



# Dork Diaries 1: Tales from a Not-So-Fabulous Life

By Rachel Renée Russell

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Meet Nikki Maxwell! She's starting eighth grade at a new school—and her very first diary packed with hilarious stories and art in this SUPER SQUEE updated edition of Book One of the #1 *New York Times* bestselling Dork Diaries series!

Nikki confesses all in her first diary ever: her epic battle with her mom for an iPhone, meeting her new soon-to-be BFFs Chloe and Zoey, falling for adorably sweet crush Brandon, dealing with her zany little sister Brianna's antics—and the immediate clashes with mean girl Mackenzie, who becomes Nikki's rival in a schoolwide art competition.

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### Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Grade 5-8—Fourteen-year-old Nikki J. Maxwell has been awarded a scholarship to a prestigious private middle school as a part of her father's bug extermination contract. Her angst as she deals with the resident mean girl, her embarrassing parents, her crush on the hot boy, and making new friends are all recorded alongside numerous sketches of her life. Although occasionally amusing, Nikki is not a very likable character. She is shallow and self-centered and fails to show any growth in the book, even as she one-ups popular and cruel MacKenzie in the end. In fact, Nikki, who steals her neighbor's hearing aid and plays pranks on her little sister, is somewhat of a mean girl herself. All the other characters are underdeveloped, including Nikki's family and her new BFFs, Chloe and Zoey. Black-and-white drawings, which are often witty, appear throughout the text, which is printed on lined pages as though from a diary. Fans of Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Abrams) may enjoy this book, but it's an additional purchase.—*Terry Ann Lawler, Phoenix Public Library, AZ*

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Review

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Of Dorks and Diaries: Rachel Renee Russell

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Rachel Renée Russell

Dork Diaries

Rachel Renee Russell debuted her Dork Diaries series last year, and the result was anything but dorky. In fact, it was an astounding success, as Russell's recent win from the Children's Choice Awards shows. The next book in the series, *Tales from a Not-So-Popular Party Girl*, is coming June 8, so we caught up with Russell to talk about both books, her plans for the series, and what the next book will be about.

Had you written before starting Dork Diaries?

I had other projects. Actually, Dork Diaries is my third book. I had a young-adult project that had a 16-year-old main character. I completed that one, and I had another one I had only gotten maybe halfway through; it was a middle-grade book. And the strange thing is, I had originally sent it in; it was called *There's a Fairy in the Bug Zapper*, which is weird, but it's about two little girls—I guess the dork, outcast, fish-out-of-water thing is a theme for me. They don't get invited to a party, so they decide to have their own party and camp out in the backyard. They notice what they think is a little comet or something, this streak of lightning comes out of the sky and it's kind of whizzing around the yard and then it bashes into the bug zapper, and the bug zapper explodes in color and lights, like a Disney movie. So then they jump out of their tent and run to it, and there's a little fairy in there. When she hit the electrical current, it goofed up her electrical current, her being able to fly, so basically she can't fly and she can't use all of her fairy powers. So they take her inside and they give her some water and some apple, and she starts talking to them. It's a really cute story. But since the electrical current messed up her powers, she's basically having to recuperate, so they put her in a Barbie Doll house, and over the next month, she gets stronger and stronger and she needs to go back to fairyland. So it's

kind of a contemporary thing.

It was a graphic novel too. I was writing it and I had an artist who was working with me. Her name is Lisl Adams. So that was the project that I had originally submitted to my agent, Daniel Lazar. He loved it. He was reading it over and getting back to me with notes, so we could polish it up and have it be the best it could be. We were in the process of writing up a contract and he thought it would sell. About a week later, I got a nice prize from the Fire and Ice writing competition, which is sponsored by the Romance Writers of America. The Chicago division of RWA is Fire and Ice, which has a contest where you submit 30 pages of a work. It's then reviewed by editors and agents. I can't remember if I won second or third place. I emailed Daniel and told him about it and how happy I was, and he asked what it was about, and I told him: This is about a dorky girl in middle school, and she doesn't have any friends. She's switching to a new school, and she's an aspiring artist, so she has a lot of doodles. He said, "Oh, that sounds really good. Why don't you send me that?" He emailed me back a couple days later and said, "To be honest, this new thing is a lot stronger and it has the flavor of Diary of a Wimpy Kid, and at that time, Wimpy Kid was already on the New York Times bestseller list. And you know, I think I had a fairy in it too, and he said, you know what, this middle-grade girl, her voice is so strong and she's so funny, let's get rid of the fairy and just make it a slice of life. This would probably do better than your other project." So we dropped The Fairy in the Bug Zapper, took the other one, took out the fantasy elements, and had a very insecure, dorky, artistic eighth grader named Nikki Maxwell. He submitted that and the rest is history.

Has The Fairy in the Bug Zapper been published?

No, it hasn't. The other strange thing is I think I won the award in April or May, and then I think I got in contact with Daniel in April. The whole thing was like a 60-day period. Within 60 days, it went to auction and it sold. I think we signed a contract in maybe June or July, and they wanted Dork Diaries in the stores 11 months later. And you know, you don't get the 11 months to write it! You get four months to write, because they have to send it to the printer much earlier. So I said of course I can do it. But it was a lot to do in a short amount of time! So I asked my youngest daughter, Nikki, who's an artist, to help me out, which she did—but then she ended up moving to Virginia. So I went back to Lisl Adams, who I had worked with before, and it ended up that my daughter and Lisl and I all worked on it to get that first book done on time.

