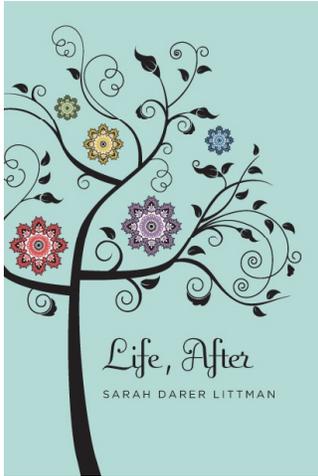


LIFE, AFTER

by Sarah Darer Littman



About the book:

Dani's life will never be the same again. After a terrorist attack kills Dani's aunt and unborn cousin, life in Argentina—private school, a boyfriend, a loving family—crumbles quickly. In order to escape a country that is sinking under their feet, Dani and her family move to the United States. It's supposed to be a fresh start, but when you're living in a cramped apartment and going to a high school where all the classes are in another language—and not everyone is friendly—life in America is not all it's cracked up to be. Dani misses her old friends, her life, Before.

But then Dani meets a boy named Jon, who isn't like all the other students. Through him, she becomes friends with Jessica, one of the popular girls, who is harboring a secret of her own. And then there's Brian, the boy who makes Dani's pulse race. In her new life, the one After, Dani learns how to heal and forgive. She finds the courage to say good-bye and allows herself to love and be loved again.

About the author:

Sarah Darer Littman's widely praised first novel, *CONFESSIONS OF A CLOSET CATHOLIC*, won the 2006 Sydney Taylor Book Award. She is also the author of *PURGE*. She lives in Connecticut with her family, in a house that never seems to have enough bookshelves, and loves *dulce de leche*.

Author interview:

1. What was the initial spark for Dani's story? How did you bring it to life?

LIFE, AFTER started out back in 2004 as a book about a boy without Asperger's Syndrome, a subject I'm intimate with because my son was diagnosed when he was five years old. My then editor turned down that book, but suggested perhaps I write from the perspective of the boy's sibling. I'd just read the arc of my friend Cynthia Lord's book RULES, so I knew that had already been done, and brilliantly. But I started thinking how in elementary and middle school most of my son's friends were from South America, and I wondered if it was because they, too, weren't "typical American kids".

I was also frustrated that for many Americans it seemed as if terrorism only sprang into existence on 9/11, and wanted explore the different ways people react to traumatic loss.

I'd lived in England during the IRA bombing campaigns of the early 1970's, and terrorist threats were part of our way of life. It's not that we let it dominate our existence, but as an eight-year old riding the Tube to school, I was always vigilant and aware. I wanted to try to put terrorism in a global context. So I chose Argentina as the native country for Dani, because it had a history of terrorist incidents, and the economic crisis there had a dramatic impact on the middle class, almost overnight. I wrote a synopsis and some sample chapters but didn't get the voice right, and ended up putting it in a drawer in early 2006 to write PURGE.

LIFE, AFTER would probably never have seen the light of day if it hadn't been for a wonderful and courageous woman, Claudette Greene, to whom this story is dedicated. I met with her mother/daughter book group, who had read my first book, CONFESSIONS OF A CLOSET CATHOLIC. She wrote to thank me afterwards and told me that her daughter had become interested in writing after she lost her father on 9/11 (Claudette's husband Donald was a passenger on United Flight 93). Claudette asked if I'd ever considered writing a book on the subject, because at the time there wasn't much available for kids. Profoundly touched, I dug my synopsis out of the drawer and e-mailed it to her. With Claudette's encouragement, I spoke to my editors at Scholastic. Having met Claudette and heard her story, I felt a much deeper connection to the characters and returned to the manuscript with renewed passion.

2. How do you know when an idea will sustain you through the novel writing process?

That's a terrific question. I have to admit, there have been times where I've had false starts. I'll do research, start writing, and maybe get even 10,000 words into a book and gradually start to feel like I'm beating my head up against a wall. One time it got to the point where I was depressed about going into my basement lair to write every day. I finally had to admit that it wasn't the right book for me to be writing. With great trepidation, I called my agent, told her I had another idea, and asked if it okay to work on

that instead. Two hours later, I had a synopsis written for the new idea and felt more energized with a clearer idea of where I was going than I had after five months of working on the previous novel. The new idea was my upcoming novel, *WANT TO GO PRIVATE?* coming from Scholastic in July 2011.

Having a strong character voice is usually a good indicator. If my characters are speaking loud and clear, they'll usually guide me in the right direction.

That being said, it's important not to confuse the situation I've described above with the usual "I'm in the middle of my book and I'm freaking out about where it's going" phase of novel writing. That's something you just have to get your butt in the chair and work through. I find dark chocolate helps.

