

**West Virginia Center for the Book**

*Letters About Literature 2006*

West Virginia Center for the Book  
West Virginia Library Commission  
Cultural Center  
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Charleston, WV 25305  
304-558-3978

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## Special Notice

*The response to this project is so great that 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. Names are withheld by request or in the event that documentation permitting the release of a student's name is unavailable.*

## Level One

### First-Place

Leila Feuchtenberger-Bluefield Intermediate School  
Tacky the Penguin by Helen Lester

Dear Helen Lester,

Your book Tacky the Penguin made me feel better about myself. I learned you don't have to be perfect to be a hero. I could never be your characters Goodly, Lovely, Angel, Neatly, or Perfect. But just maybe, I could be like Tacky.

Before I read your book, I felt odd like Tacky. I laughed when you described the way he marched. You are very funny! I want to be funny, too.

If people never have scary things happen, they never get to be brave. I like Tacky-he tricked the hunters and saved his friends. Thank you for writing about Tacky. His oddness outwitted others.

Your book made me travel to places like the icy land Tacky lives in. Even though Tacky wasn't the best out of the six penguins, he still saved them. I have braces and glasses. People called me names like four eyes and metal mouth. Before I read your book, this hurt my feelings. Now I just ignore them and they stopped. No one calls me names anymore!

Even though Tacky isn't your perfect penguin, he is a character who is brave and bounces back. He alone stands up to the hunters and confuses them into running away. He keeps his cool, and never loses his sense of self or his sense of humor. That's a life lesson I'll treasure.

Sincerely,

*Leila Feuchtenberger*

### Runner-Up

Ian Lovern by Bluefield Middle School  
Hiroshima by John Hersey

Dear Mr. John Hersey,

"A noiseless flash." The words you used to describe the atomic bombing of Hiroshima also reflect the changes your book made in my mind. I tend to be a very trusting person. While in school, I'm likely to believe that what's written in my textbook represents the whole story without going deeper and getting other accounts. Since reading Hiroshima, however, I now realize how important it is to look at any event in history from all angles.

Until recently, all I knew about World War II was what I had learned during a few classroom discussions. I'd also heard people who had lived during that time say things like "the atomic bomb saved American lives... it was necessary... that's what ended the war". Now I'm not sure if that's all true. Your objective account of the lives of six survivors after the bombing showed me that history isn't just facts and numbers.

There's a human side to every event. I saw that human side through your words. I can't just view history on a national scale; it's important also to look at how individuals are affected. While dropping the atom bomb on Hiroshima definitely changed the history of Japan; learning about the brutal suffering of Japan's people had a greater impact on me.

Hiroshima inspired me. I now know it's critical to see history from many perspectives. Only then will I be able to understand and have a clearer view of the world. That's the only way mistakes of the past won't be repeated.

Your friend,

*Ian Lovern*

### Runner-Up

Maher Shammaa-Chamberlain Elementary School  
Eragon by Christopher Paolini

Dear Christopher Paolini

I am a ten-year-old boy living in a suburban area in the city of Charleston, West Virginia. I am writing this letter to you to tell you how I feel about your fantastic fictional book: Eragon.

Many fictional stories include either a dragon or magic. Your combination of both pulls me into the adventures of the boy Eragon and his dragon Saphira. I get so into it that I probably wouldn't notice if the fire alarm went off!

Judging by that last paragraph, you can probably guess how your book affected me. I have always been interested in books, but yours especially created an unbreakable bond between me and fictional stories. In almost every single story plot, the main character changes. As Eragon, your main character, changed, I noticed a change in myself as well. I began to realize that wisdom is very important in this world, and I was encouraged to love learning, as did the main character in your book. Eragon likes to ask questions, as do I. Before I read your book, I set up small goals for myself, such as getting an A on an upcoming math test. After I read Eragon, however, I gained confidence and set for myself larger goals. I was ready to try and be the smartest person in the world! (Slight exaggeration, ha ha ha!)

I noticed something else about your book that caused me to view the world a little differently. When I read your book, I knew that a lot of imagination was involved. Just that. Imagination. Before I read Eragon, it was harder to write reports and essays and such, but now I know that with imagination I can easily write an enjoyable article about whatever I please.

I plan to be an author after I get a degree in biology. Then I'll write nonfiction biology books for science lovers (like myself) and write fiction books like yours just for fun! It really is fun to write, don't you agree? I have written many reports that my teachers enjoy immensely. I could never write nicely, however, without authors like you. Authors such as you set me an example for me so I know how real authors write. For that I thank you, and I would like to



say that I think your writing job is extremely important. So please keep it up!

Sincerely,  
*Maher Shammaa*

### **Honorable Mention**

Maranda Crane  
Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson

Dear Ms. Paterson,

Your book, Bridge to Terabithia, really touched me. It showed everyone reacts differently to death, but they can still feel sad. Most importantly, it helped me to feel normal.

I have encountered more deaths in my life than most of my friends. My grandmother on my dad's side died when I was very young. I was five then and did not really realize what had happened. Five years later, my grandfather on my dad's side died. At this funeral I was upset, but I didn't cry. I saw everyone else crying, so I decided I should cry too. I forced myself to cry, but made it look natural.

Not even a full month later, my Great Uncle Rob died. At this funeral the same thing happened. Except this time, I couldn't force myself to cry. I didn't get it! I was not five anymore, I was ten. I knew what death meant. Why couldn't I cry? I started feeling weird, different, and disrespectful because I didn't cry.

Then I read your novel, Bridge to Terabithia. At the end when Leslie died, Jess didn't show his emotions in the same way everyone else did. He understood she was in a better place, she was always there in spirit, and he would always have her in memories.

This made me feel much better. I will remember that novel, and I don't think I'll ever forget it. When Jess built a bridge across Terabithia, he built a bridge for me to feel normal.

Sincerely,  
*Maranda Crane*

### **Honorable Mention**

Name Withheld  
"I Have A Dream" by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dear Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.,

Your "I Have A Dream" speech made me see things differently. I now stop people from using discrimination, I've learned a lot, and I make sure that discrimination never happens again.

First, I used to never care when people would talk badly about people just because they are different. I now try to get people to see it through that person's eyes. I have stopped many people from being mean since I heard your speech.

Next, I have learned as much as I can about the Civil Rights Movement and I think about how white people thought that just because there were more of them that they were better. I sometimes wish that more people would have not been such bigots and seen that in God's eyes we are all beautiful and no one is better than the other.

Finally, I am now aware of how awful it is to single an entire group out, and I have made a decision to make sure that nobody is ever treated like that again. I tell people that make fun of how someone looks that they need to read your speech and learn something from it. When they do, they are changed to be more civil towards other people.

Your speech has inspired me, and I know it has inspired others too. Thanks!

Sincerely,  
*Name Withheld*

### **Honorable Mention**

Makennah Lewis-Roosevelt Elementary School  
Chicken Soup for the Preteen Soul by Various Authors

Dear Chicken Soup Authors,

I love your book Chicken Soup for the Preteen Soul II. My favorite story in the book is, "A Friendship to Remember." Venta, the young girl in the story, really inspired me. My great aunt Marlana was just like Emma, Venta's best friend. Like Emma, Marlana had cancer too. Last December she wasn't doing well and we were told there were no more treatments for her. On January 5th, the day after my aunt's fiftieth birthday, I had to deal with death the same way Venta did. I'm pretty sure it was the worst day of my life.

A couple days after the funeral was over my mom gave me a box. When I opened the box, I found a necklace that belonged to Marlana. Included was a note that read:

*Dear Makennah,*

*I know you are probably sad, but please don't cry. You are my little angel and I will watch over you everyday. Don't forget I'm always in your heart. I am so grateful God blessed me with such a beautiful niece like you.*

*I love you,  
Aunt Marlana*

After I read the note, I couldn't help but cry. I still have the box and the note. They are something I will always treasure.

