



AN ANONYMOUS GIRL

by Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen

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A Conversation with the Authors

Was it easier or more difficult to write a second novel, and why? Did you feel pressure to live up to the first book?

The Wife Between Us and *An Anonymous Girl* were challenging in different ways. In *Wife*, the essence of the concept for the story came very quickly—it was a lightning-bolt idea—but we also changed big chunks of the plot as we wrote, and rewrote, the manuscript. Perhaps our biggest challenge was figuring out the logistics of writing a book together, since we live in different cities. There was a learning curve to setting up our systems—we needed to become familiar with Google Docs in order to write together in real time, and Google Hangouts so that we could simultaneously talk and write. *The Wife Between Us* also had a very complicated structure that required us to keep multiple time lines and charts, and it used every bit of our combined brain power to juggle all of the elements!

For *An Anonymous Girl*, we spent months talking every day and exploring different ideas in order to pin down the story we wanted to tell. We also devoted a lot of time working out the best way to tell it. In our early drafts, we wrote Jess's and Dr. Shields's sections in the first, second, and third person in order to determine which would be the most compelling point of view for each character. We made a pact that we could not give our editor a book that did not feel as strong as or stronger than our first book, so we really pushed ourselves. In the end, we feel books are like kids—each is rewarding and challenging in its own way!

For your previous book, you wrote every line together using Google Docs and meeting up when you could—did your process change at all for this book? Do you feel like you've hit the perfect balance of working together, or are you still refining how you go about it?

We use the exact same process, relying on Google Docs and Hangouts to write our manuscript in real time while we simultaneously talk. Recently, we also added in something new. We now meet in Philadelphia, midway

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between our home cities, for a forty-eight-hour marathon work session every month or so. We stay in a hotel that has restaurants and a gym and we usually only leave the hotel for one brief walk outside. Otherwise, we work around the clock and through every meal. We get an enormous amount of writing done during our getaways—but as usual, our only enemy is time. We never have enough of it!

What gave you the idea to write a novel about a psychological ethics study gone wrong?

It's tricky for us to answer this, because our ideas percolate over a long period of time. Every day, when we are brainstorming our plot, we throw out about a hundred suggestions—and the next day, we reject ninety-nine of them. But there are a few key elements we can point to that inspired part of the foundation of *An Anonymous Girl*.

We wanted to create a sense of intimacy for the reader, so in addition to having Dr. Shields's voice be in the second person, we structured the ethics and morality quiz that Jessica took in a way that allows readers to consider how they would answer the same questions. This interactive element was really appealing to us, and we've heard from a lot of early readers that they loved answering the ethics questions and learning how their friends or book group participants would respond.

We're also both pretty obsessed with psychology and therapy in general. In college, Sarah was a guinea pig in a bunch of experiments through NIH (the National Institutes of Health) to earn extra money. At first she did pretty innocuous tests, but the ones that paid the best were a little more invasive. The final one she did involved being given something that made her super groggy—then her dad found out about it, and that was the end of her time as a guinea pig. Sarah majored in journalism, with a minor in psychology. Greer was a psychology major (and English minor) and her mother was a practicing psychotherapist for many years, so this is an area of keen interest for her. One of our favorite parts of working on *An Anonymous Girl* was researching the psychology experiments we incorporated into the novel.

*About
the Authors*

Did you learn anything about writing through the experience of doing this book that you didn't know before? Were there any unique challenges to writing this particular kind of novel?

We learned we love the research—geeking out on psychological studies was so much fun for us. As with *The Wife Between Us*, learning which pieces of the puzzle to reveal, and when to reveal them, is perhaps our biggest structural challenge.

What is next on the horizon for you?

We are thrilled that eOne, which developed *Sharp Objects* for HBO, has optioned *An Anonymous Girl*. We are attached as executive producers, which means we get to be involved in key creative decisions. eOne has already hired a fantastic writing team to craft the pilot (we chatted with them about their ideas for the story line) and we hope to have some more good news after *An Anonymous Girl* releases in January.

