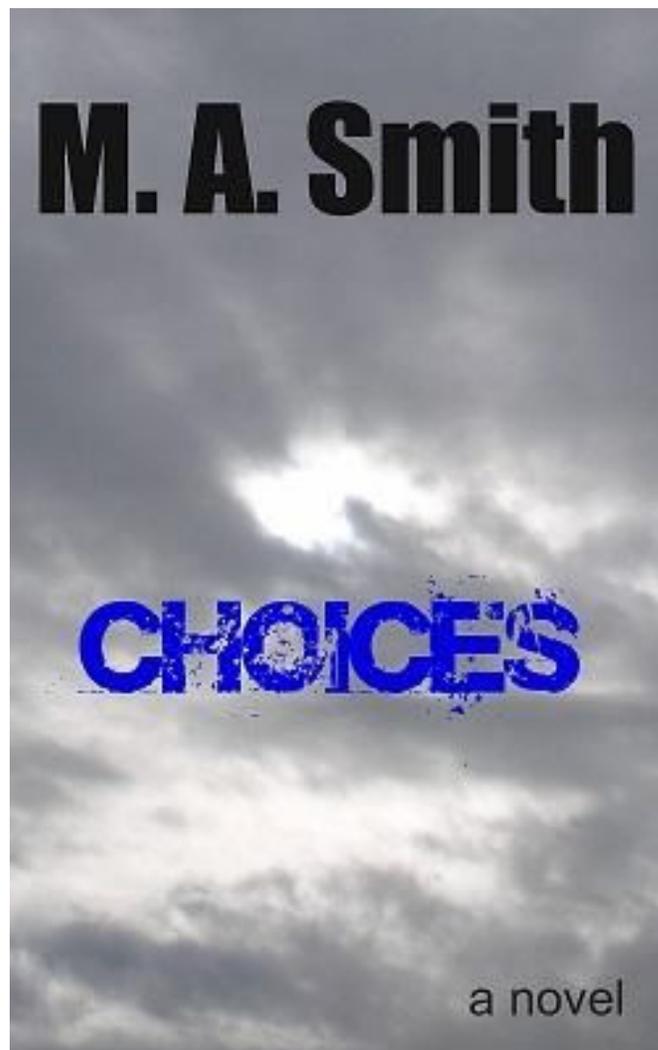


On a perfect moonlit May evening in the City of Angels, Ethan and his newest reward – a five-hundred-and forty-thousand-dollar sports car – go airborne off Mulholland Drive, an event that a year later sets him on a path to defend James Nazareth, an out of work, and until recently, homeless man arrested for vandalism and assault resulting from his protest inside Estate Trust and Savings Bank. Ethan reluctantly allows himself to become responsible for his new client in a bid to resume his lost stature as a celebrity lawyer. Along the way he comes to confront the choices he has made in life – and is forced to face the consequences of those decisions.

CHOICES



Choices are made every day. Some are black and white, but many are shades of gray. We lie to ourselves to justify the choices we make – and we lie to others to protect our choices. A thrilling debut novel uncovers what happens when we are judged by the choices we make. It's about a high-powered Los Angeles lawyer whose horrific car accident leads him a year later to seek to make amends for the wrongs he has committed.

Choices, a tale of morality and greed, opens with Ethan Bernstein, a corrupt civil attorney, seeking to recover from a mysterious auto crash. He is also a partner of a law firm that specializes in using any advantage – illegal or otherwise – to line its pockets with ill-gotten gains

As he begins to recuperate physically and make sense psychologically and even spiritually of the life he's lead, Ethan is plagued by blackout headaches while confronted with a law career on the precipice of collapsing. He's a damaged individual on so many levels, but he still feels he has something to prove and he finds possible salvation in taking on a pro bono criminal case.

As the disgraced lawyer represents James Nazareth in a case against a big bank that accused his client of assault and vandalism, he begins to realize something is just not right with his affable client and that his case – his ticket back to fame and redemption – isn't what it appears to be.

