

GIRL TALK

An Interview with Lesley Arfin

Writer Lesley Arfin confesses that in 5th grade she was mean to a girl named Sherry Lee: "I called her Sherry Lee Lewis and threw an eraser at her. That was super mean. Now it just sounds funny." In an interview with Lisa Rovner, Lesley reflects on getting bullied herself: "Being bullied was one of the most character-defining periods of my life." Lesley, whom some of you may know thanks to her book, *Dear Diary*, now writes for Lena Dunham's television show *Girls*.

ARTWORK BY LESLIE DAVID

LISA ROVNER: Let's talk about *Mean Girls* and what you like about it. I read that it was your favorite movie.

LESLEY ARFIN: I love *Mean Girls* because it's just super funny.

LR: The term "mean girl" is now used to describe girls who are bullies and who use psychological warfare against other girls, including exclusion, relentless teasing, trickery, name-calling, etc. Your book, *Dear Diary*, bears witness to this kind of treatment and also to the kind of traumatizing effect it can have on one's psyche. Luckily, as Woody Allen says, tragedy plus time equals comedy, and your book made me laugh more than cry. In the book, your friend Sheryl breaks it down for us: "We were not only mean to each other but to other people at school because we thought we were better than everyone. That's the way it is with girls, we're mean." When you ask another old friend, Lydia, "Why did we stop being friends?" she replies, "The short answer is I was jealous." What do you think makes girls so cruel to one another?

LA: It's probably like some primitive, survival-of-the-fittest-type shit that's part of the human makeup. I have to say, though, while getting bullied in middle school was torture, I am so grateful for the experience of it. It changed who I was for the better. It allowed me to stop having to be friends with assholes. It gave me the freedom I needed to be myself. Of course, when I was going through it I wanted to die, but I didn't. Being bullied was one of the most character-defining periods of my life.

LR: There was an op-ed piece in The New York Times a few years ago called "The Myth of Mean Girls." In it, the authors bring up a good point: "Why, in an era when slandering a group of people based on the misdeeds of a few has rightly become taboo, does it remain acceptable to use isolated incidents to berate modern teenagers, particularly girls, as 'mean' and 'violent' and 'bullies'? That is, why are we bullying girls?" Do you think that the media in any way contributes to the "mean girl" problem?

LA: I think mean girls have been around since forever, so this seems like a hard question to answer. I guess if the media/corporate America is like, "This is what makes you beautiful, cool, thin, funny, etc.,"—creating a "better than/less than" culture—then, sure, the media contributes to it, but it's a cop-out to blame "society." I guess I don't necessarily think of the "mean girl problem" as a very big problem, or even a problem at all.

LR: Do you think media has a role to play in solving the mean girl/bully problem? Your book, *Dear Diary*, offers some refuge—that's playing a role, right?

LA: I'm glad that *Dear Diary* is seen as something that offers refuge. There are a million things that offered me shelter, like punk music, fashion, underground art, and all that kind of stuff. In a way, that solved the problem for me. I sought refuge and found it. It's not the media's responsibility to solve problems. We live in a culture that likes to blame everyone and everything because it is so difficult to take responsibility for our own actions. We live in a lazy culture. I could have sat around and pitied myself or blamed the world. Actually, I did. I said "fuck the world" all the time. But guess what? The world doesn't give a shit if you hate it or not. And if you sit around waiting to get something you think is owed to you because you've been "bullied," what ends up happening is that your bullshit sense of entitlement causes you to become—guess what?—a fucking bully.

LR: You are currently a writer on the HBO show *Girls*, which I absolutely love. I'm wondering whether you writers have set an agenda and if there is a message you are trying to push with this show? I assume young women mostly watch the show—do you ever think about the effect it will have on the audience?

LA: I think it would be a pretty lame show if every single writer in the room all agreed on a specific agenda and then tried to push it onto viewers. Besides being impossible, it would also be highly manipulative. This is more of a question for Lena [Dunham]—who created the show and it is really her vision—but as a member

of the team and someone who stands behind it, I think if there is an agenda at all, it's more like, "Let's not be scared to expose ourselves." What I love about the characters is that I never know what they are going to do next. They are always contradicting themselves and surprising me because that's what makes for an interesting person and, moreover, a real person. I also don't assume that young women mostly watch the show, but maybe that's just me being naive.

LR: So many of your previous writings are autobiographical. How much of your writing for *Girls* is inspired by your real friends and real events?

LA: It's weird, with *Girls* I totally forget what stories are "mine" because I think with all the stories we start with someone's personal seed and it just eventually takes on a whole new shape. Even when it's not my particular story I relate and identify with the other writers in the room because so much of our personal lives are universal—we just don't know it because humans don't connect intimately like that on a daily basis. Everything I write is always going to have evolved from something in my real life, I suppose, unless I'm writing about aliens or something. But who knows, I love a good allegory. I think Lena has more personal stuff injected into the show, but I don't know what's autobiographical and what's not, and I don't think it matters.

LR: Nora Ephron (the screenwriter of *Sleepless in Seattle* and *When Harry Met Sally...*) passed away a couple of months ago. She once said, "Above all, be the heroine of your own life, not the victim." You wrote an advice column for a while, what's your advice to girls who are suffering because of mean girls, and to girls who want to write for a living?

LA: My short advice to girls who are getting bullied? Buy a *Minor Threat* album and a drawing pad. Short advice to girls who want to write for a living is: read. Read all the time, as much as you can. ♡

