

Epilogue Transcript

Ariana: We started this podcast asking ten writers to write a Romance novella. We brought in an expert, Julia Quinn, to walk us through it. You've heard all their stories and all our assignments.

But as Julia Quinn taught us in our last assignment, every good story has an epilogue. Including ours.

When we started this project, we thought we would end this season with 10 fully written Romance novels. I will tell you now that there have only been three. For those of you who haven't been to school in a while, 3/10 is a failing grade.

If the point of our project was to have people write romance novels- well- they overwhelmingly did not do that. And so I think we have to ask ourselves: does that mean that our project was a failure?

In order to figure that out, I thought I'd take us back to the source of the idea. Probably blame her. This whole podcast was based on an experience SHE claimed to have had. So I thought maybe we should talk about it. Compare her experience to what had happened with our other writers and decide once and for all whether writing a romance novel really can be a sacred practice - even if most people didn't write their happy endings.

I'm Ariana Nedelman, the co-producer and one of the seven failed writers for: Hot & Bothered.

Ariana: Can you introduce yourself for me please?

Vanessa: Sure, my name is Vanessa Zoltan.

Ariana: And the host of this podcast.

Vanessa: I am the host of this podcast.

Ariana: Tables are turned though.

Vanessa: Oh god.

Vanessa wrote a *Friends to Lovers* Romance novel; a trope we've covered before. But her Romance novel also has a love triangle. Rebecca is days away from being engaged to Chris when she has a brief affair with her best friend, Ethan. Ethan proclaims his love, and Rebecca has to choose: Ethan or Chris.

Here are some shortcuts. Rebecca IS Vanessa (she disputes this). And Chris (the almost fiance) IS Vanessa's ex-fiance. (She also disputes this). But I'm telling you. It's like, a one-to-one ratio.

But the most important character for us to think about is actually Ethan. This mystery man who doesn't, at least to me, resemble anyone in Vanessa's life. The character that Vanessa - I mean Rebecca - ends up with. Throughout the course of this season, Vanessa has been very adamant: who the main character falls in love with matters. They should be your 90% person.

So Ethan HAS to embody something aspirational for Vanessa, right?

Just like she did with the other writers, I wanted to get to the heart of what that was. What Vanessa was wishing for herself and what she was trying to negotiate in her own life.

Ariana: The thing that I thought was really like you that I recognized in Rebecca, was I feel like she's someone who really cares about being taken at her word and believed. And a lot of the story even turns on her desire to be believed by the men in her life. And that was something when I read it I was like "Oh I've heard Vanessa say these things before!" *laughs*

Vanessa: Um, yes that is something that matters a lot to me. Almost to a fault would I say I take people at their word.

Ariana: What do you mean?

Vanessa: Peter and I just had this conversation, it was just our anniversary the other night, and we were talking about a particularly hard time in our relationship. Sort of like, looking back on our time together... and one of the really hardest parts of our relationship is that Peter is

someone who under-promises and over delivers and I took him at his word, his under-promise and it wasn't enough of a promise for me.

But I really do believe that if someone says to you 'I'm never going to want to... go to the moon' you have to believe them that they never want to go to the moon. Whereas Peter, it turns out, did want to go to the moon - just, he didn't want to talk about it at that point in our relationship. So I think that sometimes - people often don't want to tell you exactly what's going on with them, right?

You ask somebody how they are and they say 'I'm fine' and you're supposed to hear that they're not really fine. And I'll be like 'they're fine!' And I think that I err on not wanting to pry and respecting people's privacy and saying 'they know what's best for them.' And something that I explored in the book was that Chris, the almost fiance, takes Rebecca at her word. And Ethan, the one we want her to be with, knows when to not believe her.

Ariana: Yeah, I think I found that really interesting. Because Becca cares so much about being believed and yet the person she ends up with is the person who at several points during the book for better and worse doesn't take her at her word and doesn't believe her.

Vanessa: Yeah...

Ariana: Why do you think she ends up with someone like that?

Vanessa: I think that one of the things I've learned from Peter is that belief is not the highest form of respect. Peter is I think the first partner I've been with who to a large extent knows me better than I know myself. And I have found that to be such a delight, I have found it to be very hurtful and difficult at times, but I think there's such grace in that. He can often see things in me that I don't see in myself.

