# Nantucket Book Foundation 2026 Young Writer Award Finalists

This year's prompt is inspired by our visiting author Ruta Sepetys. Her novels remind us that the past is never lost. It continues to shape who we are and how we see the world.

PROMPT:

Think about an experience, story, or memory that taught you something important about yourself or others. What lesson did you take from it, and how has it shaped the way you see the world today?

Your essay should be approximately 650 words.

**Alex Wisentaner (overall WINNER 2026)**

## Carried By The Current

A scratched, weathered shell rests on the sand, shaped by the waves, and holds a quiet, imperfect beauty. Living on a small island, I've seen how quickly things - weather patterns, shorelines, the shapes of shells - can change. For the shell, change comes through shifting weather patterns, unpredictable currents, and changing wave conditions. Like the shell, I've changed too. For me, change has been shaped by life experiences that are often unexpected, much like the ocean. I've come to appreciate the storms. It is in those conditions that I discovered the strong, resilient, and beautiful woman that I am today.

As a child, I faced many challenges that scared me, but also allowed me to grow. When I was fourteen, I suffered a dip in my mental health that felt overwhelming. I experienced new, terrifying symptoms and couldn't ask for help, feeling ashamed of what I was experiencing. An overwhelming mess of emotions rushed through my head constantly. But then I found therapy, which taught me the importance of opening up and trusting others with my emotions. As I expressed my feelings, I realized that many were not as daunting as they appeared. They were built up and held in, creating a false sense of magnitude. I discovered that I have a core self, a foundation that survived with each crashing wave. The more waves I endured, the closer I came to understanding who I truly am and embracing strength. The more challenges I faced, the more I grew. I realized I'm strong.

Sometimes, we face waves that we believe will break us. When I was sixteen, the stability I relied on was shattered when my father walked away from my life completely. In a brief conversation, he said, "I hope you have a good life." I was devastated. I thought I would never recover from this pain — the wave that would break me. But I turned inward and clung to my new self. With time, I found that I'd be okay. With time, I realized that by trusting myself, I could weather the storm. While the rupture of this relationship was painful, it taught me that I was strong. The way I handled the situation and the support I received from my friends and family were beautiful. I've learned to be my own buoy during life's storms. In the past, when my

anxieties weighed me down, I felt flawed. I could see the marks that my life's waves left on me, and I hated the way they looked. I saw them as flaws in a life that needed to be perfect. But I

now understand that life doesn't need to be perfect — maybe it shouldn't be. I endured the waves and became a version of myself that I admire more than my past self. Now, I see these marks as texture, character, endurance, strength, and beauty — as signs of distinction. Life's waves are always whittling me down to my best, most essential self. Although I once struggled to reach out, I found that with each wave, my loved ones awaited me on the other side. My mom encouraged me, and my friends checked in on me. I learned that it was okay to be a little disoriented, since these people, like other shells and strands of seaweed, tethered me to my beach. I could be strong through others, too.

Like the shell, I continue to flow with the currents of life. Now, I am confident that I can face whatever comes my way, even when I am not ready. I can understand that it's not how strong the wave that crashes against you is, but rather, knowing that the damage caused by it will not define you. As I grow in life, I will always hold onto the truth that everything will be okay, and each wave will bring me closer to my true self.

**Noah Stringer (Finalist)**

**Patience of the Wave**

"Noah, patience!" I grew up wanting to be the first at everything. I never really knew what patience was. I just knew slow wasn't an option. My mind and body ran in a million circles, whether competing with my brother, learning to cradle a lacrosse stick, or struggling to sit still in church on Christmas Eve as I anticipated what was coming next. Patience is learned in many different ways. For some people, it is learned by example. For others, it is learned through self-reflection. For me, I learned patience in an unexpected place: surfing.

