote? If only the rich voted, they might vote for someone who would cut the taxes that pay for social benefits like food stamps, Medicare, or financial aid. By not voting, the poor people are really hurting themselves.

Your poem has made me think of the importance of voting and that people shouldn't take it for granted. I am aware that taking part in government is an important privilege. In some places, such as Iraq, the people do not have a say in their government. They are not able to choose leaders who will represent their ideas. They likely feel unhappy, frustrated, and powerless.

In conclusion, your poem has given me a deeper appreciation of the importance of voting, especially if you are underprivileged. The right to vote gives you a say in government. For the poor and underprivileged this means that they can elect people who will promote social programs that will help them with their basic needs and give them an opportunity for a better life.

Thank you,
Eva Marshall

Honorable Mention

Meghan Diane Mills
Fairmont Catholic School
The Two Princesses of Bamarre by Gail Carson Levine

Dear Gail Carson Levine,

When I read your book Two Princesses of Bamarre it reminded me of my little sister and myself. I was always the scared shy one, while my sister was the brave outgoing one: though I had no idea that your book would connect to us in such a common way.

I read your book when I was about eight, and I was fascinated by all of the fantasy creatures in it. The places they went seemed like wonderlands and dreamlands. It made me realize that books could

take me wherever I wanted to go. I was also intrigued by the action and mystery of the book, but I never thought about how Addie must feel about losing her sister to the Gray Death.

Then one day a couple of months later my sister Mckenzie got very sick. We had to take her to the emergency room right away and I was scared I would never see her again. Just like Addie in the cave with the dragon as her captor, I felt trapped and helpless. I stayed in my room and reread your book. It made me realize even though I couldn't go out on a perilous adventure and find a cure, I could still be brave for my sister and my family. I thought to myself, even if there aren't any fairies, maybe the angels will come and heal my sister if I am brave.

Many of the characters in the book reminded me of obstacles I had to face as well. The father not really trying to find the cure was like the doctors, in my point of view, though now I know they were helping her; it just took a while. The battle at the end near the waterfall was like the feelings I had all jumbled up together- depression, anger, and fear. And the dragon was me. I was holding myself back from seeing Mckenzie in the hospital and being brave for her. But as I got to the ending where Addie's sister turns around to help her, I realize my sister would do the same for me.

I gathered up all my emotions and threw them aside and went to the hospital. I sat next to her and told her everything that happened in school and read to her from your book. She was so happy I came that I stayed with her the whole day. When I went home, the doctors called and told my mother and me that my father was bringing Mckenzie home.

All that time I knew that I must have contributed something to help my sister get better. If I could help her get better by being brave, maybe I could help others, too. When someone in my class becomes ill, I send them a get well card and make sure I call them to tell them all about the day. If someone in my family becomes ill, I take care of them and do their chores.

Your book taught me a very valuable lesson. I can't always be the hero and save the day, but I can take care of others and make them feel better. Because a smile on someone's face is the greatest award anyone can receive. And the bond of family is stronger than anything. Thank you for teaching me these lessons, and for making me a stronger person.

Best wishes,
Meghan Mills



Honorable Mention

Mashal Shaikh

John Adams Middle School

Kiss the Dust by Elizabeth Laird

Dear Elizabeth Laird,

Kiss the Dust relates to the world around us today. It is a book that has greatly inspired me. Tara Hawrami and her family live in Iraq in the 1980s. She has a normal life and does much of what America's youth does today. Everything changes when the Kurdish people of Iraq have to flee to Iran. She and her family become refugees.

The plot of this story is not unlike what is happening today. Many people are being sent back to their countries because of their ethnicity. Shiites and Sunnis do not get along because their beliefs are slightly different. Some populations around the world are facing prejudice and are being discriminated against. As a result of this, much blood is being lost. Land and oil are being fought for.

It is motivating to read books that open your mind to the issues of today. To help fight hunger, our class makes cookies to send to the hungry and homeless. Individual people can do their part by electing leaders that will help make a change in the world. We need people that care about the environment and the welfare of the nations.

Kiss the Dust has taught me not to judge people by what they look like and to have more tolerance for diverse people. Instead of making friends with only the people that have interests similar to mine, I expand my friendship towards other peers in my class. This book really relates to the issues of everyday life and makes me appreciate the things I overlook.

Sincerely,

Mashal Shaikh

Level Three

First-Place

Carolyn Rose Garcia

Notre Dame High School

Bloomability by Sharon Creech

Dear Mrs. Creech,

People are a lot like flowers. We start life as seeds—tiny, self-contained, and unsure. Then, fate lands us in a certain place: country or city, hill or valley, past, present, or future. Gradually, we come to feel secure and at ease with our surroundings, and we learn, stretch, extend. Through trial and error, we navigate through the rubble in our home soil, anchoring ourselves to what we know and are comfortable with. Now we have confidence. The solace and nourishment we have absorbed from our environment reassures us and we strike out in a totally different direction and grow towards our hopes, dreams, and goals. Soon, time and experience bear their fruits, and we burst into bloom, flaunting our unique and vibrant colors, boldly showing the world who we are and what we're made of. Each small, isolated seed

has this wonderful potential to become something beautiful. This is why "bloomability" is such a perfect word. And this, in part, is why your book changed my life.