I genuinely think that, you know, we were starting this company right as Peter and I were becoming a serious couple, and I think I would have found a job if I hadn't been with Peter rather than founding this company. I think him just believing in me so much and never judging me just gave me a little cushion of confidence. And so I think that - I think I just really learned that from our relationship, that it's okay for other people to know us better than we know ourselves on certain things.

I understand why Vanessa cares so much about being believed. I watched her be sick and not believed by doctors for a long time. And in the time of MeToo-- focussing on believing women is more important than ever. And yet-- in real life and in fiction, she doesn't end up with the men who always believe her words. And that seems... complicated.

Ethan and Peter both don't believe Vanessa (OK, "Rebecca") when it comes to mental health. Rebecca has a mental health crisis in the middle of the Romance novel. And she says she's fine and just needs a few days. But Ethan disagrees and takes her to the doctor. Ethan, in the context of the Romance novel, is right.

And something very similar happened with Vanessa and Peter. As Vanessa told Brigid a few episodes ago, there was a time recently when Peter didn't believe that Vanessa was sad and grieving for her grandfather. He knew that she was in a depression. And Peter was also right.

I think that Vanessa is saying-- believe women; but that sometimes, the people we love can see patterns in us that we can't see in ourselves; and if offered up correctly, gently and respectfully, can be, what Vanessa calls an offering of grace.

Which, at the end of the day, clarifies who Ethan in this story. Even though he doesn't look or act very much like Peter, he is embodying the kind of love that Peter gives Vanessa. And that's beautiful.

I love what Vanessa is negotiating in this text. But I have one problem. If Ethan is Peter - that means that there is nothing aspirational about this book; Vanessa has ended up with a man, who, like in her book, knows what is right for her even when she doesn't know herself. So she isn't hoping for anything-- she HAS it. She is working through nothing. She's writing a book based on her relationship. And so totally violates her own premise on what sacred writing means.

I just flat out asked her about this. What is the fantasy in this story? What is the happy ending that you're hoping for that you don't have?

Vanessa: I think that the fantasy aspect of this is believing in the ability to be in a relationship with your best friend. We don't see Ethan and Rebecca together after they are couple, right like it ends with them getting together and there's a little bit of an epilogue. But yeah, I love the idea of being in a relationship with my very best friend in the whole world, the person who I can tell absolutely everything to.

Ariana: Well this is the moment where I tell you I'm in love with you Vanessa.

Vanessa: Good, let's run away together! Um... right? But I don't think that's how the world actually works. There are moments though, and maybe that is what I want, there are moments that Peter and I can act the way I act with my best friends. I told you this story the other day, I've been obsessed with making this beet cake over the last week so there have been a lot of beets in my house. And I came out of the bathroom - and this is usually something I feel like I would text you or Julia, or one of my best friends, or Kim - and I was like 'you know, Peter, there's been blood in my urine for the last week and I don't know what's happening!' And he was like 'I do, you've been eating a lot of beets.' And I was like, "yes! I have been eating a lot of beets!" And none of you would have known that.

Ariana: That's so true.

Vanessa: So it was a moment when I treated him like my best friend and got rewarded with the correct diagnosis very quickly. And I love those moments in our relationship where we are best friends.

You heard that right? Vanessa says 'The fantasy is being in love with my best friend. Also Peter is basically my best friend.' What is that? Nothing. That is nothing.

But, deep breath, maybe we can read Vanessa as writing aspirationally about the *other* relationship in her story? Not the Ethan character, but the Chris character.

In real life, Vanessa was engaged and her fiance broke up with her. In this book, Vanessa, I mean, Rebecca gets to leave Chris for a better man.

Ariana: I'm not trying to reduce this, but there was something redemptive about the fact that you were dumped by your ex, and then you wrote a book where a character who is kind of you, dumps a guy who is kind of your ex.

Vanessa: That's so funny! I mean sure, I'm not going to disagree with the facts. Like you have me on the facts of the case. And I don't want to sound overly defensive because, again, on the facts of the case, sure. I feel no need to be redeemed by that break-up. I feel, he and I are friends, legitimately are friends.

Ariana: Yeah.

Vanessa: I don't feel jilted by him in any way.

Ariana: Really? Because he was shitty!

Vanessa: In the way that he broke up with me?

Ariana: Yeah!

Vanessa: Yeah I just think - first of all, I am happier. So I'm grateful, I feel like he wanted more for both of us.

