

"Cross-Smith's tender writing draws you in with enormous warmth and control."
—RAVEN LEILANI, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Luster*



THIS CLOSE TO OKAY

A Novel

LEESA
CROSS-SMITH

BOOK CLUB KIT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *This Close to Okay* alternates between Tallie and Emmett's points of view. How does this narrative choice affect your reading of the story and your understanding of the characters?
2. "She knew healing—if and when it happened—happened in increments, the same sneaky way the days got longer and shorter. Barely noticeable at times, slow" (page 137). What are some of the pivotal moments in this gradual healing process, for both Tallie and Emmett?
3. After her divorce, Tallie gets into an obsessive cycle of following her ex-husband Joel's new wife on social media: "Tallie learned generic things about her life by snooping around. And obsessing over those things was something that made her feel crazy. Crazier. When it got going, it was a loop she kept looping, a hoop she kept swirling around and around, never stopping" (16). At what other moments do characters get stuck in unhealthy mental loops, and how do they escape them?
4. What are Tallie and Emmett's coping mechanisms for stress, anxiety, and grief? What kind of support systems do they each have in their lives, both before and after the events of the novel? Where do these support systems fall short of their needs?
5. When Tallie says Emmett seems like a kitten, Emmett reflects that, "Remarks like that felt like criticisms coming from women" (29). How do gender norms in our society intersect with mental health? In what ways might this story be different if Emmett were a cisgender woman?
6. The first night Emmett stays with Tallie, he decides he won't return to the bridge right away if the Giants win the World Series. Why do you think he leaves that decision to chance? Do you ever look for signs from the universe to help you make important choices in your life? Why?
8. What are some of the secrets that Tallie and Emmett keep from each other, and why do they do so? Do you think they ever cross a line in keeping these secrets?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

9. In his email to Tallie/Emmett, Joel says about his affair: “You may feel like there are parts of me you don't know, yes, but you do know the heart of me. I separated myself...in order to deceive you” (77). In what ways do different characters compartmentalize themselves, and why?

10. Both Tallie and Emmett share intimate personal details with each other that are sometimes considered taboo topics in society; Emmett talks about his depression and suicidal ideation, and Tallie shares her struggles with infertility and her husband's affair. Can you think of any other common struggles that may feel forbidden to discuss openly? Why do you think this is, and how does it affect us both as individuals and as a society?

11. Tallie frequently logs into Joel's Facebook account to get a glimpse into his new life without her, but she tells Emmett that no one should be on Facebook. In what ways can social media both enhance and detract from our mental well-being?

12. Art plays an important role in both Tallie and Emmett's lives, and there are references to specific works in the novel. For instance, Tallie has hung pictures of Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* and Klimt's *Frau bei der Selbstbefriedigung* by her bed, and Emmett references Francisco Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*, Hieronymus Bosch's *Last Judgement*, and Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for a Crucifixion*. What do you think is the significance of including these pieces?

13. When describing Joel, Tallie says he is “the kind of person who thought the Grand Canyon was overrated. (‘I just thought it would be bigger, that's all’)” (81). Can you think of any other instances where a short line conveys a great deal about someone's character?

14. Although Emmett is innocent of his wife and daughter's deaths, he is convicted and sent to a maximum-security prison. What factors lead to his wrongful conviction? Why does Emmett have a harder time emotionally after his release?

A CONVERSATION WITH LEESA CROSS-SMITH

When did you first have the idea for *This Close to Okay*, and why did you choose to make mental health one of its central themes?

Most of the time it's difficult for me to say when I first had the ideas for my books, because I usually can't remember, and I usually work over such a long period of time! But I want to say it was somewhere between 2015 and 2016 that I started thinking about these characters. I knew from that first flash that one of the characters was going to be considering suicide, with the other one attempting to stop them, so mental health was a central theme from the beginning. When considering characters and themes, I'm always looking for a way in...a connection...and in this case, there was no other consideration regarding my way in. I knew this was it from the moment it came to me. And since mental health is so important and so much about survival and I enjoy reading and writing about how people make it through life...all aspects of that...it made sense to me.

Throughout the book, Tallie puts a big emphasis on how self-care rituals and creating a comfortable—or hygge—physical space can improve mental health. What are some of your favorite rituals or objects that put you in a good headspace during stressful times?