One thing I love about your book is how you introduce the reader to Dinnie, a timid, quirky thirteen-year-old-girl, and immediately fling her into a whole new environment. Of course she has trouble adjusting to this sudden change, but when I read Bloomability, I had no idea how dramatically Dinnie and her surroundings would enter my life and change my way of thinking.

Your book affected my life in several ways. The first and most prominent is that now I have a dream to travel the globe. Your descriptions, of Switzerland radiated such a sense of place—stunning, colossal snow-covered mountains, outdoor cafés, and solitary grape arbors—that I felt a powerful need to see everything for myself. I not only got a taste of Switzerland, but I also got to peek at other cultures through the students of the school that Dinnie attends. I savored the rich Italian phrases spoken by the sophisticated Mrs. Stirling, reveled in Guthrie's guttural gusto, and laughed delightedly at Keisuke's fractured English and offbeat personality. I was tantalized by these fantastic samples of faraway lands and vowed to visit every one of them someday.

Two years after I first read Bloomability, I was confronted with a more immediate change of scenery. The first nine years of my formal education had been completed at Fairmont Catholic Elementary, a small, loving school where everybody knew everybody else, and students, teachers, and parents were part of their own tightly-knit community. My parents have told me I was a very outgoing and social toddler, but the initial shock of entering kindergarten, no matter how friendly a community my school was, must have left its mark on me. While I was still a happy child, I had become much quieter and a bit slower at learning how to interact with other kids. Despite these setbacks, I grew, made friends, adapted, and became satisfied with my place in the student-body hierarchy. During the seventh and eighth grades, I finally felt confident enough to reveal my talents, shortcomings, and personality to everyone around me. I had finally come into myself—and then I had to take up my roots and change schools.

I was devastated—after all, I had come so far, how could I be expected to start over again in a totally different place? I did a lot of reflecting on my plight, and one person who came to mind was Dinnie. She had it a lot tougher than I did, I realized. At least I had grown up in a secure family, and I would still be able to come back to my own home after school every day. I had only moved once, when I was about three years old, as opposed to all of the moving and adjusting Dinnie was forced to do. The difference between Dinnie and me, I discovered, was that while I had put down my roots in a sturdy plot of land, Dinnie had never put down hers at all. She was essentially blown from place to place by the winds of a changing family, never daring to attach or settle down for fear of disappointment, captured inside herself, a seed. I had taken root and grown, flourished and bloomed, and this move was simply something that had to be taken as it came. I could bloom again. After all, wasn't being transplanted easier than starting from scratch?

And so I took the leap that millions of kids have taken before and started life at a new school. I am starting to bloom again and am loving the process. Even though I knew a total of three people at the beginning



of the year, I have made plenty of friends and acquaintances at my new high school. Dinnie remains a source of hope for me. And when I travel to distant lands to see new places and meet new people, I know that I will love the experience as much as Dinnie loved hers. In Keisuke's words, I may have done a lot of downfelling, but now I have truly discovered my own bloomability.

Your friend,

Carolyn Garcia

Runner-Up

Casie Fox

Magnolia High School

The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd

Dear Ms. Kidd,

I want to thank you for the gift of your wonderful novel The Secret Life of Bees. I read it last winter, and it came to me with perfect timing, providing the diversion, encouragement, and solace I needed at that time. You see, my great-grandmother had just died, and became rather inconsolable. I'd always felt that my great-grandmother and I shared a special relationship, a sort of secret world we'd established, where we could go and be content to just let the moments pass as slowly as honey dripping from a comb. Going to Little Mam-maw's, as I called her, always provided such comfort, a pause from the chaos of the rest of the world. When she died, that secret world was gone, and I was lost.

About a month later, my book club selected The Secret Life of Bees as our book of the month. Each page was a delicately woven tapestry, creating the delicate but binding web that was the secret life and world of the Calendar sisters, Lily, and Rosaleen. As I devoured the sweet honey that glued the story together and became my comfort food, I found myself once again part of that secret world I so badly missed. I had somewhere to go, even if it wasn't Little Mam-maw's house anymore.

Little Mam-maw was always a quiet source of wisdom, never scolding, never pushing, never demanding. Your book was similar. The wisdom Rosaleen and the Calendar sisters provided to Lily was always present but never forceful. When I started to feel overwhelmed by my own grief, I had only to peel open my paperback copy of your novel to find the same type of wisdom and comfort Little Mam-maw would have given me. I could just lose myself in that world for a little while and forget.

It was easy for me to relate to Lily. She was the frightened young girl who choked out her fears with her strength and courage. Her own strength and comfort came from women much older than she. These women had already weathered all there was to endure, and that made Lily feel more secure about her own ability to make it through life's storms, such as her struggle to escape from T-Ray and learn more about her mother.

May was also one of my favorite characters. Her wailing wall showed me that it was OK to grieve, OK to cry. I could cry and still be strong.

In fact, allowing myself to cry was one of the strongest things I could do.

After awhile, I even realized I had something like a wailing wall myself. The day of her funeral, our family started cleaning out Little Mam-maw's house. I took the little jar of pennies and molded glass jewelry tray that my cousin and I used to play 'jewelry store' with and an empty notebook. While the penny jar and jewelry tray brought back more memories, the notebook proved to be the most valuable item to me. I wrote, wrote, wrote, and still often write, poems, short stories, and letters to or about Little Mam-maw in that notebook. Since no one else was really in on our secret little world, it has helped so much to revisit it through the notebook. Yes, that little dollar store notebook is where I've gone when I've needed to remember, cry, or even laugh.

