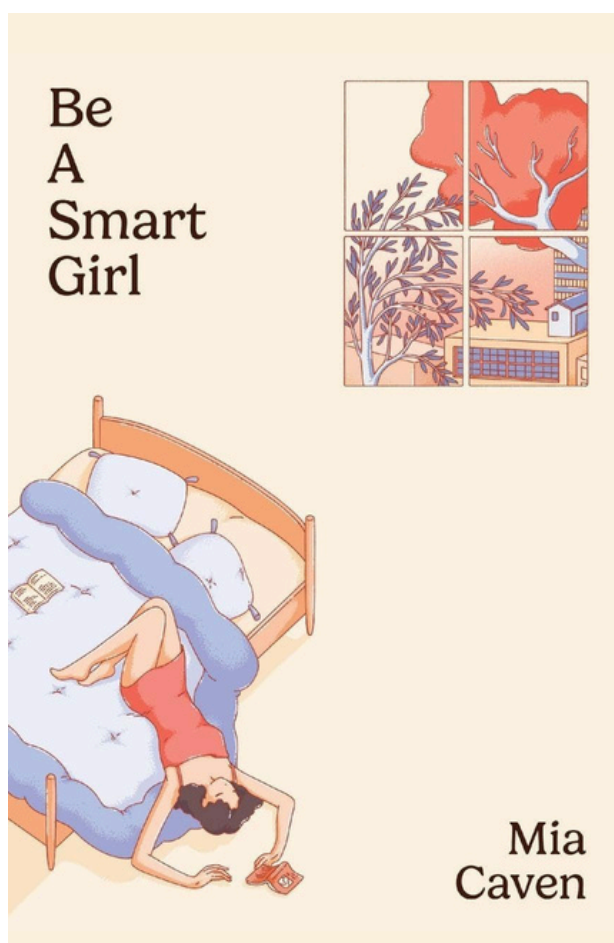


BE A SMART GIRL

A BOOK REVIEW WITH AUTHOR MIA CAVEN
BY SITI ABDULLAH



INTRODUCTION

In this coming-of-age story, we follow our protagonist Anastasia as she takes us through her journey of self-discovery and what it means to fully embrace her femininity in a world steeped in patriarchy. At the same time, she struggles to break free from the deeply rooted traditional beliefs that shaped her, ones so entrenched she once believed there was no way out.

ATROPOS MAGAZINE

Anastasia left Greece at thirteen to continue her studies in London. Later, she moved to Chicago, hoping to find work and begin a new life. There, she met a guy, who became her first everything. First boyfriend, first fiancée, first almost husband. One day at the library, she crossed paths with the mysterious girl she had once seen outside her window. The girl invited Anastasia to join a feminist march. This is where the story truly begins. Here is where Anastasia begins to realise that there is a world beyond what she was taught, and that she can become anything and anyone her heart desires.

As I was reading this, funnily enough, halfway through the book, I found myself hating Ana. Her constant back and forth between what she feels or wants to do and her actual actions left me going “???” This oscillation frustrated me, but in a way, I also understood it. I have been there: knowing what you want, feeling it in every fibre of your being, yet being constrained by circumstances and having to wait, be patient, and hope for the right moment. Perhaps this is why I found her simultaneously annoying and relatable. It represents the type of people who fight relentlessly for what they desire, the ones determined to change their lives because they refuse to accept the limitations imposed on them.

One of the central themes in this book is feminism. As we know, Anastasia was introduced to the feminist movement after joining a march with Creole, a pivotal moment that marks the beginning of her ideological awakening. The story was set in 1960s America, during the second wave of feminism, a period that expanded the movement's focus beyond voting rights to include social, cultural, and economic inequalities from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. While first-wave feminists primarily focused on political equality, particularly on women's suffrage, second-wave feminists sought to address systemic barriers that shaped the lives of everyday women. They saw a connection between how women are treated in politics and in culture—issues that were often overlooked in earlier feminist agendas that centred on white women's experiences— and that one cannot be fixed without addressing the other. This wave tackled issues such as domestic violence, reproductive rights (access to birth control and abortion), harassment at work, and sexuality (the right to express sexuality freely). Feminists also rallied for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), a proposal to challenge the U.S Constitution that would guarantee equal legal rights regardless of sex. In the United States, the movement gained traction following the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan in 1963, which critiqued the limited roles of wife and mother imposed on women. It is against this backdrop that Anastasia begins to understand feminism as a framework for liberation, reshaping her worldview and identity.

