

Lena Miller  
Campus Middle School for Girls  
106 South Webber Street  
Urbana, IL 61802

Dear Jewell Parker Rhodes,

I always thought that change was a bad thing. There was something about it that made me feel uncomfortable. Even a small change like switching teachers, bothered me to the point where I felt sick. Change was the darkness that I had always stayed away from. But then I read about Deja, the brave, strong, main character of your book, Towers Falling. She faced so much change in her life but was unfazed by it. Even when she learned about the events of 9/11 and how her father was working at the World Trade Center that day, she showed resilience. Your book taught me that change isn't something to be afraid of, it's a chance to grow and learn new things.

Before this book, I had no clue what 9/11 was. My parents told me not to search it because I would regret it. Although it didn't really matter to me, because it didn't seem like something I wanted to learn about. But reading your book made me want to know more. I tried to ask my parents about it, but instead of telling me, they just changed the subject like Deja's father did when she asked him what happened during 9/11. But like Deja, my desire to know was stronger than my willingness to forget about it. I hadn't known what to expect when I looked up 9/11 for the first time. I can still remember clearly the video I saw. Two aircrafts come smashing into the Twin Towers. Suffocating smoke everywhere. I had wanted to stop the video, pretend like I had never seen it. But my eyes were glued to the screen, watching the towers crumble and then vanish from the skyline. Almost 3,000 people were killed on 9/11. Now I understand why my parents were afraid to tell me about this. They thought I would change. They didn't want me to live a life of fear that something as terrible as that might happen to me. And I did change, just not the way they thought I would. I changed by becoming more aware of how 9/11 affected people and still affects some today.

One thing about your book that made me think is your perspective on change. Before I laid hands on your book, whenever I thought about change and what it was, the only things that came to mind were, "This is a bad thing," and, "Stay away." But seeing how well Deja dealt with her fears directed my thoughts towards things more like, "This is an opportunity for new ideas," and, "If you turn this down, you may regret it." Towers Falling made me realize that I've been missing out for part of my life. Because if I keep pushing new things away, I'm never going to go anywhere.

I came across a particular quote on my computer one day that I immediately felt very passionate about. It said, "*In any given moment we have two options: To step forward into growth, or to step back into safety.*" - Abraham Maslow. I loved this quote so much because reminds of how I want to handle change. Those really are our two options. It seems like nothing can go wrong if you just stay in the safety zone. And that's how I thought before I read your book. I hadn't realized it then, but I was staying in the safety zone, pushing away anything that was new and different. And Deja was too at first. But this quote and Towers Falling were like a wake-up call for me. Holding myself back wasn't helping me overcome my fear of change, it

was making it worse. But Deja helped me learn that even just taking a tiny step into growth will give you enough courage to take another one. So because of that, change isn't as scary for me anymore. Towers Falling sent a powerful message to me. That it's much more beneficial to take small steps into growth, than to take small steps back into safety.

Sincerely,

*Lena Miller*

Lena Miller, Grade 6

#22

108 S. Webber

Urbana, IL 61802

December 13, 2019

Dear John Green,

I was only about eight years old when my parents decided it was time that I see a therapist for clinically-diagnosed anxiety disorder, and it was during that time when I realized I was not a “normal” young girl. I have always felt as though I must commit to showering everyday in precise counts of seven, and make sure that I clean my body meticulously after going to the bathroom. Whenever I get sucked into this spiral of anxious thoughts, I close into myself, and become unaware of what is going on outside. I get sweaty palms, rapid heart beat, and a sick feeling that clenches my stomach and insides. Then I picked up *Turtles All the Way Down*, and soon it was as though there was an irresistible magnetic force attracting my eyes to the heartfelt pages of your novel. Your book changed the way that I saw myself as someone with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder compared to other people, comforting me, and making me feel less alone in the world.

