

**State Winner Level 1: Jayna Barrette wrote to J.K. Rowling, author of the *Harry Potter Series***

Dear Ms. Rowling,

After reading your first book in the Harry Potter series, “The Sorcerer’s Stone,” I knew there was only one thing for me. While all my peers were learning gymnastics and taking piano lessons, I was learning magic! Well, sort of. I remember praying every night to wake up on my eleventh birthday with a thick, brown envelope on my doorstep. I would never mistake this odd letter. The emerald ink that I dreamed about would be as familiar as my best friend. The purple wax seal would open the door to my dreams. This unusual letter would be my invitation to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. And I wanted to start as soon as possible! So I began by trying to move anything I could by waving my hands and using the spell “wingardium leviosa.” Unfortunately, I never moved anything, not even an inch. But I kept faith in the books that took me to a new world. Filled with hope, I didn’t think anything could shatter my dreams. Then came the biggest disappointment of my short life. I realized I wasn’t going to Hogwarts. I wasn’t a wizard. My confidence in my future faded away to an unknown. My fragile spirit was smashed to pieces.

However, my dad continued to read one chapter of your books to me every night. He read a chapter a night, every night, without fail. One night I realized what was so special about your books. They didn’t just take me somewhere for a minute. They crushed my troubles, erased any sad thoughts, and transported me to a new world. I decided if I couldn’t live there, I would make my own.

So, inspired by the books you wrote, I started to write too. My first few stories were atrocious. The next few were indescribably terrible. But after a while, they got better. I didn’t care how long it took. I wanted a world of my own. I started to read them to my friends. And by some miracle, they actually liked them.

I think your books taught me so many things, not just about writing, but about putting faith in myself. In my opinion, becoming a writer is even more magical than being a wizard and going to Hogwarts. Every day I can wake up with a new idea in my head and a new vision for my world. But if I ever need help, I can turn to an old friend who always has advice. His name is Harry, Harry Potter.

From an aspiring writer,  
Jayna Barrette

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**Level 1 Honorable Mention: Mira Cheng wrote to Wendy Mass, author of *The Candy Maker***

Dear Wendy Mass,

My only memories are faded and blurry. All I remember is the feeling of wet, warm tears leaking out of my eyes and onto my cheeks. The cries and the shouts for the ambulance, and the red

lights blinding my large wet eyes. When I was about 2, I had gotten a 3<sup>rd</sup> degree burn. Boiled water spread all across my right arm, sinking into my flesh. I remember pain searing through my arm, my blistering arm making the pain unbearable. I used to carry it as a burden, now I carry it with my head held high, I carry it hoping to keep it with me. It is a spoil of war, and I've just won.

I would always dread the spring and the summer. It was the time for short sleeves and tank tops. It was as if the seasons were playing with me. I wasn't allowed to wear that kind of stuff. Every time I got a surgery on my arm, the surgeons would forbid me to wear anything that would make my arm vulnerable to the burning sun. I would have to wear long sleeves or something that shielded it. But that wasn't the only reason I decided to keep my sleeve on, after all it was my decision. The surgeries did help, but they were also the perfect excuse, the perfect cover up. When you took away the sleeve, what would you find? You would find the face of a girl covering her face, cowering. You would find someone ashamed, regretful for something that wasn't her fault. That was me.

Staring. Teasing. Laughing. Joking. Insulting. I would hear this almost everyday. Most of the time when somebody would stare I would fight the urge to cover my arm with my hand, even if it wasn't big enough to cover the whole thing. I wouldn't care, I just wanted to be somewhere where the appearances didn't matter, where nobody cared what the person on the left and right looked like. The bullying about my burn started in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. There was always someone staring, but in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade it became more and more consistent. One time when I couldn't tolerate it anymore I told my parents to tell the principal, when the principal met up with him it didn't make me feel any better. The words were said and the wounds were made. It was as if they were deep, infected gashes. The poison spreading throughout my whole chest, striking again and again until it finally broke me. Only recently had the pain subdued from a stab to just a pinch...

