

Letters About Literature 2015

Level I Illinois Winner

Dear Mr. Lamb and Mr. Ellsworth,

As an avid Cardinal fan Albert Pujols used to be one of my favorite players. I've been fortunate enough to see him play many games. I have witnessed him hit a grand-slam into Big-Mac Land and he and the Cardinals win the 2011 World Series. However, my feelings drastically changed about Albert after the 2011 season. Pujols signed a 10 year, \$240 million contract with the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim. As a Cardinal fan I was devastated. As a baseball player I couldn't comprehend the decision. He could have been a Cardinal legend like Stan Musial and Derek Jeter in New York. As a young boy, I lost one of my heroes. I had totally written Albert off until I picked up your book, *Pujols: More Than the Game*.

To be honest, I started reading the book because I needed something to read in my independent reading class. I was searching through some of my dad's books (because they're mostly sports books) and stumbled upon your book. After about a month, I finally finished the book. My opinion on Albert had changed drastically. Your biography truly inspired me. It showed me how somebody can come from nothing and be a super-star. More importantly, it showed me that giving back and being dedicated to God are the most important things in life.

Albert was born in the Dominican Republic, a less fortunate country. While he was making millions of dollars in America, he continued to give back to his native country. This shows me that he is a dedicated person and that he has not forgotten where he came from. If I follow my dream of becoming a Major League Baseball player or I get a job outside of my home town, I, like Albert, will not forget where I come from and the people who helped me along the way.

Albert believed that God put him on this Earth to give back, and that is exactly what he is doing. Through the years Albert has given countless dollars, time, and resources. The Pujols Family Foundation provides for families who live with Down Syndrome. He also assists families who cannot afford their own medicine. Because of his deep relationship with God, he also donates to local churches. Albert's generosity showed me that it is better to give than to receive.

Prior to reading your book I knew a lot about Albert's baseball life but not his personal life. I now have a better understanding of why he may have taken the higher dollar contract with the Angels than staying with the lower bid from the Cardinals. Hopefully many more will benefit from his earnings.

I would like to thank you for changing my perspective of Albert and inspiring me to be a giving person, devote myself to my faith, and to work hard at fulfilling my dreams. I have also learned that I should not be so judgmental. There are always two sides to every story. I guess you were right. There is more to Albert than just the game.

Sincerely,
Cameron Hailstone

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Level II Illinois Winner

Dear Joanne Kathleen Rowling,

If stories were food, I would be obese. Growing up my mom believed in the power of stories just as much as the next person (possibly even more), so it's no surprise that even as an eighth grader, I'm still enthralled by the *Harry Potter Series*. Like most things, Harry Potter holds different meanings for different people, but for me, it's difficult to sum up years of my life buying Harry Potter wands, waiting expectantly for the next book or movie, dressing up as Hermione for Halloween (multiple years in a row), and sitting on the couch with my family watching the movies for the millionth time. The best way to start is by picturing my knees pulled to my chest as a little girl, laying up against my mother as I read for the first time: "Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much." Picture her listening intently as I held the book up to my small nose sounding out the words, as I do the same with my younger brother, now. My mother didn't need to follow along because she knew the story by heart so no matter how much I stumbled over names and words, she always kindly corrected me. I was a small person empty of belief but your story filled those copious holes the second I began the story. Thank you.

Thank you for my love of stories. Believe it or not, when I was little, many hours of my childhood were spent bossing my brothers around, dressing up in robes, pointing sticks at people shouting spells that probably sounded like gibberish to the passing onlookers. "*Avada Kedavra*" – the killing curse – still stands as a viable curse word in my household. My brothers and I didn't just learn to love the phenomenon that is *Harry Potter*, we learned to love the idea of stories. Somehow the 7 books you wrote, inspired an infinite love of reading, and with that came a love of writing. Reading *Harry Potter* – a fairytale – I was enthralled by the way that fictions could parallel real life. For me, that is what gave me the curiosity to indulge myself into the realm of stories. Thank you for opening the door that, despite the struggles that may include the loss of a favorite character, encompasses the giddy feeling I get from walking into Barnes and Noble, and nourishing my insatiable hunger for stories.

Thank you for teaching me about passion. Like I previously stated, *Harry Potter* means something different to everyone, but for me, it took some time to arrive at this conclusion: *Harry Potter* means passion. The fact is, everything that happens in *Harry Potter* is enveloped in an aura of passion. *Harry Potter* has changed the way I see the world and I know that it doesn't matter that I may have no clue who I am or what I want to do with my life (like the average teenager), because the only life for me, is the passionate one.

Thank you for teaching me about characters. It's strange how one can feel something about someone that "technically" doesn't exist. *Harry Potter* taught me that there is a no fine line between a bad guy and a good guy: Snape, the man that everyone learns to hate after Book 6, finds a way to make readers feel empathy for him after ... I won't spoil what may be the best plot twist of all time. Every character has a story, and it has helped me realize in real life, that every single person has one too. Though equally important as many others, thank you for Hermione. Like many girls, I look up to Hermione in a way that's difficult to put into words. Hermione was the first female heroine to show me that it doesn't take a man to change the world. Thank you for giving me a role model that taught me and my brothers the real meaning of what it means to be a feminist, a girl, and a human being.

Thank you for adventure. Just thinking about adventure evokes visions of Indiana Jones and Superman, but I found that my life could be adventurous if I wanted it to. *Harry Potter* is something that one can learn from no matter who they are or how many times you have already read it, so once I got over the disappointment of not getting a Hogwarts letter at age 11 (my owl experienced some altercations along the way apparently), I

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realized eventually that my life could be an adventure (even without attending a Wizardry School in England). Thank you for the opportunity to see things in a special way.

