

Nina: Adolescence

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In this debut audio novel, the author captures the nuance and language of adolescence with stunning ease. The story opens with the death of Jonas, Nina's four-year-old brother, in the family pond. Nina's mother had asked her to keep an eye on him while she completed a phone call. Jonas, a more confident and ambitious swimmer than Nina, insists on swimming in the middle of the pond rather than in the more shallow areas Nina prefers. When she notices him facedown in the water, she assumes he's teasing her. As she drags him to land, she realizes something is wrong and begins her frantic search for attention from her mother.

Four years later, the Begley family continues to struggle with their loss. Nina's father has taken on all the household chores in addition to his job as a history teacher. The hour-long drive to and from school gives him time away from his wife's depression. Nina loves her mother, Marian, and hates her for being unable to offer comfort.

When Marian finally starts to recover, she uses her painting as therapy. In an effort to reach out to Nina, Marian uses her daughter as a model for a series of nude paintings. With one child gone forever, Marian becomes obsessed with her daughter's emerging body and sexuality. The tensions in the family are at a breaking point when Marian decides to go public with her studies of Nina. As the critics review the show, Marian insists, "They're seeing ART, not porn," to anyone who disagrees with her vision of her daughter.

Nina, struggling with her changing body, inner world, guilt, yearnings, and desires, is forced to deal with her sexuality and self-image in front of a large and critical audience that includes Leo, an art critic who shares a secret history with her mother. Leo, who is in his thirties, uses his power, position, and relationship with her mother to coax Nina into an affair. None of the adults around Nina seem to understand that she is in need of protection. Her further loss of innocence plunges Nina into self-destruction.

Nina: Adolescence, despite its optimistic resolution, is a disturbing novel about abuse, neglect, and vulnerability. As a coming-of-age story, Nina's is a deeply unsettling experience. The author has taught writing for both the Iowa Writer's Workshop and Iowa State University. She lives in Ames, Iowa and is at work on a second novel. The narrator, stage and screen actress Mia Barron, has done an amazing job of portraying the angst of being a teenager. She reads with passion, intensity, and tenderness.

PAM KINGSBURY (January / February 2004)

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