Sometimes I imagine myself to be like Lily. Her writing stories about Zach so that he would always know he hadn't been forgotten is kind of like what I'm doing with my little notebook. Putting my memories in writing makes them immortal, even if the people in the memories aren't.

Sometimes I even fancy myself to be like you, Ms. Kidd. Maybe I, too, am writing on the importance of our secret lives and worlds. Maybe I'll even be published one day. Of course, I could just be a kid writing stuff down to get it out of and away from me, but I don't know. I think it's something more than that.

The Secret Life of Bees has been a very beneficial book to my life, and I am truly blessed to have read it. There are pictures in my head from the story even today. Every picture from the book, every triumph of Rosaleen, Lily, and the Calendar sisters, and every memory of my great grandmother is a little added extra honey in my life. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Casie Tenille Fox

Runner-Up

Rebecca Yeager

Capital High School

The Relatives Came by Cynthia Rylant

Cynthia Rylant:

One of my favorite things to do is go to my family gatherings. I will never forget the time when we managed to get all of my father's side of the family to my aunt's house. That was certainly one to remember. My big family is so much fun, and your book, The Relatives Came, reminds me of my relatives exactly. Just like in your book, there is always something going on in my house and always someone there to entertain me. There are just a few memories and visions of my family that came to my mind while reading your book.

All the barefoot children running around describe my cousins and me at my grandmother's house in the summertime. The dog that is in the middle of the action reminds me of my aunt's dog. Wherever we go, he goes. When the book mentions that some of the relatives had to wait for others to finish eating before they could sit down eat,



I immediately thought of my family at Thanksgiving. At my dinner table the generations range from my eighty-year-old grandfather to my two-month-old cousin. We have all kinds of different ages.

In order to get from room to room when my relatives are in town, I have to go through many hugs and kisses to even make it to the next room where there is nothing but more family to hug and kiss! In the evening my cousins, grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and the pets all sit around and play board games, look at photographs, or tell stories. I love moments like that. In your book there were never enough places for “the relatives” to sleep which applies to my family also. We have to make beds out of couch cushions every Christmas because there is just not enough sleeping room for all of us. The children love to sleep on the floor in sleeping bags, but there is sometimes not much sleeping!

Your book is full of what I like to call family moments. Even though everything is out of order and crazy, “the relatives” still find a way to handle and live with each other and I think that is a very important quality to have. The main idea of this story and the characters in it make me think of my whole family. While they are here we are just waiting for it to be all over, but when they leave we want them to come right back. This book has made me realize how important my family is to me and how much I love them. We should cherish every moment we get to spend with our families. Some people just are not as lucky as we are. They get to have a whole bed to themselves, left over food, and quiet, calm meals during the holidays, but who’d want that?

Thank you for writing about your memories. They seem to match mine perfectly. Everyone should spend time with their families whenever possible, and appreciate each individual person. For better or worse, they are part of who we are. Family is the biggest part of a person’s life and they should not take them for granted. The Relatives Came has always been my favorite book as a child. I hope you keep up the good work!

Sincerely,
Rebecca Yeager

Honorable Mention

Brittany Angus
From the Corner of His Eye by Dean Koontz

Dear Mr. Koontz,

There are some phrases that get burned in ones memory throughout their entire life. The title of your novel, From the Corner of His Eye, has been in my thoughts ever since I read the cover. From the beginning, I knew that that phrase had a significant meaning to the plot of the novel. It wasn’t until I came upon the phrase in the actual story that I would realize the significance it would have on my personal life.

To me, it was the most touching part of the whole book. Agnes and Barty were sitting in the hospital room just before the dramatic surgery that would take away Barty’s precious eyes. I felt like I was there with them feeling the horror they were about to embrace.

It was the first time that Barty was showing any signs of fear in the story. He asked Agnes, his mother, why God was letting this terrible thing happen to him and if God were really watching over him. She gently answered him by saying that there were a lot of people in the world that had greater problems than they were facing, and God had a responsibility to watch over them too. She added, however, that God was always at least watching them from the corner of his eye.

That was the point at when I thought I was right there sitting next to them and holding their hands. I bawled like a baby. The picture that these few, simple words created in my mind touched me at a deeper level. How does a mother stay strong enough for her child and is able to give them words of comfort so that they will not crumble from fear.

Now, whenever I have a problem that I do not think I will be able to get through on my own, I remember that significant phrase, “...from the corner of his eye.” I know that God is always watching over me and really does care about the trials I experience.

Another strong aspect of this novel, involved strong family bonds and neighborly love. There were several different forms of bonding in the novel, such as mother and child, husband and wife, sibling bonding, and neighbor -to- neighbor.

Each time a character in the story went through a tragedy or they were just having a rough time, a family member or a friend was there to comfort and console them. For example, when Agnes’s husband died and she was alone with her new baby, her brothers stepped in and helped with a pie service that she operated. Her friend, Maria, was always there helping her as well.

I thought the most important bonding took place when all of the characters came together in the end for a common cause and that was to catch the bad guy. When the families or people trying to catch the criminal were separated in the beginning, they found they could not catch him, but when they came together and combined their unique talents they were able to put an end to their pain and heart ache and catch him. This was the climax of the novel for me.