Nothing compares to the look on my father's face. "Do you think you need another surgery?" my father prompts, his face white. "I think my arm is good the way it is." He must be surprised with my answer because I catch his jaw drop a little. A look of relief floods his face. He takes my hand and his eyes meet mine. I can see the sorrow and stress hidden deep in them. Ever since I could understand words, I could tell that he felt that my injury was his mistake. But it wasn't his fault. It wasn't anyone's fault. I could tell that his heart ached whenever he saw my arm. Although he still thought it was his fault just because he held the teapot when it had exploded, what could he have done to have possibly caused it? And how could he have possibly stopped it? There was nothing humanly possible he could have done to stop it.

Reading your book reminded me that I wasn't the only one who had to face times like this, I wasn't the only one who had to go through it. It reminded me that appearances really don't matter. It's your decision whether you choose to let them defy you or not. It reminded me that I am lucky that the burn was on my arm and not somewhere else. It reminded me of all of the numerous blessings around me. It reminded me that I was lucky to be me. And I thank you for this because I am proud to be one in a million.

Sincerely,

Mira Cheng

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**Level 1 Honorable Mention: Yael Goldstein wrote to Dawn Fitzgerald for *Getting In the Game***

Dear Ms. Fitzgerald,

When I read your breathtaking story, it immediately transported me onto the ice the night before at the Providence College ice rink...

*...There's one minute on the clock. The score is tied. It's anyone's game now. I intercept a pass and skate it up the ice, my skates moving in a synchronized way. My heart is beating so fast that it feels like it is going to burst. Though under so much pressure my mind suddenly wanders to Getting in the Game, a story about a girl named Joanna who loves the game of hockey and stands up to all the people who think girls shouldn't play hockey from her very own coach to her principal.*

*My body fills up with adrenalin. Girls can play too, and I'll show them what we can do right here today on the ice. I hear hoots and hollers from the crowd. I see the smiling face of my mom, which is now beet-red because she has been yelling nonstop. I wind up for a shot, fake it, and instead pass it to a forward, who then "roofs" the puck! Score! The crowd roars with approval.*

A few weeks after that awesome game I hear a boy say to me, "You play for the RI Sting huh? Bet you think you're so great." He smirks and continues, "Well guess what. You aren't! Girls aren't meant to play hockey." He searched me to see if I was angry or upset and I was a little bit of both. I felt hot tears starting to run. I saw a little grin beginning to form on his face. That is what he wanted.

"What would Joanna do if she was in my place?" I wondered. Joanna would stand up and say "In your dreams!" So, I blinked back the tears and a new me started to form: a girl who always would stand up for herself and fight for what she thinks is right. Joanna's urge to play hockey is super inspiring to a girl like me who also loves the thrill of ice hockey.

What also inspired me in Getting in the Game is the fact that Joanna not only pursued her love of hockey, but at the same time she almost lost a friend, became a victim of a bully, and watched as her grandpa slowly forgot her and was placed in a nursing home. That is a lot of pressure and she certainly was going through a hard time. I remember when I was really little I would visit my Nana in a nursing home. What was really sad is when I saw my great grandma sitting in her wheelchair, she would not remember me at all. It was almost the same situation with Joanna. When I read Getting in the Game I thought back to Nana and how Joanna's situation was so much like mine at that time and it made me feel a lot better that I was not the only one with these kinds of feelings.

Joanna yet again inspired me to help my friends stand up for what they think is right and to help them get through the hard times. She taught me that forgiveness is the answer, because even though Valerie Holm was very mean to Joanna, she still forgave her. Two wrongs do not

make a right. It just makes a fight. Though Valerie never really was nice to Joanna (even after Joanna forgave her), Joanna didn't care. She just did not want to get in countless fights. I like to stop people from fighting and just forgive, kind of like Joanna. All you have to do is forgive someone to make you feel a lot better and to take a heavy load off someone's shoulder and dump it in the waste bin! Joanna is a strong character, who represents the person I would like to have as my role model. I found my inner self revealed after reading this book and Joanna inspired me to always show it!

Your book has changed my life. Keep writing to help other kids like me.