We've also been contracted by Amblin—Steven Spielberg's company—to write the screenplay for *The Wife Between Us*, which is exciting. We love the challenge of adapting our manuscript for the screen.

And of course, we are hard at work on our next novel, another psychological thriller featuring complicated, relatable female characters!

 *Similar but Different*

Greer: We often talk about the uncanny similarities we share—it’s one of the many reasons why we became friends even before we morphed into writing partners. We are the exact same age, we both played field hockey in high school, we studied psychology and journalism in college, and are terrible cooks. We even have brothers we are close to—who are both named Robert!

We joke that we have “one brain” because we often say the exact same thing at the identical time when we are writing together. And on our last two writing trips, we have shown up in nearly identical outfits. Perhaps because of this closeness, when people first meet us they often ask if we are sisters.

Sarah: But recently, something inexplicable and a little eerie has begun to occur that goes beyond our surface similarities. We’ve read about twins who can sense when something is happening to one another—for example, if one breaks their arm, the other feels a sharp pain at the same moment. And this sort of phenomenon seems to be happening to us. Greer recently popped a blood vessel in her eye—the first time this has ever happened to her—and a few hours later, I also popped a blood vessel in my eye (only the second time this has ever happened to me). When I got an allergic reaction and hives formed on my arm, Greer’s arm began to itch moments later. We also both fractured bones within a month of each other (one of my right toes and Greer’s right thumb).

Greer: It’s almost like something out of one of our books! But as well as we know each other we thought it might be fun to find out some of our differences.

Greer: If you weren’t a writer, what would you be doing?

Sarah: I’d be a teacher, or a therapist. Or perhaps I’d combine the two and become a high school counselor. It’s so tough to be a teenager these days—social media can make it seem like everyone except you has it all together and is constantly having a good time with friends—so school counselors are more vital than ever.

*Behind
the Novel*

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required.”*

Sarah: If you could spend an entire day doing anything all at all—no commitments, no schedule—what would you do?

Greer: I would wake up early and well rested—but without the aid of an alarm—and relish the quiet of my apartment while drinking coffee and reading *The New York Times* with my two dogs.

I would meet one of my friends for a run (six-mile loop around Central Park) before you and I worked for a few hours. John, my husband, and I would enjoy one of our boozy lunches and then I would have a relaxing afternoon of beauty treatments with my daughter. I am very close to my parents and my brother’s family and so the day would conclude with a delicious home-cooked dinner (and the dishes are magically cleaned).

Greer: What’s your favorite part of the writing process?

Sarah: I love it when we have our crazy synergy going; when we are so in sync that one of us begins a sentence, then the other adds to it, and so on . . . and all of a sudden, we’ve written five pages. It’s almost as if our book is hidden inside a vault that has two locks, and we each possess one of the keys, and we have to turn them together to reveal our manuscript. This might not make sense to anyone else, but I know that you understand what I mean!

Sarah: Now I have to ask you the same question—what is your favorite part?

Greer: I adore your answer! I do know exactly what you mean. I also love the “what if?” brainstorming part. When we talk and talk and talk about a character, scene, plot twist. Again, it’s the interaction of our brain power that is so fun—and what makes us always say we are “better together.”

Greer: What is your quirkiest habit?

Sarah: I am extremely wary of odd numbers, as you well know, because I always try to avoid putting them into our books! I understand we can’t write books without at least a few odd numbers, but I try to avoid them whenever possible.



Sarah: Which character out of any book did you relate to most as a child?

Greer: I must have read *Harriet the Spy* a dozen times. In fact it is the only book that I saved from my childhood and I read that original copy to both of my children when they were younger. Like Harriet I wanted to be a writer when I grew up. And using her as inspiration I even kept my own spy notebook. Luckily I never lost mine.