I would like to thank all of the Chicken Soup authors. Your stories have brought laughter, tears, and comfort to so many. My whole family reads your books. May God bless you all!

Best wishes,  
*Makennah Lewis*

### Honorable Mention

Abigail McClung-Fairmont Catholic School  
Loser by Jerry Spinelli

Dear Jerry Spinelli,

I read your book Loser in the fourth grade. Before I read your book I was not mean but not nice to one kid in my class. I knew how she felt because I was treated that way with most of the kids in my neighborhood; they would leave me out of games because I was always the youngest. She was different than everyone else and nobody would talk to her. But then I read this book and realized just how cruel we all were being to her. Your book has probably taught a lot of kids that have read it about how to treat others, but this book really helped not just me but another kid too. Your book has taught me so much about the golden rule, and it is a good example of just how mean kids are today to others who are different than them.

After I read your book when all the kids were picking on that one kid, I would step up to them and tell them she is a person and needs to be treated like one. After that they all stopped picking on her. This book now is like a thing that helps mean kids look inside and see how they really make those kids feel, and I'm positive that is helping all the kids being picked on. So I just wanted to tell you how much your book has helped me and thank you for writing the book.

Sincerely,

*Abigail McClung*

### Honorable Mention

Tyler Richards-Mercer School  
The Magician's Nephew by C.S. Lewis

Dear Mr. Lewis,

This address is not a fan letter. However, it is about lessons I learned. It is about how my life was positively affected by reading your book, The Magician's Nephew. This is a letter about changing.

The first lesson I learned is that I am not always right. I actually have difficulty accepting this. Sometimes when my dad corrects me, I am annoyed because I think I am always right! We would start a discussion and then it would gradually develop into a debate. The Magician's Nephew helped me realize I need to listen to my dad for he knows best. Now I try to listen, think, and accept that I may be wrong.

The second lesson I noticed was promises are profoundly important. I used to think promises were just words built together for a conversation. If they were hard to keep, I would break them. I now realize that promises are words with meaning between the lines. If Digory can keep a life or death promise, I think I, too, can keep a promise no matter what.

Your book has taught me lessons that I will use throughout my life. I have learned it is important to listen to my parents. I have learned I am

not always right. I have learned that promises are important. I have learned to stand up for myself. I have learned that I can change. Thank you for writing this book.

Your friend,

*Tyler Richards*

## Level Two

### First Place

Bayan Misaghi-John Adams Middle School  
The Giver by Lois Lowry

Dear Mrs. Lowry,

A world without memories, lacking love, starved of compassion, and without true vision and perspective was impossible for me to imagine before I read your book, The Giver. I have always imagined and dreamed of a perfect world, a world without disease, violence, natural disasters, and other incidents that humans are constantly facing on a day-to-day basis. After reading about the life of Jonas and other members of his community I no longer wish for this perfect reality to ever take place.

The subject that struck me the most was the action of Release. Though at first I was quite confused about people going "Elsewhere," I realized that in our world today, being Released isn't an event that would be celebrated or be a normal, non-dramatic event of life like in The Giver. After I found that dying was what being Released meant I felt that the members of the community wouldn't find death to be something to dread or to mourn about. Relishing and enjoying life to the fullest is impossible without knowing the suffering, as well as the happiness and joy that it offers with its experiences and events that take place. Realizing that each day would be repetitive and the same would be extremely boring and in essence life would have no importance or meaning.

Jonas, in your book, symbolizes difference, which I can relate to very easily. My ethnicity, the way I speak, the clothes that I wear, even the music that I enjoy listening to may be found as different or strange for a fourteen year-old living in America. While all Jonas's peers in The Giver were focusing on a specific service or career, Jonas volunteered and worked in a variety of settings, making it almost impossible to pinpoint the profession that he would be best suited for. Though I do have aspirations of going into medicine, I find that I too am becoming a jack-of-all trades by participating in a variety of services and organizations such as Jonas.

The Utopian community that you created has given me the opportunity to reflect on all the different aspects that make up our world. Having no history and no memories of the past makes everyone in the community almost generic. People cannot look back on the past experiences of others to make decisions, after all those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it. But because everything from the meals that the people eat each day, to their careers, and even their spouses are all pre-determined, there is no need for decision-making on the individual level, resulting in a repetition of the same day

each and every day. To think that even genetically disabling or removing the rods of the eyes to completely restrict the ability to see color so that everyone may be equal is unimaginable, almost a punishment and a disfavor to humankind.

By the end of your book, when Jonas saw a community that reminded him and myself of his memories, much like the world that many are accustomed to today, gave me hope that humans would not have to go to such drastic measures so as to bring “peace” and “equality” to the citizens of the earth. That in fact the generations to come may be able to enjoy the sights, sounds, and events that that the world has to offer, to appreciate the sound of music and experience the thrill of riding down a snowy hill on a sled.

Truly Yours,  
*Bayan Misaghi*

### **Runner-Up**

Lauren Dittebrand-Elkview Middle School  
The Giver by Lois Lowry

Dear Lois Lowry,

It is December, and as I am looking outside my bedroom window at the winter weather, I’m remembering the laughter and memories of Thanksgiving and anticipating the excitement of Christmas in just a few weeks. In your book The Giver you created a society where people had no individuality, emotions, feelings or memories of the past. As I was reading, I couldn’t help but think how different that would be from the world today. How could I live in a society that was controlled and left no room for individuality? Would it be fair for a government to control the feelings and memories of its people? These are the questions that your book made me ask.

In the Community of The Giver the main character, Jonas, struggles to maintain his individuality in a society where everyone is the same and has to live by the same rules. Today’s teenagers are subject to rules we sometimes don’t like to follow and pressure from our peers to conform to what is popular. It is hard to keep our individuality in the midst of this. We don’t always make the right choices and as a result, we have to learn from our mistakes. The memories of this might be painful, but they can also help us develop and mature as people. There are other times when making the right choice comes easily and leaves us with happy and satisfying memories. We respond to the world based on emotions, past experiences, and feelings—how good it feels to get an “A” on your report card, the excitement of Christmas Eve, or the sadness of losing someone we love. Jonas had to carry these kinds of memories for the whole community because the government felt that by doing that, they were protecting the community from ever being hurt or sad.

In reality it is impossible for our lives to be free from pain, and the things we experience are sometimes good and bad, but it is through this that we grow. Just like Jonas, we grow from children totally dependent on our society into individuals having dreams and desires of our own for the future. The reason I enjoyed your book so much is because it taught me how it is OK to make sacrifices for

someone we love or for something we believe in and how boring the world would be without all the pleasure (and the pain) we experience every day. Thanks for writing a book that really made me think.

Yours Truly  
*Lauren Dittebrand*

### **Runner-Up**

Susan Kurian  
A Little Princess by Frances Hodgson Burnett

Dear Mrs. Burnett,

A year ago, when I initially read A Little Princess, I cherished it for its plot and memorable characters. A few weeks ago, I found myself perusing it once more. The plot had so much more to it than I recalled. Sara’s life, her worries and dreams, seemed so lifelike and familiar. I felt a deeper connection to her than I had before, and a deeper look into what her fictional existence might have been like. Immediately I began to see similarities in our lives.

Sara’s loss of her father affected me in a singular way. I, like Sara, also experienced a sense of loss when my father moved away to India after my parents’ divorce. Although divorce is by no means as heart wrenching as death, knowing that our relationship would never be the same was difficult to bear. It is devastating to lose a parent, and many children must face this reality due to death or divorce. I learned through my experience and your wonderful storyline that focusing on the positive and drawing strength from frustration can make it easier to overcome obstacles.

