

BOOK CLUB KIT



WATCH OVER ME

Printz Award-winning author of *We Are Okay*

NINA LACOUR

“For years, I’d done all I could to live a normal life, to forget the things that had happened, to leave the memories buried where they belonged—out of consciousness, obscured by neglect, unable to hurt me.”



Newly graduated from high school, Mila has aged out of the foster care system. So when she’s offered a job and a place to stay at a farm on an isolated part of the Northern California Coast, she immediately accepts. Maybe she will finally find a new home, a real home. The farm is a refuge, but also haunted by the past traumas its young residents have come to escape. And Mila’s own terrible memories are starting to rise to the surface.

Praise

- ★ “Printz Medalist LaCour’s (*We Are Okay*) ... brims with **tender moments** and sensory details.”
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review
- ★ “A quiet, contemporary tale filled with loneliness and dark undertones... **A first purchase for all collections.**”
—*School Library Journal*, starred review
- ★ “**Gripping**; an emotion-packed must-read.” —*Kirkus*, starred review
- ★ “A painfully **compelling gem** from a masterful creator.”
—*Booklist*, starred review
- ★ “Richly atmospheric and **both haunting and hopeful**, *Watch Over Me* is a rewarding novel about a young woman on the brink of a new life.”
—*BookPage*, starred review

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DEAR READER,

I've always been fascinated by ghosts. In life, yes, but mostly in fiction. How they appear (usually silently, usually glowing) and make the character stop whatever it was they were doing before in order to behold them. How being face-to-face with a ghost almost always also means being face-to-face with a metaphor.

I used to teach high school English and one of my favorite electives to offer was Gothic Literature. So after *We Are Okay* was published and it was time to write my next book, I thought I'd return to some of the classic ghost stories I used to teach for inspiration. I ended up landing on Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. It had all the makings of the kind of novel I wanted to write—a young governess, a remote location, secrets and omissions, and, best of all, ghosts. But what I initially conceptualized as a retelling grew into something much different.

The ghosts I was drawn to are absolutely there, haunting the residents of the Northern California coastal farm where my narrator, Mila, has come to live. But *Watch Over Me* also became a story of gaslighting and injustice because all art is, after all, a product of its time. It became a story of self-forgiveness, of trust, of family, and of loss—themes that follow me from book to book. And perhaps most of all, it became a story about finding yourself in a strange and unfamiliar place and being forced to take stock of your life. A story that begins in the wake of devastation, with a character thrust into a new and unsettling reality, and explores what comes next. I hope that it speaks to you, now, in the midst of this life-altering time we're all in together. Thank you so much for reading my work. It means so much to me.

Nina LaCour

Nina LaCour



Content Warnings

Discussions of past trauma

Flashbacks of child abuse
(emotional, mental, and one
instance of physical)

Death of a grandparent

PTSD



Author Interview

The cover of *Watch Over Me* is stunning. What was the design process like?

When we first started talking about the cover, I had two requests. The first was that it be different in style from my other books. I love the beautiful cover of my last novel, *We Are Okay*, but since *Watch Over Me* is my first book that ventures into the unexplainable instead of staying firmly in realism, I wanted the cover to reflect that evolution. The second request was that it be a classic portrait style, made modern. I was thinking of the Penguin Classics covers of books like *Jane Eyre* and *Turn of the Screw*. I wanted a cover that would have a similar feeling but with something new about it.

The wildly talented Samira Iravani, the designer assigned to the project, found Pippa Young's work and approached her about making a painting. It was a true pleasure watching Pippa's process unfold, from photographing the model in different positions to find the right angle and mood, to the first drawings, to the application of paint. Each detail was carefully chosen, from the type of flowers in Mila's hair (anemones, which are in the book) to the flat blue/gray of the background to represent the foggy sky, to the wave-pattered blanket she has wrapped around her. And then the bold title across the whole thing! I couldn't be more pleased with how it turned out.

What made you want to structure the book with flashbacks throughout?

