

2. Best Friend Lady Pirates

Vanessa: Hi Ariana!

Ariana: Hi Vanessa!

Vanessa: Why don't you tell us who you are?

Ariana: Sure, my name is Ariana Nedelman. I am the producer of Harry Potter and The Sacred Text, and this show; Hot & Bothered.

Vanessa: I knew I'd seen you somewhere!

Vanessa: Ariana Nedelman is one of my very close friends. We talk every day. We travel all over the country together. My dog loves her more than she loves me. We joke that sometimes we're sisters, sometimes wives, sometimes each other's bosses, sometimes each other's moms. Sometimes each other's therapists. And yes, sometimes we fight. As you will hear.

On this week's episode, Ariana Nedelman picked the trope Enemies to Lovers. I'm Vanessa Zoltan, and this is Hot & Bothered.

[theme music]

Ariana: So the story is sort of based on Anne Bonny and Mary Read, who I don't know if you know them. They are two pretty famous female pirates.

Vanessa: No idea who they are.

Ariana: Great, I know just a very small amount about them, just enough to be inspired. They were both born as girls, who were dressed up by their parents as boys.

Vanessa: I imagine in the 17th century there are about a billion reasons why you would want to do that.

Ariana: Definitely, both of these young girls dressed as boys eventually grew up and escaped to lives of piracy. One via the Navy, I think one directly to piracy, and the really fun thing about this story is that they meet on the high seas.

Vanessa: REALLY?!

Ariana: Yes.

Vanessa: In real life!?

Ariana: In real life. And become part of the same crew, and one of them basically tries to seduce the other one, and says like 'hey I'm secretly a girl.' and the other one says 'oh, I'm secretly a girl too.' And then they become best friend lady pirates and live their beautiful lives. At least one of them marries a man, but they do their pirate thing together in a really beautiful way. They both are imprisoned at one point I think, and say that they're pregnant and get out of prison. It's a remarkable story that I know very little about but everyone should go look them up. Anne Bonny and Mary Read.

Vanessa: I'm so excited to become obsessed with this.

Vanessa: Ariana's story is inspired by Mary and Anne; but she's changed it up. In her story, Mary and Anne are enemies; part of different crews, going after the same treasure. And they fall in love, amidst sword fights, hidden identities and storms on the high seas.

Ariana: I think everyone is delighted by the idea of female pirates, and I was twice as delighted by the idea of two female pirates who kind of have a love affair, and who are masquerading in some sense.

Vanessa: Isn't Ariana's story idea brilliant? Ariana is brilliant. And this story is fantastic. It's even about the right kind of enemies. Yes. There are right and wrong kinds of enemies. I've given it a lot of thought.

A right kind: Bad first impression enemies. Think Darcy and Elizabeth from *Pride and Prejudice*. Deep down, our two characters are actually compatible - they just need to learn more about one another.

A wrong kind of enemy is Toxic enemies. There are people in this world who you are toxic for and they are toxic for you. And sometimes you are super attracted to each other... in spite of the toxicity? Because of the toxicity? Who knows. But you are enemies with that person. And for good reason. Or there are people who you are addicted to; or substances you are addicted to; or trains of thought. These are enemies that you should not fall in love with. Stay enemies. There comes a point where you say to them, 'you live your life, I'll live mine. I wish you the best - but I'll stay over here, and you stay way over there!'

Another right kind of enemy (and the kind I find most fun to read about) is Structural enemies. Like in Ariana's story. Two people are on different piracy crews, or fighting for different countries. There is nothing inherent about the two of them that makes them bad for each other: think Magic Johnson and Larry Bird. They just need the will and opportunity to overcome the structure. Sometimes the structure is too much. *Romeo & Juliet*. And that is when the story is a tragedy and not a Romance. But what Ariana is going to write about is about two women who are set up to be enemies, on different crews; and are set up to not be able to be together, queer in the 17th century, and find a way to be together anyway. SWOON. So romantic.