Sara’s experiences at Ms. Minchin’s seminary before her father’s death would have been tiresome had she not been equipped with a vivid imagination. Whenever things were not going well for her, Sara depended on this gift as a reprieve from dreary existence. I too share her passion for stories and enjoy imagining their characters come to life. After reading this book, I finally comprehended the full power of imagination.

Friendship is obviously an important part of your book. Without it Sara might not have made it through the sudden, unexpected change in her lifestyle. She found friendship in unlikely places, but those friends stood the test of time. She was not afraid to break boundaries and make friends with the overlooked servant, Becky, or the academically unexceptional daughter of a genius, Ermengarde. True friends can enrich your life in countless ways.

Your book inspired me to challenge myself to think positively when things aren’t what they should be. Being a fountain of hope for others can make your own troubles seem diminished. Sara’s courage, cheerful disposition, and imagination changed her fortunes and brightened the lives of the people who knew her. These qualities are standards that every girl strives to achieve, in the hope of really being a little princess.

Sincerely  
*Susan Kurian*

### **Honorable Mention**

Jennie Bailey-Bluefield Middle School

Queen Bees & Wanna Bees by Rosalind Wiseman

Dear Ms. Wiseman:

I am writing you about your book, Queen Bees & Wanna Bees. I cannot tell you how much this book has helped me. I am a middle school girl with all the beginnings of becoming a woman happening. My hormones are racing, not to mention all the girls in my grade are at it to. It seems in this time of our adolescence years we all become testy and think we know it all. However, after dealing or having to deal with all the peer pressure at school, I must admit that there have been times when I just wanted to go and hide. I have been made to cry so many times I cannot count.

As defined in your book the chapters on girl cliques and nasty girls my mother refers to them often, she would explain to me as I was reaching the years that life will be tough and girls can be mean, but I never listened or knew exactly what she meant by it.

All I ever wanted to be was popular. I believe you defined it as a social climber, a chameleon as you put it, a person who changes constantly to fit in. I thought it would bring me great happiness and boyfriends, I might add. But it seems sometimes the more popular you are the more trouble you have. You even stated, a social climber can be a horrible target and is easily manipulated by more powerful girls.

That is why my mom brought your book after I had had several incidents with my girlfriends. They would leave me out, not invite me somewhere, talk about me behind my back, etc. But the worst was when one of my friends called me names. I never understood it. It made me feel horrible, and at times I believed it.

As you mentioned in your book about power plays I could relate to that, since it has happened to me so many times. Your advice was to think through them so I don't have to feel as if I have to go along with the group. My mom always told me she loved me and believed in me and trusted my judgment. I hated that at times because she was making me make decisions that I wanted her to make for me like she did when I was little. I wanted that protection, the secure feeling of being home. But what she was trying to make me understand is there are positive aspects to girl's friendships and not all excommunications. Mom always empathized with my situations but her main concern was make me aware of them and how to handle these situations and feelings.

But after talking many hours with Mom and reading your book, I can understand why I am going through this and maybe this is a part of life I have to deal with even though I wish it would just go away and be my perfect little world. Mom tries to make it so easy for me and tries to lead me in the right direction. But there are still times when I get weak or can't stand up for myself and need her strength. However I need to find a way to get the support from my friends that will help validate my decisions of action.

Funny thing is all you hear about is bullies and what harm they do but does anyone realize that these girl cliques are just about the same thing and can cause the same outcome? If I didn't know better or had some guidance I could have reacted so differently to my problems with my friends. This is a part of growing up I am sure, and once we all learn the value of our home and family and learn to find our true friends then surviving all the realities of adolescence will become easier. But we will always need our safe place, home, that is where the heart is, and we are loved for who we are no matter what it would be. So I do believe in myself and always will.

Sincerely,

*Jennie Bailey*

### **Honorable Mention**

Sarah Cavaness-John Adams Middle School

Indian Captive by Lois Lenski

Dear Lois Lenski,

I was inspired by your book Indian Captive. It was one of the first books I've read where I could actually relate to the main character. When Mary Jemison is abruptly taken away from everything she holds dear to live with Indians, she experiences a radical change that affected the rest of her life. She had to adjust to a completely different culture and environment. I had to do the same at a very young age. My dad accepted a job as a traveling evangelist for three years. We moved every five weeks and had no stability or extended family to lean on for support. I felt alone and was unaccustomed to being separated from family and loved ones. My life had drastically changed; in the same way Mary Jemison had no one to support her or to help her. After a period of time, Mary came to find out that Indians were good people who cared about her, too. She learned to love her new surroundings and became attached to the people, who in the beginning, she was afraid of. In the same way I adjusted to my situation and learned to appreciate my experiences. I met some wonderful friends and saw some exotic places. In fact, I made some friends that became almost as close as family to me, and helped to replace that empty space in my heart.

This book kept me reading and imbedded the concept of sacrifice and acceptance of certain difficult situations into the deepest part of my heart. In the end, when Mary Jemison has a choice between her family and her initial lifestyle, she decided to stay with her new found lifestyle and friends. I can't say that I would choose my current lifestyle or friends over my family, but the friendships and relationships I've formed will last for a lifetime. Thank you so much for writing a book that spoke deeply to the innermost part of my heart. This book has painted a vivid picture of how important it is to take events and situations that occur in our lives to prepare us for what is to come, not to dwell on the down, or negative side of things. In addition, the book has opened my eyes to see how accepting change can and will improve your perspective of life for the better. Thank you so much, and may you continue to make a difference in the lives of numerous others as well.

With much admiration and thanks,

*Sarah K. Cavaness*



**Honorable Mention**

Sophie Greenburg-Princeton Middle School  
The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants by Ann Brashares

Dear Ann Brashares,

Ever since I was three years old, I had gone to the same little school in Joplin, Missouri. My friends and I always stayed together through thick or thin. We assumed we would always be together through all of middle school and high school; we had it all planned out. Unfortunately, that wasn't the reality. Two years ago, I moved from Joplin to Princeton, West Virginia. Just like the characters in your book, Lena, Carmen, Bee, and Tibby, we were all going our separate ways. I didn't want to lose these girls, but I didn't know what we could do to keep our connections strong. I wanted to do more than just talk on the phone or IM (instant message). I needed to do something to make it seem like we still lived right around the corner from each other. I picked up The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants because I heard it was a book about a group of friends. I thought that if I read the book, it would bring some comfort to me while I was leaving the only friends I had ever known.

After I had finished the book, I knew I couldn't find a magical pair of jeans that would fit all of us, so I found a scrap book that we all loved- our Memory Book. We had agreed that my friend Katie would start out with the book, then pass it on to the next person. We would put little poems we had written, goofy pictures, and all sorts of little mementos. When the book arrived at my house, I was so excited; here was a little piece of "home". As I opened the first page, I felt like I was right there with my friends. The book had made us grow even closer.

Once a year in June, my friends and I organize a reunion in our old town where the main item on the agenda is to look at the Memory Book together. We laugh and tell each other the stories behind the pictures and the objects that each one of us has contributed. It is one thing to talk to each other on the phone or write letters, but it's another to have a special book where we can all record our thoughts, our pictures of ourselves, and mostly, our hopes and dreams.

If you had not written this book, I might have lost some of the best friends I have ever had to time and distance. Having friends is one thing, but having a "sisterhood" takes friendship to a whole new level. Lena, Carmen, Bee, and Tibby have an enduring bond that many girls envy. Thank you so much for writing such a wonderful book filled with laughter, tears, and, most of all, the sheer joy of friendship.