The structure was very challenging for me to get right. Initially, I wanted it to be a frame novel—opening in one time, dipping into the past, and then returning to the present, like *Frankenstein*. But that just wasn't working, no matter how hard I tried. I realized through trial and error that even more than the ghosts, Mila is being haunted by her memories. Once I figured that out I was able to make the memories take her over at certain points, revealing her backstory a little piece at a time.



Author Interview

What first inspired you to tell this story?

So many different sources of inspiration came together to make the book. I'd wanted to attempt a re-telling for a long time, and had decided that I'd adapt Henry James' novella *The Turn of the Screw* by bringing it into modern day and setting it in California. That story is about orphans and ghosts, and orphans led me to foster youth, which reminded me of an article I'd read when I was in high school about a couple who had adopted dozens of children and young adults out of the foster system over many years.

And then, there was the lot of land across the street from the house I lived in at the time. It was owned by a man who planned to build a house on it but couldn't come up with the money. Instead, he lived in an assortment of partially-built structures on the property, and people came and went. I watched them as I washed dishes and wondered about their lives.

Also, of course, is the emotional current that runs through the book, which has a lot to do with the questions of what it means to be "good," and if the things we've done define who we are, and whether we can allow ourselves to show others our inner selves, however messy, and asked to be loved and accepted anyway. These were the questions that swirled through my head at the time, so they became the central questions of the book.

You were a tutor at a public elementary school. Did that shape Mila's role as Lee's teacher?

Very, very much. I didn't have any experience working with young children at the time and received little training. I had five students assigned to me and I met with them after school for about an hour each, every week. All of them struggled a lot with reading and I did my best with the limited knowledge I had, aware the entire time that I wasn't doing enough. I drew from the feelings I'd had—of uncertainty, of inadequacy, of longing to do better—when I wrote the tutoring scenes between Mila and Lee.



Author Interview

Did you know from the beginning that you wanted the ghosts to be real?

I ended up deviating quite a bit from *The Turn of the Screw* to the point where it's just one of many sources of inspiration. But something I love about James' novella is how many interpretations it welcomes, including one where the ghosts absolutely exist, and another where the ghosts are the governess' hallucinations. I considered both of those approaches, but ultimately, I decided that the ghosts were going to be a fact of the farm. I wanted them to be as much a part of the place as the house and the fog and the flowers and the family.

How they would behave—and how much fear or wonder they would evoke—was something that took me a lot longer to figure out. Each draft I wrote had a slightly different take on the ghosts. Sometimes they seemed menacing, other times they were very gentle. As I wrote, I realized that Mila's past was the true source of fear and that the ghosts, strange and mysterious (and ultimately painful) as they are, didn't need to be frightening.

As a writer, how do you strike the balance when writing a book that explores darkness and trauma alongside light and love?

That is one of the central pursuits of my work, because that's what life is like. I'm always trying to get to the heart of what it means to be a person in the world—or at least, of what it feels like. Take this past year for example. So much suffering has taken place all over the world, and our days have been full of uncertainty and missing loved ones and anxiety and so much loss. And yet, I can still put on a mask and drive a few miles to the ocean and watch the waves. I can still take walks with my daughter and discover miraculous, everyday things about our neighborhood. I can have Zooms with a group of friends every week and feel those bonds deepen. I can drink coffee in the morning with my wife, and stay up late reading together or watching TV, and love every moment of that time together. Life is full of pain and beauty and loss and love, and I try to reflect it—sometimes even to make some sense of it—in my work.



Author Interview

What do you hope readers take away from *Watch Over Me*?

I never write with a message in mind, but they seem to arise anyway. I think this book is about vulnerability and the power of letting people see who you really are, even when it's terrifying. It's about the power of choosing your family. And, to be totally transparent, it's also about the power of therapy—of allowing yourself to fully experience your past trauma, to see yourself as you once were, to welcome that old self in and comfort her, and be comforted by her, and continue on with your life, a little more whole than you were before.

What are you working on now?

