

West Delaware High School
Manchester, Iowa

Dear Sarah Dessen,

In first grade, when I was first learning how to swim at our local pool, I was never afraid of drowning. Now, eight years later, that fear has grown on me. If I sit and think long enough, I can see myself giving in and letting my fears take over. In other words, I can see myself drowning. While reading *Dreamland*, I could feel it. I felt myself falling with Caitlin. There was an obvious presence of something—a feeling—inside of me, a new feeling. It shoved itself next to my fear and happiness and settled. It gave me a new insight to life.

I've actually read *Dreamland* twice. Both times I related tremendously to Caitlin. She's one of those characters who you almost feel come alive. Actually, *you* become that character, and you feel yourself seeing what she sees, living her life, drowning as she's pulled under. It's almost terrifying when that realization hits you that someday, in maybe some other way, it certainly *could* be you. Life is scary and spontaneous like that.

It seems weird to me, at first, that I do relate to Caitlin. If you look on the surface, our lives are completely different—there is almost no comparison. But as I read I felt an immediate connection, as if someone who had been searching blindly in the dark for the light switch had finally made contact. In the aftermath of reading a few chapters in *Dreamland*, I would think about myself and how I worry and obsess over my life. I'd think of how my strength had a tendency of petering out and dying just when I needed it the most. I'd think of the life going on all around me, constant and seeming so sure of itself, sometimes so unlike me. I'd think of drowning and wonder if an escape would be easier.

To record my thoughts, I don't journal. Your mind travels faster than your hand and sometimes you end up missing the important parts when you try to write it all out. Instead, I went with my mom to Target and bought myself a tape recorder and a package of tapes when I turned fifteen. That night, or the next—I can't quite remember, I closed the door of my room, sat in a safe, small spot right in between my dresser and bed, and I talked. I clicked the record button, and held the device close to my lips, letting myself spill it all. It's amazing what comes out of your mouth when you give yourself the chance to say everything you want to say. The air is clean, the ground is sturdy, holding me up, and my room smells like the potpourri my grandmother gave me for Christmas one year. And when I'm done, there's something inside of me that has cleared up. Usually, I go back a few days later and rewind it to the beginning, so I can listen to myself reflecting and thinking, and wonder what kind of person I am. I realize that I am afraid, but that I can keep myself from self-doubt and lack of self-confidence by *listening* to these thoughts and confessions. Doing this, I can know myself; therefore, I keep myself afloat.

For a while, I felt like I almost had no control over my feelings and decisions. This part of my life—being a teenager, starting high school—has been a struggle. But *Dreamland* led me to believe otherwise. At the end, when Caitlin is reunited with Cass and her photos are hanging up everywhere and everyone's there who means everything to her... There are no words

seriously, no words. It was just his grand moment in my life when I could suck in this new air and feel okay.

Your book became a powerful presence to me. I learned a lot about myself and about life. I'll never forget how quickly Caitlin let life overtake her, how it felt when she finally broke free and saw what had happened to her, and, most importantly, now life won't always bring you down. I *have* strength, and I *have* control. I'm breathing very well these days. Thank you for that.

Sincerely,

Joanna Demkiewicz