

LEVEL 1

Winner: Sinead Pyle

Title: *Stargirl*

Author: Jerry Spinelli

Dear Jerry Spinelli,

As I read *Stargirl*, the fitting shadow of an elf owl guided me through the rollercoaster of pages. Along the way, I started finding out new things about the characters in the book and about myself as well.

I found that my life was intertwined with all of the characters. I have been in Leo's situation, wanting to be cool, but still wanting to be friends with that person who didn't fit in. *Stargirl* showed me things about myself that I never knew. I started seeing the glass as half full, not half empty, and keeping a smile on my face even when people tried to put me down.

I found that I had a weakness, just like in Hillari's character. I wasn't keen to open my mind to someone different, or I set myself to give people chances. Instead of trying to find out who the person was, Hillari found it easier to bully Stargirl and put her down in public. Although I have not publicly bullied somebody, I have, too, found it easier to ignore somebody, who doesn't fit in.

I started caring about what people thought of me, and stopped trying to figure out what I thought of them. A couple of years ago I had a friend who pushed me into doing stuff I didn't want to do. She didn't care about what I thought, only about herself. At one point she started getting mad at me about my hair, she thought I was trying to copy her. I finally decided that friendship wasn't about one person having more power than the other.

Stargirl taught me how to be myself without changing, to see people as individuals, not in crowds. She explained to me to not let your own barricades get in the way of what you want, to help others concur and break down their challenges and walls, and their ditches in the road.

Sir, you and Stargirl illustrated to me to be kind to others; you helped me realize that every human being started out the same, but then details were added to make

them who they are now. You showed me that there is a bit of Stargirl in everyone, they just haven't found it yet. But when they do, it will shine bright even in the dark, cold, tragedies of this world.

Mr. Spinelli, you told me how to edit myself without changing, you showed me how to help other people with their problems, not get caught up in my own, you are the elf owl guiding me through those pages, the faintest scent of the cactus flower.

Thank you!

Sincerely, Sinead Pyle

LEVEL 1

Runner up: Sasha Bartoo-Smith

Title: *So B. It*

Author: Sarah Weeks

Dear Sarah Weeks,

Ever since I first picked up a book, I have loved reading. I have read and reread hundreds of books. But the first time I really fell in love with a book was in the summer of 2010. I received your book as a gift from my school. It was new looking and quite beautiful with the words So B. It written in big letters across the top. I started reading So B. It at the beginning of summer break, and I was enthralled. I had shouted in frustration, and cried at the devastating truth with Heidi, yet we had never met.

A lot of people think that you only learn from non-fiction books, but your book taught me more than any non-fiction book ever will. Heidi learned many lessons throughout the book, and so did I. I learned that some things are better not to know. There is a difference between not knowing and not wanting to know. Heidi thought that she wanted to know all about her mother, but as it turned out, all she needed to know was right in front of her. Some things, like the color of dinosaur skin will never be discovered.

I never cried at the end of a book before. But on that summer day when I read about the end of So B. It, the end of Sophia Damuthe, the end of Soof, my heart

caught in my throat, and my vision blurred with tears. Around the time I read So B. It, my grandmother's sister Ollie died of the same cause. I know So B. It isn't a real person, but I felt like I had lost them both. I will always remember Ollie, and I will always remember So B. It.

People in our lives have different ways of letting us know that they love us. Whether it's offering us a cup of tea, or telling us repeatedly that we will not be forgotten Whether it's giving us a tie that we will never use, or saying a four letter word that will not be found in a dictionary, it means the same thing. I love you.

I just want you to know that you are my inspiration and my teacher.

Your truly,
Sasha Bartoo-Smith

LEVEL I

Honorable Mention: Anonymous

Title: *Bud Not Buddy*

Author: Christopher Paul Curtis

Dear Christopher Paul Curtis,

First of all I'd like to let you know I'm **[Jack]** not Zack and my last name is **[Batton]** not Patton. For some reason people get those switched around. Thank you for writing Bud Not Buddy. I have a lot of things in common with Bud. First of all I'm part black, just like my dad; second of all my dad left before I was born too. Bud is like another version of me; I am kind of scrawny and skinny and I'm pretty fast. Also I'm about the same age as Bud and I used to carry around a "Memory Jar" like how he carries around those rocks and suitcase.