I moved to Nantucket from Western Massachusetts when I was three years old. Instead of rolling mountains, I was now surrounded by water - and I loved it. I already knew how to swim, and while most kids were afraid of the ocean, I ran right toward it. I vividly remember a big tropical storm from when I was around five. My mom, brother, and I went to Nobadeer Beach to see the big waves and watched as the surfers waited in the lineup for a set. As one of the largest waves formed, I remember seeing a surfer paddling as hard as he could and catching the wave. The crowd was cheering. It seemed effortless. I imagined myself in their place, and soon after, my brother and I began to teach ourselves how to surf.

Like a lot of things, learning how to surf is a step by step process. You have to first be comfortable paddling on the board, then with popping up, finding your balance, keeping your knees bent, looking straight ahead, and then turning on the wave. My brother and I spent countless summer hours working on these skills. Once I was good enough, I switched from a long board to a short board because I wanted to go as fast as possible down the line. But I would get stuck on the pop up because of my eagerness to ride the wave. Over and over again, I'd end up off the board and back in the lineup.

Surfing isn't about being first or fastest. It's about balance, timing and most importantly patience. Popping up correctly is one fluid movement from horizontal to vertical that requires

being totally present and great concentration. I had to learn to be where I was in the process and not where I was anticipating going. Once I realized this, I felt more connected with my board and ultimately mastered the pop up. Soon I was keeping up with the guys I once dreamed of being.

I've carried this lesson of patience with me. At school, I've stopped seeing writing assignments in English class as something to just get done. I've started to connect more with the topics and take the time to think about what I want to say before starting to write. In lacrosse, I had struggled with learning the offensive plays because I was rushing through the motions and not reading the defense as a whole. Once I was able to break down the play to what was directly in my line of sight at each moment, I became a key part of the offense and a more reliable teammate. Finally, in my summer job working alongside the Nantucket Harbormaster, I've applied the focus I developed in surfing to deal with distress calls, where you have to follow protocols to gather information on the boat adrift or taking on water and its possible occupants. The trust I've gained with the Harbormaster crew gives me confidence that next year I'll be hired back as a seasonal assistant.

I'll admit it, I still tend to rush ahead sometimes. But the lessons I've learned on my surfboard will continue to carve their way into my everyday life.

**Estella Grow (Finalist)**

**Saying "Yes"**

The boat rocked. The kids screamed. I composed myself and guided the nervous 4-year-old's hand onto the back of a spiny spider crab.

I wasn't always this confident with the families that came on our Critter Cruise, the children's fishing and lobster-trap charter I've worked on for the past four summers. I used to hide in the corner of the boat, tremble from anxiety before each shift, and dodge eye contact with passengers. I wished that my white zinc sunscreen would camouflage me with the paint on the boat. I admired the natural confidence of my coworker, Nick.

Then one hot day of Critter Cruising, I had to jump into action. A little boy, whose head barely reached my hip, managed to sling a flopping fish into the boat, hook and all. As I rushed to prevent it from giving the boy his first piercing, the boy's father chuckled. After grabbing the fish, I asked the dad how he could stay so calm. He laughed again (at my question this time) and explained that he overcame his anxiety by saying yes to opportunities that scared him.

With each day of reeling in scup and Nick's effortless chatter, I reflected on the father's advice. I began thinking about how I could start saying, "Yes." And so my mission of speaking more with our customers began. I was terrified. I probably averaged ten jokes that led to awkward silence each day, and was forever coating my sweaty palms in baby powder (which might've been more off-putting than a clammy handshake).

I wasn't as smooth as Nick, but I kept working towards my goal. I crafted daily checklists of social challenges: learn every client's name and leave them with a smile. I spent hours watching

YouTube videos on making conversation and became captivated by the study of microexpressions. My Notes app became an archive of stories I collected on each trip. In just a fifteen-minute drive to our lobster traps, I could learn so much about the passengers.