I think we could relate to this story in our everyday lives. If our society would work together for common causes like the characters of your book did, then we as a nation would be able to solve many of our important issues. Instead of our nation’s important leaders arguing about who is right and who is wrong, why don’t they come together and compromise on issues that are important to both sides. However, this will never happen unless everyone works to make it happen.

I would suggest this piece of literature to anyone who wants to read a tale of miracles, family and neighborly love, or someone wanting to read something that would inspire them to never give up because they will learn God is watching them from the corner of his eye.

Sincerely,
Brittany Angus

Honorable Mention

Audrey Baird
 Capital High School
Fat Chance by Leslea Newman

Dear Ms. Newman:

Ms. Newman, your book Fat Chance has affected me greatly. I admire how you take real teen feelings and thoughts and write them on paper. Judi relates to all teenage girls in a remarkable way.

When I started the school year, I was more on the heavy side of the weighing scale if you know what I mean. I didn't eat at school and barely ate at home. When friends or my mom would ask why, I would make a quick excuse like, "Oh, I'm not hungry" or "Oh, it's a new special diet." As soon as the dieting word came out of my mouth, my mom would say, (just like Judi's mom) "You're a growing girl. You need your right food, and I'm sure you'll turn out just fine." Then I thought just like Judi did FAT CHANCE!

After reading this book and seeing how miserable and pitiful Judi is it makes me wonder if I always look like I am worried and always moping. I would wonder if I looked all pale like Judi did when she wouldn't eat. As a result I had decided I would eat a little more than nothing after I got home from school. After awhile I started eating after school and dinner. Now I eat practically every thing and out of a miracle of who knows how I'm actually losing weight.

Judi and I were a lot alike. We both wore baggy clothes and at first didn't eat some meals and eventually ate no meals. Then as we slowly lost some pounds we started wearing tighter clothes, though we still didn't eat right. I would never throw up though. When Nancy Pratt is sent to the emergency room, I'm sure it would change any ones mind.

I think teens, especially teen girls, will enjoy this book because it deals with a lot of things that young people deal with to get by in life. In the book Judi deals with bullies, the hot guy in school, the beautiful girl in school, parents, family, friends, her weight, school, and even teachers. Most people still have to deal with that as a teen.

The thing in this book that attracted me was how Judi was determined to get what she wanted. Though she may have taken it a little to the extreme, she lost a best friend. She even did the most disgusting thing she could have thought of. Judi set her point, which was that she was going to lose weight no matter what. That meant no matter what! But things work out because she realizes that she doesn't have to be the skinniest girl in school. Basically she finds herself. That is the greatest thing ever. I have realized that Judi is right, and in a way I have found my self. I realize now that change happens every day and whether we embrace it or reject it is our choice.

Now that I have read this book I take caution to the extent of my dieting. I eat regular meals and actually take daily vitamins in case I don't get the proper nutrition that day. I also don't care what others think; they think what they want to think about me. I have people who support me even if I am fat. I'm me not who or what every one wants

me to be all because of your book. Thank you so much. You have opened my eyes by putting my situation on paper. Again, thank you.

Sincerely,

Audrey L. Baird

Honorable Mention

Heidi Chrisman
The Music of Dolphins by Karen Hesse

Dear Ms. Hesse,

I must admit that when I first opened the book The Music of Dolphins, I nearly shut the cover to move on. I saw very large print with short, simple statements that seemed very elementary. I thought for an instant that I had chosen a book that was far too simplistic for my taste. Then on second glance, I went back and read the introduction. That's what "sucked" me in. I wanted to know what in the world they were going to do with this child/dolphin!

The rescue of Mila made me shiver. I could almost feel her nerves making my body shake and I found myself short of breath experiencing her fear. I was embarrassed for her not having any modesty about her own body and ashamed that she wasn't aware that she should be embarrassed! It was comforting to see that one of the coast guard rescue members shielded her head from the wall of the helicopter as she thrashed about. That one particular incident showed that the team was compassionate. It was the only "warm fuzzy" of the rescue process. The most interesting part of the whole rescue is the way Mila took a drink from the team when she was offered one. The "cupped hands" tells you that the process of humanizing this girl is going to be a slow and difficult process. I wondered how you were going to go about teaching a feral child communication skills when she had no human instincts whatsoever.

Now, to think like Mila. She wasn't seeing this rescue operation as a rescue at all! To her, it probably felt like a kidnapping from her safe, secure and familiar home. Trying to put myself in Mila's shoes helped me to understand just how frightened Mila was. I've never been in a similar situation, but the media shows countless abductions and airs them over the television. It makes you think you have a sense of what it would be like to be "snatched up." The fear of the unknown is a horrible position to be in and that's exactly where Mila is. She finds herself in a strange new world where nothing is understood, not even the language.

As I continued reading the book, I saw Mila's character becoming strong. Her zest for learning makes me think about the "slugs" at school that are so apathetic towards their schoolwork. Here is a girl that is so thirsty for knowledge. Mila soaks up everything she is introduced to and I don't think she ever reaches the point of saturation. She not only pleases her instructors, but herself as well. She found a joy in music that can't be put into words. Music filled her so completely that she could learn songs on her own. Her musical progress wasn't because of study or lessons. Mila found an internal joy and exuberance from music that propelled her forward. She found a new way to express herself without the language barrier.