I'm a big tea drinker, so having my teapot is definitely a favorite object and ritual for me. If it's nice enough, I like having a window open so I can hear the birds. (I'm a birder!) And all of the furniture in our house is very soft and soothing. I have a pink velvet couch and velvet pillows, plants, twinkle lights, etc. I can't control the world or anything that happens in it, but what I can do is make my house as cozy and comfortable as possible, so I do that as much as I can!

Do you have any rituals specific to writing? What are you like when you're in the middle of a project?

I don't have any other rituals specific to writing besides my teapot, really. I write at home and I rarely listen to music while I'm writing. And I never wait until I "feel" like writing in order to write. I write whether I "feel" like it or not. I just get to work. It's how I get things done.

When I'm in the middle of a project, I'm probably a bit like Doc from the *Back to the Future* movies, honestly. Wild eyes, wild hair! To someone not in my intimate circle, I probably seem like a bit of a mess maybe? Hyper-focused on my book. There's a certain level of obsessiveness I have to maintain in order to finish a project. I have a journal I carry with me everywhere just in case I think of something and I usually watch movies that inspire me. I go for long walks alone or sometimes with my husband. I need to be alone quite a bit in order to work.

Did you encounter any roadblocks while writing this novel? In general, how do you deal with creative setbacks?

There is almost always a point while I'm writing a book when I think...oh no what do I do now?! But I'm used to it! And there are always specific plot points or things I need to figure out how to make work and if they aren't working...it's hard for me to think about anything else until I figure them out. But I always figure them out. Somehow!

I really just push through when it comes to creative setbacks. I'm a workaholic, which is something I am trying to get better at, but I just keep at it because I'm quite stubborn about it.

So while I may take a bit of time off, (and by that I mean a night or a day) I've found that the best approach for me is to keep working through it until I figure it out. It's frustrating and exhausting, but I don't know how else to do it.

Depression and suicidal ideation are very personal and sensitive subjects for a lot of people; how did you approach writing about them? Were there any tropes or common misconceptions about these topics that you tried to avoid?

One thing I did was avoid using the word "commit" when writing about suicide. I'd read a lot about how that wording can be hurtful, so I didn't use it. I tried to be as careful as possible with my words. I also wanted to make sure I allowed room for the complexity of suicidal ideation. For some people, it can be a sudden, impulsive thing. For others, a lot of planning happens. For some people, those feelings can go away and never resurface again. For others, it's a lifelong battle. And I would say the same for depression. It can take many different forms and what works for one person may not work for another. I try my best not to assume things and not to lump everything or everyone together because every circumstance is different, and people are very multilayered and complex.

I wanted to make sure that my characters were presented as fully formed people who are flawed and real and who change their minds and have conflicting feelings. Someone battling depression can definitely have lighter moments when they feel a lift...and someone who doesn't battle depression can definitely have darker, heavier days. I wanted to capture the complicated, messy humanness of those thoughts and feelings.

This is a massive understatement, but 2020 was obviously a difficult year for everyone. How have you been taking care of your mental health during this stressful time? Did you ever find yourself thinking back to *This Close to Okay* and taking the advice Tallie (or rather, you) gave to Emmett?

I've definitely been digging in even more (if that's possible for me!) to the cozy, comforting things I always depend on when it comes to my mental health. My faith in a sovereign God and His unfailing love, tea and soft pajamas, spending time with my little family, British mysteries, period pieces, living slowly, going for walks, art, making dinner.

I do find myself thinking about Tallie a lot! Her knitting and her cats and candles. Her house! And most importantly, her heart. I think often of 1 Peter 4:8..."Aboveall, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins."And I don't mean that in a generic, hashtaggy way. I mean that in a real way. Love, kindness, forgiveness, gentleness, and softness in a super negative, anxious, toxic environment...I'm not saying those things are an instant magical fix for a hellscape, but I am saying a whole lot of good and beautiful things start there.



THIS CLOSE TO OKAY

PUMPKIN CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES

Any *This Close To Okay* menu has to be filled with comfort food! And this delicious recipe pairs well with rainy windows, soft blankets, warm drinks, autumn leaves and spilling secrets.

Recipe adapted from [Sally's Baking Addiction](#).

