

## Advance praise for *When It All Syncs Up*

“A bold, insightful debut that explores young artists experiencing trauma. Maya Ameyaw writes about the psychological tolls and triumphs of dancing with a captivating freshness that will pull readers into this intense, intimate story.”

—**MARIKO TURK**, author of *The Other Side of Perfect*

“Maya Ameyaw’s storytelling is as expressive and entrancing as the human form in dance. *When It All Syncs Up* is a stunning read—an emotionally complex tale of friendships and first loves that’s simmering with tension and gripping to the final word.”

—**DEBBIE RIGAUD**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Simone Breaks All The Rules* and *A Girl’s Guide to Love & Magic*

“Aisha is every teen who’s struggled to separate their self-worth from the expectations of their parents. A touching story of healing and self-discovery.”

—**RYAN DOUGLASS**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Taking of Jake Livingston*

*“When It All Syncs Up* is a powerful story of finding the light when the clouds roll in. Ameyaw crafts an emotional tale of journeying through mental health dilemmas while dealing with friendship, love, and starting over. A gorgeous narrative of new beginnings, fresh hope, and taking back control.”

—JOY L. SMITH, author of *Turning*

“Ameyaw’s debut is raw and real. It contextualizes Black girlhood through the lens of mental health and what it looks like to heal within community. Aisha is strong and soft, a perfect balance in a relatable heroine.”

—LOUISA ONOMÉ, author of *Like Home* and *Twice As Perfect*

“At times hopeful and beautiful but also heartbreakingly devastating, *When It All Syncs Up* is a story of love in so many forms. But maybe most important of all, it is about the love we give ourselves, and allow ourselves to be given, even at our most broken.”

—JONNY GARZA VILLA, author of the Pura Belpré Honor Book *Fifteen Hundred Miles from the Sun*

“Delicate and fervent, like any good ballet performance, *When It All Syncs Up* is honest, captivating, and fresh. It will stay with you long after you’ve finished the book.”

—GABRIELA MARTINS, author of *Like a Love Song* and *Bad at Love*

*“When It All Syncs Up* is a journey that will pirouette into your hearts and leave you breathless. So much more than a story about dance, the pages are filled with depth, tackling heavy issues from a relatable point of view. Ameyaw reminds us throughout of the lengths one will go to for the love of friendship. And how sometimes, finding your own path along the way will offer the surprising self-discovery of courage

and strength. I cannot wait to see what's next from this debut author because I am here for the ride."

—VANESSA L. TORRES, author of *The Turning Pointe*

"*When It All Syncs Up* is a powerful, needed story of healing. Aisha deals with racism, mental health issues, and bullying, as well as experiencing first love. It's a story that will resonate with so many teens and help others have more compassion. The honesty, vibrancy, and compelling writing make it an unputdownable book."

—CHERYL RAINFIELD, author of *Scars and Stained*

"Powerful, moving, and achingly personal, *When It All Syncs Up* is the perfect read for teens who need a book that feels like a friend who understands."

—KAYLA ANCRUM, author of *The Wicker King*, *The Weight of the Stars*, and *Darling*

# Letter From the Editor

Dear Reader,

When we think of world-building, we often imagine fantasy realms or parallel universes. We might not imagine a high school dance studio or the quiet rooftop where a boy and girl hold hands and watch the stars. But it's the only way I can describe Maya Ameyaw's captivating writing—how vividly the scenes unfold, how her characters come alive on the page. Maya has created a rich and utterly immersive world in this novel. I hope you'll join us in stepping inside.

At the start of *When It All Syncs Up*, sixteen-year-old ballet dancer Aisha knows something has to give when the racism at her elite academy—already a threat to the career she's always dreamed of—causes her mental health to spiral. When she tries out modern dance at a new school, she's drawn to the freedom in its more intuitive and improvisational techniques. But she's not prepared for the intense emotions this dance form brings up. Aisha is used to pushing her body to extremes for her art. But actually feeling her feelings? That's way out of her comfort zone, especially as she navigates past trauma and questions about her future.

As readers, though, we feel everything Aisha is going through on a visceral level. Whether it's the physical strain of perfecting a ballet solo, the joy of a basement dance party, or the thrill (and awkwardness) of a new crush. We feel, too, her panic and confusion as she experiences dissociative episodes and the suffocating pressure of other people's expectations for her—and her expectations for herself.

