

## Level One - Grades 4-6 - First Place Winner - 2025

Henry R.  
Fort Wayne, Indiana

Dear Langston Hughes,

I recently read your poem **"Let America Be America Again,"** and I wanted to share how much it impacted me. Your words really opened my eyes to what being American means and how important freedom is. Your poem made me think about the dreams that many people have in America. When you talked about the hopes of different individuals, it hit me hard.

It's sad to think that while some people are chasing their dreams, others can feel stuck because of unfair barriers. You captured the feelings of those who work really hard every day, but still struggle to get what they want from life. It shows how uneven things can be in a country that's often seen as a land of opportunity. One part of your poem that really stood out to me was when you said that America should be a place where everyone has the right to pursue happiness.



I believe that everyone, no matter where they come from, should have the same chance to chase their dreams. This message resonates with me deeply. I think a society becomes better when it respects and embraces different people. We should all stand up for those who face challenges and make sure their voices are heard. The way you used vivid descriptions and strong feelings in your poem made me feel like you were talking right to me. I was inspired by your call for a more inclusive and fair America. Your powerful words made me think about how I act and what I believe.

Learning about the struggles faced by many has encouraged me to think about how I can help make positive changes in my community. Because of your poetry, I'm inspired to become a better person. I want to actively lift others up and support those who need it. Your writing has pushed me to choose kindness and fairness in my life. I believe that if we all try to be a little more compassionate and include everyone, we can create a better world for ourselves and others.

I also recognize that it's essential to keep reflecting on our own biases and barriers while working toward a more equitable society. We need to inspire those around us to join in this quest for justice and equality. Thank you for sharing your thoughts through your poem.

Sincerely,  
Henry R.

## Level Two - Grades 7-8 - First Place Winner - 2025

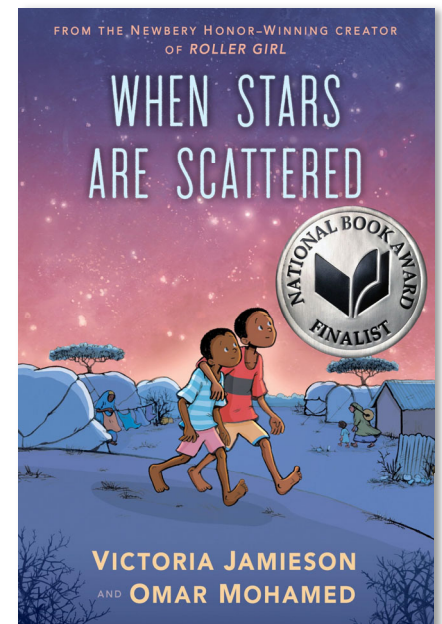
Vaishnavi P.  
Columbus, Indiana

Dear Omar Mohamed and Victoria Jamieson,

Two years ago, I saw the book ***When Stars Are Scattered*** on one of my school library's shelves. Thinking this was just another graphic novel, I picked it up. Now I know this is not the case. Ever since I read ***When Stars Are Scattered***, I can't help but think about how thousands of people are refugees worldwide. Your book opened my eyes to how people face difficult situations in day-to-day life, just to survive.

In Dadaab, Omar lived a miserable life trying to make both ends meet. Still, he never stopped amazing me with how he continued to be happy amidst his struggles. Your book taught me that the small joys in life make our days better. Whenever I complain about not getting the flavor of ice cream I wanted, I remember that Omar and Hasaan never got to eat ice cream even once, much less enough portions of food. Whenever I complain about having to do homework, I remember how badly Omar wanted to go to school. To him, going to school was an option he was afraid to choose, for he had to care for Hassan. Even though Omar had much to complain about, he thanked God for the good things he had in life. Omar showed me that you can be grateful when everything seems wrong and happy when the world isn't in your favor. ***When Stars Are Scattered*** is reality. It showed me that life isn't perfect, but it's a journey to be forever cherished.

