



Life and Other Complications

Heather Mullaly

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In Heather Mullaly's agonizing novel *Life and Other Complications*, a teenager who lied about how she contracted HIV faces her past to reclaim her self-worth.

Aly was once a member of the Children Living with Life Threatening Conditions Support Group, where she met her best friends. But Aly, who was ashamed that her mother's boyfriend groomed and raped her when she was young, always claimed that she got HIV at birth. To her, the lie was more palatable. When Aly is called to testify at a trial concerning one of her abuser's victims, she's forced to divulge the truth.

In this sobering novel, relationships are strengthened through hardships. Aly's memories alternate with her current life: she lives with a foster family whom she doesn't feel close to, is stigmatized because of her HIV, and finds reciprocal love. Her trauma and memories of abuse imply a pattern of harm without detailing too many incidents. Childhood confusion, shame, and silence are treated with clarity.

The book's secondary characters are less developed than Aly is; those who work not to define themselves by their terminal diagnoses become symbols of a carpe diem mindset. There is an instance of sudden healing within the swift plot, which seems intent on delivering its message of hope after sorrow. Here, Aly's birth mother's complicity is devastating, and Aly's escape is fortuitous. In her present, a background project involving a mural ties in with the book's light Christian themes about restoration, and everything culminates when Aly finds healing in trusting others.

Amid revelations of tough secrets, *Life and Other Complications* is a tender novel in which a brave teenager is able to hit reset with the help of her chosen family.

KAREN RIGBY (July / August 2021)

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