

Like her previous novels' many accolades, Nina LaCour's new novel *We Are Okay* is receiving much praise. Booklist gave it a starred review and had this to say, "*LaCour paints a captivating depiction of loss, bewilderment and emotional paralysis. Images of the icy winter surrounding Marin in New York contrast sharply with her achingly vibrant memories of San Francisco. Raw and beautiful, this portrait of a girl searching for both herself and a sense of home will resonate with readers of LGBTQIA romances.*"



We Are Okay (9780525425892, HRD, \$17.99) publishes this month. LaCour shared some insight, with CATS, on her new novel and approach to writing.

Q: What inspired you to write this book? Was there any particular source you drew from for a favorite element, character or theme in the story?

A: Unlike my other books, all of which began with characters, this story began with structure and setting. I wanted to spend a lot of time in a single place and pay attention to daily tasks and rituals, the meanings within small gestures. I always knew that it would be a lonely book and one about loss. And then, a few months after my grandfather died, my wife suggested that I write a book about a girl who was raised by her grandfather near San Francisco's Ocean Beach. With that suggestion, Marin and Gramps and Mabel began to come to life and I began to understand why Marin would be all alone in an upstate New York college dorm in the snow.

Q: The setting of *We Are Okay* – on a college campus instead of in a high school, and with stark contrast between New York snow and California sunshine – really sets this novel apart. What led to your decision to incorporate these elements?

A: I didn't know if I'd be able to get away with making my character a college freshman, but that's just how she came to me and how I needed to write her. Even though it pushed the boundaries of YA, the story wouldn't have worked any other way. So I wrote the first draft and shared it with my editor, Julie Strauss-Gabel, fearful that she would object, but when we sat down to talk about the book and I mentioned Marin's age, she smiled and



shrugged and said, "It is what it is." As for the settings, the stillness and isolation of being alone in the snow called out to me, and then my own college years were spent in San Francisco, just a couple blocks from the ocean. We would sit up on the roof of our apartment building and look out at the water. The funny thing is that San Francisco isn't all that sunny during the summertime, especially not near Ocean Beach, but Julie and I felt that the contrast of warm and cold was important, so I channeled the sunniest days.

Q: Is identity a notable theme within *We Are Okay*?

A: If our identities are formed by the relationships and beliefs and experiences of our childhoods, then what happens if we discover that what we believed to be one way was actually quite different? This is a question I've been wrestling with for a few years and it is at the core of the novel. One of my favorite sentences by Joan Didion, whose writing has inspired me since I was in high school, is from her essay "The White Album": "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." This is true on so many levels, and many of the stories we tell ourselves about our lives turn out to be faulty. So what happens when we realize this? Marin is at a place in her life where she's having to create her identity in a new state, after the loss of her last family member, and in the wake of a discovery that leaves her questioning the stories she has always told herself.

Q: Talk a bit about the role of love in your book, romantic or otherwise.

A: Well, speaking of literary influences, I can't help thinking about Virginia Woolf when I think about this question. After reading her nonfiction and novels in a college class when I was nineteen, all I ever wanted to write about was the way we strive for the impossibility of truly knowing each other. The love between Marin and Gramps in *We Are Okay* is like that. Both characters have endured tremendous losses. They love each other deeply, but in many ways are alone in one another's company. And then there is the equally complicated love between Marin and Mabel, which carries through to the present. Mabel is who Marin has left, and the girls need to find out who and what they can be to each other at this point in their lives.

Q: If you could pick one character from *We Are Okay* to meet a character from one of your previous novels, who would it be and why?

A: Of all my books, *We Are Okay* feels most similar to my first novel, *Hold Still*. I guess it's a little bit like *Hold Still*'s older sister. They both come from the same place--loss, friendship, hope--but *We Are Okay* is maybe a little wiser. Marin, three years older than *Hold Still*'s Caitlin,

would be able to talk to her about death and loss with honesty and empathy. And then she could analyze all of Caitlin's photographs and help her with her homework.

Q: What was your writing process during the creation of *We Are Okay*? How was this journey different/similar to that writing your previous novels?

A: Like all of my novels, I wrote *We Are Okay* in short bursts of scenes and images and snippets of conversations and then put all of it together in an order that made sense and filled in the blanks. It's a strange and chaotic way to write but it's what works for me. This book felt much different, though, because despite some early fears that my characters weren't doing enough and were spending far too much page time eating meals and washing dishes, I felt like I knew the path forward and knew what the book would be. After a couple books that were real struggles to write, this one came naturally, which was a true gift.

Q: What is your favorite thing about being an author of books for young adults?

A: I love that, five books in now, it still feels new. YA is still a perfect place to work through the questions of my own life, because our questions in youth rarely get permanent answers--they just take on different forms and nuances as we grow older. It's now been ten years since I sold *Hold Still* to Julie and my ideas of what YA can be have expanded. It's a gift to keep the experiences of youth so close. It helps me from becoming too jaded about the rest of the world.

Q: What did you like to read as a teen, and how do you think that has influenced your own writing?

A: I read a *lot* of Raymond Carver in my teens and early twenties and I think my work still shows his influence. Talk about small gestures conveying great meaning! I thank him for showing that ambiguity--of feeling, of message, of character--is sometimes the most honest path to take. And I also thank him for showing how much can be left unsaid and unresolved. As a middle schooler and younger teen I loved Walter Dean Myers' *Hoops* and read it so many times my paperback lost its cover. I owe it a reread now, in adulthood. I remember being captivated by the emotion in that novel.

Q: What message do you want readers to take away from *We Are Okay*?



A: When I write I think a lot about questions and not very much about message. While writing *We Are Okay* I asked myself a series of questions: What remains when the fabric of a person's life unravels? How conscious are we about the ways in which we lie to ourselves out of self-preservation? How do we forgive the people who raised us for the ways in which they've failed us? How do we reconnect with loved ones from our past when we find ourselves changed? All of these themes are examined--and I imagine there are messages within them--but it was the exploration rather than the answers that inspired me to write the novel.