

Everything to the Sea by Alicia Upano

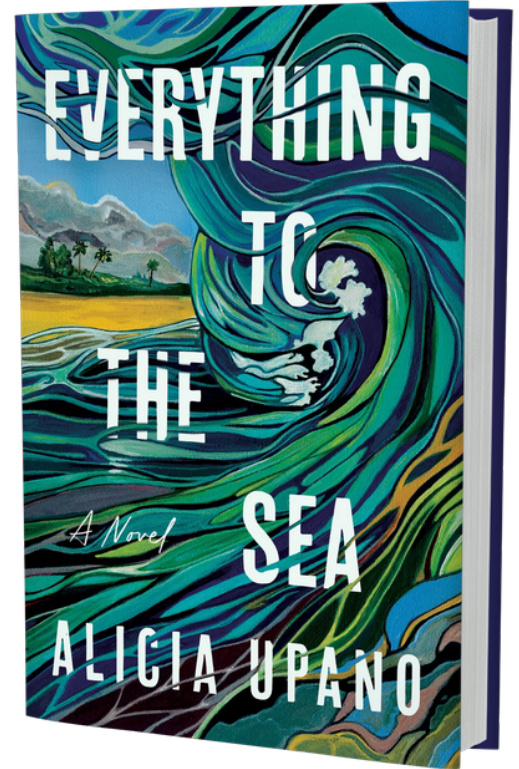
“This deeply emotional epic of undying love follows Hawaiian lovers Jane and Kenji in the aftermath of a devastating tsunami.” —*People*

Part riveting love story, part coming-of-age tale, *Everything to the Sea* is a breathtaking debut novel spanning years and shores after a sudden tsunami devastates the island of Hawai‘i and cuts short a young couple’s budding romance—a deeply moving testament to the catastrophes love can endure.

Home for one final summer, Jane is working and saving cash for her senior year of college before she leaves her island town behind forever. At first, she doesn’t remember Kenji, but he quickly becomes someone she can’t forget: square jaw, a dimple in his cheek. A Hilo boy. To Kenji, she’s Janie, nose perpetually buried in her old high school sketchbooks. Jane tells herself it’s only a fling—one perfect, carefree summer, on her way to achieving her dream of becoming an architect and moving to the continent.

Then a tsunami sweeps their families out to sea, and their all-consuming affair breaks with the weight of grief, pulling them in opposite directions. Kenji remains in Hawai‘i, bound by duty to rebuild their hometown. Jane, shattered by the loss, follows her best friend to California. For seven years, an ocean lies between them, until Jane and Kenji meet on another coast . . .

In prose that sparkles like sun on the water, Upano’s debut novel tells the unforgettable story of two young people as they come of age, fall in love, forge new families, and try to find their way back together, again and again. *Everything to the Sea* is a moving portrait of our ability to overcome even the most devastating tragedies, when everything else is washed away.



ALICIA UPANO was born and raised in Hawai‘i. She is the recipient of the Poets & Writers Maureen Egen Writers Exchange Award Hawai‘i, the James Jones First Novel Fellowship, and a Bread Loaf-Rona Jaffe Scholarship. Her short fiction has appeared in *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Best Peace Fiction: A Social Justice Anthology*, and more. After living in Asia and both U.S. continental coasts, she now resides on O‘ahu with her family. *Everything to the Sea* is her debut novel.

Alicia Upano's Story Behind the Book

Everything to the Sea is a love story, yes, but also a story of catastrophe set in contemporary times. And beyond the world of the novel, several real-world catastrophes absent from these pages bookended its writing. I began drafting at the onset of a global pandemic, and by the time this book found its final shape—the characters realized, the architecture sound—a fire destroyed thousands of structures and killed over 100 on Maui, where my family first set foot on Hawaiian soil nearly 100 years ago.

As I write this, a week has passed since my spouse collected our children from their Honolulu schools—I was traveling—following a coastal evacuation after an 8.8-magnitude earthquake struck Kamchatka, the world's largest seismic event since the 9.1-magnitude quake in Tōhoku, Japan, caused a death toll of nearly 20,000. How can one not obsess over this world, its power revealing our fragility—the water can swallow us, the earth can crack beneath our feet, fire can scorch our homes, and the air we breathe—for a time—could kill us?

Early drafts were written quarantined in dark hours while my toddler slept, as I tried not to panic over the possibility of giving birth to my second child alone in a hospital on lockdown. I'd started a novel intellectually curious about climate change set in the near-future, understanding that my island home would be more susceptible to environmental threats (rising sea levels, for starters). Yet I kept returning to two minor characters from Hilo, a town long accustomed to nature's toll as the tsunami capital of the U.S. The possibilities of the Hilo setting intrigued me: Amid omnipresent peril, how do we connect and disconnect, treasure and abandon, embrace and mourn? How do we navigate a future we can't possibly predict? Could we rebuild, and if so, how? The near future was now, or perhaps, always was.

And so Jane and Kenji became central to a new narrative designed around the stages of a tsunami. This metaphor, inherently dramatic, became four discrete parts of the novel. Writing became one thing I could hold onto, and it also offered relief in a grave time—what is more irresistible and life affirming than a love story?

With each part and draft completed, my home and universe shifted. My water broke as I wailed through a surgical mask. The world re-opened. From the privilege of safety, I watched Maui struggle to rebuild. Eventually I would sit in a New York City hotel room, tuned to a feed of Hanalei Bay, some 5,000 miles away, waiting for a wave and aching for my family. It was, thankfully, anti-climactic. Yet it's a grim comfort, each close call a reminder of risk.

In the novel, a reporter asks Kenji about the fascination with natural disasters, and he says, "They're big events, beyond our control. It reminds us nature is greater than us, that life can be random. But also, there's a fascination with its singularity. Most of us will live long lives, with twists and turns and loves and losses. But with a natural disaster, it's every loss you can imagine compressed and crystallized into one moment that changes you forever. You must endure the loss and rebuild."

Everything to the Sea crystallizes our heroes' losses early in the novel, and we follow Jane and Kenji through their long arcs of longing and grief, repairing and reclaiming their lives. For most of us, our transformations will unfold in quotidian ways, though threats always loom—because isn't the world always drowning in disaster? And still we love. And mourn.

Reader, whatever season this may find you in, may Jane and Kenji's journeys delight and comfort you. May they remind us all, as Jane observes, that to love is to know our lives contain something worth the risk.

—Alicia Upano, Honolulu, Hawai'i, August 2025

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Discussion Questions

1. The novel details the aftermath of a tsunami. How does catastrophe shape the choices Jane and Kenji make in the years that follow?
2. Discuss Hawai'i as a character. Which details made the setting feel most alive, and how did they inform the story's emotional stakes?
3. Duty vs. desire is a central tension. Where do you see each character compromise, and where do they refuse?
4. Time and distance create both clarity and confusion. How do the seven years apart change Jane and Kenji individually?
5. Family—biological and chosen—plays a major role. How do secondary characters (e.g., Wally-Jun, Lorelei, parents) complicate or clarify the protagonists' paths?
6. What is the book saying about rebuilding—of places, of lives, of relationships? Where does rebuilding succeed or falter?
7. Consider the moments of miscommunication. Are they avoidable, or are they honest reflections of grief and growth?
8. How does the novel engage with identity (AAPI, mixed heritage, local vs. mainland)? What resonated with you?
9. If you could follow one character beyond the final pages, who would it be and why?
10. How did you feel about the ending? Do you think Jane and Kenji are finally in a place where they can be together?