When my parents first described how I took a long time to comb my hair and take a single shower at night to the psychiatrist, they said that my case was a “mental illness”, and in that moment I felt extremely nervous and scared. My brain was only able to process the words no, no, no, no, while my mind perpetually spun around like a top. I thought of my condition as being crazy, weird, mentally sick, crippled and damaged, and especially different. I truly felt alone because of OCD, but *Turtles All the Way Down* made me acknowledge that lots of other people have gone through the same nerve-racking experiences as I have, which comforted me immensely. I could deeply relate to how Aza felt about being stuck inside of her own head, and

not being able to control her own anxiety. Aza forces herself to swallow hand sanitizer, fearing that she will catch a disease called Clostridium Difficile Colitis in her microbial system. She describes her conflict with her own thoughts like this: “You don’t actually want to do this; it’s just an invasive. Everyone has them. But you can’t shut yours up. Since you’ve had a reasonable amount of cognitive behavioral therapy, you think I am not my thoughts, even though deep down you’re not sure what exactly that makes you,” (Green 46). Similar to Aza, I constantly ask myself, what kind of person would you be if you didn’t think like this? I’m only bound to get swept up into the spiraling storm of my own thoughts. Even though Aza and I don’t always worry about the exact same things, it is clear that OCD affects us both greatly in the same way. I think that it is very difficult to describe one’s struggles with OCD, because once I get tangled up in my own intrusive thoughts it feels as though anxiety is a true part of me and is the cause of every significant action I do. I appreciate that you put a great effort into describing a difficult experience that I can really, truly relate to.

*Turtles All the Way Down* lead me to accept my condition around other people, and feel comfortable with them being aware of my OCD behaviors. Before I felt as though my friends would suddenly avoid interacting with me and that others would judge me if I ever opened up to them about my struggles with mental illness. I never mentioned OCD in general in front of anyone and for a while I completely avoided talking about it to my therapist. Aza constantly carries around a pack of Band-Aids during the school day because she has a cut on her finger that she cleans periodically throughout the day, while being anxious about it getting infected. Similar to Aza, I normally have to take a pack of baby wipes with me wherever I go, because often I hurt myself when I clean up after going to the bathroom. Aza’s parents, her best friend Daisy, and Davis still inevitably loved her and cared for her despite knowing about her obsessive-compulsive

behaviors and noticing the ways that she dealt with them. When Aza talks to Daisy about her struggles with anxiety and being unable to control her these perpetual thoughts, Daisy said that she wished she could understand it. She replied to Daisy, "It's okay. Nobody gets anybody else, not really. We're all stuck inside ourselves," (Green 244). I realized that my friends wouldn't look at me as someone "mentally-ill" if they ever knew about my OCD, and still care for me despite my unnecessary struggles. I even decided myself to talk about my experiences in front of my close friends and family. For example, I once talked to my sister about what it's like for me to be stressed and anxious all the time and she asked if I was gradually getting better and if I would be able to recover soon. Even though I must explain that it takes time to get over mental illness, I recognize that she felt concerned and that she genuinely cared for me in a loving way.

While I am also able to express my deep struggles with OCD, through your writing of this book, I was able to recognize the gifts of experiencing these types of struggles. Soon after reading it, I became aware that your book was based off of difficult, personal experiences you had earlier in your life with mental illness. I realized that you also had the purpose of spreading OCD awareness to your readers. This is one of the gifts that comes with my condition and others alike, because we are able to educate the community and put our heart and soul into expressing emotions we feel when we are anxious. Adding on, I then showed more empathy towards others around me that struggle with other types of mental illnesses such as anorexia, ADHD, and depression (just to name a few), because now having OCD is much easier to share with the world around me. I no longer feel paranoid around "normal" people.

Reading your book made me want to burst into tears because of how deeply I was able to connect with Aza and relate to how difficult it is for her to face mental illness. I could feel tears

pooling out of my eyes like fountains as every paragraph seemed to reach out and touch me in a way with delicate hands or shake me up inside, sending a sudden chill down my spine. *Turtles All the Way Down* has brought me to accept the part of me that I am not able to control, and can be traumatizing at times, in front of others. Not only has your book encouraged me to not worry so much about putting my own anxiety in perspective with the ordinary world, but also to speak out for mental illness in my own way. To consider advocating for OCD awareness by simply talking about these types of struggles in front of my classmates. I no longer have to be “normal” to carry on with my own life and live it to the fullest, while engaging with close friends and family who will be newly aware of how I struggle internally, making me feel secure and comforted. Thank you for sparking such a significant change in my everyday life and self-perspective. I couldn't imagine taking this message away from any other source besides your truly poignant novel. Thank you for expressing the terrifying struggles of a teenage girl with mental illness that I can very deeply connect to, in such vivid language. *Turtles All the Way Down* has helped change my perspective of myself as well as my perspective of the diverse world around me. In moments where I suffer from being overly anxious I will remember your book, and how Aza's experiences with OCD made me realize that I am not alone, for which I am forever grateful. Thank you, John Green, for giving me this very miraculous opportunity.