Your book also taught me that mindset does matter. Through Omar's story, I understood that hope is a powerful thing people try to hold on to, even when it seems like the universe is against them. Like Tall Salan said, Omar was like a grain of sand in the desert. His chance of getting picked to go to America was less than one percent. Still, Omar held hope, somewhere deep in his heart. That's why he listened to the stars. They gave him hope that his parents were somewhere close, and that he wasn't lost in the ocean of refugees at Dadaab. Omar showed me that it was important not to lose hope. Before reading ***When***



**Stars Are Scattered**, I held a negative mindset. I always thought "I can't do this," or "It's impossible." The way Omar saw the world changed me. He thought there was a chance of getting picked to go to America. He had hope for his future. If he never hoped to get there, his life would've been different. It made me realize that impossible things happen sometimes because your book made them seem real. Omar was not written to seem like a fictional character who never lost hope, or always had things his way. Instead, he was a relatable character. He also lost hope sometimes, like when he decided that he should be a social worker when he grew up, instead of something else because it seemed like he was never going to get out of the refugee camp.

One important thing that your book taught me was that hard work is the way to success. **When Stars Are Scattered** is a perfect example of how nothing comes easy. Fatuma told Omar that everything in life is a gift from God, and it's his job to use it. This convinced Omar to go to school, leaving young Hassan at home. From that day on, Omar studied daily, even when it was hard. Sometimes, it felt like there was no point, especially when he might not get a job. Still, he passed his exams, even after he didn't get called to a second interview. Omar showed me that if you want something, you should work hard for it. There's no other way out of it. After relocating to America, Omar never forgot where he came from. Sometimes, when we turn around to see how far we've come, it's a shock to us. That's what it was like for Omar. This relates to how we should be grateful even when it seems like the world has turned its back on us.

**When Stars Are Scattered** is a beautifully written story that has changed and enlightened me in ways that I would never have imagined. Now, I firmly believe that thoughts do matter, and that there is hope for everyone. Thank you for inspiring me to be grateful for everything I have, to find joy in the small things, and for enlightening me about all the struggles refugees face today.

Sincerely,  
Vaishnavi P.

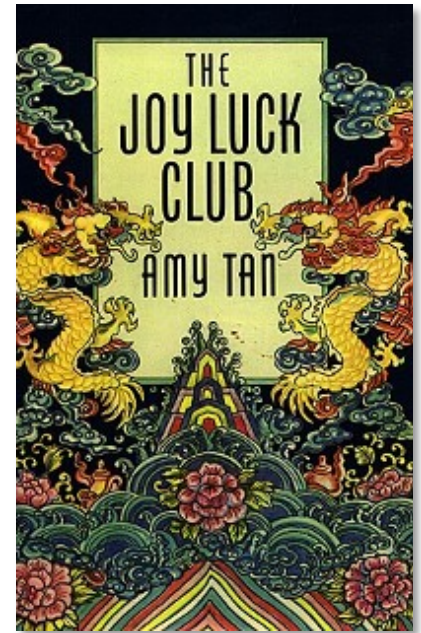
## Level Three - Grades 9-12 - First Place Winner - 2025

Jenna N.  
McCordsville, Indiana

Dear Amy Tan,

Reading ***The Joy Luck Club*** was truly inspiring to me. Your book didn't just tell a story; it was able to help me understand my identity as an Asian American and deepened my appreciation for my mom's experiences and sacrifices.

Before reading the book, I often felt caught between two worlds: the traditions and expectations of my Asian heritage and the fast-paced individualism of American life. I sometimes felt disconnected from my mom and unsure of how to balance these parts of myself. Your novel changed that and gave me a way to navigate my two sides. For the first time, I saw characters dealing with the same problems I feel, the desire to make my family proud while also trying to put myself first. Jing-mei's struggle to balance her mother's hopes with her own desires felt deeply familiar. It made me realize that my own uncertainties about who I am and where I belong are part of a larger, shared experience.



What resonated most and truly changed me was how I saw my mom. My mom and I have always loved each other, but sometimes it's hard for us to fully understand each other. Your story helped me see her with new eyes. When I read about Suyuan Woo's sacrifices and dreams for Jing-mei, I thought about how my mom has worked tirelessly to give me opportunities she never had. She doesn't always express her love with words, but it's there in the meals she cooks, the lessons she teaches, and the things she gives me. Through your writing, I understood that these unspoken gestures are her way of showing how much she believes in me. When Suyuan Woo says, "You could be anything you wanted to be in America," it reminded me of my mom's faith in the endless possibilities she sees for me. Like Jing-mei, I sometimes feel overwhelmed by those expectations, but your novel helped me understand they come from a place of love and sacrifice.

