

## Evie Allgood 2025 LAL Winner Level 2 (grades 7-8)

January 1, 2025

Dear Ms. Leigh Bardugo,

Ever since I was a little girl, I've loved to read. Anything I could get my hands on. Often, I would reread the same books over and over again simply because I had already gone through everything we owned. But I never quite connected to the books I read. They were all about middle schoolers and big-kid problems that I couldn't relate to. Around fourth grade, I began to lose my passion for reading. Each day was eerily alike, and the only thing I could bring myself to read were the backs of cereal boxes. I was surrounded with normalcy and cliché-filled stories that all began and ended the same way.

Fast forward to February of my sixth grade year- where, slowly but surely, reading integrated back into my daily routine. Starting with the massive pile of books that had amassed on my desk. Sitting right on top was a book titled, *Shadow and Bone*, that my best friend had given me for my birthday. I read through the first few pages, and before I knew it, the sun had set and I had already reached the halfway point.

Now, as someone who's only experience with fantasy had been the Harry Potter series, *Shadow and Bone* shook me to my core. It was like riding a roller coaster for the first time. The magic and tragedy entranced and amazed me; I could feel the words everywhere, rattling my bones and twisting my heartstrings. Suddenly, I was able to look at books not only as reflections of my own life, but as places filled with endless opportunities. It allowed me to reach for broader ideas and perspectives of the world around me. My universe had been split down the middle, half reality, half fiction. It taught me to see what things could be, and I found myself searching for the magic throughout my day. I lived in that book as far as I was concerned. I truly saw myself in more people than just the main character. Even to this day, I try to mimic Mal's tenacity, Alina's selflessness, Genya's grit, and Zoya's unwavering ambition whenever I can.

Not only that, but *Shadow and Bone* was my first taste of a real relationship within the confines of a page. It's where my love for romance novels stems from. Mal and Alina taught me the importance of communication and trust, even when they made me want to scream

and cry and throw up. Their battles were mine as well, and returning to this book years later has opened my eyes further to the addictive toxicity of the pair. However, despite the many flaws in their relationship, I rooted for them down to the last page. The Darkling's obsession with Alina intrigued me as well. Honestly, I didn't see anything wrong with him until my second time reading the book, which was just as enlightening as the first. From there, I started viewing villains differently. I was desperate to learn what made them tick, all thanks to Aleksander Morozova.

It would be a lie if I said that up until that point, I had never cried over a book. Many books had made me shed tears, and they were all warranted. But sitting at my sixth-grade desk, hands shaking as I read through Mal's brush through death, I felt gut-wrenching sadness and fear for the life of this character like never before. It was as if my survival was linked with his. I can relate to Mal in this way. We both relied on Alina to save us.

Looking back on it, *Shadow and Bone* was my catalyst for growing up. It triggered new thoughts and filled my year with new emotions. When I finally finished the series, I wore black for a week, mourning the fact that I would never get to read about Alina Starkov for the first time again. But most of all, *Shadow and Bone* marks a time in my life when everything was changing. Friendships shifted, the things I used to enjoy became irrelevant, and I also gained more independence. At the center of it all, and the thing that sticks out to me the most is the experience of escaping to a whole new world.

This is my 'thank you,' Ms. Bardugo, for keeping me grounded whenever I felt unstable. Thank you for helping me appreciate the little things in life, like sunbeams on a windowsill or a tiny ripple on the surface of a lake. But most of all, thank you for helping me find myself in a sea of uncertainty. You changed my life with words, and I hope you know how powerful that is.

Sincerely,

Evie Allgood