Yields 18 cookies

Prep time: 1 hour

INGREDIENTS

- 1/2 cup (1 stick or 115g) unsalted butter, melted & slightly cooled
- 1/4 cup (50g) packed light or dark brown sugar
- 1/2 cup (100g) granulated sugar
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 6 tablespoons (86g) pumpkin puree (see note)*
- 1 and 1/2 cups (188g) all-purpose flour (spoon & leveled)
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/4 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 and 1/2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 3/4 teaspoon pumpkin pie spice
- 1/2 cup (90g) semi-sweet chocolate chips, plus a few extra for the tops

DIRECTIONS

Whisk the melted butter, brown sugar, and granulated sugar together in a medium bowl until no brown sugar lumps remain. Whisk in the vanilla and blotted pumpkin until smooth. Set aside.

Whisk the flour, salt, baking powder, baking soda, cinnamon, and pumpkin pie spice together in a large bowl. Pour the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients and mix together with a large spoon or rubber spatula. The dough will be very soft. Fold in 1/2 cup semi-sweet chocolate chips. The chips may not stick to the dough because of the melted butter, but do your best to combine them. Cover the dough and chill for 30 minutes or up to 3 days. Chilling the dough is imperative for this recipe.

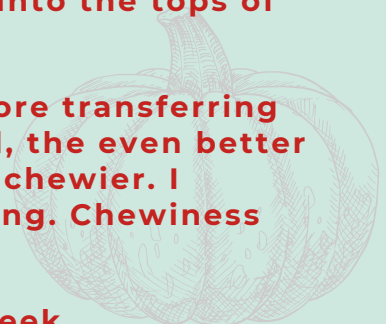
Remove dough from the refrigerator. Preheat oven to 350°F (177°C). Line two large baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats.

Roll the dough into balls, about 1.5 Tablespoons of dough each. Using the back of a spoon, slightly flatten the tops of the dough balls. (Without doing so, the cookies may not spread.)

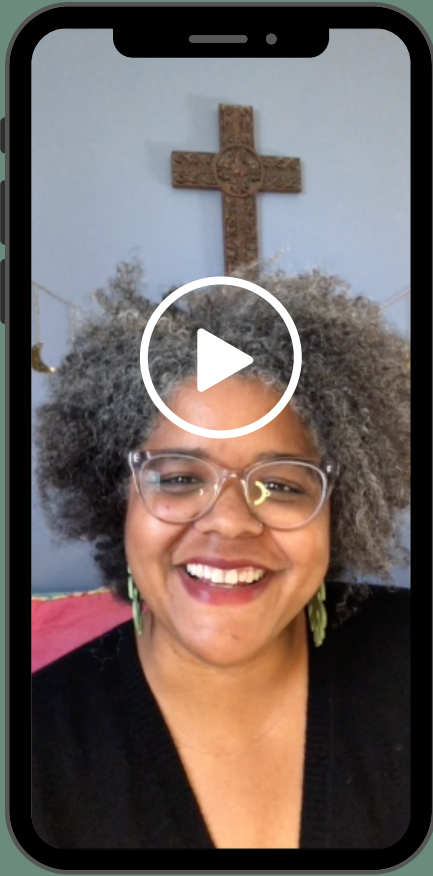
Bake for 11-12 minutes or until the edges appear set. The cookies will look very soft in the center. Remove from the oven. If you find that your cookies didn't spread much at all, flatten them out with the back of a spoon when you take them out of the oven. If desired, press a few chocolate chips into the tops of the warm cookies. This is only for looks!

Cool cookies on the baking sheets for at least 10 minutes before transferring to a wire rack to cool completely. The longer the cookies cool, the even better they taste! The flavor gets stronger and the texture becomes chewier. I usually let them sit, uncovered, for several hours before serving. Chewiness and pumpkin flavor are even stronger on day 2.

Cookies stay fresh covered at room temperature for up to 1 week.



MORE RESOURCES FOR YOUR BOOK CLUB



Watch Leesa Cross-Smith discuss self-care, mental health, and other themes of *This Close to Okay!*

Listen to a playlist of songs that inspired or were featured in the book!



“Human Thing” by Be Good Tanyas
“Jesus, Etc” by Wilco
“Halloween” by Phoebe Bridgers
“Bring It On Home To Me” by Sam Cooke
“You Send Me” by Sam Cooke
“Just Like You” by Keb’ Mo’
“A Blossom Fell” by Nat King Cole
“I Need My Girl” by The National
“Head Over Heels” by Tears for Fears
“I Feel Love” by Donna Summer
“I Put A Spell On You” by Nina Simone
“Don’t Dream It’s Over” by Crowded House
“Clean” by Taylor Swift
“Nikes” by Frank Ocean

MORE BY LEESA CROSS-SMITH...

