

CAN.

Never Been Better

A NOVEL

Leanne Toshiko
Simpson

U.S.

"Hilarious, honest, refreshing, and moving."

— EMILY AUSTIN, author of *Everyone in This Room Will Someday Be Dead*

*Is she falling in love,
or falling apart?*

NEVER

A Novel

BEEEN BETTER

Leanne Toshiko Simpson

BOOK CLUB KIT

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A CONVERSATION *with*

LEANNE TOSHIKO SIMPSON

How would you describe *Never Been Better*?

Never Been Better is the mental health beach read that I've always dreamed of! After meeting in a psychiatric ward a year earlier, Matt and Misa are hosting a picture-perfect destination wedding in Turks and Caicos—much to the dismay of their former floormate Dee, who has been in love with Matt ever since he got her kicked out of the hospital. Dee arrives at the resort with her trash-talking little sister, Tilley, in tow, and is immediately overwhelmed by a) the fact that many of the guests don't actually know how the happy couple met, b) how bougie the resort is (Dee is used to eating off-brand Kraft Dinner in the dead of the night), and, c) how something seems amiss between Matt and Misa. Stuck between trying to be a good friend and chasing the happy ending she's always wanted, Dee has a week to figure out what the future holds for her and the people she loves most.

What inspired you to write this story?

I wound up in a psychiatric ward in my early twenties after years of struggling to come to terms with my bipolar disorder diagnosis. It was a time when many of my friends were becoming “real adults” and I could barely get out of bed most days, let alone make it to class, hold down a job, or maintain a functional romantic relationship. While I was hospitalized, I wanted to read about a character that was facing the same challenges that I was, but my doctors were worried that mental health books were too depressing and might send me into a spiral. My parents came home from the bookstore with Matthew Quick's *Silver Linings Playbook*, which was the first novel I'd ever read that confronted mental illness with a healthy dose of love and humor. It was a story that saved my life, and I hoped that one day I'd be able to return the favor for someone else. It took me a decade from discharge to achieve that goal, but with a support network of family, friends, and the mental health community (plus a number of speed bumps along the way), I made it here after all.

Why were comedy and love stories so important to you while developing *Never Been Better*?

I find that a lot of people feel like my doctors once did about mental health narratives—that they might be too triggering or depressing to read. But I believe that people living with mental illness often share the best sense of humor around. I mean, you kind of need it in order to survive yourself! There's a beautiful sense of community

that comes from laughing alongside others who have been in your shoes. And when it comes to love stories, I've always been interested in how romantic comedies can tackle serious issues while reminding us that there are happy endings just around the corner. I wanted to write this book because I think it's important to see yourself reflected in joyful stories and know that whatever you're facing, you deserve love of all kinds. We all do.

Which character do you identify with the most?

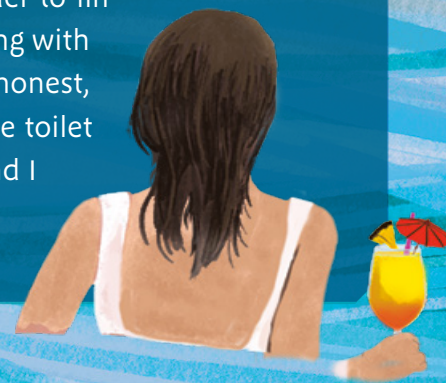
When I first started writing the original story, I was really grappling with my mixed Japanese identity. Like many folks of my generation (Yonsei), I reconnected with Japanese communities later in life—largely due to the longstanding effects of the World War II uprooting and dispossession—and harbored a bit of imposter syndrome as a result. I definitely started off identifying with Dee more, especially in how I talked about mental health. But the more work I did within my community, the more I realized that some of the mechanisms I used to cope with my bipolar disorder were equally influenced by my cultural background and family history. Out of all the characters, I think Misa grew the most through later edits of the novel, and I am so happy that it turned out that way. The historical elements of her story also brought me so much closer to my family and helped me appreciate the choices they made to try and protect me in the early years of my diagnosis.

What was your favorite part about your writing process?

