

A Conversation with Jennifer Ziegler

Is writing easy for you?

Goodness, no! It's almost always a joy, but it isn't easy. That said, I will acknowledge that I've found my writing "comfort zone." I've been doing this so long that I've found my "voice," a writing style that feels right and, once I get going on a project, seems to flow right out of the inner me. So in that sense I suppose it's easier than it has been in the past, and it's certainly easier than other things I might try to do – like complex math equations or computer programming. But writing still takes a lot out of me, as it should. You have to be willing to dig deep and challenge yourself. *You* have to suffer or the work will. That's the whole contradictory aspect of writing.

Were you a writer as a child? If so, did writing help you survive high school circumstances?

I can't remember a time when I didn't write. Growing up, I was always scribbling down ideas or stories or poems or detailed essays on why a particular rock star was the cutest guy ever. It did help me survive the scary confusion of high school in that it was a great escape. I could vent my frustrations in writing – in my journal or in story form – and therefore confront them, in a safe, indirect way. Sometimes just by writing about a particular problem, I come to understand it better – or at least better understand how I feel.

What was your inspiration for this novel?

How Not to Be Popular was inspired by my oldest, dearest friend, Christy. In the fall of 2005 she called from California to say she was getting married, so of course that triggered a whole series of lengthy long-distance chats. Christy, like Maggie, moved around quite a bit when she was younger. (I had always envied her worldliness, but later, when we were grown, she confessed that it could be tough.) Well, I guess she was on my mind a lot, because one day I got a clear vision in my head of a teenage girl walking to school in a crazy outfit. The girl wasn't Christy, but she was in a similar predicament: she was sick and tired of getting uprooted all the time, so she was purposefully trying to drive people away. I found myself so intrigued I had to investigate this person and her world. What did she think would happen? What *would* happen? Who would she affect along the way?

As a teenager, did you struggle with social power ranking? Did you have a lot of “cool points”?

I didn't strive to have power, per se. I wanted good friends, not minions. But I did struggle with the whole fairness of high school social hierarchies. I'm not sure if I was cool. It's hard for me to describe what I must have seemed like to others, but I can tell you how I *felt* as a teen. While I didn't feel popular, I also didn't feel unpopular. I had a best friend who really understood me, and together we discovered hip music, British TV shows, cult films and Tom Robbins novels. We were part of a fun social group made up of theater and band misfits, and had many oddball adventures. I used to think I wasn't in the power crowd because I wasn't self-assured enough. But now that I understand life a little better, I think I didn't fit in *because* I was rather happy and confident. I was pretty comfortable being me. Don't get me wrong—I was still insecure (we all are at that age). It's just that I preferred being my goofy self rather than conforming to someone else's standards.

Which character do you identify with the most?

Looking at all the characters in *How Not to Be Popular* I can see that each one contains a tiny fragment of myself. A personality trait or hobby or neurosis – anything from Jack's love of film to Carter's tendency to make bad puns. Maggie is not me, but she does have several aspects of my personality. Her avoidance of conflict is one, as is her rather irreverent inner voice. And I strive to be as non-judgmental and kind as Penny.

I think writers can't help but make characters into their fictional counterparts, at least to a degree. Everything gets strained through our views of the world. And so much of our understanding of life is based on our personal histories. So even if I think I'm completely outside myself, relaying someone else's tale, it's inevitable that bits and pieces of my soul end up in the mix.

As a parent, are you like Rosie and Les?

No. I'm afraid my children would say I'm strict and boring. I do feel that Rosie and Les, while eccentric, are very devoted parents in their own way. So in that sense, yes. My son and daughter are the main focus of my life. However, I do believe in setting rules and curfews. And I would never ever walk around naked in full view of my neighbors.

Tell us about Jack. What was your inspiration for his character?

I love how Jack is the perfect foil for Maggie. In many ways he is the direct antithesis of her, at least on the surface. And yet they make such a great match. They learn from each other, gain

courage, and grow as individuals. He becomes less rigid and willing to take chances; she finds someone who challenges her and helps her find (and appreciate) her real self.

When I write, I try to take myself out of the equation as much as possible. I can't be too aware of "creating" someone – or "basing" a character on someone I know. However, sometimes I will read my books *after* they are completed and see connections to my own life. It's strange when that happens – sort of like psychoanalyzing yourself via your fiction. Jack was a character that I thought I was making up, but later I realized he was very similar to a serious boyfriend I had in college. What a shock!

Which character is your favorite? Why?

That's a tough question, but I'd have to say Penny. She's so unpretentious, so good-natured, so unapologetically *herself*. We should all be able to cast off that pressure to be something we're not, to act in prescribed ways.

Why the oxymoron chapter titles? What are you attempting to say with these?

They are simply reminders that nothing is clear – especially when you are a teenager. Growing up is full of paradoxes. Rarely is something completely simple or totally good. It's all good-bad or easy-hard or scary-fun. You want people to take care of you and you want your freedom, all at the same time. Loving people can really hurt. And doing the "right" thing can sometimes feel very wrong.

Will we see any other these characters in books to come?

I can't say. Perhaps. I don't want to squeeze a story out of these characters. But if they come to me with a brand new tale, then yes. I'd have to tell it. And I would love to go back to their world and spend more time with them.

What do you hope readers will take away from this book? How do you hope this book will impact them?

I just hope they enjoy it. If they learn something about themselves or the world at large – that's wonderful. But I simply want them to have fun hanging out with the quirky people in my story.