Hi, kids!

I was born in Chicago and grew up in Georgia, Arkansas, and later back to Chicago again. I had a Southern accent, but I made an effort to lose it when I lived (briefly) in Michigan with foster parents. My teacher told me that my accent was so heavy that nobody could understand me. So I changed.

Like all of you, I had good times and bad, hard times and easy, boring times and fun. But I think a lot about how I once interviewed an elderly Japanese American woman, and I asked her whether she thinks it’s easier or harder for kids today to grow up than it was for her. This woman had lived through the Great Depression and the incarceration of thousands of people of Japanese ancestry. But she said she thought it was harder for kids today.

I’m reminded also of a man I interviewed during college. We were both students at the University of Southern California. He’d once been a heroin addict. That’s why I was interviewing him, for a story I was working on – I was a journalism major. I asked him what he thought of the sororities and fraternities that dominated the school. Did he find them superficial? And he said it was a hard fricking world, and he didn’t begrudge anybody whatever they had to do to be happy.

Finally, I think often of a woman I met on a long Greyhound bus trip. She had lived through the Dust Bowl, and in order to survive, her whole family was forced to move to California to work picking fruit. She told me how this would be the last trip she would ever take, because she wasn’t well and wouldn’t live much longer. What I remember most about her is that when we parted ways in Amarillo, Texas, she looked at me with true compassion in her eyes and said sincerely and fervently that she hoped I had a good life. “You’re so young!” she exclaimed.

These were big-hearted people. And I think if any of them knew you – yes, you who are reading this! – they would love you, because that’s the kind of people they were. So when I write, that’s who I want to be. I want to be a big-hearted person who thinks of you, the kids who read. Some of my books come out better than others! But I hope there’s something in all of them that strikes a chord with some of you, that makes you love to read, that shows you a glimmer of how much life means.

I hope you have a good life. You’re so young!!!