



Dear Author

letters of hope

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with an introduction by
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philomel books

DEAR FRIEND,

I'm calling you that because you signed your book A. C. LeMieux, and I feel funny calling you A.C. or Mrs. LeMieux even though my teacher said you were a lady. Why'd you sign it that way anyway?

I loved your book The T.V. Guidance Counselor. I'll be honest. When I first saw the book, I thought it would be boring and put me to sleep. I have never liked a class before this and I hated reading, but I actually look forward to this class now because of your book. I never thought I would like a class or reading books but now I love reading. Your book was cool because the characters were mostly our own age, and I would love to read others that you have written for my age group. Oh yeah, I'm in middle school. I also wanted to tell you that the whole class loved it so it wasn't just me.

I liked the part when Michael Madden tells his photography teacher why he wants to be in his class. He said he

wanted to capture people's souls and this reminded me of myself. Michael Madden and I have a lot in common. My soul is searching for something but doesn't know what. I don't want to turn out like Michael's "red Corvette" dad or even my own father (he left us, too), and I definitely don't want to turn out like the T.V. Guidance Counselor even though I liked her enough but she was weird. I've seen homeless people who look crazy. They scare me but the T.V. Guidance Counselor didn't. She wasn't homeless but she acted that way. Did you do that on purpose? I never thought about people like that having a soul before. Why'd you have Michael take her picture only to give her soul back to her? I have to admit that I didn't get it entirely—but I sort of do. Everybody's got a soul and it's not right to mess up someone else's, like Michael did to Janey, Ricky did to Victoria, Michael's dad did to his family, and how my dad's doing it to us. I might not read TV Guide (I told you I hated reading before this book), but I watch a lot of TV just to forget that my dad is gone. Is that what happened to the T.V. Guidance Counselor? Did her dad leave her, too? Is that what will happen to me? I'm not going to jump off of a

bridge like Ricky did. I know better and besides, there aren't any bridges by my house. But, I'm mad and glad that my dad left. I'm glad because I don't have to hear him yelling anymore, but now it's just my mom who yells even though she didn't used to. I don't have a job to go to like Michael so I just watch TV.

My other favorite part was when Michael went to Melissa's house, had dinner with her family, and then went upstairs to her room with TRUST. Does that really happen in real life? You know, kids being trusted to be alone upstairs in a girl's bedroom? I told my teacher that was fiction, not just the book. Even though my mom says she trusts me, there is no way she would let me have a girl alone in my bedroom. One other thing, you should have had Ricky go out with Victoria. They fight like they are married, so I thought they should see each other like boyfriend and girlfriend.

My last favorite part was Carl and Mr. Thumm's relationship. They were always nice to everybody, like when Carl gave the platter of food to Michael, and Mr. Thumm let Michael have store credit when he didn't have any money.

They even included Michael when they went fishing, which was a good thing, or Michael might have died when he jumped off of the bridge.

Well, that's all for now. I hope you answer my questions.

Sincerely and your friend,
Jordan "J.T."

DEAR FRIEND "J. T.,"

First of all, I really want to thank you for taking the time to write and let me know how much you enjoyed *The T.V. Guidance Counselor*. When I write a book, I spend a lot of time in my own head by my own self (or with my characters, anyway), but that's only half of the equation. The other half is you. I always think of reading a book as an event involving two participants, writer and reader, who somehow magically connect, a mind-to-mind connection, in the pages of the book. I'm so glad to "meet" you via the book.net connection.

You've asked a lot of deep questions in your letter,

and expressed a hope that I'll answer them all. Well, Jordan, I'll try. I hope you won't mind a long response, because once I get writing about things I care about, I tend to just keep going and going and . . . well, you get the idea!

There's a simple answer and a complex answer to your question about why I signed my book "A. C. LeMieux," the same name I chose to use on the cover. The simple answer has to do with trying to help this book reach as many readers as possible. I don't know if it's true or not, but some marketing studies have suggested that guys your age are less likely to pick up a book by a female author than a male one. (Do you think that's true?) Since *The T.V. Guidance Counselor* is written from the male perspective, or point-of-view, I didn't want that to be a factor. So I did what S. E. Hinton did with *The Outsiders* and just used my initials, to stay neutral. (A little biographical background—I have six brothers and no sisters, so to think like a guy while writing this book came pretty easily for me.)

The complex answer has to do with identity. F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, "Writers aren't exactly people . . .

They're a whole lot of people trying to be one person." (All the different characters in my books are like citizens of a country called "My Head," and they're all relatives—of mine!) When I write in a voice like Michael Madden's, or Boog Buglioni's in *Do Angels Sing the Blues?*, I feel like a different part of me is speaking, not the "Annie" that my brothers know, or the "Anne" that my friends know, or the "Mom" that my kids know. So it felt right to give that "me" a different name.

