

Questions for Nina de Pass - English

Can you introduce yourself to the Dutch readers?

I'm Nina – and I am so excited that my debut novel, *The Year After You*, is being published in The Netherlands. I'm so aware that this is such a strange, worrying time in the world, I hope that you are all keeping safe and well.

***The year after you* is your debut! Could you tell us a bit more about what inspired you to write this book? Was it something you had to write or more because you wanted to tell this story? Or maybe both?**

When I was seventeen, there was a terrible car accident at a nearby school – one that has stayed with me ever since. A girl of my age died; a girl of my age – the driver – survived. I didn't know those involved personally, yet I have thought about them for over a decade – about what happened, about everything that came after.

The Year After You is not about that accident – that's not my story to tell – but the events in my novel are underpinned by a car crash. For years I had been thinking about the aftermath of such a tragedy and the complex relationship between guilt and grief – how do you reconcile yourself to a life without someone you love, when you feel responsible for their death?

How did Cara start? Was she a complete character right away? And what about Hector?

I was very lucky with my protagonist, Cara. I knew exactly who she was when I started writing: a seventeen-year-old girl who has lived through unbearable trauma.

I set out to write a book about a girl who can't make sense of her grief when it is so tangled up with guilt. By the time Cara arrives at the school in the book, Hope Hall, she's so traumatised, she has lost a lot of herself and has put up a guard of steel. Very early on, she meets Hector who, on the surface, is a bit of a flyboy. Good-looking, bright, engaging, he works the system, charms the teachers, abides only by the rules he chooses. I loved writing Hector – like Cara, I didn't have to spend very much time working out who he was as a character. I knew exactly what he'd say and how he'd approach things.

What parts of your qualities and or quirks can we see back in Cara? If any?

Oh, that's a good question. I tried really hard not to base Cara on myself or any of my closest friends, but I am sure there are bits of me in her – and the other characters too. We definitely write what we know!

How long have you spent writing *The year after you*?

I wrote the first draft fairly quickly – in about six months. But I edited for about a year after that and rewrote big chunks.

Have you always wanted to be a writer? Was your way to publication an easy one?

Well, I make up elaborate stories in my head all day long (I always have), so I definitely always thought I would write a novel someday. But for some reason I thought you had to be a lot older to be an author! I think I thought, with age, I would have a bit more life experience and therefore more to say.

In my early twenties I discovered while reading and loving the Divergent series by Veronica Roth that she was 21 years old when the first novel in the trilogy was published. Not only did I think this was pretty amazing (and she's pretty amazing), I realised that age doesn't matter! You can write however old you are – there is always something to say.

So, I started writing right away. I wrote a terrible book, put it in a draw – and even though I didn't end up with a bestseller, this taught me that I could write a whole book from start to finish. *It was possible!* So, I started again and somehow the next book I wrote was *The Year After You* . . .

Can you tell us more about your writing process? Do you think a lot about how you formulate things or does it come naturally? Do you write a quick first draft that you correct after you finished it, or is each sentence carefully studied before continuing?

A huge part of the joy of writing for me is seeing where things go and being creative and imaginative as I write. I used to hate planning essays at school – I just wanted to get on with it! – and I feel the same about writing novels. That said, I don't usually start writing if I don't know in what direction the story is going. I have markers throughout – I know where I have to get to, or what has to happen, and then I just write as I go.

Did you suffer from a writers block and what did you do to overcome this?

Not exactly, but there were definitely moments in the book that were slower and more difficult to write. I write because I love writing; I don't want to spend hours agonising over a sentence, so if a scene is not working, I normally skip forward and write a different one. Everything looks different when you have a bit of distance.

Many of our readers may also like to become writers. Do you have any tips for young writers trying to get their book published? Or any writing tips for upcoming writers?

An author I greatly admire once told me to write the book I'd love to read – I think this is great advice. If you love what you are doing, it will shine through the pages.

If you could say something to Cara that she really needed to hear, what would it be?

There is a scene in the book that's really important to me where Hector tells Cara, 'It gets better.' I would reiterate this to her.

Can you choose a sentence or paragraph from the book that is very dear to you?

The first line I wrote in *The Year After You* comes somewhere in the middle. Cara is sitting with Hector on the roof of a building in the local town. He asks her if everything is all right and she thinks:

'Everything's wrong, I want to say, because for the first time in almost a year I don't feel like I'm drowning.'

Strangely, my American publisher printed this line on the back of their edition. I never told them or anyone that this was the first line I wrote or that this is the line that shaped the whole arc of the story for me. But this is the whole crux of the novel in one line – at the beginning of the novel, Cara thinks she will feel the same way forever, but going to the school in the book and the people she meets there change everything.

If you could put one of your characters in another book by another author, who would it be and which book?

Hmm, that's a fun question. How about Hector in *The Hunger Games*?! I'd love to see how he'd fare.

What book did you wish that you had written and what book do you still want to write one day? Subject, genre?

I have been thinking a lot recently about *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven. It's such a powerful, emotional book – and so carefully and beautifully handled. I am very in awe of Jennifer and her writing.

One day, I'd love to write a crime novel, but I've always thought it would require a lot of plotting and I don't love planning! Who knows if I'd be able to pull it off?

Can you tell us about what you are doing now?

I am working on a couple of new YA projects and have lots of ideas spinning around my head – that's all I can say for now!

What do you hope readers will take with them after reading *The year after you*?

That things change whether you want them to or not, that it gets better, and that true friends will see you through all of it.