Truly inspired,  
Yael S. Goldstein, 5<sup>th</sup> Grade, HMS  
Left Defense-woman, RI Sting Girls Ice Hockey

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**Level 1 Honorable Mention: Lila Salazar wrote to Malala Yousafzai for *I Am Malala***

Dear Malala,

I have to admit that I don't read that many biographies. I do know though, that people like you are braver than any character in a fantasy. Here and there I hear of unsung heroes and they all passed through history without a trace. Many of them are women. Am I an unsung hero who will never be remembered because I didn't call more attention? Maybe. Your book *I am Malala* has made me think about how many people need help. Those who need others because they cannot muster a voice of their own. I'm pretty normal, but reading your story makes me want to run out and save the world. You've taught me that girls like me can be brave too.

I was terrified to see all of those girls being denied the right to an education. I can't imagine what it was like not to go to school. It doesn't feel right that a girl wasn't allowed to have the rights a boy had. I probably take it for granted. I go to school in the morning, without a second thought. My friends are always there, my teachers trying to hold my attention. I've never suffered more than getting in trouble for talking. I see now that I should work even harder because of that. You took everything thrown at you like a sponge absorbing water.

As I read about how calm you were with everything happening, her reporters in your face, making speeches, I thought, "Why can't I be as brave as her?" Well I know now, that I can be. Maybe I already was. My parents split when I was 8 years old and I would cry through the night. It hurts being alone and vulnerable having to force a smile on my face as I walked to my friends every day. I would stay awake wondering, why me? It got better, but I wish I could've gone back and told myself, it will be alright in the end. It's not as big as what you did, but challenge comes in all different forms. I thought about what I would do if I saw the Taliban on my bus. I don't take the bus, but I still would've had your first reaction. To defend myself. My sisters and I don't take danger very calmly. I can see that would never work so your story guided me to better ways of defense. If you can't do it peacefully why do it? Peace always prevails someday or another. I held my breath when I read about the shooting. My parents could never stay as calm as yours were.

It hurt me as it opened my eyes to the realness of these problems. Maybe I won't become a world famous activist but I realize that I need to press the issue of women's rights further. Why do women have to sit and applaud great men when we should be applauded as well? Bravery is the key to confidence. We all need to find that key. I have never been to Pakistan, or Asia for that matter, but I could still picture the beauty of Swat Valley and I realize how depressing it was that the marvelous scenery held a dark secret. Never having gone anywhere except for the valley must have been hard. I travel between my American life and Hispanic life, meeting people of all kinds as we're welcoming bunch. Nevertheless, it has never occurred to me that it was difficult. I also learned to be really cautious with strangers, because unlike the pashtun, I live somewhere where strangers are bad news.

This book has taught me so many things yet I still can't wrap my head around the fact that it's all an inescapable reality. What if that was me? In fact, all of those girls that are not going to school are just like me. They have hopes and dreams of inspiring people as well. I'm still in awe of how courageous you were during your fight to women's right to learn and expand the world's knowledge of equality. It takes time to find your voice. You must build your thoughts with care and take small steps that I didn't take before. I read your book 2 months ago and I still wish I could show the strength you did. I know I am starting to be a bit braver, pushing myself a little more each time. Maybe I'll never take the world by a storm. The difference is that now I know it doesn't hurt to try. I admire you much more than I could admire any. Thank you.

Sincerely,  
Lila Salazar, Grade 5

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**State Winner Level 2:**

**Hannah Capron wrote to Laura Ingalls Wilder for *Little House on the Prairie***

Dear Laura Ingalls Wilder,

In this world cars rush by, and keyboards are clicked. Cell phones ring and city lights flash. Not when I'm with you, Laura. As soon as I lay my eyes on your words, I step into a portal. I'm sitting with you under the humid, sweltering sun that hangs over the endless frontier. I can hear Pa's crooning violin, a call for you and your sisters to dance. I am no longer on the ground in this 21<sup>st</sup> century haze. When I open *Little House on the Prairie*, I sprout wings and fly all the way back to 1874. Thanks to you, I can step through the gateway of the past.

