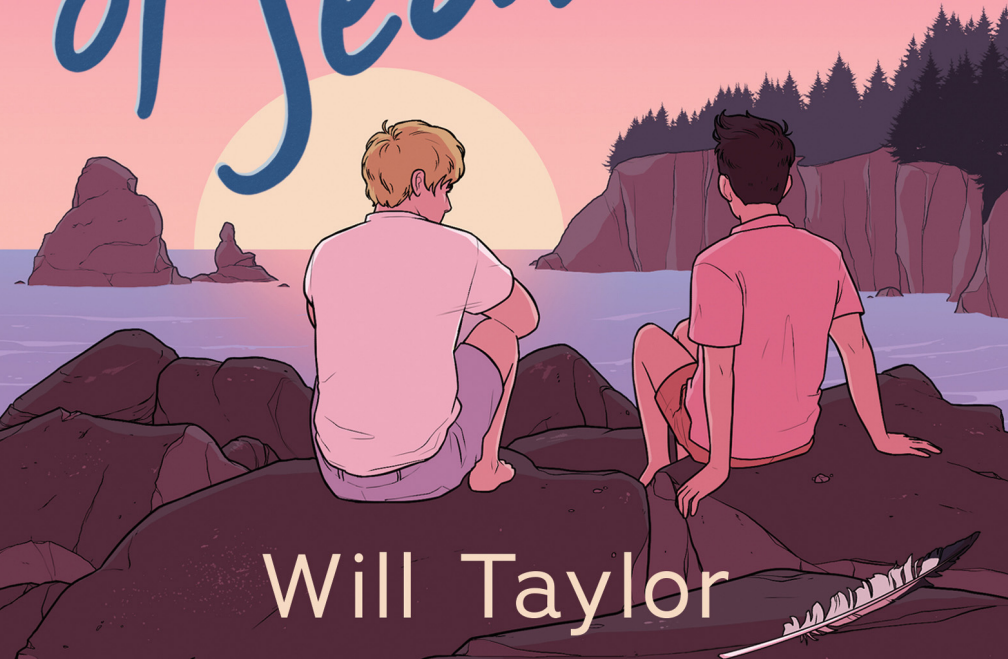




GOLD

The Language of Seabirds



Will Taylor



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WILL TAYLOR'S

The Language of Seabirds

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Glossary

Marbled murrelet = *friends*

Heermann's gull = *annoying*

American bittern = *feeling awful*

Sanderling = *happy*

Caspian tern = *high five*

Great blue heron = *hungry*

Cormorant = *beautiful*

Black-footed albatross = *lonely*

Cassin's auklet = *us*

Curlew = *goodbye*

Other Oregon birds seen or named: Horned grebe; cinnamon teal; wandering tattler; snowy plover; osprey; sparrow; chickadee; killdeer; western gull; black-legged kittiwake; sooty shearwater; ruddy turnstone; fork-tailed storm petrel; spotted sandpiper; common murre.

A Note about the Birds

This book, like a summer on the Oregon coast, is full of birds. I love birds and have done my best to describe the ones in this book as accurately as possible, but careful bird-watching readers may notice I've taken liberties when it comes to timing. To put it simply: Most of the birds Jeremy encounters can be found on an Oregon beach in June, but not all.

Those special guest birds who wouldn't ordinarily be around have been included because I couldn't resist their beautiful names. It's a sad but true fact that some bird names just sound sillier than others, and while I certainly love a good canvasback, lesser scaup, bufflehead, American coot, marbled godwit, red knot, gadwall, northern shoveler, short-billed dowitcher, parasitic jaeger, mew gull, or brant, I wanted the majority of birds named in this book to bring a certain romance to the story rather than giggles.

For anyone interested in learning more about the seabirds of Oregon, flipping through this book again and finding all the places I got things wrong could be a fun—and hopefully rewarding—place to start.