One of the most profound moments in the novel is when Jing-mei reflects, "And I am sitting at my mother's place at the mahjong table, on the East, where things begin." That moment was a revelation for me. It made me think about the ways I carry my mother's legacy, even as I shape my own identity. It's a reminder that being Asian American doesn't mean having to choose between two cultures, it means combining them together, creating something new yet still deeply connected to the past. Your book gave me a way to talk to my mom about her life. Like the mothers in ***The Joy Luck Club***, she has stories about growing up in a culture so different from the one I know. After finishing the novel, I asked her questions I'd never thought to ask before. What were her dreams when she was younger? What does she hope for me? Those conversations brought us closer, and I don't think they would have happened without your book.

Thank you for writing a story that feels like home and adding light to the complex life of being both Asian and American. You made me feel seen, and in doing so, you helped me see myself and my family more clearly.

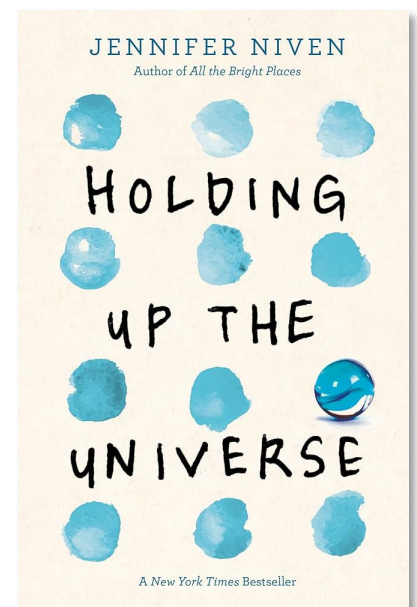
Sincerely,  
Jenna N.

## Indiana Author Letter Prize - 2025

Jozlyn H.  
Flora, Indiana

Dear Jennifer Niven,

By age thirteen, 53% of American girls dislike their bodies, and unfortunately, for a while, I was a part of that percentage. As a child I struggled a lot with bullying and I had horrible body image issues. Sometimes after school I would stare in the mirror for hours wondering why I looked so different from everyone else. It was really difficult for me to understand that some people are just rude and that it is okay to appear different from everyone else. As I matured, I decided that it did not matter to me what people thought of my appearance. My confidence in myself grew and I started wearing cute clothes that I was confident in, instead of baggy clothes. Reading your book, ***Holding Up the Universe***, gave me some closure. It helped me realize that I am not the only person that struggles with these issues. This book greatly helped me work through my body image issues.



When I was twelve I found your book, ***Holding Up the Universe***. I found it bewildering that I was not the only person struggling with my body image. I felt like I related a lot to Libby in the beginning of the story. The part I felt that I related to a lot was when she was too large to come out of her house and had to be lifted out by a crane. Even though I was never physically so huge to the point where I was lifted out by a crane, I still felt similar to her. In this situation I felt like her house resembled my clothes. Libby felt like she was too overweight to come out of her house so she hid in there. I felt like I was too large so I hid in my clothes. My clothes were what made me feel safe. For so long I was bullied for my body, so I just started hiding it. I wore clothes that were oversized so no one could see my figure. I thought if I hid my body I would stop being bullied. That is not what happened. Instead, I started being bullied for what I wore. It made me realize that no matter what I did, people would still find a way to criticize me. Once I finally started to reach the end of the book, I realized how much Libby grew in confidence. I did not understand how she became so confident in herself. I wanted to be like her. I wanted to learn to be confident in my body. I decided that this book would be my turning point. I wanted to be able to go to the beach in a

bikini, just like Libby walked out into swim class in a bikini. This book changed my mindset on life. It made me realize that people are going to have an opinion on everything, whether I liked it or not. I started to become more confident in myself. By eighth grade I finally made a change and started wearing tight clothes, not because I felt forced to, but because I finally felt confident in them.