Adding to his problems is Ethan's law partners want him out of the firm, which won't be easy and might even be dangerous for Ethan.

The clock ticks down on the Nazareth trial as Ethan struggles to piece together memories that hold clues as to what he must do next in order to stay alive and for once, confront the truth and the logical conclusions it leads to. Ethan must face his own past, present, and future choices, including those he made about the woman he loved and lost.

Smith writes from an informed vantage point, having worked at a law firm as a benefits and insurance administrator. She worked for over a decade in the insurance and risk analysis industries. She also worked for a decade as a contract senior workers compensation claims examiner and was involved with litigation, investigations, and settlement negotiations.

Smith's fast-paced novel ignites a dialogue in the following areas:

- The choices we make in our lives – and the choices that are made for us – and how these choices dictate the unfolding or haunting of our lives.
- Insightful look at the legal profession as well as whether one can truly find justice in our money-influenced, politically-manipulated legal system.
- How our parents shape our fate and create burdensome barriers that can't always be overcome – and the price of debt of children wanting to please their parents.
- The struggle to balance having a successful career and an ethical one.
- Why our personal lives suffer severely as we pursue wealth.
- Explores greed – on a personal and corporate level – and exposes to what lengths some will go to protect their loot – even lie, steal, blackmail and kill.

Her first book is a unique story about one man's journey through life with an unexpected twist at the end. There are plenty of books called *Choices*, but none of them take us on as unique a journey as that of Ethan Bernstein.

Industry Reviews:



"...A novel which I enjoyed a great deal"

-Judge, Writers Digest Self-Published e-Book Awards

Book Review (with podcast):

February 5, 2016

Nick Shenkel, WBAA and West Lafayette Library Director

<http://wbaa.org/post/book-review-choices>



"This book drew me in within the first few paragraphs, and did not disappoint anywhere along the journey to the conclusion. The story was very well crafted, and I am ready to purchase her next book. The anticipation is similar to what I feel as I await something I have not yet read by David Baldacci, Brad Thor, or Lee Child. Smith's style is quite different than those very seasoned and successful writers, but the caliber of her writing is easily on a par with them. I hope I do not have to wait too long for more.

-David Bunte, Former NPR Author Interview and Talk show Host

About M.A. Smith



M. A. Smith (Alice) was born in Indiana, but grew up in Southern California during a time when the Golden State was considered a laid back place to live. An avid reader since she was seven years old, her interests span both fiction and non-fiction. She is an enthusiastic fan of stage productions, traveling frequently to New York City and Los Angeles. Other interests include history and archaeology. CHOICES is her first independently published novel. She is currently at work on the DOMINION trilogy, a series based on alternate history. For more information, please see her website: www.MASmithAuthor.com

M.A. Smith

Q&A

Choices

1. **Alice, what inspired you to pen your debut book, *Choices*, a novel that seems to explore the decisions we make – and sometimes regret?**

One nugget of the idea for the story came from a conversation with my husband about the movie version of "Chicago" which revolved around a particular scene between Richard Gere and John C. Reilly in which Gere's character, Billy Flynn, talks about if Jesus had \$5,000 at the time of his trial and Flynn as his lawyer, things might have turned out differently. Flynn, of course, was a celebrity lawyer before there was a term for it. Another layer to the initial story was the difficult financial times we were all living in during 2008 to 2012 and how that was forcing people to take stock of where they were in their lives. I'd read a lot of individual stories of folks who had used their difficulties as an opportunity to seek new directions for themselves and they appeared to be happier with their choice.