When Anastasia was first invited to join the women's rights march by Creole, Creole asked her if she knew anything about it. Anastasia said she didn't. Creole explained that the march was in support of *Roe v. Wade*, a case in which a woman in Texas was fighting for the legal right to have an abortion.

In 1969, Jane Roe (real name Norma McCorvey) was denied an abortion because her pregnancy was not deemed unsafe or a risk to her life. During that time, in 1971, 44 states in the United States outlawed abortion, making it a crime to ask for abortion except to save a patient's life, or for other reasons such as rape, incest, or foetal anomalies. This meant that people who have the means to travel to other states or countries could do so. However, people with low incomes, including Jane Roe, will have no options. Lawyers Sarah Weddington and Linda Coffee, who were working on collecting cases that could be used to challenge the United States' abortion bans, filed a lawsuit against Henry Wade, the district attorney of Dallas County, Texas, on behalf of Jane Roe. The lawsuit claimed that phrasing used in the state laws were vague as it didn't clearly define when an abortion is legal (In constitutional law, if a law is vague, it can be challenged because citizens can't reasonably know what is permitted or prohibited) and that they violated her constitutional right to privacy, which was protected by the first, fourth, fifth, ninth and fourteenth amendments. The Supreme Court ultimately agreed in 1973. The Court ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment protect a woman's right to privacy, including the decision to have an abortion. At the same time, the Court also has to consider that the government has its own interest in protecting women's health and the potential life of the foetus. To balance these, they created the trimester framework. It works as follows: during the first trimester, the state cannot interfere, and the decision is left completely to the woman and her doctor. In the second trimester, the state may introduce some regulations, but only to protect the woman's health. By the third trimester, once the foetus can live outside the womb, states may restrict or even ban abortion, except when it is necessary to protect the woman's life or health. They also concluded that the Texas Law is unconstitutional as it did not consider different stages of pregnancy and or the woman's right to make a decision. Unfortunately, on June 24 2022, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, returning to the states the authority to ban abortion. This again highlights the fragility of reproductive rights in the United States and why feminist activism remains as important and urgent today as it was in the 1970s.

After this first encounter, Anastasia was left with more questions than answers. Her conversation with Creole about the march opened her eyes to a world she barely understood, and she felt a strong urge to make sense of it. Curious and determined to learn more, she wandered through the library in search of books on feminism. That was when she came across *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by Judy Norsigian.

First published in the 1970s, this book provided vital information on women's health and sexuality, key issues that second-wave feminists were fighting for. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* encouraged women to embrace their sexuality (not a direct quote from the book, but this is a summary of what *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was about), which challenged the dominant societal norms that pressured women to be "docile and passive". The book is built on the work of the Bread and Roses collective, a socialist women's liberation group founded in Boston around 1969. The collective sought not only economic security for women, but also dignity and recognition within the workforce. One of their most influential projects was a course booklet titled *Women and Their Bodies*, released in 1970, which made information on topics such as abortion, pregnancy, and postpartum depression accessible to women outside the traditional medical authority. In 1970, women were expected to comply with decisions about their health without question and were often kept in the dark about their own bodies. So, the collective gathered personal accounts from women, because they believe that these real-life experiences were the best way to know our own body beyond the facts that were given by experts. The aim was to empower women with knowledge so they could ask questions, challenge the system put in place for women's health, and ultimately make informed decisions about their health. They also believed that having information about your own body is important because if not, we will be strangers to our own bodies. Inspired by these motives, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* became a model for accessible healthcare education. It helped women learn about their bodies, communicate better with doctors, and advocate for systemic changes to improve women's health.

During the second wave of feminism, reproductive justice became a central issue, sparking intense debates about women's biological rights over their own bodies. One key development within the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) included provisions addressing reproductive rights and family-related issues. This legislation aimed to ensure that women had the legal foundation to make autonomous decisions about their reproductive health. The passing of this legislation would guarantee access to abortions, birth control, and full control over their bodies, rights that had long been denied. As mentioned earlier, the *Roe v. Wade* case was a major legal battle that exemplified these struggles. It saw Jane Roe challenge the Texas Law that banned abortion, with the Supreme Court ruling in her favour and establishing abortion as part of a woman's constitutional right to privacy. This victory aligned closely with the goals of the vision laid out in *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Yet the recent 2022 overturning of *Roe v. Wade* under a conservative majority shaped during the Trump administration highlights the importance of why these rights continue to be contested.

