

Level One - Grades 4-6 - First Place Winner - 2024

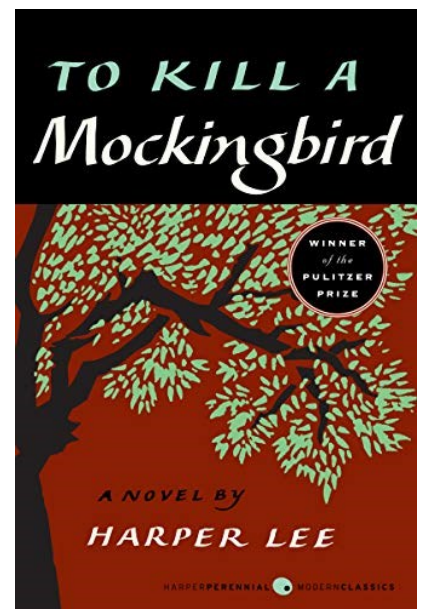
Megan M.
Zionsville, Indiana

Dear Harper Lee,

There are some lessons in life that can be impossible to learn, or that you never fully understand until it feels real. Your book made it feel real. Before I read your book, I never imagined that someone could be wrongly convicted of a horrible crime and still be proven guilty, just because of what they look like. With each turn of a page, I became aware of the horrible social inequalities and darker aspects of humanity, and I am grateful for that. Without your novel I never would have fully understood what it was like for people to be outcasted not because of who they were, but the color of their skin.

I chose your book because your book impacted me deeply. I found myself still thinking about it months after I read it. Pondering the jury's decision, trying to look at it from every angle. Why wasn't Tom Robinson believed when he was obviously innocent? How could the jury not be aware of Bob Ewell's malice, and pin it on Tom Robinson? I was confused, but then I realized people are being judged based on appearances or rumors, and this was just one of the many injustices in our society. Your book brought me out of my unawareness of the world around me and the many injustices in our society, and I believe this has made me a better and more mature person.

I started to think about how your characters felt being judged based on lies. Then I realized this is a part of my life I had never noticed. I started to wonder if this was happening to me or people around me. Or... could I be the person judging someone? What could I do to change this? I thought about every negative opinion I had of someone, and if it was backed up by facts and their actions and words. I reset my opinions on everyone and tried to continue with an open mind like Scout and Jem did after they discovered Boo Radley was a good person. Before I read your book, I would judge people on first impressions and pay no attention to who they were as a person. Your book taught me to break free of these opinions.



Your book made me think about the consequences of hateful prejudice in the world. Like what is going on with all the hate swirling around the world. I then began to become angry. If someone would just stand up for them, people would change their minds, right? But deep down I still knew that minds were not easily changed, and what can a 12-year-old girl from Indiana do? With that revelation I connected with your character more than ever. In a way, I became the characters and felt their hopelessness.

I learned from your book not to destroy what is beautiful. I now understand that the mockingbird is a reference for beauty and kindness, but killing a mockingbird represents destroying beauty. The mockingbird does not harm us but grants us with their beautiful song. Like how a person can have good and beauty in them and still be persecuted and viewed as an outcast. After reading your pages I began to think for a long time, I thought about how much beautiful life is being taken advantage of. I read articles and stories about children abandoned by their parents, and I felt horrible for them. I felt horrible each time I asked for a Christmas present knowing full well that those kids would not get any. Then I remembered how Scout and Jem felt so helpless not being able to do anything for Tom Robinson. That inspired me to talk to my family, and we decided to donate Christmas presents to homeless children and children in child protective services. I knew it was not going to make an enormous difference in the world, but it would make a difference in their world.

While your book was beautifully written and an amazing story, that is not what I value from it. I value the lessons it taught me, about how not to judge people based on preconceived notions or what they look like and not to take advantage of the beauty of life in the world. And I thank you for teaching me some of the most important lessons one can learn. There is so much hate and prejudice in the world right now. Our society needs more people like Atticus who will stand up for what is right and go against what others think. Your book has inspired me to be one of those people, and to hold true to what I believe, even when it gets hard.

Sincerely,
Megan

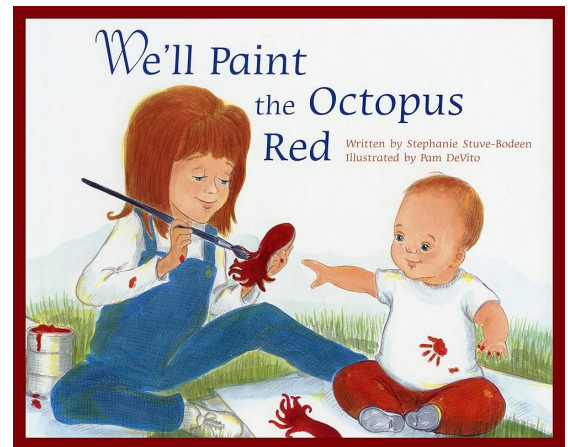
Level Two - Grades 7-8 - First Place Winner - 2024

Audrey S.
Jasper, Indiana

Dear Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen,

On February 10th, 2016 my life was forever changed. Like Emma, my new sibling would be born with Down syndrome. I discovered I would have a new baby brother or sister around a month before my 5th birthday. Soon after my parents got pregnant, the doctors told them that their baby would have Down syndrome. They told me as soon as they found out, but not in the way you would expect.

