

Letters about Literature 2016 – Michigan – Winners compilation

COMPETITION LEVEL: I

WINNER: Beatrice Mulder

Dear Sharon M. Draper,

Thank you for writing *Out of My Mind*. This is embarrassing to admit, but I didn't voluntarily decide to read your book. In fact, it was required reading in my class. My favorite genre is fantasy/sci-fi books and I have to confess, I love reading books with dazzling covers and heaps of action and excitement. Because of my preconceived biases, I wasn't thrilled to read *Out of My Mind*. *I know you can't judge a book by its' cover, but this book looks boring*, I thought.

Actually there was more than one reason why I didn't want to read your book. You see, I have felt uncomfortable around disabled people at times, not knowing what to say or how to act. I always felt sympathetic, but there was an awkward moment from time to time. Therefore, I wasn't convinced reading your book would be a positive experience.

I attended a public school through fifth grade where mentally and physically disabled children would join my class in our room for an hour a day. When they came in, I felt a bit uncomfortable and shy around them. I wanted to say "hi" and "do the right thing", but I didn't want them to think I was staring. Then, in 2014, Theo, who is in the grade above me in school, unexpectedly developed encephalitis. Encephalitis is a virus that affects the brain and causes inflammation. When Theo contracted encephalitis he was first in a coma, and then when he woke up, he couldn't move or talk. My grandma, a retired school teacher, immediately volunteered to be with Theo in the hospital so his parents could get a break. Once Theo was home, my grandma also tutored him and helped him catch up on what he had missed. My grandma had difficulties teaching Theo because he could barely communicate and had problems moving.

One day when my grandma was bringing my cousins, sister and me home from school we encountered Theo in the hallway. My grandma brought us over to Theo and asked us to say "hi" to him and get down so we were eye to eye when speaking with him. After my grandma told me what to do, my brain was going a mile a minute screaming, *what do you do? This is awkward! Can he still think and understand me?* I am embarrassed of my thoughts, but I couldn't stop them. During that time in my life, I tended to think that if someone couldn't communicate back with me, something was wrong with them. In other words they weren't as smart as me. But that wasn't true in Theo's or Melody's case. A line that I found in *Out of My Mind* helped me see things from a different point of view. In the story, Melody's mom says to Doctor Hugely, "But a person is so much more than the name of a diagnosis on a chart!" This immediately made me think of people like Theo and Melody and the compassion they deserve.

Reading your book also reminded me of a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson, “To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.” This quote brings to my mind when Spaulding Street Elementary students labeled Melody as stupid because she couldn’t talk. But Melody didn’t give up, she stayed true to who she was. She was encouraged by her neighbor, Mrs. V and Catherine, her teacher’s aide, to be herself even though the other children had misperceptions about her. When Melody received Elvira she could now communicate what she thought. She proved to them that she was as intelligent as them.

After I read *Out of My Mind*, I understood. I could more clearly put myself in Theo’s shoes and I also realized that I was acting no better than Claire and Molly. Sure I never said any of my criticisms out loud, but I continuously thought them and left them virtually unchallenged in my mind. From then on, I decided that I had to change. But, it was slow progress at first. I had to train my brain to think, *how’s he doing?*, instead of the usual, *can he hear me?* I finally started feeling more comfortable around disabled people thanks to Melody’s story. I can now engage in conversation with Theo and other people have disabilities without feeling strange. With the help of Melody, I now understand what it is like not being able to talk. As Melody says, “Thoughts need words. Words need a voice.”

Again, thank you for writing *Out of My Mind*. Even though your book is realistic fiction, and did not appeal to me at first, I appreciate Melody’s story more than I expected and gained valuable life lessons for how to relate with people who may appear different than myself. For even though Melody couldn’t speak, her story speaks volumes of wisdom for me.

Sincerely,

Beatrice Mulder

## COMPETITION LEVEL: II

WINNER: Alexis Krumbach

Dear Joni Eareckson Tada,

Appreciation is a complicated feeling. I should have appreciated many things that used to be, simply expectations to me. I expected to always be able to walk, to dance, to learn, to be loved. I expected the love of my family, my friends, I even expected life itself to be good. I took these things for granted. This was all before I read 'Joni, An Unforgettable Story.'

Reading how you became paralyzed absolutely shocked me. It never occurred to me that something so severe could happen so suddenly to change a life forever. I can use my body. I can walk. I look 'normal.' My dilemma has been a life long journey of accepting how I learn.

The way I learn is different. It is not normal. That makes me feel abnormal. My mom has tried to convince me ever since I remember that the way I learn is 'unique.' I never wanted to be unique. I wanted to be like everyone around me. I wanted to be normal. I never realized how having Central Auditory Processing Syndrome and a Language Processing Disorder could transform me into a more compassionate, empathetic human being. I always had to leave class for extra teaching and then come back in when everyone else already knew what to do. Teachers would give me a short version of the directions. Directions were always difficult for me to understand, especially the shortened version. I grew used to doing things wrong, getting laughed at, sighed at, nobody wanted to be my partner. I had to do everything over and over. It is humiliating to be treated differently than the normal kids. Every single year I dreaded school starting. I dreaded being viewed and treated like I was stupid or worse, uncooperative. I have been teased and bullied every year until sixth grade when I started going to my new school. Kids don't understand that even though I look normal on the outside, I'm not. Every single thing is a struggle for me to understand and to remember. I have to memorize almost everything to learn it and that takes a lot of time.

