

Melinda too was an outcast. She was a social pariah of her high school, a place so difficult to fit into, even when you're popular. She knew what it felt like to be, not only invisible, but hated. I saw in her all of things that I saw in myself. She was not perfect. She was not spectacularly beautiful, smart, kind, or brave. She was just brave enough to survive. She was not a stereotypical hero, but she became *my* hero. She had been hurt so badly, and she had survived. She had been hurt, yes, but not beyond repair. By the end of the novel she had taken back control of her life.

It gave me hope beyond words. It's amazing how such a normal object as a book can symbolize so much more. Of course, I was still sad on most days. I still dreaded going to school and I was still afraid of those girls. I was still afraid of myself, for that matter. I was afraid that I would never find myself. But I did. I became stronger. I built my own opinions and morals and I stuck to them. I made new friends. Over time, and with the help of inspirational novels and heroines like yours, I found myself stronger and better off for all the taunting and the pain. I realized that I was worth far too much to care what those girls said to me and about me. I was not stupid. And I was not a loser. I was far from it. I was special in my own way, just like Melinda. And I felt proud of the person I had become. So later, when those same girls came back to insult and threaten me again, I thanked them. I thanked them for making me more than I once was. I thanked them for making me happier, brighter, and worth more than their comments could ever mean. I thanked them for making me more like Melinda.

*I enjoy reading books, playing with dogs (especially my dog, Buddy), and watching movies. My favorite books include Speak, East of Eden, and The Phantom Tollbooth and I really do believe that a great book can change your perception of the world, yourself, and those around you. I love soft rock and electronic music and I am the epitome of a couch potato. My idea of a perfect day is curling up in bed with a book and cup of warm tea. I hope to become a doctor or be involved in the medical field one day.*

### L E V E L T H R E E



**Michael Murata, Age 16, Grade 10**  
**Palos Verdes Peninsula High School**  
**Palos Verdes, CA**

**Dear Yoshiko Uchida,**

I never thought my family was interesting. My parents have normal day jobs. My brother is attending a local college and I am just a student in high school. Although normal, we are special; we are Japanese-American.

Many of your books describe the mass evacuation of the Japanese-Americans during World War II. As I was reading *Journey to Topaz*, I felt sad and angry with what was happening to Yuki and her family. She also carried a normal life, but the attack on Pearl Harbor and the entrance of the United States into World War II drastically altered her life. Little did I realize that these same events also happened to my own family. Following Executive Order 9066, my grandparents were relocated from the West coast to several camps across the Midwest including Topaz. After I made the connection between your book and my own family history, I was compelled to learn of the struggles and hardships that my grandparents faced. *Journey to Topaz* became less of an ordinary book and more of a diary telling my history. Soon, I learned that my grandmother was attending Berkeley when the order to relocate was given. Like Yuki, my grandmother was also sent to the Tanforan Racetracks. Because I realized that the relocation of the Japanese-Americans included my family, I became especially furious that the United States government could doubt the loyalty of American citizens, which included my grandparents. These events began to have more meaning to me knowing that they were exactly what my grandparents had once endured. My family suddenly became a little more interesting.

Before reading *Journey to Topaz*, my pride for my culture was not outstanding. I knew I was of Japanese descent, but it had no meaning. My family did not celebrate any Japanese traditions that I could think of and we did not speak Japanese at all. I knew the American part of me more than the Japanese part of me. However, Yuki's family and my own grandparents held strong onto whatever Japanese traditions they could while isolated in the desert camps. I began to feel that my grandparents struggled to keep the very things that I had forgotten and now I owed it to them to at least try to keep the Japanese in my family alive. However, I had been doing just that without realizing it. I looked more closely at the little things that never caught my eye around my house. There was the *hibachi* in the living room that had always acted as a coffee table. There were the small paintings of *koi* fishes lining the halls. All these things were signs of my culture that I had overlooked, and now they are things to be proud of.

My ultimate pride, however, lays not in the material things that represent my culture, but rather in merely my last name. My last name originated from a village in Japan and has traveled across the world to the United States. It endured the hardships of starting a family in a strange new place and fought valiantly for that same country during World War II through my grandfathers, who bravely made the decision to fight for the government that discarded them into the desert. Now, my name has been passed down for me to carry on. It stands for bravery and honor, the qualities of the ancient *samurai*, and it is my duty to hold those characteristics high.

After reading *Journey to Topaz*, I have realized my own history by reading about the Japanese during World War II and by talking with my grandparents about their experiences. My culture has more meaning in my life and I have learned to take pride in not only being Japanese, but also Japanese-American. And my family had always been very interesting. I just needed to open my eyes.

*I have always found it easier to write about things that relate to me, and I used this contest to write about my family heritage. I enjoy running cross country and making music with the piano and saxophone. In the future, I plan to become successful studying engineering.*

L E V E L T H R E E



**Joseph Taylor, Age 16, Grade 10**  
**Saugus High School**  
**Saugus, CA**

**Dear Mr. Orwell,**

I recently read your book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and I'd like to tell you that I enjoyed it. However, since you're dead, you probably won't receive this letter, and if you do, you won't be able to read it. Nevertheless, mere death shall not stand in my way. As you are no doubt unaware (due to your death), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has become a symbol of our society, and an ominous warning of our future. If you were alive, I'm certain that you'd be very rich. Hopefully your lineage can benefit from the mastery of literature that you had achieved.

It takes a lot to scare me when I read a book. Some books are page-turners, but few have actually frightened me. I think the world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* succeeds brilliantly in this regard. Oceania is not a living, breathing world. It is the opposite. It combines everything that could possibly go wrong in society into one whirling torrent of absolutism. After I finished reading the book, I realized that my own thoughts were no longer safe. I now walk my world scared of yours. Even television commercials worry me. What is it that they really want? If a cereal company touts their product as *perfect*, when they inevitably refine it, are they not soiling the perfection? And when such (un)perfection is achieved through the blatant copying of competitors, who in turn advertise their cereal as the *best*, does that make the first cereal the *best*, and in turn *perfect*, and is it possible to be *perfect*, without being the *best*? When a company claims two of their cereals to be the *best*, are they canceling out their own statements, leaving our minds stalled, and ready to be controlled? I believe that a logo reading *Kellogg's Empire* would be more accurate, and all of the little kids would be dying to try *Communism Crunch*.

Apple Computer scares me, too. I'm into technology on a basic level, so please bear with me. Apple has long used Motorola processors in their computers, and claimed in their own advertising how much better they were than Intel's processors, which competing PC's use(d). Well, Apple switched to Intel processors last year. Now they speak of the freedoms that Intel offers them, and how much better Apple's products are thanks to the new processor. The problem is, their products *are* better