

Dear Ms. Draper,

Thank you for helping me understand my cousin.

*Out of my Mind* was initially suggested to me by my friend with the remark that, "It's really good, it made me really sad." I took her word for it. But this novel was more than just a "sad story" to me.

In 2023, I read *Out of My Mind* for the first time. It was through this novel that I gained some clarity in the way I interact with people with disabilities, especially my 14-year old cousin, Timothy, who has Cerebral Palsy. Timothy, and I are very close in age, so growing up with him, I knew of his disability. I knew he needed to use a wheelchair for long-distance walks and that my aunt took him to Speech Therapy classes on the weekends. We would all take turns pushing him in his stroller on family vacations or buckle his seatbelt whenever we got in the car. Yet, despite knowing these crucial things about his needs, I still never knew how to treat him or talk to him. It wasn't until I read your novel that I finally began to understand.

I was taken by surprise that the entire novel was narrated from Melody's point of view. We would witness how Melody dealt with emotions of joy, friendship, anger, and sorrow. The narration wasn't watered down or took on a caricature of a disabled person. Her emotions were real and her experiences were real, all told through Melody's voice, even if no one could hear it. I remember feeling frustrated on her behalf. How could no one around her understand what she wanted? How was it possible that her needs were constantly misinterpreted?

I had never thought about what life was like from my cousin Timothy's point of view before. It was eye-opening to me to see how and it made me think of the "tantrums" I had seen from my cousin. Unable to verbally express his frustration and his anger might've resulted in what we considered tantrums, and his way of grabbing our attention results in what we considered pinching our wrists. Melody encounters this exact same situation in the novel when trying to warn her mom before backing up her car and injuring Melody's baby sister. Melody began to scream and kick to try and grab her Mom's attention, but her mom turned blind eye to Melody's warning signs, which resulted in an accident. Timothy is very afraid of dogs, but in order to express that he screams and kicks. I realized that Timothy was communicating to us in the only way he knows how. Melody's experiences helped me understand that it's not that my cousin lacks the ability to think, but he just sees and expresses things differently than I would and that it's my job to bridge these connections.

People are quick to assume that my cousin does not have the capacity to comprehend thoughts that come easily to the average person, and I believe that's very telling of how quick our society is to judge. The truth is, he can comprehend just as clearly, but he's not given a chance to express that since he has a disability. He has to find other ways to express his thoughts and needs because he's non-verbal. Instead of forcing disabled people to adjust to our society and our norms, maybe we should adapt around them. It's easy for our society to change, but it's impossible to change a disability. Your book taught me to be more accepting of everybody and judge others less. By giving Melody her own voice and making her the narrator, you inspire many others with disabilities who don't have a voice to advocate for themselves. You inspire people, like me, to open up to the disabled and assist them with the most care.

After reading this book, I decided to actively change how I treated my cousin or viewed his company. I try to have conversations with him that are easy for him to respond to, and are easy to maintain a back-and-forth, but I avoid having conversations that would "baby" him. I listen to what he's telling me, and put it into perspective; what is he trying to tell me that he can't say in full? Timmy's disability does not prevent him from growing up the same way as we do, his mind is still rapidly developing and learning everyday. Our relationship is still not perfect, but I'm content with it being a work in progress. Through Melody's story in *Out of My Mind*, I hope others, like me, will continue to come to a better understanding of everyone around us and to put forth the effort to make connections, even if they aren't obvious at first.

All the best,

Bethany Yu

Dear Marissa Meyer,

Thank you for helping me understand my sister.

As a kid, watching the Disney version of Alice in Wonderland, I always loathed the Queen of Hearts. To toddler me, the Queen of Hearts was a sadistic, irrational villain who enjoyed executing people with her well-known motto, "off with their heads!" I never quite understood that there might be more to it than what met the eye, a reason the villain turned out that way. Growing up, my sister was always the 'Queen of Hearts' in my life. She was rude to me, enjoyed making fun of me, and her favorite pastime was yelling at me, "Get out of my room!" After reading *Heartless*, however, I began to understand why she was that way to me.

My sister used to dream of becoming an author like Agatha Christie, her idol. As she grew older, she was told her dreams were unrealistic, and that a career as an author could never support a living. They told her that she needed a good education at a prestigious college and eventually, a well-paying job. Her dreams were crushed over time, forced into the ideal mold for the 'perfect life'. Over the years, I watched as she was slowly consumed by others' expectations, the pressure to be the best, for whatever she needed to put on her college applications. She spent her time competing in Science Olympiad engineering-build events that she never had any interest in. She traded her pen and paper for balsa wood, 3D printed jigs, and cyanoacrylate adhesive glue. She accumulated medal after medal, even becoming the captain of the SciOly team. She held up the weight of the team, forced to smile through all the meets and stress. When snooping through her room, her stack of notebooks, scrawled with drafts, lay abandoned in the back of her closet. During this process, she became quieter and quieter until she wouldn't even respond to me when I tried to pester her. Her lack of emotion struck me as odd as I was expecting her to chase me out of her room or at least yell at me. At first, I didn't understand. Wasn't this what she always wanted? The 'perfect life'? To others, everyone thought that what they were telling her to do was for her sake. They never stopped to think that maybe she had other dreams.

