

LEVEL 1

Winner: Rachel Barnhart

Title: *Umbrella Summer*

Author: Lisa Graff

Dear Lisa Graff,

I was afraid; even though I was safe, I felt in danger. My mind kept saying, “something bad will happen, don’t do it.” So, I didn’t. I was worried that one day when I woke up, someone I loved would be gone. *Umbrella Summer* helped me to close my umbrella of sadness and worry, and step into the sunshine.

It all started when my uncle died last summer. No one knew he would die, just like Annie’s brother. He kissed his pregnant wife goodbye as he left work that morning; unaware he wasn’t coming home. At the age of thirty, Brian was in a tragic accident that morning. After being hit from behind, the gas tanks in the back of his work truck quickly caught fire. He was killed instantly.

Death didn’t seem real before Brian’s accident. I felt that somehow, someday, I could avoid it. After his death I was afraid I would wake up again, walk into the living room, and be told all over again that someone I loved was gone. I was afraid of the world’s natural dangers too, and fatal diseases. Some nights, I would cry myself to sleep.

A year after Brian’s death, I read *Umbrella Summer*. About three chapters into the book, I realized, Annie was me. We were both scared, and worried people who needed help. And that’s what this book did for me; it helped me to close my umbrella.

After I read the last work of the book, I vowed to change my thoughts of the world. Yes, life did have dangers, and we need to be aware of them. But God didn’t create this life for us to fear it, but embrace it. Because as it turned out, I sure did like the sunshine after all.

Thank you Lisa Graff.

Sincerely,

Rachel Barnhart

LEVEL 1

Runner up: Matt Lee

Title: *Maximum Ride*

Author: James Patterson

Dear James Patterson,

Before reading your book “*Maximum Ride*”, I had an exceedingly hard life. I came from a country called Korea. Many people here don’t know how the learning system in Korea actually works, but it truly can be laborious work for some people. I didn’t have that much freedom. I couldn’t go out, have fun, and socialize with friends. I had to do what other people told me to do. So I was always tired. I didn’t smile, laugh, or talk. When I came here, I couldn’t understand what people were saying. I hated everything. I couldn’t talk, join, or ask my friends. I never told anyone that I had a hard life.

Your book totally changed me in and out. I saw your book in a bookstore. I could easily buy it because I needed to learn English. When I opened it up and began reading, it was very hard to understand. I knew only a few words, so I could only understand it partially. English I learned in Korea didn’t help, because they don’t teach you basic stuff like nouns and verbs. They start with remembering the spelling of the words. As I read, I could notice myself searching the words that I didn’t know. As I studied, I could fit a whole notebook with words and it’s meanings that I had written down. When I flipped the last page, studying through them, I opened up again from the beginning and read it again. This time, I could understand the book. I could laugh, think, and express my emotion while reading your book. I loved that feeling, I felt that I could fly away just like the flock. I could understand what my friends and teachers said, I could even talk to them. I felt so joyful that I could have exploded. I bought the next volume and studied it. It felt so different. I was studying English just like I did in Korea, but I felt happy. I could study for a whole day and didn’t get tired. Your book was like a magic potion to me. It changed me, and my life. I have lots of friends, I am always confident that I could succeed at anything, and I overcame my fears. Still, I’m very shy and don’t like to talk very much. I know I have to fix it but, I sometimes say something wrong and it embarrasses me.

I still read your books, studying and reading aloud. I always put your books on my bed. So when I come home tired, I can read your book instead of doing nothing. One sentence from your book caught my attention. I looked at it for a long time. I wrote it down and I put it at my secret notebook. I read it when I felt sad, mad, and tired. It makes me get in shape. It keeps me up and makes me only go forward. The sentence says, "It's not too late, it's never too late." It totally makes me happy. I never knew just a little sentence could make people feel truly happy.

I wanted my freedom like the flock did. Like Max said in the first book, "It could be easily your story too." It really was. I'm not winged. I'm not chased by deadly creatures that want to kill me, although I fought for my freedom just like they did. I never gave up. I studied for my freedom. I don't like being underestimated like Max was. I'm super tall compared to kids my age and very light just like the flock. Your book changed my views of the world. So, I decided that until I achieve my dream, I'd never give up. I'm not going to be stepped on. I'm going to step up to achieve my dream just like the flock achieved their goal step by step.

I can't imagine what it would be like not if I hadn't found your book in the bookstore. I still can't believe how one book could change a person's life 360 degrees. So until I achieve my dream, I promised myself to never give up because it's not too late, it's never too late.

