

Overdue

AUTHOR Q+A

Overdue is a deeply bookish book—a novel about librarians and booksellers. What made you want to write about these professions? And why do you think books about books are so evergreen?

I struggled with depression from a very young age, and books themselves were my greatest source of comfort and escape. As a teenager, it was thrilling to get a job in a bookstore—to be surrounded by books for hours on end! My coworkers were the first adults who took me seriously, and they sort of cracked me open and expanded my world. Through their eyes, I saw that good things were coming and life was worth living. They gave me so much hope. In my twenties, I became a librarian, and my coworkers there were the adults who taught me how to be an actual adult. How to do things like find a new dentist or refinish an old piece of furniture or roast a Thanksgiving turkey. I still feel such profound love for all of these people over the years who took me under their wings. Because books are such excellent teachers of empathy, I truly don't think you'll find a kinder and more empathetic group of people than book people. Even if some of them (many of them!) are a bit awkward or curmudgeonly (I'm both!), they all have these big, beautiful, compassionate hearts.

And I think books about books are popular for the same reason that I fell in love with them as a child—they're tremendously comforting, so there will always be a built-in audience eager to read about the thing they love. In a way, bookish books have a lot in common with romance. Which, of course, I was also writing about.

Let's talk about the title. It's doing double duty. It's evocative of libraries, but it's also thematically important to Ingrid's story.

Yes, the novel takes place over the course of one year, and it contains two quietly looming birthdays: the protagonist, Ingrid, will be turning thirty, and the love interest, Macon, will be turning forty. Milestone birthdays carry so much more weight than they should. Numbers are just numbers, right? Yet they aren't, because most people *do* tend to examine their lives when they reach these points. Hitting a new decade is like getting a report card or status update. And thirty is such a big one! There's this very real sense that we should have our lives figured out by then, so it comes as a shock for many people to realize they don't. We forget that, actually, we *never* stop learning and growing. Humans literally never stop. So milestone birthdays live in this odd space of being both completely arbitrary and endlessly meaningful.



As Ingrid examines her life, she realizes that she doesn't feel like an adult at all. She's been in a relationship for eleven years, but they never talk about marriage. She's still living in a small apartment with starter, build-it-yourself furniture. She's working a job that she likes but doesn't love, and she's feeling pressured to commit the rest of her life to it. Her growth feels stunted. She's realizing that she can't imagine what the future might hold for her, and it's unsettling.

Apart from your shared careers, do you find yourself identifying with other aspects of Ingrid's character?

Yes and no. Unfortunately, there's this odd thing about writing a book in first person, especially when writing about a decently normal person (as opposed to a serial killer): It's easy to convince the reader that the I in the story is a one-to-one stand-in for the author. It's similar to watching a convincing actor and believing that they *must* be exactly like the character they're playing.

While Ingrid and I do have certain things in common, unlike her, I got married young and settled into adulthood while still in college. I couldn't wait to be an adult and have a house and grown-up responsibilities and buy organic produce. Ingrid is also a lot more optimistic than I am. My husband is the cheerful one who gets along with everybody, and while I try my best to present a friendly face to the public, I'm much more of an exasperated Macon, trying to do good in the world despite believing the world to be . . . not that great of a place. (I like to say I'm a *realist*, as opposed to an optimist or pessimist, thank you very much.)

The book is set in a mountain town in North Carolina, and you live in a mountain town in North Carolina. Is it safe to say your town was the inspiration?

Ha! This is true—something else that Ingrid and I *do* have common. Ridgetop is a fictional town based off my hometown of Asheville. My husband and I have lived here for over twenty years, but from the first moment we visited it, we knew it was our home. Asheville has changed a lot over the years, but at its heart it's still the same vibrant community of artists and weirdos and tourists.

The name of Ingrid's bookstore when it's revealed ("Nobody will ever be able to spell it. Or pronounce it. Or know what it means," her coworker warns her) is also a nod to my hometown independent bookstore, Malaprop's. I love them and their delightful name so much . . . and I cannot even begin to tell you how many times I've had to look it up in the dictionary.



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