

A Personal Letter from Lois Lowry

Directions: Read the letter below, then discuss the key points that follow.

Dear Reader—

When I was young, I thought that all writers were creatures with mythical status: unavailable, inaccessible, perhaps dead. It never occurred to me to conceive of them as real human beings, in a house somewhere, drinking coffee, using a dictionary, making typing errors, chewing on a pencil eraser, twisting a strand of hair (or stroking a beard) as they thought of the next sentence.

Imaginative though I was as a kid, I never pictured a mailman knocking at the door of a writer and saying something mundane like, “Lots of mail from your fans today.” Nor could I envision the writer opening a letter, reading a letter, or chuckling or weeping at a letter from a person like me.

Yet here I sit today, chewing on a strand of hair while I ponder a sentence, and on my desk is a stack of mail from readers who realize that I am no farther away from them than a first-class stamp.

I wish I were young again, with a favorite book by my side and a pen and paper in my hand.

Dear Lois Lenski, I just read a book that you wrote. It is called Indian Captive. The girl in it, Mary, had hair the same light color as mine, and so the Indians called her “Corn-Tassel.” Now I sometimes think of myself as “Corn-Tassel and I try to be as brave as she was. I don’t tell anybody about that because they would laugh. But I think you would understand.

That’s a letter I would have written when I was nine. At ten, I would have written to a woman named Betty Smith, to thank her for creating a little girl named Francie Nolan in a book called *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. She was my best friend when we were both in sixth grade, though her life in the boisterous immigrant neighborhoods of Brooklyn seemed infinitely more exciting and dangerous than mine in a Pennsylvania college town. I envied Francie her raucous surroundings, shared her most

private fears and worries, and have remembered her with love for almost fifty years.

When I was eleven, I met a boy named Jody Baxter and learned all there was to know about grief.

Dear Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, I have never lived in the South. I have never been poor. I have never been a boy. But when I read The Yearling, I understood Jody, and I understood how he felt when his pet fawn had to be killed because it ate the crops. I had to give my dog Punky away because he bit my little brother. I know Punky didn’t mean to. Now my heart is broken. You and Jody know how that feels.

Dear Gustave Flaubert, I would have written, when I was fifteen and felt that my life was as dull and unrewarding as Emma Bovary’s. At sixteen, making the acquaintance of Holden Caulfield, it would have been an ongoing, slightly sardonic thank-you to Salinger—at least until I turned seventeen and began to compose, in my mind, a more impassioned and convoluted correspondence with Thomas Hardy.

Somehow the communications I actually *did* put on paper—usually in garish turquoise ink (which seemed terribly soigne)—never amounted to more than perfunctory thank-you notes to great-aunts and grandparents after Christmas. *The sweater fits perfectly and will look nice with my new gray skirt.* There had never been the underlying level of communication that would have enabled me to speak the truth, even if one could write truths in such appalling ink:

The sweater fits just fine but, oh, Aunt Grace, I wish I had a more grown-up body to put inside it, and I wonder whether I will ever be pretty, and whether boys will ever like me, and I know you will understand . . .

Reading Worksheet B continued

No. One can't write such things to a person who will be sitting across the dinner table from you on Sunday, suggesting another helping of peas. Privacy is required. Distance. And a different kind of gift for which to say thank you.

Of course, many authors are, in fact, dead. They are not drinking coffee, chewing a pencil stub, or stroking their beards—not in this world, at least. Yet how alive they are—Anne Frank, Malcolm X, John Steinbeck, and others—how accessible, how available, to each young reader. What a gift they bring, author and reader, to each other.

Here's another unwritten letter from me to someone who changed my life:

Dear Harper Lee. Thank you for writing To Kill a Mockingbird. I became Scout when I read the book and I have been Scout ever since. She (and you) taught me about innocence and honor. Thank you for never writing another book about her and her brother.

I have grandchildren now. I can watch with delight as they turn pages that invite them into the lives of Scout, Jody, Francie, Corn-Tassel, Holden, and others I have never met. But I can't participate in their friendships between writer and reader. Those are private.

The phrase *Dear Author* is not just a simple formal salutation. It's a wish that touches on a love affair. List to it with envy and with awe.

Lois Lowry

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. As a child, what was Lowry's concept of a "writer"? How has her understanding of who authors are changed over time?
2. What does Lowry mean when she says even dead authors are "alive" and "accessible" to young readers?
3. Lowry shares snippets of letters of she *might have written* to authors. The letters are from different stages of her life. (a) How do the authors and the stories they tell change as Lowry ages? (b) What does this tell you about literature and a person's response to it?
4. Lowry says she wrote thank you notes to relatives who gave her Christmas gifts but that the gifts authors gave her were "different." What does she mean?
5. What does Lowry mean when she says the relationship between an author and a reader is private?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Use Lowry's letter as brainstorming model. List three books you read at three different periods of your childhood. Consider, for example, a book you read or a parent read to you when you were seven years or younger. Then move forward in time to a book you read when you were nine or ten, and then move forward once again to a book you read when you 12 or 13.

Next, answer these questions:

- How do the books' characters and conflicts differ?
- What did you find appealing in each instance?
- Most importantly, explore how the books you liked changed as you yourself changed, grew older?