

FELICITY CASTAGNA

GIRLS IN BOYS' CARS



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WE CAN
MAKE OUR
OWN STORIES

SNEAK PEEK

ABOUT THE BOOK

A complicated friendship.

A roadtrip in a stolen car.

The stories that define us.

And two funny, sharp, adventurous young women who refuse to be held back any longer.

Rosa was never really trying to hurt anyone, no matter what they said in court.

But she's ended up in juvenile jail anyway, living her life through books and wondering why her best mate Asheeka disappeared.

A page-turning novel about a complicated friendship; a road trip through NSW in a stolen car; the stories that define us; and two funny, sharp, adventurous young women who refuse to be held back any longer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Felicity Castagna's first novel for Young Adults, *The Incredible Here and Now*, received the Prime Minister's Award for Literature, was named the IBBY Honour Book for Australia and was a finalist for the CBCA Book of the Year for Older Readers. Her latest book, *No More Boats*, was a finalist in the Miles Franklin Award and published internationally. Felicity has written for the stage and radio and her essays frequently appear in magazines and journals. She also loves creating cross-artform and collaborative work with other artists and has helped to make a lot of wild big things for many major festivals, art galleries and outdoor spaces. Outside of writing she teaches writing, talks about writing and helps to run a lot of storytelling, mentorship and art projects.

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LIFE ON THE INSIDE

Sometimes the past is a long arm that reaches out and slaps you in the face. And then you're awake to everything and nothing at all. It's like looking in the rear-view mirror – you only get a partial picture of the places you've already left and sometimes you're not exactly sure of what you saw.

In my case that rear-view mirror was always full-up with Asheeka smacking cherry-flavoured gloss across her lips until I pushed her out of the way or we backed into a Welcome sign in a drowned town that suddenly caught on fire or we sped away from the police in a car that just wouldn't go fast enough or came close to running down some boys (who deserved it) with a vintage neon-pink Cadillac . . . you get the picture. And just for the record I was never really trying to kill anyone – whatever they said at my sentencing hearing – I was just trying to run down that giant M on a pole in the parking lot at my local

McDonald's because it was too much of a loaded symbol in my life – you know like the green light at the end of the pier in *The Great Gatsby* or something.

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that Asheeka and me, we were always in each other's way somehow. She made it hard to see all those things behind me and all those things in front. We were like that: taking turns leaving each other at the side of the road as we drove that car away from our lives and back again. Now that she's missing, it's easier and harder to get a grip on things. I've got to concentrate on learning to grow my own skin and sit in it.

They tell me I'll soon be transferred out to where the other girls are in the centre. But for now I'm in isolation, where everyone starts out, and I'm trying to distract myself from that light in my cell that keeps buzzing and blinking on the ceiling. I close my eyes and imagine those bright orange cans of Fanta Asheeka used to buy from the tobacconist for a dollar, the sweetness of them, the way they turned your tongue a funny burnt colour and made everything you ate afterwards taste like neon lights.

And I'm thinking that maybe me and Asheeka, we were never really running away from anything at all, maybe we just had to keep going forward because it was the only way we could get back to ourselves.

EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT LITERATURE I LEARNED IN A PORN STORE

Maree, that's the counsellor in this place, she says that if I like books so much I should write one. It'd give me a chance to reflect, she says, on how someone *like me* ended up in some place *like this*. Maree, she's nice and all, kind of like one of those teachers who must have been really great at one time but now can't see their way past the tiredness of doing it too long. She brings me books from the centre library, so I can't fault her all that much, but I don't think she knows who someone *like me* really is. It's the same thing the magistrate said when he sentenced me to six months in a juvenile correction centre, the same thing my mother said too. But I *am* acting *like me*, that's the thing, I've got lots of different me's bubbling away on the inside, trying to get to the surface. We're all made up of lots of stories. I read that somewhere in a book. You know, like peeling back the layers of an onion – that's not from a book, that's from

the movie *Shrek*. It's the same concept, though. I learned that every day I was on the road with Asheeka, when all we did was pull stories out of each other, sometimes by force, sometimes because they just escaped from our mouths when we didn't want them to. Telling those stories was like unravelling a ball of yarn that stretched out longer than any road we drove in that stolen car (and then the next car we stole after that).

