

## Nina LaCour's Printz Speech

When I got the call from the Printz committee on the Saturday of Midwinter, I sobbed so hard that I'm pretty sure what little I *did* say was incomprehensible. I remember promising the committee that I would make up for it in July, but I've gone and written a speech that I'm sure I'm going to cry through now. Angela, Karen, Julie, Kathy, Edi, Megan, Jenna, Traci, Scot and Audrey: I apologize in advance for not living up to my promise. It's been five months and I still can't believe this gift you've given me, and I imagine that I'll continue to be this amazed and gladdened forever.

It was pointed out to me by Malinda Lo, who, in addition to writing great novels, collects invaluable data on LGBTQIA+ literature, that this is the first time an #ownvoices book about queer girls won the Printz. For all the teens who have to search a little harder for books that honor their identities and the ways and people they love, I am so grateful to the committee for bettering their chances that they'll find them, and also grateful to the librarians—all of *you*—who tirelessly work to champion books and ideas and free information to those who need it most.

I can still feel the wonder of afternoons in the children's section of my hometown library, pulling out each book one-by-one, looking through it to see if it was a story I wanted to take home. And some of the most quietly mesmerizing moments of my early adulthood were in my grad school library, where I would spend hours at my favorite table reading and writing and discovering. I have always felt equal parts excitement and overwhelm at being surrounded by books, knowing that any one of them might change the way I see the world, offer a comfort or a challenge, illuminate something vital. Angie, Jason, Laini, and Deborah—yours are books such as these, and it's an honor to be here among you.

On May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007, I got the following email from Sara Crowe after she read the manuscript for my first novel: "Hi Nina- I have finished— and I love this book. It's too early to ring, and I do have a lunch, but let me know a good time to speak with you this afternoon and I will ring!" And just like that, I had the loveliest agent in all the world, someone who believed full-heartedly in my work and always picked up when I called and talked me down when I did silly things like read Goodreads reviews. Sara, you have been a friend and a champion and you always pick the best restaurants. And I am so happy that our home is now at Pippin with Holly and Elena and Lari and Ashley who are so collaborative and warm and have made me feel like I've been a Pip all along.

Since I was a kid I always knew I wanted to be a writer, but I didn't know what kind I wanted to be. At one point, I thought I might be a political speech writer. I imagined myself a journalist. In high school, I had a clear image of working in a bustling downtown wearing business suits and riding elevators to the tops of very high buildings. (I have no idea what kind of writing that job entailed.) But one thing I never pictured nor imagined for myself was the singular joy of working with a brilliant editor. The experience of sitting down to a lunch in San Francisco thinking I had taken a novel as far as I could and leaving one three-hour, magical conversation later knowing I

could take it *so much* farther. Julie Strauss Gabel, you were the editor I wanted from the very beginning and each book we do together reminds me of why. I am so excited about all of the magical phone calls and emails and lunches to come.

I promise that I will stop these thank yous soon, but I do need to mention my Penguin family for the amazing support they've given to me over the years and to this novel especially. That you all saw so much potential in this quiet, sad, tiny book still blows me away. And I want to especially thank Elyse and Carmela and Venessa. I am so lucky to have you amazing women in my corner.

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*We Are Okay* is the product of a painful time. I was mourning the death of my grandfather who had been one of the most steadfast and loving presences in my life, and I had to be hospitalized for weeks during pregnancy due to preeclampsia, my vision so blurry from the condition that I couldn't even read.

On the night my daughter was born, I experienced powerful visions of my grandfather pushing me in a swing as he used to when I was a child. *Go away*, he'd tease as he pushed. *Come back!* he'd plead as I sailed into the sky.

As a kid, I visited him and my grandmother every summer, flying by myself from Oakland to Long Beach, California. The two of them would stand by the arrival gate, my grandmother, ever stylish, clutching her purse, my grandfather with his arms wide open even before he caught a glimpse of me, so that when I was finished with that hour-long journey on my own, there would be no question that straight into his arms was where I would go next. In my hospital bed in the delivery room, those two images circled through my mind: My grandfather pushing me on a swing. My grandfather with his arms wide open. I had never experienced anything like the power of those visions.

Our daughter was born on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013. I didn't realize it then, but it was the one-year anniversary of my grandfather's death. Turns out he had been with us all along.