Sincerely,

*Sophie Greenberg*

**Honorable Mention**

Taylor Robinson-Harpers Ferry Middle School  
The Littles by John Peterson

Dear Mr. Peterson,

After I started reading your book The Littles, I could not put it down. It was such a comical story, yet inspiring to younger readers. Since the Littles were so small, it sort of identified with the small children who read the book. I know when I was younger and first read the story; I looked up to the Littles because they were so brave in many situations. They were an admirable family because they worked together and had fun at the same time, especially when they were threatened by the cat. With their skills and intelligence, they came up with brilliant plan. Even getting food was an adventure within itself.

I remember the very first time I read the The Littles. My parents were going through the first part of their divorce. I used the Littles to identify with because I felt so small in this big situation. Like the Littles, I got through that obstacle by taking time to think things through and letting certain things happen. I think it is important for every child to have a 'hero' or someone to look up to. In a sense, the Littles were my heroes.

I still read this book whenever I can because it brings back those feelings of strength and the way I felt about my personal situation after reading the book. I love the way the story made me feel like I wasn't alone. Everyone has to make adjustments and overcome challenges. That is sort of the message your book sent to me. I am glad that I had a role model family to look up to throughout my parent's divorce. Your story was as inspiring as it was comical.

Sincerely,

*Taylor Robinson*

**Honorable Mention**

Jessica Smith-Beverly Hills Middle School  
Journey of Hope by Lurlene McDaniel

Dear Mrs. McDaniel,

From the time I was born, my parents have always taught my sister and me to dream big. Additionally, they have encouraged us to believe that we can succeed at anything if we set our minds to it. Unfortunately, in my case, the old adage, hearing is believing, is not true. After reading your book, Journey of Hope, I realized that not only did I not support the dreams of my older sister, but that I had also put limitations on my own possibilities. The similarities between my family and the Barlow family compelled me to reexamine my own future.

The character of eighteen year old Heather Barlow is a fictional replica of my sixteen year old sister, Jaimee. Much like Heather, Jaimee has always dreamed of becoming a volunteer medical missionary to foreign countries. My family, including myself, has not seriously supported her dreams. Similarly, I can relate to the feelings of Heather's sister, Amber. Like Amber, I felt resentment toward Jaimee's dream. Rather than sharing her dream, it isolated me from her and threatened to steal my only sister from me.

Until reading Journey of Hope, it was easy for me to believe that Jaimee was selfish in her dream, a dream that would require her to abandon her family, especially me. My own thoughts and feelings were reflected in Amber's attitude toward Heather. I was selfish. Since I had failed to dream dreams of my own, limiting Jaimee's dreams was natural.

Reading about Heather's mission trip to Africa changed my perspective. Before Heather went back to Africa, she became terminally ill and couldn't make the trip. I was surprised that Amber, the rebellious younger sister, and her mother were willing to take the second mission trip in place of Heather so that Heather's dream could be fulfilled. Would I be willing to share my sister's dream and help her to fulfill it? Could I be selfless and think of the needs of others over my own wants and desires? Will I continue to let my fears limit my dreams? Do I dare to have dreams of my own? Do I dare to dream big?

Inspired by the way the Barlow family finally supported Heather's work, I now realize that my own sister's dreams are not selfish. Dreams are important, and as her sister, I should be the first to support and encourage her in her dream to make a difference in the world. Encouraging Jaimee can be my first step to making a difference as well. Now I realize that it's okay to dream big and that dreams can come true with determination, perseverance, and hope.

Sincerely,  
*Jessica Smith*

### Level Three

#### First Place

Mashal Shaikh  
The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan

Dear Amy Tan,

When I read The Joy Luck Club, I was reminded of my own culture. Coming from an Asian descent also, I know how important family is. The four families in your story symbolize unbreakable bonds of friendship that I see in my friends as well as my parents' friends. The stories about Chinese taboo morph into the warnings and precautions that I receive from my family. The dumplings eaten regularly during club meetings waft into my mind as spicy tandoori chicken sandwiches and the laughter becomes an ice-cold mango smoothie. Every minute spent in the company of friends is a blessing.

The mother-daughter relationships in your story are a reminder to every girl that time is not reversible. When Jing-mei replaces her mother's seat at the table, I feel intensely sorry for her. It is such a shame that she does not get to ask and learn from her all the tidbits about life. When she learns of her destiny to fulfill her mother's wish of seeing her two twin daughters that had been lost, I am hopeful for her; maybe this time around she can connect with who she really is.

Your book helped me understand that behind all the nagging,

screaming, punishments, and hugs, there is a sole purpose. Mothers want the best for their children. They want their children to bypass the hardships that they had to endure; to live the life they never had. They have gone through experiences so trying that they are full of knowledge and wisdom that we know not. Remember, mother always knows best. It had been a childhood dream of mine to learn how to sew and embroider. I was too lazy or too busy to act upon it. There was always that one football game, that one sleepover, that one party. After reading your book, I realized how important it is to act in the moment. My mother not only sat down with me to teach, but also transformed into an actor. She enthralled me with vivid stories of her childhood and her friends. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I had a lifetime to learn about my mom; things that would only benefit me if I opened up my ears. Moms are like a sale at the mall. It's those times when you don't need anything but go for the heck of it and find the perfect pants that accentuate your figure. The same way, you don't expect to learn anything new from your mom, but when it happens, you're glad you took the time to find out.

I can't say that I wasn't disappointed in Jing-mei, Rose, Waverly, and Lena. Growing up, they did not hold on to their Chinese culture and later on tried to be something that they were not. A famous quote that has embedded itself into my mind is: "A crow tried to walk like a crane, but then he forgot his own gait." All four girls did not participate in the ways of their mothers. When they were teenagers, they wanted to be cool, but it dawned on them in their middle-age that maybe the true cool wasn't the cool that they thought it was. What's cooler than being yourself? Your epitome of one of the oldest morals in the book makes me hold on to the culture I have been given even more. To find a balance between each is the best way to be a well-rounded person.

I applaud you on your interpretation of the way that mother-daughter relationships should be. I have learned to act in the moment, say what I mean, and mean what I say. Create a lifestyle to balance both of your cultures. Most importantly, be yourself; there is nothing better.

Sincerely  
*Mashal Shaikh*

#### Runner-Up

Name Withheld  
A Walk to Remember by Nicholas Sparks

Dear Mr. Nicholas Sparks,

How do you come up with these real-life intense situations for your books? I usually just read books because, for some odd reason, my "wonderful" English teachers assign them, but on the occasion when I read for pleasure, I rarely am touched by any of them. However, somehow your book A Walk to Remember got through to me, making me realize I should quit being spoiled and selfish and start to appreciate the simple pleasures of life.

Now I am not going to lie, I have been the jerk that picks and points out the people in the hallways that have unusual oddities about them. I can not say I would go as far as having someone



jump off a building and watch them plunge in to the shallow, freezing water, but I have had my rude moments. This book has taught me to look beyond physical appearance and look at what is on the inside. You portrayed Jamie Sullivan as an ordinary girl, but to figure that out you had to look past her overly conservative clothes and the fact that she was categorized because of her relations with God and her dad being a minister. I am trying to overcome my quickness to judge, so that I too can make friends like many characters in your book did.

Roughly two weeks after reading A Walk to Remember, the book became a reality instead of just an inspiring book. One of my close friends became diagnosed with the same disease Jamie had, leukemia. I never thought any situation like this would ever occur in my life, but at that moment when I received that horrid phone call, my heart dropped.

Did anything like that happen in your life to make you come up with this devastating ending? When this happened to my friend, I remember feeling as though I was in the same position Jamie's father was in; I was scared. With Jamie's situation and my friend's situation, I realized life was not about going to the mall every Saturday and talking on the internet in my spare time. Now, my goal in life is to live life to its fullest and to live everyday as if it's my last. Those are two messages I got out of the book.

The final message I got from your book is to let people in and love entirely. People are there for me, and before I read the book I pushed them away. The part which got through to me the most was when Jamie told Landon she had cancer and he still was there for her and loving her more than ever. That taught me to love with my whole heart.

