

Alycia Ripley exhibits no typical behavior of an author being interviewed- no coy evasive smiles, pat answers, or hms and haws I'd have to edit out. In fact, I rather doubt she notices she's being interviewed at all - she loves to answer questions, punctuating her answers with an enthusiastic grin or exclamation. Her innocent demeanor reminds me of a remarkably self-assured and self-possessed child, albeit one that dots the words "perspicacious" and "maladroit" fluidly throughout her sentences and is nominated for an Independent Spirit Award at the Toronto Literary Festival this winter. Her name is on the tip of so many tongues these days it would seem the photogenic, witty writer-actress was an overnight sensation, an insta-celeb ready to dominate magazines, bookstores, and public appearances, but mention the word "instant"-anything to Ripley and she'll bulge her eyes and shake her head. "I wish," she says and stops to tie the lace of her bright pink and aqua sneaker. "As much as I'd like to pretend this all just happened, it took years of sweat and effort. I can't remember a time when I wasn't trying. But I suppose it makes it all the more fun when it happens!" She is a walking contradiction, this girl with the bright smile and stern brow. Both incredibly energetic and carefully mannered, she easily disarms any age group and knows how to hold a room's attention. We met up to discuss her upcoming novel, *Traveling With An Eggplant*, the art of provocation, and being afraid of the dark.

### **Are you always this happy?**

No, no. I wasn't really happy for a while. There were some trying times when I was in New York. The city as a whole got me down. But I'm thrilled the book is finally coming out and for the chance to do signings and just talk to people. I like to sponge them up. Something absurd always happens to throw a wrench in things but I try to be like Steve Mc Queen. He used to say he had no complaints, ever. That's what I aspire to be like.

### **First things first- Why should people read this book?**

This novel is a throwback to books that challenge readers to use creativity and imagination. I'm discouraged by all these so-called "chick-lit" books on the market. Why is it interesting to read the upteenth book on who is sleeping with who in the Hamptons? I won't get on my soapbox but seriously. I mean, *come on*. I've been there- I noticed some beautiful beaches, ate some fantastic food, and heard some annoying people talk. These books don't really do anything- they don't envelop a reader or challenge him or her to understand three-dimensional characters and the fictional world they live in with intricacies beyond who so and so is dating or scheming. My book deals with issues relatable to everyone but yet challenges them to imagine and create the circumstances I provide. The book presents realistic personalities dealing with fantastical situations- you have to imagine the microcosm the book exists in. Readers used to do this like breathing but a lot of books nowadays don't force readers to use imagination or creativity. I hope my book gives them an opportunity to do that again.

### **That question usually puts authors on the defensive.**

Authors tend to be defensive- it comes from years of explaining what goes on in your head and we typically do look a little odd! But I don't mind having to hold fast or stake my claim. I like arguing and defending. I think it was Madonna and Sean Penn who once said, 'Sue us. We like complications.' I always loved that quote. I do have a thing for curveballs. The unexpected question.

**Who do you feel is the novel's ideal audience?**

Anyone who likes to read. I really feel everyone can garner something of interest in *every* book be it a memoir or science-fiction or a comedy. There is something inside every story to enjoy or that can teach or illuminate an issue they find interesting or that gets their minds working. This book presents characters that are unique but easily relatable. Anyone willing to put in the time and work of connecting the dots can enjoy this book. It encourages optimism, the idea that our journeys in life are more important than our destinations. We need to be reminded of this from time to time whether we're fourteen or ninety. It's so easy to get mired in what we haven't achieved or haven't become. Negativity is addicting.

**Your work has been described as “provocative.” What does that word mean to you and how do you respond to it?**

It *has*? I never imagine that people are talking about me or my work so I find this kind of thing hilarious. Provocative to me means thought-provoking, innovative, challenging in some form or another. If I can make people think and imagine anything fun, interesting, or bizarre about the human condition I'll be satisfied. Provocative is a flattering adjective, so thank you!

**Who are your influences?**

Patricia Highsmith. Chuck Klosterman. Chuck Palahnuik. And Steven Spielberg for making *Jaws*, my favorite movie of all time. Believe it or not, that film influences everything I do creatively- I love the concept of this seemingly ordinary Every Person gaining the courage and decency and inner resources to do an extraordinary and frightening thing. It is a central theme in all of my writing and how I like to look at life and people. Watching a few scenes of *Jaws* is a must before I write anything!