I'm currently finishing the revision of my first novel for adult readers, *Yerba Buena*, which will be published in early 2022. I've been working on this novel for my entire adult life and I'm thrilled and terrified, in equal measure, to know that it's soon going to be out in the world. I'm also working on a series for elementary-age readers and a new YA novel.

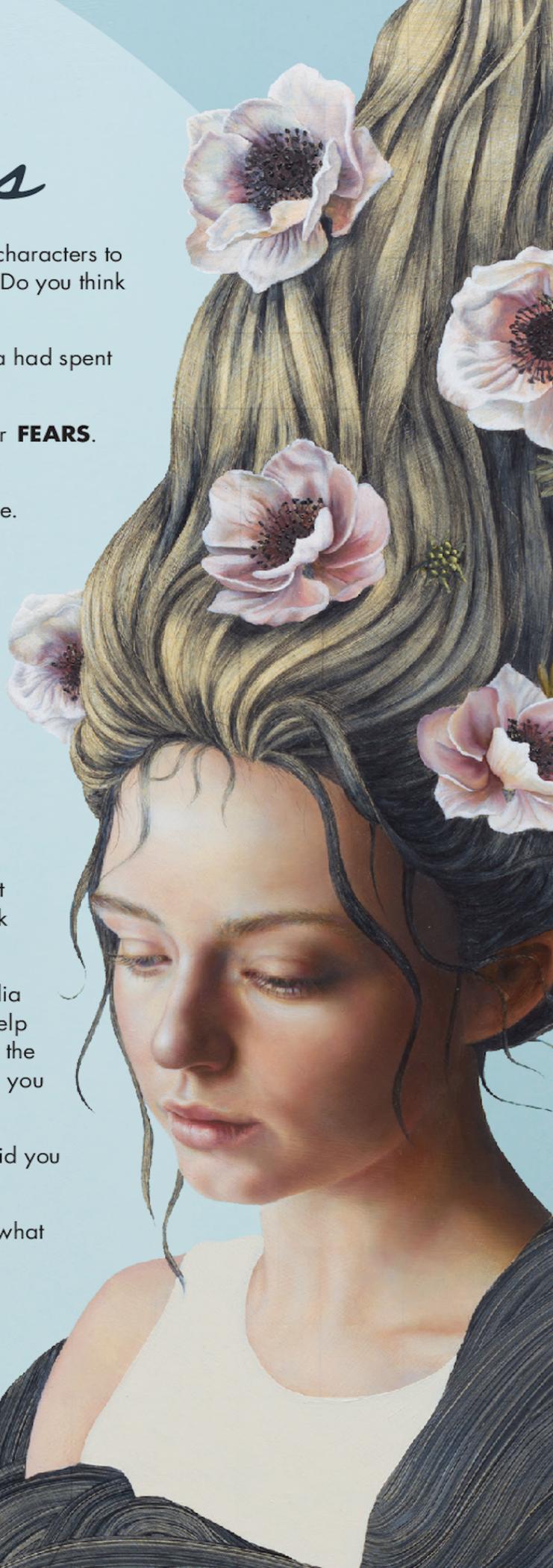
What are three questions you recommend book clubs include in their discussion guide for *Watch Over Me*?

- 1) What do you make of Terry and Julia and their decision to bring children to the farm, knowing what awaits them and the pain they'll endure? Did your feelings about them evolve as the novel unfolded?
- 2) Why do you think so much is left unspoken and kept secret by the members of the family? What does it signify that Mila has to go through her process of remembering and discovery on her own?
- 3) Were you surprised to learn about the secret Lee kept from Mila? Why did he do what he did, and was Mila partially to blame?