This part of the book pleased me the most. I could really relate to how it must feel for someone to be so fulfilled by the sound of music. My Mom is a music teacher (for 25 years so far!) She teaches recorder to her sixth grade students. Some, like Mila, finally make the connection to rhythm, harmony and melody. Others like Shay, never quite feel the same sensation. It felt so good to see Mila fall in love with her recorder. The music opened a new door for her to a strange world. For Mila, music was part of her waking hours and her security blanket when she should have been asleep. Music was her good-night hug and warm embrace of love.

I had mixed emotions about the doctors and their efforts to humanize Mila. Part of me was so thrilled watching Mila think, talk and act human, but at the same time, part of me was sad. I wanted Mila to be human but it meant she'd have to learn human concepts that are cruel. For example, humans don't necessarily take the responsibility for their children that they should. Mila is finding that out slowly. She is also learning that just because there is a door, it is not always unlocked and welcoming. Humans are basically selfish with their possessions and their property is not always inviting. There are too many rules about permission that Mila doesn't understand. How do you teach a child that humans are good when there are so many bad examples around them?

Mila explains that a dolphin community is loving, receptive, full of laughter and fun. Sometimes, I wanted to send Mila back to have the freedom that she knew with the dolphins. It made me compare what we call "freedom" to the "freedom" sea creature have. Which is truly free? I guess both have their shortfalls. Dolphins must face nets and captivity the way humans are threatened by terrorists, war and corruption. In the end, no freedom goes without its price.

In closing, I just want you to know that I'm so glad I went back to the introduction of your book and started over. The Music of Dolphins has made a profound impact on me. I had to constantly re-evaluate what I thought and how I thought, every page of the way. The ending was perfect. I'm glad Mila got to go back to her dolphin family and reconnect. It was like putting a family reunion at the end of a hard separation. Everyone deserves a soft place to fall in a safe, secure and familiar world. Thank you for a lovely story with a positive ending.

Sincerely,

Heidi Chrisman

Honorable Mention

Heather Hughart

Ravenswood High School

A Walk to Remember by Nicholas Sparks

Dear Mr. Sparks,

How can a book change your immortal soul? Well, I'm not quite sure either, but your book, A Walk to Remember, has changed my entire view on life. I, and most of my friends, both saw the movie and read the book. In my opinion, nothing could ever compare to the reality and depth of the book.

When the movie came out in theaters, I wanted to see it but did not get the chance to do so. Once the movie came out on video and DVD, I immediately rented it. As soon as the movie was over, I knew that I had to have the book.

Once I read your book, it made me put my entire life into perspective. Your main character in the book got cancer, got married, and died, all at the age of seventeen. I'm seventeen now, and this book made me realize that I need to live each day to the fullest. You never know what might happen next. Your book has an extremely powerful message or wake-up call, specifically directed towards teens, and I think it helps a lot of teens accomplish their goals as well as mine.

You have inspired me to accomplish a lot of goals that I once thought of as impossible. Never before would I ever have done half of the things that I now do. I was once a very shy person, being the "new kid" in the community. After reading your book and watching the movie, I decided not to sit around feeling sorry for myself and wasting away anymore. I became more outgoing by trying out for sports, auditioning for various parts in chorus, and auditioning for All-State band. I would not have thought twice about any of these things before reading your book.

Your book has also taught me to forgive and forget anything bad that has ever happened to me, and the people that caused my pain, although sometimes I wish that I could at least loathe them. It taught me to be confident and to stand up for myself, along with my beliefs. Life is short, and you need to just take life by the reins, controlling *yourself* and what *you* do. If you go around all of your life being scared and afraid to do anything, then just think of how many wasted hours that you have thrown away.

I continue to read other books of yours, such as The Notebook. Every book that you have written has inspired me in more ways than one. I hope that *you* continue to write such inspirational and meaningful novels, not only for my own sake, but for all of the people that need a little inspiration or lift in their lives. I am certain that I am definitely not the only person that feels this was about your writing or who has absorbed such a strong message through reading your work. Although I have already read your book, A Walk to Remember, I continue to read it regularly, finding messages and meanings that I had originally ignored.

Sincerely yours,

Heather Hughart

Honorable Mention

Tawfiq Khoury
Wheeling Park High School
All books by Dr. Seuss

Dear Dr. Seuss,

I have very few memories of my early childhood, but the memories I retain almost all include one of your books. Whether it is a unique cat that utilizes an odd approach to finding things, or a persistent boy following his friend and trying to get him to try new foods, none of the time I spent with your books was ever wasted. While I did not know at the time what impact your books would later have on my personality, I did know your books were very enjoyable to read and listen to; the rhymes you incorporated into your stories spun off the tongue so easily that it was impossible not to be entranced by their rhythmic harmony. The cadence of your stories may be what makes them popular with children, but the real meaning of your stories lies in their underlying messages. The messages that you wrap so neatly in your stories usually only surface much later in the reader's life and are rarely traced back to their origin on your humble pages. One such experience happened to me, and *Wit* were not for that experience I probably would not be writing you now.

I was recently looking through my childhood belongings when I came across a book entitled *Green Eggs and Ham*. Leafing through the book's old pages I realized how much I resembled the main character, Sam, in personality. Among the traits we share are a slightly annoying type of persistence, a love for different foods, and a sense that everyone else should feel exactly the same way as I do about everything. Noticing the striking resemblance between my favorite childhood protagonist and me led me to wonder if the similarities were all coincidence? I didn't have much to go on, so I picked up another of your books and started skimming it for nostalgia's sake. It was in this book, entitled *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish* that I discovered a second similarity between your characters and me: I love numbers. I have loved numbers ever since I was a child, and I now see that it may have been because of your wonderfully colorful children's book.

