

# MASSACHUSETTS LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE 2023

## HONORS LEVEL II

Dear John Green,

I grew up knowing something was wrong with me; I didn't think the same as other kids. I would obsess over the smallest of things and insignificant imperfections. My differences started to become more apparent as I grew up, people would see me as lesser because of something I couldn't control. I couldn't help but obsess and bend to the will of my compulsions. At the time, I couldn't express these feelings and I felt trapped. My mind became a prison of my own making. I was put into therapy right before my 11th birthday. During the same year, I was professionally diagnosed with OCD. I was riddled with shame, and I felt so alone. In my mind, I was the only person who experienced these extreme thoughts and compulsions. I was originally intrigued with *Turtles All the Way Down* because of the mystery aspect, and I didn't realize Aza, the main character, had OCD in the book. This felt like a glimpse into the mind of someone like me.

I have always had some obsession with hygiene. I would wash my hands dozens of times throughout the day and avoid putting my elbows on things like tables because I knew how dirty they were. People would judge me, constantly telling me "you are not gonna get sick, stop worrying" but my brain would continue to flood with thoughts of sickness and inevitably death. When I read how Aza would wrap up her cuts and constantly spray them with antibacterial spray, and people told her she was strange and obsessive, I felt seen. I vividly remember the odd feeling of happiness when I read the passages. I couldn't help but shed a tear because this representation meant so much to me. I also started to not let people's words and doubts affect me as much, and started realizing I couldn't control it and wasn't to blame.

I avoid certain foods just because they might get me sick and nauseous, there have been times where I take this to extreme lengths avoiding everything in my fridge or having full blown panic attacks at the simple thought of getting a stomach bug. I remember reading the chapter where Aza wouldn't kiss the boy she liked because of his germs getting in her mouth. The avoidance made me feel seen and I realized I wasn't the only person who had to deal with this disorder. I started to find other people who experienced things similar to me, I wasn't as isolated and felt much better. It was baffling to me that some character in your book related so much to me and it truly opened my eyes. After I was diagnosed, people around me would say things to comfort me, but nothing felt as genuine as Aza and her symptoms.

I have gone to some extreme lengths to act on my compulsions. There have been nights where I don't sleep because my house might burn down, or someone will break in. I would also rewrite entire English essays because the original draft isn't good enough and I might fail and disappoint my parents. These things would affect me to great lengths

and I would crawl back into my shell. My mind always goes to the worst-case scenario, seeing this in Aza when she drank hand sanitizer while in the hospital in the unlikely case, she would get sick made me feel sane. I had always told myself that I wasn't normal, or I was 'insane' because of my OCD and my compulsions. I saw her risking her life doing something that she knows will hurt her because of her compulsions and I could a hundred percent relate to that.

The representation in *Turtles All the Way Down* changed my perspective on OCD, and I could come to terms with this disorder I'll have to live with for my entire life. I started being able to talk with people about my perspective and how OCD has affected my own life, because I can now tell that if I didn't have OCD my life would be completely different. I could really be myself and be comfortable in my own skin. Something that also greatly affected me is finding out you have OCD, and you were writing from your own obsessions and compulsions, and it wasn't some fictional character to me anymore. I could relate to her more after knowing she was based on a real person.

Sincerely,

*Luca*