

# On making space for truth and joy



Author Nicola Yoon discusses the connection between grief and how we imagine life, being a grumpy writer, and making space for BIPOC romance in publishing

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As told to Arriel Vinson, 2795 words.

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**What's the transition been like from writing young adult novels to writing adult novels?**

Well, it's kind of the same and kind of not. For me, the writing process is the same because some stories are just young adult stories and some are clearly adult stories.

When I thought of the idea for *One of Our Kind*, it was obviously for adults in terms of themes, in terms of things kids can and cannot do. There's probably a lot of hope and openness in young adult books, and answers to questions. Usually, I ask a question and I try to answer it. *One of Our Kind* asks more questions than answers. The whole book is a question. And that separates the processes too.

**Tell me what inspired *One of Our Kind*.**

There are a few things. I've been saying to people that in some ways I've been writing this book for 30 years. A lot of the ideas are things I've been thinking about for a long time. You know how sometimes things are just percolating in your head and you don't realize you're thinking about them until you put pen to paper? But specifically, the things I can really remember is a dinner I had with a friend of mine. We'd done a panel on race and racism and he asked me if I ever thought about who I'd be and who we'd be as a people, as Black people, without the specter of race and racism.

It's a heavy question for dinner and wine, but it had been a question that I'd been thinking about for years anyway. It's interesting, but impossible. Because it's hard to imagine the world if everything was completely different. It's like telling fish to imagine a world without water. It's part of everything.

Then there was this moment when I was listening to a podcast about the book *The Stepford Wives*. The podcast was talking about how most people misremember that book because they use the term Stepford Wives as a pejorative. We bashed women with it. But actually, the book is super feminist, and the book is about the men that would do these terrible things to their wives. I hadn't known that. At some level I knew, but not really. I was part of that zeitgeist that used Stepford Wives in that way. So then I'm like, The Stepford Wives but Black.

Then the summer of 2020 and George Floyd's murder and all the protests happened, and I was despairing. I have to be honest, I felt so much anger and despair. Then I wrote it basically all at once. The first draft took six weeks, which had never happened to me before, and will never happen to me again. Actually making it into a proper book took three years.

There's also this Toni Morrison quote that I heard when I was really young, and it was super formative for me. She says the very real function of racism is distraction that keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you having to prove over and over again your reason for being. I heard that when I was really young and that was in my head when I was writing the book. Those three things really came together to make it.

**In both your YA and adult novels, you explore some of the same themes, such as belonging, home, what race means. What do you think is different about what you're trying to say in adults versus what you're trying to say in YA?**

The reason I love writing YA so much is because I think that kids are quite philosophical. And they don't even mean to be-kids just ask a lot of questions. When you're 16, 17, 18, you're becoming, and you're asking a lot of questions of your world and of yourself. Who are you? Who do you want to be in the world? It's part of growing up and differentiating yourself from your caretakers or your parents or whoever.

In those books, I get to ask questions with the readers. I'm really philosophical. I am one of those people that is like, "What's the meaning of life?" I really am not fun at dinner.

But I love being in those conversations with people who are becoming, or people who are just asking those questions because I think they're eternal. I think adults should be asking them, honestly. Something that happens as an adult is that you close down that questioning part of you, and you just go along, which is kind of sad, right? Because there are so many questions to be asked, and so many corners of the world to look at.

So with young adult, I'm usually working through the question. By the end of the book, I try to have an answer or a direction at least. With *One of Our Kind*, there isn't an answer, the book is a question itself. It's open-ended.

**In each of your books, you explore grief or proximity to death. What intrigues you about the fragility of life-or the time we have to live life to the fullest or the most truthful?**

I don't think anyone's ever noticed that or asked me that before. When I was younger, I grew up in Jamaica, and my best friend died. She was eight. She got hit by a drunk driver and I saw it happen. I think I was [also] eight at the time.

But I do actually think that is part of why I talk about that all the time. I keep coming back to it, this idea that nothing is promised really, and you have to try to just grab on with both hands and live right now because there can be a moment at any time that this changes everything. If you have love in your life and whatever, just hold onto it because it can go. I know that in my bones, it's not just an aphorism that you read.

**I'm subscribed to your newsletter and I love the Nicola's Joy list that you started. Tell me more about the joy list and what inspired you to start it.**

I started a version of it in 2020. I can't remember what I called it, but on Instagram, it was just five things that were making me happier on Sundays. It lasted for a little while, but then the pandemic stretched on, and I was like, "I don't know if I can find joy right now." I was sick of being at my house and the lack of care we were showing each other. I lost my way a little bit. This year came, and I was like, there are some moments when I need levity and I need something interesting. I'm very deliberate about trying to look for the good moments. So I thought, maybe other people want that too.

Also, social media is ridiculous. I hate it so intensely, but I really love my readers, so I figured I would just try to connect with the people who wanted to connect in a significant way. People will write back to me from the newsletter and say, "Oh, I really like that." And I love that connection. It feels stronger than the stuff that you see on social.

**The list also reminds me of Ross Gay's The Book of Delights. How would you say that gratitude fuels your writing practice or your writing life?**

That's funny. I'm the grumpiest writer on earth. When I am writing, I'm grumpy. But gratitude, I think gratitude fuels my life. I don't know if it fuels my writing.

Trying to get the thing on the page that's in your head, I have such a vision for it. And then the whole writing process is trying to get as close to that as possible. And my frustration often is it's not there.

Also, I'm a slow writer, and I will write the same sentence literally 10 times with the words in slightly different order. It's obnoxious. I always get to the middle of a book and think I'm the worst writer in the world, and this book is trash. I cry. Even my husband looks at me like, "You go through this every time, it's fine." I keep reminding myself that doubt is part of the process. That doubt, insecurity, the grumpiness is part of the process. And then you get through.

