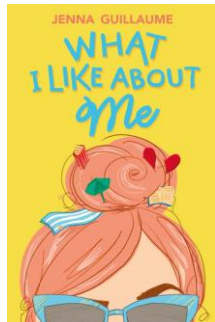

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT



Jenna Guillaume on *What I Like About Me*

ABOUT THE BOOK

The last thing sixteen-year-old Maisie Martin thought she'd be doing over vacation is entering a beauty pageant. Not when she's spent most of her life hiding her body from everyone. Not when her Dad is AWOL and her gorgeous older sister has returned to rock Maisie's already shaky confidence. And especially not when her best friend starts flirting with the boy she's always loved. But Maisie's got something to prove.

As she writes down all the ways this vacation is going from bad to worse in her school-assignment journal, what starts as a homework torture-device might just end up being an account of how Maisie didn't let anything, or anyone, hold her back.

Q: *This is your first YA novel. What inspired you to write it?*

A: Initially my main aim was to write a fun summer romance—the kind I love reading. As I developed the main character, Maisie, I realized that what she really needed was a self-love story. Her insecurities with her body and some of the problems she faces as a fat girl were definitely inspired by some of my own feelings and experiences. So while I wanted her to have a really cute romance with a guy that loved her just as she is, I also wanted to give her the gift of loving herself.

Q: *Who or what inspired Maisie's character?*

A: Maisie is definitely fictional, but some of her feelings and experiences are drawn from my own life. I had a toxic friend as a teenager and have long had a lot of insecurities about my looks, so that all went into Maisie's character. She also has my passion for pop culture—right down to her obsession with Arnold Schwarzenegger movies! But she's different from me in a lot of ways, too. I think she's braver than I am.

Q: *Where did the idea of Maisie keeping a journal come from? Have you ever kept a journal?*

A: Maisie's journal was inspired by one I kept myself as a teen. My original draft was in straightforward first person prose, but I was struggling to move forward with it. Looking back, I realize it was because I hadn't found the right voice for Maisie. One day when I was visiting my parents, my dad forced me to clean out some of my old high school books that were gathering dust in my childhood bedroom. Amongst them I found a journal I'd had to keep for English class, and I was quite surprised to discover some of the things I'd written in it. I was a bit of a snarky teen, it turns out, and I'd made some pretty resentful comments in there—and somehow I'd still handed it in to the teacher! It gave me the idea to try writing Maisie's story in a similar journal style, and when I did, something immediately clicked into place. I'd found her voice.

Q: *When you began writing, was the message of body positivity and self-love deliberate or did it evolve throughout your writing process?*

A: It definitely evolved through the writing process. I began with the idea of a family vacation, with two boys and two girls and the complicated relationships between them. It was only when I started questioning who these characters were and why they interacted in the way they did that I came to realize how Maisie felt about her body, and that she would need some body positivity.

I'm so glad the book evolved in this way, because it's a subject that's very important to me.

Q: Young people like Maisie have been strongly affected by the culture of social media. How do you think social media has affected young people as they tackle issues of identity, body positivity, and self-esteem?

A: Social media puts a lot of focus on looks, so it can make it extra hard to deal with body image issues. Everyone presents an idealized version of themselves online, and it's so difficult not to compare yourself to it even though it's not reality. I think it's really important to carefully curate your feed so that you only follow people and things that make you feel good. For instance, I recently unfollowed a lot of celebs (including all the Kardashians) and instead followed a bunch of body positive Instagrammers, and it's improved my experience of the app so much! I now feel joy and inspiration when I go on there, instead of feeling more negative about myself.

Q: Maisie struggles with body confidence, but she also learns to confront her fears and be secure in the spotlight. Have you ever done something that terrified you, like entering a pageant?

A: I've never entered a pageant, but when I worked at *BuzzFeed* I did appear in a video in which I tried pin-up style for the first time. Because of my insecurities I was absolutely terrified of the whole experience and almost backed out, but I ended up having the most incredible and positive day and it was this that inspired me to give Maisie a similar journey. The actual way it happens is different, but the feelings are the same.

Q: How is writing a novel different than writing for magazines and BuzzFeed?

A: Writing a novel is totally different from my experience writing for magazines and *BuzzFeed*. For one thing, it's about 100 times more work! It's also a very different thing to construct a fictional story and create characters and build a whole new world. There's a lot of daydreaming involved. It's tough, but also wonderful fun. While I love the writing I do as part of my day job, my novel is much closer to my heart in many ways.

Q: What is your writing routine? Do you have a favorite place to write?

A: When I was writing *What I Like About Me* I was working full time at *BuzzFeed*, and so I would get up every day and write for an hour before heading into work. Occasionally I would also write after work. Now I'm a freelance writer so my schedule is a bit more flexible, although on a practical level it's not much different—it's still sitting at my desk, trying to get the words down. My own desk is my favorite place to write. I can't write in public—I get distracted too easily and prefer the control and quiet I have in my own space. I also tend to “act out” the expressions of characters as I try to describe them, so privacy is important to avoid embarrassment!

Q: Which books have had the biggest influence on your writing?

A: *Looking for Alibrandi* by Australian author Melina Marchetta was an important book to me as a teenager. I reread it constantly; it was like a faithful friend I could always turn to. It became a part of me. It's one of the reasons I really wanted to write YA—to be able to create a story that makes teen readers feel even a small portion of what that book made me feel is everything to me.

I also adore the work of Stephanie Perkins, and her YA romances were what made me sit up and think “this is what I want to write.”

In terms of the craft of writing, Stephen King's *On Writing* helped motivate me to get started and keep going.

Q: While your book has an important message of loving yourself, it also has a fun rom-com feel to it. What are some of your favorite romantic comedies? Books? Movies?

A: Romantic comedy is my all-time fave genre so I have many that I adore. In terms of movies: *To All The Boys I've Loved Before*; *Love, Simon*; *10 Things I Hate About You*; *When Harry Met Sally*; and *The Proposal* are up there for me. In the world of books: in addition to *To All The Boys I've Loved Before* and *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* once again, I'm also a big fan of *Anna and the French Kiss* by Stephanie Perkins and anything by Rainbow Rowell. I love Sarra Manning and Mhairi McFarlane's works too.

Q: If you were going on a family vacation like Maisie, where would you choose to go?

A: There are so many beautiful vacation spots along the coast of Australia, but I think I'd really love to travel further afield—Hawaii would be nice!

Q: Who is the better action hero in your opinion—the Rock or Arnold Schwarzenegger?

A: Arnold Schwarzenegger, obviously! I am with Maisie on this one. Sorry Dwayne.

Q: What do you hope readers take away from What I Like About Me?

A: First and foremost I hope readers enjoy *What I Like About Me* and have fun with it. I hope it makes them laugh and swoon a little, and provides a nice escape and place of comfort for them. I'd also really love if it made readers think about the way they treat their bodies and consider being kinder to themselves. In the book, Maisie starts keeping a list of the things she likes about her body, and I think that's a really simple but powerful way to show yourself a little bit of love every day. I hope readers are inspired to try it themselves!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenna Guillaume was the editor-at-large for *BuzzFeed* Australia, where she wrote about very important things like pop culture, identity, feminism, social media, and Chris Hemsworth's biceps. Previously, she spent more than half a decade in the features department of *Girlfriend* magazine, editing the sealed section (yes, all those questions are real), and writing about everything from bullying and body image to bad kisses and boy bands. She was also a contributor to *Girlfriend Life Hacks*, an essential guide to navigating a girl's completely-awkward-but-totally-awesome teen years.