This is going to be a great story. And it's so Ariana. A brilliant idea based on lots of research.

But I was still a little concerned. Not about the story. I was concerned — OK, very concerned — about Ariana doing this project at all. So I wanted to know why she was doing it.

Ariana: I was a kid who loved writing. I wrote stories all the time, I went to creative writing summer camps, and minored in theater in college so that I could take playwriting and screenwriting classes, I have not done any creative writing since college, and in the last two years, I've pretty much stopped doing any kind of writing.

Vanessa: Why have you stopped writing?

Ariana: That's such a good question, that I wish I knew the answer to. Fear I guess? I was in divinity school, as you know. And I had all of these papers to write, and in this slow process I just gradually stopped being able to write them. There's probably one paper that I didn't write, and that just flipped the switch and suddenly I didn't write, and it was suddenly like I couldn't write anything after I hadn't written that one paper.

Vanessa: I watched Ariana as she struggled with "to do or not to do grad school" for over a year. It was awful. Grad school was torture for her. So was the process of deciding whether or not to quit. She talked to her parents, her brother, professors. I made her ask a tarot card reader, because why not? And then, through pain and tears, through grief, she quit. It was so brave, I could still cry thinking about it.

And she just went from being so unhappy to being happy. And from so unhealthy to healthy. And not even two months after she quit, she had signed herself up for this writing project.

Ariana: Writing is so painful for me, even when I was in college, every paper held so many tears inside of it. I just never had the option in college not to do it, I had to do it, and suddenly when there was one paper that I hadn't written, there was this whole other option of not writing that was so much easier, I just found myself opting into it.

Because I know the expression pulling teeth is a cliché, but that is what it feels like to write for me, it feels like I am involved in a process of self harm, and at some point I just decided to stop hurting myself.

Vanessa: Remember toxic enemies? The people, the trains of thought, drugs, habits that are bad for you? I was worried that writing, for Ariana, was that. A toxic enemy.

Vanessa: So why did you ask to do this project? Because I feel like I brought that concern to you, right, when you said you wanted to write the romance novel and be part of the podcast, I was like, I would love for you to be one of our writers, but I thought you hate writing.

Ariana: I just think that writing doesn't have to be painful, that I loved writing as a kid, it was essential to my identity that I was a writer. More painful than writing for me is the idea of never writing again, and this seems like such a safe space to practice it a little bit. There's nothing at stake for writing a romance novel for yourself, if it's cliché, it's supposed to be cliché. All of the things that I would worry about what my graduate school writing could be if I turned it in and someone else read it, doesn't apply here in theory. Maybe I will struggle and hold myself to those standards, but if there is any way for me to overcome this wall that is writing, I think it is in writing a romance novel.

Vanessa: I am skeptical of this reasoning.

But, I'm biased. I don't believe in beneficial suffering — at all. And I come by that feeling honestly. I am the grandchild of four holocaust survivors and the child of refugees. So I was raised to believe that suffering is something that happens TO a person, not that you willingly sign up for. The world *will* bring you suffering. Just wait. Don't self-inflict.

So, I basically want an all but guarantee that the suffering will pay off. Like, the gym sucks, but having a strong heart and good blood pressure is good. So, that suffering is fine. If I am not at least reasonably sure that the suffering will be worthwhile then I want to do everything I can to stop it from happening.

And I did not think that Ariana's suffering was going to be worth it.

I felt like I was giving her the instrument of more torment. She dropped out of Divinity school, which was such a big, hard decision, to end this suffering, and now I was giving her a way right back to it.

But also, she is not a child. I may pretend to be her mom sometimes; but she is my fake mom just as often and has a real mom who is named Libby, and is great. And I know that another thing to call someone who goes around trying to prevent the suffering of others is someone with a savior complex, or is patronizing or overbearing. And I don't want to be any of that!

