

## Letters About Literature 2017 – Level 1 Maryland State Winning Letter by Tori Delaine Johnson

Dear Ms. Natasha Tarpley,

My name is Tori Delaine Johnson, and I'm only 10 years old, but for as long as I can remember, all of the girls I see on television, in movies and on magazine covers don't look anything like me. Most of them have skin tones much lighter than mine, and ALL of them have long, flowing hair. I began to believe that these females were chosen for their tv shows, the big screen and magazine covers because everyone thought they were beautiful, but none of them looked like "me" so, did that mean I wasn't? I sure felt that way – until I read your book.

My mother gave me a copy of "I Love My Hair!" as a gift one year for my birthday. She would hear me talk to my friends about who I thought was pretty or who had beautiful hair, but I never included myself in those conversations. Even though my parents always tell me that I am beautiful, it was really hard for me to believe, because of what I saw everyday. My curiosity led me to do a little research on the internet and found out some very interesting things. For example, did you know that women spend \$426 billion every year on cosmetics and over \$500 billion on their hair extensions? Those numbers made me think that there are lots of other females who believe what mainstream media had me believing; that having flawless skin and long hair means you are beautiful, but that's not true at all and thanks to your book, I don't believe that lie anymore.

Throughout the pages of "I Love My Hair!", I was reminded of Saturday mornings with my mom shampooing, blow drying and combing my locs. Every hairstyle you described "Keyana" getting made my smile stretch wider and wider. I could feel my confidence building as I turned each page and suddenly, an indescribable love for my own hair began to blossom. I remember thinking, "My hair is so amazing and incredibly versatile! Afro puffs, box braids or cornrows with beads; it can be styled so many different ways. I can have a different look every week – actually, every day, if I wanted!" I finally saw the light. My eyes had been opened and it was all because of your book. After reading it, I became more aware of just how many girls my age, believed the same thing I used to believe. I noticed that lots of girls at my school wore hair extensions and that hardly any of them wore their natural hair. I also noticed how the Brown girls with long ponytails were admired by their friends and how we all described their hair as "good hair" which, in our minds, meant that ours was "bad". It became obvious to me, even at the age of 10, that the repeated images of lighter skin and longer hair directly determined how I felt about myself. Those images made me think the 'chosen' girls were prettier and far more beautiful than me, but not anymore.

Thanks to you, Ms. Tarpley, I no longer think that I have to look like someone else to be beautiful. I was so busy believing the world's definition of beauty that I could not see my own, but you helped me to discover it, and my life will never be the same. "I Love My Hair!" helped me to love the skin I'm in. Everything from my short, black, coils to my milk chocolate, brown skin. I am uniquely and wonderfully made; a one of a kind, original design and there's no one else like me! From the top of my head to the tips of my toes, I am exactly how I'm supposed to be, and I think I'm absolutely beautiful. Thank you so much for helping me to love myself and to realize what true beauty is. I used to only see it in other people, but now I see it every time I look in the mirror at me.

Sincerely,

Tori Delaine Johnson