

How We Named the Stars

Andrés N. Ordorica

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A first-generation Mexican-American college student is altered by love in Andrés N. Ordorica's elegiac romance novel *How We Named the Stars*.

Daniel's freshman year at an elite Ithaca university was marked by tumult—including the death of his roommate, Sam. At the novel's outset, he addresses departed Sam, retelling the story of how they met. At first wary and anxious on campus, Daniel was a scholarship student living far from his California home; his early impressions of athletic Sam were influenced by such fears in unfounded ways. Nonetheless, they became friends.

Still, the ordinary challenges of young adulthood were compounded by Daniel's background. He recalls experiencing racist assumptions in class and feeling pressured to pretend that everything was fine for his family's sake. He wrestled with fears about coming out, too, handling hateful comments while remaining hyperaware and cautious. He also developed near-reverence for Sam, whose everyday kindness is amplified in the wake of his loss.

The tense, rearward-gazing narration takes heightened turns through the school year's cinematic autumn. It is interspersed with thoughts about Daniel's Uncle Daniel, who died when he was young but whose story paralleled his namesake's. Hesitations and unspoken yearnings gather, generating anticipation about how the boys' fleeting, confusing love will end. A poignant motif that surrounds the naming of constellations further hints at the beauty and constancy of connections across time, even as the seasonal movement of the book's background pushes the story toward its inevitable end.

A sensitive story of a first love, *How We Named the Stars* is a nuanced coming-of-age novel about hiding, heartbreak, and healing.

KAREN RIGBY (January / February 2024)

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