

Letters about Literature 2015 Michigan – Winners Compilation

Level I – Soja Kureekkattil

Dear Malala,

Congratulations on winning the Nobel Peace Prize. I never wrote a letter to a Nobel Prize recipient in the past. So I write this not just to congratulate you on winning the Nobel Prize but also to thank you for showing me, what a girl who is just 5 years older to me can do for this world, for showing us how courageous a girl can be to fight even the terrorist. Thank you for fighting for our right of education and thank you for not being silenced by the Taliban. I read your book, “I am Malala” and I want to tell you how much impact it has made on my life.

I have been asked many times by my teachers and parents in the past, “What I want to be when I grow up”. I have seen most of my friends saying they want to become doctors or engineers but I could never make up my mind. But the day I finished reading your book I realized what I want to become in my life. I read about your life as a Pakistani girl living in a place where the Taliban were in control. You strived for girl’s education. When everyone else silenced at the sight of Taliban, you spoke out knowing that your life was at risk. Your bravery towards the Taliban has inspired me to one day become an activist for children’s education.

Your life is not just a story of courage and strength. You taught me lessons of forgiveness too. It was always hard for me to forgive others when anyone did anything wrong to me. I felt ashamed of myself when I read what you wrote about the man who shot you. You wrote, “My only regret was that I hadn’t had a chance to speak to them before they shot me. I didn’t even think a single bad thought about the man who shot me”.

I was born in your neighboring country India and lived there till my family moved to United States in 2007. I used to visit our relatives in India every other year. During these trips, one common thing I have seen in India is the children on the streets begging for money. I feel sorry for them as they live in poverty. Most of them probably never even got the chance to go to school and obtain a good education. I may never receive the Nobel Peace Prize or ever be brave like you but I know I can make a difference. I can start by donating to charities that help support education for children.

Thank you Malala, for writing this inspiring book. Now I finally have the answer to my question to what I want to be. You wrote in your concluding paragraph, “peace in every home, every street, every village, every country, and education for every boy and every girl in the world is my dream”. The day I finished reading your book, it has become my dream too.

Soja Kureekkattil

Level II – Ellie Martin

Mr. Jerry Spinelli,

My name is Eleanor (Ellie) Martin, and I absolutely LOVED your book, Start Girl. I read it at the recommendation of my Health teacher, Mrs. Simmons, who for some reason decided one day that she saw many similarities between your character and I. She bugged me about reading the book for about a week. Finally, I went to the school library and checked it out. I sat right down and began reading. Within minutes, I was hooked. I read and read as much as I could, anytime I could. I even got into trouble a couple of times for reading in class when I was supposed to be doing something else. I couldn't help it. I sat with my sweatshirt covering the sides of my desk, book on my lap, looking up every few seconds to make sure that my teacher wasn't giving me the dreaded death stare. That is one of the most embarrassing things to have happen to you in class – the teacher staring you down, everybody looking at you, but you don't even realize it until – “Ellie!” ☺

I was about ninety pages in by the time the school day was over, and I'd wanted to bring the book home, but to my dismay, I forgot it in my locker. I finished it the next morning. I did not savor the book slowly, I tore through the pages hungrily. Mr. Spinelli, the reason why I enjoyed your book so much was because, my whole life, I've been – different, weird, eccentric, a little crazy. I have never been “popular.” Because of my differences, I've always been bullied and rejected. I don't really fit in with anybody here. I think they think I'm mentally insane, but I'm not, I'm just different. What's wrong with that?

At first, I thought that nobody understood what that was like. Maybe you don't from experience, but you changed me for the better through StarGirl, regardless. That's more than I'm able to say about any other book I've read. Ever. And I've read a LOT of books. Discovering StarGirl was a little miracle, because, even though she's nothing more than a character from a book, she helped me. You helped me. Thank you. StarGirl made me feel so many emotions – happy, cause I felt like somebody gets it – finally! Angry, because of the way they treat her – All she has ever done is try to make other people happy, but nobody bothers to do the same for her. Weak, for feeling ashamed of who I am, for hiding it, for the sake of a good reputation. StarGirl isn't afraid of that – she is proud of who she is. She doesn't try to hide her strange personality, she embraces it! It makes me sad because I know what it's like to try so hard to make everyone like you, to make everyone be happy, and have them shut you out in return. It really hurts.

Your book made me laugh, it made me cry (a lot), and it made feel happy to know that there are good people too. Even in an ocean of mean, hateful people, there is still goodness. I like knowing that. StarGirl helped me realize that the hateful things other people will say and do to bring you down don't matter so long as you do what feels right to you. If you aren't hurting anybody, and you aren't being someone you're not, who cares. This is MY life, I'll live it how I want – true to myself, happy and kind to all, (whether they deserve it or not.) I'm getting over the self-pity and doing what feels right to ME. I may not have tons of friends, popularity, or a trail of boys on my path because of it, (Who would want to, anyway?) but I did find my own self-respect, and empathy for

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those who don't show their true self in fear of losing popularity – they don't know what they're missing. I cried a lot when StarGirl changed herself to please people who weren't wise enough to see her worth. I hated it, but in the end, she was true to herself, and that is what matters most. I realize that now. I vow to do the same – today, tomorrow, and every day leading up to my last breath. Thank you so much for StarGirl. Sincerely,

Ellie Martin ☺

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Level III – Rashna Soonavala

Dear William Wordsworth,

I am a sixteen year old girl without her license doomed to having to ride the bus. But it is not so much the bus ride itself that I loathe, but rather the arduous walk home that I truly detest.