My parents sat me down and said they had some news to share. They read me your story, *We'll Paint the Octopus Red*. After they said, "Audrey, your new baby brother or sister will be like Isaac, they will have Down syndrome." I asked similar questions as Emma regarding what my new sibling would be able to do. The one that my parents remember the most is, "Will she be okay?"



Well, 7 years later I can definitely say that my sister is more than okay, she's astounding.

My first memory of Elynn, my sister, was the exact day she was born. My grandparents drove me to the hospital to see her. At this time, I didn't know what gender she was. My parents told me to look in her crib. I went on my tiptoes and saw the illustrations in your book come to life. My new baby sibling was bundled in pink. "Her name is Elynn Jean," my parents said. "Hi Elynn, it's your big sister, Audrey," I whispered into the crib. The corners of her brand-new cheeks curled into a smile. It was like she already had my voice memorized. This memory is forever engraved in my mind. Without your story, I would have never realized how important my role as Elynn's sister would be. Thanks to you, I now have an everlasting relationship with my little sister.

As Emma's dad said, having a sibling with Down syndrome will require patience. My sister does lots of

things that irritate me. Being her big sister, I've learned that she really looks up to me. Emma's father paved the path for me to think that no matter what little thing she does, I have to be the shining light in her life. The role model she can always rely on. Elynn and Isaac handed me new lenses to look at life through. I now know that just because people are different, it doesn't mean I should think they're out for the count. Like Emma, I have to work extremely hard with my sibling. Emma and her dad have helped me understand that if I put aside time for Elynn, the possibilities of what she can do are endless.

Emma's dad and mine are quite alike. They both remind me that as long as we give our siblings time and attention, they will thrive at anything they want to do. When Emma and her dad were brainstorming ideas for what Isaac could do, they thought of millions of things. I adamantly think this is true. Elynn is now in 2nd grade and is one of the most intelligent kids I know. We work nonstop with her at home on her math and reading assignments. It takes time, but it's so worth it to see that gleaming smile on her face when she gets the answer correct.

Emma was worried about Isaac being able to do kickball with her. I was also concerned if my sister would be interested in sports. I can safely say I have nothing to be worried about. Some of her favorite things to do are swimming, basketball, and soccer. She's superb at all of these activities. Elynn can swim at my grandparents' for hours, and every summer day she asks to go to a pool. She got a basketball goal for Christmas one year and is still obsessed with it. My dad and I train at least three days a week during soccer season. She always wants to attend and keeps right up with me. She especially loves doing push-ups and going on runs. I can't help but smile when she tells me how hard she worked after training.

I'm sure Isaac has taught Emma many lessons and Elynn has surely taught me some. I want to thank you for being the one to give me the news that my sister will have Down syndrome. It is without a doubt the best news of my life. You have inspired me to be the shoulder that my sister can lean on. A lesson that I will never forget that Elynn has taught me is that you shouldn't judge someone by the score on their test, but by the size of their heart.

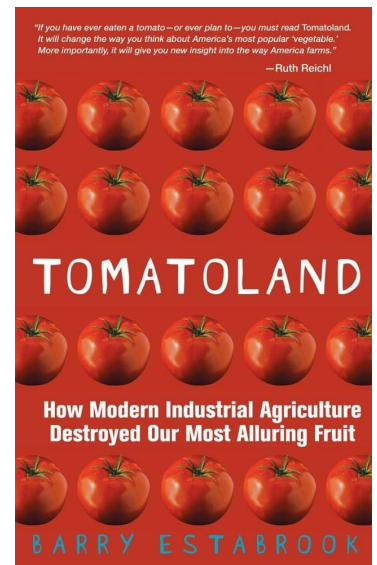
Sincerely,
Audrey S.

Level Three - Grades 9-12 - First Place Winner - 2024

Kayla X.
West Lafayette, Indiana

Dear Barry Estabrook,

I read *Tomatoland* recently, and now every time I go to the supermarket, I can't help but think about how my tomatoes reached me. Before reading your book, agriculture wasn't something I was interested in. I don't think that I ever really thought about worker exploitation in the agricultural industry, much less specifically in the tomato picking industry. Since I don't live in a rural area, farming has never been at the forefront of my mind. However, reading this book made me rethink my consumerist choices. Reading about the worker exploitation needed to grow a winter tomato while eating a tomato stir fry during the winter made me think twice about the food on my plate and in my refrigerator. I was so incredibly moved by Edar's story and how the Coalition of Immokalee Workers got its start, yet I had to confront my own capital-h-hypocrisy as I continued to eat tomatoes – in the middle of January.