I really admired Bud for being able to not be afraid to stand up for himself and go out on his own, almost going 120 miles. When his mom died, Bud went after something he thought he should have, which was family. I think that I could never do what Bud did because I have never been that courageous. It really made me think about the world I live in now and how happy I am to be able to live in my own house and have my own room to sleep in and to have a very loving family. Also, I am very glad that I do not have to live in a foster home.

Your book also changed my point of view on how badly treated blacks were like how he was getting bullied by the Amoses and beat up for no reason. Did this story really happen to you or someone you knew? You wrote it like you knew how Bud felt. I also thought about how lucky I am to have a loving mom and grandparents that help take care of me. And now that I think about it, if my grandparents for some reason did not let my mom and me live at their house, I could possibly be living on the streets like Bud. I really enjoyed reading your book Bud Not Buddy because it made me appreciate a lot of things that I have in my life. Thank you again.

Sincerely,
[Jack Batton]

LEVEL I

Honorable Mention: Juliet Raedeke

Title: *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairy Land*

Author: Catherynne Valente

Dear Mrs. Valente,

Your book, *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairy Land in a Ship of Her Own Making*, will forever be a favorite of mine. Not just because of the story, but also because of the specific time your book came into my life.

I had never really been into fantasy books and thought I would never read one unless I had to for some Language Arts assignment. They just didn't interest me, with all of the fairies and dragons and stuff. The week I got your book was the time I needed it most. I was away for eight days at a camp where I didn't know anyone. Plus I'm very shy so it's hard for me to make new friends. After the first night I was *very* anxious to go home, when I got a package in the mail. I thought, "*Oh, great! Mom and Dad sent me something!*" but when I opened it I said, "*Oh, great. A fantasy book.*"

As soon as the day was over, I began reading, because the only other book I had with me was one I had read about 30 times. I flipped open the cover of your book, looked at the clock, which read 9:04 p.m., and began. I ended up reading until

11:45! I had just gotten to the part where September meets Ell, the Wyverary when I couldn't keep my eyes open any more.

The next day, I was inspired by September's confidence and made 3 new friends! That night, I didn't dread going back to my dorm room because I couldn't wait to read more about September's adventures. I was literally an empathy machine, feeling all of the mixed emotions that your characters felt. Every night I read more and more of your novel. I was trying to savor it to last me until camp ended, but I didn't succeed. I had finished it a day early. By the time I had finished it, I had made friends with over 10 people, and that's a LOT in just one week. Your book had helped me become more open about making friends and not being so shy.

Thank you for writing a story that inspired a quiet girl like me to be more adventurous. I will always cherish your book and remember that summer because of it.

Sincerely, Juliet Raedeke

LEVEL I

Honorable Mention: Anonymous

Title: *Wings*

Author: Aprilynne Pike

Dear Aprilynne Pike,

I never really knew my dad. Not well, at least. I've only read about him, looked at photo of him, talked about him, and things like that. See, he left me and my mom about two days after I was born. People always feel sorry for me, but I never really thought about it. Even so, I've always liked reading about girls who bond with their dads in one way or another. I know, weird, right? Anyway, it kind of inspired me when I read about how connected Laurel is to her dad. In fact, so inspired, that when my grandmother (I live with her) asked me if I ever wanted to see him, I said yes. I haven't met him yet. He hasn't even called yet. Yet. He was the one who told my grandmother once that he wanted to meet me in the first place. I'm looking forward to it...I think.

Your book also helped me in the romance department. Of course! I have a crush on two guys—one more than the other—even kissed one of them on the cheek, of course, but still!! Laurel's conflicted feelings for David and Taminie helped me to understand that choosing one of the guys won't be easy, and sometimes, I'll make the wrong choice. So thanks for preparing me for a slight heart break.

OK, question time! You knew this was coming. But, unlike many, I only have one question. See, I want to be an author when I grow up, so I was wondering what's it like being an author. Thanks for reading. Please respond! If it wasn't clear before, I LOVE your books. I'm working on the 3rd one.:-) Don't tell me what happens!!

