OVERALL WINNER OF THE WATERSTONES CHILDREN’S BOOK PRIZE 2023

WATERSTONES BEST BOOK FOR OLDER READERS

NOMINATED FOR THE CARNEGIE MEDAL 2023

LONGLISTED FOR THE UKLA AW ARDS 2023 AND THE BRANFORD BOASE AWARD

‘This moving, unique, incredibly assured debut is full of life’s slow richness, the lagging toll of grief and the brightness of unconditional love.’  Guardian

‘A phenomenal book. Such a distinctive voice, so beautifully crafted, and what a premise.’  Louisa Reid

‘Fresh, hopeful and thought-provoking and with a real lightness of touch.’  Rashmi Sirdeshpande

‘A poignant debut with a punch-packing, end-of-the-world set-up, and unconditional love at its heart. Through its deeply endearing characters, this tells a stirring story of family finding a way through loss, loneliness and feeling abandoned to embrace what’s really important.’  Lovereadings.co.uk

‘A breathtaking debut about hope, healing and love.’  The Bookseller

‘I picked it up and couldn’t stop. It’s beautiful – original, emotionally truthful and infused with love and hope.’  Patrice Lawrence

‘It’s good to meet kindness in books – a rare commodity – and humanity at its best. A beautiful debut about finding the light even as the world is ending.’  Jenny Downham

‘This is the most gorgeous, hopeful and unique book I have read in a long time.’  Waterstones bookseller

‘A stunning and vital look at what becomes important in the face of impending doom, without ever losing hope.’  Waterstones bookseller
THE CATS WE MEET ALONG THE WAY

NADIA MIKAIL

Illustrations by Nate Ng
Aisha’s family used to live in Kuching.
For Child
The cat that followed them home had a bald patch on his left hind leg and one ear missing. It was orange, a distasteful, dirty shade of it, one that reminded Aisha of fish curry gone off.

“Shoo,” Aisha told it. The cat ignored her.

“Don’t be mean,” Walter said, reproachfully. He leaned down and flashed his crooked canines at it, bent his dark head to look properly. “Kitty, are you lost?”

“Mew,” said the cat impatiently, which to Aisha sounded like it meant *obviously not, I’m following you to my new home.*
When Walter got up and they rounded the corner to her street, the cat followed steadily, like it was inherently familiar with the place.

“Oh, it probably has fleas,” she protested, making a more vigorous shooing motion.

“I don’t think it matters,” said Walter. He meant, since we’re all going to die anyway. “I don’t want it to be alone when . . . well. When.”

Still, Aisha would rather die with her scalp not itching, thank you very much. She opened their lime green front door and said, “Hi, Mak.”

“Hi, sayang,” said her mother, looking up from the lined exercise book she used for recipes. The sun struggled through the grimy windowpane, on its last legs. Everything was on its last legs these days, it seemed. “Hi, Walter. Hi, stray cat I don’t want in my kitchen.”

Aisha looked at Walter and shrugged not-very-regretfully. “You heard her. Her kitchen, her rules.”

But Walter looked at her mother, and Aisha knew it
was a lost cause already. They exchanged a glance in which Walter communicated to Esah plaintive sentences about not wanting the cat to be alone at the End, his gaze beseeching, and Aisha could see the moment when her mother’s eyes softened. A beat later Esah asked, “So what’s his name?”

“It’s a he?”

Esah gestured towards where the cat was sitting on the doormat, licking clear evidence of he-dom.

“Hm,” said Walter. “What’s his name, Sha?”

“Fleabag,” said Aisha.

Walter flicked her ear gently, thumb and index finger. “Don’t be so mean.”

“You know, I think it’ll stick,” Aisha’s mother said. She smiled absently in the direction of Fleabag, who made a huge show of a ragged lick to his nether regions, as if to illustrate the point.

“Fleabag,” Walter said, crouching over him and scratch ing at his chin. “Don’t worry about her. Think of it as a fond nickname.”
Aisha was watching her mother, who was still looking vaguely at the cat. She wondered what Esah was thinking about. June had told her, once, that strays had used to follow her father home as well, close at his heels, rubbing their heads against his ankles. Perhaps Esah was remembering them in Fleabag’s furry face.