Sincerely,
Matt Lee, Grade 6

LEVEL I

Honorable Mention: No permission to release name

Title: *Spiders*

Author: Seymour Simon

Dear Seymour Simon,

Ever since I can remember I have always had a terrible fear of spiders. Black, brown, yellow or spotted, if it had eight legs and spun a web, I would run for the hills. One day, in my favorite section of the library, the nature section, I came across your book, *Spiders*. When I picked it up and saw the detailed picture of the spider on the front cover I decided that I would check that creepy looking book out. This way I can learn more about these hairy creatures so I will not be afraid anymore.

I was amazed after reading the first page. I discovered that spiders do much more good than harm. For example, the way some spiders eat the insects that damage crops. Without those spiders who knows what would happen to our food supply. I never would have dreamed of how a fishing spider can make a diving bell and live underwater. That almost sounds like a fiction story. But, after seeing the pictures and reading how these underwater spiders stay alive and lay eggs in a bubble, I know it is not some fiction tale.

When I finished the book I came to realize the importance of spiders. Without these tiny, but sometimes big, animals, we might not live in the same kind of world that we live in today. I have decided the next time I see a spider in the corner of the room I am not going to run away screaming. Instead, I will watch, learn and appreciate the assistance of these amazing creatures. *Spiders* has taught me that if I face my fears and learn about what seems frightening, I might learn to appreciate them instead of run away.

Sincerely,

No permission to release name

LEVEL I

Honorable Mention: Regan Magee

Title: *Turtle in Paradise*

Author: Jennifer Holm

Dear Jennifer Holm,

In a way, I am similar to Turtle. I have people who are dependent on me. An example is my parents. I sometimes feel as though like they are on the verge of breaking emotionally. It is hard to realize that. I want to go and hide until all the uncomfortable emotions are gone.

Another similarity between me and Turtle is that our parent's are both separated. My parents got divorced when I was six and it is still an uncomfortable topic for me. It is so hard to constantly have to know that your parent's are never going to get back together and that nothing is never going to be the same.

I get to see both of my parents frequently and I get to be with them both. I am generally pretty lucky for a child whose parents are divorced. My parents get along well. Sometimes though, they will disagree and it makes me close up inside of myself when I have just begun to open. It is unbelievably hard every day having to have everything different from the other children. Reading *Turtle in Paradise* stirred many emotions in me. Emotions that I was trying to get out for a long time. It was difficult when they were coming out. I would cry myself to sleep and have sudden mood changes throughout the day. I feel a lot better now. It is easier to discuss my parent's divorce. I might be able to go to a counselor or therapist now. I wasn't ready before. Some strange person asking private questions about my life was not a prospect that I was keen on. Out of all the therapists in the world I think that you and your book helped me the most. This idea may seem absurd to any other person, but to me it meant a lot. Thank you for helping me get through difficult problems. I really appreciate it.

Your book helped me realize many things. That is why I like to so much. Your book showed me and made me understand better who I am and who I want to be. I am very grateful to both you and your book.

Sincerely, Regan Magee

LEVEL I

Honorable Mention: Julia Lee

Title: *Be Careful What You Wish For*

Author: R.L. Stine

Dear R.L. Stein,

Every eleven year old girl wants to meet a genie and be granted 3 wishes. At least I did before I read your book, *Be Careful What You Wish For*. My top three wished were to live in a mansion, be famous, and to be admired by people.

I thought being famous meant being in photoshoots, signing autographs, and being popular. But in your book Samantha Byrd becomes her worst and most hated television show's character. I rethought that wish because I didn't want to be judged by what I looked like. My second wish was to live in a mansion. Who wouldn't want to live in an enormous house? I imagined riding in limos, wear fancy sunglasses, and get everything I desired. Turns out I was wrong. Samantha showed me that my so called friends could only like me for my money. So, I didn't want that wish. Finally, I wanted to be admired by people. I wanted them to look up to me and well, think that I was awesome. Well, that wish sure went bonkers. I would have been turned into a statue if I made that wish. I guess being a statue does mean being admired. So, I guess all my wishes didn't turn out the way I thought they would.

After reading, *Be Careful What You Wish For*, it made me realize every wish could be twisted into something bad. Thank you for your book, it helped me realize I liked who I was and always should have, and other people should too, because everybody is special and unique in their own ways. Once again thank you.

