



Watch Over Me

NINA LACOUR

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Fiction

RECOMMENDED READING AGE: 14+

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CURRICULUM GUIDE

The following teaching guide has been designed to embrace shared curriculum values. Students are encouraged to communicate their understanding of a text through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.

The learning activities aim to encourage students to think critically, creatively and independently, to reflect on their learning and connect it to an audience, purpose and context. They encompass a range of forms with a focus on language, literature and literacy. Where appropriate, they promote the integration of ICT and life skills.

SYNOPSIS

Mila is used to being alone. Maybe that's why she said yes. Yes to a second chance in this remote place, among the flowers and the fog and the crash of waves far below. But she hadn't known about the ghosts.

Newly graduated from high school, Mila has aged out of the foster-care system. So when she's offered a job and a place to live on an isolated part of the Californian coast, she immediately accepts. Maybe she will finally find a new home—a real home. The farm is a refuge, but it's also haunted by the past. And Mila's own memories are starting to rise to the surface.

Nina LaCour, the award-winning author of *We Are Okay*, delivers another emotional knockout with *Watch Over Me*, a modern ghost story about trauma and survival, chosen family and rebirth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nina LaCour is the author of the widely acclaimed novels *Hold Still*, *The Disenchantments*, *Everything Leads to You*, *You Know Me Well* (with David Levithan) and *We Are Okay*. She is also the host of *Keeping a Notebook: A Podcast on Writing* and founder of the Slow Novel Lab. Nina lives with her family in San Francisco, California.

BEFORE READING

1. Examine the title *Watch Over Me* with your students. Prompt students to consider what immediately comes to mind. Students may consider the contexts that this phrase could be used in or who potentially may watch over others. Ideas that could be included may reference religion, spirituality, loss, protection, angels, love or striving to make someone proud.
2. Ask students to brainstorm the ways that people are able to feel belonging and connection in our world. A follow-up question may ask students to consider why it is important to feel connected and that they belong.
3. Ask your students if they can recall any famous or infamous orphans from literature. How has the orphan archetype operated in fiction, and more specifically in classic literature?

WHILE READING

1. Look at the flowers included on page 3 of the novel. What may these flowers symbolise? Why are petals discarded while other flowers remain intact? What themes or ideas might this visual foreshadow?
2. How does the epigraph on page 9 set the tone and mood for the novel? Who may have refrained from telling the truth?
3. Using evidence from pages 6 and 7, what possibly attracted Mila to the job on the farm? Would you be interested on a job in the farm? What would you enjoy and what would you find challenging?
4. Why don't we hear how Amy and Jonathan farewell Mila? What kind of relationship did Mila have with Amy and Jonathan? Do you think she felt that she belonged?
5. On pages 21 and 22, Mila sees the ghosts on the farm for the first time. Who do you think the ghosts



may belong to? Are these ghosts similar to the scary ghosts we see in films?

6. What do you believe happened to the girl before Mila? What happened to Samantha?
7. On page 168, Mila witnesses the piano keys 'moving on their own'. Who is playing the piano in this moment?
8. Why does Mila make the decision to leave Blake in the burning house?

AFTER READING

CHARACTER

1. What do the ghosts on the farm represent for each of the characters? Why do they each have a ghost?
2. Reading from Mila's perspective, it is difficult to determine whom she can and cannot trust. How does LaCour's characterisation provide hints and clues to who is a friend and who is a foe? Through this characterisation, what does LaCour ultimately convey about vulnerability and trust?
3. On page 230, Mila meets her younger self, the last time she was 'whole'. What does the reader learn through watching her interact with her younger self?

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

1. How does LaCour employ fairytale allusions in her novel? How do these fairytales connect to ideas surrounding childhood and innocence?
2. LaCour's novel can be considered an allegorical text. What is an allegory? What may her novel be an allegory for?
3. How does LaCour structure Mila saying goodbye to her younger self and accepting the pain she has suffered? Why does she structure the farewell in this way?

THEMES

Recovery

1. 'Once there was a girl who was raised without a father, until her mother fell in love with a wolf.' (p. 80) How do stories help us recover from pain or allow us to better understand trauma?
2. 'I'm only now understanding it myself, but I think we have to face the things that scare us in order to move on from them.' (p. 85) Do you agree with Mila? Do we need to confront the things that scare us to ultimately overcome them?
3. 'I craved escape—even if it was into something terrible.' (p. 176) How are there both constructive and destructive ways of coping with trauma?

Kindness

1. 'I wondered who had done that to him. Who had left it untreated.' (p. 36) How do Mila and Lee form a

connection? How do they have a similar history and past? What do they both crave?

2. How does Mila show kindness to Lee? How does her kindness not only help Lee but also herself? How important are small acts of human kindness?

Family

1. 'They were anchoring me to the earth.' (p. 150) How does Mila's relationship with Billy and Liz help her understand and cope with her past traumas? How important is it to be supported by friends and family through challenging experiences?
2. 'You are a true friend to Lee.' (p. 158) What makes a friend a true one? What does a fake friend look like? How can we learn to recognise the difference?
3. What does 'Blake's skeleton house' represent? How does it being incomplete reveal its ability to provide a home to Mila and her mother? How does its symbolism operate when juxtaposed with the farm?

RESPONDING

1. While LaCour's novel is a contemporary look at the experiences of orphans in the current foster system, her novel takes inspiration from classic coming-of-age stories that also focus on the experiences of orphans. Read page 98 of the novel before selecting one of the following classic texts to compare with *Watch Over Me: Anne of Green Gables*, *Harry Potter*, *Jane Eyre* or *Oliver Twist*. Present your findings in a presentation, examining how these characters have overcome the challenges of being an orphan.
2. 'Had we been telling the truth, he would have said, *The place where I'm sending you—it looks beautiful, but it's haunted*.' (p. 8) Rewrite the scene between Mila and Nick, but this time, write the conversation with both characters being completely honest with each other.
3. Write a story from the perspective of the ghosts watching the humans. What do the ghosts notice about their older selves? What do they find strange or unusual about the humans? Are they sad or happy watching their older selves?
4. What do the pieces of gold jewellery in the novel represent? Have you ever received a gift that has helped you feel that you belong? Write a personal story about receiving a gift that has had profound meaning to you.
5. 'It was so cute to watch. I don't know if cute's the word. Cute-sad. You know.' (p. 135) How can something be both cute and sad? Create a table with two columns. In the first column, write down a list of emotions that Mila feels in the book. Now, look up their antonym and record it in the corresponding row. Now consider how often these emotions can meet in the middle. Why is it important to remember that emotions aren't always black or white or felt on two opposite ends of the spectrum?