It is so special and rare to find a book where young peoples' inner lives are explored with such depth, nuance, and compassion. Our hope is that this story will make YA readers feel seen and supported, particularly those whose experiences have not always been represented in young adult media.

This isn't just a story about the healing potential of art—it's a piece of art that puts that healing into practice. I am so proud to have edited Maya Ameyaw's debut novel and look forward to hearing how it resonates with you.

Sincerely,

Claire Caldwell

Senior Editor, Annick Press

WHEN  
IT ALL  
*Syncs*  
UP

MAYA AMEYAW



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toronto + berkeley

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*For all the highly melanated girls—  
You are beautiful and belong in the sun.*

—M.A.

## Author's Note

The ultimate intention of this story is to hold space for people, particularly young Black women, who have experienced trauma. This is a story centered around healing and support, however there are a lot of dark places that are travelled along the way.

Those sensitive to issues of racial discrimination, mental health challenges, disordered eating, and verbal abuse, please be aware that these topics are covered at length throughout this story. There is also a lot of on-the-page descriptions of addiction issues in relation to a supporting character, as well as brief off-the-page mention of physical and sexual assault of a supporting character. I advise those who find these topics potentially triggering to proceed carefully and at their own pace.

# 1

*“Stop freaking out. You’ve got this, Aisha.”*

Michaela’s voice cuts through the jittery, jumbled thoughts that have me pinned in place in front of my dresser mirror. When I glance at her across my tiny dorm room, her dark eyes are fixed on me, daring me to disagree.

Taking a deep inhale, I sink to the floor. The faint chemical musk of carpet cleaner fills my nose. My heartbeat starts to slow down as I contort myself into a split, pressing down hard on my calves.

“You’re right. I worked my ass off last week.”

*“Exactly.”* Michaela’s still focused on me; looking as effortlessly confident as always. *“Warner had to have noticed. You’re definitely scoring an apprenticeship spot.”*

“We’ll see. Wish me luck.”

Jumping up, I cross my room in a few steps. I tap my chest once before tapping hers. My fingers glide off the glossy magazine poster of Michaela DePrince tacked to the wall above my desk next to my Misty Copeland and Raven Wilkinson posters. I tap Misty and Raven next.

Michaela's airborne form, poised gracefully in a grand jeté, is physics-defying. A pattern of tiny vitiligo spots is a beautiful explosion of sparks across her deep brown skin. My own skin is a similar shade, but slightly darker.

*"Sweetie, remember what I said about staying out of the sun!" My mom calls out as I skip into the kitchen from the backyard. My shoulders stiffen, but I pretend not to hear her as I twirl my iridescent pink Sailor Moon wand, watching it glimmer in the sunlight.*

Snapping out of the memory, I find myself still staring at the poster. Looking away, my face grows warm like someone is witnessing this, even though I'm alone.

It's pretty sad that I've had a variation of this same fake conversation every morning for the last three years. But being almost friendless forces you to get creative.

I would definitely be completely friendless if Neil knew about my little morning ritual.

"I get that you love Michaela. But it's just a stupid *poster*, Ish." I can almost hear his snorting laugh.

I'm somehow annoyed even imagining Neil saying that. Which is dumb. I should stick to being annoyed with him about something he actually did—missing our weekly virtual dance party last night. I stayed up way too late waiting for him to call, but he must have fallen asleep early.

*All right, here we go.* Time to stop zoning out and talking to myself like a freak.

I grab my hoodie off the back of my desk chair and wrap it securely around my waist over my leotard. Straightening my spine, I perfect my posture, arranging my face in a placid expression fit for public

consumption. Wouldn't want to scare anyone faint of heart with my natural resting bitch face.

Taking a final deep breath, I step out of the warmth of my room into the cool, hushed hallway. The rubber soles of my knitted boots squeak against the sparkling floor.

I squint my eyes almost shut. The rising sun peeking out from the towering crop of evergreens behind the dorms is way too bright through the empty hall's floor-to-ceiling windows.

A door clicks open behind me and I quickly rummage around in my dance bag for my headphones. Tchaikovsky drifts gently into my ears and I focus on mentally running through today's choreo. I visualize myself doing my chaîné turns effortlessly, my turnout flawless as the music swells.

