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# WE ARE OKAY

## Nina LaCour



### Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian  
in context with the Australian curriculum  
(English)

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**SYNOPSIS**

After the death of her grandfather, Marin arrives in New York with only her phone, wallet and a photograph of her mother, determined to block out the doubt, fear and grief enveloping her. However, she finds that her loneliness and isolation only intensifies now that she is thousands of miles from the only home she's ever known. When her best friend comes to visit – against Marin's wishes – she is forced to uncover all that has been left unsaid. About her grandfather. About her mother. About her relationship.

*We Are Okay* is a coming of age novel that explores grief, loneliness, love and belonging with absolute clarity and tenderness.

**THEMES**

- Friendship
- Love
- Grief
- Doubt
- Acceptance
- Belonging
- Ghosts
- Hope

**WRITING STYLE**

*We Are Okay* is written in first person, with Marin's story being shared through both the present day setting in New York, and flashbacks to her last few months of high school in California. Her voice is honest and contemplative, allowing readers to connect with and understand Marin's struggles and deepest fears. It does this without being overly sentimental, instead eliciting an aching sense of empathy for Marin and all she has lost. The text approaches same-sex love in a sensitive and delicate manner.

**STUDY NOTES**

- The opening line of Chapter 1 immediately positions readers in Marin's headspace. How has the author successfully achieved this? What questions does the first chapter raise? Why is it important that novels encourage readers to ponder and speculate?
- Being alone in an empty college dorm causes Marin to hear things she may not otherwise have noticed as the 'sounds of living' have been silenced (p2). Discuss Nina LaCour's use of description and senses to create this setting.
- What does the clicking of the heater in the dorm room symbolise?
- Why do you think Hannah gives Marin a book of essays about solitude? How might this help Marin? In what ways can solitude be a positive thing? How would you describe Marin's solitude at various stages throughout the novel?

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- We discover that Gramps has recently died. As you read the text, keep a journal of the relationship between Gramps and Marin. How does this change as the narrative progresses? How do you think Marin's view of her grandfather might be different twelve months after the novel's conclusion? Discuss.
- On p3, Marin's bed, pillows and blankets tempt her to 'stay in bed all day'. How does this passage help reveal Marin's fragility?
- Marin refers to the effects of alcohol letting 'the memories out of their cages' (p4). After reading the novel, come back to this passage. How does it show Marin's true feelings and hopes, despite her confusion and sense of betrayal?
- The first essay that Marin reads puts emphasis on setting, as the writer 'spends pages describing a lake' (p4). How does this description symbolise Marin's internal struggles? Using photographs of lakes, write your own piece of description.
- Discuss the symbolism of water in *We Are Okay*, with reference to the lake, the comfort Marin finds in swimming and by taking showers at certain junctures in the text. As well as the fact that both her mother and grandfather are lost to the sea.
- Why is Marin looking forward to Mabel's visit being over? What questions do you have about Mabel and Marin's friendship at this point in the novel?
- How does the Christmas setting magnify Marin's feelings of isolation and loneliness?
- Marin makes a list of things to do after Mabel has left. What would be on your list if you were Marin?
- Marin feels 'alone, even when surrounded by people, so I let the emptiness in' (p7). What does she mean by this?
- What does Marin mean when she says 'there are many ways of being alone' (p8). What is the difference between being alone and being lonely? Share with a friend a time when you felt either alone or lonely.
- Discuss the symbolism of Marin's empty bulletin board in her dorm room. Why does she feel she should fill it before Mabel arrives? Why, when she does add to it, does she think it 'looks desperate' (p10) and throw it all away?
- Create your own digital vision board, including quotes and images that reflect your hopes and aspirations.
- After completing the novel, reread the passage on p10 in which Marin talks about California redwoods. How do these trees represent Mabel and her family?
- Why hasn't Marin responded to Mabel's texts? Why do you think Mabel still comes to visit, despite Marin's behaviour?
- Marin learns that she is 'a tiny piece of a miraculous world' (p17). How might this realisation eventually help her to heal?
- Why don't we discover Marin's name until p20? How does this reflect her feelings of loneliness and isolation?
- Discuss the significance of Marin's name. What does it mean? Why has Nina LaCour potentially given her protagonist this name?
- As you read *We Are Okay*, create a character portrait of Gramps. Add to this as you discover more about him throughout the novel.

