



# NOVA REN SUMA

on writing

## THE WALLS AROUND US

**This book haunted me like one of the ghosts found in its pages.** Before I even began to write it, before I had a word down, I knew it would be a story I couldn't shake, one that would make me face writing the kind of characters I'd never let myself explore before. Turns out, the most fascinating characters to write aren't the ones I'd want as friends—they're the ones I wouldn't want to be left alone in a room with, not without protection.

*The Walls Around Us* is about girls who have been sent away to pay for their crimes—and pay they do, sometimes far beyond what they owe. It's about the guilty, and about those labeled guilty even though they're innocent.

It's also about those who escape justice, the ones walking around in the sunlight free and clear, and no one has any idea. Imagine what they might do to keep the truth from coming out.

In this book you will find some things fantastical and some things disturbing. You will also find some truths. Some are personal to me, such as how I, like one of the characters, was a teenage ballerina and played a dancing princess in my local production of *The Firebird*, not that I was ever good enough to wow an audience or pursue a serious career. I, like another one of the characters,



Erik Ryerson

**NOVA REN SUMA** has an MFA in fiction from Columbia University and a BA in writing and photography from Antioch College and has been awarded a fiction fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts. She is the author of *Imaginary Girls* and *17 & Gone*. Nova lives in New York City, and her website is [www.novaren.com](http://www.novaren.com).

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was a girl who kept a diary, secreting it in various places in my room until it was found and exposed. A deep and passionate love for books can't help but seep into this story, and some of my favorite authors and life-changing novels from long ago can be spotted on the shelves of the prison library. When writing fiction, memories still filter in, and these memories twist and distort and transform until they become living, breathing pieces of the story, as they have here.

Months ago I stood inside a prison cell for the first time in my life. I was alone, and the walls were cold around me, and the ceiling was low above me, and the space was small, the bars menacing. For a solid moment, I could imagine this was my first night of a great many nights ahead. I imagined the bars clanking closed, the lock turning. I thought of Amber, one of the girls in this story. She's been locked up in the Aurora Hills Secure Juvenile Detention Center since she was fourteen years old.

But this picture of me standing inside a prison cell is fiction. I was only a tourist come to Alcatraz Island on a boat with other tourists, free to leave on the next ferry out, where I could go down to the concession stand and buy a soft pretzel. I have never lived behind bars the way the girls in this story do. I've never had to find a way to survive that.

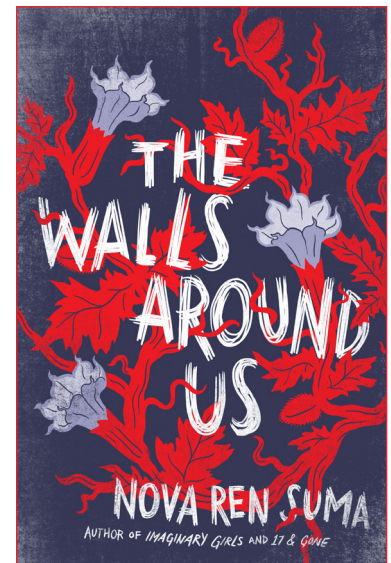
The Aurora Hills Secure Juvenile Detention Center may not be a real place, and what happens inside its gray stone walls may not be fact. I may not have stood where Amber stands—or where many young people in this country have stood, locked away at ages as young as sixteen, fifteen, fourteen, thirteen—but I can imagine. I can imagine in ferocious, frantic detail, and *The Walls Around Us* shows what I see.

In the end I did write what haunts me—and I discovered it wasn't only the phantoms trapped in a juvenile detention center high up on a hill in the northern wilds of my home state. There was something else outside all along, in the world we live in. It's human nature.

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