

Letters About Literature 2016

Level I Illinois Winner

Dear RJ Palacio,

Let me first start by saying that I wasn't that excited to read your book Wonder when my mom handed it to me. I'm a pretty good reader who just so happens to not enjoy reading unless it's a book that interests me immediately and that doesn't seem to happen often. My mom is always searching for a book that she hopes will grab my attention and turn me into a reader and less of a "gamer" on my iPad. When my mom handed me your book and said "here you go, I think this is perfect for you", I took one look at the length of the book and immediately tossed it to the side. After my mom asked me for the 1,000th annoying time if I started the book yet, I finally picked it up and started skimming the first page. As I started reading I immediately become so interested in August that I couldn't put the book down.

Wonder is a book full of lessons and I'd say the best kind of lessons! One lesson I took from the book was bravery. Auggie had never been to school before starting Middle School. I'm only in fourth grade, but I'll be starting Middle School next year. I'm already nervous to start fifth grade. What will it be like? Are the older kids going to be mean? Will the older kids accept me? Will they make fun of me? Will I know what I'm doing? Will I be able to figure out my locker? Will I be able to make it to class on time and what will lunch be like? Most importantly, is there time to go to the bathroom? I've already heard horror stories that give me anxiety from friends who have older siblings in middle school. Auggie was brave to start Middle School knowing that kids weren't going to accept him and would call him names and make fun of him. I loved his new friend, Summer, right away! I can relate to Summer in a lot of ways and immediately thought, "Hey, this girl is just like me!" I think just like Summer. Summer's loyal and kind. She saw Auggie sitting by himself at lunch and she literally decided to go sit with him and become his friend and a true friend. Summer was able to ignore the haters and what everyone else was whispering and saying and she thought about Auggie and what he was thinking and feeling. I can honestly relate to this and I myself have been in a similar situation without getting into too many details. It was the first time I've read a book that had a character I really understood.

This book is all about kindness and acceptance. Our school is on a really big "Be Kind" campaign and it's pretty cool! Kids can be mean. It seems like there are just some days when kids decide when they show up at school that they're on a mission to be nasty and bring someone down. I truly think a lot of times it is because they have something else going on in their life that's upsetting them, so they take it out on other kids. Sometimes I think kids do it to show off for their friends. It is sad that being mean and hurting someone can somehow translate into "Watch me everyone, I'm cool and funny". It amazes me how many kids sit and laugh along with a bully when they have to know it's not right. Nobody wants to be made fun of, including a bully. I wish more people would think about how the other person must feel before they go out of their way to bring them down. Wouldn't it be awesome if everyone could be kind, think about others feelings, put others before themselves, accept each others differences, keep their mean opinions to themselves and just be nice?

Betrayal was another part of this book and something I think all of us have experienced and will experience again. Jack was one of Auggie's best friends and Auggie caught Jack talking about him and making fun of the way Auggie looks. Unfortunately, this is something we will all go through at some point even with our closest friends. Jack ended up doing the right thing and made the choice to be Auggie's friend and stand up for him. This book is about doing what you know is right even when it's not the cool thing to do.

Even though I didn't want to read all 404 pages of this book, I'm really happy I did! I enjoyed reading each character's point of view. I loved the characters, the quotes, the story, the message, and well let's just say I

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loved the whole book! I especially loved the message. I feel like the message was that a little kindness can go a long way. I can't stop thinking about this book and I think it is a book that all kids my age should read.

Because of your book, I look forward to reading a lot more than I used to. Thank you for writing a book we can all relate to and learn from!

WHEN GIVEN THE CHOICE BETWEEN BEING RIGHT AND BRING KIND, CHOOSE KIND.

Sincerely,

Emma Blaum

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Level II Illinois Winner

Dear David Levithan,

For a while, the thing I identified as was 'broken'. When the term 'bisexual' wasn't frequently used, when all I knew was that sometimes I stared at boys and sometimes I stared at girls, I thought there was something wrong with me, with my brain. At the time, I didn't even know that two people of the same sex could love each other just like the girl and the boy from those cliché movies and television shows. When I grew older and the world started to appear in facts instead of false truths, the word 'gay' was introduced. But I wasn't gay. I wasn't straight. I was broken.