My eyes first laid upon *Little House on the Prairie* in my third grade classroom. I didn't enjoy the stories of modern day children like most of the other 9-year-olds. I would stare at the clock, waiting and waiting and waiting until reading time. I would leap from my desk, eager to jump into your world. Laura, you became my best friend. The Ingalls, they became my second family. I devoured the books in less than a month. I wanted to be you, to play on the prairie with Mary and Carrie. That year on Character Day, I was proud to enter school wearing a bonnet

and a calico-print dress. Reading about the adventures and troubles of surviving on the frontier ignited a spark in me. Since then, I've been absolutely obsessed with historical novels. From Revolutionary War to Edwardian stories, I would read every single one. The flame has yet to burn out. You, Laura, were my entrance to that world.

Because of *Little House on the Prairie*, I care more about history. I know the generations that came before us are important to our country, and everyone should appreciate the hard lives they endured. If it wasn't for these men and women, I would not have a chance. You and your family have shown pride, bravery, and remarkable spirit. Some may assume that learning about the past was unnecessary, but now I know it is priceless. Despite the fact that my grandparents are quite a few generations ahead of yours, I have found myself asking for and listening to their stories much more often. Too many fail to realize that their elders are living history. The memoirs of yesterday live in nursing homes, eager to be read. I am forever grateful to you, for now my mind is filled with my own grandpa's reminiscences of fighting in the Pacific Theater of World War II. Every person has once been young, hence everyone in this world has their own story to tell.

I have read the highest-praised historical fiction, the gripping novels of years before. Regardless, they do not compare to your work. Why is that? Because you are so real, Laura. You felt these exact emotions, there is no one else who could ever describe them so well. I have never felt so connected to words. Every time my eyes are glued to the pages of your books, I am with you. Laura, you and I felt frustration and joy. We felt boredom as the oxen slowly lumbered across the wilderness, bringing your family to a new homestead. You and I felt fear when we heard the wolves wailing to the stars, and the Native Americans yowling just miles away.

There are books like these that people are lucky enough to come across in their lifetime. They provoke questions and thoughts no one can answer. The solutions are not truths, nor facts someone can find in their local library's encyclopedia. I have pondered many questions of this type, and yet I will never receive answers. After I read *Little House on the Prairie*, I couldn't help but wonder if back then was better. Most people would argue that it wasn't. We have phones, television, computers, cures for diseases and a healthier chance at living. Somehow, I'm still not entirely convinced. Our lives do not have to be so complicated, but we make them that way. You experienced many hardships, and it was a harsh and difficult time. However, you found joy in the simplest things. We continue to increase the greed when we have everything we could imagine, while you found pure happiness in eating a fresh apple. I cannot help but find your life appealing.

I don't think I could ever thank you enough for opening a door for me. Thank you for igniting that empowering spark. Thank you for allowing me to run to you on a day I needed an escape. When my soul is getting dusty, I can count on you to wash it all away. Your words, Laura, are evidence that magic does indeed exist.

Yours Truly,

Hannah Capron

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## Level 2 Honorable Mention: Emma Waters wrote to Trenton Lee Stewart

Dear Mr. Trenton Lee Stewart.

There are many children in our world that are exceedingly brilliant. There are kids, who at a young age, knew they were different from the rest. Some of these children have embraced their brains, while others have tried to hide them. Some have done their best to hone in on these skills, while others neglected them. Many child geniuses of our world haven't been able to find a place where they are with equals, being challenged, and being recognized not just as children that are smart, but as children with the ability to learn quickly, solve problems, and enjoy doing it. In your book, *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, Reynie, Sticky, Kate, and Constance found this place. Though the means of finding this place were different for them than me, I myself have also found a place of my own.

I read your book at a young age, and immediately fell in love with all of the characters! I could relate to almost all of them. From Sticky's self-conscious habits appearing in my constant discomfort in large groups of people (and Constance's childish behavior reflecting my way of expressing how I felt), to Rhonda's sense of responsibility, which I felt for my siblings. I was even able to relate to Mr. Curtain's search for power for I too wanted to always be in charge. Group projects were my worst nightmare and team sports where I was not the captain were my nemesis. These characters, they truly helped me understand who I am, and who I want to be. I could see some of my own faults through some of these characters (especially the whole power hungry thing), and I have been working to improve myself. I remember when your book about Mr. Benedict's childhood came out. I thought that I might just not read that one, thinking I was too old for the series. Then I remembered how the three previous books had impacted my behavior around others, how I treated myself, and how I saw a change in the way others were around me.

