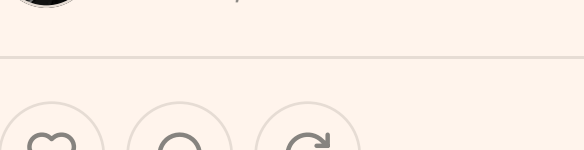


Enchanted by Kaylie Smith, meet the author

With tantalising trials, steamy romances, and fierce female characters, bestselling author, Kaylie Smith, opens up about the magic behind her *Wicked Games* series



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The *Wicked Games* series has already captured the hearts of its readers. Recently, *The First Draft* attended an event hosted by Sarah Rees Brennan and Waterstones, where Kaylie Smith told us all about how the series came to be and where its headed next.

Growing up in Louisiana, Smith is a writer and lover of all things magical and fantasy – which is exactly what you find between the pages of her bestselling series.

To celebrate the launch of her second novel in the series, *Enchantra*, the *#1 New York Times* bestselling author begins by telling the audience how the first book, *Phantasma*, came to be: “*Phantasma* was the perfect storm. At the time, I was working on something entirely different when all the pieces clicked into place.”

She continues: “I have an arts degree and an arts history background and in school we were studying so many things in literature, one of those things was *Dante’s Inferno*, and I was sickly obsessed with it.”

Dante’s Inferno, which follows the journey of a fictionalised version of himself through Hell, guided by an ancient Roman poet, became inspiration for the underworld elements within *Phantasma*.

Smith says: “In a different class, we were learning about an art medium called Phantasmagoria, and I wrote down that it would be a great title for a book.” She tells us of how she then debuted a different series and always felt a pull to return to paranormal adult romance.

“I wanted to do my own take on *Dante’s Inferno* but really marry it with my love for my home state which is Louisiana and New Orleans and put in my history of OCD, which really went hand in hand with the psychological horror [in *Phantasma*]” she says.



Kaylie Smith. Image Courtesy: DK Herbert Photography

When talking of the beautiful gothic descriptions within the book, Smith laughs and says: “It’s so funny – people are like ‘She was either an artist or an interior designer.’ I love that, it helps me as a reader. I want to know what everything looks like because once I can picture it, I am firmly in the story.”

On the topic of making the reader feel both scared and allured, Smith goes on to talk about the protagonist, Ophelia’s, background in necromancy, the practice of summoning and communicating with the spirits of the dead. She says: “She desperately wants to do good and be perfect at everything no matter how much that pains her, and no matter how much her own mind doesn’t allow for that to be the case.”

She continues by talking of Ophelia’s love interest, Blackwell, a phantom within the *Phantasma* trials: “Who would be her counterpart here in a way that both pushes her to grow but also gives her what she needs? I think both of those things are important in a love interest.”

Continuing, she says: “Obviously she is a necromancer, she *has* to be with a hot ghost! There was no other outcome.”

When speaking of Blackwell, Smith describes the character: “He is kind of sad, yet he shows overwhelming empathy for a girl. He is trapped within the house, and she is trapped in her own mind.”

The love story that forms between the two characters is one of the plots that keeps the story flowing. Allowing readers to kick their feet at the sarcasm and wit shared between the two main characters, you can’t help but fall in love with their journey, even if it is ironically set in hell.



Image Courtesy: The First Draft

Smith’s second novel in the series, *Enchantra*, hit the shelves of bookstores worldwide in April this year, and instantly became a bestseller.

The story follows Ophelia’s younger sister, Genevieve, as she travels to Italy in search of others that share a background in necromancy. Smith says: “Originally, Ophelia was an only daughter, I grew up an only child and my younger sister is 17 years younger than me, so I was truly an only child for so long.”

She continues: “It is a very specific experience and so I wanted Ophelia to be an only child. When I was writing it, I was like ‘she needs an anchor’, and Genevieve came crashing in in the way that she does and that was maybe the second or third draft of developmental edits.”

“As soon as she appeared on page, I was like ‘this is like an entire world and there are so many characters here I want to do books for,’ so I went back to the beginning and outlined every possible story I wanted to tell. That way I could make sure there were breadcrumbs from *Phantasma* onwards.”

In terms of the setting for both books, they offer rich, atmospheric backdrops that are personal to their author. *Phantasma* was based in New Orleans as that is where Smith grew up. She says: “New Orleans just feels like it is magical, and I know it very well.”

She goes on to say how in *Enchantra*, Genevieve’s dream, much like her own, is to get out of a small town. She says: “It’s hard to know what your idea of home is when you’ve never left it.”

Phantasma carried a lot of gothic influence, making New Orleans the perfect setting. However, for the second novel, Smith says: “I really wanted to put a baroque twist on it, and what is better than Tuscany?”

Where Ophelia is contending with control and darkness, Genevieve is on a quest for identity and independence. The locations of each novel allow space for that and ensure the stories surrounding each sister holds its own atmosphere and emotion.

“Strong female authors raised me”

Smith then moves to talking about the genre in which her novels fall into, romantasy, and how it is coming to be. She says: “Romantasy has always been there, it raised me. I used to steal my grandmother’s mass market paperbacks off her side table, and so the recent resurgence of it is so interesting, it was always my destination.”

She continues: “I feel so passionate about it. Strong female authors raised me, and I have always been someone who needs both fantasy and romance. I want people to go to my books and know they will find a plot, but they also know they will find the romantic aspects of the plot.”

In talking of the books that shaped her: “My first love was Diana Wynne Jones’ *Howl’s Moving Castle*. I think you can see the influence of her in everything that I write.” She continues: “The author that made me want to be a writer was Cassandra Clare.”

