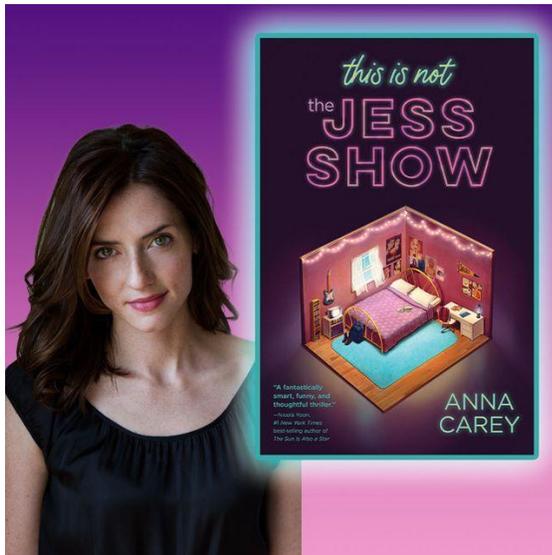


# Anna Carey's New Novel Mines the Dark Side of Our Online Lives

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In the opening pages of Anna Carey's latest YA novel, *This Is Not the Jess Show*, it's March of 1998, and Jess Flynn has an extremely normal teenage life: her biggest problem is figuring out whether her crush — her longtime best friend, Tyler — likes her back.

But also, lately she can't help noticing that a few things in her extremely normal life are seeming more and more off. Like the faint sounds of chanting everyone else insists they can't hear, and the stomach flu that has half the town in bed. Or the mysterious black and silver object with an apple logo that fell out of her friend Amber's backpack, which Amber insists is no big deal. That's the strangest thing of all, she keeps thinking: that no one else will admit that anything strange is going on.

*This Is Not The Jess Show* follows Jess as she starts to realize her world is not what she's been led to believe. Without giving too much away, the result is a thriller that mines '90s nostalgia and 2020 tech dystopia in equal measure. The book's *Friends* references, as well as its obsession with putting on a picture-perfect face at all times, will feel eerily familiar to readers — as will Jess' struggle to figure out what "reality" even means in a world where people will lie to her face in order to get what they want from her.

It's a dark and distorted mirror of our own extremely strange times, perfect reading for anyone who wants to feel seen without necessarily needing to be looked at. Shondaland spoke to Carey about nostalgia, reality TV, and the lives we live online for the world to see.

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**ZAN ROMANOFF: Where did this book come from for you, and how did it start to come together?**

**ANNA CAREY:** I feel like books come together super piecemeal, in these little moments of revelation. To me, I usually write from a question, and one of the things that really sparked it was that I was on Instagram, watching a story that my friend had put up of her two-and-a-half year old. She's storying him, and he's putting up his hands and saying "No!" as she's storying him.

She's a great mom — this is the thing. She's a phenomenal mom, but she puts up this video, and there didn't seem to be a lot of awareness of the fact that he's telling her in the video, "I don't want to be filmed right now."

Or you know in LA, those Spanish houses that have those big half-moon windows in the front of them, that you can almost see right into the house? One time I was stopped at a stoplight and I could see right in, and this woman was posing with her child in front of a Christmas tree. The dad's like, coaxing them into different poses, and at a certain point the kid, she was probably like four, drifts away. She tries to come back into the shot, and the mom was posing, hand on hip, and there was a real energy of, *get out of my shot*. All of these little things add up.

I've always been fascinated by the separation between real life — "real life" I put in quotes, the life that you're living in the moment when you're not on your device — and then this online life, and do those line up? Where is the disconnect?

I've read a lot about how this generation coming up right now is the first generation that has a footprint online that their parents created for them. They have this moment of discovery where they're realizing, for the last ten years I've actually been online, and my parents have been putting out a presentation of who I am — their version of who I am.

**ZR: The obvious reference for this book for me is *The Truman Show*.**

**AC:** It's a 1998 movie, and this was set in 1998, which was not a coincidence.

**ZR: But, of course, you're also writing about the reckoning of the mom blogger.**

**AC:** So much of the anxiety in the '90s was around the emergence of reality TV. And reality TV has done some horrible things — it's given us Trump. But now what's interesting about 1998 is, it was the first moment where a lot of teenagers were on AOL. And so to me, 1998 was the year Pandora's box opened, and we missed it because we were like, well, reality TV. Yes, reality TV, but also this other thing that's creeping up on us.

**ZR: And now the internet has swallowed reality TV — I'm thinking about TikTok hype houses. Instead of getting on a TV show, we can just live broadcast ourselves. The internet and reality TV have created this unholy stepchild.**

**AC:** There's no way to talk about it without feeling impossibly old! And obviously, there's wonderful things about social media and ways that it's changed the world for the better, but I was always interested in the darker side of it. Nobody wants to read about it uniting us! Where's the darkness?