My sophomore year of college I went through a terrible depression. I was in bed for two weeks. The guy I was dating, Aaron, came over after the two weeks and said, "Time to get out of bed." I remember thinking, "Screw you. You do not get it. I can't just get out of bed." And he physically ripped the sheets off of me and forced me out of bed. I was so mad. But here's the embarrassing thing: it worked. We went to dinner and a movie and it didn't cure my depression, but it wrapped up that session of depression quicker than it naturally would have ended. And that was so embarrassing to me. I had missed weeks of classes, and if dinner and a movie with a cute boy could have cured it this whole time then what had I been doing?

Ariana wants me to be Aaron — to rip off the covers and yell at her, 'WRITE! FASTER! MORE! KNEES HIGHER!' I don't know. Sports metaphor!

But I don't really want to be Aaron. I think that he just got lucky. And he helped me. But he would have been just as much of a help if he had crawled into bed with me, rather than ripping the sheets off of me. And I would always rather crawl into bed with someone than strip them bare.

Ariana: I mean I think everything good I've done in my life I've done in partnership with you.

Vanessa: [laughs] That's not true.

Ariana: It's true!

Vanessa: No, it's not true, you have done other things in partnership with other people.

Ariana: All the best things I've done in my life have been in partnership with you, so I think if I am going to get myself to start writing, it should be in partnership with you, that's my best method for getting to success.

Ok. So, no pressure. If I can't write with you, Vanessa, than this essential part of my identity is dead and I'll be sad forever. That's what she thinks at least. So I can't let her quit, right? I'm fucking in this thing, I guess.

We parted for a month, and I had no idea how this was going to go.

A month later we found ourselves back in the studio:

Vanessa: Hello Ariana.

Ariana: Hi Vanessa.

Vanessa: How's writing going?

Ariana: It's not.

Vanessa: Okay. I mean you're busy, you have a job.

Ariana: I do have a job. Thanks boss.

Vanessa: That is me hedging. See? If you end up not writing, you have a list of excuses that have nothing to do with me being a bad friend or of you not being a writer. Life happens!

Ariana: It scares me, it scares me like any other writing does. I thought that it would feel like something easier, but it doesn't.

Vanessa: Why did you think that it would feel like something easier?

Ariana: Because so many romance novels I read are not good, so it felt like the barrier to entry was lower, whereas for graduate school, so many academic articles I read were, held this bar quite high for me when I was imagining what I needed to be producing.

Vanessa: Were you imagining that you had to write the new Foucault or Derrida?

Ariana: I just wanted to say something worth saying.

Vanessa: Do you think the story you have in your head is a story worth telling?

Ariana: My romance novel story?

Vanessa: Yes.

Ariana: No, I also think a lot of romance novels are not stories worth telling in the world, because they're just the same story over and over again.

Vanessa: Noted. You think what I read is dumb. Well, I think your face is dumb. Told you we were good at fighting.

Vanessa: Okay. So I think part of it is that I take tremendous joy from the process of writing my romance novel, but it sounds like you don't enjoy the process. My question is, what if you took the final product out of it? What if I was like no one will ever read it?

Ariana: I'm counting on no one ever reading it. Well you're going to read it.

Vanessa: What if I said I don't have to read it? Would you be more likely to write it?

Ariana: I don't know, because I think writing is so hard for me I do need a reason to do it, you know. I don't think I'm going to write just for myself.

Vanessa: Do you have a belief in beneficial suffering?

Ariana: That's what I'm struggling with because it feels really masochistic.

Vanessa: Yeah. So end of episode, stop.

Vanessa: And that's where we finished. I convinced her. Suffering is bad. We went and had martinis and fries and she is now comfortably stunted and not writing at all ever. She won't even text me back in words. Only that flamenco lady emoji, again and again.

Ariana: But I think if there's something I want to be masochistic about, it is this. I think being able to write is something that is worthwhile in my life and something that with enrich my life. Just like with anything, learning to play piano sucks when you first start learning because you're bad at it, and you just have to do the same thing over and over again, but eventually you're able to play, and that is joyful. I don't believe writing right now for this podcast is going to be joyful, but I do think that it is the practice.

