

# **Real Life and Liars**

## **by Kristina Riggle**

### About the Book

Sometimes you find happiness where, and when, you least expect it.

For Mirabelle Zielinski's children, happiness always seems to be just out of reach. Her polished oldest daughter, Katya, clings to a stale marriage with a workaholic husband and three spoiled children. Her son, Ivan, so creative, is a down-in-the-dumps songwriter with the worst taste in women. And the "baby," impulsive Irina, who lives life on a whim, is now reluctantly pregnant and hitched to a man who is twice her age. On the weekend of their parents' anniversary party, lies will be revealed, hearts will be broken...but love will also be found. And the biggest shock may come from Mirabelle herself, because she has a secret that will change everything.

### Praise for the Book

“With ease and grace, Riggle walks the fine line between sentimentality and comedy, and she has a sure hand in creating fun, quirky characters.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“In her wondrously affecting debut novel *REAL LIFE AND LIARS*, Kristina Riggle accomplished something authors almost never do anymore: she made me care about her characters - and what a wide-ranging cast of characters they are! She made me want good things for them. A must-read for summer 2009.”

—Lauren Baratz-Logsted, author of *Baby Needs a New Pair of shoes*

“A compulsively readable, rip-your-heart-out portrait of a family in crisis. These characters live and breathe.... Powerful, complex, utterly unforgettable.”

—Tish Cohen, author of *Inside Out Girl*

“A dazzling debut.... A beautiful exploration of the intricacies that draw families together even while pulling them apart.”

—Kristy Kiernan, author of *Catching Genius* and *Matters of Faith*

*Courtesy of HarperCollins Publishers*

## About the Author

Title: Kristina Riggle

American Novelist

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### PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Married; children: Sam, Avery. Avocational Interests: Reading, yoga, amateur musical theatre, spending time with family. Addresses: Home: Grand Rapids, MI. Agent: Kristin Nelson, Nelson Literary Agency, 1732 Wazee St., Ste. 207, Denver, CO 80202. E-mail: kris@kristinariggle.net.

### CAREER:

Novelist. Freelance journalist for *Grand Rapids Press*; coeditor for fiction, *Literary Mama*. Formerly a full-time newspaper reporter for seven years.

### WORKS:

#### WRITINGS:

#### "ZIELINSKI" SERIES; NOVELS

- *Real Life & Liars*, Avon (New York, NY), 2009.
- *The Life You've Imagined*, Avon (New York, NY), 2010.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Cimarron Review*, *Literary Mama*, and *Espresso Fiction*. Contributor to blog, *Debutante Ball*.

## Sidelights

Kristina Riggle is a western Michigan author whose "Zielinski" series of novels follow the misadventures and complex family relationships of the Zielinski family in their home of Charlevoix, Michigan. Riggle, a former journalist and occasional contributor to the *Grand Rapids Press*, has contributed fiction to the *Cimarron Review*, *Literary Mama*, and *Espresso Fiction*. Her first novel is *Real Life & Liars*, and it introduces readers to the Zielinski family.

In *Real Life & Liars* the Zielinski clan reunites to celebrate their parents' thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. Despite the happy occasion, the children--and their mother--are all concealing things from each other and from themselves that prevent them from fully connecting. "The tale is told by the mother, Mira, and her three grown children, alternating points of view with each chapter," wrote Hollyn Johnson in her *Grand Rapids Press* review. "Mira's segments are told in first person while the others are in third person, making this seem more Mira's story. But each narrator reveals secrets and grows considerably." *Real Life & Liars* is really "about three grown children whose lives are falling apart, all coming home for a family anniversary party," the author explained in an interview with *Scruffy Dog Review* Web site contributor Terri Molina, "only they don't know yet their mother has a big secret that will change everything. I had been frustrated with the publishing end of the business and decided to just sit down and write the kind of book I like to read. So I wrote a story with a big cast of characters--there are four point-of-view characters in the book, plus spouses and children and dates and friends--and I set it in one of the prettiest places in the world."

It turns out that all of the children--eldest daughter Katya, middle son Ivan, and youngest daughter Irina--have issues that interfere with the celebration of their parents' relationship. Katya is demanding and judgmental, Ivan is disgusted with his lack of success in his chosen career (he is a musician), and Irina has recently acquired an older African American husband and an unplanned pregnancy. But Mirabelle, the family matriarch, is concealing the most devastating secret of all: she has been diagnosed with inoperable breast cancer and has chosen not to have the recommended mastectomy, even if the decision will cost her life. "I loved this book," wrote Therese Walsh in her introduction to her interview with Riggle published on the Web site *Writer Unboxed*. "Kristina is truly gifted, not wasting words, but using each to reveal character with a clever, smart and humorous delivery--and even the occasional Monty Python joke. A 'cancer book,' humorous? Just wait until you meet the members of the Zielinsky family, each of whom needs to learn that the ideal in life--perfection--is as sterile as symmetry and not a reflection of the lumps and bumps of reality at all."

