

Today on The Lerner Podcast, author Nicole Valentine talks to her editor, Amy Fitzgerald. Nicole is the author of middle-grade novel A Time Traveler's Theory of Relativity, which Newbery Medal winning author Erin Entrada Kelly called "one of [her] favorite debut novels of the year." Here's Nicole.

Nicole (author): A Time Traveler's Theory of Relativity is about a boy named Finn, who is 12 years old, and finds out that all the women in his family have secretly been able to time travel. And once he discovers the family secret, he also realizes he needs to save his mom from somewhere in time.

And I came up with the idea at a very young age. I was around 13 at the time that I first conceived of Finn. I was thinking about my own father at the time, so I kind of flipped the gender roles a little bit. My father had passed away when I was 12. And in my grief and in my family's grief at the time, as with most kids, and you know, all psychologists will say that children when they experience grief, what they want to do is fix the situation and go back to normal.

So what I decided was the only way to solve this, this problem in my family was to time travel. So I went to the library and I read every book about time travel that I can possibly find. And in truth, I was looking for some sort of seedling or a kernel of truth that would help me learn how to time travel. And I didn't learn how to time travel. But I did--I did learn something from reading all those books. And what I did learn was how to find hope. And I learned that I could generate awe, the power of awe and wonder. And when I did that, I instantly felt better. And I knew I could power on. So that's how I fell in love with books. That's how I got through and that's how I felt about Finn. That's how the story came to me.

Amy (editor): And when I first read the manuscript, I was really drawn to it because it had such a personal concept of time travel. It's not a story where the characters go back in time and try to kill Hitler or run with the dinosaurs. It's really reflective, I think, the fact that most of us if we were presented with an opportunity to time travel, would instinctively want to fix something in our own personal lives, and probably go back to see someone we loved one more time, or try to prevent a tragedy that's very close to home. And I thought that was really compelling. I also loved that in this version of time travel there are always consequences. Time travel is not a get-out-of-jail-free card or a way to wipe the slate completely clean. Everything Finn and his family end up doing affects other people and affects the present. It seemed like a really original way to have a young character grappling with how to deal with loss and how to deal with the fact that he can't fix everything. And he can't necessarily prevent bad things from happening to the ones he loves. But at the same time, he comes to realize how connected he is to his family through time and space.

I think the most moving line I encountered in the manuscript when I read it for the first time was when Finn's grandmother tells him, "We're all alive and dead at some point," and I thought this was a really wonderful way to explore that in a middle grade novel.

Libby (publicist): How does quantum physics factor into Time Traveler's?

Nicole: I'm kind of obsessed with quantum physics and quantum mechanics. And it's something that I've been reading about my whole life. I love to read like Brian Greene's books. If there's somebody out there reading about or writing about quantum physics for the average human being, I'm reading it. I'd say I probably understand about 75% of what I read, and then I take the 25% that I don't understand, then fictionalize it for my books. That's what works the best for what I'm doing.

It's funny, with this book while I was writing it, there's a couple of things that I fictionalized, as I was writing the book, four or five years ago, that then were proven to be true, which was weird. Some, some

articles came out in science journals and I looked at that did like a double take when they came out over my feed. One of them was about silica and sand and how all the silica on the planet comes from star explosions of supernova, and how that they can trace them back to individual stars. That they can actually know that they're from supernova. So and that, to me was something that I had thought of in the book. And I have one of the characters saying this in the book that you know, everything in your science, everything in your world, they rest upon a pile of sand. And she's talking about how everything is stardust. When I read the article, I was just kind of laughing to myself, because it's like, there you go. There it is. So and that's happened about three times in last year. So--which kind of makes me want to go back and write addendums--scientific addendums for the book.

I had a chance to work with the great Sally Ride my career. And she was wonderful to work for. And I was very young at the time. I was in my early 20s. And if I had the opportunity again, I think I would ask her less about her work with Richard Feynman and more about what she was doing mathematically at the time because she's amazing woman, and I thought I'd have more time.

Amy: Since you've been working on this for years and years and years, what one thing that you ended up having to drastically change or rethink at some point?

Nicole: Oh, gosh. Okay, that sounds obsessive too. I worked on other things for years and years and years too. So, you know, there's many novels, but this one particular novel has been around the most, I would say. And I've put it away and taken it back out again.

Lots of things have changed over the time. And this setting is one of the things that have changed. Dorset, Vermont, which is a very real place, was something I did not discover until the 2000s or so. I started vacationing there with my family and fell in love with the town. And it does feel like a town that is untouched by time. It does have marble sidewalks that have been quarried from the mountain. It does have one of the oldest continuously operating general stores in America. So everything I talked about about Dorset, Vermont is very real. And it does have a tree at the top of the mountain with two doorknobs on top of it that no one knows how it got there. So, you know, it was the perfect setting for this novel. It is a place out of time. So that just kind of came to me much later.

But the characters and the story were with me for a much longer time. And then of course, you know, when you change the setting, the characters change as well because setting--you know, I have a friend, I'm going to say his name because he's brilliant. He's an also an author that I teach with. His name is Rob Costello. And he always says that setting is the third parent to a character. So it does that. When you change the setting it changes the character.

A Time Traveler's Theory of Relativity is available now.

Thank you for joining us here on The Lerner Podcast. Tune in again next time for more author interviews and the stories behind the books.