For weeks, I tried to converse with my sister, ask her what was on her mind. Despite my attempts to get an explanation on why she was acting this way, she continued to ignore me, to my confusion. That's when I remembered the book. Catherine, a noble girl, never wanted to marry the King of Hearts but was constantly pressured by her parents and those around her. Everyone believed that marrying the King would be the ultimate goal for a happy ending and make her the 'happiest girl in the world,' pushing her goals aside. Instead, she wanted to open a bakery with her best friend, which had been her lifelong goal. Such simple dreams for a high-born girl were disapproved by her parents, who cared about the royal title more than their daughter's happiness. Parents often think they know what is best for their children, but how many parents actually understand them? Are they simply pushing their own dreams onto their children?

With nothing to converse with my sister about, I decided to introduce *Heartless* to her, hoping that it would reignite her love for books and writing again. She reluctantly agreed after I begged her to try reading just the first eight chapters. She finished the book over the weekend. My sister was interested in the plot, and it became our reason for conversation. We finally had something in common, and I used it to talk to her. Eventually, she began to open up to me. I would go to her room after our parents went to sleep, books in hand, and we would talk about them. Who our favorite characters were, how we could relate to them, and why they acted the way they did. We have since read *Cinder*, *Scarlet*, and *Cress* together. I enjoyed these late-night book talks with her, and even if she would never admit it, she did too. One day, while she had a science meet, I dug around in her closet and found her old notebooks. They had been moved, and I decided to take a peek inside. To my surprise, she started writing again, this time about the side characters and their backstories. She was giving attention to the characters who she felt got lost in the background, characters who she felt needed a voice.

I used to think villains are born evil, but after reading *Heartless*, I understand there is a story beyond every character, even villains. Often, they are created through life experience, social expectations, and fate. Now, I approach people with empathy, trying to see things from their perspectives. Your book helped me see my sister in a different light and unexpectedly mended our relationship. For that, I thank you for spreading your magic through your words.

Sincerely,

Charlize Chen

Dear J.K.Rowling,

I hope you are doing well. The Harry Potter series has seriously changed my life. Like countless of other children around the world, I am a huge fan of Harry Potter. I have read through all the books and watched all the movies.

As far as I can remember, Harry Potter was the first full book series I have ever read. It began on an ordinary weekend when I was in third grade. Back then, I didn't have phones or iPads to entertain myself, so boredom came easily. I wandered around the house aimlessly, trying to search for something to spark my interest. Then something caught my eye, the Harry Potter series, sitting there on the shelf like it was waiting for me.

As a 10 year old, I was immediately drawn towards it. It felt like an invisible force was pulling me toward those books. I reached out and pulled the first book : Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.

I flipped it open and began to read. Instantly, it brought me into a world of wonder and magic. I sat right on the floor, completely absorbed, traveling alongside Harry through his extraordinary adventures. It was my first experience with fantasy novels, and it changed my life forever.

Reading the entire series took me quite a long time, maybe a year, maybe a year and a half. But it led to a foundation of my lifelong love about reading. Ever since reading Harry Potter, fantasy has remained my favorite genre. In middle school, I went on to read The Lord of the Rings trilogy and watched the movies. Now, as a high school student, I've started to explore through the series A Song of Ice and Fire.

Most importantly, Harry Potter inspired me to pursue a dream of becoming a director.. I still remember watching the Harry Potter films at home with my friend in middle school. At one point, I realized I could instinctively predict how scenes would be shot and edited. I assumed it was a normal thing that everyone can do. But when I mentioned it to my parents, they suggested that it might be a natural intuition for visual storytelling, shaped by all the films I had watched.

In eighth grade, I began to seriously think about my future. A doctor? I didn't excel in math. A lawyer? Public debate didn't come to me. The film industry? Feels attracting. Actor? I don't see myself on screen. But by chance, I discovered directing, and I was hooked.

It felt like the word director attracts to me like how Harry Potter attracted me when I was in third grade. Having a dream, I started to do research about the film industry. Learning about the different positions and how they contribute together, how a director can run a group of hundred of people together and work together. That is when I realized there are a lot of things that I need to learn about.

Time flies, and it was time to pick my classes for high school. Certainly, I picked digital video production as my elective. During the whole year, I began to dig deeper into the film industry. The teacher taught us about different shot sizes and different feelings the shots express. I quickly grasped onto the knowledge. But when it was time for us to write our own script, it felt hard. Writing is not my strength.

Sitting in front of my desk, I tried to concentrate and focus on my writing. But nothing came out. Feeling depressed, I laid on my bed and started scrolling on my phone. But then, Harry Potter came up and it reminded me of all the good times I had. Suddenly, inspirations came into my head. Sitting back to the desk, words and ideas flow through my fingers and onto the computer.

For me, Harry Potter is not just a book, it is a guide. A guide towards courage, a guide towards perseverance, a guide toward the unwavering belief in chasing one's true passion. It taught me that even though when in the low ebb, it is possible to find a way out. Every time I think about quitting, I remember how Harry conquer his weaknesses. Every time I feel lost on my way, I think about the magic of Harry Potter, and it reignites my determination to keep learning, creating, and fighting for my dream.

This wonderful world that you created didn't just open the door to reading for me. It created a path for me. It taught me lessons that can be used my whole life. And one day, I hope that I can create magical story through my work as a director, just like you did for me and millions of readers around the world.

Amy Zhan Gao