Your biggest fan,
[Anonymous]

LEVEL 2

Winner: Ella Beaver

Title: *The House at Pooh Corner*

Author: A. A. Milne

Dear A. A. Milne,

When I was little, I had an endless imagination. I would carry around my little orangutan, Jeremy, my bear, Sally and all my other "lovies", dressing them in little outfits, playing with them in the park, setting up their tiny beds, and speaking for them when they had conversations with each other. My imagination was fueled by books: my parents made sure I was exposed to all kinds of literature. They would read to me in the morning, during the day, and before bed. Of all the poems, stories, and children's novels that I took in and loved in my childhood, my favorites were the stories of Pooh. The lovable bear with a little brain but a huge heart was my companion as I traveled through the Hundred Acre Wood, played Poohsticks, snacked on honey, sang funny and whimsical little songs, and conversed with all of our friends, all in my imagination.

These stories fed my longing for the world of pretend; they painted my life with the colors of happiness, making every day an adventure. The world was bright and alive to my three and four year old self. I tumbled through my years more carefree than any adult could be. If I fell down and skinned my knee, I would feel sorry for

myself for a few minutes, only to jump up a few minutes later and race off towards my dolls, the swings at the park, the trees build for climbing, the open sky.

Your books also opened the doors for my love of words. Your playful word choice and childlike wonder portrayed in the writing showed me the fun in reading and writing. Your stories make me the reader and writer I am today. When I listened to my parents read to me about the Hundred Acre Wood, I was just starting to think about reading myself. Listening to these fantastical stories that fit just right inside my tiny, imaginative world gave me interest in the language arts.

As I sat thoughtfully under those shady trees in Pooh's woods, I developed a fondness for the great, big, world outside and all the things you can find there. The meadows, the trees, the rain storms, the sun, and the woody paradises spread all over the globe were just waiting out there for someone to happen upon them. I spent and still spend a lot of my time outside. I don't spend as much as I did back then because of school, but I certainly wish I did! When I was younger, all I wanted to do was explore the woods. I would go on a hike in the arboretum and look peacefully through the sun-lit trees, dreaming of what lay beyond the path, how I could find something magical. I would walk around the neighborhood with my parents, gazing innocently at everything that went on around me, not noticing the bad things I notice now, only the good. My little voice would be caught on the breeze, singing Pooh's poem, "Noise, by Pooh" about the coming summer to the tune my dad had come up with.

Oh, how I wish I could go back to that time. The joy of childhood has been lost for a few years now. It's mostly troubles that take up my time now; troubles with friends, parents, teachers, boys, and the world in general. I don't have time for sitting on the porch and gazing up at the cerulean, cloud-dotted sky longingly, or sitting in the magnolia tree with my bare feet dangling in the air. All is a drama, all is in a rush. When I re-open my cover-less, worn copy of The House At Pooh Corner, I get a familiar taste of that young energy and imagination.

Back when that feeling was inside me all the time, my four year old self answered to the question of "Which chapter?", and said "Rabbit's Busy Day!" I remember lying there in my little bed, with my little orangutan by my side, hearing my favorite story come out of one of my two favorite people in the world. When I

talked to my mom about Pooh today, she recalled a funny memory: when she read me the chapter, “In Which Rabbit Has a Busy Day, and We Learn What Christopher Robin Does in the Mornings” from The House At Pooh Corner for probably the 75th time or so, after a while she thought I had fallen asleep, but she kept reading. When it came to the part when Rabbit found the notice on the door, my mom accidentally misread the sentence and said “note” instead of “notice”. At that, having noticed her mistake, me, age four, promptly stated matter-of-factly, “It’s not a note, it’s a notice!”

I wish I could visit that place, that magical Hundred Acre land of Pooh and his friends. To spend a carefree afternoon playing Poohsticks, instead of cramming for that essay due tomorrow or arguing with my parents. To investigate strange happenings in those woods. To invent a song about the snow, or the mooing turtle doves, or how we are on an expedition to the North Pole. Then again, I *can* do those things. All I have to do is open a book.