So, Mr. Sparks that is how your book made an impact on me. It taught me to look past people's appearance to the inside, to live life to its fullest, and to let people in and get close to people. So, in closing, I would like to say "Thank You" for making me a better person, and I look forward to reading more of your literature.

Sincerely

*Name Withheld*

### **Runner-Up**

Ashley Yoho-Magnolia High School  
Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf

Dear Mrs. Virginia Woolf,

I have never read a novel like Mrs. Dalloway before. How do you come up with such characters and settings? When I read the first few beginning lines of Mrs. Dalloway I felt as though your novel would have lurid, melancholy features of life. I can relate some of the characters to people I know or have known in my life.

The heroine in your novel, Clarissa Dalloway, seems to be a perfectionist. I can say that I am a perfectionist also. I am an absolute perfectionist when I am doing a project in art. Clarissa reminds me of my own mother because of her personality. I almost share the

same relationship with my mom that Clarissa and Elizabeth have. A few months ago, in September, I had a relative whom committed suicide. I did not realize why he would have wanted to end his life. Every Thanksgiving, when he usually visited my aunt and uncle, he seemed okay and enthusiastic about life. A month or so after his death I began reading Mrs. Dalloway. I noticed that the character, Septimus Warren Smith, became more and more out of touch with his life, reality, and it was almost evident that he would kill himself. Septimus reminded me so much of my deceased relative and it helped me have an understanding as to why he did what he did.

Do you take anything from your own personal life or experiences and put them in your novels? I noticed how you seem to know the characters' every like and dislike, the way you keep true to their beliefs, and their outlooks on life. What were your intentions for writing Mrs. Dalloway? I have noticed how you narrate the novel and you make it seem more meaningful and direct to the plot in the novel. It's really unique that you made the time in the novel to be one day in Clarissa's life and the people she interacts with. Was it difficult to have the story set in only one day? I know it is sometimes frustrating, as an artist, to find creativity for an art project. Is it the same for you as a novelist? I can imagine using words instead of paint or oil pastels to make an artwork and it would be rather amazing if I could describe such vibrant settings, bring life to characters, and put my own mark on literature. I am not a person of words, but I do enjoy any media of art. To make an artwork I have to have at least some form of descriptive creativity. I know it would not be amazing, but I suppose it works for now.

I was surprised when I read your novel because I was reading very intensely and I was lost in your novel. One October day, after school, I went to a very quiet place to read in a forest and I read almost half of the novel in one sitting. I cannot remember being that interested in a novel as to read almost an entire half. I read until my eyes hurt but then I had to find a stopping place. I honestly did not want to put the book down. Mrs. Dalloway means so much to me and it made me take a harder look at my life. I am looking forward to reading your other works. Thank you for writing Mrs. Dalloway.

Thank you

*Ashley Yoho*

### **Honorable Mention**

Cathy Caudill-Capital High School  
A Separate Peace by John Knowles

Dear John Knowles,

Did you know that we are both from West Virginia? Well, I'm going to assume that you knew that *you* were from there, but not necessarily that I was also, considering that we have not met each other. Anyway, as a starter to allow you to know me better, I would like you to know that I absolutely adore your novel A Separate Peace. I found it unusual how this book was able to stir such a variety of emotions within myself. When I had finished it, I wasn't quite sure if I was happy or sad, and the mixture between the two extremes seemed to make me feel at peace and mellow. Is it strange that your novel that caused me to feel a separate peace?



## Honorable Mention

Kailey Imlay-Huntington High School

The Pearl by John Steinbeck

Dear Mr. Steinbeck,

I have read four of your books: Of Mice and Men, Cannery Row, Sweet Thursday, and The Pearl. Of the four, The Pearl is my favorite. I love this book because of the lessons it teaches me about greed and how destructive it is to families, to friends and ultimately to the soul. These are principles I will use in my life.

The basic lesson of the story is to be grateful for what we have and to focus on what is important. Like Kino and his family, most people in the United States have sufficient money to satisfy their needs as well as a good number of their wishes, but still we desire more. In many families both parents work just to make the extra money that is not really needed. The extra money purchases the larger house, the better car, and the lavish vacations. Parents buy their children all the toys in the world, but because of their busy schedules, parents are not spending enough time with their children. They forget that it is their responsibility as parents to instill values and to pass on wisdom to their children. If children were able to interact more with their parents, they would feel more secure and loved. They would also be more prepared to become parents themselves.

I learned that our greed blinds us. We get so absorbed in what we think we need to make our lives better; we forget what an excellent life we already have. With my allowance I buy clothing and jewelry, even though my parents supply me with plenty of those things. I spend my money as quickly as a gambler loses his. Sometimes I want something so badly, I waste all of my time obsessing about it. Kino did not remember that he already had a good life without the pearl; he had a wonderful wife and child. It is only when he loses the life of his precious son that he realizes his mistakes. I have to remember that I have enough, and enough is more than what many people in this world have.

It is also important for us to keep in mind what is really significant, such as our faith, friends and family. Kino becomes consumed with protecting his pearl, only an object that is not nearly as important as other aspects of his life. He starts to suspect that everyone around him, even his neighbors, is trying to steal his pearl. "This pearl has become [Kino's] soul." His desperation to keep the pearl distracts him from his morals and, in the end, he kills a man, therefore permanently scarring his soul. Money cannot buy the most important things in life such as love, peace of mind, family, and friends. I learned that money and possessions are really not important; it is our relationship with God, with ourselves, and with others that matter.

Also, the book teaches me that things are not always as they appear; it is foolish to act on first judgments. We should think things over and consider the future before making impulsive decisions. When Kino finds the pearl, he immediately thinks of the financial good that will come from it; he does not think about the consequences that come with protecting it. Kino's desperation to save his son, Coyotito, led him to believe that

I suppose that it is fair to conclude that where I connected with the story's main character the most is very easily summed up in the title. Gene and Phineas are two teenagers living amidst the world crisis of war. They spend much of their time preparing themselves to enter into the tempest of political turmoil, battle overseas, or whatever challenges that life should fling at them. Yet amidst this stew of madness, they find the crisis to be almost unreal, and continue to live peacefully in the secluded community of their prep school. In fact, besides the slight change in their school curriculum that focused the students more on the war than previously, the two boys proceeded in their everyday activities as easily as they had before.

Similarly, I also live in a time of political turmoil. There's war in the Middle East, hurricanes and tsunamis destroying cities, and an oil spill that has left many people in eastern Asia without water. Yet, amidst the insanity of the real world and preparing myself for college, I still find myself living in a happy ignorance. Here in my small, isolated city, I found that of these natural and political disasters, my everyday life was only affected by the raise in gas prices. An inconvenience, but all the same, life goes on. I live in a separate peace.

Adults look down upon us happy young folk, calling us ignorant and silly, as we are not nearly as concerned about the world's problems as we should be. But as they scorn our ways of living, a hint of jealousy can be detected in their eyes. You can see that they crave to be young again, so that they can live in the similar, content ignorance that they, too, experienced long ago. They crave to live such a day in naive bliss, without having to worry about taxes or whatnot. We pretend to ignore all of this, because we know that one day, we too will be old, and will not be able to live in the frivolous state of happiness that we do now. As we see them observing their pasts in our eyes, they see us observing our futures in their eyes.

When the direction of the future is as clear as it is in our situations, we realize that we have to grasp our opportunity to fulfill the best years of our lives while we still can. We'll hang out with friends when we should be studying for tests, we'll go to see a movie when we're supposed to be cleaning the house. We realize that although education and maintenance is important, so is life. It is better to live life now than to forever spend our time preparing for the future. That is wasted time that can never be recovered.

