

A Pessimist's Reading List
1st Place Stuckey Essay Contest
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I didn't enjoy eighth grade much. Maybe it was because of the dismal repetition of my class schedule. Or possibly that several of my friendships dissolved as my peers became obsessed with tiktok and boys with weird haircuts, and I with analyzing the themes of *Lord of the Flies*. Perhaps it was the revelation that the matriarchy of middle school was based on whether or not you were athletic, followed by that I was not, and once again followed by that my best friend was. Maybe it was simply because it was eighth grade, and nobody likes eighth grade.

Whatever the reason, I found middle school a bleak affair that I couldn't be more eager to rid myself of. It was late second quarter, school wouldn't be ending any time soon, and I needed a way out. So, I got the idea to reread *The Heroes of Olympus*, a series that I had loved back when I still thought school dances could be fun and that group projects could be fair. The plot centered around a group of seven friends, four boys and three girls, embarking on great magical adventures to save all of humankind. It was a pretty standard fantasy book. I absolutely loved it. The villains were incredibly well written. The protagonists felt so real and, suddenly, I wasn't so lonely. The scenery had such a vivid description that I could forget that I was sitting in my math class whilst blatantly ignoring the lesson and trying to ignore the kid behind kicking my seat as if he were a toddler on an airplane. All of that coupled with some of the best humor known to the fantasy genre made the book a top choice for someone who didn't want anything to do with reality for a few hours. Even the romance subplots, which I normally thought were highly unnecessary, added depth to the plot and contributed to the character arcs. And with that, let me introduce you to my dear, fictional friend Leo Valdez.

I found him to be the most relatable character for one reason only: he was kind of a loser. Leo watched all of his friends pair off, start dating, and ignore him completely. He got blamed for destruction of a village, which wasn't even remotely his fault. He was constantly looked down upon by his best friend, Jason, even after he saved his life a few dozen times. Also, he was, quite literally, cursed.

But the worst part, in my opinion, is a line spoken by a character called Nemesis who, if you hadn't guessed, wasn't an incredibly nice person. She rudely stated thusly,

"You will always be an outsider. A seventh wheel. You will find no place among your brethren."

A bit over the top, but she was right. Leo moves on from this encounter, proceeds to save the world, and then sacrifices himself for the best friend that didn't appreciate him. The end.

The day before Christmas break, I found myself seated around a table in the science room with six other girls that I had formerly considered myself to be great friends with (until they discovered their love for tiktok and boys with weird haircuts). They had all paired off and were talking about guys or horses or stock markets or whatever it is they talked about. As I

pondered which would be more painful, trying to engage in a conversation or walking straight out of the building and into oncoming traffic, I was reminded of the words from Nemesis,

“You will always be an outsider. A seventh wheel.”

I certainly did not appreciate the symmetry. In fact, I found it quite rude that my memory should happen to bring up that particular quote.

Second semester ambushed me with a host of new and interesting things to worry about- I got shin splints during track season, had a few dozen near-death experiences while trying to navigate the school parking lot, skipped MORP, got harassed for skipping MORP, prayed for the apocalypse. Basic stuff- and I didn't have a whole lot of time to think about Nemesis. I actually found myself taking refuge with other books- *Red Queen*, *The Outsiders*, *Snow Like Ashes*, *The Sword of Summer*, etc.- until I was nearing the end of my eighth grade year. It was about time.

It was also my sister's senior year and, with her graduation fast approaching, I decided to check her favorite book out from the library to use its quotes in a gift for her. *Struck By Lightning* started off by introducing its protagonist; his name was Carson Phillips and he hated high school. We were going to get along well.

Carson lived in a very dull town with the duller name of Clover. He hated everyone in his high school and they hated him back. His dad was a deadbeat, and his mom wasn't a whole lot better, so Carson pretty much raised himself. The only family member that ever seemed to care about him, his grandmother, as forgetting him due to her dementia. The only two things that keep Carson going were the school's dying journalism club and the hope of one day going to Northwestern University, and to never to step in Clover ever again. The book is all at once terribly sad, and terribly funny.

In order to be accepted into college, Carson ends up blackmailing nearly the entire school into writing for his literacy magazine (this scandal is named “Clovergate”). And, shockingly, this works. His acceptance letter finally arrives one day while he is visiting his grandmother, bringing with it the power to change his entire life.

His mom throws it away.

He misses the enrollment.

He has to stay in Clover. Possibly forever.

Carson is, understandably, unhappy about this. So he does what any rational person would do, and beats up a sign with an umbrella. After he is finished demolishing that poor, defenseless sign, he finds himself standing back at the place he hates most in the world: his high school. His dreams have been shattered (so has his umbrella, but that is far less important right now) and he fears living an eternity in Clover, therefore being eternally miserable. Which leads him to an epiphany: yes, his life has been a sequence of dreadful occurrences. Yes, his school was a miserable place. Yes, his one goal had been ripped away from him after he had worked so hard to achieve it. Yes, he hated his life. But he didn't have to. Because, when it came down to it, happiness was really a choice. I think he says it best,

“From this day on, I refuse to let anyone bring me to a point where I can't take a horrible situation and spin it into something beneficial. I will never let anyone make me feel anything I don't want to feel again or rob me of the passions that make me who I am.”

This passage intrigued me. As someone who was once told that she was the living embodiment of the color gray, I found the idea of just choosing to be happy and then becoming

happy odd. Was I really the one stopping myself from being happy? There was one way to find out: keep reading.

For the first time in a long time, Carson Phillips is happy. He leaves his school with a new point of view, ready to apply what he's learned to live a better life.

He dies in the parking lot. Struck by lightning, actually. The end.

This troubled me for two reasons. The first because both characters that I had related to most had died very early, which is probably an omen of sorts, the second because Carson finally realized how wonderful his life could be in time for it to end. It was rather jarring. Carson was *dead*...

...but I wasn't. If happiness was truly up to me and me alone, then why couldn't I just be happy? What was stopping me? Nothing. There was no good reason for me to feel so miserable. So I decided I wouldn't be.

I'd be lying if I told you that school improved, that I suddenly gained social skills, or me and my classmates join hands every morning to sing together. I'm still unathletic and painfully nerdy. But I'm also happy. *Struck By Lightning* is a cautionary tale for pessimists. You need to enjoy life because it can end whenever it wants. Death doesn't ask for permission. It was too late for Carson, but it isn't too late for me. It isn't too late for *you*. Turns out it wasn't too late for Leo, either. With the use of some clever magic, he is able to resurrect himself. In the very last pages, he finds his true love and Leo Valdez files off into the sunset.

I didn't enjoy eighth grade, but maybe I can enjoy ninth. If not, I can always reread my favorite books.