While the book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* awakens Anastasia's passion for feminism, I personally believe her true turning point in how she perceives herself comes after her encounter with Mattia at the library. Mattia, Creole's best friend and the man who eventually becomes Anastasia's partner, functions as a catalyst, forcing her to confront not just the ideas that she got from reading, but also her own lived reality. She had returned her first book and was browsing for her next read when she bumped into him. In their conversation, Anastasia admitted her desire to travel but explained that she felt unable to because her fiancé preferred staying in Chicago. Mattia challenged her with the remark: "But it shouldn't be the case when we are the God of our own lives?" To this, Anastasia replied, "Maybe you, but not me, because I have to be a smart girl."

The library encounter does not end with words alone. As they sit together, Anastasia turns to an article from Ms Magazine, Jane O'Reilly's *The Housewife's Moment of Truth*, which intensifies the very question Mattia had stirred within her. In it, O'Reilly discusses the emotional labour within marriages, the lack of communication, and the unspoken inequality women endure in domestic relationships. Anastasia finds herself offended, perhaps not by the article itself but by the harsh truth it reveals about her own. She realises that Brennan, her fiancé, never really asks her how she feels or what she does. O'Reilly's words force her to confront a difficult question: Is there a life beyond being a wife or partner? Anastasia took the article personally. It sparked a revelation, yet she struggles to pinpoint the emotions the book brings to the surface. As narrated in *Be A Smart Girl*, she reflects: "I carefully consider every question Jane O'Reilly asked and answer them for myself. What is a relationship without knowing what the other feels and does every day? What is marriage, and why do we marry? What do I find important as a housewife? Do I realise I am not my husband's property? Where is my identity? I feel lost for words. I can't help but feel it is my fault that I feel this way. Who wouldn't want to be looked after by a dominant, sweet man who wants a loyal partnership? I feel guilty. Because there are women who would love to be in my position and I hate it, I'm taking advantage of it, and there are also women hating the position I am also in, yet at least attempting to get out of it. I could leave, but I don't. And I don't know why. Is it safety or security that I want? Comfort - is it a comfort zone? I can't pinpoint it." Anastasia is torn between guilt and truth, comfort and self-actualisation, unsure whether she is complicit or trapped.

It is understandable why Anastasia would feel this way. In her piece, Jane O'Reilly introduces the concept of "clicks", moments when things suddenly fall into place in a woman's mind regarding the inequalities surrounding her. Every time a woman experiences such moments, O'Reilly observed, the revolution begins. These clicks happen faster now, not only because women are questioning what has long been accepted as the natural order, but because they are realising through each other that it was never natural at all, only imposed. O'Reilly ended her article with a powerful observation: that in the end, women are treated like housewives. Regardless of job, status, or education, women are still expected to take on the bulk of domestic work in society. Employment alone does not disrupt this expectation; working women are simply expected to do domestic work after their jobs end. This burden will not shift unless society begins to challenge and change its deeper cultural norms. She also critiques housewives who believe feminism is only relevant to working women, reducing it to a question of economic fairness. O'Reilly stresses that, in truth, feminism is not only about income or status; it is about power dynamics, respect, and autonomy. She concludes that achieving genuine equality requires women to consciously reject the societal roles imposed on them, even if that journey must sometimes be taken alone. She closes the article with a line that remains painfully relevant today: "The more we try, and argue, and change, the more we will realise that the male ego will be the last thing in this world to change. And the last place it will change is at home."

Which, I suppose, is also what *Be A Smart Girl* is about. Reading Jane O'Reilly's piece is what prompted Anastasia to realise she needs to start gaining control, to try and be a bit more assertive. It marks the beginning of her breaking free from the expectations placed on her by her father, and her questioning of her mother, who she believes should have known better, having been a woman and a victim of the same pressures herself. Anastasia's attempt to break the cycle that would have continued had she allowed herself to stay with Brennan, despite the growing feeling that something about it is wrong.

Perhaps one might wonder why these things still matter, why works like *Be A Smart Girl* are still published today. But of course, as with many social and political issues, you would expect that by the 21st century, people would have a clearer understanding of gender equality and the importance of women's rights.

