

A Note About My Research Process for *My Life After Now*:

As you can imagine, *My Life After Now* is very important to me. Not just because it's my debut novel and all that awesome, exciting stuff, but because I believe (hope!) this book will help do its part in filling a void in the YA contemporary market—the subject of HIV/AIDS (and STIs in general). Quick fact: *Young people (ages 13-29) accounted for 39% of all new HIV cases in the U.S. in 2009—an extremely high percentage, considering the 15-29 age group makes up only 21% of the general U.S. population.* HIV/AIDS is affecting a lot of teenagers, yet very few authors are writing about it! I wanted to change that, since HIV/AIDS is something that can happen to any of us—it doesn't discriminate.

I took several different routes in researching the book. As someone who has friends and family members who are and were HIV+, I already knew a bit about it, so I started from a somewhat informed place. But even so, as I wrote and revised and wrote some more, I found I had to stop writing quite often to research. I researched pretty much nonstop during the first few drafts of the book. I was very conscious of two things while I was writing:

1) I wanted to make sure Lucy wasn't unusually informed for someone in her situation. She's kind of clueless, actually, as most teenagers today are. Since people aren't dying from AIDS at the rate they used to 10, 20, 30 years ago (thanks to medications), people have become complacent and stopped talking about it. So all Lucy really knows about HIV is what she's learned in her school health class, which isn't much. So I put myself in her shoes and really thought about what I would do if I were her. And the first thing I would do is Google it. So that's what she does. I did Lucy's Internet research with her—I took in all the out-of-context statistics, looked at all the graphic images, and read all the conspiracy theories. She ends up with a vastly distorted impression of what it means to have HIV at first, thanks to the good old Internet, but I think that's what would happen to most people who didn't have access to any better information. So the Internet and all its out-of-context, out-of-date misinformation, in a weird way, was an excellent resource for me.

2) I wanted to make sure Lucy's experience was realistic for an HIV+ teenage girl in 2013. So it was very important to me that her visit to the testing clinic, her doctors' appointments, her support group meetings, etc. were accurate. This is where the bulk of my research came into play. I had several conversations with people I know who are HIV+ about their personal experiences with doctors' visits and the like—those personal accounts are *not* in the book, but they helped to form a clear picture in my head as I wrote. I also watched documentaries and read as many books as I could find on the subject, but I was surprised to discover that *very* few books (whether fiction, non-fiction, or academic/medical books) have been published about children and teenagers with HIV/AIDS. (It's kind of funny how doing research for a book I had already decided to write was what ultimately made me realize just how much a book like this really needed to be written.) In fact, I only found *one* book in the whole of the NY Public Library system on the subject—an academic book of essays, which gave individual accounts of group meetings, varying family reactions, varying school administration reactions, shame, fear, and so much more. I renewed that book about ten times—I apologize to anyone who may have been on the library waiting list for it! ☺ And, of course, I also did field research. I visited New York City's various free STI clinics and did exactly what Lucy does—showed up by myself, a young-looking girl, and went through the whole testing and interview process. Let me tell you, that experience—even if you are pretty certain your results will come back negative—is nerve-wracking! And embarrassing. The scene

where Lucy has to walk through an office, past workers' cubicles, holding a urine sample, actually happened to me. Sigh.

The goal was to end up with a realistic, emotional story about a character going through this very challenging situation, but not a preachy info pamphlet. This book is not *only* about HIV/AIDS. It's also about a character—a girl with a full life. She's got her family, her friends, school, theater, and so much more. Life doesn't stop when you test positive, so I wanted to be sure to include the highs with the lows, the good with the bad. I hope readers will think I accomplished that!

Thanks for reading!

~ JESS VERDI