Ariana: Yeah, I've been there.

Vanessa: Right, I'm grateful to him because I think he was just braver than I was. And yeah, I don't know, we'd either be divorced or unhappily married.

Ariana: You don't have to put up with his parents.

Vanessa: I did get to write just the supervillain version of his parents. It was my opera. I got to write the worst possible version of who would have been my in-laws. And they were complicated and in some ways, lovely people who I really had a lot of problems with and I got to just write them as villains. And that was complete catharsis. So I will grant you on Chris's parents, that was catharsis and incredible. But I don't think that Chris to my ex is a one to one ratio.

I don't mind being wrong. I really don't. But I find this super frustrating! Vanessa is making everything out to be ladeeda happy. Like-- very boring. What is Vanessa working through here? She says it's that she wants to date her best friend, but she also says that maybe Peter is one of her best friends? She says she's totally over her ex-fiance and then continues to gush more about Peter.

We're supposed to be looking to Vanessa for a model of figuring something out through writing a Romance novel. Of writing an aspirational happy ending. We are supposed to be finding some sacredness here. But Vanessa seems to be the least sacred of the bunch.

Vanessa went to Michigan to visit a friend so I had some time to think. Something finally occurred to me and I gave her a call:

Ariana: So I was listening back to our first interview and...

Vanessa: You were seduced by my charm and you want to run away with me?

Ariana: You were just gushing about Peter the whole time-

Vanessa: *bleh*

Ariana: -and I was like 'this is so boring.'

Vanessa: *laughs*

Ariana: But I realized something really important which is that when we interviewed all our past writers we interviewed them at the beginning and middle of their writing process.

Vanessa: Uh huh.

Ariana: So I'm wondering, I'd like to hear a little bit about where you were, right as you started writing this book. Like what was going on for you?

Vanessa: Well you were sleeping over a lot and I was having panic attacks nightly. And Peter and I were, I guess we were on a break, to use Ross and Rachel terminology. We were still talking every day but we were in a dark place. We loved each other very much and were concerned that long term we didn't want the same things and so were like 'uh I'm not sure this is going to work, even though we love each other so much.' And then Hurricane Harvey hit and then another one in Florida and then Maria hit. And I... really didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I was like "what matters more? Loving a person more than I've ever loved anyone or the fact that we might not want the same things?" And so I was in a very personal existential crisis. And then I was also like, "the world is ending!"

But, I don't think I realized how bad of a spot I was in until one night you were sleeping over and I went through what was my current nightly routine, which was at around 8 o'clock at night, checking the news and just really working myself up into a very anxious state, and I sort of saw myself reflected in your eyes, and I was like "Uh oh this is not good."

Duh, it's in the first episode Ariana. You edited that audio! Vanessa was working through some things with this Romance novel. She was working through being on a break with Peter and her deep anxieties about climate change. I *remember* the moment when reading romance novels wasn't enough for her-- so she started writing. I asked her about that.

Ariana: What was the difference between reading and writing the Romance novel?

Vanessa: It was more mentally taxing I think is part of it. While reading a Romance novel, especially because I really liked listening to Romance novels, and you can a little bit multi-task and so I would still look at the news while listening to a Romance novel. And so writing was just more engaging and if my mind would wander, it would wonder on the topic of what I was thinking about.

Ariana: Do you think the most important part of this process for you was just the breaking the cycle of anxious thinking?

Vanessa: Probably, it also though broke the cycle in terms of me talking about dark things with my friends also. Like you and I - I made you talk a lot about escape plans and whether you had enough food and I started storing food for you also.

Ariana: Yeah, I refused to store my own food so you just started storing more food so that I could come to you.

Vanessa: Yes. And then I think there was a transition where we started talking about my Romance novel.

Ariana: Mhm.

Vanessa: And so, it just refocused my brain. And rather than talking about despair and bleakness, we were talking about hope. And you were helping me figure out, because mine is a love triangle, what the exact right amount of the guy she doesn't end up with sucking is... you want him to suck a little so you're not sad that she's not with him, but you don't want him to suck so much that you're like 'why is she even with him.'

Ariana: Yeah.

Vanessa: And that was a much more fun thing to talk about than dogs drowning.