I'm brought back to the present by someone shouldering past me, bumping me off balance from behind. Gritting my teeth for a moment, I force my face back into its unbothered position as I look up from my phone. It's Stephanie, not even stopping to apologize as she books it toward the washroom, her toiletry basket swinging wildly behind her.

*Oh, no worries, Steph. I'm all good.* Containing a sharp glare, I keep moving toward the studio.

Almost everyone is gathered by the windows when I get there. Taking my usual spot close to the door, I don't look up from my phone even as I feel their eyes on me.

There's some faint whispering, followed by the familiar sharp peal of laughter from Noelle. It always reminds me of the sound a cat would make if someone mistakenly stepped on its neck. There are some quieter giggles from her friends and I turn my music up, a fury of strings drowning them out. I concentrate on changing into my pointe shoes.

Usually, summer vacation is a much-needed break from Noelle and the rest of the girls, but not this year. Everyone else in our level is gone for the summer; there are just ten of us here for the final intensive.

Only five of us are going to move forward to the apprenticeship program at the Western Canadian Ballet, the major company that's partnered with my school. The program starts next week, once the school year is back in session. We've been in the studio all of August—today's our very last day.

I'm trying not to freak out about it too much... but this is the biggest opportunity I've had since Neil and I placed in the Youth American Grand Prix.

But that was almost exactly three years ago—basically a lifetime in ballet. This apprenticeship is my last chance to get back on track with potentially scoring a contract with a respected company.

The Western Canadian Ballet is as good as it'll get for me now. I try not to think too much about what could have been—what *should* have been. I try not to picture what it would have been like if Neil and I won YAGP scholarships to the School of American Ballet, the number one ballet school in North America. SAB is where we always planned to go when we were kids. We worked endless hours preparing for that before—

Squeezing my eyes closed, I shake my head. I can't do anything about the past now. All I can do is focus on nailing today.

Madame Warner enters and everyone scrambles to their feet to take their places at the barre. Stephanie bolts in a second afterward and takes her spot, flanking Noelle. Warner puckers her wrinkled face and Stephanie mutters an apology.

Warner turns on the music and we begin warming up at the barre,

starting with our pliés. I settle into my usual rhythm, studying my form carefully in the mirror as I move through the positions, bending my knees so they're exactly overtop of my toes. Warner's voice slowly transforms into the voice of my first dance teacher, Madame Dmitriyev. That always happens when I'm in the zone; her deep, throaty voice keeping me in perfect time, yelling out the eight-count in Russian.

Close to the end of class, I feel eyes on me again and I realize Warner has paused right in front of me. Which she's never done before.

She claps twice and we all freeze. Her gaze remains fixed on me, and my stomach drops straight to my bowels.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I prepare myself to be reamed out for my form.

*Tuck your zadnitsa!* Madame D.'s voice reverberates in my brain from beyond the grave. I can almost feel the light tap of her cane on my butt and I resist the urge to flinch.

"Let's see you solo," Warner says, and I blink at her. It takes me a moment to register the meaning of her words.

*Earth to Aisha. This is it. This is your shot.*

I manage a nod and force my shaking legs to move toward the front of the room. Sweat drips down the back of my neck.

I start, keeping my arms graceful and light as I lift them into my first position. I kick my front foot forward and up, my extended toe soaring toward the ceiling.

There's no way in hell I'm going to mess this up—not after everything. I've imagined this moment thousands of times. And now my daydreams are somehow bleeding into reality.

Letting go, my body fully awakens and muscle memory sets in. My chaîné turns are perfectly executed as I float across the room in perfect time with the music. For a moment, I wonder if this is just another vivid fantasy, but when the music and my body stop as one, my heart rams against my ribcage so hard I know I can't be making this up.

Warner's studying me. The room is so silent I can hear birds trilling to each other from the woods outside the window.

Turning to the rest of the class, she lifts a finger in my direction. "*That's* what I want to see."

I can't help the grin that takes over my face. She's been stingy with praise all summer. Warner turns and faces me again, her eyes run the length of my body. She takes in my pink tights and pointe shoes—a stark contrast to my deep complexion. She says nothing to me, but her thoughts are as clear as day in her eyes.

*What a shame.*

The realization hits me with a sickening thud, leaving me breathless. It doesn't matter how closely I followed the choreo. Even though my movements were cuttngly precise, even though my figure—besides my overgrown legs and hips—matches the rest of the girls... my skin never will.