But I have to say I don't much like the books Maree chooses for me. She keeps on bringing me those vampire romance books all the girls are into. I've never understood the big deal about them. What's so sexy about some guy who wants to bite you and suck out all your blood? As if that's not completely disgusting even if they do look good without a shirt on and their pasty-arse skin glitters in the sunlight.

Truth is, my taste is more discerning than that. Everything I know about literature I learned at the porn shop on my way home from school. No way I would have gone in there, except that in the second week of year seven I lost my copy of *Anne of Green Gables* that we were studying for English and I could see they had that movie tie-in edition in the window.

On the inside there is an 'Adults Only' sign that points to the upstairs bit where they keep all those plastic dicks. Downstairs, there's books packed sideways onto endless dusty shelves to get more in and old cardboard boxes spewing bright-coloured books onto worn-out carpet.

Sue, with her bright blue eyes and her leathery sun-baked hands, is always sitting at the back of the shop reading something with one of her drawn-in eyebrows raised in an upside-down V like she's really thinking about something super hard. She told me once that she gets all the books in her store cheap because when the bookstores don't want them anymore they end up being pulped in giant machines that turn them into blank photocopy paper. She can't stand it, the idea of all those stories being shredded, so she buys them all and has moved most of her handcuffs and latex and the magazines with all the boobs on the covers upstairs. And now she's got more interesting company than the customers who climb the stairs without looking at all those books she's got on the bottom level: she's got people like me (or mostly just me).

That first year of high school I split my time pretty evenly between the porn shop and hanging with my nan at the retirement village after school. Then I'd go to McDonald's until my mum got home at six or so – I liked it there. I liked it there most afternoons and sometimes Saturdays and Sundays. Maybe *like* isn't the right word here – it was more about finding comfort in habit, in knowing that you could just sit there and no one expected you to do anything else but eat.

My dad lived in one of the old red-brick apartment blocks to its north and my mum had moved into the 48th floor of the Meriton luxury apartments to its south;

my nan's retirement home, school and that porn store weren't too far from it either so those golden arches were the sun everything in my universe revolved around. Everything, everything, everything was strange that year but between stuffing my face with chips and my head with books I could keep it at bay a little.

I liked the way that in the porn store there was this unspoken rule that everyone who came through the doors suddenly became invisible – no one looks up at each other, there's no kind of awkward chit-chat like when you run into someone you know at the supermarket or something.

Sue's the only one who acknowledges I'm here. I like that. I liked that a lot in year seven and even in year nine when things started to get better or later when I realised that things were just same same but different and I wanted to be invisible again. Every now and then Sue kicked me out of the shop, not so much for using her place like it's a library but because she said I needed to go get a life outside of a book. Doesn't stop her from encouraging my reading though.

Once, Sue gave me a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*. It's about this guy called Holden who complains too much. I liked it in the end, though, the way he takes off from everything in his life, searching for some place where he feels free. I guess, on reflection, that's what we did too. He starts that book with something about how he knows everyone probably wants to hear the story from the beginning, where he came from, what his family was like, all

that background, but he tells the reader that he's not so interested in starting from that place, so he begins the story somewhere in the middle where most stories really start. All that background comes later in the book, though. No one can really escape all that backstory, I guess. We never could. No matter how far we drove from Parramatta, it always came back like a fly you were constantly trying to brush away from your face.

PLACES I'M THINKING OF STARTING THIS BOOK

There is always the problem of starting the story too early or too late or even in the middle but then I guess that also brings up an even more complicated problem which is, where is the end and the beginning anyway?

So, I can't work it out really, where I should begin *The Book of How I Got Here* but I think that maybe I need to go back again to that summer before year seven and I probably need to spend a little more time talking about me when I was a super fat nobody with a bowl cut stuffing all my anxiety down my throat in handfuls of hot chips at North Parramatta Maccas.

I was lonely but I also wanted to be alone. I used to live in this house which was loud, loud, loud, loud. My grandparents lived with us and they were always out there on the lawn in the same white plastic chairs holding court. Nan's a Greek-Egyptian and he was Italian. Between them

they spoke a lot of the languages of the neighbourhood. At the start of the summer before year seven started, Pop died in his sleep and Nan kept getting lost because she'd forget that he was dead and wander around the neighbourhood trying to find him at the TAB or the home of the guy who made grappa in his bathtub.

