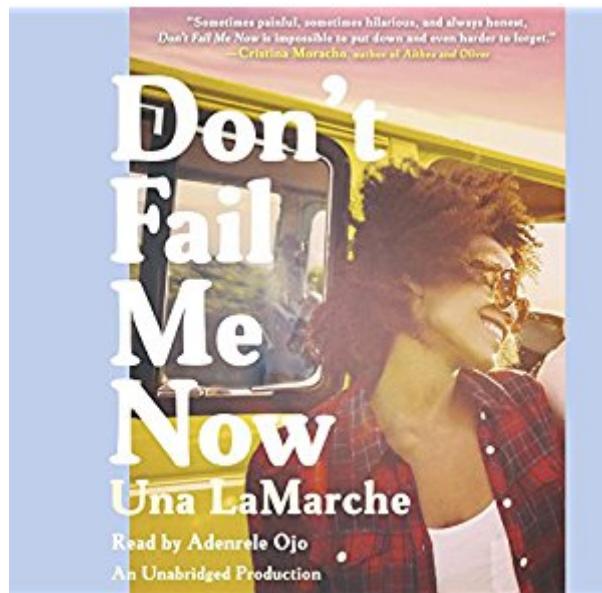


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# Don't Fail Me Now



## **Synopsis**

Michelle and her little siblings, Cass and Denny, are African American and living on the poverty line in urban Baltimore, struggling to keep it together with their mom in jail and only Michelle's part-time job at the Taco Bell to sustain them. Leah and her stepbrother, Tim, are white and middle class from suburban Maryland, with few worries beyond winning lacrosse games and getting college applications in on time. Michelle and Leah have only one thing in common: Buck Devereaux, the biological father who abandoned them when they were little. After news trickles back to them that Buck is dying, they make the uneasy decision to drive across country to his hospice in California. Leah hopes for closure; Michelle just wants to give him a piece of her mind. Five people in a failing, old station wagon, living off free samples at food courts across America, and the most pressing question on Michelle's mind is: Who will break down first - herself or the car? All the signs tell her they won't make it. But Michelle has heard that her whole life, and it's never stopped her before.... Una LaMarche triumphs once again with this rare and compassionate look at how racial and social privilege affects one family in crisis in both subtle and astonishing ways.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Michelle Devereau has seen and experienced a lot in her short life. She has a heroin addicted mother (who has been recently jailed); a troubled, younger sister; a baby brother who some would consider a bully; an indifferent aunt; and less than \$200 dollars to take care of her siblings. So when

a white teen (Tim) shows up and claims that they share a sister (Leah), she is shocked to say the least and isn't sure how she wants to react. But when she learns the reason for the visit....apparently her very absent, white biological father (Buck) wants to see her and her half-sister before he dies. In a moment of clarity or maybe panic, Michelle decides to head to California with her siblings, and see what her father has to say. Of course a bonus would be any inheritance he might leave. As the kids travel cross country, in an jalopy (nicknamed Goldie...the only thing she has from her father)...they must sleep in the car, live off samples or returned food in the mall food court, elude the authorities, and learn to accept each other. Ironically, they eventually learn that they have more in common than they first thought. This was my first Una Lamarche novel and I must admit I really enjoyed it and wouldn't hesitate to read another. Her writing style is clear and easy to follow. And while there were times that the story seemed somewhat unbelievable (five kids traveling cross country with no real resources or adult supervision), it was still entertaining and compelling. As a parent, I believe that this story will resonate with teens and inspire discussions about everything from drug use to bullying. Overall, it was a wonderful read...4 stars.

Running away in young adult novels nowadays isn't quite the same as it was in the pre-GPS/Amber Alerts/social media days. (Can you imagine what would have happened to Huck and Jim if someone had installed a monitoring device in their cell phones?) This is something seventeen-year-old biracial Michelle Devereaux soon discovers when she takes her younger brother and sister and leaves home to seek out their estranged, dying father, Buck, who supposedly has a "heirloom" for them. As her drug addicted mother is currently in jail, and their aunt doesn't want to host them unless they provide rent money, few people are looking for Michelle and her siblings, but complications arise when they are joined by their half sister, Leah, and her stepbrother, Tim, both white and affluent and therefore, more likely to be searched for. With varying degrees of success at remaining off the grid, the group deals with car trouble, Michelle's sister's health issues, and lack of spending money as they attempt to reach Buck in California. Michelle is also surprised to find herself falling for Tim, even as she worries about keeping her part time job when she returns, as well as her siblings' problems. Pros: I really liked Michelle as a heroine. She was flawed but likeable, and the author did a great job in depicting how the oldest child in a dysfunctional family can have an over-developed sense of responsibility for her siblings. I also loved that she managed to fix the car with Leah on her own, which she was inspired to do by watching her single mom tinker with it. Cons: I felt like it was a bit of a cop out not to resolve any of the issues that Michelle was fleeing in the first place. Obviously, you can't put a storybook ending on everything, but I would have at least liked to

know if she kept her job. Overall: An engaging road trip/coming-of-age novel that handles issues like racism skillfully.

Don't Fail Me is the story of two half-sisters and a stepbrother who take off on a cross country journey to find their dying biological father. The kids, only related marginally (if even) by blood, are held together only by their common grudge against their father. They have to handle poverty (they've got no money at all and have to live on whatever food they can find) and are hobbling along in a seriously beat up old car, hoping they make it all the way to California before their father passes. I believe the central intent of Don't Fail Me was to explore difficult interpersonal and social issues such as: inner growth, inner peace, race, family relations, parental involvement, and poverty. In many ways it was successful in approaching these topics, but less adept at seriously digging deeply. Don't let the cover art or blurb fool you, there's a lot of sadness and anger that most definitely take away any lightheartedness in the book. I think a bit of a balance to offset the emotionally dark moments would have made them even more poignant. Overall, a nice change of pace compared to the average YA drama. I appreciated the unique, if flawed, characters which are well conceived and packed with emotion.

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