You also enlightened me about chemicals. I definitely knew that my food contained pesticides, but I had no idea how much and to what extent farmers were applying them to their crops. What would compel Floridian farmers to spray 8 MILLION POUNDS of insecticide? Reading about the consequences of such reckless endangerment for not just me as the consumer but the pickers was terrifying; I've thought about it every time that I wash a fruit, vegetable, or tomato. Even my parents were largely unaware of the process from the start of the growing season in July to the supermarket for winter tomatoes.

When I was little, my grandma tended a vegetable garden. I remember that when I harvested our garden, I felt that our misshapen tomatoes and cucumbers were defective or rotten. I was so used to the perfect pantone red tomatoes from the supermarket that I had no idea what actual homegrown food looked like. I reflected about this often while I was reading. I highlighted a lot of my favorite quotes from your book, quotes like, "Workers who pick the food we eat cannot afford to feed themselves," or "Any American who has eaten a winter tomato...has eaten a fruit picked by the hand of a slave." My blithe ignorance for the

lives of the people who picked the food I was eating needed to be addressed, and I needed to make a change.

My favorite part of your book was near the conclusion. The section on Lady Moon Farms was really interesting, because after being uncomfortable for the majority of the reading, I was glad to see that there is a way forward. While reading, I often had uncomfortable thoughts like, *why does the industry have to be this way, and what can be done about it?* Discovering all the farms that were supporting their workers and the health of their consumers felt uplifting and helped me feel less out-of-control.

My grandma always had me help her in her garden, and while it's been a while since I've tried my hand at gardening, this book has made me reevaluate that decision. I've made plans to create my own small garden, and I have already gotten a head start by propagating some green onions for myself. I am looking forward to enjoying my ethical, healthy, and tasty tomatoes next summer. Thank you for sparking an awareness about this overlooked yet critical issue and reintroducing me to a nostalgic and healthful hobby.

Sincerely,
Kayla X.

LettersAboutLiterature

Indiana Author Letter Prize - 2024

Lincoln H.
Westfield, Indiana

Dear Mr. Green,

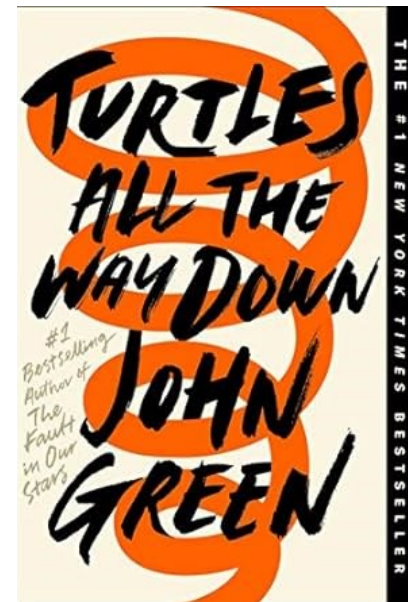
I recently read a bunch of your books, including: *Paper Towns*, *An Abundance of Katherines*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, and *Turtles All the Way Down*. My mom says I have to wait a few more years before I can read *Looking for Alaska*, but I'm excited to read more of your writing.

The most notable book for me was definitely *Turtles All the Way Down*. I have read it four times and know I'll read it again in the future. The anxiety spiral you depicted made me feel seen. I used to and still do have a bit of anxiety. The analogy you used with the spiral made sense to me – that sometimes feelings seem so tightly wound that you can't control them, or yourself. I've experienced this personally, where my mind won't think normally, emotions keep building up, and I feel like a shaken soda can waiting to explode.

It felt nice reading about a character with anxiety, because I understand them. It felt like I wasn't alone. Many people don't talk about their struggles out loud, but when you read a story from a character's perspective dealing with emotions you also experience, you not only understand yourself more, but understand other people more too.

I've been trying to talk about my anxiety struggles more lately as well. I have a therapist named Ms. Lindsea. She knows I read your books a lot. It feels good to share my experiences with her. She knows what *Turtles All the Way Down* means to me and that it is my favorite book to read over and over. Everyone should have a trusted person in their life that they can talk to about stuff like this. But if you don't, reading books with characters that are dealing with things you are dealing with can help.

In the future, I want to be more like you and write articles that can help people get through problems they are going through.



Mr. Green, please keep writing and publishing books with characters like Aza Holmes in *Turtles All the Way Down*. At the end of the book, Aza realizes she will never be completely well, but that's okay. I like that it's realistic. You can never be perfect or completely fine. Everyone has insecurities and imperfections. Being able to understand that is what makes you okay.

Sincerely,
Lincoln H.