Nan went to a home and Mum and Dad split up not too long after that. I think, in truth, it was Nan and Pop who kept our family together for so long. I think Mum wanted to be with his family because she didn't have much of her own and Dad's a good man but all the things he'd seen in the army had broken him and Mum couldn't take it, just us and him.

I guess that's the whole story, but not quite the whole story of why I let myself become invisible in year seven. My story is a lot like this Marvel comic I really like called *Invisible Girl*. Before she became invisible she was living her best life with all her family on another planet but they all got hit by a meteor shower and when she woke up she'd fallen to earth and all the cosmic radiation made her invisible. That's exactly what happened to me except that I fell to earth and then I had to begin high school at an all girls' school and, also, nothing is more scary than teenage girls. I didn't know how to talk to anyone. There was too much noise in my head and the couple of girls I knew from primary got sick of me not being all that fun, so I guess at the end of the day I crashed to the earth and let myself

sit in all that radiation. I rubbed it all over my body and covered myself in all its cosmic gooeyness.

Invisible Girl's an old version of me that still comes up, knocks on my bones, rises to the surface of my skin occasionally. But she comes up less and less these days. She's one of the me's I've left behind. I've tried so many ways of getting rid of her. Some of them, okay, most of them, weren't such great ways of leaving her behind. But I'm trying now, trying just to be myself and be more visible in what Maree would call *a much more productive way*. Let's just leave her where she is for now because I'm trying to let her sit there somewhere deep inside my gut where she can remind me who I am but not take over.

A CHAPTER WHERE I SHOW MY SUPERPOWERS

It was Asheeka who helped me to work out that being invisible could also sometimes be my superpower. That's why I was always the one who would pull the fire alarm at school. I could stand there in front of that bright red lever in its case, suspiciously by myself. I could pull it, or I could keep standing there. I could scream and rip off my clothes and run around the school yard naked – not that I ever did that but I'm pretty sure no one would have noticed anyway.

I started pulling the alarm after Asheeka and I became friends in year nine. Asheeka told me once, when we were on the road, that she needed those screeching bells to echo through the hallways so that they weren't always just in her head. I know now that there was probably a lot more going on in Asheeka's life than I understood back then but the most obvious thing was that she'd had an epic fallout with one of the other popular girls at school, Catherine.

Catherine was also how we'd become friends despite the seeming impossibility of it – because I was sitting there one afternoon at Maccas, at my own table, away from all the other kids who came there after school, when Catherine walked by and called me fat and shortly after that Asheeka chucked a frozen Coke at her head. I told Asheeka it was the most amazing thing anyone had ever done for me and she told me very matter-of-factly that she thought if I was going to be fat I should be prepared for people to call me out on it. She'd just chucked that frozen Coke at Catherine because she was a bitch and she didn't like her. But anyways, we stuck together more and more that year and the years that came later.

I pulled the fire alarm a lot after that. I'd wait until everyone was tucked away inside those classrooms and I could breath again and then I'd open up that glass case and pull the lever down slowly. The bells rippled through the building and the red flashing lights on the ceiling started to go off and I'd walk slowly out of the school and to the park across the road where everyone would shortly line up in their home room groups in front of disgruntled teachers with clipboards who just wanted to get back to their desks. In those early years, I'd just look over at Asheeka standing there in her line staring up at the trees and I'd know that Asheeka, like me, had been given a moment to catch her breath before we had to go back into the classroom and I'd have to sit there again, looking like I was cool and calm and

collected when all I wanted to do was unzip my skin and jump out the window and Asheeka had to be that person again, smiling, with all the other girls, being the centre of attention.

I want to flash forward now, to the last time I pulled that alarm. It was almost the end of year eleven. I guess it was the final time we escaped, before we really, really escaped in that car and we just kept going, I guess you might say it was the first time we realised that we didn't always have to turn back.

I did it like I always did: I waited for the girls to file into the classrooms. I stood there and watched them flick their hair and laugh and whisper some story to each other that I'd never be a part of. I wanted . . . not to be them – it wasn't anything as simple as that. I wanted whatever they were creating with their easy jokes and loud laughter and I wanted what they made for themselves when they walked down those halls like nothing was ever going to trip them up.