2. ***What's your book about?***

It is about a high-powered, wealthy Los Angeles attorney who survives a very bad accident. However, he has some permanent damage to a leg and has suffered severe damage to his legal reputation because there are unproven allegations of alcohol impairment. A year later, he finds himself back at work, but his partners want him out, which isn't going to be easy and it may prove dangerous for him. His prestigious clients are gone and he is relegated by his partners to representing a multitude of innocuous pro bono cases. He's alone, having been divorced for nearly 20 years from the love of his life. Ultimately, he takes on a seemingly simple case of a homeless man who rampages through a bank. His new client quickly became a media sensation, but the case isn't anywhere near as simple as it seems. Defending his client forces the attorney to use his skill -- not the media -- to keep his client out of jail. The case also strips

away any delusions he has built up about his life and why he can't let go of the woman he divorced.

3. **To share your story, you reveal bits of information and events out of chronological order. How does this device serve in the telling of your tale?**

I wanted to use flashbacks at strategic points in the novel to give the novel a really interesting way of filling in the central character's back story. The way I did events out of order are not commonly used in fiction writing, however, I believe it works quite well with the pacing of this story.

4. **What challenges did you have to overcome the writing of your book?**

I needed to make sure that I was always telling the story from Ethan's perspective. It is his journey, not mine. Keeping the issues and other characters revolving around Ethan realistic and complex and not a thin portrayal was always a challenge. I wanted the reader to go with Ethan on his journey, not stand on the outside, looking in. I have always liked the old proverb "never criticize a man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins." Everyone has a story and choices in their lives and experiences that drive their decisions.

5. **Where there any real-life events or people that motivated some portions of your writing?**

Sure. One real-life event had to do with banks actively pulling lines of credit from small businesses around 2010 through 2012. In January, 2012, Bank of America was the subject of a lengthy Los Angeles Times article doing just that. Some of the characters are composites of people I have known or worked with in the past, so I wouldn't say that any one real-life person motivated my writing of *Choices*.

6. **Your story revolves around Ethan Bernstein, a complex character who finds himself struggling to recover after a near death car accident. What issues is the one-time successful lawyer confronting?**

Ethan Bernstein had spent a great deal of his adult life building his profession and the wealth and power associated with it. But in a very short space of time, all that he had built has been

severely diminished. How does he cope with it? How would any of us cope with hitting rock bottom? In Ethan's story, he believes that all he has to do to regain his place at the top of the heap is have one last great case. He's in denial that the loss of being a legal star may be permanent. In a classic corporate sense, Ethan is burned out on his job, but he can't let go of it either. It's too much of a part of how he sees his own self-worth. He is struggling with his personal life as well. His first and only wife has her own life and career and he wants to fit in with her life, but he can't. He is at that moment in his life where all the past decisions or choices, if you will, can no longer be justified or ignored. Our experiences are what shape our lives and the decisions we make along the way. Ethan is no different.

7. **And as he looks to redeem a career built on illegal and unethical maneuverings, he is tasked with defending a homeless man in a criminal case pro bono. Why is this case so important to him?**

Ethan's client, Jim Nazareth, is important to him in the beginning only because Ethan sees the case as a vehicle to boost him back to the top of the field. He wouldn't have had any interest in the case had there not been a big media presence involved. For Ethan, taking the case simply isn't about sticking up for the "little guy." All that slowly starts to change as Ethan begins to focus more on his client than himself.

8. **The case involves an alleged assault that happened as a man, James Nazareth, protested the way a bank was treating people who were down on their luck during the height of the recession. Is there a message about greed and responsibility?**

In the context of just that scene in the novel, not really. The underlying reason for Nazareth's action was the distress over a friend's plight and the resulting anger and frustration that overflowed after the insensitivity of a bank officer towards a potential customer. His emotional state was what many people would understand however, Nazareth took more of an "in your face" approach most people are unlikely to take. I don't think there are a lot of people these days that would characterize the big banks as being customer oriented or a friend, regardless of their slick marketing. Very simply, they are global corporations

whose first allegiance is to return profit to their shareholders. I'm not sure we should even characterize them as banks.

