

The Life You've Imagined: Q&A with author Kristina Riggle

What inspired this book?

This book has been through many drafts and was once known by another title, and I actually started it before I wrote my debut *Real Life & Liars*. I was sifting through my life to find material weighty enough for a novel, zooming in on times when I was most upset and scattered. A moment of disillusionment stood out to me. It was a time when I realized that doing your best, working your hardest and being a nice person wouldn't guarantee success. It was a painful newsflash to realize the real world is not always merit-based! This brought me to the character of Anna, the attorney who is poised for the career success she thought she wanted, only it doesn't bring her the satisfaction she'd expected. Anna's mother, Maeve, was the next character. At first, she existed mainly to support Anna's story, but she emerged with a powerful tale of her own. Cami was simply "the friend" and Amy was a plot device, but their stories became more important as the novel went through its many drafts. I love the fact that it's an ensemble story, now. Also, I loved the idea of using Geneva for a last name, if only for the "Geneva Convention" joke made by Aunt Sally.

You mentioned many drafts of this novel. Why so many?

I am ruthless about abandoning projects that aren't working, and this was especially true before I ever had a book deal and thus a contract to fulfill. So, ordinarily I would have just filed this one away as a learning experience. But I always loved the ending chapter. Indeed, the existing ending is not much different than my earliest drafts. I was determined to write a book which *earned* that ending. I'm happy with the result. It was worth every bit of the work.

What inspired your fictional Haven, Michigan?

I had set *Real Life & Liars* in a real city which was very special to me, but this time I wanted total flexibility in the setting so I just made up a town. Originally I'd called the town North Haven, then I decided to drop the "north" entirely because "Haven" alone is so evocative, and for some of my characters, ironic. Haven is loosely based on Grand Haven, South Haven, and similar small towns on the southern shore of Lake Michigan. I worked for a couple of years at the Grand Haven Tribune as a reporter. It was my first real job, with a desk and business cards and everything. I was so proud of my own desk! The Tip-a-Few bar in the book is based on the real thing in Grand Haven. It's such an excellent name for a bar, I couldn't help but use it.

The Nee Nance Store is based on various small convenience stores near places I've lived. I love little family run places – and their whimsical names -- and had always thought a family business would make a great jumping-off point for a novel.

How did you come up with the title?

At first, "the life you've imagined" only came into play as a bit of scenery: the magazine clipping Anna had taped to her mirror as a girl, and later tore down in a fit of disgust as a cynical adult. As the novel evolved into an ensemble story, I gave each of the girlhood friends the clipping and imagined how they reacted to it. The quote (which is actually a misquote, the real Thoreau excerpt isn't quite so modern and pithy) seemed evocative of this story about adults grappling with the contrast between their actual lives and what they thought they'd have.

Are you living the life you imagined?

No! And I'm glad. I imagined myself by this point sailing along in my career as a newspaper reporter, well on my way to becoming editor of a large urban daily. Novel writing was a vague aspiration for some undefined "someday" point. I always envisioned myself a hardcore career woman who would do "it all". I'm still a career woman but the career is different, and my definition of success more fluid and flexible. I no longer try to predict my life many years ahead, and when I do imagine the future, it's more in terms of family and home rather than jobs and money. Also, the older I get the more aware I am that it's all so fragile. I'm happy that my family and I are healthy right now, today. And I'm awfully glad that my "someday novel" came sooner rather than later, because who knows what later will bring?