



Baker & Taylor Interview with Hayley Krischer

Something Happened to Ali Greenleaf is a powerful YA debut novel. What inspired you to write it?

It started as a short story in college. The story just poured out of me. Really it was an unconscious act. I had my own experiences with sexual assault and sexual harassment, had seen friends get sexually assaulted and grew up just a few towns away from Glen Ridge, NJ, where a gang of athletes raped an intellectually disabled girl. I was a senior in high school when that happened, and it impacted me deeply. (Ironically, I live in Glen Ridge now.) The original short story was only about the rape. Ali didn't have any agency. She didn't heal.

She took a shower and that was it.

I was very unconnected to the story as well, not realizing how much it was about me and the experiences I was exposed to. But as I got older, and after I had many years of therapy under my belt, I kept returning to Ali's story. I couldn't avoid it. Sometimes a story tells you what it needs and that was this story. It was something that had to come out of me.

An interesting dynamic takes place between Ali and Blythe, teens that travel in very different circles, yet a friendship ultimately ensues. Please tell us why you made this an integral part of the story.

Blythe didn't start out as a main character. But I thought about the Glen Ridge rape case. A girlfriend of one of the rapists befriended the victim, trying to convince her not to testify. I was always taken by that detail. My girlfriends in high school were everything to me. I couldn't imagine how one girl would set up another girl in that way.

Then my son started reading *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio. Palacio wrote a short story about the bully, Julian, delving into his background. *The Julian Chapter*. All of a sudden, it hit me that I needed to know more about Blythe. Why did she take the rapist's side? Did she *really* take his side or did she just want to be loyal? Was she just too uncomfortable seeing a masculine guy like Sean cry? Was there something in her background that made her more vulnerable to this kind of thing? As I delved into Blythe, I realized that she and Ali were ultimately connected. They needed each other for different reasons.

Please discuss the relationship between Ali and her parents and Blythe and her parents, how are they similar and how do they differ.

Ali's mother is a recovering alcoholic who escaped to Truth or Consequences, a small hippie town in New Mexico. Blythe's mother was diagnosed with bi-polar and lives at home with her. So both mothers struggle with addiction and mental health; both women take a back seat in their daughter's lives. Both Ali and Blythe resent their mothers for their problems.

The difference between Ali's mother and Blythe's mother is that Blythe can't go to her mother. Her mother just doesn't have the mental facilities. She's too limited in her disease and she's limited by her meds. She's there, but she's not *there*. Blythe is in the dark when it comes to her family. Because when you have a parent who is mentally ill, that's how it feels. Her father is completely removed. Blythe is left with a lot of responsibility, too much. She doesn't have anyone to really rely on except for her boyfriend Dev and... now Ali.

Ali on the other hand, is close with her father. She's close to her aunt (her aunt dropped off Plan B and takes Ali to her first gynecological appointment). She's even close with her mother, despite her mother living across the country. Ali tells her family everything. Basically.

Discuss rituals and how they factor into the story.

Blythe and her best friend Donnie take part in The Initiation, a ritual which involves select freshman girls giving oral sex to senior boys. The senior girls came up with this initiation to try and stop sexual assaults from happening. The idea behind it is that if the girls control the narrative, if you're doing it to them, you can somehow stop the assaults from happening. You become an untouchable. Of course, that's not how sex or sexual assault works. Blythe and Donnie are traumatized by it. The whole idea felt dystopian to me, that these girls were trying to normalize sexual assault by assuming the power. Now that Blythe is a senior, she's expected to be in charge of The Initiation, but she's repulsed by it. But that's not the case for everyone. There are plenty of boys – and girls – who want it to continue. It gets complicated. Just because someone says a ritual is safe, doesn't mean that it is.

What message (s) do you want teens to take away from your story?

I hope it makes them feel less alone. The girls in my story are very messy. I want them to read my book and know that people will believe them. That people will hear them.

What advice would you give teens who have been victims of sexual assault? As well as any advice you would like to share with people close to them?

I've had incidents from my teenage and college years that I've replayed in my head for years and years. Memories and details that sometimes I can't escape. Just because someone decides that you've recovered, doesn't mean you have. But with time and with empathy, and with therapy, it's possible to heal. Believe survivors.

What authors have inspired you and have they influenced your writing in any way?

The authors I go back to over and over are Lorrie Moore, Megan Abbott, S.E. Hinton, Alice Munro, Zadie Smith, Miriam Toews. Of course *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson was incredibly influential. Also more recently, Kathleen Glasgow's *Girl in Pieces*, Leila Slimani's *The Perfect Nanny*, Melissa Broder's *The Pisces*. I love a really deep dive into a character's psyche, a descent into madness sometimes, and an author who can pull the readers mind apart and make us look differently at the world.

Public librarians from all over the U.S. will read this interview. Is there something you'd like to share with them?

I want to thank them for opening their minds to reading about girls who don't fit a perfect mold and for supporting a sensitive topic like sexual assault.