Thank you. So, as I write to you at the desktop in my house I think of me as a little girl, reading with my mom, then reading all by myself, and now with my younger brother. I think of me the day I started *The Sorcerer's Stone* and the day I finished *The Deathly Hallows*. All the days I went on fantastic adventures and all the days I sat wondering about them, wishing I could relive the moments like the very first time. Thank you for giving me a reason to write and the inspiration to do what you have done to me, to someone else. Thank You, for teaching me to see things in an extraordinary way. *Harry Potter* isn't "just a story." It's a lifestyle, and I gladly chose to indulge myself everyday by not only owning shelves of *Harry Potter* merchandise, but by living my life with love, friendship, and passion. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Claudia Hope Levens

P.S. My brothers and I ask you to "please write another book about Harry. Thanks!"

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Level III Illinois Winner

Level III National Winner

Dear Mary,

I know it's an unconventional subject for a letter; death. A fact of life that most of us endeavour to avoid, or at least ignore. But I, Mary – I have walked side-by-side with death all of my life.

I was thirteen the first time I read your poem, and at that time in my life there was a good chance that I would not see my fourteenth birthday. I had been depressed since age ten, but I had never received any treatment. My mind was very dark; I dove deeper and deeper into my own twisted thoughts with each passing moment. I was someone who was simultaneously terrified of dying, and yet obsessed with the very idea. I was also suicidal, which is a state of being that I cannot well describe, because there are not words that can describe such utter loss of hope, such bitterness and pain and unrelenting sorrow. I wanted to end my own life so badly that most days I could not find one single reason for living. It was not a cry for attention; it was a feeling of utter self-hatred. There is also no accurate way to describe the feeling of hating yourself and your life so much that you long to end it all. It is a feeling of being trapped, of being insane, of being hopeless. When you are suicidal, you are like a wild animal just barely being contained by a thin human shell. Your soul is empty and your heart is blackened and dead. You have no straws left to grasp, no ladder to climb out of the abyss, and the only rope offered to help you scramble out is in the shape of a noose, and after weeks or months or years that noose begins to look very, very appealing.

So there I stood, face-to-face with death on a daily basis, wondering if each new day was the day that it would finally consume me. I was afraid of my own mind. I found no comfort in wooden crosses or the taste of bitter crackers, nor in the deluded words of psychiatrists. That eventual uncertainty - the uncertainty of the terror of my own death – haunted my footsteps as I walked from day to day, wearing it like a heavy, bitter cloak. The very idea of my own death was killing me.

The, one day, in my seventh-grade English class, I was presented with your poem. My teacher referred to it as 'a dark poem with note of hope underlying,' but within it, I found so much more. Within it, I found new life. My mind opened up as I read your words; I was a frail but inspired butterfly clawing my way from a dark, putrid cocoon. The way you spoke, Mary; the way you talked about death, and how it sought to take all the bright coins from your purse, how it was an iceberg between your shoulder blades leeching the warm life out of your form. I could tell: you knew. You knew what it felt like to be owned by death's shadow, in the same way that I was then. You had felt the same terror, the same all-consuming dread. But you were also strong. You faced death and said that it did *not* own you; you had looked into death's dark eyes and said, "*No, you cannot have me, I am not yet done here.*" When you spoke of not wanting to have simply visited this world, my own world turned upside down. I began to think about how horrible it would be to have only been a visitor, in the way that you said; to not have made my mark on the world, to have only passed through with no real substance. I thought of a life lived entirely in absence of beauty and amazement, a life barren of love or excitement or laughter. I began to realize that that was what suicide would do to me. I saw that life was fast becoming my own. I saw killing myself would take me away before I even had the chance to make something of my life. Suicide would eliminate my pain, yes, but it also closed any doors of possibility that I might have still open to me; doors that may lead to happiness in my future.

I never would have imagined, Mary, that *not* killing myself would be one of the hardest decisions that I would ever have to make. But in the end, I made the choice, and I am still alive today. My life has not been full of joy; in fact, it has been dark, and hard, and at times I have even slipped back into death's unrelenting grasp. But at those times, I have reminded myself of what I thought then – that I want to make something of my life, and

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that ending it would mean turning my back on all future possibilities, as well as the few pieces of happiness that I have managed to find in the present. At those dark times, Mary, I often also read your poem to myself – the poem that catalyzed my grand suicidal epiphany. I still struggle with this menace of the mental method, but now I have one thing that I did not have before, I have hope.

When Death Comes, Mary – and it will – I want to face it as an equal, and shake its hand as a friend, and accept it as an eventuality. You taught me that that is the only proper way to die. With your words you taught me that life cannot be lived in the shadow of death – that life must be a thing *separate* from death. And you taught me that when death comes, I should embrace it, but also that I should not welcome it before its time. You taught me, Mary, that there was nothing to be feared in death so long as my life was one well-lived.

“I do not want to end up having simply visited this world” ...

And When Death Comes, Mary, I will tell it that you were my friend. Because you were. I will tell it that I am armed with your words, and it will bow its dark face in respect, and then, it will offer me its hand and lead me into whatever may or may not lay behind it. I will feel no fear, Mary – I no longer fear death and all its ways. I will know that I have beaten death down with your words and the inspiration that they gave me. I will know that I did not let it take me in any way but the one I wanted. And I will know that my life, no matter how twisted, corrupt, and fearful, was worth living.

So thank you, Mary. Thank you for wrenching death’s grip from my wrist. Thank you for showing me that the burden of my soul was not so dark. That there was still hope left in me.

Love,
Aidan