Vanessa: Ugh. OK, so we're still doing this.

Vanessa: Okay, so how do we fix... how do we do it? Do you and I write together for an hour a week?

Ariana: I think we give me like really short amounts of time to do writing. Because it's always going to feel painful. It's always going to feel like holding my hand in a flame.

Vanessa: So we say try to write 100 words in five minutes?

Ariana: Exactly.

Vanessa: Okay, we'll do that today. Do you want to do that right now?

Ariana: Yeah. Okay.

Vanessa: We're going to pause right now, and we're going to take 5 minutes and Ariana is going to write 100 words. And then we'll talk about the 100 words?

Ariana: Yeah.

Vanessa: And then we'll talk about the 100 words. On your mark, get set, go!

Vanessa: OK. 5 minutes. She will either be miserable and end in tears and then I can clearly say, 'we're done here. This is bad for you.' Or, it will be hard, but she'll end this with 100 words and at least we'll have a tactic that we can use going forward.

[alarm beeps]

Vanessa: How many words did you do?

Ariana: 57.

Vanessa: Oy. It is not clear that she is failing. And it is not clear that she is OK. She's not still in bed. But, she's not at the movies. At least she's writing. At least something is on the page.

Vanessa: Hey, 57 words! Read them!

Ariana: They're not good words.

Vanessa: Good!

Ariana: "If the devil were a woman in the Caribbean, she would be Captain Mary Read, or at least that's what the cooks and seamstresses whispered to one another back in the colonies. Mary herself did everything possible to bolster this infamy. She started small, took out an ad in the local newspaper, Captain Mary Read: Wicked Murderer?"

Vanessa: Okay how do you feel? How did writing for those five minutes feel? Was it miserable?

Ariana: Not every second of it.

Vanessa: How do you feel now?

Ariana: Like I want to delete it.

Vanessa: What if I told you it was good?

Ariana: I just don't think you learn about a character by talking about a character. I think I should start the scene in the bar. Whatever.

Vanessa: I know I don't sound like it. But I was very annoyed with Ariana in that moment. Like, really, deeply annoyed. She said she wanted to write, and that sitting with me was the best way to make it happen. And we did that. And now she wants to delete it. There are actual torture systems designed like this. Where you are made to dig holes, just to fill them back up.

But also I know that she is really working through something. I just cannot stand to watch her work through it. I thought that this episode was going to be about Ariana writing or not writing. I didn't account for the 57% and then delete possibility. And what I cannot do is sit here and watch her painfully write 57 words and then delete them again and again.

It is poisoning me; watching her seemingly (to me, at least) hurt herself like this. And if something is toxic for me, shouldn't I, by my own rule, quit?

[music]

I couldn't get to the bottom of why this was so hard for me. So I called my chaplaincy mentor, who also happened to be one of Ariana's professor's, Stephanie Paulsell, to help me figure it out.

Stephanie: My name is Stephanie Paulsell, I'm a professor at Harvard Divinity School, where I was lucky enough to teach Vanessa Zoltan and Ariana Nedelman.

Vanessa: So, Stephanie. I'm gonna tell you a little story, and I think none of it will surprise you.

Stephanie: Okay.

Vanessa: So, Ariana quit divinity school, and she quit because she found writing to be so painful that she couldn't do it anymore. And then, like less than a month later, she decided that she would sign up to be one of our writers for Hot & Bothered and try writing a romance novel. And I'm having a really hard time sitting here and watching her suffer through this process of writing. I'm like, we already figured out that writing is so toxic for you that you can't finish grad school, and you just threw yourself back into it. And she's like no, this is really important for my identity, I can do it. She's also being a snob and is like, writing a romance novel's sooooo much easier than writing about Foucault.

Stephanie: [laughs]

Vanessa: And I'm just having a really hard time reconciling the fact that I technically went to divinity school to be a chaplain and sit with people who are suffering, and I just want to tell her to quit. Like, can't I just tell her to quit? I'm okay sitting with someone who's suffering because their mom died, that's not their fault. But she's doing this to herself. So I'm wondering, your, like, judgement of this or I'm also just curious because you watched Ariana really struggle. Is she the idiot, or do I need to be more patient?

