

LEVEL 3

Winner and national Honor Award recipient: Y Thien Hoang

Title: *Across the Plains in 1844*

Author: Catherine Sager Pringle

Dear Catherine Sager Pringle,

I'm writing this letter to you with great gratitude for your book *Across the Plains in 1844*, which has lifted my soul and helped me survive through very difficult times in my life.

My family and I arrived to Oregon as new immigrants from a far land, Vietnam, almost two years ago. We came here with empty hands because our house had been confiscated by the government. My parents had to sell almost everything for the airline tickets. The only possessions we brought with us were some pictures holding memories of the past and hopes: hope for freedom, hope for a new beginning, and hope for a better life. It is always hard to start new things and you would understand, Catherine, how hard it was for us to start life all over again from nothing.

There was the language barrier for my parents to overcome, a new culture for my brother and me to learn. None of these was easy for me at the beginning. One night, I was awakened by the talking of my parents, and I heard my mom crying. Many questions rose up in me: "Did we make the right decision when we came here? Was it worth it to leave everything and start a new life?" There were moments when I wanted to give up, when I thought I could not face such challenges, but your book has changed my perspective and helped me to keep going.

The moment I read your story, I stopped feeling so lonely. You and I have so much in common: both of us come from afar; you are from Missouri and I am from Vietnam. Both of us have had difficulties adapting to a new situation, and both of us have many questions and doubts about our journey. However, I think your situation was much harder than mine. I could not imagine going on this new journey without the support from my parents, and you had to go through it without yours. It must have been heart-breaking when your parents passed away during the journey and when your adopted parents were killed by the Indians. I admire you so much for your strength and bravery. You have survived it all. Thanks to your book I have new strength and more determination to keep going. Of course life is hard, but if you could go through great hazards, I believe I can too. You are my inspiration.

My heart jumped a beat when I read these lines: "There were several musical instruments among the emigrants, and these sounded clearly on the evening air when camp was made and merry talk and laughter resounded from almost every campfire." What a beautiful scene! I thought I had to give up my passion for piano and music when I came here, but thanks to the help of many generous people I could keep on playing and learning. I think music truly has the power to relieve and connect human beings.

The beauty of this land melted my heart. One of my favorite experiences since I arrived in Oregon was going hiking around Multnomah Falls. It was a beautiful summer afternoon when I looked at the majestic view surrounding me and realized that what I was looking at is priceless, and many people had to pay for it with their hard work, and even their blood. You are the pioneer and I am the recipient of all the hard work you did. The sharing of your journey helped me gain more and more appreciation for life.

Things have settled down for my family and me now. I cannot help but love the scenes when you talked about your siblings, when you were taking care of the younger children along the trip. Although I have adapted myself to the new life journey, I can never take anything I'm receiving in this wonderful land for granted. Indeed, I always feel the urge to give back to my community. I am using all the talents that I have accompanying choirs, churches, and volunteering at schools and senior centers. I am using my English skills to help the new immigrants who are having a hard time, just like you and me, starting a new life. All my thanks to you and your book for giving me strength to keep going, helping me gain more appreciation, and showing me the bright side of a difficult journey. Thank you very much for traveling with me through my own "Oregon Trail."

Truly yours,

Y Thien Hoang