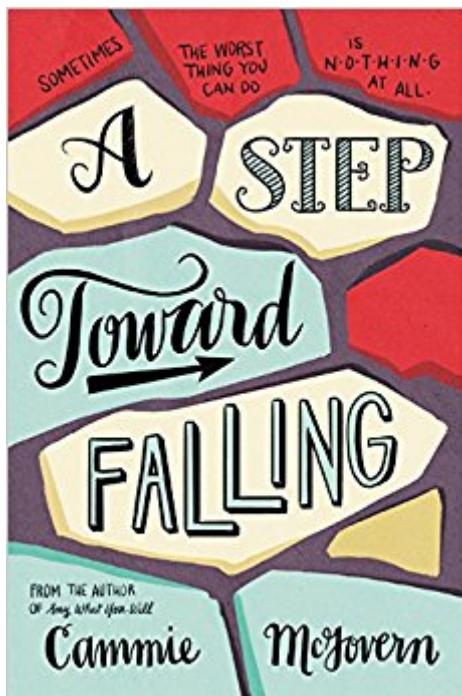


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# A Step Toward Falling



## Synopsis

Cammie McGovern follows up her breakout young adult debut, *Say What You Will*, with this powerful and unforgettable novel about learning from your mistakes and learning to forgive. The New York Times Book Review raved: “This is a beautiful, big-hearted book with important lessons embedded in compelling stories of two irresistible girls. Expertly executed and movingly realized.” Emily has always been the kind of girl who tries to do the right thing—until one night when she does the worst thing possible. She sees Belinda, a classmate with developmental disabilities, being attacked. Inexplicably, she does nothing at all. Belinda, however, manages to save herself. When their high school finds out what happened, Emily and Lucas, a football player who was also there that night, are required to perform community service at a center for disabled people. Soon, Lucas and Emily begin to feel like maybe they’re starting to make a real difference. Like they would be able to do the right thing, if they could do that night all over again. But can they do anything that will actually help the one person they hurt the most? Told in alternating points of view, *A Step Toward Falling* is a poignant, hopeful, and altogether stunning work that will appeal to fans of books by Jennifer Niven, Robyn Schneider, and Jandy Nelson.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Gr 9 Up “Emily knew when she saw Belinda, a classmate with developmental disabilities, being assaulted under the bleachers she needed to intervene, but she froze, and now she's doing community service and trying to figure out how to live with herself. Belinda is attempting to

determine how to go forward after rescuing herself. Told in alternating sections of Emily's and Belinda's voices, this book explores how even good people can fail morally. Emily and Lucas (who was also present that night) are wrong, and that is made clear throughout; their inaction is understandable but inexcusable, and that subtle distinction is an important one. In addition, Belinda is written thoughtfully and respectfully. She has a distinct voice that reflects her cognitive disabilities but without condescension. Given that portrayals of people with developmental disabilities so often either depict them as perfect angels or use them as a device by which the neurotypical characters better themselves, Belinda's full-fledged personality is important for readers to engage with. The parallel romances are charming and appropriate, and while Emily and Lucas's treads the well-worn paths of smart girl plus hot, sensitive jock, it is not an unpleasant trope to revisit. The secondary plots of Belinda's family conflict and Emily distancing herself from her friends are well-executed ways to flesh out the two protagonists' growth. VERDICT Highly recommended for realistic fiction collections. —L. Lee Butler, Hart Middle School, Washington, DC --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

PRAISE FOR A STEP TOWARD FALLING: "Universal human emotions and challenges link the characters across boundaries of gender, class, and I.Q. This is a beautiful, big-hearted book with important lessons embedded in compelling stories of two irresistible girls. Expertly executed and movingly realized." (New York Times Book Review) "Without evading or sugarcoating difficult topics, McGovern shows that disabled and able aren't binary states but part of a continuum—a human one." (Publishers Weekly (starred review)) "Told in alternating sections of Emily's and Belinda's voices, this book explores how even good people can fail morally. Belinda is written thoughtfully and respectfully. She has a distinct voice that reflects her cognitive disabilities but without condescension. Highly recommended for realistic fiction collections." (School Library Journal (starred review)) "Through alternating chapters, Emily comes to understand her inaction, prejudices, and failings, and Belinda learns to face her fears, find her voice, and take charge of her future. McGovern's ample experience with special needs youth is evident, as it allows this unique story shine from within." (ALA Booklist (starred review)) "Cammie McGovern's second nuanced, thought-provoking young adult novel. A co-founder of Whole Children, a Massachusetts community center similar to the one about which she writes, McGovern obviously draws upon personal experience to create characters who are complex and fully realized." (Chicago Tribune) "So much love for this wise and powerful book. Most of