Stephanie: Well, the thing about Ariana is she's a beautiful writer, and like for a lot of us, it's painful to get those words on the page. I guess I would never tell Ariana to quit writing. I can't imagine telling Ariana to quit writing. There's obviously something in her that wants to write, she's a really good writer, but I do think sometimes people need permission to do other things, like writing is not all there is in the world, grad school is not all there is in the world.

I would never tell a student "you should quit grad school," but I would certainly try to scaffold people's decisions if it was clear they would really love to quit grad school but they don't want to disappoint their mom or they don't want to disappoint their college professor or something like that. So, what is my answer to your question? I guess maybe don't make yourself so available to Ariana's suffering.

Vanessa: You mean emotionally, or like physically?

Stephanie: I mean like physically. Like don't be in the room with her watching her trying to get those words down.

Vanessa: So, something that's come up for me in this process is that I believe that suffering happens, right, like, suffering happens, so don't inflict it upon yourself. And so I just didn't realize that as a chaplain, I'm making sort of a moral judgement, right. Like, in talking to Ariana sometimes, I felt like a republican. I felt like I was like, "can't you just be straight? Like it's easier! Just do it!" And I like, I don't think that! And she's telling me part of her identity is writing and I want to believe her and in the same way that I hope even fifty years ago I would have believed my child if they were gay and not just been like, "but it'll be easier if you're not." But I'm also just like, "just stop!" it feels like, you know we come back into the studio and she'll be like "yeah, it was really bad," and it feels like she's like "yeah, I held my hand over the candle, for ten minutes and it really really hurt and now I have this burn," and I'm like, stop putting your hand on the candle. What do I do in those moments? Where I feel like what she's doing to me is showing me the wounds.

Stephanie: Well, this is the thing that makes sitting with people who are suffering difficult, is that we also suffer with them, right? If you're a compassionate person, you suffer with them. That's what compassion means. And so sorting out what's your suffering from what's Ariana's suffering I think is maybe one important thing. And maybe not, you know, the impulse to sit in the room with someone who's having trouble writing, I really get that. But it may be that that's not your work in this situation.

Vanessa: So Ariana made me complicit in her suffering because she said to me, literally Stephanie, how terrible is she. She said to me, "the best things I've done in my life I've done with you. So I think that you're my best shot at being able to write." Should I have just been like, too bad? And I did push back. I was like, "no, you do great things without me all the time." And she was like "no, only with you."

Stephanie: Well.

Vanessa: She's a monster.

Stephanie: Well, A. But B, yeah, so she's asking you to be with her, so if you're going to do that you need to figure out how you can be with her without absorbing all of her unhappiness of her writing. You're being challenged as a chaplain, you want to fix it, which is of course what we all want to do. When someone's suffering, we want to fix it. And that's another great temptation of chaplaincy, that we'll make the suffering go away. But as you know already, that chaplaincy is often a ministry of presence, a ministry of bearing witness, a ministry of holding a space for suffering to happen without taking it into yourself and making it your own suffering. Which is very hard. I think you're going to have to cultivate some detachment, with Ariana's suffering, which is hard when you love her. That's why it's so hard to take care of the people we love the most. You know, when our parents are suffering, when our lovers are suffering, when our children are suffering, you know, she's your beloved friend. You love her, and you're feeling more of what she's

feeling. So I understand the impulse to want to say "just stop suffering," but there seems to be something Ariana wants to do here.

Vanessa: Yeah. I also just really appreciate the distinction you've made between never telling someone to quit, but giving them permission.

Stephanie: Yes, absolutely, because writing is not — so maybe there's some space you want to inhabit between opening this space for her to write, giving her, you know, a project, this wonderful project you've given her, but also always knowing that what you value about Ariana is not that she's a brilliant writer. What you value about Ariana is she is who she is, and you love her.