And I know that he is with me tonight, too, in New Orleans, the city of his birth and boyhood and marriage and first child. The city where he lived until World War II—when he and the other men in his all-black battalion endured horrors in Europe that would haunt him for the rest of his life. When he returned to a still-segregated south that denied him and his brothers good jobs and opportunities for their children, they moved their families to California. I grew up eating his gumbo and hearing the stories of his childhood, seeing New Orleans through his eyes. He always made me feel like my writing was important. And so it feels very special to be here in New Orleans to accept this award tonight.

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Months before our daughter was born, my wife Kristyn told me, "I have a novel idea for you. Why don't you write about a girl who was raised by her grandfather near Ocean Beach?" She

probably knew even better than I did that I had more grieving to do and that writing about a girl and her grandfather would offer some catharsis. The debt of gratitude I owe Kristyn—for this suggestion and for sixteen years of loving me—is as sweet as it is wide. I would say more but it would make me cry even harder.

The grandfather who eventually formed on the page was not my grandfather. Gramps in the novel is haunted by very different tragedies and, with the exception of a propensity for jokes and cards, is an altogether different man. But, at least in my mind, the heart of my novel has something to do with the way we work so hard with what we're given, the way we try to love people the best that we can while wishing we could love them better—and in that heart is where you'll find my grandfather.

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As all of you well know, orphans are a trope in children's literature, and a pet peeve of many. The thinking is that if a child has no parents, she will be free to have adventures without parental interference, and once she finds herself in the inevitable crisis, it is neither an expectation nor a probability that an adult will be the one to get her out of it.

For my first few books, I did my best to keep the parents alive.

But during the time when I was writing *We Are Okay*, I discovered for myself a more compelling reason to write about orphanhood. I learned that *grief* orphans us. One moment we are among the living, and then something happens, some unforeseen change comes, and we are alone. Even with parents who are very much alive. Even with a wife who knows what you need and wants to give it to you. Even with a best friend willing and content to have yet another conversation about the exact same thing—you find yourself on the other side of a glass with no way of getting through. Or: You find yourself in an empty dormitory in the dead of winter in the middle of a snowstorm.

As Joan Didion wrote, "Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it."

I would not have written this novel had my grandfather not died. I would not have written it had I not become so ill during pregnancy that I had to come face to face with my own mortality at the exact moment when I became most needed by another human being.

I would not have written this novel had my parents not broken up shortly after I became a parent, leaving me feeling untethered, as though my past had somehow disappeared or had never been there in the first place. As though everything I had believed about my family was wrong. I was holding my baby daughter on the sofa when I learned the news. And all through that rocky time, when secrets were uncovered and discoveries made, when it felt sometimes difficult to breathe, I was holding a baby who needed me. It was a new way of being. Her body in my arms, every whimper and cry, was a call back to the present moment, evidence of how completely my life had been altered.

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I'm interested in daily rituals. What they mean for us, what we find in them.

As a teenager, my nightly chore was washing my family's dinner dishes. The pots and pans and plates and utensils. My mother's espresso machine that sat in the sink all day because it was such a pain to dismantle. I came to enjoy my hands in the soapy water. My headphones on. I would start a couple hours after dinner was over and wash late into the night. I made it last.

Washing dishes is still my favorite chore.

I'm interested in the objects and places that we give meaning to. How a beach is rarely water and sand. It's a place where one person fell in love, a grave site to another. How a bowl can be only a bowl, or it can be a bastion against loneliness.

Whenever I begin to write a new novel, ideas come to me in brief flashes— an image, a feeling, a snippet of conversation between two people who I don't yet know. With *We Are Okay*, these unknown figures became Marin and Mabel, but at first they were just lines on a hotel notepad.

Once I knew enough of the story—knew that Marin had fled San Francisco after her grandfather's death, cutting off everyone in her life; knew that Mabel had flown to see her in her empty dorm in the middle of a still and snowy winter; knew that there was a personal tragedy at the heart of the story—nothing earth-shattering to the outside world, but enough to send a person's life into upheaval—I did what I always do, which is to identify the big questions that the story is asking. The most important one was this:

When we don't recognize our old selves, our own pasts, what can anchor us?

A pair of yellow bowls.

Books and films and art and science.

Faith in something.

Some people who love you.

At first, even the good memories are cast in an unfamiliar light, while the painful ones swell and rise—all those warning signs we missed, all those gut feelings we ignored, all the ways in which we didn't listen or didn't try hard enough, all the times we told ourselves we were okay when we were not—until in time even the worst memories lose some of their power and we can see our pasts as what they were again: Not all one thing or another.

And eventually, maybe we can feel at home in ourselves. Along the way maybe we keep eating our meals from a yellow bowl until the bowl becomes just another object that we own, no longer something that keeps us tethered to the earth.

Thank you.