I pulled the alarm and walked.

In that park across the road I found Asheeka. 'Good job,' she whispered in my ear, and we walked together casually, like we'd planned it, across the road while all the teachers fumbled with their orange safety vests and someone tried to marshal twelve hundred girls with a

giant megaphone that spewed robot-sounding words no one could understand.

We made it up to the train station in less than the time it was probably taking to organise all those neat rows of girls, but caught up in the excitement of having gotten away with things, we realised too late that we'd got on the wrong train. Instead of heading towards the city we were heading back into deep, deep suburbia, where the yards were getting bigger and the roads were getting wider and flatter and the Hills hoists and their endless rows of baby clothes poked out from above wooden fences.

'Man,' Asheeka said, 'we're going to have to get off at Cabramatta and go all the way back into the city from there.' But I knew it wasn't such a big deal. She liked it, we liked it. Just going somewhere. Anywhere. Asheeka unbuttoned her school blouse so that the sparkly top she was wearing underneath threw light all around the carriage and then she pulled off her school skirt, exposing the short shorts she had on underneath. I fumbled, pulling up my leggings and getting my own skirt off. Asheeka shielded me while I changed my top, showing my old cotton bra to the world that was flying past my window.

'Here.' She'd packed a survival pack for our escape, a picnic of orange Fantas and rice crackers, and then she pulled out her phone, tuned it to Beyoncé and handed me one of her earbuds. These were the moments I liked best, when it was just us and we didn't need to be anything for

anyone else: Asheeka could quit being the most popular girl in the remake of *Mean Girls* and I didn't have to be the dorky side-kick who didn't know they looked ridiculous with their new makeover. We pulled into a station and I watched two young women get onto the train, too dressed up and glamorous for the dirty grey of the platform they were standing on, clutching their fake leather handbags.

'What will we do when we get there?' I said.

In the reflection of the train window behind her I checked the red and blonde streaks in my hair. Asheeka had told me how to do them from a packet you buy at Priceline. She told me I needed them and that I also needed to learn to use those wax strips to do my eyebrows and that I also needed to paint my nails in red at least once every couple of weeks. She said everyone would respect me more if I did these things. She said it like it was a fact, and it was.

'Just be there,' she responded, taking a long sip of her Fanta like she was one of those old guys at the pub drowning in the relief of the first beer at the end of the day. 'We don't need to do anything but be there. You know, it's the city. We can look at all those shops in the QVB and sit on the steps of the Town Hall and just be there. Better than here,' she said, looking out the window at all those rows and rows of streets and same-same houses.

COSMIC RADIATION

Let's stay here for a while in those last few weeks of year eleven. I'm trying to pinpoint that one moment that made us have to run but really I guess it was a lot of things, over a long period of time, like all those days of dealing with peak hour in the girls' toilets after school. There were ten minutes, maybe, between when the bell rang and when the teachers came in and forced you out, ten minutes for everyone to try to adjust themselves for the world outside. All the girls came in looking like this – skirts all the way past our knees and our school blouses buttoned up at the top and at the cuffs and tucked in neatly so that they looked as ugly as they were meant to. Lots of ponytails with bland green ribbons, the only colour the school would allow. Everyone left the toilets looking like this – skirts a little higher, lips a little redder, hair as wild and free as a selfie you've taken at the beach.

That last time the weather was hot and I was looking hot too, according to Asheeka, who was stabbing me with an eyeliner pencil so that she could get my eyes to pop out like two fat brown dates. ‘Every time you do that it feels like my eyelids are on fire,’ I said.

‘It’s meant to feel like that,’ she responded, exasperated because she’d already given me that explanation a million times before. She turned to the mirror and held that small bit of space everyone behind her was waiting for. She did it all casual, even though there were so many people waiting. There was a hierarchy to getting to that mirror. The year sevens mostly just jumped up and down at the back, catching a glimpse of themselves every now and then; the less confident waited and never got through. The front, near the basins, was for people like Asheeka who stood there like she just might go ahead and stay there for the rest of time. For Asheeka the world outside was mostly Arnold, so for him she put on lip gloss and eyeliner and brushed her hair until it shone like the surface of a plasma TV.

