

# Letters About Literature 2014

## Level I Illinois Winner

Dear Sharon M. Draper,

I entered second grade a few years ago. We were on our way to the cafeteria to eat lunch. My class and I went to our assigned table and sitting there were these kids about my age that looked so different from the other kids. Some had unusual headphones that were black, big, and puffy, while the other ones were slumping over and making weird noises. To be honest, at that time I was a little scared. I had to sit next to one of these kids and she was a girl. She had light brown hair, green eyes, and pale skin. She tried to talk to me and my friends and so did her other friends and I ignored all of them and I really regret doing that. It was rude of me and I shouldn't have been so mean. My friends and I used to gossip, talk, and basically bully them. Once that year was over, 2 years went by and I saw myself with the same problem but in the hallways. By that time I was in fifth grade, and more mature.

At the beginning of the year, I was reading a whole bunch of interesting and amazing books. Sooner or later, I started to run out of ideas of what to read. We were in the school library and I stumbled upon your book, *"Out of My Mind"*. I showed this to my friends and they decided to read it also. Little did I know that this would definitely change the way I saw things. This book made me realize things I've never noticed about people before, Melody went through such a hard time and I would have never pictured the problems she was going through in my head. I always thought that their lives were just as easy as ours, maybe even a little easier since people take care of them. Then I realized her life was like an elk running away from a wolf. When I was reading this book, every single word made me feel as if I was Melody. As if I was in her place. The way you told the story made me realize that I was very cruel to the special Ed kids in my second grade class's lunch period. This turned my whole entire thought about them into something completely different.

The way Claire and Molly talked to Melody was so awful. At that moment, I thought of how I would feel if I was in Melody's place. It would've felt so hurtful and sad. After thinking about it more and more, I figured out that special Ed kids aren't that different from "normal" kids. I made a promise to myself that I would never ignore, exclude, and judge them ever again. My friends also realized the same thing and promised with me. If you never wrote that book, I don't think I would have ever changed. Your book made a huge difference in lots of people's lives, including mine. This story encouraged me to take this special opportunity I was given in fifth grade. Our class was the only one that got to do it.

These adults came in and told the whole class about this opportunity to go and hangout with special Ed kids. We would have to be their peer buddies once every two weeks if we chose to take this opportunity. I was kind of having an internal conflict with myself during that moment. Half of me wanted to sign up but the other half of me didn't want to. In the end I chose to sign up and I'm glad I made the right decision. It felt so good to make them feel better and be someone's friend. We did different activities, fun art, and cool board games. One thing I want to do is tell everyone how great these kids were. They're not "different" or "weird". They are perfectly normal, just like everyone else. I'm in sixth grade right now and I still wish I could hang out with them again because it was so cool. The book, *"Out Of My Mind"* is truly amazing and is my favorite book of all time. There are so many reasons why I love this book that I'm out of my mind. Thank you so much for writing it.

Sincerely,  
Jennifer Nguyen  
Algonquin, IL

# Letters About Literature 2014

## Level II Illinois Winner

Dear Megan Kelley Hall and Carrie Jones,

Confusion. Regret. Worthlessness. As I flipped through the pages of Dear Bully, these feelings and emotions flooded through me, and not just because of the captivating yet utterly heartbreaking stories, though they certainly were a factor. I felt that way because the stories I read were all too familiar. For the first time I was able to come to a shocking conclusion. I had been a victim of the spiteful cruelty we call bullying.

Each day, 160,000 students miss school for fear of being bullied. It's almost imponderable, until I consider that I was once one of those students. Just like the authors whose stories were shared in Dear Bully, at that time my fifth grade self felt as if I had more than enough reason to weave myself into this statistic. The six girls who'd been considered my best friends for as long as I could remember had suddenly decided that I wasn't cool enough to be a part of their group. Without warning, I was no longer invited to hang out, had no seat saved for me at the lunch table, and any of my feeble attempts to talk to them were ignored. I thought it couldn't possibly get any worse, but that was before I started receiving the texts. Although the memory is a bit blurry, as the messages were read through tear-filled eyes, to this day, I still remember what the first one said- "Your name is Larissa Bersh, and you have no friends."

When school let out for the summer, I thought it would be an easy escape from my misery, but I had no such luck. The text messages continued to come, and they got worse too, to the point where I was ashamed of myself. Never once during this time period did I think to tell an adult, or anyone else, what I was going through. Instead of realizing what was happening and searching for a solution, I was blinded by the fact that the catalysts of my torment had seemed like such different people just weeks before.

That was three years ago. They've since apologized for – and have presumably forgotten about – what happened, but until a few weeks ago, I wasn't completely satisfied. It wasn't revenge that I wanted, but closure. I'd never known why they had chosen me specifically to exclude. Was there something wrong with me? Why wasn't I good enough? It hadn't occurred to me that this was bullying, and that I wasn't the only one experiencing it. Not only did Dear Bully help me give a label to one of the most critical ordeals of my life so far, but reading about people who had gone through a similar nightmare to mine gave me the sense of closure that I'd not only wanted, but felt as if I deserved. As I read, I came to the realization that there really is no rhyme or reason behind bullying. If anything, those doing the bullying prey on people they believe to be better than them in some way. By putting those people down, they can feel better about themselves. I had always thought that it was more a survival of the fittest, and that those being bullied were weaker. Considering that every single one of the authors who contributed to Dear Bully are now very successful, I was wrong. Those who were picked on were not the dumbest, ugliest, or most unpopular, which was exactly what I had previously accepted as the reasons for my own experience with bullying. In fact, they were often the opposite. With this knowledge, I was finally able to forgive the girls who bullied me. I even began feeling sorry for them, because they had felt the need to take their insecurities out on others.