*Behind
the Novel*



Recommended Reading

You

Caroline Kepnes

Kepnes's debut is told in the second person, like sections of *An Anonymous Girl*, which gives the story a sense of immediacy and urgency. The protagonist, Joe, works at a New York City bookstore and becomes romantically obsessed with a young female shopper. He tracks her down after she leaves his shop and insinuates himself into her life. This novel is disturbing and creepy, yet Joe possesses a wry sense of humor, which sets this book apart from other thrillers.

You Should Have Known

Jean Hanff Korelitz

We love books about psychology and the protagonist of this novel, Grace, is a New York City therapist. Grace is also the author of a self-help book that is about to be published entitled *You Should Have Known*, in which she admonishes women for not valuing their intuition about potential romantic partners. On the cusp of her book's publication, her husband goes missing and she discovers she has failed to follow her own advice and now must deal with the fallout.

Still Missing

Chevy Stevens

Annie, the unforgettable protagonist of Stevens's debut, is a realtor who is abducted during a slow open house and spends a year held captive in a remote mountain cabin. We were especially drawn to the story because of the structure—much of the novel is told through Annie's therapy sessions, in which she seems to directly speak to the reader.



The Weird Sisters

Eleanor Brown

This isn't a psychological thriller, but we added it to the list because it's a standout for us. Some authors create such vivid settings that a physical location becomes a character in their book. Eleanor Brown, the author of *The Weird Sisters*, does even more. A compelling aspect of this gorgeous novel about three sisters was the collective "voice" given to the entity of the sisterhood. Here are the opening lines of the book: "We came home because we were failures. We wouldn't admit that, of course, not at first, not to ourselves, and certainly not to anyone else." We loved this inventive novel.

The Girl Before

J. P. Delaney

Like *An Anonymous Girl*, this story is told in alternating chapters between Emma, the girl before, and Jane, the occupying resident of a very unique apartment. In fact, the apartment is so special—it's been designed by an architectural genius—that in order to live there prospective tenants are required to fill out a very elaborate questionnaire and agree to many specific rules.

We relished the immediacy of this vetting process as it reminded us a bit of the ethics and morality questions in *An Anonymous Girl*.

Bad Blood

John Carreyrou

This is narrative nonfiction at its finest. The shocking story of the rise and fall of Theranos, the multibillion-dollar biotech startup created by a young, brilliant female Stanford dropout. We devoured this book. Elizabeth Holmes could have been a villain in one of our novels.

*Keep on
Reading*



Reading Group Questions

1. If you were in Jess's shoes, would you have snuck into Dr. Shields's morality and ethics survey? Why or why not? After the questions started to become more invasive, do you think you would have continued answering them, or looked for a way out?
2. What did you think of the authors' decision to use the second person "you" in Dr. Shields's chapters? How did it affect your experience of reading the novel? Did it change your perception of any of the characters, especially Dr. Shields?
3. Early in the novel, Jess thinks, "Sometimes an impulsive decision can change the course of your life." Do you agree? Have you ever made any impulsive decisions that dramatically affected your life? What were they?
4. On page 202, Jess asks, "How do you know if you can really trust someone?" What do you think—how do you know? Can you ever know? What about someone makes them seem "trustworthy" to you?
5. Do you think Dr. Shields truly had a good marriage, or was it doomed from the beginning? Why do you believe this, and what about Dr. Shields informs your thoughts?
6. Did you have an idea of what had happened to Subject 5, or were you surprised? If you did suspect what occurred, can you point out what kind of foreshadowing or clues led you to this conclusion?
7. What did you think of Dr. Shields's morality and ethics questions? Did you find yourself answering them? Which question did you find the most challenging?



8. *An Anonymous Girl* explores the lies that link people together and the damage these deceptions can cause. Is it ever okay to tell a lie? When does a secret become a deception?
9. How much of a motivating factor was money for Jess? In your opinion, was the money Jess earned worth what she endured? Can trust ever really be bought?
10. At the start of the novel, one of Dr. Shields's questions to Jess was, "Do victims have a right to take retribution into their own hands?" How would Jess and Dr. Shields answer this question at the end of the book? How would you answer it?

*Keep on
Reading*