Yet clearly, many don't. Society as a whole still needs constant reminders of why gender equality remains a pressing concern. While there has been a rise in men who identify as progressive and supportive of women's rights, this is not a universal shift. In fact, recent studies (6) show that younger men are often more negative towards gender equality than older generations. Surprised? Surely not. We've seen this play out not just in academic research but also in pop culture. For example, Netflix's *Adolescence* explores contemporary attitudes among young men, revealing persistent stereotypes and biases that undermine feminist ideals. The rise of social media has only further amplified this backlash. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram allow misogynistic ideas to spread quickly, especially through viral content that normalises and celebrates regressive gender norms. The "manosphere" is a collection of forums, blogs, and podcasts where self-proclaimed men discuss issues from an anti-feminist perspective. These spaces often promote ideas about male dominance and resistance to gender equality. Such communities are often appealing to younger audiences, shaping their perceptions of masculinity and further perpetuating opposition to women's rights. This shows that, despite advances in women's rights, cultural pushback remains strong and pervasive. Figures like Andrew Tate promote a version of masculinity rooted in dominance and misogyny, aligning with the harmful "Red Pill" ideology. The term, taken from the movie *The Matrix*, is used by online communities to claim that men are oppressed in a feminist society, promoting anti-feminist and male supremacist beliefs while framing gender equality as harmful to men. And so, to reiterate: even if feminist topics are sometimes dismissed as repetitive or overexposed in music, literature, and film, these cultural undercurrents reveal why feminism still matters. Until men can truly understand that feminism is not a battle against them, but a fight for shared equality, these conversations cannot and should not end.

Spoiler alert! During one of the marches, Anastasia experienced violent harassment from police officers. She was attacked, harassed, and physically harmed in the chaos, and this ultimately caused her to lose her pregnancy. Experiencing such traumas firsthand and witnessing how authorities attempted to suppress the movement clearly changed and shaped her outlook. Given her love for books and her habit of actively seeking out knowledge on topics she doesn't understand, it made sense that she would channel her experiences into starting a publishing house. Perhaps this is partly an assumption about the author's intent, but it makes sense: books have long been the enemy of those in power. Starting a publishing house could very well be Anastasia's own act of rebellion, a way to resist forces that try to silence women like her, and to empower others through access to knowledge.

According to Alesha Brown in *The Politics of Publishing*, book publishing is, by nature, political. It allows the diffusion of ideas, perspectives, and stories that can shape public opinion and social narratives. By opening a publishing house, Anastasia and Creole can create a platform for authors to represent marginalised communities and amplify silenced voices. This is why the publishing industry can never truly be separated from politics, because it is tied to representation, freedom of speech, and intellectual freedom, all of which shape how we understand the world.

Books have been banned and censored based on their political content or sexual themes. Prebor and Gordon (2015) note that censorship seeks to block access to materials deemed dangerous or harmful to readers. However, books are arguably harder to censor than other art forms like film, music, or visual art, which is why I think it's a smart move from Anastasia. A notable example is the legal battle surrounding *Ulysses*, which had its publication halted for obscenity. In the 1933 case *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses*, the judge ruled that a book must be judged as a whole before being deemed obscene. Although this case isn't directly connected to feminism, it sets a precedent: entire books could be banned for containing unacceptable content, not just specific parts.

This meant that publishing houses can still publish the book; distribution will just depend on regional laws. This makes Anastasia's decision to enter publishing a strategic and powerful move.

Be A Smart Girl is written in a way that closely mirrors the emotions experienced by anyone going through a journey of self-discovery. You feel angry at yourself and everyone around you. Angry at yourself because you are overwhelmed by new and conflicting emotions, different waves of emotions that are new to you, but you almost don't know if you are allowed to feel this way. It's as if everyone else is already so far ahead, and you hesitate to burden them with your own whirlwind of emotions. There's also the painful process of unlearning what you've always believed, almost feeling or thinking it absurd that the opposite is acceptable, but also relieved to realise that the opposite might be true. In a way, it's a new set of feelings that have nowhere to go, almost given to you in a box, wrapped as a gift, something you didn't ask for but cannot return. You feel angry at others, too, because how could they not have known any better? How could they, themselves, have lived through the same things and not thought I don't want this for my children? But then again, you're also conflicted, because you can understand. Maybe that's the essence of every coming-of-age story. But I also think that, because sometimes I felt as confused and angry as Anastasia, I have come to understand that this might exactly be how people around us perceive us when we're going through something similar. Perhaps this wasn't the author's exact intention, but it was the feeling that I walked away with.



INTERVIEW

WITH AUTHOR MIA CAVEN

What was your inspiration behind this book – what motivated you to write it? And what specifically is it about abortion and women's rights that made you want to talk about this?