**Your main character suffers from a condition called audiokinesis- songs and voices play at their own will inside her head. There has been a recent scientific discovery about musical hallucinations, notably presented in a *New York Times* article. Was this a condition you researched?**

It wasn't. The *Times* article was just an incredible coincidence. Audiokinesis was a condition I invented to present a given theme in a certain light. It served the story well. But the fact that the condition has modern relevance is exciting and nothing I could have predicted.

**The novel is subtitled, A Memoir of Sorts. What inspired the story?**

The kernel is the relationship between the two main characters, which is based on a relationship I've had, a tumultuous, perennial limbo type of scenario. Everything else grew organically around that- it took time to weave the thread of my grandmother throughout it; she was my favorite person in the world. Taking someone and channeling their essence into a story is a daunting task and one that can make you not want to even switch your computer on. She passed away a few years back and I always feel her around me. She just began to have more and more to do with the story and furthered it along in several different ways. Everyone asks how true the characters are, how exact to the people they represent. Some are dead on, such as the male character. Others are just their essence or a sketch. In the case of my grandmother, it was her essence mixed in with some memories. In the case of the mother character, it was a vague outline of my mother, nothing more. My life inspired the story. And I wanted to use it to encourage people to think about where they are versus where they want to go.

**In the novel, a loving but deceased grandmother manipulates her granddaughter into not only helping herself, but also helping her grandmother help her. She encourages, through unique ways, the heroine to work through her fears to arrive at one particular place at a very specific time so that the grandmother can seek revenge for wrongs done to the girl as a child. Is this scenario a form of wish fulfillment?**

I needed a villain for the story- this was early on, before I knew where the end was going. And it occurred to me- I had the perfect villain. My mother had a boyfriend when I was younger who wasn't exactly a nice man. He fit the story perfectly. My grandmother never knew the extent of the situation- only the tip of the iceberg. It was wish fulfillment in the way that I got to end the climactic fight, or the book's "moment" in a way that felt cathartic and great. It was wonderful to have my grandmother come in and save me and take charge. But I realized after I finished the book that it had fulfilled me; even though the circumstances hadn't happened exactly like they do in the novel, I still came to terms with the man's negative effect and the entire act of writing it down, of cannibalizing the memories for the book, got me to a more peaceful place where I didn't always want to punch him like a piñata every time I thought of him. In that sense, the book did change me. I may not have been down in the water like my heroine but it sure felt like it. That's a major theme of the book - if you don't deal with a childhood monster or problem at the time, it will come back to track you down. We need to bully these monsters and loosen their hold on us. It's like Stevie Nicks says in the book, 'We keep ghosts around as long as we want them. We're only as haunted as we want to be.'

**Your novel is interesting in that it's both very funny and also very disturbing. There was a scene at the end that I just couldn't get out of my mind. The scene where the main character remembers an upsetting phone call she once received.**

That one is a kicker. It does seem to bother people and I always apologize for it! But the truth is- that scene is real. It happened. I'm glad the scene jumps out because it shows how insidious abuse can be. It isn't always a broken arm or a rape. Those things

are evil but mental and emotional abuse can be as well. I enjoy making people laugh and there is much about the story that is funny and absurd and the way the characters interact in dialogue makes me laugh. But I'm happy the disturbing scenes are in there. Those are the things the heroine has to fully remember to get mad enough to really face this man, this ghost-demon, in order to get past this fear of water and this strange hold the experience has had. I hope people read it and think about how awful it is to abuse a child, to make them feel sad and worthless and unheard. Abuse isn't just physical- bones can heal but it takes your spirit and your mind a lot longer. We can have the best intentions as my mother did, but when we let our guard down before someone earns it, bad things can occur. I'm glad I hit a nerve. If you aren't provoking or pushing or making an audience feel something or be shocked into realizing something, then to me, the question is, Why are you writing at all?

**You mentioned the character's fear of water. Is this something you suffer from?**

I'm better than I used to be. I love swimming but I don't really go underwater. And I never go in oceans. Just pools or quarries or ponds. I genuinely don't like water you can't see underneath. Something could be right there, coming for you, and you wouldn't know it. I don't like the sensation of being underwater so I just swim in this stunted, awkward sort of stroke so as not to dip my face in. I'm really ridiculous. But like I said, it's hard for me to get past some things. Water still isn't completely my friend.

