

Things

I'll

Never

Say

STORIES  
ABOUT OUR  
SECRET SELVES

EDITED BY ANN ANGEL



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*To the writers on these pages,  
who cherish the stories of  
secrets kept and revealed.*

# introduction

Got a secret? Want to share? Two can keep a secret. I *swear*.

Or maybe not.

We've all tried to keep secrets—our own and those of our friends. We've crossed our hearts and *promised* that certain words would never pass our lips. But keeping secrets isn't that easy. Sometimes we slip up and a secret comes spilling out before we realize we're the one revealing it. Other times we deliberately reveal secrets with the intention of helping, or maybe even hurting, another.

By nature, secrets are exclusive. Private. Being the holder of a secret gives us tremendous power over the decision to share a secret and let someone into our

inner circle or not. By making a friend a confidant of our secrets, we grant power and esteem. There's no question that, even if we gain *more* power by bringing someone else into the circle, we are also betraying ourselves or someone else by revealing that secret to others. But the fact that secrets so quickly find their way beyond a circle of friends indicates our natural desire to belong and our urge to spread what we know despite the risks.

I'm not a secret keeper myself. It's just too hard to keep track of who knows what. So I tell my family and friends not to share things with me if they don't want them repeated.

Still, being in that circle of secrecy intrigues me so much that although I say I don't want to know, I really do. During a writing workshop aptly named "Untold Stories," I recognized that warning others away from sharing secrets with me might protect their secret selves, but it also left me out, as if I was the only one without status updates or a Twitter feed. I was suddenly ready to swear to silence if only I could hear one friend's most private confession. It was probably at that moment that the idea for this anthology of secrets was born.

Writers are a tell-all bunch, so when I asked potential contributors if they'd want to write about the

topic of our secret selves, they seized the theme and poured out tragic, dramatic, and funny stories of our secret keeping and revealing. They gave me stories of those turning-point moments when a kept or disclosed secret reveals an innermost fear. I read about secrets shattering lives and secrets saving a life or a soul.

Some of the stories included here show how we can be motivated and propelled by self-protective secrets. Kerry Cohen, Louise Hawes, Mary Ann Rodman, and debut writer erica l. kaufman share stories of teens whose secrets may shape their future lives. In contrast, Ellen Wittlinger and Ron Koertge look closely at how secrets can be so deep that we keep the truth from ourselves. Varian Johnson takes another turn and looks at the ways in which choosing either secret keeping or telling might betray a friendship. Katy Moran explores how secrets might play out in a fairy tale.

Although there are moments of humor in “Lucky Buoy,” Chris Lynch demonstrates the darker side of secrets, as do J. L. Powers, Kekla Magoon, and E. M. Kokie, who take readers on life-altering flights from the truth of our secret selves. Zoë Marriott creates a magical dance of secrets and truth in “Storm Clouds Fleeing from the Wind.” Secret keeping can also give us a sweet ride, as in Cynthia Leitich Smith’s “Cupid’s Beaux.”

The stories on these pages are an exciting journey of discovery into the many different and surprising secrets people keep. I enjoyed considering the diverse ways the teens on these pages keep secrets, bring confidants into the secret circle, or purposely betray a friend. With each tale, these writers are inviting you into their characters' inner secrets. Come on in and share their stories.

*Ann Angel*

## about the contributors

ANN ANGEL is the author of the 2011 YALSA Excellence in Nonfiction Award winner *Janis Joplin: Rise Up Singing*, among many other biographies. Previously she served as contributing editor for the anthology *Such a Pretty Face: Short Stories About Beauty*. A graduate of Vermont College of Fine Arts' MFA program in writing for children and young adults, Ann Angel directs the English graduate program at Mount Mary University, in Milwaukee, where she lives with her family. She was drawn to the idea behind *Things I'll Never Say* because she believes that the secret self is often the true self.

KERRY COHEN is the author of nine books, including three young adult novels, *Easy*, *The Good Girl*, and *It's Not You, It's Me*, and the best-selling memoir *Loose Girl: A Memoir of Promiscuity*. Kerry Cohen practices psychotherapy and can be found writing about all her secrets in Portland, Oregon, where she lives with the writer James Bernard Frost and their four children.



LOUISE HAWES is the author of two short-fiction collections and more than a dozen novels. Her work has won awards from the American Library Association, Bank Street College, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, the New York Public Library, the Children's Book Council, the Independent Booksellers Association, the International Reading Association, and the American Association of University Women, among others. She helped found and teaches at the Vermont College of Fine Arts' MFA program in writing for children and young adults. Louise Hawes is the perfect person to share your secrets with, since she can't remember lunch dates, doctor's appointments, or the punch line to a single joke!

VARIAN JOHNSON is the author of four novels, including *My Life as a Rhombus* and *Saving Maddie*, a Bank Street College of Education Best Children's Book of the year. His first novel for younger readers, *The Great Greene Heist*, was published in 2014. He has always been intrigued by the secrets we keep from others and the secrets we keep from ourselves.