I suppose the way in which your novel affected me the most is that it gave me a new vantage point at which I may see inside myself. I am ignorant, and it isn't a sin to be so, as long as I am still able to appreciate my ability to be ignorant and proceed to live life out to the fullest. Because the truth is, I realized that I will never know when my life is going to end. When I die, whether my life was short or long, I just hope that I will pass knowing that my life wasn't a waste and that I lived it to its fullest extent. Your book told me to live life for the moment, and to worry about today *today*, not tomorrow. Because there is always the chance that I will not be able to live tomorrow *tomorrow*. Thank You

*Cathy Caudill*



the doctor could heal him. Kino assumes that the doctor is a good man who wants to help; so he trusts the doctor with Coyotito's life. In reality the doctor is a greedy, wicked man who tricks Kino badly. I need to be careful in whom, or what, I place my trust.

Thank you for your book The Pearl. I have learned many lessons from Kino's poor choices and devastating results. Showing gratitude for what I have, making people rather than things a priority, and acting cautiously rather than impulsively are all principles to abide by in my future.

Sincerely,  
Kailey Imlay

### Honorable Mention

Paula Kaufman-South Charleston High School  
A Green Desire by Anton Myrer

Dear Anton Myrer,

We have become a divisive nation; a nation divided by colors on a political map; divided by skin tone, by polarization of thoughts. However, your book, A Green Desire, reaffirmed the lessons I learned while working on a Native American Reservation in Maine this summer. These lessons affirm that there is a tacit connection between all Americans. In addition, your book synopsisized what I want to acquire in life—education, a job, a house, mobility—and underscores how our lives are at once singular and universal.

By setting the novel during WWI, The Great Depression and post WWII, you depict the two America's we vacillate between: a land of prosperity, and a land of want. However, throughout this continuum, we remain, forever, Americans. In The New York Times Magazine<sup>1</sup>, September 25th, 2005, Michael Ignatieff responded to the Hurricane Katrina disaster: "We are American: that single sentence was a lesson in political obligation. Black or white, rich or poor, Americans are not supposed to be strangers to one another. . . what was bittersweet news was that their [the victims] claims of citizenship mattered so little to the institution charged with their protection."

I attached this message of pluralism, yet singularity to A Green Desire, as I plunged into the novel, and followed Tip—the quintessential self-made man—throughout the decades. You juxtapose Tip with his older brother Chapman: Tip's hands are calloused from weighing dry goods, shoveling ice; his figure is wiry from lack of food. Conversely, Chapman has lived an elitist's life, one of bow-tie balls, servants, Harvard.

So from the onset you present contrasting characters, one who is a laborer, and another who owns Wall Street. In addition, you present America as a land of contrast by illustrating the prosperity of the post WWII years, pitted against the destitution of The Great Depression. This is a microcosm for the financial spectrum in today's society. During The Great Depression, even the hard-working, most tenacious of citizens—like Tip—had to stuff their

shoes with cardboard, sleep in stairwells and walk miles in the mostly futile quest for a job.

The two brothers are like night and day, as the axiom goes, and they spend their lives clashing over money, women and values. From the onset, Tip and Chapman seem to be the antithesis of each other, however, in the end, your story proves that all lives either indirectly or directly intersect.

In my home of West Virginia, where there is much poverty, many people I know would like to believe that their lives are removed from those who live in destitution. Yes, our lives are different, and yes, we take pride in being autonomous geographically, economically and culturally, but we are *not* removed. We are all here, trying to share a piece of the same dream: go to college, have a job, a house, a family, be protected against unemployment, ill health and old age.

That is the universality of America, a lesson which your book heightened. This summer, while working with the Passamaquoddy tribe in Maine, individuals instilled in me the egalitarian approach they have towards one another. How ironic, that the group most concerned with treating others equally has been so dehumanized in the past. "The People of The Dawn," as they their tribe is called summarized what your book so poignantly stated. Metaphorically, they said that our lives create a universal spider web; we have a collective present and a collective future—severe one strand and the web will give way.

Paula Kaufman

<sup>1</sup> "The Broken Contract: It was not blacks or the poor, but citizens whom the government betrayed in New Orleans." By Michael Ignatieff. The New York Times Magazine. Sept. 25, 2005. Page 15

### Honorable Mention

Taylor Shepherd-Magnolia High School  
Bleachers by John Grisham

Dear Mr. Grisham,

I am writing you to tell you how your novel, Bleachers, affected me. I play football at Magnolia High School in New Martinsville, West Virginia. I would love to go play football in a major college and to then go to the NFL, but I'm a realist and I don't have the size or ability to do so. I can relate to the story for one reason, and I like it for another. I relate it because we have a legendary coach named Dave Cisar, the real version of your Eddie Rake. I also played with, in my opinion, the best all-round football player to come out of Magnolia. His name is Josh Sims and he was a great quarterback just like Neely was. This book taught me to enjoy my football career, work hard to get better, because one play might change your plans for the future. Neely had a late hit, and ruined his plans for the NFL and any more football for the rest of his life. I will only have my high school days of football to enjoy, and hearing others stories, even ones that aren't real, make you think about what you're doing. They make you



think if you should be working harder, and partying less.

I got your book in November of 2004, right after we had our fourth losing season. Before I had read it, I was planning on being lazy for the winter, and then play some basketball pick-up games to get in shape before the first day of football practice. I read the book in 3 hours, and it changed my perspective on how I should prepare. I hit the weights and put on 20 pounds, which helped me a lot, all the way into starting center as a sophomore. All of this was a result of previously not valuing every little thing I did playing football, but after I read your book I did not want what happened to Neely Crenshaw happen to me. He didn't know where the end for him would be, he guessed somewhere in the NFL because he was that good. I know mine will end in 2008 when my last game is played as a senior, and I can play for fun and enjoy my time playing football.

I also liked the book for something else. One of the three things I dread the most is saying goodbye to people I will miss or that I love. An example of that is leaving my best friends from high school and going to college and not seeing any of those friends ever again. Seeing how Neely came back, and all his friends came back, and he got to see them all again made me feel like if I have to go out of state for college and have to leave the state for work, we'll all still have ties to New Martinsville and I'll be able to come back and see those people that I will miss so much. I wanted to thank you for writing this book, it had a profound impact on my life, and has affected my life almost as much as Josh Sims and Billy Longwell, which is a major compliment to you, sir.

Thanks for everything, and keep writing,  
*Taylor Shepherd*

### **Honorable Mention**

Preston Sundin-Notre Dame High School  
Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe

Dear Mrs. Stowe,

I'm getting chills as I type this letter-and not just because I'm writing to one of the great authors of American history. Awe is part of it, but it's not the only reason why I'm trembling. Maybe these feelings come from reflecting on the content of your novel. Uncle Tom's Cabin wasn't easy for me to read. I had read about slavery in history books, so I thought I knew what to expect, but I had never contemplated the painful human side of slavery. You showed it to me. You wrote about the separation of parents and children and brothers and sisters. The emotion that touched me the most was hopelessness. The families that were separated *knew* that they would never see each other again. This hopelessness is the basis for one of the most poignant moments in the story-when Uncle Tom had to leave his home and his family because he had been sold to another master. I could connect with Tom on this basic level of leaving a place one loves forever.

It's a painful feeling-leaving a place that you've held dear all your life and knowing that you won't return. I had never experienced any feeling like it before. Being as young as I am, I still haven't grasped the idea of something being final. This summer I helped my grandparents move out of their tiny house on the windswept plains of North Dakota to a retirement home in Pennsylvania. It wasn't just the house I was leaving, but the small town they had lived in. I'd been going there all my life, and even though my grandparents' love is what I cherished most of all, their house, and Bowbells, the town in which they lived had become symbols of love and security. Although I was happy that my grandparents would be living closer to me, I knew that it was the last time I would see their house and the town of Bowbells ever again. Although my experience was nowhere near as heartwrenching as Tom's departure, his story made me realize how painful it is to know that you are doing something for the last time. I wish Tom didn't have to leave his family. I'm fortunate to still have my family with me. My last trip to Bowbells turned out to be a growth experience for me that prepared me for the next time I have to do something for the last time.