Earlier in this letter, I mentioned how I had found a place that was my own version of being a part of *The Mysterious Benedict Society*. This place is called PEGASUS. It is a program for the gifted 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders, and only after a month or two, I found that this place was so similar to the "Society" that I couldn't stop myself from preparing to outwit a tenman while walking through the halls! It's funny how, even though this collection of papers and inks just that, a collection of papers and ink, I feel my life has been changed on so many levels. Thank you, I wouldn't have been able to realize how different my life was until I looked back at your books and reread them. That is when I noticed the change and I can't thank you enough.

Your book, *The Mysterious Benedict Society*, impacted my life in a way that I cannot completely explain. It made me want to excel, be more than I already was. In some ways it changed my life for the worse, making me become a perfectionist and obsessing over whether or not I did the absolute best I could. Eventually even getting only one question on a test wrong began to look bad, but your book also taught me that I *can* be better, and even when I mess up, I can allow myself to expose the Constance Contraire side of me. I can dig a hole out for myself (though this hole might be dug up with complaints)! I just wanted you to know that even though these books are getting to be a little but old and somewhat forgotten on some people's shelves, they have a special place on mine!

Thanks again,  
Emma Waters

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**Level 2 Honorable Mention: Alexander Yeaw wrote to Phil Kaye**

Dear Phil Kay,

This is directed to you

Dealing with a st-st-stutter

Reading

Reminisce

Listening

Watching you stand confident

Over your past

Reminisce

On stage

St-St-Stutter

Listening

Like water over rocks you write

Pencil on paper

Your hear and s-s-soul

My impediment drove me into hell

Bullying

Parents screaming

Fighting

Love lost

It's all over

Forgotten

Love remembered.

My stutter resolved

A rope thrown down from heaven...

Carry me up.

My name is Alexander Yeaw. Your poem, "Repetition", spoke to me and pulled me back to the time of my elementary school days. I was not your...average kid. I played sports, sang pretty well, and had amazing grades. But my impediment made my body a criticism punching bag. A stutter built up from years of putting it off and thinking I can go through my life with this problem. People calling me a stutters and mess-up...how original. Hiding in my room, practicing the "Real" way to talk. Those bottom feeder torment for attention...I learned the hard way.

While all of this bullying happened, my parents fought more and more. I didn't know why, but this made my young brain more far out and alone as ever. A thundering of shouts and squawks find a way through the covers surrounding my head, lying in bed trying to block out the ungrateful sounds. Nightmares haunt my dreams after each night and ruin my colorless day the next morning. I'm so glad this is over.

I went through my worst years before they ever should have happened. Middle school was my savior, my guardian angel of friends and people I can trust. I could finally get away from that steamy, hot mess of my life. Finally I am free.

I am in eighth grade now. My stutter was straightened, weight lost, and respect gained. Thank you, Phil Kaye, for reminding me that I can get through everything.

Sincerely,

Alexander Yeaw

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**State Winner Level 3: Miranda Zito wrote to Tomie DePaolo, author of *Strega Nona***

Dear Mr. DePaola,

From the time I was old enough to understand until I was about seven, my mom read a book to me every night. We would choose from a wide selection of books kept in my bookshelf. The books we read weren't chapter books; they were short children's books that we were able to start and finish in the same night. Many of these books were stories about talking animals or damsels in distress, but then one day my mom brought home one of your books that changed reading time for me. This book was called Strega Nona.

Having my mom read this story about the little old Calabrian woman with her magic pasta pot for the very first time sparked my interest. This is not only because it was different from all of the other books we read together, but also because of the setting of the story. The story takes place in Calabria, Italy, which is where part of my family is from. It inspired me to

start asking my mom questions about my European ancestors and just Italy in general. We were really able to have interesting conversations about the topic, and I learned many different things about the connection between my family and the beautiful country they came from. I loved this book so much that I had my mom go out and buy the complete series of Strega Nona books, and she was happy to do so. In a way these stories brought my mom and me closer together. We continued to bond over these beloved books every night. I never shared these books with my younger cousins because it would be like letting them in on a secret they weren't supposed to know. We read these books countless amounts of times, but neither of us cared. Even though my mom worked long hours and was always exhausted from running my brothers and me around, she always put her energy into reading to us. We both cherished this time together and looked forward to it every night. We loved all of the characters in the stories and never got bored of them.