I love writing dialogue! My favorite thing to do when I get stuck on a scene is to call a friend and talk out a hypothetical situation like it actually happened to us. I also have a huge soft spot for Tilley's one-liners in *Never Been Better*—she's so hilariously blunt but protective of Dee's mental health at the same time, and I think that contrast makes for some of the most tender and outrageous parts of the novel. As much as *Never Been Better* is about a love triangle, I think one of the driving forces of the story is really sisterhood.

What challenges did you face while finishing *Never Been Better*?

The biggest challenge that I face in most areas of my life is the ups and downs of my mood disorder. Writing comedy can be especially challenging when you're prone to depressive episodes, and building a consistent writing practice isn't always easy when there are days when your brain short-circuits and you suddenly decide it's the perfect time to host a carnival (I did try to do this in real life one time). If you read carefully, you might be able to pick out a few sections where I was running a bit high, because the cadence of my writing changes slightly. I have to be really diligent about my work, sleep, and social schedules in order to finish projects. One of the major questions I get asked by other writers living with mental illness is if my medication has stunted my creativity, and to be honest, I used to think that it did. But as soon as I flushed my routine down the toilet (sometimes literally), I found that my ideas weren't always coherent, and I



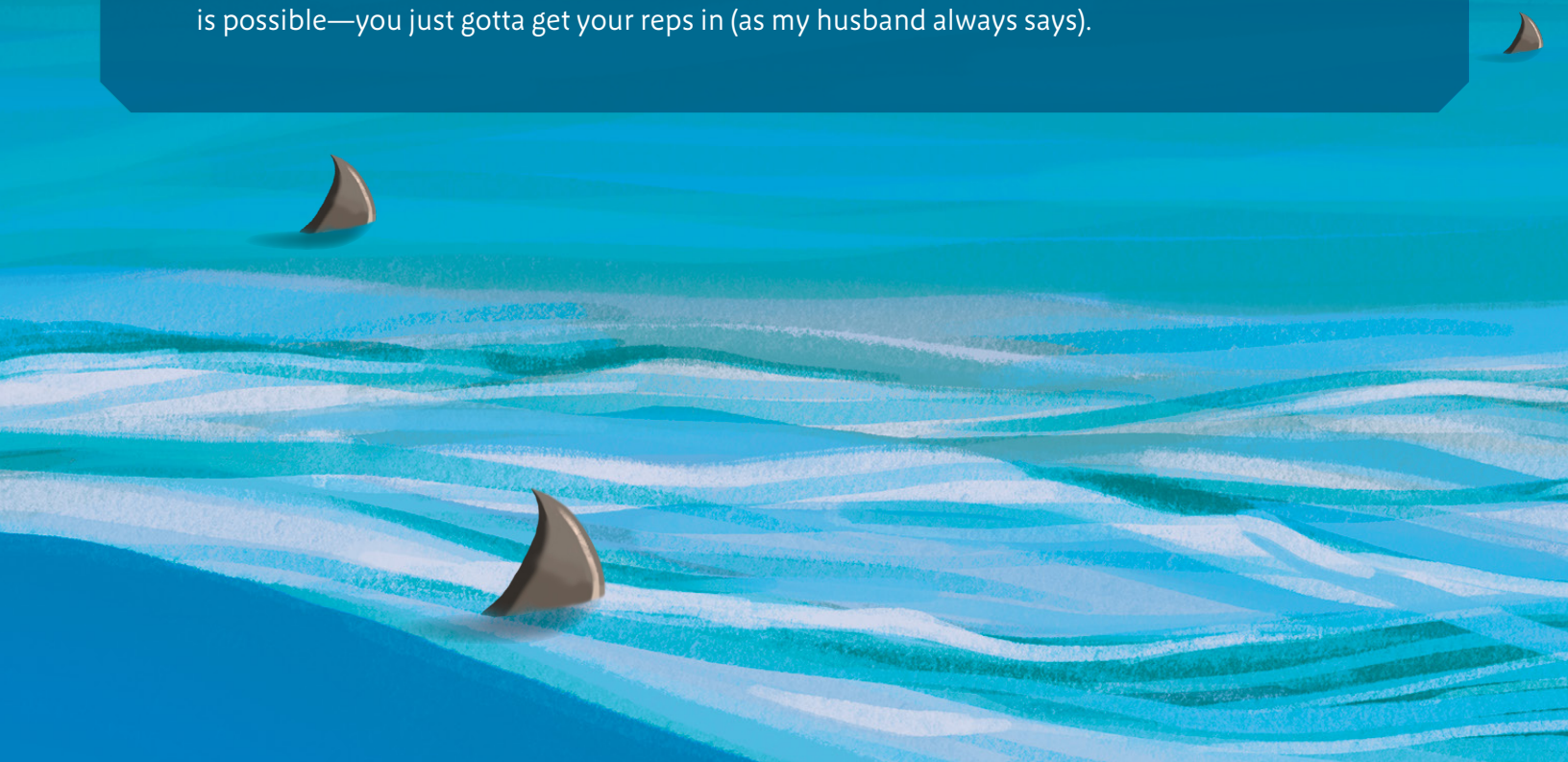
wasn't able to finish much in that state anyway. It's different for everyone, but I think it's important to remember that you are still you, on or off medication, and you have to make the choices that support your ability to thrive.