Due to the influence of female authors, Smith soon came to a realisation about her own life. She said: “This is what I want to do for a living, I want to create something where people come together and connect.”

“Books saved me as a teen”

Smith talks of where her career as a writer began, she says: “I started in [Young Adult] fiction. I wanted to give something back to my teen self, because books saved me as a teen, books were my best friends.”

It is this sentiment that make both *Phantasma* and *Enchantra* so impactful – both novels explore themes of self-worth, isolation, and growth, that resonate so deeply with its readers. Finding a novel where the reader can find reflections of themselves within the pages is powerful, and something that should be celebrated.

Moving on to book three, the topic we are all burning to know more about. Smith shares how she is sworn to secrecy involving everything about the third novel, but what we do know is it is in its early phases. She says: “It is my favourite, by far. I think everyone will be very excited.”

“I will write them as long as people want them”

When asked about *Wicked Games* as a complete series, Smith says: “There is going to be a minimum of four. I have plans, I always have plans. I have an entire note app worth of ideas. Everything that I would want to write I have thought about and outlined because I like to leave breadcrumbs. Whether or not I get to write more is up to readers. I will write them as long as people want them.”

As always, *The First Draft* seeks to discover what its guests are currently reading. Smith says: “I am currently in the middle of *The Knight and the Moth*; it is definitely going to be a five-star read for me.”

Finally, when asked for a sign off, Smith reflects that her favourite sign off is in the author’s note of *Phantasma*. She beautifully articulates: “Struggling with your mental health does not make you unworthy of love. I hope my books were safe, cosy places, even when they were scary.”

Wicked Games is more than just a romantasy series – it is a reminder that even in the darkest places, there is light and love to be found. Smith doesn’t just build magical worlds, she offers readers an escape, and in doing so allows them to feel seen, heard, and understood.

While Kaylie Smith has risen to the top of *The First Draft*’s favourite author list, all we can do now is recommend you read the first two novels in this captivating series, which can be purchased via Waterstones, [here](#).

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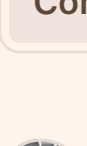
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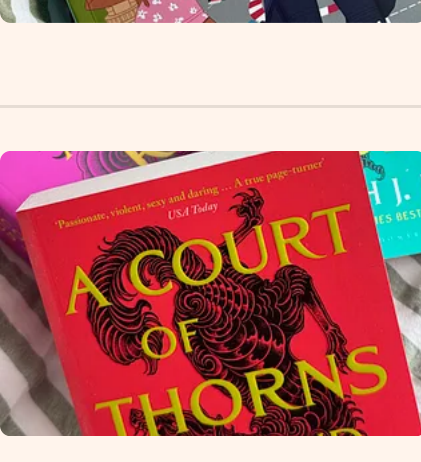
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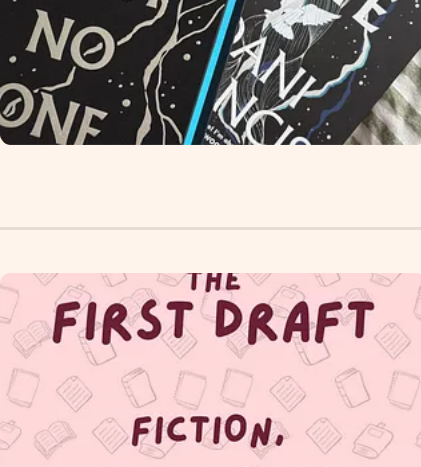
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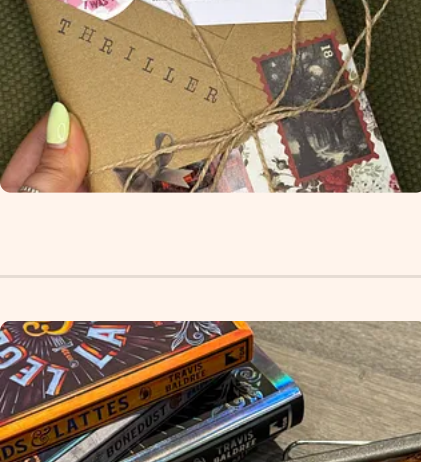
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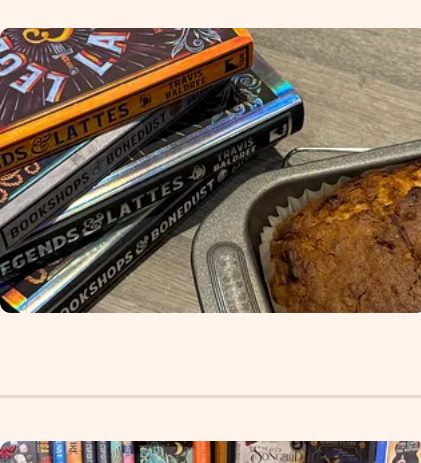
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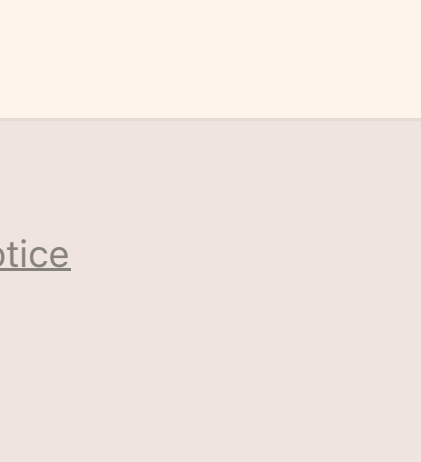
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