Discussion Questions

1. The author uses literal ghosts as a **METAPHOR** for the characters to confront the darkest parts of their pasts and their selves. Do you think this is an effective metaphor?
2. Why does being on the farm bring up **MEMORIES** Mila had spent years burying?
3. Mila spends most of the book learning to confront her **FEARS**. Do you think she succeeds?
4. Mila feels a lot of **GUILT** for leaving Blake in the fire. She spends most of the book thinking she's a terrible person for her actions. Do you think our **ACTIONS** define us?
5. Mila's new family on the farm immediately embraces her. However, they do not accept her fully until she confronts her past to feel whole again. Do you think it was fair of them to only welcome her completely once she dealt with her past trauma?
6. Part of the magic of this book comes from the misty atmosphere in Northern California. It feels as if ghosts really could exist in the world the author creates. Could you see this book also taking place in a different **ATMOSPHERE**? What other **SETTINGS** do you think would work?
7. Early on, Julia asks Mila if she likes the **OCEAN**. Julia says some like it because its power and magnificence help drown out certain things. Do you feel that way about the ocean? Is there something else you are drawn to when you are upset?
8. Which character did you connect with the most? Who did you connect with the least? Why?
9. If you could ask any of the characters one question, what would it be?
10. **BELONGING** is one of the core themes throughout this book. How do you think the time Mila spent living with her mom and Blake shaped her desire to belong? Do you understand her **JEALOUSY** when she sees Liz and Billy's relationship? When she realizes she is the only one without a piece of gold jewelry? How does her **ENVY** tie into ideas of belonging?



Homemade Butter Recipe

Mila bonds with Billy and Liz when they teach her to make butter from scratch. Follow their recipe to make some for yourself and your club members!

Directions

Per Billy's instructions: "Pour [heavy cream] into a mason jar, make sure the lid's on tight."

Next Billy says, "Shake. *Forever.*" But 5-10 minutes should do the trick.

Wait for the moment Mila experiences: "One second I was shaking a liquid and the next it thumped in the jar."

Then "take out the butter and strain it through a cheesecloth—to get the rest of the buttermilk out." Buttermilk can be saved and used in other recipes!

Pour cold water over the butter to rinse off the remaining buttermilk. Discard water.

Now for Billy's favorite part: "Stirring in the salt. So much salt." Taste as you go.

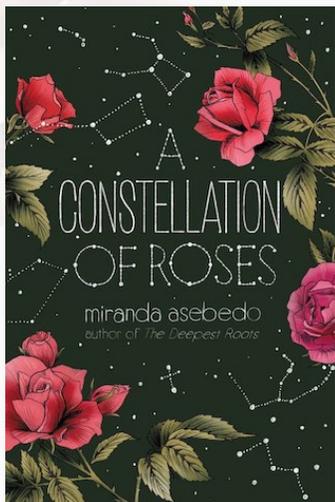
Shape butter and serve!

Ingredients

1 cup heavy cream
Cold water
Salt to taste

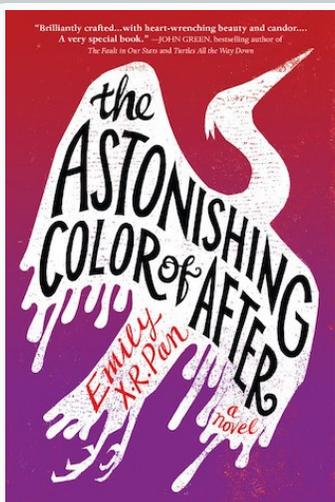


What to Read Next



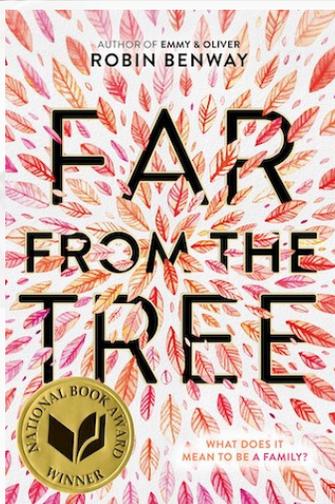
***A Constellation of Roses* by Miranda Asebedo**

Trix McCabe thinks she doesn't need to rely on anyone, until a judge sends her to live with long-lost family in a tiny Kansas town. As she gets to know her aunts and cousin, the walls she's built to protect herself start to fade away. Quiet and with a touch of magic, this novel is sure to enchant those who loved *Watch Over Me*.