Warmly,
Ella Beaver

LEVEL 2

Runner Up: Anonymous

Title: *If*

Author: Rudyard Kipling

LEVEL 2

Honorable Mention: Felicity Rizzo

Title: *Love Drugged*

Author: James Klise

James Klise, your book *Love Drugged* changed my perspective on homosexuality forever. Before getting to know Jamie, the main character, and what he struggled with, I never considered, or even really thought about what some gay teens go through during high school, or even their entire life. The indecision, the self hatred, the confusion, and the brutal, vulgar, and cruel bullying that they, and other people, torture them, and themselves with. I wanted to cry for Jamie. To help him, in some way. The fact that he wanted to change himself so badly, to the extent of taking life

threatening drugs, really opened my eyes to a whole new world of challenge, and perception of what is real, and what is not. What is not real, is the fact that there will never be a world where everyone loves the same type of person, the person of the opposite gender. Also, there will probably never be a “safe” drug to ever come into existence.

What is real, is the abuse and self loathing that many teens go through, just because they’re not “normal”. And that so many people use the term “gay”, homo”, and worse words, so derogatorively, loosely, and often. To the point that they are simply accepted, and not questioned. Also, the lack of acceptance that homosexuality has, in our so-called “free country”, or “progressive world”. If our country is so free, why is it so frowned upon, and shied away from, in many areas of America, much more, the world, to be gay? If our world is so progressive, shouldn’t homophobia be a thing of the past, as leprosy and the Black Plague are? Shouldn’t it be something that we read in a book, in our Social Studies class, and shudder to think of what a world it must been to live in, in a world of such turmoil, hurt, and confusion? If you come to think of it, I wouldn’t be writing this letter if homosexuality was simply accepted.

What really makes me sad and angry, is that in my day-to-day life, in the classroom, I hear people comment on the most ordinary and commonplace things, such as someone’s handwriting, and say “Dude, that’s so gay”. Before I read your book, I never even noticed that going on. I somehow missed this behavior. Now, my eyes are open. Witnessing that happen. And it sickens me. Downright sickens me. I read your book, and thought right after finishing it, I thought “Naw, this isn’t happening in my school. People don’t say those things and act that way. I live in a friendly environment”. And I do, but not in the same way that I thought I did. People say those things, and act that way. And I really, really want to prevent it in some way. Because I have been warned by your written word, I can make a bigger difference in the world. And now I try to stop people when they make fun of people being gay, or making it seem as though homosexuality isn’t “normal”.

I thank you, not in sarcasm or mockery, but in appreciation, James Klise, for showing me a world that I have never known, and for making people listen to your voice, in a world of so many oblivious and unknowing voices, and showing me the world in a different light.

Sincerely,
Felicity Rizzo

LEVEL 2

Honorable Mention: Dora Totoian

Title: *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

Author: Betty Smith

Dear Betty Smith,

Never has a book made me cry so much or caused me to reflect on everything in the world around us more than your book, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. At first I was reluctant to read it, because I knew it was written in an entirely different era, but once I read it, I realized that it was definitely one of those books that can withstand time. Francie and I come from completely different walks of life, although in some ways we are exactly the same. Francie had a very challenging life growing up, she never had enough to eat, her house was never warm, and she was never truly comfortable and satisfied. On the opposite end of the spectrum, I have to admit that I never have to worry about having a roof over my head, or ever being unsatisfied. I'm the child who complains about not having absolutely everything, when, in actuality, I have to realize that I have been a lot more fortunate than most. What Francie and I do have in common, though, is that we are both the children or grandchildren of immigrants, and Francie is better off here. Why? Because both of her parents were born in the United States, and both of my parents and I were born in Romania.

As an immigrant, I'm sure you know exactly what I mean. You always feel left out of something because you are not an American, and I'm sure that in March, when I can take the citizenship test, I will still feel the same way. Americans are super-bubbly, out-going, and by far the friendliest society in the history of the world. Romanians can be all that too, if you get to know them a bit. My parents never fit in with all those people, so I am just like them and never did either, and I still think that to this day that is why I am a bit unsociable and not very "cool". Francie is exactly the same, very shy and people are mean to her because of that.

