

2015 Letters About Literature Maryland Level 1 Winner

Dear Daniel Handler (a.k.a. Lemony Snicket),

I am writing to let you know about my great love for your fictional series '*A Series of Unfortunate Events*' and how much it has influenced and affected my life and writing skills. While I have not undergone a series of unfortunate events, or any abnormal events for that matter, reading your book series has had an enormous impact on my life.

It all started with a visit to the public library. As always, I went over to the young adults (YA) chapter book section to check out the books. I walked past several shelves while glancing at the dull, unappealing pictures and titles. Suddenly, something caught my eye. I walked closer and pulled out the book - the title read, "The Bad Beginning" - with bright illustrations on the front cover. I thought to myself, hmm, this might be an interesting book to read, so I carried it over to the chair and opened it up. Pretty soon, my mom called me over to check out the books. I gazed at her, flabbergasted, thinking that only 5 minutes had passed; when actually closer to an hour had passed. I carried the book over to the checkout counter and begged my mom to get it. After a brief hesitation, she said yes, and I carried it home.

This visit to the library sparked the beginning of my own extremely interesting series of amazing events. After I started the first book in the series, I was hooked on the series and read the rest of the series until the last book, *The End*. Even after the series ended with the three Baudelaires stranded on a deserted island, and a few years have passed since the series ended, I still felt that any day now, you will create another series of even more interesting events with your investigative style of writing. As if hearing my wish, you have now created another series called '*When Did You See Her Last?*' which is even more captivating than the previous series.

One of the many things that fascinated me was how the Baudelaire orphans always loved to read, and no matter where they were, they would always be searching for a library or a book. As you may have guessed, I have become a very avid reader ever since I started reading this series. Last year, my fourth grade class took a field trip to Politics and Prose, a local bookstore where I was able to meet you. Even though it had been some time since I had read your books, I was still very excited to finally see and meet the magician who had made this amazing series. During this visit, you also provided us some insights into the writing style you employed in your books.

I also wanted to mention that after devouring the intellectual content of your books, I subconsciously started implementing your amazing writing and persuasive skills in my own academic work. Even though it is now a year since I got to meet you, and it has been a longer time still since I read your books, I still feel that when I am writing my own stories, you are standing besides me guiding me along. Your writing has gotten me extremely interested in literature, and I have started to write my own stories to turn them into books that will hopefully get published and inspire kids in the future. In fact, motivated by your style, I am currently working on a book entitled, "The Mysterious Misfortune Stream".

Even in my writing class in school where our teachers tell us to write stories, I am able to create long realistic tales that get me good grades. The pieces that I have written have made me one of the best writers in the class and people (not just my parents) say I should get my pieces of literature published.

This is all thanks to you, Lemony Snicket. I would honestly like to thank you for bringing out the author in me. You have made me realize that if I want to become a great writer, I have to do a lot of reading too. I am totally inspired by your quote, 'All the secrets of the world are contained in books. Read at your own risk'. Your stories bring out the best in me, and I think they are some of the best stories in the world. From Sunny sliding down the slippery slopes to the Baudelaires surveying their burnt house, I have loved your writing and I hope to some day be a great author like you.

In the hope that your life will be a happy stream of events, I sincerely thank you.

With a burnt house,

Dhruv Pai

5th grade

Cold Spring Elementary School

2015 Letters About Literature Maryland Level 2 Winner

Dear Mr. Wiesel,

This year I read your book, *Night*, for my English class. I attend an all-girls Catholic school, so, as you might imagine, we get assigned a lot of “coming-of-age” books with the main character usually being a teenage girl. When I was assigned your book, I was surprised to find out that a teenage boy was the protagonist. Of course, I naturally wondered what a 2014 Catholic teenage girl in America could have in common with a 1941 Jewish Boy in Transylvania. It turns out we share more than you might think.

Early in your book, I realized how important your family was to you. One of your main missions while in the concentration camp was not only to survive, but also to remain with your father. You would find a way to be with him in the infirmary or keep him awake in the cold snowy weather so he would not freeze to death. In the end, you lost your father. Your father had been your will to live. Death was all around you. You saw babies thrown into flames, men marched into the crematoria, men and children hung right before your eyes. You saw death at a very young age.

