After I switched schools in the third grade, it took me months to make my first friend.

I didn’t used to like Chinese people! But I like you! Uh... thanks?

There were, however, certain settings where I felt perfectly comfortable. One of these was Summer Computer Programming Camp.

I’d learned how to program the year before, so I went in with the confidence of a rock star.

You did that? That’s so rad! Why, yes. It is pretty rad.

This kid named Ronnie* started hanging out with me. He marveled at all my programs and laughed at all my jokes.

Orange! Orange you glad I’m not a banana?

Ha ha!

There was this other kid at the camp named Chris*. He was stocky and loud.

I’d made a friend without even trying.

*Not their real names.
During class, he couldn’t help but blurt out all sorts of random statements.

This reminds me of this time I went to the movies and—

That’s nice, Chris, but let’s get back to the topic.

Maybe he was just really exuberant, but now that I’ve been a classroom teacher myself, I wonder if he had something more going on.

Back then, though, Ronnie and I found Chris endlessly annoying. We came up with a plan.

Every time he says something stupid—

—we cut him down to size!

Teacher! You know what my favorite color is? It’s——

Nobody cares, Chris!

Yeah! Be quiet, you moron!

After just a few days, Chris went silent.

Ronne and I thought we’d done the class a favor.

And he stayed silent for the rest of the camp.

We actually celebrated our cruelty.
This is one of those childhood memories that just makes me cringe with regret.

Being comfortable brought out my inner bully.

But it also makes me thankful for stories that push me out of my comfort zone.

Stories about experiences I've never had, struggles I've never faced, and perspectives different from my own help me build empathy.

I really wish I'd found a story about someone like Chris when I was a kid.

I'm not saying it would have fixed everything, but it certainly would have helped.

Which is why, as the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, I'm promoting the Reading Without Walls program.
I’m challenging readers all over the country to do at least one of the following:

1. Read a book about a character who doesn’t look like you or live like you.

2. Read a book about a topic you don’t know much about.

3. Read a book in a format that you don’t normally read for fun. This might be a chapter book, a graphic novel, a book in verse, a picture book, or a hybrid book.

Reading Without Walls can get us out of our comfort zones.

Empathy is something I need more of in my life, and I’m guessing that I’m not the only one.

Reading Without Walls can help us build empathy.