



WINNER, LEVEL 3
Michael Egan, Grade 12
Individual Entry
Wilton

“Instructions,” Neil Gaiman

Mr. Gaiman,

To begin: I was the boy with the book. I was the one that the teachers would reprimand for reading under the desk, the one that would casually allow his eyes to slip from equations on the chalkboard to the sunlit window, the one that would dreamily pick at flowers and grass in far left field while the other players went on with their game. That was me. I believed in books the way a priest believes in paradise. They were a promise that elsewhere, in some impossible elsewhere, things were different; ten-year-old children had adventures every day, saw things and did things and fought things and learned things that I only dreamed of. I was convinced that one day, without warning, I would be whisked off to untold lands and endless wonders, on my own adventure. I was waiting for the moment that I would discover a magic doorway, or find an enchanted sword in an old pawnshop, or discover an ancient pirate manuscript in an old sea chest, or unlock the secrets of the eldritch glyphs on the wall of the boy’s bathroom, or be accepted into a mysterious company of knights that would appear one morning, tapping on our old screen door, asking for Sir Michael the Wise.

In the meantime, I dreamed. I drew pictures of mighty, scowling warriors wielding ferocious swords of all shapes, sizes, and varieties in the margins of homework assignments and on my brown-shopping-bag book covers. I drew maps of the mystical lands that I would explore, and I named the towns and cities that dotted them—Grassland Town, Destrier, St. Martin’s Vale—during math lessons.

Mostly, though, I would make lists of all the things I would need to bring (a sturdy rope and pocketknife were utter necessities), of all the people I would meet, of the various magical flora and fauna that I would have to be aware of, of the best ways to appease the creatures that I half-remembered from mythology books and Harry Potter stories. These lists covered the backs of texts, scraps of notepaper torn from composition books, the inside flaps of book covers. The lists made me feel prepared, ready for that moment when something magical would happen and my adventure would begin.

“Instructions” is a genetic match to those childhood daydreams. As I read the poem for the first time, I laughed aloud in the silent library, a grin splitting my face wide. A librarian turned in my direction, but seeing my expression, she just smiled and lifted a finger to her lips. I sat down and read the poem twice more. Everything was there. There were the monsters that I had dreamed of facing, witches and giants

and a River Styx-esque ferryman; the realms of danger and mystery and beauty; and best of all the unexpected, grasped-at beginning, the door that I had dreamed of so often, that throws the reader into the wonderland. The poem doesn't give you the adventure trussed up and ready to read, it actually allows the reader to have the adventure himself, to experience a hundred different ways with every new reading. I reclined cozily in the library chair and remembered the adventures I'd dreamed of, and the adventures I'd lived out myself.

I've learned the secret that I had almost grasped in my days of daydreams. I've learned that the endless lands of adventures can be found in a single sheet of blank paper. I can have the adventures I'd dreamed and share them as well, by writing them into stories and poems and songs as they come to me. I was a better writer at eleven than I ever could be today, but while I can I'll do my best to trap what childhood remains in me, and enjoy it to the fullest.

But that's all just to pass the time while I wait to find the door in the wall I never saw before, that will lead me on to adventures unknown.

Yours in utter hero worship,
Michael Egan

Michael James Egan has been caught reading under his desk so often that he has managed to learn how to read while keeping his eyes on the teacher. Despite this, he has received acceptance letters from several major universities, no doubt due to his Eagle Scout award, work as an author and as a playwright for his school and community, and stunning good looks. Although he works summers as a Camp Counselor at Camp Sacramento in the Tahoe area, his career path will no doubt gravitate toward that of a "starving artist." He would like to extend his support to all California counselors and librarians who have given him huge amounts of support through his writing development, and who might fall victim to education budget cuts in the near future.

L E V E L 3



HONORABLE MENTION, LEVEL 3

Summer Chavez, Grade 10

Nipomo High School

Nipomo

A Bad Beginning, Lemony Snicket

Dear Mr. Snicket,

After reading the first book in the series, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, I was shocked, or should I say, stunned. My mom had just died, and the misfortune of the Baudelaires' lives changed my state of thinking. It made me feel like a new person. Self-loathing was no longer there, sympathy taking its place in the forefront of my