3. What advice do you have for young people who want to write?

Read, read, read, read, read and then read some more. Read in different genres. Challenge yourself with your reading. Read the news. I don't just say that because I'm a political columnist and I think it's important for young people to be informed, but you can find ideas in those news stories.

And then... **WRITE**. As Jane Yolen says, it's all about Butt-in-Chair. Be disciplined about writing consistently, not just when you feel "inspired". Try to set yourself word count goals, even if they're small. I keep track of my daily word production in a spreadsheet. Some days the words pour from my brain faster than my fingers can type. Other days, I have to force myself not to check Facebook and Twitter every five minutes because they won't come and I'm struggling to focus. But that word count goal keeps me disciplined, and the spreadsheet gives me a sense of accomplishment as I see those numbers gradually add up to a novel.

Discussion guide:

1. After reading chapter one, summarize Dani's life in Buenos Aires, Argentina. What challenges does her family face? Who are the main characters in Dani's life story?
2. Make a list of Dani's life before and after the terrorist attack. How has her life changed? Are there any events in your life that are marked by a particular event? How do people survive such a loss?
3. What opportunity puts a rift between Dani's parents? How is it resolved? Would you want to leave the only place you've ever known as home if the economic situation was similar or not? Why?

4. What will be the most difficult for Dani to leave behind? Will she see Beto ever again? Why do you think so or not? What would you miss most about your home if you had to emigrate?
5. What things and people must Dani leave behind? Why is she “scared of staying in Argentina but scared of leaving, too” (p.80) Have you ever felt a similar ambivalence about an important decision? How do you get past it?
6. Describe Dani’s first day in America. Compare her hopes with the reality of Twin Lakes. What is surprising?
7. Describe Dani’s first few days in her new school and home. What is it like compared to her life in Argentina? Who does she meet? How is she humiliated?
8. Discuss Dani’s relationship with her father. Would you characterize him as depressed? How would you cope with him? Do you think Dani is a good daughter and sister? Why?
9. Would you characterize the treatment that Dani faces from Trevor and his friend, Derek, as racism? How do they connect Dani and her friend Rosalia to the events on 9/11? Do you think the events of 9/11 changed America, especially concerning immigration?
10. Describe Dani’s new friend, Jon Nathanson. How does this relationship land her in the principal’s office? Do you think her actions were justified? How does this change her relationship with Jess?
11. How does Dani try to maintain her relationship with Beto? Do you think it’s possible in this age of instant communication to maintain a long-distance romance? Can chat and texting convey the emotions needed to maintain and build a relationship or not? Why? What does Dani eventually discover about Beto’s new life in Miami?
12. “...anger layed on top of guilt like frosting on a cake.” (p. 174) Have you ever felt like this? Why are Dani’s emotions so intense?
13. How do Dani’s parents react to her fight at school? Do all parents assume the worst of their kids? Why? How is their reaction tempered finally?
14. How does Jess prove that her intentions and attitude toward Dani have changed? Would you want to be her friend or not? Why? Explain how their relationship grows and how they are connected by tragedy.
15. How is Dani’s “exploration of the social habits of the American teenager” (p.233) enhanced by Brian? How does he help her adjust to life in America? Describe the dance through Dani’s eyes.
16. What does Dani discover about Jon through reading his notebooks? How does he understand far more than people believe?
17. How does Dani finally confront her father about his behavior? How does this begin his path to recovery? If you were depressed what would you want someone to do for you?
18. Although Dani is proficient with the English language she stumbles on all the idioms that pepper American speech. What else does she find difficult to understand about living in America? If you were her friend, how could you help?
19. “We all knew that there was a Before, which we could never return to, and an After, where we had to learnt o find joy again” (p.276) How is this true for most

- everyone? How do we move past events that shatter what we once knew, once loved?
20. Which scene in the novel is your favorite? What can you learn by studying the dialogue, scene-building, and action sequences? How can you apply this to your own writing?

Extending the novel:

Writing:

Write a scene between Beto and Dani when they happen to run into each other at an airport over the summer.

Language:

Collect the idioms (or brainstorm a list of your own) that Dani struggles with while learning American English. Create an idiom dictionary, which defines these terms in an understandable way, and provide illustrations. Share with your ESL class!

Reading:

As you begin the novel create a character web about Dani adding facts, descriptions and details as you read along.

History:

It irritates Dani that the only information Americans seem to know about her country is from watching the movie “Evita.” Instead of relying on this movie, research at least ten facts that every American should know about this country instead.

This guide was created by [Tracie Vaughn Zimmer](#), a reading specialist and children’s author, visit her website and blog to find hundreds of guides like this one.