Truly,

Julia

LEVEL I

Honorable Mention: Ketaki Deuskar

Title: *Out of My Mind*

Author: Sharon M. Draper

Dear Ms. Sharon M. Draper,

My teacher read your novel *Out of My Mind* to us. As she read the first page, I was captured by Melody and her disabilities. It was incredible when you think about how she could live like this. I love this book because of its meaning and lesson. In my opinion, this book is so good that it should be a Newberry winner. This book's lesson reminded me of a good connection to make.

Once, my three year old sister's friends came to dance practice that they were going to perform somewhere. My mom got so tired of the cooperation that wasn't being shown by those little kids that she told them that if they practice, they will get candy. Woah, woah, hold your horses, I had thought. I knew very well that my sister's Halloween candy was hidden by my mom. So, the children had to take MY CANDY!!!!!!

Feeling furious, I sprinted over to the pantry and watched my mom let everyone pick one candy. Those greedy children scrambled through my candy bag. Two Skittles got picked. There goes my Milky Way and my Twix. Then, I spied by Milk Duds pass by. I've never had them before. I tried to bribe the little girl to give me one Milk Dud with different candies but it didn't work. I felt like I was going to blow up!!!!!!

A couple days later, I heard someone say the the little girl who took my Milk Dud's her brother was allergic to almost anything. So she can't have anything that her brother is allergic to. I felt sorry for her.

Suddenly, I thought of Out of My Mind.

Poor Melody, She works so hard but get's stares. I realized the lesson in this novel and in this scenario: Be Thankful for What You Have. Melody was really thankful for just her thumbs. Now, most people won't think this much about the importance of thankfulness because they are good, strong and healthy people. But you have to

remember that there are many unfortunate people out there. So remember, be thankful that you are who you are. Thank you for writing this amazing novel.

Sincerely,
Ketaki Deuskar
Grade 5

LEVEL 2

Winner: Kayle Kelso

Title: *Thirteen Reasons Why*

Author: Jay Asher

Dear Jay Asher,

After reading *Thirteen Reasons Why* I've had a major change on my outlook on life. I've heard many stories and watched videos about people attempting to commit suicide. I never fully understood why anyone would thrust such a terrible action upon themselves until I read your book. My view on others has completely reformed and I don't know how I could possibly go back to my old ways of thinking again.

Initially, I had always wondered why people commit suicide. Now I have more knowledge on the trials they withstand. I learned that no matter what the reason is, it always gets better. High School is the time period when most teens commit suicide, but there is a huge chance that you're never going to see those people ever again. Once you graduate or go to college, your slate is clean and you can start with a new beginning. You can forget about your past. You still have the rest of your life to live and goals to achieve and accomplish. Why would you waste it? I think it's really depressing that people have a life they are willing to let go when other people would give anything to possess it. There is always someone who has it worse than you do. When you're going through hard times, it helps to think about those people and it makes you grateful for all the amazing things you have.

Next, I think one of the biggest reasons why some teens commit suicide is because they don't have support from their friends or family. This makes me feel extremely blessed to know that when I need someone to fall back on, they will be there to catch me. I have someone to back me up and that cares. I feel for all the people in this world that don't have that kind of support. I'm so glad that I'm not someone who hates her life and wishes for it to end. To be able to have lungs that work, a heart that beats, and a body that is able to function is a miracle. I don't see how anyone would want to take that away.

In addition, my mom has recently told me a story about one of her friends that had attempted suicide. After listening to her, my first thought was *Thirteen Reasons Why*. It was then that I realized we really need to be kind to everyone, because you never know what kind of battle they are fighting. I remember a girl we all used to pick on a couple years ago. There were several different opportunities for me to defend her, but I was too afraid. One day I wish to be an individual who will be able to stand up to the bully without backing down.

All in all, I believe reading *Thirteen Reasons Why* was a very good choice. It really changed my perspective on life. Now I am able to meet someone new and not judge them as quickly as I used to. I know that I need to be around them first to learn about their past and why they act a certain way. *Thirteen Reasons Why* has truly changed my life and I will forever remember the lessons that I learned.

Sincerely,
Kayle Kelso

LEVEL 2

Runner Up: Hannah Bates

Title: *Life As We Knew It*

Author: Susan Pfeffer

Dear Susan Beth Pfeffer,

I picked up your book not knowing the impact it would have on my life. I read purely for entertainment, unaware of the change that would occur in my daily routines. Anything from eating, sleeping, or even breathing in fresh air was something I never gave a second thought. But after I finished your books, I became conscious of my future and how I needed to change.