Without giving anything away, did you always know how the story would end?

I did not at all! And I think that makes the reading experience more fun! I am not much of a planner—I tend to write my way toward the emotional truth of a story and surprise myself a bit. Writing this book about bipolar disorder was also a really helpful way to work through some of the hang-ups I had about my own life path—if I could forgive myself for everything I had put my family and friends through when I was really sick, if there was a way to move my life forward after being in a psych ward, and most importantly, whether or not a happy ending was possible for someone like me.

What are you hoping readers take away from *Never Been Better*?

I had two major writing goals for this book—first of all, I wanted to give readers who had faced mental health challenges a space to laugh, cry, feel the love, and most important, remember that there is so much life for us to live still. Secondly, I wanted people who may not understand what it's like inside our heads to have a window into our perspective. That's actually why I wanted the psych ward flashbacks to be peppered throughout the book, because I think it's important to understand that our day-to-day interactions are constantly interrupted by the re-winding of our memories, and that our challenging periods are not neatly bookended by time. The back-and-forth structure of the book, and the inclusion of the '90s/2000s comfort songs, both reflect that feeling of telling yourself the same story over and over again and hoping that something will change. I think people without this life experience can get frustrated by our fixation on the past, and just want us to get better as soon as possible, but breaking those thought patterns that are both familiar and limiting takes time. It also takes a network of support. But it is possible—you just gotta get your reps in (as my husband always says).



Playlist

Never Been Better

1h 19m



- Crazy In Love (feat. Jay-Z)**
Beyoncé
- Waterfalls**
TLC
- Love Don't Cost a Thing**
Jennifer Lopez
- Time to Pretend**
MGMT
- Try Again (feat. Timbaland)**
Aaliyah
- Don't Speak**
No Doubt
- Maps**
Yeah Yeah Yeahs
- Got 'Til It's Gone**
Janet Jackson, Q-Tip, Joni Mitchell
- Back In Your Head**
Tegan and Sara
- Whenever, Wherever**
Shakira
- Ms. Jackson**
Outkast
- Ocean Avenue**
Yellowcard
- You Know I'm No Good**
Amy Winehouse
- What's My Name?**
Rihanna, Drake
- Everywhere**
Michelle Branch
- Unfoolish**
Ashanti
- Family Affair**
Mary J. Blige
- What's My Age Again?**
blink-182
- You Get What You Give**
New Radicals
- Always Be My Baby**
Mariah Carey

RECOMMENDATIONS

from the **PSYCH WARD**

SCOOBY-DOO GANG

Dee

CURRENT SONG ON REPEAT:

I Wanna Get Better by Bleachers

FAVORITE MOVIE:

13 Going on 30, although she'll watch Mark Ruffalo in anything (even when he's dating the ghost of Reese Witherspoon)

COMFORT READ:

The Silver Linings Playbook by Matthew Quick
(she loves a good psych ward rom-com, okay?!)

