

LEVEL II

FIRST PLACE WINNER

Paige Laughlin (Grade 8: Berne Union High School, Sugar Grove, Ohio)

Letter to author Ava Dellaira concerning her book, *Love Letters to the Dead*

Dear Ava Dellaira,

Last year, I read your very first novel, and it was a deep subject for a twelve-year-old like me. Reading all of the individual letters to well-known people, who really left a mark on the world before their tragic deaths, dramatically helped the plot unfold. The way you portrayed Laurel's character reminded me of myself and the way I took the death of my older brother just a few short months before reading your book.

On June 6, 2014, like Princess Diana, my brother, who was almost 17, died in a car accident just down the road from our country home. That day, my mother and I were on our way home from seeing a movie when we saw an ambulance zooming down the road, but we never thought anything of it knowing that there were many elderly people living on our road and it was somewhat bright out for it being summer and only 5 p.m. Around 9 p.m., my parents and I were watching a movie in the living room when we heard our dogs barking and footsteps coming up our stairs outside. We saw a glimmer of light and someone opening the gate to our front porch. The unknown person knocked on the door, and before I knew it, in front of the doorway stood a sheriff. Immediately everyone knew something was wrong. Ever since then, our Boxer mix howls when it hears the roaring of sirens. One night my dad and I couldn't sleep. All we could do is replay the night again and again. Then I found your book. Until reading it, I never thought I would be the same again. I never believed I would lose the pang of hurt I would feel at the sound of sirens and the loss of my brother.

When I read your book, *Love Letters to the Dead*, it reminded me so much of myself, given that I was also entering a new school year just a few short months after the death of my loved one. It made me realize it was okay to mourn and be

sad, even if I never show it in front of people. The way Laurel wrote to the stars, almost as if she knew them, sharing the memories of her sister as well as the new ones she was making was really interesting. In Laurel's to Kurt Cobain she writes, "After May died last April, it's like my brain shut off. I didn't know how to answer any of the questions my parents asked, so I basically stopped talking for a little while." When I first read this, being 12 myself and having gone through a similar loss, I stopped and had a mental flashback to the few days after the accident. During those days, like Laurel, I was quiet and locked myself away from the world not knowing how to answer people. When people said things like, "I'm sorry for your loss," I never knew how to answer them. That portion of the letter really hit home with me, and I felt as if I really connected with Laurel's character.

You've changed my view of myself, as well as my view of everyone else in the world knowing everyone has experienced a loss. Whether it was an animal, a family member, or a friend, it still hurts. Before I would think, "Why do these people believe they need and want so much sympathy?" But now, after reading your book I have learned that although I myself don't like the sympathy of others, for some, it really helps them through extremely tough times.

We always hope that at some point in life we will get the chance to be with a loved one who we miss each and every day. Whether they live thousands of miles away or in the world down under, your book, *Love Letters to the Dead*, showed me that no matter what, dead or alive, your heart will always long for that special someone.

Sincerely,
Paige Laughlin