Something else Francie and I have in common is that we both like to read a lot. I think that it is our outlet, so let us be “geeks,” but I am pretty sure that no one else can name the capital of pretty much every country in the world, and I am sure that no one is more up-to-date on the presidential race than I am (now, there are eight people vying for the GOP nomination, to see if that person will replace President Barack Obama, just so you know)!

Your book lets everyone know that even if you are not the most popular, and you haven't had the best childhood, you will be OK in life, because that is not what matters. As said in the forward, everything that happens in life happens in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. But it takes place in a slow way that it happens in reality. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is simply one of those great reads that reminds everyone that we are all just human, and to not be so quick to judge people, just because we probably do not know their story. I also thought what a creative way to tell your life's story, because if someone looks at your life and at Francie's, they can tell that it is the same, and that *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is really your autobiography. Thank you so much for changing my life in such a positive way.

Lots of love,
Dora Totoian

LEVEL 2

Honorable Mention: Taylor Ishida
Title: *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*
Author: J. K. Rowling

Dear Mrs. Rowling,

Some call it cliché, some call it generic, and other just don't understand: the-boy-who-lived, as completely changed my life. Flipping through the cream-colored pages of Harry Potter, with the intricate, worn covers, opens a door to a world where magic is real, your imagination can run free, and a place where all the evils of the real world can finally be forgotten.

When I was seven, I didn't have many close friends. Sure, there were the quick, almost empty greetings once in a while, but there wasn't much that really meant anymore than that. Perhaps that may be entirely my fault, was I bitter to other?

Maybe I didn't open myself up enough for people to want to know me. Or did I just have a hard time making friends at first, like Hermione did?

In instance in my life that I recall the most intensely, was a party at a family friend's house. We had known each other for years, but had been growing farther and farther apart. She made new friends, and I made new friends. My family and I were excited for the party. Who wouldn't be? We arrived at my friends' house, right on time, smiles on every ones faces, and a copy of Harry Potter And The Goblet Of Fire grasped in my hands. My parents told me to leave it behind, but I refused. If I went anywhere, so would Harry. My friend's family welcomed us with open arms, and the loud chatter of the other partygoers quickly filled our ears. My parents mingled with the others parents, and I found my friend, who was playing with her friends. They all said hello, or waved, but then, forgot about me. I became a shadow, a ghost, a speck of dust left behind. The other kids ran off, laughing and having fun, leaving me behind with my book clenched closely to my heart. I curled up in a comfortable corner on the glossy wooden stairs. I opened my book, and began to read. All the chatter escaped from my head. I was in Harry's world now. Practicing spells and potions, flying on a broomstick, and learning new things. I could feel the eyes of the wandering adults stare down at me. I would look up, and they would just smile back. I was that one girl, always reading Harry Potter.

You have taught me so much. I am able to make close friends, and I have truly learned that love will always win in a battle against hate. I know now that there won't always be good times, but there won't always be bad times. Once I lose something or someone, I can't give up, I have to fight for what I believe in.

People often ask me, "why is Harry Potter so important to you?" I reply the same way every time. The wonderful, fantastical work of Harry Potter is the one place where I can escape from everything around me, and concentrate completely and utterly on the reading, and my imagination. With the world around us changing so often, the world of Harry Potter is the one place that will never change. It will always be there, like a very wise woman once said: "The stories we love best do live in us forever, so whether you come back by page or by big screen, Hogwarts will always be there to welcome you home." I'm so grateful that I have the honor of being able to read the Harry Potter series. Thank you so much.

Your Truly,
Taylor Ishida

LEVEL 3

Winner: Lucia Hadella
Title: A Language Older than Words
Author: Derrick Jensen

Dear Derrick Jensen,

After reading your book *A Language Older than Words*, I had to write you and ask: Am I putting myself on a path I was never meant to walk? You see, I leave home next fall to begin studying environmental science at Oregon State University, and I would like to think that researching endangered species and promoting the rise of organic farming will put me in a position to save the planet. (Or at least help people reconnect with nature to the point where it no longer appeals to them as an exploitable commodity, but rather as a beauty worth preserving.) Your book, however, led me to question whether intuition is more important than science.

