

2009 Letters about Literature Michigan Winners

COMPETITION LEVEL: I (Grades 4-6)

WINNER: Valerie Reeves

CITY & SCHOOL: Mancelona, Individual Entry

Dear Erin Hunter,

When I was younger, I sometimes felt like I was a loner at school. I always wanted my mom to go to school with me because I didn't want to be alone. I felt just like the rogue cat, Yellow Fang, who was without a clan. After reading your book, Warriors: Dawn, I found I wanted to be a warrior, too.

I admire how the cats in your book all work together to accomplish goals that they probably couldn't working on their own. Their survival often depends on learning to share the work load and responsibility. The warriors collect food for the whole clan. They also protect the clan from rival clans that mean to do them harm.

I have found that working with others is very important to me and has helped to raise my confidence. My class recently visited a farm. Our goal was to make butter. Each student took a turn shaking a jar of whole milk. Doing this alone would have been very tiring as it took about forty-five minutes. When we were all done, we shared the butter equally, so that each person got a nice spread of butter on her bread. This reminds me of how the warriors get food for the whole clan and then share it equally, so that everyone gets enough food.

Your story also inspired me to join Odyssey of the Mind – a group of creative kids who try to solve a problem. I also learned the importance of a strong leader. In Warriors, the cats work together to solve problems with the help of leaders, such as Firestar and Tallstar. I learned that a lot gets done if you follow a leader who is organized. Brokenstar was not a very good leader because his apprentices were too young and his clan was too big. His clan had to scavenge and half of his clan died and the other half was unhealthy. My OM leader, on the other hand, is a very good leader because she is extremely organized and encourages us to talk problems out when things get tough.

Thank you for writing Warriors. It has taught me the importance of working with others to accomplish more. I have also learned how a good leader can make things run smoothly.

Sincerely,

Valerie Reeves

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COMPETITION LEVEL: II (Grades 7-8)

WINNER: Daniel Harrison CITY & SCHOOL: Kalamazoo, Mattawan Middle School

Dear Ben Mikaelson,

About two years ago, I had been a real bully. I used to pick on kids and call them names and not even realize how much of a jerk I was. I had been in trouble a couple times, and ended up in detention. It was there, ironically, where I read your book, *Touching Spirit Bear*. It transformed my life.

Cole was exactly where I was in my life, except maybe not as dramatic. In the beginning of the book, when Cole assaults Peter, I had been going through a similar situation. I didn't care about the people I made fun of at all. But, during that detention after reading your book, I stared up at that pencil-scarred cement wall, I realized who I was, and I hated it. As I got in depth with Cole, I felt like I was reading my soul in your story.

As the end of your book neared, I realized what I needed to do. I vowed that I would be a better person. In chapter eight in your book, Cole taunts the Spirit Bear. The Spirit Bear in my life that I taunted was authority, and it wasn't scared of me one bit. When I tried to show up that authority, the same thing happened to me as with Cole: trouble. A couple days after the whole incident, I dreamed of the sparrows, in their nest, like your book. The dream showed me that I should care, and I started caring for all sorts of things. After that, my life totally turned around, and I'm very grateful for what life has given me.

But as time went by, it came to me how negative I still was. I still felt anger inside me, like Cole did. I had apologized plenty of times before, but somehow, I knew that I never meant it from the heart. I tried one more time, with all of my heart, and asked for forgiveness. Most of those people I bullied forgave me, though I could still feel that missing piece to friendship, but now we're good friends. Being forgiven felt like a wave from Heaven had just hit me.

When I finished your book, I had learned many things about myself. I learned how mean and ignorant I was, and I learned that authority is there to help. A couple months later, the very people who had once been in the position to where they couldn't even stand the sight of me, all went to the movies together with me, and we had an awesome time. I'll never forget the lesson I learned and how much your book changed me. I have truly touched Spirit Bear.

With all my heart,

Daniel Harrison

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COMPETITION LEVEL: III (Grades 9-12)

WINNER: Nilesh Raval

CITY & SCHOOL: Saginaw, Individual Entry

Dear Jhumpa Lahiri,

Roll calls make me apprehensive. Every time an announcer scrolls down to my name, I can predict that there will be an uncomfortable pause and a startled expression as they attempt to pronounce it. When I intervene to help, their anxious faces metamorphose into relieved smiles as I save them from, as they tell me, “butchering [my] name.” My name has withstood a plethora of pronunciations I never imagined a six letter word could possess. After reading your culturally enlightening novel, *The Namesake*, I have realized the importance of my name in Indian culture and that I am not alone when it comes to possessing an unusual one.

Growing up in a small Midwest town, I vividly remember that it was from an early age when I became conscious of my foreign-sounding name. The pediatrician’s file with my name was ruthlessly overlaid with a nurse’s phonetic version, using body parts; it became “knee-lash”. Candid as elementary school kids are, my classmates claimed I had a “weird name.” My teachers also had a difficult time deciphering it. My baseball coach, cheering me on as I hit a home run, shouted out a version of my name that rhymed with the condiment “relish.” This rendition echoed across the stadium; I was mortified. My youthful ears became antennas trained to listen for any contrived form into which my name could be conjured.

I questioned my parents as to why they gave me such a tongue twister of a name that stumped most people. They calmly consoled me by explaining how my name was based on the traditional Indian system, where the positions of the planets at the time of my birth are interpreted by astrologers. I could not even attempt to comprehend this abstract form of name-bestowal; much less appreciate it. I was so engrossed in my frustration that I bluntly ignored all their cultural explanations. There were times when I wished my parents had tweaked my name to fit in with American sounding names. What difference would it make if my name was Americanized? This chagrin remained because being an avid speller and stickler for proper pronunciation; it was very difficult for me to blandly nod at people’s feeble attempts. Once I delved into your novel, however, these vexations seemed to melt away. *The Namesake* revealed to me the essence of name-giving in our culture in a way that no amount of explanation from my parents would have accomplished.

I immediately identified with Gogol; the feelings of embarrassment and ambivalence he had with his name were identical to mine. I saw myself in him when he struggled with his name and identity, and I pondered over the impact my name has had on my life, just as it had on Gogol’s life. Reflecting on how the magnitude of respect Gogol held for his culture and his name escalated tremendously after his father’s death, I realized that my name is a part of who I am, and that there is a minute fragment of respect for *my* name that is imprisoned in my mind, waiting to be freed. It has. Like Gogol, I have been reborn. I have now begun to accept my name as an integral part of my cultural identity. Looking back, I now scoff with resentment at Gogol when he goes through the process of changing his name. Did he not contemplate what effect it would have on his

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family? By changing his name, he was negating any respect he held for his birth name. I couldn't have that in my life, and so I learned from Gogol's mistakes. Now, not only do I accept my name: I cherish it, knowing that without it, I would lose my sense of self.

The Namesake has compelled me to understand that a name has an inherently profound power to shape its bearer. It has bestowed upon me a newfound respect for names in our culture. I have realized that Indian names are not just picked because of their euphony or popularity, but that name-giving is a time honored tradition, a duty not taken lightly. To fit into American culture does not necessarily mean one has to sacrifice an essential part of Indian culture. My name commands no alterations; I am proud of my name. From now on, I will make an extra effort to ensure that people pronounce my name correctly. In fact, I'm looking forward to the next roll call.

Sincerely,

Nilesh Raval