

Dear Ruta Sepetys,

I greeted your characters as old friends. I journeyed through the forests during winter, stayed in the abandoned barn, and found the mansion just as beautiful as your characters did. I walked on the ice, and right before my eyes, I watched my beloved friend slip from my hands. The beauty of our ship amazed me as much as it amazed your characters. But most importantly, I felt the terror of lives being taken under, heard the screams and pain around me, and realized that I was the only one guaranteed life in that very moment. The only one in the comforts of my own home, silent in the background.

I never knew how such small words on a page could make such a huge impact. Your novel *Salt to the Sea* took me to new places and perspectives I had never imagined. The thought of this tragedy being unknown to most of mankind breaks my heart. The thought of innocent citizens just trying to seek refuge, but are caught in the death trap set by war breaks my heart. I have always longed to know what it was like in the past. I have always wanted to know what they had to go through.

My grandpa recently gave me a box containing pictures of his family. I was so fascinated by them. My great uncle stood in front of a tall, stone building by the sea when he was in Germany fighting in World War II. I felt such a moment of pride knowing my ancestry was there, fighting and saving. My great grandfather and grandmother lovingly embrace each other as they vibrantly smile to the camera. Looking at the picture, their joy seeps into my soul, the same way I felt when your characters finally reached refuge. The photographs transported me through time and I was able to hear the sea, smell the salt in the air, feel the tension in my great uncle's shoulder, and feel the pain that was felt throughout an entire country. It was through these small squares of frozen time that I could travel back and imagine what it was like to experience history with my great grandparents and family. Like the pictures given to me by my grandpa, your novel allowed me to time travel and connect personally with the past. Reading your book was like looking at pictures of the past.

Ruta, you brought awareness to me. You helped me gain compassion for people on all sides of war. My heart aches for the innocent.

You have helped me realize that these cravings for knowledge and compassion of the helpless are not qualities to set aside, but qualities that I should embrace, and put into action.

Your story touched my heart in a way no story ever has before. I have never connected with characters more deeply, and I have never loved characters as deeply as I have loved yours. You bring life to the forgotten memories of the past, and authors like you are what keep this world connected. Authors like you find, and bring light to what is

left of the small, shattered pieces of hope still found hiding throughout the world...and I thank you.

Sincerely, Alyssa Hodge