Warner looks away and swivels on her heel as she heads toward the door. "The apprenticeship list is posted in the locker room."

I walk back to my spot by the door with my head held high, consciously keeping my face as expressionless as possible as the other girls shoot me side-eyed glances. I swallow down the acidic rage sprouting within me.

*Stay cool. Just stay cool.* Grabbing my headphones, I switch from calming Tchaikovsky to my loudest playlist, electric guitars wailing in

relentless riffs. I shut my eyes and make myself focus on some winding down stretches.

When everyone else has headed into the locker room, I slowly get to my feet. The sickly-sweet strawberry flavored meal replacement shake I forced down first thing this morning sloshes violently in my stomach.

*You don't know for sure what Warner was thinking. You can't know for sure. You're being paranoid.*

I push open the locker room door and glance at the list on the bulletin board. My name isn't there.

Okay. So I definitely read Warner's face correctly.

A squeezing knot forms in my throat. I manage to take in a full breath, tinged with the classic locker room mix of mildew and body odor.

I want to throw myself on the floor and scream, but I keep perfectly still. This was my very last chance; this was the only way I would ever be able to get anywhere decent with my ballet career—

*Keep it together.*

I collapse onto a bench near my locker, facing away from the other girls. With a flick of my wrist, I sweep my stray braids back into my bun and start untying my pointe shoes.

The tip of my left shoe is a deep crimson. When I get it off, the bandage on my big toe is soaked through. I grab a new bandage and unwrap the old one, discovering what's left of my toenail barely hanging on. Bracing myself, I rip it off.

I think of pain in levels since I'm always in it, my muscles perpetually aching. Losing a toenail usually cuts through the background pain for a sharp moment, but the wince that crosses my face is only a reflex.

I feel absolutely nothing.

My pulse speeds up to a vibrating hum and the fluorescent overhead lights start to weave and bob erratically. All sensation in my feet fades, but it's not like normal pins and needles. It's like my nerve endings have all been snipped at once.

A locker door slams and the room comes back into focus. I run a hand over my sweaty face and re-wrap my toe as tightly as I can, fresh blood seeping through the new dressing.

The girls' voices fade and then they're gone, leaving me alone in the locker room. The bone-deep numbness in my feet spreads up my ankles and then my legs before it races through me. Erasing me.

I untether from myself like a ghostly apparition. Somehow, I'm now staring into my own dark eyes, as lifeless as a propped-up doll's.

The utter strangeness of this jars me back into my body again. I bite my tongue to keep from yelling out.

*What the hell is happening to me?*

Trembling, I get to my feet and throw on my hoodie before I grab my bag. When I get out into the hallway, it's empty. Searing midday sun is unabashedly streaming in through the windows now. I should head to the cafeteria to grab lunch, but as if of their own accord, my feet move toward the dorms.

I stare at my phone's lock screen. It's a picture of me and Neil—we're both laughing so hard our faces are contorted, our grins slightly blurred as we throw our heads back. For the life of me, I can't remember what was so funny. It could've been anything. He never fails to crack me up with the dumbest shit.

Since I didn't get the apprenticeship... maybe I could visit Neil before the school year starts up again next week? Dad should be okay

with it; he let me visit him last summer.

The cool surface of my phone is pressed up against my ear and I become aware of it ringing.

When I hear Neil's voice, I let out a breath of relief.

"You know what to do."

"What?" There's a blaring beep and I register it's just his voicemail.

This is the first time he hasn't picked up my call. Ever. I stare at my phone in disbelief for a moment before hanging up and calling my dad instead.

"Hey, honey. What's up?" he says through a yawn. "It's late over here."

I wince at myself for blanking on the fact that Tokyo is sixteen hours ahead. "Oh yeah, sorry."

"No worries. What's going on? Did you get into the program?" he asks, his voice perking up. "Congrats!"

I step back into my room. Now that I'm alone, I let my face fall and my shoulders droop.

"I didn't get in." I keep my voice as light as I can manage. "No big deal, though," I add quickly.

I really don't want him to start worrying about me again. Like when he sent me to that horrible clinic before I moved here. Shaking my head, I envision holding a match to the memory and setting it ablaze.

But whatever just happened in the locker room... it wasn't like before. As spaced out as I used to get sometimes, floating out of my own body is a brand-new development in terms of my general screwed-up-ness.