This book has changed me in more ways than one. Clothes are no longer a way to hide myself, but a way to express myself. I have lost a lot of weight, but that does not change how people used to treat me. I no longer worry about what people think of me because I know that beauty is subjective. I've grown to love my body, and achieved my goal of loving myself. Libby was a character I looked up to greatly and now I hope that people can look up to me too. I am finally proud to say that I am no longer a part of the 53%.

Sincerely,  
Jozlyn H.



## Special Recognition - 2025

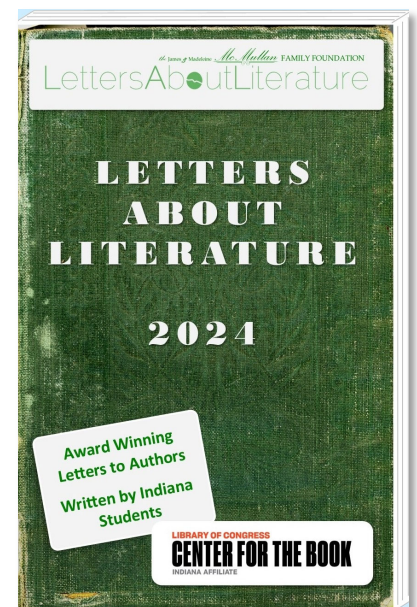
Rhea S.  
Evansville, Indiana

Dear Center for the Book and Letters About Literature Selected Candidates,

I'm Rhea S., and I have been entering my letters in the **Letters About Literature** competition for four years. Even though I enjoy searching for a book every year and writing a competition letter about it, that's not my favorite part of the **Letters About Literature** competition. I love reading all the letters written by other students all over Indiana!

Whenever I feel sad, angry, or overwhelmed, I turn to books. The stories of characters overcoming adversity, pain, or misfortune to become their best selves always offer comfort to me. When I received my first copy of the compilation of letters from the **Letters About Literature** competition, I was enthralled by the stories written by children like me about their own challenges and lives. What made these letters even more striking was that they were real. Characters in books often have something special about them that sets them apart from the masses. The authors of these letters are ordinary kids who had to work to accomplish anything, not just rely on a special power or an impossible gift. Their letters were proof that kids my age can persevere despite the circumstances. I always look for letters that talk about overcoming challenges that I am facing at the moment. They give me inspiration to keep going and may even offer a solution to my predicament.

These letters helped me get through a dark time in my life. In the summer of 2023, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. All of a sudden, my life was turned upside down. I missed massive amounts of school traveling back and forth from my hometown to Indianapolis for Mom's appointments; I was taking care of my mom between surgeries, and my dad was always too stressed to comfort me when he was in need of comfort himself. Additionally, my mental health started to decline, alienating me from my friends and family. I was diagnosed with depression, but I couldn't go to my therapist as often as I needed to due to Mom's enormous medical bills and the time Dad was already taking off from work to drive my mom to and from Indy. I was so lost. I felt so isolated in my school community because I felt like nobody





had gone through what I was going through. I felt sure my life was going to be crushed for good. This is where **Letters About Literature** came in. There were so many letters about children grappling with sickness in their family and struggling with their mental health. All of these letters told inspiring stories about how the authors managed to cope with and overcome the sudden uproar in their lives. I clung to these stories because they showed me that I was not alone. I felt so hopeful when I read their letters. This hope helped me pull myself back up, which gave me the strength to help Mom get through her trying illness. I am happy to say that my mom is now cancer free, and I have been feeling a lot better. I owe a large part of our recovery to the hope and strength I got from reading the letters of all of the kids who were brave enough to share their stories for everyone to read.

So thank you to the Center of the Book for going out of your way to compile and publish the letters written by kids from Indiana with a story to tell, and thank you to the students from all over Indiana who offered up a piece of their own lives for us all to read about. Thank you for giving me so much hope during a trying time in my life, and thank you for continuing to tell me stories that show me that no matter what I experience, I am never alone. I hope we never stop reading, because, as these letters show, books can inspire all, either directly or through the words of readers passing on their message.

Regards,  
Rhea S.