Most teenagers ever see someone die right before their eyes. I have. I saw my brother die when I was only nine years old. I saw my brother, Joe, try to fight death just like your father tried to fight. His enemy was not the Germans but the quieter enemy eating away inside him, leukemia. Your book helped me understand some of the things that happened during his hospitalization. For example, my parents would have the whole family attend Mass in the hospital’s chapel then grab food from the cafeteria to eat in my brother’s hospital room. Despite the horrible disinfectant smells and gloomy décor, we would laugh so hard as we played board games until visiting hours were over. I now realize that it was important to my parents for us all to be together, regardless of where we were. Just as the concentration camps could not break your bond with your dad, so the leukemia could not stop us being a family. Those Saturdays nights kept us going through two and a half years of hospital stays.

You questioned how and why God was so powerful and almighty would let such terrible things happen. On Rosh Hashanah, you could not understand how fellow Jews would call God “Blessed.” I too wondered why God would let my brother die. He was so young and what could he have done to make God angry? Or was God punishing me or my parents? Surely my brother deserved one of those miracles that my books about saints had spoken of. I felt guilty asking these questions. Your words show me that maybe it is normal to wonder if God is present during hard times. Later, following Joe’s funeral, my parents, my other brother, and I continued to go to church. Why should I go and sing praises to Him? Hadn’t God abandoned me just like he had abandoned you? I understood why you refused to fast on Yom Kippur. My brother died on Ash Wednesday, and still in the Lenten weeks following his death, my mom refused to serve meat on Fridays. Why should I care about something so silly as not eating meat when God did not care to step in and cure my brother? Again you showed me that it is just part of being human to wonder about these things.

Despite all the confusion inside me, I think your words give me some peace. In your Nobel Prize acceptance speech, you spoke about how we cannot sit by and just let human beings endure suffering. You said that indifference is not acceptable and the only way to fight it is by taking action. Your words motivate me. Each May since my brother’s passing, I help at the Join for Joe Bone Marrow Swab Day at my school. At this event named for my brother, I help collect sample of cheek cells which can help

determine if a person is a good match to be a bone marrow donor for a victim of leukemia. Many girls are eager to sign up and hope to be a match. But I have also seen other girls, as well as faculty, try to sneak by the sign up table outside the cafeteria. They are indifferent. They do not know the suffering you and I have seen. They do not know that one person can make a difference. I will tell them. I will try to make them understand that these random victims of leukemia should not be forgotten. I know one person can make a difference because the Swab Day found a match last year for a 14-year old girl with leukemia. At age thirteen, I will fight ignorance with the hope of ending more human suffering. Though this is a small drive and we may only collect 100 swabs, *Night* makes me more committed to this cause.

You spoke in *Night* about how you will never forget the smells and sounds and the feelings in the concentration camp. I too shall never forget.

I will never forget the sad looks of the families in the elevator on the way to the pediatric oncology floor.

I will never forget the constant antiseptic smell at home as we tried to keep our house germ free.

I will never forget the stares by strangers at my brother who wore his blue baseball cap to cover his hairless head.

I will never forget the sick kids on the oncology floor who just wanted to go to school and be like all the other kids.

I will never forget these kids and their hope to live.

I will never forget my brother, Joe.

Sincerely,

Juliana Gorman

8th grade

Notre Dame Preparatory School

2015 Letters About Literature Maryland Level 3 Winner

Dear Amy Tan,

As a first generation Chinese American, you are probably intimately familiar with the tense dualities of growing up Asian in a western society. On the one hand, there is that indomitable sense of estrangement from mainstream society you feel due to the color of your skin. Occasionally the feeling is loud and piercing, but often it is subtly pervasive – a low, constant humming of “I am different” in the periphery of your consciousness. I know you experienced it first hand – first spending your childhood in Switzerland, an ethnically homogenous county where almost everybody looks the same *except* you, and then living in America, where cultures were more diverse but Asians were still a minority among minorities.

My childhood was no different. As a Chinese American living in a predominately Caucasian community in upstate New York, I was no stranger to prejudice. It might not have been as conspicuous as it was during your time, but it was equally damaging. I remember one time going sledding with my older brother, only to encounter other kids on the hill laughing at us for having “slanted eyes” and insinuating that we would not be able to see in the dark because of them. This bias was not absent in school either. At lunch time in grade school, whenever my mother had packed me *baozi* – or meat buns – to eat, my classmates would pick them up, inspect their strange texture and aroma, and then hand them back to me with wrinkled looks of poorly concealed distaste. Such incidents were the childhood reminders of my otherness.