Reading about your journey after your accident and how it made you a stronger, better person gave me hope and helped me to appreciate my strengths and blessings. I am thankful that you shared your story in a way I understood. It was like your words touched my heart. If you can focus on what is positive in your life, I can focus on positive things in my life too. After reading about how many people you have been able to help with your organization 'Wheels for the World', how you are able to paint using your mouth and teeth to hold your pencil and brushes, and how you appreciate life, how you are thankful, made me believe I can do that too.

Believing in myself despite my differences, having perseverance to reach my goals, being determined not to let anything or anyone stop me, these are all lessons I have embraced

from your book. In my opinion, you have proven everyone is valuable, no matter what. Like invisible victories, achieving my of graduating high school and going to college will be proof of my triumph over my personal circumstances. Thank you for sharing everything you went through.

Sincerely,

Alexis Kumbach

### COMPETITION LEVEL: III

WINNER: Sophia Nam

Dear Maya Angelou,

Our stories begin on the same chapter at the age of three. When you were three years old, you moved from St. Louis to Arkansas. At the same age, I moved from South Korea to the United State. We both found a life we never expected.

I was always confused. My early childhood is a blur of unfamiliar words and stretches of time marked only by varying degrees of uncertainty. During story time, I used to look outside the window because, no matter which side of the globe I was on, the only thing that remained constant was the sky.

Then, I stopped being confused, and it was worse. I was the oldest child, so by the time I turned five, I was the only one in my family who could speak fluent English. We all heard what they said about us, but I was the only one who understood. In your book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, you describe being aware of your own displacement and an “unnecessary insult” and “the rust on the razor that threatens the throat.” I felt “the rust” as keenly as you did. I no longer needed the sky. I depended on people and their acceptance.

I started asking my Mom to drop me off a block away from school, so my friends wouldn’t hear her accent. I told her that my name wasn’t “American” enough, so I didn’t want the name she gave me. The look on her face made it clear that she knew what I was really saying, that I didn’t want the skin she gave me.

When I was thirteen, a boy asked me out because he wanted to know what it was like to date an Asian girl. A part of me knew just how wrong that was, and there were so many things I should have said. But this was a small town in Georgia. But I was thirteen years old. But I was *flattered*. And the words I needed to say folded onto themselves as if to hide some secret that I wasn’t ready for.

I found the secret, Maya. I found it in your book when you put on a ruffled dress and imagined that you were going “to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody’s dream of what was right with the world.” I knew for the first time that I wasn’t alone. Every little girl of color must experience a moment when they realize that the world turns its attentions to girls with blue eyes and blonde hair. Is it our fault for wanting that?

But then you sang in celebration at your high school graduation as a “proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race.” You quit a badly needed job because your employer insisted on calling you “Mary” instead of the *blacker* “Maya.” You learned to possess a quiet dignity that touched every part of your life. You held a mirror

to my face in the form of your book, filled with all your wonderful, beautiful words. It struck me just how much I gave up to embody a caricature that I had crafted in my head.

Because when I treated my Mom like a dirty secret, when I rejected a name that didn't fit neatly into the contours of someone else's mouth, I was accepting the walls of my cage in silence. That was the lesson you taught me.

In school, we learn about assimilation, and my teacher describes it like it's something over. Gone, done, and buried. But then I remember you in the 1940s. And I remember me in the 2000s. And it feels like, somehow, I'm both the criminal and the victim. The word "assimilation" sits like acid on my tongue.

But I no longer rely on my old wish. I don't want to be one of those "sweet little white girls." I'm rediscovering my language, my family, and my culture.

Our stories end on the same chapter at the age of seventeen. You end your book with a baby on the way. I may not have a child, but I have my own mission. I want you there with me.

At eight years old, you stopped speaking because you feared the power of words. You taught me that they're not meant to be taken lightly. Now, I work at a tutoring center for young kids, teaching them how to read and write. I want to do right by them. I want to teach them beautiful words, like the ones you gave me, but I know that words can all too easily become weapons. I don't want to construct tools that these children will use to shepherd each other into cages.

However, you taught me that I don't have to be afraid of words; I can be in awe of them. When you were thirteen, you started speaking again with a voice that would ring through generations. I will do my best to make sure that the words I offer these children will become paint brushes and poetry. Ms. Angelou, your lesson does not end with me.

There are moments when our journeys intersected, and I discovered you in little pockets of my life. You tell me you know why the caged bird sings.

Maya, I found the secret.

Cages like ours don't exist in nature. Our cages are not made by our own hands, yet we sit complacently, tightening the bars when society demands us to be weak. But you learned to sing, every day, loud and unapologetic. Your song was a cry and a battle hymn and a reincarnation. You demanded the world's attention, and you made sure you always deserved it.

I have finally heard your song, Maya. It sings in harmony with a voice that I've recognized as my own.

Thank you,

Jihye Sophia Nam