The identity issue has a lot to do with Michael's feeling of searching for something. Maybe another way to say it would be "searching for someone," namely himself. Michael got furious at Dr. Sherman when the psychiatrist advised him to look inside himself for the answers he was seeking, saying there was nothing in there. I think part of what he meant was that he couldn't find the "Michael" inside himself.

Identity is something that grows. Tiny kids depend on their parents (or caretakers), and their parents' interactions with them and reactions to them, to develop a sense of who they are. It's almost as if parents are mirrors, reflecting this tiny little person back to themselves,

until the image takes hold inside. As a kid gets older, starts school, the number of mirrors increases, friends, enemies, teachers, each reflecting a message: "This is how I see you. This is who I think you are." And a kid will start to hold mirrors back to others, reflecting that message to them. Parents are really important mirrors while we're growing up. If a parent isn't there for some reason, or isn't able to provide a clear and positive mirror—it can be a lot harder to figure out who you are.

Part of Michael's inner struggle in the book had to do with sorting out the distorted mirrors his parents were holding up for each other, and realizing that he was allowed to form his own mirror (opinion and feelings) for each of them, have his relationship with each of them, separately. The other part was the task of creating his own mirror for himself, one with a true reflection.

Janey Riddley, the "T.V. Guidance Counselor," was actually modeled on a real person who used to come into the grocery store where I worked when I was in high school. I was as fascinated with this person as Michael was with Janey, and it wasn't until I was an adult that I realized the way she acted fit the description for a type of behavior

called "autistic." Although Janey's body lived in the everyday world of social reality, a world where we interact with each other, her inner world was like a gated community of one; you could view her behaviors as "No Trespassing" signs. But they weren't signs she put up herself. According to *Webster's Dictionary*, the word "autistic" is an adjective describing "autism," which means "a state of mind characterized by daydreaming, hallucinations, and disregard of external reality." The symptoms of autism can be mild or very severe, or somewhere in between.

When Michael told his photography teacher, Mr. Dorio, that he wanted to capture people's souls with his camera, he was being kind of a wiseguy. I don't think he had any idea when he said it that it would turn out to be true in a certain sense. I believe that whenever we make a connection with another human being, whether it's a brief momentary connection, or one that turns into a relationship, we have the opportunity not only to absorb a part of another person's soul, but also to give them part of ours. I think this is how we help each other evolve, hopefully in a good direction, although it can work the other way, too.

I say we have the opportunity to share our souls, because you've probably realized by this time in your life that some people are able to relate well to other human beings better than others.

And I believe you're absolutely right when you say everybody's got a soul. I myself suspect our souls may be the most important part of who we are—and definitely connected with our hearts, and how we treat other people. Though Janey's soul might not be "visible" to the average person, she certainly acted as an important teacher to Michael, even if she didn't realize it.

One last detail about Janey and whether or not her father left her: When I write a book, I write out little biographies for each of my important characters. I imagined Janey as old enough that both her parents had died. And so that's why she lived with her sister.

I'm really sorry to hear that your dad left, even though there's probably a sense of relief that the fighting stopped. (Don't feel guilty that you feel glad about that part—and don't feel guilty about being mad at your dad. He's supposed to be the grown-up, and that means he better start figuring some things out.) Having your

parents get divorced, or separated, is about one of the toughest things life can throw at you. Here you are, trying to grow your identity, which is your job as a kid, and they're supposed to be helping you in a calm and adult way, which is their job as parents. But a lot of times, calm and adult behavior flies out the window when divorce comes in the door. That puts a huge amount of pressure on you, to figure yourself and life out on your own, especially when the adults are losing it big-time. I really feel for you, because I went through the same thing when my parents got divorced. I remember thinking, just like Michael did, "So, what's the big deal? It happens all the time." But it is a big deal.

I was especially lucky, because I had some great teachers who went out of their way to help me figure some of the life stuff out until I could get a handle on things. I guess they held up a mirror that told me I was worth taking the extra time and making the extra effort for, even when I felt kind of worthless. With their encouragement, I started writing, and that was when I started to grow into myself. And then I realized that part of figuring out who you are is figuring out what you like to do.

ANNE C. LEMIEUX ANNE C. LEMIEUX ANNE C. LEMIEUX

You say you're watching a lot of TV these days. TV can be entertaining and relaxing, and even educational, but it can also be an escape, a way of tuning out from real life, which might slow you down in your search for that "something you don't know what it is." So try not to overdo it. (Same goes for video and computer games.) Being in middle school, you can't get a regular job yet, but maybe there's something you can do at this time, not only to earn some money, but to keep the current unhappiness at home from gluing your door to the world shut.

Well, Jordan "J.T.," I told you when my words get flowing on certain topics, I tend to keep going. I'll stop the words now, but please know that all my wishes for you keep going. You take good care of yourself.

Your friend,

Anne C. LeMieux

Anne C. LeMieux