***The Astonishing Color of After* by Emily X.R. Pan**

Emily X.R. Pan deftly weaves a touch of magic into this moving story about grief and healing as 15-year-old Leigh travels to Taiwan to visit her late mother's family. She believes her mother has transformed into a bird and is encouraging her to explore places that her mother frequented while growing up.

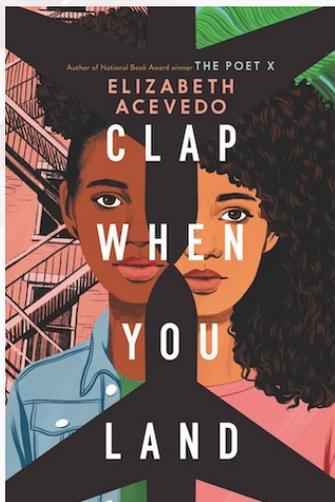


***Far from the Tree* by Robin Benway**

When 16-year-old Grace decides to put her baby up for adoption, it sparks a desire to find her own birth parents. With the support of her adoptive family, she begins her search and along the way discovers that she has two biological siblings: Maya and Joaquin.

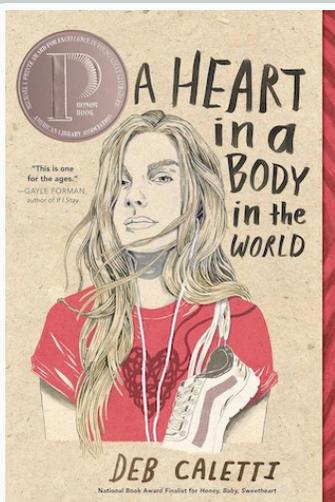


What to Read Next



***Clap When You Land* by Elizabeth Acevedo**

Camino and Yahaira are sisters who have never met. Camino lives in the Dominican Republic, while Yahaira lives in New York City. When their father dies in a plane crash, his double life is revealed and the two girls learn of each other's existence. Grappling with grief and feelings of betrayal, the two slowly come to lean on each other.



***A Heart in a Body in the World* by Deb Caletti**

Annabelle Agnelli is preparing to run nearly 3,000 miles from Seattle to Washington, D.C. in the hope of escaping the trauma she experienced the year before at the hands of a person she refers to as The Taker. Annabelle isn't alone in her journey, but only she can find a way forward past her guilt and grief.



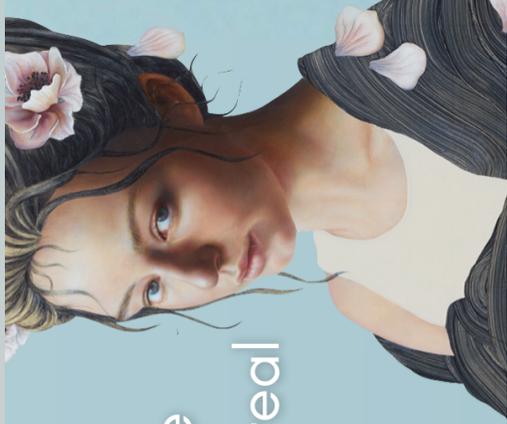
***The Grief Keeper* by Alexandra Villasante**

Marisol Morales flees El Salvador for the United States. When she's discovered by a U.S. government official, Marisol agrees to participate in a medical trial in exchange for asylum approval. Scientists found a way to transfer emotions from one person to another, and Marisol is tasked with becoming a grief keeper.



Printable Bookmarks

"It was difficult, when ghosts were everywhere, to figure out what was real and what was imagined."



"They were clearly looking for exceptional people, so I told them the truth: that you are exceptional, you are resilient, you are amazing."



About the Author

Nina LaCour is the author of the widely acclaimed *Hold Still*, *The Disenchantments*, *Everything Leads to You*, and the Michael L. Printz Award-winner *We Are Okay*. She is also the co-author, with David Levithan, of *You Know Me Well*. Formerly a bookseller and high school English teacher, she now writes and parents full time. A San Francisco Bay Area native, Nina lives with her family in San Francisco, California.



Photo: © Kristyn Stroble

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