Instantly, upon reading the first page, I felt a very strong connection with Miranda. Though there were no obvious similarities between us, I recognized her stubborn personality as a trait we share. I tried to offer her advice throughout the book, but wither she couldn't hear me or was more stubborn than I thought. But overall, the main difference that separated us was bravery. Miranda taught me a valuable lesson throughout all of the books, and that was to never give up. I have yet to face a trial in comparison to what Miranda faced, but I can always tell myself that I will make it. If Miranda can survive a struggle for life, then I can certainly survive a bad grade, losing a basketball game, or anything thrown my way.

Shortly after finishing your books, I felt as if I had a huge burden on my shoulders. I needed someone to understand the reason behind my madness and to maybe feel it for themselves. It was almost a miraculous event when my mom decided to read your book. Straightaway, we began discussing the chilling plot, the frightening scenes, and the disgusting details running through our minds like an old familiar movie. But oddly through all of this, my mom and I have grown closer. Though we have always gotten along, we have always had our major differences. It's great to have something to talk about without disagreeing.

After seeing the world through the eyes of Miranda and Alex, I started appreciating my own life and the luxuries I enjoy. When Thanksgiving rolls around, many people give thanks for the little things in life like movies, ice cream, or cell phones. Even though those things are great, has anyone thought to be thankful for the big

things in life that allow us to live and do the things we enjoy? Everyday is a Thanksgiving for me, only without the delicious dinner. I think how lucky I am to eat something besides canned chicken for dinner every night, and that I don't have to rely on a woodstove to heat my house. Before your books, I never thought this way. Never was there a day when I saw the sun and wanted to jump in the air for I couldn't hold in my excitement. Never did I see the moon, and though trembling, nodded to myself in satisfaction that yes, it was the correct size. I didn't think these were important parts of my life. Could they call my friends, entertain me, or fix my sweet tooth? I later realized that little things like that aren't important. I learned to take a step back and look at the big picture, the whole picture. Life is good, and your books really brought that out of me.

In the long run, I don't consider your books as a fun fictional read for myself. I view them as inspiring and life changing. In some ways, I feel that you wrote this book especially for me. And although it's been almost a year since I shut the cover of your last book, I can still hear Miranda's voice ringing inside my head, as a constant reminder that I have changed.

Sincerely,
Hannah Bates

LEVEL 2

Honorable Mention: Jessica Ban

Title: *A Christy Miller Collection*

Author: Robin Jones Gunn

Dear Robin Jones Gunn,

By the time I finished the first chapter, I knew I was going to have a certain animosity towards your book *A Christy Miller Collection*. I am not a Christian. I do not fully understand the terms and concepts of this religion, nor do I understand why, in order to be a pure and worthy person, you must accept God into your heart.

Your main character, Christy Miller, irritates me like an itch you can't quite reach and aggravates me more than people who don't turn off their cell phones during the movies. I couldn't grasp the fact that she got so upset and ran out of the party crying because someone thought that she wanted cocaine and not a Coke-A-Cola, even though she yelled out that she wanted Coke. Her actions seemed to me as if they weren't what a mature person would do, they made her seem as if she had never been outside her own little world and that she took what she had for granted. It seemed as if she didn't know what it was like to truly be happy.

But I was able to find two silver linings, so to speak, inside the disagreeable pages of your book. One was the speech Alissa gave about death. I always thought about it. It was always there, looming on the edges of my mind, staying safely hidden until I went to sleep. It would then unfurl its dark tendrils and clutch my imagination, making me see a vast array of images of my loved ones or me dying in an assortment of ways and places. It was an inescapable part of my day and I dreaded the moment one of them would become true, because it then would automatically make me believe that the rest would follow soon after. I felt as if I had no one to talk to, everyone would sugar coat it, stating that a young girl such as myself had no need to worry about deaths or when they would happen and that I shouldn't be thinking of something so far away from my life right now. They would talk as if death wasn't happening around us, like the people dying on the news were just people on video games, as if they got more lives after they used up this one, or that they didn't care because the deaths didn't affect how they lived their own lives; "Oh that's a shame, please pass the salt." I needed someone to be real

with me, to state that death was just an unavoidable part of life and it was ok. Ok to think about, but not ok to be afraid of. I wanted someone to tell me that there was no need to be afraid about death, and because it's destined to happen, there is no need to try and avoid it. That's what Alissa did for me, and though she is a fictional character, she helped me more than any real person did in the past. It feels as though the dark fog of death has lifted out of my mind, leaving me a lighter, freer person.