I leaned back against the wall and opened my backpack, checking that the books I needed for later were there. When I looked up, Catherine was leaning forward, adjusting the ballerina bun on the top of her head. I stared at her boobs as they drooped down beneath the blouse where too many buttons had been undone. This was all for Asheeka, of course. To piss her off. They were like

those videos of peacocks you see, displaying their bright feathers and shaking their arses in each other's faces when it was mating season. Asheeka flicked her hair back like a knife across Catherine's face. Catherine turned to her friend and put her index finger across the front of her scrunched-up nose and I remembered Asheeka telling me some story about how Catherine had said she always smelled like curry. Asheeka then applied another round of mascara to her eyelashes and 'accidentally' slashed Catherine across her perfectly contoured cheek with the mascara wand.

'Sorry,' Asheeka said with a casual shrug of her shoulders, knowing she'd won as Catherine furiously pressed the palm of her hand against her face, as though at any moment blood might start pouring from that black gash.

The fight began with some boobs and ended with some hair and then we were on our way out to the road where there were dozens of girls leaning up against the school fence letting the crisscrossed wires hold them there. Asheeka casually slid herself into the row of girls who were the popular ones: the ones who'd had *I rule this place* stamped invisibly on their foreheads since the day they were born. There were nods of heads towards her and a little squeeze to her left hand from Lauren of the ever-present blonde ponytail. They didn't acknowledge me but they tolerated me because Asheeka had told them they had to and that was that.

Ms Stacey showed up for bus duty and I tried to look away from her before she looked at me but I was too late. ‘Do you really need that much eyeliner?’ she said to me and not to Asheeka or any of the other girls standing there looking like Cleopatra’s doppelgangers. You were meant to either be one of those girls who wears too much makeup or someone who reads books. You couldn’t be both, so I was confusing.

‘Just trying some things out,’ I said as she stood there in front of me for a little while longer. Ms Stacey always made it her mission to get me back to my own people – the type of people who would spend all of next year pining after ATARs that were close to three digits. I’d been into that in the past, or at least I’d thought I was interested, but I’d forgotten to turn a lot of things in on time in the last year or so. I just found it harder and harder to buy it, you know, this idea that a mark on a page, a teacher’s corrections scratched in red ink on a white page – that all that stuff really mattered as much as the school kept saying.

‘You know the debating team are having tryouts at the start of next year,’ she said quietly and smiled.

‘Right,’ I said. But we both knew that debating was never going to save me. I might have liked to read books and have a few private conversations about the world with Ms Stacey and Sue from the porn store but I definitely didn’t have the I-know-everything-about-the-world kind of confidence that kids on the debating team had.

But I guess Ms Stacey thought I was more saveable than Asheeka. You could tell that Ms Stacey had long ago decided she knew exactly who Asheeka was: her idea of girls like that was as cemented as Asheeka's arse was to that fence. Ms Stacey walked past Asheeka without comment. I watched a small smile grow in the corner of Asheeka's mouth as that iridescent blue Ford Falcon pulled up at the kerb and she grabbed the handle of the passenger side door. I followed her lead and climbed in the back, my bum sticking to the leather as I slid across the seat. Asheeka wound down the window and stuck her middle finger up at Catherine as she walked out of the school gates. But all that was unnecessary. Asheeka knew she'd won both the bathroom battle and the one playing out here: she was the girl in the front seat of a car that glittered its way down the street, next to a guy who was attractively a few years older.

We cruised through all those backstreets with their squat brown-brick 1940s suburban dream homes and their overgrown front lawns and all those skeletons of new apartment buildings overlooking them. The sky above was blue. So blue that it smacked me in the eyes and got me lost somewhere.

'Hey, spaceship!' Asheeka reached back and slapped my knee as we pulled up outside my mum's. She was always that person who insisted I come right back to earth where I belonged whether I wanted to or not.

I opened my mouth to say something to her but I'd forgotten what it was. She was looking out the front window again, sitting still as a statue as I opened the car door. When I leaned back into the car to grab my backpack, I saw Arnold place his hand high up on her thigh, underneath her school skirt, and hold it tight.

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