After a few weeks, a father with an autistic daughter wrote an appreciative email. He wrote that "Estella showed excellent patience and understanding" to calm his daughter, who was "nervous" of the Critter Cruise. I was thrilled. I was finally connecting with both kids and adults, whether it was discussing Mr. Beast videos or what it's like living in NYC.

My confidence was growing, and it didn't go unnoticed. My (usually grumpy) boss, Josh, grabbed my shoulders with both of his hands and exclaimed, "Who are you? Where is Estella?" Josh doubled my shifts from three to six a week and gave me a $5 raise.

By Labor Day, I had successfully reinvented myself. When I met a curly-headed girl named Charlie, who feared every critter pulled from our traps, I realized that I could inspire others the way the father had inspired me. I showed her the grapefruit-sized whelk and promised her that the sea snail was harmless. I watched her hand shake while reaching out to touch the solitary snail. I felt accomplished. Helping someone else get out of their comfort zone was even more rewarding than branching out on my own.

I never would've thought that a flopping fish and a hazardous hook would drive me to change from an anxious observer to a confident leader. I grew into someone who looks at the unfamiliar with curiosity. Now, knowing that the most growth happens when I tackle situations that intimidate me, I lean into what's daunting and actively seek out opportunities to grow even off the deck of the Critter Cruise. I confidently introduce myself to strangers, stand up for myself, and volunteer for leadership roles that I previously shied away from. What at first seemed like a simple fishing job has led me to transform myself.

**Bianca Japp (Finalist)**

## I Love You

Everyone you know will die. It's such a truistic statement, right? Of course, everyone dies, but doesn't some small part of us believe it won't happen? We push so many things to the side because we secretly think we have all the time in the world. The reality is, we will never know how much time we have, and cancer definitely doesn't care about what we want.

Death always felt like a made-up concept to me; something you just acknowledge because you have to. Almost like a conversation starter: "Hey, how ya been? Did you know we're all going to die someday?". The possibility of dying seemed so far away it almost seemed impossible, but when my parents sat me down to tell me my mom's cancer had come back a third time, the possibility of death started to become palpable, something I could almost touch.

The sicker my mom got, the stronger death became. It bled into my veins, made my stomach ache, and my head hurt, but still, I pushed it away because my mother was not going to die. Death was only a concept we created to make books more interesting, and in no way would it affect my mother. Even as the cancer consumed her liver, and her doctor regretfully told us there was nothing else they could do, I still believed death couldn't touch her. It wasn't until I heard her take her last breath that I realized we ran out of time. So many "I love yous" went unsaid because I believed death and time were conquerable forces, little hiccups in the never-ending game of life.

When my mother died, I became angry. I was furious that she was gone when all my friends' moms were still around. I was furious that she was gone, yet the world moved on, as if no one cared, as if she never mattered. I lived in that anger for a while, until it was the only thing I knew. The only source of comfort I had.

One night, I was home alone. I had traded the chance to go out with my friends to lie in bed and stare at my phone, when a thought snuck up on me; I can't live like this. I had a life to live, one that I now knew could end at any time, and I was choosing to waste it. The memory of

my mother was the catalyst that motivated me to live as much life as I could. Instead of hiding my feelings, I communicated with the people around me because I never again wanted to regret leaving thoughts unsaid. I'm terrified of leaving home, but I still applied for summer programs at colleges hundreds of miles away. I was scared to lead and take initiative, but decided to reach out to local businesses and town officials about community projects. I was once too shy to even utter my own name, but I put that part of me aside and tried out for the captain of my cheer team and succeeded.

She doesn't even get to hear about it, but thanks to my mother, I became brave. I was willing to explore the world on my own and slowly pave the way to becoming the person I want to be. I have an endless sea of possibilities standing in front of me, and for once in my life, I am no longer scared to dive in. One day, I will leave this earth. My laugh will never be heard again, my thoughts will stay with me, and my bones will turn to ash. When this time comes, I plan on being ready because I know I will have lived my life without wasting any more time.