The second silver lining in your book was *The Land Of If Only*. That simple statement helped me to reshape my life, it made me pause and critique the way I was thinking, and acting towards myself. No longer do I say what if, and no longer do I say if only. I learned that those two words have much more power than most do. They have the power to shape the way you think. Instead of cherishing yourself and the possessions you have, they try to manipulate your mind and make you believe that your not good enough, and that what you have isn't good enough either. So whenever I catch myself saying those words I stop and think. Is this really not good enough for me? Or am I just making myself believe that it isn't good enough for me. I also realized that you can't dwell on the past, you have to live in the present and not worry about the future, life is life and whatever happens, happens. Just cherish what you have before it disappears. And this book, however much I detest it, helped me leave *The Land Of If Only* and live in the real world, not a world I created for myself so I didn't have to fact the truth about things.

Sincerely,
Jessica

LEVEL 2

Honorable Mention: Jonathan Gilbreath

Title: *Call of the Wild*

Author: Jack London

Dear Jack London,

I have read your book *Call of the Wild* many, many times in the past few years. It has really made me think about my life, and about the troubles that I have dealt with. *Call of the Wild* made me realize several things about my inner self.

My life hasn't been easy. I've been beaten and hurt just as the man in the red sweater beat Buck. I was taken out of my peaceful home and had to move in with my father. He was physically and verbally abusive. Your book made me understand that I can survive and that I can get through all my troubles, I just have to persevere and make the best of what I have at the time. It also helped me with my depression issues and my thoughts of ending my life. Buck was brave and your book made me brave again, and I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for writing that book, because it helped me and I am sure it will help someone else too.

Ok. So now my life isn't so bad. Now I have overcome most of my troubles and my "father" isn't a problem anymore. My attitude towards life has improved greatly and now I am much happier. Thanks to you I believe in myself again. Your book inspired me to overcome many problems in my life, also it was a lot of fun to escape this world and enter Bucks when I was feeling sorry for myself.

Now I would like to compare a few things from the book with my life. When a greedy man kidnapped Buck, that was like my father taking me from my home. When Buck was beaten, that was like the times my father hit me or threw things at me. But in the end everything turned out OK for Buck, just like me. Buck released his inner self and survived, just like I will survive, but I can never stop believing in myself. You and that book changed my life forever and I'm guessing that when you wrote it you didn't think that this would happen but I am thankful it did.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Gilbreath

LEVEL 2

Honorable Mention: Amy Bond

Title: *Fallen Angels*

Author: Walter Dean Myers

Dear Walter Dean Myers,

When I read your book *Fallen Angels*, it struck a place close to home for me. I'm sure that others have had this same feeling. It's hard to describe, but it made several thoughts come into my head. They range from military personnel to what I hope for. I've written them down in this letter, and by just doing that, I almost broke down into tears. I guess that it's pretty clear that your book really affected me.

While I was reading *Fallen Angels*, several thoughts came to mind. One was all of the wars our country has been in. From the Revolutionary War to the war in Iraq, they all crossed my mind. What hurt the most was thinking about our actual "fallen angels". It breaks my heart when I reflect back on all of the lives lost. I'm thankful that my family hasn't had to go through that. I pray for comfort for the families that have.

The people in my family that your book made me think of are very, very close to me. My cousin, Jason, was stationed in Iraq. He is on medical leave now and doing okay. His wife Misty, (she was pregnant at the time of his departure) and their daughter were hit the hardest when he left last year. It's been tough for all of them, but they're pulling through. My grandpa was a meat inspector for the Army. He was in Germany during the end of the Korean War. My mom was born during this time. My grandma was probably relieved that he wasn't stationed elsewhere. I also have a few friends who have family in the military. I know that it will be tough for their families during the holidays with loved ones overseas. It's tough, and I pray for all of them.