all for Belindaâ€”a girl with a cognitive disability who shows how full a life can be, and who loves Pride and Prejudice and Colin Firth as much as we do. For fans of Jennifer Niven and Jandy Nelson.â€• (Justine Magazine)â€“Alternating viewpoints illustrate how braving the uncertainty of relationships, expectations, and life after high school transcends class or ability. The sensitive overview of tough issues gracefully balances romance with reality. Fans of Jane Austen will appreciate this unconventional homage.â€• (Kirkus Reviews)â€“Belindaâ€”â€œs voice is perfectly pitched: itâ€”â€œs clear that sheâ€”â€œs thought her world through on her own terms. By including a wide variety of distinct characters, the novel shows that the presence or absence of a disability is just one of many aspects of who a person is.â€• (The Horn Book)â€“This book might lead to an interesting discussion about responsibility, about standing up for someone, about doing the right thing.â€• (Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA))â€“McGovern uses her experience working with youth with special needs to illuminate the everyday thought processes and internal lives of young adults who function differently in society. She gives readers characters, not archetypes. Itâ€”â€œs a poignant, warm, compelling book that insists that mistakes and redemption can go hand in hand.â€• (The Globe and Mail)â€“A sensitive exploration of frailty and strength, setback and recovery. Ultimately, itâ€”â€œs a story of young people reexamining themselves, their preconceptions, and their possibilities, and readers will recognize their vulnerabilities and applaud their commitment.â€• (Bulletin of the Center for Childrenâ€”â€œs Books)â€“Beautifully written. Although this story has its dark side, to be sure, it also is a story told by McGovern with much love and humor. Everyone who reads this book will be touched and forced to question her/his own stereotypes.â€• (Examiner.com)â€“Readers will fall more in love with the characters the more they read.â€• (TeenReads.com)â€“Itâ€”â€œs hard not to fall in love with McGovernâ€”â€œs story. A beautiful portrait of a real teenage world that is capable of hopefulness and healing. Fans of Rainbow Rowell and Jandy Nelsonâ€”â€œs brand of realistic YA fiction should find a new favorite in Cammie McGovernâ€”â€œs lovely *A Step Toward Falling*.â€• (BookBrowse.com)Praise for *SAY WHAT YOU WILL*: â€“This is a book to read, savor, and pass on and on until it has gone around the world twice.â€• (Ron Koertge, author of *Stoner & Spaz*)â€“A unique and unforgettable love.â€• (Teen Vogue)â€“Exhilarating and heartrending. This novel is stunning.â€• (ALA Booklist (starred review))â€“Readers will be surprised, moved, amused, worried, hopeful, and grateful.â€• (Publishers Weekly (starred review))â€“McGovernâ€”â€œs triumph is how well she normalizes and highlights the variety of disability experiences among teens and their often circuitous

journeys toward claiming their voices and right to self-determination. Ultimately, a deeply engaging and rewarding story. (Kirkus Reviews) "A beautifully written story about two teens who find each other in spite of what might seem like insurmountable problems." (Examiner.com (5 star review)) "It's a little bit *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, a little bit *Eleanor & Park* and a lot of something else entirely. A young adult book with grown-up lessons." (Metro US) "Wonder meets *Eleanor and Park* in this authentic romance with beautifully crafted characters." (IndieBound.org)

Whenever Cammie McGovern releases a book, I know I'm in for a treat because her books all grip me so much that I have to read them more or less continually because I simply have to know what happens next. The themes in this book were as amazing as everything she's published. The topic of young people with disabilities particularly resonates with me because of a boy I knew in my childhood who was mainstreamed into our class. While it was easy to see the differences between him and the rest of us at first, it didn't take me long to see his special abilities and beautiful heart, making the first impressions quickly disappear in my mind. Causes for the disabled are very important to me because of this early impression. I love the intertwining theme of first impressions through the discussion of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in this novel. Like all people, each of the characters struggled with this and made valuable discoveries upon getting to know one another as people. It was the perfect vehicle to make the point in a very natural way. I wish I could give this book unlimited stars, and that might not even be enough.

