



Jesse White

SECRETARY OF STATE

NEWS

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WHITE ANNOUNCES ILLINOIS WINNERS OF 2006 LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE CONTEST

SPRINGFIELD — Secretary of State and State Librarian Jesse White has announced the Illinois winners of the annual Letters About Literature contest presented by The Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, in partnership with Target Stores and sponsored by the Illinois Center for the Book.

The Letters About Literature contest is a national reading and writing program for children and teenagers. Participants write a personal letter to an author, explaining how his or her work changed their views of the world or themselves. Readers may select authors from any genre--fiction or nonfiction, contemporary or classic. The Illinois Center for the Book appointed judges who selected the top essayists in the state on each of three competition levels. This year's winners are:

- Level I, for children in grades 4 through 6, **Annika Sundberg** of Lake Zurich, who wrote her letter to Jerry Spinelli, author of *Stargirl*. Annika is in the sixth grade at Lake Zurich Middle School.
- Level II, for grades 7 and 8, **Abigail Renner** of Ashland, who wrote her letter to Ben Mikaelson, author of *Petey*. Abigail is in the 8th grade at A-C Central Junior High School in Chandlerville.
- Level III, for grades 9 - 12, **Heather Vogt** of Sheridan, who wrote her letter to J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings*. Heather is a senior at Serena High School in Serena.

"I am delighted to congratulate these three talented young readers, who were among nearly 2,000 Illinois students who took part in this rewarding and innovative reading initiative," said White, who also serves as honorary chair of the Illinois Center for the Book. "Though only these three students will advance to national competition, all of the students who took part are winners because they are immersing themselves in the magic and joy of reading. I am confident their participation will help these young people develop a lifelong love of reading and learning."

The three winning students each receive a cash award from the Illinois Center for the Book, a \$50 Target Gift card and a plaque. The three state level first place winners also advance for national competition, in which two national winners will be selected from each competition level. Target Stores will send the six national winners, two parents/guardians and one teacher to Washington, D.C. to attend the National Book Festival this fall. The national winners will read their winning letters during the festival. Each national winner also receives a \$500 Target Gift card.

Dear Ben,

I really enjoyed your book Petey. It was a very moving story. It is inspiring because of the way the story encourages us to treat people with special needs like human beings. It really reminded me that I need to pay more attention to people with unfortunate illnesses. Also, your book says a lot about friendships. Because a teenage boy like Trevor became friends with an old guy like Petey, it encouraged me to do the same. I think that I can put effort into being friends with people I don't normally talk to.

I do have one friend that is a lot like Petey. His name is Bobby and he is like a grandpa to me. He is seventy-years old and has cerebral palsy. He is confined to a wheelchair and lives in a nursing home. Sometimes when he talks it is hard to understand him, but I try my best. He has more guts, wisdom, persistence, and personality than anyone I know. He always thinks of other people before himself and helps out any way he can. The people who look at him funny do not understand that it is not the outside that defines a person. His outside might be a little rusty, but his inside is pure gold.

Your book and my friend Bobby taught me that good friendships can be developed with all kinds of different people. You do not have to limit yourself to people your own age. I liked the way Trevor reached out to Petey. Their friendship benefited the both of them even though they were not the typical friends for each other. There are some people who need our friendship. Your book helped me realize that. An act of kindness could mean a lot to someone who is going through problems at home or at school. I am sure you know that since you wrote the book. I think we should make it a priority to be extra nice to people who need it.

Thank you for writing the book Petey. I am sure it has touched a lot of people. I know it has taught me a lot of valuable lessons.

Sincerely,
Abby Renner

Dear Jerry Spinelli,

I read your book, *Stargirl*, because it had a cool cover, description, and title, but it turned out to be more than just a stylish looking book. Stargirl is like me when I was in 2nd and 3rd grade; nice, energetic, and all smiles. Then, in 4th grade, I was exposed to a variety of new things: much more hurtful insults, *bad* words, and the line that separated the cool and the uncool, things that bounced off Stargirl like a basketball off a backboard. I started using an attitude I never knew I had. I started being tough and, now and then, mean. Your book saved me from what might have been my dark, dreary future.

Stargirl helped me see that insulting people was not the way to go, even when they insulted you. She gave most people a warm, fuzzy feeling inside by doing simple things like giving them candy on Halloween or singing "Happy Birthday" to them. She showed me how to be helpful, inspiring, and most importantly: kind. I realized once again, no matter how they acted, others have feelings too. I learned from her to think before I speak, even though I had been told to do so many times before by my teachers and parents. Without realizing it, I had listened to others' insults and repeated them to my peers. She helped me greatly.