9. **As the story unfolds, we learn more of how Ethan's family life fell apart as a result of his work. Why does it seem to be a constant occurrence that people who make money or are successful end up sacrificing their personal lives?**

It is true that we certainly seem to hear a lot of stories like that, but I don't believe that everyone who becomes successful and/or wealthy torpedoes their personal life. I've known successful folks who are very grounded, so to speak, in their lives. Maybe the reasons why some end up sacrificing their personal lives has to do with why they chased the success and money in the first place. In *Choices*, Ethan Bernstein's hunt for success as a lawyer really had a lot to do with his dysfunctional parents and his underlying need for an "atta boy" from them that he was never going to get.

10. **You say that Ethan is a "celebrity lawyer who believed his own bullshit." Don't most people lie to themselves about who they really are?**

I don't think it's so much that people lie to themselves about who they really are as it is that they lie to themselves to varying degrees about why they make a life changing choice such as their job and why they stay with the choice perhaps longer than they should. I'm sure we could have an interesting discussion on this topic alone.

11. **Ethan believes helping Nazareth is a second chance to get his life right. Do many of us get second chances to reverse the trajectory of their lives?**

I believe that there are forks in life's road that come along to cause a second thought or two about whether a change of course can or should happen. We either ignore the road signs or we pause, really examine the issue and change direction. If you want to call that a second chance, then it doesn't have to be a roman candle going off in your head or a really life threatening situation to change life's path. Second chances can be subtle. It can be that recurring nudge you've ignored telling you it's time to let go of a friendship with someone who's no longer really your friend.

12. **You grew up in Southern California and your story takes place in Los Angeles. Is life there very different from the rest of the country?**

I grew up in a small town with a private college about 60 miles east of Los Angeles. That was in the late 1950s into the 1960s. I never saw downtown L. A. until I was in college. Southern California during that time was very different than it is today. It had way less in population, housing was cheap and the freeways weren't what they are now. I've lived in Massachusetts and Florida for short times in the early '70s, but returned to Northern California in about 1975 where home was until about a year ago. My husband and I went to L. A. frequently for live theater and I still have high school friends who live in Southern California. I appreciate L. A. for its vibrancy and its celebrity, so that's why I chose it as the setting for my novel.

13. **What can we learn from Ethan's life to help us examine how we live our own lives?**

Ethan's life is a reminder that the best things in life really are free. A little over two years ago, two very dear friends of ours passed away within six months of each other. Both died of two different types of cancer and they weren't anywhere near being "old men". I could say that both were larger than life - one of them was the epitome of the best of being a Texan. I miss his great stories and his sly sense of humor every day. The other had a great passion for restoring Chevy Chevelles, was one of the groomsmen in our wedding and an old college friend of my husband. Just like the rest of us, neither man was a saint - each had sometimes struggled with their choices. Neither man was wealthy. Through the final months, each one, in their grace and wisdom as they faced cancer head on, showed us what was really important in life and what is not. Ethan learned that life can turn on a dime and it doesn't matter what your station in life is. How you react to adversity is as important as how you react to the good times.

14. **Your book makes some commentary about what happens to us after we die. Is true justice ever reached, even in death?**

That's an interesting question, too. It wasn't my intention in writing *Choices* to address that particular theme. While doing some research for the novel, I was interested in the concept that

there are some spiritual beliefs in the notion that for a Christian, it may be hard to make it through to the Promised Land in only one life, that one cannot overcome all one's sins and must return again until those sins are cleared to be able to move completely out of the secular world.

15. ***Another aspect to your story touches upon flashbacks to Ethan's childhood and how he was raised as a replacement child, they started over with Ethan, but they put too much pressure on him, didn't they?***

I wouldn't say that Ethan's parents started over with him per se. He may have been a replacement child, as you say, but their first child was still very much alive for them. Pressure wasn't the issue here, it was ugly abuse welded by the very people who were supposed to nurture and protect him.

16. ***Does Ethan's upbringing show that some choices in life are made for us, not by us?***

Yes, certainly it does. When we're young we don't have control over most aspects of our lives, but that should change when we start making our own way in life. Unfortunately, without any self-awareness, Ethan carried others lousy choices well into his adult life. He may have had moments of vague understanding of the motivations he had had, but he ignored them and went on down his path.