Acknowledgments

This book very nearly didn't happen. In the summer of 2018, I was preparing a list of project ideas for my agent, wondering what to do next after the fun I'd had writing the silly, pillow-fort-secret-society world of my first two books. The list I came up with was mostly more of the same: rompy "what if?" scenarios with an emphasis on magic and comedy. I wrote multipage descriptions of new worlds for my agent, new secret doors and lost keys, new animal sidekicks, new buried treasures, and new superpowers. And then I paused, debating. A title had been nagging at me, a title and not much more, just an image of the beach on the Oregon coast and one boy, a little sad, watching another running fast along the sand. It wasn't much to go on, and nothing at all like what I usually wrote. I hit save, preparing to send in the document as it was. Then, not entirely sure why, I scrolled to the bottom and typed, *The Language of Seabirds: a sad, gay, first-love summer beach story on the Oregon coast? Maybe.*

To my total shock, my agent called the following day to tell me *Seabirds* absolutely had to be my next project, and after three years of writing, rewriting, re-rewriting, pitching, praying, rewriting again, and finally editing, I cannot believe how close I came to letting this story go. This has been a hugely important book for me—writing it literally changed my heart—and that's why my first and biggest thank-you goes to Brent Taylor, of Triada US Literary

Agency. You are the greatest champion and cheerleader I could ever hope for, and your instincts are impeccable. *The Language of Seabirds* would not exist without you. I can never say thank you enough.

Next comes the team at Scholastic who gave this book the perfect nest to call home, starting with the spectacular David Levithan. Thank you for seeing the story under the writing, for showing me how to find it, and for giving me the time and grace to do the work. Every word of this book meant breaking new ground for me, both as a writer and a person, and your support, kindness, and care made that possible.

A sky full of thanks to the extraordinary Teo DuVall for making me cry with the perfect cover, to Christopher Stengel for a design and layout that had me sounding like a Heermann's gull, and to my indescribably brilliant publicist, Alex Kelleher-Nagorski. I don't know how you do what you do, but I know I am beyond lucky to have you on my side. Enormous thanks also to Jeffrey West, Melissa Schirmer, and everyone else at Scholastic who has treated this book so well.

Thanks to my family, in all our different skies.

Thanks always to Amber, Lindsey, Gabrielle, and Maria.

Thanks to all the author friends who reached out and reached back as we navigated the pandemic, especially Kelly Jones, Caroline Carlson, J. Anderson Coats, and Lish McBride.

Thanks to Grant Peel for keeping me functioning with the walks and coffees and movie analysis amid the squirrels of Volunteer Park.

Thanks to Wiliama Sanchez for inspiring me to write about a sweet, beautiful guy living in Oregon. And for the flowers. They were gorgeous. I'm still sorry I got so flustered.

Thanks to Danielle Dreger for having one of the world's best salt and pepper shaker collections.

Thanks to Steven Carter-Bailey for being both a sweetie *and* a biscuit.

Thanks to John Paul Brammer, whose book helped me sort out just why fashion was so important to Jeremy (and me, back when I was a queer twelve-year-old).

Thanks to all my local indies, especially Third Place Books, Queen Anne Book Company, University Book Store, and Phinney Books, home of my champion Tom Nissley.

Thanks to Ursula K. Le Guin for every word you ever wrote. *Searoad* had an enormous influence on this book, and I hope you don't mind me giving Jeremy a brief glimpse of Klatsand in tribute.

I believe in celebrating my influences, so readers may also notice tiny nods laced throughout this book to: *Reading Rainbow*; *The Devil Wears Prada* (the movie); *Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812* (the musical); Kate Bush's album *Aerial*; Judy Collins's song "Albatross"; *The Secret of Roan Inish* (my favorite movie of all time); Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising*; Elton John's song "The One"; and *A Room with a View* (the movie).

And, last as always, thanks to Alex Kahler. You encouraged me into this gig, the job of my dreams as well as my heart. Thank you for that, and for the bakery visits, the coffees, the long, long talks, and the everything. People reading this probably think we're a couple, but you're my best friend and that's even better.

Okay, I'm cheating, one more:

Thanks to you, dear reader. You are the seabird on the wind. You are the dream and the reason.

Q&A with Will Taylor

Q: *Where did the idea for The Language of Seabirds come from? What made you want to tell this story?*

A: It sounds like magic, but the title and central image just dropped into my mind one early summer evening. I saw a twelve-year-old boy sitting on the porch of a beach house a little before sunset, carefully pretending not to be watching another boy run by. The title arrived next, and I immediately had so many questions. I wondered about the boys, and who they were, and if they would ever cross paths. I wanted to tell their story because I recognized elements from my own preteen years in that moment, and I knew going back into those emotions and memories would give me plenty to work with on the page.