TRUE, VANESSA. What Vanessa is describing is the exact moment when she and I had the idea to make Hot & Bothered. There was something about the joy of it - we were in the car with Vanessa's dog who was safely above water, and instead of talking about work or our to-do lists, or death and despair we were talking about her Romance novel. And I, jokingly, looked over to Vanessa and said, 'this should be our next podcast!' And she said "No really, it should be."

And, maybe not coincidentally, she and Peter got back together at the exact same time. As soon as we started talking about Hot & Bothered, they were better than ever.

Ariana: The crisis you were having about Peter... do you feel like you resolved that crisis and then you started writing? Or do you feel like you were still in the course of it while you were writing?

Vanessa: I was definitely still in the course of it while writing. And to be clear, I feel like he and I have committed to spending our lives together, but the issues have not gone away. Bottom line we're gonna be together and we'll figure out everything else. But I started writing first and I think it helped. If nothing else, it like, calmed me down. Also I did not directly deal with the issues that Peter and I were having in the Romance novel, I think that by imagining a simpler relationship it was helpful...

Ariana: But I think you made a strong point last time we talked that all of the things you love about the character Ethan are things that came out of the way that Peter loves you.

Vanessa: Yes. Absolutely.

Ariana: So maybe by writing Rebecca as ending up with Ethan, you're allowing yourself to end up with Peter.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Ariana: Like seeing that as the best love for yourself.

No wonder Vanessa wanted all of her friends to write their happy endings. She did it and it really worked for her. Vanessa wrote herself the happy ending that she deserved. And then it materialized.

To me though, as I look back at this season and what our episodes have been about, I am starting to think that this whole thing was less about the writing happy endings (which most people didn't do) and more about that moment that Vanessa and I had in the car. You know in a "Maybe the true treasure is the friends we made along the way" kind of way.

Vanessa in her writing is playing with this idea of what a true friend is. How friend love can be different than partner love. A true friend can see patterns that you can't see in yourself. Like Ethan and like Peter - they reach out to interrupt those patterns. And that's also what I saw Vanessa do with all her friends throughout this season:

she said to them, “I don’t think you’re telling yourself the right story. I’m noticing a pattern and I think we can undo it together.”

Ariana: Something that I’ve been wondering, looking back, listening back to our previous episodes is whether or not the writing is the sacred thing or the conversation is the sacred thing. Do you have thoughts on that?

Vanessa: So, I’m going to take the really easy way out and say both. Cause you can’t have one without the other. You can have writing without conversation, but you can’t have the conversations without thinking about the writing. I agree with you, I think conversation is always sorta the most sacred thing, but I also am Jewish enough that I believe two people bent over a text is one of the most sacred forms of conversation. And two people bent over a creative text about hope and love that one of the women are working on? You know like, whoo.

Ariana: I’m not trying to say that it’s not about what you originally thought it was about. I think we are imagining better ways to love and be loved in the act of writing. I just think the act of sitting down and talking to someone you love about what you’ve written, that is also a practice of love and getting better at loving.

Vanessa: I agree. I think that that should be the last thing on our podcast. I think what you just said should be the final voice and the final thing we hear. I mean my favorite part of writing my Romance novel was the few times you and I have gone for martinis and fries and talked about our Romance novels.

But this is my episode and I get to decide what the last thing on our podcast is. And I want it to be this:

Vanessa: So, I love love songs, but my favorite love songs are best friend love songs, like ‘For Good’ in Wicked. And this process has taught me how much I love my friends, and so I think one day I’m going to try and write a best friend romance novel where two best friends get into a big fight and then they actually do the dream that we all want, which is to buy houses next door to one another. And two houses were purchased with a bridge attaching them. And they eat dinner together every night.

Ariana: Would you still call that a Romance novel?

Vanessa: I don't know but I want to write it. Because I think female friendship is one of the great resources in this world. It's better than oil. It's like clean water! It's just the most important resource in this world.

I agree. I'm glad to have a friend like Vanessa. I won't stop trying to write my Romance novel, but I don't think the writing is the most important thing.

This has been the final episode of season one of Hot & Bothered.

If you want to read an excerpt of Vanessa's Romance novel, or if you want to share your writing assignments go to our website, hotandbotheredrompod.com You can read Vanessa's whole Romance novel, "Kiss and Can't Tell" on the Radish app.

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Our music is from Firstcom and Nick Bohl

Even though she wasn't in this episode special thanks to Vanessa's mom, and my mom, and all moms. Mom's are the best. Moms and Friendship.