

## Level I Winning Essay

Dear Nancy Farmer,

I have a disease called Graves disease which make my thyroid very large. I have to take medicine in the morning and at night. Plus, I have to get a blood test every few months. The medicine I take tastes horrible and sometimes it's hard for me to have courage. Last time I saw my doctor, she said my thyroid was doing well and I could probably stop taking medicine soon. I was super excited that I would finally be able to stop taking the horrible medicine. About three days after the appointment, I got a call that my latest blood test results had come in bad and I couldn't stop taking the medicine. I was so disappointed, and I needed a lot of courage. That's when my friend's mother gave me the book *A Girl Named Disaster*.

I started reading the book right away. I ended up loving the book and not wanting to put it down. It was like I could see through the eyes of Nhamo, because she faced difficulties she didn't think she could handle, just like me. When a lot of her family was sick, Nhamo had trouble helping them, because she was worried that she would get sick. I didn't like having my blood drawn once every few months. Nhamo didn't think she could make it to her father's house, and I didn't think my journey through Graves disease could end. My mom kept telling me that it would end, and I would get through it. Somehow I couldn't bring myself to believe her. That was until I got to the end of the book, and Nhamo finally reached her father's house. That gave me courage because she had made it after all the times she had thought it was been impossible. Although that gave me courage, it did not give me enough because Nhamo's problems were all solved and mine weren't. Nhamo reached her father's house and it was all okay. It wasn't okay for me. That was when Nhamo learned that her father was dead, and yet she still found happiness because she had a good home in which to live. That was when I realized that there are flaws in life, and you have to find the good part about life even then or you will never be happy. After reading your book, I haven't complained once about my medicine or my blood tests. Instead I have found happiness with my friends, family, and all the good things in my life.

Thank you, Nancy Farmer, for writing your book *A Girl Named Disaster*. It has given me the courage to live with Graves disease. You have truly changed my whole perspective on life, because now instead of focusing on the bad things in life, I savor the good things.

Your fan,  
Julia Ilhardt  
Glen Ellyn, Illinois

## Level II Winning Essay

Dear Jay Asher,

The unique way that your book, Thirteen Reasons Why, deals with depression and suicide has affected me enormously. I myself have never had depression but I have had many indirect encounters with it, and you have helped me handle it all better.

As an eight-year old child I began religious school. In my class I became friends with a girl, but more important, in terms of your book, was her sister. She was a helper in my religious school class. To me she always appeared to be happy; smiling as bright as the sun, and helping us draw pictures. One day when I came home from school and my mom told me that she had committed suicide. What was suicide? I had no idea. My mom explained to me that suicide was when somebody kills himself or herself. I was terrified. I found out then, and I still believe now, that suicide is more terrible than murder. I was hysterical. That is the only way to describe it. I was hysterical and confused. What had happened to the smiling 16-year-old who was coloring next to me in class just a day before? Could this happen to anybody? Would I end up in such a horrific position in my life where I would choose to end it all?

At age 8 suicide is not an easy thing to deal with or even to understand. Admittedly it's not a whole lot easier at age 13. There was one thing that really helped me understand how a person could truly become so sad, and that was your book. The fact that the perspective of the book is through the eyes of the girl, Hannah, who committed suicide and struggled with depression helped me to be able to understand the mind of someone struggling with depression a little bit more. Since that awful day in third grade I have had six other encounters with depression. It may seem very difficult to deal with, but your book helps a lot. I have learned to be very careful about what you say and do in relation to these people. I learned this because there were a whole 13 people who contributed to Hannah's sadness and ultimately her death. Though many of these people were doing obviously terrible things some of them had no idea what they were doing. For example, the teacher/guidance counselor of Hannah, Mr. Porter. She relied on him to save her, to say the perfect thing that would show maybe, jut maybe, somebody cared enough to keep her alive. This showed me how people who are depressed depend upon every word that you say to them. I have learned not to grow impatient with the increasing problems of those who cannot help it, because the best thing to do is always let them know how much they mean to you. I also learned from the part in the book where Clay realizes, through learning Hannah's thoughts and signs, that Sky is also depressed. I learned by reading your book, what the signs of depression are. I suddenly realized that one of my good friends was depressed and I went with her to get help. I was very grateful I had read your book because it helped me to help her through such a difficult time.

You have left me changed. With my new knowledge about the inner workings of those with depression I have learned how to help my close loved ones. Maybe, hopefully, by reading your book I have convinced someone to save their own life.

A Changed Reader,  
Rachel Baruck  
Northbrook, Illinois

## Level III Winning Essay

Cherie Bennett

I have never been skinny. Even as a little girl growing up I was chubby, having friends that could eat and eat without gaining an ounce of weight while I could just look at the food and gain ten pounds. Being the heaviest of all the girls in my class, I quickly learned that making fun of myself was the easiest way to get through school. I silently wished to myself that the skinny girls could experience what I went through everyday. They never once experienced the name calling, disgusted glares, or quiet conversations behind their backs as they walked down the halls. To them being fat or overweight was something I could control. I remember sitting in health class watching a video on obesity, listening to the kids around me as they hollered, "Why don't you just put down the fork!", "Why would you let yourself get like that?", "How could you let your kids get that big?" to the video. I just sat there silently as I answered their questions in my head, thinking how they could never truly understand till they have experienced it themselves.

It was not until I read *Life in the Fat Lane* that my wish had come true. Lara Ardeche's character in the starting of the novel is someone every girl wants to be. She is everything I'm not and wish I was, the number one thing being thin. Like everybody else in my health class she doesn't understand how people can let themselves get that fat or overweight. After being diagnosed with Axell-Crowne syndrome, she begins to understand what I go through everyday. I connected with Lara on her levels of self-esteem and awareness of the people around her. How she slowly lost her friends and all self-confidence she had for herself. When she was mocked and talked about in the halls, it was like an ordinary day at high school for me.

It wasn't until Lara met Suzanne that I started realizing things about my weight and myself. I never noticed how much time I spent focused on my weight and how little I spent focused on myself as a person rather than a number on a scale. My weight was controlling my life! My interests were limited because I always thought of what people might think of me. There were so many activities I wanted to participate in but very few that I actually involved myself in because of my weight. Suzanne helped me realize that being overweight had no barriers or limits.

This book made me realize that weight was nothing compared to personality. It is something that we are first judged on, but the people that take the time to get to know us soon realize there is more than just a few pounds to us. I turn to this book for reassurance each time I feel myself being put down because of my weight. It is inspirational to anyone, fat or thin!

Sincerely,  
Eryca Campbell  
Petersburg, Illinois