If a speed walking race were to be held at my bus stop at 3pm every weekday, there is no doubt that I would be the reigning champion. My form is impeccable: My head is down, eyes glued to the pavement, hands in jacket pocket, back slightly hunched, not really out of choice you see, but rather because of the 9-month pregnant backpack that is accompanying me. In my ears are my headphones blasting some irresistibly catchy Coldplay song as my feet unconsciously synchronize to the song's infectious beat. Left. Right. Left. Right.

Throughout my trek I am bombarded with numerous obstacles: Jack Frost rudely blowing in my face, my ravenous stomach growling at my feet for not moving fast enough, my aching shoulders whimpering in pain, but my brain is immune to all of these distractions. It is programmed to know exactly which turns to take, which puddles to avoid, that I barely even need to glance up on this journey home. Before I know it, I have reached my front door and victoriously crossed the finish line. Whether it is just my backpack hitting the floor or true euphoria, after every walk home, I feel like a heavy weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

The cycle unconsciously unwinds every week day. The minute my shoes land on the pavement, a wild blur of fast feet and unbridled determination to reach home once again commences.

But that all changed the day I read your poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." Your ability to beautifully describe the encounter between the narrator and the daffodils with such delicate simplicity is remarkable, but what truly captivated my attention were the lines, "I gazed—and gazed—but little thought/What wealth the show to me had brought." It is in these lines that the narrator admits his lack of awareness regarding the Earth's beauty despite being surrounded by its presence. Those two lines resonated deep within me as I saw the unmistakable parallel between the narrator and myself.

Just as the narrator had failed to acknowledge the daffodils, I too remained oblivious to Mother Nature's ubiquitous existence on my daily walk home from the bus. Dictated by the sheer urge to get home in the shortest time possible, I treated my walk home like a perfunctory chore that need to be done, rather than embracing the moment. In the whirlwind of hastiness and speed, I was missing out on so much. I failed to notice the autumn air making the trees blush a deep crimson red. I remained unaware of the ostentatious roses flaunting their pink petals one last time—unobservant of the chipmunks playing tag. I did not see the robins gliding effortlessly in the sky, nor the pair of rabbits ensconced in their cozy burrow. I was oblivious to the majestic cumulus clouds

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making way for the sun as if she were royalty, deaf to the birds' chirping. Had I acknowledged these things earlier, there is no doubt that I would have fallen in love with my walk home. After all, you wrote yourself that, "A poet could not be but gay/In such jocund company."

So the lingering question in my mind was why? Why did I feel the need to treat my route home like a race? What possessed me to scurry through this walk as if a deadline needed to be met? There was no prize for reaching home in 8 minutes instead of 10. So why? And I realized that it is not just me that "fast-walks" his/her way through life—but everyone.

Mother Nature has not lost her glow, yet every day we humans, with our brains supposedly the most advanced of all species, fall victim to something as basic as time. We yearn for things to get done faster and crave quick results. We live in a world where if a website does not load within 5 seconds, it is deemed "slow" and there is always the uneasy feeling of waiting impatiently for a measly 1 minute as our food heats up in the microwave. Unfortunately, this insatiable hunger for things to be done swiftly most likely stems from our advancements in technology. You wrote this poem in 1804 and I often wonder what you would think of today's technology-intoxicated society that is more likely to download the Google Earth app, than acknowledge our actual planet.

Yes—it is sad—but I am forever grateful that you have saved me from completely falling under the spell and becoming one of the many mindless victims who get caught up in the hustle and bustle of life's monotonous routine and fail to take a couple minutes to just marvel at the Earth's magnificence. Your poem struck me so deeply that it caused me to reevaluate my attitude towards something as simple as a walk home from the bus stop. Was I going to remain in my little bubble and fly through life unaware of my surroundings or was I going to, as cliché as it sounds, "Stop and smell the roses?"

You will be happy to know that because of you my walk home from the bus stop is now actually my favorite part of the day. I no longer play music, my pace is slower, my back straighter, and my head now directed upwards instead of down, but the extra time it takes me to get home is a small cost compared to priceless experience that I have. There is something cathartic about emptying your mind completely, being free of any distractions, and just gaze in awe at the simple beauty of how bright the sun shines or how vivid in color the flower petals are. In these moments, I once again find my thoughts being an echo of those of the narrator as I too find joy in the purity of nature: "...my heart with pleasure fills/ And dances with the daffodils." Perhaps I can wait a bit longer to get my license. My parents will definitely be glad to hear that.

Yours truly,

Rashna Soonavala