I've told you how a single moment in your book touched me. Your book changed me in another way-in the way that it impacted so many other people. Your book brought the horrors of slavery to the attention of the nation. Only by understanding the moral outrage of slavery were we motivated to act as a nation to end that institution. President Abraham Lincoln was right when he called you "the little lady who made this big war." Your example has shown me the profound change *one* book can cause in the world and how much *one* book can alter the status quo. You showed great courage writing about such a controversial subject. Only when a courageous person stands up to injustice is there hope that it can end.

Writers have a special power because words can inflict far more damage than violence. The deep impression left by words lasts far longer than any physical wound. A spoken voice can be silenced, but the written word can speak over and over, louder and louder, even after the writer is gone. This is one lesson I hope all writers, especially young ones, understand. Writing is not a simple pastime or harmless hobby. Writing is a dangerous thing. Words can be weapons. Writing is the process of shaping words into a powerful force that can't be stopped. Writers should not shy away from controversial subjects, because if writers ignore them, how can there ever be change? Writers have the power to bring about change. I hope the example of your fearless words in Uncle Tom's Cabin gives them courage. Maybe that's why I'm getting chills as I type this letter and see each word appear before my eyes, because after reading your book, I realize that each word, each sentence, each page has the potential to change the world.

Sincerely,  
*Preston Sundin*



## Honorable Mention

Kelsey Wright-Capital High School

How to Read Literature Like a Professor by Thomas C. Foster

Dear Thomas C. Foster,

I want to thank you. Thank you for completely ruining books, movies, and poetry for me. I can no longer watch a movie and merely enjoy the visual experience. Thank you for shattering my naive belief that sometimes authors just write to write. I now have to believe that the mentioning of the color of the protagonist's socks was some form of foreshadowing. Thank you for making me feel like an illiterate. You reference more books, stories, movies, and poems than I can hope to read in the next ten years. I suppose I should mention that my heartfelt gratitude is the result of having read your book How to Read Literature Like a Professor.

In my Advanced Placement English class, your book is the closest we have to a Bible. My fellow students and I are expected to follow your advice on uncovering symbolism in our assigned readings this year. How to Read Literature Like a Professor is our guide book. In fact, a couple weeks ago, my class consulted your poetry section to determine the accuracy of the class analysis of the Robert Frost poem "Out, Out-." We compared our meager analysis about the murderous buzz saw to your claims that Frost was writing about the fragility of human life in the cold loneliness of the eternal universe.

I must confess that I do have one question for you. You are obviously an authority on literature; your book makes that much evident. However, how you can possibly presume to be an authority on the minds of authors? The main message of your book is that every detail in a book or story is placed there by the author for a specific purpose. No longer can the Great Feast in the Harry Potter series be viewed as a reunion dinner - we are to view it as a symbol, a message, anything but a simple meal. You lead us to believe that J. K. Rowling uses the meal as a clandestine symbol for only the true analyzing readers to understand. This same presumptuous attitude is present throughout the book. Any child who had previously entertained the idea of pursuing writing as a career would be frightened by all of the preplanning and careful placement of description that you state authors do.

Amy Tan, author of The Joy Luck Club and other novels, once wrote in her memoirs about fans' letters. She said her fans would write about how impressed they were with the motif of red clothing or the number three in her works. Her response? She was impressed herself. She hadn't purposely inserted red clothing or the number three into her novels to stand as symbols or motifs. I am of the opinion that most authors follow Amy Tan's line of thinking; they do not put as much thought into the details as you make them out to do.

Since I do not agree with all of your literary beliefs, you might be wondering how you could have ruined books, movies, or poetry for me. I do not believe the rain in the reunion scene of The Notebook represents a rebirth, but I do think about it. Ever since I read How to Read Literature Like a Professor, I cannot help but follow your advice for analyzing literature. For this, you receive both my sardonic gratitude and my respect. A true author completely entrances the mind of a reader even when the book is closed. You have captured my attention and, unfortunately for me, have taught me to look deeper. Thank you.

Sincerely,

*Kelsey Wright*

## Level One Finalists

Allison Bartram  
My Secret War by Mary Pope Osborne

Danielle Bible-David-Thomas EMS  
Shiloh by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Charles Blaydes-Bluefield MS  
Brian's Song by William Blinn

Hannah Bowles-Glenwood School  
Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom

Nathan Burks-Mercer School  
The Door in the Wall by Marguerite de Angeli

Kayla Chambers  
The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants by Ann Brashares

Chanel Davidson-Bluefield IS  
Missing May by Cynthia Rylant

Jenna Dodson-South Jefferson ES Library  
The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein

Elizabeth Hughes-Confidence ES  
Harry Potter Series by J.K. Rowling

Pranav Jain-Fairmont Catholic GS  
The Giver by Lois Lowry

Anne Jarrell-Bluefield MS  
The Bear Who Didn't Like Honey by Barbara Maitland

Kimberly Martin-Spring Mills MS  
Because of Winn Dixie by Kate DiCamillo

Meredith Martin-Fairmont Catholic GS  
A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L'Engle

Clara Beth Novotny-Spring Mills MS  
Hattie's Story by Susan E. Kirby

Seth Rader-David-Thomas EMS  
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets  
by J.K. Rowling

Marissa Rollins  
Tiger Eyes by Judy Blume

Heather Romage-Collins MS  
The Story of My Life by Helen Keller

Christopher Ryman-South Jefferson ES Library  
Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone by J.K. Rowling

Sarah Smith-Bluefield MS  
Spy High: Mission One by A.J. Butcher

Amanda Sosnicki-South Jefferson ES Library  
The Grim Grotto by Lemony Snicket

Jason Sullivan-Nichols ES  
Shiloh by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

India Titus-South Jefferson ES Library  
My Secret War by Mary Pope Osborne

Daren Wadsworth-Fairmont Catholic GS  
Kira-Kira by Cynthia Kadohata

Joy Yao Wang-Horace Mann MS  
The Legend of Holly Claus by Brittney Ryan

Stephanie Wherry-Roosevelt ES  
A Child Called It by David Pelzer

## Level Two Finalists

Brenda Best-Moundsville JHS  
Junie B. Jones Series by Barbara Park

Grant Chapman-Fairmont Catholic GS  
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain

Amber Drennen-Elkview MS  
Will He Ever Be Mine by Rebecca Rae

Jeffrey Fuss-Shepherdstown MS  
Hatchet by Gary Paulsen

Audrey Hayhurst-Fairmont Catholic GS  
Gathering Blue by Lois Lowry

Ali Mason-Shepherdstown MS  
Olive's Ocean by Kevin Henkes

Andrea Nickerson -Shepherdstown MS  
Wild Justice and Sleeping Beauty by Philip Margolin

Jessica Ott-Shepherdstown MS  
Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë

Arpan Prabhu  
Summer of the Monkeys by Wilson Rawls

Jesse Ramsey-Western Greenbrier MS  
Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul: Letter by Rachel Bently

Haley Rudd-Eastern Greenbrier MS  
The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton

Jade Thompson-Western Greenbrier MS  
Foxfire by Elliott Wigginton

J. Wesley Urian-Milton MS  
Black Like Me by John Howard Griffin

## Level Three Finalists

Marlee Amos-Magnolia HS  
All works by Erma Bombeck

Shawna Barr-Magnolia HS  
A Child Called It by Dave Pelzer

Evan Botizan-Magnolia HS  
Black Hawk Down by Mark Bowden

Megan Brookover-Magnolia HS  
The Bible by God

Heidi Chrisman-Musselman HS Library  
The Solitary by Lynn Hall

Daniel Fonner-Magnolia HS  
Dateable by Justin Lookadoo

Carolyn Garcia  
Qamicas by Preston Sundin

Katrina Harper-Capital HS  
California Diaries: Maggie by Ann M. Martin

Noah Harris  
The 48 Laws of Power by Robert Greene and Joost Elffers

Brittany Means-Capital HS  
American History: A Survey by Alan Brinkley

Calli Posey  
The Five People You Meet in Heaven by Mitch Albom

Erica Riggenschach-Magnolia HS  
Love You Forever by Robert Munsch

Rachel Sankoff-Capital HS  
Speak by Laurie Anderson

Colt Street-Magnolia HS  
Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince by J.K. Rowling

Bree Ann Lynn Williams-Magnolia HS  
The True and Outstanding Adventures of the Hunt Sisters by Elisabeth Robinson

Stephanie Workman  
The Mozart Season by Virginia Euwer Wolff



## Closing Remarks

### Coordinator

Karen Goff

West Virginia Center for the Book

Letters About Literature 2006 by various young writers

Dear Letters About Literature Writers,

Winnie the Pooh is one of my favorite literary characters for many reasons but mostly because he understands the importance of books. In chapter two of *The House at Pooh Corner*, Pooh goes visiting. As the result of curiosity and self-indulgence he finds himself in a tight place.

*Bear began to sigh, and then found he couldn't because he was so tightly stuck; and a tear rolled down his eye, as he said: "Then would you read a Sustaining Book, such as would help and comfort a Wedged Bear in Great Tightness?" So for a week Christopher Robin read that sort of book at the North end of Pooh, and Rabbit hung his washing on the South end.*

Many of you who participated in this year's Letters About Literature project, those whose letters are in this book, and those whose letters are not in this book, know what it is like to be a "Wedged Bear in Great Tightness". Sometimes life squeezes hard. All of you discovered the value of a "Sustaining Book".

It is always a delight to discover the titles that young readers find sustaining. They are rarely titles adults consider important or influential. But, when you are wedged in a tight place, you need something different. Some of you like fiction, some history, some poetry. Some of you find comfort, some of you find inspiration, some of you find mistakes. Pooh needed to get thinner to get out of his tight place. I think most of you got wiser, more tolerant, more alive because of a "Sustaining Book". You told the authors:

*Your books got my brain working. (Ryman)*

*I cannot thank you enough for Gathering Blue. It has changed me for the better. It has helped me discover what is really important in life. (Hayhurst)*

*To me, your book was like a punch in the face; a swift kick in the shin. (It) was like a powerful blow, awakening me from a deep sleep. (Novotny)*

*This book opened my eyes and made me realize life will not always be easy, and it is only as meaningful as one chooses to make it. (Posey)*

Those discoveries are exactly what the Letters About Literature project is all about. It's not about winning or not winning. It's about reading and writing and changing. It encourages each reader to examine his or her personal response to a book. It does not require research. It does not require perfect grammar and usage. It does not require lots of words. It requires introspection. It requires honesty. It requires writing from the heart.

Nationally and statewide, the dominant themes of all three competition levels deal with peer pressure and bullying, discovering a sense of self-worth, and coping with loss; in other words, tight places. Although the issues are similar, the books that help all Letters About Literature writers deal with those issues are not. Sometimes Wedged Bears in Great Tightness find sustenance in imagination and fantasy. J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, received letters from an upper elementary writer and a high school writer. Sometimes the comfort comes from books written for very young children. A teen-age mother found inspiration in while reading Love You Forever to her baby son. The twelve year old that wrote to the author of Tuesdays With Morrie discovered that Sustaining Books can teach lessons about dying.

It is hard to believe, but reading has not always been considered good. When the invention of the printing press made books widely available, it changed the whole nature of reading and caused a lot of worry in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. There was fear that widespread reading might result in dangerous activities such as asking questions and arguing. It might result in more thinking. It might result in physical ailments like heat rashes, arthritis, pulmonary disease and indigestion. How times have changed. Last month, ACT, formerly known as the American College Testing Program, released a report titled "Reading Between the Lines". The report concludes that too many American high school students are graduating without the reading skills they need to succeed in college and in workforce training programs. Letters About Literature and many other similar programs seek to address this problem. Every student who reads a book, discovers its power, and writes a letter to the author is part of the solution.

The first year West Virginia participated in the project, the national screeners selected 44 of the 400 West Virginia entries for state level judging. This year, they selected 78 of 702 West Virginia entries. There were over 47,000 entries nationwide. In 2004 a West Virginia entry was among the top six national entries in Level III. This year we were notified that a West Virginia entry was in the top twelve national entries in Level II.

One of you may write a bestseller. Most of you will not. It does not matter. What matters is that you to keep reading. Read the good. Read the bad. Read the ugly. Think about what you read. Tell others what you think. I close with the comments of Catherine Gourley, as she reflects on her three years as national coordinator of the Letters About Literature project.

*For those who make the investment, the result can be empowering for them and incredibly enlightening for us. These letters are windows to understanding this young generation – what the children think about, hope for, and fear. Recognizing that the youngest among them are just nine and ten years old makes what they write all the more remarkable. A hundred thousand letters. A hundred thousand children. If we do not listen, we risk too much.*

My promise to you is that I will keep listening.

Sincerely,

*Karen Goff*



# JUDGES

**BELINDA ANDERSON**

Author  
Asbury, WV

**JAY COLE**

Director of Educational Policy  
Governor's Office  
Charleston, WV

**EVA M<sup>C</sup>GUIRE**

Director  
Craft Memorial Library  
Bluefield, WV

**PHYLLIS MOORE**

WV Literary Scholar  
Clarksburg, WV

**BOB MORGENSTERN**

Director of Higher Education  
American Federation of Teachers/West Virginia  
Charleston, WV

**DR. BETH MUSSER, DEAN**

School of Education  
West Liberty State College  
West Liberty, WV

## *From the Teachers & Judges...*

**Teacher**

Cynthia Garcia  
Fairmont Catholic School

I want to thank you again for this contest. I think it's a wonderful contest; it helps kids focus on the idea of what reading does for them and reminds them of the deep connections they can make with the characters and ideas from books. We do this contest every year, and I think I would give them this assignment even if there were no contest, because I like the way it makes students think.

**Teacher**

Margaret Golden  
Western Greenbrier Middle School

Thank you for this writing opportunity. It gives my class the chance to practice their writing skills while learning the friendly letter form. I look forward to your contest each year. This assignment seems to be one that students don't mind. As a matter of fact, they seem to enjoy it.

**Teacher**

Lisa J. Dirting  
Spring Mills Middle School

I want to thank you for sponsoring such a worthy competition which encourages both reading and writing. The students have had the opportunity to explore and express their creative thoughts in an interesting and positive venue.

**Judge-Level III**

Phyllis Moore

As usual, the letters caused me to laugh, cry, think, hope, and rejoice. It is a joy to know West Virginia schools hold such creative, thoughtful, and perceptive students. . . . The teachers involved with the contest should be commended for guiding their charges to such an eclectic array of literature and for turning them loose to develop their own thoughts and styles.

**Judge-Level I**

Belinda Anderson

I was so impressed by the quality of the entries and by the touching nature of so many of these letters.

**Judge-Level III**

Jay Cole

As always, I thoroughly enjoyed reading the Letters About Literature entries. And as always, some of the entries were very emotionally charged. The personal courage these students show in the face of adversity is really inspirational. Thanks you very much for asking me to judge. With every word I read, I am reminded of how wonderful these students are and how they are what really matter!

# *Autographs*

*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](http://www.wvcenterforthebook.lib.wv.us).*

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