A fascinating look at teens from completely different worlds. Emily knew Belinda when they were younger and kids were less aware of developmental differences. When their paths cross years later, Emily freezes and her inability to act leads to an unusual community service option that not only opens her eyes to the lives, feelings and needs of a group of disabled people, it makes her look at her own life in a new way. Lucas travels a parallel path, but his begins with his being part of the high school football team. Following the alternating stories of Emily, Lucas and Belinda is fascinating. The author does a great job of humanizing all three as they move toward a new awareness and her portrayal of the characters with developmental disabilities is superb.

Grade: D  
One Word: heavy-handed  
When Belinda, a developmentally delayed student, is attacked, Emily freezes. Football star Lucas does nothing to help either. Now Belinda stays home from school

and Emily and Lucas must do community service with special needs young adults. Alternating chapters between Emily's and Belinda's POVs, *A STEP TOWARD FALLING* is a story about judging others and learning from them. Emily had positive and negative traits, extremely judgmental, yet with a good heart. She seemed more like a teenager than an adult dreamt up, rather than a believable person. I did, however, find her voice plausible. I didn't find Belinda as authentic in her chapters, though infant seizures were mentioned as a possible cause, I was never sure why she was special needs. She has some autistic traits, but her verbal and reading skills seemed too high for a special classroom. I felt like Cammie McGovern threw a few convenient traits onto Belinda, rather than developing her as a person. I generally enjoy issue books, when the story isn't hitting me over the head with a message. *A STEP TOWARD FALLING* felt like McGovern was screaming in my ear with a bullhorn, "Don't be judgmental" and "special needs folks can teach you things". The premise and plot were strong and engaging, but the execution felt more like a lesson in being nice to special needs kids, rather than a satisfying story. **THEMES:** special needs, friendship, relationships, dating, bullying. *A STEP TOWARD FALLING* missed the mark with too forceful a message.

I had to read this book for a book review in one of my classes. I was slightly disgruntled that I had to take money from my food budget to buy it (college student). After reading it I discovered it was completely worth it. This book is a true representation of things that could happen on a regular high school campus. I totally recommend buying it if you are even just thinking about it.

Cammie McGovern has done it again! Writing about disabled characters (for which she is famous), she now combines her current genre of YA with her old one of mystery, in that a catastrophe occurs before the book begins and informs much of the action; we learn about it only gradually over the course of the book and do not realize its full significance until the end. The plot is also a kind of homage to *Pride and Prejudice*, which is often referred to throughout. As Cammie has done in previous novels, she alternates narration between the two principal characters. Others are not given narrative voices, but we nevertheless learn much about them. One of the most interesting features is the blend between homosexual and heterosexual characters, not often found in this genre. The book was partly inspired by (and dedicated to a co-founder of) the community center for disabled children which Cammie helped to found more than ten years ago. Highly recommended!

Belinda's plain-spoken, straightforward way of interpreting the confusing subtleties of "normal"

society are spot-on and provocative. The reader will be hard-pressed NOT to conclude that the differently-abled have much to teach us about how to treat each other and handle our own emotions and insecurities. To her credit, Ms. McGovern's inclusion of a gay best friend for the protagonist is in neither gratuitous nor superfluous but, rather, adds an additional layer of depth and complexity to the storyline. Excellent work, and a page-turner, to boot!

This was a great book! I loved how this helped to show people with disabilities in a true light. They are just people trying to get through life with its challenges and opportunities. I love how it also showed an honest look at how it can sometimes be difficult to relate, but not any more difficult than any other person just different. Lastly, how sometimes we make mistakes that affect other people and owning up is the only way to change.

After the wonderfulness of "Just Say What You Will" this is a sadder and more serious tale, but still uniquely interesting, well-written, and hard to put down.

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