Afterwards, when I've written a book, I'm like, "Yes. This is the best thing in the world." And the gratitude is there for persevering or for it being, "Thank God, bloody done."

**You also lead an imprint, Joy Revolution, with your husband, David Yoon. Why is the imprint important for BIPOC authors and how did you and David decide it was time or an imprint that centered BIPOC romance?**

David and I have been talking about this since we were in grad school together. We met in graduate school, and we were friends for two years before we started going out. And one of the first things that we bonded over is rom-coms because we're both totally romantic goobers.

We always talked about how there were never any people of color as the main characters in most of them—not all of them, but the vast majority. Why are they never the one that gets the boy or the girl, falls in love, walks into the room and lights it up, or is super smart and vulnerable? We often talked about starting a short story contest and spending our own money to reward the winners. We were young and we didn't know what we were talking about, but we really wanted to do something.

It wasn't until 20 years later when we both found some success with writing that we were like, "We are not famous, but we have enough name recognition to try to do something." Barbara Marcus, who's the head of Random House Children's Books, has been an incredible mentor to me over the years. She took me under her wing and she's been incredible for me personally, professionally. Dave and I just pitched her and then she said, "Write something up."

We took a couple of weeks and wrote something up and then I sent it to her. I didn't hear anything for another couple of weeks. And I was like, "Oh, she hates it." And then one day, I'm sitting in my office, and her email pops up, and it says, "This is great. We should do this." So I did that thing again where I screamed and we danced around the house. I think it's important because people of color fall in love every day, and you wouldn't know it by the media.

A lot of stories that center BIPOC characters are stories of pain and issues. I say this all the time, we absolutely need those stories. We need those books because we still live in a world where there are so many issues, but we also need some other stories. We need stories that are aspirational, and swoony, and there's kissing. And pain free, because those stories are true as well. We do fall in love, and we do want these things. Everyone wants love, and certainly deserves it.

So we took a bet that there were writers who were writing these stories and that people would buy them. And we were right. It turns out that there is an appetite for this, people falling in love, which we know. Romance is huge—the single biggest category in publishing. We want to give people of color the full measure of their humanity. So we started this imprint, and it's been seriously life giving. It's just one of the best things that we've ever done.

**I love that because I think since 2019, but I'm going to guess 2020—when everyone was asking more of publishing for Black books in particular—everyone has really been like, "We're going to read these books. Please put them**

out." It's exciting to see the growth in the genre.

Yeah, it's really good. I do think we still have a long way to go. I'm one of those people that's like, "That's great. I love it. That's fantastic. Okay, but what's next?"

Because we still need to get there. It's so great to find all these debut authors. They are wonderful authors of color, just writing these joyous stories. And it's so nice to find them and to meet them, and to just read the work. It's so much work but it's so rewarding.

**How do you balance reading other people's work, figuring out what's next for Joy Revolution, what fits for Joy Revolution, and your own writing?**

I don't sleep that much. We have weekly acquisition meetings. So it's me, David, and our editor, Bria Ragin. Bria is the magic sauce because she is brilliant. When we first interviewed for an editor, we were supposed to just do the standard half-hour interview and we ended up talking to her for two hours.

The three of us will read manuscripts that come in and we have never disagreed on an acquisition yet. And sometimes we'll go, "Oh, maybe this is a revise and resubmit."

But in terms of balancing, it's seasonal. Summer is slower in publishing in general. And sometimes we just lean on each other. If David's on deadline, I will read all the submissions and I will write the edit letter. If I am, he'll do it. And Bria too. We just make it work because life happens and Bria does a lot, she's also editing for Delacorte. So we just balance each other out. But the fact that we all have the same taste and the fact that we have the same mission, we're all very committed to these joyous stories. I think that makes it easier.

I'm serious when I say I don't sleep that much. Sometimes there are times when I'm just like, "Oh, I really need more sleep."

**You told the *Hollywood Reporter*, "A writer's job is to tell the truth, and the truth is, we are human." How do you continue to center truth-telling in your work?**

So I am a reader. I read just constantly. It's a compulsion. I read at least two books a week. I can't help it. And my favorite books are the ones where I feel like it's true, even if it's a fantasy. I feel like there's something true that I haven't seen or I don't know.

I used to have this really crappy job in finance, and it was terrible. For a long time. Basically my job was to get yelled at by wealthy people on a trading desk for years. I'm always aware that I used to have a crappy job, and I'm not going to make this one crappy. So the only way is to tell the truth, right? I don't see the point of art-making if you aren't trying to get at something. For me, anyway. The only reason I write is because I'm trying to explore something and trying to illuminate something. And it's not as lofty as that. I write for myself because I don't know how else to be in the world. But my way of being in the world is to try to really be in it. And that means trying to tell the truth, whatever it is, even if it's a hard one.

**Is there anything else you want to add about writing *One of Our Kind*, about your Joy List, being grumpy, or about Joy Revolution? Anything else you want readers to know or take away?**

For *One of Our Kind*, my biggest wish is that when you get to the end of it, that you talk amongst yourselves. But I really do hope that people talk within their circles and outside of their circles and really talk to each other with grace and really listen to each other because I don't think that we get anywhere in this world, especially with race and racism, without talking to each other and affording each other some grace, and really believing that most people mean well.

**Nicola Yoon recommends:**

Love someone or something more than you love yourself.

Learn to make something from scratch. It doesn't matter what it is—bread, clay figures, a knitted scarf, cookies, whatever—just as long as you do it.

Be gentle with yourself and others.

Listen well.

Read poetry. Don't worry if you don't understand it right away, the meaning will come eventually.

Name

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Vocation

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