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WITH A GIRL LIKE YOU

In her new novel *Brooklyn Girls*, writer Gemma Burgess proves that not every love story ends with a kiss and a promise. By Sharon Steel. Photographed by Aaron Wojack

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When we discuss, with serious gravity, what member of *The Baby-sitters Club* we most resemble, author Gemma Burgess pauses thoughtfully and crosses her legs, which end in a pair of silver-sequined Converse. “I loved Stacy, but she was always too cool for me. I wanted to be Claudia—I even bought the parrot earrings!—but underneath it all, I knew that I was Mary Anne,” she says, referencing the series’ shy, bookish character. Burgess was born in Australia, grew up in Hong Kong, and spent her early twenties working as a copywriter in London. Last year she moved to New York City, which is where her third book, *Brooklyn Girls*, is set: The novel is the first in a series following five friends who are launching their post-collegiate lives with a string of glorious, excruciating, and universally specific 20-something misadventures. *Brooklyn Girls* is narrated by Pia, a half-Swiss, half-Indian, and 100 percent loveable boarding school alum who was raised all over the world but doesn’t really belong anywhere. Armed with a useless degree from Brown and the vague idea that she wants to work with people, Pia buys an adorable pink food truck named Toto and figures out how to turn her adopted city into a home with her friends. “I wanted to write about reality with just a little touch of happy endings, but not too much, you know?” Burgess says conspiratorially over coffee and eggs at a café in SoHo. “Girls in romantic comedies often don’t have girlfriends for some reason, which I could never figure out. I thought there needs to be something written about friends that nobody’s writing about. Because it is the most formative relationship that you have.”



IS IT TRUE THAT YOU CAME UP WITH THE IDEA FOR BROOKLYN GIRLS WHILE YOU WERE ON YOUR HONEYMOON IN 2010?

I did! I wanted to tell a story where falling in love is not the answer. St. Martin’s Press had read *The Dating Detox*, my first book, and they said, ‘We really like it, what does she want to do next?’ That was on my wedding day. I thought about it while I was on honeymoon, and I decided to write a series about five girls sharing a house in the years post-college, getting drunk, doing drugs, having sex, and having it be awesome and really funny, and all the stuff that girls are.

THIS BOOK IS BEING RELEASED FOR A NEW AGE GROUP IN PUBLISHING—NOT YOUNG ADULT, NOT CHICKLIT, BUT “NEW ADULT.”

Yes, because people read up. I was reading everything when I was a girl—like Judy Blume when I was eight! *[Laughs]* But it was a really specific thing where I wanted to write something for girls in their 20s. I kept thinking, they shouldn’t be identifying themselves with a 29-year-old who wants to get married. Carrie Bradshaw is in her late 30s. Young girls are watching *Sex and the City* reruns all the time, and thinking they should have that life—whereas it takes awhile of channeling through all the rubbish.

WHAT’S YOUR TAKE ON HBO’S *GIRLS*?

I read about it after I finished writing *Brooklyn Girls* in February of last year. I brought it to my agent and publisher and was like, ‘This sounds really familiar, guys.’ And they were like, ‘Don’t worry about it.’ Then it came out and they were like, ‘Well, maybe we should worry about it.’ But I think ultimately from when I’ve spoken to girls in the age group who are watching *Girls*, they find it a little depressing. I think it’s more fun if you’re past that period and looking back. Whereas this book is aimed at that age group. It’s like how I’ve got a new baby right now and I’m working really hard, but I don’t want to read or watch something about how shit my life is. I want to read something about how it’s amazing. That’s how I hope *Brooklyn Girls* is going to be received. I wanted to write something that felt relevant, true, and funny—most of all, funny—and that would make girls feel better about their lives. Also, to make girls feel empowered to feel that they have choices.

PIA IS THE KIND OF GIRL WHO IS COOL, BUT UNABASHEDLY HERSELF. SHE ISN’T PERFECT. WAS THAT SOMETHING YOU WERE VERY CONSCIOUS OF WHEN YOU CREATED HER?

Yes! Completely. All of us have to make bad decisions. It’s Shakespearean. You have to have a flaw, and you have to have folly, otherwise there’s no story.

HER FLAWS—THE FACT THAT SHE CAN BE A BIT OF A DRAMA QUEEN, AND IMPULSIVE—FEEL REAL, NOT WHIMSICAL AND STEEPED IN A MANIC PIXIE DREAM-GIRL FANTASY.

I hate the manic pixie dream girl. And I think girls have girlfriends. We are gangs. We have these little urban families in our 20s. I used to go over to my friend’s house and we would just lie in bed and play *Would You Rather* for like eight hours, because you had nothing else to do. *Would you rather... smell like a goat or have a tail?* *[Laughs]* That kind of thing. I really wanted to write about friends that did that.

AT ONE POINT IN THE BOOK, THE GIRLS’ OLDER NEIGHBOR VIC, WHO WAS BORN AND RAISED IN BROOKLYN, CATCHES PIA WHEN SHE’S THINKING ABOUT LEAVING NEW YORK CITY TO MOVE BACK IN WITH HER PARENTS. HE SAYS: “IT’S NOTHING TO CRY ABOUT. JUST GET ON WITH IT. YOUR FUTURE IS WAITING FOR YOU.”

I’m very romantic about that stuff. There’s a couple of lines in books I hold on to; one line was in this book called *Mariana* by Monica Dickens, Charles Dickens’s great granddaughter. She says, “I always kept a bit of myself back, because I always knew it wasn’t the ultimate thing—that I still had to find you.” Which how I’ve always felt about everything. There’s another line in Candace Bushnell’s book, *The Carrie Diaries*: She says something like she pictures her future like a jewel that she’s waiting to pick up. Which I thought was just gorgeous.

HAS MARRIAGE AND HAVING A BABY CHANGED YOUR PERCEPTION OF THIS FORMATIVE PERIOD IN A WOMAN’S LIFE THAT YOU WRITE ABOUT?

I have a very different perspective now. There’s stuff you can’t know at 22 that you do at 30. Nobody gives you a chance. I think when I conceptualized this idea, I was almost saying goodbye to my 20s. Every now and then, I go back over my emails and I can find ones I wrote to some of my best girlfriends who were living in different countries. Once a week, I’d write them a 4,000-word email about what I’d done over the weekend. And it is amazing. It’s like a snapshot. But I’m interested in telling funny, vaguely uplifting—not like, *Hey everything is great*, but things that make you feel better about life—stories for women and girls who are feeling lost. Because getting started is really hard.