Leesa Cross-Smith

"The women throughout this collection are constantly being revealed by a powerful inner light."

**NEW YORK TIMES
BOOK REVIEW**

SO

"Unapologetically for women, about women, a love letter to who we are, so we can glow as brightly as we dare."

ROXANE GAY

WE CAN
GLOW

WITH A BONUS STORY



A lush, glittering short story collection exploring female obsession and desire by an award-winning author Roxane Gay calls "a consummate storyteller."

Follow the author!



READ AN EXCERPT FROM *SO WE CAN GLOW*

WE, MOONS

We're not depressed all the time, some of us aren't even depressed sometimes. We're okay, our hearts, dusted with pink. When we cry in bathrooms together it's about men or our mothers or our fathers or our bodies. We are resilient, none of us have attempted suicide, although we do at times imagine what it would be like to have never been born. Is that sadness? Is that regret? We love men. We are ashamed of this attraction. We, the ones who aren't lesbians or asexual, wish we were; we fantasize about lesbian communes or asexual communes. We take the curse of Genesis 3:16 to heart. Isn't it a curse to want a man? Didn't God intend that after the fall? We feel cursed. We are Eve. We develop crushes on men we'll never meet, men in magazines. We prefer our men to remain onscreen where they cannot hurt us. We, protected by those alien-beams of light, that space glass. We envision those men down on their knees before us, looking up at us, smiling. We pat their heads and call them good boys. We use them. We crave and desire them. We leave them whether they want us to or not. We wear their clothes because they smell like them and we let the sleeves hang long past our wrists. We swear to one another we won't call or text them during our Girls' Weekend. We try to keep our word. We try really hard. They call us, they text us, they send us pictures of the flowers they'd have delivered to us if only they knew where we were. We are in the mountains or on the beach or at a grandmother's home; the grandmother has passed and left it to us, left us her journals and her cake recipes, left us the blankets and sweaters she knit, the quilts and tea-stained books she read when she was young like us. We are not young, but we are younger than our grandmothers. We are young enough to still have our periods. We bleed together when the moons are death-darkened and new, ovulate under the full ones. Their fierce, primal, ancient names connect us to the women who came before and all those who will come after: wolf, snow, worm, pink, flower, strawberry, buck, sturgeon, harvest, hunter's, beaver, cold. If we had been in charge of naming the moons, we wouldn't have changed a thing. Some of us are mothers, some of us have miscarried, some of us have no desire to bear children in our dark and starry wombs. Where do we go for emotional rescue? Where do we go to feel safe? Where do we go to escape the men who would rape and murder us, the men who would kidnap us, the men who would torture us, the men who would, the men who, the men. We are complete without them but we want them anyway. We love them but we want to hide from them. We drink champagne and wine and whiskies and stay up too late smoking. We eat dark chocolate brownies and coconut cakes and wake up and fry eggs with butter and chilies. We lock our doors at night and keep our secrets.

We howl at the moon and paint our toenails with glitter and make promises, free before we leave. We return to our homes and our children and our jobs. We return to those men, the ones who keep us, the ones we are afraid of, the ones who would never harm us, the ones who protect us. We know they desire us, they are cursed with wanting to be inside of us. We are wild and cannot be tamed. They are cursed with wanting to tame us. They want us to be witches so they can burn us. They burn with lust for us. We use our own lust-flames to fuel us and keep us warm. We are better at this than they are. We read and write our books, sing our songs, scream our screams, and fall easily into the arms of a God who loves us. We fight a God who loves us. We beg for forgiveness for we know not what we do. We know what we are doing. We run away and want to be found. We want to disappear. We want to be seen. We search our breasts for lumps so our breasts won't kill us, our cervixes for tumors. We scan our bodies for poison, never knowing. We feed our babies with these bodies and offer our bodies to the men we desire and the men take and take and take and we give and give and give. We are handmaidens and helpmeets and neither of those things. We are created in the image of a God who can be both man or woman or neither. No empty vessels; we are achingly full, spilling over. And when we die, our souls pour out like water.



[CLICK HERE TO READ MORE](#)