With my mother, though, it was different. We went from close to over 15 arguments a day, consistently! I was beginning to be touchy, overly-dramatic, and independent, while my mother was (to me) too dramatic herself. As I watched Stargirl live her life without fighting and making (almost) everyone happy, I asked myself, "How does she do that?" I tried to be optimistic like her, but it didn't work. After that, I read your book wide-eyed, thinking about everything she said and did, and then changing it to

where it was my own. Within a few weeks, I was free again, all thanks to you.

What I wrote may seem like a little thing in a huge life, but it isn't.

Your book changed me for the better, and I appreciate it a ton. You filled up my happy wagon all the way. Like Archie said, "you rarely see Star People" . I'm glad I saw this one.

Thanks.

Annika E. Sundberg

J. R. R. Tolkien
The Lord of the Rings

Dear Professor Tolkien:

I have a terrible confession. I actually avoided your books for some time, believing them to be just another series of silly children's books. But upon finally reading them, I found the one thing that I was looking for most—acceptance.

I have never fit in with the world around me. I was born and raised in the country, but I've never liked farming or fields. My personal life has been just as desolate, a constant shuffle of friends changing faster than I am and embracing lifestyles and morals I avoid. My parents have always been loving and supportive, but my extended family is made up of people who have never completely approved of me. Since my world has often been cold and unfriendly, I turn to other places for acceptance—usually books. Where other people criticize my clothes and style because I don't have the "look," the characters I read about willingly make me a part of their lives and accept me as I am, and none more so than the citizens of Middle-earth.

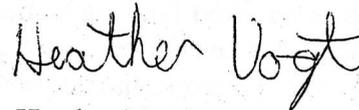
I have often been accused of being sentimental about fiction, and I grudgingly admit that I probably am. But with The Lord of the Rings, the tears I shed were justified. The final words signaled that I had reached the end of a long and much loved journey, and that I must return to reality—which I still found incredibly lacking. During that time in my life, I was struggling more than usual. I had hoped that high school would be a change for me, that I would finally find a sense of belonging. But it didn't work out that way. I once again found myself at the bottom of the social food chain—a skinny nerd who had no sense of fashion or the looks to back it up. Separated from my few friends, most of whom are younger, I was lonely and disappointed with my life.

But your books changed that. Suddenly, I had another place to go to, a sanctuary I could disappear into when times got too rough, a place where I was welcome and where everyone shared my grief in some way. If I found myself collapsing under the world's weight, Frodo was there, struggling just as I was—and surviving. When something horrible turned the world into a terrifying place, Galadriel opened Lothlorien's warm and safe embrace as a haven. Eowyn healed my heart and insisted that all was not lost when the man I loved rejected me. The demons without and within were no match for the Three Hunters, who defended me with sword, axe, arrows, and the invincible power of friendship. If pride kept me from turning to others for advice, Gandalf would take my

hand and help me find the answer. When my pessimism and negativity kept me from really enjoying my life, Merry and Pippin would march into the room to lead me in a silly song and dance that left me feeling ridiculous—but happy. But most importantly, Sam was always there to help me battle the stereotypes placed on me, and he made me realize that being different didn't make me inferior—it made me amazing.

Since that time, my life has improved greatly. I have resigned myself to the fact that self-acceptance is better than worldly acceptance, and I do not let people's opinions bother me anymore. My younger friends are now in high school with me, other friends have been discovered in unlikely places, and curbing my ego has made me closer to my parents. Now when I am in need of a hug or words of wisdom, I find myself dialing the phone or walking into the living room instead of running to my bookshelf. I don't think that Middle-earth minds though. The world you created was a special refuge for me for a long time, and the people there are still some of the best friends I will ever have, but I think we all knew that some day I wouldn't be coming back. But then again, someday I may turn the shiny yellow knob on the round green door and stride into Bag-End with a smile and say, "Well, I'm back."

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Heather Vogt". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Heather Vogt

The Illinois Center for the Book (illinoiscenterforthebook.org), an affiliate of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, is a not-for-profit organization promoting books, book arts, libraries and reading in Illinois. Established in 1985, the organization's mission is to celebrate the printed word and to create in Illinois an environment that promotes reading, the book arts and an appreciation of the state's rich literary heritage.

Target Stores, along with its parent company Target Corporation (NYSE:TGT), gives back more than \$2 million a week to its local communities through grants and special programs. Since opening its first store in 1962, Target has partnered with nonprofit organizations, guests and team members to help meet community needs.

(The winning letters are attached.)

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