Even as I was able to forgive them, I came to yet another realization. I will never forget what happened, nor do I want to. This experience did not make me weaker, as was wanted by the bullies themselves, but it made me stronger. Thanks to Dear Bully, I'm not embarrassed that I've been bullied. I can now accept that it's a part of my past, and although I'll always remember the way I felt and the lessons I learned, I've moved on. Now, I can proudly say the following- "My name is Larissa Bersh, and I'm happy with the person I've become."

Sincerely,  
Larissa Bersh  
Northbrook, IL

# Letters About Literature 2014

## Level III Illinois Winner

Dear Jane Austen,

I guess you could say that I'm just your average Asian American. Someone who wears glasses and sweatshirts on a daily basis, the same pair of jeans all week long, and speaks with a thinly veiled Chicago accent. I never really got the chance at life in which I didn't feel different. I remember that for birthdays five through ten, the only thing I wished for as I blew out my candles was to be "just like everybody else;" a Caucasian, with fine, round eyes and ivory skin. To be treated with bias on a daily basis because of something I couldn't control, like my race, well that's just senseless.

In seventh grade, I saw a girl toss your book, Pride and Prejudice, languidly onto a table and exit the library laughing loudly with a group of friends. The title intrigued me. I knew it was a love story, and a classic one at that. I checked out the book with mild, off-handed curiosity, not knowing that your novel would soon become an obsession. I read hungrily late into the night, my eyes quite unable to soak in the words at an adequate pace to keep time with my racing mind. *Can love exist in the presence of both pride and prejudice?* I asked myself as I read. *And furthermore, will it exist for me?* I knew that I had both living within myself.

Two hundred pages and many racial slurs later from my "friends," I returned the book to the library and picked up a copy of my own at the local bookstore. I mused, as my mother drove me home that day, over the possibility of a highly romanticized relationship ever blooming in my own future? Surely not. Such tales only existed between book-covers, not between two living, breathing human beings. And yet, there was hope. Somehow I knew that if we had both died and stood together at the foot of God, speaking not only woman to woman but also spirit to spirit, you would have told me that, "*there is hope.*"

When I made the decision to switch schools in the middle of my junior year in high school, I felt that my only true companions were your friendly, familiar words. It had always been a comfort to me to know that somewhere out there, in another time, in another world, someone else knew exactly how I felt. Granted, Elizabeth Bennet never had to face the problem of her race in her story, but she fought a very similar battle, one for her own place on the social ladder. And, as I write this letter to you, Jane, I am, too, in purgatory between schools; battling endlessly with my feelings of alienation that come from being called a "Twinkie," white on the inside, but undeniably yellow overall; an adopted Asian girl in a classroom full of upper-middle class, Midwest, beauty queens.

Today, using your own words from Pride and Prejudice as my sword, I continue to fight the war that plagues us all – the battle between one's self view and society's view of what that "self" should look like, act like, and be like. Still burdened with the memories of objects being thrown at me, like books, papers, and cruel words being hurled my way, like "chopsticks," somehow, each day, I continue to put one foot in front of the other. To say that reading your book was the magic pill that changed my life would be a lie, because I'm slowly realizing that only I have the power to change myself and the life I lead. My story isn't finished yet, Jane, far from it, because I now understand that I am the author of my own life. And although I'm regrettably writing in pen – and so what's happened in the past is irrevocably unchangeable, - still I am confident that I shall emerge as my story's heroine.

Despite the disparity in their social classes, Mr. Darcy loved Elizabeth all the more, and she him. If two people in a time so clouded by ignorance and bias could find each other, shouldn't I, in a world no less veiled by ignorance, keep my hope as well? Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, in order to find the love, had to put aside all that they had been taught, and their preconceived notions about beauty and class to set new standards for

## Letters About Literature 2014

themselves based on what *they* deemed as “good.” My dream is that maybe he is not a “Mr. Darcy,” maybe he’s just some geeky guy who sits in front of his computer all day in Vermont, but maybe he’ll see past what

society deems as “lesser” and get to know me for who I truly am. *This* person, the perfectly imperfect in his own way, is who I strive to meet. I hope that the people at my new school can help me to finally understand that the world is not all “good” or all “bad,” and that beauty is neither white nor yellow, beauty and love radiate from within. I know that one day, that phrase will become more than just words to me; those words will become a truth.

Now as I sit in front of my laptop, and dream lofty dreams about the next years that are to come, I am at peace knowing that I have *Pride and Prejudice* tucked neatly into my suitcase. There’s a stigma around people like me, Jane – people who have depression for reasons like being uncomfortable in one’s own skin. Which is why I’m going to be shipping off to a special boarding school and seeking the help that I undeniably need. But once I get there, this is what I will tell them:

*Yes, I’m Asian, and one day I will believe that I’m no less of a person because of it. I will see that we set the standards by which we are judged, within our own minds. Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth saw that, and once they did, they found each other. One day I hope I will find my “Mr. Vermont” and that I will be able to say, with confidence, “I will never be alone,” so long as I can find the person inside myself and introduce them to the world.*

Thank you, Jane, for sharing with me, yourself.

Sincerely,  
Jacqueline Barbera-Mirza  
Barrington, IL