It's been around eight years since we shared those nights together, the nights that we never wanted to end. Every once and a while my mom and I will talk about the Strega Nona series. We will always go on and remember how much we loved it and still do. A few weeks ago my mom and I were cleaning out my bookshelf that was filled with books that I had gotten as a toddler and also as an adolescent. All of the books that I no longer read or had no connection to we decided to donate. It was not complicated to make these decisions because I knew that I either wanted to keep a book or that I did not care if it was gone, I was never on the fence. One of the easiest decisions I made was keeping the Strega Nona series. There was no way I could get rid of those books, it would be like giving away all of those beloved memories with my mom. So now they are still sitting on my bookshelf, full of their imagination and creativity. I don't know if I'll ever be able to give these books away, for it would be like giving away a part of me. Maybe I will keep them to pass down a generation.

I am very thankful that I discovered the Strega Nona series, for it is not just a series of children's books to me. If it weren't for the series I might not have been as interested and educated about my Italian ancestors as I am today. I also might not have been as close with my mom as I am. Strega Nona has definitely affected my life for the better, and I think that it's important for you to know that. I appreciate all of your work and thank you for being such an inspiration.

Sincerely,  
Miranda Zito

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**Level 3 Honorable Mention:**

**Tyler Jackman wrote to Ken Kesey, author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest***

Dear Ken Kesey,

“Conform, conform, conform!” The message cuts through my head like a shrill shriek, an echo reeling through the cracks of my brain. Even as I write this letter to you, as I listen to my television in the background of my room, I am bombarded with advertisements of all kind. Buy this phone, drink this beer, watch this show. It goes farther than that however, much farther.

Conformity is not just a message played on our little electronic screens, but an unspoken law ingrained into our society.

As a young teenage man, I am told to follow the same straight path in my life by the adults in my life. Focus on my grades, focus on my college degree, focus on my career. Of course, I am expected to do these things like every other person is, and I take no issue in this. However, this makes me wonder where it all became so dull. Why are we all urged to take the same life path, to follow the latest trends, to be so-called “normal”? What exactly is the issue with being different? As I read your book *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, I couldn’t help but contemplate this question. Why are people scared of being a little weird?

, and I learned many different things about the connection between my family and the beautiful country they came from. I loved this book so much that I had my mom go out and buy the complete series of Strega Nona books, and she was happy to do so. In a way these stories brought my mom and me closer together. We continued to bond over these beloved books every night. I never shared these books with my younger cousins because it would be like letting them in on a secret they weren’t supposed to know. We read these books countless amounts of times, but neither of us cared. Even though my mom worked long hours and was always exhausted from running my brothers and me

Before I read your book, I went to Wikipedia to get a quick overview of its general plot and characters. Now I knew your novel took place in a mental hospital, but these characters sounded like they had more than a few screws loose! The most prominent case was your novel’s narrator, Chief Bromden. I figured he would certainly be an enigma, as a Native American schizophrenic who believes society is run by a system known as “The Combine.” Imagine my surprise when he ended up one of the most relatable, humane characters in the story.

One of the first things that immediately jumped out the pages at me is the conformity of the patients in the hospital. Whether their diagnosis was depression, epilepsy or germaphobia, they all followed the same orders and same regiment. They all woke up, showered, took their pills and followed the orders of the Big Nurse. Were they happy? No, of course not, yet it was just the daily grind for them.

Once fate decided to bring Randle McMurphy to the hospital, the husks of men that were the hospital patients were revitalized with a unique, warm passion that can only be described as human. With McMurphy’s help, they were no longer zombies that followed the orders of their superiors, but men who embraced their inner spirit and let go of their societal expectations. In the words of Chief Bromden, they were free from the grip of The Combine.

A characteristic I admire the most of Randle McMurphy is his ability to cast away society’s grip on him and become one with himself. However, this begs the question; is simply following your heart the true key to happiness? In my life, I have witnessed situations of people following the rules of conformity in society and others who decided to travel on their own path of life.