Q: *At the start of the book, Jeremy isn't very happy about having to spend the summer away from home, but at the end, it's hard for him to leave. What are some of your favorite summer memories from when you were a kid?*

A: I've always loved winter more, but summer does have an undeniable power. My happiest summer memories all happened outside: digging in my parents' garden, riding my bike around the local park, camping in the temperate rainforest up here on the Olympic Peninsula, reading the entire Redwall series on a torn old blanket under the maple tree out back. I think that showed itself in this book as Jeremy

goes from feeling safer indoors behind windows to finding the freedom to be himself out in the world under the sky.

Q: *Have you ever shared a secret language with someone else?*

A: My dear friend Amber and I invented a language called Po in college, but since it just involved swapping the first letter of every word with a p, I don't think it really counts. Po was more silly than secret, and it didn't have the resonance or meaning that makes the seabird language work. Maybe I'll share one someday, though. It was a joy getting to dream up Jeremy and Evan's.

Q: *Jeremy loves finding old Vogue magazines—they become a secret treasure for him. What are some of the secret treasures you remember from when you were a kid?*

A: Old keys, for sure! I still carry one around just in case it opens a hidden door someday. I also collected rocks and shells, especially any that shone or sparkled. Having them on my bookshelf felt like I was inviting in potential magic. Maybe that's the same thing Jeremy sees in the fashion magazines: a window into another world, a reminder that there is so much more waiting for you out there, even if it seems far away from where you are now.

Q: *How do you get to know your characters? With Evan, did you know a lot about him ahead of time, or did you meet him as Jeremy met him?*

A: The main way I get to know my characters is seeing what

they do and think about when they're alone. This is easier with main characters since we're seeing the world through their points of view—so Evan was definitely a challenge. I'm a lot like Jeremy, which meant Evan would need to be someone pretty different. I actually felt like Jeremy while I was writing the early scenes, carefully observing Evan, picking apart everything he said looking for meaning. The wonderful thing is that Evan kept surprising me. Writing him was like meeting someone in real life and finding all these unexpected ways we fit together, all this room for friendship. I think he and Jeremy could be friends for years and years and still be discovering things they like about each other.

Q: *Do you have a favorite seabird (or favorite seabirds, if you can't pick just one)? Tell us why they're your favorite!*

A: I genuinely love good old seagulls. There's something so solid about them; they're just completely themselves. Maybe I envy their self-confidence. Cormorants are beautiful. You can see them from the ferries up here in Seattle, and they always look like they're having so much fun hanging out together. Curlews have held a special place in my heart since I first saw one flying through a foggy morning on the west coast of Scotland when I was eleven. Birds are already magical, and when you add the in-between power of the sea and the shore? Glorious.

Q: *Almost all your other books so far have had magic in them. What was it like to write a story where the magic is about finding the right friend, not about casting spells?*

A: So hard at first! I had never even considered writing a “feelings” book. It felt so far outside my comfort zone, and I had no idea how to make a story happen when most of the action was occurring inside someone’s head and heart. The answer I found is right there in your question, though: the magic of finding a friend. In my first book series, a secret network of magic pillow forts acts like a huge metaphor for friendship politics and the social networks we exist in as kids. As I wrote *Seabirds*, I noticed I was pulling the same threads and exploring the same emotions, just using the worlds that exist inside people instead of a metaphor. That was the breakthrough for me, realizing feelings and friendship are a kind of magic! I started to see *Seabirds* as almost a fairy tale happening underneath a contemporary setting, and suddenly it all felt doable.

Q: *If a reader just finished The Language of Seabirds and loved it, what are some other books you’d recommend?*

A: Anything by Ashley Herring Blake! *The Mighty Heart of Sunny St. James* came out just as I finished writing *Seabirds*, and it’s a remarkably similar story about two girls. I just adored it. I also loved *Hurricane Child* by Kacen Callender; *Small Town Pride* by Phil Stamper; *Different Kinds of Fruit* by Kyle Lukoff; *Thanks a Lot*, Universe by Chad Lucas; and *Almost Flying* by Jake Maia Arlow. Oh, and *Barakah Beats* by Maleeha Siddiqui is about a girl trying to balance multiple versions of herself as she finds her place in the world (just like Jeremy) and is one of the best middle-grade books I’ve ever, ever read.