

This Is Not the Jess Show

Anna Carey

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Anna Carey's young adult novel *This is Not the Jess Show* starts in a familiar fashion, with a teenager in the suburbs dealing with drama. But there are unsettling events, too: Jess hears a chorus of chants in the morning, her dog has been replaced with a lookalike, and she's starting to notice that her sister and friends are acting weird. In between the story's expressions of 1990s nostalgia: something is amiss.

Jess lives in 1998, but one day, a small, rectangular metal device with an apple logo on it falls out of her friend's backpack. Her friend is fast to make an excuse—that she took the device from her dad, who works in tech—and put the object away. Still, the device is only one of many instances of Jess noticing something not quite right. The eventual explanation for the anomalies forces her to make a life-changing decision.

The plot twist is major, and the cast is less developed before it. Jess is alone as a fully fleshed out character—and for good reason. How the pieces fit together is always in question. Authentic nineties discussions propel the story, with references to *90210*, *Jewel*, and Dave Matthews contributing.

The novel illustrates the perils of influencer culture and social media, probing how far people are willing to go to be a star, what stardom means, and what's reality versus what's staged. When it comes to everyday life, what people value as authentic is questioned. Jess is forced to grapple with all of these concerns, just as everything she knows falls apart.

The fun novel *This is Not the Jess Show* goes deep in exploring how people live their lives and create their own realities—sometimes at a cost.

JAIME HERNDON (July / August 2020)

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