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**ZR: How did you get yourself into a '90s mindset and remind yourself what those years were like?**

**AC:** It was shockingly easy to dip into that time, because I was, in fact, a teenager in that moment. So for me, it was more about visceral things, like listening to the music that I listened to at that time. I was really fascinated by the idea of it existing in two worlds — being of the '90s, but also contemporary.

To me, the best metaphor for that feeling is when you listen to a song that you haven't heard in 20 years, but that you used to listen to all the time. It puts you in this space where you're in the present moment, but you're also transported back to that time when that song was everything. Music became a real key part for me to access those feelings and that energy.

The worst thing about doing press for this book is that you're just constantly telling people how old you are.

**ZR: Right, and this book is perfectly pitched for me, because we're approximately the same age. But there was a moment when I thought, "Huh, what are teens gonna make of this?" And then I remembered that teens are obsessed with the '90s.**

**AC:** It's a moment where everything '90s is new again — they're remaking *Sister Sister*, they remade *90210*. All those things that were so iconic in the 90's are all coming back, to the point where I was at a Bat Mitzvah and I looked around and it was so trippy: the girls were wearing babydoll dresses with tee shirts underneath them, Doc Martens, glittery eyeshadow — they looked like we looked in the 90s. It was like traveling through a portal.

**ZR: Why do you think the '90s are such a powerful source of nostalgia — what are we looking for there?**

**AC:** I think usually 20 years before is the moment of interest. When we were in the '90s, we were wearing bell bottoms; I remember I used to love those fluorescent flower power prints and stuff. There was an interest in the '70s when we were in the '90s, so maybe it's just cyclical, that once 20 years have passed, there's a moment when people want to revisit it.

**ZR: This book is sort of hard to talk about because so much of what I want to talk about happens at the end, and I don't want to spoil anything. But one of the things that happens pretty early in the book that then plays out in how it ends is, Jess' dog dies, and it gets...**

**replaced with another dog. And everyone expects her not to notice. She says, that's not my dog, and everyone just says, yeah it is.**

**AC:** The ultimate gaslighting!

**ZR:** Ultimate gaslighting. It's just so strange to think, here we are, we live in 24/7 surround sound surveillance, so you think we'd be living in the realest reality. And yet here we are in gaslit reality where you can see reality, and people will still bald-faced lie to you about it. And that feels really powerful to me as a way of saying, technology creates a certain kind of reality, but it's not just transparent in the way people want it to be.

**AC:** We all have these social media profiles, and we all have these followings, and we're all creating our own versions of what reality is. So we start to lose agreement on the truth of the truth. We're all in these little bubbles, in our own worlds, so you have the additional complexity of the algorithms feeding us the same things over and over again. Of course we have this question of, what is true, and what is not.

**ZR:** I know I sometimes feel conflicted about it — I know how hard it is for me to separate my online self from my “real” self and I’m an adult, so I know it’s even harder for teenagers who don’t have as robust a sense of self yet.

**AC:** It's like, am I luring these children into this dark world? It's hard. But what you realize is that so many people are already bringing their kids into that world. They're already there. This one '90s actress, I follow her on Instagram, and she has three kids. All three of them have Instagram profiles that she links to in her profile. In some ways, it's genius, because by the time they're 15 they're gonna have a hundred thousand Instagram followers. But also by the time they're 15 they're gonna look online and say, *Who is this person you have created? Who is this version of me that you have put out to the public?*

I get super bummed out when I think about it — all parents have an idea of who their child is. A lot of times there's an aspect that does not line up with who the child actually is. So it's really just an image of what they want their child to be, or what they think their child is.

**ZR:** Lastly, you wrote a book about a particular kind of modern dystopia, and it's coming out into a different one. How are you feeling about your pandemic book release?

**AC:** It's totally weird. This is my first book out in a while — I had a book that I worked on for two years that I revised and revised and revised and is now a file on my desktop, that I may revisit one day but will likely not. So for me, this was just such an exciting time, pre-pandemic, to get my newest book out and be relevant again. To be like, I actually have been working on some stuff, not just twiddling my thumbs!

So of course it's a little bit of a bummer, but I'm also trying to see the opportunity in it, and the exciting things about it, which is, in a virtual setting you can get hundreds of people in a room

together. That's very different than organizing a book event or a launch event where you have a 40 person max. So there are some cool things about it.

I'm struggling to read right now, but I hope people are finding enjoyment in books and escape in books right now, especially books that — I do think Jess is a real page turner and has a lot of escapist elements to it. So I'm trying to be positive about the current everything.

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*Zan Romanoff writes essays, journalism, and fiction, and is the author of [three YA novels](#). She lives and works in Los Angeles. Follow her on Twitter at [@zansopticon](#).*