**Your attachment to your grandmother is really apparent in this novel. I can sense immediately how close you were to her.**

We were very close. We still are. I can feel her around all the time. Last night I was too frightened to go to sleep, I hate being alone in the house. I'm one of those people who checks under every bed and in every closet and behind every chair before I can relax and lie down. I was home alone and turned on the television to help me sleep. So oddly enough, the station was a digital music station and just as I turned it on, this song came on from 1993 that my grandmother used to hate and I used to sing all the time as a joke. Then when she'd hear it she'd laugh and say, "Oh now she's singing that? I'm going home." It's this semi-offensive reggae song called "Girl I Want To Make You Sweat" or something to that effect. So I'm sitting there, terrified to lie down in the dark. Then this song comes on and I knew it was my grandmother telling me it was OK and she'd protect me while I slept. This happens all the time. This isn't a widely played song but it comes on at the most random times and especially when I need it. I know it's her behind it. I know that everyone believes their family is special and rightly they should. But my grandmother really was special. She was a fantastic lady- beautiful, glamorous, gracious, kind, charismatic, sweet and funny. People in Buffalo knew her because she was THE hostess at The Yankee Room Restaurant in the old AM & A's department store. I used to visit with her there all the time. She knew many of my friends' parents who ate there during their lunch hours and they'd tell me how wonderful they thought she was. I hope this book makes them remember her again.

**Ah, Buffalo. Land of Snow and-**

Don't even say chicken wings. Let's not go there.

**But they're supposed to be amazing.**

They are. I've been to both Anchor Bar and Duff's but there are so many misconceptions about Buffalo. It's a wonderful city filled with art and gorgeous architecture and historical landmarks. The suburbs each have their own unique feel and you can drive anywhere in fifteen minutes. The art scene is wonderful and the city is hugely supportive of local artists. There's so much going on. People don't sit around eating chicken wings. Ok, I'm sure some of them do. I'm not going to front like it doesn't happen, but that's only a small part. It's a wonderful city. I'm proud to be from there. And for the record, it snows all over the northeast. It's not like it's the Blizzard of '77 every single day in Buffalo.

**You've sold me! I'm moving there! Speaking of your hometown, it definitely surprised some people that you chose to schedule your book's launch party in Buffalo rather than New York. What sealed the decision?**

I would never, ever, do it in New York. It was a nice city to study in and experience but I have no personal connection to it. There was never any question of having it in Buffalo. It's where I'm from and people there have known me and what I've wanted to achieve for such a long time. I love the spirit of Buffalo- to me it is a place of persistence and endurance and history. The people there are incredibly friendly. No matter what city I've lived in or what airport I've walked through, I always run into people from Buffalo and they are incredibly nice and welcoming. There was never any question that I would have it here.

**What do you hope people will think of when they hear the words, *Traveling With An Eggplant*?**

That magic is possible. That our journeys are as important if not more important than our destinations. And that we can change who we are at any given point. Metamorphosis is wonderful- that's why I love butterflies. They start as one thing and become another. We can do-over or re-set our computers to become exactly who we want to become.

**That's a wonderful point to make.**

Well, I'm just hoping that when they hear the title they don't imagine a cookbook. That's all I ask. No cookbooks. I can only make three different dishes and calling them dishes is a total euphemism. My family would laugh if anyone connected my name to a cooking *manual* of any form. If you see my book shelved in the Food section at your bookstore, please take it out. As a favor to me.

**Are you allowed to tell me about any future projects?**

Of course! My second novel, *Winterphoenix*, should be out next year.

**I've heard of that. It's supposed to be scary.**

Really disturbing. I can't wait. I have my novella, *Nothing But Flowers*, revamped and almost ready to go. It's about a few women at an advertising company that institute a no-jerk policy and end up killing the men who work there, and a few women, too. I'm working on *Jane Says*, sort of an alter-ego comedy, and also preparing this satire on Scientology. I have way too much to work on. It's overwhelming but a lot better than having writer's block. And of course I'm in the process of promoting *Eggplant* which should be very exciting.

**You're a busy lady.**

I love it! I've worked hard to be busy. Busy is the wonderful prize I've gotten after years of sitting in my apartment, writing this book, or going to Strasberg and acting out various plays or scenes I've written, hoping to make people laugh, or get nervous, or enjoy a character. I just want to stay busy writing and creating.

**And checking under beds and in closets?**

Exactly.

Interv.  
M. Menari- 9/05