

Level I Winner

Dear Mrs. Burnett,

The first time I read A Little Princess, I cried for Sara Crewe. Like Sara from your book, I love imagining and pretending, but I was not as brave as she was. A word of criticism could bring tears to my eyes, a coach's yelling made me tremble, and homesickness overwhelmed me. All that changed when your novel stepped into my life for the second time.

Last summer, I was selected as 1 of 20 young gymnasts to train at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Lake Placid, NY. The famous Russian coach, Liana, who practically ruled the rhythmic gymnastic world, would be training us. Being only 10, this was my first overnight stay away from my home in Illinois.

The minute I got onto the mat, Liana screamed at me in Russian, accusing me of not pointing my toes. By the middle of warm-ups, I was panting heavily with the sides of my throat sticking painfully together, and we weren't even half done for the morning! My face burned red and hot, and my eyes were never dry. As soon as we finished passes with Liana, we rushed on to Tatiana's ballet station. The way she threw out spiteful words and the presence of her fierce chipped tooth, gave me the impression of Miss Minchin, rather than a ballet instructor. When we finished, I ran out of the gym so quickly that no one saw my tears fly out behind me.

The 9 hours of grueling training and the harsh screaming of the coaches made the center seem cold and heartless. My body, numb and sore, had to be treated at the therapy center. Already, I couldn't wait to go home. Not wanting to worry my mom, I told her that I was fine. Despite my effort to stay strong, I broke down in tears during our phone conversation at night. I couldn't help but feel the world crashing down on me. To calm me down, my mom read me "The Magic", my favorite chapter from A Little Princess. Gradually, I forgot about all the pain in my body. I was horrified by the hunger and humiliation Sara experienced, but I cheered at the magic and marveled at her self-confidence.

In the days that followed, I experienced my own magic as my mom read me your novel over the phone each night. Even though the training got harder, and the coaches screamed louder, I blinked back my tears knowing that being a princess is not about how people treat you, but how you choose to feel inside.

Gratefully Yours,
Carra Wu
Lake Forest, Illinois

Level II Winner

Dear Mr. Jay Asher,

Is it possible? Tell me, Mr. Asher, could it be true that I have so much impact on other peoples' lives? Is it feasible that I, intentionally or not, could completely alter the course of someone's life for better... or for worse? After reading *Thirteen Reasons Why*, I now know the answer to that question, and frankly, I am quite fearful of it indeed. I am fearful for myself, for others. What if this tremendous power is used incorrectly? What is it to become of us then?

Before I read this novel, I was blissfully unaware of the truth that we as humans face every day: the fact that we have the ability to affect others. This power is so easy for us to access that we rarely even realize when we are utilizing it. Everywhere that I look today, I see people that are potential "reasons why" for others. Did the cruel remark someone made to a girl bring about the tears she shed the moment she arrived home or cause her to snap at her mother? Did rumors about a boy trigger his hatred for particular people at school? Did it initiate his contemplations of suicide, like it did for Hannah in the story? *Thirteen Reasons Why* has portrayed to me unimaginable power one has to shape others' lives. All actions, whether intended to be hurtful or not, have repercussions, and one must be prepared to live with them.

Whenever I look at the world around me now, I cannot help but do so with a whole new perspective. Peers are constantly using their influence on other individuals in a harmful way. Like in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, they tease people who are different and spread rumors about others that they are not fond of, which sickens me. Most disturbing of all is that some of these antagonists are friends that I have grown to trust. If people I have always thought so highly of could do something like this, then what hope is there for the rest of the world? Do people know what their words might be doing to the person that they are aimed at? Are they aware that they might be contributing to the growing sadness and anger in that particular person's life? Of course, the answer is no. They are not conscious of the impact that their jabs result in, doing mental and emotional damage to their peers without even knowing it.

I am regretful to confess that I too, was guilty of this terrible treatment of others in the past. Because of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, I have been inspired to make a change, not only for myself, but for others that would suffer as a result of my ignorance and cruelty. I am now aware of the final and everlasting effect that I may have on others, and I thank you for that. I am no longer fearful of the damage that I could do to others with this power, but hopeful that I can use it to do good and change their lives for the better. I have realized that my impact on others can also be positive, and I vow to use it accordingly. Thank you, Mr. Asher, for opening my eyes to this reality and for giving me the chance to help others. Most importantly, thank you for this caution. Because of your book, I will never let myself be one of someone's *Thirteen Reasons Why*.

Sincerely,
Jana Mudrock
New Lenox, Illinois

Level III Winner

Sarah Dessen,

Thank you for writing your book Lock and Key because it made me feel like I wasn't alone in dealing with who my mom is. Ruby had to be the kid who played the role of mother for her own mother and I too have been playing the mom role.

Unlike Ruby's mom, my mom wasn't just into drinking she was into hardcore drugs as well. My mom would come home with different guys all the time, or, even worse, we would go and live with the new guy. Just like Ruby's, our family was always in a new motel; hotel; or, if we got lucky, an apartment. Ruby and I are close in age, and I think that it made it all the more real for me. I know that your books are fiction, but, all the same, the book was emotional for me because it really hit close to home. The fact that Ruby was with just her mom is a parallel into what my life was, that's really all it ever was; my mother, my brother and me. Lucky enough for me, my brother never left me like Cora did. Seeing as he is the younger one, I suppose he is the lucky one that I didn't leave him. I wouldn't have been able to leave my brother anyway. As hard as it was for Cora in the book to leave her little sister, I can understand why she went through so much to try and find Ruby again. My brother and I are really close, like Cora and Ruby only more so. I would do all the talking for both of us, and I took care of him when he was really small. Now, my brother is manly and independent, but back in those days my brother was completely dependent on me for all the necessities of life; from food to someone to come to when he was scared, I was there. He didn't know it, but I would've been completely lost without him. I can remember one time when my brother went with my mom to see some boyfriend of hers; they went and left me at my grandma's alone. Within the hour, I was calling her cell phone worried and wanting to know when she would be home.

Like I said it was always just the three of us. The man, who helped bring me into this world was never around. My grandma was the mediator for us; she solved all our problems and was our go to woman when there was a crisis. She actually saved us from that terrible situation with my mom; we would go to live with my grandma for two years before being adopted. My grandma was the one who made sure we went to church and had clothes and cookies. My mom isn't a bad person, and she never ran off like Ms. Ruby from the book, even though my mom has been in a correctional facility for several months now I thank God every day that she is still at least alive. She actually is a really good person who just made the wrong choices, she held on to us kids though. Ms. Ruby knew she couldn't stop Cora or Ruby from leaving so she just let go of all responsibility and ran off. My mother, just like Ms. Ruby loved her children dearly and still does to this day. Ruby's mom was receiving treatment in the end of the book and her future was still unpredictable. Unfortunately for our real life situation, my mom will probably go back to the same routine when she gets out. That's that thing about your story; it has a happy ending for Ruby and Cora, your book shows that just because one generation is messed up it doesn't mean that the next has to follow in those disappointing footsteps. My brother and I certainly won't. My brother has had a 4.0 since he has been in school and talks for himself now. I am an honor roll student and have been accepted into Illinois State University for the fall of 2010. Miss Dessen, your novel shows that those kids who had a hard start, can make it. I love all your books and hope that you will keep them coming!

Truly inspired,
Allyssa Brown
Athens, Illinois