My mind screamed words that I will never want to feel again as I had to tear away gazes at girls and place them on a random boy. I was in denial. I kept telling myself over and over that I can fix this. This is something fixable, like my heart was a shattered china doll and I could pick up the glue and slowly piece myself back together again. That this was a phase. That this could all just go away if I just tried hard enough. But no matter how hard I wished and pleaded and prayed, it was still a part of me that would never leave.

This thought lurked in the back of my head for years and years and years, this little flaw in my programming, this little *inconvenience, problem, quirk, error*. This was something about me that I had to hide because it wasn't normal, this *thing* I was feeling wasn't normal. You are gay or you are straight. There is no in between.

I told myself words that I would rather not say, words that made me even more ashamed of who I was. I described myself as words that, even now, are still buried deep inside my head. These are words and phrases that society forced into me and into all the other queer people in this wretched world that we live in. Those words are still words that I'm still trying to chip out, and believe me, these words will take a lot of chipping to fully remove from the deepest darkest corners of my brain.

So I hid. I hid and I hid and I hid. I tucked myself far back in the metaphorical closet and covered my face and identity with forgotten winter coats and only peeked out of the doors when I thought no one was watching. It was there when I started to pile the clothes on top of me in an awful attempt to stifle everything inside of my head. All I wanted was to make this go away, to make the voices whispering these words and for everything and everyone to *just leave me alone*.

I hated feeling this way. Feeling like I couldn't get out of bed in the morning because there was nothing to keep me going. It wasn't just the fact that I was queer, but that was one of the main things that affected me in such a negative way. I was different. I was unusual. I was queer in a heteronormative society. My mind was shrieking that I wouldn't survive and slowly I started to believe that was true.

When I first picked up *Will Grayson Will Grayson*, I didn't know that your Will Grayson was gay. I didn't know anything about the book except for it featured two boys with the same name who meet in Chicago, where I happen to live. When I read about your Will Grayson, I had a character to relate to. He was a closeted boy who didn't want anyone to find out about his identity and was so set on living his life in denial that he couldn't be happy. My mind latched onto Will Grayson and kept telling me "*that could be you that could be you*" over and over again. I kept reading.

Will Grayson found peace at the end of the book in a form of being out of the closet. Of course, he wasn't openly gay (such as Tiny Cooper), but he stumbled out of the closet and shut the door behind him for good. I wanted to come out, but I couldn't. The closet door was still shut. But I had started to creep closer to the door.

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Two Boys Kissing was more than just two boys kissing: it was a life savior. The book was being told by the deceased LGBTQ+ populations, the ones that passed from AIDs, and the little comments that they said in between passages were like knives that kept sinking deeper and deeper in my flesh. They were honest. They were heartfelt. They were beautiful. The narrators seemed to be waving their skeletal hands in front of my face, clapping along as they yelled “*wakeup!*” I woke up.

I told myself, for the first time ever, who I was. I removed those piles and piles of sweaters and coats and shoved them to the side. I didn’t come out of the closet. I fell out head first because I was taken by surprise how much there was out there. The light was blinding, the warmth that I felt spread through my veins, and I think I cried.

You told me that “there are moments where you don’t think you will survive. And then you survive.” There were times that I was too scared to walk by high places alone because I didn’t know what I would do. There were times where I had to try to place my thoughts on getting through the day. I didn’t know if I would survive. I survived. I’m surviving.

You told me that “there is no reason that we should ever be ashamed of our bodies or ashamed of our love.” It was that line that started to clear the first layer of my mind. There is no reason to be ashamed of the people we love. You are right, David Levithan. Thank you.