17. ***Choices makes many statements about the law profession. Are most lawyers corrupt, by the nature of their position, or can some lawyers be honest?***

I really don't think that law school teaches law students to be corrupt. That's an acquired art form for some and certainly not exclusive to being a lawyer. Corruption can occur in many professions and government. In prior jobs, I have worked with many lawyers and most were good examples of what a lawyer should be, but some were just adversarial for the sake of their own belief in the idea that lawyers are the top of the food chain and everyone else just isn't as smart. That didn't make them corrupt by the nature of their work, just ego driven. On the other hand, a great deal of members of Congress and past and current Presidents have been lawyers. On second thought, let's just not go there.

18. ***It also makes conclusions about the legal system that are unflattering. How can we change our system so that cases are won fairly and on the merits – and not dictated by money and political power?***

That's a larger question which is beyond my skill level to answer. Although the novel may make some unflattering conclusions about the legal system, its purpose wasn't to be a call for change. However, it could also be said that the public perception about the legal system is quite tainted considering past cases such as the O.J. Simpson trial, President Clinton's impeachment, Casey Anthony or George Zimmerman to name a few.

19. ***Do we need a new definition of success, other than "an accumulation of wealth by any means necessary"?***

Haven't most human beings, since the beginning of time, defined success by the accumulation of wealth? In the ancient world, the guy with the most amount of cattle or sheep or goats and bags of gold and gems was successful. Maybe the type of wealth has changed over the millennia, but the idea that wealth equates to success and power hasn't changed. Maybe what we need is to change our own individual definition of what success is or isn't.

20. ***When it comes to lawyers, why do so many people dislike them except for when they need one? And why do so many who practice law find it unfulfilling?***

I'm not even sure we like them even when we need one. We don't like bankers so much any more either, but we still need them, don't we? Seriously, though, maybe many people dislike lawyers because of either their own experience with one or horror stories they hear from others or maybe it's a downside to the seemingly suit happy society we live in. Such things can build preconceived opinions about a profession. Why do those who practice law find it unfulfilling? I don't know. All the lawyers I knew stayed in the profession. Maybe the question should be why don't they do something to improve their public image and stop going into public office?

Selected Excerpts

The Accident

"Ethan was still astounded that he had survived at all. He often thought that by all rights, he should have ended up on a cold slab in some morgue. His pride and joy at the time was hauled off as scrap metal. Ethan spent three months in the hospital, several more months in physical rehab and then finally home. His injuries included head trauma, two broken arms, numerous cuts and bruises and a shattered left leg that was basically held together by rods, plates and screws. He would never drive a stick shift again."

"Still a practicing attorney, although it had not been easy to quash the rampant rumors that he had been drunk the night of the crash. For whatever reason, either sheer stupidity or just plain dumb luck, the admitting hospital had not run any blood alcohol test. Ethan had very little memory of what happened that night. But he did remember drinking too much. He also remembered being careful to make sure that there was no evidence of it in his car."

A Chance At Redemption

"To this end, we will in the next few days be having a news conference with you present to speak about your accident and how it has dramatically changed your life and by extension, your life's work. In other words, you have been given a second chance, you are extremely grateful to God and you will be using your talents for the benefit of mankind. You know what I'm saying... lie your way to redemption.' Wendell concluded his diatribe with a meaningful look."

'How long is this redemption period to last?' Ethan said trying to sound contrite.

'As long as is necessary,' Wendell retorted as if reprimanding a child for a household infraction."

The Next Case

"Jim looked down at the floor for a few seconds and then went on. 'About two days ago, he didn't show for morning coffee, so I went to his room to see if he was sick or something. I knocked, but he didn't answer. For some reason I can't explain, I opened his door and looked inside. There he was, fully clothed on the bed clutching an envelope to

his chest. There were some pills on the nightstand and I was pretty sure he was dead. I yelled for help and everybody came running. The paramedics came, but it turned out he wasn't dead yet, so they took him to the hospital. I found out later that day he had survived. His family had been contacted and were coming to L. A. He wasn't coming back to the shelter which was probably for the best.'

