

## Q&A with Kristina Riggle about *Real Life & Liars*

Q: Why did you choose to write this novel using four points of view, and with Mira's point of view in first person, the others in third person?

A: I wanted to write the kind of book I love to read. I love a good family drama with a big cast of characters and colorful personalities. Also, it's fun for me as a writer to get into different voices. It's hard to get bored when you switch perspectives regularly. It did make for some tricky logistical issues sometimes. It was hard for me to remember what each character knew at any given point and where all the rest of them were, since the progression from chapter to chapter is not always precisely linear. But that was part of the fun, too. I put Mira's voice in first person because I wanted to leave no doubt that this is her story, first and foremost. Also, she's such a bold character. It would have seemed strange to speak for her, instead of letting her speak for herself.

Q: What inspired this story?

A: I'd been trying to get published for a while, and that effort to be commercial had wrung all the joy out of my writing. I finally decided that I should write to entertain myself, and even if rejections rolled in, I could at least enjoy the process and be proud of the result. Happily, this book was received very well. I suspect this manuscript was the most authentic I'd ever produced.

Q: What kind of research did you do for the novel?

A: I did some reading, and contacted Susan G. Komen for the Cure, but the best research of all came from interviewing local doctors. A prominent oncologist told me that women of Mira's age often discover a lump in their breasts while holding their grandbabies. I found that detail so poignant that I worked it into the book. Another doctor walked me through a "diagnosis talk" just as she would give a real patient. She also told me how patient reactions to breast-cancer diagnosis have ranged all over the map and didn't always follow what seemed logical or reasonable. This bolstered my faith in Mira as a genuine character, even if her reactions might not be "correct" or "expected."

Q: Your novel's epigraph is the famous first line from *Anna Karenina*, "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." How do you think that quote applies to your book?

A: I'm sure happy families are alike—all two of them! I'm being glib here, but my point is that every family has its problems, the Zielinskis included. It's funny, some people who have read the manuscript seem amazed at how screwed up these characters are, when to me they don't seem that far out of bounds. Maybe people are reacting to how all these problems seem to be coming to a head all on one weekend. That's the way novels work, though. More drama that way.

Q: Is the story autobiographical?

A: No. Mira is diagnosed with cancer before the story even begins, and that diagnosis drives much of the plot, but that's not a reaction to anything that's happened in my life. Everyone has someone in their circle of family and friends touched by cancer, but that's not why I wrote about it. I needed a crisis to drive the story, and breast cancer is singularly terrifying to women. As for the other plot elements, I can relate to each of my characters on some level, but no one character represents me in the book.

Q: There's one male voice in the book: the middle child, Ivan. Was it hard to write from a male point of view?

A: Not especially. I can relate to Ivan quite a lot, in fact. He's a struggling songwriter and at the time I wrote the book, I was an aspiring novelist. It wasn't hard to convey his feelings of frustration over trying to break into a creative profession. Also, he and I share a love of Monty Python.

Q: Why did you set the book in Charlevoix, Michigan?

A: This little town in northern lower Michigan is known as "Charlevoix the Beautiful" and it fits. I spent many summer weekends there visiting my grandparents, and some of my happiest memories come from walks on the dune at Mt. McSauba, or taking in a sunset from the pier. Mira and Max's house is loosely based on the home on Dixon Avenue where my grandmother grew up. Charlevoix (pronounced SHAR-le-voy) is one of my favorite places in all the world, and I figured if I had to spend a year or more writing a book, I should at least dedicate the hours in my imagination to someplace beautiful.