Once upon a time, there was a girl. Let's call her Rapunzel. A modern-day version. Abandoned. Alone. Waiting for her hair to grow and dreaming of a way to escape from her tower. She was trapped, you see. Not in the conventional fairy-tale way—this was the dreaded after-school Homework Club. A desolate place, where no gum could be chewed, and where Rapunzel sat day after day, cursing the evil spell that had been cast over her father. The doctors called it something else, but a true heroine can smell an evil spell a mile away. So when a mysterious letter addressed to P.O. Box 5667 falls into her hands, she knows she's found the pea under her mattress. But since when is finding happily ever after as simple as Just Writing Back?

Winner of the Ursula Nordstrom Fiction Contest, Sara Lewis Holmes' enchanting debut novel is a breath of fresh air. Told through letters, with a liberal sprinkling of fairy dust, Rapunzel's quest for a happy ending gives every reader something to believe in.

My Personal Review:
This is Sara Lewis Holmes' debut novel, winner of the first annual Ursula Nordstrom Fiction Contest. An epistolary novel (that quickly becomes tantamount to reading a young girl's diary), it centers around twelve-year-old Cadence who calls herself Rapunzel. Cadence is extremely close to her father, a poet, who is suddenly hospital-bound with clinical depression. Soon after his hospitalization, Cadence finds an intimate and cryptic (but incomplete) letter he had written to someone nameless, addressed to a post office box. In the hopes that the recipient of the letters will help her save her father, she composes letters and sends them to this particular post office box, 5667. However, she finds herself writing so much more -- re-writings of fairy tales with her own plucky spin (one of her protagonist princesses decides not to marry the prince after all and not to sleep on any
more piles of mattresses: She will no longer "take teeny-tiny steps. Instead, I opened my own detective agency, and lived happily ever after, asking lots and lots of questions. THE END"); creative responses to homework assignments and math problems; and letters to the editor when she hears about the imminent destruction of one of the last authentic swing bridges in her area, a place holding special significance for her father and a place, she learns the hard way, that was the backdrop for a devastating turning point in her father's illness. All the while, no one, including her mother, is talking to her honestly about his depression. She imagines herself a modern fairy tale heroine, mostly "just a victim in a tower," she writes to the nameless letter recipient: Her particular prison tower being the afterschool Homework Club, and the evil spell that has afflicted her father, his depression.

The book has a steady, vigorous pace; Holmes' Cadence is fully-realized (she's entrancing when she really gets going) and will especially draw young pre-teen girls who feel a bit left of center or a bit out of place, especially if its due to their brain power in and out of the classroom ("Everyone thinks that smart people are happy, but it's not true. What's so happy about being able to see what's wrong all the time, and not having the power to fix it? What's so happy about feeling weird and different every day of your life?" she writes in one letter); as The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books put it well, the novel possesses a "{d}elicately layered grace and springiness"; and there's a lot of poignancy in the novel, yet Holmes knows how to put on the brakes and keep it from getting too schmaltzy or overdone. Her relationship with her father is especially moving; here she is writing to the nameless post office box recipient (though it quickly becomes clear, especially after getting no letters in response, that she's writing for her own self-preservation):

"Did you know he writes me a letter, with a poem in it, every year, for my birthday? Half the time I don't understand the poem - not completely anyway - but it doesn't matter. Understanding isn't the point. It's how those poems make me feel. I read them to myself at night, sitting cross-legged on the bed, catching the words on the paper like they were fantastical beasts in the round, pale moonbeam of his silver flashlight. In the daylight, the words seem to run away when I try to read them, but at night, safely circled by my mighty beam, they slow down and turn toward me, and I whisper them to myself, memorizing their tracks on the page.

That's what I love about my dad - he doesn't give me cute or fancy verses for my birthday. He gives me strange and beautiful and mysterious pools of words, way over my head, but right at eye level with my heart. Those poems make me feel I'm truly growing older, that it isn't just a cake-and-icing-induced hallucination."

And there are also several beautifully-rendered moments as Cadence works through her confusion and her sadness over her father's sudden absence, all through her letter-writing. In thinking about her father's love of
poetry ("One time he said poetry happened whenever he felt `the weight of reality's shadow.' I didn't get that exactly, but then he said it was like the world tilted, or shifted a little, so that he could see its hidden side"), she comes to understand her own writing abilities, albeit accidentally: "Then something weird happened. I wrote a poem about it. I didn't mean to, but all of a sudden, it was like there was another SOMETHING in the room, like a ghost. You know how you feel like there's breath on your neck? I didn't know how long it would last, so I grabbed a pen and I wrote down everything I could about that moment. What I wrote didn't make sense at first, but then I remembered what my dad told me once about his work - that he tried to make his poems like spells (good ones, not evil) so that when someone heard one, the listener would be haunted by the spirit of the poem, as he was when he wrote it . . ." Ah, loveliness.

Best of all, though, is Holmes' perceptive commentary on modern education (or, at the very least, the tendency of some teachers to adhere a bit too rigidly to pedagogical orthodoxy). Cadence is brilliant and very determined to avoid trying the new gifted program that her mother and some teachers want her to join. Compounding her dislike for school, a handful of her teachers refuse her rather imaginative ("frivolous" in the eyes of some teachers) efforts at answering homework questions. "Why do teachers encourage you to be creative when they don't mean it?" she writes. Indeed, her letters to the editor about the imminent destruction of the bridge are smart and incisive.

And, in the end, thoughtful readers will appreciate Holmes' further commentary on some readers' insistence for happy endings in stories and Cadence's acceptance that "{y}ou must be willing to have your heart broken in order to live. There's no other choice, scramble as we may to look for it, to find a way out of our dilemma. It is hope, crack your heart open and breathe, or close it up and die." That's not to say that something dreadfully tragic happens either; this is not the case at all. It's simply that Cadence -- and her father, for that matter -- comes to realize that she must make herself vulnerable, despite the pain, that the light can come through, even when things seem topsy-turvy and beyond repair.

In the words of Cadence, "It's very hard, rescuing yourself."