I was, at the time of writing it, learning about Roe v. Wade in my studies, and I felt so appalled by what occurred to get to that point. It felt like the world was in shambles, soon after with the pandemic, and then years after writing it, Roe v. Wade was overturned. I was horrified. I always felt that reading was an escape, so my intent was to create this romantic, fantastical version of that time, whilst still being educational to a degree. I wanted there to be hope.

Women's rights, including abortions, are still at risk of harm every single day. As a woman, it's obviously something I've experienced myself and is close to my heart. There is no escaping it, and I wanted that to be present in *Be A Smart Girl*.

From your bio, I get that you did a film degree, and it is interesting that you mentioned learning about Roe v. Wade in your studies. Was it a part of a module?

Actually, my studies of Roe v. Wade were not in university, doing my film degree, but my studies prior to that, when I was studying English and had to read *The Handmaid's Tale*.

I understand that you chose to write the novel so that it would be set in the 1970s. How do you think choosing this time period pushes your story, as opposed to choosing another time period? And if this novel were set nowadays, what do you think would be the biggest differences?

Honestly, I don't think this story would exist nowadays. I can't imagine any of my characters looking into a phone screen or, unfortunately, meeting so naturally. I also feel like in the world we live in, fortunately, it would be much harder for Ana to be so naive and oblivious and childlike. These days, when I go back home to Greece and Cyprus, it's easy to see there has been progress since the seventies, although not much, of course. I also feel like Roe v. Wade isn't as prominent as it should be today, despite being overturned. I wish it would be - it's so integral to women's rights history.

Since you mentioned going home to Greece and Cyprus, is there a major difference then vs now? How did it affect your writing?

Obviously, I wasn't born until the early 2000s, so I can't say from experience whether the countries have changed, but even from 10 years ago, there's a difference, even if it is slight! Prior to writing *BASG*, I'd never been to Greece but had gone home to Cyprus, and I hated it. But returning to both post-*BASG*, I fell in love with them. Cyprus is still so barren and behind, but not the way it was a decade ago. And hey, progress is progress!



INTERVIEW

WITH AUTHOR MIA CAVEN

I remember the first time I read the part where Ana met Creole, and she asked her to join the march, and how she went to the library to understand more about the issue. I wasn't sure why, but it was surprising to me. I thought, at least, living in America, she would have at least heard about it. Why was Ana so unaware of the issue at first?

Honestly, the point was that Ana was an immigrant. She hadn't been there long in America, and she was completely sheltered due to the abusive relationship she was in with Brennan. Whilst she was naive, that wasn't part of her naivety - she was purposely held back by the men in her life!

Also on page 44, there's this part where Creole mentioned that they will help Ana go to the clinic. I know that the reason behind it was that she didn't want to have anything that would tie her to Brennan anymore. However, I was wondering, was Brennan religious? If so, how does religion play a role with abortion in your story vs how the view of abortion in America was in 1972? Do you think they're tightly linked?

Brennan was 100% religious! In all honesty, I think everyone but the core friends were. It largely dictated how the men treated women and their traditional values. Had she been able to go through with the abortion, she knew she would be disowned by those men, but she was okay with that; she had already made peace with that, you know?

I'm curious, why the title and phrase "Be A Smart Girl"? Is it something that was maybe said to you? What was the inspiration?

Honestly, I'm not sure — since I wrote it five years ago, it's probably slipped my mind why I wrote it to be called that. I was probably tired of feeling like I kept having to do the right thing, the smart thing, as any teenager feels. Growing up and being the eldest daughter, it doesn't matter what your siblings do as long as you're doing the right thing. I think those themes have been in play as an eldest daughter since I was a child.

Do you have any message that you would like to say to people who will read BASG? And what does Mia have in store right now? Are we looking at another book release?

I'd love to say that BASG is a book for people who have felt lost at some point; if you have, you'll relate to parts of it and feel comforted, hopefully. I have four books in the works! They've all been in the works for years, but I'd love to release another book next year. Saying that, I've barely done anything for BASG (promo, events, etc) and would love to do that before I release something new, so BASG can really thrive by itself first!

ABOUT

Mia Caven is 22, half Greek, half English. She was born and grew up in London and has been writing from a very young age. She loves to write contemporary romances that cover topics close to her heart; from reproductive issues, women's rights and offering perspectives as an immigrant. She hopes her work touches the hearts of many who relate, whilst loving the love and fluffy romance!

Links:https://www.amazon.co.uk/stores/MiaCaven/author/B0DFTPX2ZTref=sr_ntt_srch_lnk_4&qid=176692083&sr=1-4&shoppingPortalEnabled=true



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