In science class, I often peer through the bright lens of a microscope to examine the behavior of freshwater plankton, or to search for organisms within a sample of soil removed from my garden at home. I think of the microscope as a window, allowing me to admire and understand aspects of nature I never knew existed. Next year, I suspect I'll be looking through this window as much as through the window of my dormitory on many a rainy Oregon day, but it is only after reading your book that I have begun to wonder whether a microscopic lens is really the window I should be using.

Derrick, when intuition and a few prophetic dreams sent you glancing out of your bedroom window time and again to witness the resident coyote disappearing into the forest with another one of your chickens you were observing nature from behind the glass of a window not in existing in science. Science leaves no room for making deals with coyotes, as you did, and for receiving consolation from the “voices” of stars. Science would apply logic to these touching experiences of yours and conclude that you spent too much time alone—that the duck you claim offered himself to the blade of your axe was the product of an isolated writer's

imagination, and that coyotes, just like most predators, cause less trouble to humans when they are no longer threatened by hunger. Science will make sense of your supposed “truce” with the coyotes through one logical explanation or another, until every ounce of the mystery which made your accounts so intriguing has received the same treatment as a cancer cell undergoing radiation treatment. The window of a microscope will never reveal the type of nature-human interaction permitted by a view through the glass squares in your bedroom.

I’m a fiction writer, Derrick, and a poet, who founded a writing group at my high school. Am I kidding myself by thinking I belong in science? I analyze literature for pleasure, but I also love scientific articles about honeybee research and the discovery of new planets. I’m choosing to contact you not only because your book has been a pothole in my road towards developing a firm truth in science, but also because I relate to you. In college, you pursued a Bachelor’s of Science in mineral engineering physics. However, somewhere along the way, you seem to have abandoned numbers and hard facts for a more imaginative path – that of a creative writing teacher. People like us, who harbor such a broad range of interests, where do we fit into society?

Your accounts of your experiences often take on a spiritual nature that would be scoffed at in the laboratories where I hope to one day to study. Upon realizing this, I suffered an emotional conflict. You suggest that mending the damaged relationship between humans and the organisms composing our natural environment—a relationship that once consisted of so much respect—will require us to abandon our societal mindset of human superiority over all beings. Where might science aid, instead of hinder, such a transformation? Are scientific approaches towards conservation too impersonal? And if so, may this problem be remedied by combining biology with spirituality? Is that even possible?

Derrick, there must be a natural scientist somewhere within me, for, as you have surely noticed, I am brimming with curiosity and questions. I smiled when you told in your books about frustrating your teachers by posing questions they were unable to answer. I, too, have been guilty of this act. I don’t expect you to answer all of the queries; I only wish to know if I am, indeed, positioning myself to help others learn a language older than words, so they too may join the conversations of the

natural world. Please tell me, Derrick, that this language may in fact be spoken through any window, as long as those who speak it are willing to listen.

Respectfully,
Lucia C. Hadella

LEVEL 3

Runner Up: Ben Jarrett
Title: Tuesday's with Morrie
Author: Mitch Albom

Dear Mr. Albom,

Tuesday's with Morrie was one of those books that help you figure who you really are, and what's important in life. The feelings and emotions that I felt while reading this book were, incredibly enlightening, and reminded me of what I experienced one year ago, when my Aunt Kristin was dying of cancer. During this experience it was obvious to the entire family that there is nothing better in the world than the love and peace you receive from your family when you're in the process of dying. It was as if we were all waiting for a baby to be born to this earth but the truth of the matter was that we were waiting for our family member to return to our creator. When Morrie says, "once you learn how to die and you will learn how to live," (p 82) as I reflect one year ago that my Aunt Kristin learned how to die and my family members and I learned how to live with more peace.

