

A note from CYNTHIA SALAYSAY

Private Lessons came in the wake of a bad breakup. It was not an easy, picture-perfect time—I felt fragile. I had to get a new place to live, a new job, and new friends, but there was a lot of beauty in my life all the same. I was growing healthier and happier, and I was discovering that I could write. I had always wanted to be a writer. Now I had the grit and determination to do it.

Claire's story appeared in my life one morning in my new apartment, about a year after my breakup. I was ecstatic to find that I could write on and on about a young girl who falls in love with a manipulative piano teacher. To her I gave the difficult lessons I learned from being in an abusive relationship. I also gave her the quiet strength it took to heal.

Claire sees herself as ordinary; she feels the color of her skin is ordinary. It is a surprise to her that people don't feel the same way about her. As a Filipino-American, she experiences slights and indignities that let her know that she doesn't fit in. She's seen as smaller, exotic, perhaps submissive. Though none of the people who see or treat her this way would describe themselves as racist, these impressions, coupled with knowing that her immigrant family has fewer resources than other families, have consequences on her psyche.

I really wanted readers to look deeply and with compassion at Claire's life, in part so that they could feel how racism makes her feel, but more importantly because I wanted readers to feel what abuse does and take her side—the side of the abused instead of the abuser. Sexual abuse and harassment is often spoken of with fear and disgust. Our society continues to question the victim, as if they're at fault, out of fear and avoidance of the subject itself. People don't want it happening to them, and they don't want to be blamed for it, either. This book is in response to that.

Claire grows tremendously as she begins the slow work of healing. She has the love and support of her family and friends, and she continues to feel magic at the piano. It is her lifeline and comfort, how she chooses to express her deepest feelings and let them go. She gives everything to it, and it gives back, too, and for that she feels reverence.

This is a story of abuse, one that I hope will spark conversations and help girls look more deeply at themselves and their own relationships, and also a story of empowerment. I hope that readers find their own courage, confidence, and strength.