"Honey... I know how much this meant to you. I'm so sorry. Are you all right?"

I kick off my boots and plop down on my bed, stomach first.

“I’ll be okay. I can go to a dance college instead when I graduate.” I say this like it’s a perfectly feasible second option instead of the complete failure that it truly is. The most prestigious ballet companies in the world choose their new dancers through apprenticeships, not college programs.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” His voice gets all syrupy with concern.

“Yeah, it’s fine.” Bitterness almost overwhelms me for a moment, but I push it back down. Stewing over this won’t change the fact that my future of mediocrity is now sealed. “I was only calling to check in... Do you mind if I visit Neil in Toronto for a few days before school starts next week? I promise I won’t book a super pricey flight or anything.”

He’s silent for a long moment.

I wonder if he’s annoyed that I didn’t ask to visit him in Tokyo instead. As much as I would really love to see him... he’d probably have to work the whole time I was there anyway. Biting my lip, I fight the urge to ask if he can visit me anytime soon. I know it’ll just make him feel bad if he can’t get time off before Christmas.

“Okay, that’s fine. But I need to ask you something first.” His voice is strangely grave.

“Uh, sure. What is it?”

“Aisha... Are you and Neil dating?”

I screw up my face in confusion as I wrack my brain for anything that could have prompted this from him. Neil and I met when Madame D. paired us together at her dance studio when we were eight. Before my parents’ divorce, he was over at our house almost

every day. He's basically family.

"Yeah. We're dating." I snort as I roll over onto my back. "We've been keeping this from you for years. Congrats, you finally clocked us. You're kidding, right?"

I expect him to laugh but he doesn't. "If you're seeing each other now, I'm not comfortable with you staying over at his place like when you were kids."

I roll my eyes toward the ceiling. "You know we're just friends."

He's quiet again for a moment before responding. "I didn't expect you two to stay so close these last few years."

I'm guessing that's because the last time Dad saw him, I wasn't exactly thrilled with Neil. It was the day I left for the academy. We'd stopped at Neil's house to say goodbye on the way to the airport.

*Neil stares down at his front steps, refusing to look at me.*

*My voice is almost gone from screaming. I'm completely beyond caring that Dad can hear me from the car a few feet away. "You promised you wouldn't—"*

I sit up abruptly, suddenly short of breath. *Don't think about it.* Shaking my head, I make myself focus on his voice again.

"I thought you'd make some new friends in Alberta—"

"I thought you liked Neil." Neil and my dad used to be close too, to the point that it irritated me sometimes when they would talk for hours on end about boring-ass sports crap.

"I do. He's a great kid."

Thankfully, Dad has no idea that Neil isn't quite the same sweet little goody-two-shoes he used to be.

"Well, like I said, it isn't like that with us. So can I go?"

"All right... Just check in with Neil's dad. And one last thing—"

“I won’t visit Mom while I’m in town,” I say in a monotone.

God, why is he so obsessed with thinking I want to see her every chance I get? I’ve always been way closer with him than my mom—even before the divorce. But in the past couple years, I’ve only seen her for brief, awkward holiday dinners before my dad and I would go actually celebrate with Mexican takeout.

“Aisha,” he says warningly. “I know you think I’m being ridiculous. But I don’t feel comfortable with you seeing your mother on your own.”

Why would I even want to see her? The idea of telling her I didn’t get the apprenticeship makes my skin itch like I’m about to break out in hives.

“I promise, I won’t,” I say, keeping the annoyance out of my voice this time.

“Thank you. Let me know when you land safely. Love you.”

“Okay. You too.”

Once I’m off the phone with him, I try Neil again.

I let out a long breath when I get his answering machine. “How the hell are you *still* asleep? Look, sorry this is last minute... but I’m heading back to the city. I can crash at your place, right? Call me back.”

I toss my phone on the mattress and look over at Michaela, Misty, and Raven. I wait for some reassuring words, but there’s nothing. They’re just stupid, silent posters.

That same consuming numbness from the locker room starts to creep up on me again. Before it can overtake me, I jump up from my bed and hastily untack the posters. Not able to bear the thought of crumpling them, I just release my hold, letting them float gently into the waste can. Turning away, I go to the dresser and empty its contents

into my gym bag.

I try to convince myself that a break from this place is all I need. Once I see Neil, I'll for sure feel more like myself again.