My own father is a clear-cut example of a man who has adhered to society’s standards of like. He passed high school, went to a trade school and currently holds a high paying job at a

pharmaceutical company. Intelligence wise, my father is seemingly a genius. At a glance, his life seems quite grand. He owns a spacious house with a loving wife, four good-natured sons and lives well with his great job. Yet, even with blessings like these, he is a very stoic man. He doesn't often crack a joke or even smile, and the tiredness in his eyes is apparent after working his stressful night shift job. Though he has hobbies to take up his free time, he seldom has a change of routine in his day. Many may call his life successful and lucky, but I am sure that Chief Bromden would have considered him another victim caught in the cold grip of The Combine.

The opposite side of this spectrum includes my uncle, my father's friend. He never had a solid career like my father and, not until recently, he never truly settled down with anybody or lived in a proper home. In spite of this, he would always follow his sense of wonder and adventure against the wishes of The Combine. Instead of settling down and having a family, he rock climbed, skydived, hiked up mountains, and rafted across rivers. When he would come to visit my home, he would always come with a smile from ear to ear and a heap of stories to share. Some may not call him successful, some may, but he surely is a joyful free spirit of a man who enjoys life to the fullest.

Society may not be a monstrous machine constraining us and shattering our spirits like Chief Bromden believed it would be, but your novel has made me realize just how strong the pressure of conformity is. Until I read your work, I never even considered the questions of following the orders of society and how it will affect my life in the long run. Your novel has not only helped me contemplate the future of my life, but has helped me become a better person today. I have learned how to cast away judgments of society and be true to myself, to treat others with respect and courtesy without casting them judgment, and to take control of my own life. Whether following your spirit or society is the correct choice for life will undoubtedly differ from opinion to opinion, but you have helped me make my choice.

Thank you, Mr. Kesey. You have saved me from The Combine.

Forever in your debt,

Tyler Jackman

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**Level 3 Honorable Mention: Grace Miner wrote to Henry James, author of *The Portrait of a Lady***

Dear Mr. James,

Every day since her diagnosis I have searched the mirror for clues. Am I my mother's daughter? I share her big brown eyes and brown hair. I inherited her sense of humor. Will I develop breast cancer like she and her mother before her? Will she be a survivor? Will I? I search and stare, cautiously cataloguing between chance and fate. The answers I seek do not come from the looking glass. How I wish I had a magic mirror on the wall! But, would I want to know all the answers if I could? The very notion of it makes my flesh cold and brings fear into my throat. And

then one summer's evening, your words enveloped me in the kind of hope and healing that brings deep peace.

Coming down the stairs for an evening snack, I heard her voice. I stopped. I sat down on the step, and with my arms wrapped tightly around my bended knees, I listened as my mother read her favorite novel to my father, sitting in the chair nearby. The gentle summer breeze blew the white gauzy curtains to full sail, infusing the air with a smell of summer flowers. I calmed my breathing as to not give away my position. The book she read was your very own "The Portrait of a Lady." My mother first read it when she was 17 and a junior in high school. My exact age.

The leather bound copy she held in her hands was a gift from my father not long after her diagnosis in November. She was too weak to read it until the summer. My father was not familiar with your intelligent and independent heroine Isabel Archer and her love of freedom despite the strict custom of marriage as the only suitable endeavor for a young woman of the time. I, too, was discovering her for the first time.

The story pulled me towards it. So many marriage proposals spurned, so much intrigue, love, treachery, and passion in each turn of the page. The patient Casper, the conniving Merle, the snobbish and egotistical Osmond, and the encouraging Ralph-they are absolutely delicious characters! My mother savored every word as my father shouted out his opinions and predictions. She gently rebuffed his pleading questions about the fate of one or another of the characters and returned to her reading with renewed vigor. Laughing aloud over mispronounced words or nuances of text that had escaped her younger self over 30 years earlier, she seemed so alive. It reminded me of how she had read aloud to me, and I to her, when I was a little girl.