Vanessa: So I have to care about Ariana less? She's making it easy by being so annoying.

Stephanie: [laughs] I don't think you have to care about Ariana less, I just think you have to not be so bothered by the fact that this is hard for her. And just let it be hard for her.

Vanessa: Let it be hard for her. Fair enough.

Another thing that's interesting about enemies to lovers — specifically the 'structural' kind of enemies to lovers that Ariana is writing about, is that the stakes are always wrapped up in identity. I can't love you, because you are a *Montague* and I am a *Capulet*. And at the climax of the story, one or both characters have to sacrifice that identity to be together. They have to say 'my love for you actually is more important than my name. What's in a name anyway? You make me happy and that is more important than this part of my identity that I was clinging to.'

What Stephanie was saying is that I have to sacrifice a little bit of my identity here. I have to sit, a little disconnected, and watch someone I love suffer, not knowing if it is going to be worth it.

I love thinking about myself as someone who acknowledges suffering. I went to divinity school specifically to train myself to be better at sitting in the face of suffering and bearing witness. And that is all that Ariana was asking me to do. She was just asking me to bear witness to her process. To sit with her as she tried to figure out whether or not she could find this part of herself again. And I went kicking and screaming. She wasn't asking me to condone her suffering. She was asking me to sit with her in it, to figure out how bad it was going to be. And I was so attached to my identity as "No-Suffering-on-my-watch-Zoltan" that I couldn't just let her figure that out in a safe, low-stakes and loving environment. Writing hasn't been her enemy; I've been her enemy.

But Ariana has to sacrifice some of her identity too. Ariana has some entrenched conception of herself — I am writer. But I know that Ariana is a complete person, even without being 'writer'.

So I texted her: Do me a favor. You think that writing is such a huge part of your identity? Call your mom and see what she says. And record the call, like a creep.

She responded, “flamenco lady”, which I knew meant, “Oh my god You’re so smart! Such a good idea. BTW — have I told you you’re pretty yet today? Because you are!”

That call, after the break.

[phone rings]

Ariana: Hi Momma.

Mom: Hi Sweetheart.

Ariana: How ya doin’?

Mom: Oh yeah, I’m doing great, how are you?

Ariana: I’m doing great, I just have a couple questions for you.

Mom: Okay, shoot.

Ariana: Okay. What was your experience of me as a writer when I was a kid? And like what is your awareness of writing as an anxious thing for me? Where does that start?

Mom: Oh that was probably more in high school when you were stressed out about writing papers. But I don’t remember it in middle school? I just did the “Who am I” interviews at Lincoln Middle School so I pulled out your “Who Am I” Binder, do you remember that? I didn’t get the sense that you were really stressed about that or maybe you remember more vividly?

Ariana: No I don’t remember. What’s a “Who Am I” binder?

Mom: It’s the culmination of the seventh grade at Lincoln Middle School, here in Santa Monica, and they’ve been doing it for many many years. And they try to help kids articulate their vision of what constitutes a worthwhile life. You do an essay on “My Glory,” something from your year you were proud about. And in your Glory you took a different angle, instead of writing something you were really proud about you wrote about having a nervous breakdown on the phone with your friends when you said you “had no talent.” Ha. Does this sound familiar to you?

Ariana: No! What!?

Mom: Yeah. You said you didn't have any talent and your friends said no Ariana you have this or that and you said no those aren't talents, those are just qualities. And then at the end of it you say, Ok I do have a talent, I'm a good friend. Hahaha. They said one of your talents is writing and you said "Oh no I'm not a good writer, Joey's the good writer." You know, you poo-pooed everything.

Ariana: That's so sad.

Mom: But at the end it was redeeming because you went upstairs feeling "Ok I have fourteen qualities and one talent — I'm a good friend." But yeah, you're right. You're always very hard on yourself.

Ariana: Yeah that — wow I have no memory of that.

Mom: Mhm.