One of the experiences that I can relate to is when Mitch and Morrie spend quality time together as I did with my aunt. My Mom and I planned time to deliver special food for her to eat when she was sick. As we sat there prayed and ate dinner with her in the living room it felt as if the visit was the only thing that mattered in the world, I knew that time was of the essence. "The things you spend so much time on-all this work you do-might not seem as important. You might have to make room for some more spiritual things" (p 84). When I read this quote I felt a validation that prayer is my foundation.

When I got towards the end of the book I started to feel bad for you. I was feeling bad because you and Morrie had become such good friends and life partners and it seemed like you didn't want him to die yet. Like when Morrie tells you, "once you

get your fingers on the important questions, you can't turn away from them" (p 175). That quote kind of reminded me of the golden things in life like love or family, and how much I cherish them.

I would like to thank you for reminding me that there is still goodness in the world and there are people just like Morrie that can help me or anyone else who struggle in their daily life. One of the deepest quotes that caught me off guard was, "As long as we can love each other and remember the feeling of love we had, we can die without ever really going away. All the love you created it still there. All the memories are still there. You live on—in the hearts of everyone you have touched and nurtured while you were here" (p 174). This quote got to me the most out of all the quotes in the book because, when someone dies that I was very close to I'm going to feel just like what the quote explains. This book needs to be read by people who are having trouble in their life or are facing hard times, and they need to listen to what Morrie has to say because he has great life lessons in this book that can really help someone. I look forward to reading your future books and thank you for sharing your special experience.

Sincerely,
Ben Jarrett

LEVEL 3

Honorable Mention: Kelsi Gammon

Title: The Help

Author: Kathryn Stockett

Dear Kathryn Stockett,

I've been a writer for longer than I can vividly remember. Even in grade school, the stories and reports that I had to write were longer than my teachers requested. Writing was where I went to create the stories of all the make-believe lives I wished I had. As I grew older, it became more effective to write about things that I knew—in other words, reality. For equally long as I have been a writer, I have been raised by my parents and grandparents to stand up for what I believe in, and to be open to all walks of life. Into my teenage years, this has led to my writings drifting into the realms of social commentary, remarking on the things that I

witnessed as injustices in the world. I may have been a sheltered white girl from the suburbs, but I found myself drawn to the plights of people who didn't have life as easily as I did. I developed strong opinions and values, and I voiced them whenever the situation called for it.

And yet, I have never been a "Skeeter". Living in the liberal Portland-metro area of Oregon (a state that has not elected a Republican representative since the early 1980s), I was fortunately surrounded by people equally as open-minded and accepting as I found myself to be. My high school is diverse, with students of all various races and religions and statuses and orientations. Aside from the bullying and harassment that is, unfortunately, present at seemingly every American public school, Tigard High School is not an awful place to attend if you are, in any way, "different". No one ever told me that I was wrong in standing up for the things that I believed in.

Racism in particular is an issue that has always frustrated me. Everyone has moments of prejudice and judgment—another unfortunate aspect of human nature—but when I say that I don't see a person for the color of their skin, I actually mean it. I don't just say it to sound politically correct or kind or whatever—I genuinely believe, what should the color of one's skin matter? It's a difference in pigmentation; why has it played such a role in dictating the past four hundred or more years of our existence? When I read *The Help* last spring, I was affected by the stories of the African American maids and the cruelty of the women they passively served. I was even more so affected by the character of Skeeter—a young woman, a writer, who bravely stood up for what she believed in simply because the situation bothered her, and she wanted to say something about it. It didn't matter so much what it cost her—her reputation, her boyfriend, her childhood friends—because it was her championed cause that she loved. I related to Skeeter—or rather I *wanted* to be able to relate to her. I wanted to know that I would be able to do what I believed to be right regardless of what others thought of me. But, in my relatively liberal community, I had not yet been presented with the opportunity.

Around a month ago, I began dating a boy from my school who is of mixed race—his mother is Caucasian, and his father is African American. Like me, he is a graduating senior, and we met through our IB (honors-level) English and History

classes. He plays on the varsity football and rugby teams, and he is one of the most eloquent speakers on the debate team. He makes terrible puns, he can be awkward and goofy in the sweetest of ways, he brought me flowers when he knew I was distressed over college applications, and in college he plans to study international relations so that he can continue on to work in local, national, and later global politics. He's a special person, and I am glad to have him in my life. Our friends at school think we're an adorable couple, and my parents appreciate his intelligence and his naturally respectful nature.