“If you let the world in, you open yourself up to the world. Even if the world doesn’t know you’re there.” You gave me courage that I can never repay you for. When I laid in bed and pondered over your words, I closed my eyes and imagined letting the world flood in. A whirl of maybes danced in front of me and I saw myself opening, my china doll being picked up and put back on the shelf because the manufacturer realized that it was never broken at all. I was never broken at all. One by one, I told my friends. I crossed off their names and smiled after each new strikethrough that appeared in my head because I had confided in people, the people I knew I could trust. I am only a small person in a large world, but I started to let the world in and opened myself up. I wasn’t alone anymore.

“That’s all we ask of you. Make more than dust.”

I will make more than dust.

Forever Thankful,

Sarah Song Huddleston

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Level III Illinois Winner

Dear Mr. Kotlowitz,

I wanted to let you know how much your book *There Are No Children Here* changed the way I view the world. It opened my eyes to the nature of one's role in communities and how communities can support or inhibit one's goals and aspirations. Every person lives within many different communities, including their neighborhood, school, family, religion, and friends. Each of these communities has expectations for each of its members and has roles for each person. While the communities to which I belong are very supportive of me pursuing my dreams, your story made me realize that other communities have a powerful influence to do the opposite.

For me, the most powerful part of the story was Lafayette's struggle to escape the neighborhood in which he lived. Upon reading this, I realized that the influence of one's environment could be inescapable. As a young child, Lafayette was driven to escape the horrors of the Henry Horner Homes through education. However, as he grew, this determination was slowly swallowed by the temptations around him, especially from the influence of the older children like Ricky. He slowly started drifting towards crime, even after seeing his older brother in jail. Eventually Lafayette was charged with armed robbery. The neighborhood had changed him completely. I was shocked that even though he seemed as if he was heading in the right direction, the pull of his environment was so strong that it could completely change his goals and aspirations.

Lafayette's tragic story made me realize how hard it is to break away from what is expected. Not only do you have to fight the instincts of conformity inside you, but you also have to fight the influences of the community around you. It is a gravitational pull, slowly and constantly pulling everyone in the community back to the status quo. These pressures can be both beneficial and detrimental, either helping you towards success or pulling you away from it. This is true anywhere, not just in the inner city of Chicago.

There Are No Children Here opened my eyes to this communal gravity in my own life. I was inspired to take notice of similar situations where confining social generalizations were holding people back. When I entered high school, I joined both the math and science teams to find that only a handful of girls attended. I noticed this again when I founded a Maker Club at my school and almost no girls enrolled. For some reason, smart girls were not connecting with the sciences. I realized after reading your book that this was probably due, at least in part, to the expected social norms for girls that were pulling them away from exploring science and math. The fact that there were few girls in the clubs made it even harder for them to break away from what was expected. I felt compelled try to help these girls escape the gravitational pull of their peers.

I decided to take action. I began by working with another student to organize a girls-only computer-programming workshop over the summer. We tried to make the class fun and interesting for the girls by teaching concepts that were exciting and creative, such as designing video games. We taught these classes weekly, and by the end of the summer we generated a lot of interest in science, technology, engineering, and math, also known as STEM.

I also tried to help younger girls break out of this mold by reaching out to the Girl Scouts and showing them the exciting side of STEM. I worked a booth at a Girl Scout STEM convention where I presented 3D printing concepts to interested scouts. This time, in order to make it intriguing for the girls, I 3D printed things that I knew my little sister would enjoy, including animals, hearts, and stars. My goal was to inspire the same passion that I had for STEM in the young Girl Scouts. Based on the barrage of questions and constant excited giggling coming from the crowd of girls around my booth, I felt that I made a difference and reached my goal.

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Reading *There Are No Children Here* has greatly changed the way I view the world around me. Now, I am constantly seeing ways in which society is hold people back from their dreams. Even though I cannot help Lafayette get back on the right track, I hope that I made a difference in the lives of the girls that I have taught. Even if I only influenced one girl, I feel that I succeeded. I intend on continuing to weaken the communal gravity that is pulling girls away from STEM as I move on to life in college. Once they have escaped this gravity, the will be able to shoot for the stars in all of their endeavors.

Sincerely,

Zachary Kowalczyk