Ariana: So you know in this episode of the podcast, I try and write a romance novel and I don't write anything.

Mom: [laughs] I see.

Ariana: And I guess like the thing we kept coming back to was whether I should keep trying or whether I should just give up and focus on other things I was good at.

Mom: That's a really hard one because I'm always like, it's like, it's not worth torturing yourself, at what point do you just say, you need to move on?

Ariana: I mean, what do you think the answer is, like? Do I stop trying? Like you never, you don't, I never got the sense when I was younger that you were like pushing me to be a writer even though it was something that I was good at as a kid.

Mom: Right well I think because you had so many talents it wasn't like this is the one thing you are good at.

Ariana: [laughs] Thanks mom.

Mom: No it's true! I mean if there were a way to lowering the bar of expectations and just saying OK this is good enough [laughs], but yeah I'm not one for saying one should inflict self-torture.

Ariana: [laughs] You and Vanessa have that in common.

Mom: Oh, ok, alright.

Ariana: So what I'm hearing you saying is that too much suffering is bad.

Mom: Yes, I do firmly believe that.

Ariana: And... I have more talents than just writing.

Mom: Indeed.

Ariana: Alright, love you mom.

Mom: Alright Sweet, love you buh-bye.

Ariana: Bye.

Vanessa: Apparently, one of the roles I play in Ariana's life is being exactly like her mother. I love Libby; so that's fine by me.

After the forced phone call, Ariana and I talked one last time about this project.

Vanessa: So this is our third interview which is supposed to be our final interview, and you haven't written your romance novel.

Ariana: No.

Vanessa: What is, how do you feel about that?

Ariana: I don't know if this is too meta, and I also don't know if you know this, but I'm the producer of this podcast.

Vanessa: WHAT!

Ariana: So there's been this funny parallel for me of trying to write a romance novel and create something out of nothing in that way, and also trying to create this podcast with you, and create something out of nothing in that way, and it has been equally scary to make this thing, I have felt all of the same existential dread and fear of humiliation, so I think if people are actually listening to this episode, it means that I have been on the journey that I should have been on, and have succeeded, and made something, and that just happens to be this podcast instead of the novel that I was supposed to write.

Vanessa: [laughs] She's giving me her cutest smile right now, it doesn't work on me anymore. That's not true, it totally does. Are you going to keep writing your romance novel? Now you're off the hook, It's like, the semesters over, you're getting a 0.

Ariana: That's a good question. Whenever I don't turn in a paper, I always have the beautiful image in my mind of one day writing it to the best of my ability and then sending it to that professor three years later. I have never yet done that. But maybe this will be the one.

Vanessa: We're going to publish the things that people write on our website.

Ariana: Yeah, I'll write... I want people to be able to go and read something that I've written.

Vanessa: Hey, everybody go to the website and see what's up there.

Ariana: Yeah.

Vanessa: Do you think, even if you don't write a single word, even if that website space is left blank, do you think that the thought experiments that you have gone through, the conversations you have had, do you still think this process was worthwhile?

Ariana: Yes. I think one of the really, the things I was thinking about coming into this conversation, was how much I considered myself a writer when I was a teenager, you know I went to all these writing camps. That was a huge part of my identity and it's something that I really felt like I had lost in later adulthood, and I was kind of mourning the loss of that, but when I was a teenager it was not like I wrote novels. I wrote three pages of an idea that I had, and that's what I've done here. I've written a synopsis of something, and a couple pages of character study, and that gesture towards the thing that I did when I was a young girl, feels really valuable to me, like a reclaiming of self.

[music]

Vanessa: Ariana did not write a Romance novel.

Turns out writing a whole romance novella is not actually a baby step. She is writing scenes of another romance novel, which none of us are ever allowed to read.

And she has taken over the Harry Potter Sacred Text inbox — which is a lot of email writing. She has also become committed pen-pals with a few people.