I still didn't know if it was all coincidence, or if your books really had molded my personality, so I picked up another one. This one was *The Cat In The Hat*, and it featured an eccentric feline with some interesting tendencies. While reading through its pages I realized that I, like the cat, loved large hats. I also noticed that both the cat and I had horrible organizational skills. At that point I was pretty well convinced that my character had been almost entirely defined by your children's books. It was a frightening thought at first, so I kept looking for a book that didn't describe me at all. The *Lorax* and I were both very much for environmental rights, so that couldn't be it. *Horton* the elephant was also similar to me in that we both believe that the nurture of young is important to their future.

I had reached the bottom of the box. Every book of yours that I had read as a child resembles me in some way or another today. At first I was disturbed by this notion. How could anyone form my mind so completely, I wondered. It was then that I realized that I'm glad you bent my mind into what it is today. With your short

stories, all filled to capacity with lessons and morals, you have helped me to become the person that I am today in every aspect of my life.

Thank you,

Tawfiq Khoury

Honorable Mention

Preston Mac Sundin
Notre Dame High School
The Chocolate War by Robert Cormier

Dear Mr. Cormier,

“WARNING: CONTENTS MIGHT BE HARMFUL”

As far as I was concerned, this was the caveat your book carried before I read it. This message drew me to your book. I read *The Chocolate War* not because of good reviews or because I thought I would learn a warmhearted lesson. No, I needed to know if your book was as chilling, shocking, and brutal as I heard it was. So I guess you could say that these “warnings” meant to keep innocent readers away had the opposite effect on me. In fact, they grabbed me like a magnet and led me to opening your book and releasing the horrors from within.

Your book was dark, frightening, and unpredictable. Instead of being turned off by these qualities as I might have been in the past, I immediately felt at home in the dismal and cruel atmosphere you established in your book. For a long time I wondered why this felt so familiar, and then I realized that the answer was obvious. All the emotions that you wrote about were ones I knew. The uncertainty, the frustration, the fear, the sorrow, the desires, the anger, the rage, the outright hate—your writing had seamlessly captured the turbulent period in life known as adolescence.

I formed a bond with the miserable protagonist, Jerry, simply because it was comforting to see someone experiencing some of the same problems as I do. In a world where everyone around me appears so perfect and pulled together, it came as a great relief to discover someone as confused and conflicted on the inside as I am.

But there was more, a much deeper message that touched me. Maybe it was the poster that Jerry Renault hung in his locker, that poster that asked the deadly question: *Do I Dare Disturb the Universe?* These words inspired Jerry to stand up to Brother Leon and the Vigils when they tried to force him to sell the chocolates, even though he was martyred for it. The message of standing up, of questioning that status quo, even when you're the only one, resonated with me, because it reminded me of a decision I had made the year before.

You see, I live in Fairmont, a city split down the middle by a river that divides everything into East and West. In my elementary school, when it came time for eighth grade graduation, everyone filed into two lines: one to go to East Fairmont High School, and one to go to West Fairmont High School. Where you live not only determines where you go to high school, but also reflects deep cultural divisions that have lasted for generations. It's been that way for years, and everyone accepted it as fate. Something deep inside me told me that I didn't have to choose.



So I decided to go to Notre Dame High School (which I'm glad to report is very unlike the Trinity High School you wrote about), a small school located in the next city. I made this decision, because when I reviewed all my choices, Notre Dame offered more of what I was looking for.

How did people react when my decision disregarded years of tradition? Well, each morning I wake up very early and board the bus to Clarksburg without anyone noticing. Unlike in The Chocolate War, there isn't a gang lurking in the shadows, waiting to pounce on me. And the two lines that lead to East and West Fairmont High School are still open. Did I bring Fairmont to its knees? Not exactly. Did I still disturb the universe?

I'm happy to inform you that two other boys joined me, and this year, another girl decided to come along also. And other students tell me that they are giving serious thought to their choice of high school based on what is best for *them*, rather than what geography or tradition demands. People are realizing that they have choices in life. So maybe in the end, I didn't make waves when I went to a different high school, but I did start a ripple. A ripple isn't as big as a wave, but it can still spread and make changes too, sometimes far away from where it started.

I end my letter to you the same way I began it: with the warning. Was I overreacting when I placed the *Warning: contents might be harmful* disclaimer on your book? Was your book harmful? It depends on your point of view. The independent thought you encourage in The Chocolate War is dangerous to a society that demands conformity and teaches me that if everyone is doing something then I should too. I want to break away from all that. Just because something is good for everyone around me doesn't mean it's also good for me. Your book is dangerous, Mr. Cormier, because it challenges me to ask *why*? Why do I have to accept things the way they are? Why should my choices be limited? Now I always ask why, even when asking this simple question means that I might disturb the universe.