There are, however, individuals in my life whom are less-than-thrilled with my dating a "person of color". As an only child and only grandchild with two parents who have always worked full-time, I have spent much of my 17 years around my maternal grandparents, whom have always lived nearby. Because of this time spent with them, they have played a large part in raising me, in turning me into the curious, passionate, kind individual that I am. Even throughout my painful teenage years, I have maintained a close relationship with my eternally loving and doting grandmother and grandfather. Although raised Catholic and on the east coast of the country, my grandmother in particular has always remained remarkable open-minded, socially. She is pro-equal rights, and does not consider herself to be a prejudiced individual—in her working days, she was a secretary in a high school and later college, and became close to students of different backgrounds. However, she and my grandfather were less content when they learned that I had developed an interest in a boy who was African American. Having begun to date him, I feared and still fear that my relationship with them might be in jeopardy because of this decision in my personal life.

At first, I was shocked, and even disgusted. My parents had no problem with my dating an African American boy—all that mattered to them was his personality, and that he treated me well. No matter how much I tried to talk up his moral and intellectual high points to my grandparents, the first—and sometimes, I fear only—aspect that they focus on is the color of his skin.

To be frank, I was heartbroken. I am still heartbroken. Here are these wonderful, adoring, intelligent, upright people who helped to raise me (the very people who taught me, as Aibileen teaches the children she looks after in *The Help*, "You are kind, you are smart, you are important"), and in following my heart and my

desires, I am deeply disappointing them. I love them with all my heart, and my life would be so intensely empty without them in it, but this is one situation in which I cannot please them. I'm a people-pleaser; I work hard to ensure that others are happy, with life and with me. I despise doing anything that might disappoint anyone. And the idea of disappointing two people who have been so close to me all my life? It made me feel sick.

I was faced with the decision of whether to act to please the people whom I love and trust, or act to please myself and follow my own morals. For the first time in my life, following my morals would be what would *not* please my grandparents. I couldn't stand the idea of hurting them or making them so unhappy with me. However, my hatred of racism is so deeply rooted in my system that staying away from this boy due to the color of his skin would go against every instinct I've ever had.

I made the decision to push through my grandparents' disappointment—I'm dating the boy, and I'm happy. The furthest conversation on the topic that I've since had with my grandparents is that, since they were simply raised in a different place and different time, we're going to have to agree to disagree. I'm careful not to bring up my boyfriend around my grandparents, but if I do, I can see the disapproval in their faces or hear the casual distaste in their tones. I know that I would be asking for trouble if I introduced him to my grandparents, and so for the time being, it's a relationship that I cannot be completely open about with them.

I finally had found myself a way in which to relate to Skeeter in *The Help*, but I wasn't particularly happy for it. I was standing up for what I believe in, and that fact made me proud of myself, but it hurt me that I had to hurt someone else to do so. But Skeeter gave me someone to lean on—someone to say that sometimes doing what I believe is right is more important than doing what is easy or what will please others in my life. Skeeter made me stronger. I don't think, if there hadn't been *The Help*, that I would have been able to go through with this relationship that angered my grandparents so much. I think that I would have felt alone, and my resolve would have crumbled under the fear. The idea makes me a little angry with myself, and that fact makes me consider how furious I would have been with myself had I ended the relationship based on their views.

I love my grandparents very much. Their opinions on my views of race relations and my mixed-race boyfriend could never change the amount of affection and admiration I have for them. Your character Skeeter, like me, is opinionated. She's never been quite popular, and she doesn't exactly care. She learns that she has convictions that are different from those of the people around her, but regardless, she sticks to them. She finds her voice in writing.

Thank you for helping me to stand up for what I believe in, even if it angers others. That is what Skeeter did, and that is what you did in writing *The Help*. Thank you for helping this budding writer, filmmaker, politician to finally, *finally* find her cause in human rights. In this way, thank you for helping me to find my voice.

Sincerely,
Kelsi Gammon