

# Q + A

With Varian Johnson

(Originally published as back matter in *My Life as a Rhombus*)

***1. Can you tell us a little bit about where *My Life as a Rhombus* came from? So much happened in Rhonda's life before the book begins, so it seems like the book must have had quite a complicated genesis.***

*My Life as a Rhombus* was inspired by a friend I met a few years ago. The young woman already had one child (an eight year old) and upon discovering that she was pregnant again, she eventually decided to have an abortion.

My friend had a decent job, but she still struggled to make ends meet. More times than not, she had to depend on friends or parents when money got tight. So from her point of view, she had no choice but to terminate her pregnancy. Any other option would have been unfair to the daughter she already had.

What really resonated with me was that when I offered to go to the clinic with her, she declined. She said that it wasn't my place; it wasn't my responsibility. She had gotten herself into this predicament and now it was up to her to get herself out of it.

While Rhonda isn't in the same situation as my friend, I was intrigued with just how much my friend wrestled with her options—and how she repeatedly reminded me that I wasn't there to fix her problem, just to listen.

I wondered what would have happened if she hadn't had the abortion. I wondered what would have happened if she had been forced to make a decision that she wasn't quite comfortable with.

***2. There are fewer men who write for young adults than woman, and very few men who write first-person female narrators. Why did you choose to do this? What were some of the challenges?***

I originally considered writing this as an adult novel, from Rhonda's father's point of view. But very quickly, I realized that if anyone was going to tell this story, it would be Rhonda. I also realized that in order for the reader to truly understand what Rhonda had gone through, I had to write the novel in first-person.

Of course, I've never been a teenage girl, much less a teenage girl that had once been pregnant, so I knew I was up for quite the challenge when I began the novel. I conducted a lot of research on pregnancy and abortion—and not just medical research. It was important for me to dig deep and to research a teenager's emotional response to pregnancy and abortion.

***3. You're also an engineer—the career Rhonda aspires to. Is there a little bit of you in Rhonda? How do engineering and writing books for teens intersect—if they do at all?***

Rhonda's a math geek—of course there's a bit of me in her (although, for better or for worse, I'm probably more like her father). Engineering and writing are both similar, at least in a few ways. Both take a lot of creativity and determination. Both usually take years and years to master. But if I had to pick, I'd say that writing is much more difficult than engineering. The rules of science and math are very exact. The rules of writing, on the other hand, are guidelines at best. What's right for one book can be completely wrong for another.

***4. Rhonda is an African-American character, but the conflicts she faces in the novel and the choices she makes (both correct and otherwise) don't immediately seem to involve her race. Was it important to you to write an African-American protagonist who faced challenges aside from race? What about the character of Justice Gamble?***

I do think that it's important to feature African-American characters that are not purely defined by race. We live in a diverse society where decisions are influenced by number of factors: socio-economic status, political affiliation, religious beliefs, educational level, and of course, ethnicity. While I'm proud to be an African-American, my race doesn't dictate every decision I make. Likewise, the same should hold true for Rhonda and her father.

However, I feel that I have an opportunity—or perhaps even a responsibility—to create fiction that positively portrays aspects of the African-American experience. Is it really that unbelievable for Justice Gamble to sit on the South Carolina Supreme Court? I'd bet that the Honorable Ernest A. Finney, Jr. (South Carolina's first African-American Supreme Court Justice) may disagree.

I'm not saying that race isn't important. I'm just saying that it's not important all the time. I promise, when Rhonda was waiting for the results of her pregnancy test, the last thing on her mind was her ethnicity.

***5. In a similar vein, you've written a book where abortion is an important issue, but your book doesn't take an explicit pro- or anti-choice position. It's not a preachy or political novel, but it is very frank about choices and their consequences. Did you set out to write a book "about abortion" or was abortion more of a vehicle to allow you explore a character?***

I never intended to write a novel that either validated or opposed abortion. If anything, the novel is about the power of forgiveness (hokey, but true). That being said, I knew I was walking into a potential hot bed when I decided to use abortion as the main plot device. But, I think that's what writers are supposed to do. A lot of the time, the issues that a character struggles with are some of the same issues that the author himself has struggled with.

Personally, I've always struggled with the legal and moral aspects of abortion. I hoped that writing this novel would help me sort out my position on the matter. If anything, all I've realized is that it's a hell of a lot easier to be pro-life or pro-choice when you aren't the one that can get pregnant.

***6. Care to talk a little about the challenges and rewards of writing for teens? You're still a young guy. Are you just working out your issues with your own teenage years?***

I love looking at life through a teen's eyes. Teenagers see the world through such a clear lens—before things like work, bills, and family begin to clutter their landscape. Also, teens know crap when they see it, and now-a-days, they aren't afraid to tell you so. You've got to

get the story—their story—right, and in the process of telling their story, you have to respect them.

As for myself, I don't have any residual issues from my teenage years. I'm nothing like the teenagers I write about. I was a good, obedient, perfect kid. At least, that's what I tell my parents.

### ***7. Any advice for aspiring writers?***

Read as much as you can. Read the classics, but also read contemporary works, because industry standards fluctuate. Read books both within and outside your genre. Read, read, read.

Then, write. Everyday. Writing is about putting 'butt in chair' and putting 'words on paper'. The revision can come later; the first draft is all about getting the story on the page.