I was captured by the drama I heard rising from the pages of your novel and the one I witnessed being played out in my own living room. I thought to move my position and reveal myself; I was eavesdropping after all. Still, I could not bear to leave this spot where I first discovered your brilliant heroine and first believed that despite an unknowable future, life is beautiful and carries small, everyday joys. In fact, Isabel did not know what fortunes her future held, and she "preferred it that way." It was a moment of clarity, understanding, and peace, all of which had escaped me for so many months.

Your heroine is fiercely independent yet loyal to her commitment to family. She is trustworthy, well read, loved, and intelligent. She cannot perceive nor does she know of her future beforehand. She lives according to her own conscience and meets each day clothed in determination and strength. Like the bright summer sun that refuses to surrender to the evening and in resisting creates a stunning sky for all to behold, Isabel is true to herself come what may. I see why my mother admires her so much. More importantly, listening to my mother read your novel helped draw a clearer portrait of the lady I admire. My mother.

Perched on the table by the couch in between reading, that leather bound copy was her companion this past summer. In the fall, I nonchalantly asked if I could read it, not wanting to disclose my secret. She handed it to me with a smile. She stared into my eyes and I saw my reflection in her dark, rounded pupils. Like so many other things, we would share our love of your novel, too. I devoured every syllable, every word, every page. Now completed, I miss it as

one misses a good friend who leaves on a journey after a short but intensely wonderful visit. A piece of it is always with me.

I no longer search the mirror for clues. I have my answers.

Thank you,

Grace Miner

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**Level 3 Honorable Mention: Joseph Paquette wrote to Elie Weisel, author of *Night***

Dear Mr. Elie Wiesel,

There are few people who are capable of enduring what you have been challenged with. You have created for me a device that has allowed me to step into your shoes and feel what you felt. This device is your memoir *Night*. I have read plenty of books and articles on the Holocaust, but never have I felt so vulnerable or so helpless as I did when I read your story. I am grateful to you for helping me – to a degree – understand the harshness and realities of Nazi Germany, and therefore making me recognize the luxuries I have in my life that you did not have during this time.

Throughout your time as a prisoner in the concentration camps, you went without most of your basic needs and what you did have was rationed. Unlike you, I am able to go to the bathroom whenever I need to, eat whenever and whatever I please. I have privacy, and most importantly, I have safety. These concepts are not foreign to you as you had them before and after your experience in the camps, yet they were unavailable to you within the gates of Auschwitz. After reading *Night*, I now appreciate what has been given to me and I make sure that I do not take it for granted because there is always someone out there like you as a prisoner who does not have what I have.

I also learned a lesson in mental strength from your story. You have taught me that no matter what happens to you, you must stay strong and believe that you will survive and get through it, because if you do not believe in yourself, no one else will. That is another thing you have taught me. Although you cannot teach someone to be mentally tough, you can teach someone to believe in themselves. Whenever I am feeling low or lacking confidence, I remind myself of people like you. The people who had nothing and made it nevertheless because they believed in themselves and persevered. I have always considered my heroes and role models to be those who had the remarkable success stories. The poor man who worked through college is now the CEO; or the foreign exchange student who didn't speak English but went to an Ivy League school. You are one of these people, Mr. Wiesel. Your courage and determination is like no other, and I admire you for that.

Lastly, the main reason this book challenged my perspective on life is the simple fact that you have taught me the value of life itself. You have helped me visualize what is truly important in my life and what my priorities should be. I now realize that the best things in life cannot be bought or given or even seen. The best things are within us: Courage, perseverance, love, fear.

Those four things, the things created inside ourselves, are the things that keep us alive when we need it most. They set us straight when we veer off the road. More importantly, they give us a second chance. They make us realize what we are doing wrong and what we need to do to fix it. Mr. Wiesel, you have displayed more than enough of these attributes in your memoir *Night* and I thank you for guiding me and lighting up the road ahead. I will always remember your story because it is just the perfect mix of reality and disbelief. Anyone who read *Night* will close the book and open their eyes to a whole new view of the world. The harsh stories of Nazi Germany become real and you feel them in the first person, as they are told through the eyes of a man who lived it. I am beyond grateful for you giving me the opportunity to live as you did and feel as you felt because it has forever changed me.

Sincerely,

Joseph Paquette

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