'The next morning at five I went to his room. It had been cleaned up for the next person. I have no idea why I went there. I'd only known the guy for a short time. I knew I didn't want to end up like him. As I was leaving, I saw something sticking out from underneath the closet door. I pulled it out and it was the envelope he had. I was mystified why it had been left there. I took it with me while I went out for my usual morning coffee. The sun was rising and I decided to read it. I guess I was thinking that his family really didn't need to see a suicide note right now. Well, it wasn't a suicide note at all. It was the letter from Estate Trust calling his credit line due. I couldn't believe that he was still carrying that piece of crap around. The bank had completely destroyed a man, his family and a business for nothing more than to regain profit on the backs of people who didn't make the board of director stupid decisions. His life died and not one of them went to prison.'"

The Law

"Judge Wright's admonishment to him several years ago echoed to him now, 'Then why don't you do something extraordinary and defend your client on the basis of the law and your legal prowess?' All of the glitzy legal swirl that Ethan had lived by, really didn't have as much to do with the law as it had to do with how the legal system could be bent to serve those who could pay the most. Judge Wright, not Ethan, had aspired to the nobility of the profession. Ethan realized that, at the end of the day, all he had as real tools to defend Jim was the law and his own legal deftness. He wished he could tell that to Judge Wright."

Seeking Freedom

"He quickly realized that getting out of the partnership was intertwined with a successful conclusion to Jim's case, that being no criminal charges and some community work. The other three partners wouldn't dare to bad mouth Saint Ethan and he could pretty well get what he wanted out of the firm - his complete freedom, even if he took less money to buy out his interests..."

...“But what to do about the firm’s secrets? Being disbarred was the least of the sticky problem. Going to jail was very real. He thought about living in Europe the rest of his life and that wasn’t appealing either. The firm’s highly illegal information files were always kept away from the office. Ethan’s were stored in his safe at home and he assumed each partner did the same. But what if they didn’t? Finding out where such files were kept would be nearly impossible.”

Burdened By Our Parents

“‘You never really died, David,’ Ethan said to the room walking on in and sat down on what was his bed at one time. All the memories he thought that he had reconciled with came flooding back: Jacob and Esther always reminding Ethan of how smart, caring and industrious David was; David wanted to be a lawyer; David got high marks in school – just looks at all his awards; you have to work harder Ethan because you’re not as smart as David; David wouldn’t have had your friends; David was never sneaky. Angry with himself, ‘To hell with all of this,’ he said, bolted off the bed, flipped off the light and closed the door. He stood looking at it for another five minutes. He thought, David and I are Cain and Abel, except that Cain died, but has been killing Abel over and over again. Tears formed in his eyes. He needed to get out and go back to Los Angeles where things made more sense.”

Family Or Career

“Ethan graduated as one of the top five at Stanford Law, passed the bar exam on his first try and accepted an offer at the San Francisco law firm, working eighty hour weeks. Catherine became pregnant almost the moment that he started his first job. Ethan barely made it to his daughter’s debut into the world. They named her Molly...”

“On Molly’s fifth birthday, Ethan met Wendell Proctor and Paul Stuart at a conference in San Francisco. They were looking to add a lawyer to their burgeoning Los Angeles practice. Over a steak dinner and a lot of wine, both men decided they had found their addition with Ethan. To Ethan, their offer was breathtakingly lucrative, one he would not pass up for himself and his family. Molly would just have to understand why her Daddy missed her fifth birthday party. Catherine was not so understanding, regardless of the gobs of money he would be making or the big chance to be a partner before he was thirty-five! He promised to never miss another one of Molly’s birthdays. He never kept the promise.”