PICK-ME-UP SNACK:

A cold orange Fanta and a bag of Miss Vickie's salt-and-vinegar chips

Misa

CURRENT SONG ON REPEAT:

Strawberry Blond by Mitski

FAVORITE MOVIE:

Pride & Prejudice
(the Keira Knightley version, but she will never turn down an Austen remake)

COMFORT READ:

Nimona by Noelle Stevenson
(her favorite graphic novel)

PICK-ME-UP SNACK:

Matcha dorayaki and a steaming mug of green tea

Matt

CURRENT SONG ON REPEAT:

Solsbury Hill by Peter Gabriel

FAVORITE MOVIE:

He tells everyone it's *Braveheart*, but has never actually made it through the whole film without falling asleep at least once.

COMFORT READ:

The Fellowship of the Ring by J.R.R. Tolkien
(because it's the "Friday night" of the Lord of the Rings trilogy)

PICK-ME-UP SNACK:

Black pudding
(partially so he can remind you that it's a superfood)

Tilley

CURRENT SONG ON REPEAT:

all-american bitch by Olivia Rodrigo

FAVORITE MOVIE:

10 Things I Hate About You
(for obvious reasons)

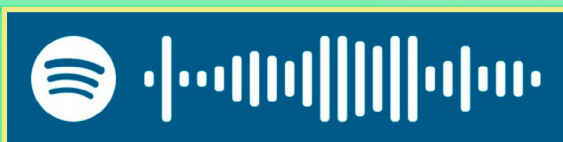
COMFORT READ:

Us Weekly
(mostly for Kardashian updates)

PICK-ME-UP SNACK:

Peanut butter and pickle sandwich
(it was their mom's favorite—and weirdest—pregnancy craving)

SCAN to LISTEN on SPOTIFY NOW!



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Never Been Better* captures the nonlinear nature of healing through its characters' ups and downs. Discuss why Dee, Matt, and Misa might be searching for a definitive state of recovery, and why that idea might not be so helpful to them after all.
2. Dee, Matt, and Misa first meet in the psychiatric ward and become incredibly important to one another as they all grapple with leaving the hospital. Have you ever developed a friendship that began in an unlikely place?
3. *Never Been Better* illustrates love's wide-ranging expressions. How does the love Dee feels for Matt differ from the love she feels for Misa? How does dating, or romantic love, differ from friendship or familial love in the novel?
4. Early in the story, we learn that Dee was discharged from the hospital early because of Matt—yet she never blames him. Why not, do you think?
5. As a reader, do you think Dee is a reliable narrator? Which interactions in the novel reveal different sides of her that she might not recognize and admit to?
6. In addition to being her plus-one for the wedding, Tilley is described as Dee's human fire extinguisher. How do the sisters give each other the space to grow? And what is the biggest challenge of their ride-or-die relationship?
7. Whether it's the secrets kept within Misa's family or miscommunication between Matt and Elinor, Simpson paints family as both a haven and hazardous territory. Why do you think it can be hard to speak up around family, especially when it comes to mental health? How does Misa's cultural background inform how she deals with stressors, including her diagnosis?
8. *Never Been Better* shares a cast of lovable and eccentric characters, many of them contributing from the peripheries. From Vik's secret romantic history to Washington's dating updates to Obachan's steady focus on snacks, there are plenty of characters to laugh with, adore, and root for. Who in the supporting cast did you feel for the most?
9. Amid the wedding hijinks are some long-buried secrets. When is it permissible to keep a secret? Is there such a thing as a "good secret"?
10. In *Never Been Better*, none of the characters are in crisis mode during the action of the book. Instead, we see how past triggers affect the way they move through the present. Discuss Simpson's use of flashbacks in illustrating mental illness and recovery.
11. *Never Been Better* is set on the turquoise-rimmed beachside of the Turks and Caicos Islands. How does the setting both contrast and align with some of the challenges Dee faces during her trip? Why do you think she fixates on finding a "last-resort-resort" early in the story?
12. How did you feel about the novel's happy ending? Which characters, in your opinion, grew the most over the course of the trip? Discuss the final few scenes and any developments that surprised you.
13. Whether it's Tilley's playlist, Matt's guitar sessions, or Misa's piano playing, music becomes a big part of the characters' recoveries. Share which song(s) you turn to in times of need. Which track from Tilley's playlist did you gravitate to? Were there any you'd never heard before?