After reading *Fallen Angels*, I sat and thought for a while. During that time, I came up with two wishes. One is a dream that I've had for a long time, but now I emphasize it even more. I pray for world peace. During the church service I attended on 12-7-10, the pastor quoted, "World peace is not possible unless the

thought of war is absent.” The thought of not having to fight in wars ties into my 2nd wish. I pray that there will be a day when we won’t have to send our men and women into combat to protect our country. If either dream were possible, there would be that much less heartbreak in the world. However, one with cannot be completed without the other. We have to continue to fight without world peace, and world peace isn’t possible if we even think about declaring war. I respect and pray for the men and women who have decided to risk their lives for our country, like Peewee, Perry, and the others did in *Fallen Angels*. I just hope that one day, they won’t have to.

In conclusion, I’m glad that you decided to write a book about the Vietnam War. It made me realize what went on over there, even though I wasn’t born yet. Hopefully I’ll find another reader who had the same effect come upon them to discuss it with. I thank you for writing *Fallen Angels* for the readers like me.

Sincerely,
Amy Bond

LEVEL 3

Winner: Allison Zhou

Title: *Anthem*

Author: Ayn Rand

Dear Ayn Rand,

“I”. This simple one letter work may seem insignificant to others, but not to me. After reading your novel, *Anthem*, “I” has become one of my favorite words. No, I am not a narcissist, nor would I call myself egotistical. I am just a girl who has recently come to realize the true meaning of individuality.

Before reading *Anthem*, my greatest fear had been one that all adolescents share: I feared being ridiculed for my differences. Throughout middle school, this fear compelled me to conform to whatever was “cool”. Suffocating my own thoughts and desires, I only allowed words that held pre-stamped approvals from my peers to pass through my mouth. I dressed in only the latest fashions, listened exclusively to popular music, and took on the role of a character completely different from who I actually was. I endeavored to change and shape myself with a cookie cutter others had created.

However, one aspect that I could never succeed in changing was my cultural background. I am first generation Chinese-American with Buddhist parents. I grew up not attending church every Sunday, but going to incense-filled temples. I kept my family values hidden all throughout my childhood and even pretended to celebrate Christmas. Every year I feigned excitement for the popular holiday. But, when I came home, no Christmas tree, no twinkling lights, and no brightly wrapped presents awaited me. I lived hiding behind a mask of conformity, oblivious to the beauty of my diversity and individuality.

Last year my English teacher asked me to define individuality and unique in my own words. I distinctly remember my immature response word for word, “Individuality and being unique is just another way of saying someone is different or an outcast.” I now realize that I was greatly mistaken. Thanks to *Anthem*, I can proudly say that if given the chance again, I would answer differently.

Individuality *is* another way of saying someone is different, but does not make

someone an outcast. It is a promising present awaiting its opening, and the day you unwrap it, is the day you find yourself. Through reading *Anthem*, I have unwrapped my own individuality. And it is a gift that I cherish.

Now, I freely express my quirky personality with pride. My funky fashion sense and love for techno pop music is an important part of who I am. The unusual sense of humor I have often leaves me laughing by myself, but I have come to embrace my inner oddball, the side of me that screams creativity, eccentricity, and confidence. I have come to realize that there really is no such thing as normal. I no longer strive to be “normal”. I strive to be myself.

Reading *Anthem* was a significant journey of self-discovery for me. I traveled through the pages of *Anthem* along side Equality 7-2521 and shared his adventures. When he rediscovered electricity, I rejoiced with him. When he secretly wished for the courage to share his breakthrough with others I cheered him on. And when he longed for his differences to be allowed and accepted I realized that I had been wishing for the same thing my whole life. Together, Equality 7-2521 and I learned the importance of individuality and the power of the word “I”. By the end of the book, Equality 7-2521 felt like an old friend of mine.

Anthem has given me the courage to take off my mask of conformity and give up the false persona that I once carried. Now, I can say with confidence that I have started my first year of high school as someone I enjoy being: myself.

I am different. I am quirky. And I am an individual.

Thank you for showing me that,
Allison Zhou

LEVEL 3

Runner Up: Kelsi Gammon

Title: *Still I Rise*

Author: Dr. Maya Angelou

Dr Maya Angelou,

“You may write me down in history with your bitter, twisted lies. You may tread me in the very dirt but still, like dust, I’ll rise”. Those are the words that have danced across my mind any time in the past two years that I have experienced a time of hardship or heartbreak. They are also the words of your poem – “*Still I Rise*”.

