

Rachel Hegewald

Dear Mr. Gipson,

A couple of years ago, my dad and I ended our tradition. We ended it with your book, Old Yeller. Every night for about an hour, my dad would read to me while we sat together in his golden-tan easy chair. Once in a while my mind would wander, and I would stop paying attention. My dad, using that strange sense parents have, would stop reading and randomly come up with something that made no sense. As an example, he would read, "In the next few days, while Old Yeller and I healed fast, we all jumped into our motorcycles..." By then I usually would have noticed and said, "Daddy! Stop it!" My dad would then find the spot where I had stopped listening and painstakingly go over what I missed. That left a special memory in my mind.

A couple of years later, I had, actually, about the same experience as Travis had with Old Yeller. Like Travis, I was given my first pet, a pet rat named Snickers. Snickers was my first rat like Old Yeller was Travis's first dog. I was close to Snickers. Very close. He was my best friend until that horrid day: March 4. Snickers died, and I felt responsible for it. As with Travis, I thought I had pretty much shot him, although I didn't. I dropped him and that triggered his death. I was devastated and I couldn't stop wailing.

A few days later, I was past the point of crying; I felt dried up. I thought that if I bought two other rat, it would help me. It did, but not at first. They reminded me too much of what a tremendous loss I had suffered. I couldn't accept them. Eventually I did, but it was not easy, then I accepted them, and that was that.

Sometimes I look back and say, "What would have happened if I hadn't read Old Yeller?" I probably would have cried more. Old Yeller was the first book that exposed me to death. When I was 10 and 11, I was still reading all the "once-upon-a-time" and "happily-ever-after" stories. Until Old Yeller, I had heard of death but never experienced it or thought about it. It set me to thinking: why did Old Yeller have to die? Why did Travis have to kill him himself? Now I know – because life isn't fair.

A few weeks after I read this book, I was still stuck pondering. Why? Why? Why? Then I realized something. When something bad happens, weeks later you think of only good things: about whoever died; whatever you lost; etc. What if the bad things were there to highlight the good things? A few years later, I used that same concept.

He died, yes. But I couldn't stop thinking about the happy times: the highlights. That's how I dealt with my grief. I remembered the happy and delightful times. That's all it took. And Travis's and Old Yeller's story showed that. You just had to dig a little deeper.

The ending of a tradition is never easy. My ending was never really an ending; it was a beginning. Old Yeller was like a premonition to a new life. A beginning of a new life where I will move on but will never forget the highlights.

Sincerely,

Rachel Hegewald