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- Marin describes her life with Gramps, sharing their living arrangements and the fact that they never go into each other's spaces. Later in the text, this proves to be more divisive than practical. Discuss the symbolism of their household and the way in which it prevents Marin and Gramps from healing and processing the death of Marin's mother.
- Why does Marin collect shells? What do these shells represent?
- Throughout *We Are Okay*, Marin refers to some of her favourite novels, including *Jane Eyre*, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In what ways is *We Are Okay* similar to these texts? Consider viewing a film-version of *Jane Eyre* to compare with *We Are Okay*. In what ways is Gramps like Mr Rochester and Marin like Jane?
- Similarly, study Frida Kahlo's *The Two Fridas* with reference to Mabel's analysis of the painting. How does this painting parallel Marin's story?
- Why does Marin strive so hard to find a memory of her mother? Why doesn't she have any of her own? Why does it take Ana's cradling arms at the end of the text for Marin's memories to come flooding back?
- What is the importance of Marin's two yellow bowls, and her decision to ask for a job at the pottery shop? What does the pottery represent?
- In relation to *We Are Okay*, discuss the Emerson quote that Mabel notices everywhere around Marin's college: 'Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can' (p36). How can you apply this quote to your own life?
- Marin is consumed by the thought that her grandfather's ghost is with her in the motel. She likens this to the many ghosts in her favourite stories. Why does Marin worry so much about ghosts? Are the ghosts holding her back from healing, or is there something else obstructing her sense of peace?
- Marin admires Jane Eyre's strength, sincerity and honesty. How does Jane Eyre help Marin?
- How did Gramps change after being asked by Marin for a baby photo?
- Discuss Gramps' relationship with Birdie. At what point did you realise Birdie's true identity? Why does Gramps write to her so often? In the role of Gramps, write a letter to Birdie.
- When Mabel comes to visit, Marin senses that 'she really wanted ...to be somewhere else, where it wasn't the two of us trapped in a room thick with the things we weren't saying' (p63). Why, if Mabel comes all the way from San Francisco, might she feel this way?
- Marin describes loss as something that 'undoes your life, undoes your self, so that when you look at your face it isn't yours anymore' (p68). What does she mean by this? Have you ever experienced such loss? How did you feel during this time? Share a reflection.
- Why does Marin feel disappointed when she is not forced to change for Ben's party? Why does she cut her dress? What does this tell us about her need to belong to a family?
- How do Marin's doubts impede her ability to heal? What strategies would you suggest to Marin to help her manage these doubts?

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- Discuss the cab driver's warning to Marin not to be 'a person who seeks out grief. There is enough of that in life' (87).
- Reread the passage on p88 in which Marin realises that she shuts out grief by finding it in books instead. What does she mean by this? How have you used books to help you navigate difficult times in your life?
- Discuss the symbolism of Ana using the bottom of Marin's dress on her collage of the sea, covering the sea with pink and white shells. Why does Marin say 'I couldn't think of a single thing it might mean' (p89)? What do you think it means?
- Discuss Nina LaCour's use of language in the following passage: 'I have only just learnt how to be here. Life is paper-thin and fragile. Any sudden change could rip it wide-open' (p93). How does her writing style help elicit empathy in readers?
- Why does Gramps stop joking and having fun with his poker buddies? How does this signal a shift in his mental well being?
- Discuss the significance of the title of the book with reference to the reconciliation between Mabel and Marin, even though Mabel has moved on.
- How does the news of Carlos' baby make Marin feel even more vulnerable?
- Why is denial a dangerous feature of Marin's state of mind?
- Discuss the language features and formatting on p184 (shortly after Marin arrives at the motel), and p210 (when she confronts her fears). How does the pace and urgency of these passages reflect Marin's desperation and ability to process her past?
- Marin describes Mabel as 'fearless and funny and whole' while she is still 'learning who I am now' (p188). In the role of Marin, write a journal entry that explores her burgeoning sense of identity now that the past is behind her.
- What does the replanting of Marin's peperomia symbolise?
- Why does Marin feel the need to give Gramps a grave?
- Discuss Chapters 27 (p212) and 28 (p213). Why are these chapters so short? How does this technique help Marin clarify her fears and therefore enable the healing process to begin? Similarly, how does this help readers to see the true essence of her hurt?
- How does the bird represent Marin's release from the doubts and denial that have been suffocating her?
- Why does Marin run up and down the hallways, yelling? How does this help her realise that she will 'be okay again' (p215)?
- Write a reflection that responds to Marin's comment that 'someday is an open word' (p226).
- How could Gramps' life have been different had he shared his memories rather than be locked 'in a secret room with the dead' (p228)? What does this reveal about grief? How does thinking about Gramps in this way help Marin to move forward?
- Discuss the passage from *Jane Eyre* quoted on p229 in relation to *The Two Fridas* and *We Are Okay*.
- How is the colour yellow used to represent hope in *We Are Okay*?
- Discuss the closing paragraph of *We Are Okay* on p234. Why is this ending so full of hope and closure?

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Nina LaCour is the author of the widely acclaimed *Hold Still*, *The Disenchantments*, and *Everything Leads to You*. 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 Martinez, California. [www.ninalacour.com](http://www.ninalacour.com)