I was 14 and a freshman in high school when I first read your poetry in my advanced ninth grade English class. Months earlier, my best friend had moved away. High school seemed a large, lonely space without her. Four long years stretched out before me. I knew that they would be full of what would one day seem to be fond memories – but at the time, it just looked like four years of emptiness. I was in every way a bright eyed little girl. It may only have been two years ago, but it feels like an eternity when I count the ways that I have matured, and the things that I have learned about myself. My larger-than-life dreams were still undisturbed by the realities of the world. I believed that my friends would be with me forever, and that each “love” I encountered would last a lifetime. I was excitable and passionate, and I was scared. I’d spent the past three years in middle school being the geek, the artist, the misfit. To be a teenage girl in the 21st century is to struggle and to cry. I do not know even one adult woman who would gladly trade places with an adolescent girl. There is pressure from every angle – your parents, your teachers, your friends, your boyfriends, and “society”. Your parents and teachers want straight A’s and perfect behavior. Your friends and boyfriends want you to be a different person and at times do things you’re not ready for.

“Society” wants you to feel that if you’re not some kind of airbrushed anorexic like their models, you’re never going to be good enough. Though I struggled with peer pressure like every teen, I stayed true to myself – and most of my peers didn’t like that. I was perhaps halfway through my first semester when we read your poem and analyzed it. Although we quickly moved along after half a class period spent

discussing the poem, its words stayed with me. Whenever I cried because of something a so-called “friend” had said to me, or doubted myself because I was not what the world wanted me to be, your words resounded-“Just like moons and like suns, with the certainty of tides, just like hopes spring high, still I’ll rise”.

Freshman year ended, and with it, many friendships changed. I began my sophomore year of high school with a whole new group of friends. Things looked and felt miraculously better – good grades, a cute boyfriend, friends who might not stab me in the back, what more could a 15-year-old girl ask for? Life went steadily downhill from there. Although I maintained the grades and the boyfriend, the friendship situation went downhill. There was the typical high school cattiness among girls – I was gossiped about and called names by girls whom I thought I could trust. Dr. Angelou, I’m the kind of person who doesn’t want to hurt others intentionally. I go out of my way to make others happy and put them before myself – I am a people pleaser. But regardless, I am going to be who I am and state my opinions – if people don’t like it, then that’s their problem. Turns out people didn’t like it, and they made it *everyone*’s problem. The splitting up of a close friendship is something like a divorce – hang out spots, friends, and memories are promptly split up and drawn to one side or another. I was hurt – how could one not be hurt upon losing a friend? I felt like yelling your words at these people – “Does my sassiness upset you? Why are you beset with gloom? ‘Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells pumping in my living room”.

As far as high school goes, feuding girls is pretty standard fare. But as the year progressed, things quickly turned darker. Within the course of three months, two close friends threatened and attempted suicide. One of them, because his girlfriend dumped him for the fifth time in two months. The other, because he claimed to love a girl and she didn’t return the feeling. That girl that the friend claimed to love, that girl that he blamed for his depression and attempted suicide, was me. I felt like the world was turning against me. I’ve never had a particularly difficult existence; no real hardship has ever darkened my relatively happy life. I have not faced racism, poverty, or any true discrimination or sadness. Seeing my friends go through such inexplicable depression was crushing. The words of your poem returned to me-“Did you want to see me broken? Bowed head and lowered eyes? Shoulders falling down like teardrops, weakened by my soulful cries?” Did they? Do they still?

During and after that time, I threw myself in to my school work, my writing and filmmaking, and my relationships with others, knowing that life would go on, and that *still I'll rise*. I read constantly, and every week I seemed to discover something inspirational or touching. But nothing stuck with me like that one little poem that I read in a freshman English class.

We all survived our sophomore year, but we survived with emotional scars that will stay with us. I'm in my junior year, with only a year and three-fourths left until I graduate high school and leave the little town of Tigard, Oregon forever. Things are going better, yet I still have friends who talk about depression and suicide. I still have friends who want to drop out of school and simply give up on life, because they have dealt with too much in the past few years.

I myself do not understand their reasoning when they say that life is too hard to continue living. I am far from what one would call an optimist, but the notion of giving up has never once crossed my mind. The endless times that I repeated your words to myself – whether I was crying over a heartache or soaring with a triumph that everyone doubted would ever happen – truly drilled that notion into my head: *still I rise*. Still I rise. It's a simple concept – just three words, and not even unusual or important words on their own. But when put together, they have power. They have the power to remind a person that despite all the hardship, despite all of the doubts of the world, and despite all of the things that make a person cry and scream and just swear at existence, there's still a tomorrow. There are still hopes and still dreams. There are still ways to turn your life around. Above all, that there are still ways to rise up. That simple idea – that has taken me nearly two pages to explain – is what your poem has given me. It's taught me to always have hope, and that no matter how dark or difficult life seems, *still I'll rise*. You most certainly did, going from an impoverished young girl in a Southern segregated town to one of the most talented and respected American writers of all time.

