

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

One of my favorite things about being an indie bookseller was that—unlike when you’re a parent or a teacher—it’s OK to have a favorite kid. And mine was Clare.

She was nine when I met her, painfully shy, and she loved sweeping epic fantasies. Second worlds. Portals. Mayhem. As an eleven-year-old, she particularly loved Malinda Lo, for some reason that she couldn’t quite identify. (I had my guess as to why, but it wasn’t for me to say.) And while she was smarter and a much more attentive reader than I’d been at her age, there was something we recognized in each other. The easy answer is we were both nerds. The fairer answer is probably that we both felt a bit out of place all the time.

I grew up half Japanese and half Jewish in a country that’s only ever half wanted me. I was never Japanese enough to fit in with the Asian kids, never Jewish enough to fit in at Hebrew school. I was told, often, that I didn’t belong to either group. So when I met Clare, I wore the aura of a misfit like a perfume. We liked each other almost immediately.

When she was twelve, I started writing the book that is now *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea*. I was writing it, I told myself, for Clare. It would have all the things she liked best: witches, pirates, rules, murder, and—though she would not have known to ask for it then—a queer romance at its heart.

In the five years it took to complete a first, messy draft of this story, a curious shift took place. Yes, the book was very much still for Clare; she was on my mind with every word that I wrote. But now it was also for me. Not adult me, but twelve-year-old me. The twelve-year-old me who, like Clare, loved all things magic and mayhem and mermaid. The twelve-year-old me who, also just like Clare, longed to see myself reflected in the pages of the fantasy novels I read.

To me, *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea* is a story about stories. The stories we tell ourselves. The stories we tell one another. The stories that define nations and nationalities. And none of the main characters see themselves in the stories that are told about them, just as I did not see myself in the stories I grew up reading. There were no Asians in the Enchanted Forest, no lesbians in Narnia, no one with a complicated relationship with gender at Hogwarts. And so this book I was writing was a story about stories, sure, but it was also something else. It was a love letter to the kid Clare had been, queer and uncomfortable, passionate and shy. The kid *I’d* been. An invitation to belong.

And I hope kids now find themselves in it, too.



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