

room. Everything that Milagros gave me seemed pointless now that she wasn't with me. A month passed by and I finally realized death is part of life. Two of my other friends would give me advice and helped me get back up.

After reading your book in the fall of 2006 more than three times, it seemed to lend me a hand by showing me that Bailey's death was a part of a chapter in Tibby's life. That things weren't over for her as they weren't over for me. Tibby had other friends that cared about her as I had my two friends that visited me every day that fall that cared about me.

Finding your book in that public library wasn't just a coincidence. I have so much gratitude toward you and your book for giving me strength and showing me who my true friends are. Thank you very much for helping me realize that I also lived my own "sisterhood."

Sincerely,
Michelle Huete

My name is Michelle Huete, a girl with many dreams and hopes for the future. I expect very much of myself and hope to become the very best of what I am in the future with the life lesson my mom and grandma have taught me. I want to get into USC and pursue a career as an accountant, and later write a book naming it "Second Life." Life is full of opportunities and I hope to accomplish as much as I can.

L E V E L 3



Joanne Kang, Grade 12
Downey High School
Downey

Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe

Dear Mr. Achebe,

I connected almost instantly to Okonkwo, the protagonist of your book *Things Fall Apart*. The struggles that Okonkwo had to face, I found, were directly parallel to my own (for the most part).

Okonkwo grew up fighting for a place in the world, his parents offering nothing but motivation to ascend their shortcomings. My parents, being immigrants, also put me in a similar situation. For example, when I needed help with a homework assignment they were the first people that came to mind. Every time I asked them, however, I always got the same response; they would take the paper, stare at the small words at the top, and then glance back in my direction, their eyes hollow and blank. They could not even read the directions. They cannot read English. I struggled to keep that fact from being engraved into my memory. I could not let myself finalize

their incompetence. They were supposed to know everything. Every time a question stumped me I went to them for help. Every time I went to them for help I became newly disappointed in the outcome.

My parents are unfamiliar with the educational system in America and I do not have any older siblings to guide me on my journey through high school or explain to me the daunting process of applying to college. Until I read your book, Mr. Achebe, I had no idea how to approach my problems. I felt confined in my uncertainty. Over the summer, I would sit on the couch watching *Spongebob Squarepants*, staring at the little yellow sponge going to the Krusty Krab every day to flip burgers for a living. I knew I did not want that to be my future. I knew I wanted to become someone successful. I wanted to be like Okonkwo whose “fame rested on solid personal achievement.” I was clueless on how to get there.

Reading about Okonkwo going out of his way to get the richest man in the village to sharecrop with him or defeating the great “Amalinze the Cat” in a wrestling match really resonated with me. I began to think, “So what? So what if my parents can’t help me with homework. So what if I don’t have a sibling who’s been through high school already. I can make my own destiny. Okonkwo sure did.” These thoughts intertwined and became part of the story that I held in my hands. I almost felt as if I was Okonkwo! Never in my life have I felt truly connected to a novel. Never in my life have I felt understood.

The ending of this novel was quite tragic. Okonkwo committed suicide because he felt that there was no other way to preserve his crumbling world. He was stuck. His cultural ties made it so that he had nowhere else to turn once the missionaries overtook his village. My traditional Korean heritage and the American culture that awaited outside the walls of my home used to constrict me. My parents demanded that I follow strict Korean customs, but at school I was taught the breezy, individualist American lifestyle. I did not know which culture would define me. As I read about Okonkwo’s failure to accept a new culture, I realized that being bound to one way of life would keep me from truly accepting who I was. I needed to look beyond my clashing cultures and create a new one for myself. I am now proud to be Korean and I am equally proud to be American. I am not one or the other. I am both.

Things Fall Apart has taught me not only to separate myself from my parents’ inability to help me but also to learn from the fatal mistake of Okonkwo. This book is truly my favorite. It is my teacher, role model, and friend all in one. Mr. Achebe, I am truly grateful for your words, and I am truly grateful for the hope you have instilled in me.

Sincerely,
Joanne Kang

When I think of my future—where I will be, what I will be doing—I seem to always find my stomach coiling into knots and my mind spinning like a malfunctioned merry-go-round. The future seems so distant and yet college is knocking on my door. My hopes and dreams for my future lay in my current interests; the desire to help someone, anyone. I want to become an

ambassador, a representative of the United States to various foreign nations, because I want to experience how people in other countries live and how their cultures influence them.

L E V E L 3



Zach Mason, Grade 11
Golden Sierra High School
Garden Valley

Night, Elie Wiesel

Dear Mr. Wiesel,

I am not writing to praise you on the ingenious writing and brilliant emotions and feelings you applied in your memoir. Nor am I writing to thank you for some fictitious, life changing epiphany that occurred while reading it. I am writing, simply, to enlighten you on how reading *Night* opened up my ignorant mind to the evils and cruelties of this venomous world.

Growing up in 21st-century America, I am perhaps one of the most fortunate men alive. I am, in fact, at this moment, lying on a couch under a solid roof, steadily typing away on a laptop with hardly a care in the world. I feel warm, my belly is full, but most importantly, I feel safe. Now here is a feeling many people, including myself, take for granted on so many levels. I say I feel safe, and yes, for most of my life I have felt safe from the “danger” of the world, but for most of my life I have been completely oblivious as to what this “danger,” what this “hate,” actually is. Sure, I sometimes hear on the news that a truckload of soldiers is blown up while fighting in Iraq, or that some cashier is shot and killed in a drug store robbery, but it wasn’t until freshman year that my mind was truly open to what the sadism of man really is.

It was freshman year when I read your book, Mr. Wiesel, that the viciousness of man became apparent to me. I was so astonished, so disgusted, that my initial instinct was to blatantly deny it. I didn’t want to believe that those of my own kind, my own species, could do something so diabolical, and to each other. But as I read on, it became apparent to me that these were not lies you were spewing, these were truths, the truths of the world. From then on I began to slowly accept it, slowly acknowledge that this abhorrence toward fellow man did occur, and from then on I began to realize how established this animosity really is. Not only from the Nazis in the concentration camps but also from Joseph Stalin in communist Russia, the constant ethnic violence between the Hutus and the Tutsis in Rwanda, and the persistent genocides taking place in Sudan. This hatred was everywhere and I had been living under a rock, deaf to it for perhaps the sole reason that I didn’t want to know.