ERICA L. KAUFMAN lives in Providence, Rhode Island, in an old, tilted red house with her needy cat and her less-needy husband. Originally from New Hampshire, she earned her BFA from Emerson College in writing, literature, and publishing and her MFA in writing for young people from Lesley University. She says, "One of the most vivid and complicated aspects of adolescence is having to constantly decide, often based on instinct alone, which parts of our lives are safe to reveal to others. As a writer, I was particularly interested in the theme of secrets as a way to examine closely how adolescents cultivate and possess

many fractured identities at once. I approached the idea of secrets as synonymous with the idea of survival. I focused on the secrets we keep that, if revealed, would dramatically alter the current place we hold in the world.”

RON KOERTGE writes fiction for young adults and poetry for everybody. Among his books for young adults are *Coaltown Jesus* and *Lies, Knives, and Girls in Red Dresses*, and his books of poetry are *Fever* and *The Ogre’s Wife*. He loves to bet on Thoroughbred racehorses, but only four days a week. “Secrets have always intrigued me,” says Ron Koertge, “but that’s my only secret and now everybody knows.”

E. M. KOKIE is drawn to stories about characters on the cusp of life-changing moments. Often those moments involve revealing the secrets we keep from others and discovering the secrets we keep even from ourselves. Her debut novel, *Personal Effects*, involves both kinds of secrets. *Personal Effects* was chosen as an American Library Association Best Fiction for Young Adults selection and an Amazing Audiobooks for Young Adults Top Ten selection.

CHRIS LYNCH is the author of several young adult and middle-grade novels, including *Hit Count* and *Killing Time in Crystal City*. He is also the author (pseudonymously and otherwise) of several other novels. He teaches in Lesley University’s MFA program in creative writing. Chris Lynch believes that we should all be granted a certain number of badnesses that we are allowed to keep close and take to the grave with us. “Seven,” he says. “Seven sounds about right.”

KEKLA MAGOON is the author of the young adult novels *Camo Girl*, *37 Things I Love*, *Fire in the Streets*, and *The Rock and the River*, which won the Coretta Scott King–John Steptoe Award for New Talent. She also writes nonfiction on historical topics, including *Today the World Is Watching You: The Little Rock Nine and the Fight for School Integration, 1957*. Raised in a biracial family in the Midwest, Kekla Magoon teaches writing, conducts school and library visits nationwide, and serves on the Writers Council for the National Writing Project. She says, “Secrets are a kind of power. There’s a rush that comes from knowing something no one else knows, and when you share your secret, you give someone a means to either understand and connect with you or reject or hurt you.”

ZOË MARRIOTT lives on the blustery east coast of England with a growing library of more than ten thousand books, which will eventually bury her alive. Her first young adult novel, *The Swan Kingdom*, was published to international critical acclaim when she was twenty-four, and she has since written four more, including the Japanese-influenced Cinderella retelling *Shadows on the Moon*, from which her short story in this anthology grew. “When I was a teenager, part of my process of growing up lay in realizing that my secrets didn’t have to be weaknesses—in fact, they had the potential to make me stronger. But only if I had the courage to turn them inside out and wear them proudly.”

KATY MORAN lives in the Welsh Borders with her husband and children. She wrote her first novel at the age of ten and became a published author later in life, inspired by a piece of

jewelry given to her as a present. The brooch was sold by an antiques dealer as a fake but turned out to be a thousand years old. For Katy Moran, it acted like a time machine, taking her back into the mysterious past of the British Isles. “What I love most about secrets is their ambivalence—keeping them or not can lead to such devastating consequences. Do our friends and family always have the right to know the truth about our actions, or sometimes is it kinder to leave people in ignorance? Can telling the truth even be actively selfish—more about salving our own consciences than about the best interests of those we love? Do we have the right to decide what is in the best interests of others? Secrets are thorny and complicated.”

J. L. POWERS is the award-winning author of three young adult novels, *The Confessional*, *This Thing Called the Future*, and *Amina*; editor of two collections of essays, *Labor Pains and Birth Stories* and *That Mad Game: Growing Up in a Warzone*; and a picture book, *Colors of the Wind: The Story of Champion Runner and Blind Artist George Mendoza*. She has some secrets but will usually divulge them over a cup of coffee to a friendly person.

MARY ANN RODMAN is the author of two middle-grade novels, *Yankee Girl* and *Jimmy's Stars*, as well as a number of picture books. As the daughter of an FBI agent, she learned that people have reasons for secrets lives. She lives her own unsecret life with husband and daughter in Alpharetta, Georgia.

CYNTHIA LEITICH SMITH is the best-selling and award-winning author of the Feral and Tantalize series, both set in the universe featured in “Cupid’s Beaux.” You can look for

more of Joshua and Quincie, and get a glimpse of Jamal, in those novels. Cynthia Leitich Smith says, "Writing is the boldest way I share glimpses of my secret self. I'm never more honest, more exposed, than in my fiction for teen readers."

ELLEN WITTLINGER is the author of fourteen young adult and middle-grade novels, including *Hard Love*, a Michael L. Printz Honor Book and a Lambda Literary Award winner. Her book *This Means War!* was a Bank Street Best Children's Book of the year. She has also taught in the Simmons College MFA program. Ellen Wittlinger says that if you want your secrets to stay secret, don't tell her. After all, she's a writer.

# Things I'll Never Say: Stories About Our Secret Selves

Edited by Ann Angel

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