Sometimes, when my friends are at the end of their rope, and I am out of ways to help them, I try to convey to them that notion – that they can still turn it all around and rise up despite whatever hardship they are faced with if they simply believe that they can. It's a difficult idea to put in to words, let alone words that an already hysterical teenager can understand. An so now, at times like that, when I have done everything else I can think of, I tell them to go look up the poem "*Still I Rise*", by

Maya Angelou. I have not doubt that it actually has saved lives of at least one of my friends. Even though I was and am not quite as lost as my friends have been, it saved me, too.

Sincerely,
Kelsi Gammon

LEVEL 3

Honorable Mention: Cole Anderson

Title: *The Giving Tree*

Author: Shel Silverstein

Dear Shel Silberstein,

As a kid who has been diagnosed with both A.D.D. and high anxiety disorder, there have definitely been some difficult times in my life. Probably the hardest time of all was when I started high school three years ago. Almost every time something needed to be done, I wouldn't be able to concentrate until it was too late, which in turn, would cause me to freak out and have panic attacks. It was a terrible period for me, and one that I desperately wish I could completely forget; well, almost completely. For there is one night that will be forever etched in my brain because it was on the night that your book, *The Giving Tree*, helped pull me through one of the darkest points in my life.

The night started out hectic, as did most of my nights back then. I had a five-page English paper due the next morning that I had yet to begin writing, and I began to self-destruct. I was pulling my hair out, breaking things in my room, and tearing books apart at the seams out of sheer frustration. Eventually, I charged at the book cabinet and punted it right on the edge of the shelf. I yelped in pain, fell to the floor exhausted, and began cursing my throbbing foot as well as anything else that entered my mind. I had hit rock bottom and I didn't know what to do. So I sat up and began staring at the books that were still intact. I wasn't much of a reader at the time, so there weren't a lot of options on the shelf. One book, however, caught my eye. That book just so happened to be, *The Giving Tree*, and whether it was destiny, or the fact that it was sticking half-way out of the cabinet, I'll never know. In any case, I took the book in my hands and began flipping the pages back and forth. I slightly remembered that the book had been one of my favorites growing up, but since I hadn't read it in about ten years, I could hardly remember how the story went. So I opened the book and began reading about the boy, the tree, and the deep bond that they had shared. It was one of the simplest stories I ever read, yet after I was finished, I started crying and couldn't stop myself. I just sat on the floor of my room and wept like a three-year-old who stubbed his toe. I was at one of the

lowest and most frustrating points in my life with an unwritten essay, a trashed room, and a bleeding foot to worry about, yet the only thing on my mind was this happy little story about a tree's love for a boy. The pages had transported me back to a time when I was nothing more than a carefree lad who swung upon the branches of trees himself. I clearly remembered the simplicity of the past and I yearned deeply for it to come back. Suddenly, I could care less about homework, housekeeping, or the fact that my swollen foot still felt like a nail had been hammered through it. All that I wanted and needed was to find peace of mind and escape from the clutches of anxiety. The experience had inspired me to seek help for curing my crippling, psychological disorders. Two-weeks later, I had seen a therapist and had gone on medication to treat A.D.D. and high anxiety. I was finally able to relax.

I will never forget what you and your book, *The Giving Tree*, did for me. It opened the door, which allowed light to engulf a dark mind that needed nothing else. The memory has stayed with me, as well as the book, which hasn't left the nightstand next to my bed. There it will wait for the next occasion when life gets me down, so it can empower me yet again. The book, the boy, the tree, and the pure and simple happiness have never left my heart.

And I was happy.

Sincerely,
Cole Anderson

LEVEL 3

Honorable Mention: No permission to release name or reprint letter

Title: *Graceling*

Author: Kristin Cashore

LEVEL 3

Honorable Mention: No permission to release name or reprint letter

Title: *Harry Potter*

Author: J.K. Rowling

LEVEL 3

Honorable Mention: No permission to release name or reprint letter

Title: *The Kite Runner*

Author: Khaled Hosseini

LEVEL 3

Honorable Mention: No permission to release name or reprint letter

Title: *The Inheritance Trilogy*

Author: Christopher Paolini