

# FINDING HOPE THROUGH STORY



**A young adult novelist  
uncovers the truth  
she never meant  
to write.**

---

**BY ANICA MROSE RISSI**



**AT** a bookstore event for my first young adult novel, which tells a story about toxic love, I was asked by a reader, “How does it feel to be publishing this book in the era of *Me Too*?” My answer began: “Hopeful.” But I did not always feel hopeful while writing it.

When I started the first draft of what became *Always Forever Maybe*, I didn’t plan to write a novel about an emotionally abusive relationship. I thought I was writing about forbidden love: about a teenage girl whose parents unfairly disapprove of her new boyfriend, and the complications and heartache that follow. But my first draft – like so many first drafts – contained a lot of clichés, including the stereotypical ways that Aiden, the male love interest, pursues Betts, the female narrator. As the draft progressed and their relationship unfolded, I recognized some disturbing signs and patterns in Aiden’s behavior – red flags I know I would have missed as a teenager and that Betts, head-over-heels, misses too. But I was no longer a teenager. I was an adult writer getting to know my teenage characters, and I realized their relationship would take a darker turn.

When Betts meets Aiden in the candy store where she works, their connection is like a sugar rush to the heart. Aiden is sweet, attentive, and singularly focused on Betts, whom he immediately makes the center of his world. He texts and calls frequently, and shows up at her school and workplace to surprise her – and check up on her.

He is open and effusive with his certainty about their relationship, and pressures Betts to prioritize it above other people and interests. He places her on a pedestal with his admiration and expectations, and gets moody and sullen when she disappoints him – though outside of those moments, he's spontaneous, generous, and fun. The mild jealousy and controlling tendencies that accompany Aiden's devotion are the sort often displayed by male leads in rom-coms and popular young adult novels, where they're presented as a romantic ideal. But in real life, these "romantic" gestures are anything but, and I knew I couldn't let them stand as such in my draft.

Instead, I leaned in and developed the clichés into nuance. As the book continues, Aiden turns increasingly needy, manipulative, and possessive. He's quick to anger, so Betts adjusts her behavior to avoid his pouting and lashing out. She absorbs tiny insults, makes excuses for him with her friends, and apologizes even when she doesn't know what she did wrong. Each compromise seem worth it because she has already fallen deep – and the best parts of their relationship are everything she thinks she wants. Aiden isolates Betts from her family and friends, and gaslights her into believing she is the one at risk of hurting him, not vice versa. He convinces her their love is the only thing that matters, and she gets swept up in the narrative he creates for her. To write it well, I had to *almost* believe it too.

I am the kind of writer who inhabits my characters' emotions as I draft, and the feelings and excuses I found in Betts' heart were painful – and painfully familiar. I wasn't thinking of my own past when I set out to write *Always Forever Maybe*, but the deeper I sank into Betts' story, the more memories it stirred up: memories of a time when I, too, once fell hard and fast for someone I should have been safe with but wasn't. It became increasingly difficult to push those memories away.

One moment that kept flashing to mind was a phone call I had in my first week of college with my long-distance boyfriend from high school. "I met Alison," I reported after running into a girl he'd known at boarding school. "She seems nice." Surprisingly nice, given the awful things he'd said about her.

"What were you wearing?" he asked – an odd response, but he often caught me off guard. I

**I wasn't thinking of my own past when I set out to write *Always Forever Maybe*, but the deeper I sank into Betts' story, the more memories it stirred up: memories of a time when I, too, once fell hard and fast for someone I should have been safe with but wasn't.**

looked down and described my baggy striped sweater, green corduroys, and suede Mary Janes. (Yes, it was the '90s.) An uneasy feeling itched at the back of my throat.

"Don't ever go out like that again," he said. "You're embarrassing me."

More than 20 years later, I'm still ashamed of how I reacted. *Wow*, I thought. *She must be horrible*. What snide, petty judgments lurked beneath her friendly smile? What was she already saying about me – and him – behind our backs?

I ignored the clear signs that all judgements were coming from him. It was easier to think the worst of a woman I'd barely met than of the guy who insisted he loved me.

When I look back at the most damaging moments in that teenage relationship, my first instinct is to blame myself. Thinking about the things my boyfriend said or did, I feel guilt, embarrassment, humiliation, and shame. I think, *I should have known better*.

*I shouldn't have put up with any of that.*

*I should have walked away sooner.*

*I shouldn't have still wanted him to want me.*

It took years for me to add, *I shouldn't have needed to protect myself from someone I loved*.

It is only when I hear other people's stories that I have the distance to feel outrage.

Betts' story is not my own, but there are parallels to a time in my life when trusting someone else meant repudiating my own best instincts. I didn't have the perspective then to see what was really happening or the vocabulary to define the ways it was not okay. But if I'd read a book like *Always Forever Maybe* – or heard some of the kinds of stories that are currently being shared in our ongoing national conversation about power, manipulation, entitlement, and control – I might have recognized the pattern sooner.

Other people's stories have the power to help us understand our own – and, sometimes, to change the narrative.

Therein, for me, lies the hope.

—Anica Mrose Rissi is the author of the *Anna, Banana* chapter-book series; the picture books *Watch Out for Wolf!*, *The Teacher's Pet*, and *Love, Sophia on the Moon*; and a young adult novel, *Always Forever Maybe*. Follow her on Twitter and Instagram at @anicarissi.

OUR GUIDE FOR YA, MG, & CHILDREN'S AUTHORS

# The *Writer*

Imagine • Write • Publish

JANUARY 2020

INSIDE:

30+  
GRANTS  
& AWARDS  
FOR WRITERS

WRITING FOR...

# YOUNG READERS

8  
INNOVATIVE  
WRITING EXERCISES  
TO SPARK  
CREATIVITY

10  
TOP CONTESTS  
FOR KID & TEEN  
WRITERS

PRO TIPS  
TO INCREASE  
YOUR PRODUCTIVITY  
IN 2020

writermag.com

\$6.95US \$7.99CAN



01 >

0 74851 64507 9