She also helped write this script. That I am reading right now. These words. Yup. These. So she's writing. I don't know why she's writing. I don't know if this experiment helped or hurt her process. I don't know if it was just getting some distance from grad school. I don't know if it was maybe me saying, "you can quit!"

But I do think that Libby and I were right and Ariana was wrong; she is good at many, many more things than writing. But she is still writing.

But, for now, writing has become a non-toxic enemy; a worthy adversary to cross swords with on the high seas. Whether they fall in love over their crossed swords is yet to be seen. But I don't think that they will do any mortal damage to each other for now. But of course, I worry. Because as her wife/therapist/boss/employee — and apparently mom — I'm in this for the long haul.

[theme song]

And now it's time for our next assignment from Julia Quinn.

Vanessa: Hi Julia!

Julia: Hi.

Vanessa: How are you?

Julia: I'm good, how are you?

Vanessa: Good, thank you! Ok, so last week everybody went out and they wrote their main character. What should they be up to this week?

Julia: I don't think anybody will be surprised that they need to figure out the next character, because we are working with two. And the next character can be equally main — basically, it's kind of, do a lot of what you did last time. Figure out the other character. Who are they, what's their backstory, what has happened to them to lead them to this moment where they are going to enter the first character's life? Or re-enter it, I should say, because it could be somebody who has already been in that person's life.

So I think you should do that, but then also, now that you have these two characters and you've figured out who they are, now you have to start figuring out plot, and generally start with your meet. It could be a meet cute, it could be a meet tragic, I don't know. But how are they going to intersect to begin the story, and if you're writing a full length novel, they might not need to meet right at the beginning, but if you only have 10,000 words to work with, and that's sort of what we're aiming at here, I mean obviously if you're doing more, that's great, but if you are writing a novella, you don't have a lot of extra space to come up with some sort of opening that doesn't involve your main characters meeting. So I think you need to figure out how are they going to meet, and basically what's going to happen. Are you going to work with a tried and true trope, are you going to do, enemies to lovers, friends to lovers, they're all sorts of fun tropes you can work with, or just regular plots, is it going to be a workplace romance?

Vanessa: I mean, even deciding the two characters is going to determine a lot, right. If one of them is much older than the other one or much wealthier than the other one. It

sounds like what you're saying is starting to think about the way who these people are will impact what happens to them.

Julia: Exactly.

Vanessa: So, write your second character, and then do sort of a one to two page outline of how you think the story is going to arc.

Julia: Yes, and be aware that you will probably go off script at some point. You know, some people will be like "my characters just took it in a different direction!" and that may happen. You may change your mind, but at least you get something down to get you moving. It is so important.

Vanessa: And, for people who are interested in following one of the tropes that our authors is going to do on our podcast, you can go to hotandbotheredrompod.com, and we have a whole section on tropes and basic rules of what each trope does. And if you google tropes, hundreds of tropes will come up. And I personally love the idea of working within tropes, although I know that not everybody feels that way, but I think the limitations are really fun, of that, and it becomes sort of a puzzle.

Julia: Well, one of my favorite quotations I've ever heard about writing a romance came from Jennifer Crusie, who for many years was writing for Loveswept or Harlequin Romance, which is what we call category romance, a kind that people like to mock it because they're numbered, they sell them at the supermarket, but they are actually incredibly difficult to write, or to write well, and what she said though, was, she says "It's like performing Swan Lake in a phone booth." So working with a trope can actually be more difficult because there are rules you have to follow, but that's the thing. I'll probably say this every episode, there's no one right way to write a book.

Vanessa: Well I think that's a great thing for people to hear again and again, so. Okay, so everybody, that is your assignment this week. Go out and write your second character and then do a sketch of how you think this plot is going to play out, and we'll see whether or not that ends up to be true.

Vanessa: This has been Hot & Bothered, and I'll talk to you next week!

If you want to share your writing assignments go to our website, hotandbotheredrompod.com.

Follow us on Twitter and Instagram @therompod, and leave us a review on iTunes, preferably a 5-star one.

Our Romance Teacher is Julia Quinn.

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