

Massachusetts Letters About Literature Honors, Level III | 2011

Dear Mr. Mortenson,

"Somewhere, over the rainbow/Skies are blue/And the dreams you dare to dream/Really do come true." --Judy Garland/E.Y. Harburg

Your book has given me enjoyment, as a fan. It's given me satisfaction, as a visionary. And it's given me hope, as a person.

For a second, let's assume that you're someone who loves reading. Not just like, but love. And let's say that you have thirty bookshelves scattered around your house. And for the heck of it, let's also say that you like used books as much as new ones, and every month there's at least one gigantic used book sale near your house. That would be me. I'm the one at practically every used book sale, devouring each of these books one by one and savoring each word. And I'm the one who picked up *Three Cups of Tea* at a book sale and read it nonstop.

Your story touched me. Genuinely. It was a testimony that the hackneyed cliché -- "one person can make a big difference" -- is true. It's not just a phrase that adults all over the world randomly throw into the air. It's something that is actually true. You've proved, despite everything that set you back, that one person can change things. The attempt is amazing in itself. But beyond everything else, the fact that everything worked out, the fact that after years of hard work the CAI was established, and the fact that people like Abdul Rashid Khan came calling, that was what truly inspired me.

An acquaintance of mine got a certificate to teach North Korean refugees. Do you know what the refugees said? "I want to learn. I want to see more of the world."

For us kids, learning is synonymous with torture. For all of the lectures we get, it's hard to imagine that trigonometry and the physics of waves will really matter to us in the future, because we're all going to be movie stars, rappers, or sports superstars, or even millionaires who spend all of their time in their mansions. We can't imagine that someone would actually want to learn. You know what? Some actually do. Can you believe it? Education is actually one of the best things we can give to these kids, obviously. For us, though, it's unbelievable that someone would actually like to learn.

As I read your book, I followed you. I followed you up the slopes of K2, I followed you to Pakistan, I followed you to California, I was with you when you founded the CAI with Jean Hoerni, and I was with you when you opened your first school. I feel like I was with you through each of your highs and lows. I was next to you through every tough moment. I know there is no way I can comprehend what you went through, but I feel like I can. I feel like I was right there.

Your book got me thinking. I was born in the United States, but I also think of myself as a Korean. So when I read your book, my mind instantly made a connection between Central Asia and North Korea. My hope is for the same thing you did to happen in North Korea. What you did in Central Asia could be the difference between freedom and oppression in thirty years. What your book showed me is that my dream could be a reality someday. If the unimaginable can happen once, why can't it happen again?

Why can't someone like you, five, ten, fifteen years from now, go into North Korea and do what you did? Why can't he or she go and change the country? My parents are from South Korea, but my grandpa grew up in North Korea before fleeing during the Korean War. He managed to escape. What if he hadn't? My grandfather and his three brothers made it out, but their three sisters are either still there or dead. That means that my distant cousins could still be there, and if my grandfather didn't make it, I could have been there. For every me in America, there are hundreds whose grandfathers or grandmothers or dads or moms never made it out. And I know for sure that if I was stuck in North Korea, the first thing I'd want is help. And this is help.

I used to dream. I'd dream of money. Fame. Happiness. But that was years ago. When I outgrew Legos, Yu-Gi-Oh, and Saturday morning cartoons, I figured I outgrew dreams, too. I was wrong. Your book showed me that I can still dream. It's like a Disney story: If you believe, you can do anything. And you can. I don't know if I can put it into words without repeating myself. It's like having your parents break the news to you that Santa Claus isn't real, only to have yourself wake up Christmas morning and catch Santa in the act. So thank you, Mr. Mortenson. For showing me that E.Y. Harburg was right in his classic song, that dreams really do come true.

Sincerely,

Sun-Ui

**Sun-Ui Yum, Grade 9
Cambridge**