Who does the illustrations now?

I did about 70 percent, and the rest was my daughter and Lisl. Lisl is very, very talented. She has her own projects that she's working on. That's what she's doing now.

Would you like to revisit The Fairy in the Bug Zapper sometime?

I would! Not only would it be a graphic novel, but I would still want Lisl to do it.

In addition to doing Dork Diaries so quickly, you were going through a lot in your life at the same time.

Yes, it was crazy. I was getting divorced, and I was very, very sad. I was depressed, and it was really weird that in that state of mind, I was writing this. Book 1 is the funniest. Books 2 and 3 are funny too, but Book 1 really is the funniest. I don't even know how I was writing such funny material when I was so brokenhearted and my family was falling apart and my kids were moving away, but I got through it. And maybe that's part of the reason why I was able to get through it without getting on medication and therapy! I could sit down and speak through the book. I would laugh at the stuff as I was writing if it was funny. That's how I knew if it was good: if I would laugh. When my daughters were around, they'd go, "There's my crazy mom, just laughing away!"

You mentioned Book 3. What's it going to be about?

Actually, I'm still at the moment maybe 90 pages in, but part of the plot is going to be music. I love Glee. In

between Glee and American Idol and High School Musical, I tried to write about what the girls in the age group, 9–14, would really like and music is really in now, so music is going to be a big part of Book 3. There's going to be maybe a talent show or maybe some kind of competition. Nikki Maxwell and her friends are going to make a girl group and compete, and of course Mackenzie will have her girl group.

Will romance blossom too?

Yes, we have to do a little of that every time too.

It's sweet how you pace the romance in these books. Do you have a complete storyline in mind? I'd love to do 12 books, because it's a diary and each one covers one month. At this point, Simon & Schuster has purchased books three and four, so I'm working on three now and I'll start four next winter.

Did you feel like a dork growing up?

Most definitely! Most of the time. You just feel like you're not normal, like everybody else has it together and you don't. Yeah, that's been a big issue with me.

What made you set the series in Westchester County in New York?

I wanted to pick an affluent community. Nikki's father is an exterminator, and he's a small-business owner. I wanted to have the fish-out-of-water thing, so I thought, Where can I take my middle-class, blue-collar family with the dorky girl and put her where she will totally not feel comfortable? So that's why I picked it.

I love Nikki's friends, too. They're really supportive and have a great relationship. Will the focus ever be more on them?

I'd love to do a book or two from their point of view. Chloe is Hispanic and Zoe is African-American, and I'd love to do a book or two with them as the main character, their diaries. But it's Nikki's diary right now, and by being her diary, she can talk about them but she can't really get in their heads.

Did you know people like Mackenzie?

Oh, yes. I bet if you talked to your sisters, they could tell you all about girls like this!

Who were your writing inspirations?

I loved Harriet the Spy, and when people ask me "What's your inspiration?" I'll say obviously Wimpy Kid and then Harriet. I loved the character and was really close to her. She had the same feelings that I felt. Wimpy Kid didn't inspire the writing so much. I could see that there was definitely a market for this, though. Because normally you have to write about the paranormal if you want to write something that has the potential for being humongous, but seeing Wimpy Kid, I thought, wow, you can write something slice of life. It doesn't have to be vampires and angels and demons and stuff like that. Oh, and I loved The Princess Diaries and Meg Cabot. She's really humorous and witty and smart.

How much interaction do you have with kids reading these books?

I get about a dozen fan letters a day. Some days more, especially when kids are out of school.

Is it difficult to write to this age group?

Not at all! You know, I'm a mom, so I'm well aware of them and how they act. My group is 9 to 14, but Nikki Maxwell is actually 14 and an eighth grader. I didn't want to make it about high school. I picked a 14-year-old because I figured younger girls would want to read about her. Plus, she can have a crush on a boy. But still in a sweet way. For my first project, the young-adult book with the main character who was 16, my writers group labeled it "Sweet Young Adult," which is stuff that's more innocent. She had a crush too and they basically just looked at each other from across the room. That's where I'm a little more comfortable

writing, I think—on the sweet side of things. You know, I have two daughters. They're adults now, but still! It's the mommy side of me.

So if you end up doing eight more Dork Diaries books, where do you plan the series to go? That will take her right up to high school. And since each of the books are slice of life, I'll throw Thanksgiving into the November book and with December, we'll get into Christmas. Summer would involve summer camp. I'll keep it interesting. I'd also love to do independent books from Chloe and Zoe's points of view. But I'm having a hard enough time keeping up with the deadlines I already have!

#### About the Author

Rachel Renee Russell is a lawyer who prefers writing children's books to legal briefs (mainly because books are a lot more fun and pyjamas and bunny slippers aren't allowed in court). She has raised two daughters and lived to tell about it. Rachel lives in northern Virginia with a spoiled pet Yorkie who terrorises her daily by climbing on top of her computer and pelting her with stuffed animals while she writes. And, yes, Rachel considers herself a total Dork.

### Users Review

#### From reader reviews:

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