

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

The day I came up with the idea for this story I happened to walk into my house after running errands to find my husband watching the U.S. Olympic gymnastics trials. I didn't make it to the kitchen with my groceries, mesmerized in my path by Simone Biles performing her floor routine.

The last time I'd seen her perform was in the 2020 Olympics when she had to withdraw from the competition after the vault because of a case of the "twisties," a disorienting mental block that causes gymnasts to lose body awareness in the air and which can be very dangerous. Her critics were unrelenting and brutal, calling the twenty-four-year-old everything from a coward to a traitor. I remember feeling terrible for her. As the mother of a daughter the same age, I wanted to reach out and hug her.

So seeing her, four years later, trying out for the Olympics again, was stunning. I was blown away by her invincible fortitude and courage. She dominated the team trials, finishing over five points ahead of her nearest competitor.

Me being me, after the trials (and putting away the groceries), I took a deep dive on the internet to discover who this amazing young woman was, wanting to know her story. What I discovered was almost as remarkable as the idea that she had decided to put herself back in the

perilous spotlight. It took a million small things to go right in her life, along with the support, talent, and love of dozens of extraordinary people, for the stars to align so Simone Biles could become the greatest woman gymnast of all time.

I was inspired. I had always wanted to write a coming-of-age story. Many of my favorite books and movies are about the formative journey from childhood to adulthood: *Forest Gump*, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, *This Tender Land*, *The Power of One*, *All the Colors of the Dark*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*. The literary term for it is bildungsroman—bildung (education, formation, growth) and roman (novel)—stories about protagonists who come from challenging circumstances and how they overcome those beginnings to become extraordinary, unlikely heroes. Exactly like Simone Biles!

Though Simone was the inspiration for this book, I didn't want to write a story about her specifically, which was why I chose figure skating as the pursuit instead of gymnastics. This turned out to be gift. It allowed me to set a portion of the novel outdoors, which I love to write about. And it allowed me to discover a host of other inspirational women athletes with remarkable histories who greatly affected the story: Surya Bonaly, Sonya Henie, Hedy Stenuf, Debi Thomas.

It also provided an opportunity for me to set some of the story in Minnesota. Initially, I chose the state because it has freezing cold winters, and it was where the Olympic gymnastics trials had been held. But as it turned out, Minnesota has a long history of progressive views on immigration, especially when it comes to welcoming refugees and integrating them into its communities. This worked well for the secondary theme I wanted to explore about prejudice and injustice in modern times and the idea of an individual standing up against those forces and ultimately reshaping the landscape of those biases.

I had my inspiration, setting, and underlying themes. All that was left was to write the story. In the past, my novels have taken place over the course of a few weeks or months, so writing a story that spanned decades was daunting. I started by researching all the significant events that had occurred over the past twenty-two years—technological breakthroughs, climate change, political upheaval, mass global displacement, recessions, wars, COVID, cell phones, NetFlix, Amazon. It was astonishing to see how much had changed in the span of my kids' lifetimes and how rapidly the world was continuing to evolve.

The timeline gave me a chronological outline, and I went from there. I knew I wanted to start the story with Vivien being sent away to school, and that her driving force would be her single-minded pursuit of a gold medal at the Olympics.

The magic came from the host of supporting characters that brought the story to life. I loved developing Vivien's band of unlikely allies who helped her realize her destiny. Stories are all about the characters, just as life is all about who you surround yourself with. Simone Biles wouldn't be where she is without the people who helped her get there. I wouldn't be where I am without the remarkable people in my life. And Vivien would likely never have become who she did without Profe, Boodo, Dylan, Ivy, Meryl, Kai, Heinrich, and Esma.

No story is easy to write, and no two journeys of getting to "the end" are the same. This story, with all its possible twists and turns over the course over twenty-two years, was especially difficult to wrangle. Perhaps that's why it was also one of the most rewarding. I hope you enjoyed it.

Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!

Suzanne