Critics celebrated Riggle's depiction of the complex relationships of the Zielinski family. "First novelist Riggle," wrote Bette-Lee Fox in *LJ Book Review*, "goes beyond the stereotypes to create truly unique ... characters." "I loved seeing how this family came to terms with each other, finally realizing how to support and accept one another," stated a reviewer for *Devourer of Books*. "I can't wait for Kristina Riggle's next book." "With ease and grace," stated a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, "Riggle walks the fine line between sentimentality and comedy." "I devoured this book and loved every second of it," declared Swapna Krishna on *S. Krishna's Books*. "The characters, the writing, the plot: they all fit together perfectly. I definitely recommend this book." The result, concluded *Booklist* contributor Aleksandra Walker, is "a moving and accomplished first novel about a family coming to terms with change."

## FURTHER READINGS:

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### PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, May 1, 2009, Aleksandra Walker, review of *Real Life & Liars*, p. 65.
- *Grand Rapids Press*, June 21, 2009, Hollyn Johnson, review of *Real Life & Liars*.
- *LJ Book Review*, June 26, 2009, Bette-Lee Fox, review of *Real Life & Liars*.
- *Publishers Weekly*, February 16, 2009, review of *Real Life & Liars*, p. 103.

### ONLINE

- *Coffee with a Canine*, <http://coffeecanine.blogspot.com/> (June 2, 2010), "Kristina Riggle & Lucky."
- *Devourer of Books*, <http://www.devourerofbooks.com/> (June 2, 2010), review of *Real Life & Liars*.
- *Fantastic Fiction*, <http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk/> (June 2, 2010), author profile.
- *Kristina Riggle Home Page*, <http://www.kristinariggle.net> (June 2, 2010), author profile.
- *Scruffy Dog Review*, <http://sdr.colingalbraith.co.uk/> (June 2, 2010), Terri Molina, author interview.
- *S. Krishna's Books*, <http://www.skrishnasbooks.com/> (June 2, 2010), Swapna Krishna, review of *Real Life & Liars*.
- *Writer Unboxed*, <http://writerunboxed.com/> (June 2, 2010), Therese Walsh, author interview.\*

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## Author Interview

*Courtesy of the Author's website:*

*[http://www.kristinariggle.net/download/Liars\\_KRiggle\\_QA.pdf](http://www.kristinariggle.net/download/Liars_KRiggle_QA.pdf)*

*Retrieved December 19, 2011.*

*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?*

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.

*What inspired this story?*

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.

*What kind of research did you do for the novel?*

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."

*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?*

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.

*Is the story autobiographical?*

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.

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

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.

*Why did you set the book in Charlevoix, Michigan?*

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.

*Courtesy of the Author's website: [http://www.kristinariggle.net/download/Liars\\_KRiggle\\_QA.pdf](http://www.kristinariggle.net/download/Liars_KRiggle_QA.pdf)  
Retrieved December 19, 2011.*

## Discussion Questions

### Real Life and Liars: Reading Group Questions

1. Does Mira's reluctance to have surgery for her breast cancer seem understandable?
2. What other reasons might she have for this reluctance beyond what she shares directly with the reader in the opening chapter?
3. Which significant life changes are facing Mira, and how might those changes be affecting her state of mind regarding the cancer diagnosis?
4. How would you describe the relationship of Mira to each of her children? How do these relationships affect the plot of the novel?
5. How do you react to Mira's marijuana use? How much does it affect her decision-making throughout the book?
6. How would you describe the marriage of Mira and Max? How do you think their relationship plays into her reaction to her cancer diagnosis?
7. How does birth order affect the three grown siblings and how they fit into the family?
8. Which main character—Mira, Katya, Ivan, or Irina—do you understand the most? What parallels can you draw to your own life?
9. Mira observes in the book that children grow up any way they want to, despite a parent's best efforts. Do you agree with this?
10. Why does Katya find herself driving by her old boyfriend's house and secretly calling him? Have you ever felt drawn to a romance from your past?
11. What is the source of the friction between Mira and Katya, and does it seem justified to you? Do you have old childhood fights with your parents that still echo in your adulthood?
12. Do you think Katya and Charles's marriage will endure? Do you think Katya will truly change her life? If so, in what ways?
13. Do you agree with Katya's decision to stay with Charles? How else might she have reacted?
14. Why is Ivan so clueless about romance?
15. Do you think Jenny and Ivan have a future together? Why or why not?

16. Why do you think Irina engages in reckless romantic behavior?
17. What do you think Irina should do about Darius and the baby?
18. Do you believe Mira will change her mind about the surgery when she sees the doctor again?  
Why or why not?
19. What role does the Big Tree play in the novel?
20. How does Mira's lack of formal religion play into the story? Do you believe her view has  
changed by the end?
21. Do you think the Zielinskis are a happy family at the beginning? How about at the end of the  
novel?

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