
Emily Franklin

The Girls' Almanac
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Q: What was the biggest challenge in writing about such a large cast of characters whose lives intersect in so many ways? How did you keep their connections straight?

A: The challenge for me with this book wasn't keeping the connections and characters clear in my mind, but rather knowing when to stop exploring them! There were more stories I could have told (one involving Jenna meeting her fiancé's parents, for example) but I edited out the extraneous stories so that Jenna, Lucy, Gabrielle, and Kyla had their arcs. My husband is a physician and I asked him to make a flow chart for me—similar to the character chart at the front of *The Girls' Almanac*—which gave me a visual for holes in the narrative. In my mind I often knew how two or three characters overlapped, but I realized I had to make this clear in the context of the stories. I loved having a large cast of people to write about as well as the freedom to look forward and back in their lives; I was able to trace the origins of certain behaviors and see the outcome of childhood incidents as they appear in adulthood.

Q: One of the most tragic figures in *The Girls' Almanac* is Alice. What inspired you to include her in these stories? Have you witnessed firsthand the wreckage of anorexia on relationships and bodies?

A: Although I have been friends with a woman whose life was ruled by her food issues and whose health suffered greatly, the character of Alice is also an emblem. To me, Alice represents that friend who can never really be yours, the one you can't fully get close to for whatever reason—illness, geography, age, social spheres. Alice's illness keeps her at arm's length from Jenna, leaving Jenna unable to help her friend and yet desperate for the friendship to continue. It's terrible to lose a friend, especially when their self-destructive behavior feels like it could stop at any time. I wanted to show—from Jenna's perspective and Justin's—the way that having someone enter your life that you know can't—or won't—stay affects us.

Q: Matt and Kyla, who are two of the less sympathetic characters in *The Girls' Almanac*, both end up dying young. Do you think there was any subconscious sense of wanting "justice" guiding you when writing their characters? What did you want to show by including stories from these two characters' viewpoints?

A: "Early Girls" was the second story I wrote ("Suburban Solstice" was the first), and I knew Matt had died from the minute I wrote that first sentence. His infidelity wasn't revealed to me until later, when I wrote "The Justin and Matt Show". I wasn't surprised, exactly, by his cheating on Lucy, but it made sense to me. His death had already been written, and it was interesting to me to write in the fling with Heather as a giant flaw in Matt's story—and in his never-fulfilled marriage with Lucy. The infidelity makes for further questions—would Matt have told Lucy? Would Justin? Either way, would Matt and Lucy have gotten married if he hadn't drowned? Matt is a valuable character in terms of showing his view of Lucy (and how we know her through her loss of him), and in his friendship with Justin. I wanted to include a lot of the "almosts" in these people's lives—the near-friends, the could-have-been relationships. Matt and Kyla are old friends of Lucy and Justin's—both sets of people met in high school. I wanted to explore some of that comfortable closeness balanced with the sense that sometimes old friends are too familiar (thus the critiquing in "The Justin and Matt Show", and the way Kyla relates to Lucy, and later treats Jenna).

With Kyla, I do think there was a certain amount of punishment there—albeit subconsciously. Not so much that I wanted her punished, but that she—having turned her life around finally—doesn't get to live it fully. I didn't start out wanting that to happen, but when I wrote "Talk", I wanted Kyla to have become more self-realized; that she was this mean girl. Leaving her in that cruel state seemed unfair to her character and to the narrative, but even I was surprised to find out what happened to her at the end.

Q: An almanac is generally thought of as a publication that includes forecasts, astronomical information, and other information that helps predict the future. Are there ways in which *The Girls' Almanac* is meant to provide guidance like a typical almanac? Why did you choose this title?

A: Those gardening manuals, almanacs and the like, have always pulled me in; each page makes something big and unknown—like the weather—seem knowable. This almanac isn't meant to be a guide, nor to predict the future, but like those outdoor publications, the novel takes this complicated notion of friendship and ties it up in one large cluster of people and places. Just as typical almanacs convey a tidiness and simplicity, *The Girls' Almanac*, I hope, shows the other side—the complexity and beauty of the various elements of family and friendship, gains and losses.

Q: Why did you choose to write in the form of short stories rather than in the form of a novel? What was it that drew you toward making these stories interconnected rather than individual short stories?

A: These stories burst out of me one at a time, but demanded to be linked. One of my favorite aspects of the writing process is when a narrative or character is so sure and strong that the writing seems to come from somewhere else. That happened as soon as I write "Early Girls". One girl lead me to the next, and soon I was seeing this map of people and how they intersected. To then craft them into a traditional novel would have felt forced, I think. For me, there is great pleasure in reading one story and then being able to revisit certain characters in the periphery later. I always envisioned *The Girls' Almanac* as a vine—a trail of stories that looped back on itself—and this was a good match for the concept of connected stories rather than following point A to B in a novel.