On the other hand, in the face of this alienation, there is no easy retreat into your own community. Common adversity may breed unity, but it also breeds competition. While I loved going to our Chinese Community Center, I could never feel at ease there. My early childhood was years before “Tiger Mom” emerged into the cultural landscape, but it was quite evident looking back now at how stereotypically the parents in our Chinese community measured the worth of their children. Competition in academics, classical music, and chess were imposed on us like an iron mandate. In this environment, I could be competent and even good at many of these competitive subjects, but was almost never able to be first. “P” would be better at piano and violin; “A” would have a multi-level head start in math. It was a culture of comparisons and reference markers and external validation seeking. It was hard to define myself or to find my own ideals while suffocating under the weight of other people’s standards and judgement for who I was and who I should strive to be.

Over time, I learned to repress these memories – to bury them in the recesses of my mind and pretend they never happened. Moving to another state gave me the reprieve from such competitions to clear the slate for myself. My new town was also predominately Caucasian, but there was no tangible Chinese community like before. Finally, I could breathe a sigh of relief. While I subconsciously repressed my past, I began a period of peaceful introspection going into high school.

I read the *Joy Luck Club* the summer before my sophomore year of high school. My decision to read your book was not entirely random – I had always loved to read for pleasure, and the ideas that Asian

Americas, so stereotyped as one-dimensional STEM geni, could succeed in literature greatly appealed to me. My initial expectation of the book were met, and then some. I found the characters and the plot more than relatable – reading about Jing-Mei’s struggles at the piano while her friend Waverly Place Jong gained acclaim as a young chess champion was like peering into the reflecting pool of my childhood. I identified so strongly with Jing-Mei: her reluctance to begin taking piano lessons with aged, deaf Mr. Chong; her humiliation at her disastrous first recital; her shame and resentment when Waverly nonchalantly declared “I guess you are not a genius like me.”

As I continued to read and saw more of the juxtaposition for Jing-Mei, with all her shortcomings, and Waverly, who seemed like a Tiger Mom’s prototype, the overwhelming memories of upstate New York came rushing back to me. Mental repression could only work for so long. I was once again an insecure grade-schooler, surrounded by children who were more talented than I was in the fields our parents cared about. There were times when I had to put your book down in order to fully process what I was feeling.

However, as Jing-Mei moved past her feelings of inferiority compared to Waverly, I too began to recognize, accept, and be at peace with my childhood feelings of shame and inadequacy. I had been ashamed at not living up to the standards of others – my parents, friends, peers, and relatives. In finishing your book, I came to realize that my sense of self worth should come from myself, not others. It meant that I didn’t need to live up to somebody else’s model of success to be a person of value. Instead, it meant that the ultimate marker of excellence in life is defining your own set of standards, values, and ideals, and then striving to live up to them. As Jing-Mei discovered in the end of the book, being a prodigy is not about the quality of your work, but in the quality of your desire to work hard, live with integrity, and remain true to yourself.

After finishing your book, I explored pursuits that nobody in my upstate New York community would have cared about: Model UN, studying law and politics, or becoming really, really good at Frisbee. What mattered was that these hobbies gave me an immense sense of pleasure and gratification in and of themselves. However, I also resumed activities from childhood that I had dropped as a means of forgetting the past. I played cello once again, and this time – removed from the mental encumbrances of other’s expectations – I was able to play as freely and passionately as I had ever played before.

I even “re-embraced” my culture. In a way, a by-product of repressing my past was the denial of my Asian identity. For example, I quit Chinese school when I moved to Maryland. But reading about Jing-Mei’s growth allowed me to re-evaluate my own culture, and appreciate a civilization spanning more than 3,000 years. I resumed studying Chinese independently, and now I love reading about Chinese history or current events. Moreover, in becoming more culturally aware, I discovered I had contemporaries out there who were broadening the definition of what it meant to be Chinese or Asian American. Filmmakers and artists like Philip Wang and Ryan Higa demonstrate that there is far more to being Chinese American than going to an ivy league school or becoming a doctor, lawyer, banker or engineer.

Thank you, Ms. Tan for teaching me to accept and love myself, be at peace with my past, and appreciate my culture. Thank you for motivating me to define myself, pursue growth independently, and discover inspiring contemporaries.

With admiration and gratitude,

Norman Xiong

11th grade

Severna Park High School