Sincerely,

Leyla Cohen, 7th

Kayla Jastrzebski  
6111 W. 175th St.  
Tinley Park, IL 60477  
Illinois Center for the Book  
300 South Second St.  
Springfield, IL 62702

Dear Ashley Herring Blake,

*Girl Made of Stars* really called out to me, and I'm so glad it did: It helped me. I remember when I first opened up your book. I was afraid that I'd be caught reading it, because I didn't want anyone to find out about what happened to me. I was terrified to let the monster out from its cage, despite having a treacherous longing to get that weight off of my chest. Still, I was determined to read it. I wanted to be able to say that I pulled through, and I did. It was a long, hard, painful journey reading your book, but I made it.

A lot of the time, I had trouble separating myself from Mara. Her wins were my wins; her troubles were my troubles. Sometimes I forgot her name, because I was so caught up in imagining her as being me. She felt so many of the things that I did that I soon imagined her face as mine. I could relate too well with her, and that scared me. It made me put the book down for a whole week at times. I couldn't handle it. But I forced myself to push through, and I learned some form of acceptance. Seeing Mara working through the rape in the book and through her own troubles with sexual assault made me more comfortable with what happened to me, and I'm grateful for that — for feeling such a deep connection with Mara. For being able to go, "I felt like that, too. I *still* feel like that sometimes."

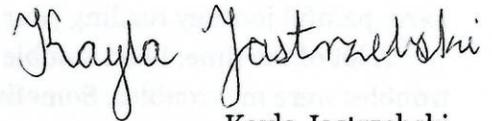
I had a feeling that Mara had her own story, and Chapter 18 revealed it fully, peeled back the plaster from her wall and showed us the intimate details of what happened to her. Chapter 18 made me share my story, too, and you truly don't know just how much that means to me. It made me feel so ready and strong. When I told the people I trust, the fear and anxiety was there, but it fell away like the way the ocean steals seashells from the bay, quietly and peacefully. Don't you understand? *My fear went away*. It was swallowed up like how whispers are in the howling wind and simply spat out. It makes me feel so *free*, Ms. Blake, like I can do absolutely anything. Taking that *step*, getting that suffocating weight off of my chest, *telling* the people I care about? After two long years, I've finally taken control.

"For the first time in a long time, I think I do have something to say. Maybe I'm finally ready to say it." Like Mara, I've found my voice. I'm not speechless anymore; I'm not going to be quiet anymore — I'm sick of doing that. Sick of letting fear reign over me like a tyrant over an oppressed population, sick of feeling small and powerless, sick of not fighting back. "This is me. I'm done hiding." It's so unbelievably important to speak up, I've learned. To take a stand, to be able to say, "This happened to me, and it's okay." Mara made me realize that something really needs to change, that I need to *do* something. Like she told the readers once: "I can't shake this need to do something, anything." She made her statement with short skirts, because they made her feel in control. I'll make mine by being open about what happened. By advocating for kids who have gone through it — through the harassment, the assault, the rape, the abuse. So that

they can have something I didn't: Someone who is like them, who knows what it's like, who can guide them, who can tell them it's okay. I needed that so badly, and so I'm going to give it. I don't want kids to suffer the way that I did.

I've already done it. Twice. I'm so proud of myself, Ms. Blake. I'm not going to stop. This is important, and something really does need to change. I'm going to make that change when I turn sixteen, because that's the legal age to create a petition on this website, change.org, I came across. You don't know how much I've been debating over this — if I should, if anyone will believe my story, if I'm too young to make a change, if anything good will come of it. I've been thinking about this petition for months now, and I've been so scared and uncertain. But Mara gave me that final push. She made me realize how strongly I feel about this, that I *can* do this, that other kids out there need help. "It's a battle cry," were Mara's thoughts when she finally told someone about what happened to her; this is the beginning of mine.

Sincerely,



Kayla Jastrzebski