Sincerely,
Mac Sundin

Honorable Mention
Sarah Beth Yoder
Wheeling Park High School
The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein

I was much too young to read The Giving Tree when my grandmother gave it to me several Christmases ago. The thrill of the holiday had not fully worn off as the prospect of receiving more gifts before December twenty-sixth dawned, and I'd ripped no less than sixteen gift-wrapped packages to shreds and traded what was less than satisfactory with my sister, Emily, before my arrival at Grandma's house. Initially I felt disappointment as all children do—the bitter aftertaste of expecting the fantastic and receiving the mediocre is common enough in households after the magical morning. After the first five minutes of delight with the Littlest Pet Shop Zoo set, I

realized with sinking disappointment that the toy I'd looked forward to above all others had become as boring as the Hollywood Hair Barbie I'd anticipated last Christmas and cast away long before Emily stuck its head down the disposal. I overlooked the most valuable gift I'd received that Christmas and, indeed, that gift seemed to have little meaning at all to my five-year-old self. Its real value was not revealed to me until later that night, and even then when Grandma sat down by the bed and read The Giving Tree to me I only partially understood the message it conveyed. Reading your book became a Christmas tradition of sorts, and over the span of sixteen years the changes it wrought in me became more obvious and reflected the subtle degree of deeper understanding that grew with the passing of each Christmas. As my wishes evolved each year I became profoundly aware of the sacrifices my loved ones were making for my happiness, and my increasing wisdom resulted in mixed feelings. It was comforting to know that I was loved to this extent, and yet I had an unexplainable sense of foreboding as I turned the final page of the story, though I knew I'd reached a happy ending.

That conclusion I came to marked a transition in my life. I was no longer content with simply receiving—the gifts I'd been given now felt incomplete without my giving something in return. Though I understood that my parents were happy to give what they had for their children, I wanted to be sure that they knew I realized what they were doing and that I was grateful for their doing it. The Giving Tree planted the seed, or so my grandma said on my fourteenth Christmas when my parents' presents outnumbered mine underneath the tree. I began to understand that the true joy my relatives experienced giving gifts was far more satisfying than the fleeting ecstasy of tearing into piles of toys when I was a kid. Through gifts, words, and deeds I was not only returning the love given to me, I was growing up.

I hope that you will hold your head up just a little straighter when you see what you have given me, Mr. Silverstein. I've received a gift from you that is not legible, tangible, or hardly explainable, and at the same time it has changed my life. Through the simple words and pictures of a children's book you have shown me the definition, the meaning—the essence of love. You've taught me to appreciate what is given to me, and, better yet, to appreciate the meaning and the love represented by the gift. I wanted to write to tell you that I understand and to give a token of appreciation to you as well. As with your message, my gift to you is not a material thing. It's just something I think you'd like to know.

My gift to you is to let you know I'm giving back.

Sincerely,
Sarah Beth Yoder

Level One Finalists

Allyssa Borak-St. Joseph Grade School
The Wide Window by Lemony Snicket

Lillian M. Clifton-Confidence Elementary
Happy Birthday, Josefina by Valerie Tripp

Brandy Jarvis-East Bank MS
Holes by Lois Sachar

Camille Leon-Fairmont Catholic School
A Series of Unfortunate Events by Lemony Snicket

Ashley Peters-Wilsonburg Elementary
Charlotte's Web by E. B. White

Alec V. Sauble-Spring Mills MS
A Look at Life From A Deer Stand by Steve Chapman

Rachel Sayre-Roosevelt School
Lizzie McGuire by Nina Bargiel & Jeremy Bargiel

Ruby Schwartz-Roosevelt School
Child of the Wolves by Elizabeth Hall

Maria Setliff-Confidence Elementary
The Family Under the Bridge by Natalie Savage-Carlson

Sarah Shears-Green Bank MS
Smoky the Cow Horse by Will James

Level Two Finalists

Stephanie Anderson-Eastern Greenbrier JHS
Traveling Light by Max Lucado

Camron Baranski-Wheeling Catholic School
Sabriel by Garth Nix

Caleb Brownfield-Beverly Hills MS
A Walk in the Woods by Bill Bryson

Chelsie Davis-Fairmont Catholic School
Esperanza Rising by Pam Munoz Ryan

Bree Elizabeth Eberbaugh-Green Bank MS
Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson

Jessica Geiger-Princeton MS
Letters from Rifka by Karen Hesse

Ashley Gower-Western Greenbrier JHS
"Sorrows Underneath" by Zihanna Rahman

Lee Houck-Western Greenbrier JHS
Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien

Ala Jitan-Beverly Hills MS
The Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis

Olivia Lloyd-Shepherdstown MS
Joy School by Elizabeth Berg

Martin Lockman-Green Bank MS
The Last Book in the Universe by Rodman Philbrick

Alexis Morrell-Wheeling Catholic School
Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone by J.K. Rowling

Hannah Nagowski-Fairmont Catholic School
Telling Christina Goodbye by Lurlene McDaniel

Adrienne Nottingham-Green Bank MS
Nory Ryan's Song by Patricia Reilly Griff

Amanda Nottingham-Green Bank MS
A Corner of the Universe by Ann M. Martin

Alexandra Palmer-St. Francis Central School
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

Alyssa Marie Ruberto-Fairmont Catholic School
The House of the Scorpion by Nancy Farmer

Kristin Sauve-Shepherdstown MS
Keeping the Moon by Sarah Dessen

Michelle Schussler-Beverly Hills MS
Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes

Crystal Silva-Shepherdstown MS
Boy's Life by Robert R. McCammon

Emily Spickler-Shepherdstown MS
That Summer by Sarah Dessen

Keara Vickers-Moundsville JHS
The Diary of a Young Girl by Anne Frank

Ashley Nicole Wade-Green Bank MS
River's End by Nora Roberts

Jenna Wood-Fairmont Catholic School
The Hidden Staircase by Carolyn Keene

Level Three Finalists

Katie Blake-Musselman HS
The Jungle by Upton Sinclair

Madison Boggess-Capital HS
The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold

Jordan Burgess-Capital HS
One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish by Dr. Seuss

Kassidie Cross-Magnolia HS
Stolen Lives: Twenty years in a Desert Jail
by Malika Oufkir

Erin Crouse
Dragon's Dawn by Anne McCaffrey

Kristin Nicole Duncan
A Death in the Family by James Agee

Colin Ferrell-Wheeling Park HS
Brian's Song by William Blinn

Emily Friend-Ravenswood HS
The Hot Zone by Richard Preston

Zachary Gouzd-North Marion HS
The Things They Carried by Tim O' Brien

William Hardy III-Princeton SHS
The Book of Five Rings by Miyamoto Musashi

Laryssa Hoskins-Poca HS
Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom

Patricia Jennings-Musselman HS
Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck

Anita Kovaleski-Musselman HS
The Diary of Anne Frank by Anne Frank

Josh Lewis-Liberty HS
Faith of the Fallen by Terry Goodkind

Maegan Muse-Musselman HS
Go Ask Alice by Beatrice Sparks

Bionka Patterson-Capital HS
Beloved by Toni Morrison

Jessamine Paul-Wheeling Park HS
A Walk to Remember by Nicholas Sparks

Sandra Pritchard-North Marion HS
Into the Wild by Jon Krakauer

Kristi Rule-Capital HS
The Diary of Anne Frank by Anne Frank

Philip Scolaro-Musselman HS
I Kissed Dating Goodbye by Joshua Harris

Ana Margarita Simental-Huntington HS
Where the Red Fern Grows by Wilson Rawls

Jenisha Watson-Liberty HS
Killashandra by Anne McCaffrey

Tamara Wilt-North Marion HS
The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger



Closing Remarks

Coordinator

Karen Goff

West Virginia Center for the Book

Letters About Literature 2004 by various young writers

Dear Letters About Literature Writers,

The letters included in this book, the letters of other Finalists, and the letters of every West Virginia student who participated in Letters About Literature 2005 prove that words are powerful. Your letters tell how the words of special authors have influenced how you look at the world, how you look at others, and how you look at yourself. Your letters shout out the answer to the question “why read?”

Award winning author Barbara Juster Esbensen answered the question this way. *“I read because I want to connect with the next book that is already waiting out there – waiting for me to open its pages, to breathe in that fragrance of paper and binding and ink that signals something exciting and unknown. I read so I can experience yet again, the miracle that happens when the paper, the ink, the book itself all seem to disappear, and I am journeying somewhere I have never been before on the wings of those magic words so carefully chosen by someone I will never know.”* Barbara Juster Esbensen. *The Next Book. The Most Wonderful Books.* Edited by Michael Dorris and Emilie Buchwald. Milkweed Editions. 1997.

Before appearing in this book your magic words have been read by many people. Some of you may have shown them to your parents, to your teachers, to other students. Once they became a part of the Letters About Literature project they were read by national screeners who read over 46,000 letters submitted by students across the country. These screeners selected 90 of the 614 letters from West Virginia for state level judging. If you are one of those 90, your letter was in the top 15% of all the letters submitted statewide.

When those 90 letters were received at the West Virginia Center for the Book in February, they were distributed to more readers. Six state judges donated their time and expertise to thoughtfully read and evaluate your letters. One of these judges has been a judge every year West Virginia has participated in the project. Three of the judges were new this year, one an author, one a college dean, and one a librarian. The judging deadline is particularly tight for two of the judges who are involved in state government and legislative activities. But they all looked forward to receiving the packet of letters and they all met the deadline. While the judges were judging, Center for the Book and West Virginia Library Commission staff were reading, scanning, and preparing this book for publication.

As you all have discovered, words have no magic until they are read. Each of you could read the same book, and some of you did, and each see magic in different places, or search for magic in vain. The magic of words depends on who you are and where you are at any given time. You might be living with a serious illness. You might be learning about social responsibility. You might be dealing with moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar. You might be discovering joy and meaning in what just seems silly on the surface.

Wherever you found the magic, you wrote about it. You wrote about it well. You became the magicians and your readers were touched with the magic. Thank you for choosing the Letters About Literature project as your stage.

Please keep reading. Please keep writing. You all are remarkable individuals.

Sincerely,

Karen Goff

Coordinator

West Virginia Center for the Book

LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE 2005

JUDGES

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West Virginia Department of Education and the Arts
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Charleston, WV

DR. BETH MUSSER, DEAN

School of Education
West Liberty State College
West Liberty, WV



*Although Letters About Literature honors students, we applaud
Parents and Teachers
for the support and encouragement given to these developing writers.
Without your contributions and direction,
many of these letter writers would have remained undiscovered.
Thanks to all who participated not only this year, but also in years past.*



*For future competitions and news regarding
the programs and events sponsored by
West Virginia Center for the Book,
please visit our website at www.wvcenterforthebook.lib.wv.us.*